

## Excerpt from *EvilSpace*

by  
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1

Lev Andriessen sat up in bed.

Around him, the quiet of night reigned. His room was pitch black, except for the dim starlight that filtered in through the window. He reached over to the bedside table and tapped his clock. The numbers glowed briefly, indicating that there were still several hours before dawn.

He muttered a curse under his breath and lay back down. This was the second night during this week that he had woken in the middle of what should have been a sound sleep. Except for brief periods during his childhood, and when he was ill, he had always been a sound sleeper. The family home, built by his grandfather over fifty years ago, was far from any city or other large congregation of humanity. The only sounds to break the stillness were the wind in the trees and twittering birds. It made for a peaceful life.

Lev was twenty-seven standard years old, the youngest of six children with two brothers and three sisters. All of the sisters and one brother were married, and only the married brother and his family were still living at home along with Lev, his parents and his grandfather, who was still in remarkably good health in spite of his eighty-five years of age.

Lev sat up again, then threw the covers off and climbed out of bed. *While I'm awake I might as well use the bathroom*, he said to himself. He shambled over to the door and touched the contact. It slid silently open, revealing the hallway dimly lit by a pair of night-lights. The bathroom was the second door on the right.

In spite of being out in the backwoods of the continent of Vostim, the house was fairly modern. True, it had been built from native wood and stone instead of prefabricated plastic and composites, but it had common amenities such as an electric generator and a communication station. There were a couple of skimmers in the garage that Lev and others in the family used to get to Gerson, which was the nearest town of any size.

Life was fairly quiet in this part of the world, and that suited Lev just fine. He was not one to wish for the lights of the big city, or the mad rush of the older colonies or even of Earth itself. Like his brothers and sisters, he had done his elementary education via remote access. Afterward, he had followed his sister Erika's footsteps and gone to Gerson for a couple of years to a general-purpose technical school. Unlike her, he had not come away married. She ended up living there, while he came home.

He had not majored in any particular field of study. Indeed, at the time he wasn't even sure what he wanted to study. He still did not have any clearly defined direction for his life. It hadn't bothered him then and it didn't bother him now. He had always taken it for granted that he would figure it all out someday. So far, that day had not come. He was content to help his parents with the farm work and other things around the homestead. His father had commented a few times on his rather cavalier attitude toward life, in response to which Lev had merely shrugged. In a much earlier age he might have been considered normal. Personally, he rarely thought about it.

Nevertheless, he admitted to himself as he stood in front of the toilet, it's going to have to end some time. His father had inherited the house and the farm from his grandfather. But Lev was not the oldest, and his married brother was making sounds like he wanted to stay on. Somehow, Lev could not see himself working for his brother in the same way as he worked for his parents. He would have to move on. Yet, at the same time, he really didn't want to.

He finished emptying his bladder, and made his way back to his room, where he lay down, pulling the covers back over himself and spreading his arms out in his favorite sleeping position. For a while he just stared at the darkness, wondering why he had suddenly become subject to nightmares. He had never heard of anyone else in the family having that problem. He seemed to recall reading somewhere that stress could cause bad dreams. So could indigestion, drugs, or any of a number of other irrelevant items. None were applicable. It made no sense.

It wasn't that he had never had unpleasant nocturnal experiences. Like any other member of the human race, he had encountered his share of night terrors. But that had been mostly during his childhood. They had diminished during his teen years, and dwindled to practically nothing by the time he was grown up. And, like his more pleasant dreams, they had been disjointed and irrational; natural laws were grossly violated and it seemed perfectly normal, and the memory of them soon faded upon waking. These new nightmares were different. They were vivid, full of bright colors and sounds and smells, and as clear and consistent as reality. And, unlike other dreams, they did not fade.

Furthermore, they were all the same dream. It had disturbed his sleep twice during the previous week, and this was the second time this week.

And, unlike the paltry terrors of his youthful subconscious meanderings, this one frightened him in a way that no ordinary dream ever had.

