

Blazing Guns / Flashing Sword

The fanfiction magazine



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Cover art by Sylvia S. epycut@yahoo.com <http://epantiras.deviantart.com/>

The Annals of Ramon

In the center of a wasted land stood a grand edifice; the center of a kingdom, a mighty fortress, and the home of a powerful lord; called Kurst Castle, for the lord who dwelt there; it was also called Cursed Castle, for the same reason.

Once the center of a soft and beautiful land, the home of the lord of Ramon now squatted in a barren wasteland where little lived and nothing flourished. It was not always so: before Kurst took power there, and the sun burned hot, Ramon had been a bountiful land.

Karned Kurst sat upon his throne like a figure carved from stone.

He stared unblinking down at the man who knelt trembling at the foot of his throne.

He blinked lazily; Kurst was not the sort to show emotion until he was ready. "The bounty hunters failed to capture her?" He asked evenly.

"Yes my lord." The young noble whispered.

"Then tell me this: why are you telling me?" Kurst said calmly. "I neither hired nor directed these bounty hunters; why should I care whether they have captured her or not?"

The noble closed his eyes and swallowed. "Because I did." He said, knowing Kurst was toying with him.

"You did what?" Kurst asked, honey rolling off his tongue.

"I hired them." The noble said.

"You hired them." Kurst said with a nod. "When I told you to capture her, you. You hired bounty hunters to do it for you: I ordered you to bring her to me, and you have returned without her; you have disobeyed me; you know the penalty for that!" He roared.

The noble screamed in fear and threw himself at Kurst's feet, weeping and begging for forgiveness; Kurst kicked him, and knocked him sprawling.

Kurst silently pointed to him, then jerked his finger up.

The noble rocked to his feet like was a puppet on a string; he opened his mouth, but no sound came forth.

Kurst spoke one word, in a harsh tongue that burned one's ears: a language not meant for any human tongue.

The noble's fingertips suddenly burst into flame; Kurst released him, and he dropped to the flagstones, screaming in agony and beating his hands against the cold stone; smoke rose from his boots, and the leather turned black and curled.

As his screams rose, a smile slowly spread its way across Kurst's face; in his eyes was a look of unholy delight as the demonic flames slowly spread up the man's limbs.

His cries reached a crescendo, then stopped abruptly, as the unquenchable flames reached his lungs; the last to burn was his terrified eyes, staring at Kurst, begging silently for mercy that did not exist.

With a flick of his finger, Kurst dismissed his magical bonds, and the remains drifted to the stone floor, even the bones burned to ash.

There was movement from the side of the great hall; a young woman, a girl really, walked to the pile of ashes, and stared down at it curiously. She drew a deep breath, and blew softly.

The ashes blew up into the air, settling around her like a soft black snow; Like a child, she spread her arms wide and spun about, her lips spread in an innocent laugh, like the tinkling of bells.

"What do you have to say, Lady Lilith?" Kurst said aloud, interrupting her child like display.

She turned to face the brooding throne, and showered on him a smile of such innocent pleasure, it would have moved the most hard hearted villain to smile in return.

She had smiled the same beatific smile she showed him when she castrated a man with a dull knife; she was evil to the depths of her black soul, her foulness cloaked in beauty, her wretchedness shrouded behind a mask of innocence.

Lilith was born the most favored daughter of Lord Rust, of the north country; when she was thirteen, she tortured to death her entire family, one by one. When offered the power of a demon, she had taken it without hesitation: she reveled in pain and fear, and death besides; if there was one of his servants who came close to rivaling Kurst for power, it was her.

A pretty pout on her lips, she looked up at him like a naughty child demanding a

sweet. "I want her." She said. "Let me have her; I'll be good, I'll even bring her back to you."

Krst smiled; ever since this master of demons had taken the rule of Ramon, he had reveled in the company of the girl who was as dark hearted as himself. "You shall have her, my sweet." He promised her easily. "But first, there is the matter of our little war."

Her head cocked prettily to the side, her lips pursed in thought. "That would be fun, but... she would be such a special toy!"

Kurst smiled at her benevolently such a strange word to apply to him! "Don't worry, my dear." He assured her, an evil smile on his lips. "You shall have a toy; a very special toy, indeed."

One of the most important parts of a good story is what I call Showing the Villains: unless you want to leave a bit of mystery and keep people guessing, you've got to show who the villains are; you have to showcase how ruthless and evil they are; more than one story has been made or broke by how the villains were Showed.

Jochannon Mahler

And now, a word from the editor:

I should start with an apology to miss A. Reynolds; the author of 'Tomorrow Lingers': I failed to include her comments at the foot of her story.

Miss Reynolds, I apologise most humbly; the only excuse I can offer is that I am having trouble with my email, and I could not reach the end of your story. having now found the blindingly obvious means to do so, I have included your comments attached to your story, as they should have been in the first place.

With that said, I am more than pleased with the success of the first issue: thank you all, for your kind messages of approval and congratulations; I can only hope that this issue will be worthy of such a reception as the last one one had.

The guy who offered to do the cover art for this issue couldn't finish in time, and I had no backup lined up brilliant, I know ; huge thank to the talented and generous Sylvia S. of <http://epantiras.deviantart.com/> who came through with the cover art; thanks a heap, you saved my ass.

And now, a bit of rant.

I don't like the 'Lord of the Rings' movies; I don't think they did a good job of it at all. Don't get me wrong: they are good movies, very enjoyable; I just think they did a bad job of bringing the original story to the big screen.

But there is one thing about the movies that totally pisses me off:

THEY DIDN'T HIRE MIDGETS!

They made a movie about Hobbits, and did not hire midget actors to play them; they went to an incredible amount of time, effort, and expense to make a movie about hobbits, without midgets!

They hired midgets anyway for the long shots, so why the hell did they not get midgets to act?! It's not like there's any shortage of midget actors.

I could go on, but you're probably bored by now.

Thank you for reading. You got any questions or comments? I'd love to hear them: please send an email to: fanficmag@gmail.com

Or, if you want to reach me personally, you can reach me at hans.mahler@gmail.com, or check out my user page at either <http://jochannon.deviantart.com> or at <http://warhammer4okfanon.wikia.com/wiki/User:Jochannon>

Feel like you've missed something? The previous issue s can be downloaded for free here: <http://www.lulu.com/johnsstories>

Jochannon Mahler

We have a wonderful selection of stories from a bunch of great writers here, so without further ado let's get to them.

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THE WAGE

By Stephen aka Caller of Storms
Subject: Negima!, a manga by Ken Akamatsu

The winds of the protective whirlwind parted to reveal four figures; one standing before the others. The lone figure stood between his friends and the immense horde of ogres that had been summoned to kill them all. The figure, a youth of 17, looked far older and more powerful than he had moments ago. He stood with his head lowered and beside either arm floated a blade, long and deadly.

“Who are you, that stands before us and does not quake?!” demanded an ogre.

“Who are you that you would think to stand in our way?!” shouted another.

“Who are you that you would dare think to challenge us?!?” yelled a third.

He raised his head and said in a strange voice like a raging river, “Your death.”

Within the space of a single heartbeat, the heads of the ogres who had spoken were separated from their bodies. Before their bodies could even hit the cold, hard ground, many more began to follow the same deathly path to the dirt.

He was a spinning whirlpool of slivery light; his blades flashed like lightning from one ogre to another. For he was not any mere mortal; he was a wizard, a double Wage to be precise. For he was both a Water Mage and a War Mage and none could stand before his unleashed fury....

In minutes, the once strong horde of ogres was reduced to a mere shadow of its former power. The Wage turned to the few that he had left unscarred and said “Scurry back to the one you call master and tell her that the Wage is coming to reclaim what she stole. Go now before I decide you should join your kinsmen on the ground....”

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CRUSADE

By A.J. Croft

Subject: Warhammer 40,000

“What do you see brother?”

“There are many over that ridge, numbering in the thousands.”

“Have you spotted a leader?”

“There is a large Greenskin in a clearing off to the left of the horde, no more than a dozen of the beasts in between the woods and the boss.”

“That is good, well done Initiate. Sword Brethren Barus, order the company into formation around the perimeter of the brutes.”

“Understood Castellan Tyron.”

Castellan Tyron of the Black Templars felt as thrilled as always at the thought of combat approaching. Marching side by side with Chaplain Fior around the edge of the ridge and into the wooded area to conceal his approach, he couldn't help but enjoy the rank he had been bestowed prior to landing on this planet.

“Calm yourself Tyron, you are not as invincible as you may believe.” Chaplain Fior had been the Castellan's mentor for many years and somehow always had an idea to what Tyron was thinking.

“Understood Chaplain, I only look forward to our chance to again prove our loyalty to the Emperor.”

“Hahaha, as you say brother.”

Approaching the edge of the clearing, Castellan Tyron and Chaplain Fior crouched to the ground and readied their weapons.

“This is Castellan Tyron to Fighting Company Veil, No Pity! No Remorse! No Fear!”

“No Pity! No Remorse! No Fear!” Tyron heard the reply from his Astartes.

Tyron grinned behind his helmet, “Engage at will.”

Fior and Tyron could both see and hear near on a hundred bolters open fire at once, tearing apart dozens of greenskins and sending them into a panic. The larger greenskin was bellowing orders at its followers and attempting to regain order and control. Both of the Templars launched from their hiding spots and charged towards the Warboss.

Tyron's Power Sword carved easily through two greenskins in his way while Fior's Crozius, his badge of office, bashed in the head of another sending brain matter through the air. The Astartes were forced to suddenly defend themselves as the Warboss gave up on trying to organise its kin and charged the only two enemies it could see.

“Oi, you metal boys. We is gonna stomp ya fer killin' me boyz. Dis 'ere iz Kazhragaz's land now!”

“You will meet your end at the point of my blade beast,” the Castellan replied defiantly.

“Get 'ere and 'ave a go then.”

The Chaplain charged the massive Warboss swinging his Crozius Arcanum, barely managing to avoid a swing by the Ork's Power Claw as Castellan Tyron charged around the rear and with a swing of his Power Sword sliced off Kazhragaz's Kombi Shoota. Tyron danced out of reach as the Ork swung round to hit him. Fior lunged in and landed a glancing blow across the Warboss's Mega Armour, stumbling him but not before Kazhragaz swung out again and hit the Chaplain

square in the Breastplate. Fior was sent hurtling through several trees eventually landing in a heap over fifty yards away.

Castellan Tyron, in blind rage at seeing the motionless form of Fior, charged again at the Ork Warboss, hacking and slashing without any signs of form or technique.

“Dis 'ere iz fun metal boy,” Warboss Kazhragaz bellowed at Tyron, merely grinning its fanged grin as slash marks and chunks were taken out of its armour.

Hitting back at the Black Templar, the Warboss caught him with a glancing blow that knocked the Castellan down. Looking up at the towering mass of greenskin and armour above him, Tyron could still feel the defiance burning within him.

“You will fall foul beast, the crusade will exterminate you from this world!”

Out from behind the Ork Warboss, Chaplain Fior suddenly appeared and brought his Crozius in a downward arc, breaking the plates across the shoulder of the Mega Armour and distracting the massive greenskin. Kazhragaz swung over and sliced clean through the Power Armour of the Chaplain, sending blood splattering across the ground. The Warboss let the Chaplain fall to the

ground and turned around in time to see the Power Sword plunge itself in between its eyes.

As the Ork Warboss realised it was dead and fell sideways to the ground, Tyron rushed over and knelt by his old mentor. The wounds were far too severe and Fior was doomed, but he would die a hero's death.

“Thankyou brother, if it wasn't for your assistance we would not have brought low that brute.”

Chaplain Fior looked at Tyron as the younger Astartes removed his helmet. He was glad his sacrifice had ensured the survival of the Castellan. This one had great potential and was sure to do the chapter great honour.

“Remember... always... brother... No Pity... No Remorse... No Fear...”

