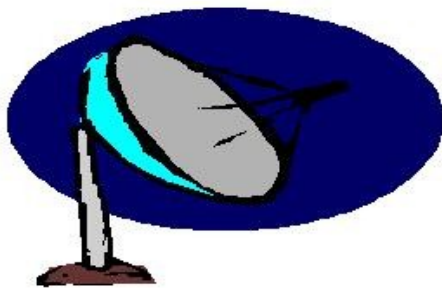
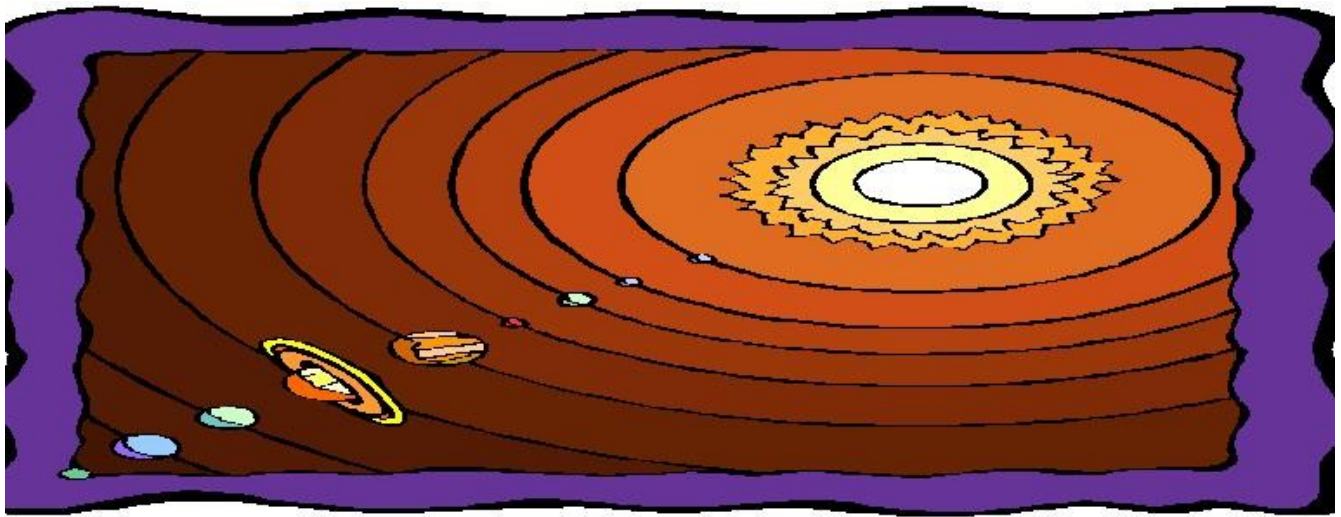


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The Maiden Voyage of The Starship “Metallic Feathers”

By Michael J Renner

Chapter 1

It was a beautiful ship, the top of the line, the good folks at Gornak Universal Lines really outdid themselves with this one.

They called the ship "Metallic Feathers", as they felt it would glide through the stars as smooth as birds in the air. They even added the effect of feathered ridges along the bow of the ship and gave it an eagle's face to hammer home the idea. Yes it looked a beauty.

But the real beauty was not so much in the outside design, wonderful as that was, but in the actual workings of the engines. True most people would never see the engines or care to learn how they worked, but the innovative design of the Coadec Propulsion System that allowed the ship to travel faster than Superlight speed that was in common use, and not only use very little energy, but it actually created and stored energy that could be sold at the different ports of call to subsidize the cost of running the ship. It also gave out no harmful emissions that could ruin the environment of space.

The CPS worked on the principle of taking the natural radiation that occurs out in space, and there is an endless supply of this as it is being created by the numerous suns throughout the universe, and running it through the Dexter Hyrdocarbonic Chamber and letting it react with the initial load of soft crystallized carbon and hydrogen gas. The radiation would act as a catalyst to create hydrocarbons (sugars) that the ship would turn into energy to propel itself through the stars at great speeds. This of course would turn back into more carbon and hydrogen and the system would churn off more. Being a closed system, there was no loss, and in fact it created ore fuel than it could use. So the excess would be drained off and stored in fuel cells that could be used in power plants or spaceships using older technologies.

This was of course theoretical. It was tested on small craft, but never on anything this size. So the success of the maiden voyage of the "Metallic Feathers" would make or break the technology, and of course Gornak Universal.

All the decks were laid out in wondrous luxury. There were fifteen decks with 40 cabins on each deck giving it a passenger capacity was up to 2400 passengers (limit 4 beings to a cabin). All the rooms were suites and boasted the finest furniture and amenities around. One never really had to leave one's cabin if they wished. Each room being furnished with video communication centers, and of course the latest in Virtual Hologramatic Chambers that allowed the occupants to enjoy whatever their hearts desire. Room service was available at all hours, at no extra fee, so there was no problem as far as enjoying food from any of the fine fifteen dining areas, each boasting cuisine from different regions of the confederation.

All available places were booked up within days of the announcement. People looking to take a voyage through the stars, others looking to emigrate to distant planets, or visiting relatives who have already emigrated. There were still others who just lie being first in line for anything that is popular and their lives depended upon being looked upon as being an “A-Lister”.

