



Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – SERIAL KILLERS ANONYMOUS by Kaitlyn Downing. The author writes, “Bio: Kaitlyn Downing—part fairy, part mermaid, and part cat—spends most of her time in her pool or her garden in Florida with her four cats when she’s not teaching English. Most recently, her work has appeared in *Hemlock*, *34 Orchard*, and *Circle of Salt*.”

Page 3 – DARTS WITH RED MORGAINE ONE-EYE by Craig Inanen. The author lives in the Midwest USA. In addition to *Corner Bar Magazine* his stories have appeared in other fine publications. His work has been most recently published in *Blue Lake Review*. It will also be featured in the *Black Hare Press Year Eight Anthology*. His crime, police procedural and speculative fiction often have historical elements.

Page 6 – SO YOU SAY by Margaret Karmazin. Ms Karmazin’s credits include stories published in literary and SF magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *The Speculative Edge*, *Aphelion*, *AnotherRealm*, *Tough* and *The Worlds Within*. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Mobius* were nominated for Pushcart awards.

Page 16 – BAPTISMA ASTERIÓN by Luke Fredette. The author writes, “I am a teacher of English and Creative Writing at the University of Science and the Arts of Oklahoma, having received a degree in Writing Popular Fiction from Edinburgh Napier University. Aside from poetry, I have not yet been published.”



“SERIAL KILLERS ANONYMOUS”

by KAITLYN DOWNING

“Let’s begin, everyone.” Ben, the facilitator, glanced at the four other men sitting in the circle of faded chairs in the basement room of Howard Johnson’s. A year ago, he would have done a double take at the huge man in the feathered leather mask sprawled with legs spread wide, but he was used to “Nighthawk” by now. He resisted the urge to shake his head.

He wasn’t there to judge; he was there to help.

“Who would like to share today?”

A pudgy, balding man around 40 or so raised his hand hesitantly. Ben motioned him forward, and his nylon track suit squeaked as he fidgeted in his seat. “I’m uh, Joe, and I recently fell off the wagon.”

“Welcome Joe,” came the chorus.

“So, you know I’ve been good for over a year, right? This last girl just made me feel so...” He balled up his fists, unable to find the words.

“How did she make you feel, Joe? Talk it out.”

“Angry...frustrated. I mean, why wouldn’t she just give me a chance? I could be a good boyfriend...”

“Of course you could.” The tall, skinny guy in the grey sweater patted his shoulder comfortingly. He gave his name as John and was 5 years in recovery.

“What do you want to share with us, Joe?”

He wrung his hands, but his eyes were in-

dignant. “She made me...”

“No, Joe, who’s responsible for your actions?”

Joe’s gaze dropped to the floor. He murmured, “I am.”

“That’s right. We can’t help how we feel, but we *can* help how we react to it.” Ben fingered the 10-year chip in his pocket. The feelings were always there. Oh, they crept in like ivy, feeling for tiny cracks in his foundation, spreading to tear down the life he had created.

“What happened?” Ben sat back—he would *not* lean forward—and folded his hands to still them.

“I let myself into her apartment to cook her a romantic dinner. I sprinkled rose petals around the floor, and waited for her to come home. I wanted to surprise her.” He wrung his now-sweaty hands. “She was surprised,” he whispered.

“She screamed and I tried to shush her, but she threatened to call the police.” His words tumbled over each other like people fleeing a burning building. His chest rose and fell rapidly. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I just couldn’t help it. My hands just wound around her throat. Her skin was so soft, and I could feel her pulse fluttering beneath my thumb, and I just wanted to squeeze until it stopped...” his hands mimicked his words, strangling an imaginary throat.

Ben closed his eyes, and tried not to lick his

lips. No, he hadn't done it in over 10 years. He clutched the wooden chip and breathed slowly and deeply. You won't go back. You won't go back. You're better now. Breathe. Better.

When he opened his eyes, he could tell he wasn't the only one affected by the vivid visual.

"Reminds me of my first," Nighthawk said with a salacious smile and John sat poker-straight in his chair.

"You never forget your first." Black hood hiding his face, "K" sighed wistfully, leaned elbows on knees and rocked slightly. The others nodded.

Ben strangled memories of his first. He had to get everything back on track. "You didn't, though. Right?"

Joe's eyes fixed his. He didn't blink.

There's a peaceful light that only comes after a kill and lasts oh so briefly before the itching starts in the back of the mind. His eyes responded that he remembered that peace, yearned for it still, and perhaps a gleam of envy.

That gleam was reflected in every gaze around the circle. Wolves drooling over thoughts of the hunt.

Was that why he started this support group? To vicariously experience the thrill of the kill so he didn't have to risk it actually? He told himself he was helping, but was he really? Who was he helping? He knew he would always be in recovery, that he would always struggle with this yearning, this need. He pushed Joe's images into a deep corner of his mind.

He would not kill today.

One day at a time. ❖

“DARTS WITH RED MORGAINE ONE-EYE”

by CRAIG INANEN

Red Morgaine One-Eye thinks she's the toughest being in the known universe. Maybe she's right. I didn't believe it until I actually saw her myself.

I've heard the stories about Red Morgaine One-Eye like anybody else. I say anybody but what I mean is sentient beings that tend to hang around the edge of space. This was the first time I'd seen her. There she was, at a table in the back, her and her whole disparate crew. At first glance she didn't look like all that much, certainly not like someone shrouded in legends like the ones that surround her should look.

What she looked like was a pirate. That was my first impression. I'm sure that's enhanced by the black eye patch she wears. Kind of a funny thing, that. I don't mean funny like you'd laugh at it, I mean funny strange. With the state of medical technology these days an injury to an eye can be healed, repaired. They can even match your other eye by growing one from a cell culture in vitro. If you don't want to go that route a prosthesis can be fitted. In fact with some of the enhancements available today you'll find people walking around who've chosen eye replacement with a prosthetic for one reason or another in place of perfectly good eyes.

Her anti-gravity boots contribute to that image of course. They were black, looked like leather, real leather and came up to her knees. Custom made no doubt. They had heels, too,

which don't serve any purpose on anti-grav boots that I'm aware of although they did boost her height up to about 180 centimeters. They had a strap with gold buckles over the step. They laced up the front, with actual laces, gold eyelets, and there were wide cuffs folded over at the tops. I suppose there were another eight or so eyelets on the folded over part that weren't being used. She could have laced them up over her knees. Rumor has it the leather came from a Fimbuthul she took a dislike to. They certainly look supple.

Her belt matches with a big square buckle at the front. Maybe the buckle is gold. It's got a dull luster to it. I mean the buckle for her wide gray and black striped pants of course, not the one for her utility belt. That one's old and worn, like it's seen some hard use, and it hangs at an angle. There's something strapped to her left thigh in a holster. I can see the polycarbonate handgrips but I don't know what it is. Some sort of a sidearm I suppose. I've been told she's fast on the draw with that, or with the knife in the scabbard on the right side. That's a fixed blade fighting knife, about 38 centimeters long, with what looks like a bone handle. She was eating Kapteynian peppers off of it earlier. Right at the moment it's sticking up out of the table in front of her, point imbedded into the surface.

She'd trap one of the peppers between the knife blade and her thumb, raise it to her

mouth and then curl her tongue around it and suck it between her lips. Very sinuous, very sensual. She makes a fish face as the pepper juices bite into her taste bud receptors and enjoys that for a while before she chews it up. Then she'll swig down a tankard of whatever she's drinking and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. She doesn't actually have an order of Kapteynian peppers, I mean, who does that? Instead she reaches across the table with the knife and lifts one off the plate of one of her cohorts.

There's eight of them with her now. You've never seen such a mixed bunch. Well, I haven't anyway, I can't speak for you. Varied species, male, female, undetermined and one electro-mechanical robot, they seem to speak Fornax Common with one another mostly, but not exclusively and of course they curse in some demonic tongue. Maybe Mahbring. Sort of a polyglot babble coming from their table actually. The robot talks with a Mayall II accent. It must be a long way from wherever it was originally programmed. It's got some deep scratches up its right hand lower appendage, up to the main lower housing and across that.

I guess the Red part of her name comes from her hair. You see she's got that long single braid but I don't know. Maybe it comes from the color of the path of carnage she leaves behind her. That's what some people say, anyway.

They were throwing darts, earlier, before their food was served. Gambling on the throws, the way it looked to me. There were a lot of credits changing hands when they did that. One of them went and stood in front of the dart board, the Sagittariun female, and they threw darts around her head. She didn't move a centimeter. Nobody hit her but they came awfully close. Big rousing cheer when they were done with that and the female went back to her seat

smiling. So Red Morgaine One-Eye gets up and walks over to the board and she stands there. The only thing is, she stands there facing the dart-throwers, full face on, not in profile. She didn't flinch either until the very last throw. That one, she reaches up and grabs it out of the air. Just snatches the dart in mid-flight, I've never seen anything like it. She stops it about 50 centimeters in front of her face.

"That one was going to hit me," she says in Fornax Common. I'll grant you it was pretty impressive. I don't think there was any trick to it, either. She's that fast. She looks at the crowd and calls out, "Anyone else want to play?" That's when I started to believe some of the things I've heard about her. She looked around the noisy room which had suddenly fallen silent. "Anyone?" she asked. No one volunteered. "Bunch of clinkers and has-beens," she said to the hulking Ptolmaidan with bulging muscles seated next to her. He looks as if he spent 20 years in the underground mines there before he joined Red Morgaine. He'd been banging the table with his tankard at random intervals.

"Yuh," he agreed in a guttural voice. Then he banged the table again. Plates and glasses jumped and rattled. Red Morgaine One-Eye's fighting knife quivered where she had stuck it.

"C'mon," she implored. "I'm here for a good time, not a long time!" She looked around the room. Suddenly she pointed. "What about you? You've been eying me. Do you want to play?"

