

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #2



Poetry by Jennifer Crow

Stories by Lou Antonelli
Yosof Sharifi

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September

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Lee Kuruganti's Cover Art: *Alien Crash*

Lee Kuruganti is relatively new on the scene, but that has not stopped her from starting strongly. She is an amazing artist, whose work has already appeared in magazines such as *Staticmovement* and on the covers of books like *Sha'Daa II Beachheads*. More of her work can be found online.



Publisher, Seth Crossman

Editor, Seth Crossman

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Editor's Letter

Secrets.

There are so many of them. Who killed John F. Kennedy? Have aliens ever passed through the Milky Way Galaxy or even landed on earth? What was the first human *really* like? Where is Heaven and can I touch God? What happened to all that sunken treasure and how much is there? Where are all the missing children?

These secrets are buried in the past and they lie hidden in the future. They lie below miles of water and are buried beneath the earth. They are beyond the reach of shuttles, out in the expanse of blackness I see at night. Who knows the secrets and why aren't they telling?

Secrets.

It is amazing what we don't know. We probably can't even begin to comprehend the scope of what we don't know.

Yet some of us are curious cats. We *long* to know the answers to these questions. Most likely, beyond a few surprising breakthroughs, the answers will remain beyond our reach except through our own imaginations.

The imagination is a powerful tool and a wonderful hope. It is not until we imagine something is possible, that its reality and eventual fruition can begin.

It is for us writers to use our imaginations and illuminate those truths, to reveal those secrets, ponder them and perhaps find the truth.

But it is a thin line.

Some secrets are better left hidden, not only because they can be dangerous as our own history suggests, but because some of the wonder is lost in the reality.

C.S. Lewis put it aptly, "The best is perhaps what we understand least."

That is why secrets are seductive and magical.



Berserker

By Lou Antonelli

Lou is a professional journalist and has won awards in news, feature, column, sports and editorial writing. His stories have been published in RevolutionSF, Bewildering Stories, Astounding Tales, and Asimov's Science Fiction, among others. He is a recipient of eight honorable mentions in The Year's Best Science Fiction since 2004. We are proud to have this timely tale.

My football-scarred ass was floating on a neat little maglev plate in a sonic whirlpool. I was just beginning to relax. I had to fill two piss pouches that day, the regular daily doping test, which was only going through the motions, of course, as well as a second one to show that the regen nanites I had taken for my ACL tear had washed out.

Everyone cheated. You were expected to. Those regen nanites I took for the ACL tear--yeah, the ones Doc gave me washed out, but I pumped in some silicon ones gray-marketed from Vilnius. I got them from a trainer. Those little Lithuanian buggers didn't react to anything. Of course, I'll probably never get rid of them. I'll be peeing out sand when I'm old. If I live that long.

Brad Carlisle sidled up to me and bent down. "The Hillman is going berserk tomorrow," he said quietly.

I didn't turn my head. "How do you know?"

"I heard him tell Coach we're sure to win."

"Shit."

The Hillman. That was his nickname, because of his name as well as because he was as big as a hill. Hylton Hawkins had been a defensive lineman with the Cowboys for ten years--a long damn time in pro ball, especially when you're constantly being doped with nutraceuticals, nanoparticles and gm-protein supplements. It took a toll.

The Hillman was really sort of dumb and sweet; he was just a big East Texas country kid out of Texas College in Tyler. For years after he hit the big time he threw away his money on drugs, whores and cars. Of course, team owner Joe Jenkins got a cut of it all. It was Jenkins who spread the money around to pay off the police and the media. And it was Jenkins who sent the word down that a berserker payoff was available.

Not that it was very common, or people might have wised up. Even as corrupt as the U.S. and especially Texas was, you couldn't pay someone to go berserk very often.

The summer of '27 we were a tight race in the west division with the Raiders. Oakland was coming to town for the second-to-last game of the season and everyone knew it was an important one. Tuesday that week Coach said it was a "must win". We all knew what that meant. That was the code.

I thought we could win anyhow, so I didn't give it much thought. Then Carlisle dropped me the word.

He slipped away as quickly as he came. I muttered under my breath. "Oh, Hillman."

Three years earlier he had met a nice gal and married. He really settled down, in every way. Had his mook block the drug dealers, stopped going to the titty bars. Christ, he traded in the candy apple red Viper for a fuel cell SUV.

Last year they had a sweet baby girl. His wife brought her to the sidelines during training camp. Adorable little booger.

I'll never have any kids. I went to a Big Ten school. The steroids I took in college turned my cojones to stone. In the big leagues you didn't get anything as crude as steroids--unless and until you went berserk.