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Mankind in the twenty-eighth century considered himself to be far less superstitious than his ancestors. He had more knowledge of how things worked and of how the universe was put together than at any other time in history. And he occupied a far larger fraction of it than did those selfsame ancestors. Conservative estimates put the number of colony worlds with a population of over a hundred million at somewhere near two hundred and fifty. And there were innumerable other small colonies and outposts, stretching out nearly twelve hundred parsecs from Earth.

One of those colony worlds was called Eison. Originally settled by Russians, it had later seen an influx of Swedes and Dutch, with a smattering of other nationalities. The largest continent--called Novaya Rossiya--was still a Russian stronghold. The Eison General Politburo claimed sovereignty over the whole world, but in practical terms that only meant that they controlled immigration. The capital city, Novaya Moskva, had the only passenger spaceport on the planet, and interstellar liners respected their wishes and would not land passengers anywhere else. There was a spaceport in Gerson, but it was only used for commercial and freight transportation. Beyond immigration, however, the outlying colonies essentially ruled themselves.

The Swedish immigrants had originally settled among the Russians, but after a generation or two many of them began to look for an unoccupied place to move to. Eison was very Earthlike and was what was referred to as "prime colony material," being only a fraction larger than Earth and having

similar gravity and atmosphere. Even the biota were not too dissimilar. So, when the Swedes began to look around, the small southern continent of Vostim presented itself. The small city of Gerson was named after the leader of the original colonizing expedition. The original Andriessens had been a part of that same expedition. Later on, when the Dutch came, they eventually sought a homeland of their own as well. Unlike the rugged wilderness of Vostim, the more placid territory of Platte allowed them to industrialize more quickly.

Fifty years ago, Lev Andriessen's grandfather had built the home that he currently lived in, about thirty kilometers from Gerson on a newly cleared road. The clean forest with the view of the Kalash Mountains to the east had attracted him. The home overlooked a thickly wooded valley that stretched for kilometers in either direction to the north and south. He cleared several hectares nearby and successfully planted wheat and soybeans. Lev's father had been a boy of eleven when his father built their new house. When he reached maturity he went back to Gerson for a while to study, as Lev did later on. While there, he met Lev's mother and married her. But he never forgot the family home, and two years after they married, he took his bride and baby daughter and moved back. He and Lev's grandfather worked to enlarge the house to make it fit for a bigger family when they began having more children.

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Lev recalled once seeing a story in the human-interest section of the news about a woman from Kanneveta who claimed to have had the same dream repeatedly over a seven-year period. He had barely skimmed over the article, and today still couldn't recall any more details. Part of him still didn't want to, as if closing his mind against the subject would make his own dreams go away. It didn't work.

Lev considered himself to be a rational product of his century and culture. He believed in a universe that ran according to well-understood rules, and in a human race that fit into that greater structure as a well-integrated part. Therein lay the other disturbing aspect of his dream. For, no matter how hard he tried, he could not conceive of anything even remotely rational that could account for it. Every time it repeated it was like having his nose rubbed in the mud of irrationality. It was as if the universe itself were mocking him.

*I ought to tell someone*, he told himself. It was not the first time that he had entertained the idea of opening up about his dream. But it was the first time he had entertained it seriously. The question was, who? For a moment he considered telling his parents, then decided not to. It had been hard enough to convince them to accept him as a grown man when he turned eighteen. If he told them about these dreams he would lose all of the respect he had gained during his adult years. Well, maybe he could tell his brother...

The trouble was that there weren't very many people that he could tell. Living away from the city had its advantages, but it also had its disadvantages. One of the disadvantages was that there were few people to go to when a problem arose. There were the Glicks, who lived fairly close by. In fact, he was going to help Arne fix his skimmer in the morning. Arne was always easy to talk to and willing to listen. Or, if that didn't work out, he could take one of the family skimmers and go into Gerson. His sisters and brothers-in-law lived there, as well as a few other people whom he knew.

Meanwhile, it was useless to just lie in bed without sleeping. He reached over and checked the time again. More than an hour had passed since he had wakened. *Well*, he thought, *I've never had the*

*dream more than once on any given night, so it probably won't come back.*

With that comforting thought, he finally managed to drift off to sleep again.

