



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2 JANUARY 15, 2008

ABOUT THE NEW SCHEDULE

INOCENCIO—Well, if anyone hasn't noticed, this issue seems to be more than a bit late. Actually, this is probably going to be the new schedule for this E-Zine: every 15th of every month. Give or take a day or two. Why? Mostly because of the scheduling of things. Expect though, that we will be seeing even more material as time goes by. Remember that *Crafters* is still very much in its infancy and as can be expected, doesn't have as much bite as the bigger players yet. You'll notice though, the E-



Zine has received a few facelifts. Mainly, more consistent fonts and design, but mostly only aesthetics.

We're still looking for new people to help out with the effort, and that will not change for the foreseeable future. The keen of eye will also realize that there are fewer articles this issue. True that may be, but the articles present are much longer than last issue's. Anyways, I will not hold you any longer. Have fun with the latest issue, and a good day to all, and to all a happy new year.

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AND NOW A WORD FROM YOUR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

And here we are. And here I am starting a sentence with a conjunction. Hang on, that was two sentences. But either way. Crikey, that's the third. Anyway, here we are, the year is young and possibilities abound wherever you choose to glance. Yes, welcome to 2008 and the first issue of the year and the second issue of the first volume of *Crafters*. As mentioned on the first page, this issue seems to have fewer articles. True, the ones we have now are longer, but it still stands to truth that there are fewer articles present. Now, as EIC, I believe I have a few things to say about that.

Writing is hard. It is bloody difficult, time consuming, brain draining, and even physically tiring (after beating your head against your monitor repeatedly that is). Then again, writing is a passion. Passion takes pain, it



takes love, it takes a lot of hard work. I myself have experienced times when I felt just too tired or drained to write or even tell a decent story. Or halfway decent even. But soldier on we must. Not as dumb driven cattle we must be, but rather heroes in the strife.

Make such be our resolution for the new year then. To soldier on and write, tell our stories, and add more life to our own little sphere in the world of literature. Take the time, take the effort, work hard for your passion.

With these last few words then I leave you, write what you will and say what you can. For it is only with our blind dedication to our craft that true masterpieces are ever created.

Kudos to anyone that sends in a letter telling me what poem I alluded to in this little blurb. •

T A L E C R A F T I N G A N A L Y S I S

CIMAFRANCA—Following Sean's analysis of his Talecraft storytelling process, here's my own take based on The Tesseract.

A quick introduction to those not familiar with Talecraft: Talecraft is a card-based storytelling game developed by Davao-born artist and developer Ria Lu. The fat deck consists of Genre, Archetype, and Key cards. The mechanics are simple: pick some cards at random and tell a story using the elements you turn up.

I first encountered the game at ToyCon 2007 at SM Megamall. Though I did badly on my first try (and will probably continue to do so -- live performance is not my strong suit), I thought the game had promise and so decided to sell it in Davao and Dumaguete. (Yes, you may contact me if you want to buy a set. It's P350 per deck, same price as in Manila.)

The Talecraft contest site threw us a doozy of a curve ball. Essentially: write a SciFi short story involving a Dandy and a Haunted Hero with Diamond, a Grandfather Clock, Blindness, Blood, Tomb as elements and Escape as a plotline.

The difficulty is reconciling the Dandy and Grandfather Clock into a science fiction story. These are not the typical elements for the genre (unless you're a Doctor Who fan -- which I am, by the way.) But this is where the value of semi-random nature of the Talecraft game comes to the fore: it forces you to mix elements which you might not otherwise think of using.

My immediate instinct was to associate the Dandy and the Diamond. The image fits quite nicely. The Dandy is typically vain and shallow; thus, a Diamond would

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A LITTLE SOMETHING

A few of the more observant may have noticed that this issue is a bit sparse. Well, that is a matter easily addressed. As of now, the only person working on the E-Zine is the Editor-in-Chief, that's me. If you have any articles you'd like to send in, stories, poetry, comics, anything whatsoever, feel free to drop me an email any time. Even if just to ask, complain, or even the traditional letters-to-the-editor, those are all welcome.

