

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #17



Stories by Ward Crockett
Janett L. Grady

Poetry by Darrell Lindsey

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March

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Cover Art: *Bus Stop* by Kurt Kirchmeier

Although new to illustrating, Kurt Kirchmeier is no stranger to the world of small press publishing. His fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous print and online venues. His story “Lucidity” appeared in OG’s Speculative Fiction, Issue 12. For more information, visit www.kurtkirchmeier.com.

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Editor's Letter

Lately, the news has begun to look like a science fiction magazine. I don't mind at all. We are living in fascinating times. All they need to do is hire a good team of fiction writers to really give their stories some good characters and they are all set.

A month ago, Google Earth took underwater pictures of the sea floor near the Canary Islands and a strange grid-like structure was seen. Those with a little creativity immediately thought it was the streets of long lost Atlantis. Google tried to downplay it as image resonance left by boat sonar. What? Are there any other "grids" left by boat sonar to date? In the following weeks, this story was one of the most highly searched stories on the internet. I think that shows there are a lot of closet science fiction readers out there. Now we just need one of those salvage teams to get down there and reveal this boat sonar!

In Japan, Honda and Tokyo professor Kobayashi tested one of the first human-sized robots. They tried it in a Tokyo elementary school where Saya (the robot's name) gave roll call and scolded children.

A few photos are included with the story and they tell a far different tale of our future with robots than our movies have the past few decades. Our movies all have robots with visible gears and frames and hard metal surfaces. But Kobayashi's robot has a very life-like synthetic rubber covered face and a good wig. While the robot's face certainly needs some work, it is amazing to see science fiction come to life.

And let's not forget Venice, a romantic haven that in recent weeks has displayed a darker gothic side. When archaeologists excavated a mass grave of bubonic plague victims they found a vampire. Or at least a woman that had been treated like a vampire. A stone spike had been hammered through her mouth and into the back of her skull, apparently a 16th century solution to vampires. With the spike in her mouth she couldn't feed.

The news is certainly disappointing though. There is so much more story behind these news items. I bet there are a hundred good stories around these items and if there aren't, then there could be. I guess that is where you and I come in. We have to breathe the life and fancy into them.

-SC

Faux Pas, Doc

by Janett L. Grady

Janett Grady writes from Palmer, Alaska. Her work has appeared in magazines all over the country with her latest fiction appearing in a Science Fiction Trails publication entitled "Ghost Town."

I'm at the port in Paris, on my way to the port in Boston. My insides are all screwed up and I'm on my way to see if I can get things fixed. If I can't get things fixed, the conservative types in World Congress will argue to have me taken apart and fed to the hogs, piece by piece. It's what they do, forever finding reason to turn back the clock, to change things back to the way things were, forever trying to rid their world of toys and fun.

I'm three hours early for the transfer and I've already been scanned and labeled. I'm killing time, wandering back and forth, when I suddenly spot her, or think it's her. She's in one of those ancient hover-chairs. I wave, catch her eye and she waves back, hovers toward me, a quizzical, surprised look on her face.

"Well, well," she says with a smile. "What a surprise."

I smile in return. "Doc," I say, "it is you. My God, you haven't changed at all." It's almost true. She's in the chair, a few pounds heavier, a little older-looking but the same Doc Tan who turned me on back in 3010. "How have you been?" I ask. "It's been what, twenty years?"

"At least that long," she says. She hovers back a little and looks me up and down, her blue eyes crinkling at the corners. She's gorgeous. Even after all these years, I still want to give her a great big kiss. "Damn, T-3," she says, "you're looking fine." She sighs and then frowns prettily. "I never thought you'd last this long," she says. "Is it all still working?"

"Still working," I tell her, and hesitate, unsure about telling her what's wrong. "I'm at the Capitol," I tell her. "I've been there for nine years."

"Men, women, or what?" she asks. "You're wired for both, or at least I tried." She laughs.

“But with all the women in World Congress these days, I wouldn’t be all that surprised if you’ve been rewired to prefer women.”

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I still do men, but I’ve been tweaked to prefer women.”

“I figured they might do that,” she says. “But, hey, no big deal, right?”

“It is a big deal,” I shoot back. “When I do men, it hurts like hell. There’s something wrong. I’m on my way to Mass Tech to see if I can get it fixed.”

She doesn’t seem interested. She shrugs, looks at her watch. “I’ve got a few minutes,” she says. “You want some wine?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. She spins around, waves for me to follow, and leads the way into The French Space. She leaves me at a table, goes for the wine and then joins me. She sips from her glass, settles back in her chair. “You do look a little different,” she says, “but hell, don’t we all? Me, I’m stuck in this chair.” Her eyes seem fixed on my blouse. “So what’s wrong?” she asks. “You look healthy enough.”

“I’m not,” I tell her. “The penis-pocket is closing shut, not to mention being backed up. I’m not passing the way I should be.”

“It’s been a long time,” she says. “You’ve been screwing your brains out, and you’re scratched and swollen. It’s the inside sensors. They wear out.” She takes my hand, squeezes hard, then lets go. “Tell you what,” she says. “I’m in the lab at Notre Dame. If they don’t fix it in Boston, come back and let me know. I’ll take a look.” She grins a mischievous grin. “If worse comes to worse,” she says, “I’ll take it all apart and start over. Then you can stay with me, service yours truly for awhile.”