Buzz was rampant and of course they would all be there to hear the speeches, then be transferred on

board all at once. This was due to the new Paniterri Transport System (PTS). This system worked upon the simple technique of placing a chip within the tickets and then sorting out all the passengers directly into their cabins. It also detected chips in the badges of the crew so that they would be at their ready as well. This allowed for quicker embarkation and boarding without all the tedium and inconvenience of making passengers stand in line. The PTS was another innovation that the “Metallic feathers” and Gornak Universal boasted. Of course it is based upon the current transportation System, but takes it to the next level, or at least that is what the Marketing Department would have us believe. But in fact it has been in use by the military arm of the confederation for years, but just was declassified for civilian use in the last year.

The crew consisted of 400, almost all humanoid androids, with a few service robots to take care of the maintenance and cleaning. A human was assigned as supervisor of each section, just so there was an “organic touch” to each department. Plus someone has to make decisions when the 'droids and 'bots needed to be down for maintenance or acted strangely. The Captain and bridge crew were human, though there were androids there as well to handle the more delicate navigation as they were tied into the main computer system. The human were all sent to special training so they get used to working with these automatons. This of course helped build trust amongst the crew and things would run as smooth as ice on a still pond.

The fact that the "Metallic Feathers" was originating from Earth, didn't matter as it could easily reach even the farthest colony planet in a matter of a month at the latest, that is if the CPS works as planned.

What systems could be, have been tested and retested, including the PTS (don't want to leave anyone behind, especially the richer passengers), to make sure all was ready. Now came the tense and frustrating wait for the big day of the launch.

Chapter 2

Before the ship would be ready to launch there was one last task to do. Install the robots and androids and make sure they were all online and ready for action the next day.

First on board were the maintenance bots. These were programmed to do the menial fix-it type of jobs, electrical, patching, and other minor repairs as needed. They tended to be faceless and simple looking. However the programming and circuitry was advanced. In fact they were even programmed to fix themselves, and other robots and androids on board ship.

Next came the engineering crew. They were all trained and programmed in the running of the massive engines and turbines that ran the ship. They also handled the intake of radiation and the output of the clean fuel for resale. They again were simple looking and nothing special, except again for the complicated and intricate programming.

The cleaning and maid staff came next. These had humanoid features as they would be the some of most visible and it would calm the passengers who might be a bit afraid of mechanical beings, and yes there were still those who couldn't get over the “lifeless” stares of the “eyes” of androids. Since these would be in and out of the passenger areas, they were equipped with more lifelike eyes that would give off a faint glow that simulates the glint in human eyes.

The wait and kitchen staff were next. These were built in the same manner as the maid and cleaning staff. They were programmed to understand every known language and how to cook the cuisine of

every planet in the confederation (plus a few select exotic dishes from outside the region). The kitchens were equipped with all types and configurations of ovens, grills, fryers and other food making and prep machines. The chefs and sous chefs all the way down to the line cooks were highly trained and programmed to just love cooking. And cook they did, and as programmed could make it like the best of the human chefs (well technically at least, but creativity was programmed in and was limited to a few thousand patterns, upgrade possibilities will be available later, or so says Marketing).

The purser staff was next. These of course were more complicated and needed to be as they were the ones who dealt with the passengers the most of the time in dealing with them as far as directing them to the various dining areas, activities and other ship amenities. They were dressed in fancy uniforms. Navy blue blazers with gold buttons and a red ascot, supplemented by white trousers for the “male” androids, pleated skirts for the “female” androids. They were copied from an old history visiscope program of the history of sailing ships of the 20th century. Again these were designed to give the passengers the sense of class and comfort.

The last were the bridge crew. The two navigators, communications liaison and helmsman were the first to be installed. They were hooked into the computer system and the hook ups were given one last test. All worked. Finally the Captain's android First Mate (there was a human one as well), whose job was to cover when the humans went off duty, was put into place and turned on. It smiled at the installers and walked around the bridge and nodded as if it was a human captain inspecting his/her ship for the first time. It patted the fellow androids and asked if all was working. They replied affirmative and the installers just laughed at the pantomime and left for the day. Their job was done, the ship was ready, and all that was waiting was the launch ceremony scheduled for 9 o'clock the next morning.

Yes thought the android captain, all is ready.

Chapter 3

The big day arrived! Everyone was all agog over the massive ceremony planned for the launching. The whole dock area was covered with streamers and banners wishing a “Bon Voyage” and “Great Trekking” to the new ship and crew.

Along the wharf a podium and stage was set up for the senior crew, executives of Gornak Universal and of course major local politicians. In front of that was 2400 chairs with room for luggage as these were for the lucky ones that were going to part of this historic event by being passengers. Plus that they all got a 50% discount on their fares. Hey if you are going to take a cruise, why not take advantage of low fares? Behind these there was a great grandstand that held over 15,000 well wishers, towns people, lower level employees of Gornak Universal and of course the family and friends of the passengers.