If you happen to be an experienced writer, or believe that you can contribute to the younger writers still learning the trade, and you want to write a regular article like 3C, then send me an email, I'd be glad to have you onboard.

Remember though, that as of now, and for the foreseeable future, Crafters will be non-profit. In a nutshell, that means that this is a work of love as you won't be getting paid. Rather, it will be the sheer joy of working and helping others that will be your bread and butter.

I am currently looking for the following:

- Regular writers/Columnists
- An illustrator
- Contributors

For all contact information, see below.

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3C—ON CHARACTERS, CLICHES, AND CRIMES

INOCENCIO—Welcome back to another issue of C3. Last time, we went a little into how we shouldn't write one-sided characters. This issue however, we'll look at a few things you can do to actually create an effective character. I mentioned before that one of the best ways was to hang around other people. One way to take this further is to hang around your character. No, I am not telling you that you need to suddenly develop multiple personalities or even become schizophrenic (although that would produce *very* interesting characters) in order to write effective characters. What I *am* saying is that you should try writing your characters as real people. You should know their traits, quirks, and failings. When asked the question, "If you had one wish, what would it be?" Darth Vader would answer *very* differently as compared to the stereotypical dumb-blonde (or light-haired, intellectually sub-par individual if you prefer to be PC). Take the following as an example:

Interviewer: Well, many famous people have found various things and aspects of their fame to be the most rewarding in their lives. What would you guys say was the most fulfilling part of fame?

Interviewee One: Crushing my enemies, stealing their horses, seeing them running from me, and hearing the lamentation of their women!

Interviewer: I see... And how about you, Sir... I'm sorry, how should I call you?

Interviewee Two: It stoles our precious!

Interviewer: Aha. Moving on... How about you miss?

Interviewee Three: Well, I'd just like to like, uhm, like say it's totally cool to like be talking to you like this you know? And like, I think it's like totally like oh yeah, nice to see everyone like here right now like this! And oh, I brought my puppy and he's like totally cute and sweet isn't he? And, oh, world peace!

<Interviewee One cuts Interviewee Three's head off>

See how that works? There you have three different characters (kudos to you if you know who the first interviewee was) with three very different answers. It should be no different with your characters. If you ask one of your characters a question, then that character should respond differ-

ently from your other characters. Take in mind however, that they do not simply respond differently, but they also sound differently. By this I mean that they shouldn't seem to simply be reciting lines from a page. Take the following for example:

Fred: I don't believe that you're telling the truth!

John: I am telling the truth, it's your fault if you don't believe me.

Fred: She doesn't love you, I was with her first, she's mine!

John: She's not yours, she loves me. It doesn't matter if she was with you, she's with me now.

Is that really the kind of heart-pumping action that will prevent you from putting down a book? Hardly. They sound too much alike. When reading something it's best if you can almost hear the people talking. Each character has his (Yes, I said "his", not "his/her". General rule of the thumb, just choose one. Don't bother with "his/her") own way of talking. Try this on for size:

Fred: Sod that, John, you're a bloody filthy liar and you've always been a sodding prat!

John: Can it. I told you what you wanted to know, and it's really all up to you if you're going to believe me or not.

Fred: That's sodding bollocks! She was mine years before she decided to shag up with you. I don't give a shit if she thinks you're better than me, that tramp should know I've always been better for her!

John: First, if I hear you talk about her like that again, I'm going to shoot you once in each kneecap. Secondly, your language is atrocious. And finally, it doesn't matter a whit what the past was, this is now, and I'm the one she's with now.

See how different that is? It's the same thing in essence, but you can almost get an idea of the background of each character. Fred comes off as a street-wise scrapper who happens to be very hotheaded. You can also tell that he's relatively poor, compared to John. John on the other hand seems educated, but rather cold. Maybe he's a gangster or a mob-boss? He's also calmer, but has a mean-streak as seen in his threat to shoot out

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be a good object of his covetousness. And between the Dandy and the Haunted Hero, I actually thought the Dandy would be a much more interesting character.

