

Be The Cat

By Bill Wolfe

...*The Lair*...

Lewgan was nervous. It seemed, sometimes, that Lewgan was *always* nervous about something. And the something was usually The Boss. It isn't easy being executive assistant to the most feared, despised and hated Crimelord on all of Bethdish. But it paid well, very well.

Lewgan straightened his lime-green tunic and tried to smooth his unruly hair as he checked-out his gaunt, ratty reflection in the elevator doors. His palms were sweating again. The Boss *hated* sweaty palms. He hated them almost as much as he hated being disturbed at his 'play.' Lewgan had been forced to do it only once before and he'd found that no amount of alcohol could reduce the frequency or severity of the nightmares. The Boss's concept of recreational was. . .exotic. Lewgan had been breaking the law since he was six years old but by all that is holy, some things are *meant* to be illegal. In his own way, he prayed that The Boss was finished and the bodies removed by the time he was allowed entry. If not, *this* time he swore he wouldn't look any of them in the eyes. It was the eyes that haunted him after the other images had begun to fade. The eyes.

He tried to compose himself. The elevator had sophisticated scanners and an impressive array of both defensive and offensive weaponry ranging from sleep gas to molecular destabilizers. And Lewgan should know since he'd supervised most of the installation, personally. But he had to keep telling himself that no technology could look into his heart and tell The Boss what he was *feeling*. Not yet, at least. He had often seen The Boss idly finger certain controls as he watched the approach of 'visitors' on the security monitors mounted throughout his sprawling complex. He wondered if his own image—now wiping his palms on his jungle-green pantaloons for the fifth time—was displayed for The Boss on one of the many screens adorning the walls of the Playroom. Was a jeweled finger even now hovering over one

of the 'Blue' buttons? The 'Red?' The shiver that ran up his spine had nothing to do with the temperature inside the elevator.

Abruptly—for there were no displays in *this* car—the doors opened into a short hallway with a single, adamantium-reinforced door at the end. Even Lewgan didn't know if he were a mile below the City of Lights or atop one of The Boss's several skyscrapers. The elevator never *felt* like it moved at all and the duration of the ride always varied. This trip had taken over twenty minutes.

"Welcome Lewgan," The Boss's voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. It was meant to be intimidating, Lewgan knew, but since he had also ordered the state-of-the-art equipment that made this possible, he was free to be intimidated by much more than mere parlor tricks.

"Mr. Grym," Lewgan's voice was steady, he knew what he had to do. "I apologize for disturbing your. . .disturbing *you* at this hour but I have an unconfirmed—though reliable—report that your 500,000 credit bounty is going to be claimed."

Silence. One of the reasons that Lewgan was valuable to The Boss was his innate sense of economy. Oh, he could wax poetic when the need arose, and The Boss often depended upon him to grease the social wheels in gatherings as diverse as a Lights for Life benefit, which was THE charity in the City of Lights, or for a clandestine meeting of fellow Crimelords. Whether it was a cabal of pornographers, street pushers or even an all-hands conclave of the Thieves Guild, Lewgan could sway the group or—as much as possible—make them receptive to whatever scheme, offer, fiat or con The Boss was planning to introduce. But when he wasn't 'on,' Lewgan was brevity exemplified. And The Boss despised having his time wasted.

In this case, Lewgan knew that The Boss would immediately grasp the magnitude of the tidings Lewgan was bearing. This was not a conversation that The Boss would want transmitted on *any* circuit which could be compromised. The Reeve had technologies at his disposal that were hundreds of millions of years in the making. Some of the gadgets utilized by the Immortals of Bethdish defied the best minds The Boss had been able to hire, blackmail or coerce into

offering an opinion. In short, The Boss was the boss still, because he strived to *never* underestimate his opponents.

He didn't know why it was so important, but he was acutely aware that The Boss *really* wanted a clandestine means into the *Mare* Tower. A few months earlier, he had offered a 500,000 credit prize to any member of the Thieves Guild who could offer proof that they had successfully managed that feat. The prize had remained unclaimed and the last Lewgan had heard, The Guild had cancelled its participation in the quest. After many failures. . .eleven to be exact. . .it had been deemed impossible. But it was axiomatic that the impossible was often merely a matter of perspective.

“Perhaps you should come in and discuss this, Lewgan,” The Boss sounded oddly contemplative and subdued. “Third door on your left. I will join you once I've freshened up, a bit. Help yourself to a drink and for Machiavelli's sake, man, dry your *hands* before you touch anything.” The heavy door opened without a sound.

Lewgan expertly stifled a sigh of relief. The Boss was finished with his ‘distractions.’ For tonight, anyway. Third door on the left turned out to be a small room outfitted with a surprisingly well-stocked bar, a dataport and two chairs.

“This arrived on my desk, this morning” Lewgan pulled a single image from a crystal he had already loaded into the dataport. He began speaking as soon as Grym lowered his ample, powerful frame into the only chair in the room which would accommodate his bulk. Freshly showered and wearing only a luxurious, soft and absorbent bathrobe, The Boss had entered the small room at a leisurely stroll, apparently his appetites had been sufficiently sated. His leonine mane of hair was still slightly damp, though Lewgan thought he could smell the coppery odor of fresh blood. To divert his mind from the implications of this line of thought, Lewgan noted that The Boss's chins were fuller than usual. He was overdue for one of his off-planet ‘Spa’ visits. But that was one of the few areas where Lewgan was not authorized to make arrangements. Every other year, or so, The Boss would leave Bethdish on his private yacht and return a month later at least a hundred pounds trimmer and brimming with vitality, vigor and—usually—boiling

with new schemes. The Boss always made these plans himself. Lewgan had learned not to comment in any fashion concerning Grym's weight, health, or lack of it.

Displayed on the dataport was the image of a brightly-colored and intricately-molded ceramic vessel. In several windows arranged top-to-bottom on the right side of the screen were various scanner images of the object. Included were densitometer readings, elemental ratios, nuclear decay schemes and a pigment chart. This was no simple photo, it was a detailed sensograph made on some *very* sophisticated equipment. A few touches of the screen and anything from the crystal lattice structure of the glaze, to the strength of the gravitational field in which the ceramic was poured could be analyzed to almost endless detail. "Beautiful," Grym's intense gaze was avarice incarnate. "Please tell me what I am looking at, Mr. Lewgan."

"This, sir, appears to be the Kkhresh'diak urn. Are you familiar with the story?" The Boss had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of anything from which he might turn a profit. Priceless object d'art were well within The Boss's field of interest, though Lewgan was aware that his employer's classical education was sorely lacking. And The Boss disliked having this paucity highlighted. Lewgan *always* took Grym's dislikes seriously. That's one of the reasons he was still alive.

"Refresh my memory, Mr. Lewgan, if you please. And feel free to freshen your drink after you have prepared one for me."

Lewgan was no Max, but he did mix a mean Flotilla Surprise. Perhaps it was another reason he was still breathing after working as Grym's personal assistant for the past twelve years. Most of his predecessors had lasted only months before they 'retired.' Lewgan's first official duty in his current capacity had been disposing of the few remaining pieces of The Boss's last assistant. It had been light work.

"The Kkhresh'diak urn is considered THE finest example of D'rriish ancient funerary vessels. It is one of a matched set containing the twin brains of the first D'rriish Emperor, Kkranggch. . . Kkranggchi'ghaffni....uh. . ." Lewgan glanced at Grym, who waved-off Lewgan's failed attempt at pronouncing the primitive D'rriish dialect. It was probably

impossible to do for any being who relied upon vocal chords, anyway, though Lewgan was sure he'd been close when he practiced it, earlier.

“The name is loosely translated as: Immaculate Radiance of Peaceful Strength and Wise Use of Ignorance,” Lewgan finished weakly. “It was over a hundred thousand years old when it was brought to Bethdish by the D’rrish Ambassador Cach’. . .uh. . .at the opening ceremony for the first D’rrish embassy in the local year nine twenty, some five thousand, nine hundred and seven years ago.” Unwilling to again fumble the harsh D’rrish nomenclature, Lewgan temporized. “And it has been confirmed to have been on display on the 90th floor gallery of the *Mare* Tower two months ago at the reception thrown by the Immortals for the Shebeja Delegation to The City of Lights Council.” Lewgan paused to let this information sink in. “This scan was made two days ago and although we have yet to identify where, the background is certainly *not* in the *Mare* Tower.”

“One of a matched set, you say?” Grym’s eyes narrowed, suspecting treachery at every opportunity was one of his trademarks and had become second nature to him. Survival in this line of work often depended upon a constant, healthy distrust of anything and anyone. And Mr. Grym not only survived, he thrived.

“After extensive research by myself, your. . .connections. . .at the History and Art departments at the *Collegium Lux* and your best hackers,” Lewgan began. “We have reached a one hundred percent consensus that the other urn was stored in the fourteenth sub-basement of the D’rrish Royal Palace on their Homeworld on The Night The Stars Changed, seven hundred years ago. It is in another *galaxy*, sir. Our best estimates put Andromeda between two and two point two million light years away. I think we can assume that we are *not* dealing with the urn’s mate.”

“And I presume that this object is now offered as proof that the security of the *Mare* Tower has been breached?” The wheels in Grym’s mind were turning. Not even Lewgan knew of his designs upon a certain room, a certain person who could often be found within the Tower, but Grym was willing to give up much that he had built during a surprisingly long lifetime of unceasing effort in order to achieve this goal. It was the Crimelord’s most cherished, and secret,

desire. Absently, he wiped his damp palms on his soft, thick bathrobe. It was an action that Lewgan had never seen from The Boss. And it spoke volumes.

“No doubt we will be contacted with terms,” Lewgan said. “As of now, all we have is this data crystal. The trail ends with an anonymous, cash-paying customer of indeterminate species or gender who dropped the package off at the courier service. Coincidentally,” his unruly eyebrows arched in sarcasm, “all accessible security cameras within three city blocks of the drop-off point experienced an unexplained malfunction for about fifteen minutes prior to and following the exchange. There are still a few leads being followed by your . . .investigators. . .but there is little hope that we will be able to trace this individual or more likely, this group, any further. Until they choose to make our acquaintance, of course.”

“Lewgan,” The Boss’s voice was hard. “Let me make this perfectly clear. Under *no* circumstances are you to do anything to compromise this operation. I want any efforts to uncover the identity of our successful thief to cease immediately. Understand me, immediately. We are going to play this straight and be prepared for any treachery.” Grym was as adamant as Lewgan had ever seen.

“My initial suspicion,” Grym continued, “is that this is a sting operation masterminded by the Reeve, or perhaps by The Collector, himself, which might mean that one of the previous attempts came closer to success than we realized. Although this could be valuable information, I will allow for no error in this matter. The bounty I offered was merely a taste of what I expect this matter to eventually cost, so there is no reason to attempt subterfuge in order to save a paltry few million credits. If there is a chance that this offer is real, we must assure that *we* do nothing to risk spooking our thief back into obscurity. Am I understood?”

“Perfectly, sir.” Lewgan answered. “But with your approval, I am going to continue to try and ascertain whether there has, in fact, been a successful incursion into the Tower. Our current intel indicates that Tower security remains heightened after the four, disparate periods of maximum activity intermittent over the last two weeks. We have information from certain vendors that extensive repairs have been necessary in various parts of the building although there have been no reports of death or injury. However, I have just recently discovered that shortly

after the first suspected incursion into the tower, thirteen days ago, Doctor Mgshhabii, the chief veterinarian at the Zoological Gardens and Reserve was rushed to the *Mare* tower in the middle of the night and has yet to return either to his home or his work. Third-party enquiries indicate that the Good Doctor is on ‘Sabbatical.’ Several lectures and teaching assignments have been put on indefinite hold. No further information is available.”

“By your leave, sir, I will also continue the research into the possibility that the second urn might possibly be unaccounted for or failing that, that the true Kkhresh’diak urn is indeed still in the Tower.”

“Surely you don’t suspect a fake, Mr. Lewgan? The audacity of such an attempt. . .” Grym’s tone was almost respectful.

“I suspect everything, Sir.” The answer was not flip.

...*The Scare*...

In Max’s small, cluttered and cozy office in the *Mare Inebrium*, an incredibly ordinary looking human was tapping away intensely at a dataport. Mr. Guiles Thornby was scrutinizing two snippets of the security recordings from the first of four recent attempts at breaching the supposedly impenetrable *Mare* Tower. Not even the AI’s which controlled the bulk—but by no means all—of the intrusion countermeasures protecting the Tower could offer more than guesses as to whom, or *what* had been attempting to gain access. He was showing Max, the bartender at the *Mare Inebrium*, the first-floor bar, some of their best evidence in hopes that his vast experiences with diverse life forms could help them ascertain the nature of the threat.

The first recording showed nothing but a blank, stone wall which was obviously cut from solid bedrock. It was the lowest level of the Tower’s substructure, the deepest of the Tower’s four sub-basements. Max had spent a lot of time down there over the last few centuries. He’d had three friends there, and only one was still alive after the first and ‘least determined’ break-in attempt. And Fran, the Jubjub bird who liked to lick treats from Max’s outstretched hand, wasn’t expected to survive the night. Max was eager to do all he could to help find out who was

responsible for these attempts. And if it was at all possible, he wanted to be there when the Reeve caught up with whoever. . .or whatever did this to his pals. There was a score to settle.

A shadow moved rapidly across the wall. Max didn't need computer enhancement to ascertain that it was that of Kukla in full charge. Moments later, almost simultaneous with a horrid shriek which, fortunately, the security microphones had been inadequate to fully record, the broken body of a fully mature Bandershatch—furious no more—slammed into that section of wall and slid to the floor, a crumpling bag of loose bones. But Kukla—one of the three incredibly rare and semi-mythical guardians of the lower levels of the Tower—had gotten a piece of his adversary. The only one of the three known to have done so. That much was apparent from the recording. What happened next, however, defied anything in Max's direct experience. . .though he could swear that he had heard about *something* like this, before. If only he could remember!

Snagged in one of Kukla's fourteen inch, razor-sharp claws, was a steaming hunk of scaly flesh. It was a pale, luminescent beige and dripping rich purple blood which burned holes in the stone floor wherever it spilled. They could track the intruder from this point onward by the pockmarks in the floor and walls wherever it moved. Then came the really strange part. The gob of tissue lodged in the claw began to smoke and steam. Distinct popping sounds could be heard over the receding din of battle between Ollie, the Jabberwock, which was by far the toughest and meanest of the guardians—though Max had found he liked to be scratched behind his fourth thoracic barb—and the intruder.

