

Mind's Eye

By Mark Wandrey, copyright 2004

Chris knew his career was nearing an end. Nestled in his cocoon deep inside the Labrea class starship Cricket, he wasn't just in command of the vessel, he was the vessel. The very thought that he would not be doing this for too much longer sent a shiver up his spine. It was only through an incredible exercise of self-will that the shiver wasn't translated to the ships attitude control subsystems.

"Is everything okay?" asked a voice in his brain.

"Certainly, why do you ask?" he replied.

"Just had a quiver from the hyperspacial field modulator." Chris smiled as he realized that he must not have completely suppressed the shudder after all.

"We're approached Archeron in nine minutes," he told the captain. "It was probably quantum flux from another vessel's passage earlier in the same space time."

"You're the Driver, I just hold the keys." Chris gave a mental nod and the digital presence disappeared, leaving him alone in the warm darkness of his cocoon. That was ultimately the way he preferred it. As they approached Archeron, navigating Cricket through the busy complicated electromagnetic fields around a primary star system was no easy task and required most of the faculties of the best Drivers. Many were forced to drop their ships out of quantum space far outside the system and then navigate inward using a tactic called micropops.

Chris navigated his vessel with a combination of self-assurance and pure tenacity. He was among the best there was at this job, a job dominated by people in their early twenties. As their age approached thirty, they were much rarer. The oldest Driver to date had retired at the ripe old age of thirty-two. His retirement had not been voluntary, or very pretty. Chris had turned thirty-one during this jump.

With typical expertise, Chris brought the Cricket out of Quantum space within three planetary diameters of Archeron, close enough to maneuver into orbit with reaction thrusters alone. And close enough to earn him the typical five percent bonus on his already huge fee.

“Perfect as usual, Driver Chris,” the captain whispered into his head.

“No problem whatsoever, Captain.” A short two hours later the Cricket was nestling up to huge orbital transfer station where robotic dock handlers waited to unload the freight she carried. Chris pulled himself along the boarding tube, as comfortable in zero gravity as anyone else that had spent the majority of their life there. The captain hovered just inside the station speaking to the facilities loadmaster, do doubt arguing about some price.

Chris didn’t have to haggle with the captain, his fees were set by the INDG, the Interstellar Navigation and Driver Guild. Only bonuses and tips were up for negotiation so he merely nodded to the captain as he floated by, a small bag with everything he owned in tow. The captain was not quite so content to let him go.

“Oh, happy birthday, Driver!” Chris cringed visibly, which made the captain smile even wider.

“How old, Driver?” asked the loadmaster.

“Thirty-one.” The other man let out a long low whistle out of respect. But Chris could see more than respect in the man’s eyes. There was some curiosity, some pity, and no small amount of fear. Chris gave his bag a tug and pushed away from the pair with a snort. What did they know about the life of a Driver? Nothing, that’s what.

Not too far from the docking ring, in one tenth gravity where they would be more comfortable, was the Drivers Pub. Chris didn’t even bother checking into a cube but headed straight to the bar. It wasn’t a very big pub, as pubs went, but it was very exclusive. To gain entry you had to sell your soul to the stars.

Inside he was greeted with the typical backhanded wave of the Drivers. A baker’s dozen of his fellow drivers waited for him, most of them he knew by name. A few faces were new to him.

“How’s everyone doing?” he asked after greetings all around. There was no hazing to join this fraternity, everyone had already paid. They all respected Chris, he was the elder statesman of their trade. No one who respected a Driver ever offered birthday greetings. It was his party, but it was more like a wake. They waited until he’d had his first lager before giving him the news.

“Eric Grick didn’t make it,” Janice, one of his oldest friends said quietly.

“He didn’t lose his ride?!” Chris exclaimed.

“Lost a lot more than his ride, he’s a lamb now.”

“Oh God,” Chris said and stared down at his empty drink. “He was only a year older than me.”

“Are you going for Eric’s record?” a young Driver asked.

“Do I look like I’m ready to go lamb?” No one dared say such a thing. “I’m just not ready to retire, that’s all.” They all raised their glasses to Chris and shared a drink to celebrate another year as a Driver.

The next morning he reported to the INDG doctor for his annual checkup. He reclined in a special examination chair similar to the cocoon inside a starship as the doctor plugged him in. In an actual cocoon, a series of tiny robots handled the connection in moments. It took the doctor and his assistant fifteen minutes.

Once complete, the tests ran for quite some time. Powerful computers simulated conditions in quantum space and watched to see how his own biological computer responded. For a time he was part of the test computers, another module. Hundreds of nano-probes that had been installed deep into his brain thirteen years ago to the day allowed him to receive and send gigabytes of data as fast as any computer, but with a flexibility and creativity no computer could match.