The news from Carlisle hit me like a horse dose of respirocites. Goddamn, why didn't I think of it? Hylton has squandered millions over the years. Even from the nosebleed seats you could see he was struggling this season. His pro career was coming to a close--and he had a wife and a daughter he probably couldn't provide for in the future.

I was a strong safety slash corner back. The shit I took to do my job would probably make me hobble and wheeze by the time I was 60. That was the trade-off for being a pro. A big lineman like The Hillman--he'd probably be in an augmented wheelchair by the time he was 45.

Well, now he'd never have that problem.

I must have looked stunned when I got out of the whirlpool and went over to the physical therapist doing rubdowns.

He rubbed his mech-gloved hands over my calves and thighs. "Marcos, man, you look puny."

Nanites are supposed to be too small to cause an immune reaction, but the silicon jobbers from Vilnus didn't seem to know that. Between the nanites and the bad news, I was sweating like a hog.

I faked a smile. "I had to give two UA samples this morning. I feel squeezed like a lemon. Sometimes it's awfully inconvenient, as Coach would say."

The trainer laughed. “You’ll bounce back soon enough.”

Hylton was already on the field by the time I was suited up. I slapped his shoulder pads as I ran by. He didn’t turn or acknowledge me. With those carbon nanotube plates, he might not have even felt it.

He was subdued and held back somewhat from the other players during practice. There wasn’t much of the normal macho chatter and cussing, and what there was sounded tinny. I think the word had begun to spread. The grunt trainers and second stringers might have thought we were all concentrating on the next day’s game. In a way, we were.

The locker room bullshit and bragging seemed forced. A few of the players hailed Hylton as they walked by; he only grunted or said “hey” in that squeaky voice of his. He showered and dressed quickly. He didn’t look to the right or the left. He looked down, and then walked out.

A few of us shot glances at each other. We really couldn’t say anything that might get back to Jenkins. I just shook my head a little. “Goddamn Jenkins.” I thought.

Running a pro football franchise was a big business. In an evil way, he was real smart. He made millions, but spread a lot around. The league and the officials were kept happy.

You know, by then, some people had begun to wonder why we were still using cash in the U.S. If you ever saw an official pick up a fat envelope before a game, you would have known why. No smart chips in cash.

I was doing well myself. I had a big ice machine that rattled the bridge over the condensation canal as I pulled out of the parking lot.

That year the canal was almost overflowing all summer as the cooling towers sucked the moisture from the domed stadium. Welcome to the Texas Tropics. And God bless Houston, the poor bastards. I paid a fat fee for the right to drive that internal combustion engine. It was worth it to hear the roar and watch people turn as I rumbled down the streets in North Dallas.

Other players lived in the gated community. Carlisle was one of them, and I banged on his door as soon as I got out of my car.

“You went straight home, too, I see.”

“I guess I’m like you, I don’t feel like going out tonight.”

“Where’s Melissa?”

“She’s off with some friends at the Galleria.”

We sat down with some microbrews.

“You know, when I was in high school and a player would drop dead, I thought it was like they said, stress, you know, and the strain of pro ball.”

“It’s not like it’s common,” said Brad. “Hard for the public to see a pattern. John Tomachevski with the Pats two years ago--from what I heard, he really did have a aneurysm.”

“Yeah, but was it caused by drugs, anyhow?”

“Welcome to the Big Leagues. The point is, he didn’t go berserk.”

For the past few years, once or twice a season, a player had died either after being stricken on the field or in the locker room. When I was a rookie out of college, I thought it was the drugs and the stress, too.

“I’ve only been on the team a few years. I’ve never seen this happen with the ‘Boys.” Brad smiled a thin smile as he wagged his beer bottle. “Yeah, well. Money talks and bullshit walks. The Hillman wants his wife and kid cared for.”

“You think she knows?”

“What do you think?”

“What will she think after the game?”

"She'll probably think he took one hit too many." He stared down the long neck of his bottle. "At least, that's what she'll be told."

Brad was an offensive lineman. The calcium-carrying nanocrystals he took for his bones had begun to affect his face. When he looked serious, it looked like a mask.

I stood up and looked out the window. “Do you think it’s really his idea?”

“He probably thinks so. I’m sure Jenkins somehow dropped him a hint. Maybe he read the *News* on Sunday. You saw that story about J.J. Jervinis.”

“J.J. was in a fight in a bar.”

“Yeah, well, I'm sure Jenkins knew about his contract.”

“You don’t think he’d arrange for somebody to beat J.J. up?” Brad took a long swig. “Well?”

J.J. left the team the year before, banged up and broken after spending years on the line. He was killing the pain the previous Saturday night when he got in some kind of fight in a West End bar. The beating left him brain dead.

Usually people go years before passing away and having their organs harvested.