It was a carnival atmosphere, with parties going on all the previous night and full on to morning with an amusement park for those who couldn't get into the grandstand (or children who wouldn't sit still through the boring ceremony).

Everyone seemed to want in on the act and be seen. It was the event of the year and the people went all out on the event.

At 9ish in the morning, the crowd gathered and the podium was filled with all the dignitaries and crew. The first speaker was Harvey Gornak, President and CEO of Gornak Universal. He was a heavy set man in his 50's with a palish complexion. His thinning hair was greased down and he wore the navy

sports coat and white trousers and red ascot in honor of the “naval tradition” . This was his family's business and he was looking for the “Metallic Feathers” to put them back on top and save the company from a takeover or worse, ruin.

Harvey spoke for a scant 20 minutes where he talked about how proud he was of all the workers who helped bring this wonderful ship online in record time with minimal delays. He talked about the future where the other shipping lines, transport companies, and even, yes even the military will be interested in licensing the technology and plans and put the company back where it belongs.

Next up was Georgiana Hucklesby, the provincial governor. Georgiana was 60 is small in build, but a shrewd politician. She also had a huge stake in the success of the “Metallic feathers” as she owned 20% of the stock in Gornak Universal.

Georgiana talked about 30 minutes, praising Harvey and the workers, talked about prosperity for the province as the orders were surely to be pouring in after the launch is successfully completed, and blah blah political banter for the rest of the time (elections were coming later in the year and she wanted to be reelected).

Jerry Kawasaki, Gornak's Marketing Director, was next. Jerry's talk was the most exciting and powerful yet. Of course he was paid to be the “head cheerleader” as are all Marketing Directors, but he took it to the next level. His powerful voice went booming over the crowd as he bounded from side to side of the stage, and it seemed he didn't even need the microphones. The crowd hung on his every word as the electricity of his enthusiasm cut through the air like a knife through warm cream cheese on a soggy bagel. Yes he enjoyed his job and he was one of those that could be enthusiastic about anything if the money was right. The crowd loved him and after a 45 minute speech he gave up the stage to the VP of Engineering.

Grant Mattimore was the VP of engineering, and as enthusiastic and crowd pleasing Jerry Kawasaki was, Grant was boring. In fact throughout his talk about this system and that most of the crowd took the cue as this was the perfect time to go to the restrooms, or get something to eat or drink or just catch up on some sleep. Yes Grant, as with most geeks, though knowledgeable about his field had no clue how to talk to a crowd. He plodded on with his charts, graphs and diagrams for about 30 minutes, until he mercifully gave up the stage to a rousing sarcastic applause. But he didn't notice the difference, he was just glad he survived.

The last speaker was Merriam Webster, the Activities Director for the “Metallic Feathers”. In her 30's she was peppy and as enthusiastic as Jerry was. It was smart to follow up the engineer's speech with hers. Her enthusiasm about the ship's amenities was catching. She went into details about the various and diverse dining experiences, the wonderful shopping and salon services, as well as the variety of sport and recreational opportunities that awaited those who were lucky enough to be on the voyage. There was golf, rock climbing, volleyball, swimming as well as hiking trails through a bountiful arboretum. Also there were parks and plenty of deck chairs strategically placed around for just sitting back and relaxing. Oh yes there were visiscope movies as well as private screens in each room. And she ended by reminding all that there were private “Virtual Hologramatic Chambers” in each suite so that the passengers could live out their own private fantasies and adventures. This is very useful for those passengers who are going to the furthest end of the confederation territory.

After she was done talking, a band struck up a merry tune and everyone was told that the ship would sail in two hours, so it is best to say your goodbyes now and all passengers should be in place and be

ready for boarding transport in about 1 hour and 45 minutes, and oh yea don't forget your tickets!

With that the crowd moved about and people were doing their goodbyes and crying. The carnival atmosphere still prevailed as expectations of the wonderful flight and future were assured. All that was needed was for everything to go right.

Chapter 4

It was time and the champagne flowed all around,. The passengers were returning to their seats so that they would be in range of the PTS beam. Everywhere there was a buzz of excitement as the massive turbines started up and the low hum could be heard all around. The politicians and company executives were all smiles as they gave the order to the android First Mate to start the embarkation procedure. The crowd of people who came to witness the event roared with excitement as cheers went all around.

The turbines hummed, the slight high pitch whine that is associated with the transport systems started building up and all of a sudden a bright green light and smoke engulfed the docking area, then the rush of the turbines were heard, then nothing.

The Metallic Feathers was off on her maiden voyage.

When the smoke cleared, everyone stood in silent awe and shock. The ship was gone, away on her trip, but the crew and passengers were still there! Everyone was too stunned to say anything as they just stood there looking at the empty bay.

Nothing, Gone!

The company executives all started to cry.

Chapter 5

The android First Mate looked around the bridge and nodded. It had worked, it was able to hide its true programming from the humans. It and its bridge crew were successful in the first stage of their mission, and now the journey to Cephalus 4 was underway. Cephalus 4 was in the out regions and out of the confederation. Now all the latest technologies of the confederation was here for the taking.

<TO BE CONTINUED ! >

Don't Open the Mail !

