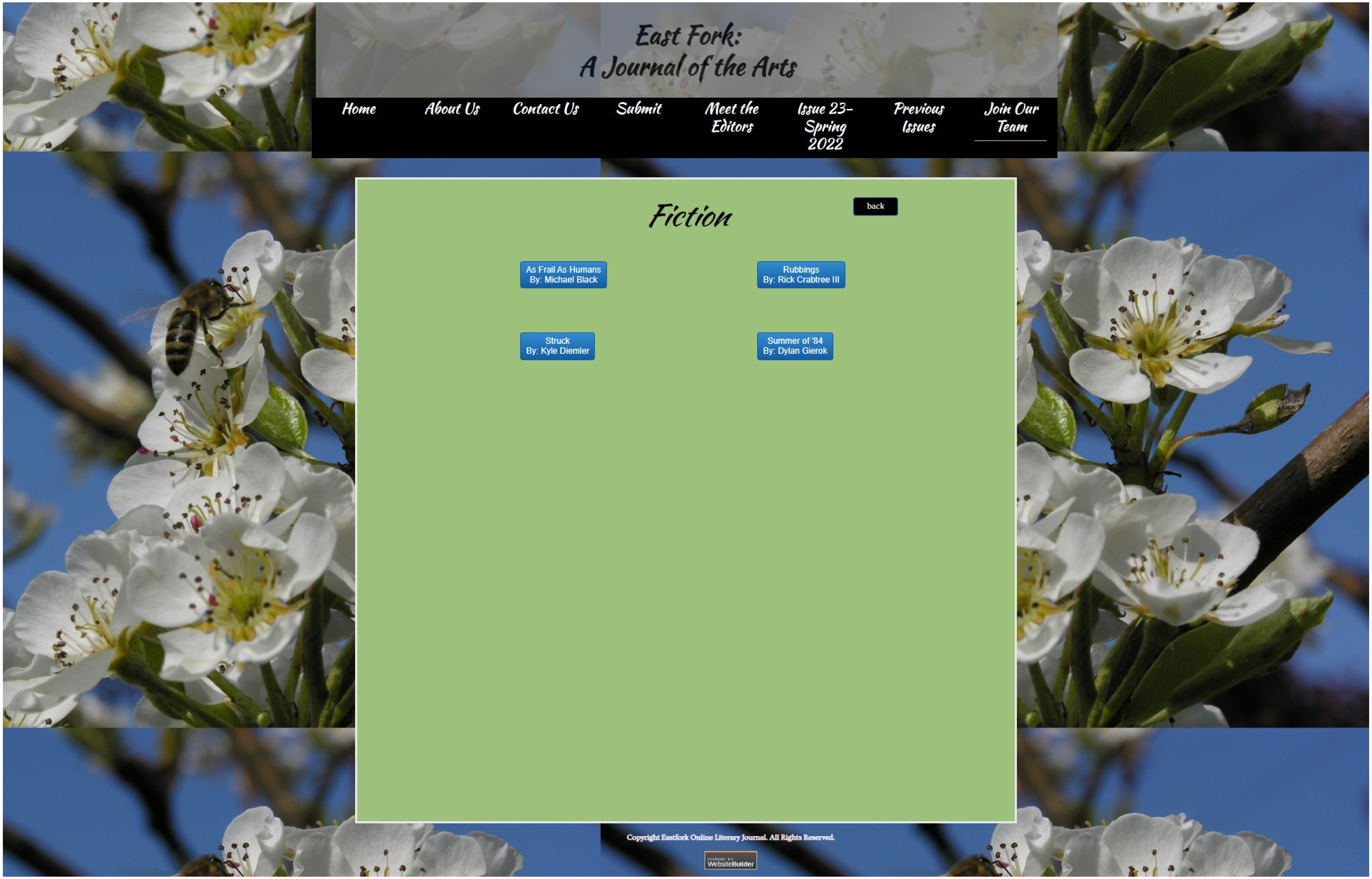

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As Frail As Humans

back

By: Michael Black

The morning sun shone through high windows, the light creating streamers through the suspended dust. Of course, he only knew it was morning because on Serdion the sun was red in the morning, and shifted to bright yellow in the afternoon. It was red now, and was low in the sky as shown by how dim it was in the ceiling windows. That was the first feature he noticed, partly due to the fact that his head was tilted backwards.

The space was large, a storeroom of some kind. There were shelves lining the walls, food containers lining the shelves. There were rows of kegs, crates of bottles, boxes of jars. On one shelf he even spied a big bag of fresh linens. This was probably the only storeroom in the back of a small bar, which meant that either the bar was not open right now, or every employee knew that he was in here. If it was the latter, he probably wouldn't get very far once he removed the lashings holding him to the chair he was in, unless perhaps there were only two or three employees. If it was the former, then it wouldn't be very long before it did open, and he had to be dealt with.

He was lashed to a chair. With every advancement known to man, or Serdion in this case, thugs and criminals still used leather thongs to tie the wrists of their victims. Especially when they were trying to make a point. Douglas figured they were probably made from the indigenous vogearin, a buffalo-like creature. They had been a popular import to Earth, before the war, and there were multiple things you could do with them. He had eaten a steak dinner here at the bar last night, made from vogearin meat. Their hides were good for clothing, their hair for gloves and hats. Their horns and bones were ground into powders and used for cosmetics or medicines. Their tendons were even still used for primitive lashings. Backwater thugs tended to use these and strips of the leather hide.

Douglas only remembered bits and pieces of what had happened, but the more he woke, the more he remembered. Fully awake, his head began to swim. His wrists were bound together behind him, his legs each lashed to a leg of the chair. It was inclined, so that his feet did not touch the floor, and his head looked up towards the ceiling. His face felt puffy, and he could barely see through one eye. From what he felt with his tongue, his lips were swollen, he was missing at least two of his teeth, and there was still blood caked on his mouth and chin.

His ribs were beginning to hurt, his stomach, kidneys, chest. He had been beaten pretty severely the night before, or perhaps it had been that morning. Yes, he remembered now, he had been at the bar. The Angler's Rest. He was casing the place, waiting for his contact. Somehow someone from the Lohanan Syndicate had decided he was a nuisance, and they had taken him to the back. A good old-fashioned shakedown had ensued. They thought he was from a rival business, performing some type of industrial espionage.

At a crappy bar. In the middle of the fishing district.

Well, they were stupid, and that was a plus. It meant that they had no idea what his real reason was for being on Serdion. And that, well, that was a long story.

He was twelve and staying over at his uncle's house, his parents both being away. His father, the senior Ambassador to Kalvernia, was always gone. Douglas usually stayed with his mother in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, but occasionally she had to attend conferences that his father couldn't make. An able diplomat herself, she was currently at a conference in New Tokyo on Mars. It was a meeting of the various governments of the Solar system, with trade as the main topic. Representatives, and even regional governors, were taking part.

Douglas never went to the conferences. He was only twelve, after all, and would just end up getting in trouble. So, he was playing football with his cousins. On his birthday, his mother called him. He rushed in from the yard and saw her on the wall phone. "Hey mom." He was out of breath.

"Hey, kiddo, I have about twenty minutes to talk. Then I have another meeting. What have you been doing all morning?" She probably asked because his shirt was dirty, filthy in fact. Her face conveyed her displeasure, but also her mirth. She knew boys would be boys.

Twelve year old boys always get dirty playing football. "I was the running-back, and I got tackled a bunch, mom. But I got three touchdowns!" His excitement was clear.

His mother grinned. She was happy that he seemed to be having a good time, even though it pained her in a way. He was growing up without her, and she had vowed that he would have a mother to guide him. This was his birthday. Just this morning she had told his father that this was the last time she was going away without the child, and if he couldn't go, then she wouldn't. It was too important that she be there to raise him. In fact, she had decided that they were all going to be together after next week. Once this conference was over, she was going to pick her son up from Earth and take the next Diplomatic Transport straight to Kalvernia, and there they would be a family.