## 2

"All hands, prepare for quantum drive."

Captain Ray Hedberg's voice crackled from hidden speakers on all decks of the EES Valdez. For the most part, the crew paid little attention; after all, quantum drive did not involve acceleration or any other noticeable sensation. The only item of real interest was that using the drive meant that they were going somewhere. Captan Hedberg had sometimes toyed with the idea of saying nothing, just for the fun of seeing the looks on crewmembers' faces when they looked out the window and saw that the stars had changed. But the announcement was required in the regulations that governed all Earth Exploration Ships, and Hedberg, though he occasionally grumbled about what he considered useless frills, nevertheless followed the rules.

Ray Hedberg had recently turned forty-four standard years of age, content that it had happened without a lot of fanfare. Tall but thin, with light hair and a receding hairline and just the beginnings of a hint of a potbelly, he was a serious man who hid a sense of humor behind an enthusiasm for exploration. Since he had been a boy, he had dreamed of discovering new lands. He had been born on Earth, in the city of New Denver, but his parents emigrated to New America, the oldest of the interstellar colonies, when he was only six. It was there that he grew up, in a small outlying town called Caletin Lake.

New America was remarkably Earth-like in many ways, but geologists insisted that it must be a younger world than Earth. Mountain ranges stretching upward of fifteen kilometers in altitude seamed the planet like stitching on a baseball. Hedberg had grown up with vast, majestic peaks lining the horizon, and, when he was fifteen, he had participated in a nature program with other boys his age in which they spent two weeks hiking and exploring the high points of the world.

Later, he realized that that had been the turning point in his life. Those two weeks instilled in him the desire to see new territories and unknown places. He never forgot the day that his group stumbled wearily into a deep canyon after a grueling seven-hour hike, only to find a breathtaking waterfall cascading into a sparkling mountain lake waiting for them. He never looked back. The following year he enrolled in a youth exploration club and made a number of trips to various parts of the globe. In spite of being mankind's oldest colony, New America was still far from heavily populated and possessed considerable wild and relatively unexplored territory, especially on the vast northern continent of Seward.

When he became a man, his focus shifted. Now he wanted to explore the stars. This desire had taken him first to Earth Fleet Academy back on Luna, and then to a starship posting of his own. By the time he was thirty-five he had gained his own command. From the beginning, he had been determined to enjoy it while he could, because a captain who showed competence was marked for promotion. He wanted to be competent--but he did not relish the duties of a commodore or admiral. Fortunately, Earth Fleet was currently top-heavy in the higher ranks, and so, for the past nine years, he had been able to keep the job he enjoyed best, which was commanding an Earth Fleet exploratory vessel.

Someday, of course, he would have to give it up. The current flag rank officers would eventually

retire, and there were plenty of young ensigns, lieutenants and commanders eagerly awaiting promotion. When that long-avoided day finally did come, though, he wasn't quite sure just what he would do. There was always room for experienced officers in the corporate fleets, and he could probably get a command just by asking for it. Not to mention better pay. But it still wouldn't be the same.

Lieutenant Roger McIntyre turned from his station and gave the captain a thumbs-up. Hedberg nodded and relaxed. McIntyre had the job of calculating the factors involved in performing the quantum shift. What that meant was that he ran a particularly powerful and specialized computer that did the real work. No human mind could possibly begin to grasp all of the mathematics involved in computing even the simplest shift. That same computer was now saying that the calculations were finished and that it was ready to direct the quantum field apparatus as it generated the mathematical constructs far outside human sensory experience that made it possible for the Valdez to travel to the stars.