Honestly, I turned around and looked behind myself to see who she was pointing at. There was no one behind me. She was pointing at me.

"I - I - I," I stuttered.

"Good lad!" she called. "Do you want to throw or stand?"

I shouldn't have stood up. I could have smiled and just shook my head. My tongue-tied voice sure wasn't any help. Slowly I got to my feet.

"Think carefully," she warned me. "There's risk either way."

The Ptolmaidan laughed. "Yuh," he agreed. I think it was a laugh. It sounded like gravel being scooped up with a shovel.

She beckoned toward me with her right hand. It was the most compelling hand gesture I'd ever seen. It seemed to promise delights that I couldn't imagine, if I just went nearer.

I did, as my mind was racing, one step at a time. Every eye in the barroom was focused on either her or me. "Throw or stand?" my mind raced. What would happen if I threw and hit her? I'd seen her skill. Could I trust her to miss me yet still come close? She looked to be about the most untrustworthy, scurrilous person in the room. I couldn't rely on my voice not to crack and quaver. Instead I simply walked over to the dart board, turned and stood in front of it.

"Good choice," the robot said in its Mayall II accent. "His hands are shaking too much to throw."

"Yuh," the Ptolmaidan agreed.

"Of course his knees might be shaking too much to stand," the robot added thoughtfully. The Sagittariun female giggled.

Red Morgaine One-Eye took her position at the line, darts in hand. I watched her eye. You don't ever want to look into Red Morgaine One-Eye's eye. She threw and the dart landed next to my left ear. It was close enough for me to hear its passage through the air and the solid "thunk" of impact. I stood still. She raised the second dart and then lightning quickly she threw. That one embedded itself in the dart-board behind my head and quivered there, tickling my right ear for a moment. There was a communal sigh throughout the barroom.

She raised her hand, with the final dart in throwing position. Then she closed her eye. I closed mine too and waited. I just couldn't watch. The dart whirled through the air and I felt it pass through my hair at the top of my head and heard it strike the cork board behind me. I opened my eyes and Red Morgaine One-Eye was smiling at me. "Bartender," she called. "This lad drinks on me the rest of the night!"

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“SO YOU SAY”

by MARGARET KARMAZIN

Trevor Mackley suddenly rematerialized in a locked basement room of the Wexler building in a small Pennsylvania town on the Delaware River. His superiors had selected this particular building since one: it still belonged to one of their major backers and two: they were reasonably certain that at the chosen time of arrival, August 16, 1972, this particular end of the basement was empty and that Trevor could maneuver about without hindrance. That particular date was the target for an independent UFO retrieval division of “Immaculate Constellation” for which Trevor worked. His mission was to investigate and retrieve an object from a reported UFO crash site in what would later become a marsh preserve six miles from his “appearance” location.

Trevor traveled in a time machine “bubble.” He wore a watch-like band around his wrist with the controls, which would create the bubble around him. One that had been tested only four times, only one of which involved Trevor himself and took him to just one week in the past. The trip he was making now, was for fifty-four years. Or so he and his associates believed. Trevor himself was born in 1992 and had never experienced the target area at any age. They had recruited him because he was divorced and had no children, in addition to the fact that he’d worked in Special Ops and had not yet done anything particularly stupid. He was, to them,

expendable while at the same time capable. They explained to him the “butterfly effect” and Trevor understood that anything he did in the past could conceivably greatly change the future, but retrieving this “alien” or more likely “interdimensional” object was, apparently, more important than risking this possible change of reality. They did not explain to Trevor the reason for this. They never explained anything to him.

So now, here he popped into, hopefully, 1972, dressed in supposedly normal 1970s attire which included tan polyester pants slightly flared at the hem, a brown long-sleeved, also polyester, formfitting shirt and short rust jacket. He carried an altered vintage gym bag with another change of clothing in it and some equipment. He pulled his sleeve over the time machine “watch” to cover it. They’d made him a fake 1972 driver’s license and given him some proper money for the era. Of course, no cell-phone – there was no one to talk to.

He managed to get out of the seemingly endless basement and into a back alley, carefully marking on a pad how to find the room again, and made his way to the nearest phone booth where he opened the thick phonebook and called for a taxi. When it arrived, he climbed in, slightly surprised at the bare bones, uncomfortable feel of the back seat and annoyed by the driver’s smoking, and said, “Take me to Upper

Van Sciver Way.”

“Where’re you from?” asked the driver.
“You have kind of an accent.”

He did? He was literally originally from the same general area, though somewhat north of there. Did people from 2026 speak differently than those from 1972?

“Um, from up north a bit,” he said.

“They dress differently up there, do they?”

He looked down at himself. His outfit was supposed to be accurate.

“You kind of look like you’re from the past,” the driver said after a quick look around.

“The past?” said Trevor. His heart thumped.

“Yeah, like you know, the Beatles or something. You look like George Harrison back then kind of. In this hippie days.”

Trevor felt so confused that he had trouble finding words. “Uh, so I’m out of style, you mean?” And what had he meant by “back then”?

“Well, no offense,” said the driver, who was rounding a curve rather alarmingly, his cigarette almost burnt down but still hanging from his lips. “Maybe you’ve been living abroad a while or something? It doesn’t matter. Who am I to talk? I’m no fashion plate.”

Trevor felt a terrible hollow in the pit of his stomach. “What’s today’s date?” he said suddenly, not caring if he sounded stupid.

“What?” said the driver. “The sixteenth. Monday. Monday, the sixteenth.”

“What *year*?” said Trevor, now fully annoyed and feeling some degree of panic.

“What *year*?” said the driver. “What’re you, some kind of time traveler? It’s 1982!” He jerked his head around to get a better look at his apparently unhinged passenger.

“Oh, oh!” said Trevor, now completely discombobulated. “OMG.” Then he decided he

had better shut up. “Um, sorry,” he mumbled, desperately trying to think of a believable excuse for his behavior, “too many recreational drugs, I guess. Mind is destroyed.”

The driver nodded and stayed silent, possibly a person not approving of drugs in general, and Trevor tried to gather himself together. They were almost at his destination but ten years too late. Who knew what had happened to the artifact since then, unbeknownst to Black Ops.

“Well, here we are,” said the driver, rather shortly.

Trevor scrambled to get his money in order and handed the little pile over. The driver took it and nodded and as Trevor let himself out of the cab, said, “You take care now,” and Trevor thanked him, his heart racing.

So here he was now, standing by a rather unattractive lake, hopefully on the correct end. The area definitely looked marshy. The question: was the object he was looking for still there ten years after it had fallen into the water or mud? He had general coordinates and a lightweight 3D ground scanner folded up in his bag. But by now, wouldn’t somebody else have found it? Although, you couldn’t count on government programs to inform each other on any subject. Also, there would have been local civilian stories and ufologists would have recounted their tales in various popular sources. Stan Gordon, PA’s most famous UFO and anomaly tracker surely would, by now, have mentioned it. But there was nothing. All that his superiors had on the subject was a newspaper article with the report of a somewhat hysterical bank manager who had supposedly witnessed the “the object falling into the brush.” Apparently, some credibility had been given to the incident for reasons not shared with Trevor. His superiors,

weird, as they were, wanted to know if anything was still there and if so, they expected Trevor to obtain it and bring it back. Apparently, they knew or suspected something about it that they had not bothered to share with him. He was just the gofer.

How in hell, he now wondered, would he call a taxi again from where he now stood? Knock on someone's door? How to go about this, he wasn't sure. Right now, there wasn't anyone else around and the nearest houses looked closed and forbidding. And then he heard a voice behind him.

"Are you lost or something?" a young woman asked. She was short, had brown, wildly curly hair and wore pale blue, slightly puffy pants and a tan and beige striped top. He liked her hair.

"Kind of," he said, though he shouldn't be exchanging information with locals. He could use some help though in getting to the right location on the shoreline. "I'm just visiting," he said.

A story popped into his head. "Um, like ten years ago, there was a story circulating about a UFO here? My cousin was one of the observers, but he's dead now. Since I was in town, I thought maybe I'd see what he was babbling on about all that time."

Should he have said that?

"You look like George Harrison. Are you in a retro band or something?"

He flushed. "Oh, you mean because I'm dressed like this?"

She chuckled. "Kind of."

"Oh, uh, well," he fumbled, trying to think of a good story. "I came to visit someone but they weren't there and then I fell in their pool and his mother gave me this crap to wear."

She gave him a disbelieving look and said, "I'm Joan Buchanan. I live right over there."

She pointed to a pink ranch house.

"Pink, huh?" he said, sounding like an idiot.

She continued to stare at him. "Where're you from? Are you from around here?"

"Um, no," he said. "I'm originally from Jenkintown."

She nodded. "And your name?"

Would it matter if he told her the truth? She'd never be able to find out anything about him; he wasn't even born yet. "Trevor," he said. "About that UFO thing," he reminded her.

"Oh, that," she said. "Yeah, I know about it. I lived here when it happened. I knew someone who saw it come down."

"Could I talk to them maybe?"

"Nope, they're dead." She continued to stare at him with a slightly smirky expression.

"Well, that's no help," he said.

"What are you, a ufologist? I read UFO books, love 'em."

Hmmm, he thought, what would be a good way to go about this? "Yeah, that's what I am. A ufologist."

"Really, so cool! What books have you written?"

Oh god, now what? "I work for the government, actually. Private reports."

"That's even cooler! So, tell me what you know! Tell me everything."

"Well, obviously, I can't do that," he said. He suddenly realized that he could use her to help him. He'd better be nice to her. "I could probably use your help though," he said.

She was even more excited. "Oh, I'd love that! What do you want me to do?"