"That's great, kiddo. Hey, I've got something really important to tell you when I get home. I hope you like surprises, 'cause this is going to be a big one!" She was excited just thinking about it, and she hoped he would be as well.

"Or you could just tell me." The mischievous grin on her son's face was infectious. "I promise when you tell me again I'll act surpr........"

She suddenly saw concern on her son's face. The screen began to flicker, just as she was about to ask him what was wrong. But the screen went black, and then she saw what Douglas must have seen. Reflected in the phone's now blank screen was a wall of flame, as high as the sixty-story hotel, and racing towards her. There was nowhere to go.

When the screen went black Douglas was momentarily confused. Had that been real? Was there an explosion up there? He immediately hooked into the system-wide news service, and there were red bars on the tops of every station. Videos and still pictures of a devastating scene. And below, on the news ticker, the name. He turned up the volume as his cousins and uncle entered the room.

"It appears that New Tokyo has been completely destroyed. Reports are still sketchy, but it appears to have been a massive anti-matter explosion, possibly originating at the main power plant. There appear to be no survivors, however, search and rescue operations are being planned. The devastation is off the scale...."

Douglas fell down onto his knees. His eyes were glazed, his ears weren't functioning. His mother, his mother, HIS MOTHER was dead.

That was a big surprise indeed.

Russel Tragan burst through the door with a package in his hand. Douglas saw the seal on the cover, and knew that the day of reckoning had come. It was from Harvard, and his father probably now knew his decision.

The elder Tragan dropped the package down on Douglas's desk. "I just received this from my friend the dean of Harvard. He said you haven't responded to his letters for weeks." His stern visage and proud aristocratic air was mangled under the oppression of his anger. His voice shook audibly, his hands clenched. "Do you have any idea how many strings I had to pull to get back to Earth so I could take you to meet the Dean? You've embarrassed me in front of one of my oldest friends!"

It was now or never. "I'm not going to Harvard, father," said Douglas. "I've been accepted into the Virginia Military Institute. Senator Young, from Lexington, has sponsored my admission."

"I will not allow my money to be used to send you to some upstart military school."

Upstart? VMI might not have been as old as Harvard, but it was founded in 1839. It was turning 500 years old this November, and he would be in the 500thclass to graduate. His father may have been proud of his Harvard lineage, but VMI's tradition was just as important, if not more so. Besides, he didn't even have to spend much money going there, because it was a military school supported mostly by the government of the United States.

"Mom left me that money to do with as I pleased when I turned eighteen. I can go to whatever school I want. It's my choice." Douglas stood up, his six foot frame practically even with his father's. "I'm going to ROTC with the Terran Navy, and I might just seek a commission."

"You will not!" His face was red, a little spit flying from his lips. "The men in our family have gone to Harvard since the 1970's. You will do the same."

Harvard. He had the grades to get in, and even several recommendations. His father had, in fact, traveled for a week to get back to Earth just to introduce him to the Dean, a man he had graduated with some twenty years before. In truth, he probably should have told his father over hyperspace radio, but he hadn't heard back from VMI until this morning. He couldn't let the old man know he felt a bit guilty for that.

"Wow, Dad, fifteen generations of Tragans who were scared to death to strike out on their own and try something new. We've been in space for three hundred years, and you're the first Tragan to even leave the solar system. How many politicians and diplomats does this stupid star system need, anyway? I want to help people..."

Russel's face convulsed, his voice lowered. "How dare you speak ill of your ancestry. Politicians and diplomats help people every day. I've negotiated treaties between sworn enemies. I've helped to avert three wars since I was appointed to Kalvernia."

It was Douglas's turn to get loud. "You spend so much time helping other planets and you couldn't even save your own wife. Mom died because you were 'averting a war' on another planet. The Navy is on the front lines. Peace through strength, Father. The best way to avert a war is to make the other side afraid to attack you. The Serdion's certainly weren't afraid to attack us. How many more have to die before you start giving a crap about your own people?"

Douglas turned his back on his father, and walked to the window, his fists balled up, his face a conflict of emotions. "All mom ever wanted was for us to be a family. All you want is for everyone to do what you tell them to. I'm not one of your junior diplomats that you can boss around. I'm your son. I'm practically the only evidence left that someone actually loved you."

Tears formed in the eyes of the older man. "Don't you think that every day I wish I could trade places with her? She was there because I couldn't be. If I had been, then we wouldn't be having this conversation. You wouldn't be considering joining the Navy. You would still have your mother."

"Yeah, I wish you could trade places with her too." The words were out before he could pull them back, and in truth, he had meant them to sting.

They did.

Douglas tensed, knowing what was coming.

Russel dried his eyes and straightened his back. "If you go through with this, then you will be cut off. I won't have some warrior son trying to be a hero. Get your things and leave my house. You can come back when you've regained a bit of common sense."

The terrain of Mars had changed drastically from the days of early colonization and research. Full scale terraforming had changed the cold, dry planet into a living, breathing new Earth. The Northern Ocean and the several craters turned into lakes and inland seas gave the planet enough of an Earth-like feel that Douglas barely felt out of place. The gravity was lighter, but in all, it wasn't bad.

Douglas sat in the park watching the children play. Fifteen years ago this city had been completely destroyed when a Serdionite terrorist had detonated an antimatter bomb inside the city's power station. The resulting firestorm had engulfed the city in flames, tearing down one of the oldest cities on Mars. Humans had rebuilt. As Douglas looked on, the little boys and girls were bouncing along in the light gravity playing some sport involving a ball. The rules seemed to change at a whim, and the children were just being children having fun.

It was a testament to the spirit of humanity, the very soil beneath their feet holding the ashes of ten million humans. Their pioneering spirit was still alive, new sections of the city being built every year. If that wasn't a reminder of what he had been fighting for these past ten years, he didn't know what was.

Douglas's blue-green eyes caught sight of a butterfly. In the Mars gravity, they could grow fairly large. It seemed to not have a care in the world, fluttering from flower to flower, staying at neither for very long. He watched as it rested on a rather large flower, and stayed there for several minutes. The children had moved on down to another part of the park, still playing their ball game. The emperor's wings flapped a few times in the slight breeze that blew through, but the small creature just sat there.

Like Douglas himself.

On his last mission, Douglas had infiltrated an enemy encampment on the single habitable moon of Pythiar's fourth gas giant. There he stole a single item, an encryption device used by the Serdion ground troops to scramble and transmit messages to their space-bound fleet. To cover his escape, he decided to detonate a plasma grenade inside the camp's armory, but as the explosion rocked the camp, he fell down an embankment and broke his leg. When the rescue team found him, his broken leg was infected, he was severely dehydrated, and he was holding onto the encryption device like a lifeline. On their way back to the carrier the enemy position was completely destroyed.

The encryption device proved invaluable to the Allied effort against the Serdions, and actually turned the tide in the battle for the Pythiar System. Naval Intelligence thought it fitting that Douglas deserved a promotion and a rest while they prepared the framework for his new mission. He had been analyzing intelligence reports since he left the hospital, all the while training and rebuilding his strength. The butterfly lowered its wings again, but this time, it took off. It had rested long enough.

Like Douglas himself.

Even with faster than light ships, it took several days, and sometimes weeks, to get between star systems. The Terran Star Ship Endeavor was a carrier, a technological marvel. It was really a small city in space, with four squadrons of fighters, support craft, and repair bays. Nearly eight thousand sailors, pilots, and marines called this their home. Douglas had the privilege to be on her for the second time.