Next: how to turn this into a science fiction story? Taking my cue from Doctor Who, I turned the Diamond into a plot device, specifically, an alien plot device. Cheating? Maybe. In any case, with these the Dandy and the alien Diamond, I already had the first two paragraphs of my story:

Even afterwards, when he had plenty of time to contemplate the matter, Desmond's thoughts always flew back to the diamond. Yes, the diamond, calling out to him with its irresistible siren song, its every sparkle a seduction of the senses, and its very touch exciting him to pure ecstasy.

That the diamond was of alien origin, there was no doubt. By the scientists' estimations, it was immeasurably old. These were the quaint oddities that had first piqued his curiosity that day he attended the function at the Singh-Meyer Space Institute. Little did he know that it would become his deadly obsession.

By the second paragraph, I already had some inkling of the conflict between the Dandy and the Haunted Hero in the form already present in the story. The Haunted Hero unwittingly brought the Diamond back to earth, and the Dandy would covet it. But how to up the ante for the hero? Well, have the Dandy strike through the Haunted Hero's wife.

Starting the story by way of retrospection was a method I picked up from "The Flood in Tarlac." Nevertheless, I found it apt. The reader would know that, yes, the Dandy had survived but would still leave enough room for suspense. In my mind, I already knew what the ending would be -- that the Diamond would also be the Dandy's Tomb.

In order to flesh out the character of the Dandy some more, I decided to add a few more touches. This came in answer to a few other questions: What brought him in first contact with the Diamond? A swanky function at a space institute. Is this the place a dandy would go? Probably not. So why would he go? At the insistence of his lover, Nigel!

Aha! the bisexual sybaritic touch would just the thing to round out the Dandy's character.

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He recalled that he had not even wanted to go. Nigel, being one of Institute's investment angels, had insisted on his company for the exhibit's premier. "I'm delighted you'll turn another billion, Nigel, love," he had said, "but must I tag along? Scientists and explorers, phooey! I'll simply be bored to tears."

Along the way, I had to introduce a few minor characters. Nigel was a necessary addition, and turning him into a venture capitalist was just the thing to develop the background. Initially, there was no Rajiv Singh, but he had to come into the picture because there was no way Hank Meyer could run the company. Meyer, the Haunted Hero, was meant to be bold but socially inept; and for that reason, he needed a smooth CEO.

I was through a third of the story when I realized I had not actually incorporated the Grandfather Clock. Could I introduce it later in the story? Not without unbalancing the story with an obviously minor detail pulled out from the hat. So I decided to introduce it early, in so doing introducing the Blood element as well.

With the revision, the opening now read:

Like an eternal monument, the ancient grandfather clock stood unmoving, its hands forever fixed at a half past one. The brass pendulum hung a few degrees off apogee, but neither rose nor fell. Remnants of the glass window, smeared with blood, were as jagged teeth of the broken case. From one of the jutting splinters a fresh crimson dollop threatened to fall, yet clung stubbornly to the wood.

That didn't segue so well into the previous opening, so I decided to make the further revision:

Desmond regarded the unmoving scene, bemused by the irony. Time was all he had now. Well, time and his own sardonic self. Nothing more to do, then, but dwell on the sins that had brought him thus.

Even now, Desmond's thoughts flew back to the diamond. Yes, the diamond, that which called out to him with its irresistible siren song, seducing him with its window to infinity.

With this addition, it became more logical to use the

Grandfather Clock as a story marker. And that's what it does, throughout the three parts of the story. Now we open with the Grandfather Clock in its final static state; midway through the story is the Grandfather Clock still operational; and near the end is the Grandfather Clock destroyed but still in real time. The Grandfather Clock served to symbolize the frozen-time element in the story, too.

Along the way, the nature of the Diamond changed somewhat. Now I already knew that the Diamond would be a fourth-dimensional construct of some kind (hence the title, though I did not explain). Somewhere the idea of psionics also came into the picture. At first, it was just going to be an imaging device, but that seemed insufficient to get investors excited, so I turned it into a mysterious energy source.

The portrayal also changed. From a sparkling temptation, I turned the Diamond into a dark obsession. This was a difficult transition to make as I had to rewrite several paragraphs, but it was a warranted effort because I wanted the Diamond to be as alien and mysterious as possible.

Hence, the final version:

Inside was the diamond, but it was a fact perceived rather than seen. One felt it when one was not looking at it directly.

