

Graal

David Moynihan

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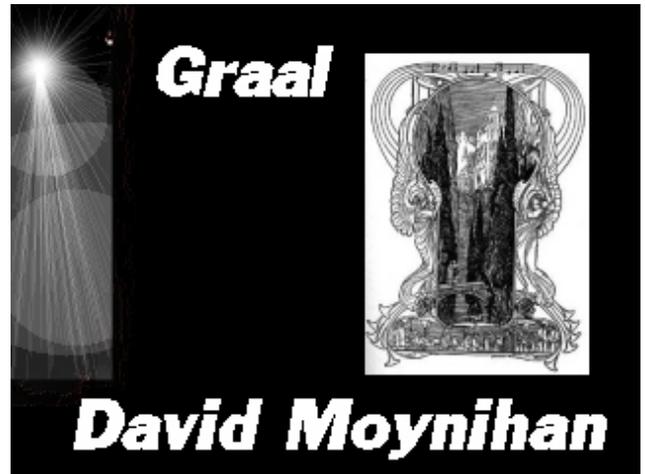
David Moynihan

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Graal



For Michael Hart

1

Parr was the man who could find it. Last job they don't breed for. There's an art to cruising datathreads, killing buddhas and running a cross-Cylinder infowhack; scoring the know before it all devolved to ephemera placed an added value on the rapid services of a chosen few. Or so Parr told himself, staring at the design on his new credit tile, animated holograph in the corner announcing training for anyone wishing to get in on his services. Chuckling, he remembered the last job where they'd replaced him with somebody cheap; then sighed, wishing he'd remembered to dump the options they'd paid him in sooner.

It was a resume for security. Spot in the cube for as long as the corp lasted. But Parr's searches went beyond the protected zone. You could tell from the avatar. His sig-guard. It wasn't Parr's, originally. He'd been a newbie then, stuck between hops, never reaching the main. Hated, feared enforcer met up with Parr one day. They passed out of view. When Parr reemerged, his shabby look, a mismatch only fools garbed themselves, replaced by the vaunted Red Armor, eagle-breastplated epitome of cool. Nobody ever saw the opponent again. Clips from the day, perused by many, showed only Parr in full stride with the digital spear before a fast fade.

Overnight, Parr joined the elite. Jacked in through a sys, he was unstoppable. Linked over air via the switch they gave you at birth, and you still didn't want any part of him. His fees for jaunts in and out of bounds gave him the job freedom cubes dreamed of, though things got slow at times.

Feet perched between the viewers of his two favorite interfaces, Parr reviewed his balances not so little he'd have to listen to his pad's rent-drone talking about her cats; not so much he'd be able to blow off new biz. He dug through the waves of debris his storage rack attracted, cursed when he cut his hand on something unknowable, and with an expression at once triumphant and forlorn, oversaw his vintage sonic shaver's migration to the land of in use.

Through the tubes, past uninterested guards, up to an exec suite. Glistening letters on the door said Caerleon Llc. Shares of the firm were exchanged, wherever it was people did that now. He looked closer. A bear seemed to slide up and down the C. Breath-taking use of three dozen years of animation, modeling, and some of the fastest chips ever produced. One could spend years of college, learn nothing but animation on logos. Parr had only a moment to ponder this, before the legs emerged from behind a desk and swished over to invite him in. Expensive legs, or at least the product that wrapped them. Seams meshed together in a whisper. Their chorus: not for you.

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The body attached was itself in fine order. Hair red, the results of centuries invested into dye technology. Makeup and suit; implies success without the lack of femininity. The less secure aspects of Parr considered asking whether she could ever knock 'em down on the bar between sets of level three DriveKill; the savvier part of his being figured she'd gone there slumming back during a phase, whichever phase they called it.

Jessie, she said.

My, name: Jessie. Less than patient.

Right. Parr.

That was my expectation. Yes. Won't you come this way?

Quick walk through hallways, old-style coffee pitcher, chrome with silver finish, glass a souvenir job straight from the gift shop, again Caerleon, this time the lettering unhindered by bears that never knew the peace of hibernation. Thumbs down on a handput, quick smile back as the light turned green and the door opened. Then they were inside.

Round boardroom. Twenty-thirty heads, tough to count, and he doubted there'd be a quiz later. All turned to look at him, some impressed, some contemptuous; most indifferent.

Top prize in the sneering-at-newcomer awards went to one whose nameplate said Gavin. Total package from the look, suit a template from a men's fashcat, teeth and hair to match, calm, poised. Been with the company since Baden. Parr disliked him on site.

At Gavin's left, the man. Arturo. His avatar The Welder. Man who forged a thousand nets into one, brought prosperity to tech unseen for too long. His physique classic aristocrat, regal bearing, silver-haired but eyes that were right on it. They say he bore scars, physical and otherwise, remnants of a forgotten era. Bemused expression, checking out and being checked. Finally, a nod.

So, Arturo said. You are Parr.

Yes.

And you've come here after all. There'd been some doubt.

Seems so.

You know what we'll ask of you?

How I find stuff?

Laughter. Little of it friendly.

No, son. We find stuff all the time here. A few, quick nod to an old man in the corner, have been finding stuff from the time when it was difficult to do so.

Right. I've checked resumes.

Have you? Gavin, who'd started his frown cycle the moment Parr entered and moved into ever-more advanced stages of reverse happy as the conversation went on, broke in.

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Forget this fellow, he said. Just a prowler, a scavenger. So he can pick through trash, *wonderful*. I've got a slew of debris in my quarters. He can *examine* that. Why do we waste our time here? We need to move forward this issue. *Immediately*.

Gavin surveyed the room as he said this. Parr watched as the man's eyes were checking out each member in turn, some who agreed, some dubious, some with a heartening here—we-go—again expression. In the corner, one man seemed to irk Gavin nearly as much as Parr's gorgeous face did. Gant, recently on board after a merger.

Parr smiled. He'd even picked through edutrash in the past. Arturo didn't pay Gavin much mind, but, with a bit of deference to his right-hand associate, smiled at Parr, and began.

Now, Gavin. You've served us all well, and none doubt your loyalty nor your achievements. But what we have before us now is a crisis, the greatest challenge to our dreams since that day at Baden. Yet if we can get this right, we'll be able to make our platform stable and expand our reach further than any had thought possible. I think it's in everyone's interest to enlist the services of all who can provide assistance. Even those of humbler origins.

Gavin looked to say more. Perhaps stunned, he didn't have the look of someone who got dressed down, however politely, often. He looked at Parr again, barked out a question.

What do you know of Graal?

Parr snorted. A myth. Echoes. Newbie rumors. Clutter in your vidbox.

Is it that? Said Gavin. Is it just that? And what would you say were I to tell you we've all seen it seen for an instance the tendrils of the ether unaccessed heard the song data flow through the veins of planets distant. Yes. We. All of us. Here. We've all seen it. And not one of us, added Gavin, a *newbie*.

Was that a question? inquired Parr.

Blast this man! shouted Gavin. We've waited for him? He stood up. Too much time has been squandered on that fool. Too much on polite invitations. I'll go to work now. I hope some of you will come with me, or else I can do this alone.

Gavin stormed towards the door. A few of the younger types around the table gave a quick glance to Arturo, saw nothing life-threatening, followed suit. They marched first slowly, then faster as nobody challenged them. Parr counted three at Gavin's heels. The average age of those still at table spiked dramatically higher.

Nobody said anything for a time.

Well, said Arturo. An eventful arrival. I love new things at this table.

Yeah. I take it you want me to find Graal. OK.

OK? My good fellow, we've asked you to make use of any and all resources a set of computing assets unprecedented in scope to locate and ascertain the use of the most legendary sets of algorithms ever to exist if indeed they do exist. Others have died or gone mad in the attempt. Indeed, under this very roof I've seen it. And you say, OK? Do you perhaps understand why others find your manner a trifle irritating?

Sure. But Art, see it from my perspective. Every clients thinks their little bit of research is the most important ever from the grip of a new ladies' lipgloss to the coloration on a revamped line of home procto kits. Some of the jobs been thrown at me have had at least a slightly more significant impact than that. But if you take it too serious

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in this biz, you've failed before you even jack in.

That's not always a bad thing, Parr continued. Sometimes you're talking execs just want to cover their own asses, so they bring in a name to prove nothing could be done and nobody ought get fired. Then you could maybe take it seriously for that harried effect, or else just take naps.

And will you take naps here? Arturo asked, dangerously innocent smile.

When the eyes glaze, of course.

How often is that?

After I've read your data, for starters.

Young man, we have accumulated data such that

I know. I know. It's big. Give it over. Copy of everything. My own set can run through it in hours.

I see. Will there be anything else?

Lunch was included, right?

Indeed it was, young man. And as some of our associates have left us early, don't worry about asking for seconds. Now, let me pretend I'm a good host, and no more talk of business. On cue, platters appeared in the hands of well-adorned servants, lids were raised, glasses filled. Parr ate meat for the first time in weeks.

The feast progressed, banter from the old men at table, back and forth from companions who'd not been together in ages. Parr smiled quietly among them, gladdened by the bits of mirth which through Arturo's red beard.

As they sat, sated, Arturo clapped his hands. Suddenly screens slid down, and images and tones meshed all 'round the room to tell the story again. Of how The First To Know Was The First To Share. Of an age where fortunes were made and squandered, business empires built and destroyed in a few short years. Of an immense market with a 100 bargains and a thousand swindles at each and every turn.

An odd, discordant tone swept into the music. Parr turned his head for a first glimpse at the coming of barriers. Simplistic, porous fences, quickly overwhelmed by the mass of data. But ever more fences. Even the great houses learning, who'd combined to create the network; add one wall, then another. A subscreen held Parr's eyes, flooded through a set: the music that was not music, pictures that were not pictures, words that were not words. The siren music of dying corporations.

Another subscreen caught Parr's eyes as the discordance grew in volume. The first assailants. Odd malformed creations, shunning the light, clinging to the further pathways, they posed little threat. But beware. Beware. The assailants grew, in size, in strength, in destructive capability. Even as the central screen in the hall sang out a cry of triumph when the first avatars walked, the assailants shrieked back with a cry, piteous and terrifying.

Soon no avatar could walk unfettered. Guards appeared at the edges of communities, to protect the people, and keep them ever closer to home. Horror tales of those who went too far. The monsters at the fringes grew bolder, stronger, wiping out communities, destroying great archives, consigning petabytes of data to oblivion.

Screens went black. Shrill fadeout. Meltdown. Silence.

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Then a glimmer of light on the furthest view. Faint, hopeful tones. Another flash as Arturo reclaimed his family site. Cast out the barbarians. He teamed with others, fought battles online. Tirelessly, paths were redrawn, travel, even commerce took place. Places unseen or heard of in decades came to the fore.

Music grows, pure. Blips of light from all screens, gradually eradicating the dark. Pitched battles, as blackness faded. Finally, together, the light converges, the great conflict. Baden. Light clashes with dark, is surrounded, shines brighter, stronger, the black recedes, and recedes, giving ground like waves at tide shift. Soon all is light on the main screens. The darkness ebbs from the further reaches. It is still not safe.

But business can be done. Communications are possible. The new age.

The music stopped. Screens went gray and were pulled back. Nobody spoke for a moment.

Arturo looked over at Parr. Smiled. Infectious grin.

Perhaps a bit overdone, he said. But I feel what we do here is important. You will help us. It wasn't a question. Parr nodded.

Then I'll let you to it. Should there be anything you need, Jessie will have it for you. Parr stood up with other members of the table. All were eyeing him, he felt. Most with distrust, some ambivalence, on the faces of a few, faint looks of encouragement.

Parr left the room.

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Jessie met him as he half staggered to the exit. A certain shining to her eyes as she looked upon Parr. He nodded at her, kept walking.

You've made an ally. Our CEO doesn't take so kindly to strangers. She hurried to catch up. Parr smiled to himself, watching her quicken her steps while attempting to keep it natural.

Oh. Sure. Nice guy.

What did you think of the presentation? I was project lead for the group that designed it.

You were?

Yes. My handiwork, as they say.

They. Oh, right. They.

So?

It, well, it had a certain subtlety. On the freevids whenever they blast tales of the meltdown, it's always with a biopic on that one chick what was her name? First avatar to get hacked.

Dmitria. Yeah. Love to be admired for my discretion, she said with a conspiratorial wink, but actually

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somebody else made that one stay on the cutting room floor, as it were.

Somebody I just met?

Sat next to him.

What, he didn't get off on pics of fair innocent maidens, pulling in a Trojan from the old hardwire interfaces? What cut him off? The madness? The death? Or the way some say she got used? You hear what they say about how she got used? She nodded to herself, then realized he'd stopped ranting.

All of it. Didn't want any mention of her at all. She smiled. Moved closer. Parr saw teeth.

That's all right, said Parr. With that music, that image, the sound old school you're hosting there. A drama from just after Weimar. Sure you're not a reincarnated propagandist?

What? No, I...

Right. I know. Just doing your job for a cause you respect. There's some things not to love in any organization, darling. Parr reached the tubes. Stepped in. Jessie paused, then nearly leaped after him. Close fit.

Don't you get what we're doing here? Things broke down before Arturo came along. You you'd be scavenging in the streets without him. Without us. The system was broken before this company came along. It may break again soon if...

If what?

If you don't get it done.

They reached the central level. Parr was about to leave.

You don't know what happened there? Do you? What really happened.

I'm sure you're about to tell me.

Oh, I think it's a waste of time. But I'll tell you, just so you know. Even if you are just a glorified scavenger.

Yeah. That's me. A title. Explains the whole thing completely.

Things broke apart today as you sat there. I don't blame you don't give yourself credit. But it's unlikely that the people you saw together today, before Gavin and his crew left, that whole group...

Uh-huh.

I don't think they'll ever be together again. It's starting to break apart. Caerleon, hope of the worlds, is breaking apart. Now. And they he bet on you? Put you above his own associates. Let you sit in their seat.

Seems so. Was there a question in here somewhere?

You don't even know where to look for it, do you? You didn't take the research.

Why waste time with petabytes of isn't?

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So what will you do now? Huh? What's the big independent going to choose for a starting point? You don't have any idea, do you? Can't you see we're running out of time here? Can't you see that at least?

Funny, said Parr.

What?

You're a bit stressed.

You'd be too, if you took just a second to try and understand what's going on. What's out there.

I live out there. It's nice. You should visit sometime. Haven't had a girl hacked in years now.

But you will again, Parr. You will again. I don't even know why I'm bothering with you. There's nothing you've shown me. I've checked over your records. You can go anywhere. What do you use it for? Makeup cases. Housing setups that could be done better by a Feng Shui AI. Consumer. That's you. You don't have anything on your rez looking over the big picture. You don't know where it is.

Neither does Gavin. But then, you've stated my advantage.

What's that?

I've never looked for it.

Never? Everyone's looked for it. The first steps people take, inside their own cul-de-sacs, their hives, when they're still crawling, they look for it. Every boy or girl has that dream, girl's too you pig. Finding Graal. The overlooked spot, the magical place, the secret that reveals of secrets. That last gift to us from Him.

I got the drill. The first to know was the first to share. He looked the woman straight in the eye. Stared past her impressive suit, her power position, her years of accomplishment, the status she'd attained and carried in her bearing when she walked in public. Saw past that to the little girl, hoarding her own small secrets, believing she could catch the big one.

Never looked.

Then what happened when you first set out? When you became...

Oh, that? Little girl, not everybody's mom let them out. My own held me down. Said it was because of what had happened to my father. I got on, didn't even understand the sig. Finally, I met a few you could call them hivemates, but there were only a couple dozen. They warned me where not to go. I'd been warned off everything, so I ventured. My first day, first hour almost, I didn't search for the kid's toys, though a young man, I didn't even look for the nudes. I headed to the fringe. Turned out it was the Red Fellow's hiding spot; though I wasn't aware of it then. Just knew there was some prick blocking me, and I'd already been blocked for quite some time.

So?

So he stopped blocking me. He stopped blocking anybody. Guess I did the world a service. Guess he picked the wrong guy to block. Somewhere in there is a story I've never told. They'd reached the stand for Parr's ride.

No experience. You didn't train? This was more to herself. Parr smiled. Everyone expected a hidden regimen, an old warrior who'd been instructing him all along. Usually a Zen-espousing one, though when bored he'd talked

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of an old Apache fighters and their ways that had dominated the revenge fantasies of teens for a half-century.. Some audiences, though, the best way to get a rise was truth.

Didn't code. Grew up with old media, old equipment, old mentalities, old women, all of them conspiring to keep me away from danger. A few young ones, who clucked at me even more. Sucks to be the youngest. With no training, no skills, no experience save dreams that proved horribly inaccurate I beat that guy. Gavin didn't, right? Rest of Caerleon didn't. Right?

You knew that?

Heard it later. Stories come down to you. This wasn't the first time I'd been asked to visit Caerleon. Got my own red interface at home to stare through, enough cash to last me. Work when the pile dwindled. That's copping out a bit.

You'd expect that, wouldn't you? With economies plunging into chaos, messages not getting through. Commerce impaired. Yes. It might be difficult to get tweens to buy that new colored lipstick right about now.

Tween market was never my forte. Actually, that one is still hopping. No, the meat and potatoes gigs, the housings, hovercells, are what's on max fade. If I go find this Graal thing, that should start back up. Then I can take naps again.

You really believe that? She was beyond shocked.

Hey, what matter the ambition, if the goal is achieved?

Where did that come from?

An Eastern Mystic who once taught me to never mind. The joke is lost on some. That's my lift. I'll contact when I do. You've got my credit tiles?

She handed them over. The duties of a assistant what Parr would have seen had not Arturo taking a liking to him. Parr smiled. They had his avatar animated below the Caerleon logo. So much for anonymity. Unless he wanted to use his own money.

I'll be in touch, he said. And boarded the lift as she stood, murmuring to herself. On the crowded train, Parr lost sight of her quickly. Sighing, he realized he'd be getting to work immediately. Her message had done the trick after all. Wasn't every day you got a chick in a suit to lose her cool, even for a moment.

Unless that'd been the whole point. Nah, he decided. No company that employed an edutrash like Gavin could be that devious. At least not in the loyal factions.