I’m sipping wine, biting my lip, trying to keep from looking at her. I can’t stop thinking about her being in the chair and I don’t want her to see any trace of fear on my face.

“So what’s with the chair?” I ask. “If you don’t mind me asking, I’d like to know what happened.”

“Nothing much,” she says. “A transport to Moscow didn’t quite take and I lost the use of my legs. It’s no big deal, though, I’ve still got feeling down there. You can kiss it and lap it and it’ll drive me wild.”

“I’d like that, Doc, but...”

“No buts,” she says. “I’ll clear it with Congress, let ‘em know

you're going to be with me." She glances at her watch, says she's got to run. "I'll be looking for you, T-3." She smiles that cute little smile of hers, waves and keeps waving as she hovers away. I assume she's hurrying to catch a transfer. "Doc, wait!" I shout, but she's already gone.

My own transport doesn't happen for another hour, so I just sit there drinking wine. I'm thinking about how Doc is in a hoverchair, and figure if she can't fix herself, how in the hell is she going to fix me. True, she's the one who turned me on, but that was twenty years ago. Besides, I never knew Doc all that well and it's possible she'll simply take me apart, have me fed to the hogs, and start over, create something new and better. I'm not going to chance it. I'm no longer a perfect toy. I just need a little fixing, that's all.

Sorry, Doc, but I just don't trust you. For one thing, the inside of what you first designed and put together is now all screwed up. For another, I'm Tan Number 2, not Tan Number 3. T-2, not T-3.

Blowing Bubbles

by Darrell Lindsey

*Darrell Lindsey is a freelance writer from Nacogdoches, the oldest town in Texas. His haiku and tanka have won awards in the United States, Japan, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Canada. One of his poems published in 2006 was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Some of his credits include The Christian Science Monitor, Star*Line, Sci-Faikuest, Modern Haiku, and Fire Pearls: Short Masterpieces of the Human Heart.*

Blowing Bubbles

Countless billions of galaxies now speak to us
beyond time as we know it,
deconstructing our myths, guiding and goading us
to the illusion of discoveries—
laugh at the black holes in our knowledge,
the gaps between earthbound synapses.
They let us think we are the Columbus
of the cosmos; though, like children,
we are only blowing bubbles
against their transforming energy and secrets.
They are shaping our consciousness,
giving visions of event horizons
that, until now, have been zen koans
eyed through toy telescopes.

Influx

by Ward Crockett

Originally from Colorado, Ward Crockett is currently working as a freelance writer and filmmaker in Chicago, Illinois. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in GUD, Rockstar, Danger City Two, Right Hand Pointing, Sinister Tales, Ideomancer, and Kaleidotrope among others. At present, he is embroiled in post-production on his first feature-length horror film, Night Things. You can check it out at www.LastNightofApril.com.

Staring out the soot-stained window that overlooked the main gravel thoroughfare of the mining town of Candle 6, Kurn Jendresen was having second thoughts about crossing the Portal.

He'd been planning on crossing ever since Grandpa sent him the letter. That was seven years ago. During that time he'd saved as much of his pay as he could without starving or living on the street. And every one of the three thousand dinarii he'd saved went into the pocket of the Shakhal, the guide who would take him and twenty others across the Portal to Ceridea.

Kurn had felt sick as he had handed over the cash.

"Don't look so green, kid," the Shak had said. "The Golanese don't know nothin' about the tunnel in the South Portal area. People says it used to be part o' the circulatory tract o' the planet beast. They say some rogue miners found it. Don't matter what it is. Fact is it's a way through and no one knows about it." The Shak had drawn his hunting knife and was running his thumb along the blade. "And no one's gonna know, right?"

"Right."

Kurn had quickly paid the Shak his advance, left the man's smoky office through the bead curtain and had made his way downstairs into the bustling tavern and out into the hot, sooty night of Candela.

That was two weeks ago.

Kurn watched from his window as an AP-12, the six-wheeled mining transport that had standardized heavy-load transport technology on Candela, rumbled down the street and rotated on its reticu-

lated chassis like a centipede to make a tight corner onto the road that led to the Candle 6 mine. Its rhythm shivered up from the earth, through the building's infrastructure and into his body. A song began to smolder in Kurn's mind, a low, rumbling song that burrowed through the black earth and rose up to an orchestral frenzy as it boiled in the flames roiling deep below.

His stomach leapt when he realized it was the AP-12 he was supposed to take for his night shift. Watching the transport's red jimmy lights recede into the haze, he felt ashamed. He wondered what the Foreman would say when Kurn didn't show up. He wondered what the rest of the mining crew would say. He wondered if they would call the Candleguard.

Kurn turned and eyed his half-packed bag. He could always show up late, apologize profusely, work doubly hard and even work overtime to make up for his carelessness. He could say he overslept. He could say he hurt his back. He could say his flat was robbed. And they would dock him a couple hours and then forget about him again. He could get the money back from the Shakhel and put it toward a bigger flat, maybe even move to Candle 2, where the mines were easy-going and the town was clean and the liquor was cheap and the women were pretty.

And later on, he could look back and be that man who had always worked hard and never missed a day's work except for once long ago when he overslept or hurt his back or was robbed. And only he and Grandpa would know the real reason behind his tardiness.