“Everyone knew he signed that organ contract so he’d have some money for himself and his wife,” Brad continued. “But he only collected a few months. Hardly got anything at all. His wife’s screwed now.”

“What do you think it would take to take J.J. down in a fair fight?” he asked bitterly. “It was obviously a set-up.” Also, J.J. didn’t read the fine print. The company he signed with exercised its option once he was on life

support. Instead of pumping him full of hyper-accelerated regen nanites, they parted him out.

“Shit, you think Jenkins would do that just to drop a hint to The Hillman?”

“Hey, he’s not the sharpest guy in the world, but he knows what’s coming at the end of the season,” he said. “He sees someone like J.J. push off and leave his woman high and dry, and then a day or two later, a berserker bonus is hanging out there. A sure ten million dollars.”

Something about quoting an actual dollar figure startled me. “Is that the going rate?”

Brad flipped open another bottle. “From what I hear.”

“I wonder if he knows how much his wife and baby girl will miss him?”

“I think he sees it as a self-sacrifice, which it is.”

The sun was setting over Dallas. The late afternoon monsoon rainbow was fading into the orange twilight.

“You know, what pisses me off the most is that we can’t say anything,” I said. “You know what a businessman like Jenkins would do.”

Brad shook his head in a short jerky kind of way. “There’s not much guys like us can do.”

He took a really long swig. “We’re just twenty first century gladiators. Sometimes, you win, sometimes they drag you out by your heels.”

“Yeah, well the gladiators were forced to do it. Or they did it for the glory. We do it for the money.”

Brad gave a bitter chuckle and raised his bottle in a mock salute. “God bless America!”

I could tell how he was dealing with his feelings, so I left him to soak and slouched over to my apartment. I kept the TV on flat as I watched the news and sports; I wasn’t keen to have the sports AI’s jumping across the room at me. The old pro, Dale Hammond, was live and real, though, and holding forth.

“The Cowboys’ game tomorrow against the Raiders is an important one, but both teams are in the playoffs. The only thing to be decided is who plays against whom, and for Dallas, whether they can put the hurt on a tough Oakland team which will try to keep them from making it out of the division.”

“It’s an important game, a big game, but let’s get past the hype,” he continued. “Nobody needs to go berserk, if you know what I mean. Cool heads will prevail.”

I sat up like a shot. “Goddamn, he knows!”

“Troy!” I shouted. My mook came on.

“Yes, most worthy buster of butts?”

“I need an e-mail to Dale Hammond. Just say, ‘I saw your report on the 10 o'clock news. Hylton Hawkins is a player to watch in the Oakland game.’”

“Do you want to send this as ‘anonymous?’”

I thought hard for a few seconds. I guess it was time to be a standup man. “No. Fuck Jenkins. Use my proper name. Marcos B. Taylor.”

“Yes, sir. Sent.”

I know it wasn't much, but it was something. If anything came down, well, shit, I could make a dash for the Pacifica Republic. That would be funny--I might even play for Oakland.

I thought about Hylton as I drifted off to sleep listening to my restful playlist coming through my audio chip. I saw the face of his wife and daughter, who would not have a husband and father tomorrow night.

I thought about what Brad had said. “Yeah, bread and circuses,” I thought. “Beer and football.” I rolled over. “Let's not forget about drugs and nanites,” and after the endorphins kicked in, I slept.

#

I saw the video bots buzzing around under the dome like vultures as I looked out the runway. I had to wait my turn as we all were dosed with our protein/calcium supplement. I didn't see Hylton at all; he was in a back room probably being prepped like an Aztec sacrifice.

The supplement was supposed to be simple gm-proteins and minerals; we knew Jenkins, as well as all the other owners, paid off the league to look the other way. It was a witch's brew of nanoparticles and crystals that looked as ugly as swamp water and tasted worse; we bitterly called it Nanorade.

The linemen on both sides of the ball also got a shot of respirocycles, to carry extra oxygen in their bloodstream during the game. One of the few things they dosed us with that was actually harmless, but still illegal. It was given under the guise of a vitamin shot.

I was on the sideline when Hylton came out right before kickoff. They obviously didn't want him talking to anyone. I saw the head trainer wave a little hand-held device alongside his helmet. He was disabling his MEMS chip so the medical staff wouldn't get an accurate reading of his vitals during the game. The doctor had to be in on this, too, for it to work.

I took my place for the opening kickoff. From behind I could see Hylton and could tell everything was ready to kick in. The Hillman looked like he was ready to take off like a rocket. In addition to our normal

pre-game preps, he was now full of nanites to increase his muscle metabolism, along with others carrying steroids. He also probably was pumped a few gallons of enhanced methamphetamines. His metabolism sped up to the point that I could almost see the heat coming off his helmet.