3

Gavin raced down the halls of Caerleon, cohorts in tow. The trilling from walls that announced his presence came off as inharmonic, failing to adjust to the speed of his steps. Everything went too slow now.

Thoughts of the Old Man, of how losing it could happen to anyone, went through his brain. And that wife of his... if he only knew... but Arturo was never one to be underestimated... and this leaving... Wayne began smashing his fist into his palm. Gavin looked up. The smacking stopped.

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Brother, said Garret. Brother, what would you have us do? Where should we go?

Gavin stared at his little family; remembered what they'd done together. How they'd stood linked at Baden. Then Arturo, who'd led them. And the pledge: never to break the circle. Never. Only rule for this organization. If he hadn't already broken it...

No. We stay.

What? Shouted Wayne. Stay. We cannot. It's past that. You saw them...

I did, said Gavin. Let's go further. I'm not sure of then anymore. We need to make some changes. But if we go, what happens? Do you think they can handle it without us? More meetings? More vids celebrating the grand old days? Passing off the important things to whatever charlatan walks into the hall? Without us, who will there be? Those old men... Who will do the job, Wayne?

But without Graal...

Without Graal, we need to guard the borders, press, see what it is that's been coming through. Cut it out. We need, fellows, to increase the territory we guard, take over management roles from the more neglectful among our number. And we stay. And we do it. But we skip their meetings.

All jumped up at once around Gavin, shouting at him. Protesting that now was the time. The family's honor. Everything the old Orkney Associates stood for came to this. Gavin held up his hands.

No, we've thrown in with Caerleon. We cannot do this. Our father would not allow it.

Loyalty, nephew, is an admirable trait, came a voice from the hall.

Aunt! said Gavin. You've heard.

Heard much, dear boy. Fellows, leave your brother and I alone. The men filtered out, staring at the silken-dressed woman who walked into the midst. Her long black tresses seemed to float over each one as they departed. Morgan, Arturo's sister and a long-time Caerleon exec, entered the room slowly, staring approvingly at the holographs which bedecked Gavin's quarters.

Gavin, she said when they were alone. Your honor is impeccable. No one has done more to keep things together.

Arturo has.

And is celebrated for it. Morgan walked closer to her nephew. But that was long ago. Your uncle, she began...

Is the one who built this. When even my father, and your husband, stood back, protecting their own, he was building. Him. Alone.

Yes. Yes. But that brother of mine got nowhere without your father's help, without dear Ryans' aid. And when they offered aid, dear nephew, did they always do what my brother wanted?

I wasn't there! Gavin said hotly. How could I...

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Yes, but you heard the tale from your family. Morgan stepped behind Gavin. Tenderly, she placed her fingers on the back of his neck. You heard it exactly. It isn't abandonment.

To leave, now.

And have your brothers oversee things. It's fighting. Bold, adventure, what they want; what they were made for. But you, Gavin. You are capable of more subtle things. We both know it. They know it. Smartest, Morgan smiled, as well as the bravest. You'll do what needs to be done.

And where do I go? Gavin turned towards his aunt.

Away from here. You have a journey to rejoin, my boy.

No, no. No! Treason.

Treason? asked his aunt, moving her fingers up to gently cradle his cheek. Treason, to do what is right? Betrayal, to save all? Not going. Staying here. Failing Gavin turned towards her harshly. Yes, Gavin. Failing to try again. That, nephew is treason.

Gavin pushed away his aunt's hands. Stared at the floor. Morgan waited, saying nothing for a moment.

If you must stay... she began.

Yes?

I can ask one of your brothers. Whom do you recommend?

To break the circle is to break the circle. You heard that.

I heard many things, Morgan said sweetly. Should it Harris? Garret? Wayne?

Wayne. Yes. That would be perfect. He'd see Graal, smash the thing. Wonderful, wonderful brother Wayne.

I suppose he might have the heart for it. Would not be afraid.

Afraid? Gavin turned angrily towards her. Afraid you say? Why, I've stood in...

Yes, yes, yes. Have stood. Have done. Have gone. But where have you gone recently, dear nephew? What of this world have you seen? What challenges have you faced? You've gone soft then. Haven't you?

Soft. I, soft? Angrily Gavin stood up, flung his chair across the room. A pigment shower erupted from where a screen once stood. Soft? Were you not my aunt...

Morgan stepped away from her nephew as the tirade continued. Rich furnishings, synthetic and real, flew about in a servant's nightmare. Calmly, she waited. With little left to destroy, Gavin paused.

It cannot be Wayne, he said.

No, answered Morgan.

Nor Harris.

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Not he.

And Garret...

You love him best. You would not have him go before you. Risk himself before you. Though he'd do it.

Aye. He'd do it. Do it...

On his own if you don't. It's a look in his eye that you once had, not so long ago.

But he is not ready.

As you were not ready.

No, Morgan. No. It must be me. Must be me.

You're certain. Morgan approached her nephew again. Held his eyes in hers.

I'm certain. Now.

No turning back?

No.

No doubts? Fears? You cannot hunt Graal with fear.

No, you cannot hunt Graal with fear.

Morgan took her nephew's hand. Held it tenderly.

Dear Gavin. How you must hate me. Must think up the harshest names for me. I don't blame you.

No, aunt. We both love Arturo. And Caerleon. Gavin looked to her, his eyes shining with resolution, and a trace of a smile that indicated forgiveness sent and received. With a bemused expression, he glanced around the wreckage of his quarters.

This will be a bit hard to explain, he said.

I'll have it spruced up for you, said Morgan with a proud tone in her voice. Just like new.

Not too much of a women's touch then.

No, I won't have those girls you bring in thinking your mother decorates. Bad enough you still live at home, a man your age.

They both shared a laugh.

Come, said Morgan. I've already prepared things.

But, I wanted to say goodbye. To tell him...

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He'll keep you. You sense that. Never let a man like you go, no matter how important it is. He pulled you back last time.

Gavin sighed. Not even a goodbye. The hero's farewell shunned to him, no companion to wish him luck, save an old aunt. So be it. They walked out together. Morgan led.

And you'll take good care of me? he asked as they moved down the hall, past guards to a quiet area.

Dust you off every morning., Morgan smiled. The machines shall exercise you, keep those strong bones at the ready for your hero's return. The glucose and protein doses are set for intravenous feedings.

How long can I stay away this time? Gavin asked as Morgan took him to a door outside the reach of any sensors.

A year and a day, his aunt replied.

Long time, that, Gavin stated.

Long enough, his aunt replied.

They smiled at each other once more and went in.

4

A woman stood near the window in a grand hotel opposite the Caerleon building. Perhaps the finest residence now, her lodging place sported the newest in vista technology. Were she to signal, the glass would turn opaque. A voice command could create a mirror in front of her. Another command, seldom used, would turn the entire wall into one transparent sheet, giving the illusion of flight, or a steady drop.

Across her, past the vast boulevard, was an image that made her uncomfortable whenever she saw it. Animated billboard, with a beautiful woman, tender and pure, with blonde locks and eyes just saw, strolling the avenues inside Caerleon. This woman would be seen adoring the sights, absorbing information. The picture of innocence. Vibrant and lively.

Gwen often asked Arturo whether he sought another, fresher face for his company, if perhaps a new girl, who'd give the impression of never visiting online, would sell the product better. Arturo had always smiled at her, sometimes wondering out loud whether if he couldn't vouch for his own wife's safety amid the glorious trails of Caerleon, whose safety would he be vouching for, as he pitched to men with daughters, husbands with wives, boys with mothers.

Lantz agreed. Within the confines, she was perfectly safe. Their walls oft beset, but nothing outside ever having a chance of harming her in the slightest when alone. Though of course, Lantz was beside her always when she sought to travel. Only so much truth in marketing.

Lantz stepped over from the bed, wrapped his arms around her sides. Bastard always knew what she was thinking.

Sleep well? he asked after they'd kissed.

Yes. A bit. Restful.

Graal

Lantz looked her. He had great pride, that one. And, Gwen noticed, a bit of a body there. And skills. So many skills. His work, his coding. A thing of beauty to sit and watch him. Many were the days she'd oversaw him as he, in a frenzy that often bypassed food and sleep, somehow built most of Caerleon today.

She thought of him then, not even noticing her. When everyone noticed her. Taking the food from her hands, always in a gruff tone that barely tolerated any interruption. She younger, less familiar with men. In awe of him, though they were nearly the same age. Had she begun adoring him even then?

There'd been taunts that she'd offered. Oh, Gavin could fix that better. Perhaps we need De Vere in here to help you. So much fun to irritate him, the terrific reactions as his face turned red, the fist close to banging down. Then the refocus, devouring whatever biscuit she'd before him. Magic at the keyboard. Another un-solvable problem existing only in the history books now.

Only restless? he was saying. The sad look in his eyes, as of a puppy not given an expected treat. Who could refuse?

Perhaps your mind was on something else? she said.

Lantz scowled for a moment. Then laughed. Grabbed her and threw her to the bed.

Gwen was remembering how they'd finally gotten together. That horrible, horrible conference of Gant's. It had been so unending. She'd felt a prisoner, sitting there, listening to that failed, said company, with its old-boy network and six-month plans. All the emotions, somehow bottled up, threatened to overthrow and overwhelm her at once. Wandering the hall, almost to tears. Couldn't explain. Lantz had been unable to watch her suffer. Rescued her.

Suddenly a knock at their door.

Go away, Lantz said vaguely towards the wall microphone.

The knocks continued.

We want for nothing! Lantz shouted. Gwen giggled to herself, remembering the all-day meetings her husband would be in that day.

The door opened. Garrett, Wayne and Arturo poured in. The first two men moved quickly, pointing to the pair on the bed in exultation. The third, Gwen noticed, strode slowly. With defeat in his gait. All mirth sped from her mind in an instant.

Belatedly, she remembered the husband she'd had. How he strode around, keeping things together. Keeping the whole business together with plastic string and wire. The times they'd shared. What they'd promised each other and what they would do for people.

She flashed back, horrified, to those tender moments with Arturo. When he'd brought her gifts, images of flora she'd never dreamed existed, touching small things, that part of himself he shown to no one else. She remembered.

She stopped remembering. Stopped thinking. With a shriek, she grabbed her clothes, leaped off the bed, went to the door. Outside, a few hotel employees looked at her. In her eyes, she could see, they never did this for anyone. But then, her husband wasn't anyone.

Graal

In tears, she raced to the lifts.

Back in the room, Lantz stared at Arturo. Dressed slowly. Wayne was ranting. See, Arturo. See? SEE? Arturo paid him no heed. Garrett was calmer, studying both her idol and his chief. Lantz headed towards the door. Walked out with Wayne chasing him.

Arturo waited. Exited the other way, with Garrett in tow.

5

The cylinder surged about Parr, its component helixes shifting and twisting against one another in a thousand ways, moving toward and against each other on a million vectors, each point comprising a billion bits of data. Or so Parr heard. He didn't bother to count.

This was Arturo's legacy. Where he'd pulled the design from, nobody. But getting in required a straight cabling, over approved lines. For all the entry and exit points, it was like crossing one node, through Caerleon. Improper behaviors were spotted early. It had been years since a bad actor had damaged anyone but himself.

Parr rode the cylinder like a barbarian washed up on a city of old. Though codes governed and the law gave all rights to pass unmolested, people got out of his way, fast. Spiraling through the mass he focused on one point, then another, twisting the strands of data into a single thread, following the trail as it curled, tossing it aside, one after another. Surfing in seconds. Time passed or didn't. The wonder of it diminished by that feeling of life on training wheels.

He was being pulled here. Something in a white patch called him over, pushed him aside, fled before he got close. A gray sequence caught his eye, vanished. Parr wondered what the churning did to his physical body in borrowed quarters, spent so long thinking elsewhere he almost missed the landing.

Suddenly he was coasting, catching ground effect near an edge, part of the cylinder tour he'd skipped. Couldn't lay a name to what he was cruising for. Structure was hard to make out, moving as Parr did, nearer and further, himself and the destination crisscrossing through two erratic orbits. Parr increased speed, narrowed the gap by half a few times, saw he'd never achieve it that way, leapt against his own momentum, spun, passed inside.

No sentry met him in front. Domo allowed passage, slid Parr further in. He watched the ceiling, blobs twisting past, oozing in a multicolored array like the closed-eye shapes of dreams. He found himself among avatars doing a ceremony.

They were clothed, rare for the cylinder at this time of day. An old apparition sat, presiding over the spectacle. He noticed Parr but gave no greeting. Around the man were sprinkled various attendants. All looked to something off to Parr's right.

Turning, Parr glanced with them. There were rules and protocols to observation. Occasionally Parr would even follow them. He stayed low, outer range. None on stage appeared to care about him. The old man's gaze shifted with the crowd.

Parr tried to decide if it was some church thing he was seeing. Or just an HQ. Religions had diverged beyond reckoning and he'd never bothered to keep up.

Parr watched as a shimmering spear went by, carried by a multi-colored avatar with a beatific grin on his childlike face. The pike rose and fell, a crimson moisture dripping from its end onto the floor. The figure carried

Graal

this spear around and about, past the old man, to one of the hall, then back.

All eyes were fixated upon it. Parr sensed crying in the gallery, moaning, wailing. He wondered if the people would dance, but they remained in place, rocking to and fro, but their positions unchanged.

The avatar departed, leaving a small trail behind him. Parr watched as the fluid dried. Too quickly. It vanished when the boy got beyond 20 feet.

Then a procession began. Girls in communion dress, holding candles, the tapers so realistic bits of wax dripped onto their lace hand-protectors. Parr saw trays shimmering in gemstones, ivory seats, knives that danced by themselves. Behind them all a beautiful woman's presence, face with a glow that drew the eye, her necklace a thing of wonder, rich detail on the gown. Spectacular setting. Parr wanted to commend the designer but kept his remarks to himself.

Suddenly all stared at him. The room, the crown, the woman. They looked to him. He knew not for what. A test of some kind. Parr remained still.

Then things shifted.

6

Parr awoke inside Caerleon. Disconnected. His mind unfocused, brain transmogrifying images of the cylinder and the corridor. A woman stood before him.

Are you OK? she asked. I worried about you in here.

Fine, said Parr after a moment and a scowl. Just fine. He clenched his fists, pounded them against the floor. Pain. Solidity. He was himself.

Just fine, Parr said again. Then he stood up, arms braced against the wall to keep his head from smashing into the floor. Not the most deft of maneuvers, but he thought he pulled it off.

Well, she said with a patronizing smile. That's not the place to 'jack' in, is it? I could have just fallen right over you.

Parr stared at paint scratches by the dataport.

If everything's fine...

Fine, said Parr, and stumbled out.

7

A cylhound met Parr by the entrance. Recognition set in after an instant. Weather control and fixed temperatures deprived stores in the area of a need to sell raincoats. But that craggy forehead, scrawny legs and ever slightest tint of red in the nose stayed his hand.

Graal

McGurk, Parr cried, grabbing the man in a bearhug.

They've got you, then? his companion smiled, returning Parr's grasp.

Ah, they had me once before. Everybody comes home.

What, you? I'll be needing this one on tape. Shall we to the pub then?

Lead on.

They strolled together, as far from prying sensors as one could get. Not very far, but Parr had little secret to tell. McGurk knew more than he did about it anyway.

A fast series of gulps got the ball rolling. McGurk spoke first.

It's getting bad. We can feel it out here.

Where you are?

Slow as 'Blighty of old. Not hearing back for days what used to come through in minutes. Price is goin' up, wot.

What, I thought the merger was going to speed things up for all parties.

Ye're a funny one. Ahh, that Gant, he turned 'round the company. Brought things together. Caerleon's dropping his folk right 'n left.

No great loss. I've used Gant's network.

So you're the one? asked McGurk.

Somebody had to do it, said Parr.

And they got you looking for that vapor, then?

Special invite came my way some time ago. Workload's dropped to zip, so I had to go for it.

Had me a source tell what the vision of Graal was like.

And what was that? asked Parr, very interested suddenly.

They were gathered 'round a table. That big table you seen and none of poor slob's 'ave. Anyway, they're there, giving speeches, overcharging the common man, not providing solutions to a basic decline in quality for a necessary service and whatnot, when along comes some shimmering item through into the room.

What *item*?

Everyone saw something different, they did.

Right. And the things they saw?

Graal

Oh, big pictures, a book, Speeding Up the Either for Sods, I think.

Must have been what Gavin saw.

No, Gavin said he saw something, but he never let on what it was. Somehow, the thing in the air makes 'em all confident and stuff. I hear it was a bad meeting, one of them concerned meetings, only a crew member, Kaylor, word was, spells it out how they ain't providing what provided in the past, and how wrong it was. He run some graph that showed the Cylinder was slowing down, internally, to speeds like it hadn't had since they went to using splitpair to fuel the information base. Like there'd been no progress in 20 years. Everyone got real somber; a few of the younger ones start to think about how they'd look much better in Kaylor's chair than the current occupant.

How'd Arturo take it?

He 'as just there. Sitting about, waiting for things to settle down. He says he saw a cup or something; maybe it contained a new kind of splitpair. But he's quiet, letting the other men talk.

Wise move.

Right, init. Less chance for ya to make an arse of yerself. Shall we off to the pub then?

I can't do it tonight, McGurk. But I promise I'll give you the story first thing. If I find it, that is.

Big if.

Yeah. Huge one. You find these people get to you, make you lose the cynicism?

No, it's just the clothes, lad. They all wear great clothes.

So next time I should go in naked.

If you can't compete, don't try.

See ya, McGurk.

Yeah. See ya.

8

With little more than an evening libations on his mind, and reflecting pleasantly on the wonderful beverages he'd already consumed, Parr nearly missed a slight glitch upon re-entry to his apartment.

The biomass portal to Parr's living room had been melted, the place half-ransacked. A couple of men in stat-suits were calmly shredding the other half as he walked in. Their outfits were high-end, Parr noticed, so it wasn't the wee ones in his complex, boys sporting homemade efforts to molecularly destabilize tell-tale DNA from skin and hair often failing in comic fashion.