The doctor carefully compared the data gathered from the linking with thousands of similar tests performed over the ninety years since the first Driver had turned his brain into a living link with quantum space, and tamed faster than light travel. He didn’t entirely like the results.

“You’re showing fifteen percent higher theta wave emanations and your Q-wave patterns are vastly different than last year.” The doctor finished unlinking Chris and waited while the Driver put his protective skull cap back in place. “I don’t like it at all.”

“I’ve never felt better!” Chris said honestly as he sat on the exam table.

“That’s just what Eric Grick said, six months ago during his annual checkup. You’ve heard what happened to Eric?” Chris gave a single nod. “I figured you had. News of a Lamb travels faster than Quantum space with you people.” Chris just shrugged.

“Just because Eric popped a vacuum gasket doesn’t mean I’m going to!”

“Yes it does, and you damn well know it! What is it about having a hundred holes drilled in your head that makes you people think you’re immortal? We’ve been doing this to kids like you were for going on a century, and we still don’t know the complete effects on a human mind. Did you know that every other space-faring sentient species we’ve encountered tried the same thing and eventually gave it up because it caused insanity in a very short period of time? We just seem to be able to keep our apple-cart upright a little longer, that’s all. You just can’t pour terrabytes of input into a person’s brain, year after year, and not have it eventually drive you nuts. Either you quit while you’re ahead, suffer a terminal stroke one day in quantum space, or have a psychotic episode. A few of you have gone so far over the deep end that Hannibal himself would be proud of you.”

“You don’t think I’ve heard this story a hundred times before? I know that some of us lose it and become Lambs. I’ve known it since I was five years old and met a Driver for the first time. But I’m telling you, I AM FINE! So either retire me, or let me go back to work.”

The doctor turned back to his desk and removed a file. “Still one more test,” he said and handed something to Chris. It was the Driver’s version of a Rorschach test, printed on a card. The drawing was a strange complex combination of geometric angles and color patterns. The doctor himself saw nothing in the picture but a slightly disturbing jumble. Driver’s minds didn’t work in the same way. “A century ago the first Drivers were the criminally insane,” the doctor spoke as Chris studied the picture. “The Guild finally learned to find that potential in a young child and harness it for the incredible things you can do.”

“If you’re trying to remind me that there is a slim line between the insane and the genius, I’m quite aware of that,” Chris said as his mind began to work. “Insanity can not be the inevitable outcome of having your mind expanded by being interfaced with a computer.”

“History so far is proving you wrong. So what do you see?” Chris was beginning to see a design emerge. The picture was different and unique for every Driver’s test, removing any possibility of cheating, but it was always some normal image hidden there. Last year it had been a monkey, the year before it was a dog. “I’ve almost gotten it,” he said. His mind worked almost without his will to create a picture from the data hidden on the page. A moment later there it was. A donkey stood on the bank of a stream. As he looked even more detail became visible. There was a mountain in the distance, a forest to one side and a desert to the other. Chris suppressed a gasp of astonishment; there had never been anything more than simple line drawings before. This was a photo quality picture!

“What is it? What do you see?”

“It’s a donkey,” Chris told the doctor with a straight face. A pixy-like fairy materialized over the donkey’s head and danced in the air. “J-just a donkey...”

The doctor turned from Chris to stare at the numerous graphic displays of test data. After a moment he made a quick notation on the data screen and handed Chris back his INDG license. “You’re certified for your thirty-second year. I hope I won’t regret it.” Chris quickly snatched the piece of plastic from him before he could change his mind.

“You won’t doc, don’t worry.” The image was etched in his mind as he walked out into the hallway. The doctor’s office was on the outermost part of the station, in the highest gravity. He climbed toward the hub as quickly as he could; leaving in his wake more than a few people wondering what demons pursued the young man.

He reached the Driver Pub in nearly record time, out of breath and eyes wide with fear. He’d tried putting the image of the donkey out of his head, and it had become less perfect as the moments passed. It was the pixie, the tiny fairy hovering over the donkeys head that became more real, more lifelike every second. It was like a tiny imperfection on an otherwise perfect woman’s face, impossible to look away from, impossible to ignore. He needed something, anything to get the horrible vision from his mind. When he burst into the pub and found it deserted, he fell to his knees and began to sob.