With those last words the light faded from Chaplain Fior's eyes and he slumped down lifeless. Standing up from his fallen comrade, Castellan Tyron observed the battle as it had gone. Templars were moving amongst the corpses of much of the greenskin warband, finishing off those that had not fled when their Warboss was killed. Today he had lost a mentor and close brother, more importantly the Black Templar chapter had won a great victory.

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TOMORROW LINGERS

Chapter 2: this is a continuation of a story that began in issue #1

By A. Reynolds

Subject: Star Trek: The Original Series

Four months later

Even with the shields at maximum and every inertial damper at full strength, the storm battered at the ship, tossing it like driftwood through what was normally a harmless void. It was inevitable that every now and then an ion storm would occur that was unavoidable, and the best course of action was simply to batten down the hatches and ride it through but this was a particularly violent one, and no matter how little there was *outside* for the ship to impact with, there was plenty *inside* for human bodies to slam and crash against at every lurch.

Spock barely reacted as the turbolift doors opened he was concentrating fully on his various sensors and readouts as he tried to plot some kind of course that would take them through the storm as soon as possible. He had a basic trajectory plotted into the computer, but the storm was ever changing phenomenon, and every few seconds minute alterations had to be made in the course.

'Spock.'

McCoy's voice at his shoulder caused him to turn. The doctor's voice was quiet grave, even but its very quietness paradoxically caused him to be more audible against the snapped orders and whooping alarms in the background.

Spock turned to the doctor. 'Be brief,' he said without preamble.

'There were four crewmen injured by falling debris in weapons control,' McCoy said quietly. 'Nothing serious, just cuts and bruises. Nurse Chapel went down to see to them but another beam fell, and she's trapped in there with them.'

Spock nodded briefly, then turned back to

his console.

'I thought you might like to know, Spock,' the doctor continued uncertainly. 'Since er since it's Christine down there.'

Spock turned a steady, questioning gaze on him. 'Why do you believe the news would be of specific interest to me, Doctor?'

McCoy's eyes widened. 'Spock, hasn't she told you yet?' he asked cautiously.

'Told me what, Doctor?' Spock asked tersely. 'I am very busy.'

'Dammit, I've been telling her to tell you for weeks,' McCoy cursed. He seemed to undergo some kind of internal battle, and then finally he said, 'Spock she's pregnant.' At Spock's blank expression he said quickly, 'She's pregnant by Henoah. By *you*, Spock.'

In the entire length of time he had known Spock he had never seen him go so quickly and utterly white. He reached out blindly, his hand closing convulsively on the edge of his console.

'I don't ' he began, then broke off, shaking his head.

His expression changed from one of shock to one of hard, repressed fury. All of the chaos on the bridge had faded away, his focus narrowed down to this very different storm inside of his head.

'No,' he said flatly. 'I *do* understand. That creature...'

He trailed off, lost for words.

'He violated you both, Spock,' McCoy said softly. 'I know you don't remember. You weren't there, so to speak, but '

'No,' Spock said quietly. 'You are quite wrong. I *do* remember. I had thought it to be nothing more than a dream...'

'But how ' McCoy began.

At that point he didn't have the presence of mind to wonder at the fact that Spock had not been surprised at experiencing an erotic dream about the Head Nurse of the Enterprise, and instead of following it up had dismissed it from his mind.

Spock shook his head impatiently. 'Events were impressed on memory engrams in *my* brain, Doctor. I have no conscious recall of them, but they *are* there...'

McCoy blinked. He hadn't thought for an instant that the memories of those few days might linger on in the brains of the hosts. Jim and Dr Mulhall, of course, would never have the mental discipline to access them but a Vulcan was a different matter.

'Doctor, you said a beam fell. Is the nurse injured?' Spock asked, pulling him back to the more relevant topic.

'That's just it, Spock I don't know,' McCoy said helplessly. 'I got word about the beam through a crewmember outside the room but communications are down, so '

He blinked. Spock was no longer beside him, but the doors to the elevator were shutting with serene precision, unconscious of the turmoil in the ship around them.

Some kind of fury seemed to be unleashing itself on the blockage across the weapons control door. Christine could not hear any machinery or phaser fire outside just the wrenching and groaning of very, very heavy things being moved and flung aside. She met the eyes of young Ensign Winters, and smiled.

'I told you they'd get us out, didn't I?' she asked brightly.

Ensign Winters nodded wordlessly,

glancing at the damaged door. He was the youngest, newest crewmember trapped in the room, and he was also the worst injured. He had lost a good deal of blood from a gash in his leg, and blood loss and fright were conspiring to send him into shock.

'Bear up, Al,' Lieutenant Marvin said to him, patting him briefly on the shoulder. 'The nurse here's right. Just a few more minutes now...'

Christine smiled at the lieutenant gratefully as Winters relaxed. It seemed that the ensign put more trust in the words of his co workers than in hers. The three senior officers in the room had spent most of their time since the collapse in reassuring Ensign Winters, and their combined efforts had distracted themselves from the situation as much as it had distracted Winters.

'Here we are,' Marvin continued with a grin, as a gap appeared between the two doors, fingers slid through, and the panels were wrenched apart by sheer physical effort.

They had been expecting a team of engineers and medical staff. What they did not expect was a wild eyed Vulcan with torn hands staring into the room, quickly composing himself as he registered the presence of the men inside. Spock inhaled deeply, and instinctively straightened his top, leaving dark green blood stains on the blue fabric. His eyes instantly caught Christine's, and held them.

'Nurse,' he said in a fast but level tone. 'Are you uninjured?'

'Oh, I'm quite fine, Mr Spock,' she said quickly, getting to her feet. 'It's these men here '

Spock's hand instantly cupped under her elbow as she moved, helping her to rise as a small team of medical personnel pushed past them. An odd recollection pushed over her at the heat of his fingers on her arm. Henoach, steering her towards the bed in her quarters. Henoach, peeling the clothes from her body...

Before she quite knew what was happening Spock had escorted her out of the room and a little way down the corridor. All activity was crowded around weapons control. They were quite alone.

'You are certain you are well?' Spock asked insistently, his eyes travelling from her face, down to her abdomen, and then back again. *Four months*. It had been four months since Henoah had taken control of his body. He could just discern a slight curvature of her normally flat stomach.

'I'm *fine*,' she promised. 'Not a scratch on me.'

Spock took in a deep breath. He looked down briefly at his injured hands, then back up at her. His eyes were unreadable. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then suddenly turned away from her, fixing his gaze on the wall instead as if he would read forgotten lines in the paint.

'He told you, didn't he?' she asked hesitantly. 'Dr McCoy?'

Spock turned back to her, and she caught the instant of the veil of control being lowered over bewildered emotions. His eyes were briefly searching, and then expressionless again.

He nodded, once. 'I am slightly dismayed, however, to learn of this *after* you had told the good doctor,' he said steadily.

She shook her head miserably. 'I didn't tell him. He just found out. He happened to scan me without my realising.'

'Ah,' Spock nodded sagely. 'How very like McCoy.'

'I wanted to tell you,' she continued. 'Really I did. I just didn't know how...'

It was obvious that she was telling the truth. It was written on her face as clearly as if he had melded with her. But he said in a hard voice, 'If McCoy had not spoken, would I ever have learned about that which is to be my child?'

Her expression faltered for a moment. He thought she was going to cry but with

admirable discipline she fought her way back to composure, and said in a crisper tone, 'I *would* have told you. I can't do more than give you my word for that, Mr Spock.'

Spock nodded, his expression unreadable. His eyes moved down to her stomach again, almost of their own will and then he refocused firmly on her face.

'I must return to duty,' he said in a level tone.

'You're injured,' she protested, her professional conscience taking over from personal concerns. 'Let me see to your hands,' she said, reaching out to them.

'No,' Spock said, then more firmly, 'No. It is inappropriate. I will go to the sickbay.'

He held her gaze for one more second, then a veil seemed to have lowered in his eyes. He turned stiffly, and walked away down the corridor, ignoring the chaos behind him.

Spock did not return to duty, and he did not report to sickbay. Instead, as if he was being driven by something external to his own mind, he walked in silence to his quarters and stepped in through the door. He looked down at his hands again as the door hissed shut behind him. The cuts there were beginning to sting as he allowed himself to feel the pain.

He went into the bathroom and ran his hands under cool water. Then he swabbed the water away and dropped the blood soiled towel into the laundry chute. He opened a cupboard on the wall, found antiseptic cream and bandages, and carefully dressed the wounds. He had lifted debris outside weapons control that four male crewmembers had not been able to move. It was no wonder that his hands were damaged.

Spock returned to his living quarters, and sat down in silence behind the desk. The red alert siren was no longer whooping. The storm seemed to have passed. The ship was no longer bucking and shaking,

and he noticed that the light on his desk communicator was blinking. Communications must have been restored. He reached out and pressed the button, saying in a flat voice, 'Bridge. Captain Kirk.'

Jim replied instantly, with a mixture of concern and annoyance in his voice.

'Spock! What the hell just happened?'

Spock hesitated for a moment. He had no intention, on an open communication to the bridge, of saying, *I was told that I had inadvertently impregnated a member of the ship's crew, and I was concerned for her safety.* He had no intention of saying anything at all on the matter to the captain as yet. He had little choice but to prevaricate.

'Dr McCoy informed me of a number of crewmembers, trapped in weapons control,' he said steadily. 'I judged that I was needed.'

'Well,' Kirk began, sounding confused. 'You got them out safely, Spock?'

'I did,' Spock nodded, 'but in doing so I sustained some small injury to my hands. May I request to be relieved for the remainder of my shift?'

'Of course,' Kirk said instantly. It was unusual for Spock to ask to be relieved, but not unprecedented. 'We're out the other side of the storm. It's just damage control now.'

'Thank you, sir,' Spock nodded, then cut the communication.

He leant back in his chair, steeping his fingers before his face. It was impossible to deny that he had reacted emotionally to the news that McCoy had so unceremoniously sprung upon him on the bridge. Anger, mortification, and ... fear. Yes, it was fear that was washing through both those other emotions. Fear of ... this immense change that was about to be wrought on his life. A child... He was going to be father to a child, with none of the secure web of Vulcan family rituals behind him. He had no bonded partner, no ideal

Vulcan wife and home back on Vulcan. He had a woman with golden hair, a human woman who loved him hopelessly, with whom he had no proper relationship. Both of them on an active starship, both sundered from one another by a gulf of mixed emotions, the only thread holding them together being a tiny life that fluttered in her womb.

Spock sighed. The breath that he exhaled was minutely shaky, and he steadied it. Perhaps the only way to understand the future was to understand the past that had formed it. He had, as he had said to McCoy, experienced a dream about Miss Chapel after regaining control of his body from Henoah. It had startled him, it was true but he had accepted it as no more than the movings of his unconscious mind. Despite all of his Vulcan training, he still experienced dreams in a very human way, a way to which his mother his mother could relate, to which his father only responded with bewilderment. He had dreamt about her before. She had burned in his mind at pon farr. She had been in his dreams when his controls were loosened after the Psi 2000 virus. He did, he had to admit, think of her more than he thought of other women on board the ship. Her face was attractive. Her mind was attractive. But he was not currently in need of a relationship, so there was no logic in positioning himself in such entanglement.

But this dream... He had been troubled by odd memories since those events his own voice, speaking with alien intonations. His hand reaching out to a face he recognised as Dr Ann Mulhall, a face Henoah saw only as *Thalassa*. Memories of burning emotions that he himself had barely experienced emotions that he associated with a corrupted psyche. The fascination of standing before a full length mirror and examining his own nude body, a body both intimately familiar to him, and which he had never seen before. An odd, voyeuristic pleasure...

In all honesty, he did not want to probe those memories. He did not want to understand Henoah's desires and motivations. They were alien to him more alien even than a human's mind. He was fearful of Henoah's mindset influencing

his own. Fearful of infection, corruption, contamination. That fear had to be pushed aside. Truly understanding what had happened between Henoah and Miss Chapel or between himself and Miss Chapel, for he had to acknowledge that he himself had been intimately involved was of paramount importance.

