

Rerun

By **Bill Wolfe**

It was, technically, a slow night at the Mare. Larrye would normally have been happy about that since he was manning the bar alone. Max, the manager and primary bartender only left him alone for the slow shifts but Larrye was still plenty nervous. The bar should have been jumping on the first night of the Bethdish New Year. After all, tomorrow would be a work holiday for most of the city's businesses. The bar, the streets and even the spaceport had been virtually empty since the latest round of murders. A tense atmosphere of strained expectation and... fear had pervaded all aspects of life in the City of Lights for a week. Rumors circulated like bad blood concerning the Immortals, Max and even the Reeve. And Larrye had been on duty two days earlier when the Reeve, the Chief Justicar, highest-ranking cop and most feared being on the planet, Ambassador to the Immortals of Bethdish, had stumbled bleeding and gasping through the bar's front door.

The Reeve, described by those who know him best as nearly two meters tall and sudden death on two legs, had publicly vowed to solve a string of Immortal murders, seemingly related only by their randomness and level of violence. Apparently, he found his culprit, and had barely survived the encounter. Since that day, The Reeve had been in and out of the Mare more often than the guy who fixed the broken tables in the Klingon's private banquet room. The "Owner's Entrance," the unremarkable section of wall near Max's office which was kept devoid of paintings and clear of the crowded tables and other accoutrements of the Mare Inebrium, had turned dark blue and shaped itself into a door more times than Larrye had ever even heard about as the Reeve had conferred with Max and the Owner in order to glean more from the bartender's extensive and—unofficial—sources of information. The Reeve had even once appeared in the middle of the bar (startling poor Blanche so badly that she dropped a whole tray of Priaptian snacks, which scuttled everywhere and prompted a visit from the health inspector) by stepping through some super hi-tech portal which looked like a flat round heat mirage with little specks of glitter floating around in it. Larrye later heard that this was some kind of Immortal gadget and the Immortals never, ever flaunted their highly advanced technology in public without good reason. They were funny that way. Something bad was about to happen and Larrye, along with most of Bethdish, was sure of it. Larrye would have rather faced a full and rowdy bar with both hands tied behind his back than this thin trickle of patrons.

Kazsh-ak Teir, the D'rish ambassador, a massive scorpoid who could swill his mildly radioactive brew like any humanoid lush was even in a foul mood. "Too much Thorium," he managed to growl through his translator, which was one of the best diplomatic models available. Larrye hadn't even known that it was capable of expressing disapproval.

Larrye scrambled to remix the noxious and only marginally hazardous recipe from Max's handwritten note tacked to the ledge just above the large blaster kept under the main taps at the front of the bar. He was so engrossed trying to follow the directions precisely that he missed the entrance of little man who made his way quietly to the unoccupied end of the bar and took the last stool. When Larrye had finished the process, including crediting the D'rriish ambassador's account for the unfinished and presumably unpalatable—if that word had any meaning in this context—drink, he had the unpleasant feeling that he'd again bungled the mix. He was about to recheck his work when he simultaneously noticed the new customer and realized that the hulking shape looming over him was the impatient recipient of the finished product he was retrieving from the isolation mixer. He heaved it to the bar, muttered an apology to the D'rriish and scurried over to take the little man's order.

Larrye was slightly nonplused as he recognized the uniform the man wore; it was the blue and white security uniform of the local rent-a-cop company, a minimum wage job, at best. Though he'd seen an uncountable array of species and professions at the Mare, this was a new one on him. The prices here weren't especially reasonable. The fellow, thin faced with an almost unbearable expression of complete boredom simply looked at him expectantly, as if he'd already ordered. Well, it had happened before, so Larrye asked, "Er, sorry. What was that again?"

Surprisingly, the fellow looked dazed for a second and then shook his head as if to focus more closely on his surroundings. "Gin, cold, whatever's cheap," he replied, confirming Larrye's earlier assumption about his financial resources. Larrye filled the order and half expected the guy to balk at the cost. The Mare's cheapest was more expensive than some places charged for their best, but it was also much, much better. He had already decided that the first would be on the house, a Mare tradition usually exercised only with Max's approval, because Larrye thought it might be nice to have someone normal drinking in the bar on a night like this. He wasn't at all prepared for the guy to casually hand him a Dricorian quasimatter Ducat. "Helium-three," was his only response to Larrye's startled exclamation at seeing the universe's most valuable monetary unit.