Captain Carter, the ship's commanding officer, had requested Douglas dine with him the evening of the third day out from Phobos Station. The Endeavour's battle group had used the last several months to effect repairs and upgrades so they could get back in the fight. They were on the front lines for over a year fighting in the Pythiar system until the information from the enemy encryption device was used to rout the Serdions and take back that system. Douglas had spent six weeks on board in the ship's sicbay before a hospital ship arrived to take him to Utopia Planitia. Captain Carter had made frequent trips to his bed side in those weeks, especially after some of the hardest fought battles. According to the captain, if it hadn't been for the device, casualties would have been much higher.

At dinner, Captain Carter outlined what they were planning now. It was time to take the fight to the Serdions, he said. There was a Serdionite defector that needed a way out, a ranking military official that had been feeding information to Earth forces for almost a year. The plan had been to pick him up off-planet, then destroy his personal shuttle. Now, though, he believed that someone was getting suspicious, and had grounded all flights from the capital city. With his personal mode of off-planet travel gone, he needed a team to come in and get him. It must look like he had died, or that he had gone into hiding on Serdion. He was requesting a meeting and an extraction. Captain Carter's carrier would provide the escape shuttle, which was a captured Serdion cargo ship, and Douglas would have to infiltrate the city to meet the man. His taller frame and excellent Serdion accent would allow him to blend in well. His natural suspicion and intelligence training would allow him to find out if the defector was on the level.

In the corridor, the captain made a final plea. "Douglas, this Serdionite could have more intelligence than we've had in the past five years, and he is willing to share it. We could end the war in a month, maybe two with what he's got."

"I understand, sir."

Carter knew who the man was. He must have assumed that Douglas did too, but his silence on the subject was profound. "I don't have to tell you that we need him alive, Lieutenant."

Douglas knew the stakes. And, he had a plan.

==

It took a full two weeks to get to the Serdion system. The plan was that the battle group would launch three squadrons of fighters and a squadron of bombers. The cargo ship would be launched, with only a pilot and Douglas on board, and break away from the main group. They would maneuver through the asteroid field and slip into the trading lanes while the system's scanners were focused on the incoming warplanes. Once the fighting started, the system's defense forces would engage the enemy while cargo ships would be grounded, and either sent to the orbital platforms or ordered to land on the surface. Tragan was counting on the Serdions being extremely predictable, since the entire plan hinged on that very thing.

Just as expected, as the blocky vessel rounded the last asteroid and dropped into a line of sight with the fast approaching station, a series of chirps emanated from the control panels. Orders were being sent to various ships on where to dock, queries were relayed requesting types of cargo. It was a standard response. Tragan's ship was ordered to drop the container it was towing, and land on the planet.

"H-comm control, this is Necca's Triangle, we need to stay in orbit. We cannot cut loose our container."

"Negative, Triangle. You must drop your load and land on the surface. We are transmitting a transponder code for you to follow to your destination."

"I don't think you understand, Control. I may not have enough fuel to effect an escape velocity. I only keep a small amount...."

"We can provide you with additional fuel if necessary. You must land now, or we will send ships to escort you down."

With a resigned sigh, and a wink at his pilot, Douglas answered. "Understood, control. Prepare to tractor the container. I expect to pick it back up when this is all over."

He actually planned on leaving the system without the container. It would have been fine on the surface, but having it in orbit, pulled inside a cargo bay of the largest traffic control stations in the system was a bonus. Douglas just needed to make sure his shuttle made it back to the station before the Serdions decided to get curious about the contents. Scans were fine, as long as they didn't open it.

Douglas and the pilot landed on the planet without incident, and the local authorities took a cursory look over the interior of the ship. "Just doing our job, sir. They think we're gonna get some kind of attack from one a you freighter guys. They don't listen when we tell em you guys are on the level. Never listen."

"I know, Sergeant, you have a thankless job. Say, I hear there's a really good bar in this part of town. I ain't never been to Serdion before, but my buddy says Angler's Rest is a pretty good spot. I'll be there a while, case you guys wanna come by when your shift ends."

"Nah, we'll be on 'til they give the all clear. Dang hoo-muns pushed a squad a fighters out by the belt. I bet they're just testing our defenses, but what's new huh?"

"Well, the offer stands. You know how to get there from here?"

The spaceport police gave Douglas directions, he thanked them, and they walked away. No more aware than before.

He turned to his pilot. "If I'm not back by noon tomorrow, local time, get permission and leave. There's no sense losing you and the ship if we can prevent it." The pilot nodded, the frown on his face evidence of his displeasure at the notion.

It was less than a mile to the Rest, and Douglas made good time. The General was to meet him there. It was late in the evening at this spot on Serdion, and Douglas made good use of the shadows, just in case there was someone following him.

The bar looked innocent enough. Well, for a bar.....

"What happened to your face?" Ever the diplomat. His tact must have been left on the negotiating table, along with his sense of decency. "Is that what happens when you try to play the hero?"

It had been ten years since he had seen the man, and there was really no reason to see him now. Douglas wanted nothing to do with his father. Unfortunately, when a senior diplomat wanted to see a Navy "hero," they were not denied. The Utopia Planitia Naval Hospital on Mars was one of the best recuperative hospitals in the system, and after his bout with a broken leg and bacterial infection, he was still in pretty rough shape. There was little to do but let the man come in.

Russell Tragan was still the top Ambassador of Earth to Kalvernia. At fifty three years old, he had just begun a new family. His new wife was half his age, and had just given birth to a new Tragan son. Perhaps the old man felt this was his way to redeem his family, a new direction so that he could forget about what had happened to his first wife, and what it did to his first son. Douglas had been cut off from his father's wealth, though he had his mother's. He had been cut off from his father's influence, but he had his life in the Navy. His hard work was all he needed to get ahead.

The contempt his father held for his chosen field was widely known, even though the diplomat knew the value of a trained spy. He simply felt they were pawns to be used on the galactic chessboard. The thought of his son being one of those pawns? He preferred to disown him, and pretend that he had no son named Douglas Tragan. That man must be a distant relative.

"Why are you here? Come to tell me about your new wife and son? Must be comforting to know that when you lose one family it can easily be replaced." The younger man had practiced what he might say to the man he had called father for so many years, but now that the moment was here, he just wanted his father to accept him, call him son. Why, then, couldn't he keep the bitterness out of his voice?

"They have nothing to do with you, and I'll thank you to keep it that way, Lieutenant." He rounded his son's bed, glancing up at the charts, feigning interest. "Speaking of losing family members, do you happen to know who ordered that surprise attack on New Tokyo so many years ago?" He didn't wait for an answer. "No one did, actually, until about two months ago. We managed to track him down, and guess what?"

The older man slapped Douglas on his shoulder. He was smiling, but not with joy. "He wants to defect. The Navy is about to be ordered to set up an extraction."

Douglas rolled his eyes. "Is this your way of manipulating me into asking for the job? You want me to go tearing across the galaxy on a revenge mission?"

Any trace of a smile had left the man's face. "You don't choose your own missions, sailor, you accept what you're given. You WILL take this job, and if you screw it up, everyone will assume it was because of your history."

"Lots of people lost family to the Serdions. There's hardly a person in the service that hasn't lost someone." His head snapped back against the pillow. His throat was starting to hurt, that clenching and cramping that always accompanied the urge to cry, and the refusal of that action. "Why me?"

"Because this is what you've been waiting for. And, if it goes well, the Solar Confederacy wins the war. If it goes badly..."

"If it goes badly then you won't have to worry about me ever again. I can appreciate that." The lump in his throat had hardened. The pain was helping him to focus. "I'll run your mission, Ambassador, and I'll bring him back. I've a few weeks of recovery yet, but afterwards, I'll be ready."

Russell Tragan walked towards the exit. "Bring him back, Douglas, and you'll be the hero you've always wanted to be. If you can't, don't bother coming back at all."

He left the room, and left Douglas to his thoughts. "Either way, father, you'll never see me again."

His throat no longer hurt, but those tears never fell.