He lowered his hands, lit his meditation flame, and then resumed the posture of concentration. He did not always need to use his flame, but this time he thought he needed the focus it would give him. This time he was not examining his own thoughts and feelings. He was examining another man's memories another man's actions inside his own body.

He stared into the wavering flame before him, let himself sink into its depths, let his eyes slip their focus, and began to remember...

<Lying on a bed in the sickbay ward. The mattress, firm and comfortable under the length of his body. A sense of anticipation.

<The transfer beginning. An odd, slipping sensation of vertigo. Being suddenly weightless, blind, disconnected...>
□□□

No. He was slipping down the easy route, following the memories at the forefront of his awareness. He had to access those memories that were hidden from him, that were traced delicately on his mind in fading ink, whispered somewhere behind his consciousness.

<Lying on a bed in the sickbay ward. The mattress, firm and comfortable under the length of his body. A sense of anticipation.
□□□

<The transfer beginning. An odd, slipping sensation of vertigo. Being suddenly >
□□□

He gasped involuntarily, the first breath of life after millennia, the sharp movement of

his ribcage threatening to pull him out of the meditation. He struggled, pushing himself back into the depths like a diver desperately fighting against the density of water.

< The transfer beginning. An odd, slipping sensation of vertigo. Being suddenly enlivened. *Joy!* Immense, consuming joy at physicality, light, movement *power*. Oh, the joy...>

He found himself shrinking from the unrestrained emotion of Henoah. The exuberant chaos of his thoughts was overwhelming.

He distanced himself. It was not necessary to examine every sordid thought in Henoah's mind. It struck him that this was akin to performing a mindmeld on his own mind. He should approach it as such, navigating his way through irrelevancies until he found the knowledge he was seeking.

Christine. He was looking for the brightness of her image amongst the dull unpleasantness of Henoah's thoughts. Something he had already seen in a dream...

He found her.

<The blond nurse, walking down the corridors at the end of her shift. The pleasing movement of her hips under the brief blue uniform. The air of distraction that hung about her since the mind touch that he had initiated. Oh, this Vulcan's body was useful...
□□□

<Walking smoothly after her, in the knowledge that she was heading towards her quarters. Slipping through her door after her before she could shut it, before she could protest. Her brief exclamation of surprise.
□□□

<Coming upon her, close and fast, pressing her against the wall. Her lips on his, her

hand curling about his neck, her fingers cool and soft. Alien tastes of her breath, the wetness of her mouth. The small, animal noises she made. Hungry for her... It had been so long...

□□□

<A mental sense of her confusion, this mental ability of his becoming frustrating. Not wanting to sense her desire, her fear. A selfish lust, wanting to do nothing but satisfy his own longing.

□□□

<He put his hands to the scooped neck of her dress. He used his strength to tear the fabric like tissue. He peeled her like fruit, dropping the rind about her on the floor. The scents of her body flooded around him. He could see her pupils dilating in a mixture of fear and anticipation, her chest moving faster as her breaths came short and sharp. Her breasts, round and firm, her milky skin, the dark hair between her legs drawing his eyes, building an insatiable hunger.

<He had her on the floor. He was fumbling urgently at his own clothes with one hand, releasing that which was straining against the fabric of his trousers, holding her down easily with his other hand. Straddling her naked form. Entering her... Oh, the pleasure of that sliding movement to his yearning flesh...

<And later he was naked too, and he was all over her, tasting her as she writhed in pleasure, allowing her hands to trace over his body, instructing her to pleasure him, telling her with his mind exactly where to touch, where to stroke, where to place her tongue. It went on and on. This Vulcan body was inexhaustible, and she was forbidden rest. The night darkened, then thinned, turned to dawn, and she was tottering, exhausted, her face pale and bloodless. He was untiring. He had waited millennia, and this fresh female body was his to command. The ability to have her obey him as a doll was almost as intoxicating as the act himself.

<He ordered her one last time to spread herself for him, to give herself up to him, and then, at last, he left her. There would be plenty of time again tonight, and the night after, and yes, when he had done away with this stupid human crew he would

take her with him her and any other females particularly attractive to him. He had that power. He had that *right*.

<He went to the bathroom, meticulously cleansing this borrowed body, admiring the sleek musculature and dark hair in the mirror as he stood there.□ He had acquired a good, virile, attractive body, and with his superior mind the possibilities were endless.

<He returned to the bedroom, smiled down benevolently at her as she lay exhausted on the bed. She had pleased him. He made sure she self administered a stimulant to cover the traces of her sleepless night, and he left the room...>

Spock came back to himself with a gasp, shaking. His hands had slipped from their position in front of him and were gripping the arms of his chair, his knuckles standing out white against his skin. He was panting, hot, breathless, and *aroused*. He could feel the solidity and heat of his erection pushing against his clothing, just as it had in the memory. He yearned for

No!

This was his precise fear. Henoah, influencing his thoughts. Henoah, controlling his desires. Henoah was dead, non existent but he was there, behind him, touching him on the shoulder, whispering to him where to look, what to think...

He stood abruptly, almost knocking his meditation flame off the desk in his preoccupation. He had to control this. They were memories, nothing more. No more than the lingering traces of a meld. Logical. Controllable.

I have been violated, he realised with sudden astonishment. At the time the choice to offer up his body had been the logical one, the scientific one. He had given no thought to the emotional consequences of giving up his body to such intimate access by another. Perhaps if his body had hosted Sargon, or even Thalassa, it would have been different. Perhaps the

thoughts and feelings left behind would have been less like a stain in his mind. He hated Henoah with a steady, burning hate.

He remembered something McCoy had said when the idea of the transference was proposed. *It all seems rather indecent to me*. Perhaps the doctor had been right. McCoy had seen the human cost of the experiment. Spock had seen only scientific wealth. He had never imagined emotional consequences lingering behind. Certainly he had never imagined physical, biological consequences lingering behind. In his sublime selfishness, Henoah had managed to warp two lives.

Selfishness...

The word hung in Spock's mind. Was Henoah the only one guilty of selfishness? Selfish of Christine, perhaps, to take advantage of Spock's borrowed body.

No. No, she would not be able to fight

To be continued. . . .

Author's comments:

This story follows on from events in the Star Trek: The Original Series episode Return to Tomorrow.

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against Henoah's power. The woman that Spock knew would not have thrown aside principles to satisfy transient lust. There was a certain rigid honour that characterised Christine Chapel. She did what was right, often to her own detriment.

Selfish... of himself.

Spock's head dropped minutely. Selfish of himself to think only of scientific advancement, and to offer his body regardless of the consequences. Selfish of himself to walk away from her outside weapons control. Selfish of himself to ignore her emotions and to fall prey to his own. Selfish to believe that he was the wronged party, and she was not.

He was not useful at present. He was not in any fit state to present himself to another being, to discuss anything of import. He reseated himself behind the desk, re steepled his fingers, and re entered the dark space of his own mind.

We Had Big Dreams

By RoAnna Sylver

Subject: Hotel Dusk: Room 215

“Hey, Louie, Lou aaaayyy, heey eyy, we gotta go now!”

It was sometime after 3 AM on the first day of 1980, and ex detective Kyle Hyde was pleased to find himself far happier than he'd been in a long time and far less sober. Not quite to the point of drunkenly slurring “hey, I love you man” and other things that tended to come out of alcohol loosened lips, but apparently to the point of singing old songs at the top of his lungs. Or maybe ‘song’ wasn’t right you had to be able to carry a tune to call it a song. His head spun gently, and the hallway rocked with the comforting rhythm of the inside of a ship’s hull in rising waves, or a child’s cradle.

Sway walking alongside him, Louis DeNonno half hummed, half giggled the chorus to the old song, pleased as spiked punch to be singing something with his name in it. After the kind of drinking they’d done that night toasts for the new year, or anything at all that popped into their heads that sort of thing became a big deal.

“Hey, man, we gotta get you a song now!” He nudged Kyle in the ribs, giving him a scrutinizing look. “But there ain’t no songs with Hyde in ‘em... or Kyle. Hey you got a middle name?”

“Yeah, but I’m not telling you what it is. I’m not that drunk.”

“Aw, c’mon! I’ll tell you mine!”

“No.”

“Bet it’s a girl’s name or something. Like what? Kyle... Elizabeth Hyde?”

“It is not Elizabeth.”

“Then what?”

“It’s ‘Shut Your Pie Hole And...’ and... mmm.” he trailed off with a grunt. He was just sober enough to be able to string coherent sentences together, but not quite enough to come up with any clever insults or banter. Even with Louie.

“Ah, whatever.” Louie shrugged. “Can’t think of any songs about Elizabeth either.”

They moseyed together down the hallway from the bar the place was empty, but that was a big change from a few hours ago. The place had been surprisingly full, the tiny bar packed wall to wall with revelers armed with noisemakers, confetti, and glasses of champagne, and some harder stuff.

Louie’d had his work cut out for him, mixing drinks for the happy crowd, and had been truly in his element. Kyle had watched him pour and mix and add studied dashes of ingredients almost faster than his eye could follow, and marveled that he could keep track of the seemingly endless list of liquid recipes. The boy was a natural, it was almost like watching a dance, beautiful in a weird way. Something he was really good at. Back home in New York he’d been committing that special, slow kind of suicide that came from living on the streets, and running from the law. Here, he shined. Remembering him talk about wanting his own bar, a place where he really belonged, and seeing him like that Kyle could believe it would happen someday. It really just might.

Louis DeNonno. From crook to bartending magician. A damn Cinderella story. Who the hell would have thought?

The party’d started to really wind down around 2. Just Kyle, Louie and one or two late night stragglers left in the bar. Dunning Smith had been mysteriously absent from most of the festivities; even Rosa had gotten out of the kitchen some

to enjoy herself. But just around then he'd popped into the bar and left the door partially open behind him. And through that ajar door Kyle had caught a glimpse of a girl not Mila, she'd gone to bed just after midnight. After all she'd been through, poor kid still needed to rest, and a raucous party was not her cup of tea just yet. No, this was a different girl, maybe a little older than Mila who despite the party going on before her, only had eyes for Dunning.

Kyle saw all of that in an instant, and all he could think was, "God, could that really be her?" But before he could even open his mouth, the door swung shut and Dunning folded his arms at the mess of confetti, toppled glasses and dirty napkins and plates and bottles littering the bar.

"Well, shit. This mess isn't getting cleaned up tonight." He shook his head. He was right the bar alone would take several hours. "Leave it for the morning." He looked from Louis to Kyle and back, looking as if he were struggling to say something, or not say it. Kyle couldn't help but think it had everything to do with the girl who waited outside. In the end, he just gave a nod to both of them, along with what might have been a smile, then turned and exited the room again.

As the door swung shut, Kyle saw him put his arm around the girl's shoulders and lead her down the hall. Well, that was Dunning maybe he'd tell them all about it later, but probably not. And that was just fine. He'd thanked them from the bottom of his heart just now, if not in so many words.

Despite Dunning's decision to leave the mess until they were all fresh, Louie couldn't stand to leave his beloved bar in that state. He just had to take a few minutes to clean off the worst of it and finally let himself relax a bit for the first time that evening. Hell, he deserved a little New Year's celebration too, he'd probably worked harder that night than he had all year. Now that the adrenaline high of practicing his art for a most appreciative audience had worn off, it left him feeling drained and exhausted.

Kyle stayed, shared a much more quiet few

minutes with him than the rest of the night until then. Wasn't even entirely sure why, except that he didn't feel like crashing into bed immediately, and there was nobody else he particularly felt like hanging around. In a weird way, he'd actually really enjoyed that evening a rare party. An excuse to actually be happy for once, and put his heart rending three year obsession aside, if only for a few hours. Just to hang loose with a friend. And yeah, he could admit it quietly to himself, in a part of his mind where it wouldn't be the drink talking Louie was a friend. In a much better setting and situation than they'd previously known one another, Kyle enjoyed his company. And he'd sure as hell proven himself trustworthy and loyal in the harrowing events of the past few days. No way Kyle would have gotten through it without him, he knew that for damn sure.