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It was the year 2755, according to the slightly reformed version of the old calendar still in use on Earth and in many other places. Mankind had been traveling among the stars for nearly five centuries, establishing his hundreds of colonies. And ever since the very first working starship, the means that made it possible was the quantum field apparatus. It had been tweaked, improved and made more reliable, but the basic mechanism remained the same. It had been one of the earliest practical applications of Mellethin's Grand Unified Theory, which had appeared in the late 2100s and quickly swept aside all previous attempts at unification as being totally irrelevant. Many scientists did not like the GUT simply because it did not explain the why of the universe. But it explained the how in precise detail, and, in spite of aesthetic objections, they were forced to admit its validity.

Karl Mellethin had been a scientist who lived in one of the Martian colonies in the twenty-second century. A rabid neo-nazi who played around with quantum physics more as a hobby than a real profession, most of his colleagues had considered him at least partially cracked. But in the end, it was his theory that was "crazy enough to be true". While everyone else was trying to take the basic forces and elements of nature and cobble them all together under one roof, Mellethin had started from the opposite direction. Later on, nobody could ever understand just how it was that he picked the right initial assumptions--theories ranged from divine inspiration all the way to the suggestion that he had been an alien in disguise--but in the end he had a model of the physical universe that actually worked. After that, as with any new technology, it was merely a matter of time until the practical spinoffs followed. Including ships like the Valdez.

The Valdez was an exploratory vessel. With a personnel complement of just over sixty, it was staffed with scientists and enough crew to navigate and maintain it. It also carried weapons: two batteries of laser cannon, ten hydrogen torpedoes, and two total-conversion bombs capable of blasting the Earth's moon out of orbit. It didn't matter that to this date not a single sign of intelligent life had been found anywhere beyond the Earth. The weapons were still there. "Someday," was the way the Powers-That-Be liked to put it.

Like most ships, the Valdez was designed with the idea that it would spin about its long axis when not under acceleration in order to provide the sensation of gravity. It was built in the form of a squat cylinder with a narrow tail twice as long as the main body of the ship. The tail was surrounded by a

cluster of hydrogen fuel tanks, and at the very end sat the main fusion engines. In front, a hemispherical dome as wide as the main cylinder enclosed the control section. The captain's chair sat in the very center of the control section, on the spin axis itself. Under acceleration, he experienced the same weight as everyone else. Under spin, however, he still floated in free fall, hovering over the rest of the bridge crew like a benign deity.

Hedberg had occupied that same chair for the entire nine years that he had commanded the Valdez. Some of the console components had been replaced, and one time a repair crew had had to swap out the entire base swivel mount, but the essential chair itself--the cushions, armrests and back--were still original equipment. They were old friends, having long since molded themselves to the shape of his back and buttocks. Yet one more thing that would someday pass on to another eager, young officer...

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The Valdez was currently in orbit around a blue-white spectral class A4 star, part of a binary system whose puny red dwarf companion never approached closer than the distance from the Earth's sun to the planet Neptune. Therefore, there were stable orbits for planets, and, as in nearly ninety percent of the cases, there were planets.

None were habitable. There was a huge, ringed gas giant in what was essentially the largest stable orbit possible. Three smaller globes circled further in toward the sun. Two of them were about the size of Mars; the closest one a hot, airless rock blasted with solar radiation, and the other wrapped in a shroud of noxious fumes about a third the density of Earth's atmosphere. But it was the third planet of the three, the furthest in distance from the sun, which was the interesting one.

When the Valdez arrived three weeks ago, the scientists and navigation crew had performed the standard search for planets and had quickly found the gas giant. The three terrestrial globes were spotted shortly thereafter. Due to their distances from the sun, the two smaller ones had been quickly written off as being too hot to be candidates for life. The outer one, however, was located within acceptable limits. The Valdez moved in to investigate.

It turned out to be slightly larger than Earth and slightly denser, with a correspondingly higher surface gravity. That certainly did not eliminate the possibility of life; worlds had been found during man's expansion through space that had much more extreme environments, yet held life. Not always life even remotely resembling the terrestrial kind, but nevertheless something capable of reproducing and with other aspects that scientists had learned characterized life. Never anything intelligent, but it was life. There were plants, animals, and forms that were neither. Some used oxygen, others used chlorine, fluorine or other gases. There seemed to be few limits to what life could be like. Therefore, this planet was certainly a candidate.