He probably had a normally lethal dose of nutraceuticals to fuel all this, and probably some narcotic happy juice for good measure. I just caught out of the corner of my eye his wife with their daughter on her knee sitting in the third or fourth row on the fifty yard line.

The other corner back took the ball and sprinted up the field as Hylton cleared a swath. He batted and banged away the Oakland line and secondary like so many toy soldiers. Our runner tripped over his own feet at midfield because he was running so fast.

On the next down, Oakland made a line shift. One of their largest linemen, Dexter Ward, lined up opposite Hylton. I thought, “poor chump, he doesn’t know what he’s in for.”

On the next play, the pair hit squarely. The stadium almost shook. The play stacked up in the middle.

I couldn’t figure out what happened. I looked over to Brad on the sidelines. His eyes just got real wide. I guess he got a better view from where he was. Then it hit me.

I hadn’t cussed like that since when I was in college and realized what the steroids had done to me.

That had never happened before, two players at the same time. Oakland had a player going berserk, too.

I learned later the progression of the nanites and other drugs was accelerated by the increase in a player’s metabolism and adrenaline as the game progressed--but normally a player went a few quarters before he got real sick, because he was batting away his opponents.

Now with two equally enhanced and aggressive players facing each other, they quickly went out of control. After a couple of downs, our quarterback was shouting at Hylton in the huddle, who couldn’t hear because of the blood rushing in his ears. The Oakland QB was screaming at Ward, too.

You could tell from the hush that fell over the stadium that the fans knew what had happened. All the players, both on the Dallas and Oakland teams, were stunned and weak-kneed. To see a player go berserk was bad enough. To see two players killing each other on the 50-yard line was a horror show.

The pair began to hit each other so violently blood splattered on other players, who began to shrink away, afraid of being infected by the

raging nanites. The refs looked like they were trying to walk backwards out the stadium.

And neither team was scoring.

After a punting the ball back and forth a couple of times, neither QB could keep either lineman in the huddle. They paced the line of scrimmage and groaned like animals.

At the seven-minute mark of that first quarter, the pair hit each other so hard and evenly they both bounced back three or four feet from the line of scrimmage. The ref's whistle was futile. They shouted and went after each other.

Ward landed a crushing blow on Hylton's head that crushed the top of his helmet. Hylton's simultaneous blow, to the side of Ward's helmet, obviously broke his neck.

It was over.

Ward was dead, but Hylton was still breathing, and now the medical staff had to go through the motions of trying to help him. Jenkins meanwhile had come down from his sky box and, as he so often did, put on a show of fake concern over the injured player.

The doctors and trainers were mumbling and looking at each other. Hylton began to convulse.

Jenkins stood next to Doc. "Can't you do something for the boy?" he shouted. For the record.

He looked down and over at Hylton. In one gigantic spasm, Hylton's back arched in a violent thrust and the contents of his stomach erupted all over Jenkins.

Hylton's body relaxed and as his head turned sideways blood ran out onto the artificial turf and towards Jenkins, who stood there with puke all over his face and suit. You could see him raise his hands like he was ready to scream, but then he saw Doc's face and he froze.

Doc saw Jenkins had aspirated some of the vomit. A trainer dumped a water bottle over Jenkins' head. Another began to wipe his face with a towel. Coach spun Jenkins around and told him to run towards the locker room, and then shoved him ahead of him as he ran.

Brad came up to me as everyone stood there stunned. We listened as the ref called off the game.

Brad took off his helmet. "Can you believe this?"

I thought I heard a baby crying in the stands.

I looked towards the runway where Jenkins disappeared, and said the most hateful thing I ever have said in my life.

"I hope he dies, too."

I meant it.

#

Hammond went live after the game, and bless his artificial heart, laid it on the line. Some of the other sportscasters still couldn't get over their fear of Jenkins and they hemmed and hawed and babbled from the sidelines.

Hammond was live and livid. Everyone who saw it remembers it. I was ten feet away.

"Two wrongs don't make a right, but it does make it over," he declaimed as he began.

When he was done and the lights went off, he muttered, "The suits can have me fired, but I don't care."

I went over to him. "We hold these goofs to be self-evident. There's no turning back."

"Thanks for the e-mail, Marcos." He smiled. "You confirmed what I suspected."

"You didn't know, for sure?"

"No, not really, but with my experience, I had a real good hunch. Actually, I was more sure of Dexter. There is much more freedom in Pacifica and I have good sources in the Bay Area." He threw his bag over his shoulder. "In fact, I feel a trip to the West Coast coming on. I have a jet at Addison Airport."

He turned away.

"Hey, you old sports hound, can I come?"