As he always did when he had second thoughts about crossing the Portal to Ceridea, he pulled the tattered paper from his pocket and gently unfolded it. He had taped it several times over the years, and now even the tape was yellow and brittle.

Dear Kurn,

Usually the beginning of my messages are filled with boring details of life in New Golan. Let me skip the boring stuff and get right to the point: your music is beautiful. It's inspired, Kurn. I'm sorry I don't have better words to applaud you—I'm not a writer. I hope you don't mind I played your recording in my shop. Every customer asked me who it was and where they could buy it.

You truly have a gift, Kurn. I wish you lived here. When Golan opens the Portal to all, as I'm sure they eventually will, we must get you up here so you can pursue your dream.

*Yours,
Grandpa Seiji*

But Golan had not yet opened the Portal. When he asked Grandpa why they hadn't opened it, Grandpa always replied, "Money." He'd asked a few of the miners in his crew, and they always replied, "Candelans are different" or "Cerideans are different." Kurn sometimes pondered the differences but could think of so few that it left him just as confused.

And so here he was, finally about to cross, but having second thoughts. He stared at the letter. He knew it by heart, but only when he read it was he reassured that he was doing the right thing. The black, sooty mine and the black, sooty town and the chiseled, sooty faces of his fellow miners and the *clink* and *chink* and *whirr* of picks and drills and the icy breath of the mine shafts and the cold comfort of his flat—all crumbled away and left nothing but his longflute, his sheaves of staffed paper and his mind bristling with melodies and counter melodies and rhythms and harmonies.

His body tingling with determination, Kurn gently folded the letter and put it back in his pocket. He stuffed the last of his clothes into the black duffel bag, wrapped his longflute case and mag recorder in soft clothing, then lifted the loose floorboard that hid his emergency money. He pulled the small pouch of fifty dinarii out and buried it between articles of clothing in his bag. He had found the money after Father died seven years ago. He'd always wondered whether the money was the beginning of a collection Father had started to get them off of Candela.

As he opened the door to leave, the Messenger on the end table began to ring. Its green LED blinked insistently. He looked at his watch. He should have been at the mine twenty minutes ago. It was probably the Foreman calling.

Kurn flipped the light switch and closed the door behind him. He listened to the Messenger's muffled ring as he stood in the hallway. Its cheerful trill caught in his head and began spawning new

melodies. He pulled out the notebook and pen he kept in his pocket and scrawled a quick staff and note progression, then headed for the stairs.

The Messenger continued to ring.

“Answer, answer, answer!” Seiji Jendresen said into his Messenger, but Kurn didn’t pick up. Maybe he was showering or having a drink at the tavern before going to meet the Shakhhal.

His grandson’s Voice Messenger picked up.

“Kurn,” Seiji said, “if you get this message, stay put for now. Looks like a storm is coming.” He hung up.

Seiji paced his flat and tried to think of another way he could get in touch with Kurn. He could think of nothing. Even if Kurn did have a wireless, cross-Portal wireless reception was still less than reliable, much less secure. The hard-wire Messenger lines were the only dependable means of communication short of pen and paper. All he could do was pray that Kurn would get the message before he went to meet the Shakhhal or that the Portal Authority really didn’t know about the South Portal tunnel.

Seiji mixed himself a drink to soothe his nerves.

It didn’t work.

He went to the dining room table and opened the newspaper to the story about the Portal immigration legislation that had gone into effect today. In an effort to capture red-handed as many Shakhals—or “Shaks,” as the media had dubbed them—and their unwary illegals as possible, the Parliament had deliberated and passed the legislation in secret almost a year ago. Behind closed doors, the Portal Authority had worked with defense contractors to develop a surveillance and security solution that rivaled the military’s technology: armed hover drones, laser-based motion detectors and high altitude aerial surveillance drones with infrared imaging systems. Additionally, a vastly increased complement of Portal personnel would supplement the four thousand Portal Authority Officers that already patrolled the six-hundred-mile long quantum border between the two planets. The legislation had also authorized the dispatch of Golan Guard troops to the Portal to support Portal Authority Officers and provide ad-

ditional firepower as necessary. Gone were the days when Shakhals could smuggle forty or fifty illegals in an AP-12 or LV-4. Every vehicle would now be searched top to bottom and front to back and then scanned with high-powered imaging systems. Worst of all, Seiji thought, the secret legislation had loosened the laws regulating the Portal Officers' protocol on the use of deadly force, a clause bastioned by the recent shoot out between the Portal Authority and a group of crossers who'd been armed by their Shakhal.

Portal Authority Secretary Paul Caleder had commented, "The PA has been working closely with Parliamentary committees to enact and deploy the new measures."

A neighboring article outlined the Open the Portal activist group's protest of the legislation and the secret means by which it was passed. The Open the Portal and the Progression of Human Rights groups were seeking an investigation into the legality of Parliament's secret process, stating that such a process was for use only in times of war.