So now they meandered down the hallway together, in no hurry to reach their destination and bring this rare, happy night to an end. Occasionally bumping into one another and not caring, narrowly avoiding stepping on each other's or their own feet.

"So, you gonna be here tomorrow?" Louie asked, glancing up at Kyle with an odd look. "Not leaving right after the party, skipping out without saying goodbye, right?"

"Come on, you know better than that." Kyle half smiled, half grimaced. "I'm not going anywhere tomorrow except into hangover heaven. You and me both, I'd say."

"Yeah sure is sweet while it lasts, though, am I right?"

"Damn fine brew." Kyle smiled at the memory and lingering taste. "But no, I'm here for a few more days at least... been running all over, pushing myself so hard for three years straight... I'm burnt, Louie." He sighed, let his eyes close for a moment. "I need some time to just breathe easy for a while. I need a bre eaAAAH!"

His feet were no longer on the ground. In fact, they were swooping up in front of him as if he'd stepped on a banana, and he was falling backwards faster than his sloshy,

tired brain could connect the dots. He windmilled in instinctive attempts to grab at something, Louie's shoulder or the wall, anything but it didn't stop him from falling. His hand did catch something, though, something that felt like a thin chain. It slowed him down for just a second while Louie gaped and reached out to catch him, but too late. Then, whatever it was in Kyle's hand snapped, and the floor slipped up and hit him painfully in the face. A thump beside him and flailing arm that smacked against his shoulder told him that Louie had met the same fate.

Goodbye walking upright like normal human beings, hello floor.

"Aaaghhh..." one of them groaned, Kyle wasn't even sure which. They just lay there for a few seconds, slowly moving arms and legs and making sure all body parts were present and accounted for. They were, but still hurt like the dickens.

"Oh, jeez, Hyde..." Louie managed, struggling to sit up. "Are we really that drunk?"

Kyle sat up too, slowly but not slowly enough. His head was heavy and spinning, and starting to throb already. Here we go. But he squinted at the floor, looking for whatever he'd tripped over. "Not yet. The floor's wet."

"What the..." Louie blinked, frowning accusingly at the puddle. "I haven't even been out here all night. You?"

"No, in the bar the whole time."

"Huh. Trip."

"Yeah, literally." Kyle had to smile a little. Quite a trip that had been. "Someone must have decided to take a little extra back to their room... but some of it never made it that far."

"Mmgh. And guess who'll be cleaning it up in the morning?" Louie winced.

"Cross that bridge when you're sober." Kyle said, thinking it sounded better in his head. They stood up, or rather sort of clawed their way up the walls and each

other, leaning on one another once they were both upright.

They'd just started back down the hall when Louie stopped dead, actually letting out a gasp and grabbing at his chest. "AAH!"

"What?!" Kyle almost yelped, surprised at the sudden motion and wildly wondering if his friend were having a heart attack or something.

"It's gone!"

"What's gone?!"

But Louie didn't answer. He dropped to his hands and knees and started searching around the floor, looking in all directions and pawing at the carpet, seeing if it would lift up.

"Louie, what the hell are you doing?" Kyle stood there, looking down at him and suddenly feeling very, very tired. The night, the past few days hell, the past few years were finally starting to catch up to him, and now... now, the thought of the bed in room 215 was real sweet.

But Louis was not to be distracted. "My tags." He said at last. He looked up before Kyle could open his mouth to ask. "On the chain I always wear around my neck, the two metal tags on it. I have to find them!"

Kyle's face twisted, he was about to let loose with a snarky remark, something about 'for Chrissake, Louie, look for your own jewelry, I'm going to bed', but something stopped him. The look on Louis' face, his eyes, wide and desperate, almost pleading this was important. For whatever reason... finding these little pieces of metal right now, was as vitally important to him as finding Bradley was to Kyle. And that was saying something.

That, and the memory of a thin metal chain in Kyle's hand, the thing he'd grabbed when he tripped. The feeling as it snapped, and he fell. Maybe it wasn't his fault, but the thing had broken because of him. He had to help out if only to get Louie to stop looking at him like that.

“Okay.” He said, as relief flooded Louie’s face.

So he looked on the floor too. He didn’t actually get down on his hands and knees, he just stalked back the way they had come, bent over and scanning the floor. Then his hand darted down, and he grabbed something up off the carpet. “Hey, I got something.”

Louie’s head jerked up, and he scrambled unsteadily up to join Kyle. His face lit up when he saw the glint of metal in his hand then fell.

“It’s just the chain...”

“Well, yeah. I thought you wanted it. I know it’s broken, I’m... sorry.” If Louie recognized how rare an unprompted apology from Kyle Hyde was, he didn’t show it. Instead he was looking dejectedly at the ground, hands balled into fists. Then he suddenly whirled around and went back to scouring the floor.

“Louie, what the hell?”

“It’s not the chain!” Louie almost shouted, desperation coming through loud and clear. “It’s what’s on it. The tags, his tags. I need to... if I can’t find them...”

Kyle frowned he’d caught that one word. ‘His’ tags. Whose tags? But he didn’t ask, just went back to searching. Behind him Louie spasmodically moved across the floor, before finally coming to a stop at the other wall. He just leaned against it and stared at the ground for a minute, head spinning. This was all too much. He couldn’t even think, he was too far under already. Why had he had those drinks after the party had ended? None of this would have happened if he hadn’t...

“Hey.” Kyle said quietly, coming around to stand in front of him. He didn’t like what he saw that look of panic and loss. Nobody should have that look and definitely not Louie. Not again. Jesus, he seemed close to tears. “We’ll find them.”

“Okay. Okay.” Louie took a deep breath and rejoined the search.

Nothing. Up and down the hall, all around the puddle, around the edges of the carpet. They even looked behind plants, even inside their pots on the crazy off chance of a bizarre ricochet. Nothing. By this time Louie had gone very quiet, a much more disturbing contrast to his panic of moments before. This wasn’t good. Kyle couldn’t help that like this he was a time bomb, and he had no idea what would happen if that counter reached zero and no little bits of metal had been found.

Kyle sighed, straightening up to crack the crick he was getting in his neck from staring at the floor. He jammed his fists into his pockets then stopped dead. One hand touched something round and cold, like a coin but oblong. Two things. He slowly drew his hand out two small, roughly rectangular pieces of metal, with rounded edges. Well, I’ll be damned, he thought. The things had actually fallen into his pocket as he fell. What were the odds?

“Louie,” Kyle said, holding out his find, and looking at them himself. He barely had time to register that they had something written on them, before Louie had jumped up and run over. And just enough time to read the first two words of one of them: “Barelli, Daniel.”

Louis let out his breath in a great rush, grabbing the small metal pieces and rubbing them between his fingers. The back surfaces were dulled and some of the writing on the front was worn down an old habit. He generally tried to keep that to a minimum: he didn’t ever want to rub out what was on them completely... but it was comforting. Rubbing the metal with his eyes closed and speaking softly under his breath, something Kyle couldn’t quite hear or maybe it was actually in Italian.

“You okay now?”

Louis looked up at Kyle as if seeing him there for the first time. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks, Hyde.”

“Don’t mention it.” he said, but kept looking at him strangely. Louie didn’t really notice; he was trying to slip the little tags back on the broken chain presumably for safekeeping until it could be fixed or

replaced.

“They’re his, aren’t they?” Kyle asked quietly. Louie looked up at him, but didn’t say anything. “I saw the name. Daniel Barelli?”

“... Yeah.” Louie said at last. “They’re Danny’s.” He took a deep breath. “Army. Vietnam.”

Kyle kept his mouth shut, not at all sure what to say. What the hell did you say to something like that? But he had to say something, couldn’t just leave it like that. Running away now would be the ultimate cop out, and he really would end up leaving the next day; they’d never figure out what to say to each other. So, he gritted his teeth and dragged the words out of himself. “You weren’t in the war. Right?”

“Me? No.” Louis shook his head. “Luck of the draw, I guess. My number never came up... his did. You know that all the time, we’d been planning on just getting enough money to get out of the city. We were doing good too then that damn letter came. Threw a wrench in our plans just like that.”

Kyle kept quiet, just let him go on picking at the scab over the old wound. He’d spent the last few days hearing everyone else spill their guts all over the floor in front of him, what was one more time? It seemed to be good for them. Therapeutic, or whatever. And, well if it would get that look off Louie’s face, that was worth it, wasn’t it?

“So he went off... and I stayed home, trying to keep it up without him.”

“When was this, ’74, ’75?” Kyle interjected.

“Yeah. Late winter ’74 to... I dunno, man.” Louie didn’t look up at him. “Seemed like freakin’ forever, the days ran together.”

“Heh, I’m not surprised... I remember, for a while around that time seemed I was hauling your ass in every day of the week. No wonder you really were working overtime.”

“Yeah. I worked so hard then, worked my ass off, trying to get some extra scratch

together for when he got home. Just so things would be a little nicer, maybe a little easier on him. He sent me letters, you know.” A faint little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Tons of ‘em, one every week or so. Think I was the only one he had to write to. Told me all about it... the rain. How it seemed like it would soak right into his skin, water all the way through... how he learned to sleep with one eye open and a gun in his hand. And how...”

Louie broke off, face contorting with pain. He looked away. When he spoke again, his voice sounded husky and hoarse. “And how he wished so bad he was back home, cooking up the next big thing with me. I mean fuck, man. Danny wanted to be where I was, in that cold, stinking city, never knowing where our next meal was coming from. He wanted to be in the place I would have killed to get away from. Can you imagine that?”

“Must have made you grateful for what you had.”

“Maybe a little. But mostly it just made me all the more determined to break out. God, I was so sure we’d make it. We had such big dreams then.” Louie turned back to look at Hyde there were no tears on his face, but it wouldn’t have taken much. He continued, the words starting to spill out of him more easily after a while, he wouldn’t have been able to stop if he’d wanted to.

“And then Danny came home. He wasn’t the same ‘course, everybody says that war changes you, you hear it all the time. But it does. Little things, like... like when he’d eat, he’d always set aside some of it for later, and freaking guard it with his life. I remember one time, he had some French fries, I tried to grab one of ‘em... he just grabbed my wrist and stares at me like he didn’t know who I was, like he was about to knock my lights out. I’d never seen that look on his face before. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’d been in prison instead of working for Uncle Sam.

“Nothing went right from then on. We thought he might get some whaddaya call it, government comp, for all his time.” Louie shook his head with an entirely

mirthless laugh. "Nah. What the hell happened to 'America takes care of her boys?' We got shit. Veterans here... Jesus.

"He'd got hurt a few times over there, but nothing really serious. Nothing to get him a Purple Heart or anything. He was all healed up by the time he got home his body, anyway. His mind... that was something else. All the time after that, he'd wake up nights... screaming. Crying." Louie's voice lowered to a dry, labored whisper. "Thinking someone was in the room, trying to kill him, thinking he'd heard a wire snap or a land mine. All in his head, but real to him, you know? I'd talk him down, tell him he was home, the worst thing here he had to worry about were the rival wallet snatchers and big, bad Officer Hyde. Sometimes I'd just put my arm around him, hold him until he stopped shaking. Sometimes it took hours.

"And then... God. He'd ended up just like me, more desperate than ever to get out of that city. I don't think he never would have gotten involved with Nile, if he hadn't been drafted, if that hadn't sent him over the edge. We would have found another way. Damn it, Danny, we always found another way!" He actually smacked a fist against the wall, and stared at the ground.

Kyle didn't say anything, but thousands of words were spilling through his mind. Find something to say, anything, what the hell did he do with this? Some things "I'm sorry" just isn't enough for.