He smiled a crooked smile. "What do you plan to do out there?"

I threw my helmet to the sidelines.

"Defect."

#

I was still wearing my uniform when we arrived in California. On the way to the hotel we watched the video as a representative of the Pacifica Council met the Oakland team at the airport. The coach was quickly in jail, the owner in France.

Reforms haven't moved as quickly in the U.S. That's why I have welcomed the opportunity to testify before this congressional committee. I think every intelligent and honest person in the U.S. supports the nanotech legislation proposed by the Administration. Although I am no longer a U.S. citizen, I urge its passage, and I hope my first-hand account of Bloody Monday has been enlightening.

I hope you understand my reasons for not coming in person. There are still people like Joe Jenkins in the U.S. ready with bucks and bribes. I think I'll stay put in Pacifica for the time being.

Jenkins hasn't died, yet. They've been trying to purge the nanites, I understand. Apparently he's little more than a zombie. Mrs. Hawkins and her daughter received a \$50 million settlement from the court-ordered sale of the team.

Because of the reforms enacted by Pacifica after Bloody Monday, I have enjoyed playing football for the Raiders. I know the abuses in the U.S. are disappearing. Let's finish the job.

#

Sometimes I have nightmares. Nightmares neural-interface chips can't control. I see a metal box designed to hold ashes, sitting on a mantel in a home in North Dallas. It's late at night, and there's not a sound.

I can see the box move just a little. And I hear it groan



Burrowing

By Jennifer Crow

*Jennifer Crow's work has appeared in a number of genre publications, including Strange Horizons, Golden Fruit, and Star*Line. Her poetry has received honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror anthologies, and "Colder" received a Rhysling Award nomination this year.*

Burrowing

Beneath the planet's skin--
the poison air, the rivers of ice,
the stone tales of eons--
we crawl, metal worms
with soft insides, marrow
bound to the company's future,
our past a forgotten eye-blink
in some distant system.

A sleep and a forgetting: we sign
the contract, the long journey
dulls our sorrows, and we slip
the bonds of family, country,
to become new in the embrace
of a different gravity.

The machine my brother
holds me safe, sniffs out
the best veins. But someone
must be his blood, his brain--
the sinews of the beast
tangled forever with metal.

Once we walked upright, our names
bound into the pages of our own history.
Now, we take the rhythms of the moment
as our own, and sleep light
with the scent of oil in our dreams.

Synchronicity

By Yossof Sharifi

Yossof has published fiction in Afterburn Science Fiction and The Silence Within. He is currently in law school. This story stems from his interests in physics and math. He is at work on a Sci-Fi thriller novel.

Michael took a deep breath, exhaling through his nose. The café smelled like burnt oil and the linoleum floors were dirty from days of not being mopped. He sat in the booth across from Harold, the older man looking absently out the window.

Michael had been working with Harold at the University for over two years now and had come to find that Harold was a brilliant mathematician. When graduate students and faculty had been getting mixed results on a new computer program designed to help with numerical integration, Harold had the computer run a few examples and determined the problem by simply watching the results.

Apparently, if you try and integrate a function numerically that has a thin spike at its peak—like a graph that looks like an arrowhead pointing up—computer programs sample the function at a number of points and then give the numerical integral. Harold determined that computer programs sample randomly and if they don't get anywhere near the thin spike on the graph, the spike itself will go undetected and the computer will assume the graph to be much smoother than it actually is. Like Harold said when he solved the problem, "We can program a computer to memorize or predict the location of all the atoms in the universe, but we can't teach it common sense."

"Sorry to bring you in on your lunch break," Michael said.

Harold turned to him, his aged face full of patience. "I understand my dear boy. Our profession, if nothing else, can be full of momentous perceived discoveries."

"This isn't perceived, Harold. The damn thing works."

Harold nodded understandingly and leaned back in the booth.

"What you're suggesting Michael, is quite simply impossible."

Michael leaned in. "It works. What am I supposed to think?"

"You're a mathematician. You're supposed to think rationally, for Christ's sake."

Michael reached into a leather satchel he'd brought with him and pulled out two sheets of wrinkled paper full of diagrams and equations. As

he was about to pass them to Harold, the waitress brought a pot of fresh coffee and Michael pulled the papers under the table, concealing them from view.

“Must you really be so paranoid?” Harold asked when the waitress had left.

Michael brought out the papers and set them on the table. “You don’t know what this is.”

Harold glanced down at the papers and then back up at Michael. He removed his glasses from his breast pocket and picked up the sheets. He read them once, and then again. He removed his glasses and read it once more.

“This is all?” Harold said, his voice hardly a whisper.

Michael nodded and took a sip of coffee.

“The equation’s barely two lines long. The rest is just defining value sets.”