Suddenly, the alien flesh erupted into a coherent cloud of vapor which hovered momentarily as it was joined by tiny wisps of vapor from other sources and then immediately moved, as if pulled by a ventilation shaft, straight *down* into the stone floor. There was no evidence of any foreign tissue or fluids found by The Owner's most high-tech scanners in spots where they *knew* both had once been. Only the marks in the floor where the purple blood had eaten into the living rock.

The cameras which should have seen the intruder would never transmit another image. All the rad-hard and insulated circuits were irreparably fried the moment the intruder came into

‘view.’ However, cameras which were often closer, such as the one which had captured these horrid images, but which were not pointed in the direction of the intruder, remained completely unaffected by whatever destroyed the others. All that was certain was that the intruder was considerably tougher than the guardians, and that unlike its opponents, it cast no shadow. Again, there was no explanation, no good theories, and more than once the term ‘impossible’ had been bandied about by individuals for whom the word was customarily considered to be the last fallback of the incompetent.

“Polios is understandably upset, Max,” Thornby said. “The lower levels were supposed to be a safe haven for these rare and magnificent creatures. Their value as a deterrent to entry to the Tower was merely an adjunct to his efforts to provide them shelter from a universe which no longer seemed to tolerate the presence of the truly exotic. This was never *meant* to happen.”

Max gave Guiles a hard look. He had always opposed putting Kukla, Fran and Ollie at risk by turning them into oversized guard dogs. Albeit they comprised a force superior to many small armies. And, of course, they worked for table scraps. Max was not a happy fellow, not by a long shot. “Show me the second clip again and pause it when the ‘head’ is most clearly defined.

With a touch of the screen, Guiles activated the short segment caught in the *reflection* on the surface of a children’s wading pool located in the 30th floor health club. The fourth and—so far—final attempt had gotten this far but no more. Each incursion had been more determined and more forceful than the last. And each effort had been thwarted by one or another of the security measures installed by the individual who was referred to simply as The Collector, The Owner, Mr. Grey, Polios (and a host of other names) and who had assured Max on more than one occasion were completely impenetrable. An exhaustive survey of all valuable items in the building was underway, and so far nothing had been found to be missing. But the task was monumental and far from complete.

On the screen, the highly-enhanced image of a nondescript section of wall suddenly exploded inward as something crashed through, leaving a hole that was measured at over three meters wide but only a little over a meter in height. Whatever went through—assuming it was

upright as it attempted to escape the countermeasures which were even then converging on it's position—was relatively short and squat in stature. It wasn't much, but it was *evidence*.

A coherent beam of light could be seen cutting through the hole the intruder had just made in the corridor wall and sweeping through the dust and falling debris until it struck an object—the intruder—where it was absorbed, apparently to no effect. A second beam, thicker than the first and ochre in color, was fired from someplace behind the camera and also swung to impact at the same spot as the first. The focal point seemed to dance and dodge, as if harried by a swarm of hornets. The enhanced image began to pick up a distortion in the atmosphere surrounding the intruder as superheated air mixed with moisture and dust to form a visible shroud. A low-pitched moan became audible through the sound of crumbling stone and breaking plastiglass. Whatever it was, it was hurting. A thin smile graced Max's otherwise focused countenance. But it wasn't a smile you'd like to see directed at you. Believe it.

There was a Dopplered whine as an antigrav-mounted weapons bot shot past the camera at high speed. It too began dancing about the focal point of the two beams—careful not to block either—and began firing coherent packets of magenta plasma at the intruder. The moan intensified into a low-pitched scream as the combination of a mobile particle beam projector, wall-mounted molecular phase disruptors and the plasma cannon platform pounded away at the increasingly sluggish, though still moving, object. Whatever it was was absorbing massive amounts of energy and at least some of that was being bled into realspace in the form of heat. The very molecules in the air surrounding the intruder luminesced as the ionic bonds holding them together absorbed quantum energies and then released them into space in the form of immeasurably tiny dots of visible light. An image was beginning to form.

It had probably been an indistinct image, at best. The Owner's AI's had done a spectacular job of cleaning and enhancing the surface reflections from a small pool that was anything but remaining placid during the battle. But the image—though vague—was clear enough to determine that the creature was bipedal, with incredibly broad shoulders and hips, arms long enough to drag the floor and a small, sloped head. The figure dropped to its knees as its scream increased in both pitch and volume until it became a piercing keening which stirred a sense of glorious exaltation deep within Max's core. This was a being that *should* suffer the

torment being inflicted. The emotion was an intensification of every feeling Max had ever experienced when he, of necessity or as an act of revenge, had become the sword of justice. It was akin to the sensations he felt when he—personally—had the opportunity or responsibility to END someone or something which sorely needed annihilation. He had felt this before but never had it been so real, so strong, so *necessary*.

But it was the head which interested Max. There was something familiar about its shape. “Computer, freeze shot,” he spoke rapidly to the computer a moment before Guiles Thornby, who was ostensibly running the thing, had intended. The head was not its clearest, quite yet.

“Enhance and magnify grid two-one-one and advance in five millisecond increments for the next three seconds of the recording. End command string,” Max was surprisingly good with computers. He’d had a lot of experience in his two million years of life. As immortals go, he was a youngster and anyone can tell you that kids are great with computers.

So it surprised Thornby when with all the sophisticated hardware, software and wetware at his disposal, Max quickly opened a drawer and snatched-out a pencil and a pad of blank paper, real wood paper, medium bond, to be precise. His eyes only occasionally flicking from the pad to the screen, Max began to sketch rapidly. Slowly, the image of the intruder’s head on the screen coalesced into the clearest that it would ever get. Max’s drawing, however, contained details based upon nothing but gut instinct. Extrapolating from millions of years of experience looking into alien faces, Max discarded some irregularities as the vagaries of the digitized photographic media while he enhanced others because they ‘felt’ right.

On the paper, the image began to resemble something living. But it was a nightmare which should have ended at its birth. Grotesque pustules swelled and burst from a scaly rictus of pain. Fanged mouth open in silent torment, it looked not upward for deliverance, but down. *That’s why the head seemed so oddly shaped*, Thornby thought.

But Max had somehow also picked-out two small, bony projections emanating from the creature’s forehead. On the original image these discolorations had seemed to be eyes, but now with the head bowed, Thornby could see how they might make sense. The creature was on its knees with arms outstretched as punishing energies lashed it until the very fabric of space

became suspect. The creature had been detected when it triggered subetheric motion detectors, generally more prevalent on the upper floors of the building. It had somehow been moving through gravity-stressed subspace when the first beam—the phase disruptor—reached in and stung it. It had apparently learned from its first three attempts—when it had been driven off—that normal space was not a healthy place to be for an intruder in the *Mare* Tower.

Max began sketching again, filling out a little here, erasing a curve there.

Still staring at the image on the screen, though he had spent hours doing nothing else, Thornby broke the silence. “So this is the thing that killed our guardians in the basement? Maybe The Collector should add it to his bestiary on Sitmus V.” If it had been an attempt at humor, it failed.

Max’s features were grim. “Living things should never be part of *any* collection, Guiles, and *HE* knows exactly how I feel concerning the subject. We disagree. Big deal, I would probably hate living in a universe where nobody ever disagreed with me. But dammit, those three creatures were more noble, more thoughtful and frankly, better *people* than most people I know and I may never forgive Grey for what has happened. But I sincerely believe that he thought that they were quite safe where they were.

“But mistakes that cost others dearly are the kind that we all have to live with in our own way,” Thornby replied. “These are the kinds of mistakes we have *both* made, Max. I live with my past mistakes every day but unlike you, at least I’ll get to die --eventually. Kukla, Fran and Ollie have really only paid part of the price for this. Polios must wrestle his personal demons in his own way, as all men of conscience must.”

“Interesting choice of metaphor, Guiles,” Max said as he added a few finishing touches to his sketch. He flipped the pad and tossed it on the desk in front of Thornby. “Have you ever been tested for innate psychic Talent?”

There on the page was a masterfully rendered, intricately detailed and artistically perfect drawing. The face showed incredible pain and a sense of abject bewilderment mingled with desperate fear. As a work of art, it was breathtaking. But you wouldn’t call it beautiful. No, the

word you would strive for might be damnable, for damnation was written plainly in every line. Each little shading or suggestion of depth was a reminder that evil has substance, a place in this universe. It was the tortured face of a demon. An actual demon straight from Hell. And it seemed that this one had set its sights on the *Mare* Tower.

“I think we might be in real trouble, here, Guiles,” Max said. “Any idea what our boss might have collected, lately, that might have drawn *this* kind of heat?”

...*The Dare*...

Lewgan barely had time to marshal his thoughts before The Boss answered his page. The message: “Our seller has made contact,” was innocuous enough to risk sending over merely encrypted networks. When Grym’s visage appeared on Lewgan’s screen, The Boss raised his left eyebrow marginally. This was a signal to Lewgan that the line wasn’t trustworthy and that nothing incriminating would be tolerated. Finding a more secure line would have taken only minutes but apparently The Boss was anxious for any news. It had been three days since their discussion in the Playroom.

“You have information for me, Mr. Lewgan?” The Boss’s tone and manner were brisk, professional. *Nothing suspicious here, officer. Just a business call.*

“Yes sir, Mr. Grym,” Lewgan had played this game for far higher stakes and was not at all nervous. He too, was a professional. “We received more documentation as to the nature of the goods and so far they seem to be of excellent quality.” So far, so good. “However, sir, there seems to be some question as to the previously discussed price.”

“Shocking,” The Boss seemed honestly amused by this detail. There had been occasions where The Boss had been inclined to ‘make an example’ of certain underlings over amounts which wouldn’t buy a decent Correllian Cocktail (the one with the real rooster feather floating midway in the glass) at the *Mare Inebrium*. “The price discussed was always simply a starting point, Lewgan, please feel free to negotiate in good faith up to any amount you deem necessary. Is there anything else?”

“I apologize for the misunderstanding, sir,” which was code for: ‘Something is *really* strange with the deal.’ “But I’m afraid the seller claims that the merchandise is not the issue, there is an extra cost to the *procurement* process which must be addressed. The price quoted for that. . .documentation. . .is quite beyond my ability to authorize.”

“I see,” answered Grym, though it was apparent that he did not. “Perhaps I should meet with our seller, personally. Do you think that might be arranged?” Normally, this was supposed to be interpreted as a threat. Grym almost never—anymore, anyway—sullied his exquisitely manicured hands by dealing with common rabble. That’s what underlings were for. He was unprepared for Lewgan’s terse reply.

“She insists upon meeting you personally, sir.” Lewgan was as bewildered as his boss. “It is an unimpeachable requisite of the price.”

Grym was startled, but only momentarily. “Make the arrangements, Mr. Lewgan. You know my schedule. Oh, and please make quite certain that our meeting is *absolutely* private. In these uncertain times, there is no such thing as being too careful. Am I understood?”

“Perfectly, sir. I’ll get right on it.” Lewgan was beginning to have some serious doubts about this whole affair. He was confident that with a modicum of effort, he could identify the woman who had contacted him, earlier. She had taken some impressive precautions to disguise her identity and location but this time she wasn’t going to be just some anonymous customer at a courier service, she had called Lewgan’s office, directly. But The Boss had been quite clear that there were to be no efforts to track her down and Lewgan hadn’t survived this long by disobeying direct orders. He hoped she didn’t balk at the security precautions he was going to have to take. Lewgan was good, but if the woman on the vid was an agent of The Collector, or worse yet, the Reeve, he might just be up against more than he could handle. He wondered if this would be a good time to update his escape plan. . .or perhaps his will.

...*The Prayer*...

Thornby was a patient man. He truly was. But if this squirrely cleric didn’t stop muttering to himself soon. . .

“Yes yes YES!” three times, in rapid succession. Bony knees on hard rock, Brother Chucky scabbled about sniffing at the scattered pockmarks left at the site of battle between Kukla and the intruder. Guiles Thornby still refused to believe the Demon Theory. . .as it had come to be called. But The Owner had different ideas. He was pulling out all the stops in trying to prevent another such incursion. Guiles knew his employer had an affinity for unearthing arcane and weird things, but he wondered where the boss dug up *this* strange specimen.

“You there,” Brother Chucky was jabbing his long and surprisingly delicate—and dirty—index finger in Guiles’s general direction. “My case, bring me my case, my case, MY CASE!” This staccato repetitiveness was one of the monk’s more annoying quirks. “Hurry man! Before the ectoplasm evaporates completely. Hurry hurry HURRY!”

With a sigh and a shrug, Guiles strolled over to the large portmanteau that the little man had insisted must be lugged all the way down here to the lowest levels. *I take it back*, he thought. *I liked it better when he was only talking to himself.*

That evening, snugly ensconced in one of The Owner’s private meeting rooms on the 99th floor of the *Mare* Tower, Guiles was still annoyed. But at least this time he had company. Max, The Reeve and via commlink, The Owner himself were there to share the burden. Of them all, only Max seemed to enjoy the so-called, “Demonologist’s” company. But Max could get along with anyone. It was one of the reasons that he just might be the Omniverse’s best bartender.

“So what you’re saying,” Max interjected when the Mad Monk paused for a breath, which he seemed to do so infrequently as to make one wonder whether some of his foibles might be due to oxygen deprivation to the brain. “Is that just because God *knows* what we are going to do before we do it, he doesn’t actually ‘make’ us do bad things. Even though he ‘made’ the universe, and us, and is responsible for everything being the way it is, we are still personally responsible for our own actions. Am I close?” Max seemed to be enjoying this futile dogmatic exercise while they awaited the delivery of a data crystal which Brother Chucky’s acolyte was editing at this very moment.

“Oh yes oh yes OH YES!” the anorexically-thin (“Can’t eat that!! No no NO! It’s holy month, I must fast! Just bring me some bread and water, please. Just bread bread BREAD!”) humanoid with an intensity which included spilling some *very* old Dricorian Merlot on the leather armrest and thick rugs appointing the meeting room. Apparently, his fasting didn’t preclude a little fruit of the vine after a long day chasing the denizens of the underworld. Though he had so far managed to empty two glasses, how much actually made it into his carbohydrate-starved tissues was open to debate. “Free will is YOURS, Max. God gives directions but he doesn’t actually pilot the ship! The ship the ship THE SHIP!”

It seemed an eternity, though it was Max who was taking all the heat, before a muted chime announced that the data crystal had been sent up from the media center on the fourteenth floor. Brother Chucky’s acolyte—Guiles couldn’t remember his name, just now—had been enraptured by the state-of-the-art equipment available to him. He had almost pleaded permission to ‘do this presentation up right,’ apparently with sound effects, background music and multispecies subtitles. Brother Chucky had started out quite stern, but had finally relented and allowed his assistant to stay and play to his heart’s content *after* he had cobbled together a visual record of the salient points concerning this day’s ‘investigations.’