But it had no atmosphere.

That was something that was not merely unusual; it was something that most of the scientists on board agreed was practically impossible. With a gravity higher than that of Earth, the planet literally had to have some sort of atmosphere. Through the ages it would have retained outgassing, captured interplanetary media, or something.

It quickly went from the status of mildly interesting to that of being a puzzling enigma.

Even before the Valdez achieved orbit, the scientists could clearly see great basins, which looked suspiciously like dry ocean beds. Chains of eroded mountain ranges wended their way across continent-sized highlands. And one feature common to airless planets--impact craters--was glaringly missing. When the ship finally entered orbit, at an altitude of ten thousand kilometers, they began searching for small ones that they might have failed to spot earlier.

There were absolutely none, down to the limits of the resolution of the ship's telescopes.

The scientists continued to avidly study the planet from orbit for a week and a half. Incredible as it seemed, the planet had the appearance of having had an atmosphere and ocean up until very recently, and then having somehow lost them both. Their appetites whetted, they wanted to land and explore the planet directly, but unfortunately, a peculiar problem never before encountered stood in the way.

The Valdez possessed two landing pods, officially designated Landing Pod A and Landing Pod B. Pod B (unofficially christened the Spider because of its gangly legs) was designed to operate in an airless environment, but was constructed with the idea that such a planet would have a relatively low gravity. Pod A (also called the Fly) was equipped with more powerful thrusters, but relied on aerodynamics, something impossible on this strange world. That was the peculiar problem; neither of the pods was designed for such a planet. In the end, under protest, the chief engineer stripped the braking rocket from one of the unmanned probes and cobbled it onto the Spider. The result was dangerous, and flying it was about as easy as trying to break a wild horse, but Ed Norton succeeded in getting it down in one piece, along with four scientists willing to risk a ride in the monster in order to have the chance to explore such an interesting planet.

From space, the planet's surface looked a sort of mottled gray, somewhat darker than Earth's moon. As the pod descended, it was possible to see that there were huge areas that had a scorched appearance, as if a tremendous fire had blasted them. They reminded Norton of fictional dramatizations of hyper-nuclear war. At the scientists' request, he managed to put the Spider down near a spot where one of the blasted areas overlapped the "shore" of one of the dry sea beds.

The surface proved to be composed completely of fused rock, resembling chocolate ice cream that had melted and refrozen. There was no soil or even sand. However, there was a residue coating large areas like burnt paint. Analysis of this residue showed chemicals associated with forms of life based on carbon and chlorine, a type found on about fourteen percent of all life-bearing worlds.

The scientists and crew of the Valdez spent another week and a half digging around in the wreckage of that planet, looking for clues as to what had destroyed it. Early suggestions included some unknown kind of stellar flare-up, but even a superficial examination of the two inner worlds did not support such a theory. Besides, the star was not of a type noted for flare activity. And so geologists poked about, physicists quarreled, Ed Norton played test pilot with his monster rig, and Captain Hedberg tried to maintain peace. But they learned nothing new.

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Hedberg mused quietly as he watched McIntyre's fingers dart across his console, activating the field coils and transferring the calculated results into the crystal matrix control grid. *Almost like a concert pianist*, he thought. *Maybe I should get Anne to write up a paper...* Roughly, he thrust the

irrelevancies aside. Some other time he might have dwelled on the similarities between operating highly sophisticated computerized equipment and playing a musical instrument. But not now.

He had sent in his final report on this solar system to Fleet headquarters only a few hours ago. Part of him still wondered if he had been completely honest. It didn't really matter, he kept telling himself. The admirals didn't get their pips by being stupid; the same ideas that kept nagging at the back of his mind would certainly occur to them as well. He soothed his conscience with that thought.

The Valdez was on an extended exploration mission into uncharted space; right now, they were further from Earth than any human being had ever been before. Except for a few scattered giants burning their hydrogen in profligate gulps, none of the stars here were even visible from man's home planet, save through a telescope. *This must be something like Lewis and Clark felt*, Hedberg decided. Only they had found helpful natives along the way instead of... whatever it was that he and his crew had stumbled upon.