“Jesus Chris, what the hell is wrong with you?” came a female voice from the door. Like most robot pubs, The Drivers Pub never really closed. The owner was a consortium led by a dozen corporations, one of which had been founded by a retired Driver. They sat back, paid the bills, filled automated robotic orders, and reaped the profits. It was Janice standing framed in the door. “I’ve been following you for five decks, trying to catch up. And when I do, you’re here bawling your eyes out!” Chris looked into her eyes and tried to stop crying. He couldn’t stop no matter how hard he tried. All he could do was hold out a hand to her.

Chris had known Janice for twelve years and she was only a year younger than he was. They’d met in his last year of Driver academy, then again two years later during his rookie year. They’d worked huge tandem-drive rigs and shared cubes in cramped stellar outposts. Never once had Chris tried to so much as kiss her.

She reached back and flipped the secure switch, locking the doors, and came to him, dropping to her knees and taking his trembling hands into hers. “Tell me what you need?” she asked with nothing but love and

acceptance in her eyes. He couldn't speak, not in words. He reached up and touched her face, his eyes pleading and the image getting sharper every second. She cocked her head, unsure what he needed. He moved his hand down to trace the curve of her breast through her jumpsuit. Janice didn't hesitate, she just nodded her head and unzipped her suit. In one quick sensuous movement she was naked.

Chris slid into her arms, his whole body quivering and tears running down his face. He didn't even have enough presence to take his own jumpsuit off. Instead, she did it for him. He didn't even know why he made the first advance. In fact he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to perform. But as she pulled the suit off his shoulders and slid it down past his waist, she took his penis into her mouth and he found himself quickly getting hard.

How long has it been since I've done this? He wondered silently as her mouth worked its magic. He realized at that moment that the image of the pixie was stable. He could look away from it in his mind's eye and that brought the tears to an abrupt end.

Before things had gone too far, Chris pulled her up and spun her over. The quarter gravity of the pub made some things possible that earthbound lovers could only imagine. It also made other things more challenging. One of them was purchase, finding something to push against. They were face to face again, Chris' face wet with tears as he finally found his voice. "Do you really want to do this?"

She smiled and kissed the tears from his cheek. Then she locked her legs behind his backside and pulled, *hard*. His saliva slick penis slid into her smoothly and all the way. Janice let out a long hiss of pleasure as their pubic bones came together. For the first time in what felt like a year, the image of the pixie was pushed from his mind by a flood of pure pleasure.

Chris grabbed the brace of a secured table with one hand and locked his legs under the edge of the bar and gave her a couple of experimental strokes. She grunted and helped with her legs with each one. "God, stop teasing and *fuck me!*" she said huskily. Chris knew an order when he heard one so he pinned her against the floor and began pounding.

It only took a few minutes. Their sweat soaked bodies undulated madly under the cheesy pseudo-neon light, both working toward the same thing as fast as they could. Suddenly Chris ground against her as hard as he could, spending himself with ferocious intensity. Janice added a little hip grinding at the very end, crying out with her own release, squeezing him deep inside her. After a few moments, they both released their desperate grips and lay there in the low gravity listening to each others heartbeats and the hum of atmospheric recycling pumps.

Some time later Chris flipped the lockout switch back to open and moved over to sit at the bar. Janice sat a proper two bar stools away after she emerged from her turn in the fresher. Luckily The Driver Pub ran a trade in people who often wanted a drink even before getting a shower so the fresher was a setup complete with shower and dryer. There was no evidence of what had happened, and except for a quick hug and kiss after the shower, neither of them said anything about it.

Chris had opened the door none too soon either because it cycled open to admit a pair of Drivers fresh from their rides even before the robot attendant delivered his first drink.

“Chris!” the older one said with a big smile. “I heard you’d docked yesterday but figured you’d be back out already.”

“Hey yourself, Adam. No, I had my yearly this morning so I’m taking another day off.” Janice spun to face him, almost spitting out the first sip of her drink. He could see the gears turning behind those hazel eyes.

“How’d it go? Your test that is?” Adam asked as he and his younger friend plopped onto bar stools next to him.

“Here’s to one more year!” Chris said and raised his drink. The robot delivered the newcomers drinks and they raised them with him. Janice took a little longer to hold her drink up.

“How old Driver?” asked the young man.

“You know we don’t ask that on a Driver’s birthday,” Adam reminded him.

“My birthday was yesterday,” Chris said with a tight smile. “I’m thirty-one years old.” The young Driver whistled long and deep.

“So you’re the one,” he said with respect. “With Grick gone Lamb, you’re the oldest Driver still in his seat.”

Chris nodded, turning to look at Janice. He still saw some of the affection he’d seen in those eyes less than an hour ago. Added to it now was more than a smattering of horror. Chris, like most Drivers, had never shown even a small inkling of Psi, but swore he could read her thoughts; *“Have you gone Lamb?!”* He didn’t answer her unspoken question. Instead he ordered another drink. The silence was long and deafening in the Pub.