The acolyte may have been an aspiring Rodenberry in sack cloth, but he knew his stuff. The visual presentation had been masterfully blended to remove all the drudgery, trundling back and forth and scrabbling about on the floor. He’d even had enough sense NOT to show the time Brother Chucky tried to stick his tongue into one of the deeper blood/acid burns and had managed only to bloody his own nose in the process. *Evil has a taste! Oh yes, a taste a taste A TASTE!* Today’s events seemed almost orderly, professional and even a bit scientific. Unless you’d been there, of course.

Brother Chucky somehow managed not to empty his glass onto the rug as he jumped up and dashed to the dataport once the crystal had been loaded. “Have you got the image there, Mr. Grey?” he asked, though he didn’t really pause long enough for an answer before he plowed ahead. “Max, you have a real future in the clergy if you ever want to give up this bartending sideline. You do you do YOU DO!”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Brother.” And if Max was joking, it didn’t show.

“Before I get started, please let me assure you that the situation is not without hope and to relieve one of your worries,” Brother Chucky smiled, as if he were delivering the best news possible. “This was definitely not human.”

If he had been about to repeat himself, he never got the chance. The Reeve nearly choked himself with the severity of his dismissive snort. “Polios! Are you wasting my time with this maniac?” he called. “Isn’t human? Did somebody even *try* to claim this was a human?” The Reeve made as if to stand when the frail cleric stopped him cold. It was a sight to see as the little man stalked up to what is possibly the most dangerous humanoid in existence and transfixed him, both with his long, but considerably cleaner, finger and with the vehemence of his voice.

“You!”

“Immortal!”

And Brother Chucky suddenly became Saint George, facing a dragon with nothing but a toothpick and his faith. “You should get down on your knees and thank Antuth! Thank Antuth and every God Who ever walked the holy streets of Albion that this was NOT a human demon that slew your blessed beasts and invaded this very edifice! If it were you would all be doomed. Doomed Doomed DOOMED!”

The Reeve had only two choices. He could push the Passionate Preacher aside or fall back into his chair. He chose the latter. But nobody in the room was fooled into thinking that the Reeve had retreated for any reason beyond the fact that this strange character might actually be of some help. “I apologize, Brother Chucky. I misunderstood you. It won’t happen again, I assure you. Please continue.”

It was the right thing to do, but whom among us are big enough to have done it with such grace and immediacy?

“A human demon—that is, a demon conforming to the *human* mythos—would never give up. Never never NEVER!” Brother Chucky shot the Reever a withering glance as he finally condescended to explain himself clearly. “Once a human demon signs a contract, it WILL be fulfilled. Even if the eternally damned creature is killed in the attempt, and it *has* happened, you know, another demon will simply take his place. And another, only each is more powerful than the last. It is their very nature to never give up and the *prize*, the soul of the poor, suffering child of God, is more valuable to their Unholy Master than a whole host of his minions. But there is hope, I tell you. Hope hope HOPE!”

Polios took advantage of the slight pause created when Brother Chucky decided to finish the dregs of his glass. “So the demons found in other mythologies are real?”

“Oh yes oh yes OH YES! Very real, indeed. As a matter of fact, as far as we know, *all* of them are real, to one extent or another. As long as the sentient beings who created them *believed*. I suspect you Immortals know as much about how that works as anyone, hey hey HEY?”

Max and the Reever exchanged a quick glance but said nothing. There were things that you just don’t discuss outside the family.

“Nevertheless,” the Beneficent Brother continued. “The *Mare* Tower was invaded by a very real demon and if God’s plan is for it to return, it will eventually succeed. There is nothing any of us can do to stop it. In each incursion it will learn more and more about your defenses, and each failure will only strengthen its resolve. So far, your defensive measures have thwarted its efforts. His *physical* efforts are only a small portion of this creature’s capabilities. Demons have access to incredible power, and not all of it can be affected by even the technologies of the Immortals or the Magics of your Sorcerers, Mr. Grey. This Demon, or one of his successors *will* triumph over your efforts in the end. But I do know of certain blessings, icons, artifacts and prayers which will make it pay for the privilege. Pay pay PAY!”

“If we are powerless to stop it,” Guiles spoke for the first time since the meeting began. “Then how can you say that we have hope have hope HAVE HOPE?” He hadn’t intended to mimic the cleric’s odd speech pattern when he’d begun his question, but sometimes his mouth

just got the better of him. He knew he ought to apologize, but hey, he was no Reever. And he never claimed to be.

If Brother Chucky noticed Thornby's mockery, he dismissed it. "Because the Holy Water turned blue, of course. Didn't I mention that? Blue blue BLUE! Isn't that wonderful?" He hurried over to the dataport and selected an image from the menu. On the screen, a strangely silent—though his lips were plainly moving—Brother Chucky selected a small vial of clear liquid from a scattered and disorganized pile of interesting objects and jerked the cap off. Apparently, his propensity for spillage was not restricted to thousand-credit-a-bottle Merlot. He slopped the contents into one of the larger holes in the rock. The intruder had paused here after poor Kukla had extracted his final pound of flesh and the vitriolic substance had chewed deeply into the earth. The acolyte had known to zoom in for a clear shot of the few drops that managed to find their way to the very bottom of the miniature pit and there was an instantaneous blue flash clearly visible from one of the droplets. It dissipated quickly. None of the other splashes reacted in any way. Thornby had no explanation for this. The Owner's best scanners had detected no residue of any kind in any of the places where the intruder's blood had destroyed the rock.

"You see?" he shouted to everyone and no one. "I don't need a spectrochromatograph to tell me that was blue!" He looked about at the blank faces staring back at him. "That water was blessed by the Virtual Pope, himself! On Earth! In Rome in Rome IN ROME!"

"And the residual ectoplasm glowed blue," Max finished, calmly. "Which means that it was a Demon from a mythology where the rules are different? So this demon *doesn't* have to fulfill its contract? The contract can be broken? It has a choice?"

"A choice a choice A CHOICE? Never!" The Flaky Friar had been beaming at Max as if he were the star pupil in a spelling bee until Max's final question. Brother Chucky's disappointment was plain as he carefully explained the facts of life to his bumbling student. "Demons have no *choices*, Max. They are *not* Children of God. No free will to exercise and no soul to loose. But the contract *can* be broken. Oh yes oh yes OH YES!"

And with a beneficent smile, he offered them their only hope. “We merely have to find the Dahlian who made this unholy pact and instruct *her* how to break it before she is lost. We can save her soul her soul HER SOUL!”

“A Dahlian? Her?” The Reeve bounded to his feet and advanced on the Frail Friar. “Which Dahlian? Who? How do you know it’s a ‘she?’ What else do you know and why haven’t you told us until now?”

The Stuttering Supplicant scuttled back from the Reeve’s wrath. “But I DID tell you! You saw it yourself on the screen! The color was BLUE! It was BLUE! It was. . . weren’t you paying ATTENTION?”

Perhaps Brother Chucky would have repeated the word, perhaps not. The Reeve had moved with lightning speed and astounding grace as he reached forward to snatch the collar of the plain brown robe with his index finger. And using only that connection, had lifted the emaciated cleric over a foot off the floor until the two men were, quite literally, nose to nose. Not a centimeter of space separated them. “We have wasted *hours* you old fool!” There was no mistaking the menace implicit in each of the Chief Justicar’s words. “Now you will tell us everything we need to know in order to locate this woman and under no circumstances will you repeat the same word twice! Nod exactly *once* if you understand me.”

It had been a long time since Guiles Thornby had been truly shocked. Oh, it wasn’t the Reeve’s actions that he found so disturbing. The skinny little twit, though he seemed to know his stuff, had it coming. *Lives* were at stake here and his delay constituted an intolerable waste of that most precious of commodities: time. The problem was that from his vantage point, sitting in the most comfortable chair in the room, he no longer had to wonder what Demonologist monks wore beneath their robes. Guiles needed another drink. Right away.

...*The Care*...

Once again, Lewgan was nervous. It was his job to bring the Seller, a Dahlian woman, and The Boss together while maintaining a veil of absolute security. He felt like an overpriced pimp. The mysterious Seller had passed phases one through four of the security measures and so

far, all seemed to be going well. There were just so many ways that this deal could go wrong. If this was a set up by The Reeve, it was improbable that Lewgan's security efforts would be sufficient. It would be up to Lewgan to make the final decision as to whether Mr. Grym would be exposed to any threat, whatsoever. Perhaps Lewgan could not be held accountable for his inability to thwart the Reeve's technology, but he *would* be expected to sniff out the scam. And all good sting operations were, at heart, merely another confidence game.

It occurred to him that perhaps he should just call off the meet and blame an inexplicable feeling in his gut. Grym was intelligent enough to recognize that there were some suspicions that simply could not be quantified. But Lewgan just didn't get the *sense* that this deal represented any danger to The Boss. For some reason, his intestinal early warning system told him that this offer was legitimate. . .even though it was *obviously* a scam. And The Boss knew it, too. But he had given the go-ahead for the meeting, anyway. Was Grym's obsession with the *Mare* Tower clouding his judgment? Was he losing his edge? Lewgan had seen more than one criminal genius fall due to one simple mistake. And it seemed they always managed to take their closest companions in crime down with them. Ah well, his fortunes had been tied to The Boss's for over a decade and so far, their combined instincts had yet to fail.

The plans had been laid with utmost care but the most telling test was yet to come. It was often the case that the low-tech approach was the best. The seller had been stripped and bathed with UV, EMP and a mildly toxic industrial solvent before she was allowed a high pressure shower with scented water. Continuous scans had confirmed that she was carrying nothing but a single data crystal. The crystal was of simple manufacture and had very limited capabilities. Though the information was encrypted, it *was* only information. So far so good.

And while doubles were a common ploy for shaking a tail, Lewgan was about to go one further. The Seller would be told that her security ordeal was over and that Mr. Grym would meet with her shortly. Grym's Double—a veteran of multiple plastic surgeries and a highly-valued asset—would soon meet with the female Dahlian to discuss terms. He had been given instructions to say something which would seem to be highly incriminating and that no law enforcement official would be able to resist. Before any specifics were discussed, an emergency page was to interrupt the meeting calling 'Mr. Grym' away.

If it was a sting, that's when the authorities would make their move and if the Seller was being honest, she might never suspect that she had been dealing with an imposter on the earlier occasion. The true Mr. Grym, of course, would be safely across town at the time with an unbreakable—because it was real—alibi. An unexpected visit to the *Mare Inebrium*, was Lewgan's suggestion. Therein could be found scanners and witnesses that even the Reeve would have to take seriously.

And speaking of the Reeve, seems he had been discretely turning the City of Lights, the colonies, the resort and even the off-world settlements upside down for days looking for and questioning every Dahlian of the female persuasion to be found. There had been no public release of information, of course, but Mr. Grym's sources were diverse, to say the least. There were quality reports that some of the detainees had been interviewed by an very odd individual, indeed. Lewgan had been unable to determine this fellow's expertise, but reliable information insisted that he had a most annoying personal habit. It seems he has a tendency to repeat himself.

Lewgan's pager beeped twice, the signal that the Seller had passed all scans, was not being followed and was ready for the meeting with Grym's Double. Lewgan sent the prearranged response code giving the go-ahead. He also sent a code through a much more circuitous route which would inform Mr. Grym that it was time to make his way to the *Mare Inebrium* to establish his alibi. There was still time to abort if anything went wrong but everything was proceeding as planned. But Lewgan still *knew* that this was a con. He just hadn't yet been able to figure out how. And more importantly, why? It couldn't be for anything as trivial as money. *Nobody* would ever try to take The Boss for mere credits, would they?

No. Not after the example Grym had made of poor little Sa' Kringe. Who would have imagined that even a Tash K'Net—tough as they were—could survive being dipped in molten gold? The value of the precious metal which clung to every skin surface and filled every available orifice had been exactly equal to what he had tried to swindle out of The Boss. Lewgan had actually seen Sa' Kringe hobbling about the old section of town only a few weeks earlier. He had apparently, long ago, painfully peeled away the last of the gold to trade for food

and shelter and was currently begging for alms. Few knew that Sa' Kringe was living proof that when The Boss's plans don't work the way he intends, it's because they work better.

So try as he may, Lewgan could find no legitimate reason not to go ahead with the meeting. All his instincts told him that the Double's little performance would trigger no raid by the Reeve's forces. And more importantly, The Boss *wanted* this meeting to take place too badly for Lewgan to risk his wrath for anything less than absolute proof that the Seller's offer was a ruse. He still had a few feelers out trying to ascertain if the Kkhresh'diak urn was still within the *Mare* Tower but so far had nothing to show for his efforts. It was nearly impossible to get *anything* from the Tower. Information included.

...*The Mare*...

Max couldn't believe what he was seeing. Grym himself had just strolled through the swinging doors at the main entrance to the *Mare Inebrium*. Accompanied only by a single, unarmed bodyguard and wearing a jovial expression he meandered through the room, stopping to gaze at the curiosities decorating the walls and alcoves of the main bar. He seemed especially entranced by a crude, inactivated robot which only had wheels with which to get around. It's two flexihose arms ended in c-shaped pinchers and its head was a clear glass disk with little whirligigs inside. Nobody had ever been able to determine it's utility. Absently, Max noted that Bruce, the bouncer, had dismissed Grym's muscle man with barely a glance. But there were others in the room who seemed suddenly considerably more agitated.

Several of the diverse clientele seemed transfixed, undecided whether to bolt for the door or hunch over their drinks in a vain attempt to disappear. Some, no doubt, were tempted to rise and greet the man who was either their unofficial employer, their nemesis or their competitor. And for many, these distinctions were vague, at best. Max knew of at least one patron present with whom the Crimelord would very much like to 'discuss' a certain matter concerning the disappearance of a shipment of hybrid poppies. But Grym didn't seem to be looking for anyone in particular. And besides, there was no way he would ever try anything in the *Mare*. Not only was it not Grym's style, it was also quite stupid. And that is one of the few detrimental epithets that had never been applied to Grym. Never.

But there were others for whom Grym's sudden appearance held no particular threat. Kazsh-ak Teir, the D'rriish ambassador and a regular at the *Mare*, interrupted his own story—an entertaining, if highly improbable, tale concerning a Thaxiconian farmer with three attractive grublins and the traveling uranium merchant who needed a place to molt—and immediately began easing his two-ton scorpoid bulk through the sparse group that had gathered to listen to his discourse. In fact, there were few in the place who hadn't yet heard this one, it was one of the D'rriish's favorites. But this time the punch line: "Your mother mates out of season, too?" would just have to wait.

"Pardon me, please. Coming through. Please excuse me. So sorry. Have another and ask Max to put it on my tab," the translator worn by the D'rriish Ambassador was one of the very best diplomatic models available and when he needed to move rapidly through a crowded room, it was worth every credit. The Ambassador reached Grym's table just as the Crimelord was about to lower his own massive bulk into the chair.