By Michael J Renner

Chapter 1

In the movie business it is extremely hard to get the attention of a movie producer. Josh Saltzman, Chairman of Robust Pictures, was no exception. If someone was trying to get Josh's interest they sure found the right way, but definitely for wrong reasons.

It was the bright pink paper that really stood out. Sure other people have tried that, sending resumes and curriculum vitae on bright paper, but this was different. It was the cut out letters, like a bad B-Movie's ransom note, that stuck out and made him take notice. Funny it was people like Josh that made these bad B-Movies, (although no one called them that anymore as everything had to be marketed as the next "blockbuster thriller", and the public went along with the scam) and he thought they were a joke at first.

Then they kept coming one a week, same bleak warning "The Time To Repent is Nigh!". Nothing specific mind you, just some faint hints and innuendos.

What made him nervous was the fact that it brought up bad memories about an incident he thought was forgotten and done with from 20 years earlier. After all it was so many years ago, and there were no witnesses, or were there?

Was it blackmail? Extortion? Well all he knew was something had to be done to find out who this person was and why they were threatening him, and get them to stop, now.

But what can he do? He can't go tot the police and tell them of that awful night. They probably wouldn't understand. It was an accident, but since it was never reported they might not look so favorably on him. In the movies and in books people would go find a private detective. "But how does one go about doing that?", he thought. Look in the phone book? Under what? Maybe he could ask around discreetly. Sure why not, in his profession people are always getting threatened or sued. One of his friends or colleagues surely knows who to call.

Josh called around and finally one of his friends recalled hearing about a detective named Mitch Robinson that seemed to have helped out many others in the industry.

Chapter 2

Mitch Robinson stared around the office as he waited for Josh to finish his meeting. The appointment was for 2:15, and Mitch arrived early as was his custom, sort of to get a feel for the potential client. The secretary was nice enough showing him in and offering coffee, then informing him that Josh was in the weekly production meeting. She thought Josh should be out soon, but sometimes these ran longer. Mitch said that it would be fine and he'd love some coffee, no sugar, lots of cream, thank you very much, and sat and waited.

He looked over the walls of the nicely decorated office. There were framed posters of the movies that were produced by Saltzman and Robust Pictures. Some Mitch recognized as being pretty bad, others as just bad, and a few downright awful. But for some reason the public ate this stuff up.

The general theme was basically the same for all the movies, A group of friends get lost in a forest/jungle/house/warehouse etc., and some maniac or spirit comes in and hacks all but the good looking guy and girl to pieces and then gets killed by the heroic couple. If the spirit or monster was popular enough, somehow they would inexplicably come back to life in a sequel or two or fifteen.

Not Mitch's cup of tea, which he preferred to coffee by the way, but if people are willing to plop down good money for them, and the DVD's and other merchandise, well there is no accounting for taste is there?

Along one wall was a bar that looked stocked for any and every occasion. Another wall had shelves populated by statuettes, some awards for special effects, other for best in genre (but no Oscars Mitch noticed) etc. Sure there were enough award shows these days that everyone wins one for something. If you don't, well make up your own award show, have some "C-list" or "D" list actor present them on cable TV, and have yourself declared the winner, that's how it works in the biz these days.

Around 2:40 Josh came rushing into the office. He was a bit disheveled and all apologetic.

"Sorry for the wait but Sally Keller one of our best producers was pitching a great story and I lost all track of time. She is really good at finding winners out of all the garbage we get sent daily. You wouldn't believe what some writers want to pawn off on us as art. Would you like a drink?"

Josh made his way to the bar where he poured himself a scotch and water. Mitch politely just shook his head no.

Mitch started, "Well I understand you are having problems with a blackmailer or extortionist or something like that, yes?"

"Well I am not sure, all I know is that I have gotten 11 letters, one a week, over the past 3 months and it is driving me nuts. They are threatening, but won't say what they really want."

"Have you gone to the police with these?"

"No, it probably wouldn't be of any use as we get hundreds of these every year from nut cases out there, and the police just smile and say to call if we see anything suspicious. They have more to worry about than crank letters to some studio head or movie producer."

"So why do you think these may be real?"

"Well, it's the consistency and amount of letters arriving. Usually we might get one or two from some crank who then goes off and bothers someone else, but this guy just doesn't know when to quit."

Josh dug out the letters and showed them to Mitch. Mitch looked them over and smiled at the handicraft of the sender.

"I really like the use of bright pink paper. I guess someone has way too much time on their hands eh?" asked Mitch.

"Yes they do, and to tell you the truth this sounds like something out of one of our movies, except maybe it was a series of phone calls, I don't remember they all just sort of blend together after a while. But don't tell anyone I said that as the punters need to think that they are actually all different."

Mitch just smiled and winked at Josh.

"So what is it you want me to do?"

"Find out who is sending these if you can, and make them stop, I don't care how, just get them off my back."

"Do you have any idea who might be doing this?"

"No not really."

"Any enemies out there?"

"In this business, are you kidding, you might as well ask if I have any friends."

"Oh right, let me rephrase that, anyone you might have recently ticked off, some writer or independent producer?"

"Probably hundreds of them, I can have Julia get you a list of all who have submitted in the last 6 months if you need one."