A while later Chris left The Driver Pub, headed for the hub. There, just outside the docking ring, he was effectively in zero gravity. Gone were the

rubber padded floors and up/down oriented hall. The corridors were now round and covered with handholds every few meters on all sides. He pulled himself along with practiced ease until he reached the INDG office. The nestled alcove full of computers made him heave a sigh of relief. Life outside his cocoon has becoming hard to deal with. He quickly grabbed a privileged access cord and plugged it into his data interface plug just above his right ear. A moment later he'd logged into the INDG data network.

The first thing he noticed was the renewal script signed by the INDG doctor he'd seen yesterday. The authentication encryption was validated. He had his year. At the edge of his consciousness the pixie hovered. He slammed it out of his mind with brutal intensity and this time he swore he heard musical laughter. He grimaced and logged onto the Job Network to find a new ride.

There wasn't a great deal of work available right then, but that was seldom a problem for Chris. He usually didn't look for work, it looked for him. He'd logged more hours in Q space than any other Driver and that made him a very valuable commodity indeed. He saw the Cricket was preparing to depart Archeron station in two days but passed right by it. He'd had more than enough of that ship's master. After a few minutes looking he didn't find anything he liked so he called up his resume-script and sent it out to the network. As usual, it didn't take long for the offers to come rolling in.

Most of the offers were the kind he deleted before even reading them. Indefinite terms of service, ridiculously low pay, ludicrously high pay, dangerous area of operation, any one of these was enough reason to pass it up. After what happened with the test, he suppressed a shudder, realizing this might be his last ride.

With a nod he made up his mind. He narrowed the acceptable offer parameters to a year or more. In a blink, there were no offers at all. *Damn*, he silently cursed. That's the problem with Archeron, too much of a backwater world. He knew what he wanted so he left the inquiry as it was and logged out of the system. He'd check back again later. Chris decided if he was going to treat this as his last hitch, he had a few things he'd need to do.

It was still only early afternoon when he returned to The Driver Pub. He'd hoped to find Janice there. Chris felt like he needed to speak to her. The pub was as empty as he'd found it this morning, a testimony to the fact that there had been few opportunities for a ride. Most of the drivers that had celebrated another year of his career were off to the stars again. In fear of the images returning again, he quickly went to the bar and ordered a drink.

It couldn't arrive quickly enough; when it did he made short work of it, then ordered another.

"You can't hide inside alcohol," a voice shocked him from the rear of the pub. Chris spun around in surprise, wondering who was behind the voice. Each booth had a small light that activated whenever anyone sat down, but a privacy switch could deactivate the light. Whoever sat there hadn't wanted Chris to know he was there. Curious, he picked up the fresh drink when it was delivered and walked toward the voice.

"How would you know, stranger?" Chris asked as he craned his neck to get a better look. "You know this is a private pub, right?"

"Oh, I know that. I've earned the right to sit here and drown a few." Chris reached the booth and flipped off the privacy light. Not a very polite thing to do in most cases, but his curiosity and his status in the Driver community added up to enough for him to get away with it. The light revealed quite a surprise. There sat Eric Grick himself, a slight smile on his face and a pint of liquor in front of him. Chris took half a step back in surprise.

"Holy shit...Eric!? We heard you went Lamb out toward Reticula!" Eric just smiled some more, the barest corner of his mouth turning upward.

"Sometimes a legend begins with a true story." Chris shook his head once to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. He'd been filled with tales of Drivers going Lamb and the devastation they caused since the age of twelve. He'd seen vids of the damage they'd caused, interviews of those that survived their murderous rampages, but never had he seen one. Alive, and not killing anyone at this moment. Chris sat down.

"What happened, Eric?" The older Driver told his tale. Less than a year ago he'd been where Eric was now. He'd celebrated his thirty-first birthday and went out the next day to have his required INDG physical examination. Eric tensed unconsciously at the mention of the procedure he'd gone through that very morning. Eric just quickly skipped through the procedure, moving on to his next ride a few days later. "So there I was, on top of it all, in another high paying ride and the longest Driver there is. We went through transition, and then it hit me. The damned sheet of numbers they give you that force our fucked up brains to create a picture? All of a sudden it starts coming back to me. Only now the picture starts to change, kind of fill in the details, you know what I mean?"