She was awfully trusting. She runs into this strange man in this marshy edge of a marshy lake with no one watching what they do and she's willing to just go off with him wherever he

suggests? Was this normal for the 1980s? Where he was from, you didn't trust a neighbor saying hello - what did they *really* want?

"Well, okay. Do you remember what exact part of the shore here that they saw the thing come down?"

"Do I get paid for helping you?" she said. "I just got laid off and could use the money."

"Um, no, I don't have any allotted money for hiring anyone, no." They should have thought of that and supplied him with more. Though he wasn't supposed to interact with people if possible.

"Oh," she said. She was quiet for a moment and he noticed how her hair glinted with red and gold highlights. Her skin was a glowing peach-gold. She must eat healthy food, he thought.

Well, I don't have anything else to do right now, so I might as well help," she said. "I'm back with my parents since I got laid off, but I might get a job subbing in another school district. Anyway, it was the guy across the street from us, Larry Wright. He was a nice old guy and not, as far as I know, a liar. He said it started with a blue, curved streak in the sky and then this bright blue ball came down real fast. Not a big ball, maybe just a foot across? He told us he ran to where he thought it would land and it hit the shore there, sank into the mud and disappeared. But after it sank, there was a kind of blue glow there for half an hour."

"Did no ufologists or like, government types, come to see what he said came down?"

"Well, a reporter came out - that's how it got in the paper, but no government types."

"And the reporter wrote the article tongue-and-cheek, right? Making fun of the dude, making him a laughingstock."

"Yeah," she said. "That's about it. He was

so pissed after that, that he wouldn't tell anyone where it came down."

He liked the sound of her voice. "Okay, so now will you show me where it came down?"

"I gotta go change my shoes," she said. She looked at his. "You should do that too."

He searched through his gym bag. They sure hadn't fitted him out very well. He held out a pair of brown loafers with two-inch heels.

"What the hell are those?" she said "Disco king stuff? Come with me."

He followed her across the street and into the pink house. A woman was sitting on the living room couch watching TV. Her hair was up in rollers. "This is my mom, Trudy," Joan said. "This is Trevor."

"Trevor who?" said the woman.

He hesitated and then said, "Mackley."

"Are you related to Janet Mackley over on Farragut in Bristol?"

"Um, no," he said.

"He's not from around here, Mom. Dad's old cowboy boots, where are they?"

"In the back of our closet, I guess. Did you get your clothes from a thrift store?" Trudy asked. "Not to be rude or anything but..."

"I know," he said, tired of this subject. "Had to borrow them."

She let it go and he followed Joan into the master bedroom where she rooted through the closet and held out a beat-up pair of cowboy boots. Dark green. "What size are you?" she said.

"Ten and a half."

"Well, these are eleven but you should be able to wear them."

"Won't your dad care?"

"Oh, he won't care. Anyway, he's on a fishing trip with his buddies. We'll need to clean them up afterwards though."

He put them on, a bit loose, so he borrowed some thick socks and then they weren't too bad. She put on some boots of her own, rolled up her jeans, and they headed out. "We got about an eighth of a mile to go in there."

"We're probably going to need a shovel," he said.

She got a small one out of their garage.

It wasn't fun. The temperature seemed to have risen fifteen degrees. The humidity was almost unbearable. He, now living near Gettysburg near an underground installation, had almost forgotten the steamy summers of the Philadelphia area. Of course there was global warming, so Joan's location here was worse now in his own time.

They trekked seemingly endlessly through the sparse woods with their feet sinking in the mud and making sucking noises. His bag felt like it weighed a ton and that was without the artifact. She probably felt that way about the shovel. They constantly batted mosquitoes and didn't talk much. Finally, they reached the spot. "This is it," Joan said. "See, he carved it there on that tree. 8/16/72. This rock here is where he marked where it went in."

"Why hasn't anyone dug it up?" said Trevor unbelievably.

"No one believed him! After the smirky article, he refused to talk about it. Imagine the crap he must have endured at work. Does anyone ever believe UFO witnesses? Haven't you read any of the reports?"

That was like asking Santa Claus if he'd ever made toys. He didn't bother to answer. "Well, why didn't you dig it up?"

"And get radiation poisoning or something?" she snapped. "Or like suddenly the aliens show up? No thanks."

"Well, we're digging it up now," he said.

She looked more excited than scared as he went to work. About a half hour later, he hit something metal. She gasped.

Carefully now, he bent down and worked the dirt away from the object and finally lifted it out. "Is it heavy?" Joan said, backing away.

It was a shiny, bluish, steel-colored ball with one marking that resembled the Greek letter *Theta*. "I'd guess about eight-nine pounds," he said. "Don't touch it."

"What does that marking mean?" Joan asked.

"I have no idea," said Trevor.

He pulled a towel out of his gym bag, wrapped the sphere with it and settled it carefully into the bag. "Now," he said, "there is the matter of getting this home."

Joan's face took on a sly look. "You're taking it home? To your house? You're gonna keep that thing in your *house*? And maybe it belongs more to me than to you, huh? I mean I'm the one who knew where it landed, not you, and since I live here and knew the man who saw it come down personally, I'd say I have more of a right to it than you do!"

Trevor was silent, his mind running a thousand miles an hour. She had a point. But of course, her scope of things was way tinier than his and he supposed he had better make her understand this. But she had more local power than he did. One little scream out of her and she could make it seem that he was trying to rape her or something, or she could tell the authorities what he'd found and taken and there would be Men In Black of the time period up his ass all over the place. His final place of residence would be some underground prison far from the light of day.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'd better come clean. I am going to need your help anyway in

getting this object back to the future.”

She stared at him for a half a minute before bursting into laughter. “The future!” she said, laughing more. “Good play. Next, you’re going to tell me that *you’re* from the future.”

They were both sweating like pigs and he could smell himself. All he really wanted was a shower and some cool, dark place to lie down and conk out for twelve hours. There was literally nothing to lose, so he said, “As a matter of fact, yes. I’m from 2026. Jenkintown originally, but now near Gettysburg, never mind the actual place. I’m here to get this back to my bosses safely.”

Her mouth twitched. “You’re from 2026. Well, tell me about that! Who is the President?”

His mouth dropped open. How did she know to go right for a sore spot? “Donald Trump,” he said.

Now she laughed right out. “You mean that tacky real estate guy in New York that brags all the time and thinks he’s classy?”

“Yeah, him.”

“*President of the United States*,” she said.

“That’s right, second term.”

“They elected him *twice*?”

“Yeah, they did. With a space in the middle. Someone else was president in between.”

She said, “Are people not educated in the twenty-first century?”

“Not for me to judge,” he said, just wanting to get out of there and home.

“Wow,” she said. “Just wow. Did you vote for him?”

“No, I did not,” he said.

“Tell me more stuff about 2026, not that this means I actually believe you. But tell me more.”

He sighed. Not only was he exhausted and dirty but he had to use the toilet. “Look, I really

need to get back to your house, at least. I need the bathroom, I’m hungry and my head aches. Can we talk there?”

She took pity on him and they headed back. “You can stay overnight,” she said. “We have a bed and stuff in the basement. There’s a shower down there. My dad likes to use it but he’s not home.”

Should he stay overnight? He was so tired and hungry and dirty, damn it, and he needed to rest. If he managed to get back to the Wexler building with the artifact tonight and got himself back to 2026, they’d grill him until he dropped without an iota of consideration for what he’d been through. Screw them, he thought. He was going to get a good night’s sleep!

“All right,” he said. “Sounds reasonable. Then tomorrow early, I’ll get going.”

“You need a ride to wherever you’re going?” she asked.

“Well, uh, yeah, that might be nice. I’d really appreciate that.”

“I’ll drive you,” she said, “no problem.”

His shower felt delicious with some kind of good smelling soap called Irish Spring, and Joan took pity on him and supplied him with a pair of her father’s underwear, an old pair of his jeans (fortunately classic Levis) and a T shirt. She took back the cowboy boots and cleaned them up. He had to put back on his 1970s loafers but she said he didn’t look too bad. Since her father was a bit wider around the waist, he pulled the jeans in with a belt.

They had a dinner of tuna casserole that Joan made herself, with green beans and corn. Dessert was a bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Then they got comfy in the living room and watched Archie Bunker’s Place and later MASH. Trevor hadn’t spent such a cozy evening

since he could remember. But after Trudy went to bed, Joan leaned forward to grill him.

“Okay, now, enough of your bullshit,” she said. “Where are you really from and who do you work for?” She almost looked threatening, much like his supervisors. He realized that he hated them and wouldn’t mind if he never had to put up with their intimidating crap again.

What would it matter if he told her the truth? Once he was gone, and if she blabbed, no one would believe her. “I told you, I’m from 2026. May tenth, to be exact. I don’t care if you believe me or not. I work for a secret division of the government, a section of what they call Black Ops in slang, that deals with recovered UFOs and other anomalous objects. They also engage in experiments in interdimensional and time travel. They’ve succeeded in a few instances and they’re currently risking me – no, I did not volunteer, I was ordered – to come here and obtain what we recovered today because they have reason to believe it may be from a certain group of what people call aliens but are really interdimensional travelers and it might be crucial to the continuation of our society as it now is. I mean as it is in my time.”

“Can you take me there with you?” Joan said.

It’d never occurred to him to think about such a thing. Could his device even handle a double body mass? “Absolutely not,” he said. “Besides, why on earth would you want to come with me?”

“Curiosity,” she said.

“What if you couldn’t get back?”

“Well, I do love my parents, but I’m divorced, I have no children, my sister and I don’t get along, I don’t have a job and I’m adventurous. Those are good reasons to take the chance, no?”

It was out of the question. “You wouldn’t like living in the future,” he finally said.

“How would you know? You don’t even know me. I’m sure there are all kinds of things there I’d enjoy. But really, you’re making it all up anyway, right?”