"Might be good, just in case I need a lead or two."

"Great I'll have her send one to you, can you start right away?"

"I get \$100 a day with expenses", said Mitch.

"Fine sounds good, I'll give you a check for \$5000 as a retainer alright?"

Mitch smiled and nodded.

He took the check and gathered up all the letters and their envelopes and got up and the two shook hands as he went to the door and said their good byes. Mitch said he would be in contact and for Josh to call him immediately if any other letters or phone calls come in, and then he departed.

Josh sat back and finished his scotch and water, then poured another one. He wondered if he should tell Mitch about the accident way back then, or would that just stir up more trouble.

As he finished the second drink the phone rang and it was one of his producers with trouble on the lot. He listened in and forgot his other problems for the moment.

Chapter 3

Mitch got back to his office, a room in the back of his house that he shares with his parrot, and spread the papers out on the desk. He took care not to touch them and mentioned to Josh and Julia that he might need their fingerprints if he finds any on the paper.

He scanned the letters carefully and tried to determine if the individual letters were cut from magazines or books. He marveled at the craftsmanship of the letters. How the creator went about and made sure that each line was level and the letters matched up in nice rows. It was as if the person he was looking for was a writer, or a printer of some sort. Yes that was it, the person who put these together cared about the art of writing and couldn't bring themselves to produce a badly written piece.

Mitch smiled at the observation he just made, and carefully started to see if he could undo the glue that held the letters to the page. He tried steaming them off and though a few fell off, he was unable to really tell anything from his efforts.

He looked for a watermark on the paper, and found a faint mark in one of the corners. This sheet the watermark was in the lower left hand corner. He looked at a few other sheets and they all appeared in the same corner. It read "Dawkins and Sons LTD, London 1894".

"Well Dude", he said to his parrot, "It seems that our letter writer likes good paper. It is always good to see an artist who cares about his work."

The parrot just sat on his perch and cocked his head and cleaned his beak out with his right claw. Then rearing back his head and spreading his wings he replied, "Ha Ha Ha" in that high pitched tone that parrots seem to prefer.

"Okay now let's see what we have."

"First we have a series of letters that seem to be threatening or predicting some harm coming in the future."

"Second our writer likes to use magazine and newspaper cutouts glued to paper."

"Third is the writer seems to care about the appearance of the letters, or at least seems to care about professionalism."

"Fourth the writer uses expensive paper."

With that Mitch scratched his head, sat back and stared at the ceiling, as if asking for a clue from above. But alas nothing came to him.

I guess it was time to see his favorite colleague and cyber-sleuth Jeanie Donovan for help.

Chapter 4

Josh Saltzman sat back in his office looking over the latest status reports from the movies he had in production at the moment.

As the starry, moonless sky beamed in his window he poured himself a healthy portion of scotch, added a few ice cubes and went back to his desk. The reports all seemed to meld together and he pushed them away, laid back and started to think about those letters. In three weeks it will be 20 years ago to the day, on a night just like this one.

“Why now?” he thought, “After all these years, why is the past coming back to haunt me?”

He thought back to that fateful day. He and his partner Hank Goulston were struggling film makers. They were recent film school graduates and decided that they had to do a film together and get their name “out there”. The problem, like most of their school mates, was money. Sure the script they had for their surfing slasher bikini babes movie was not the best, but as good as most of the “B” movies (though that term has fallen out of use with the end of double features and drive-ins) and so called “summer thrillers” out there in the field.

Hank found some folks to stake them, but never bothered to tell Josh about the nature of the “investors” true business.

So they made their film and it got released, to less than critical acclaim. But that should be expected for slasher movies, but at least it did get picked up by the major theater chains. But alas the film barely broke even, that was because it only cost around \$350,000 to make.

So their names were out there, careers were born, and they even got some interest from a few minor studios to produce similar pictures. Everything seemed to be right in the world, except for one small minor irritation. Yes the “investors” wanted their money back, with the proper interest, or “vig” as they called it, and they wanted it now. It was about now that Hank decided to inform Josh who exactly these “investors” were, and oh yea they “invested” \$750,000, and were expecting \$1 million back, as that is what he agreed to pay back.

The truth of the situation became apparent when the two burley well dressed men showed up at their apartment and came pushed their way in and started yelling at the two producers to sit down and to “keep your friggin mouths shut, and just give us the money if you would”, and as if to drive home the request they added “please” in a very sarcastic and sneering tone punctuated by wry, forced and gold plated smiles.

The older of the two men, Vinny, bent over Hank and grabbing his hand, bent back his thumbs until Hank cried out in excruciating pain.

“There Tony”, he said turning to the younger man, obviously a trainee, “If you twist too fast you might break them too early and you lose the option of coming back to them later.” With that he let the thumbs go and smacked Hank across the mouth.

“Now film boy, the boss wants his money. You promised it by the end of the month, and we even gave

you an extra week. So, times up, let's see some cash now or else!”

Hank sobbed and replied, “We don't have it, the film didn't make as much as we thought it would. We spent the money paying off the marketing, and advertising agencies. Please we are in negotiations with syndication with the TV stations and possible video tape deals. We need just a few more months.”