Grym paused, a slightly uplifted finger signaled the bodyguard to stand at ease. Not that the fellow would have been any obstacle to the Clydesdale-sized D'rriish, anyway. Grym faced Kazsh-ak Teir and bowed with practiced civility.

"Ambassador, you honor me," the D'rriish translator wasn't the only thing in the *Mare* capable of switching to diplomatic mode. "My name is Grym. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all yours, I'm sure." Which for the D'rriish Ambassador, was as rude as anyone in the room—Max included—had ever heard. "Your name is known to me, Mr. Grym. And your reputation precedes you by many paths and through channels both above and below the sand."

"The sands cover both lies and truths, in the end, Ambassador. And when they are unearthed, are not lies often the more abundant?" Grym was no stranger to D'rriish platitudes. Especially recently, since he had been delving into the history and philosophy of Bethdish's third oldest alien colony.

“Well spoken, Mr. Grym.” It seemed the Ambassador was becoming more cautious, more diplomatic. This Grym was not the crude commoner he had expected. “It is fortunate, perhaps, that our paths have not crossed before now. Except for a certain incident involving illegal dumping of nuclear wastes near our colony, none of your enterprises have interfered with us so *we* have left you alone, as well.”

“I recall the ridiculous charges made a few years ago,” Grym seemed almost sympathetic. “If I am not mistaken, the Reeve himself declared the investigation complete. Lack of evidence, or something. A pity the waste hauler and his family perished in that freak accident. I’m quite sure that his testimony would have revealed the entire episode to have been a tragic error. My company paid a hefty fine and cleaned-up the area, I believe. But the sands have covered that business, as well, don’t you think? And yet you sought me out, tonight. How may I be of assistance to the noble and ever-wise D’rrish?”

At that moment Blanche approached the table ready to take the Crimelord’s order. Kazsh-ak Teir scuttled to the side to allow enough space to accommodate her own resplendent mass. Standing between the two, the normally Reubenesque waitress seemed almost diminutive. Though she moved through life with humor, elegance and grace, on her face was a barely-controlled scowl as she spoke.

“What do *you* want?” Grym’s reputation had, indeed, preceded him.

“What indeed?” Grym’s leer would have chilled the cockles of the most jaded professional walking the nighttime streets in the worst sections of the City of Lights.

But Blanche merely arched her eyebrows in contempt and replied “Not on your best day, me Chunky Chum. And then not even if you were the last man in the Universe and I’d been fed a diet of nothing but Aphrodesia for a year.” Her returning smile would have driven a lesser man insane with desire.

Grym was probably already insane, by most rational standards. He was unaccustomed to such cavalier dismissal. But he knew better than to allow this common barmaid to get the best of

him. “Ah, but for you dear lady, I would relinquish my evil ways and give all my wealth to charity. All for the smallest kiss, the merest loving glance.”

“Silver-tongued Devil, aren’t ya?” she almost laughed but continued the banter. “A single taste of this,” and she vigorously slapped her ample thigh with her free hand. “And you’d starve to death rather than sully y’er pallet with mere ambrosia.” But Blanche was tiring of this game. It was time to put this disgusting scourge on all decent folk in his place. “But place y’er order, Bub. Ain’t got all night to waste tradin’ barbs with the likes of you.”

Grym’s outward appearance was of amused tolerance, but within he was a seething cauldron of anger. Still, there was an angry D’rish before him and if nothing else, anyone close by would certainly remember this little exchange. He was here to establish an *alibi* after all. “I understand that this establishment makes an excellent Flotilla Surprise. My companion,” and Grym indicated his bodyguard with a nod, “will not be enjoying your hospitality, this evening. Allergic, poor fellow.” Grym, seemed as unaffected by Blanche’s dismissive demeanor as she by his continuing crude appraisal. But inside, Grym was planning retribution. He was *not* accustomed to being treated this way by servants nor accosted by aliens as if he were a common street vendor whose wares had been found substandard. *Lewgan!*, he thought. *Using this tactic to establish an alibi was Lewgan’s idea. Perhaps a little lesson in propriety is in order.* And miles away, as he concentrated on the screens monitoring the Seller’s meeting with Grym’s Double, Lewgan felt a chill. Unlike Guiles Thornby, Lewgan *had* been tested for latent psychic ability. Somehow, somewhere, he had been endangered. And he knew of only one true threat to his personal safety: The Boss.

“As a matter of fact,” Grym continued, simulating a jovial demeanor. “Since it has been some time since my last visit to the *Mare Inebrium*, why don’t you just refill every glass in the house, with my compliments.” Grym’s last words somehow carried to every corner of the room and was greeted with cheers, whistles and hoots. But the din was far less than a crowd this size would normally have merited. Many, it seemed, were unsure whether they would refuse the offer or merely pour it on the floor when it arrived.

Grym looked up as if surprised to find the huge D'rriish still looming over him. "Please forgive the interruption, Ambassador, I believe you had some business to discuss with me?"

"The Kkhresh'diak urn," Kazsh-ak Teir answered without preamble. "Your agents have been making enquiries about it and I wish to know what your intentions are. I assure you that it is not for sale, not for any price."

"Ah yes, the funerary urn of your great first emperor," Grym was aware that his research had not gone unnoticed. He was a little surprised that the efforts had been traced back to his organization, but was more interested in results than secrecy at the present time. He had anticipated that Kazsh-ak Teir's confrontational approach might have been related to his current project. Grym was rarely truly surprised by anything. "I understand that it is a most sacred, and priceless, icon for your august people and I would never presume to attempt to purchase it as if it were a mere trinket. I am truly saddened by your accusation, Ambassador. I had hoped that we might be able to use this rare opportunity to get to know each other better. I had heard that you. . .uh. . .*often* patronize this establishment and I'm afraid I took the liberty of asking some of my staff to research the urn so as to provide a convenient area of common interest. To break the ice, so to speak." Grym could lie like the Grinch without hesitation or qualm. It was just another in the arsenal of useful skills which had allowed him to maintain his position for as long as he had.

"In fact, I understand that it resides within this very building. Do you suppose that I might be allowed the privilege to actually view this magnificent specimen of your remarkable culture's fascinating history?" Grym was running on pure instinct, laying it on as thick as he judged the market would bear. He had a sudden feeling that this evening's efforts might turn out to be very profitable, indeed.

"I'm afraid that will be quite impossible, Mr. Grym. And I am quite sure that you know why." The trouble with translators is that the good ones reveal only what the speaker *wants* them to. Grym was good, but he knew that even he would be completely unable to read anything from D'rriish body language. But inspiration, that most elusive of commodities, struck.

“Oh, I do hope that the urn is safe,” there was an oily, slick quality to Grym’s voice. “I would be aghast to hear that it had been damaged by the recent. . . *troubles* everyone is talking about.

It was too much for the D’rrish. “Of COURSE the urn is safe! And it will remain so long after you and I have been covered by the sands, Mr. Grym. I have seen it, myself, this very day. And in the spirit of your effusive praise for my people and our history, I will make *you* an offer.” Grym found himself having to consciously stop himself from leaning away as the D’rrish Ambassador lowered his heavily mandibled ‘face’ to within inches of his own.

“I promise you, Mr. Grym, that if you are *ever* invited into the reception hall where the urn was last displayed, I will personally remove it from it’s protective enclosure and place it in your hands for a thorough inspection. Of course, you may want to wear some lead-lined gloves and take an antirad pill before I do. I understand that humanoids are particularly sensitive to neutron radiation. Pity, most of *us* find high flux densities to be quite refreshing.”

Grym’s smile faltered for the first time that evening, but it wasn’t from the ridiculous threat made by the D’rrish Ambassador. His researches had indicated that the funerary vessels posed no true health hazard due to the energetic emissions of decayed D’rrish tissue. He had been appreciatively eying Blanche as she retrieved his drink from the bar. He momentarily lost her in the crowd and when she reappeared. . . was he seeing things? Had she just spit into his drink? As she navigated in his direction, she smiled sweetly. She *knew* had been watching her, didn’t she? Would she? Could she?

His distraction had caused an awkward pause in the conversation. The implications of the D’rrish’s statement finally struck home. He was stunned at the ease with which he had manipulated the Ambassador into revealing what he had been unable to skrye utilizing the talents some of his best agents. But had it been *too* easy? Was this a trick? He decided it was not. The true Kkhresh’diak urn was still within the *Mare* Tower. Whoever had sent the data crystal was offering a fake. *Lewgan*, he thought to himself, *You’re a genius!*

“I would be honored, Ambassador.” And as the D’rrish stalked away, Blanche deftly dodged the huge scorpoid and placed the drink before him. Grym looked at her for a moment,

attempting to decide whether she had, or hadn't. Her visage was innocence, itself. With a shrug, Grym took a tentative first sip of his Flotilla Surprise a la *Mare Inebrium*. Again, he was surprised. *Lewgan, you may be a genius, but you're certainly no bartender.* Perhaps he would pay this place another visit under more cordial circumstances. And perhaps that lovely, graceful creature who had taken his order. . .and then he recalled what she had done to his drink. Or did she? *Ah well*, he mused, enjoying the complicated and expensive concoction, nonetheless. *Where would we be if we achieved every goal without effort, eh?* And for the first time in what seemed ages, Mr. Grym relaxed and enjoyed sitting in a bar with a good drink and nothing else to do until Lewgan let him know whether he would be meeting with this supposed 'Seller,' or not.

Because they were behind him, he didn't notice that Trixie had stopped Blanche in the middle of the crowded bar and whispered intensely to her. "I couldn't tell, did you do it? Did you actually do it?"

"Course not, love," Blanche smiled. "But I didn't like the way he was starin' so I made him wonder if I did. That's all, precious, I promise."

Most people wouldn't know it, but you really can't lie to Trixie, something in her Faerie ancestry, perhaps. But Blanche was certainly aware—there was little that escaped her, really—and would never dream of lying to the sweet little darlin'. Never.

Almost absently, Grym made mental notes of anyone and everyone in the place who had refused his offer of a drink. Most, he didn't know at all so perhaps they were simply afraid. Understandable, actually, and Grym was feeling generous. Others were his sworn enemies, anyway, so such rudeness was to be expected. But for a very few, those who should have known better than to refuse The Boss, it would be the last mistake they ever made.

...*The Snare*...

Just when Guiles Thornby thought that Brother Chucky had completely lost it, the Manic Minister would do or say something even more outrageous. This time he had stripped himself of all but a barely adequate loincloth, painted himself an unappealing aqua blue, and was dancing

around the lower levels of the *Mare* Tower while singing in some obscure language. And The Owner had assigned Guiles the unenviable role of Brother Chucky's assistant. At least Brother Chucky hadn't asked access to any of the *public* areas so he could perform this little rite. At least not yet.

And to make things worse, Guiles was also supervising the negotiations with a dozen museums in order to secure several arcane objects and artifacts that Brother Chucky had included in his 'shopping list' to The Owner. At least there was plenty to trade, The Owner had opened a significant portion of his collection for trade with other museums. And Guiles had been surprised at some of the entries. Why would The Collector even *want* four orc spleens preserved in alcohol? But the Museum of Natural History on the Planet Elendil was immensely interested in trading their entire collection of 'Heretical Artifacts' for just one orc spleen. And Brother Chucky claimed that one of these artifacts was a dagger which could indeed kill a Dahlian Demon. "Provided, of course, that you plunge it directly into it's forehead while repeating the *Prayer of the Damned*, in Dahlian, of course of course OF COURSE!." The owner was having a security robot built and programmed which could do just that. Brother Chucky thought the whole idea was just marvelous just marvelous JUST MARVELOUS!

Thornby watched the Palsied Priest try several times to draw a seven-sided star on the rock floor using only finely ground dust made from Dahlian bone. He finally had to give up and let his acolyte do it. There had been only so much of the substance available on short notice. He had sworn that under the right circumstances, the demon could be held within this septogram and questioned. To fix the drawing in place, a light layer of acrylic was sprayed over the thing when Brother Chucky said it was finished. "Can't have the septogram broken, oh no, oh no, OH NO!"

There were other measures, of course. The One True and Finally Undisputed Church of the Divine Okra on the planet Fatima had traded thirty thousand tons of holy water, their entire stockpile, for a crumpled napkin reputed to contain the only copy of Lagasse's gumbo recipe known to exist. The dish was supposed to be 'Heavenly.' When it arrived, the bulk of the holy water would be added to the sprinkler system throughout the building and the rest loaded into special water cannons welded to security bots. Brother Chucky assured all and sundry that the

Divine Okra religion was at least as 'real' as any other. "Those worshipers believe that okra is the path to salvation. And in this case, that's all that counts that counts THAT COUNTS!"

There were amulets which glowed red in the presence of the Unholy, one to be issued to each patrolling squad of organic guards. A rope made from unicorn hide which *might* hold a demon long enough to allow Brother Chucky to banish it to oblivion with a special prayer was being shipped from Faerie on the fastest transport available. And the list went on. Despite himself, Guiles wondered how the *Mare* Tower had remained inviolate for as long as it had. And also despite his doubts, he worried that the demon would take another run at the building before all the new countermeasures were in place. It occurred to him that somewhere along the line, between the complete inexplicability of the evidence, The Owner's unquestionable orders and Brother Chucky's incessant carrying-on, he had come to believe that they were indeed dealing with something otherworldly. Their best estimates put them weeks away from anything approaching even nominal readiness for another demon intrusion. Thornby began to miss his earlier skepticism very much, indeed.

...*The Chair*...

Lewgan was as sure as he could be that this was no trap. Once he made his decision, he immediately tapped in the code which would page The Boss and tell him it was okay to make the rendezvous. He still harbored plenty of doubt, but he could do no more to assure The Boss's safety. The woman had passed every test. No alert was sounded and Grym's Double had not been arrested even when he apparently ordered a murder in her presence. Of course, the whole thing had been set up to be shown a huge mistake. Grym's Double had ordered the termination of a business venture that just happened to be code named the same as one of the known undercover 'operatives' the Reeve had placed in the organization. These individuals had been allowed to survive, fed tidbits and misinformation, for several reasons but mostly because the Reeve usually took it seriously when one of his operatives was lost. It was also a useful way to feed competitor information to the authorities without undue contact. Many a smuggling operation or illegal gambling joint had been shut down by the Reeve's forces because they threatened Grym's own trade. And besides, one of Lewgan's many duties was to make sure that these spies were allowed only tantalizing glimpses of the workings of The Boss's organization,

but nothing concrete, nothing that could be used as evidence against them. It was an interesting game and one that Lewgan had no intention of losing.