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Fred's kneecaps.

Similarly, you could try talking to your characters and see how they would respond. Remember our first lesson though: no character is one-dimensional. As much as you want your character to be the epitome of repressed anger, the utmost victim of misunderstanding, yet the final hope for the salvation of mankind (oh my, I'm sure we've never seen *that* kind of character before) you cannot have him as a one-dimensional creature. True, you may try to reason out with us that he's really that focused that he seems to have a one track mind. My answer to you is plain and simple: No. Let's take a look at an example with such a protagonist: Yo'Bomë Resol IX from the fictional book Quest Against Evil.

Interviewer: Well, what inspired you to fight this, erm... quest against evil? So to speak that is.

Yo'Bomë: Because I am alone, and the darkness swirls around me like the wisps of dark shadowy darkness. The people do not understand me, but I understand them and have to save them even if

And though one could not see it, one knew it came in the shape of a diamond.

The skips in time were necessary to the mechanism of the story. I know I left out a lot of detail, but I felt they could be safely omitted. In fact, I thought they would heighten the tension. Besides, it was all in keeping with the retrospective structure of the story.

And Rosalie? Poor Rosalie, just a plot device, not a hint of dialogue, and in the end, a fresh corpse by the Grandfather Clock. Again, it was in keeping with the nature of Desmond the Dandy -- cruel, opportunistic and uncaring -- to portray her as such: just an object to be used.

Everything else just fell into place. The original Escape plotline was meant to show the Dandy's escape from the Haunted Hero. Escape into where? Into an eternal Tomb! I had conveniently forgotten about Blindness, but then it worked well enough as the anti-hero's obsession. Only when I finished the story did I realize that the Dandy was a Haunted Hero as well!

"The Tesseract" is by no means a perfect story. I've resigned myself to the fact that the short story is not my strong suit. With a lot more polish, I'm hoping I can squeak it past some sleepy editor. But as illustrations go, it shows how Talecraft can inspire an unconventional tale. ●

the world does not really know who I am.

No. That just does not work. While characters must have personality, they do not have only one personality. No one is all angst all the time. That character may seem different, special, not like the other characters like that you may say. I say however, that *that* is an issue that we will tackle next time on C3. In closing then, I leave you with a few words. Your character must speak like a real person (and no, emo/goth/punk teenagers do not count) while still being an interesting character. They must live and breathe, think and act. Your characters make mistakes and they will think things through. They are not robots that move about as the plot dictates. It may be very tempting to do this, but once again, it does not work.

For next time then, I leave you with a short assignment. Send in a scene of your character interacting with another one. The more characters interacting, the better. Just remember not to overdo it. Remember, three's a party, four's a crowd. Until next time then, this is me, signing off! ●

F A T E - 0 1

RIVERA—The Hades Penal Colony was not a tourists' destination spot, to be sure. Located midway between the Earth's crust and its mantle, made of reinforced titanium alloy, and constantly surrounded by hot, molten rock and metal, it was the last place anyone in their right minds would want to go. Add to its hostile location its permanent residents of some five hundred inmates with criminal records longer than they were tall, and HPC becomes hell on earth, literally and figuratively.

Captain Edwin Frost scanned the contents of the data cube quickly, its information fed directly to lens cameras in his eye. Aside from the soft whirring sound of the data cube, the only other sound came from the ensign standing a little ways behind him who seemed to have trouble keeping still.

Captain Frost made a small, irritated noise at the back of his throat. He hated it when they assigned junior officers to him, because he almost always gets one who had never seen a Manipulator like him before.

Now what was his name? Oh yes, Ensign Jake Cadger. "Cadger," Captain Frost said in a slight reprimanding tone, "stop fidgeting before you bore a hole in the floor, and then I shall have to find another assistant for the remainder of this mission."

"Y-yes sir. I'm sorry sir." The ensign immediately stopped moving, keeping very still.

There was a few moments of silence. "You can still breathe, you know." Captain Frost turned back to see the ensign flush and look quite flustered, although he was not fidgeting as much as before.

The elevator took them directly to the MC-06 shuttle port. By the time the doors slid open, Captain Frost already had the data cube tucked away under his dark blue coat. Two sentry guards accosted them when they arrived.