*It's just an anomaly*, he had repeated to himself innumerable times during the past few weeks. *Something weird and destructive, but it's out here in the wilds of space, not our celestial backyard. Nevertheless*, an inner voice kept whispering at annoying moments, *you don't know that. The cosmos is vast and still largely unknown. Anything is possible...* He recalled a famous philosophical debate that took place about a century earlier at a university on Kaiser Wilhelm (a rather exclusive German colony famous for its institutes of higher learning), in which one of the protagonists insisted that his opponent prove that aliens existed. To which the opponent had smugly replied, "Prove that they don't."

With such thoughts in mind, he watched as the star field outside the dome changed. The Valdez had shifted, off to try its luck in another part of this obscure corner of space.

### 3

Salazar was a twin world. That is, it had a satellite that was of comparable size to the planet itself. Salazar had a diameter of around 11,000 kilometers, making it slightly smaller than Earth. But a density of nearly six times that of water produced a gravitational force a fraction greater. Its companion had a diameter of about 7500 kilometers and was uninhabitable, with only a thin shroud of nitrogen and cyanide to raise the dust on its surface. The two planets danced around one another every three and a half terrestrial days, each always showing the same face to its partner. The result was a day/night temperature cycle that was a bit extreme, but given an atmosphere nearly two and a half times as dense as Earth's, it wasn't too bad.

Salazar was inhabited, of course. When discovered, it was life bearing, though none of the native flora (there was no fauna) was edible to humans. Indeed, it was, without exception, highly poisonous. But that did not stop the colonizers. Within ten years they had cleared huge tracts of land and planted wheat, corn, rye, sugar cane, and various other terrestrial crops. Once that was done, the planet was eminently satisfactory. Since most of the settlers had originally come from Bolivia, they at first named the planet Nueva Bolivia, following the practice of many early colonizers. Fifty years later, inspired leadership, looking for something a little more original, renamed the world after their first President, who had also led the expedition that colonized the world. Nobody had complained.

Gonzales was a medium-sized city on the northern continent of Ypsilante del Norte, with a population of around eight hundred thousand. Most of its citizens were fairly prosperous, owing to



the fact that Salazar was literally a treasure chest of heavy minerals. Miners dug them out, brokers sold them, and others provided various services. Bit by bit, the wealth trickled down so that even the poor were not badly off, even when compared with places like Earth.

Eduardo de la Cruz was the grandson of Luis de la Cruz, who had immigrated to Salazar from Earth some sixty years earlier. Luis married Debora Yniguez, and together they raised eight children. Their third, Ferdinand, was Eduardo's father. It was Ferdinand who had started the furniture store that had given the family financial stability. He was mostly retired now, leaving the running of the store to Eduardo and his brother. Both of his sisters had married and left the business to the boys.

Eduardo enjoyed the work. His brother Luis (named after his grandfather) was the brains of the family. He had the management skills necessary to make a success of things. Eduardo, on the other hand, was a doer. He took his brother's ideas and made them happen. Of about average height, he was thin and intense, with a narrow face, neatly trimmed dark brown hair and a small, neat mustache. He liked to concentrate on one thing at a time until it was done and done properly, but unlike many single-minded individuals Eduardo did not forget the other things that demanded his attention at the same time. He had a natural talent for putting tasks in a queue and dealing with them one after another.

Both of the brothers had discovered their respective talents several years earlier, while their father was still actually running the store. Ferdinand had started letting Eduardo, his firstborn, do some of the purchasing and making contacts. He had studied English while in school, which made it easier to do business with off-worlders; the majority of colonies used that language. He had also shown a marked proficiency at designing displays that caught the eye, and sales increased noticeably. By the time Ferdinand was ready to turn the operation over to his sons, it was evident how the task of managing things would work out. Both brothers were satisfied with the way things were.