"Everything changed. And I don't mean how I looked at things, I mean the way things looked! Do you know that the way we interpret Quantum Space is all wrong?! Drivers can maneuver ships through transitions, and

between points in Quantum Space, but we really don't know what we're doing, or how we're doing it! It's like the damned sheet of numbers. We stare at it for a while and our brain finds a pattern and that assembles into a picture. You ever wonder who comes up with the code?!"

"Eric, you're rambling."

"Am I? I wasn't aware that I was. Here, let me show you something." He got up and headed for the door. Chris guzzled the last two swallows of his drink and rushed to follow.

"How did you get here, Eric?" Chris asked when he caught up to the other man right before the door. "Know one would give you a ride now, I'm sure."

"No, you're right. I'm on the black list. No, I just booked commercial passage on a liner. Took three times as long to get here as I would have liked, but I still managed to catch you."

"You came here to find me?" There was just the hint of worry in Chris' voice.

"Yep." They stopped just outside the pub's entrance and watched the mass of people going by. The pub was in the third ring at 10% gravity so everyone bounced along looking like an ancient vid of astronauts exploring the moon. "I want to show you something I'm certain you'll be interested in." He stared at the crowd for a few moments, not watching everyone but picking out individuals to watch as they went by. The way he looked at each one he singled out made the hairs on the back of Chris' neck stand on end. It wasn't the evil eye, per se. It was like he was seeing "inside" that person. "You see that man there? The one in the green and white ship-suit?"

"The one that looks about to break out laughing for no reason?"

"That's the one. He's a Quantum Space mathematician. He's working on a line of research that is quite promising. In about three weeks he's going to have a breakthrough. A Quantum Leap, as it were, that will take us to regions of Quantum Space barely imagined." Chris looked at the man. He didn't seem any different than any of the other fifty odd people bouncing and jostling their way down the busy corridor.

"Do you know him?"

"No, I've never laid eyes on this guy before. Here, watch this." Quicker than Chris could realize what was happening, Eric produced a compact Beam Caster pistol and fired a single shot. The anonymous man's head exploded

in a bright red halo as the particle beam boiled his brains in a millisecond. The crack and hiss of the Beam Caster seemed to follow behind the dull thump of the man's head bursting like a melon. The screaming began a moment later.

Everything shifted to slow motion. Chris turned and looked at Eric, his eyes wide in shock and heart racing a million miles an hour. Eric didn't look happy, or sad. He didn't look mad, or even upset. His head was cocked to one side ever so slightly and he looked all too fascinated as the man's body finished its forward movement with a slow flip into the floor. What remained of the man's brains splattered on the padded wall, then continued to bounce along leaving a bloody trail.

"Oh my God!" Chris gasped at the spectacle. The corridor was full of people trying to get away from the carnage now. People tried desperately to do things in zero gravity that were simply not allowed by the laws of physics.

"There, you see what I mean?" Eric asked as if he were demonstrating how you could make an egg stand on its end to a young child. "See how things change so easily? That woman over there, the one with those cute nipple cups, is about to make a deal that will allow a world in the Dreamer Cluster to be colonized. Two billion people will be living there in only a couple centuries!"

The Beam Caster came up and spoke with a crack. The woman was hit in the back of one thigh, exploding several pounds of once perfectly formed muscle and bone and spinning the woman around. The shock on her face was quite pronounced as she saw most of her leg bounce away. Part of the devastation of the Beam Caster was the huge trauma it caused by exploding flesh and not cauterizing the wound. Blood loss from a dense tissue wound is horrendous.

Eric took aim at her falling body and prepared to fire again. Then, suddenly he stopped. He looked at the woman who just began screaming as she bounced to the floor and grasped the ravaged stump of her once attractive leg. He looked at her in the way that made Chris' hair stand up again. *What am I sensing when he does that?* Chris wondered.

"No, I like this better. You see what I've done? See how much more beautiful things have become by taking that woman's leg off?" Chris tried to tell him he was gone, to tell him he'd gone over the edge and become a Lamb. But for some reason, he couldn't make the words form. Somehow, shooting that woman had made "things" feel different.

Eric looked at him in that same strange way, and smiled. “You *are* getting it, aren’t you?” Chris tried to say something but couldn’t. He was too fascinated seeing the screaming crowd, how they were reacting to this lethal threat of a Lamb in their midst, and something else. Something Eric had no words for. His friend the Lamb pointed to another woman who just stood in the middle of the corridor, paralyzed with fear as she looked right at Eric raising the gun toward her.

“I’m surprised I missed this one. She’s carrying a child that has more potential than any I have ever seen!” Chris could almost see something. Patterns emerging from her abdomen separate from one around the woman. “Now watch closely,” Eric said and pulled the trigger. Her abdomen exploded in a mix of blood, organs and connective tissue. The collection of cells that was a two-month-old fetus was too small to be noticed by the human eye.