"Identification?" This guard took one look at Ensign Cadger, dismissed him as a no-threat, and turned his flat stare at Captain Frost.

Frost held up one empty hand. The guard watched open-mouthed as a silver card materialized slowly in his hand, complete with digital image, thumbprint scan, DNA sequence, and rank.

"Captain Edwin Frost of the United Nations Forces, Air Division, Squad A. And obviously a Manipulator," he added dryly. The card floated in his hand. He



gave it to the sentry. "I'm here on a confidential mission."

One of the other sentry guards produced a portable scanner. He slipped Frost's ID into the scanner and waited for confirmation. The captain's image popped up on the screen. It also showed other information, including those the card could produce effortlessly on its own: all ID cards had their own holographic image projector and a small nuclear battery pack, among other things.

Captain Frost noticed the nervous glances both sentry guards threw in his direction, and it took a great amount of willpower not to roll his eyes and make a comment. Manipulators were not generally welcome in society; unlike normal humans, they had the ability to alter any electronic device with sheer thought. Scientists have hypothesized that this was a step up in human evolution. Most people think they were only freaks of nature.

Not many children are born Manipulators, and of every ten that are born, only three will live past the age of fifteen, and only one of those three will live on to become adults. Manipulators were almost always

born with frail physical bodies. Some turned insane.

It was the military who had come to see Manipulators as something else. Their unique abilities made them perfect reconnaissance soldiers and weapons. In a worldwide project, the UN Forces collected every Manipulator they could and sent them to a secret training facility, where they could be educated while their abilities were studied and honed. Not everyone survived; most of the other Manipulator children he had known in the facility died because of sickness.

When he graduated, there was only one course of action he could take: sign up in the military. It had taken him years to earn their respect, and Frost was sure he could not expect another promotion anytime soon. Although the military as a whole recognized Manipulators as a great asset, soldiers were only human.

And human instinct dictated that anything one cannot understand must be considered dangerous.

After a few minutes the sentries handed him back his

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ID, their faces as cool and collected as his, although a thin line of sweat covered their foreheads. "Captain, the shuttle is ready for departure." They saluted and made way for him to pass.

Captain Frost made a noncommittal sound and nodded. He walked past

the guards and onto the ramp that would take him to the Hades shuttle. Ensign Cadger walked quickly to catch up. The young officer looked up and whistled. "That's one mighty impressive shuttle, captain."

Frost looked up and silently agreed. The Hades shuttle was unique, in that it is the only shuttle that was made to travel underground. Its entire body was made of the same material used to build the Hades colony, with an engine that would rival that of the best star ships under his command. It could withstand thousands of pounds of pressure and intense heat, and it was driven entirely by remote from the UN Forces headquarters.

Which was why it surprised him to find someone on the bridge waiting for them.

While he settled down on his seat in the passenger area, Captain Frost instructed Ensign Cadger to enter the mission codes into the shuttle's computer to confirm their flight path. A few seconds later Ensign Cadger had come up to him, running.

"Captain," he gasped through breaths. "There is someone on the bridge!"

Frost narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"I saw a man in the bridge, Captain! He was wearing the uniform of the Intelligence Division, but I didn't see his face. He was looking at the shuttle's controls."

Frost considered for a moment. "Very well. You stay here." With a thought he materialized a laser hand gun much the same as the one in Ensign Cadger's holster, but his had a lower power output. If they had an unwanted passenger on board, he would want to capture him alive for questioning.

For a moment he thought that someone had leaked information about his mission. But that was impossible; only the commander and the seven division chiefs knew about his job at Hades.

Captain Frost set the gun on silent and walked slowly towards the bridge. While he walked he planned out his next move. The shuttle had only one exit, and

that was in the passenger area. He had studied the shuttle's blueprints before he came here. If worse came to worse, he could Manipulate the doors to make them into a solid wall of metal and override the shuttle's controls so whoever it was could not escape.

When he opened the doors, though, he was surprised to see a famil-

iar face.

Brown eyes and a handsome smiling face greeted him with a warm smile. "It's been a while, Edwin."