Seiji thought of Kurn crammed into one of those mining transports with thirty other crossers. He imagined the transport rumbling through the tunnel the Authority supposedly didn't know about. Maybe the Shakhal would take a wrong turn in the labyrinthine tunnel network and get them all lost forever. Or maybe the Shakhal and his cronies would just rob the crossers and leave them to die underground, or maybe not even pick them up and just run away with their prepaid "tickets." Worse yet, he imagined the Authority discovering the tunnel and setting up an ambush on the Ceridean side of the wormhole. He imagined the Shakhal panicking when he saw the PA officers moving in, the Shakhal abandoning the transport and leaving the illegals to fend for themselves. He imagined Kurn escaping the vehicle, his longflute getting snapped in the resulting stampede and his papers of music and his recordings getting trampled. And then running, running from the drones and the men with the guns.

Seiji downed his drink. He made another and downed it. He tried completing a shipping order for the shop but found he still couldn't focus. He gazed at the photo of Tarynne hanging on the wall near the kitchen door. For a moment he could smell the sage in her dark hair and the warmth of her olive skin. If she were here they could talk about other things to take their minds off the situation.

Finally, third drink in hand, Seiji switched on the TV and plopped

down on the couch. He flipped away from the news and onto the Art & History Channel, which was running a program about the extensive cave system discovered in northern Redland last year. The latest theory was that the caves had served as sinus cavities for the leviathan.

Seiji's mind wandered. Twenty years ago, when he had crossed over, it was easy. There weren't as many money-grubbing Shakhals taking advantage of young Candelans wanting to cross over—you didn't need one. There were enormous gaps in Portal patrols—vigilant crossers could just walk across into Golan. And even if you did stow away on an AP-12, the Authority hardly ever searched mining vehicles. Every day a thousand transports passed through the Portal to provide Golanese manufacturers and refineries with their ores and raw stone. The Authority hadn't the time to search every shipment.

Twenty years ago, Seiji had packed into the hold of an LV-8 with his wife and ten other Candelans, mostly young couples. Four hours later, everyone piled out into the industrial district of New Golan and went their separate ways. Seiji had tried to convince his son Brand to join them on that LV-8, but Brand didn't want Jenna to travel, as she was pregnant with Kurn. Up until Brand had died of lung poisoning seven years ago, Seiji had argued with his son about whether Jenna would have died during childbirth had she been in any hospital on Ceridea.

After Brand's death, Seiji started working on Kurn, trying to convince the boy to cross the Portal no matter what it took, no matter what it cost. Scarred black by the war that had destroyed the leviathan three centuries ago, stripped of vegetation and now almost stripped of the resources that made it useful to Golan and the rest of Ceridea, Candela was a dead world that was murdering its inhabitants. The thought of Kurn slowly dying as his lungs turned blacker and blacker...

The TV program was talking about the vents and geyser holes once fed by the Redland cave system, how they served as release mechanisms for the leviathan's pressure-regulating fluids.

The doorbell rang.

Seiji checked his breath, decided it stank, then decided he didn't care and went to the door.

Three men stood outside: two pale, thin men in navy blue Portal

Authority uniforms, and a large man in a police uniform.

“Mr. Jendresen?” one of the pale men said pleasantly. “You are the Mr. Jendresen who owns the clothing shop downstairs?”

“Yes.”

The man smiled broadly. “Good evening, Mr. Jendresen. I hope we’re not interrupting your dinner?”

Seiji stared coolly at the man.

The pale man smiled confidently. “Right,” he said, sniffing. “Mr. Jendresen, you have a grandson in Candela, do you not?”

“What do you want?”

“No matter. We *know* you have a grandson in Candela. You left him a voice message just a little while ago.”

Seiji grabbed the doorframe for support.

The pale man lifted a clipboard and put on a pair of reading glasses. “Kurn,” the man read, “if you get this message, stay put for now. Looks like a storm is coming.”

The man removed his reading glasses, which hung on a golden chain from his neck. “I hear the weather is supposed to be quite nice for the next few days. A little cool, but...nice. Perhaps you have heard otherwise?”

Seiji took a step back into his flat. Leather crinkled as the policeman leaned forward and lifted his gloved fists.

“To what storm are you referring?” the pale man asked.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you here?”

“About,” the pale man said thoughtfully. “About. You say that word so differently. That’s a Candelan accent, is it not, Mr. Jendresen?”

“Yes, well, I *am* from Candela, so it follows that I have a Candelan accent.”

The pale man smiled. “Indeed. And when did you move here, Mr. Jendresen?”

“In 47264 by the Ceridean calendar, 2614 by the Candelan.”

“So about twenty years ago, then. And you applied for citizenship then?”

“Let me go get my mendafar so you can be on your way.”

Seiji started to turn away when the second pale man drew a nightstick and tapped him on the arm. Seiji stared at the men.

“Golan no longer recognizes the Candelan mendafar as adequate identification of citizenship,” the first pale man said. “Don’t you watch the news, Mr. Jendresen?”

Seiji looked at the men. They were going to arrest him.

“Oh, yes,” Seiji sputtered, “I forgot. My ID is pending. Just let me go get my papers.”

He turned away and quickly scanned the windows for a chance to escape. They were all closed—it was a brisk autumn night, after all. Not to mention the fact that he was an old man who lived on the second floor. He’d have to find another way out.

One of the men, probably the policeman, grabbed him from behind and forced him down to the cold tile floor of his front entryway. As one of the men pressed a boot into his cheek, all he could think about was what Tarynne would say if she were still alive. Something dramatic and eloquent in her thick Candelan accent. Seiji had tried to make her drop it because they were fugitives in disguise, but she was stubborn. She said he should be prouder of his heritage. He told her she was reckless.