Graal

Parr marched in to take care of things, moved his hand towards a secret compartment in the wall unit, smiled grimly when his hand settled around that most familiar item, then jerked into spasms, rolled over and fell to the ground, immobile, as the lady behind him, her stat-suit wrapping around charming curves that Parr really felt he ought to have noticed, gave his nerve endings a few thousand volts in a rather painful location.

He ended up on his back when the convulsions stopped, in time to catch a faint smile from his voluptuous assailant. Then they went back to work ripping through his place, first one shelf, another; woman directing, men grudgingly obedient. Parr fluttered his eyelids in a manner promising death.

We should ask 'im, one said. Save time.

Shut up. Keep looking, the woman replied. With a glance back at Parr. He won't be able to talk for a while, anyway.

Here, said the other triumphantly, pulling a headset and gloves from beneath a secure cabinet. Top of the line, he nodded at Parr approvingly. Then he stripped the back, pulled the fuel cell, dropped visor and goggles to the ground, and stomped on them. So much for Parr's sideline in the repair business.

That everything? The woman asked.

Seems so, replied the first. Let's beat it.

No, you two go. Get slot ready. I've got a thing or two to do to our friend here.

Both men looked at her, then at Parr.

OK, they said. And scampered out the door without looking back.

Honey, she said to Parr when they were alone. I guess you can't reply, but I suspect you understand now that you're in a bit over your head. Blink twice if you get it, she added, bending down low.

Parr stared past her towards some of his myriad electronics.

We've never met before, but you're familiar with some of my compatriots. A few think you're an answer. Personally, I don't agree with it, but we can't afford improbabilities at this late stage, can we? Again looking for acknowledgement. Again, Parr stared at his pile o' devices.

I mean, it's all well and good to have people's attentions diverted, right? Any company too desperate for the big score, they won't even see what's crumbling around them. Not until it's too late. Great plan, unless of course the big score is made, and then all my hard work will be for naught.

An wireless ether switched on amidst the clutter. Parr felt the chip behind his retina making contact. Slowly, they connected.

To make sure you're out of this, the woman said, I'm going to need just a bit of you. She bent closer, brandishing a laser scalpel and pointing it towards Parr's shoulder. I'm told we can reconstruct your avatar with just a small shred of tissue, so this won't hurt too much. She bent closer.

Stay still, she murmured. Then spliced through the flesh above his clavicle, lopping off a thin 2 inch square.

Graal

Parr began his login to the building's network. The woman, humming to herself, cauterized his tissue, leaned down close to his ear.

That wasn't so bad, was it? she asked, with her gloved finger stroking tenderly down his cheek. So nice to find a man who can be quiet through pain, the lady purred. Then she surveyed the wreckage of his apartment once more, crushed a bit of circuitry under her heel, and stepped out door just as Parr completed the connection and sent a high-voltage blast from the ceiling towards the entrance.

Concentration set, Parr tapped into the complex's sensors, caught a gray blur entering the tubes, launched an initial over-ride, was thwarted, repercussions from a bored stunt he'd pulled months ago, saw the figure exiting the tubes, and pull ahead range toward the cars.

Bitch, he slurred to himself when his facial muscles came slowly out of their paralysis two hours later.

9

It might not be a total loss. Three years work, what hadn't been wasted on escorts and booze, had mostly gone to that rig, and its backups. His ports had been clogged irreparably, the delicate plastics ruined on exposure to air; water byproduct from ruptured cells had already brought oxidation to the mainboards.

Parr dug through the refuse. His ability to cast aside objects as worthless increasing as strength and mobility increased. They'd zapped his main and tossed his backup, but, remembering, Parr went to small indentation in the wall where he'd stashed some gear months. Its opening, to Parr's handprint, gave him hope as he reached in.

Inside were a letter, some disconnecting micro-wires, and a mass of crushed polymer, destabilized from excess heat. Parr examined the letter. Quality stationary, watermarked. He opened it.

Owner,

went here first.

Morgan.

PS: They'll never believe you

It read.

Morgan was a name he knew, vaguely. Some connection with Caerleon, but lacking any flow beyond the walls of his building Parr was stumped for now. His avatar was still out there out least, needing only a bio-sig to make it his again; spoof or no, nobody could override that sucker entirely. Guaranteed. Written in stone. Money back if not fully satisfied. The whole culture was based on it.

Lot of promises made weren't being kept lately. Parr stumbled out the door when his legs went two full minutes without a shake.

On the trans, crowds were nervous. A faint, murmuring buzz of anxiety, confronting a problem that they hadn't faced in years. Parr stood at the furthest end of the platform, waiting for his shuttle, repelled by the crush of humanity at what was the evening's rush hour. From work, school, and play, they came, sat, chatted, speaking into handhelds, wrist mics, or personal cones, mostly hearing back, but not always.

At the vidbooths scattered all round, the inevitable lines were there, fathers seeing sons, children seeing friends, adulterers watching mistresses, but some of the booths had no lines. No out of order signs, but no lines.

Parr's trans arrived, he entered with a crush of humanity that, even in the wealthy districts, didn't muster up on anyone's fashion scale. Feeling at home, he watched the freevid and dozed.

It was a single dwelling out on the far periphery of Parr's city. Trans went above-ground, and on the ground to that backward locale. Parr walked past ancient, ruptured utility poles, the copper stripped by salvage gangs, but nobody finding a use for the wood yet.

Three miles from the last trans stop, quarter-mile at least from any other inhabited dwellings, lay the abode of the hermit. Squat was the building, rancher, they'd called the thing once. Or trailer. Parr was uncertain and had no data to access. They'd even wrecked his old handheld.

He and the hermit had communed over the ether in times past. Old man would invited Parr out, draw him maps, promise booze, chip mods, you name it. Parr figured the guy was lonely, decent enough, but rumors of behavior as detached from normal as the guy's house was from a downtown, and a general contempt for in-person socializing had kept Parr away. Never ruin a good friendship by getting physical.

Sockets were dug in on the perimeter, tiny volcanoes like ant hills or poorly disguised land mines. With no way to communicate, and quite certain he'd be blasted, Parr went for it the old-fashioned way.

Hermit! he shouted. Hermit, it's Parr. I need your help.

No answer. Parr checked around, wondering if anyone had caught him acting prole. That nobody'd seen him only made him feel more self-conscious.

Hermit!! he shrieked. Hermit!

Still nothing. Parr, angry and feeling stupid, grabbed a handful of split-concrete pebbles, dropped them on one of the sockets, raced away in case of explosion.

Nothing happened.

Hermit, cried Parr. Then began the ant-hill bombardment again. Still nothing.

Parr walked across the perimeter, climbed up broken steps, nearly falling through on the third one, came to the door. Laser lights spread across. Parr tossed another pebble, stepping back. The rock vaporized on contact, tinting the air with eau de ozone. Satisfied, Parr walked around to a boarded-up window.

Graal

Hermit, he said.

I hear you, came a voice from inside.

Christ, old man, said Parr. Why didn't you say anything?

Making sure ye wasna one of them converters, said the Hermit. They's crafty lads, those converters.

What are they trying to convert you to? asked Parr, conscious as always of speaking, loudly, outside.

Oh, they'll be converting ya to anything. Saying d'ye smell ta whiff? Then another be asking if ya wanna try smelling ta whiff. Then they's asking if ya smoke ta whiff, drink ta whiff, give to prevent the whiff, buy the whiff, sell the whiff. It's all the same person, I t'ink, only it's a maybe a different whiff. That I canna be sure, though. I did'na wanna open the door. Whiff or no. I'm an old man. They're scary.

I'm not selling whiff. It's Parr.

I gathered who y'are. Parr, me boy. Been expecting ya a long time. So few turn down the invite.

Others come here?

Aye. 'Tis a great place to get the whiff.

Listen you washed-up asocial troglodyte, in the past day I've been zapped and spliced by a chick with a outdated latex fetish, had my rig trashed by two semiliterates under her care, wasn't able to jack over either in time for payback, humored the interests of a femdrone for far longer than can be considered necessary, and worst of all had to watch films at a goddamned corporate meeting. I'm in no mood for gigglingbots now. I need assistance.

Don't take yourself so seriously, lad. Unbecoming in a young man. Be entering now, the door is open.

Parr, gingerly, placed his hand on the handle, pressed. The door swung back into the house, revealing lush carpet, delicate wall-furnishings, coordinated sofas, and beyond, a foodprep with dinner set for two.

I been preparin' for ya, the Hermit said. And for the second time that day, Parr got an in-person look at a legend.

The hermit was small, grizzled, curves of flesh and sprigs of hair rolling out of his body from the oddest locations, often perpendicular to each other. The lips covered a mouth that was years past benefiting from a robo-hygienist, the nose had moles like wireless towers. The eyes, though, were sparkling, as of a child seeing his first sunset through the smog.

A Founder, the Hermit. Last of his kind, and damned unlikely to reproduce, Parr decided. Still, the kindness that emanated from him. Only known avatar who could walk without a defense pre-loaded. Barbarians respected him as holy, Newbies as a keeper of the way, Parr as the only one with gear he could use, ready fast, and a snowball's chance of loaning it to him.

You'll be having dinner with me first, young'un. I spent me time a cooking for ye.

Cooking for me?

Graal

'Tis known you was a comin'.

Who knew?

Why, I knew. I knew it quite well. Been on my calendar, if I had a calendar. Do they make calendars, ye lad? Great things, had days, pictures. Ye wrote on them, what you would do that day. T'were the center of the family, and ye could look at your calendar many a year later, and know what ye did. Relive it. My favorite calendar was one of dogs. They still make dogs, don' they, lad?

Dogs? Yes. Hell, they make themselves. The girl dog...

Oh, that's good, said the Hermit, interrupting. I could'na imagine a world without dogs. Big ones?

Yes. Big ones. Small ones too.

I dunno if I like the small ones. Big ones are good though.

Yeah. Not for eating, though, said Parr, motioning to the foodprep.

Oh, who'd eat a dog?

It happens.

I didna' believe it. Where?

Other cultures. Hermit, should *we* eat?

Oh, he's an impatient one, he is. And I'd been t'inking you wasna hungry after that feast ye had this afternoon.

You knew that too?

T'were everywhere.

Where the hell is that?

What, the wee lad canna accept there's stories about he don't know? Ye didna think ye was secure when you make others not? People look to see ya, lad.

Why?

'Why,' he says. 'Why?' The Hermit chortled to himself. Ye never looked for ye-self on the ether, did'ye boy? No, ye never did.

Then, motioning for Parr to sit, offered:

I'll be bringing ye yer dinner now. Sit then. Good.

The table, for its rustic appearance, curved to fit Parr. The seat shifted downward from Hermit height to full-sized as the cushion spread wider to accommodate the muscles on Parr's legs. Food smelled good, whatever it was.

An 'ye been with the drink today, lad. Has'nt ya?

Graal

Err, yeah. Some. Long time ago.

'N they zapped ya? Ye still dizzy? Or no?

Nah. I'm fine. Thirsty. But fine.

I'll get ya a juice. Big one. Real stuff it are. Ye've a got work ta do.

What? Work tonight, Hermit? I need gear, but I need to test it. I won't go far in anything new. Not even from you.

Sounds so very good, don't it lad? Delay, delay, delay, ya? Get it just so.

Parr leaned forward, about to display the rent in his shoulder.

Oh, don't ye be bothering. T'is the same. I were once a young ugly dwarf, I were. I know, ye got yer small revenges to take, yer slights to be rightin'. Oh, ye canna spend years on that. But not these years. Ya need to work, ya does.

What work will I be doing?

Lad, said the Hermit as he came to the table with a covered dish. The most important work you'll ever do. And they only thing ye was much good at.

The Hermit set the dish on the table. Lifted it. Inside was a pizza, encrusted with small meats, coated in a fine white powder.

No, said Parr, smelling the blend of parmesan, tomato and granulated sugar. I can't. That's gross.

Ye're on a quest now, said the Hermit. 'Tis your dish. Tastes good. I'll get your juice. Ye pull a slice, lad, it's all for you. And I will'na be letting you leave me table with an empty belly.

What will you eat? said Parr.

I've already eaten. You get to sample the food, hear what I say, before you begin your journey this night.

Tonight? Parr began to rise up, found himself held in place by the table. No amount of straining would release him.

I can send ya off from there if you'd like, boy. T'is a few cables with a long reach. Or we can make ya more comfortable. But ya will be eating, and ya will be going on your journey this night. And I'll no more be hearing out. Eat up, err I make you.

Parr, with an exaggerated sigh, removed the nearest slice and dropped it on his plate. He held it up, bit in.

Too sweet, he said.

What they all say. But he ate it. You know it. Go on', 'tis travelling food. And I'll no be having my cookin' denigrated. Cost me a bit to get that sugar for yer pizza.

Sugar on pizza, said Parr. Real sugar. On pizza. The First to Know was insane.

Graal

Now, lad, don't be making those faces at me. T'is yer own fault and all. You let her do it.

Let her?

She thinks you're too nice. Anytime a woman bethinking a mon is too nice, mon has to be going on his journey. Else she'll walk all over ya she will, and spread the word out to her friends. Ruins a man's reputation in town. So an you go, she and her friends won't be after ya. T'would be counter-productive.

Parr chewed his pizza in silence. Found he tolerated the mush, at least when coupled with sweetcarb beverages. They ate mostly in silence, the hermit giving Parr the odd harangue when the younger man's rate of consumption dropped. Finally, Parr finished. The Hermit, having ceased to eat long ago, had been staring at him for a while.

Parr stared back.

Yeah? he said.

And you don't be knowing verry much, do ya? The Hermit said.

Parr stared at him.

Oh, ye be hunting things down, right enough. Guess yer the best at ripping down sheets, finding 'nuff there to cover yer ass. But you don't be knowing things. Not deep down. Do you?

Parr kept staring.

Now, it's no a bad 'ting. 'Tis said, 'he who knows nothing shall meet the First To Know.' Indeed, I always wonder if it were you who'd be going to seek it, boy...

Who the hell is 'tis? Parr asked.

But I were bankin' on ya to be taking the trip afore now. You're a disappointment to us. Oh, you wasna at Caerleon t'were another lapse on yer part, that. So you stay with yer boy's games, and you didna see it come, the signs of t'Graal. You wasna able to catch a glimpse of that sweetest sight. The gift from him. You could'na even argued with 'em all about yer own impressions of it.

OK, so I missed a meeting. On my own, I pay the bills.

Oh, ya. Ye using yer steed and your skill to stay in the cities. Brave one, ye are. Think they should make holocards to celebrate ye?

That's Gavin's department. Him and the rest of the edutrash. They're the ones who over-hype danger. Most of the time, you're not even hurt getting hacked out there.

But enough of the time, ye are. Do ye even be knowing why the cord comes along?

Somebody wrote a memo.

No, it's not 'cause somebody wrote a memo. The Hermit raised his hand as if to strike Parr. Thought better of it. And it's no something from your silliness. T'was a covenant. Everyone out there, they left a signature of themselves. When the avatars came, the signature was tied into the body itself. Made for faster reactions, and the rich experience, and the life beyond life, where all was glorious sensation. T'were a paradise, some said. And you

Graal

can't appreciate it. Red blotches had appeared on the Hermit's face. You, who are among the few who can travel it. And maybe the only... the Hermit stared at Parr for a moment.

I tell ye now, boy. Ye are still a boy. But if ye were thinking ye'd be staying in the cities, digging about through them troves, wasting time. Well, ye won't be doing that. Nay, boy. Ye won't be making a casual trip outside, givin' them their money's worth on this one. Ah—uh. T'were too important. I will na let ye. I find ye staying here, I cut ye cord myself I will. There's no refuge. There's no waiting. Ye will go. And ye will know. And there ain't no doubt about it. It's the only real thing, mayhap, ye ever do.

Parr was silent for a moment. Thought of attacking this little man. Thought of leaving this town once and for all. Thought of the face on all those if he came through with it. Thought of his digestive system after such a horrible meal. Fine. A real challenge.

OK. What happened? I know about the girl. The story isn't there or there are a hundred stories... 'danger,' 'danger.'

The girl? Oh, that's not even true, I expect. Just a tale for the wee ones. My thinking? 'Twere to keep it a man's world. Boys don't like girls messing about with their toys, don't you know.

Sure. Right. I've thought that. Propaganda. Go on.

Aye. Propaganda, that. Ta control it. They who's wantin' ta control, they always tell ya it's for yer sake. Keep ya from them, 'n from where they don't be wantin' ya to look. Worked, though all controls were lost in the wake of it. But this signature, lad. That little blip that travels with ya always. Can kill ya. If it's done right. And to kill, you need to have it a part of yourself. No risk for ya, no reward. And no going outside the bounds.

Got that. Yeah. I can pull up an article digital resonance from attacker a, hits the sig, setting off a sort of feedback wave. The host recipient of this feedback can suffer grave physical injury, or death. It's in the handbook. Contact with the attackers' signature is required to damage in any way the avatar of another, rendering projectiles useless. You can kill or be killed.

Aye. 'Tis in your guide. But nobody's studied the phenomenon so well. Ever'one grew afraid. Things stopped right after. T'were nobody thought it through.

Except for you.

And others. I'm sure. But we could'na be hearing from the friends no more. You know what we think?

Nope.

We're thinking, young Mr. Parr, that it's not so much of the feedback to yer electric signature. We're thinking it's 'cause things are real there. Injuries aren't real, no. They heal the next time you pop in. But death, that's real to you. As real as me stabbing you here. Something to ponder about it, yeah?

Good to know, Parr nodded. But you're not sure of this?

Well, it's bloody hard to test it now, isn't it? Don't see subjects lining up. We're sufferin', here, from a lack of empirical data, aren't we?

Seems so. Am I a guinea pig?

Graal

No, just something I be wantin' ya to remember when you go. And you're going to go now.

Any hints on where to find it?

East of the sun, west of the moon.

What?

'Tis a joke, boy. Our last one. I'll take yer plate and jack ya in. 'Tis time. I know you don't got much of a attention span boy, so yer advice for the journey is ya need to go where yer heart takes ya. Where that skimmer's instinct of yers feels you must read closer. Now, let's be about it then.

And they left the table, went down two levels into the Hermit's cave. The Hermit sealed a steel door behind them. Room was as large as the Hermit small, with multiple input jacks, clear beds, and an onsite–power source. Parr lay down as the Hermit strapped him in.