Today was Friday, and it was nearly the end of a fairly long week, with only one more business day to go until Sunday. It was dark outside; the extremely long diurnal period of Salazar was something that man could not adjust his sleeping cycle to, so early on in its history the people of Salazar had adopted a clock and calendar that had no relation whatsoever to the actual state of daylight. Essentially, the whole world used the terrestrial twenty-four hour day, synchronized to La Paz in the original Bolivia. And since the clock was completely arbitrary, they dispensed with the notion of time zones. The entire planet was on the same time.

Eduardo shut off his terminal. The problem with the shipment from Laredo de los Vaqueros had been resolved; the plane had developed a problem and been delayed en route. The bedroom suites would arrive tomorrow. It meant working on a Saturday, but that happened fairly regularly, and he didn't have a hot date planned or anything. He stood up and stepped around a pile of printouts awaiting the government auditor next week, shaking his head. In spite of endless promises, even after centuries of technological advance, the "paperless office" had never become a reality. For this they killed a tree...

Luis ambled into his office, jacket slung over his shoulder. "You haven't forgotten the party tonight, have you, big brother?"

Eduardo chuckled. "No way, 'mano. You only turn thirty once in your life."

Luis grinned evilly. "Yeah, and after that it's downhill all the way."

Eduardo took a swipe at his brother, who was the younger of the two by three and a half years. "Your turn is coming, kid," he answered.

Luis snorted, slipped his jacket on and started out the door, then turned around again. "Oh, by the way, feliz cumpleaños." He dug into a pocket and handed him an envelope.

"What's this?"

"My present. I thought I'd give it to you early."

"What is it?"

"Open it up and find out, idiot!"

Eduardo tore the envelope open. A card fell out. He opened it and read it. It was a typical birthday card, available at any of a number of bookstores in town. He chuckled at the inevitable bad joke on the inside leaf, then plucked a ticket out of the middle. "Hey, La Lotería! You shouldn't have, 'mano. How could you afford it?" he joked, peering at it in mock amazement. La Lotería was a city-run lottery. You didn't stand to win millions of pesos or anything like that, but there were occasionally some nice prizes.

Luis threw up his hands. "All right, so it's probably worthless. Anyway, I was just kidding. I had a couple of pesos and thought I'd pick a couple of tickets. Mine was a loser, of course." He grinned. "You won't get my real present until the party tonight."

Eduardo snorted. "Thanks. Anyway, what's new? I still say the whole Lotería thing's rigged. It's just another way for the City Fathers to take the common citizen to the cleaners. It's just more voluntary than taxes." One of the advertisements said, 'You can't win if you don't play.' Eduardo privately changed it to, 'You can't lose if you don't play.'

Luis turned and left. "Hasta la fiesta, big brother," he said as he walked out.

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There were a surprisingly large number of people at the party. Though he didn't say anything, Eduardo was inwardly quite pleased. He had expected it just to be a small family gathering. But someone had gone out of their way to invite all of his friends, including a couple of women who he had developed a more than passing interest in recently. This might be quite pleasant, although having both of them present could pose a slight problem.

At thirty standard years of age, it was slightly unusual for Eduardo to still be a bachelor. There had been several women in his life, but in each case he had lost interest when they started to get serious and hear wedding bells. It wasn't that he was opposed to marriage, he told himself. It was just that the right one hadn't come along. And yet, at times he felt that he was merely kidding himself. When he got right down to it, he really wasn't sure why he had not yet married. He had the normal male drives. But for some reason, he just didn't feel like settling down. Even though he had a fairly stable position in the family store and would make an ideal family man in the eyes of each of the women he had dated.

At any rate, he tended not to worry about it.

He hadn't always felt that way. Or more accurately, he hadn't always realized that he felt that way. Two years ago he had been dating a girl named Jennifer, from one of the few families in the city that did not trace their ancestry back to Earth's Latin America. Her grandparents had come from New Britain, making her a Third World Settler, as those whose ancestors had not come directly from Earth were commonly known. At first he had been attracted to her because she stood out in the crowd; a blonde beauty amidst the dark-haired Latin women. But he soon found himself attracted to her personality as well.