“I know.”

“How—” Harold stopped as another waitress walked by the table. He leaned forward and said, “How’d you even come up with this?”

“My specialty’s number theory, Harold. I’ve been working for the past three years on transmutation of values between the number line and human language. One day, I just woke in the middle of the night and I had the value set I was looking for in my head. I wrote it down and printed it out and, well, there it is.”

“Why English? There are certainly older and more eloquent languages.”

“I’ve run it with a dozen other languages. It’s all the same. I define the alphabet I’m using through the data sets. Then I just translate the characters of that alphabet to numeric form—like A for x-1, B for x-2—and then complete the equation. I started translating questions into numeric form, putting them in the equation and getting numerical answers, and when I translated the answers back to alphabetic form, they answered the question. Not once has the answer been gibberish, Harold, not once. How can you explain that? Cause I can’t.”

Harold handed the sheets back and looked at his wristwatch. “I have to meet Lorraine today, we’re going over her wedding plans. A father’s duty, you know. Why don’t you meet me at my office at three tomorrow and we’ll go over everything and run it through the computers. There’s got to be a logical explanation.”

Some plates crashed behind the counter and Michael nearly jumped out of his seat. He gripped the edge of the table until his fingers turned a ghostly white. Only when he saw it was an innocuous accident did he let go

and try to relax.

“Is everything all right Michael?” Harold asked.

“I’m fine.”

“I can tell something’s wrong. What is it?”

Michael glanced around at the café. A few men sat by themselves, sipping coffee with empty stares directed at nothing. A family sat in the corner eating chicken fingers and french fries. “I think I’m being followed.”

“What?” Harold said, glancing around himself.

“Less than a week after I discovered the equation, there was a guy smoking a cigarette outside my condo.”

“Well, that’s hardly cause for alarm.”

“It was the way he looked at me, like he knew me. It just struck me as odd. I saw him at the university outside my classroom yesterday. I went jogging last night and I saw him on my route.”

“Just calm down, my boy. We’ll get to the bottom of this. I promise.” Harold looked at his watch. “I have to go. Be at my office at three, tomorrow. Okay?”

Michael nodded, “Yeah, okay.”

Harold stood and laid a twenty dollar bill on the counter. “Lunch is on me.”

Michael watched as Harold walked out of the café. He looked around again and ran his fingers through his hair. He felt like he was going crazy. He gathered the papers and finished his cup of coffee before standing to leave.

As he walked outside, he was struck by the smell of the salty Utah air. The skies were gray and a wind had blown in from the Great Salt Lake.

He began walking across the street to take the trax-rail to the university when he noticed a man standing on the other side of the intersection. He was tall, with a thick black beard and olive skin. He was smoking a cigarette and had a grin across his face; it was the man that had been following him.

An icy fear ran up Michael’s back as he decided what to do. He turned, and ran in the opposite direction. He ran in between two dumpsters and came out in the back of the café. He turned a corner and ran past a strip mall, the cold air burning his lungs. He stopped in front of a small Greek fast-food restaurant and walked inside.

He stood by the glass doorway, staring out into the street. He was breathing heavy and sweat had started to form on his forehead.

“You gonna buy somethin’?” he heard a voice behind him say.

He turned to see a teenage girl behind a cash register, popping her gum as she wiped her hands with a paper towel.

“Ah, sure. How bout a large Coke?”

“That’ll be \$1.06,” she said.

Michael paid and took his drink back to the doorway.

It had started to drizzle and the streets were emptying. After a few minutes, only an elderly woman walking a small Chihuahua was left.

Michael shook his head and smiled. He felt foolish. This was all certainly a coincidence. The man just probably lived around here. It was just synchronicity, like Carl Jung had said. Like when you think about something in the morning and then what you thought about starts making appearances throughout your day. Michael walked out of the restaurant and felt the cool rain on his face. He walked to the trax-rail and awaited the next train.

As the rail let him off near the university campus, he felt even more foolish. The man was gone. Obviously, he’d been waiting for the train too. He finished his Coke and dumped the empty cup into a waste bin before walking to the mathematics building. Michael’s office was typical for academics. There were books on the desk, on shelves that took up all the space on the walls, and piled in little stacks on the floor. A poster of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue adorned one wall and a reproduction of Da’Vinci’s Virtruvian Man hung on the other.

He moved a stack of books off his leather chair and sat down. His computer took a few minutes to boot up and he leaned back and tried to calm himself. He pulled a small wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket and laid it on the desk. It was a list of questions he’d made last night. He stared at the list, turning over each question in his mind a few times before moving on to the next one. It read:

- 1) Does God exist?
- 2) What is the meaning of life?
- 3) Will there be an end of time?