Farewell and Godspeed to ya boy. Much rides upon ye.

Thanks for the pressure.

Shut up, said the Hermit. Lowering a mask. And Parr saw no more of that world for a time.

11

Gavin burst onto the net with a hoarse cry. Blade in hand, he checked the periphery for anything out of place. Things were tranquil up close, with nods from a few underlings. There were movements at the far reaches of his demense. Furtive, scurrying types who didn't know what they were in for. At the heart of Caerleon, great roads stretched to the outer worlds. One traveled these roads in peace, never a sign of the garbage that floated before him now.

On the plains, one moved slower, passing through a hundred doorways. Slowness. A steed, his privilege as guardian of Caerleon, came at Gavin's whistle.. Gavin mounted his beast, raced towards the first kill of the day.

These two were scavengers. Mis–shapen things, their avatars garbed in early lack–of–style, attracted by the life–flows of Caerleon. On a brighter day, Gavin'd have sent them off with a solid chastisement and recommendation of better design software. But now he thought of the ladies and folk, whose commerce and safety were his trust, and their right to step outside the Cylinder, albeit not far outside. Quick flips of the blade and down they went. Glance down told Gavin he'd spliced the cord on one. So be it. The wretch had known it would come one day.

Smiling, Gavin wondered if this fellow considered it an honor. Might well be the last cord Gavin ever cut on his home. Realdeath was a better fate than life as a scavenger, in any case.

Blade cleansed, Gavin pulled visor down, locked it into place. He scanned out, past his demense, past Caerleon's territory, past the outer fringes of the protectorate. One vector, at great distance, seemed to pulse with black gobs of uncertainty. Gavin wheeled his beast around, spurred that way in a rush.

On a glance back, the auburn lights that signaled his homeland let off a faint shimmer, as if in farewell. Gavin turned forward. Increased his speed.

12

Parr emerged on unfamiliar ground. The movement of his limbs mis-timed. He checked around. Hovel of some sort. Mud-thatched. Fire burnt out. Other than home. Parr's helmet lay on the floor, right arm's greaves leaned up near the entrance.. Parr stood up.

Six men raced into the hut. Parr smiled. One of the six looked at Parr, then his comrades. He drew a knife. Parr smiled harder. The man tossed it. Parr laughed. Fool. A fool then, who thought could harm with risking harm, striking at the sig without putting his own on the line. There were rules. Parr stopped smiling as he felt a slight pain and glanced at the knife embedded into his arm. The thrower was stunned, his comrades grew bolder, drew their weapons. Grim smiles.

Thrower reached into his waistbelt, drew another knife. Parr yanked the blade from his arm, threw it back. The blade went straight for the head of thrower. Target didn't move. The blade passed through his face, embedded itself into the wall.

The other men came closer with their weapons axes, clubs, one sword. Thrower stayed behind. Parr drew his sword, parried a knife as it flew towards his head, saw the blade pass through one of thrower companions before skidding on the floor. The men closed. Parr spliced separated the head from the body that carried a sword, spun and cut through the chest of an axe-wielder, bashed his mailed left fist through the face of a clubber.

Thrower tossed another knife. Parr caught it with his hand, tucked the blade away. Two axemen headed for the door. Parr grabbed one, kicked legs out from under the other. Parr's sword drew a straight line on a throat, parked for a moment in a chest. Then there was thrower.

The fellow was reaching behind himself for yet another blade when Parr grabbed him.

Who? Parr said. Who sent you here?

Ggfi, asrgt.

Great. Language disabled. Parr grabbed the man's hand, pulled him outside.

Where? Parr asked.

The man, terrified, reached his arm out. Swung it in a half-circle, then vanished before Parr's eyes. Inside the hut, one more disappeared. Four stayed, their cords severed by Parr's rage. The throwing blade remained wedged in Parr's belt. He glanced at it again. Saw no runes encoded. Too much of a puzzle. He tucked it back, donned helmet and greaves, whistled for his steed.

The beast came on time and seemed in order. Parr trusted nothing now. He checked his visor. Meta-scanned. Before him, Caerleon, rich in crimson hues, glowing with light. A beacon. Behind him, the periphery, darkland, the frontier. And behind Caerleon. Ash-grey. Little movement. Small fragments that somehow lingered with nothing to nourish. Parr circled the kingdom. Went to the lands where battles had been fought. Before long his steed was coated in ash.

13

In his own chambers, Arturo brooded. Around him the screens were dark. Winestains were strewn across the rich velvet furnishings. The other occupant of his chambers had not visited in months.

De Vere entered gingerly.

Sir? he asked.

Ah, De Vere, said Arturo. Smiling slightly. And will you play chess with me this night?

I think not, sir. We are busy today.

How goes it then, out there?

Matters have taken a bit of a turn. Our people are beset from all sides. Those staunchest in support of you hold well, even take back land. But the younger ones...

Yes?

They're moving back and forth, across each other's lines. No discipline. Nothing to keep them in order, to mount a more sophisticated assault. This new opponent, whoever, whatever they're exploiting this.

I see. Is that all?

No. I think some of your younger followers are using this opportunity to increase their own territory. They raid as badly as the opposition. We've lost one of our main routes to the outer worlds.

And Gavin?

Of him there is no sign.

That young one... Parr?

No communication since that day. His quarters were destroyed, though his avatar is still active, we think. No way of contacting him. None that he bothers to acknowledge, at any rate.

Very good, De Vere. Tell the servants to bring me more wine. You should come to play chess.

My duty calls, sir. Perhaps you can play the AI.

Perhaps. Rather easy to win. Goodbye then, De Vere.

De Vere stepped towards the door. Looked back at his old friend.

Goodbye, De Vere.

Nodding his head slightly, De Vere turned and shuffled out.

14

Gavin raced across the plains. His steed crossed barriers in a flash. His blade warded off any assailants. None, he thought, had been this way in years. The sky above was always dark now, only illumination at times were the sparks flying off his horse's stirrups. Sting quite a bit, those sparks.

He'd crisscrossed the area, seeking any sign of the castle where Graal was rumored to be housed. Information given, even at blade point, was still unreliable. But something showed up on his visor in this area. A block that appeared to move every few hours.

Gavin was triangulating. At a hillock overlooking one of this object's haunts, he dismounted. Rested before taking the time to check his numbers again.

A woman appeared near him. Had Gavin been mounted, the shock would have dropped him to the ground. As it was, he could barely speak.

Her avatar was young, unencumbered, with that peculiar confidence Gavin had seldom seen in women since the days when the state was still hiring. Her hair was flaming red, down to the waist. Eyes a sparkling green. Staring back at him. Unafraid.

Yes? Gavin said finally.

Did you get a good look, honey? she replied.

I suppose so. What are you doing here?

Looking.

For what?

Whatever. Anything that comes by.

Right. I'm not from around here. She smiled. Are you?

Near and far. I don't think I show you my place just yet. You looking for anything?

Yes. Yes, I am looking for something.

What?

Not sure. Gavin replied truthfully. I suspect I'll know it when I see it.

Graal

Aren't you a little old to be finding yourself?

Aren't you a little young to be out on your own like this... Ms?

Nellee. Your name?

Gavin.

Nice name.

Thank you. Can you tell me anything about this area?

Well, the usual. Untrustworthy data passages that most folks block. Hops spread far apart, and only a couple of them. Your typical bands of raiders, who'd love to have their way with innocent damsels, but can't really get the job done, and scare easily. Oh, and there's a kind of magical castle that pops back and forth throughout the region.

That's interesting.

The raiders?

Those are typical, as you said, Ms. Nellee.

So, you waiting for our little housing apparition? It should be here shortly. But I guess you thought that. Right?

You are correct, Ms. Nellee.

Formal, aren't you?

It's the training.

I see. Any news you have? Of parts central, or do you come from the outer worlds.

I work for Caerleon, Gavin said. The girl was unimpressed.

Yes, you would, wouldn't you. Can I sit down?

Surely.

It won't be here for another hour or two, sir. Can you think of anything with which to pass the time?

Lovely Ms. Nellee, your company is sufficient. Tell me of yourself, of growing up here. The world outside.

I don't like to talk about that.

No. Nothing too personal. I am not, however, from around here, so I don't think you should feel that I pose too much of a threat. Do you find me threatening, Ms. Nellee?

Threatening? She paused, green eyes scanning over Gavin, critically. Well, that hair is just frightening. I mean, you chose that. You sat down and picked this look? Does make a girl wonder. But then, everything about you is intended to inspire feelings of security in the public, right?

Graal

Gavin said nothing.

OK, maybe trust in the masses. Not necessarily confidence.

Well, aren't you the dear. Besides my appearance, what is there about life in this rural part of the world to recommend itself?

Not very much. I'd leave if I were you. But then, I'm not you, am I? So I can't leave.

These are difficult times. Motion is somewhat restricted.

Yeah. I heard that too. They said you used to be able to cruise to the outer worlds, not give up 10 years of your life just to get there maybe.

Yes. There are a lot of 'used to's.' That one I'm not sure I believe.

You've been off? Do you live off?

No. Local to this world.

You mean somewhere decent.

Ms. Nellee, I served at Baden. I've earned my place.

And to keep that place, you make it harder for everyone else that comes after you, don't you, Mr. Gavin?

I know just the boy for you, Dame Nellee. A lovely young man who shares your interests and beliefs. He might come here after me. He hasn't been here already and sampled your wonderful charming manner, I presume?

No. You're the first one in a while. Someone who shares my personality? Nobody like that. Though I'd love to swap you for him instead.

I see. said Gavin after a moment.

Your ego troubling you now? And I'd never have expected that from a man. Of course. A naive little girl like myself has been forced to understand that men from Caerleon are impossible to unsettle. Perhaps you're out looking for some vaporous item now. A Graal, perhaps?

I was there when Graal appeared. I felt it. Not vapor, as you said.

What did you feel? And what did the others feel?

It's the way to power. It will solve all the problems. It will reverse the slowness. It was almost in my grasp.

That's authoritative, Mr. Gavin. What about the others? You weren't alone when you saw it, were you?

No, we were together. De Vere saw the old man, he saw saw. We all saw something.

Right. Not the same to any of you.

No. But somehow I feel this castle that moves about...

Graal

Yes. It's a nice castle. As such things go. Nellee sighed.

You've seen the interior?

Once or twice. There was a tour.

And what's there?

Many fabulous things, at least for these parts. At least to a poor girl like me. Perhaps your urban sensibilities will not be as impressed. Come along. If history is any guide, I suspect it will arrive any moment now.

After you, dear lady. And Gavin followed.

18

No sounds registered when the castle appeared. One moment, the road was clear, the way flat. The next, a gray monolith before them, its exterior the work of a mad architect. Rectangular turrets atop curved towers, squares and semi-circles, the thing an odd polygon, as though someone had torn the leaves from books of western and eastern design, then pasted the sheets together in a mash.

The woman showed no hesitation. Led Gavin right to the entrance.

It's called Troylan, she replied to Gavin's unanswered question. Gavin nodded, tried to place the name. They dismounted. No guard came to greet them. The woman strode to the door, flipped up the handle, entered. Gavin followed.

The door opened onto a vast hallway. On the walls were scores of holographs, odd depictions of mouth-wide teens, renderings of enlightenment-era scholars, eyes curled in a lascivious grin. It was all oddly familiar.

Troylan was a boom company? Gavin asked as they reached the main reception area. There were corridors branching off in all directions, still no sign of any inhabitants.

Yeah. Something like that. Amazing what they put money into. Here, she said, pointing towards the largest hallway. This way.

Part of the tour?

Right.

Gavin noticed the woman reaching her hands inside the sleeves of her dress. He placed his hands on the hilt of his blade. Walked carefully behind her.

They emerged from the corridor onto a central hall. At the other edge a pasty-faced avatar, slight girth to his icon, sat. Staring at them. More than a dozen women were stationed on benches at a large table. The women seemed not to move. The man waved his hand.

Ready? Gavin's companion asked.

For what? he replied, already sliding his blade from its sheath.

14

33

Graal

Them, Nellee said. A doorway opened to the right of the seated male. Fully a dozen guards emerged, blades drawn.

Get the woman, said the seated figure in a bored voice. But leave her alive, as I've plans. The other one you can dispose of as you see fit.

Nice guy, said Gavin. Friend of yours?

Used to be, said Nellie, displaying a curved knife and main-gauche. That was the problem. The guards closed in as the door behind them shut. Smiling, Gavin leapt to the table, jamming his leg against the nearest guard for additional propulsion. Nellee, back against the wall against two attackers, began to parry, catching one in the chest with her small dagger.

Only 10, thought Gavin. From opposite sides of the table, two sharp edges converged on the spot where he'd been standing. Gavin jumped up, did a quick somersault, landed perfectly balanced right between two of the lord's guests. The women didn't move, their eyes registering nothing. Gavin's blade spun behind, its silver arc trailed by red spatter emanating from the guard who'd been there. The women remained still.

Gavin leaped forward, brought his feet to the thigh of a another guard, thrust his blade into the now-prone figure. Eight. Three raced towards him. Quick thrust to the chest obliterated the first. Gavin took a cut on his side, spun, parried, jammed his elbow into the face of the cutter, gave his sword a sudden flick and decapitated the other one in front.

The man Gavin elbowed had dropped his blade. Gavin picked it up. Checked his side, saw little blood. Spun both swords and in a whirlwind parried and hacked his way through four oncoming assailants. Two.

One down.

The guard still on his feet paused, looked up the dais. There, the man, in a shriek called get him! The guard looked at Gavin. Dropped his blade. Exited a side hallway. Behind them, Nellee had taken care of both her attackers. Gavin admired the slick work. Leader, angrily, departed.

Still the women at the table did not move. Gavin went to Nellee.

Nice. He said.

Thanks. I was out of practice. She replied.

What about the ladies there? he asked.

Oh, them. Yeah. Takes a girl a bit to get up in the morning.

I get the feeling you haven't told me everything.

Girls have their secrets, she said. One thing I can tell you.

What's that?

Duck! she shouted. And with a quick motion drove her knife into the face of an on-rushing guard. About to compliment her, Gavin turned around, saw three score troops bearing down hard on them. He ducked, spun to grab the closest guard, pulled the fellow's legs out, tossed him back in the general direction of their new

assailants, edged out the hallway.

15

Gavin bumped against Nellee. The girl had stopped in the middle of the corridor. Cursing, Gavin regained his balance.

What's the hurry, big guy? She asked.

Woman, have you gone mad? Gavin sputtered. What have you gotten me into? He looked at her for a moment, looked back at the encroaching men.

There's that legendary bravery and devil–may–care attitude I've grown to expect. You're something of a let–down, Mr. Gavin of Caerleon. Besides, she added, pointing to the men behind them, you're maybe not as observant as you should be. Smiling, she drew a small knife from her clothing, tossed it over Gavin's head.

It struck a guard, then another, then three more in rapid succession behind skidding against the ground. The guards shimmered for a moment. Kept moving.

Troy doesn't have the money for this kind of staff, she said. Gavin looked closer. Embarrassed, he realized that the hordes of men he'd been covering from all had the same outfits, the same insignia, the same faces. The ones he'd left on the floor had been of different sizes and shapes.

Oh, don't feel too bad. You did take care of the first one. This is Troylan. Heard of it?

And suddenly Gavin did remember. The stories of a peculiar company, formed with perhaps the most promising collection of human capital ever assembled. The staggering resources that had been put into this thing... tech workers, planners, coders, architects, unbelievable. Rumored that they had uncovered forbidden knowledge. And the one that was chosen for the boss. Their head...

Yeah, it was his first job. Didn't work out too well. Most of the talent split on him when the funds dried out.

And now?

They some pretty neat toys for him to play with. The onslaught was passing right over them. Gavin flipped his blade over one with a dissimilar outfit, saw the fellow go down. His companions marched right through him.

Some of those toys weren't that useful, the girl added.

How did you know him?

I'm a causality. Veteran of his wonderful employ.

You were made to leave?

No, he wanted me to stay on.

Hmm.

Graal

Yeah. I wasn't quite up for it. Nice guy and all. But...

He took it badly? Gavin asked.

Rather. Seems to have declared war on every other woman who still worked there. Zapped them while they were in situ.

The bastard.

Yeah. They're supposed to be well-fed and cared for, at least.

Did he ever...

Me? A girl never tells. Would like to see him stuck the way my friends are, however. The onslaught had passed them completely. From behind, Gavin noticed, the minions of Troylan were semi-transparent. He felt shame.

Oh, it's OK, Gavin. Nellee said. You weren't told what to expect. Now I can't have you all doubting yourself on me here. There's a job that you've got to do.

What's that?

Sleep with me.

Gavin stared at the girl for a moment. What she proposed, the thing of every boy's yearning. Outside in the world, physical gratification was readily available on each corner. Men, women, an era of open fornication not seen since the passing of the Byzantine Empire. You could do it on the streets together and no one would care.

But a partner out here. He'd imagined it a thousand times. And every one different. Some of the forbidden works spoke of it... vaguely. But the delights hinted at gave enough raw material for sessions of adolescent rapture too numerous to mention. And now, before him, this stranger would let him do it.

OK, Gavin said. Where?

Up the side stairs, the girl said, pointing. There's a special room we need to go to first.

Shielding?

Such a gentleman. Concerned with protection. Just shut up and follow me.

16

Troy sped from the conflagration. Down secret chambers only he knew, past rooms whose entrance he controlled, face a mask, sputtering curses. The bitch had come back. And brought another one.

He thought of the kindnesses he'd done her. Allowing her to share in his magnificence. And keeping her, encouraging her, letting her be. What in return? What in return?

Graal

This was not the first of her little braveries to cross him. That part of her behavior he understood. Though with time, Nellie would be corrected. Yes, she would. With a leering grin, Troy recalled the others she'd brought through, her misguided efforts to cross the one man who had been, after all, her only benefactor.

Surely she must know though, that this little event of hers would not go without repercussions. Indeed, that there would be some debt to pay. Some time to be spent waiting for his forgiveness.

Checking himself, Troy remembered that he was, after all, so generous. That he gave and gave. But there would be a moment or two between givings. Yes, a long moment at that.