But he wanted to end this now. Even though he knew damn well how the rest of the story went. But he didn't know how. Did he put a hand on Louie's shoulder? Hell, did he give him a freaking hug, what could he do here? Kyle Hyde was not a hugger. But yelling or reverting to any of his normal snarky reactions or just leaving the room was not an option. He wasn't comfortable with any of this, this sharing. Sure, he'd done a lot of it lately, but he'd never get used to it. But thankfully, Louie wasn't quite done. He spared Kyle the decision of how to react by continuing.

"And then it happened. That night, when J... when Bradley..."

Kyle actually nodded. "Go on." He said quietly. Changed his mind maybe this was just how it had to be. At the very least, let's just get it over with.

"When Danny didn't show up at the restaurant that night I knew. I knew he'd gotten in too deep, he was in trouble... and when I got there, and saw it? After Bradley left, and I run up to Danny... he wasn't quite gone. He saw me, I know that. And... he apologized to me. To me!" There was that awful, broken, thoroughly un-Louie laugh again. Kyle hated it. "God, can you imagine? He says he's sorry... and I hold him again, just like it's late at night and he's having one of those flashbacks, they call them... And I just feel him slip away.

"And then... the sirens come. He's not even cold yet and I can feel the lights coming up behind me, I've got his blood all over me, and I have to run. I don't have time to say goodbye, I just... take the chain. His dog tags, he always wore them. I think deep down he was actually proud of what he went through, serving his country or whatever. They were important to him, so... they're important to me."

Louie was quiet for a few long seconds. "I never got to go to his funeral. I don't even know if he had one, or if he just ended up in Potter's Field I was already running."

Several long breaths of silence. Kyle didn't break it, just watched Louie. He was rubbing the metal ovals again then stopped, closed his fist around them and put his hand against his chest. It was a small movement, probably unconscious.

"It's not fair, man." He said quietly. "For him to survive all of that... growing up in the city, running with me... the war... for him to survive everything, come home to me alive, and then... in half a second, have it all taken away. What was it all for, Hyde?" He looked up at Kyle, as if truly looking for an answer in his face, but finding nothing. Then he shook his head and closed his eyes.

"It was for nothing. Danny never got out. No matter how long or hard he tried,

everything he survived, no matter how much we promised it to each other and never let the dream go... it died with him.”

“Bullshit.”

Louie opened his eyes and stared at Kyle, surprised at the immediate answer and hard tone. “What?”

“Bull. Shit. DeNonno.” Kyle stepped over, put himself directly in Louie’s vision. “What the hell are you saying? That he died for nothing, ‘the dream died with him’? I can’t believe this crap is coming out of your mouth.”

“What are you saying, Hyde?” Louie’s eyes narrowed, and his fist tightened protectively around the precious tags, the raised letters that made up the name Daniel Barelli.

“I’m saying that you got out. Look at yourself, Louie. You’re three thousand miles away from that city that almost killed both of you. You’ve got a real job. You got people who care about you. You’re making something of yourself, doing something you’re good at. I saw you tonight,” Kyle smiled a little at the memory. “Working the bar like a damn pro. You’ve got some kind of weird gift some people play the violin, I figure shit out people don’t want me to know, and you? You toss a glass and drink around like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“...Really?” The defensiveness had melted off Louie’s face. Now he was looking at Kyle as if he’d never heard something like this in his life. Hell, maybe he hadn’t.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t jerk you around like that.” The weird little smile was growing. “You told me once that someday you want a bar of your own, your own little slice of heaven. How long have you been holding onto that dream?”

“A long time. Danny and I would talk...”

“That’s what I thought. So what do you think he’d say if he could see you now? Out of the city, getting closer to making that sweet dream happen?”

□“I dunno. Been too long.” Louie

shrugged he didn’t want to think about this.

Kyle took a deep breath. “Well, I do. He’d be proud of you.”

Louie shook his head. “How do you know? Even I don’t know.”

Then Kyle said the last thing Louie ever expected to hear. “Because I’m proud of you.”

“... You’re just saying that ‘cause we’re both drunk and you think I won’t remember it tomorrow.”

“No, I’m saying it because it’s the truth. All those times I was busting your ass back in NYC, everything I told you back then you think it was just a job? I really did want to see you get your act together, and get out of that life. I told you about my dad, Louie. Only other person I ever told about him was Bradley... and that story was no lie. And neither is this. You’ve done real good in my book. And Danny well. If he didn’t think so too, he’s not the good friend you remember.”

“Hyde... thank you.” Louie said softly, with a look Kyle had never seen on his face. It was almost like he was sleeping; the way that the lines faded from a person’s face, how tension melted away. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and he wasn’t gasping under its pressure and pain anymore.

“Don’t mention it.” Kyle grimaced. “Seriously, don’t. God, this place is making me soft, first the damn Christmas party and now this...”

“Nah. I wouldn’t go talking about this to anyone else. You know that.”

“Good.” Kyle gave a little laugh, just a slight exhale through his nose. “Now. Go to bed, I’m gonna do the same. You got your work cut out for you tomorrow, cleaning up that mess in the bar.”

“Right. Sure.” Louie opened his mouth and closed it again, looking like he very much wanted to ask something, but not quite knowing how. “And... and you’ll...”

“Yeah, Louie. I’ll be here when you wake up.” He promised, looking directly into Louis’ eyes. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re not gonna be adding any of my stuff to that chain around your neck anytime soon.”

Louie smiled. A real one that broke through the anxiety, the old hurt. It felt good. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow. G’nite, Hyde.”

“Good night.”

Louie gave him a last smile and nod, then turned and headed slowly back toward his room, the broken chain dangling from his

hand. Kyle let his breath out in a slow hiss, just standing there in the empty hallway for a long time, mulling everything over in his head. Getting all his ducks in a row.

What he’d said to Louie... that Danny would be proud of him he meant it. But he couldn’t help but wonder. Bradley stole back into his thoughts like a thief in the night, leaving Kyle wondering Bradley, would you...?

Well. Old habits died hard.

With a last sigh, Kyle turned and stalked out of the hall through the double doors and up the stairs, back to Room 215.

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IN HIS EMPEROR'S SERVICE

Chapter 2; this is a continuation of a story that began in issue #1

By Jonathan Taylor
Subject: Warhammer 40,000

*****ENCODED
TRANSMISSION*****
*****TO: INQUISITOR
RESTRICTED *****
*****FROM: RESTRICTED *****
SUBJECT: PROCUREMENT OF
RESTRICTED
LOCATION: STATION MARAK
ROGUE TRADER SPACE
*****MESSAGE BEGINS*****

For a moment I floated in space, no. Not space, as the Warp closed around my mind I could see the ethereal ghosts of my past. He rose up then, a rotten corpse of hate and pain his throat a mess of scarred tissue and puss. Gurgling at me, as his bloodshot eyes twisted in fury he uttered my name. He fell away then, my past. And the warp retreated.

"Helloo! Emperors holy shit, but you din't pay attention do you?"

My eyes refocused, and there before me was the Techpriest. Holding my sword. Right.

"Yer doing it again, one minute I'm all chatting away at you and then you just fade out like ol' Nux' pict feeds!" The same fixed grin, was she eternally happy or was it a mask? Stop thinking.

"I just need to sleep off my hangover, is all." I began, "Surely you got to know what its like to have had three too many bottles of amasec, eh?" Concentrate.

Her face almost looked liked it was glowing for a second, then she spoke. "Aww, yer all just tired, aint'ja?"

She stood up from the bunk, still holding my sword.

"No human made this did they?"

Of course she knows! Everyone knows! That big, bolshy Rogue Trader must have seen it! Calm down. "Its a trophy."

The Techpriest grinned, "Ah so maybe your not as weak as you look then!" Ouch. "So this is from the Eldar?"

While trying to think up a suitable lie, I suddenly realised she was still talking. "So that would explain why its like all blunt and kinda dull coloured. Cos its dead!"

"Er..."

"I mean everyone knows that the Eldar swords are a part of them, like how Ork tech breaks as soon as they die, Eldar weapons dont feel like working without an Eldar using em yeah? So where did you get it?"

Stop talking, damn it.

"Tarturus." No point in lying I suppose. "Now can I please just get some sleep?"

Her grin faded, and she looked sad for a moment. Eh? "Ah, yeah. Sure. Um take yer sword, here."

She handed the sword to me, hilt first. I grabbed it by the blade, just above the hilt and reached down for the cloth sheath from the floor. As I straightened, I took care to ignore her curious looks as I climbed into the top bunk. Falling onto the greasy sheets, I dislodged an uncomfortable widget before rolling onto my side. Every fibre of my being, saying: Go away.

It seemed to work. After a few moments of whirring noises emitting from perhaps some 'hurt feelings' circuitry, she wandered off. Finally left in some peace, I took the sword out of its sheath. Grasping the hilt firmly. The Wailing Banshee glowed in my hands

as my eyelids fell and I began to drift back... back towards the past...

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"You cant do this! You have gone mad!" That was my voice, who am I talking to? "Mad!? The only madness I see here is following a rotten corpse, sat upon a Throne a million light years away!"

I became aware of my surroundings, I could feel the broken road beneath my feet. The ruins of a once great city and forgeworks were upon me, the dusty skeletons of destroyed buildings and the rust of war. Tarturus.

Before me, stood the traitor.

"Well!? What do you have to say? I just called the Emperor a rotten corpse and all you can do is gape at me!?" The man's eyes were filled with an unholy taint, yellow pinpoints of flame danced in his eyes, spittle dripped from the corners of his mouth. Blood stained his once proud uniform, he who had remained when all else had fallen to the Orks lived only to fall to madness.

I drew my laspistol, "Enough! I will not hear this heresy!" aiming the weapon at his head, only a hairline trigger stopping me from blowing his filth to the hells where it belonged.

I heard the click of Lasgun safety locks. The low hum of a hundred lasguns, charged and ready to fire. The 37th Tartarus PDF, how far we had fallen.

Colonel Brom, safe behind his maddened eyes, grinned with glee. "My Guardsmen are with me, Kale. Who is with you? WHO WILL STAND WITH YOU!!!???"

I leapt to my feet, or at least tried. My skull connecting with the ceiling with a painful thump. "Emperor be praised!" I yelled, clutching my head. My sword falling lifelessly onto the bunk.

"Emperor be praised," came a swift reply. What the?

A head leaned in through the doorway. Attached to the head was a body in a robe,

a cursury glance let me know it was a woman, that they seemed quite pleased with something and that she wore a wig. "Well, I have had yet to hear a dirty Merc calling upon the Emperor so early in the day." A priestess?

Say something pious. "The Emperor Protects?"

"And so He does, if He finds you worthy. Are you worthy, Magnus Kale?" She was smiling, it was a good smile. Not manic or perhaps insane, I mean Zealous though I could not remember seeing a smiling Priest before...

Oh yeah, I should say something. My head seems really clear this morning, must have been that bump on my head. She is still waiting. "I sure hope so."

"Well that is good enough then. Now are you going to sleep all day? Or would you like to take clean yourself up before joining us in the canteen?"

As I climbed off the bunk and now stood before her, I managed to get a better look at her. She was quite, er shapely, yet still dressed the part of a Priest. Purity seals hanging from her robes, the Holy Book of 6 Minute ABS hung on a chain from her waist. A pair of polished skulls and a uh, Eviscerator on her back. Right. Oh yes, and she had quite a few scars.

A shower sounded good. "So where could I go to clean up?" I asked her, while trying not to stare at, well anything.

She gave me some vague directions before making the Sign of the Aquila, and promptly left. Of course, she would know a Priest would sense the warp taint in me I'm sure. Well hopefully she wont try and burn me or anything.