Chris saw these barely visible patterns explode in dazzling distinction. For just a moment he didn’t see just patterns, he saw people and more people, and how those people affected other people, and how they affected still others. It was like an immense web of life that was all interconnected. When the fetus was destroyed, the web wasn’t torn apart; it was reformed in an even more intricate pattern.

The woman was nearly cut in half by the blast, her body folding over and falling toward the floor in the delicate slow motion of zero gravity. The changes were a trillion fold and Chris grabbed his head as vertigo almost overwhelmed him.

Eric looked down from his hunt for change and shook his head. “Not quite ready, are you?” Chris couldn’t answer, his head was too overloaded with possibilities. “Take another ride, Chris. The truth will find you quickly.” And with that, Eric just disappeared. Chris looked at the spot Eric Grick had occupied only a moment before and blinked, trying to understand what had just happened. His mind tried to grasp the implications of everything it had just seen for a long moment then finally gave up. Chris was rather grateful when the floor smacked into the side of his face and he lost consciousness.

When Chris opened his eyes again, he was back in the INDG doctor’s office once again. For a moment his tortured mind tried to remember why he was there. Hadn’t he taken his yearly already? Then he noticed as he looked around that he could see not only the doctor but also a pair or INDG security personnel. Things came back quickly, but he didn’t tell them. “What am I doing here? What happened?”

“We were hoping you could shed some light on that,” the doctor said.

One of the IDNG security guards stepped forward, a strange mixture of fear and anger on his face. “Two hours ago you walked out of The Driver Pub with what ten witnesses identified as Eric Grick. After a moment he began shooting people at random and you just stood there and watched.”

“What would you have suggested I do, jump a Lamb with a Beam Caster?!”

The security man was taken back a little by the strength of Chris’ reply, but only a little. “Security cameras didn’t get very good vid, but there appeared to be several times when the two of you conversed. He was quite friendly with you Driver, so you might have had a chance to disable him or take his weapon.”

“Maybe for a combat-machine like you, but I drive starships. I don’t go around jumping armed psychotics, even if I did have the chance.”

“So you acknowledge you *did* have a chance to subdue Grick?” the other man said.

“No, I’m not acknowledging shit, I mean...oh fuck! Yes, that was Eric Grick, he just appeared out of nowhere in The Drivers Pub, started spouting nonsense and then said he had something to show me.”

“What did he have to show you?” the doctor asked.

“The inside of some poor spacers brains.”

“Listen up Driver,” the first security man said, stepping close. “We want to know everything Eric Grick said, everything he did, and wherever he disappeared to after he finished chatting with you and murdering innocent people!”

“I’ll tell you everything except where he went after the killings.”

“And why won’t you tell us where he went?”

“Because he just disappeared into thin air, that’s why.” They didn’t have anything to say to that.

The two IDNG security men grilled him for several hours while the doctor added an occasional question of his own. Just like most robotic pubs, The Driver Pub had a surveillance system, inside and out. Chris’ pulse had quickened at first hearing that fact. Not because he was afraid of them recording his conversation with Eric, he hadn’t said anything to implicate himself. No, he was more concerned that the asshole security guys had

spent a couple hours of light entertainment watching Chris fuck Janice over and over again. Apparently, the security system had shut down when Janice had flipped the inside lock, and came back on again when he unlocked the doors later. That didn't explain why they didn't know what happened outside when the shooting started. He was curious enough that he asked them.

“We believe Eric Grick somehow disabled the exterior monitors. As soon as you two stepped from the door, we lost all the external feeds directed at the area where you two stood.” Chris thought that explained why there were so many questions about their dialogue. He was glad he hadn't mentioned that he'd started to see the webs of effect between the victims and the rest of the world.

Eventually the questions ended, the doctor said he was okay and he was allowed to return to his rented cube. The security guys suggested that he not leave Archeron station and to call immediately if Eric Grick should suddenly appear again.

When he got back to his cube he found two things, one a surprise, the other not. On the rented cube's computer was a note from the INDG hiring board that a contract meeting his specifications had been offered to him. That wasn't a surprise really. The gut wrenchingly familiar Beam Caster hold-out pistol on his bed was the surprise.

Chris had seen more than his share of murder mystery vids, so he didn't attempt to pick up the weapon. The small piece of paper he could see under the weapon was accessible though, so he pulled it out while being mindful not to leave fingerprints on the gun.

“Old friend;” it began, “I found this little tool extremely useful in my metamorphosis. I hope you find it handy as well. Farewell. PS: Take the job; it's what you want.”