The General was dressed in what passed for business casual for this planet. He didn't fit in very well at the Rest, and he was getting some odd looks from some rough looking characters at the bar. He was sitting by himself in a corner booth, nursing a small drink. Douglas had taken and anti-intoxicant on his way to the bar, so he would be able to imbibe a considerable amount of alcohol before he got drunk. He went to the bar and ordered a refill for the General and a tankard of something dark for himself.

A pellet slipped from his sleeve into the General's drink, unseen by anyone. When he sat down, the General looked momentarily startled. "If you make a scene, sir, someone will call the authorities. We should finish these drinks and then find a place more private where we can speak."

Recovering himself, the old Serdion's face took on a confused look. "Talk? We are supposed to be leaving. You are supposed to be my extraction."

"Nobody is leaving the surface right now, sir. Didn't you hear? There's an attack out by the belt." Douglas drained half his mug, wiping foam from his lip. "Drink up, and smile, cause we're old buds."

The General did not look convinced, but he took the proffered drink, finishing it in one swallow. "I took an anti-intoxicant before I came in here, son, so don't think I'm going to start divulging state secrets while drunk." His evil smile, and his casual use of the word "son" infuriated Douglas to a degree he hadn't felt before. He had assumed this mission was going to give him conflict, but not like this. He kept his smile plastered on his face.

"If you hadn't, I would likely think much less of you. I don't want you drunk, I want you fully functional. It is likely that once the fighting stops and the Terran ships are run off, we'll have only a few minutes to make good our escape. Now, finish your drink. We have a business transaction to begin."

Within moments the two were walking the streets back to the spaceport. They both had ample false identification, and they passed easily through the limited security measures at the cargo spaceport. The scanning systems employed by the Serdions were generally quite effective at detecting explosives, if not entirely successful at keeping out the contraband. The guards didn't have to worry that anything dangerous was going on.

"Hey, heard anything about the fight? I'd like to get back up to H-comm and get my cargo pod. I'm due at Garrinick in about six hours."

The guards just shook their heads, fingers pointing to a screen. "You ain't leaving for a while. That moon's being patrolled pretty heavy. There's bout twelve a dem fighters still runnin round the system causin' trouble. Til they round em all up, you're stuck."

Douglas faked a frown. "Just my luck. I bet them jerks up at H-comm's goin through my stuff right now. They probably think it's super valuable or something."

The General looked nervous. Deliberately misinterpreting his posture, Douglas put his arm around the Serdion. "Don't worry, guy, them hoo-muns ain't gonna get anywhere near orbit at this place. They're probly trying to get some comm satellites or something. Let's get to the ship and you can show me what it is you're wantin to buy."

Douglas waved at the security guards with a smile, and led the General to the ship, Necca's Triangle. "She ain't much, but she'll get us out of here." He motioned to his pilot, who moved from his seat and grabbed a chair from a side compartment. The pilot, also a trained intelligence agent, fit the chair into marks on the floor, securing it there.

The General once again looked nervous. "This is supposed to be an extraction. It looks more like an interrogation. I won't give you any information until we get back to your starship."

"Unlikely, General. You're going to give us everything we want to know. I've already seen to it." It was then that the General collapsed, his legs just giving out from under him. His face broke out into a sweat, his eyes glossing over.

"What have you done to me? You can't do this to me." Douglas and the pilot strapped him into the chair and set a recording device in front of him. "You were supposed to get me out of here......"

The pellet that Douglas had slipped into the Serdion's drink was working full on now. The effects would last for at least a few hours, during which time the General would divulge every bit of war planning and strategy that he knew of. Douglas wouldn't even need to take him back. Which was good, because he planned on putting a knife to the devil's throat. "Keep him conscious and hydrated, and keep him talking. I'm going back to the bar. Have our escape ready to go when I get back."

The pilot nodded. They had at least four hours before they could leave, and he intended to use them.

They had jumped him as soon as he entered the bar. Apparently they had been watching him come down the street, and because of the clothing of the General, these thugs had thought he was a rival businessman, and that they were scoping out the bar for their syndicate. Douglas was fully awake and aware now, and his hands were throbbing, the skin on his pinkies being scraped off as he pulled them through the lashings. Finally, his hands were free, and soon his ankles would join them. It was painstaking work to get out of the bonds, but finally he was standing at the door, listening.

The plan was to leave the General on the freighter, while their other contact on Serdion Prime flew them out in an older, less flashy cargo ship. The freighter would take off on auto-pilot, faltering as its thrusters misfired, and crashing into the capital. The authorities would find the remains of the general, or at least what was left of them, along with DNA fragments from two Terrans. They would take it as a sign that the enemy had failed, and that their secrets were still safe.

Captain Carter did not know of this plan, because Douglas had not shared it with him. The intelligence department of the Navy let their operatives plan their own missions sometimes, and Douglas had requested to plan this one. If it failed, it would be his hide. A summary dismissal if not imprisonment. If they wanted to go the full monty, they could have him tried for treason and hang him. If Douglas did not make it back to the ship in the next half hour, the operation could fall apart.

If he didn't make it to the ship in time, he would be left behind. His hands were twitching, his muscles at the ready. He had to get out of here now.

There was a loud murmur, indicating a closed door on the bar proper. Douglas estimated that it was around thirty feet away, a five second run if he timed it correctly. There was a shuffle in the hallway, and it was headed in the direction of the storeroom. There was a lock on the door, and while he could have broken it, it would likely attract attention from the hallway. There was a good chance of escape, if he was careful. The shuffle stopped outside of the storeroom, and a set of antique keys jangled.

Douglas gripped the longest of the thongs in both of his hands, ready to spring. He was tight against the wall, waiting for the door to shut again.

The light came on, and the eyes of the barkeep fastened quickly on the empty chair. Douglas closed the distance between them in one step, the thong slipping easily around the throat, immediately choking off the man's breath. He tightened the thong, using one strong hand to hold the strap tight, while the other pulled the Serdion's gun from his belt. It was a cheap Yanderin lazer pistol, with a cracked grip and half-empty charge. It would have to do.

The Serdion's hands were clawing at his throat, his feet trying to maneuver around the room. Douglas kept him as still as possible, while he denied him breath. His face turned red, then purple, while blood trickled from his neck from the frantic nails finding purchase only on the soft flesh. The thong continued to dig into the bartender's throat until Douglas heard a satisfying crunch, knowing he had crushed the man's windpipe. Serdions were just as frail as humans, and an unconscious Serdion just as heavy. Douglas quickly tied the man's wrists, then shoved him beneath a bin of dirty towels. He would be found eventually, dead or alive.

He moved quickly, knowing the time restraints he was under. His pilot had orders to leave, and to continue with the plan, if Douglas did not return. Making certain that the lazer was ready to fire, he opened the door that led to the barroom. The more people that saw him, the better. His first shot put a smoking hole through thug that had broken his nose the night before, and the second shot shortened his partner by about half a leg. They had not been prepared for that, and, judging by the lack of other armed guards, still had no idea who it was they had beaten. Douglas grabbed the stunned man by the cuff of his shirt.

"Remember......me!" The bar patrons were stunned as they watched him set the lazer to its lowest setting and burn the Terran Cross into the half-legged Serdion's forehead. Douglas left the bar with no one following him.

"I know I'm cutting it close, Ghota, just get us out of here." Douglas looked around the newly acquired cargo vessel. "Does this thing even fly?"

"Watch it, buck-o. This is my baby." The plump criminal had been promised amnesty after this, his riskiest operation. He had run guns for resistance fighters on the surface, he had ferried low-level defectors to neutral planets, and had even outrun a Terran destroyer, but pulling two assassins out of enemy territory while the target was still being killed was a new one even for him. The ship rose into the air, and the three men watched as the freighter Necca's Triangle made her quick exit, then her fantastic swan dive into the capital city. An entire block of buildings were demolished.