Maybe he should let her think so. But her big brown eyes looked so earnest. “This is a great time to live, right now, in 1982,” he told her. “True that Reagan will do some dumb shit, like make Social Security taxable, but still, you have it pretty good. The music is decent – I’ve heard it on YouTube and people aren’t fat yet.”

“What’s Youtube?” she said. “And what do you mean about not fat yet?”

“YouTube is something people watch on computers. It’s very entertaining. As for the fat, in my time, seventy-two percent of Americans are overweight, forty percent actually obese. You see huge people grocery shopping in motorized carts. Giant portions in restaurants, schoolkids are fat, *cheerleaders* are fat. Also, celebrities turn their faces into horror shows by getting endless plastic surgery. Politics is war, people in power are pedophiles and the President of the United States rants and raves all night on social media.”

“What is social media?” she said.

“Oh. Well, everyone has computers now, some of them very tiny that they hold in their hands and call people on. Social media is made up of groups that comment or argue on there.”

“Computers?”

“Almost everyone has one or more of them, either in the form of a small tablet, a desktop machine or the telephone one I just mentioned. Any person anywhere can look up anything they want to know and the computers will tell them the latest information on that subject. You don’t need books except for pleasure reading. Anything else you can find out with the com-

puters.”

“Are people happy?” she asked.

“Some are, many are not. Life is tense. Easier in some ways, more difficult in others.”

“Has anything bad happened?”

“The country is severely divided politically, some say even to the point of promising another civil war. There’ve been way over four hundred school shootings since the ‘90s with over two hundred kids killed and way more injured. There’ve been riots in the streets and racial tensions, egged on by those in power. In addition, the Twin Towers were destroyed in September of 2001 by two planes purposely running into them flown by Saudi Arabians. The President at the time then attacked the country of Iraq even though they had nothing to do with the attacks, resulting in another war. Want me to go on? Oh, one more thing – the Supreme Court overturned Roe Vs. Wade. The current government is doing whatever it can to take away women’s rights. Still want to come with me?”

She was quiet. “If I don’t die or anything, by the time I get there, I’ll be seventy-one.”

He wasn’t sure what she wanted him to say about that.

She laughed then and said, “I still don’t believe you.”

“Well, that’s okay,” he said. “Doesn’t matter. If you live to old age, you’ll see that I’m right.”

“So, you say,” she said, teasing him.

“I was supposed to get here in 1972, not ‘82, hence my out-of-style outfit.”

“So, you say,” she repeated, laughing.

“I think I need to hit the sack now,” he said. “I’m so tired, I can’t see straight.”

He was attracted to her but was exhausted and in no way did he want to risk impregnating someone there. Besides, there was no guarantee

that she’d respond to his interest. She looked to be deep in thought. He stood up and headed to the basement. She didn’t say anything. He closed the basement door behind him. For a long moment, he waited to see if she would open it, but she didn’t. It wasn’t long before he fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, they ate peanut butter toast and then he said, “Well, time to go.” He had the artifact, still wrapped in the towel and stashed in his bag. It felt heavy but he managed, and the bag’s straps were extra strong for that purpose.

“Why the Wexler Building?” Joan asked as they looked for a parking place.

“The part of the basement where I make the time trip is the same in the future as it is now. And they expect me.”

“But what if the time when you arrive home is wrong? Like it was when you came here?” she said, sounding worried.

He wasn’t sure what to tell her. He was concerned about that too.

“Why not just hand the alien thing over to the government now, in 1982?”

He wasn’t completely sure about that himself. It wasn’t like his division ever told him the reason for anything. He had no idea really why they wanted this particular artifact so much. But in no way did he want to attract the attention of any part of the current government.

“I’ll go in with you,” she said.

“Absolutely not. You go on home now. And I truly thank you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“It was fun,” she said, her voice catching a little. “My life is boring and that was really entertaining. Whatever it all means.”

He leaned across the seat and kissed her and then got out of the car. He felt her watching him as he walked into a side entrance and

he hoped she would just pull out and go home. He was feeling all kinds of emotions. He liked her and reminded himself that back in his own time, she would be seventy-one years old.

He easily located the empty basement room again, unlocked the door, entered and relocked the door from the inside. He clicked on his wrist device and was about to set the controls when he hesitated. If it had been off ten years when he arrived here, clearly there was a major chance that it could be off on the return. If he arrived in, say, 2036, who knew what things would be like, if his particular division would still exist, if, for that matter the *country* still existed? If he assumed the thing was ten years off and he set it for 2016 but he actually arrived in 2016 instead of 2026, his division would probably not even exist yet, no one in his section would believe his story and he might end up in that underground prison or something. Where people were put when they were made to disappear.

He stood there for a good ten minutes, thinking intensely. Did he even want to go back? Would 2026 even be the same anyway, since undoubtedly, he would have screwed up something, just meeting Joan, for instance. Somehow that could influence her life from this point onwards. And yet, if he stayed here, he would definitely change the future. Possibly, he could change it deliberately, get rid of certain politicians, for example. But then again, he could end up in prison.

He turned quickly to sit the bag on the floor and accidentally hit his wrist on the door handle. Feeling a stab of terror, he looked at the device. The contact had occurred against the fake “watch” crown. The very thing he would press to start the settings.

Suddenly, he experienced a wild feeling of

adventure. They wouldn't be able to find him. They wouldn't know where he'd ended up. He had his 1972 fake driver's license – could he declare that he'd not driven for 10 years and now needed to retake the test? No computers everywhere yet, maybe he could get fake ID some other way. Find some experienced crook who could make fake licenses, etc. What did he have to go back for anyway? That empty, lonely apartment, those stiff, silent, dangerous people he worked for?

He took the artifact out of his bag, unwrapped it from the towel (possibly the towel could tip them off that it was from the '80s) and set it carefully on the floor. Then he picked up his bag, opened the door, relocked it, and walked out of the building. He looked across the street and saw that Joan was still there, sitting and looking right at him through the rolled down window of her blue 1978 Ford Fairmont. She had waited for him. v

χίδν ἀλώπκας· αἰδέεφ' ἄσαν· εἰ-
 δοκθῆμεν δ' ὑμῖν, εἰ μὴ ἥδ' ἔμεν
 τίνον' ὅτι, καὶ τίσι πολεμῆν' ::

Εἰ τιμωθῆσιν.

Ὀμῶσθε ἀγροῖ, ὅτι οἱ τοῖς κρέττοσιν
 φίλον ἐκοῦσιν, τῆς ἐαυτῶν σωτηρί-
 ᾧ καταφρονούσι ::



μετ' ἑμῶν.

Μ

εἰρμῆς ὄντων· τὸ παλαιὸν ἀνὴρ
 ἦν· καὶ τῆς γεωργίας δίκην ἐκῶς
 προσέχων· οὐ τοῖς ἰδίῳις ἤρκετο πό-
 μοις· ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐν ἑστέοντων
 καρπῶν ὑφ' ἑρῆς· ὁ δὲ βίος ἀγα-
 ρακτῆρας ὑπὸ τῆς πόλεως πλεονεξί-
 ᾳ μεταμόρφωσεν αὐτὸν εἰς τοῦτο τοῦ ζῶντος

ῥίαν.

“BAPTISMA ASTERIÓN”

by LUKE FREDETTE

The speaker buzzed to life. “Priest 02571-00,” it said, “your services are to be administered.”

Mahaut stood in the great plastic umbilical connecting the shuttle to the anchorage—one of the great asteroid-cells spread out in a long, circular chain around the light of a dying star. Hands clenched tightly behind her back (so she could at least give the *appearance* of restraint), she peered through the squint at the priest within, and wondered just what this one had done.

He was dressed in a pitch-black cassock that was all but shapeless, and sat tight against the far wall, the miniscule gravity in that place made up for by great iron bands around his waist and legs. His hair lay as black and sparse on his head as moss did on forest floors, only rising to the status of trees and hillocks around his ears and cheeks. A stained-glass representation of St. Hyperenor, flagellating himself with the branch of the wire-mesh tree of Kranion, shimmered in red across his figure.

The priest looked up; his eyes had receded deeply into his wiry face.

Mahaut’s every muscle tightened; she stared back, probingly.

So this is my priest.

It was in the ordinary duty of inquisitresses to traverse the depths of the antlike planetary colonies, searching there for the lost and the wretched so as to clap the bands of priestly

office upon them. The truest rite of passage, however, was the escorting of a man so ordained on his ministry.

Mahaut had been sure that she was ten years off from that honor, at least. And the cannonness had not called her to her chambers that day to award it.

“It defeats the purpose of our vocation,” she’d said, *“to kill our seminarians.”*

Mahaut had thought of the men she’d hunted over the years, like grease stains on those deep tunnel walls; their sudden, quick gesture; how they could go from their knees to your throat in a horrific instant. The scene could repeat itself on any one of the worlds that professed their faith.

“They weren’t our seminarians yet,” had been her response.

“And now they never will be.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

Mahaut had never thought so. That thinking had not run in her family, either, judging by her parents’ response when Lutia had come home, one night—her younger sister covered with hand-prints and bruises as if she was no better than a vacuum-sealed door.

The priest lowered his head.

Without thinking, Mahaut jabbed at the door-console again.

“Priest 02571-00,” the speaker repeated, “your services are to be administered.”

This time the man did not even bother looking up.

“He prefers contemplation,” the cannonness had said, after pulling up the holographic file of this one—the Father Eloi. *“For the past fifteen years, after we got him at twelve, he’s refused any sort of duty.”*

“It seems like a pious choice,” Mahaut had said.

“Hardly.” The cannonness’ eyebrows had risen slightly. *“In fact, I think he may be in need of your... particular talents.”*

The temptation to turn from the squint and stalk back to her shuttle was a strong one. But it was also the duty of an inquisitress to try *everything*—leave no stone unturned, no lamb abandoned, whether they personally liked it or not.