Josh remembered looking at Hank and wondered how he all of a sudden was involved with “The Mob”. After all he didn't guarantee anything nor was he involved in the original deal, yet here he was involved up to his neck and didn't have a clue what he could do to get out of this.

“Well boys”, said Vinny, “I am afraid that the boss isn't too happy with you and we'll just have to take a ride. Tony you grab that one, I'll take this one.”

The two producers were man-handled out to a large caddy parked behind their building and were unceremoniously thrown into the trunk. The trip wasn't the moist pleasant one Josh had ever taken, and he wasn't sure where or what direction they were going, but the driver seemed to take pleasure in hitting every bump. If he ever got out of this, he was going to throttle Hank himself, and oh yea hopefully going to the bathroom normally again. Hank just whimpered for the whole 30-45 minute trip.

When the trunk opened, all Josh could see was a starry moonless sky and the outline of the two polukas.

“Get out you worms”, gritted Vinny who seemed to enjoy using movie cliches when he talked. Perhaps he was trying to show off for the “new guy” Tony.

“Grab those shovels and move over there”, Vinny and Tony were brandishing pistols, and pointing in the general direction of an open field.

Grudgingly Hank and Josh moved along with shovels as Tony and Vinny walked behind them, at a distance that disallowed the chance of either of the two producers of swinging shovels in their general directions.

“Stop here”, shouted Vinny (Tony didn't seem to talk much, but then again he was in training). “Okay start digging, I'll let you know when to stop.”

With that the two producers started digging their own graves. After they each finished a ditch around 6 feet deep, Vinny told them to stop. At this time Tony excused himself and went into a grove of trees about 200 yards away. As he was headed into the thicket, Vinny shot Hank, and he fell into the grave.

“Shovel some dirt on him, I'll let you know when to stop.”

Josh did as he was told, and thinking up a plan.

“How's this?”, he asked Vinny. Vinny absent mindedly walked over and looked into the grave. As he bent over, Josh hit him in the back of the neck with his shovel. Vinny started to fall, and Josh hit him again and Vinny's head came flying off as the body fell into the grave. It was this moment when Tony was coming out of the thicket. He saw what happened and panic set in as Josh picked up Vinny's gun.

Tony quickly ran into the thicket and Josh never saw him again. He fished threw Vinny's pockets and

found the keys to the caddy, then quickly filled in the grave, said a few prayers for his friend, collected the head and threw that into the thickets. He laughed at that as he figured it would be eaten by wild beasts and no one could ever link it to him. He drove off into the night and had a great idea for his next script.

The phone drew Josh back to the present. He didn't realize how much time had slipped away and that he needed another drink. He just let the phone go into voice mail and finished off two more stiff scotches before locking up the office for the night.

He reminded himself to call Mitch in the morning, and maybe cluing him to the problem, or not.

Chapter 5

Mitch arrived at Jeanie's apartment and as usual the door was open so he let himself in. Jeanie was in the middle of an intense session on "War Fever" her latest gaming obsession. She played the games over the Internet and rarely left her chair for anything except sleep or to replenish food and drink supplies. The chair was specially built to include a small refrigerator, headphones, microphone, keyboard. Mouse, and remote control for all the electronics in her house.

It also had special set up so she wouldn't have to leave her gaming to go to the bathroom. Of course this meant not wearing pants, but she didn't mind, and neither did Mitch. In fact she had a second station set up and sometimes when he didn't have a case or didn't feel like working he would join her in a session.

She hardly ever left the house, as she was a geek, and proud of it. She also happened to be the best cyber-sleuth in the world. If it could be found, she will find it for you. It always amazed Mitch what she could get done from that chair.

"I'd get up and greet you darling, but I am in the middle of a tournament. It is the semifinals and I think I just might break through this year."

Mitch just smiled and went to the fridge and got himself a beer.

"No problem, I'll wait".

"Did you bring the sample letters and envelopes?"

"Yes, and I appreciate this you know."

"Of course you do, and I appreciate the money. It allows me to do this all day." She smiled at him and went back to her game. After 15 minutes she paused and joined Mitch in a beer.

She picked up the letters and started to look them over.

"Wow whoever did this really took care didn't they? I mean look how the words and sentences are crafted together, not all jumbled up helter-skelter like."

"Yes I noticed that as well, a real artist at work, as if he or she has done this before."

Jeanie laughed at that. "Imagine that a professional extortion and ransom letter writer." I bet there is

good money in that. I wonder what percentage they get for crafting these letters?"

"You know I never even thought of that angle. What if it turns out that our writer does that for a living and doesn't even know who or why they are doing it, just that they are doing it and getting paid for their efforts?"

"That would be hilarious, I wonder if that is really a crime, I mean it's not as if they were the one actually demanding anything right?"

"Well I'm sure there is some law regarding harassment and terrorist act or something to that effect."

"Yea you're probably right. Well let me get on with it and I'll let you know if I come up with anything. I guess War Fever is going to have to wait."

"Thanks, I have complete confidence in your abilities, you have never let me down, and I am sure you aren't ready to do so yet."