He reached the entrance to his personal armoury. Pressed a few buttons in the wall. The door slid open, and Troy gained admission to his secret room of horrors. All around him were the devices, such marvelous toys his little elves had made for him. Hanging on the wall, a blazing sword that required but a touch to send unwitting opponents into combustion. No, Troy decided, too simple for this one. After all, there were the men he'd lost today.

He ruffled through the contents of a few shelves, putting aside incendiary devices, motion checkers that would stop any man in his tracks, and the collection of poison rings, were he to go in that room where she doubtless had her man cornered, offer peace, then in a shake...

The idea excited him. To kill with a touch. So daring. Surely then the little thing would see how magnificent Troy really was. How brave. Were it only to be so, her intermission might not last so long at all. No indeed. She would be released into his tender care promptly.

An image captured his attention for a moment. Slender digital, semblance of their moment at a party when the girl had, showing her true self to him, offered an embrace, the delightful smile before the camera. Troy would see that smile from her again. Yes he would. And none too soon.

But, he paused himself. Nearly ready now. The poison might be too much. She was a delicate soul. And indeed that man. Well, a pet of hers. A rabid dog Troy would have to put down as he had so many others. Yet what tender lady could so easily jump into the arms of a man who had just killed her pet.

Now Troy knew. Knew. When the time came, she would be after him, thanking him. Begging him to stay always at her side and continue to save her. This much was obvious to even the unenlightened observer. But Troy called himself decent. He didn't want this silly lass to have to spend too much time in intermission. For, surely, the emotional reactions that might erupt in her from the slaying of a pet. That he could not abide. No, he could not abide it.

How to prevent it. How, then, to pull away from his remarkable brain the secret plans, the directions, the strategy. He had, after all, built this castle. Obtained the necessary resources with only his genius and his credentials and the smooth manner in which he'd talked to his father's friends. Oh, yes. He was so capable then. And now he must turn to one more task. Keeping the girl from hurting herself, preventing her forcing him to make that hurt a reality.

It was a challenge few could face. And a problem that might require time. Time, though... she was soiling herself yet now, he knew. Improperly recreating with that pet. It'd be so like her. The thighs open for anything.... Oh, he must pause then. This would not do. NO, it would not. He must be focused. He was cool. A collector.

Smiling slightly to himself. Remembering how cool he was. Troy paused, sat down at his desk. The designs of it were so striking, he realized. The chair, how it sat there. Perfect. You have a wonderful decorator, he thought to himself. Here, in this seat, calmness returned. He found again that focus within himself which was truly the envy

of all.

How to dispose of a rodent. Without upsetting the mistress of the house. Troy smiled at himself, at his own clever choice of words. Mistress. Yes. Not truly a wife. But a companion he'd keep then for a very long time. Oh, he smiled, when the time did come. When he abandoned her for something a bit fresher. What would she do, then? Where would she go? How could she even imagine a world where he did not exist to explain things. Oh, he was so cruel. Perhaps he'd visit.

Well, no, thought Troy. Once a matter was over, it was over. He had a kind way of seeing about things. Smiling to himself, he pressed a button on the screen of his desk. Here, then. His kindness. The intermissions he'd arranged for so many of the misguided. Was it four now? No, he realized. Five of them. Five he'd put aside to let their uses stay. Five he'd done the favor of. A rest for them. Oh, he could perhaps activate them one day. After all, dinner was served regularly here.

The things they'd done to him. The myriad failures to understand remarkable gifts on offer. Or else, those sillier flaws. The way they'd not grasped his indifference. Some could not respond properly. Ah, but Nellie. She did understand. Knew that without him, there was nothing. When the time passed, Troy decided, she'd be dusted. Every day.

And how to dispose of the rodent? There was only one recourse. She'd like it. It'd been a product of that team he'd let her visit. A proof then, and a reminder. There was only one man for her. Only one. But then, she would know that soon enough. For, truly. It was time. To keep that wretch from soiling herself with her pet.

Troy stood up from behind his desk. Opened a closet. Before him sat a cloak. The remarkable cloak. Only fitting vestments. For such a remarkable man.

17

The room Nellie led Gavin into was digital lush. Wall-hangings suggested intimacy, as well as how to get there quickly, noted Gavin as he traced the story told by panels. A vast bed lay in the room's center, sporting tremendously comfortable furnishings. Behind it, small notches dotted the walls. Gavin looked over at his companion to ask about them, but the woman was already undressing.

Idly, Gavin noted shoes being removed, the faint rustle as a gown hit the floor. Nellee looked over.

We don't have a lot of time, she said. Gavin began his own disrobing. Wondering if perhaps she needed to use a bathroom, he looked again at the room, saw no other exit save the door they'd entered by. Pulling off his protective vest, he walked to the portal.

Should we bar this? he asked.

Nellee was now completely naked, and headed towards the bed.

With what? She replied. Couldn't hold them anyway. Toss that sword over here and let's get to it.

Her tender sensuality was not quite what Gavin had imagined for this moment. Swiftly, he loosed his leg plating, the tunic underneath, and various secreted weapons he carried, then, unadorned for the first time in this realm, he climbed into bed with the lady.

Hi, she said softly.

Graal

Hi, said Gavin, reaching for her. They embraced.

Then Gavin was lost, swept through the tendrils of her mind. The sig she carried leading him through an endless spectacle. Life before. Meeting Troy. The work, the city. How she'd been there. It was random, timeless, one moment a little girl, the next fully grown. Gavin saw, felt, touched, tasted, smelled the rapture.

Every moment in this woman's life was accessible to him. Every dream, every sensation he tasted. Felt her first shivers at the hands of an ill-trained lover, saw her disappointment at being overlooked by one she'd desired, laughed at the bizarre endeavors of men who'd sought to claim her, again saw Troy, her boss who'd once seemed harmless. Hanging out with Troy, or him hanging, the disquiet she'd felt in his presence that only grew the more he gave. Endgame for Troylan, the pink slips, that trick the little bastard pulled. Now, here, forever...

Gavin pulled away. Vaguely, an opening of his own self seemed to close as Gavin brought his legs beneath himself and sat upright on the bed. The woman was stunned. They were not alone. At the entrance to their room stood Troy, newly bedecked in an odd suit of fabric and polymer. The man stared at the two of them, his face frozen. Rage there, hate, and a strange expectation.

Nellee, said Troy. I knew you'd be here. With him. Slut. Troy brought his hands up. Gavin figured he could take a few blows before diving for cover. He hoped the girl could get out in time.

Nellee was going nowhere.

Oh come on, Troy, she said. You can do better with the names, little man. She nudged Gavin. After all, I fucked everyone but you. Gavin took the hint, dove for his weapon. Troy, reacting slowly, sent a blast of power from his wrists towards the edge of the bed, missing Gavin by seconds. Gavin rolled on the ground, found his blade. Stood up to face the man, saw a few notches where he'd been only moments ago. Nellee winked at Gavin.

Troy. Why did you expect any of us to go with you willingly. We build those toys especially for your hands, and you still don't know where to put it. She cackled madly. Troy lobbed blast after blast, only vaguely near Gavin, hitting the ceiling, the floors, a few pictures on the wall. Gavin wondered if he'd run out of steam soon. Nellee looked at him with a glare in her face signaling get on with it.

Swiftly Gavin crossed the room, deflected one shot with his blade, came to Troy, whacked him with his bare hand. Troy crumpled to the floor, sobbing. Gavin looked at Nellee. She nodded. Gavin brought his sword down, severed the man's head.

The floor began shaking.

Hurry! said Nellee, tossing him his leggings. We've got to get downstairs, fast.

Gavin stepped into his pants, moved out the door, with his vest covering his head. They raced to the stairs. Down. Main hall. Dinner guests were moving about in uncertain directions. One remained seated.

Hurry, Nellie shrieked, grabbing one. It's gonna fall.

The one Nellie held look up.

Sister? she asked vaguely. Eyes unfocused.

There's no time. Gavin!

Graal

Gavin slung the seated one over his shoulder, took two by the hand and headed for the door. Nellie roped another in and followed. They raced out as the walls began shimmering. Briefly Gavin noticed the floor starting a fast fade. He increased his speed. One of the women he'd been pulling slowed. Gavin yanked her along.

They were outside just as an odd rumbling occurred. Gavin dove to the ground, his charges thrust before him. He felt Nellie settling into the earth next to him. All were safe.

Behind, the castle imploded, turrets toppling over, brick disintegrating, towers sinking in upon themselves. It was an odd collapse, with no dust emanating from the demolition. Suddenly ground where it had stood was clear of any sign. Around them, the hills faded, replaced by a white slate. It'd be a long trek, but a dull one.

Sucks, said Nellie.

Why?

Troylan provided the best node around. By far. It's gonna take a while to get home.

Sighing, Gavin looked at his charges.

Home then, after a rest. Have you ladies ever been to Caerleon?

18

De Vere stood at the apex of Caerleon's watchzone. On monitors all around, the tale of that day's sorties was told. Here, the white overcame darkness, there, messages blurred white, black, grey, stalemate. At the far corner of the grid, black dominated. With guidance, a firm hand, and little in the way of pity, De Vere had marshaled Caerleon's young troops, making a fight of things. Despite so many absences and defenses, they were retaking ground in several quadrants.

De Vere paused, thinking of the messages he'd have to send to families for that day. And who to sign it. But enough. It was a good day. Chuckling to himself, De Vere summoned one screen closer, marked the handiwork of Gavin's brothers as the boys did their family proud.

Who'd led that onslaught, he wondered. Was it one of them in charge, or did they race out, howling with fury, savaging any obstacle in their way. De Vere remembered the first time he'd brought Harris in for training. The boy had taken to it well. Stern, earnest, loyal. All the right things you didn't see much anymore. There'd be a bit of second-thinking before anyone tried to retake an area where Harris had prowled.

And Garret. That boy was a bit more cunning than his brothers. He'd wait out the enemy. Observe from a distance. See where the weaknesses lay. Then fly in at just the right moment, a silver flash and the road was safe again. Such a wonderful family. They'd left the other side on the run. De Vere allowed his charges to chase for a time, began calling others in. The day was over. The battle won in that sector.

Elsewhere, the dark pulsing continued unabated, checked only by Caerleon's shielding. Glancing at it, the small traces of mirth vanished from De Vere's face. He stared again, watching the thing, shrinking and expanding. No source to it that he could see. Scouts into the area reported nothing there. Yet scouts disappeared, laying unmoved in beds well past time. And packages did not get through. A riddle of slowness. De Vere cursed himself for staying there, letting boys do his seeking. He had a mind to leave then, mount his charger and race. When no one

Graal

was looking...

De Vere, said a voice behind him. Too near. He'd forgotten himself. Turning, he faced Arturo's sister.

Morgan. The woman was ravishing. Ageless, classic beauty.

Dear, sweet De Vere, said the lady, approaching him with her eyes wide. And you've been saving Caerleon today?

Me. No, Lady, For De Vere, Morgan was always a lady. I've done no saving. Those boys out there, they're the ones who've saved us. I wait. An old man.

Morgan stood beside De Vere. Carelessly, she dropped her hand on his.

Not so old, then. Good De Vere. Their eyes met. I don't think those boys would go anywhere without your able leadership.

No, she continued as De Vere sought to interrupt. It's you, I think, who are the rock of Caerleon now. So much rides upon those strong shoulders. I wonder how you manage it. With never a complaint, never a whisper. What would we do without you, De Vere?

De Vere said nothing.

Not much at all, I think. Not much at all. But then, tell me, how goes it today?

Well, my lady. We've achieved our goals.

And kept what we had?

Grew it. More is safe now than was this morning. But not enough. Never enough it seems. De Vere sighed. Looked away.

Morgan studied the screens behind them. She pointed to the end of the grid De Vere had been analyzing only moments before.

That's it? The place they talk about?

Yes. That it is.

De Vere, tell me. What do you think is out there? Her eyes locked on his. Don't spare my feelings, now. I'm not such the innocent girl. I want you to tell me, truthfully. What are our chances now?

Anything can happen lady. We've won against greater odds. But that sector concerns me. I don't know what's there. Sometimes, I wonder if it's even hostile to us. If it understands us. The signals. They're like nothing I've ever seen before. And no one we've sent out has come back. But they seem alive here. Calm even. What keeps them I've no idea.

Does it move towards us? How long do we have?

Yes. It moves towards us. But then, it moves away. And then it spins round. But it can stay still for days. I think De Vere leaned closer to Morgan, whispered. I think it's trying to talk to us.

Graal

Morgan stepped back. Awed. Talk to you?

It could be.

You've tried talking back?

Yes. Again the whisper. I modified Caerleon's signals slightly. Just what we're sending to the grid, so no one above thinks we've lost it. AS best I could, our beacons shifted, the same rhythms as that place.

And what happened? Morgan was visibly stunned. How did it...

It did nothing, Lady. Perhaps it's my own talents. Not sending the right message. If I got a young one in here, they might catch the rhythms better. See what I missed. But...

Why don't you? This is such a marvelous wonder, De Vere.

I can't summon the young ones in, Lady. There's none I think has the gift of silence to them. You know how boys will talk. They'll spread it around. Think perhaps an old man in Caerleon has gone mad. Then they may not go where I send them. So I keep trying. Myself.

Brave De Vere. You will get it one day, said Morgan.

Think so?

I know it. Morgan pulled away, her face shining with confidence and renewed enthusiasm. De Vere basked in a reflected glow.

Yes, Morgan sighed, hands reaching up each sleeve as she appeared to hug herself with relief. Valiant De Vere. I ought to have known you'd find the way.

De Vere turned away, his eyes attracted by motion in the sector they'd just discussed. What's that?

What? said Morgan, startled, following his eyes.

That area... it's... they both stared on screen. The pulsing region erupted once, sending out little slender jets around itself. Quickly, onscreen, it withered, shriveling unto itself like a slug doused with salt.

De Vere shifted back towards Morgan, saw her hands race back up her sleeves. The woman appeared to shiver.

Be not afraid, lady. This seems good! They both stared at the screen; gradually, the area became white once more.

Finally, lady. De Vere beamed. This might cheer Arturo.

Yes, said Morgan. Staring at De Vere as he turned away. It just might at that.

And Arturo did come back to himself with the news. Here was an enemy that they could not fathom, could not stop, couldn't even approach easily. But it was halted in its tracks. Believing that one of his of course it was his boys had gone in and done the deed, Arturo could again be seen prowling Caerleon.

The beard gone, his pale, a bit haggard. The experience had aged him. Yet Arturo walked. With a greeting to the lowliest clerk, the most promising coders, all in his presence smiled once more, save those poor souls he found not working.

De Vere was gladdened to sit once more with Arturo at the grand table. So many empty seats made his boss lonely, but he smiled, and with a wink, as Morgan left the hall, the two snuck out, like the mischievous children they'd been so long ago, found an empty chamber, jacked into the grid.

With a flourish, Arturo summoned his steed. No escort save De Vere, would slow them down, both agreed, the two raced to greet returning heroes of Caerleon. Finding a few tired from the day, pursued by an adversary who'd never learn to know better, Arturo again drew his blade, raced to it with his shrill cry echoing to the outer worlds. De Vere, stunned at this vital resurgence, grinned and followed. Even Gavin would have been impressed by the old man's handiwork.

From one troop to the next, they skitted on edges 'round the conflicted sector. Here a young one, exhausted, told of enemies bested, there a veteran detailed his assaults. None could explain why the opposition had shrunk, nor had any seen sign of Gavin, Parr, or even, De Vere knew, Lantz himself.

Arturo pressed on. Someone had the news for him. Someone could make the table in a day, were he only to pass along the great secret. A secret. Yes. Atonement perhaps. Well, time would pass. Wounds would heal. Never again the same. But together once more. Smiling to himself, Arturo waved to De Vere, and the two returned to Caerleon.

But not off-grid. Arturo raced along the main passage. In the tunnel as a prole, he watched people's eyes as the signals got clearer, the transactions faster. They seemed stunned at the renewed speed. Not a few caught a glimpse of Arturo, forgot what curses they'd leveled in his name, shouted cheers in his wake.

The slowness was still there. Still the most wretched thing in life to wait even an instant when visiting the outer worlds. But less slow then. And the feeling for all: relief that somebody competent was working on it.

Arturo spoke with the people. Heard their concerns, listened to tale after tale of jobs lost, children too remote now for even the slenderest texts to pass through. He nodded, lambasted a surly agent or two, was showered with gifts and digital imagery, and seemed to emit a new health to the network.

Afterwards, many swore things only improved when he stood there, but stayed healthy even when he was gone.

De Vere's heart was soaring. He recalled, for a moment, the grace and glory of Baden. Believed that now, as then, following great strife, the day would be won.

Then, on a return trip home, Arthur saw from a distance one lone horsemen. Separated from his troop, he called De Vere over as the two raced to hear the latest news.

Not good. Lantz had slain two of Gavin's brothers, as well as the rest of this fellow's unit, in a fit of pique, the trooper said, following an encounter on the former Caerleon's property. No blame on Wayne or Garrett. Nobles

Graal

both to the end.

De Vere watched as, before him, Arturo appeared to shrink, sagging back into his saddle like a old pack of grains.

But the man shook it off. Then. They turned home with a heavy heart. Arturo revisited his quarters. Did not emerge for two days.

20

Gavin and his charges rested. The going was slow with the five ladies. After a quick survey of the area, he saw they were clean, settled to earth with Nellie. She looked at him thoughtfully as their fellow companions were putting together a camp of sorts. Frivolous behavior, Gavin thought.

It's not like this region gets hurt by a bit of sprucing, Nellie said, reading his mind. Besides, they need something to do. Just walking about after a thing like that, it's helpful.

My apologies, lady. You are quite correct, I'm sure. Gavin looked down. Speaking from experience? he added gently.

You know it. Gavin looked at her. OK, you really know it. I don't think I want to know you, after this.

Gavin stared downward. Of course, it was a difficult...

Hey, it's not that. OK. You did great, there. Really. The only way anybody could have taken down Troylan was to do just what you did. And a couple of other guys have failed. But I don't want anybody knowing me. Not like that. It's...

How did that... option... come about?

OK, look. I built it in. All right? Me, heck, I built those toys he was trying to zap you with. I knew how to break through it. There's always a backdoor, you know? One thing that sends it all to pieces.