"Sh-shall I run you a tab? What?" Larrye was dumbfounded by the man's apparent non-sequitor. If the Ducat was real, and the Mare's currency scanner would confirm that it was, he was sure, it was worth more than the receipts of the entire bar for a month, and a good month, at that. Quasimatter was found only in Dricorian space, where billions of years ago a rogue antimatter solar system had briefly grazed our normal matter galaxy. Quasimatter was the trigger component in all FTL drives, had the ability to ignore gravity and was said to create a field that would block psychogenic energy. One Ducat contained a tiny bead with exactly one mole (Avogadro's number of molecules) of quasimatter set in a comparatively worthless platinum coin. If the fellow wanted change, Larrye was going to have to page Max. The Reeve and his problems would just have to wait. One of the first things Max had shown him about the operation of the Mare, was the sign above the bar, in forty-seven written and three pheremomic languages stating that all currency was welcome:

If you make it, we take it.

But don't try to fake it!

“Helium-three,” the customer seemed a little vexed, as if he'd had to repeat himself several times. “Tritium decays to helium-three through the emission of a weak beta particle. And no, no tab for now.”

“Tritium?” stammered Larrye. He still didn't know what he was supposed to do with the coin he was holding gingerly in his hand.

“Twelve point three standard years is the half life of tritium. That means that, say, a container of pure tritium will be about one tenth helium-three after only 22 months.” He could have been discussing the weather. “It's called daughter-product poisoning. It produces some interesting physiological effects in those species that consume tritium. The milder of which is a sensation analogous to a sour taste.”

Larrye couldn't stand any more. As he moved to return the too-valuable coin to the customer, the fellow murmured something Larrye could just barely comprehend.

“This *{{unintelligible}}* is sour.”

“This KKKKashd'rissh is *SOUR!*” roared the D'rriish Ambassador as he slammed the huge, lead-lined and sealed tankard atop the bar.

“I tell you it malfunctioned,” the little man droned without emotion, in a voice only slightly above a whisper. “Max, this spawn of...”

As he spoke, the previously-mentioned section of wall turned dark blue and shaped itself into a door, Max and the Reeve, now completely healed, stepped through the opening at a rapid pace, deep in conversation and ignoring the nearly deserted bar.

“I tell you it malfunctioned,” the Reeve insisted to Max, indicating his staff of office, a long, gem-incrusted and intricately carved wooden baton, rather like a walking stick.

“*MAX!*” the D'rriish bellowed as he saw his real bartender enter. “This spawn of dung vermin tried to poison me with a spoiled batch of KKKKashd'rissh. I demand that you...”

Because he was so close, Larrye could hear that the little man was keeping slightly ahead of the entire discourse in his droning, monotone whisper. The look on his face was one of impatience and, as always, intense boredom. He was even tapping his fingertips on the bar as if to hurry the proceedings along. Larrye heard his name whispered and, because he was following the conversation in advance, turned to Max just before the latter actually called him.

“Larrye!” Max barked. “Take care of the Ambassador, please.” Even so formidable an entity as the Reevever was halted by the hulking form of the D’rrish scorpoid.

“Sure thing, Boss,” Larrye exclaimed. He had a feeling that he knew just exactly what the problem with Kazsh-ak Teir’s drink might be. On the main mixing computer he called up the expiration date on the present bottle of tritium in the isolation mixer. “Helium-three,” he muttered to himself.

It took two hands to work the complicated controls that changed the ingredient bottles, so Larrye carefully placed the Dricorian quasimatter Ducat on the ledge right above Max’s directions for making a perfect KKKKashd’riss. He was way too busy to notice that Max and the Reevever had settled at a back table, the Reevever’s staff of office lying on the table between them, the center of both their attentions.