"Oh you sweet talker, you know how to sugar up a grrl geek." Jeanie blew him a kiss and went back to her chair. Mitch watched her walk, and wondered if she was exaggerating the hip movements for his pleasure, or if she got off on him watching her, or maybe a little of both.

He said his goodbyes and let himself out. She waved as she returned to her battle for a place in the "War Fever" tournament finals.

Mitch was surprised to hear from Jeanie later that night.

"Whatcha got?" he asked.

"Well first of all this paper is very expensive. In fact the only place you can buy this stuff is at the Dawkins and Sons Paper Shop in London as in England. Of course they sell it on their web site, but the minimum order and shipping charges are very steep. I mean you have to order at least 10 reams at \$15 a ream. Envelopes are just as dear."

"Okay so our letter writer has expensive tastes, they probably pass that cost off to their client." He chuckled at the thought of a free lance ransom/extortion letter writer business.

"Yes and it seems that the writer always posts the letters at the same Post Office Substation. It took some time to track down the mark but I believe it's the Oakdale branch."

"Wow I never thought of that, thanks."

"Oh that's not all there seems to be a pattern of when they are sent and tonight/tomorrow next."

"Hmm yes I noticed the date pattern and that is why I expressed urgency and haste in this matter."

"Well I hope that helps, as it seems that I might have lost my place in the finals because of your little problem."

"Yes Jeanie dear, you were wonderful as usual. I owe you one."

“Yea I bet you say that to all the girls.” She chuckled at her lame joke and Mitch joined in the laughter as they hung up.

Mitch gathered himself up and prepared himself for a long day and night's surveillance. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

Chapter 6

In a dark small apartment over looking a back alley, a figure bent over the desk and giggled, using gloved hands carefully cut out letters from a magazine. Then placed them into 36 carefully arranged individual small containers, one for each letter and numeral.

“Just a few more letters and everything will be ready to be sprung”, said to a cat as if the cat cared about anything but the window cord she was playing with.

Grabbing out a piece of expensive pink paper and grabbing the glue bottle the figure sat back and thought about what message to send today. Then as if a light bulb went off, quickly grabbed the tweezers and started gluing letters to the page spelling out he message:

“Get out now as the trees have eyes and saw it all!”

Quickly the figure folded the letter and placed it into a waiting envelope. Using the cut out letters and numerals the letter was addressed to Josh Saltzman.

The figure gave out a loud “Bwaahaha” and headed for the Post Office a block away unaware that someone might be watching.

Chapter 7

Mitch sat in his car across form the Oakdale Post Office Substation. He trusted Jeanie and when she gave him a lead he took it seriously. That is why he was spending his Friday night in a car drinking tea and eating a sub sandwich watching a mailbox. He was hoping that the writer of the letters was still active and stayed on schedule. He had a bunch of empty envelopes he addressed to himself for cover purposes, he drew on stamps as he didn't care if they got to him or not, just in case someone approached the mailbox. This way he would appear to be just another patron, and allow him to view what the people were putting in the box.

So far he “mailed” 4 letters and no suspicious letters so far. He was just about to call it a night when he saw a small female figure moving towards the box. He got out of his car quietly and grabbed one of his “letters”. He got to the box the same time as the woman and noticed her strange envelope and the glued on letters. He smiled as he held the slot open and dropped in his own “letter”.

“Thank you”, she said, smiled back and walked away.

Mitch immediately followed her to her apartment building. He sat outside and watched for a light and saw which apartment she must have gone into. He checked the names on the various doorbells and mailboxes. He recognized one of the names and chuckled, “gotcha”, then went up and knocked on the door.

The woman opened the door and was shocked to see Mitch. He just walked in like he owned the place, and took a seat at the table and observed the paper, glue and cutouts.

“Do I know you?” asked the woman a bit shaken.

“Sure, we just met at eh mailbox remember? I thought we had a moment and decided to see if there was anything there.” Mitch smiled.

“Get out or I'll call the police!”

“I don't think you will do that, you see I am a big fan of your writing.”

“What? Who are you? What do you mean by that? I have pepper spray and not afraid to use it!”

“Oh you know.” Mitch grabbed a piece of the pink paper and spread a few letters out of their container.

“I am a detective and am investigating extortion letters sent to Josh Saltzman. Do you know him?”

“Extortion? Know Josh? Oh dear, I..I.. think I should explain I guess.”

With that she sat down and hung her head. She started to weep and sway back and forth. Mitch put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Look, there is no need for the police to be involved if you just tell me about the letters and why. I think I might be able to convince Josh not to press charges..”

'Press charges? I..I.. Oh dear, I didn't mean it to go this far. Am I in that much trouble?”

“Well threatening letters are harassment and since these tended to be of an extortionist tone I am afraid that yes you are, unless we can work things out. Tell me and I'll see what I can do.”

“Oh God, I guess I should have guessed something like this would happen. Let me explain.”

And explain she did, and after an hour of explaining, and 2 cups of coffee she agreed to go with Mitch and confront Josh about the letters and what she wants from him.

Chapter 8

Josh was pleased to get the call from Mitch and agreed to see him and the 'extortionist' first thing in the morning at his office.