The Seller hadn't been followed, was carrying no recording or transmitting devices discernable to any technology or operant psychic Talent, was not able to telepathically link to anyone else and did not possess a certified eidetic memory. As one last precaution, Lewgan ordered-up The Chair. As long as she told no lies and planned no violence while comfortably ensconced in it, she would survive the interview. She would be warned, of course, that any lies or violent thoughts would be detected, but she would never learn the specifics. The Boss had kept The Chair a very close secret. Lewgan believed that he was the only other person alive who knew that The Chair, an ancient and living technology, even still existed. And even HE didn't know how The Boss had acquired it. Lewgan only knew that it worked. . .and that The Boss was truly terrified that he might someday be forced to sit in it. It had long been rigged with explosives which Grym's experts assured him would obliterate the device should it fall into the wrong hands. But it was entirely too valuable a tool to ever destroy. Any lie, any thought of violence or deceit and The Chair would simply kill the occupant. No violent discharges or flashes of light: simply death. Lewgan had been told that The Chair was quite comfortable. But he had seen it work too many times to have ever tried it, himself. Whatever else happened, the mysterious seller would either tell the truth during her interview with Grym, or die before his eyes.

It was time for Lewgan to close up shop and hurry to the rendezvous, himself. Before The Boss arrived, he had a few questions of his own for this mysterious woman. And it wouldn't do for The Boss to show up and find that the interview was not immediately ready to proceed. After all, The Boss was a busy man and he despised having his time wasted. It seemed, sometimes, that Lewgan had to spend more time and mental energy keeping up with what Grym *disliked* than he ever spent seeing to his employer's needs. He wondered if that's how things worked in the world of regular corporate crime. He suspected that it was so. But first, he had to assure that *he* wasn't being followed as he left the office. Details. It's all in the details.

...*The Pair*...

Lewgan arrived at the meeting before anyone else. As he had arranged, there was a small table and two chairs—one large enough for The Boss. There was also a small bar stocked with both drinks and food, a simple dataport with no outside connections and, of course, The Chair. The room had been swept for bugs and declared clear only moments prior to his entry. There would be one more sweep before The Boss arrived.

After assuring himself that all was in place, he took a few moments to examine The Chair. It was ornately decorated and electroplated with pure platinum, with a high back and *very* long armrests. The relief symbols appeared in no linguistic or archeological database that Lewgan had ever been able to access. There was no visible circuitry, though in-depth scans had revealed a power signature both cybernetic and organic. But nothing else. Nobody knew how it worked or precisely why it had been constructed. Operant telepaths were no more able to detect whatever scanning the occupant experienced than were those without Talent.

Because it had been designed for an alien physiology, purple velvet cushions had been added to the back and seat. Lewgan didn't know for which species it was built, but they apparently had bony projections from their backs and at least three sets of knees. He was reminded of an old joke: 'If our knees bent the other way, what would chairs look like?' Of course, the cushions also hid the explosives satchel that he had ordered checked before The Chair was removed from the vault. This would be the first time in Lewgan's tenure that it had been used outside of Grym's lair. But extraordinary circumstances required extraordinary measures. His pager informed him that their guest had arrived and he replied with the code to allow her to enter. Let the games begin.

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but he was surprised at the ease and grace with which she entered the room. From the vast array of unbugged clothing he had supplied, she had chosen a simple aqua jumpsuit with lots of pockets, sturdy lapis boots with gripping soles and had completely covered herself in a vibrant, metallic blue cloak with a low hood. The ensemble complimented her pale, slightly anoxic-looking complexion to a tee. As she entered, she pulled back her hood to reveal a perfectly normal-looking Dahlian face. Though no expert, Lewgan thought that by Dahlian standards she was relatively plain. Her close-cropped blue hair and

athletic frame bespoke a woman of little vanity but great personal esteem. And she wore it well, as the saying goes.

She scanned the room with intelligent yellow eyes which lingered longer than necessary on The Chair, before continuing on to Lewgan himself. He was impressed with the way in which she obviously catalogued everything in the room and would have bet a month's salary that she could now immediately tell him how many bottles were in the bar and how many bars bisected the ventilation plate set high in the ceiling. He shrugged-off an urge to straighten his tunic and check his zipper. She had already taken it all in, anyway.

“Welcome Miss. . .” it was worth a try.

“You can call me Cyan, if you like, Mr. Lewgan.” Her voice was husky, almost masculine and Lewgan found it absolutely enchanting. He almost regretted his next words.

“Would you have a seat, please, Miss. . .Cyan? Lewgan indicated The Chair, as he spoke. “Care for a drink? A snack, perhaps? I know that your ordeal coming here has been difficult and for that I sincerely apologize. The exigencies of our uncertain times, I fear.”

“Water, please,” she answered as she walked to The Chair but did not sit down. Instead, she began examining it, closely and tentatively touching the symbols molded to the frame. “And I'm not very hungry. Thank you.”

She had yet to sit but she began circling The Chair, lifting it as she scooted it back as if measuring its weight and heft. Her hands were now running over the smooth platinum surface as she delicately fingered the fine filigree and arcane symbols. It appeared, finally, that she was satisfied and purposely strode to the front, turning toward Lewgan as she gripped both armrests and began to bend her knees. She looked at him as she started to sit but must have detected something in his posture or face because she paused in mid squat and stood up, again.

“I think I prefer this one, if that's okay,” she said, indicating the chair Lewgan had intended for himself. “Religious reasons, you know.”

Lewgan had been unprepared for this contingency but he was accustomed to thinking on his feet. “Unfortunately, Miss Cyan, this chair has special. . .technology built in and serves as an effective lie detector. “ He found himself strangely unwilling to lie to this creature unless he absolutely had to. “If you tell a lie or plan violence while seated there, we will know it, immediately. I’m sure you understand our position.” The truth and nothing but the truth. Just not *all* the truth. The best lie of all.

“Deal,” she announced after only a moment’s consideration. “I wasn’t planning on lying to anyone anyway and violence? Well, that’s just not my forte. I agree.” And she plopped down into The Chair as if it were one of the comfortable settees in Piper’s, Lewgan’s favorite specialty club at the *Mare Inebrium*.

Lewgan set a glass of chilled water before her and seated himself before beginning. There were several points he needed cleared before he would allow The Boss’s entourage to even head in this direction. “First, you know my name, have we ever met?”

“Not officially,” she began. “But I’ve heard you speak.” At that she paused to see what the chair would do when she told the truth. If she was expecting a beep or a green flash she was disappointed. She shrugged and looked on expectantly for Lewgan’s next question.

“Where? When?”

“I decline to answer that, Mr. Lewgan. If at all possible, I intend to remain as anonymous as I can. How did you put it? ‘The exigencies of our uncertain times?’ I’m sure *you* understand.”

“Very well, then,” Lewgan was unsurprised and even less angry. She was no fool and had a perfect right to take any precautions she deemed necessary. “Next question: Are you an agent of, or in any way working for any law enforcement agency or private interest which seeks evidence against the person we are expecting?” There it was. It was *the* reason Lewgan had ordered The Chair. Her laugh was both a relief and a vexation for Lewgan. Somehow—this certainly *was* a scam.

“No, Mr. Lewgan,” her answer was definite and because of his faith in The Chair, unimpeachable. “I am simply here to collect on your. . . employer’s. . . offer that he made to the Thieves Guild not so long ago. I am fully aware that my life would be forfeit if I even tried any deception. I plan to state my case that I have fulfilled the requirements and offer proof as to my claims. No deception, no scam. Cross my hearts and hope to die.”

“Are you a member of the Thieves Guild?” Lewgan had been a bit shaken up by Cyan’s last statement. However flip she had intended it to be. But it must be the truth. She planned no deception. Lewgan was puzzled. Could The Chair have malfunctioned? Did she know something about how it worked? Had she flipped the ‘off’ switch during her highly tactile examination of the device? Did the *frakkin’* thing even *have* an ‘off’ switch?

“Again. I decline to answer. I have no doubt, Mr. Lewgan, that you will be able to discover my Bethdish identity if you try. But that would not tell you my real name and frankly, I do not feel in any way obligated to make your job easier.” She seemed to be enjoying the game. So be it.

“Perhaps, then, you will answer this one,” Lewgan began carefully. “Just how have you managed to evade the Reeve’s dragnet for female Dahlians?”

“With difficulty, Mr. Lewgan,” her reply was immediate. “And with more than a modicum of luck. The truth is that since my arrival here on Bethdish, I have been living as. . . another species. A girl has a right to her make-up secrets, after all. If it weren’t for your security precautions, especially that noxious shower, you might think that I was. . . something else. Does that satisfy your curiosity on the subject?”

“Indeed it does, Miss Cyan. And I must congratulate you on your inventiveness. One more question before I summon Mr. Grym,” and Lewgan almost dreaded the answer. “Did you successfully steal the Kkhresh’ diak urn from the *Mare* Tower?” Though he wasn’t yet privy to the information Grym had tricked out of Kazsh-ak Teir, earlier that evening. He knew the answer before the smile graced her untroubled countenance.

“No, Mr. Lewgan. I did not. As far as I know, the Kkhresh’ diak urn is still safely within the Tower. As a matter of fact, I didn’t get *anything* from the tower, though I believe that I have discovered a way to do so.” Her voice was quite steady throughout her admission but Lewgan had plainly seen a shadow of. . .what?. . .fear?. . .in her last statement.

“I promise to explain it all to Mr. Grym. . .the *real* Mr. Grym, this time, if you please, when he arrives. You have my word, Mr. Lewgan.”

She was still alive. She wasn’t lying and apparently planned no deception, though she had certainly seen through his earlier ruse. The look of wry humor on her face, however, was the final argument. She was sitting in The Chair and she wasn’t worried. As a matter of fact, she didn’t seem to be worried about *anything*. Even an honest trader should be wary when dealing with The Boss even under the best of circumstances. He didn’t like it, but Lewgan could think of no reason not to summon The Boss and get this thing over with. With a curt nod and a suppressed sigh, he punched the prearranged code into his pager. The chips would just have to fall where they may.

...*The Stare*...

Guiles Thornby was a rotten fisherman. He had tried it a few times but he found that he lacked the patience to just sit and wait for something to happen. By nature, he was a man of action. The Reeve had also told him on several recent occasions that he would consequently make a poor policeman. Patience was a necessity in *that* sport, as well. When all he could do was sit and wait, he became agitated, hyperactive and downright cranky. This time it was *his* turn to pace back and forth in the small office he shared with Brother Chucky and his acolyte. And to make matters worse, the more animated he became, the more sane, more soothing Brother Chucky seemed. And even *that* was driving him crazy. As his Grandpa used to say: “Can’t win for losin.”

“God’s will be done, Mr. Thornby,” Brother Chucky was trying, again, to calm him down. “I have complete faith in the Reeve to find this poor lost child of God in time for us to save her soul.”

“I don’t *care* about her soul. Dammit!” Thornby was almost shouting. “I just want her found so we can *do* something. Anything.”

“There is always hope, Guiles,” Brother Chucky continued. “There is the matter of the several Zanxic hybrids who might have been disguised Dahlians, you know.”

Thornby’s reply was an unintelligible groan. One Dahlian, a male, incidentally, had been misidentified as a Zanxic hybrid on his travel visa. A little research showed that except for the green skin, Zanxic hybrids shared many physical characteristics with Dahlians. And since the Reeve had long since accounted for every single known Dahlian of either gender anywhere in the system, and each had been vetted and cleared by Brother Chucky, himself, it was time now to look at any alternatives. Dahlians weren’t the most common species in the sector, which was probably a good thing. But the Zanxic hybrids came in four distinct genders and were highly valued as workers—especially in menial positions. And they had the nasty little tenancy to bud without registering the offspring. Thornby *hated* asexual reproduction. As a matter of fact, right now he hated just about everything. And he especially despised the fact that Brother Chucky was taking this waiting game better than he.

“Any word from that Dahlian paleosociologist you’ve been corresponding with?” Thornby knew better, but he was finding BC’s calm acceptance of the situation just a little too hard to swallow. He knew it would set the Phlegmatic Pastor off on one of his diatribes, but at least it was *action*.

“Oh yes oh yes OH YES!” Brother Chucky was his old quirky self, again. The transition was immediate. “We’ve spent just *hours* on the vid discussing various tales and legends. I’ve learned so much so much SO MUCH! about Dahlian demonology that I’m planning on writing an article for the Unholy Times when this is all over. Ah, no references to the *Mare* Tower’s problems or security measures, of course.”

“Brother, please,” Thornby’s exasperation was becoming unbearable. “Have you learned anything which could help us.”

“Indeed I have, Mr. Thornby. I have I have I HAVE!” And he was off. “You see, Dahlian demon summoning is a *very* rare occurrence. First of all, as I have alluded, it can only be done by Dahlian females. Just part of the mythos. And there has been no confirmed demon activity on Dahlia for centuries. I fear that the major Dahlian religion, Tantrism, has been failing for some time. They are, unfortunately, a rational people and they are slowly coming to doubt their Deity’s existence completely. Once this process begins, their God will become more and more detached from It’s people until—and we are still unsure of the mechanism—it breaks away and starts wandering the Omniverse in search of. . .”

“In search of what?” Almost despite himself, Thornby’s interest was peaked. He’d heard rumors of an odd encounter that Larrye, the assistant bartender at the *Mare*, had reportedly been involved with. But he’d never given the stories much credence.

“We don’t really know. Some call it the ‘Final(?) Transition’ and others the ‘Last Call’ but most agree that whatever happens to Forgotten Gods, they are never heard from, again. Perhaps they just fade away, like old soldiers.”

“So how does this affect the mythology’s Demons?” The whole thing sounded like the ravings of a lunatic to Guiles. And here he was trying to carry on a normal conversation about it. Maybe Brother Chucky had him more rattled than he thought. “You would think that they would thrive if their arch enemy loses his power. . .uh. . .wouldn’t you?”

But Brother Chucky just stared into space, a puzzled look on his face. Thornby waited for the ax to fall. No doubt he had said something stupid and the Bonkers Believer was about to condescend to instruct the poor dimwit in the ways of the universe.

So he waited.

And waited.

All the while Brother Chucky seemed entranced with his own thought processes. Thornby began to fear that the Emaciated Initiate was suffering some sort of catatonic seizure, or something. He noticed that the Acolyte—whose name he still hadn’t bothered to learn—was

scrutinizing his teacher's strange silence, as well, but was looking on with a look of pure rapture on his face. Only because Thornby happened to be looking in the acolyte's direction, did he notice the slight movement in the fellow's lips. It looked like he was praying. Finally, a single, discernable word, escaped.

“Epiphany.”

Almost as if the barely audible uttering had shattered the spell, Brother Chucky's normally animated, discordant and chaotic persona burst forth in all its raving glory.