Captain Frost lowered the gun and let it return to its original form: a small electronic notebook. He pocketed it and narrowed his eyes at the man languidly sitting across the pilot's chair with his legs over one arm. "What are you doing here, Captain Knightly?"

Captain William Knightly unhooked his knees over the chair and laughed. "Still as stiff as a board, aren't you?" He leaned back against the chair, beaming. "Aren't I allowed to drop by and say 'hello'?"

"Not when I'm in the middle of something." Captain Frost sat down in the nearest chair and looked straight at Knightly. "What are you doing here?" he asked again.

William Knightly shrugged, a smile still on his face as he tilted his head. "It's about your mission, Edwin."

"Who sent you?"

"Ah, let's just say I came on a voluntary basis, so orders weren't really necessary."

Frost's eyes narrowed. "You came here without permission?"

"I have every right to come to port MC-06," Knightly corrected. "I am not, however, allowed to go to Hades. Strict regulations, and all that," he added with a charming smile that had no effect whatsoever on the other captain.

"And this shuttle?"

Knightly gave a condescending grin. "I may not be a Manipulator, Edwin, but I know enough about being a soldier to slip pass two sentries and a few paltry sensors."

Frost did not know how to reply to this, so he stayed silent and waited.

"You know, Edwin, you might be a great captain, but you have the social skills of an Infantry idiot who

only knows how to shoot enemies and impress ladies."

Frost only stared at him. Knightly shrugged, sighing. "Some conversationalist," he said wryly, before adding, "I assume your assistant is at the back?"

Captain Frost nodded. "Ensign Cadger will be waiting for me until I call for him."

"And how can you be sure...?"

"If he is eavesdropping on us, I would know. I created a sensor on the door."

"Ah." Captain Knightly nodded. "That's good. I suppose he has no idea about this mission?"

Frost shook his head. "He does. But only enough to know that I might need back-up when we leave."

Knightly quirked an eyebrow. "Is he that good?"

"Good enough."

Knightly nodded, his smile fading. His face turned serious as he regarded Edwin. They had not known each other for long, but they had each saved each other's lives enough to regard themselves as friends. At least, that was what Knightly thought. "Edwin," he began, "do you know your target?"

Captain Frost paused for a while before nodding. "A prisoner. Level five, very dangerous."

Knightly waved the information away as if it did not matter. "I mean, do you know exactly who your prisoner is?"

When Captain Frost did not answer, he continued. "It's Fate."

"Come again?"

"Finely Altered Terrestrial Entity. Or, to be more precise, Fate-01. She's the first, and probably the last."

Alarm bells went up inside Captain Frost's head. He regarded Knightly wearily. What would he gain from telling him this?

Knightly continued his explanations. "Fate-01 was a project started almost two decades ago, almost the same time that the military had begun to train Manipulators. They wanted to see if they can gain a thorough knowledge of the genetic make-up of Manipulators, and add a few choice traits of their own." A twisted smile marred his face. "Hundreds of children died in the course of the project, but they

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finally succeeded after seven years. A Manipulator child was born with the abilities they had expected to see. And to keep things under control, they kept Fate under close supervision, without influence of the outside world." He snorted in disgust. "But now they want the project closed down."

He looked at Captain Frost. "Which is where you come in."

Frost studied Knightly's face. "Why are you telling me this?"

For a moment the other captain looked puzzled. "Isn't it obvious? Good God, Edwin, I knew you were a stiff, but to be this cold-hearted...don't you realize that they are ordering you to kill a child?"

"You are proposing that I abort this mission?"

Knightly rolled his eyes. "Oh no, Captain, absolutely not. It was a mere thought, you know, a passing sort of thing, like a fancy from my imagination...of course I'm telling you to abort this mission, you cold-faced lump!"

"That would be considered an act of rebellion."

For a moment, Captain Knightly did not say anything. Then he stood up, shrugging his shoulders. "It is your decision," he said finally. "I won't stop you, and even if I did, I might end up dead," he added without humor. "Think about this, Edwin." He opened the door and stepped out.

* * *

The cell where Fate was being held was in the lowest level of the Hades colony, and it was made of pure diamond.