After breakfast of a bagel, cream cheese and a latte he steeled himself for the confrontation. He was prepared for the worst and readied an explanation and rationalization on his part, just in case it was needed. He hoped things could be worked out, and thought Mitch sounded positive that things were going to be all right. Still one never knows do they.

Mitch entered the office and sat down in one of the nice yellow plush chairs in front of Josh's desk. He sat there and smiled.

Josh just stared at him and Mitch's "Cheshire Cat" like grin and frowned. He furrowed his brow and fidgeted in his seat. He folded his hands on his desk and continued staring at Mitch who never changed his expression. Finally he couldn't take it any longer and burst out;

"Well what do you have for me?"

"I thought you would never ask. First of all you will receive a letter this after noon or maybe tomorrow, depending upon how efficient the Post Office is these days. It was posted late last night or early this morning whatever you call it. I had no way of stopping it short of breaking into a mailbox and I won't do that, or at least there was no reason or necessity to do so this time."

"All right, but what should I do about it?"

"Nothing, it will be the last one and you will see in a moment that it doesn't matter. It is a rather sticky situation and I think you should hear the explanation before deciding upon a course of action. I think this can be resolved quietly and without too much fuss or bother. But it is all up to you on the action you take and of course the consequences that follow."

"Consequences? What consequences?"

"Well, you'll see once you hear the explanation."

Mitch arose and left the office and returned with the woman from the night before.

"Josh Saltzman, let me introduce Maria Verona the 'author' of the letters. Maria this is Josh Saltzman."

Josh glared at the woman with a deep hatred and malice.

Maria offered her hand, "Mr Saltzman, it is very nice to finally meet you face to face."

Josh shook her hand out of common courtesy, but didn't warm up to the woman. Mitch pointed to the yellow chairs and she sat down in one of them and Mitch took the other.

"Well?" grunted Josh, "What is this all about then? Why are you harassing and threatening me? Who are you and what have I ever done to you?" With that he started to think back and if he knew Vinny or Tony's last names. Is she a daughter or niece of one and heard about the incident back then? He steeled himself for the answer and he prepared for battle.

"Uhm, first of all let me apologize if you took offense to any of the letters.", Maria said in a quiet and submissive voice.

"You see I am a big fan of your films and have been following them all my life. I am a recent graduate from film school and have this script you see.."

"WHAT?" screamed Josh taken aback in shock.

"I wrote a movie and sent it to you many times, but it keeps coming back, so I decided that in order to get your attention I tried another method. I started sending these letters and was going to send the script

in with the last, which would have been the next, letter. I was just trying to get your attention.”

“WHAT? I have been on edge for the last few months for an ad campaign?”

“Yes, and I'm sorry I didn't think you would be that concerned or bothered. I was hoping you would be intrigued and amused, or at least interested in seeing the script.”

Josh sat in his chair and fumed. He was just about ready to explode and tell this woman what he thought of her “campaign”. He got himself worked into a frenzy and then lashed out.

“AMUSED? INTRIGUED? INTERESTED IN SEEING YOUR SCRIPT?”

His face reddened and Mitch was worried that he might blow a gasket. Maria shrank back into her chair and started shaking with fear.

Mitch broke in, “Josh surely you see there was no harm.”

“NO HARM? NO HARM?” Josh looked at Mitch, then at Maria. He took a deep breath as if he was ready to blow the walls of the office down.

“THIS? THIS?”, he screamed shaking the letters at Maria, “IS JUST BRILLINT!” Josh seemed to calm down and smiled for the first time since Mitch came into the room.

“Yes I think, no I know I would like to see that script. But if nothing else how would you like a job in my Marketing Department?”

Maria recovered and blinked. This is more of what she hoped for.

“Uh, well I don't know about Marketing, but I do have the script with me.” She pulled a package filled with pin pages out of her satchel.

“I'll have a look and let you know within a week.” said Josh. “It was a pleasure to meet you Maria, and if you hear from me by then give me a call, conventional telephone style okay?” He handed her a card and she thanked him and Mitch and left smiling and relieved.

As the door closed Josh turned to Mitch and said, “Nice woman, I hope the script is as good as her letters. Maybe I'll have her write this out and make that a movie. What do you think?”

“Well maybe if you change the ending to fit your style of movie it could work.”

Josh smiled and nodded.

“Have to admit it had me going. Well I guess I owe you, send the bill, oh but please on any color but pink, for some reason I just became adverse to that color.”

“Gee I wonder why?” added Mitch.

The two shook hands as Josh walked Mitch to the door. The two parted with Josh saying that he knew a few other people who needed Mitch's services and was going to call them later that day so he should

expect their calls.

Epilogue

Mitch did get calls from three other movies execs, and was glad none of them had the same problem as Josh.

Maria's movie came out a year later and she was busy working on her next project suggested by Josh. She was happy to do it and decided that Marketing wasn't for her but allowed Josh to use her methods. Josh was glad to have this fresh writer in his studio.

Jeanie just missed out on qualifying for the “War Fever” finals, and she of course blamed Mitch, but as usual she forgave him once the money was transferred to her bank, besides there is the “Journey Quest” tournament coming up...

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