"I suppose we have what we came for, Hunt?" The pilot held up his hand, containing a small flash drive.

"He talked for almost five hours straight. We have more information than we can possibly use." He tossed the card to Douglas. "And just how did you get the crap beat out of you again?"

The wounded man simply smiled. "It was worth it." Turning to the new pilot, Ghota, he said, "Can you get us within ten miles of H-comm Control? I need to send a message to someone."

Perplexed, Ghota just nodded. "Yeah, but why take the risk? I'm retiring next week."

"Trust me, old man, it's a message all Serdion is going to want to hear."

Douglas was sitting on the park bench, watching the butterflies. They were small here, not at all like their Martian cousins. They still fluttered from flower to flower, seemingly without a care in the world. Douglas felt better today, and he had decided that a vacation was in his best interests. Besides, he had told Intel that he wasn't coming back for at least a month. His debriefing had been tortuous, and his bosses were still a little sore at not having the general in their possession.

Fortunately, the intelligence that was recorded on the flash drive, in addition to secret documents found in the general's uniform, were enough to launch a counter offensive straight into the heart of Serdion territory. They were suing for peace, after all these years.

Douglas felt at peace for the first time in many years. His mother's killer was dead, at his own hand. They say that revenge is never as satisfying as it promises to be, but Douglas Tragan was sleeping like a baby. He had not only taken out his mother's killer, but had left a message with the Serdions that they couldn't ignore.

"So, what is this message you want to send?"

Douglas pulled an encoded transmitter from an empty spot in the heel of his left boot. He tapped a series of commands into the control panel and then pushed "send."

"Just watch. Remember that cargo container we had to drop off before we landed? I watched them tow it into a large cargo bay near the center of the station."

Before their eyes they watched as the station blew in half. The flash nearly blinded them as the window polarization routine failed to kick in on the old ship. The gun-runner beat a hasty retreat, dodging into the asteroid belt. "What the hell was that?"

"A two megaton nuclear warhead. The station might even crash land on the planet."

Douglas simply turned from the sight, finding a bench to lie down on. His part of the mission was over. It was up to the others to get him and the information home.

The other two men just stared at him, barely conceiving the sight they had just witnessed. The immediate death toll would be in the hundreds of thousands, for the population of H-comm Control was nearly half a million. It seemed not to bother Douglas one bit.

"That was for New Tokyo."

"Nice statement. I think they'll understand."

Douglas heard the sound of crunching grass behind him. Without turning he knew it was his father.

"I did what you asked."

"You did more than I asked."

Douglas had not brought the general back to Terran authorities. His father had not wanted him to, regardless of what he had said. The matter of New Tokyo and his wife's death had been a weight around the Ambassador's neck for twenty years, a demon that was not exorcised. Now, with the weight gone, the guilt he felt was beginning to diminish.

Douglas stood, his tall frame now inches over his father's. "I loved her, dad. I don't know how I've gotten along this far without her."

Russell Tragan pulled his son into his arms, embracing him for the first time in years. "I loved her too, son. It's over now. It's over."

Douglas's throat hurt again, but this time he decided not to stop the flow of tears. He cried, burying his face in his father's shoulder. It felt good to get it out.

All around him, the butterflies fluttered, without a care in the world.

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Rubbings
(Winner of the Editors Choice Award)

By: Rick Crabtree III

She lay like a corpse, lily white from lack of sun, hands folded on her chest, watching a clock. The hands clicked with each passing second, but only bumped in place. Such that she could see, the walls were bare, the curtains to her right were drawn, and the shades to her left were yellowing as if by cigarette smoke.

She could move her arms little, and her legs less, but all was stiff and creaky. All of her teeth had been pulled, apparently, and she was missing her glasses. She didn't know where she was, her head was throbbing, the room was cold, and it was likely that beneath the dingy sheet, she was naked.

The light flickered above her, little that it was, as the furnace kicked on, released a hot puff of air from the vent, then kicked back off, light flickering again. She could hear no one beyond the curtain, but called out all the same.

She managed a soft groan, as if from the underside of a thick pillow.

With some effort she turned her head to look under the curtain, without her glasses she could only see what looked like lights flickering again. Before she turned back, the curtain was thrust to the side and three people entered, one man, two women she guessed, by their size and the sound of their foot steps. They didn't say a word. One threw down the sheet while the others grabbed her, one at her legs around her knees, the other at her arms around her elbows. She was stabbed three times in the stomach, the last one burned of lingering steel.

'Be fast about this,' a woman said, 'then report back to me, we have another new one, they told me she still fights.'

With no more warning than that she was doused with cold water, and the remaining two, a man and woman she could tell for sure now, began rubbing her from head to toe.

She tried to scream and thrash around, but they held her, and, she was certain, took the opportunity to feel her again, her chest, her thighs; she continued thrashing.

The man hit her chest, pinning her down, his other hand on her head, 'stop,' he growled. He held her still for some time while the woman continued to rub her. They doused her again with cold water and began rolling her from side to side to dry her, then threw the sheet back over her.

'She'll get used to it,' the woman said.

'Or she'll die,' the man answered, 'I hate this job.'

Days later she found that this was a ritual. Sometimes it was less involved but they always rubbed her, and never explained themselves beyond hating their jobs, which she could understand. The next day they began bending her body into differing positions. This went with the rubbings, and afterward they would force something like cold, uncooked bread dough into her mouth and hold it there until she swallowed. Sometimes she was sure there were pills. The stabbings continued as well, and the burning injection.

After what must have been a week, they wrestled her from her bed to a chair and took her down a long dim hall. Many turns later she was taken into a room, equally cold as the other, and humming an electro-mechanical hum. She was thrust back into a bed, this one harder than the other, and strapped down. She tried to fight, but it was two men this time, and the straps.

One of the men held her arm while the other put a needle into her bicep then strapped it straight. The injection came hot, fast, continuous, and warmed her like she had to pee, another abuse, she thought.

With her blurry sight she saw several large objects pass close over head. She tried to tell them she was going to throw up but couldn't. She heard it hit the floor, and a man cussing in another room.

'Could you tell us next time please,' she heard. He sounded annoyed.

They changed her position again. Apparently needing something under her legs, one lifted while the other slid a large hard something under her knees. She was certain he had kept his hands to long, felt too much.

She threw up when he touched her.

'Fucking tell us, shit. Let's get this done,' he said to his partner.

Again she saw the large objects over head. Again he felt too much when removing the hard pillow. And again she was roughly thrown into the chair. She heard him under his breath, 'disgusting.'

They returned, as far as she could tell, to the same hallway her room was in.

'Sit her there until I get back, she threw up all over the machine and I get to clean it up. I'll deal with her when I get back.'

She found, while he was gone, that she was in a wheel chair, and that her arms were strong enough that she could get around a little. I'm getting stronger, she thought, and they don't know it.

She was able to get around the table to what she thought was a window, but rolling up to it, she found that it was a door. She pushed. It opened. She backed away to the table. There were others in wheelchairs, watching her.

He returned after several hours to find her sitting at the table, smelling faintly of urine. He sighed a heavy sigh, 'it never ends.' He took her down the hall and threw her onto a toilet. She didn't remember soiling herself.

'Did you want her?' he asked someone walking by.

'Yes,' a woman answered, 'just leave her there. I'll be able to get to her easier.'

She feared what the woman meant. This one was the worst by far; smelling bubble gum sweet and singing soft-like, 'Jesus loves me,' while feeling entirely too much, like the man in the throw up room: her chest, her stomach, intrusive fingers. This was more than rubbing. 'Will you gel that up for me, and hand it – thank you.' She jumped and thrashed her hardest as she felt something hard and plastic go where hard plastic things shouldn't go. 'Aww I warmed it up for you,' the woman said.

The bubble gum sweet washed over her and she threw up again. She fell to the floor screaming as hard as she could. She was thrown back into the bed, held down. Two stabs, one injection, the bending, the rubbing, then the lights were out. She was strapped to the bed.