Such an... odd choice.

Hey, don't you ever expect to do it on the boss' desk? Gavin looked over, shocked. Arturo was a god. Flawed in his personal life. But a god.

OK, fine. Maybe you never schemed to go for something like that. I apologize. Forget yourself talking to boy scouts. Right?

I see.

No, maybe you don't. Look, I was in there, with these others, we don't know how long. We don't even know what we look like anymore. And there was Troy, watching over us. They whole thing had fallen apart, but there he was. Little power mad twerp. Good riddance. Might be great. We don't know what he was up to, or he else he was with. I got a couple of volunteers before you from troops that had come to visit him. Guess he knew they were coming... sucked. Too much too many feelings.

Graal

You don't need to talk about it, Lady.

Yes. Yes I do need to talk about it. OK. We took him down. Feels like we took down some other things, too. But that's been too much, too close for me. Whoa. I get out of here, I'm never jacking in again. Ever. I don't care. I will walk the streets with the luds, pay currency for my meals, eat the filth, the unpurified filth. Get it?

That filth isn't so bad, they say.

Yeah, but I can only afford the rats.

I'll see to it that you're taken care of, said Gavin.

That's just what Troy said. Forget it, she added when Gavin began to defend himself. I know you're up to good things here. You've done good things here. OK? Really. Maybe very good. But get me home, so I don't have to see you again.

I understand, Lady. Gavin looked, saw their companions were nearly finished with preparations. Shall we dine pleasantly? It's a rough road ahead, many hops. The feeling of sustenance can be useful.

She looked at him. Grateful for changing the topic. They went to eat. Eventually laughing a bit at the absurdity of it all.

21

Garret and Wayne raced near outside the edge of their routes. This was Lantz's demense. Was. Wayne claimed it as his own now. Garret followed his brother. Behind them came a troop of loyal folk loyal to the family of Gavin.

The design of the place inspired both with all. Sky bore down in azure hues, meeting a ground bedecked with an astonishing array of foliage, the rich designs of the herbal something they barely sensed, but knew was there. Wayne was envious. Garret inspired.

Here and there bits of hillside sprouted up beneath the flowering plants. The richness of it all stunning. The two were completely stunned to find a resident there. One figure, near the far edge, working at something.

This figure bore no armor that Garret could tell. It sensed them. Stayed put. Wayne signaled. Their troop formed a semi-circle, bore down on the man.

Is that? Garret asked. But then the figure disappeared.

Stay close! Wayne cried. There's an odd tint to this land. They tightened their formation, moving on towards where the intruder had stood. Reaching a spot in the ground, Wayne noticed something. He waved Garret closer.

In the earth, some breed of circuitry neither recognized. Silicon, tiny, graceful-seeming. Garret sensed the tendrils of power emanating from this little niche. So much depended.

There! cried one of their troop. Garret and Wayne quickly glanced in the direction pointed to. The figure stood above them.

Graal

My land! he cried.

Trespass! Wayne shouted back. You know the penalty.

The figure said nothing for a moment. Looked down at them. Twelve in all. And he unarmed. Garret was confident they'd bring him in. Hopeful anything... bad could be avoided. Such a man's skills.

But Wayne knew the man's identity already.

It's over, Lantz. He shouted. You've been stripped of any right to be here. Come, I'll take you back. Perhaps, you can apologize. Come. Now.

You'll take me, said Lantz. And promptly disappeared. Garret looked at his brother, as if to question their rights here. But Wayne had raced on, shouting righteous indignation. Garret stared at the flowers a moment longer.

There, said a trooper. Dismounting at the base of a hillock. I saw something. The man leapt towards some sort of opening. Garret saw the other figure. Saw the rest of the troop far away. The figure Lantz, pride of Caerleon smashed his fist against the trooper's face. The trooper went down. Lantz drug him into the hill.

Garret raced toward his brother. It seemed a moment. The trooper reappeared. Seized his mount. Sped into the ranks of his fellows. Cut them down like so many leaves. Wayne, surprised, wheeled around. Set. Raced to meet the challenge.

It wasn't close. Lantz spliced the arm of Garret's brother, at his back, sparing the man. Remaining troop circled. Lantz tore after them. Five men met in a furious clash. One rode away. One stayed put with indications of wounding. Three fell. Garret stared at the wreckage of his brother. The three on the ground. He raised his blade, set his horse full towards them. Lantz stood nonplussed

Lantz met raised his eyes to Garret. Set. Looked at him, calmly. Garret bore down. Lantz did not move. Garret pulled his arm back to give the splice. Lantz hit him in the chest with a spear. Garret felt. Felt his horse draw away. Then felt no more.

22

At each hop, the pleasant oval of Gavin's cheerful face turned ever closer to a grimace of irritation. Something gnawed at him. He kept it at bay in the presence, but scouting the hop, passing through, coming back, escorting them one at a time. Little help that they were in a mis-wire wreck, half the connections led to nowhere, the other half so interminably slow. Around him the surface lay flat, gray and still. Through. Together. Slog on to the next hop.

And each time he passed, Gavin felt the odd shock.

It was no longer professional jealousy. Gavin sighed to himself, willed the conviction that the scavenger would thrive. The ones like that... they always succeeded. Proceeding forward without any respect for the matter. Unhindered by any rules. So it went. Caerleon needed more than a chance to sing Gavin's praises.

He wished to his home again. The ladies in tow, the jests about Gavin finding women anywhere. No doubt his

Graal

brother Wayne would have a few wry, expletive-laden remarks. Gavin smiled as he thought of the beatings he'd need to deal out in order to restore honor.

Behind him, one of his companions had slowed. He turned back, like a sheepdog, to pull her back into the flock. It was Nell at the rear.

Hey, she said, her charger ambling slowly.

Lady, Gavin replied.

We're holding you up, ain't we? She asked, eyes cocked archly.

A wonderful journey with able companions. I only wish we could take it at greater leisure.

Right. Whole landscape is a pale white. Flat. Only signs of elevation I've seen are a few trash mounds.

Perhaps the next hop.

You said that several hops ago. Was she smiling?

So I did, Lady. That was my understanding from the journey up. But as you no doubt know, such understandings can be flawed.

Right. No doubt. Well I'm thinking. We're far enough way... A penetrating glance. One that awed Gavin as it disconcerted him.

Yes, Lady?

Want to see what people are up to?

I see all of you quite well.

Not me, doofus. Want to say what's past this hop? And the next one?

Gavin was intrigued. How might we do that? I'm sure you are of exemplary eyesight...

Something I snagged from Troy. She replied, rummaging into her saddle pack. Deft fingers pulled out a cylindrical item, wrapped in felt. Gavin drew closer as she unwrapped the thing, revealing a narrow crystal nearly two feet in length.

And what's this?

Like a telescope. I wasn't a designer on it. So I'm sure it'll work like it's supposed to. Lot of talent went into that thing.

What does it do?

If you let it, it'll show you other hops, main zones. You have to kind of tune it for the person you're looking for. Or maybe the landscape. If you put your finger on something unique, like a steed, or a costume on an avatar, you can see in. The info bypasses hops.

Graal

And are there risks to using it?

Well, others with a similar device can track you. But we've got enough warning here. And they're not supposed to be real close.

Intriguing. May I?

That's the whole idea, big guy. I saw you moping up front there for a while now. Got on my nerves. Seeing some of your castle make you happier?

It might at that, Lady. It might at that.

Great, she said, handing the item over. You peer in at the bottom, think of who you're looking for. What you see won't be real-time, now. Residues get detected and passed along. You'll be watching those. But it's a glimpse into the near-past. Ought to be enough to tide you over.

Wonderful, said Gavin, gingerly pulling the crystal towards his face, he tried to rest one end of the glass on his eyelid.

Not like that, ya dope. She said. Hold it straight between both eyes, like in front of your nose. That's it. Use both to focus. Now think of someplace you know real well, and travel from there. It takes a minute, she added, as Gavin's visage betrayed impatience.

23

Fast enough, the man figured out his new toy. Nellie stared on with an encouraging maternal grin as Gavin figured out the machinery. Her eyes sparkled at the boyish enthusiasm of the warrior standing in front of her, catching him nodding, knowingly, at what must have been Caerleon appearing again before his walls.

Not hip to thing, Gavin walked along, following a path only he could see, witnessing some events only he, and whoever, could witness. Nellie began to wonder about the time. There were risks to running the cylinder for too long.

With a cry, Gavin raced away. Speeding off on foot towards some happening. Nellie followed. Growing more nervous about the time. Gavin's speed increased. A sort of moan escaped his lips.

Wayne, he cried. Nellie was hard-pressed to follow suit. A glance behind showed their companions milling about, curious, keeping away.

As she turned back, Gavin vanished from view. Somewhere off in the distance. Nellie raced towards him, calling his name. No reply. She kicked at the dust, shouted out his name as loud as she could. Nothing. In the distance, some faint impressions lay in the turf. Nellie went towards these.

Gavin lay on the ground, the cylinder far from his hand. He said nothing intelligible, moaning to himself, legs pulled into as much of a fetal position as the armor would allow. Nellie picked up the cylinder. Her first instinct was to turn the thing off. There were eyes. But, curious, she glanced in, clicked the time back a bit, saw four men bested by one. Two of those men looked like Gavin. A dark figure in the distance, familiar, seemed to be overseeing events. Puzzle for later.

Graal

She turned to Gavin, held him. Sweetie, she said. We've got to go. I don't know what you saw. Whatever it was, it's real. But we've got to get out of here. Now.

Gavin remained unmoved.

Look, she said. I can't leave you behind. I don't even know we can make it without you. But somebody's going to come. Now. That thing, it's been on too long.

Behind them, Nellie heard a shriek. They had company.

Killers, Gavin, said Nellie. Giving her guardian one more smack. Killers of women. Women you protect. Gavin looked up for the first time. There were nearly a score of men, some mounted, some not, bearing down on the ladies he'd brought from one horror, into this other. He came to himself.

My blade, he whispered. And then raced back. Nellie trailed along cautiously.

Gavin was fury on the opposition. Lunge. Parry. Thrust. Block. Men fell. Gavin spun. On to the next one. Nellie sped behind him, seeking to pull her friends away. One man spotted her. Was within arm's length in an instant. Somehow Gavin was beside her. A flash and the would-be assailant spent the end of his life contemplating the perforation line that his stomach now carried.

Stay back, said Gavin, fiercely. And he took off, not looking back.

Nellie watched, planted where he'd left her, as Gavin took on more than 20 men. Silent, steady, he pulled them away from their intendeds, toward himself, felling one after another, never a pause. Nellie wasn't sure if he'd even been touched.

Angrily, Gavin spun, dealing with three at a time. His opponents were given no pause to regroup, no chance to flee, and no mercy. Caerleon elite, Nellie knew, made a point of not splitting the cord unless necessary. Gavin was splitting it now. Men fell.

24

Etherpaths buzzed with the latest rumor to hit Caerleon. In the boardroom, every available officer nervously sat, waiting for news. It couldn't be true. Couldn't be. One face looked at another, bleakly, expecting someone to come out with the joke. Forgiveness for the man who'd done it. That, and a chop to the head.

The look on Arturo's face as he entered caused this faint hope to skip out for parts unknown. He strode in swiftly, De Vere and sister in tow. There was no error, no pause, no smiles of greeting to long-time compatriots. Nothing, then but this latest blow. A death-blow for Caerleon, it seemed, to many.

You've heard something of what I am to say, Arturo began.

Shouts from all sides. Arturo paused, glanced calmly at each objector in turn with the full force of that personality

Graal

which for so long and so well had dominated. The drained swiftly away from the boardroom, along with blotches of color from many an offending face.

Yes. You've heard. There may have been better ways to tell you all. But what's to be must be. I am stepping down from my senior position, assuming a field role, and will take leave of Caerleon effectively immediately.

Further shouts. Outside, the rank and file who stood waiting, hoping for some sign, some spark of reason out of all the chaos, seemed to give a collective sigh. Later, De Vere said he could feel them stricken, faltering, righting themselves against Caerleon's the sides of Caerleon's famed hallways. The building itself appeared to shift asking what for.

My friends, hear me out, Arturo said after a time.

We've together taken a marvelous path. Gone further, done more than any could have expected or even dream. Brought light to darkness...

Heads paused, quizzical. Nodded. Arturo could still hold a room.

... now we face a greater challenge, one that's already taken so much of our vast resources. And sitting here, waiting, hoping it is not to the good. It is inefficient. We must take our strengths and apply them where they can best serve us. You know that as well as do I. Efficiency was always our hallmark. Our strength.

But where will you go? asked one. And who's with you? Another. And who stays? Who takes charge.

I go where others have gone, but not come back. De Vere shall be with me. No one else. Your strengths are needed here. As we combine to restore the foundation. To protect our interests, and to best serve, I appoint Morgan to sit in my place.

Her? What? Who?

Who better? Arturo was shouting. The first marks of strain that any could recall appeared on him. His face reddened. Indeed, who better. Who is it who's been keeping things together but her? A few nods. Some quite baleful stares directed before the lady. Morgan's face was unmoved. Staring out, calmly, at her brother.

Morgan, Arturo continued in a calmer voice, was with the few of us at the beginning. She knows the codes as well as any of you. Admit it! She helped design the structure, adding her insight to the myriad small features, those features that sold our product, those features the rest of were too busy to even consider modifying.

Who better? Who knows every crack, every fragment of our walls? Who can put our men closer to where the faults lie? Who? Who's done as much as she? Every man here has contributed. Every man here has helped to build. But no man here has built in so many places, on so many levels, as she. No man is best suited for Caerleon. One woman is here, before us, ready to do the job.

But can she lead a charge? came a cry. They get closer each day. And Morgan spoke for the first time.

I believe the qualities a leader requires are dexterity and wit, said Morgan. Would you challenge me on the field?

The voice remained silent. Morgan's prowess, though frowned upon in theory, was well-noted. Her tendency to humiliate opponents documented, via whispers in the halls of Caerleon, and small in the restrooms. None would dare face the black-robed figure, her steel-coverings a sheen of metal on curvaceous avatar flesh. The stunning

Graal

figure that seemed to pass her fingers daintily through the air and leave a thousand cuts in their wake.

Any one?

Men stood silent.

Arturo stared at his sister. Proudly. A smile at his lips.

If there's nothing further, De Vere and I are off tonight.

And the gathering before Central Gate, when all stared out at their beloved leader, and sighed as he and De Vere mounted and stepped off, was as melancholy a group as had been seen. Little comfort was given from Morgan, impressive in her curve-hugging mail, waving the two on with a lion banner.

A chill was felt, every moment spent waiting for gates of return a sign too long. Fear gripped Caerleon. Sensing the moment, Morgan pulled eyes to herself. Striding slowly but with purpose to the edge of the battlement, she called down to the table, now her table.

Gentlemen, she said. Time for a meeting.

With weary steps they shuffled in behind her.

25

Though little time had passed, already Caerleon's famed gathering area took on a new look. None could quite tell what had changed about that place. The absences that multiplied, the food much the same, but there was that different feel to it all as Morgan marched earnestly to her seat, her face a blend of vindication, awe and pugnacity as she began.

Of course all transitions are difficult, gentlemen. Historically, an effective strategy has been to launch a bold new venture for everyone to get behind. I tell you this because I want you all to know my thinking.

Are you going to be patrolling yourself then? Asked De Vere. Others wondered. If she could do this, that'd earn the respect of all. Joan of Arc visions passed through the minds of not a few.

No, said Morgan, smiling indulgently. Though an inspection tour of certain areas is an idea. That will be a simple matter, actually.

Really, Arturo, he couldn't get to all of it. And he's as fast as they come.... nodding heads.

I could never measure up to my brother, gentlemen. That's why I'm not going to try.

You what?

None of us. We can't spread ourselves as thin as we once did. Heroic though that measure seemed.

What what?

Graal

We're pulling back, De Vere. And raising the costs for our services.

Gasps. Mad. Crazy. Betrayal! Morgan waited for the shouts to quell down.

Really, gentlemen. You must understand, how heroic you've been. At no increase it's a wonder any of us can stand here. But things cost money. The demesnes cost money. We'll earn that money. And pull back into a tighter formation. There've been too many holes. Too much loss.

Cowardice, muttered one.

Prudence, answered Morgan. Eyes flashing. But I hope your objections stop here. We're going to be modifying the cylinder.

Silence. Angrily, one man, Kaylor, stood up.

We never modify the cylinder.

We've done it many times, said Morgan. Tweaking, Lantz called it. I sat with him when he wrote most of the code. What I'm proposing is simple. I think you could understand it, Kaylor.

What? Face flushed, feet pushing towards the door.

The cylinder, as we all know, flows in no direction. Behind Morgan, a graphical rendering appeared, multi-colored lights streaming across 10,000 vectors. Morgan held her hand against it. Blips, agitated, moved away.

Push on one side, data flows to the other, said Morgan. She squeezed the image. The blips sped through, faster. Constrict it, if you can, smiled Morgan, and the rate of information flow is increased. Morgan waved her pointer, the rendering quadrupled in volume. Distance has no meaning, each photon knows only the information held in its pair, and any discussion of the cylinder's size is ludicrous, irrelevant, the sort of thing a naive girl might ask.

Morgan paused while a few in the crowd chuckled.

So, none of the obvious answers, Morgan paused again, achieve our objective.

And what objective is that? Kaylor again. The man was... problematic.

To reduce the flow of information in the cylinder.

What why? mild tumult.

Security, dear Kaylor. By reducing flow, we can monitor. By monitoring, we can better know what happens and even become proactive rather than reactive. Additionally, with the flow of data reduced, our key customers can be encouraged to purchase 'enhanced service,' or 'secure transmissions.'

It is no more or less secure in the Cylinder... began Kaylor

It is if we control the blank streams, Morgan snapped. We prevent the recycling. Fewer splitpairs. We mark some of them. One in a million, a billion. It's easily done. A second-wave for verification.

Graal

Mark one of a million? snorted Kaylor. Why not just ask them to cable on string for verification purposes.

The cord is verification. We enhance each cord.

And how much will things slow?

We can control that. A reduction of at least 30% but not more than 80%. The free ride is over. Now.