He was also too involved to notice that the little man in the drab uniform momentarily lost the look of overwhelming ennui he had been wearing like an extra garment, took a deep swallow of the cheap gin he had been nursing and set it carefully on the bar, far back from the edge.

Milliseconds ahead of the actual conversation, he mouthed the words as he glanced toward the Mare’s main entrance.

“Drop defensive shield and open access port beta,” the Immortal known as the Reevever spoke to the tiny computer embedded in his staff of office, his only real tool incorporating the advanced technology of the Immortals of Bethdish. “Authority Justicar slash Reevever slash Omega Omicron Delta.” Neither the Reevever nor Max moved nor changed expression as a cleverly concealed panel on the device slid to the side. An eerie green glow emanated from the open access, bathing their still faces with a sick pallor.

“Authority Acknowledged,” answered the device.

Larrye was just straightening up from his crouched position at the mixer when he too, stopped. And so did the D’rrish ambassador and the few other scattered patrons in the bar. They weren’t really paralyzed, it seemed, they could breathe, they didn’t topple if they were off balance, like Larrye, they just stopped moving. The Mare’s front door opened and in strode a humanoid figure wearing a dark, hooded cloak.

“Thank you, Immortal,” said the only creature in the building, in fact, in the entire City of Lights who could move a muscle under anything resembling free will. There were sounds from the street as manually controlled vehicles, both wheeled and flying, collided with whatever was in their path as drivers, but not their machines, lost the ability to move. The tales of what transpired during this officially unexplained, temporary paralysis of an entire city would surface in bars across the galaxy for the next hundred years.

“You may not believe this,” the hooded figure continued. “But I am quite pleased that you survived your encounter with our mutual friend.” As he spoke, he meandered slowly about the room, pausing to look at the wall prints, hanging space suits and other oddities

of the bar. Larrye had seen this kind of activity before, from others on their first visit. The Mare was an interesting place.

“No, I am not your quarry, Chief Justicar. Though that entity, twisted and obsessed, was recently useful to me. It was I who arranged that you find the clues which led to your... meeting. You were not intended to survive it, of course, but I underestimated both your personal resources and the level of technological complexity you Immortals have managed to regain. I have been able to interfere with the workings of your staff, but not to counteract it, entirely. And I have plans, Chief Justicar, plans that do not allow for any tampering by busybody associations of Immortals. So you see, I must understand your technology.”

Larrye, though immobile, felt a chill. *This guy was going to go head to head with the Immortals.* Like most on Bethdish, Larrye felt a petulant and somewhat childish resentment to the nearly omnipotent Immortals, and he would certainly like to see somebody rub their collective noses in it, but not this way. This guy was bad news and if the Immortals helped to keep his kind in line, well, maybe they weren't so hard to stomach, after all.

“Can you really have lived for over ten million years, Chief Justicar?” The hooded figure was making his way toward the table where Max and the Reeve were still huddled over the open access plate of the device. “And yet you allowed yourself to fiddle with your device in a public place. Tsk. Tsk. Reeve. I'm sure your self-styled High Council will be most forgiving. After all, this is just a trinket, a mere toy, if you will. And as far as I can glean, the only *significant* example of current Immortal technology to be found outside of Fort Mountain.”

As the cloaked humanoid moved directly in front of Larrye's crouched position at the bar, he felt his hands shaking in suppressed rage at his own impotence. It didn't dawn on him until they had again stilled, that they shouldn't have been moving at all. He thought about the coin the strange little man had given him. An idea, and then a plan began to take shape in Larrye's mind.

Still taunting, the figure approached the two immobilized Immortals. “I can feel you trying to break my hold, Chief Justicar. And I can assure you that it will not work. You are formidable only amongst the truly mundane. My powers,” and his voice began to take on a self-aggrandizing air that Larrye found particularly annoying. “My powers are unmatched, perhaps in the entire universe. No being can overcome me by force.” *Puh-leese*, thought Larrye. *The Immortals were downright humble compared to this jerk.* Over and over in his mind, he practiced the steps he would take when the time was right. He thought he could pull it off, but a distraction, any distraction would sure come in handy.