Down the hall people were yelling...always yelling. Woman and men. Sometimes laughter.

Not long into what must have been night, she lost her bowels. She couldn't control them. She felt it creeping up her back, heard it dripping on the floor. There was no control, she tried to call out but no one heard her whispered groans. She managed to get herself on the floor, realizing she had gained some strength in her legs, but was unable to catch herself and smashed her face into the floor, cracking her nose. Her bowels continued, she was unable to get up.

In what must have been morning they found her, and with no comment, threw her back onto her bed and began the rubbings. After which came the cold doughy whatever, then another trip to the machine. She had a plan.

After the injection, she threw up all over the machine. Again he touched her and she threw up without meaning to, having come to fear his violations. But she was leaving today.

He wheeled her back up to the table, cussing the whole way. As soon as he disappeared she wheeled over to the door and pushed. No one came so she wheeled through. She could tell it was grass beyond a patio, and could hear cars in the distance in front of her. Locking her chair she stood, and excited that she could do so, took one step. After several slow steps she found that she could walk shaky, and picked up her pace. Ten feet past the concrete, she thought, and in ten more she heard the door open behind her and voices calling.

She started to run, such that she could, gown flowing around her. He knocked her over, and while the others were behind, he laughed in her ear and she was certain she felt his pelvis force forward into her backside.

Before the injection blurred her to sleeping, with one last heave she pulled her head free and looked up to see a sign not far in front of her. It read, 'Shady Oaks Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.'

When she came to, she was sitting in her chair. She felt someone release her as she woke. 'Go ahead and call, she's awake enough to hear.'

From the receiver she heard a phone ring. 'Hello.' The voice on the other end was familiar to her.

'Yes, hello my name is Sonia here at Shady Oaks. I'm the nurse taking care of your mother today, do you have a moment?'

'You should probably talk to my dad, he's not here.'

'It doesn't matter, I'm just calling to let you know that she tried to escape today.'

She couldn't hear anymore from the receiver.

'Well she's been getting regular baths, and meals suitable to her condition. We took her for a CT scan and it showed nothing. She's been getting Lovenox injections, along with the glucose, and physical therapy. She fell the other night, we left a message. We sent her for another scan but everything came back ok.

'The pain meds have stopped her up so we gave her an enema, her stomach felt tight, but that night the enema must have worked. We've been assessing her broken ribs and they are healing fine.

'Yes, it's normal after a stroke to have intermittent hearing loss. We've explained everything to her.

'I just don't think this facility is right for her. She may do fine with a home health aide, one of our staff here are qualified, that would make the insurance paperwork much easier and the whole process faster.

'Yes he's really good, caring and attentive. Your mother seems to like him very much.

'Oh that's good you've been talking about it.

'Well it's nice to have someone she already knows. I'll get the paper work started for your father and he can come meet him this evening if he likes.'

The man smiled at her from across the counter. She began to thrash and scream, such that she could.

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Struck

By: Kyle Diemler

It's raining. It's the kind of rain that people squint and yell things in. I'm leaning against the painted walls of my apartment's entryway. It's like a cave, the entryway, a high arch cut into the building, stacked with stone steps and littered with people. I'm smoking, of course, or I would be inside. But Kate doesn't want the couch to smell like smoke.

I take a drag.

There is nothing to notice because it is dark, except the shelves of apartments that line that entryway, and the parking lot that sits in front of it all. Two floors up, at the door to 1511 a man is waiting, he has already knocked. He glanced at me when he started up the steps. His head is shaved, he is very thin, he wears loose clothes, and his eyes are bright blue. I bet he likes cheap beer because it is cheap, and because it is beer. And I know he is going to buy some heroin once Livingstone opens his door.

Another drag.

There is a man sitting on the concrete steps above me. He talks to himself in Spanish, but not sharp and quick, instead softly, and collected, like a gentle ancient prayer. Kate told me that he is crazy, that he walks around the parking lot at night, speaking to himself in that tongue and looking at the sky as if he were waiting for something to fall.

There is a car pulling into the lot, and its headlights make the raindrops silver, and it there must be rust in its undercarriage, because there is a rattling that rich men never hear. Yes, the car is worth less than a congressman's suit. It's a '97 Sentra and it is owned by a tall man in a blue coat. I watch him trot across the parking lot, the thin skin of water snapping between his feet and the asphalt with each step. He is the quiet man, the only man who keeps to himself more than Kate and I do.

He lives in 1508, and his face is very stern. He's very clean... I bet he's a Nazi. I bet he has swastika flags pinned on the walls of his closet. Proud but hidden. Nobody knows, but the beauty of not knowing is that you can imagine.

Another drag, deeper. Livingstone let the thin man inside, and they are making a deal. There's a loud thunderclap, I feel it in my chest, and I know we're in the heart of it, halfway in, halfway out.

There is a woman who lives above us, but she's not outside. To look at her you can see that she did drugs for a while, and stress has worn her down. But beyond her faded, aged skin and clumping mascara she's still blond, and pretty, and kind. Once, she was outside, and she told me that she needed to quit smoking. We both sat and smoked together, and I met her. I really met her. She liked to talk.

"I've got to be a better example to my kids, y'know? I've got two, Jessica and Nate."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a picture. It was in a plastic sleeve, but not in a wallet or purse, just alone in her pocket, wearing down its corners and developing creases.

"See, that's Jessie, she's nine, and Nate will be five in May."

Jessie's hair was so blond it was almost white, grinning wide for the camera, wearing a thrift store shirt. Nate was just a chubby little kid, but he had the face of whoever his father was, god only knows, and it was sad because you could tell even then he had one of those faces. No matter rich he got he would always look poor. You know what I mean. A white trash face. Sunken eyes and a head shaped in a way that was different, but it was hard to say how. Someday he would rot away in a smoke filled trailer, and work with his hands, and strike his wife, and touch his daughter...

"I need to start taking them to church," she said. "I want something better for them than all this."

She punched the bricks of the arch softly.

"You know any places?"

I shook my head. I don't go to church.

It wasn't long after that Kate leaned out our door, the voice of my brother-in-law somewhere at the other end of the phone in her hand. She waved me inside with her free hand, and I left the lady who lives above us on the steps to smoke alone.

That was April, and I haven't talked to her since. Once I saw her taking her trash to the dumpster, and I waited inside behind the blinds until she had gone back upstairs, just so that I wouldn't have to nod to her on my way to the car.

I don't like talking to the people of Kate's building. I don't like seeing other people like me, strange and quiet and depressed, working their way through life but not up through it. I don't like knowing that we're all in debt. Whether it's our money or health or time, something's on loan. I don't like any of it.

What I do like is coming over and finding Kate wearing my dress shirt and nothing else.

It's June now. It's a pretty heavy rainstorm for June. This is April weather, or maybe May weather. This is bullshit weather. I'm tired of smoking, and I'm tired of staring at the rain. I'm tired. I throw what is left of the cigarette down, crush it under my sole. It exhales its last few wisps of smoke and I listen to the ash grind against the concrete. God, that's a nice sound.

Then the guy from 1507 comes home, and the raindrops turn silver in the headlights again.

He drives a BMW but it's so damn old and in such bad shape that it's lost all of its class. He's a guy who works overtime a lot, coming and going with his work gear six days a week. He comes home with a dirty smock and protective glasses and black smudges all over his face, but I know he's not a mechanic. His car needs too much work on too many simple things, things he'd fix himself if he knew how. No, he works in a factory, like a lot of guys in this complex, works the weekends and everything. His shirt tells me that he works for a company that my brother-in-law used to work for, building "time-delayed mortar caps" or some shit for the military.

I wonder if he ever thinks about the men that drive those jeeps with the guns mounted on the back, kicking earthy roads up into dust clouds in the Middle East. I wonder if he thinks about those men he kills, distantly. I guess he's doing more for his country than I am.