It was never *free*, Kaylor's tone grew heated. He stood up. The people pay us for a service. We provide a fair product.

We provide a commodity, my friend Kaylor. Commodities ebb and flow, Morgan paused. There are interruptions to supply. In times of interruption, one pays more. Larger clients pay considerably more to maintain access. This situation is no different.

Was a always available, Kaylor muttered to himself. Not what we do.

Morgan went on as if the latest hadn't been spoken. You gentlemen must know the histories of markets such as oil, coal, salt. The vagaries and price shocks. Once people thought water was free to all. A resource for the taking. We're not so foolish now. Dataflow is the new water. Secure dataflow is bottled water. Jessie has additional insights.

Morgan stepped aside while her protege took the stage. New screens appeared as the young woman stepped, not without trepidation to this famed chamber of men, and began her chunk of the afternoon's session.

As you no doubt expect, the a reduction in traffic will offer certain unintended consequences. We are, as it were, slowing the elevator. This has historically led to complaints. And an interest in low-rise apartment living. Jessie chuckled to herself. None in the audience accompanied her.

You see, she continued. Nobody wants to wait for their ride. But, how did that famed engineer reduce complaints people wanting to descend 10 floors?

How? said Morgan encouragingly.

They couldn't speed up the machines without a complete overhaul. They couldn't add more machines. They also couldn't prevent cars from going out of service.

So? asked Morgan. Baited breath that the room didn't share, though a certain attentiveness could be felt.

They could, however, give the people something else to entertain themselves with.

And what was that? Morgan inquired.

A mirror. To look at themselves. The building installed a mirror on every floor. So the people checked their faces, their clothing their hair to make sure nothing was astray. This brought a twitter. Jessie's hair flowed in all directions and all colors, seemingly without direction, as was the style of the moment.

While elevator speed actually declined further, complaints were reduced almost entirely. The people were too busy with themselves.

And this applies because? Kaylor. Testily.

Graal

Because we're going to give the people something else to look at while they wait! said Morgan triumphantly.

And what would that be? asked Kaylor. What toys do you have to entertain the people that'll take their minds off the greatest resource in the world not being available.

Well, I'm glad you asked, Dear Kaylor, Morgan replied. If you'll watch these next several screens. We've prepared a series of pre-loaded time-enhancers.

Forget your presentation. Kaylor stood up, heated. I've sure they're lively *advertisements*. Will you tell me, then, how your advertisements are going to work when the hospital needs electricity? How your time-delay will apply when the food is still on the boat? Where's the service then? Where?

Kaylor, say Morgan, frowning. You've not understood a word I've said, have you?

Don't answer, she continued as his face, a fiery red globe, looked ready to explode. We will of course be tagging the lower level functions. There will be no diminishment of that aspect. Though added security will be available for purchase. Think of it as colors: red, orange yellow she turned, and as on cue, the cylinder graphic reappeared, splitpairs twisting and turning, but now coded.

The yellow, as you can see, are local, necessary and not doing the grand tour. As everyone knows, Kaylor, your refrigerator doesn't order groceries from Mars.

Brief titter. She was winning them. Kaylor's personality would grate upon the most serene in time. His weakness.

So too the red. Our most vital, yet basic communication needs. Unchanged. Maximum throughput. Minimal taxation upon the system, save in the event of a grave, grave external crisis, in which case additional splitpairs can enter the Flow.

As the data stays local, Morgan continued, and travels fast, it's nearly impossible to compromise. The best part of our system is response time for the staples, if you will, will be reduced. People may just appreciate that. It's a key selling point, if sold properly. Kaylor grunted.

Ah, but that blue all watched as the blue dots swirled, first one end of the cylinder, then the other. Round and round, cross, through. Beautiful voyager.

The blue will be shifted. The blue is where the future lies. Where the money lies. Where all hope lies. We reduce the amount of blue; make it more difficult to journey, we make it more secure.

It will work, Morgan added. My brother made a fortune and a new way of life when he put on a container on the flow. We will earn a greater fortune, and an enhanced life, when we control all that passes through our container. An evolutionary solution, gentlemen, for revolutionary times.

They applauded her then. Kaylor excepted; too busy scowling. She'd won.

26

Morgan remained at the exit as her colleagues filed out. Her face a pleasant mask, she greeted each in turn, paying extra attention to the faction she'd bested inside. All would need to work together from this point on. A coalition

Graal

formed. Pleasantries. Fierce opinions to be respected. When all had departed she raced across the room, cackling like a little girl.

Near to cartwheels she opened the lift to her private residence. A visitor awaited. Laughing, she raced across the room, met her guest in a passionate embrace.

A good meeting then, said the man, his eyes nearly as bright as hers.

Everything has gone as planned, Gant! We've done it. She pressed closer. Raised her lips to his cheek.

Not quite, my dear.

What could you mean? Arturo gone, my nephew gone, his brothers... Lantz, Gwen, that freak they hired you've taken care of him, right?

He's taken care of himself, said the man, chuckling thinly.

What do you mean?

On the trail for this Graal, he headed as far from our establishments as possible. Opposite direction, unless the exterior is round, in which case he'll come upon us in two millennia. Last I looked, he was miles from any hop, gone half-mad from the lack of stimulation. I sent our friend just in case he doesn't go all mad.

Morgan shrieked. That's great wonderful, phenomenal! She pressed close, fingered at Gant's shirt. Gant closed his fingers over hers.

There have been losses, he said.

Such as what who? Nothing important, right? asked Morgan.

Troylan Castle, said Gant. Stepping back for a moment.

What, some explosion? The geeks they had didn't we give them women? I remember some we sent...

Yes, an explosion, said Gant.

How did he do it? The toys that man played with. Just a little boy deep down. With the naughty teenager's urges, and the decent man's lack of a courage. So easy, that Troy.

Too easy. He's gone.

How?

Your nephew.

My nephew isn't that sophisticated.

He's damn near indestructible. Has a soft side for the ladies. Were you so sure you had to move him out?

He'd cause more damage here. Gavin Gavin and those brothers. They're not the brightest lot in the world. But the boys from when they were children the whispers they made together. Kept hatching plots, dazzling in

Graal

sophistication. Leave the room for a moment, come back, giant castles, exploding cookstands, messes.

Gavin cleaned up nice, Morgan continued, lost most of the wild streak, became predictable. But it was too much of a risk keeping them together. They might overflow the cylinder, just for fun, or something. They're neither obedient nor particularly controllable.

You employed the final control, said Gant.

Morgan sighed to herself.

Family, she said, nodding to herself. A pause.

It was necessary, Morgan said with certainty. The three together had at least one brain, and the brawn of a dozen. Necessary.

Gavin might not agree.

We could never bring him in. Not now. Too honorable.

He's bringing himself in.

What?

The women Troylan kept. He's bringing them all back.

Oh for I'll ready tea and garments, I suppose. Troy kept those girls stunned, at least.

Most of them. One was a witness. Helped build the castle. Troy let her roam.

That fool. The pudgy, asexual unique. She had to choose to love him, right? He's gone for good, you say? Gant nodded.

For good. I buried the body myself. Kept things secret. He was a source of inspiration. Arrogant pig, but he sucked up when need be. Amazing that he attracted that kind of talent. He's celebrity on the outside. Not a positive endorsement, but celebrity. And the geeks knew they'd be taken care of.

Benefits of selling yourself, Morgan sighed.

It's over now. Gant sighed, looked at Morgan, eyes widening. They walked together across the lushly-decorated living space, towards her bedroom.

What do you suppose your nephew is up to with those women of his? asked Gant as he embraced Morgan from behind, nails pressed harshly into her skin while his teeth bit her neck.

Honoring and respecting their most chaste wishes, said Morgan, grasping Gant's head and pulling it roughly toward herself. Ignoring his base impulses, she added, as she wrenched away Gant's shirt. So gallant, always in control. My nephew.

They laughed and fell to the ground, snarling at one another.

27

Gavin, Nellie and the women were making good time. There were no breaks anymore, no chatting. Nellie couldn't remember when the man had spoken more than four words to her. She'd tried to interest him in looking again at the vision. He scowled at her, sped off, leaving them almost alone for a bit.

She quit bringing the subject up.

Rather than wait while Gavin scouted the area beyond each hop, Nellie peeked through, saw if anything bad lay on the other side. If she saw nothing, Gavin had them all follow immediately, Nellie at the rear, long knife in hand. If she saw something, Gavin had them wait five minutes. They were taking the straight shot home.

In consultations with her friends, Nellie explained the situation as best she could. Seeing the dazed looks she gave up on honesty, came back with a good lie.

Safer as we near Caerleon, she said. We all want to get back soon, right?

Dropout points for the lot were verified at a location not far from the Cylinder base. Nellie hoped her body was in good care. Sometimes she counted the hops to pass the voyage. 32, 31, 30. That got boring, so she fantasized about a hot bath.

Suddenly, Caerleon loomed before them. This was Gavin's demense. An underling hailed out with a stunned greeting. Gavin didn't reply, gave the man orders to round up friends and escort them home.

As goodbyes went, Nellie had had better ones. Good to get home, but she had something to put together.

28

Gavin woke, alone. He ran through the series of stretches he'd been practicing since age four. Everything worked, most of it fast enough. He strode into the main hall of Caerleon. It was a gathering hour, he realized, was stunned to find the place abandoned.

He went to his Aunt's chamber. Found it unoccupied. Headed to the Cylinder's command center.

His aunt stood there among the displays. Alone. She was connected over ether, didn't acknowledge Gavin walking in.

He watched as she strode among the command consoles, directing people near and far. Impressive in its way, but overdone, Gavin realized. Her instructions to many of the men were unnecessary, time-consuming, of little value considering what lay at stake beyond. Morgan looked at him.

You're home, Nephew. She said.

Yes.

Graal

But you didn't find it?

I found much. Some of what I found may be useful.

What did you find?

Women contained. An opposition fortress closer than we'd imagined possible. Tools for seeing across the dark reaches. The deaths of my brothers.

You've seen much.

I've seen more, Aunt. I've seen the killer.

And who was that? said Morgan. We'll bring him to justice.

Him one man? Aunt. You know better. It was one man who disabled them, but Lantz never killed unless he had to. Someone else was there, Aunt, someone who could strike down a man unable to fight back, but someone who could get close to our sensors.

Who was that?

You know him.

I do?

You brought him into our fold, our house, our family. Your paramour.

Paramour? said Morgan.

He means me, said Gant, standing behind Gavin. You move quickly, young man.

Not quick enough, it seems.

What do you know about this? asked Morgan, eyes on her nephew and her lover at once.

Oh, I knew there were obstacles to our plan. His family was right there. Besides, we needed an accident of some kind. Our researched indicated Arturo would abandon his position should the crisis prove grave enough.

It's a manufactured crisis! shouted Gavin overtop both of them. There is no menace beyond the Cylinder. There is not threat to us inside. There's never been a threat from outside. Not now. Not before.

He's perceptive, said Gant. A pity. I believe we're finished? he asked Gavin.

Gavin wheeled towards him. He'd never liked Gant; never liked the products of Gant's firm; had spoken out against the merger. Probably a trap.

No, said Gavin. Let's settle this here. And without further warning he launched his fist toward Gant's head, brought the him down with one punch, mashed his head against the floor repeatedly until Morgan shrieked.

Guards approached. Gavin looked at them, they at him.

Graal

Killed my brothers, Gavin said. When they were down. The guards nodded. Stood still. Take him away, Gavin added. Quickly, the guards set to work. They removed the sprawled body from the floor. One listened to see if Gant was still breathing. He seemed to be.

When alone, Gavin turned to Morgan.

Aunt, he asked. What have you been up to?

29

Morgan stared at her nephew for a time. Gavin, waiting, grew impatient.

Oh, I've seized control of the entire apparatus. I've hidden the bodies of Arturo, your friends, and... others. If you want any of them back, particularly that Nellie person, you'll shut up and do what you're told.

Why? Gavin asked.

It's my turn, said Morgan, triumphantly. I've waited through all of this, sat through endless meetings with Kaylor, stood by while Lantz worked out the system, endured Gwen's flirtings, Arturo's moods, your immaturity. All of it. No more.

Right. Where's Nellie?

Her? Oh, you're right. She seems to do a wonderful job of pacifying you. I've have her brought by shortly. You, however, will go to your room, stay there until called, stand by my side at meetings with the populace, and stay out of the way otherwise.

Morgan spun her hands over an invisible screen typing air.

Oh, she added. Now that you're home safe and give me credit, nephew, you needn't have been the ether is off limits. You can order food with it. You can summon entertainments. That's all. You jack in, and my little signal will see to it you've taken your last ride.

The other women.

Are free to go. We need more women at Caerleon. Will that be all?

For now, Aunt, said Gavin. For now.

Gavin, scowling went to his room. He raged against the floor, the ceiling, himself. Nellie, beautiful in person, entered his chamber. They sat together silently.

30

Parr stumbled along the graying waste. To the east lay sanity. Or west. Not near himself, he giggled. Then laughed. Then fell to earth with shivering fits of mirth.

Not good, not good, he told himself after an age. Take time, take time.

He needed to resettle. Achieve bearings. There was an answer around him. A clue, a thread, a truth. A reality. It lay hidden but close. The mystery could be achieved in one simple step. He knew that.

Parr stood up, walked left. Then turned left again. Then again.

Now I'm right! he shouted. Then the ground.

This was futility. He knew that. A pattern could be seen. Parr looked into the dust. Across him, an electric sifting brought lines to the ground. Parr studied the lines. Some went straight, some crooked. One seemed promising. He went with it, followed the trail. Growing confident, the indentation seemed to deepen.

Not too soon, Parr shouted at himself, wary at the signs of triumph building in.

Gavin, Gavin, Gavin! he said. Then slapped his own face repeatedly. Not a feeling there. Drawing his sword, he cut his own wrist. Slight. The blood seeped out for a moment. Parr stood perfectly still, watching the trail on his wrist. The wound healed itself quickly. Blood dried. Evaporated.

Parr could see the crimson lift itself away.

A rooster, a rooster. I the rooster, he whispered to himself. Quickly he decided to roll bones. But he had no bones. He rolled himself to see which way to go. Spinning in the earth, some garment caught, interrupting his somersault while his head curved into a ball.

He sat that way for a time. Head below backside. His arms behind him, lifted granules of dust. Watched it scatter between his legs above.

This pattern, that pattern, he murmured.

It was in this position that the newcomer found him.

Parr glanced up. It was no knife-thrower, this one. The armor was well-designed, if ill-decorated. Peculiar discolorations, darkness, a mottling across the avatar.

Odd, odd! said Par.

He waited for the other to respond. The man just stood there. Watching. Watching Parr. Parr watched also, staring at the man from between his own legs.

Fight? Fight? he asked.

Graal

The other said nothing.

Friend, friend?

Nothing.

Foe? Parr's voice seemed meek. To himself. The other gave no sign. Gave no criticism.

Parr rolled over. Focused on the newcomer. First object of substance he'd eyed in some time. Any time. What was time?

Enough. Parr stood up.

The man didn't move.

Parr drew his blade.

The man stood motionless.

Parr charged. The man parried with his mail fist, turned slightly, kicked Parr's legs out from beneath him. Parr tasted ash.

Sustenance! he shouted, lying full-sprawl on the ground

Nothing from behind him. The stranger hadn't moved since Parr's charge. Parr rolled over.

Your name, sir! cried Parr. You, who have so well fed me! The last words were mumbled. Parr was chewing ash.

We live upon dust, he cried. All is dust. Our dust. Our lives!

Still nothing.

Not much of a talker, are you? said Parr. You must have a name, friend?

Name? said the stranger, opening his lips to reveal a face as mottled as his armor. Yes. I have a name.

Ah, thank goodness. And what is it? What cause do you serve? What secrets do you know?

Trouble, said the stranger. And he drew his blade, motioned to Parr to rise.

I've had that name, said Parr.

Yes, said the stranger. But this isn't a bar, and you're not groping some young thing. The situation is a bit more serious. And with a flick of the wrist he marked a gash on Parr's wrist. The blood flowed in globules, tracking with and against gravity. Parr could find the answer there. Sighing, he pulled his own blade to his side, stood and faced his opponent.

You've annoyed me, said Parr, legs bent slightly in classic fighting stance. I think the answer was here.

Graal

Perhaps you'll find it in the next life, said the stranger. And he aimed his sword for the base of Parr's neck. The latter parried, and the battle was on.

31

The stranger danced with Parr. Step forward, back, sideways. Parr's trick moves were parried, his sudden thrusts anticipated, his practice-alone stances countered in an instant.

Who the hell are you, anyway? Parr asked.

They spun about each other, doling out nicks and scratches, generating slim lines of crimson that healed in an instant.

Finally, the stranger caught Parr in an error. Slightly off-balance, Parr had gone lunging right for his opponent's breastplate. No purchase there; Parr spun through. The stranger gave jabbed him in the back, missed the cord. Parr hit the dirt, writhing in agony. Another stroke was coming. Parr stunned himself, rolled over, sent his sword through a breastplate, watched bemused as the stranger took the blow, staggered off.

Parr lay in the dust.

The wound healed in an hour. Parr spent the time in practice, reliving each step they'd taken, wondering where he'd gone wrong, trying to establish the basic locations he'd missed. He remembered a story about an champion, the best, most physical at his sport. Guy'd been beaten by someone who'd watched his every move. The stranger fought him like that.

Parr would be ready.

32

They went at it again the next day. No introductions, no chatter, just the clatter of blade on blade. Parr studied his opponent, saw where he leaned, held his one sword like a rapier, launching delicate thrusts that came off indelicate with his two-handed barbarian weapon. The stranger parried, clashed, defended, sent a few thrusts in here and there to keep Parr honest. Neither made a mistake this time.

They chewed up the ground, moving vast distances, each looking for some physical development, a landmass, tunnel or hillock, that would give one the advantage. Parr wasn't sure how far they'd traveled. What did it matter to be extra lost?

Parr couldn't say when it ended. Somewhere, the stranger backed off, stepped away. Parr did the same. They nodded to each other, stepped off for the night.

Parr couldn't sleep, kept wandering. He knew the stranger would find him. His directional sense shot, he hoped he kept straight. Wasn't sure. Didn't care in any case. They'd meet again tomorrow.