He stared at the list and went through each question again before picking up a pen and making one more addition:

- 4) When will I die?

He folded the slip of paper back up and put it in his pocket. The clock over his door said 12:47; he had a class on cryptanalysis to teach.

The day dragged on slowly for Michael, one second at a time. He taught his class on cryptanalysis and then his two hour long weekly seminar on algebraic topology, both with little enthusiasm.

He couldn’t get his mind off of the equation waiting for him at home. Just the thought of what it could reveal made him feel surreal, as if he were watching his own actions from some distant place. He recalled a

story in Greek mythology, a peasant that was granted knowledge of all things for saving the life of a woman whom the God Zeus was infatuated with. The peasant, having gained the knowledge of a God, became a God himself.

He left the university and stopped by his gym. He ran two miles on a treadmill and then lifted weights for an hour. He had a nervous energy about him; he couldn't get his hands to stop trembling. Driving home, he glanced in his rearview mirror every few blocks, looking for the man that had been following him. Maybe it was just in his mind? Synchronicity, that's all it is, he thought again. A friend of his had been a police officer with the Salt Lake PD. He'd told Michael that at some murder scenes, all the clocks in the house would be frozen at the time of death. Synchronicity existed; there were correlations as yet unexplained in the world.

He pulled into his two story house and got out slowly, his mind a jumble of unidentifiable thoughts. He stared at his front door awhile, and then began walking toward it.

When he was inside, he went straight to his study on the second floor. It looked a lot like his office; papers and books piled high everywhere. He sat at his large mahogany desk, and turned on his computer. He began by asking mundane questions, testing the equation's veracity. *What is the capital of South Dakota? When was the bombing of Dresden? How did Abraham Lincoln die? What is the circumference of the Earth?*

When the computer reinterpreted the numerical answers, they were always correct. It was too much. He needed a break.

He went downstairs and slouched on his sofa, turning on his television. His mind was racing with questions and new dimensions of possibility; he needed something to numb it for awhile.

He watched a few episodes of *Law and Order* and a Godzilla movie on the Sci-Fi channel. Night had fallen outside by the time he turned his television off. He hadn't eaten anything so he grabbed a sandwich and coke from the kitchen before heading back upstairs. The only lighting in the study was from the computer screen and the moonlight cascading through the window. Both were pale and discomfoting.

He pulled out the slip of paper from his pocket and lay it on the desk. He took a deep breath, and began to transmute the first question. *Does God exist?* Each operation took an average of ten minutes to complete and the answer was given one numeral at a time. Michael wasn't reading the answers as they flashed on the screen. He would wait until the operation was complete. Somehow, there was a courtesy involved.

He was staring out the window, at his neighbors sitting on their front porch drinking beers and barbecuing, when his computer hummed a three

second piece from Beethoven's Fifth; it meant the current operation was complete.

He turned, leaning over his computer, and entered the command telling the program to begin translating the results back into alphabetic form. The words seemed incomprehensible for a fraction of a second. He was confused and his head began to ache. Then the full realization of what he was looking at dawned on him. "Jesus Christ!" he shouted as he sprang out of his chair, knocking it to the floor behind him. He took an awkward step away from the computer, feeling a drop of sweat roll down his back.

In the lower right hand corner of the screen, above the words [FIELD RESULTS-VERIFIED], it said: *Who do you assume you are speaking with?*

Michael's brow dripped with sweat and he felt queasy. He tried to run to the bathroom, but couldn't make it all the way. He vomited on a rug in the hallway, and fainted.

The sun warmed the skin on his face and a loud ringing echoed through the house as Michael opened his eyes. He could see sunlight coming out of his study and the bedroom.

He sat up, rubbing his temples to try and alleviate his pounding headache. He'd slept in the hallway, near where he'd vomited. The smell made him nauseated and he felt the sting of stomach acid rising again in his throat.

He realized the ringing was the telephone and he stood, slowly making his way to the bedroom to answer it.

"Hello?" he said, still groggy.

"Professor Gibbs?"

"Yes."

"This is Charlene, at the university. You have your class right now professor, are you all right?"

Michael looked at his wristwatch. "Oh, yeah, yeah I'll be right there. Just ask one of the grad students to cover for me until I get there."

He ran a comb through his hair and brushed his teeth before sprinting out of the house. He was already ten minutes late.

Michael drove at nearly sixty miles an hour through the residential neighborhoods of Salt Lake before arriving at the University and screeching to a stop in his parking space. He got out and ran to his class. As he ran into the mathematics building, he recognized the students coming out. They were his.

"Late night Professor Gibbs?" one girl asked with a playful smile.

"You could say that. It didn't go too bad, did it?"

“No, Lisa did just fine.”