So Mahaut stepped closer and pressed her lips to the little opening.

“It’s the office of the first blessing,” she said, *“think of the child. And what it might do.”*

She couldn’t keep her own personal incredulity out of that last bit.

But the priest looked up, and his eyes were flashing. When he spoke, his voice was as hoarse and thin as fifteen years of prayer ought to have made it:

“There are others. Send them.”

Mahaut felt her blood shudder.

Yes, there are others.

She thought of Lutia again—the good child, not the surface-caste brat with a penchant for taking colonials as lovers that Mahaut had been.

“You don’t get to choose,” the inquisitress said through gritted teeth.

She pulled a small phial from her habit and thrust it against the console. The right pressure at the right place, by a practiced hand, made the crystal matrix of its glass shatter, and in mo-

ments the little machine was hissing and spitting sparks as the glorified *aqua regia* within did its work.

The priest frowned, and his eyes widened, when, taking advantage of the sudden weakness of the door’s mechanisms, Mahaut gripped it with both hands and wrenched the whole thing loose.

“It shouldn’t be me!” he tried to yell. His voice cracked and then collapsed entirely into coughing.

Mahaut, for her part, was already quite finished with listening. Shaking a few remaining crystal shards off her gloved hand, she marched across and set to manhandling the bars, peeling them apart until she could seize the priest by the neck of his frock.

“One misstep,” she hissed, *“one misstep, and I promise that you won’t have to worry about any ministry ever again.”*

She would admit to some minor sense of pleasure when potential seminarians quailed before her—even if what their fright revealed often tipped her over the edge when deciding whether they lived or died. It was a collapsing in their eyes that did it, and the feeling that she could at last glimpse the person behind their bravado.

Just as she always suspected, they were sniveling, cowardly things all.

Slaves to the wyrm in their heart.

She’d killed her own, the very day she’d woken up and Lutia was never to be seen again. To those who did it, it gave clarity.

But there was no clarity in Father Eloi’s eyes.

Even this close, all Mahaut could see was the blackness of the priest’s pupils. The darkness stretched onward and inward, endlessly, without even stars lighting its depths like the void outside.

There was no hate there, either—for her or anyone. No anger or fear. Mahaut felt very suddenly as if she was holding aloft some plant, innocuous until it poisoned you at a touch.

She shuddered and dropped him.

He staggered, and the inquisitress reasserted control over herself in a great muster of nerve and muscle. With practiced ease, she got behind him and delivered a rough prod with her knuckles to his back.

“Go,” she said, “and be grateful that you get to go outside.”

Eloi paused instead. “Augustin,” he whispered.

Mahaut shoved him forward with the same force she’d used on the door. His entire body shuddered, and his jaw worked harshly.

For a second, she thought she had already broken him; that he would collapse onto the floor, pooling blood, any moment now. That moment later, though, he was shuffling forward on his own. There was not even the wet noise of vital fluids dribbling from his mouth in response to the blow she’d given him.

What is he?

Mahaut slipped her hand beneath her habit again and grasped at the stiletto there. Her heavier weapons had been confiscated once she’d ‘accepted’ this assignment—she’d been on quite the tear about it, back on their hallowed world—but it would do just fine in a pinch.

One misstep, she thought, just one.

Their whole trip to the planet he was to minister, Eloi refused to look at Mahaut. She showed him none of the same courtesy.

Shuttle travel was like skipping a stone across water and counting how many times it bounced—over before you could truly think of

it, and yet each moment felt an eternity. Priest and inquisitress sat facing each other in the passengers’ section, its only occupants, while two armored templars in the front did the actual piloting. Mahaut had been staring at him the entire time, almost without blinking, trying to sherlock out some incriminating detail from how he carried or cared for himself.

What’s different about you? she wondered. That sense of danger still dogged her. *What’s wrong?*

But to her eyes Eloi was—with one exception—as plain as plain could get. There wasn’t the hint of mineral-stained rags beneath his smock, and if he had any tattoos or ritual scarring it covered those, too. Instead of looking at her with some amount of righteous anger, fear, or even disdain, Eloi bent low, seeming on the verge of collapsing in on himself. He was as wholly priestly as one could get: a picture of tormented innocence.

But no one is ever just a priest. They all had their histories, had done something that could not be forgiven any other way. They only hid it better than the average lower-colony lowlife—and Eloi, evidently, was a prodigy in this regard.

Mahaut’s only choice, then, was to devote her attention to the one unusual thing about him: his *chains*.

It was common for an ordinary to have several chains, especially circling the head and crossing the chest, and Eloi was no exception there. What was unusual were the fact, and number, of the *others*: he had fourth and fifth chains, which connected his wrists and ankles to each other.

Is that it?

Such an amount spoke of a man who had done something truly heinous, and that prospect alone could explain her sense of danger.

Just how many, she couldn't help but wonder, did that man merit?

She had never actually seen Lutia's culprit after delivering him to the ecclesiastical authorities. She had not yet been an inquisitress, or on anything resembling the path to it. But even knowing—academically—that one would some day catch him, she just couldn't have left him alone.

"It's good that they ordain that sort off-planet," was all the sisters' mother and father had said, once Lutia was safe and asleep in her room. As if that could ever be the beginning and end of the matter! Those words, too, had been their only consolation for the wounds Mahaut had sustained in her first capture; the great, ragged scars that still ran down her cheeks like ancient riverbeds.

It'd been a subtle warning from them, she'd realized later: *If you want to do this forever—and you shouldn't—then leave now.*

She'd waited until Lutia had vanished first. In her sister's absence, purpose had risen up to fill the void she'd left.

The wrist-chain, which had ordinarily hung loose, Eloi now held in his hands and before his face. His fingers moved across them searchingly.

Attack at an oblique angle.

"Praying?" Mahaut asked.

He started, looked up at her.

"For the child?" she suggested.

"...A child," was his answer, at last. Before she could probe, he continued: "How long will I be out?"

The inquisitress blinked.

So he can feel like talking.

When released from their anchorage, a priest's traditional right was to receive all communications, news slates, and proclamation squirts that had passed through the cosmos

since they were last entombed. Eloi hadn't asked for any of these, and in consequence Mahaut had spent their whole flight with the standard-issue digicon lying, awkwardly and weightily, on her lap. She picked it up now—it was a thing shaped like a flattened cathedral or shrine door—and flipped it open.

"You've been in contemplation for the past fifteen years, relative," she said, "and there's only one child for you to sanctify."

The priest's hands clenched and unclenched at that. "Good." His voice was hoarse again, thick with doubt.

Mahaut smelled blood. She had known his request for the danger it was: an opportunity for him to divert the conversation from himself, to distract her from whatever he had done. It hadn't worked; in fact, it had given her what she needed.

Him wanting to just contemplate... it's a strong defense, looking at it from the outside. But look closer, and you can see that it's also a critical weakness.

She said: "I've told the templars to take the long way to our destination."

"Why would you do that?" The hoarseness grated now, as if there were knives in Eloi's throat.

Mahaut did not break her gaze from the digicon. "You ought to see more of creation while you're out. Here: the Wandering Ecumenical Council is returning from the Sagittarius Stream in three months, standard. They're expected to have made great deliberations regarding those children who are given over to the Lord by their parents at a young—"

"But I don't want to see them!"

"I rather think you should," Mahaut said. "You might be among the Council's number, someday."

"No!"

Eloi's voice was bellicose, now, and it battered at her; Mahaut cursed herself when her reply stopped short at the change of tone. Sometime in the past instant, just when she hadn't been looking at him, the priest had stood—and he was standing now before her, she saw when her gaze flicked up from the data.

Mahaut's entire body ached with preparation.

"Do you have any idea—?!" he began.

Do it.

But the priest's head dropped low again, and his eyes riveted themselves once more upon his chain-links.

"At the root," he murmured, between breaths now harsh and hurried, "the Theosurge. At the source, the sickness and its cure. At the nadir, the zenith. From the black pool, the powers."

The inquisitress stared with widened eyes. Looking at him, there and in that way, with their blank steel surroundings, Mahaut felt her sense of danger from this man suddenly clarify.

He's not broken.

Many was the priest who, passing through the grand, planet-sized cathedral that was the hallowworld, appeared utterly crushed. They moved with shuffling steps and, though they were meant to face forward, had downcast eyes. Their bodies were limp and driven as if by scouring winds that no one else could see or feel. Mahaut had cherished her thoughts of the day when she'd marshal such a one—

—but, again, only in ten years' time.

Not broken, she thought, no... something worse.

A chill gripped her, and the inquisitress responded the best way she knew: another attack.

More direct this time. Don't give him a chance to escape.

"Those chains," she said, nodding at Eloi, "who assigned you that many?"

He was silent for a long moment at that, so long that Mahaut lifted up her foot to provide him with some motivation.

"...Would you provide the refrain?" he asked, voice small and desperate. His fingers tightened on the chain-links.

"Answer me first," the inquisitress said, "...I might consider it."

Eloi glared at her fiercely. For a moment Mahaut basked in it: that wonderful feeling of seeing him unmasked, even a little.

But that satisfaction was pierced an instant later, by the sheer weight and bite of the anger she saw there. She could sound it no more than she could the emptiness that had been in his eyes previously.

And yet...

I'm *not the one in danger*, she knew. It wasn't because she could handle him if he attacked (though she certainly could), but rather because, of all the threat that she sensed pouring out of this priest, none of it felt directed at her.

He's a threat to all around him, Mahaut thought, *a spiritual wound*.

The priest turned and marched back to his seat, so that now he faced away from her.

"I asked for seven chains," he said, "when I turned myself over to the lictor. He saw no reason to deny me."