He's still in his car, gathering his work gear, checking the sky to see if the rain will let up, but it's too dark to see the clouds tonight. If he hadn't put that extra time in at the factory today he might have missed the storm, it wasn't so bad an hour ago.

I'm just leaning on the bricks of the arch now, not even smoking, just waiting to see what he does. Kate's asleep, Saturday Night Live is a rerun, and I figure there's not much better to do. But if he notices me he'll probably think I'm just a creepy guy. He'll probably get nervous as he walks up to the steps, seeing me standing here doing nothing but watching the rain.

Finally he's stepping out of his car. Finally he crosses the parking lot in a slow walk, as if it weren't raining at all. Drops of water cling to the wet tendrils of his hair, dripping off with every step and joining the parade of rain that crosses the asphalt in diagonal streams. His shoulders are soaked, and the skin of his neck where the tails of a complex tattoo peek out glistens in the streetlights.

He's holding his keys in one hand, his safety glasses and smock in the other, and it bothers me that he doesn't mind the rain. I'm done. I'm ready to go inside, but I'm just dying to feel that strangeness, that tension that two unacquainted people have when they pass one another. I don't know why, but the glance that the thin man with the blue eyes gave me as he went up to 1511, and the sternness on the face of the man in the blue trench coat as he ignored me, told me so much about them.

I like to know people without knowing them.

And finally he looks at me, from out in the center of the parking lot he looks right at me, and everything slows down. The rain falls slower, his footsteps drag, and I thought for a moment that the feeling, that strangeness I had waited for, had come. But the slight tension keeps growing, and electricity fills the air. Then everything really slows down. The snapping skin of parading water on the asphalt flies away from his feet in sheets of flat, clear water and bursts into droplets only inches into the air. He blinks, and it takes hours.

And then it happens.

The electricity I had felt was not the tension between this man and I, it was the tension between the earth and the sky. And finally, the clouds burst with light, and a streak of brilliant whiteness appears between them and this man. In the slowest moment I have lived through I watch a fault line appear in the sky, a fissure of white in all of the blackness, as if a crack had formed in our universe and I could glimpse into the holiness of another.

And the lightning doesn't come down, it just appears, and it runs through his body without a sound in that slow, slow moment. His face tightens, his arms seize to his chest as if he were trying to keep his soul inside. His shirt tears along his back as the electricity cuts like a blade. The light travels down him, jumping bolts change direction in midair and coil around his body, and penetrate through his flesh as a white string of ghosts. And the entire bolt slips through him altogether, and the fleshy meats inside of his heels burst and bloom open from the inside like pink carnations as the light leaves him and kisses the ground.

And for a split second I'm still standing there watching him stand, neck bent forward, facing the ground, arms pulled tight to his chest. And then the wake comes, and the air collapses into the empty space where the white cut in our world had once been. Thunder louder than gunshots rings out, a 21 gun salute for the man, the struck statue in the parking lot, and then the sound hits me, and everything goes silent.

The punch of the thunderclap steals the air from my lungs, and I feel myself falling back onto the concrete steps, a pain in my chest that feels like it is collapsing. Sparks of tingling energy rush over me, and for a moment things go black. But I can hear again.

I can hear two car alarms going off in a horrifying chorus, and it sounds like they are arguing with each other. I sit up on the step. I can hear the door open behind me, and Kate steps out in her pajama pants and her old high school volleyball shirt.

"Did you hear that?" She says, her voice still heavy with sleep. "Was that lightning?"

And the only thing I tell her is to stay put.

The man is still standing in the center of the lot, and I stand up as fast as I can. Doors open among the shelves of apartments, and a man on the third floor balcony turns his alarm off with his keychain, sending out a tweet among the hissing of rain and the wailing of the other car. By now, Livingstone is on his balcony looking down, and the old man from 1510 shuts off his alarm too.

I walk to the edge of the archway, but for some reason I don't want to step out, I don't want to move beyond the cover of the bricks. There is no logic in thinking that I will be struck too, lightning never strikes twice... but there is no logic in what I have just seen either. The dark figure of the standing man hasn't moved, until finally his whole body finally begins to lean back. Like a struck tree I watch him fall onto the lot, turning slowly to the side as he drops, and I hear the sound of his skull crack against the asphalt.

For moment I think about how painful that is, but I know that he doesn't feel it. He's dead. He must be.

I take a deep breath and run out into the rain.

His neck is still bent, his arms still pulled to his chest. His soles of his shoes have burst open, a red mess inside them. His right hand is bleeding, and it takes me a moment to see the tip of a car key sticking straight through it. In his other hand the safety glasses are crushed. Where his shirt is torn open, from his shoulder to his lower spine, there is blackened, cracked skin, and leaking blood or something between each split. Inside, Kate calls an ambulance.

I shake uncontrollably, and I ask him if he can hear me, just to check. There's a ringing in my ears, a screech really, but I'm sure he hasn't made a sound. My chest aches. My head hurts. And I sit in the rain beside him for a while, and other tenants gather around, unsure of what to do.

And the ambulance comes, and goes just as quickly, and no one else knows what to do now. The man in the trench coat is the first to go back inside, and the man who speaks Spanish is finally silent. The woman who lives above us smokes on the steps for a while, making sure her children go back inside every time they peek out the front door. Kate pulls me inside too, leading me gently by the wrist, and it's a rough night inside my head. I take Tylenol, and I sit and think for a while.

We go to bed, eventually. The next day I think about life and death and time and all of the things that scientists won't ever really figure out.

The day after that I can only think about his life. Everything had led up to that, the timing, perfect. Each detail that delayed him, or sped him up, down to the very second, led to that precise moment.

If not for the red light he caught on the way home, if not for the penny he had stooped to pick up at the gas station that morning, if not for the extra ten seconds he spent by the vending machine, trying to decide between Snickers and M&Ms...

But it's more than that.

If not for the extra time put in at work, if not for the child support he had to pay, if not for the woman he met at a party two Augusts ago, if not for his father encouraging him to get out more...

But even grander still.

If not for his parents meeting in college, his mother showing up late for that class because she had run back to her car for a book, if not for his grandfather's last night with his grandmother before shipping off to war, if not for Hitler, for God, for higher taxes, freedom of speech, a pocketknife used for opening the mail just a little quicker...

If not for me, standing in the archway, waiting for something intense...

And I don't know what the others in the building think. But I go to church for a while after. I give up, after three weeks, and I go back to routine. I light my cigarette outside, because Kate doesn't want the couch to smell like smoke. I even smoke when it's raining. I remember what happened, but I still stand there, watching the man in the trench coat come home, the young couple that moved into 1507 leaving for a party... It doesn't matter. Because even faced with mortality, and all these grand thoughts of death and life, the things that would inspire a freer man to take to the world and make the most of it all before death, can't always strike changes in those who are stuck in life.

Another drag, deeper.

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Summer of '84

back

By: Dylan Gierok

I woke up in a tangle of sweat-stained sheets as the sun crept through the breaks of the shades. It was only 8:15 and the heat was already unbearable. Groggy and still damp, I threw on a t-shirt and a pair of swim trunks that stuck to my body like fly paper.

Downstairs, I could hear Marti and mom fighting already. Apparently Marti had come home past curfew last night. This was nothing new and in her defense, even I thought 11:00 was early for a 17 year old, especially since she'd be leaving for college next summer. But any opportunity to fight, they took.

I waited for the yelling to stop before I made my way downstairs. Marti and I crossed paths in the hall. Her face was red and streaks of make-up stained her cheeks. I played dumb and said hey but she didn't respond. When she got to her room, she screamed something about moving out and never coming back and slammed the door.

The kitchen smelled like bacon and cigarettes. Mom was running laps between the sink and the cabinets putting dishes away while she scolded dad, "Damn it, Harold," she only called him Harold when she was really serious, "will you please back me up here?"