“Okay, good. Well, I’ll see ya next Thursday,” he said.

He walked to his office and collapsed in the chair, rubbing his head. Last night seemed like a dream, he could only remember bits and pieces. He was working on his computer, there was a flash, pain in his head. Something about God. Why couldn’t he remember? Out of his peripheral vision, he saw movement by his office door. He looked up to see someone closing it. Michael knew who it was before he even turned around. The man walked to a chair across from Michael and sat down. He pulled out a package of cigarettes and lit one before replacing them in his pocket.

“Why are you following me?” Michael said, his fingers working their way to a pair of scissors on the far corner of his desk.

“Congratulations,” the man said. The timbre of his voice was low and sounded thick.

Michael cleared his throat. “For what?”

“The equation, Mr. Gibbs. It’s only rediscovered about once every two hundred years or so. You should be quite proud.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Why don’t you ask your equation?”

“Because I’m asking you.”

“Who I am is of no consequence. Who I work for, that’s a different matter.”

“I’ve had enough of this. I’m calling the police.” Michael reached for his phone and the man slammed his fist down over it before he got there. The phone had a large indentation over the number pad.

Michael grabbed the scissors and held them underneath his desk. “I suggest you get the hell out of my office before I throw you out,” Michael said, unsure if he really could.

“Have you studied the Pythagoreans, Mr. Gibbs?”

“The what?”

“The Pythagoreans. The followers of Pythagoras?”

“What does that—”

“They’re more of a religion than a group of scholars. Do you know they determined that numbers had feminine and masculine qualities? They believed mathematics were mystical. A gift from the Creators to us mortals to divine the mysteries of the universe.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“They kept their secrets closely hidden Mr. Gibbs. It was against their highest code to share mathematics with the public. The golden mean, pi, his famous theorem, these were all released into general knowledge from traitors of the religion. Do you know what they did to traitors? Pythagoras

himself killed the first one.”

“How do you know?”

The man took a puff of his cigarette and blew it out. “I was there.”

Michael felt his head begin to throb and he had to squint, as if the light in the office was too bright. The man was sturdily built, but maybe if he could catch him by surprise. no. It was too risky. He was obviously insane and probably had some sort of weapon on him.

“It takes over two hours to solve the equation by hand,” the man said, “now, with computers, there’s no limit to the knowledge that can be gained from it.”

“Look,” Michael said, placating, “I’m sure--”

“Did you ever ask it about immortality? It’ll tell you if you ask it.”

The man blew a puff of smoke in Michael’s direction. “We’d kept it a closely guarded secret for centuries. Imagine our surprise when we’d get reports of it popping up in various places across the world. The Roman Republic, the universities of the Renaissance, the independent thinkers of the Enlightenment. It was rediscovered in all of those epochs. And now, you. Turns out that if the human mind is given free reign, it can discover even the darkest corners of knowledge.”

The man stood up and put his cigarette out on Michael’s desk. “We had no choice but to ensure its secrecy through the ages, and we have no intention of making it public now.”

Harold walked through the corridors of the mathematics building, going over the lecture on partial differential equations he’d just given. He wasn’t particularly interested in meeting with Michael; he was convinced that the equation he’d read yesterday was simply a fluke. One which the computer would show flawed in a matter of minutes. He turned the corner leading to the hallway of the faculty offices and stopped in his tracks. Two police stood in the hallway, talking to a paramedic.

Charlene, the department’s administrative assistant, leaned against a wall, tears streaming down her face. Harold walked near, the two policeman giving him a suspicious glance and then turning away when Charlene threw her arms around his neck and began to sob.

“Charlene! What’s the matter, my dear?”

She managed to fight back her sobs. “It’s Michael, Professor Berkinsky.. he’s dead.”

“What?”

“He had a heart attack. My God, he was only thirty-two. Life’s just so unfair.” She put her arms around him again and the sobbing continued.

As the policeman walked over, Harold said, “Excuse me, officer,

did you find anything with Michael? A leather satchel perhaps?”

“Yeah,” the officer said, peering into another office.

“The contents of that folder were what Michael’s been working on. He told me he was being followed because of—”

“The contents?” the officer said, looking at him now.

“Yes. The sheets of paper.”

“There was nothin’ in there pal.”

“Nothing? Well, perhaps he took them out and put them on his desk?”

“Sure, I guess. But it ain’t there now. His computer’s gone and is so is almost everything else beside the shelves. Someone wanted somethin’ in that office.”

Harold’s mind spun. This was surreal. He had to get some air.

He deftly let Charlene go and walked outside. He decided to take the rest of the day off and began walking to his car across the parking lot when he noticed something. There was someone leaning against it. It was a tall man with a beard, smoking a cigarette.