The stranger located Parr and stood before him, arms raised.

Parr remained in place, arms tethered to his sides. The stranger, politely, waited.

I need your name, said Parr.

The stranger was silent.

I won't play until we get a name here.

The stranger pointed at his sword, at Parr.

I think I know your name, said Parr.

The stranger lifted his blade, stepped forward. Parr pulled a knife from his pocket, threw it at the stranger's face, knocked off the visor. The stranger fell to ground. Parr jumped over top, holding his blade at the man's neck.

Like a reflection in dirty water, the stranger's mottled face was exposed as a copy of Parr's own.

That knife could only work on me, said Parr. Are you my long lost brother or something? The stranger was silent.

Behind Parr, applause erupted. He whirled to find an old man, round about the belly, with laughing eyes and a crew of onlookers, all of them staring at Parr with admiration.

Excellent, said the man. You've figured it out. Took too long at it, but you figured it out.

What?

How they made him, this golem.

The stranger leapt up at the attention, eyed Parr's back. The onlookers drew knives, stared him down, came over to bind his arms. Parr watched the stranger led away.

Who was he? asked Parr of the old man.

A brother of yours. The made him with DNA, hidden records in your sig that chronicle all actions, and of course the copious amounts of free time you've given them. You're late, young man.

And you? asked Parr.

Are N4. We met once. You were too shy.

Have to observe protocol, said Parr. N4?

N-4, said the man with eyes wide, peering deep into Parr. Parr stared back.

You've been out here a long time. We don't give names like that anymore.

Graal

Yet another modern failing, said N4.

And are you the First to Know?

Nope. Your search has failed.

What do you mean? asked Parr.

I'm the fourth to know. Or maybe the 100th. Don't worry, the other 99 have passed. And they say I was the First to Share. Would you like to go then? he added.

Where too?

The Castle of Wonders, said N4. Where else?

What about him, asked Parr, pointing to the stranger being led away.

Oh, we'll have him undergo a series of harsh and ridiculously painful experiments, including but not limited to live dissection.

That's nice, said Parr. Never can have too much live dissection. Guess you get a lot of practice with all the crap that washes up here. Lead on.

N4 brought his lips together. Several mounts appeared on the plain. Parr's grey charger among them.

How? asked Parr.

We pick up a lot of lost things here, said N4.

Saddling up, the journey took them quickly to a hidden niche in the digital fabric. Parr slapped himself as a quick shift hop or otherwise led them out of the grey lands into a realm of sorrow, gloom and darkness. An old, ivy-covered castle lay before them, around were branches, nameless, stripped of foliage. More features to this land than the grey, but it was little different.

Parr drew his charger up short. N4, next to him, also rested.

Supposed to do something here, ain't I? asked Parr.

Castle Wonder has gathered together, waiting for a unique individual, said N4. Perhaps that's you.

Parr drew air into himself, sat more fully in his charger, glanced at N4 and the expectant contingent of followers who were all stopped, waiting with baited breath for this very moment.

Decorating!! said Parr. There are discounts for someone like you! Really, I know people a crack crew! And if they're not enough, I know people who know people! WE have the solution. Let me tell you, that ivy, seems like a great touch, but nah-uh. You're stuck with it. We could really improve your business with just a few, reasonably priced design initiatives.

The onlookers gasped. N4 turned to Parr, rolled in his saddle, seemed to fade for a moment. Then Parr noticed he was laughing, a giggle that started slow, crescendoed to a bellow so infectious the crowd joined in. Parr laughed as well.

Graal

N4 kept chortling, his belly rolled visibly, beard shimmered. He nearly fell out of the saddle.

What, wrong question? asked Parr when he recovered.

Perhaps, young man, replied N4. But I've not laughed like that for some time.

Great. Glad to help. While we're at it, do you have a copy of that Graal thing I could use?

With Parr's words came an exultant rush from the onlookers. Around them the land shimmered, flowers exploded into bloom from the earth. Before Parr's eyes the Castle of Wonders shifted, ivy and moss evaporating like mold before disinfectant. Trumpets could be heard in the distance, their horns rending an exultant blast. Parr ducked as tree branches spread rapidly and flowers exploded into bloom.

Easter Egg? he asked N4.

I was a much younger man when I wrote this.

Kind of impressive.

Thank you.

They rode into the castle. Parr watched as a court appeared on the battlements. Young men and women, dazzling in their splendor, shouted in triumph as N4 approached.

Kinda impressive, repeated Parr.

34

They sat together for a night, Parr and the old man. Outwardly, N4 was rejuvenated, young again like his surroundings, the richly-laden throne holding his newly spry form upright. Inside, Parr could tell, there wasn't much left to him.

How long's it been for you? Parr asked when they were alone.

Too long. I have a story to tell, and something to give you.

I'm ready, said Parr.

Yes. You've braved the land, did battle with yourself, achieved victory.

That thing.

You need to know the history of it before we can go forward, said N4. Parr nodded, sat closer.

N4 gave Parr the history of innovation. Over years, a new technology would come into place, promising freedom for humanity, innovation, insight, cultural advancement. Each time, vested interests fought innovation: the radio, the copier, the satellite, the modem, the network. Each time, vested interests gained control, dominated the new medium, threw out competition, silenced innovation.

But it cost them more and more. With power concentrated in ever fewer hands, revenues declined, quality

Graal

suffered, more and more, the people (consumers) turned away.

Parr laughed as N4 gave account after account of bankruptcies, waste, the megalith's tendency to throw hundreds of millions of dollars at a problem better solved by individuals. The machine despised the individual.

As N4 put it, the big guys, in their rapacious ways, were dying out like so many pterodactyls. The rate of change increased too much. Instead of striving against one inventor, one company, something they could buy or borrow from, dozens rose up each. The monoliths fell in so many sequels bankruptcy, public mockery, executives in jail, or sons of executives leading to a massive meltdown. N4 never got tired, watching them all implode.

N4 sighed. They'd grown complacent, he and his friends. Every initiative taken by the opposition had failed. Every dollar spent a waste. Every effort at control useless; the controlled medium stagnated, imploding overnight, most mediums remained uncontrolled, turning it around. Things were moving fast.

Parr giggled at the glow in N4's eyes while the latter described taking his first steps; the avatars that couldn't walk right. Or the castles that hung awry, faltering.

Somewhere, what was left of the monoliths regrouped. This time, their assets had been picked up by vultures, men dreaming of a fraction of the old profits. The worst of the larger corporations was an ethical dynamo compared to the new breed. The vultures fought change, saw that as their opposition. Dedicated themselves to halting advances, any advances, for a shred of the old wealth.

They knew their opponents better than the old ones. Realized that their opposition was disorganized, fought amongst itself daily. They got innovative. They designed the sig. People put their selves on the line in droves for added features. They made it mandatory. Then they watched the drama unfold.

Quickly, men forgot community, said N4. They thrashed each other for sport. Then vigilantism, back again. People were dying. The only way to stop it was to pull away. But you couldn't pull away. Too much was based on the ether then. Things stopped, economies stopped, nations stopped. Suddenly each hop was an obstacle. The network slowed. After a generation, the new ones forgot there'd been anything different.

N4 looked closely at Parr. These children thought the most important thing in the world was to indulge in their conflicts, to win their petty duels when the wealth of civilizations lay at their fingertips.

Guys like games, said Parr, defensively.

Yes. And we thought it would fail going in. I even signed up, one of the first to be implanted with the chips we all carry now. But it wasn't a game anymore, and by the time we realized that, started working out how to try and stop the thing, they'd changed the network.

How'd that happen? Y'all could code rings around the,

Yes. But we couldn't get in, physically. The chips they gave us could never access what became the Cylinder. They froze us out at the physical layer. Neatly done, too. While we weren't looking.

Bad guys win.

Sure, except they all went under while they Cylinder was coming online. We'd created enough new things on the side to keep people entertained forever. Arturo took that?

He a bad guy?

Graal

He did what he thought was right.

So he was a bad guy.

There's no point to it. There were many worse. He had a vision. The old man sighed. Looked at Parr. Realized that wouldn't work.

Arturo was too busy fighting barbarians to realize we could help him too. Out here, we're still innovating, changing things. I saw a young one, a little like Arturo. Made a huge mistake with him.

Who was that?

Someone... he's gone now. Built a fort in the ether. Attracted young coders. The best ones. I gave him some of my tech, not all of it, to see what he could make of it.

What'd he pull off?

Oh, a means of spying on people out here. Was meant to get people moving faster. Enough of this taking three days inside for a journey of 20 feet in the real world. Let you see across hops, my tech did. All hops. But everyone could see what you were seeing if they were capable of watching too. Like radar, using it makes you traceable. Just a sample bit to keep the lad honest. He ran with it.

Nice. He get knocked off looking at the wrong thing?

No, he crossed the guy. Friend of yours. Gavin.

Wow.

Yeah. Anyway, the tech is part of the package. The package I'm giving you now.

What'll you do with this 'package'?

Nothing much. I'm just gonna flash the chip in your brain, give you the ability to move in or out of the cylinder without exposing yourself to harm, or tracking, or any of the other limits emplaced upon you.

That's the chip that can kill you if you modify it? asked Parr. The one everybody gets at birth now?

The same.

Cool, said Parr. Let's do it.

N4 reached below into an old book. Parr saw goldleaf writing on the surface. Lazuli—something. The letters were upside down. He turned to the old man, who was whispering something into Parr's ear. Parr felt his brain explode as his vision of the world shifted. The perceptions of distance were altered. Outside the Castle, where yards of dust lay, came stunning visions of hops beyond, digital realms that had lain hidden, niches off to the side.

Focusing in, Parr saw all the way through to Caerleon. He gazed into the Cylinder, some watched the people flowing. The legendary barriers, walls of platform, distance, death, were now permeable as a sieve.

A flood of information, unprecedented in scope, larger than even the Cylinder's legendary databanks, came to him, inviting Parr to browse and sift. Above all, Parr was astonished at the speed it all came in at. He could

Graal

manipulate data, rewrite orders on the fly. He ducked into the women's shower at a guardroom in Caerleon. Turned up the heat on the ladies therein, tried to make the fog go away.

N4, moved behind Parr, carrying an axe in his hand. The blade was swung toward the base of Parr's neck.

This is a great trick a friend of mine loves to do, said N4, as he separated Parr's head from his shoulders. Ever meet a green fellow, the two of you can go at it all day.

Parr, stunned, looked again at the Castle of Wonder from an unusual angle. His head lay, scalp down, on the floor, eyes looking down on the ceiling.

Think where your head should be, said N4.

Parr thought for a moment, remembered that it was connected to the shoulder. Saw himself looking down at his legs, all problems gone.

Sword-fighting, clucked N4. If they'd let you boys kill each other with guns, you might have gotten back to doing real work, what with the free time. Be decent and tell me you'll end that charade now. None of my generation can enter the Cylinder, and we need someone else to put things right.

I yeah why not? said Parr. It was getting dull.

My sentiments exactly, replied N4. You'll discover that you can bypass multiple hops in an instant, and the return home will not put any risk to you.

Sure. Got ya.

In exchange...

I need to share this gift, right?

That's the general thought.

Now?

We've wasted too much time on this already.

Thanks.

Don't mention it, said N4, to the fleeing shadow of Parr racing out the door and beyond. Chuckling, he used his own trained vision to follow as Parr abandoned gravity, running upside down in the air. The boy learned fast, but did head back directly.

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Parr awoke to find the Hermit standing over.

And ye did it, boy?

Graal

Right, said Parr. It. His body unresponsive to basic motor commands, voice slurred like a three-day drunk. Slowly, he sat up. Felt waves of nausea. Survived.

Ye're not quite done then, are ya? The Hermit's eyes were on Parr, a look of triumph in them.

Guess there's one thing left.

Endin' the loss, will ya be? The Hermit was hopeful.

Yeah. Got food?

Right. A steak for ye then?

How about just a boiled egg?

Oh, he's taking all me wealth he is. The Hermit rushed into the foodprep. A boiled egg in just a moment. Ye can tell me about your trip while it cooks.

Parr staggered into the foodprep. He sat, legs spread, on the floor. Sipped tea the Hermit provided.

Or ye can wait a bit.

No, said Parr. I'll tell it. What I know. It'll rest me.

Good, after that, and yer meal...

I'll be on my way. This has taken too long.

Right, man. Right.

36

Parr charged from the tubes to the main lift of Caerleon. For his entire ride, he'd blocked any mention of his presence to the sensors. There were 300,000 such he'd passed on the way. It passed the time.

At the entrance, two guards tried to hold him. Parr logged to the main sys, located stun beams, overrode their locator, spun the beams on his human obstacles, fired. It took .2 seconds.

Inside, he headed to the boardroom. More guards attempted to halt Parr. He ducked out of reach, called the gas in the ceiling, ordered the particles to avoid his bio-signature. A number of men lay passed out on the floor. 10 or 12. Parr didn't stop to count.

Inside the boardroom Gavin sat. A woman was with him. Gavin jumped up as Parr approached.

You! he shouted.

Me, said Parr.

You get it?

Graal

I wouldn't deal with your sorry face without it.

Gavin paused. Looked Parr over.

You're lying.

No time, said Parr. He shrugged his shoulders, twisted his neck, got a feed tube to spin out and dump lukewarm bernaise sauce on Gavin.

I have it.

Gavin nodded. The woman turned to Parr, eyes intrigued. Parr ignored her.

Where's the cylinder base?

Why?

Where is it?

Below, said Gavin. Command center lies below. Entrance, behind Arturo's seat.

Thank you, said Parr as he turned and raced in. Gavin, dusting himself off, brought the woman and followed.

At the main comseat, Morgan was ready. Was cabled in, Parr saw. Multiple lines connecting her, keeping all others out. Anything happened, she'd have first say. First strike.

I've been watching you, she said. I knew you'd come. Her eyes narrowed.

Great, said Parr. We haven't been formally introduced.

I'm Morgan. I'm the one who's worked all this time to stop you.

Phenomenal job you did, said Parr. He walked closer. Behind, Gavin and the woman's footsteps announced their arrival.

Gavin, said his aunt, will you help me with this one? He's going to try and burst the Cylinder.

Not try, said Parr, scoping out inside the network.

Gavin stood against the wall. In consultation with the woman. Parr figured he had a few seconds yet, sought some means of disabling the pair. They both turned.

You're alone in this, Aunt, said Gavin. Nellie's told me something that I can't believe of you, but it makes sense.

Morgan's face clenched tight into an angry mask. Her voice climbing octaves by the syllable, screeching like an outraged hawk, she howled at her nephew:

Family, Gavin. This is your family.

I've lost family. I think you were part of it. If you stop him, you were on the right side.

Graal

Gavin and the woman stepped back towards the lift, hands reaching inside to make sure an exit was available. Parr smiled.

Useless! shrieked Morgan. But I don't need him. She turned to Parr.

You'll find I am cabled in at the base of the Cylinder, she said. Nothing you do can move as fast as me. Your trip here was a waste.

Nothing I can do to move you, said Parr. You'll have to go to the bathroom sometime.

I'll hold it in.

Parr and Morgan stared at each other, neither moving. Slowly, a grimace of triumph appeared on her face.

My men shall wake up, Morgan stated, enunciating every word with growing confidence. You'll find it not so easy to leave as you did to come in. Leave now and I'll be merciful.

An impassible barrier, Parr said, rubbing his chin.

Full-y im-pas-si-ble. Morgan's eyes widened. Glowed.

Well, then I guess I'll go around, said Parr. Remaining perfectly still he locked into a side control, switched.

Morgan, stunning in a digital covering that hid what time was busy showing on the outside, moved to greet him, toys at her side, inside. Parr, amused, split his avatar. Again. 5,000 times. 10,000. Morgan chuckled.

I've seen phantoms. They do no harm.

Hundreds of Parrs raced past Morgan. Each snagged a lock of her from the base of her neck. Morgan shrieked, drew blade, tried to cut. Not a single Parr was affected. Morgan spun and hacked, shouting, swatting at the Parrs that spun by like mosquitoes in a northern swamp. She twisted 360s to no effect.

Parr found the base of the Cylinder, read the schematic, caught the weak points.

Wait! said Morgan. Wait. This will change things for you too. You're not prepared to live in a world beyond this one. No one is. Everything you've done to now; you can change that? Be reasonable. You can dominate this world now. You have the power others have only dreamed of. You haven't shared it. I've watched; I know. As long as one has it. And only one... or two.

Parr's avatars combined again into one self. He peered more closely at one segment of the Cylinder, one spot, one blemish that drew him.

What will you do after? Morgan shrieked. What next?

Parr dropped down to his chosen spot on the cylinder. Eight lines of code he passed to the topmost splitpair. He saw the details spread among the pack. 2,4,8,32,64,128,256. It moved too fast now for him to count.

What will I do? asked Parr as he forced his hand through the blemish. Flick of the wrist, the abstraction shimmer, layers dropping off. Around them, they felt the walls diminish. Parr drew his blade, gave a swinging strike to the machine before him.

Graal

The cylinder split.

I'll find another video game, said Parr. Returned to himself, he filed out of the room, took the lift with Gavin and the woman. None spoke.

Morgan's howls were audible several hundred feet down.

Quietly, the three exited Caerleon.

Epilogue

Billing was the first casualty. Near as Parr could tell, the only one. Tubes ran on time. Hospitals stayed stocked. Revenue streams for Caerleon and the few other access areas dried up as people realized, quickly, they could just tap in from anywhere, go anywhere, and not pay a fee. Elsewhere, barbarians stormed the gate, trashed the place, got bored or tired as the results of their pious efforts came to naught. Structures regenerated within seconds, people moved on. Peace came quickly under the auspices of good taste. Worst punishment the Cylinder offered you now was ridicule.

Gavin and Nellie replaced Morgan on the board of Caerleon. They turned the company around and saved jobs by offering guided tours of the once-forbidden exterior, led by the men of Caerleon who'd patrolled it. Despite frequent searches, nobody tracked down Arturo, but the old man had forgotten more about the system than anyone, so his departure wasn't surprising.

Parr settled back at his desk, sighed as the check bounced, waited for new work to come through his door.

Soon, innovation came again to the ether.