“You fool you fool YOU FOOL!” he shouted. “Idiotic, doddering fool unfit to call yourself sentient!”

“Now you wait just a min. . .” Thornby tried to interject. This wasn't *his* area of expertise, after all.

“Not you, Guiles. Oh no oh no OH NO!” the Rabid Rabbi interrupted. “Though you were quite wrong, of course. Both the heaven and the hell created by any mythology are inseparably intertwined. You can't very well *believe* in the Devil without believing in God. They are not arch enemies, really, but part of the same mythology made real. Real real REAL!” Thornby was more confused than ever.

“But it is I who am the fool. How could I have been so blind? I didn't see the signs because of my own arrogance. My own, high-minded hubris hubris HUBRIS! *Mea Culpa, Mea maxima Culpa!*”

“Brother Chucky?” Thornby stammered as the Frenetic Friar pushed past him in his rush to the dataport.

“What if we're wrong and this isn't merely a Dahlian demon we are dealing with?” As he spoke, he was rapidly tapping away on the keypad. On the screen, statistics supplied from Dahlia were rapidly filling window after window. Brother Chucky had downloaded a massive amount of data on religious practices, church attendance, population surveys and polls

attempting to measure the amount of actual supernatural/spiritual belief among the Dahlians. He was now attempting to collate the data.

Though less than a novice in spiritual matters, Guiles had been told he had a real knack with numbers. But Brother Chucky was apparently a downright brilliant statistician. Using innovative variations of complex formulas he was rapidly developing a calculation which might measure the critical mass of *belief* within a society. Guiles was more than impressed, he was staggered. But Brother Chucky had run into a wall. There just wasn't any yardstick by which true spirituality could be quantified.

Brother Chucky's latest formula seemed promising but it was giving widely variant results. Thornby's frustration was furthered by the fact that he had seen something like this, before. He had seen a *very* similar calculation performed dozens of times. It was time to call in The Owner.

"Excellent work, Brother," The Owner's voice on the vid seemed tinny and there was audible static. But there was no mistaking the giddy fervor with which he had attacked the problem as soon as he'd received Brother Chucky's data. He must be far away, indeed. "Groundbreaking research. Truly. I'm going to order the AI's to allow you access to an algorithm I've developed for tracing core language phonemes in diverse cultures. I think that might just do the trick. We're undergoing a period of increased solar activity, here, and I don't think the link will withstand it. I'll be back in a day, two at most. Let me know how it works out, Guiles. Okay?"

"Yes Sir, Mr. Grey. It will all be in the report." Thornby had heard his employer more excited about a new theory, but rarely.

And within minutes, the nearly omniscient AI's running the *Mare* Tower had given Brother Chucky his answer. . .his damnable, blood-chilling answer.

...*The Hair*...

Grym was impressed with the young woman, very impressed, indeed. Too bad he would probably have to order her killed for trying to sell him an meticulously replicated fake. But still, she handled herself with a grace and serenity that he found as attractive as it was perplexing. He was accustomed to fear, or at least extreme nervousness from those with whom he dealt. He had even, though it had been taxing, come to accept the sanguine obsequiousness of the many sycophants coming to him for help or offering him something valuable in the hopes of currying favor. And yet this child seemed to fear nothing, nothing at all. The only time he had seen attitude like this was from those who had suffered so greatly that they had become numb to fear. But none could compare with the abject purity of this creature's aplomb. It was as if she had looked deeply into the face of ultimate fear and it had burned the capacity from her being, completely.

"Are you comfortable, my dear." Grym's voice was liquid honey. "Another cushion, perhaps?"

"No thank you, Mr. Grym. I'm fine. Shall we begin the negotiations? You'll find I've come quite prepared."

"A few points. A few very *minor* points to cover first, my dear, if you don't mind." Grym was trying to set her up for the kill but wasn't truly satisfied with her responses. And he was unaccustomed to dissatisfaction. "First of all, what is the object you are offering as proof that the Tower has been breached."

"I had assumed that your . . .ah. . .sources would have identified the sensograph I sent as being the Kkhresh'diak urn which was last publicly displayed on the 90th floor reception gallery in the Tower, do your experts have any doubts as to it's authenticity?"

She was good, really good. The Chair would have snuffed-out a lesser liar long before now and here she was delicately dancing about the truth without ever crossing the line into actual falsehood. Grym almost wished he could hire her as part of his legal team. She was a natural.

“As a matter of fact, they do not.” Grym decided to put an end to the games. “Their judgment—from the data you’ve supplied—is that this must indeed be the Kkhresh’diak urn. But I ask you now, woman,” Grym’s tone grew hard. “Is that what you offer as proof?”

“Of course not,” and still she remained unshaken. “To my knowledge, the Kkhresh’diak urn is still where it was during the Shebeja reception. But you must have noticed that I never actually *claimed* to have that urn in my possession. The sensograph, however, is quite accurate. Shall I continue?”

“I insist,” was the only reply Grym could come up with. He had to keep reminding himself that she was in The Chair. The Blasted Chair was one of his most useful tools. And yet this woman, this exasperating woman toyed with the truth as if there were no consequences at all. He didn’t know if he was angry or if he was merely enjoying the drama being played out before his eyes. Amazing.

“What I have to offer, Mr. Grym, is a guaranteed way for you to gain access to the *Mare* Tower. Or anything else you desire. You *do* have desires, don’t you Mr. Grym? Unfulfilled desires? Things you want that are simply impossible to come by? Immortality? True Love? Anything? *Everything?*”

“Continue, Miss Cyan, please,” and as Grym absently wiped his palms on his pants, he failed to notice Lewgan’s intense scrutiny. All tolled, probably a good thing for Lewgan.

“First a little background,” the Dahlian began. “I come from a very old family on my homeworld. Our antecedent history goes back thousands of years to the first Holy Tantric Empire. And our past, like that of many noble houses, is not always a thing of pride. To make a long story short, when it became necessary for me to leave my homeworld, a little misunderstanding between myself and certain authorities, I managed to secure a few family heirlooms—my inheritance, if you will—and took them with me.”

“Over the years, I have sold-off most of those little trinkets, often at far less than the fortunes they would command on my own homeworld, but there was one item I couldn’t even give away. And oddly enough, I actually tried to do that, once.”

“It was a book, an ancient Dahlian tome in an obscure language and it dealt with the occult. To my knowledge, it is the only copy left in existence. There were a few ancient references to the book’s title in our oldest histories, but there was no documented evidence that it was even real. But it *is* real, and I found a way to use it. Are you still with me, Mr. Grym?”

“Must I warn you, Ms. Cyan,” Grym’s eyes had narrowed and a suspicious frown had slowly formed as she spoke. “That you should know better than to con a con man?” The threat was palpable.

“A skeptic, Mr. Grym?” Her smile was as confident as ever. “Well so was I, I quite assure you. But I have had reason to doubt my skepticism, Mr. Grym. And I am sitting in your chair, after all. Can you not tell that I am not lying?”

Unbelievably, Grym *had* actually managed to forget she was snugly nestled in The Chair, so fantastic was her story. “Perhaps you are simply mad,” he countered, though the argument was weak, at best. “It is apparent that you believe your own tale, so I will allow you to continue. For now. Have you any evidence to back-up this ridiculous fiction?”

“Mr. Lewgan, you may now show Mr. Grym the video. Decryption password Delta, Turquoise, Alpha, Navy.”

On the vidscreen, the image jumped as a pale blue hand drew away from the camera lens. The audio picked up an apparent argument and the angry speaker was obviously the Dahlian woman currently calling herself Cyan.

“. . .an expensive camera! Now, I command you to allow me to record our deal in case there are any. . .questions as to the terms of the bargain. This will serve as our contract, as far as I am concerned. Answer me!”

“**EEHHHMAGESSS**,” the voice answering her was unlike anything Grym had ever heard. It was both breathy and flatulent at the same time. There was no corollary anywhere in his experience. A shiver went up his spine, it was a sensation he had not felt since he was a child. It sounded like. . .no, impossible, it couldn’t be *him!* *He* had been dead for decades and

by Grym's own hands. It was the first time Grym had killed, he was only eight. But it wasn't murder. Oh no, indeed. Though Grym had committed many, this first time the bastard had deserved it. He had told the man that he'd made his last nightly 'visit.' But his stepfather hadn't believed him. But the voice sounded so much like. . .

“EEHHHMAGESSSS KAHHN BEE SO EEEASILEEE CONTRIIVED.” Grym realized that the voice was nothing like. . .his. . .voice. It was the feeling that was the same. Deep in his subconscious, his skepticism began to fade. And the picture on the screen, a tiny blue kitten merrily licking its paw while sitting on a plain floor within a seven-sided star, did nothing to ease Grym's doubt.

“Contrived? You will contrive *nothing* you rotting, worm-infested carcass, or there will be no bargain. You will allow this device to record your appearance and words *exactly* as they look and sound to me at every moment henceforth or I declare the bargain null and void. Do as I say you issue of out-of-season mating!”

And then the kitten spoke. **“FFFIRSSST THERE ISSS THE PAAAYMEHNNT. GIIIVE IIIHT TOOO MHEEE.”** Needless to say, if kittens *could* speak, they wouldn't sound like this foul creature.

Slowly, deliberately, and from just off-camera, first came just the tips, followed by a pale blue hand tightly gripping a set of metal tongs which were holding. . .Grym could barely make out. . .a single auburn hair. As the tongs crossed the invisible plane delineating the outer line of the septogram, the hair sizzled and then disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

“NHOOO!” the creature which instantly replaced the kitten on the video writhed in apparent anguish within the confines of the septogram. **“YHOU HHHAIR! GHIVVVE TOOO MHEEE WHONE OHFFF YHOU HHHAIRSSS!”**

“The payment has been made, oh Prince of Puke,” the Dahlian woman was adamant, and seemed to be in control of the situation. “Nowhere does it say that the hair must be one of my own. Are you allowing your true image to be seen by my camera, yet?”

“**NHOOO.**” Almost like a child who has decided that his tantrum will avail him nothing, the writhing creature sat up and faced the camera. Apparently no worse for wear. “**BUHHHT EEEHT SEEHSSS WHAHT YHOU SEEHHH.**”

The creature was immensely ugly. No surprise there. Its mottled, leprous hide was stretched tightly over a frail looking, skeletal frame. Bulbous red eyes bulged from a hairless and bullet-shaped head. Open sores oozed viscous yellow fluid and scabrous flaps of withered hide dangled precariously from its improbable joints. Grym realized that the creature looked mostly dead, starved and diseased to a state where the merest slap would shatter every bone in its emaciated frame. In short, it looked vulnerable and evil at the same time. It was an interesting effect. So very easy to underestimate something so pitiful, so weak. Grym knew good staging when he saw it. He had a feeling that this creature would be considerably more formidable in its natural state. What had it said, earlier? Images can be so easily contrived? He did not doubt that what he was looking at was the same representation the creature had shown to the woman, herself.

But he also noted that as soon as the payment was received, it *had* to do as she had commanded and show the same to the camera as she was seeing. Grym remembered the kitten he had seen earlier. . .and smiled. He could deal within *this* framework of rules. It would take time and effort to learn the nuances but he was confident that he could do it at least as well as this Dahlian witch.

“**KHIINNND MEEESTRESSS. BEEUUTEFUHL MEEESTRESSS. TRICKSSS USSS SHEEE DOESSS. THEEEZ HHHAIARRR ISSS FHROMMM WHONE WHOOO ISSS BEYOHHHND OURRR DOHMAIHNNN.**” It then vomited a bolus of squirming maggots out onto the floor.

Grym watched with interest as one rolled carelessly toward the outer line of the septogram. As soon as it touched, it disappeared in a small puff of smoke, much as the hair had done. *Illusion*, he said to himself. *Images easily contrived.* When it came time to deal with this beast, he would remember to believe nothing that he saw and only what he *made* it tell him. He was hooked and he knew it. What an interesting gamble this would be.

“My mother’s. Freely given to me and not taken by deception, theft or force. Isn’t *that* the criteria? She has been dead many years. She is, indeed, beyond your domain. When this is over my so-called soul will be yours to do with as you will, but you will have to wait for it. It serves me no purpose. But you shall have no claim on my body. The price for your appearance has been paid, just because you cannot spend the currency. . .” She let the sentence trail off. You could almost hear the nonchalant shrug that must have accompanied it.

The Dahlian was gaining more respect in Grym’s eyes with each passing moment. But it also made him wary. Like that lowest of all life forms, the lawyer, this woman knew how to work the system. But Grym had some experience along those lines, as well.

“WHAHHT DHOOO YHOU WHAHHNT? HHHOWW MAYHHH THISS LOHHHLEEE WHONE BHEEE OHFFF SERVISS?” The creature seemed resigned. It had accepted that it was dealing with no amateur. Apparently, the true bargain was about to be struck.

“You must find me a way into a place called the *Mare* Tower. A simple burglary. That’s all. How hard could that be?”

And Grym knew that he had found his answer. The Dahlian woman would be paid, the book would be secured. Whatever the cost, he would find his way into the Tower when *She* was there. So close, yet so far away. Once again he would be with her, hold her in his arms. But this time, he would never let her out of his control. He had been young, weak, timid. But never again! *Sarah!* his aching heart cried out into the void. *I shall have you in my life, again! And this time we will complete our union. You will be mine!* In his mind, he planned his next step. And his next. And the one after that.

...Despair...

It was conference time again but this time Guiles Thornby was neither angry nor annoyed. He was afraid. Unlike the previous meetings. This time he knew exactly what the problem was and unfortunately, he was no longer a doubter. For doubt would imply hope.

“Not good not good NOT GOOD?” Brother Chucky was trying to explain his statistical research to a very skeptical Reeve. Polios, via secure commlink, had already signed off on the math. Max wasn't involved with this meeting, however. Which was a shame as he actually had some information which would have cleared-up some of Brother Chucky's assumptions. “No Reeve, it's just TERRIBLE! If the Dahlian Deity has made the Final(?) Transition, than it simply *cannot* be a Dahlian Demon that we are dealing with, here. They are all gone! Gone gone GONE!”

“Great!” The Reeve answered. Thornby wondered if he was being intentionally obtuse. “Then I can call off the investigation and we can stop these insane ‘precautions’ you keep insisting upon. Let's have a drink.”

“Reeve! Please! Let the man finish.” Grey's voice over the link seemed tired.

“Reeve, even you must admit that the belief in evil will linger when all faith in the power of good has been extinguished.” Brother Chucky spoke slowly, as if to a child with limited abilities. “The most rational among us will convince himself that God is merely an attempt by a primitive society to explain the unexplained and that with sufficient scientific advancement the very *need* for God diminishes to the point where the word ‘faith’ is equated with ‘gullible.’ But a belief in evil, which can take so many forms and is seen daily by everyone, is much harder to dismiss.”