All the security cameras had been Manipulated to become blank monitor screens, and the security locks for the cell door had all been disabled. It had taken Captain Frost only a minute. But the back-up system could start any moment, and the armed guards were already hunting him down, albeit without anything electronic.

That gave him five minutes, at most, before the colony became his tomb. His and his ensign's.

"Captain, is everything alright?" came Ensign Cadger's voice clearly through the communicator clipped to his left ear. He had ordered Cadger to secure the first door-lock to the bottom level. In the background he heard shooting.

"Yes. There's no trouble here. And you?"

He heard the ensign grunt. "They're using old guns with metal bullets; the force field generator you set up might not hold for much longer. "

Captain Frost dashed across the empty hallway leading to the diamond cell. "Give me three minutes." He studied the prison cell. It was a complete sphere, with no entrances or exits, although the diamond platform he was currently standing on touched the surface. He peered inside. He could see a small figure huddled on the bottom.

With practiced ease he Manipulated his electronic notebook into a compact bomb, activated it, and ran for safety. With a small boom and ten seconds later, the cell was cracked open slightly, but not enough for him to get inside.

He cursed under his breath, and ran back to the main hallway, where he Manipulated one of the security cameras into a laser gun. Turning the dial for maximum power, he ran back to the cell and started burning a hole on the surface.

It was slow work, but he managed to do it. He hid the gun under his coat and slipped inside the diamond sphere.

It was very bright inside. Frost had to squint for a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the light. He looked around and saw a little girl about thirteen years of age, with limp black hair and large blue unseeing eyes. Her skin was very pale, and contrasted sharply with her black dress. There was nothing else inside the cell except a tall, wooden, ornate, antique grandfather clock.

"You are Fate." Captain Frost walked up to the child and looked at her. She did not even flinch when he took out his gun.

The child nodded. "Are you here to kill me?" she asked in a soft, high voice. Her face did not change.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "What makes you say that?"

"I heard a gun." The child did not turn in his direction when he stepped back. "Are you here to kill me?" she asked again.

Captain Frost remained silent. He looked at the clock behind the girl. "Why do you have a clock?"

The girl lowered her eyes. "I wanted to know how long I had to wait before I am dead."

"Why?"

"Everyone is afraid of me," the girl replied. "Do you

know why my cage is made of diamonds? I am a Manipulator, but I can manipulate anything to anything else, so long as their atomic construct is not stable. Diamond has a near-perfect atomic structure, so it is impossible for me to change it." She turned around and touched the grandfather clock, ticking softly. "The clock was the only other thing I asked the commander for. The first is death."

She turned her head in the direction of Captain Frost, although her eyes stared at something to his left. "I was the one who wanted you to kill me, Captain Frost."

Shock rendered him motionless for a moment before his senses returned. "Why me?" he asked in a tone that was harsher than he intended.

The little girl tilted her head. "Why not? You are a Manipulator, like I am. Surely you understand why I should die. You and I are both different, but unlike you, I am...a monster, in their eyes." She smiled sadly. "They created me, but they do not feel anything but fear and revulsion. Death would be a far better companion for me."

Captain Frost shook his head. "I...I can't—"

"Captain!" came Cadger's voice through the radio. "The force-field generator is dead. I only barely escaped to the shuttle; it seems their real target is you."

Captain Frost cursed under his breath again. "I'll be there." He looked up at the girl. "Come with me."

Fate shook her head. "No. You must kill me before they find you."

"No."

Fate sighed. Captain Frost was startled when the laser gun in his hands shot out and floated in front of Fate. The gun de-materialized in the air. In its place was an old-fashioned dagger, the electronic components of the gun dropping onto the cold diamond floor. She grabbed the dagger and pressed the point to her neck, enough to draw blood.

Captain Frost watched as the red beads slowly slid down the length of the blade, marring her pale skin. There was something about seeing a little girl pointing a blade across her own neck that stirred something inside him. He walked over to the girl and placed a hand over her arm that held the dagger.

"Can you Manipulate the clock into something smaller, so we can take it out?"

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The girl frowned. "Why?"

He took the dagger effortlessly from her tiny, weak hands and threw it away. He took her hand and held it tightly. "You are going to need it."