She had a keenly penetrating mind, something he found very enjoyable. In the end, however, it had doomed their relationship, because she keenly penetrated into his own thoughts and attitudes in ways that he found uncomfortable. She was the one who had first pointed out his lack of interest in settling down. In the past, he had always thought that he had broken up with women simply because he and they lost interest in one another. But it was Jennifer who made him face up to the fact that he simply did not wish to be married. It had been too much for her; she was looking for a stable, family household and did not want to keep on with a man who would never marry her. At first, he had resented this, after they had broken up. But later on, when he stopped and thought and realized that what she had said was true, he ended up being friends with her, actually better friends than when they had been dating.

She was gone now. Six months ago she had finally snagged her man and gotten him to the altar. They had moved to a hacienda near a smaller city nearly 500 kilometers away. He had written a couple of times, but that was it. He was left with a fond memory--and a keener insight into his own ways of thinking.

And now he was celebrating the traditional Thirtieth Birthday Party. This Party was a somewhat formal affair, at least for the family members. Not that there were speeches or rituals or anything, but things had to be done just right. (He recalled reading about a similar rite of passage that had evolved on Santana, involving priests, robes and enough candles to light a fair-sized city. He much preferred Salazar's simpler traditions.) There was the dinner, where he sat between his parents at the main table with his siblings and their spouses. Afterward, there was the present opening, when, as was the custom, he received various gag gifts in addition to the serious ones.

But all of that was finally over and everyone had settled into the usual post-formality recreation. It was then that he really began to have a good time. Without too much effort he managed to get into a private conversation with Rosa, one of the gals he was currently interested in. They had managed to sit alone for nearly ten minutes without him being bothered by birthday well-wishers. *Could someone be playing matchmaker?* he wondered briefly. He was enjoying himself hugely. Maybe he wasn't interested in marriage at this point in his life, but it was nice to have a girlfriend now and then. Rosa had definite possibilities.

They were discussing the merits of a new singing group when Eduardo became aware of a presence at his elbow. Looking up, he saw his brother grinning down at him.

"Hey, big brother. Good party," Luis said.

Eduardo nodded, smiling. "You know, I still don't know who put it together. I was expecting just you and mom and dad and Concepción and Lourdes with Rogerio and Felipe. Who invited all these people?" He indicated around with his hand.

Luis feigned disappointment. "What's this? You don't like having all your friends here?"

"You know better, 'mano. I'm just curious as to who did it." He looked closer at his brother, who was grinning again. "Hey, it was you, wasn't it? Yeah, it had to be you. You're the only one who knows some of these people."

"Guilty as charged. Now you know why I had to make sure you came. I'd hate to throw a party and not have the guest of honor show up." He chuckled. "A bit better than a cheap Lotería ticket, no?"

At that, Eduardo slapped his shirt pocket. "Hey, that reminds me." He pulled the ticket out. "I checked this thing on the way home. Guess what? It's a winner."

"No kidding? What did you win?"

Eduardo shrugged. "Don't know. But it's more than just a couple of pesos. They couldn't tell me at the Lotería Rápida kiosk. I'll have to go to the downtown office, they said. But it's apparently worth something." He grinned in turn. "Looks like you picked the wrong ticket to keep for yourself, 'mano."

Luis shook his head, chuckling. "No way, big brother. It's your birthday, you deserve it. Hey, maybe you'll win the Grand Prize. It's a trip to Earth."

At that Rosa spoke up. "A trip to Earth! Serious?"

Luis nodded. "Haven't you heard about it? It's in all the advertising. A trip to Bolivia, of all places. Land of the Founding Fathers of Salazar."

Eduardo thought back for a moment. "I think I remember seeing it somewhere. Something about it being the biggest prize the city's ever put out."

"Hey, if you win, take me!" Rosa said, grabbing Eduardo's arm and squeezing. He smiled and patted her hand.

"Anyway," Luis continued, "maybe you won it."

"No way, 'mano," Eduardo said. "No way."