There!

The exact shape of the danger, that repulsive emptiness, that spiritual wound, now had a clear shape.

He confessed. He wasn't caught.

The cannonness *had* put her in danger, Mahaut thought.

If Eloi had not been brought down by some other inquisitress, caught in the act or after-

math and declared a candidate for priesthood, then there was no way of knowing if any of the lessons doled out by the authorities—civil or ecclesiastical—had actually taken root. He could break from his vocation at any time, and in the shock and fear that would result, do *anything*.

Mahaut carried a firecracker, a live grenade, in the shuttle with her. But true to the canoness' words, this was a danger she was well-equipped to meet.

In fact, there was the promise of relish in it.

He's no different, she thought, than the stain-people on the walls of any colony. Her heart fluttered in excitement. *Make your misstep, priest. And when you do...*

Understanding a threat did not make preparing for it futile. So rather than taking another shuttle from their landing pad, Mahaut elected to make Eloi march the distance to their client's home across the planet's surface. It was the kind of thing an inquisitress was praised for—an efficacious use of the surrounding land.

Atmizein was a world covered in long stretches of sedge in place of land; these formed a web over deceptively shallow-looking, sickly pale water that covered the planet entirely. It was all swamp and plain at once, not a single tree rising high enough to hide the blazing, silver sun in the sky. Altogether it managed to be not only humid, but crawling, unconsciously warm, the same distant way that a late spring day can be cold. It was the sort of place where the weather and labor would make it easy for someone's concentration to break, for their actions to be guided by their most base instincts.

No wonder they need their child blessed, Mahaut thought as they marched; training and anger kept her from feeling the sweat beginning to coat her skin beneath her habit. The wyrm must rise eagerly to the surface here.

Infuriatingly, though, this all seemed to make Eloi pray harder.

"Tramp down generously upon the root," he recited slowly, "do not allow war to spill from its holy borders. The conflict drives so that you may drive it to conclusion."

Only the apoëthea? Again and again?

It was the most basic prayer imaginable, telling her nothing of what the priest had done, of what she might expect when he, inevitably, broke. Mahaut had assumed a degree of facile piety—it was what he had been showing this whole time, she suspected—but she had not expected him to be so blatant about it.

It felt as though he was taunting her, and that made what was fierce and dangerous in her rise up. So Mahaut stepped closer, and pressed the tip of her stiletto more tightly against the small of the priest's back.

He took it as a signal and came to a halt.

"Pray something else," she ordered.

Eloi looked over his shoulder at her. "What would you prefer, my lady?" There was the ghostly whisper of sarcasm and snideness in that voice now.

She pressed harder in response. "The *oligothumos*."

That was the prayer for those who, by their fault or others', fled from their just punishment. The one eye that Mahaut could see of the priest narrowed. If she lowered her eyelids even a little, she thought she could see something in it besides the endless darkness and self-recrimination.

The anger's back. He's not tamed himself as well as he thought.

"I came to my punishment willingly," Eloi said. His voice was not as fierce as it had been on the shuttle, but still it roiled with a deadly undercurrent. "I've been trying to live steadfast-

ly by it—even when I’ve been taken far from the cell where I agreed to stay my days, and forced into a duty that I have consistently asserted I am not fit for.”

The fierceness and dangerousness in Mahaut’s chest reared sharply. *Don’t you dare act like the victim!*

“And the punishment was that you should pray the apoëthea relentlessly?” The inquisitress snorted. “That can’t be enough. Why would you ask for all of *these*, then?”

She pressed the stiletto a little bit deeper for emphasis. The cassock’s fabric bent beneath the blade, so that it would take only a twist to notch the knife-tip in just the right weak point to drive through it into his flesh.

Or such would be the case if the blade did not inevitably catch on those chains not worn above the smock. There had to be one around his waist, Mahaut thought, and perhaps one even lower. The thought of what *that* one could stand for made her grip the hilt tighter.

“Don’t you trust your superiors?” he asked, “if they think it’s enough...”

“You’re another matter,” she replied. She twisted the stiletto up slightly and it rang against one of the chains.

One around the waist, after all. The other, then...

Eloi sighed.

“It’s not the only prayer,” he said at last, “but it’s the only one that I can say alone. It helps the chain around my heart.”

“The heart?”

“The first one I got. The most important, really. It’s the foundation for all the others.” “And what did you build on top of it?”

Eloi didn’t answer.

“Then let me provide the refrain, if you need it,” she said coolly, “for any other prayer

you’d like.”

Mahaut let herself match the priest’s gaze. She made her inner self steel against the murk of his eyes, and pictured herself marching through it, heedless and resolute.

Yes—that’s how it always is. Always has been. No need to fear.

She did not stop until, at last, he looked away.

“The *adelphuláxei*,” Eloi said, “that one... I had it chosen *for* me.”

The adelphuláxei—!

It was the prayer for those who had taken not just blood, but the blood that flowed in their own veins. It was the prayer for repentance of kin- and clan-killers.

And before her, one who had just admitted to it! *Augustin*—that name he had muttered when leaving the cell. His brother? His father? His son?

Such wonderings didn’t stop Mahaut from doing what she did best.

Lutia had refused to identify the man who had defiled her, when their planet’s lictors and templars came calling. Sweet, pure Lutia, who had always disapproved of Mahaut’s ventures down below, and who’s warnings and scoldings had been proven right the one time—the *one time!*—that she had followed the elder sister down. Mahaut had done the work for her; no, she told herself, for *them*.

As she would now do that work Eloi’s lictor ought to have done.

Blade will snap if I try to cut him—at least until I know where all those damn chains are.

The only thing for it, then, was to strike at his head, just beneath the chains at his temple. While he staggered from that, she drove her knee into his stomach and her fist into his jaw. From there it was easy to grab at his hair, and

use that, and *only* that, to bring him hard to the ground.

After that the inquisitress simply had to work her way down.

The priest didn't resist; not once, even as she left his face swollen and his legs covered in bruises. It turned out that the chains were a help to her; if she struck just right, then they would dig all the deeper into his flesh. Some of them had barbed, thornlike protrusions at great intervals—that explained the mosaic of Hyperenor, she thought distantly—and a sudden wetness against her gloves told her that they drew blood aplenty when she pushed them into his flesh.

The heat and moisture of this planet hadn't fled with the blows she'd landed, no matter how much of the air she disturbed with her blows. Instead, it felt rather like all the humidity had taken root *within* her, and she was driving it—the stickiness, the pain, the annoyance—into the bastard beneath her.

But she recalled the canoness' words.

This is not the point.

Her blows began to drag, each one lingering where it landed.

At last they stopped. Mahaut was panting.

"You will not," she managed, "go near that child! And you... you will not make me... like—"

Eloi had fallen silent beneath her. His eyes were swollen shut; his breathing, harsh and rasping, began slowly to approach something regular.

He looked almost beatific, and a scream rose up from deep within her at that, silent to him but echoing around in her skull. It said:

There's no point!

She drove a few more blows into him, both to make sure that he would not be getting up, and to help steady her own breathing.

When that was done, the inquisitress slung the priest carelessly over her shoulder.

She looked around for some answer, some goalpost. All that rose before her was one of the planet's larger settlements, the very place that she and the priest had been trekking towards. Rising from deep beneath the silty ground-water like a stalagmite, it reached a pencil-thin middle point and then billowed out, toppling down again—a stalactite, now—as if it was some great waterspout, or an upturned cup.

And fittingly, small waterfalls trailed down from its heights to the ground below, in between the lights and holes of the city; the inverted towers, domiciles, and storage spaces that clung tight to either its contracting or expanding halves.

I can't bring this... this thing there, Mahaut thought. And yet...

The child. Who will bless the child?

It was the only chance that baby had, the only means of quieting the wyrm within its heart and preventing it from becoming something as monstrous as the priest over her shoulder—as Lutia's culprit.

Me?

But that was not her role. And besides, she was no criminal!

Yes, she thought, *I killed it. My own wyrm, I killed it. Without confession, without repentance...*

Without being caught.

She had given Lutia the sip, that night down in the colony, the moment she realized her younger sister was following her. Mahaut's feet had been used to the colony tunnels already, and it was a simple matter of turning a corner and leaving her unprepared, innocent sister to face whatever lurked down there alone.

I'd survived until then, Mahaut had told herself in the moment. But it was an old and tired

excuse even, and the response was always the same: *Then why did it happen to her?*

A throb began in the side of the inquisitress' temple.

She adjusted her grip on the priest and set off again. With no other choice, she headed for the great city ahead; at the very least, it would provide a place to stay while she thought out her next move.

Just move forward, she thought, that's all you can do.

The planet's core was a particularly active one at night. Each of the pools they had walked past by day now hissed and sizzled, sending up great goutts of steam that floated high into the sky and obscured the stars above better than any normal cloud cover could have. Altogether, it looked as though the planet lacked a moon.

Mahaut stood on the balcony of the room she'd gotten. It was a seedy, half-forgotten place, the sort of familiar haunt that an inquisitress often patronized when they were on the hunt. It was close enough to the vertical middle of the city that she could look down at its lower, poorer half. Mud-hewn shacks and jacals, stretching down in row after row, the streets between them like twisting, writhing serpents themselves.

Foul.

Mahaut smiled a little. There was something refreshing about looking at a place so openly vile, a place that didn't bother to dress itself in piety.

Eloi lay on the bed in the room just behind her. With time, his eyes had regained their ability to open and close, but his gaze and body had come down feverish. He slipped in and out of consciousness, prone to random jerks while asleep and nonsensical mutterings while awake. She had probably broken something, Mahaut

thought. The canniness would not be pleased. Yet satisfaction at this eluded her.