"What for?"

Captain Frost smiled for the first time since the start of the mission, even though Fate could not see. "Don't you think it would be better if you used the clock to mark all the time in the world you have to do absolutely anything you wanted?"

Fate was silent for a moment. Captain Frost could already hear the sound of boots echoing in the platform outside. But he held on to the girl's hand, and waited.

After a moment, Fate nodded slowly. She smiled. "Yes, I would like that better, I think." ●

NOSTRADAMUS GUESSED

DAACOND—There's something about crossroads that I can never quite figure out. It seems as if at each crossroad we too become, in a way, prophets, foretelling the future and seeing down paths that only we are privy to. It doesn't matter who we are with, we are the only ones that can see down the path that we want to take.

But then I start walking, and the spell is broken. It's just the corner of Fifth and Main again, and there are no more mysteries. I'm just another commuter on the way to a dull 8 to 5, and all thoughts of clairvoyance are pushed from my mind.

I'm passing by the drugstore now, but I don't go in. There it is again: prophecy. What if I had just missed the moment of my life? What if *she* was there, the one I've loved all my life but have never met? I could turn back wandering in nonchalantly. But I don't.

Did I just miss her? Did I just lose my chance of ever meeting the one person I could ever truly love? I don't know, and I never will, because I'm walking down Fifth Avenue again, and the crossroad has passed.

But what if I had gone in there? Perhaps the one I was to meet is actually along this road? Or maybe I made the wrong choice at the library. Perhaps that was the prophecy I so blindly missed. She could have been waiting in an alley for me, beset by a gang of

rapists, lustful and wild. I could have been there behind the library to fight them off with my umbrella and briefcase. They would have fled from my righteous rage after I beat their leader down. She would have been overjoyed. She might even have thrown herself into my waiting arms. I could have been there for her.

I could have.

But I didn't.

And I may have just lost the one chance in my life to be happy. Or maybe that was a false prophecy?

The sun shines off of my balding head, sweat glistening off of my skin. I'm forty-five years old, fat, single, and balding. My life is going nowhere. Yet here I am again at a crossroads. I could enter the building and go up to my office, or I could turn around throw my papers to the winds and be free.

The Jones and Dewey case would fly in the breeze like doves playfully swimming through the air. Alan Kovordjek Jr., Gertrude Humberg, and Kyle Smith vs. Alan Kovordjek Sr. and Jennifer Kovordjek would be nothing more than random pieces of paper to be lost to the jungle of the city. A child would pick one up, and it would become an airplane, a boat, maybe even the latest fashion from Paris in the form of a paper hat.

Just imagining it is interesting, visualizing the papers flying lightens my mood. It's never going to happen though, that much I have seen in my visions. It doesn't take a seer to see that I don't have what it takes to cast everything aside like that.

I walk through the door and the moment is lost again. The place is very familiar to me. The fake Persian rug, the polished bronze plaques that shine like gold, the tacky smell of crushed dreams and crisp money. I work here, and I have worked here for the past twenty years. So many crossroads then, so many chances at becoming someone, at being free and happy.

I'm fat and thirty pounds overweight. The next crossroad is

easy; I take the elevator. But what if I had taken the stairs? My boss might have been there, with a broken leg after slipping and falling. He always takes the stairs even though we all say that he shouldn't because of his age. I could save him, and I would get a higher position in the company. He's over seventy now, he might even give the company to me when he inevitably passes away. I do good work don't I? I've been at the same job for years, I know how to work harder than anyone else. But it's not going to happen is it?

I really can't figure it out. I could be a Nostradamus with these. Given time, I feel I could learn to see these through to the end. Each crossroad is something new, something grand. I can look down one path and see all the things that could possibly happen. We all do. There exists no one that doesn't see these prophecies at one point or the other. But once we start walking down a path, it is blind to us, but paths we haven't walked are clear. In the end, we all simply guess.

I'm in my office now. I sit at the desk, reach into the drawer and pull out the .357 Magnum Colt Python I've had there for weeks now. I put it to my temple and blow my brains out all over the room.

There's something magical about crossroads. I think I've just figured it out. ●