And so he thought about what she might say now at the sight of her husband being handcuffed at the front door of the flat they rented over the shop they had founded almost twenty years ago. But no words came to mind. She was silent.

The PA officers dragged the Candelan criminal out of the wooden chair. The Candelan, who’d robbed three fuel depots and had been brought in on an assault and attempted rape charge, kicked the wooden chair and screamed something in Candelan at Lieutenant Lowell Valeve, Chief Interrogator of the Portal Authority. Valeve had a hard time understanding Candelan, but he could tell it was some sort of curse. Something about his mother and his rear end. The wooden interrogation chair tottered on two legs before settling back in its upright stance. The man yelled one last curse before the door slammed shut.

Lt. Valeve had no sympathy for the illegals who came over to commit more lucrative crimes than they could commit in Candela. People like that gave all Candelans a bad name. And no one ever

heard about the thousands of good-hearted illegals who were making a living in Golan and elsewhere on Ceridea. As good of a position as Valeve was in to help the cause, his job was made more difficult by the ones who were bad no matter what planet they lived on.

Valeve made a note on his list next to the criminal's name: DEPORT. He looked at the next name on the list: S. Jendresen. This was the one he'd been waiting for. He pulled the man's profile from the stack of folders. Seiji Jendresen. Clothing entrepreneur, undocumented. Paid income taxes with a security number he'd obtained with the Candela-issued mendafar. Made fifty thousand a year. Drove a two-door Juran Chaser. Valeve quickly straightened up his desk, feeling that the importance of this next interrogation needed a nice, orderly setting in which to take place.

The beefy PA officers walked an old man into the room. Valeve normally didn't see many middle-aged or elderly in the interrogation room, but he had seen thirty-two already today. He figured he'd be seeing a lot more now that the Portal clampdown legislation had passed.

After looping his handcuffed hands behind the chair back, the officers pushed the old man down into the rickety wooden chair. The man did not struggle. He sat quietly.

"Thank you," Valeve said dismissively to the officers, who smiled as they tied the man to the chair. Grunts, mercs, brutes. Valeve hated working with them. He had plenty of genuine friends among the higher-ups—as an infiltrator, he had to—and, of course, there was Paul, but he rarely worked with the higher-ups directly. He was stuck in the peremptory, figurehead position of Chief Interrogator of the Portal Authority of New Golan. And so he worked with sadistic men like these guys.

"Thank you," Valeve said, forcefully this time. "You can go."

The officers looked up at Valeve, scoffed and then left, slamming the steel door behind them.

Stroking the Service Cross pinned to his uniform, Valeve looked up at Jendresen. Thin, gray hair. Olive skin that was beginning to wrinkle and wither. Healthy-looking but frail. There was a bruise forming over his left brow. The man's head hung low. Blood dripped from his nose and splattered his sweatpants.

"Mr. Jendresen," Valeve said. "You are under arrest for illegal

presence in Golan. Do you deny this charge?"

"What took you guys so long?" Jendresen said in a Candelan accent. He spat blood on his pants. "Twenty years? My dead grandmother could've smoked me out in two."

Valeve chuckled. "I'll take that as a non-denial. It says here you also employ illegal immigrants from Candela to work in your clothing shop. Is that true?"

Jendresen's face turned cold. "Some of my employees have a mendafar credential or a pending application for the mendafar credential."

"Unfortunately, the new Golanese Portal legislation no longer recognizes the mendafar as a valid form of identification, as it does not prove Golanese citizenship."

"That's what I keep hearing."

Valeve considered the man for a moment, then walked around his desk, picked up a piece of paper, made a show of reading it, then approached the chair and dropped it at Jendresen's feet. He crouched to pick it up.

"The Authority doesn't know about the new tunnel," he whispered. "I need your help if you want your grandson to make it. Speak softly or the microphones will hear you." Valeve raised his voice. "Yes, I am going to hurt you. The law gives me full authority to do so."

Jendresen stared at Valeve, studied the interrogator's eyes. "What are you talking about?" Jendresen asked.

Valeve spoke quietly again. "We must be fast. I can't stop them from prosecuting or deporting you. They've been monitoring your communications. They think you know where the tunnel is. In a minute, I'm going to ask you where it is. Tell me it's under Wick Mountain. I'm sorry I have to bang you up a little bit."

Jendresen stared at Valeve as the interrogator stood up and pulled a pair of gloves from his uniform pockets.

"Very well," Valeve said loudly, "but I am very good at hurting people." The gloves were always cold at first. They warmed quickly. He pulled them on tight.

Jendresen stared at the gloved hands, looked up at Valeve.

Valeve slapped the man across the face. Blood spattered the linoleum floor. Jendresen coughed, his lips and chin black with dried

blood and scarlet with fresh.

Valeve walked around behind the chair. “Where are they crossing?”

Jendresen didn’t answer.

Valeve came around the man’s other side and punched him in the cheek. Jendresen cried out.

Valeve hoped the old man believed him. He knew it might actually look like some sort of twisted interrogation tactic, pretending to be an insider, and he hated to work this way in his own interrogation chamber, where the cameras were always rolling and the microphones were always recording, but the wheels were turning quickly with this new legislation. He had to keep the tunnel a secret for as long as he could until he or Paul or the other activists could get word to their men on Candela. This tunnel was one of the very few ways anyone was getting across the Portal anymore, and the Authority heads knew it. Jendresen probably didn’t know where it was, but the evidence certainly implied he did know. He was the perfect decoy.