A horrifying thought struck: *Am I getting numb to all this?*

The inquisitress rested her palms on the balcony's rim and peered harder at the city below. *Think. The thieves. The murderers. The kidnappers and rapists and... a whole city of priests, all of them, sleeping just below!*

A rare gust of cool air dashed up from below and upon her face. The relief gave leave to another thought she'd have rather not had:

It'd be best just to burn the entire place down. This father included.

She pictured the slowly-collapsing hovels, the sinuous movements of the burning bodies beneath the flames, and her breathing shook. The thought was satisfying, intoxicating even. *Judgment and justice.*

But a face appeared in her mind. A girl, all ragged clothes and musty hair and toothy grin, lacking a name but full of life. The archetypal slum child, produced by the inquisitress out of a thousand young faces she had seen on a thousand worlds. An instant later and Mahaut had given this imaginary child a name: *Gisla*.

Gisla, she imagined, would always be awake before the rest of her family—someone had to throw stones at the rooster calling out the time (*every* time; removal from their native planet had caused the damned things to announce each hour in turn—it being sunrise *somewhere*, after all). After that, breakfast of small bits and pieces stolen from her baker's dozen of hungry siblings, and then she was out the door and into the streets.

Her parents would make a pittance cleaning up the public thoroughfares and begging, while Gisla would gather up her gang of hoodlums and take them romping through the city. There

would be no ceiling too steeply-inclined for them to climb; no gutter too run over with filth. They would tramp through them all, splashing themselves in and shaking off the gunk, their grins growing wider, their faces brighter, shining all the more in the dirt and blood and bruises that a day's squabbling over territory and throw-aways could produce.

And when, at last, Gisla came home, still alive and safe despite everything, her parents would take her in their arms as if she were so much gold—crooning over her, running their fingers through her hair, kissing the hurts away.

Mahaut felt the throbbing return to her temple. She longed suddenly to reach out herself, to do the same to Gisla as her imagined parents would...

But some hurts don't vanish that easily.

Only the person could, as this fake girl would the moment the inquisitress banished her from her mind.

Perhaps that was why Lutia had disappeared; to save her parents—to save *Mahaut*—from the pain that would rise up every time they glanced at her.

Well, you failed!

A sob ripped at her throat. She could no longer look at the city.

There was nothing to do other than lash out; so Mahaut turned and ventured back into the room. She caught Eloi with his eyes about to close again.

Upon their arrival, Mahaut had partially undone the chains around Eloi's cassock and rebound them to the mattress on which he lay; she gripped them now and rattled fiercely until the priest shot back to consciousness once more.

"Augustin," he gasped.

His face flushed and paled in turns. Those

eyes turned each and every which way, not seeing her or any of their surroundings.

"It should have—it should've been *me*."

A chord was struck in the inquisitress. In an instant, every cell in her was completely alert.

"Should it have been?" Mahaut asked, softly.

He most likely couldn't understand a word, but the sound was enough.

"Eleven," he managed. His voice tore. "To my four, when I... I killed him."

Mahaut stood up abruptly. Her fingertips twitched, but she did not lay hold of any more of the priest's chains. She struggled to catch his eyes as they darted around.

This is the moment, she thought, distantly. *He's going to break.*

Then and there, she needed it more from him than she had out of any possible seminararian before. So she made the noncommittal, subvocal noises in the back of her throat, the ones that told whoever heard's brain that some reply had been given—even if they'd have no idea what exactly it was.

Done constantly, and the target could not stop talking. Mahaut was never one to let up, so Eloi continued:

"We were making our way down from our parents'... They were the governors; planet ones, lived in what'd been refurbished from the first ships to make 'fall.

"Shelves and shelves of waterfall, going down from our house. We crossed them from side to side. Usually. But we, we were kids, had no better ideas, and sometimes we took it all straight.

"I was the farthest ahead, then. Always went out the most. He... liked staying inside. You'd think that was a bad thing, but Augustin... Augustin... he had this way about him. This...

he *glowed*, you know? From the moment he was first blessed, folks used to say. It drove us all back to him, no matter what he did, or said...

"I don't know why he came down that day. I really... don't. But I was a few shelves down from him, and I looked up, and there he was, where he belonged. In the light. The water, it'd made rainbows. And him, with that damn golden hair of his, that skin... complexion like, like milk...

"...It was the first time I really *knew* there was a wyrm in me."

The priest had to stop. His breath had become too ragged, and he coughed furiously, forcing some air back into his lungs.

"s not just a story," he continued, "not just a... a metaphor. It reared up inside my chest. It peered out through my eyes. And it could—I could see *his*, too!

"Just coiled up. Sleeping, but not dead. And everything made sense, right then. The way he liked to stress the *-oi* in my name, like it was some damn baby-noise... that smug little look when I came back bruised up. He hovered over me when I was getting taken care of, or—it was even worse when he walked away."

A sob wrenched its way up Eloi's throat. He bit it back and made the sound of a wounded beast instead.

"It made sense. All that childish, golden... *shit* that he was, it was just that. It was fake! A sick, disgusting mask. It had been that way the whole time! I wanted to... I wanted to... I wanted to rip that mask away. Even once.

"I reached up. I grabbed his leg. And I... I..."

He shuddered, and hacked up spittle. He was silent again. Mahaut stared down at the priest. His eyes hadn't closed; rather, they were riveted to her. The pupils were as black and

dark as ever, but the white and green surrounding it seemed to glow.

"I don't know," Eloi whispered, "I don't know what'll happen when I see that child. Why would they... I'm just going to do it again, aren't I? I can't stop it. I'm praying, and praying, but in the moment... I..."

I ought to hit him again, she thought.

But instead, the inquisitress rose and returned to the balcony.

She reached out for Gisla again. But a child no longer seemed to matter.

She thought of the parents instead.

Those hands brushing the dirt away—what dirt did they have on them, when they were children?

Lutia had been given the first blessing, too, just as she had. And neither of those had stopped that man, that future priest, from doing as he wanted to her.

The wyrm would always, *always* be there.

In me, too?

She had seen it in so many eyes, over the years; in response she had acted, without hesitation...

...just as the child of a governor on a backwater planet had so many years ago.

For the first time in years, Mahaut reached up and hugged her own shoulders. She pulled back from the balcony.

I ought to throw myself off, she thought, looking down at the city, *I ought to...*

She tried to think back to the culprit, the one who had defiled Lutia. The old hate and anger rose up within her, and they comforted for a moment. But they were weak and faded quickly. *Why did I want to hide from her?*

She was circling the root of it all and knew it.

And once she knew it, there was no option but to charge straight in and face it.

It should've been me.

The priest—Eloi—had said that, too.

The one I've wanted to tear to pieces, all these years... was me.

She flung her hands down to her sides.

There's no point! the inquisitress remembered fiercely. *It's all just one big joke joke! The entire cosmos! No one's—none of us—has got the right to baptize that child!*

It was impossible to bring herself to laugh.

There was still duty—the duty she and the priest had both thrown themselves into in their escape from guilt.

Mahaut took the energy that would have gone into a deep, sardonic laugh, and turned to enter the room again. She crossed it quickly, heading for the door.

“I’ll get you some medicine,” she said, though she did not look to see if Eloi had even heard her. “You’ve got a baptism in the morning. And...” She bit down on her lip, then: “... you’ll do it, too. Even if I have to drag you there by the chains ‘round your neck.”

The priest’s only reply was a low moan.

As they emerged onto the very top of the city, the priest mercilessly tight in the inquisitress’ grip, Mahaut caught their clients’ eyes.

Husband and wife stood on the very top of the settlement’s mushroom-cap dome. The water, which rose from deep beneath the earth and poured all about the city from whatever openings it could find, gathered in its gentlest spouts and pools here. Every few steps, there would be a small crevice in the ground, its rim stained with rainbow colors. Water burbled and spat in great arcs from crevice to crevice, on-and-off, in rows at various heights and lengths.

The mother held a bundle that must have been her child in her arms. She was looking

down, whispering sweetly to it, when the inquisitress and her priest crossed from the side of the dome’s crest opposite them.

Man and woman looked up as one. The colors swimming all about them seemed to reflect endlessly in their eyes.

An instant later, they noticed that she was dragging the priest behind her by the neck.

The mother paled, and took an involuntary step back. The husband stepped towards them.

“Is... has something happened, Sister?” he asked.

The colors still danced in his eyes, Mahaut noted, but she saw now the fragility of them. There was the sudden, unpleasant sense in her that she was walking in a field of eggshells.

It's not a farce, Mahaut thought suddenly, *to them, at least.*

“No,” she heard herself say, “but something *will* happen, yes?” The inquisitress released her grip and the priest dropped rear-first to the ground.

For an instant she thought Eloi would lie there, sullen. He did look up at her, his face asking the unspoken question: *Just what do you expect me to do?*

Mahaut could only give him a nod.

The priest looked at her a moment longer, and then began, slowly, to stand. Every motion was that of a hunted animal, one that sensed the jaws of a trap or predator closing around it.

He looked at the two parents.

“The child to be blessed?” he asked. His voice trembled, and he stretched out his arms as though expecting to receive a bomb.

Husband and wife glanced at each other, then back to the priest. Mahaut felt her teeth grind together behind closed lips.

Her choice of arrival had soiled the ceremony enough already. And even if it didn’t mat-

ter...

Duty. Remember that.

So the inquisitress stepped back—and back, and back, until the couple deemed it safe enough for them to approach the priest.

Why? she wondered, as the mother bridged the distance, *why am I the only one they fear?* That they didn't see past Eloi's cringing exterior cut her deeply.

But they didn't beat him. Like I did.

The comedy of the whole situation dragged at her again, keeping her in place.

"Helie," the woman was saying, handing the black-wrapped bundle over to the priest. It looked heavier than it probably was; Eloi held it like the base of a mountain had been pressed into his hands. "His name, father."