After having the most luxurious shower in my life hot water on a space ship! I dried myself off and dressed myself before heading for the canteen. It wasn't hard to find, I just followed the smell of food and some rather bawdy laughter. Perhaps Mr Sandhammer joined his crew for meals? I opened the door in front of me, labled Canteen, had to be right place. I stepped

forward and received five sets of eyes all staring at me. I hesitated, doubt and embarrassment beginning to flood my mind yet I managed to keep my face blank.

Five women were sat at a single long table, with enough space for three at either side and another two at either end. Six places had been set. Hmm, what to do...

"Hey there, Kale! Have a seat," Ohmi indicated the empty seat next to her, with a plate of some unperceptible yellow mass of what was hopefully food on it.

"Yeah, we was just talkin' 'bout you here." I flicked a glance at the speaker, wearing a combat vest with matching bandana around her head she almost yelled Catachan just by mere presence. With broad shoulders, powerful muscles, and ah, nice red hair. I then noticed Ohmi had thrown a poison stare at the Catachan for some reason.

Undaunted, I moved over to the seat, doing my best to not meet anyone's gaze. Something didn't feel quite right, there was a tension in the air akin to the few moments before a battle. What were they planning? Maybe they had put something in the food! Yes, that would explain it! The Techpriest told them about my sword and that Priest read my mind and now they are going to kill me! Or something. Wait, that doesn't make sense.

"See, I told yer he would do that!" And the table erupted with laughter. Well sort of, the Catachan certainly erupted and Ohmi clearly put effort into her 'hehek'. Even that Priest and some uh, girl with tanned skin and blue hair chuckled behind their hands.

Okay, rally yourself, Kale. What is going on here?

Ohmi playfully pushed my shoulder, "Heh, Kale we were only pullin' yer leg. I just said to em you had a habit of 'switching off' when girls talk to you, is all."

"I don't just switch off," I began, only to be cut off rather suddenly.

"Then waddya call that vacant look on yer

face then? Now hush up and eat yer breakfast." The others looked at me encouragingly. Another woman though, wearing a Death Corp Commissar uniform, as well as a vicious looking gas mask, had not laughed and just continued to stare at me silently.

Ah well, what was the worst that could happen? A great many things in fact, like shut up. I took a hold of a fork left aside my plate and dug it into the steaming mass and shovelled a forkload into my mouth. It tasted of salt and butter and something I don't remember ever tasting before. But whatever it was, it was good. My eyes widened as I found the food tasted a lot better than it looked.

"Looks like your enjoyin' the scrabbled eggs then, ol' metal butt Merkus there," the Catachan indicated with her thumb a servitor busying itself in the adjacent kitchen, "he makes them every mornin'."

"And we have never told him to do so, either. In fact he seems to have been making them since long before Mr Sandhammer purchased him last year." Began the blue haired girl, "In fact all of our Servitors are a little strange."

"Thats because Ohmi keeps 'tinkering' with them, Lask,"

"Its not 'Tinkering', Looshy! I'm just fixin em up a bit, you know improving on them."

"And how is makin' Merkus whistle whenever I pass him an improvement!?"

"Well at least someone is whistlin' at ya."

I shifted myself a little away from Ohmi at that point, the girl sitting opposite me seemed to have noticed. "Oh, nevermind those two. Ohmi and Looshy are always going at each other. They get along mostly, but they always seem to find something to argue about."

I glanced over at Ohmi and the Priest, they seemed to have calmed down. While the Commissar seemed to be ignoring me now, and the Catachan and Priest were muttering something.

"I am, Collette Enri Marie Raymon Tooloz Lasko IV, though that is too long to say in polite conversation so Nux started calling me Lask. It is better than just being called 'Crusader' all the time."

Eh? "Wait, are you saying your a Crusader?"

"Oh dont look at me like that, I just wanted to give something back and this seemed the best way." How could anyone say that with a straight face? I decided to keep an eye on her, since she was starting to sound a little crazy.

"I feel I should properly introduce everyone, the fine Priest next to me here is Looshy McVisconte," This got me a smile from the Priest, "and next to her we have the lovely Jeanette Nux, formerly of Catachan."

"Jus' call me Nux." Just 'Nux'? Jeanette seemed a fine name yet she preffered Nux over the former. Perhaps she felt defensive about her femininity? Or even...

"He's doin' it again." Eh?

This received even more laughter, damn it. And my mind had been really clear up until now. I smiled, last thing I wanted was for them to think I was crazy.

"Anyway," Lask said, "you already know Ohmi, our resident Techpriest and all round know it all,"

Ohmi's face looked like it was glowing again when I looked at her, there was something about her that...

"And last, but not least is Jaegoos Schablone, formerly of the Death Corps of Krieg Commissariat." I looked to the Commissar, expecting well anything but got nothing, not even a nod.

"Dont let her scare you, she just doesn't like you."

I decided to just be brief with them, "Nice to meet you all."

"So, Kale, where are you from?" Lask kind of rolled her hand as she spoke, as if trying to encourage me to be more

forthcomming.

"Tartarus."

"That sounds kinda familiar. Didn't it get attacked or somethin'?"

"Planet was destroyed, right? By Orks."

"Uh, yeah Tartarus is dead. Caught between an Ork Waaggh and a Chaos incursion," I noticed at the mention of Chaos, Looshy had made the sign of the Aquilla. "not even the Space Marines managed to save it."

"Wow. So how did you survive den?"

"I was evac'ed by Spacers. Picked me up along with the rest of the Planet's surviving PDF."

"Well that was good of em, many a Marine woulda just left you there. Uh, no offence." Ohmi really just said whatever came into her mind by the looks of it.

"They were Blood Ravens. Not as stuck up " I noticed Looshy giving me a look, "I mean er, they were really nice guys actually in comparisson to some of the Spacers. Not that I've met many of them." Damn it, I'm starting to relax too much.

That seemed to satiate them, as they started chatting amongst themselves after that. I finished off my 'scrabbled eggs' and was about to excuse myself when,

"WHAT SKILLS DO YOU HAVE?" Oh my Empor I mean, what in the hells was that?

I realised the Commissar was staring at me again.

"For goodness sake, Jaegoos, would you turn your voice distorter down!?"

"ITS A CIVIL QUESTION."

"Well, I was a Sergeant in the Imperial Guard and I'm a trained medic. I also have some expeirance with Xeno technology."

"How'd ya manage that in the Imperial Guard? Experts on Xeno tech are rare

enuff' since many would say its Heresy to even touch that stuff."

Oh crap. "I was posted on the Guard detail of an archeological group, digging the planet. They were uncovering some ruins we found on the planet and I learned quite a lot from listening to them. There really wasn't much for me to protect them from apart from the occasional Ork wandering near the dig site."

The Commissar nodded, then just started ignoring me again.

After that interest in me started to die out, thankfully. I was allowed to leave while the others set about whatever it is they did on the ship during warp travel.

I kept bumping into Ohmi during the uh, day though.

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*****MESSAGE ENDS*****□

Author's comments:

Who likes cheese? Who likes fanfiction? I know rite!!?

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Anyway, I was never really happy with this chapter, after days spent trying to clean it up and make it have more shall we say, 'oomph' I eventually gave up. Sickened by the lack of progress, I tacked on a scene involving hot breakfast and awkward introductions. I don't really write nice/friendly stuff but if I had not put this chapter in the following chapters would make no sense. And it was a good oppurtunity to describe my characters here.

For added information, Kale is a liar, a thief and a murderer. Do not trust him.

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The Dark Knight: Corynorhinus

By David C.

Subject: "The Dark Knight"

The ancient oak doors to the aging cathedral were blasted open by the battering ram of the Gotham PD SWAT team. They quickly but cautiously filed into the abandoned building, the lamps on their rifles piercing deep into the thick and heavy darkness. They split up into three teams, two edging against the walls and the third filing through the center aisle.

The team on the left scanned the corroding statues of the saints that stood proudly in their niches in the wall. Farther up were statues of gargoyles, supposedly guarding the representations of the holy men. There was one group of horned creatures with their heads bowed and covering their bodies with their enormous, bat like wings. The officer at the end of the line let off a shudder as he aimed his light at the demonic looking figures. Nothing there. He shifted his rifle back toward the front.

One of the gargoyles lifted its head. The figure narrowed its eyes as it watched the intruders of the holy sanctuary, contemplating its next move. Then, in a flash, the being had disappeared from its perch.

The officer guarding the rear of the line going through the center aisle was so caught up manning his position as he moved along that he didn't notice the pair of hands from behind reach for the pressure point on his neck and pull him up, without a sound. The officer in front noticed his missing team mate two seconds before he, too, was silently incapacitated. The leader of the line was about to make a noise to alert the other two teams before a black gloved hand gently but firmly squeezed the pressure point on his neck and slowly and quietly let his body slide to the dusty ground.

Alpha team leader had just noticed the

absence of noise from the aisle when something metal whistled past his head and loudly embedded itself in the stone wall next to him. He heard a similar noise come from the opposite wall. He looked at what had hit the wall. It was a flat piece of metal, fashioned in the shape of a bat.

It was then that he noticed three still bodies in the center aisle, the LED lamps on their rifles illuminating the dusty air hugging the ground. His eyes met Bravo leader's eyes. A line of understanding quickly passed between the two men. They signaled to each other to tighten their search, especially above their heads.

Suddenly, the doors to the cathedral clapped closed, drawing the attention of both Alpha and Bravo team. The suddenness of the noise shattered the holy silence and removed the source of external lights from the squad cars outside as well as any visual contact with the police outside. It spooked the officers a little. It was as though the place were haunted, but only few of them knew what it was they were truly up against.

With their attention on the doors, the two three men teams were caught off guard as a dark cloaked figure loudly dropped onto the ground in the center aisle. This sudden movement drew the attention and light from the six officers toward their attacker. It was indeed the prey they had been stalking but who had briefly turned the tables on them.

Six rifles simultaneously clicked in the direction of the shadowy figure. "Freeze, police!" both team leaders barked at the man. He said and did nothing, but kept his eyes on the ground.

Both teams slowly and carefully edged their way over to the masked man, whose gaze remained on the ground, like a repentant child who knew he had done wrong. Alpha

leader signaled for the other five men to remain at bay while he made his way to the still figure.

The man, with his face still planted toward the ground, shifted his eyes to the team leader, and a split second later snapped into action. He leaned his body forward and slammed his leg back, slamming a great deal of force and weight into the side of Alpha leader's head. This set off the remaining SWAT team as they attempted to keep control of the situation. The masked man, however, had other plans. He exploded into a flurry of kicks and punches aimed at the team members. It was a mass collection of limbs connecting with bodies and rifles quickly being relinquished from surprised grips. Shouting and sounds of impact echoed throughout the cavernous space of the enormous sanctuary. In a minute, the entire team was unconscious on the ground, defeated.

The figure reached down and removed the radio from Bravo leader's vest. He pressed the side button and spoke in a low growl of a voice. "Gordon, this is Batman. Leave your men out of this. I don't want any more body bags tonight more than you do. Trust me on this." With that, he switched off the device before a complaint could crackle through. Already, the cacophonous sound of heavy force smashing into the doors was sounding, to no avail. Batman had already taken care of that.

He looked down the aisle to the towering cross at the end of the room, illuminated by the pale blue moonlight shining through the right hand windows near the ceiling. A new figure stepped out from behind the cross. This one was dressed in a large mauve coat and had a rather ghastly pale face, covered with a blood red smile, part of which was carved into the cheeks. His head was topped with long, greasy green hair.

"You know, you should have let me take care of them," the madman suggested in an off edge voice as he walked closer to Batman. "I would have done it in less time, and it would have been a lot less trouble." He looked down at the still forms. "Perhaps a little messy, though," he added with a creepy grin.

"No," Batman declared. "No more death."

"Fine," the insane jester sighed. He looked up, his head still tilted down but his eyes zeroing in on the masked man. "Have it your way. But we're still going to have some fun before the night's out." With that, he snapped his fingers.