“Again,” Valeve said, “where are they crossing?”

“Wick Mountain,” the old man finally said, but it didn’t matter.

Lt. Danes removed his headphones, then picked up the phone and dialed the Undersecretary’s office.

“What is it?” the Undersecretary asked.

“It’s Valeve,” Danes said. “He’s using the old man to throw us off. He’s trying to hand us a decoy.”

“Damn. I was hoping it wasn’t Valeve.”

Danes smiled. Danes had never liked Valeve. The Chief Interrogator had never fooled him with his suave manner. Danes waited as the Undersecretary mulled.

“OK, I’ll have him picked up. Never thought I’d have to interrogate the Chief Interrogator. You have it recorded, I assume?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Good work, Lieutenant.”

The Undersecretary hung up.

Danes smiled. He figured his breakthrough would get him a couple steps closer to Valeve’s job.

Danes put the headphones back on to listen to the microphone hidden in Valeve's Service Cross. The microphones planted in the interrogation room weren't sensitive enough to overhear the lieutenant's treachery, but the bug in the medal was sensitive enough to relay the man's heartbeat. His smile grew broader as Valeve continued to batter the old man for show. He hoped they would let him participate in the interrogation of the traitor. He had some great ideas on how to extract information from quiet men.

Strategically maneuvering his patent leathers between pools of blood on the floor of the prison cell, Portal Authority Secretary Paul Caleder knelt down and shook Valeve by the shoulder. The Chief Interrogator rolled over with a groan. His face was black and blue. One eye was swollen shut. His nose was broken and his lips had split open. Whoever had interrogated Valeve had done quite a number.

"Valeve," Caleder said.

Valeve groaned.

"Valeve!" he yelled. "Talk to me."

"Paul..."

"I'm sorry this happened, Lowell. I'm sorry I trusted you."

Lowell Valeve's non-swollen eye widened in horror. He started to reach toward Caleder, then cried out in pain and pulled his arm back. The arm looked twisted at the elbow. Caleder tried not to think about what they'd done to his old friend.

"I'm sorry you have to take a fall," Caleder said, his words practiced and carefully weighted. He had been rehearsing what he was going to say to Valeve since the Undersecretary came to him with the incriminating recording an hour ago. He really was sorry that Lowell had blown his own cover. Caleder had worked hard to get his old friend into the Chief position, but Lowell Valeve always had been reckless. "Always assume you're bugged," Caleder had once told him. Lowell had finally forgotten. Or he'd stopped caring.

"Paul," Valeve groaned. "Please. I don't..."

"I'll make it a private announcement if you tell me where the tunnel is," Caleder said, loud enough for any eavesdropping device to hear. "You can go to jail quietly. Tell me where the tunnel is. Now."

Caleder planted his hand in a spot on the floor that wasn't wet with blood and placed his ear close to his old friend's mouth.

Valeve said nothing.

Caleder stood up. "Thank you."

Caleder went to the door and banged three times on the cold steel. "Guard!"

The guard opened the door and saluted.

"Paul..." Valeve groaned.

Caleder strode out of the cell without looking back, leaving his old friend to bleed on the floor. The guard closed the door. Caleder took a few steps toward the elevator, then stopped.

"Private?"

"Sir?" the guard said behind him.

"Get him a medic, would you?"

"Yes, sir."

Back in his office, Caleder slumped down in his chair. He picked up the magazine he'd been reading, an article about the quantum mechanics involved in the Portal and the theories about how the leviathan might have created the wormhole. Recently there had been a huge resurgence of research on the beast, possibly fueled by the political debate over the Portal.

He threw the magazine across the room, then leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. He had thought Valeve was done taking stupid risks. During the Eastern War, Valeve had rescued a squad mate who'd been hit by a sniper bullet in a wide-open street. A few months later, after running out of ammunition and while waiting for a supply drop, he'd crawled eighty yards through tall grass to a bunker turret, sneaked in through the back and taken out the gunners with his combat knife. And then he manned the turret and shot down the two gunships the gunners had called in on a strafing run. He'd received two Hearts and a Service Cross for what some people called heroism and what Caleder called insanity.

Three years ago, during coffee after dinner in Caleder's manor, Lowell had told Caleder about his views on the Portal situation, how they should open the Portal and welcome the Candelans with open arms.

"The government limits immigration because the corporations need people there to keep the mines running."

“That’s not true,” Caleder said, laughing.

“We both know it’s true. They’re slaves, Paul. We are keeping them in the mines.”

“Maybe, maybe.” But Caleder knew Valeve was right. The Candelan government, if you could call it that, received kickbacks from the Golanese government and the governments of other Ceridean nations that just happened to be home to corporations with material or financial stakes in the Candelan mines. “What about the criminals, Lowell? The diamond runners? The thieves? The prostitutes? We can’t just let everyone in.”

“We deport them. They screw up, they get thrown out.”

“So, we just take the ones we like? The ones with the thinnest accents? The ones who look less like miners and more like us? Just put ‘em all in a colander and shake out the bad ones? What if the good ones can’t find jobs? Should our taxes support them and pay for their medicine just because they haven’t had the benefit of a Golanese education?”