"Thank you," Eloi said.

Mahaut dared to glance from the priest back to the mother, who looked like she would be little more than a crone in a few decades' time—what with her spindly, bony body and apparent penchant for wearing long black drapes as clothing. The inquisitress assumed this to be the pious fashion on this world...

...if not the penitent one.

If his parents need such piety, then the child...!

She looked back at Eloi. He held the infant as if it was entirely inanimate, and his eyes searched its face. He mouthed something, but even standing no more than a foot away from him, she could not hear.

Does he see it?

Peering over his shoulder, Mahaut could just make out the baby's features: the misshapen lump of its body, the layers of wrinkled, pale flesh that drowned its eyes and mouth, its wriggles and squirms as it made phlegmatic sounds.

It really is like a worm, she thought, *before she could stop herself, cocooned, but not far from*

hatching.

The priest's grip tightened on the child, and he stepped towards the site the family had chosen for this occasion. There two great stone pillars rose up high into the sky; the crevice that spilt water was between them, cut by nature into a small, upthrusting outcropping.

Eloi lowered baby Helie's head into the stream of water pouring gently from it. As though it sensed the infant's presence, the trickle then sputtered into a full stream. The priest bent over further, until he looked little more than a great, black bat bending over the child in his white cloth.

One second followed another.

Priest and child did not move. The parents had turned robotically to watch the performance, but now remained where they were.

Mahaut's temple throbbed again.

Something between a sob and a laugh rose up in her, like the scream had done. She wanted to grab and shake these parents, to strike at *them* until they understood what a mockery this was.

The water poured on.

Eloi held the child's head firmly beneath it, allowing not the smallest breath of air.

The child began to writhe.

As if it was a signal, the mother clasped her hands tightly together and bent down, praying. The father tightened his grip on her shoulders. Neither moved any further.

Mahaut was not so inclined to contemplation or prayer. In a heartbeat, she'd drawn the stiletto again, and was marching towards the priest, her insides light and feverish, her mouth a tight, determined line.

Damn blasphemy, she thought, *damn duty. And damn the joke!*

The inquisitress crossed into the area of

pouring water. In an instant, she felt the air about her shift. It became, to some sense buried deep in the back of her mind, akin to a maze of veils, each gossamer-thin and utterly transparent. She lifted the stiletto and felt several of those veils tear with the motion.

Mahaut felt, at that moment, that she could tear the entire cosmos apart, just so the likes of Helie and Lutia would never be touched again.

Then she saw the child clearly.

Its lungs took in only water as it struggled to scream. In that moment it was a thing straight out of Hell—the cocoon cracking open and something hideous crawling out.

Kill them both, she thought—she *knew*—in that instant. *It's the only thing you can do. That anyone can.*

And then something within the priest gave a great, violent heave, and he lifted the child from the water.

The droplets which fell at the motion seemed to make all the rainbow colors around them brighter. Helie *shone*. Gaping up at him, Mahaut saw, even as he wretched out water furiously, no wretched demon—only the beautiful, innocent child that he had always been, that she had achieved privately to believe in.

Its beauty fell down with the water and illuminated Eloi's face. His eyes no longer appeared so deeply set. Instead of the mugginess that had filled them, something else shimmered and danced within. It brought the deepest depths of his gaze to the surface and scattered them haphazardly about all about like children's playthings, like they were nothing at all.

Like it had all been a farce itself.

Eloi's lips parted, and rather than praying, he laughed.

Mahaut lowered her stiletto. A cocoon, she thought, could be more beautiful than what had

made it—and what emerged, more beautiful still. A tree could be more beautiful than its roots; a black pool could reflect such light that it blinded an onlooker.

It blessed them both, she thought, and then absurdly continued: *the blessing blessed them both!*

The laughter she had suppressed for so long suddenly tried coming up her throat; she clasped her hand over her mouth and stepped out, away from this sacred space and back into the orbit of the parents.

Mahaut rather thought that Eloi should have vanished when he finally lowered the child; with how his body had looked in the moment, airy and smokelike, every atom ought to have disassociated from each other the instant it passed.

But the priest stood there with sodden, clumpy, clinging clothes, and his eyes and gaze had withdrawn deep inside again. He strode past the inquisitress, not showing—or caring to show—that he had noticed her arrival at all, and handed the babe to his mother.

"It's done," he said, and then added, "Helie's a fine name."

The parents were silent. They stared up at the priest with something between shock and awe.

"Thank him already," Mahaut snapped, and then: "the father is a busy man, after all."

The older woman spluttered. "T-thank you. Oh, father, *thank* you, *thank* you—"

But Eloi did not acknowledge this whatsoever. He only turned, and began the long walk away from them. Mahaut breathed out harshly through her nose at how he left, but something inside her insisted on lingering a bit longer.

She stared at the two parents, watched them croon over the child. Their eyes were narrowed,

now, and just like with Eloi she could see the babe's beauty flashing into and reflecting about their eyes, clearing away all traces of fear and tiredness.

"Protect it," she heard herself say.

The father blinked and looked up at her. "What, Sister?"

The feverishness in her innards, Mahaut realized, had spread to her entire body, and given rise to a giddiness that she found difficult to suppress. It had shaken the words out of her.

In desperation to seize control of herself again, she thought of Lutia. But what she found down that path of thought was a gladness; not over the tragedy, but over her sister's disappearance.

The thought stirred up the giddiness and light in her even more, so that for a moment Mahaut thought she would topple off the settlement's dome.

I'd land on my feet, and keep striding on, she knew. That's what you did, isn't it, Lutia? No escaping the pain, or the wyrms. Just walking with them.

"The cosmos is dangerous," she managed to say at last, "keep that child safe. Happy." And because a part of her couldn't resist, she added: "I'd rather not have to hunt him, when he's older."

Ignoring the confused and worried glances of the family, she turned and followed the priest herself.

Mahaut's threat aboard the shuttle came to pass after all—if only because it was standard procedure for an inquisitress and priest, after executing a successful ministry, to travel back to the most hallowed homeworld and confirm it as such with the ecclesiastical authorities.

Of course, a bit more rode on this report than usual.

"You want him to have more assignments?" the cannonness asked, "and soon?"

She looked curiously from behind the holographic file at Mahaut, who stood, as before, on the other side of her desk.

"With my heartiest recommendation," the inquisitress said.

The cannonness folded her hands together and peered at her more strictly.

"He deserves them, after all," Mahaut added, "maybe more than most."

There was still a little bite to her words, and the cannonness's mouth writhed at it.

"Should I even ask what you did to him?" the older woman asked.

Mahaut shrugged. "I understand the necessity of our seminarians now. They won't get what they want—what they *need*—unless they are out there." She paused. "...with a guiding hand, of course."

"But not yours? This other request..."

"There's someone else I'd rather check up on."

Mahaut was not sure what had truly moved behind those veils she had felt in the moment of first blessing; but she knew she had not glimpsed its essence—only its effects. Likely she would never glimpse it, at least not in full.

At the end of the day, however, her mind was still that of a hunter's: it needed prey upon which to fasten..

The cannonness leaned back, and intertwined her fingers. "I'm impressed."

"Then you'll approve my request?"

The old woman frowned. A deep, silent sigh shook her.

"I don't think it wise that you attend upon the Ecumenical Council when it returns," she said, "one of the cardinals there, well... he and you..."

"I'm well aware." Mahaut had finally looked up Lutia's culprit, the moment she and Eloi had left Atmizein. "I'm not looking to be his personal guardian. Just a part of the overall retinue, that's all."

"He's been very active." The canoness pulled up another holo-file. "It wouldn't do to have someone of that standing, and in such a public event... *disappear*. The whole cosmos would be aflutter."

Lutia, too, had disappeared, Mahaut thought, leaving her family nothing to do but to wish and pray for her happiness.

She always had been the good daughter, after all. *Maybe she saw farther than me.*

"I want to see if he's been made a true priest," the inquisitress said, "that's all."

The canoness stared at her a moment longer. Mahaut matched the older woman's gaze. There was no deeper searching in it, no determined attack; she merely stood fast in herself.

Her superior breathed out hard through her nose and then shut her eyes.

"Very well," she said, "go with God."

Eloi was running his eyes over the digicon when Mahaut returned to the shuttle.

"Why are there *more*?" he asked. He looked up at her, his expression as dangerous as it had been on their trip to Atmizein.

"Did you lie to me?" he demanded, "didn't you see what happened? Then why—?"

"I did," the inquisitress replied, "and that's why I asked for more for you."

"You hate the cosmos' children!"

She reached out and shoved him by the shoulder. He staggered back, and she could see

him already retreating into himself. To forestall it, she said: "I love them just as much as you do."

The priest looked as though he had rather she punched him in the mouth. His hands shook so much that the digicon dropped to the floor.

"It wasn't enough?" he asked.

"It never is," Mahaut replied.

She turned. "Say your prayers, priest. I'll even provide the refrain for you—this once."

Eloi was silent for a long moment. "... Why?" he asked at last.

She answered carelessly: "You need them, don't you? We all do."

The inquisitress wasted no more time, then, and exited the shuttle.

There was anger and wrath in her still, and it goaded her forward as it always had: in this case, towards the ship that would take her to rendezvous with the Ecumenical Council. She only paused once, on the docking ramp, when the priest's voice was carried suddenly through the ship's outbound microphones.

"Let it be released slowly into the sky," Eloi murmured, "the carrion, piece by piece, vanishing from the memory of our souls..."

Mahaut's shoulders, she noted, felt lighter; she carried those avenging feelings now like an old friend, or a well-used weapon.

I'll be an airy hunter, she thought, *precision—not force.*

With that in mind, she began walking again, and joined in with the refrain:

"...until the day we are given blades to sever the worm from our hearts." ❖

END TRANSMISSION