He sat on the edge of the bunk and checked the offer on the computer. A Long Trader named Cavalier was leaving Archeron within 24 hrs to make a trading circuit around the outer rim colonies. The duration of the Drivers contract was to be a minimum of one year with extensions available afterwards. Pay was listed at scale, but the ship's master saw his name and sent an offer of 150% normal grade with 10% close transition bonus. It was a whole year; the perfect last contract to finish his career. Or perhaps begin a new one?

He punched a few buttons and sent a message back to the ship's master. He'd take the contract if they could leave within two hours, no questions asked. It was quite an unusual demand from a driver. Maybe no driver had

ever made such a demand before. The offer was accepted in less than a minute. Chris had to whistle. He hadn't realized he was that good.

It took less than a minute to refill his pack; he never bothered to move into a cube for long. A few data chips, some clothing, the occasional memento from more than a decade of wandering the galaxy. It all fit handily into a small shoulder bag. He moved to the door and stopped to look back at the pistol sitting on his bed. "What am I supposed to do with that?" he wondered aloud, then turned toward the door.

Chris began the climb toward the hub. Cavalier was docked not far from where Cricket had called only two days ago. She had finished loading heavy trade goods like tractors, generators and other harvest equipment. Chris decided it was probably no major feat to request the captain pull his ship from port a day ahead of schedule since she was already loaded. Still, he made the best time he could climbing toward the zero gravity hub where Cavalier was docked.

He reached level four and stopped. Just outside the ladder-way he could see The Driver Pub, its sign glowing invitingly. He checked his chronometer and decided he had enough time to say goodbye to whoever was there. Chris grimaced as he jumped around the still visible red smears on the corridor's walls and glided through the pub's door. It must have been fate that in the early evening the only Driver inside was Janice.

She looked up and their eyes locked. Something unspoken passed between them, and he was the first to look away. "I've taken a year long assignment," he told her and took the stool next to the beautiful woman. "We set sail in about an hour."

"I'm surprised IDNG security is letting you leave now. I heard you ran into Eric here this afternoon." He just nodded his head and accepted the drink he'd ordered from the robot. It was perfect, as usual. "So he is a Lamb, like we heard?" Again he just nodded. They just sipped their drinks and watched the chronometer click away for a time before anyone spoke again.

"I wanted to say that you did something wonderful for me earlier today," he told her. "You saved me from myself, offered me a lifeline at just the right moment."

"I did what I thought you needed. I did what I had to do."

"There was so much more to it. It's something I can hold on to as an anchor, a light showing the way home through what's about to happen."

“What’s about to happen, Chris?” He looked up from his drink for the first time into her deep brown eyes and felt a tear roll down his cheek.

“It’s the next logical step, Janice, another leap toward the truth, maybe the ultimate truth. I’ve seen a glimmer of how all things work, and I fear I cannot live without seeing the rest of it.”

“The rest of what?”

“Everything,” he said, a slight shudder in his voice. As he watched he could see the web surrounding her and how it touched millions upon millions of other lives. It was a tapestry of lives that formed his reality, maybe all reality? He couldn’t understand all of what he was seeing, but he was beginning to. “I feel like I touched the face of God.”

“Chris?” he voice was trembling now too. “Are you a L-Lamb now too?!”

Eric turned and smiled at her. By her reaction he could tell it was that same knowing smile Eric had chilled him with only hours before. “I love you, Chris,” she said, gently touching his cheek where a tear had rolled only moments before. Chris moved against the caress, seeing how her web was changing by the moment. He was slowly becoming able to see where her connections led. Faces and further connections were becoming visible.

She got up from her stool. “Good bye, Chris,” she said and turned to walk toward the door.

“Good bye,” he said to her back. Two of the connections had faces that were familiar, two IDNG security officers that had interrogated him earlier. Every step she took made the connection stronger. Chris heaved a great sigh. “Good bye, Janice.”

The Beam Caster pistol had a surprisingly light kick when he pulled the trigger. He was sure to place the shot square in the back of her head, so she never felt a thing. Her skull exploded just like the ones Eric had shot, so beautiful to watch, so intricate in the web of life! His grief for his friend and lover was overwhelmed by the sheer artistry of what his shot had caused.

Before the echo from the shot had even faded, he shouldered his bag and headed for the door. He had to step carefully because Janice’s body was spasming wildly and spraying bright red blood, making his footing treacherous. The final climb to the hub only took a few minutes.