Because he could not move his head, he heard, rather than saw, the intruder pluck the Reeve's symbol of office from the table and remark, “Plain workmanship on the exterior, don't you think?” He was apparently addressing the Reeve. More taunts. “And

what is this wood? Odd that I can't... *by all the gods!* Reeve, did you know that portions of this device are *alive*? I can see where you have inserted your own technology, but there is something else, something...other. However did you come by this enigmatic creation?"

"Ahhh, clever. You Immortals do use stressed space as your power source. Excellent! I can certainly work around that!" Larrye could tell by the fellow's voice that he was walking away from the table. *Just a few more seconds*, he thought, impatient and excited but strangely unafraid.

With all his will, Larrye was straining to reach for the immense blaster Max kept under the bar. He had already decided not to try to set it on maximum for the first shot. It was always kept on heavy stun. As soon as his hands were free, he would grab it and just fire. Still engrossed in his psychic study of the device, the intruder stepped directly into Larrye's line of sight.

It took Larrye twenty minutes of studying the Mare's security recordings to piece together what happened in the following few seconds. But he persevered until he was pretty sure he got it right. After all, every bartender needs a *really* good story to tell.

As fast as he could move, Larrye whipped up the blaster and pointed it at the intruder, only a few feet directly in front of him. Larrye was sure that he sent a command to his finger to pull the trigger. But nothing happened. The stranger, with barely a pause, had merely pointed his finger at Larrye, and everything stopped again. This time, however, it was worse. Much worse. This time there was pain.

"Quasimatter," the intruder sounded truly astounded. "And set right above one of the more intimidating hand weapons I have ever seen. I am truly impressed. I spent a considerable amount of time and effort probing this establishment and carefully, subtly disabling your many mechanical security devices that may have interfered. As you may have gathered, I despise interference." With his finger still firmly pointed in Larrye's direction, the cloaked figure looked appreciatively at Max, and began to bow. Then the D'rriish Ambassador was heard from.

Larrye had, oddly enough, often pondered the intricacies of D'rriish metabolic processes. After all, he had read and mixed the ingredients of a perfect KKKKashd'rissh. He had once even attempted to research the scorpoid race's digestive system at City Library, but found that the information was not available without a considerably higher security clearance than he would ever want or need. But nothing, absolutely nothing in his wildest fantasies had prepared him for the immense and deeply emotionally disturbing sound that emanated...

...that exploded...

...that ripped...

...that clawed its way screaming like a all the demons of all the hells of every nightmare mythology ever articulated by sentient beings ...

...from the distinguished Ambassador's nether region.

The cloaked figure whirled to face this unexpected new threat. His control must have slipped because Larrye's body, spasming from the excruciating pain that accompanied the stranger's bypassing of the psychogenic-damping field, generated by the quasimatter ducat, pulled the trigger on the heavy blaster. The stun charge, which Max had once claimed was guaranteed to stop a Parang warrior's death surge, hit the intruder squarely between the shoulder blades.

As Larrye's consciousness faded, he heard three distinct things that he would never forget. He heard a bullwhip-sharp crack, which a tremendously embarrassed Kazsh-ak Teir later swore was the Reeve's short sword, exceeding the speed of sound as it flew toward the stranger's head. He heard the unmistakable bark of a heavy blaster pistol fired on maximum setting. And he heard the little man in a security guard's uniform chuckle, "Helium-three. Very interesting metabolic reactions."

* * *

"In the back of every mind, a monster lurks-chained in the mind's dark recesses, kept away from the light of day for all eternity... but chains can break. Corbeatee's ability to control biological systems was absolute; he was merely very good with mechanical devices. But he was learning fast. What ethical chains can withstand such strain for more than a few hundred years? His lasted for millennia. Who are we to judge?" Those words made absolutely no sense to Larrye, but he did manage to identify the speaker. The little man was bracketed between Max and the Reeve in one of the back booths. Larrye, in the adjoining booth, with a damp towel on his head and surrounded by the cloying reek of millennia-old Krupnick, in which he had apparently been soaked, sat up and tried to focus his eyes. When he saw the still-smoldering pile on the floor where the cloaked stranger had been, he regretted the effort.