The shaft of light pouring over the cross was doused instantly. Batman looked up just in time to see something like a panel being placed over the window. Of course, that meant that the madman, the Joker, was out of his grip, for now. Batman heightened his state of awareness. Being left in the dark in the hands of a mind as complex as the Joker's could only inspire the worst and most twisted of the imagination.

All was silent, until Batman heard in the distant echo the sound of a needle gripping onto the grooves of a record on a phonograph. A waltz started up with a quiet intro slowly building up. Batman tried to ignore the music, knowing that while it was the Joker's way of setting the mood, it was also a distraction.

That's when he heard it: the light padding of feet on the stone ground, making its way toward him from behind. The figure must have had night vision on, seeing as how it was apparently making a straight beeline for him in pitch black darkness. Batman remained still, and patiently anticipated his attacker, as the intro to the waltz was building up.

The figure was but a few feet away. The singing of wind blowing against a blade whistled in the air; by the sound of that, the figure was close. Batman still kept his ground, his entire eye sight still blindfolded by the blanket of the darkness.

He could hear the approaching foe behind him. He could almost feel the blade slowly being raised right behind his head...

The building of the intro was reaching its climax. Batman ducked down, and swung his leg back behind him, running only by his instinct. His foot connected with a soft

body. The intro had reached its climax and was silenced suddenly but temporarily by a dismissive percussion. A low groan accompanied the contact, before the assailant loudly dropped to the ground.

The waltz began.

A blinding, pale blue spotlight opened up on Batman from an oblique angle. He squinted as he tried to focus on the source of the light. It was of no use. He could see nothing behind the light.

The mocking drawl of the Joker's voice drew his attention immediately. By the sound of it, he had already made his way to the top. "You just may take me down tonight, Batman, or I might escape, who knows. Either way, as I said, we're going to have some fun tonight."

Upon hearing this, Batman went on the defensive and listened and watched all around for anything, as the waltz lightly swayed. And that's when they came.

They all looked about the same. Jokers. Everyone of them had long, greasy green hair and a red smile painted over a white face, dressed in purple. And each of them had a knife.

"Which one of us is real?" one posed, while another added, "And which one is the charlatan?" Those two both had voices similar to the Joker's.

"See, you like playing dress up and identity crisis," another Joker stated. "I like to do something similar, only I make other people do it," claimed yet another.

The Jokers were all around Batman now. There were six of them. Batman could take them on, though, even with the knives. He'd been trained to take on a hundred more than this.

"It won't matter to you if any of us is even real, though..."

"...Because you'll be Swiss cheese when we're done."

The psychotic clowns all raised their blades almost simultaneously, the intent to

murder frozen on their faces. Batman ducked down and pulled a leg sweep that took out two of the Jokers on his right. He then rolled out of the way as another from behind charged him, only to collide with one from the left. Batman took their heads and mashed them together, almost comically, knocking them out cold. Just as he had done so, however, he felt something start to tear through his armor into his back. Yelling, he dropped the two clowns and turned around to land a fist into his attacker's face. The Joker fell to the ground, also out. There was still the issue of the sixth Joker, plus one of the original two he'd taken down with the side sweep.

It was then that Batman realized he had something to get himself out of this, something that would save him some trouble. He pulled his grapple gun out from the back of his Kevlar belt and fired up in the direction of the spotlight. The line connected and began reeling him up and forward, away from the remaining Joker clones.

When he finally hit the stone side of the balcony where the spotlight was, he painfully pulled himself over the wall and pulled out the knife still lodged in the back of his body armor. The blade was very thick and heavy, making it possible to tear through the Kevlar weave. It felt like the blade had definitely pierced skin. He would have to talk to Lucius Fox about getting that reinforced armor set on Monday.

"Why so serious, my batty friend?" a familiar voice hissed behind him. Batman spun around to see the original Joker standing near a doorway that led to an outdoor balcony. The Joker nodded his head toward the doorway. "What do you say we take this outside? This is the house of the Lord, after all. Let's show some respect." With that, he eased his way backwards outside, motioning for Batman to try him.

Batman charged at the demented clown, sick of this already. Just as he almost had his hand touching the lapel of his jacket, though, the madman turned around and dashed out to the side. He had been quicker on the draw at that moment than

Batman. Batman didn't care, he was set on capturing the man.

He stepped out and looked both right and left before he realized that the Joker was nowhere in sight. He didn't like this.

He heard the licking of lips seconds before he heard the Joker land on the cobblestone ground from the top of the Gothic archway. The Joker was holding in his right hand a rather large knife, an eight inch blade. It wasn't the blade that had Batman worried, though. It was the look on his adversary's face. He was willing, and insane, which made that will all the more dangerous.

He stretched out his arms, and waved the Dark Knight forward. "Come on."

Batman, however, stayed where he was. He wasn't going to play this clown's game.

The psycho and the vigilante both stood staring at each other like a showdown in a western, not moving, waiting for the other to make the first move.

A clap of thunder rumbled overhead, briefly shattering the tension. This was followed shortly afterward by a sudden thick downpour of rain, instantly soaking everything.

Neither man cared. They remained glaring into each other's eyes, staring into each other's souls. There was something about this night, this moment, which seemed like it would be a defining instant in their rather unique relationship across the spectrum of the law.

Something lit in the Joker's eyes, and he gave a half smile. "Fine." With that, he flicked his left wrist, and produced a small switchblade that materialized from his sleeve. He clicked it open and in a flash sent it flying toward Batman.

Batman raised his armored arm to shield the blow. In a second he knew what had happened, but it was too late. Just as he had raised his arm near his head, the Joker charged at him, the eight inch blade aiming to kill.

Batman had almost no chance to brace himself as the Joker made contact with him. All he could do was hold off the hand clutching the knife as the Joker struggled to plunge the knife through his opponent. Rain dripped off the blade onto Batman's trembling arm that was trying to keep that blade back.

Batman called upon all his weight and managed to shove the Joker off of him and into a nearby wall. The clown's heavy body slapped against the wet wall, splashing in the downpour streaming from the sloping top of the roof. Batman grimaced, as having done this had aggravated the stab wound in his back.

The Joker looked up in fury at Batman, irritated, and roared. He was about to advance when Batman dashed over and slammed him against the wall again. The wall would give him an advantage.

The rain trailing from the overhang hammered onto the top of his mask. It was starting to give Batman a headache. He needed to end this now. He reached for the wrist gripping the eight inch blade and successfully wrapped his fingers around it.

The Joker pulled a surprise move, though, and with his free hand smashed a small stone fragment into the side of Batman's head. The mask was protected by a light Kevlar layer, but the impact still threw him off. He let go of the Joker's right wrist and instinctively reached for the throbbing part of his head.

Taking advantage of this, the Joker turned the tables and swung Batman around and against the wall. The Joker pressed the masked man at the clavicle against the wall with one arm and pressed the massive knife against his throat with the other. He was breathing hard, seething with anger and caught up in the moment.

The two men glared at each other, both slowly easing their heart rates and adrenaline, but not cutting the tension. A mixture of amazement and vehemence was alive in the Joker's eyes as he stared into Batman's gaze.

"Why...won't...you...die?"

This caught Batman off guard. Nevertheless, he softly offered a reply. "Because...I will not...cannot let myself." That was all. "I...have a job to do, and I won't...let anything get in the way." His breathing was still easing its way back to a normal pace.

Something in the Joker's eyes read that he had a change of mind. He kept his hold on Batman for a moment, a decision taking place in his visage, and then he slowly eased off of his enemy. He then turned away and sauntered over to the stone balcony.

The rain was still falling, bathing them in the moment, seemingly drowning the element of violence that had just taken place.

Batman remained at the wall, confused, not taking his eyes off of the homicidal clown. What had just happened? Was this a trick of some kind, to get Batman to let down his guard? It would be a perfect opportunity for the Joker to turn around and take advantage of Batman's confusion. Considering this, he stayed on the defensive, watching and examining the Joker, waiting for any sudden actions.

The Joker, however, kept his gaze over the side of the stone wall, down on the street. He barely moved.

"I know what you're thinking," he quietly uttered, in spite of the slightly loud fall of the rain. "Why did I just let you go? Why didn't I strike? Well, no." He waved his hand, as if refusing something offered to him. "No, this isn't some trick to throw you off.

"I could have killed you right there, where I had you, but the reason I didn't is simply that it didn't feel like the right time." He paused, and looked up into the night sky, closing his eyes and taking in the rain pellets as they splashed onto his painted face. "When, or if, I finally kill you, I want it to be right, to feel right. I want it to be a grand moment, for you and for me. You see, I believe in going out in a blaze of glory. I especially believe you would at least deserve that. You're like my great prey,

that is so ever elusive, and that I have developed such an admiration for in the midst of my quest for your downfall."

He shifted his face back down and turned to face Batman again. "You see, you've earned my respect. You fight for the law, but you decided not to do it the conventional way, with a badge. You chose to not be tied down by regulations and all of that other bureaucratic nonsense. You act how you feel is best, and don't wait for permission from a superior and let the moment pass. You just do it, and that is the purest way how it should be done.

"We're both the same. We both work on the far extreme on our side of the moral spectrum, so much that we can be considered crazy. Of course," the Joker laughed briefly, "I would say you're of more sound mind than me most of the time." He cleared his throat and continued. "Nevertheless, we both operate about the same, going to certain extremes and thinking outside the box, throwing in style and never looking back, doing what works. That's why I respect you.

"Now, that's not to say I see the light, so to speak, and will change my ways, because I acknowledge that what I do is what most would consider wrong. This system is broken and eroded. It is so destroyed that it drove someone like you to carry out its original purpose of justice yourself, and your methods are quite effective at times, I must admit."

Batman listened to all of this, and eventually accepted the notion that the Joker was not leading him on. He accepted the Joker's apparent sincerity, and made his way over to the balcony.

There was a part of Batman, of Bruce Wayne, who wanted so much to hate this man who had destroyed so much. He had widowed wives, orphaned children, and introduced chaos into the already fragile elements of society, without so much as a second glance or regard for the consequences. In fact, that chaos, the death and destruction, was the very thing that he wanted to accomplish.

And it was amazing how trivial all of that

seemed to the Joker at this moment when what really mattered to him was the deadly game of tag he enjoyed playing with Batman during every encounter.

The two men stood side by side, looking over the collection of lights from the buildings and police vehicles, almost as if they were normal, like their struggle with each other had never existed. It was a unique moment for a unique pair of individuals.

Batman was now the one to break the silence. "I used to feel the same as you, that the justice system was obsolete. The thing is, you have to have the right people do it, and give it time. I simply aid it by going places it can't. That's why I do what I do."

The Joker snorted in a cynical tone. "Maybe it works in other places, but like you said, it's the people. And with a police force as dirty as ours up for hire, true justice is a rare luxury that few in this town can enjoy. Besides," he turned to the vigilante and gave a grotesque grin, "with characters like me running rampant, you have a new agent that sooner or later will destroy this already feeble system: chaos, in its purest, most unreasonable and craziest form. Look at what it did to your precious district attorney, it drove him simply insane. Think about what it'll do to the rest of the governing body of the city over time. I won't be the only one, either."

"Your freakish antics will only invite more freaks and, shall I say, unorthodox criminals over time. I'm just the opening act." The Joker, silent for now, resumed his gaze over the Gotham skyline with a triumphant expression on his face.

Batman mulled over this. Gordon had made this point to him long ago, back when he'd first began his campaign to clean up the city. The police lieutenant had warned of the escalation the masked vigilante would inspire in the criminal populace.

"Well, since it's already begun, I have no other choice now, do I?"

The Joker turned to his adversary with a

slight questioning look. "Well, what do you choose?"

"I have to keep fighting. This city can't take you on by itself."

Joker listened and started to laugh, but it wasn't a mocking laugh. It didn't seem he disagreed entirely with Batman's reasoning. "Okay, so you'll fight for this city. But, in the end, when you've finally reached that inevitable point of retirement, either by choice or by death, what will you do? Crime will go on. It existed before you were even conceived, and it'll exist after you're gone, like a colony of roaches in an old motel room. And besides, why defend a city as decrepit as this?"