“This is about helping people, Paul. Our taxes already support unemployed Golanese and Golanese who can’t get medical care.”

“Right, but a thousand more people? A hundred thousand more people? Money runs out.”

“There is more than enough money,” Lowell Valeve snapped, setting his coffee mug down on the mantle. Caleder thought his friend’s eyes burned brighter than the fire blazing in the fireplace. “We just have to learn how to use it.”

“Lowell, you’re naïve.”

“Paul, you’re a coward.”

Then Undersecretary Paul Caleder had eventually let himself be persuaded by Valeve’s insane plan to undermine the Portal Authority. When he became Secretary a year later, after Secretary Yates’ resignation, Caleder had quickly appointed Valeve to the position of Chief Interrogator.

Caleder loved the man and hated himself for what he had to do. The Undersecretary and his eavesdroppers certainly knew that Valeve had told the prisoner to say, “Wick Mountain,” a decoy location. Caleder had to crack down on the real thing.

He picked up his secure line.

“Sir?” his assistant answered.

Caleder hesitated. He thought about Lowell's words those three years ago. He started to hang up the phone.

No, he didn't believe it. Not anymore. *Cowards don't make hard decisions.*

"Sir?"

"South Portal Patrol," he told his assistant.

The line crackled and beeped as the connection was made.

"South Portal," a man answered. "Corporal Zal."

"Corporal, this is Secretary Caleder. Patch me through to the XO of the Golan Guard Brigade down there."

"Portal's less than a quarter-mile up," Rey said. "Paint it."

The cavern echoed with the clitter-clatter of equipment as the men of the 117th Golan Guard Brigade took up positions.

Cpl. Harriman followed Pvt. Kyles to the wall, where they crouched and waited for the quantum painters to do their job. He could tell it was Kyles from the telltale skull painted on the soldier's supply pack.

A moment later, the cavern echoed with the sound of equipment whining, clicking, popping. The quantum paint bonded with the quantum particles of the wormhole entrance standing less than a quarter-mile down the cavernous hallway. Slowly the cavern filled with white light, enough that the soldiers could turn off their night vision. The support soldiers began packing up the rods of their quantum painters as the rest of the squad moved forward.

"I want the barrier set up between these boulders. The rest of you take up positions behind. Sit and wait."

Once the steel barrier was in place, the cave slowly filled with the bated murmur of pre-battle conversation.

Kyles looked at Harriman and swiveled his microphone away from his mouth. "So this was a vein or artery or something?" he said quietly.

"I guess," Harriman said, running his fingers along the smooth wall. "Explains the surface smoothness. Liquid erodes the rough edges of the rock."

"Man, that thing was huge."

“The size of two planets.”

“How’d they kill it?”

“Viruses and chemicals. They basically got it sick and dissolved it. And they used radiation in some places.”

“Creepy.”

Harriman loved reading about the conquest of Candela and Ceridea and the battles with the planetary leviathan. His parents’ stories about the monster had been meant to scare him into better behavior—“Leviathan will come up beneath the house if you don’t eat your vegetables.” And, like most Cerideans, Harriman had had plenty of nightmares about the creature. But as he’d grown older, he’d devoted a lot of time to studying the largest organism known to humankind. The most interesting part of it, he thought, was the fact that the creature had had two slightly different physiologies, one for each planet. Different suns, different atmospheres, different geological compositions and tectonic activities. A single animal with two simultaneous evolutionary tracks. Some scientists still held on to the theory that it should be classified as two separate organisms, but studies of the data collected by the military that had killed it three centuries ago showed that there was an extensive amount of organic material passing back and forth through the wormhole itself.

The wormhole flickered.

“Something coming through!” crackled the radio.

“Combat positions, people.”

The soldiers got to their feet, cocked their assault rifles, jogged into position. Harriman crouched beside a boulder, trained his rifle on the wormhole. His heart quickened. He hoped the crossers were armed, like in that shoot out last month. He had not been excited about being assigned to the South Portal region, but this might be as close to a combat situation as he would get while serving in the Guard. So far it had been disaster relief after disaster relief. Blizzards and floods and tornadoes and earthquakes. He was still kicking himself for letting Mother convince him to go into the Guard instead of the Army.

The shimmering particles in the round face of the wormhole revolved around the epicenter in an accelerating, inward spiral. The spiral collapsed suddenly with a flash, an acrid crackle, and then the AP-12 grumbled into the cavern, its soot-stained steel hull glimmer-

ing as residual quantum paint ran over it in violet waves.

The ballistics team let loose with two RPGs, which exploded with resounding *bangs* beneath the transport's front axle. The AP-12 ground to a halt.

"Open your hold!" yelled Sgt. Rey through a bullhorn. "Put your hands over your heads and exit single file!"

"Point team, advance," Rey added over the radio. "Go around back."

The five point soldiers advanced along the cavern walls, their rifles trained on the AP-12. There was no movement from the mining transport. The cavern air smelled of burning metal and grease and deep, moist earth.

There was a loud *clang* from the AP-12, then a crowd of panicked voices.

The point team jogged along the wall.

Harriman could see movement at the back of the transport. They'd opened the rear hold. The crossers were climbing out.