For the first time in history, as far as Larrye knew, the Mare Inebrium was closed. Trixie, Max's elfin paramour and probably the greatest waitress in the galaxy, and who had missed the entire encounter because she was delivering a special cocktail to one of the patrons in The Mortuary, was now behind the bar sopping up the mess from at least a dozen broken bottles. Blanche, the more Rubenesque waitress had been waiting on a Brisne Bay tourist couple—and boy would they have a tale to tell—had her back turned to the proceedings the entire time and was now scurrying around straightening tables and righting overturned chairs. Apparently the bar had been cleared in a hurry while Larrye was unconscious. Larrye moved to help, but his legs were not cooperating. He slumped back in his booth and listened to the little man's tale.

"Since you've both heard of the TANJ, I won't bore you with the details. Corbeatee was a great healer, once. When word went out that the TANJ were suffering an unstoppable plague, he volunteered to help without any thought to his personal safety. And without his help, the TANJ might have been utterly destroyed. They gave him his abilities

partially out of thanks, and also because near the end, he too had become infected. And for generations, Corbeatee used his gifts only to heal. But his powers grew. I don't think even the TANJ knew what he could become." The little man paused to sip from his drink. Larrye could smell the cheap gin even over the sweet stench of spilled Krupnick. Well, it wasn't like he couldn't afford better.

"Or maybe they did. Who knows?" The little man contemplated the bottom of his glass like it held all the answers to life's riddles.

"How is it that you... helped us to stop him?" Max prompted.

"Oh, Corbeatee wasn't the only lesser being that the TANJ have had a reason to thank. I too, did them a favor, once. Only perhaps not quite so spectacular as Corbeatee's, they were appreciative enough, all right. Asked me what I wanted. What I wanted more than anything else in life." And here the man paused again. Max signaled Trixie for refills and was about to prompt again when the little man continued.

"A very wise Earth human once wrote, 'A fake fortuneteller can be tolerated. But an authentic soothsayer should be shot on sight,' or words to that effect. You want to know what I wished for?" The little man grinned. Larrye had never seen a smile convey such sadness and hoped never to see it again. "I wanted to know the future."

Trixie brought the drinks herself. When she saw the forlorn look in the little man's eyes, she paused, and quietly sat down to listen to his tale. Larrye could tell that something in the man's face or voice had touched her. Not for the first time, he wished that he were Max.

"I had this idea that I wanted to prove, before I died, what one man's life could be worth. So I asked them if they could give me the power to help others. I imagined myself as the mysterious savior, the ordinary fellow who happens to be in the right place at the right time. The seemingly random act—kind or otherwise—which would truly be of help. I wanted to know what was going to happen so that I could do the greatest amount of good that one man can do. That's all, really. And I told the TANJ what I wanted. But I neglected to ask for the power to make a choice.

Personal choice wasn't really a popular concept in those days. I thought that if I could see the future I would be able to decide what to do. But did you know that there really isn't any such thing as 'the future?' There is only your own personal future. And that is precisely what they gave to me... all of it."

"Today was one of the *good* days, really. You see, because I have told this story, at least I have some idea of the significance of my actions. Today was the reason that, years ago and far away, when I uncovered a huge cache of Driconian quasimatter Ducats, I took only one."

Max and the Reeve exchanged glances. Both knew something about such a treasure, Larrye was sure, but they kept their silence and let the man continue.

“You know why, don’t you?” His hands gripped his glass so hard that Larrye was sure it was going to shatter. “I only took one because that’s all I saw myself taking. Just one, to be used today to allow your bartender to shoot a truly great being in the back.”

In the awkward pause, Larrye wasn’t sure if he should be ashamed, or not. “But you know the location of incredible wealth,” Trixie said, soothingly. “Surely you could do a tremendous amount of good with that.”