“You must be Driver Chris,” a gray haired woman of maybe seventy years said with a warm smile. She was just what you found in most ships

masters; intelligent, ambitious, creative, and female. Female ships masters were, by and large, less likely to get in pissing matches with other ships masters. Starships were horrendously expensive things to be playing penis contests with.

Chris took her proffered hand and enjoyed watching the way the web convulsed. The woman turned her back and propelled herself toward the gangway into the Cavalier. He stuck his hand into the bag and felt the handle of the Beam Caster and the web jerked like an animal being stabbed with an electric cattle prod. *I wonder what would happen if I killed her?* With regret, he removed his hand from the bag and followed her.

Deep inside the Cavalier he reclined in a standard cocoon. The micro robots in the chair sensed the presence of a wired Driver and began hooking him in. Chris let a contented sigh escape his lips as connection after connection locked into place. Like a bag being lifted from over his head, the sensors and other systems of the ship became his to control. The Long Trader was designed to operate on the periphery of civilized space. They were never really intended to fight, but they could if cornered.

The ship's master had already begun maneuvering the Cavalier away from Archeron station so Chris had a wonderful view of the huge rotating double wheel that he called home every so often. There were thousands of people on Archeron, their webs creating an intricate pattern that was so beautiful it was hard to look at. He marveled that he could see the patterns at all though sensors!

A hundred kilometers out, the masters voice came into his brain. "Driver Chris, the ship is all yours." Chris engaged the quantum generators and felt Q-space begin to surge around him. As it did, his awareness of the webs of reality exploded into three dimensional clarity.

"Oh my dear God!" he gasped in orgasmic ecstasy. "I see now!"

"Did you say something Driver Chris?"

His whole body shook uncontrollably. "Y-yes," he managed to gasp. "It's all so beautiful!"

"I don't understand, what are you talking about?" Chris wasn't listening anymore, he was seeing things differently. The webs connections for all those on the Cavalier came into full focus for him, quickly followed by his own connections to the ship and how they strengthened by the second.

A few moments before the ship's master had given a computer command that virtually turned the ship over to Chris, making it a seventy thousand

ton extension of his mind. With a couple quick mental commands he severed the connections between the computer and the masters bridge. Even before she realized what had happened, Chris cycled open every airlock, inside and outer door, on the ship. Alarms screamed for his attention. He overrode them and also overrode the internal blast door system. Two minutes of screaming decompression and Cavalier's entire human complement was either sucked into the vacuum of space or a bloated freezing corpse locked onto a handhold. His cocoon was the only space in the ship still pressurized.

"That's more like it," he said with a sigh and disengaged the Quantum generators. Cavalier ceased its transition into Q-space. Chris brought her around to bear on Archeron station. She might not have been heavily armed, but at less than a hundred kilometers, her four quantum cannons were devastating to the unshielded station.

Chris had worked in and around space vessels his entire life. He knew where the station was the most vulnerable. Each quantum cannon fired concentrated instability packets at the base of a hub on the great rotating wheel. Automated defenses on the station came to life an instant after the impact, making follow-up shots impossible. He didn't need to fire again. The spokes were ravaged at their weakest point. The stations own spin did the rest, tearing it away from the hub.

Like a huge gossamer web, the rotating station tore itself to shreds. Huge pieces of the wheel spiraled away spewing atmosphere and wildly gesturing bodies. Tens of thousands had just died, and the changes in the web were a sight to behold as it snapped, exploded and reformed in ever more complicated patterns. Death on this scale was more beautiful by an order of magnitude. For a moment he wondered how he could stand it. Then, as the station entered the final stages of its death, he knew he could stand more. He knew he wanted to see just how much he could effect changes to the web! Inside his mind, a tiny pixie sang him a lullaby.

"It's really something, isn't it?" Eric asked.

"Just as unbelievable as you said. What do we do now?"

The cocoon was crowded with the two of them, but it was designed for two drivers in certain situations. "We meet up with our brothers and sisters, and help the web where it's most needed."

"How many of us are there?"

"More than you might think. And aliens have been coming over long before we ever discovered Q-space!"

Chris began activating the Quantum generators once again. "Aren't you going to plug in with me?"

"After a few more transitions, you'll find out you don't need the connection any more." Chris nodded his head in understanding. "I think before long you won't even need the generators, just like me." The Cavalier began its transition. "There are a lot of places the web needs help."

"I think you're right," Chris agreed. The ship slipped through the transition into Q-space, wrenching at Chris' mind and continuing its evolution toward a new type of consciousness. *I'm wired into the galactic web*, he gasped. "Maybe we should start by visiting Earth..." Both men stared into the chaos of Q-space with the same strange disconnected gaze. "There certainly is a lot of work to do!"