A flash and a *rattle* of gunfire at the rear of the transport. Harriman's heart raced faster.

The point team returned fire on the illegals pouring out of the transport. The crowd screamed. Suddenly there were Candelans everywhere, crawling on the cavern floor around the transport, running toward the soldiers, taking cover beneath the transport chassis. They carried duffel bags, backpacks, suitcases, trash bags.

"What the hell's going on back there?" crackled Rey's voice.

"Two shooters," radioed the point leader. "One is down. The other is back in the transport. Two crossers are down."

"Point, kill the shooter. Support, get those people out of there."

Harriman and the rest of the support team ran for the transport. He kept his eyes on the front windshield of the transport in case the shooter came up front to pick people off. Not a second later a figure appeared behind the grimy windshield and shot out the glass with his semi-auto rifle. Harriman bent to one knee, took aim, pulled the trigger. Five bullets buzzed through the windshield. The shooter grunted as all five thunked into his side. He went down immediately.

"Shooter down," Harriman radioed, then moved in on the illegals swarming around the transport. The Candelans stared up at him, black tears rolling down their soot-stained faces. Men, women, a few

children. They desperately clutched bags and loose belongings. A little girl was carrying a filthy doll. Harriman kept his rifle trained on them—any one of them could have a weapon. “Keep these covered,” Harriman ordered his fellow support team. He moved toward the back of the transport, waving the illegals by as he went.

The point team was getting ready to enter the AP-12.

“Cover these guys, would you?” one of the point soldiers said to Harriman, pointing at the Candelans on the ground: two men and a boy who couldn’t have been out of his teens. One of the men had been hit in the shoulder. He writhed silently and wiped fruitlessly at the wound with his hand as it bled profusely. The other man’s face was covered in blood—Harriman couldn’t tell where he’d been hit, but the man was certainly dead. The boy had been hit in the chest and was coughing up blood. It glistened in the white light of the Portal shimmering fifteen feet away.

“Medics at the back,” Harriman radioed.

The boy stared at him with wide, terrified eyes. He wouldn’t last long if he didn’t get help. Harriman knelt by the boy, unclipped the field med pack from his belt and popped it open. He shook out a couple painkillers and jabbed them into the kid’s neck. The boy’s eyes glazed over two seconds later.

As he was standing up, Harriman noticed a piece of paper in the boy’s blood-soaked hands. He took it and unfolded it. An old letter kept intact by tape. Most of the text was illegible from the blood, but he managed to make out a little bit of it: “I don’t have better words.”

The Golanese soldier put the letter back in Kurn’s hands. The soldier looked sad. Kurn wondered why. The soldier nodded and smiled, and Kurn found the smile somehow encouraging, as if the soldier was telling him he’d be all right. The soldier stood up and walked away.

Warmth spread from Kurn’s neck down through his body. He wondered what the soldier had poured on him. Some kind of medicine. He knew he’d been hurt, but he couldn’t figure out how. It was a little hard to breathe. Maybe someone had punched him in the stom-

ach. No matter. He gazed at the white light of the Portal as it waved and shuddered nearby.

“The Shak was running diamonds,” a soldier said.

“Of course he was,” another said.

Kurn looked up at the back of the transport. One soldier, standing in the transport, was looking down at the soldier who’d just given Kurn the medicine. Kurn could see two more soldiers opening up the mining crates that he and the other Candelans had been hiding between on their way through the Portal.

Then there was another soldier kneeling beside him. He was pulling bandages from a metal box.

Then it was dark.

Rock slid by above. Darkness again. A rustling somewhere above. A breeze cooled his face. Things sharp and soft skipped along his body, making him think of Father’s stories of the leviathan. The thing that crept from secret caves and stole children in the night.

“Call an airlift for the edge of the forest,” someone said.

The stars came out. They were different, though. Then Kurn remembered he was now on Ceridea. No wonder the stars looked different. He’d never thought about how the sky would differ here. Different skies. Different stars. Different suns.

Father had once pointed out the Ceridean sun on a clear night. “That’s one hundred twenty-seven light years from here,” he’d said.

“What does that mean?” Kurn had asked.

“It means that you’re seeing the star as it was one hundred twenty-seven years ago.”

He scanned the starscape in search of the Candelan sun as it was one hundred twenty-seven years ago, before he was born, before Father was born, before Grandpa was born. Maybe that was the big difference between Candelans and Cerideans: it was a problem of suns. If they had the same sun, there would be no problem. What an idea for a song! A song of different suns and different skies and the nightmare that lived on two different worlds and the people who destroyed the nightmare and then split apart and became two different societies. A solemn melody began to wander his mind, following the rhythm of the footsteps of the men who carried him, crafting itself while obeying the mathematics of tone and meter that had become second nature to him. With the solemn melody there grew a miners’

work chorus and a keyboard chord progression in the style of a Red-land song he'd once heard, and woven through it all were the lilting threads of a longflute.

Kurn tried to reach for the notebook and pen he kept in his pocket so he could write down his ideas, but he couldn't move. *Something to do with the medicine, probably. I'll just have to keep running it through my head. Keep repeating it and you'll remember it.*

As the stars blinked and smoldered and danced far above, Kurn Jendresen played the new song in his head, listened to it, tweaked it, sculpted it. He couldn't wait to tell Grandpa about it.

It was going to be a great song.