The little man smiled his lonely smile, “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But you see, I don’t have any choice. I do what I do because that’s what I *foresee* myself doing!” His last few words came out harsh, frustrated, and angry. Larrye was beginning to see the problem, and as he considered what the man was saying, he shuddered.

“Last night I allowed a homeless couple to sleep in the storage shed at the factory where I work nights. Strictly against the rules, of course; and I don’t know why I did it. Letting them do something that I’m not supposed to do is the only reason that I can imagine why I am the midnight watchman down at Miller’s tool and die. Tomorrow I quit, and go get another job where I do something just as unusual, just as meaningless. And somehow, I am doing just exactly the right thing at the right time to do the maximum amount of good. Today I mentioned a tiny fact to your bartender that allowed him to be in the right place at the right time. I handed him a coin that he normally wouldn’t have encountered, and now the universe will never know, or dread, or despise the name Corbeatee.”

“So why are you even telling us this?” the Reeve asked. Larrye could tell that the implications of what the little man was trying to say were not lost on the Chief Justicar. “Don’t you normally avoid attention?”

“There is something intrinsic to this place which demands a tale from those who have one, a psychic cover charge, if you will. But that is not the reason I do so, today. I tell you this because this is what I foresaw myself doing. Talking to you is what I do now. Soon I will leave, walk three blocks north and knock over two trashcans on the sidewalk. Why? I don’t know. Perhaps the noise will wake a couple, who will then make love and produce a child destined to save the universe. Or maybe a dog will come by, eat poison garbage and die, thus preventing some catastrophic plague which the poor animal was about to contract and spread. Who knows?”

“Why don’t you just quit?” Trixie asked. There were tears in her eyes.

“Because I *don’t*. You see, young lady, I have been given the gift,” the man made no effort to disguise the repugnance he felt for the word. “Foreseeing the future that will be. This conversation, which will no doubt trouble your sleep, is a reiteration, for me. Your reactions, the sights, smells and tastes of this place are all exactly as I knew they would be. I have not felt a new sensation, heard a new joke, seen an unfamiliar face, or even

been mildly surprised since that fateful day, so long ago. I have one more little task, one more good deed, and then I will leave.” This last was directed at the Reeve, who obviously had further questions. He did not even wait for the Chief Justicar’s reluctant nod.

The little man finished his drink and stood, still holding his glass. Max quietly slid to the side to allow him to exit. “Three hundred and five years from now, on another planet, I will book passage on a commercial flight which will be full. Because I am there, somebody will miss that flight and will not die in the crash. My final good deed.” “That’s insane,” Larrye heard himself mutter. Three sets of eyes turned to look at him and he blushed. The little man just stared at the glass in his hand. Larrye hadn’t realized that he had even spoken aloud. “But you can stop the flight, save those other people. Don’t you care about them?”

“I have stopped a thousand flights, young man, perhaps more. Anonymous bomb threats are the easiest. But I’ve occasionally crippled a pilot, or planted a bomb in a place where it will be found, thus ensuring a search that uncovers another. I’m sure you can see the pattern. Some of these flights were undoubtedly destined for destruction. But I am almost never sure. Perhaps it was only important that a single passenger miss this one flight. I stopped worrying about it ages ago. As to your last question,” and a look of physically wrenching sadness overtook him.

“In the seat in front of me will be a small boy. His name will be Jason and he has radiantly indigo eyes. His exuberant laughter would make a Nosferatu smile and he smells sweet, like only a very clean and happy child can. We will play peek-a-boo over the back of his seat until the first alarms sound and his mother straps him down. Shortly after that, my hell will end.”

“Three hundred and five years?” Max interjected, “But you scan as human.”

“Did you think you were the only immortals?” The man’s grin seemed sincere, this time. “The TANJ like to throw that one in, a little lagniappe.” He gingerly reached out and caressed Trixie’s golden hair, a regretful look on his face. “I saved the life of a TANJ tourist because I thought he/she was a god. I pushed him/her out of the path of a charging mastodon. I have gone insane at least a dozen times, since then. But never for long enough.” He turned toward the door and, as he passed Larrye’s seat, the little man winked at him and said, “Larrye... Keep the change.”

The End