“Any cop can tell you that evil is real, Brother Chucky. But can you get to the point?” The Reeve seemed willing to listen, at least.

“When the Dahlian God. . .disassociated Herself. . .from the Dahlians, She ‘took’ both heaven and hell with her. They are gone gone GONE! My calculations show that the *belief* of the Dahlian population has only recently—perhaps within the last year—dropped below the critical point which can sustain a living God. But since belief in evil lingers longer, just enough of the people of Dahlia still *believe* in evil to support a living Devil.”

So we are *not* faced with a Dahlian demon from their Tantric mythology, Chief Justicar. Our opponent is The Devil Himself. And our efforts at demonproofing the *Mare* Tower will

avail us to naught. I therefore recommend that the Tower is immediately evacuated and boarded-up. Forever forever FOREVER!”

“But you said, yourself that this Devil is weak.” The Reeve still didn’t get it. “We’ve stopped it in four separate attempts. Doesn’t that tell you that we can manage to stop it again. Permanently?”

“Arrogance arrogance ARROGANCE!” Brother Chucky’s voice was cold. “In my own religion, Lucifer was one of God’s most powerful archangels. Just about the only thing that God can do that Lucifer cannot is to make souls. That’s why Satan wants them so badly. But Lucifer is not God. Is not is not IS NOT! Lucifer’s demons are his poor excuse for people, soulless and suffering. But the Dahlian Devil is more like your own Valleur, who is a God unto Himself. Even as he battled Antuth, they were evenly matched. Fortunately, Antuth had allies who were nearly as powerful as either adversary. Most religions haven’t that luxury. Even weakened, the Devil can be thwarted but never slain. . . unless at the hand of another God. Perhaps your Gods can help us here, but we—by ourselves—will eventually fail. And may God have mercy on our souls. Our souls our souls OUR SOULS!”

“I’ll see what I can do, Brother. But I make no promises. I had some. . . limited. . . contact with our Gods, recently. But they haven’t taken an active role in this planet’s affairs in a very long time. Another God, an alien, evil God poaching on their turf? Who knows? Might just piss ‘em off enough to leave Albion and lend a hand. But I doubt it, seriously. In any case, this is up to the Council at Fort Mountain to decide. But I assure you we will discuss this, at length. In other words, for now, it’s up to us.”

Guiles couldn’t stand it any longer. “But Brother Chucky, I still don’t understand why this thing is *here*, on Bethdish in the first place.”

“Aaah, Guiles Guiles Guiles,” at least the Demonic Devotee hadn’t yelled it, this time. “You have forgotten the Dahlian woman who must be involved in this, somehow. “ Brother Chucky ignored the indignant look from the Reeve. He’d turned this system upside down looking for this mysterious female Dahlian and although he had uncovered nearly a hundred illegal immigrants who were Dahlian, only a few were female and none of *them* knew anything

about any others. He was almost convinced that he'd found them all. Almost. If she was hiding, she was doing a *damn* fine job.

“No doubt,” Brother Chucky continued. “She is unaware that she is dealing with the Devil, Himself. She must believe that she has merely summoned a Demon and has tasked it—for reasons of her own—to breach the security of the *Mare* Tower.”

“So the process is the same?” the Reeve asked, puzzled by the mechanics of the situation rather than the spiritual implications.

Brother Chucky thought for a minute. “Consider this. You are the President of Buggy Whips Inc® and your product has been completely obviated by technological advancement. Even your arch rival has closed up shop and moved on. Everybody, and I mean *everybody* has been laid off and soon it will be time for you too, to go. You sit atop your skyscraper in your old executive suite. Alone. Bitter. All the bills have been paid and the lights will soon be out, forever. This is the situation facing the Dahlian Devil.”

Absently, almost, Guiles noted that when Brother Chucky was trying to explain something, he was almost normal. But he was still confused. “So how does this explain what’s happening, Brother?”

Brother Chucky smiled. “And then the phone rings. What do you do? Why, you answer it, of course. And miracle of miracles, it’s someone placing an order. But not for buggy whips. This is someone offering a soul. One last, irreplaceable, immortal soul. For old times sake the Devil will fill *this* order personally. It’s His last hurrah, His last chance to snag one final prize to carry with him into oblivion. He will *NEVER* give up. Don’t forget, nobody on Dahlia has summoned a Demon for *centuries*. He knows that He will never have another chance like this. In fact, it may be the only thing keeping Him. . .I’m not sure the word is accurate, but. . .*alive*. Alive alive ALIVE!”

“Odin on roller skates,” the Reeve’s voice was almost a sigh. “A desperate, dying Devil. What’s next?”

“It’s obvious that this Divine Being, and that’s what It is, truly, has been making its attempts in the form of various demons who once served Him. But sooner or later, as our countermeasures take their toll, He will drop the façade and enter the *Mare* Tower in all His awful glory. And on *that* day, my friends. We are all doomed. Doomed doomed DOOMED!”

And for once, Thornby didn’t even notice the Crazy Cleric’s histrionics. In fact, he thought the sentiment might even be a bit understated.

...*The Fare*...

“So when will you be well enough to try again, you rancid pool of ejaculate from a dung-eating camel?” Cyan’s voice betrayed her exasperation even over the vid. The creature had returned from its third unsuccessful attempt at the *Mare* Tower, it’s formerly dun colored hide was puffy, swollen in places and it seemed to be sporting an impressive sunburn. But at least this time it wasn’t bleeding. Or whimpering.

Lewgan had been making furious notes on his datapad, detailing the impressive line-up of countermeasures the demon had faced during it’s three incursions. Some it had bypassed with ease but it had been caught each time and sent packing. He didn’t know what demons were made of, but they were certainly tough little bastards.

**“FOUHHHR DAHHHYS. RHEEETUHHHRN THEHHHN AHHND
WHHHIIL NHHHOT FAIHHHL.”**

“That’s what you said last time, sniffer of the butts of the dead. Be Gone then!” The creature departed as it had before. With an audible pop and a tiny wisp of smoke. Lewgan could almost smell the brimstone. As the Dahlian moved toward the camera she could be heard muttering. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“Lewgan,” Grym barked. “What do we know about these ‘Chess Players’ who made up the brunt of the attack which thwarted our little. . .ah. . .friend, this time. By his reference to ‘Majiks most foul’ I assume they are powerful mages who use the chessboard as a focal point for

their ministrations. Can we trace them? Find out what you can and report to me as soon as you learn anything.”

“I’ll get on it, Boss.” Lewgan wasn’t sure *anyone* was going to be willing to talk about those creepy players the creature had described. But he hadn’t survived as long as he had by being pessimistic. Paranoid, yes.

“Miss Cyan,” Grym continued. “I am forced to admit that your efforts have yielded some invaluable information as to the obstacles facing anyone attempting to break into the *Mare* Tower. But so far this. . .this *creature* has only managed to make it to the fourteenth floor before he is driven off. If I’m not mistaken, there will only be one more attempt. Tell me he was successful, that time. Please.”

“If I did, Mr. Grym. You would know that I was lying.” She indicated that she was still sitting in The Chair. “In fact, the recording of the ‘debriefing’ for the fourth attempt is unavailable. The thing came back so shot up that it ‘forgot’ to turn off whatever it is that fries any camera pointed in it’s direction and *that* recording is lost. And by the way, it also forgot to appear as the skinny little gollum we have been looking at.” At this, her voice grew strangely weak. She gripped the arms of The Chair as if to hold herself in the real world as she spoke. “I saw it, Mr. Grym. I think I got a glimpse of what this thing *really* looks like.” Her voice faltered. She could say no more.

Grym and Lewgan were both silent as she composed herself. She had qualified for at least that much from men who give away *nothing* that has not been earned. Shortly, she was able to continue. All business, again. “I can give you the gist of the conversation, if you like, but in short, this time it made it all the way to the 30th floor before it was discovered and blasted to pieces. Almost literally.”

“I do not pay for failures, young lady.” Grym’s tone was unmistakable. “If you are wasting my time, you will regret it. I quite assure you.”

“Are you trying to *scare* me Mr. Grym?” And her smile was without mirth, without beauty. “With all due respect, sir, I just told you that I *saw the Thing!* It was only a glimpse,

but it was enough. I wish you *could* frighten me, sir. I truly do.” Her tone was wistful, like the reliving of a happy childhood memory by a woman who has lived a harsh and painful life.

Lewgan, despite himself, was touched. He was a man too much like his boss in many ways. “That bad?”

She merely nodded.

In a moment, she continued. “I have come here tonight to offer you the *means* to enter the Tower, Mr. Grym. This next segment of the video will explain better than I what transpired and what I am offering. The half million credits for the means into the Tower I have earned. And I think you know that. I will also sell you The Book, for I assure you that I have no further need for it. There is no item from the Tower, however, but I ask you to waive that requirement. The foul creature certainly could have retrieved *something* which would have met your criteria, but you heard the task that I set for it, the Kkhresh’ diak urn from the 90th floor gallery. I had seen it on a news report from the Shebeja reception and thought it would be distinctive enough to convince you. I think that might have been my salvation. Unintentional as it was.”

“Extraordinary,” Grym replied, after a moment of thought. “Your salvation, you say? Do I take it then that you managed to outwit this. . .this. . .demon? You’re so-called soul is no longer it’s property? But I thought. . .” If there was one thing that Grym respected, it was the ability to break a deal. But from what he’d seen and heard, he’d thought it impossible.

“If there is a way to make this creature do your bidding and not pay the price, Miss Cyan, I will double my offer now, on the spot. But you *must* explain everything. Do you understand me? Everything!” Grym’s fleshy hands pressed the tabletop before him as he leaned forward to catch the Dahlian’s next words.

“By the terms you have laid out, Mr. Grym, I could accept your offer but I shall not. For it would avail you nothing.” Lewgan knew that she did not fear The Chair as she should. She thought it was only a lie detector, after all, but he was sure that even had she been free to deceive The Boss at that time her answer would have been the same. She hadn’t even been tempted.

Something had changed within her during her dealings with this foul beast. Or perhaps, she had *been* changed by her experiences.

“You broke the contract?” Grym was still intensely interested in the details. Lewgan could almost hear the cogs turning in The Boss’s mind. *He* would decide what information was useless to him and what was not. And what had he to lose, his soul? Trifling, Grym didn’t believe in souls, not his or anyone else’s. As he’d told Lewgan once, years ago: *We are all just meat machines, designed by evolution to propagate the species and then conveniently die, so as not to compete with our own offspring for limited resources.* Grym’s only real regret was probably that he had but one ‘soul’ to bargain with. But perhaps there was a way to get around that, too.

“The contract is indeed broken, Mr. Grym. And I can only say that I have never felt so free in my life. I will sell you this information and the book, sir, but it was always my intention to warn you never to use either. If you are interested in how I did it, please ask Mr. Lewgan to run the last segment of the video. It will explain everything. I promise you.”

It was not the fact that she was sitting in The Chair as she spoke which convinced Lewgan that she was telling the truth. It was the conviction in her voice. The deception, the greed, all the lies and all the evil that may have once thrived in this woman had been burned out. Could it have been that one glimpse? A single sight—no matter how horrific—could do this to a person? Lewgan was torn between envy and fear. At a nod from The Boss, he pushed the button. And watched.

Again the air in the center of the septogram shimmered. It was as if the molecules were being tortured into retreat rather than merely pushed aside. Lewgan could describe it no other way. The demon appeared. But this time it carried with it a large and ornately designed box. Because of his recent research, he recognized a few of the ancient D’rrish runes decorating the top and bottom of the object. He couldn’t read them, of course.

“HHHAAAVE SOHHHMTHIHHNG FOHHHR YHOU. KHIINNND MEEESTRESSS. BEEUUTEFUHL MEEESTRESSS.”

“Do you have it?” There was fear in the woman’s tone, this time. “Tell me, carrion fornicator, is that what I think it is? The Kkhresh’diak urn?” This time, the creature seemed no worse for wear. But Lewgan noticed immediately, as did Grym, he was sure, that it was more kowtowing than usual. It bent and bowed, nearly groveling with every movement, every word. It was *not* the triumphant presentation of a prize hard-earned. And it seemed that the Dahlian noticed this, too.

“BEEUUUTEEFUHL, EEEHT EEEHSSS. D’RRISH UHHHRN, EEEHT EEEHSSS. AHHHS YHOU COHHHMAHHHND OHHHF USSS.” The improbable joints of the creature were straining to grovel even lower as he presented the box. **“YHOU ACCEHHHPT?”**

“Let me see it, ooze sucker. Open the box.” Deftly, the demon slid various panels aside in what appeared to be a specific order. The design was that of an immensely complex and convoluted puzzle box. Lewgan was sure that he would have to slow down the video and watch it several times before he would be able to replicate the maneuvers. It was fascinating to watch. When the lid finally popped open, there lay what appeared, indeed, to be the Kkhresh’diak urn, set in a magenta velvet-like material.

“YHOU ACCEHHHPT? MEEESTRESSS JUHHHST AHHHS YHOU COHHHMAHHHND. YHOU ACCEHHHPT?”

And Lewgan could smell the con. And now that he had some idea of the beast’s capabilities, he was even pretty sure that he knew just what the game was. Even though he already knew how things turned out, he found himself mouthing the words, anyway. *Don’t accept it. For the love of. . .DON’T accept it.*

“Uh. . .stay right were you are you. . .uh. . .bastard. Don’t move!” Her normally rich vocabulary of insults had apparently dried up. Lewgan didn’t know if it was part of the ritual to fling horrid epithets at the demon while dealing with it or it was just the way she normally—or at least the way she *used* to normally—speak. But he had been keeping a mental tally of the nasty things she had called this creature and she had yet to repeat herself. It wasn’t often he had a chance to learn a new curse, and tonight he’d heard several.

Off-camera, there was the sound of turning pages. Apparently, she had the accursed book close by and was looking something up in it. For several minutes, the beast stayed bowed, occasionally glancing up and then back down. He had been ordered not to move and his motions were not unlike those of a child who has been ordered to sit still by a parent who is still in the room. It was also apparent that things were not going as the creature had hoped.

There was a distinct *thump* as if a heavy tome had been suddenly slammed shut. The demon looked up, eagerly.

“You may transport that object into this room. I must examine it before I accept. I command you to do so without breaking the plane of the septogram. You are NOT invited into this room in any form or through any avenue at your disposal. Do you understand me you afterbirth from an unclean union? Say it!”

“YHOU WHIIHHL ACCEHHHT? WHEEE DHHHOOO AHHHS YHOU COHHHMAHHND. YHOU WHIIHHL ACCEHHHT?”