Batman considered this. He was quiet for a moment. The Joker smiled in triumph once again, thinking he had outsmarted Batman this one time, not by violence but by words.

"One of the reasons I took on this burden was so that I could be an example. This city managed to scrape through one of its worst periods after seeing the murder of one of its own elite. I reasoned that if I took a stand and could be the solid rock for everyone in the chaotic storm of crime in Gotham, then I could motivate at least some of the citizens to stand up for their own. If I can inspire even one person, then I've succeeded."

The Joker thought about this, and nodded with a grin. "A bit cliché, but you do make a point." And with that, he decided to end the topic with his silence.

The pair remained standing as the rain continued to pour down. It was like a baptism of wisdom and understanding for them that night. The tranquility and lack of anticipation of attack remained in the air.

Something occurred to Batman. "Why do we keep this up, you and I? After listening to you tonight, you seem to retain a great deal of intelligence and some element of sanity. Why waste it on destructive outlets?"

"I could get you the help you need, and get you back into society. You don't have to be an outsider, and always be living on the

edge, looking over your shoulder.” Batman paused for a second.

“Because the longer we keep this going, the more destruction there’ll be, and eventually we might very well end up killing each other. I don’t want that for myself or anyone else, including you.” Batman finally ceased. He hoped against anything that he could reach this killer that he hated and yet cared about. Who knew what had driven him to snap and lose a grip on reality so as to go on such a murderous rampage? Surely there was still something within this killer that Batman could still reach before it was too late.

The Joker held a vacant expression on his face. Whether he was considering this or not, Batman couldn’t tell. He could only hope. The one thing left to do. The thing that was left in the box when all other evil and chaos were loose.

“No.”

Batman felt a tiny stab of disappointment, but at the same time he wasn’t surprised. He masked his disappointment with a stony visage and listened for any explanation, anything that might clue in to the workings of this insane figure, something that he could use to his advantage later on.

The Joker rolled his head to the side, and cracked his neck. He was treating this, like everything else, as if it was as trivial as the weather.

“I felt I’ve reached the point of no return. All of this is just too much fun to give up just so I can conform to standards that I have never believed in.

“If it means anything...I’m sorry.” Something changed in his tone. There was a trace of regret, masked by indifference.

Author's Comments: I wrote this a few months before "The Dark Knight" actually came out, so there a few discrepancies between my interpretation of the Joker here and the character in the final film. Also, I was heavily influenced by the movies "Collateral" and "Heat", as well as the Batman graphic novel "The Killing Joke".

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“A very small part of me would very much like to believe you’re right, that it can all work. The rest of me, though, just can’t forget that Humpty Dumpty can’t be put back together again.”

Batman’s disappointment was replaced with a sense of resignation, slightly tempered with bitterness. His good intentions were wasted on this lost soul. This man had lost his humanity long ago, and with it any chance for hope of redemption, it seemed.

At that moment, the rain finally began to let up. The Joker looked up, water streaming from his messy hair, and smiled. “Hey, look at the bright side. At least the rain stopped.” He turned back to see that his counterpart was gone. The smile left his face. “As well as our conversation, apparently.”

Suddenly, a powerful light washed over his single form, shining from a police chopper. The usual monotonous voice boomed through the megaphone. “This is Gotham PD. Get on your knees and put your hands on your head.”

The Joker sneered at this command and turned toward the doorway where he had come out from, only to be greeted with multiple automatic rifles being shoved in his face, held by trained professionals in solid black.

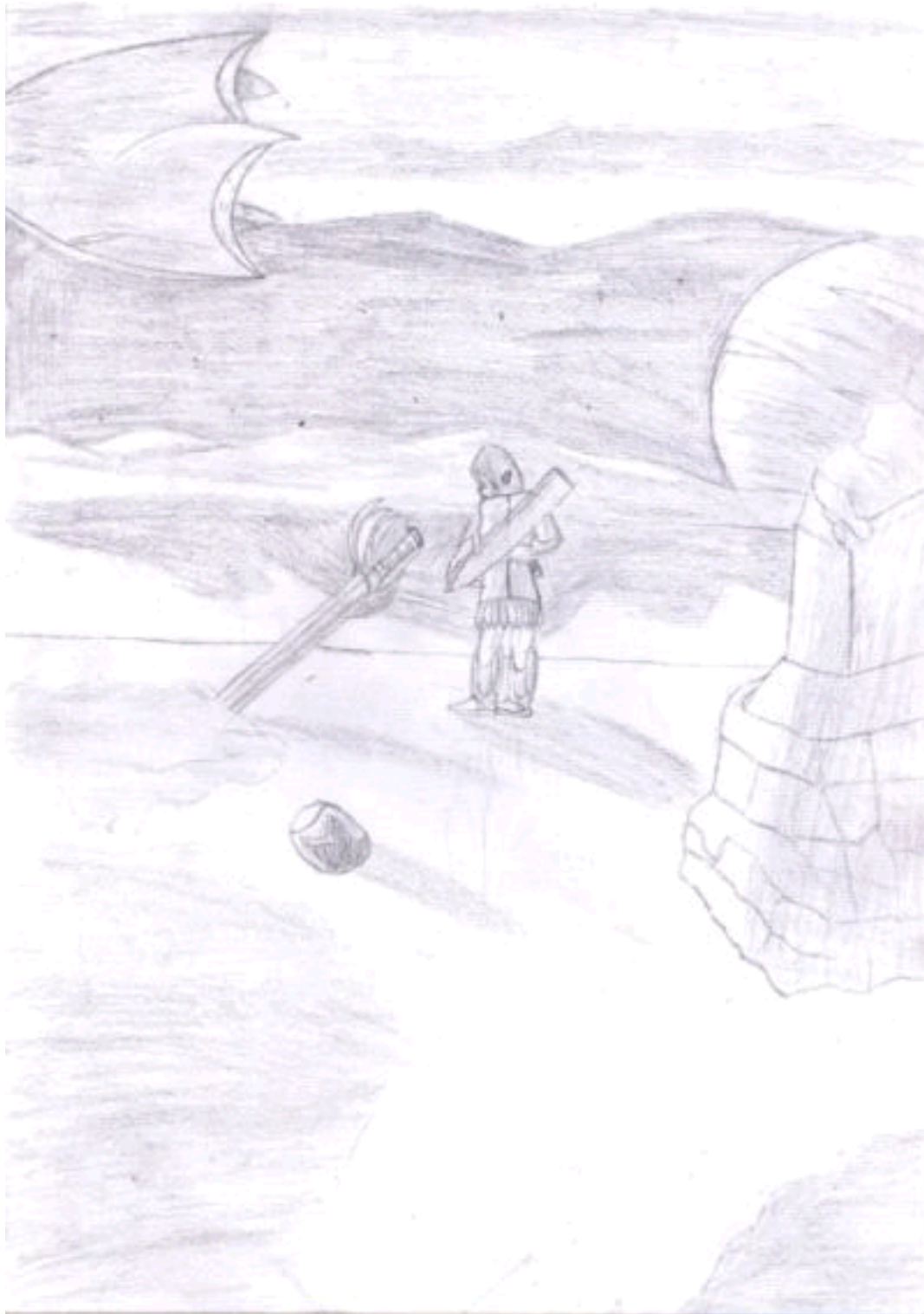
The Joker laughed and raised his hands, like it was a prank being pulled on him. “Fine,” he called out into the air as the officers rushed him and cuffed his wrists behind his back. “You’re like the guy who skips out and leaves me to pick up the check.” With that, he gave one last grin into the supposedly empty night air before letting the team shove him back inside.

There would be another night.

PICTURES CORNER



This picture was submitted by Jon Taylor; drawn by Mr Culexus of http://mr_culexus.deviantart.com/ reproduced here with his kind permission; if you read Taylor's story, you'll probably recognise everybody there.



This picture was kindly submitted by Kaito son kaitoson@gmail.com in response to my plea for cover art to drag me out of the hole I dug myself into; unfortunately, it's not

Got pictures? Drawings? Sketches? Cover art? Anything you want to show off, please send it by e mail to fanficmag@gmail.com ; as with everything here, you retain all rights to anything you contribute.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Curious Question:

In the first issue, I included a question asked by a miss A name withheld who asked me this curious question:

‘ ... The majority of my stories aren't fanfiction exactly; they take place in worlds based on worlds others created. If that makes sense, of course. My question for you is: Are those stories eligible? Or would only soul fanfiction, without original characters, be accepted? I don't write stories without characters of my own. ... ’

Jon Taylor, of *In His Emperor's Service* fame, replied:

In regards to what is acceptable fanfiction I would say that fanfiction is any written material directly inspired or otherwise related to established works. So if I were to write a story about Captain Picard and The Emperor of Mankind, exploring Atlantis then that would be a fanfiction. Admittedly in my opinion a bad one but still. :

Questions? Comments? Rants? Anything you want to share or show off, I'd be happy to include it here.

Casting Call

Like what you see? I sure hope so.

Wanna get more? To subscribe, please send an e mail to: fanficmag@gmail.com with 'Subscription' in the subject line that is, if you haven't already .

Fan Fiction:

Got a great story you want to share? We'd love to read it: send contributions as text in the body of an e mail in the following format:

Subject line: *Contributing.*

First line: *Author's name, e mail address, Author's home page;*

Second line: *Genre WoD, Naruto, Warhammer, etc. , Story name, Word count;*

Text of Story.

Author's comments.

Send any pictures associated with the story as attachments to the e mail; unless otherwise stated, they'll be included in the Pictures Corner.

Now, I can't say this too many times: any stories you submit are still yours: I'm not asking for any exclusive rights; if it's your story, you can do whatever you want with it.

Cover Art:

Absolutely necessary; cover art has to be of the young lady on the cover, in costume from something with fandom Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter, etc : original drawing here: [http://jochannon.deviantart.com/art/Leanna Magazine Mascot 139944247](http://jochannon.deviantart.com/art/Leanna%20Magazine%20Mascot%20139944247)

Other fan art:

1, Poetry:

Poetry is no problem, just so long as it follows the same guidelines as fiction.

2, Pictures and Drawings:

Pictures and drawings may be published by arrangement.

Original fiction:

I am not opposed to original fiction, if you have a story you want to publish here; but this is for fanfiction, so any original writings will have to take back seat.

Fiction Submission Guidelines:

1, Length:

Up to 3,000 words is optimum; I'm willing to go up to 5,000 words; longer stories can be published as serials by arrangement.

2, Foul language:

In moderation, I have no problem with vulgar language; it depends on how much, and how it's used: if your characters have a conversation and curse two or three times, that's fine; if there's hardly a sentence in the whole story they don't curse, that's a problem.

3, No netspeak:

If one or two characters speak in netspeak, that's no problem, but the body of the story has to be recognizably English.

4, Format.

Do NOT use indents: double space between paragraphs;

All text will be published in the same size and font, so any fancy formatting tricks won't work. Sorry.

5, Editing:

I will not edit your stories; they will be published exactly the way you submit them. By the same token, I will not fix typos.

6, Sex:

It's normal, it's natural, sex will not get your story disqualified, but NO pornography!

6.1, anything even hinting of pedophilia will be thrown out immediately.

6.2, stories touching on rape will have to handle it very delicately.

7, Spelling:

If you have a spellchecker, use it: like I said, I won't fix typos.

8, Property:

I'm not asking for any exclusive rights: any story you submit is still yours: I'm not even looking for first printing rights; I'm asking for non exclusive printing and archival rights.

In simple language? I'm asking for permission to publish your story in the magazine, and to archive the story so people can go back and read it again.

9, Re publishing:

If a story's already published, on DA or Fanfiction.com or elsewhere, that's fine; as long as you own it, you can submit it.