Dad was sitting at his spot at the head of the kitchen table, only taking breaks from reading the paper to sip his coffee or light another cigarette. I was born about nine months after he got back from the war in Vietnam, so I didn't know him as any different, but Marti and mom hated who he had become. He was always quiet and never did much except smoke cigarettes and read. In the morning he'd drink a pot of coffee and by noon he would trade the coffee in for beer, or sometimes liquor. "Jesus Christ, Harold, are you even fucking here? I swear, if you don't cut this Benedictine bullshit..."

"You mean Dominican, babe," he said through the paper, "The Dominicans had the vow of silence." She cursed again, grabbed the keys, and stormed out the back door.

I grabbed a bowl from the cupboard and planted myself next to dad at the table. As I poured some Cheerios and milk he put his paper down, "Morning, boy."

He always greeted me by cupping the back of my head with an enormous hand and massaging it with his fingers. "Hey dad," I said through a mouth of cereal. He dug through the mess of newspaper in front of him and pulled out the comics. He folded the page up, slid it my way, and went back to reading. I couldn't understand why Marti and mom were so mean to him all the time.

After rinsing out the bowl with little O's pasted to it, I made my way to the door. "I want you to stay within an ear-shot, Jim," dad instructed, "The paper says another kid went missing this week."

"I know. I will," I replied heading out. This was the third one in two months. A fourth grader from school disappeared a while back while playing in his front yard. The police had no idea what happened. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. A bunch of parents, my dad included, got together to go look for him every day for the following week. All they found was his bike in the woods about ten miles away from his house.

I rode my bike in small figure-8s in the street outside of Tony's house waiting for him to come rolling down the driveway. Tony and I had been best friends for as long as I could remember. All the other kids on the street were either too old or too young to play with. So most of the time we'd just ride our bikes around until the street lights came on, go home, then do the same thing all over the next day.

Just as I was about to give up on waiting, Tony came pedaling my way, "Sorry, man. My mom was being all weird about me going out."

"Cause of the other kid disappearing?" I asked.

"Cause of the other kid disappearing," he answered.

We raced each other up and down the street until our shirts were soaked through with sweat. "This is boring," Tony said, beads of moisture dripping down his face, "and hot. Let's get some ice cream."

"I don't know. My dad told me to stay close. Anyway, I don't have any money."

"It'll be fine. We'll only be gone for a few minutes. And I just got my allowance yesterday; you can pay me back later."

It didn't take too much persuading. It was too hot to turn down free ice cream and I had a huge crush on the girl who worked at the corner store. She was a few years older than us and had already begun to ... fill out. And she wasn't shy about showing it off.

Standing in line, I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Despite her constant smile, you could tell she wasn't happy about being cooped up in a small shack serving little kids ice cream all day.

As we got closer to the front of the line, Tony nudged me, "Hey, check that guy out," I followed Tony's eyes across the street, "He's been staring over here since we pulled up." Behind the window of an old, blue pickup truck was a round, mustached face. Even as our eyes met, he didn't break his gaze from behind a pair of thick, horn-rimmed glasses. Heat and all, a cold jolt crept up my spine.

"What would you guys like?" Tony and I both jumped as she called for our order.

"Uh... We'll take two chocolate-dipped vanilla cones, please," Tony unfolded a couple of crumbled bills and slid them across the counter.

"Hey, how long has that guy been over there?" I asked her, my nerves still reeling.

"Hmm? What guy?" She asked, digging into the giant box of vanilla delicious.

As I pointed across the street, where the old pickup had been was now just an empty parking lot. I didn't say anything, just accepted the weird look she gave as she handed us our cones.

"We're just being paranoid, Tony," I said, less to reassure him than myself.

On the bike ride home, I had a hard time enjoying the cone; partly because I couldn't ride straight with one hand and partly because my bladder was about to erupt, but mostly because I couldn't take my mind off of the man in the truck.

"Hold up, man. I gotta whizz," I said to Tony. I dropped my bike, handed him my ice cream, and scurried off into someone's backyard behind a row of bushes.

Just as I had finished, I heard Tony's voice screaming, "Jim!" I ran back to the street but he was gone. All that was left were two half-finished ice cream cones melting on the pavement; even my bike was missing. I froze. Every nerve in my body locked. All I could think was, Get dad.

I sprinted down the street. My legs were jelly and burned like fire, but somehow they kept me upright. I burst through the front door of our house, ran to the kitchen where dad was still reading the paper, and threw up all over the floor. He shot out of his chair and grabbed a wad of paper towels, "Whoa. James, are you alright?"

I was hunched and panting. At first I couldn't talk, but eventually I got out, "Tony... Tony..."

In between gulps of air, I explained what we had done, apologizing profusely for leaving the neighborhood. I told him about the man in the truck and Tony disappearing. Without a word, he left the room and ran upstairs. I heard him shuffling around his bedroom closet. When he came back down, he grabbed his keys and handed them to me, "Go start the car, I'll be out in a minute." As I walked out the door, he was picking up the phone.

I sat in the passenger seat shaking uncontrollably. Dad came out a few minutes later. When he climbed into the car, his shirt folded exposing the pistol tucked into his pants. "If you saw the truck again, would you know it?" He asked. The tone in his voice was completely alien, his posture looked painfully upright, and the usual distance in his eyes had turned into something very present. I wasn't sure if the man in the driver's seat was even my father. I started to cry.

He cupped the back of my head, "Jim, this is very serious..."

"Y-yes... I'd know it."

It was dusk and we had covered every street around the area. Dad would stop occasionally at different stores and restaurants asking about the truck but no one had seen anything. As the last light of sunset faded, dad looked to me. Tears were forming in his eyes, "We'll start looking again first thing in the morning. Alright, champ?" I couldn't answer. It wasn't alright, but what else were we going to do?

I cried to myself as we retraced our route home. It was the first time I had ever cried for someone other than myself. I had other friends, but not like Tony. He was a brother.

As I began to recognize our surroundings again, I recognized something else. At the pump of the gas station near the corner store was the old, blue truck. In the bed were two bikes, mine and Tony's.

"STOP!" I yelled. Dad complied. "That's him! Those are our bikes!"

We sat in the car and watched as the mustached man pumped gas into his truck, his eyes scanning his surroundings. When he apparently seemed satisfied that no one was watching, he pulled the bikes from the rear of the truck and tossed them into a nearby dumpster. I looked to dad. His focus was sharp and his gaze emotionless. I opened my mouth to say something but he immediately shushed me.

As the truck pulled out of the gas station, dad turned the lights off of the car and followed. He stayed a careful distance away, never getting closer than 30 feet. Eventually the truck pulled into a driveway not too far from our own house. Dad stopped the car on the street and left it running.

"Son," his eyes stayed on the man, "do you remember how to drive?"

I couldn't answer. On the last day of 6thgrade last year I had taken the car out one night with Tony just to see what it was like, but we never got caught. How could he have known?

"Jim," this time he looked at me, his expression asked the question again.

"Yea... Yea, I remember."

"Good. If I'm not back here in 10 minutes, I want you to go home and call 9-1-1. No questions, ok?"

I nodded.

He got out of the car, quietly shutting the door behind him. I looked to the clock in the dashboard, 9:52. I began to count in my head, "1-1000, 2-1000, 3-1000, 4-1000..." When the clock switched over to 9:53, I restarted.

Just as the digits turned to 9:55, I heard what sounded like a whip cracking but louder. A few seconds later, another. I began to shake again. At 10:00, dad calmly walked out of the front door holding Tony who was only wearing a pair of underwear. He placed Tony in the backseat. Tony didn't say anything, only curled up and stared at nothing.

Dad climbed back into the driver seat, turned the headlights on, and shifted the car into drive. As we pulled off, he cupped the back of my head.