“This is *not* a bargain, molester of your own offspring, you will do as I say or I will declare this contract broken. I must examine the object you offer before I accept *anything*. If it is what I commanded you to bring. . .then I *must* accept it, mustn’t I?” She was giving it no choice but to comply. Lewgan smiled.

On the screen, the open box immediately disappeared from its bony, scabrous hands and materialized just outside the septogram. Two pale blue hands reached down and gingerly picked it up. There were shuffling sounds heard, but Lewgan was unsure what was happening. The demon watched the proceedings with a malicious glare.

“Hmmm, mass is about right and the age is certainly in the ballpark.” The Dahlian’s tone was brisk, businesslike. But Lewgan could tell that it was an act. She *knew!* She already bloody well knew what she had and she was just stretching it out. Torturing the demon with that most insidious, most painful of all emotions. Hope.

“But what’s this? The isotope decay seems to have been accelerated, almost as if it had spent the last seven thousand years in a moderately strong neutron field. Now how could that be? The true Kkhresh’diak urn has been in the City of Lights Museum for most of its time on Bethdish, and in the *Mare* Tower for the last fifty years, or so. Perhaps I’m reading this wrong. Maybe these sensors aren’t working the way I think. What do you say, toilet paper tongue, should I accept this as the real Kkhresh’diak urn, from the *Mare* Tower? Is this the object that I tasked you to retrieve? Is it? Answer! Now!”

**“ACCEHHHT EEEHHT. THAHHT TOWHHERRR EEEHHS A
PLAHHCE OHHHF GREAHHT PAIHHN. GREAHHT PAIHHN. D’RRISH
URHHN EEEHHS RHHHEEL. ACCEHHHT EEEHHT PLEAHHSE.
EEEHHT EEEHHS.EEEHHT EEEHHS WHAHHT YHOU
DHEESIIRE.”**

“It *is* what I desire? I think not. I command you now to tell me the truth, you breather of rancid flatulence, is this the item I tasked you bring? Or is this it’s mate, from the D’rrish homeworld?”

She was answered by a howl of ultimate despair. Lewgan glanced at Grym and found that the grin on his face matched his own. The Dahlian, however, was merely sitting quietly in The Chair with her eyes closed, her hands gripping the ornate armrests. She was just waiting for this scene to be over with. She just wanted done with it all.

**“EEHS MEEHHSTAKE. YHOU SSSHOW PEEHCTUHHRE OHHHF
URHHN.”** Lewgan had heard this all before. The demon had been caught and it knew it. Next, if he wasn’t mistaken, came the bribe.

**“KHHHEEHHHP THEES AHHS APHHOLOGHHHEE. STEEHHHL
CAHHN GEHHT WHAHHT YHOU DHEESIIRE.”**

“But it was much easier to travel four million light years than to get the one I asked for. Is that it? You offer me something else? And then you lie?” She didn’t wait for an answer. Even over the weak audio of the vid, Lewgan heard her take a deep breath.

“By the Concord of Life and the Covenant of Death,” she began. The creature began a pitiful, low keening which never paused. Whatever this thing was, it didn’t breathe. “I declare this contract broken by your own hand and by your attempt to substitute the item I commanded of you. Be gone, now, denizen of the nether regions! And trouble me no more!” And Lewgan wondered if *this* incantation had been what she’d had to look up in the book, earlier. Could she have been so far ahead of the game?

“**NHOOOOOOOOOO**” With hands outstretched in supplication, the demon faded quickly from view. For several moments, the camera remained focused on the empty center of the septogram. In the background, quiet crying could be heard. It was over.

...*The Swear*...

Brother Chucky was in a tizzy, and for once, Guiles didn’t really blame him. The Owner, Max and the Reeve had all steadfastly refused to shut down the *Mare* Tower. They would fight with every weapon at their disposal but they would *not* be scared off by the threat of an enemy without giving it all they had.

“Reason with them, Guiles,” he pleaded. “They don’t know what this Thing is capable of doing! They’ll all die. I just can’t have that burden on my soul. I won’t I won’t I WON’T!” But Guiles knew that his arguments would fall on deaf ears. Oh, they had taken some of the precautions Brother Chucky had suggested. The *Mare* Tower had been cleared of all nonessential personnel, shops on some of the upper floors had been closed and many of the tenants relocated due to an ‘inexplicable problem with the building’s ventilation system.’ There was one tenant, however, the one occupying the 86th floor who had offered his services in protecting the Tower. And next to the Reeve, there was nobody else he would rather have watching his back when this thing made another attempt. But Guiles could no longer fool himself that they could defeat this thing.

When It came, It would sweep aside anyone and anything standing in its way. But Guiles had been in the room when The Owner had sworn by all that was holy and dear to him that they would *not* go down without a fight. They had hurt it and driven it off four times, and though the last attempt had been months ago and Brother Chucky’s best anti-demonic countermeasures

had been installed, plus a few from other sources which surprised even the Terrified Theocrat, all knew that their Enemy would return. The Reeve had failed to locate the female Dahlian anywhere in the system so there would be no breaking of the contract. And though the Gods of Bethdish had been petitioned by the Council of Immortals, no word had yet come down from the lofty heights of Albion. Max had confided that the Gods normally took a century or two to mull over new data before deigning to even acknowledge receipt. They lived and thought along different levels of time in high Albion, but in the normal world, time was certainly running out. There was no good theory as to why no further attempts had been made. The audit of all items of value in the building had been long complete and nothing was missing. To Brother Chucky, it was ‘A divine mystery.’ But his explanation was as good as anyone else’s. Nobody knew what it was after. It was all guesswork.

The *Mare Inebrium* would remain open. Brother Chucky had been nearly apoplectic when Max had told him. “You say this thing is as powerful as a God?” Max laughed. “Well if it shows up here it’ll get one on the house, just like anyone else. And if it tries to start any trouble, I’ll just sic my assistant bartender on it. He’s dealt with that kind, before.” And Max pointed to a skinny young kid cleaning tables in the back. Brother Chucky wondered if Immortals could go mad.

In all the confusion and scurrying about, the mysterious ‘donation’ of what Kazsh-ak Teir and the rest of the D’rrish were calling the Miraculous Gift had gone all but unnoticed by those preparing to defend the *Mare* Tower. Seems that somehow, someone had acquired the mate to some ancient artifact of theirs and had it delivered—anonymously and without so much as a note—to the D’rrish embassy. Rumor was slowly circulating that the donor had been none other than Grym, himself. Kazsh-ak Teir was beside himself with doubt, and perhaps shame for the way he had spoken to the Crimelord that night in the *Mare Inebrium*. Had *that* been why the man had been researching the urn? Did he and all D’rrish marooned in this inhospitable galaxy owe him such a debt? And *how* had it been found? All the D’rrish were desperate for news from their homeworld. But there were no answers to be had.

...*The Share*...

Lewgan was thinking hard. There *had* to be a way to extricate himself from this mess without putting himself in even greater danger than he was in. For the umpteenth time, he reviewed the recordings he had made of their meeting with the Dahlian woman, Cyan. He found himself wishing he could contact her and ask her what to do. She was definitely someone who could help him avoid a deal with the devil. For that is what it felt like was going on.

The Boss had offered Lewgan a share in all of his enterprises if he could come up with a foolproof way of breaking the contract *after* the demon had done his bidding. Lewgan *had* come up with a way to get a donated hair, that part wasn't too tough but he shuddered to think of the consequences if they hadn't been warned about it by Cyan. The book never mentions that a substitution would be acceptable. It states that the price for the first conversation is: 'A single hair belonging to the supplicant, offered without reservation, deception or theft. Fail to offer this payment and the septogram is broken, it will no longer confine The Beast.'

Lewgan had wanted to call in various legal experts but The Boss had been adamant. He was afraid there might be too much professional courtesy twixt demons and lawyers. Too bad, really, this kind of thing was right up their alley. There were some promising papers published by some Earth religion and authored by someone using a most unlikely pseudonym, but other experts in the field considered the guy a nut, so Lewgan was wary of trying to contact this, Brother Chucky fellow.

But Lewgan was even more afraid that he *would* find a way to break the contract. If he did, he would then have to figure out how to avoid becoming a true partner with The Boss. It wasn't a healthy position. He would have to find a way to convince Grym that a hefty bonus would suffice. He didn't *want* to share in this venture. He truly did not.

With adept tappings on the dataport, Lewgan skipped the negotiations between Grym and Cyan for the book. They were mundane. She had asked for a king's ransom but had settled for a mere fortune. Both had seemed to enjoy the haggle. Grym had not been happy that the match to the Kkhresh'diak urn was not on the table for discussion. She had already arranged to have it delivered to the D'rriish embassy.

“The book is mine to sell you, Mr. Grym.” Her tone was subdued, however. “I have little family left on Dahlia and to tell you the truth, there it would be considered little more than interesting historical arcana. Do you not understand? How do you think I’ve *survived* so long in your Chair?”

Even Lewgan had been surprised by this. *How had she known?* The Chair was one of many true secrets that The Boss had managed to maintain. *Did she read my body language so easily when she first made as if to sit?* Lewgan thought this might be so, but he still wondered.

But Grym was not easily flustered. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Good thing you’re not sitting *here* when you say that, eh?” Her wry smile was neither condescending nor smug. Merely a smile of resignation and acceptance. “My experiences these last few weeks have brought about a . . . I suppose you could call it a change of hearts. I tell you what, Mr. Grym. I’ll give you one for free. No doubt the redoubtable Mr. Lewgan would be able to ferret it out, anyway. But I *was* at the Thieves Guild meeting where you spoke. I sat in the back, for I was never a very successful thief. And I was also in the back of the room when I heard Sheffield’s report read before the Guild Council. The task is considered impossible by some of the very best in our business. Your prize would never be collected. And although I hadn’t even considered it before, at that very moment I *wanted* to be the one who pulled this one off, Mr. Grym. I would have been *famous!*”

Grym’s understanding nod was all she needed to continue. “Thieves from throughout the galaxy would learn my name and feel pride at what I had done. For the Guild is large, Mr. Grym, as I’m sure you know. All my life I had heard stories about the book, and I knew the price that would be asked. My soul. And in these oh so rational times, Mr. Grym, who even takes a moment to consider their own soul? Do you?” But Grym gave no answer.

“It is so easy to dismiss the spiritual world as a collection of fairy tales designed to scare the weak-minded into living their lives in a civilized manner, but surely we do not need them anymore, do we? I didn’t. I didn’t need any of it, and my soul? I didn’t even *believe* in the soul. But now I do. How can I look back on everything I have seen and still continue to doubt? There is a saying: ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.’ Do you know the

origin of that saying? It has to do with the ridiculous proposition that low tech planets are sometimes visited by extraterrestrials in spaceships. Can you imagine that?”

“I do have a soul, Mr. Grym. I can *feel* it. I escaped this nightmare with body and soul intact by blind luck and the demon’s own cowardice. You saw what was happening, each time it went back to the Tower it made it a little farther before that place shot the hell out of it. It *would* have succeeded, eventually. No matter how badly the demon was injured it came back stronger and more clever than before. You know this or we wouldn’t even be having this conversation Mr. Grym. “

“Then why sell me the book at all, young woman?” Grym’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, treachery never far from the surface at the best of times. “Are you not afraid that you will do further harm? How would your so-called soul fare if my. . .interest. . .in this book were to harm others?”

Her laugh was almost sweet. “The first step in saving someone’s soul, Mr. Grym, is to convince him that he even *has* one. After I banished the demon, I almost destroyed the book. On the last page it tells you how, by the way. But then I started thinking about. . .among other things. . .your offer. And I decided that the book might just be able to do for you what it did for me. Will it work? I honestly don’t know. But I do know that until you have the book in front of you and you seriously consider using it, you will never fully understand the risk that you are taking.” She paused then, and took a sip of water.

“I will make a prediction, Mr. Grym. You will sit alone staring at the book, an accurate translation in your hand and you will wonder. You will sit and you will ask yourself. . .’Do I *really* want to do this? Is it worth the risk? Can I *afford* to pay the price?’ And Mr. Grym, at that moment, you will *feel* your own soul within you. For it will cry out”

Grym’s, dismissive, answering chuckle was convincing, really. But Lewgan had known The Boss for a long time and he could hear the strain. He could *hear* it.

. . .*Epilogue*. . .

In the *Mare* Tower, the armed guards patrolled, security bots with special equipment buzzed about in random patterns, and the tone, the *feel* of the place was subdued, quiet, waiting.

The *Mare Inebrium* was the only exception. The joint was jumpin' and the alcohol ran like manna from heaven. The bartender, Max, was cranking out drinks as fast as he could but a watchful patron might notice that he wore an odd blue amulet around his neck and he would occasionally reach up to touch it, as if it were more valuable than quasimatter.

Near the back door to the main bar, a skinny priest held court with unbelievable tales about witches and succubae and demons. His stories were getting old to the regulars but at a spaceport bar and grill, there are always new faces who haven't heard this one, yet.

“. . .and so the mathematician—who had never *intended* to summon the beast in the first place. Never never NEVER!—he says to the creature: ‘So, Mr. Demon, if you can travel anywhere in the Omniverse and back in the blink of an eye, through black holes and into neutron stars without experiencing any time dilation effects or suffering any harm, then I only have one command to give you and then I suppose you can come back and take my soul.’”

Brother Chucky's voice had suddenly taken on a gravelly, dry rasp and he paused to examine his now empty glass as if it were a particularly offensive thing. The patrons flocking around got the message and called out for Trixie to bring another round. Mysteriously, the Comical Cleric found his voice again and continued. “He says to the demon. . .I command you to **GET LOST!**” It took a few seconds for the implication to sink in and then there were cheers and hoots from all around. Brother Chucky almost preened, he had a million of these.

And in his Playroom, Grym sat alone with the book in front of him and a complete translation on the view screen before him. He'd read it over so many times he could have coauthored a paper with Brother Chucky without breaking a sweat. And Grym thought. And he wondered. Grym was a schemer by nature. He was *sure* he could play this game and win. Dealing with the demon would be a simple game of Cat and Mouse. And there was always only one way to win that game. Be the Cat. But no matter how many angles he considered. He was always the mouse. Absently, he wiped damp palms on his pant legs.

Somewhere. . .though it really wasn't what you'd call a *place*, another Crimelord sat and thought. He'd blown His last chance at glory and He tortured Himself for His cowardice as He had done to countless Dahlian souls for eons. And He could feel Himself fading away, little by little as the few remaining true believers either died, or worse, failed to teach their children to fear Him. As jokesters used Him as the butt for their craft. As teenagers who once doubted His nonexistence, succumbed to more rational arguments. And yet. . .He could almost feel the presence of one who might still rescue Him from His plight. One who *possessed* the last copy of the book and was thinking about it, wondering, pondering. . .

The End