

Subj: The Beginning of the Fantasy Serial

Author's Note:

Due to Hilary's brilliant inspiration combined with some writing on my part, we've come up with a wonderfully fun idea for our little drama group: a moving fantasy serial which has varying points of view. Each person in our group is represented by a character. Each person's character's actions in the storyline are e-mailed to them between once to twice a day... These will be different depending on where certain characters are and what groups they are in. In other words, not everyone will get the same aspect of the story...they will be customized by what groups your characters are in.

Here is the character list to date:

Dragonfire, Knight to Lord Jex: played by Jeremy
Talia Jenea, Virgin Huntress Forest Faerie: played by Hilary
Lodan, the Court Jester: played by Nathan
Donoval, Weaponbearer to Dragonfire: played by Chris
Galengran, the Elven Prince: played by Jon
Celestia, the betwixt Sorceress: played by Kate
Darshek, the hired rogue: played by Jeff

And making a cameo appearance:
Joe as Lord Jex

NO Complaints YET!!! Not all of these characters are what they first appear to be, so wait until you have read the first parts your characters appear in to decide whether you like your character. If, after that, you have a problem...or, more positively, a suggestion, just e-mail me with either one. I will try to reflect these suggestions and changes in future installments of the story.

Now, I have included the following which are the first two episodes of the serial which involve Talia Jenea and then Celestia. As these two are now on a team, they will receive their portions of the story exclusively, while other teams will exclusively receive other portions. That way, when the stories connect, it will be really awesome!

Sincerely,
Jeremy T. Hanke

Subj: New Character in the Fantasy Serial!

Note from the Author:

To teams A, B & C,

A new character has entered the story and is soon to unite with one of the three main groups. Her name is Telanna and she is a shapeshifter. She will be played by Bethany.

As always, thanks for your time and enjoyment of the serial!

Sincerely,
Jeremy Hanke

Subj: Episode 1, Group C: Lord Jex's Castle

Author's Note: Episode 1, Group C: Lord Jex's Castle
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

"...And we are therefore, understandably, concerned." Lord Jex concludes, rubbing his beard thoughtfully. "As we owe allegiance to Prince Galengran, I must send some portion of my knights to help him. I can spare only you, Dragonfire."

"So, what you're saying is that, I'm disposable, right?" Dragonfire concludes wryly, wriggling in the tight scarlet dublet which constricts about his neck too tightly. The hose are riding and are annoying as well, he thinks to himself.

"I wouldn't say that," Lord Jex replies jovially, slapping the side of his stone throne. "With you, I will send my wizard, Donoval, and the court jester, Lodan."

"Us?!" Lodan and Donoval exclaim in unison, looking disdainfully at one another. With the blonde jester's multicolored garb and his large frame standing next to the slighter, brown-haired wizard in his black robes and leather gloves...the two looked like the oddest team ever devised.

"Hey, what d'ya mean? I'm not going anywhere with this guy! Especially not to trounce some dark beast the elves let loose!" Lodan exclaims.

"Yeah...and I wouldn't let him scrub my pony, let alone accompany me!" Donoval protests. "You can't mean us."

"Yes, you!" Lord Jex exclaims. "Don't be difficult in this! Oh, and, Donoval?"

"Yes?" Donoval squeaks, still recovering from this.

"Since no knight ranks having a personal wizard, you are to disguise yourself as his weaponbearer, understand?" Jex explains.

"Oh, right...and which knight ranks his own personal jestor?!" Lodan interrupts loudly.

"Oh, shut up!" Donoval snaps at the jestor. "I have to be a weaponbearer! What sort of joke is this? I am an all powerful mage, not a lowly weaponbearer!"

"You are who I say you are...and my decision is final!" Lord Jex exclaims, out of patience. "An you'll be leaving tomorrow...so get some sleep tonight!"

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 2, Group C: Past the Gates

Author's Note: Episode 2, Group C: Past the Gates
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

The path stretches out before the adventurers, dimming in the distance toward the woods which separate Lord Jex's land from the Elven plains surrounding the Palace at Galfor. The morning is too early for any of the group's temperament...the palace is only an hour away and already they all wish they hadn't been sent out.

"I can't believe I'm on the same trip with you two twits!" Donoval sputters, dragging Dragonfire's huge lance along behind him. The wizard looks considerably different, now garbed in his crimson red dublet, matching hose and slippers--the golden fleur de force of the official armsbearer of Dragonfire ebroidered upon his dublet. "I could be back at the castle, snuggled up with a servant wench on a bearskin rug in front of a fire...but no, it is my ill fate to be forced to come with you."

"It's not like I want to be here either," Lodan contributes in annoyance, his multi-colored jestor's hat hanging limply over his eyes as he walks on the other side of Dragonfires large white horse. "I could have any woman I want back at the castle, too."

"Yeah, I'm sure the wenches are tripping all over themselves to get with the court jester!" Donoval snickers snydely.

"Oh, you think you're so big just because you're the court wizard or something!" Lodan blurts out.

"All-Powerful Visier and Seer to Lord Jex', thank you." Donoval amends, his grand voice contrasting extremely with the stumbling walk he's having to adopt to wrest the unwieldy lance with him.

"Well, whatever you are, the wenches dig me because I'm a master of the Forgotten Martial Arts!" Lodan throws his head back archly, the tassels of his hat flapping backwards absurdly. "All you are is a weakling who knows a few tricks!"

"And all you are is a TWIT!" Donoval snarls back. "I have half a mind to turn you into a toad for it, too!"

"Both of you, shut up!" Dragonfire yells from atop the horse, his polished armor glinting in the sunlight. "Neither of you have any call to complain! I'm the one who has to wear forty-five pounds of bloody

armor which heats up like an oven! And I have to ride this stupid horse which is pulling out my groin like a wishbone, OK?"

"Oh, shut up! You're a twit, too!" Donoval returns sharply.

"Donoval, I don't like your attitude!" Dragonfire snaps, faceless in his helmet. "And if you don't change it and start becoming a teamplayer, I'm going to carve a wedge in your head with my sword!"

"Yeah!" Lodan throws in slyly.

"Shut up, Lodan!" Dragonfire returns archly. "You better be a team player, or I'll do the same to you!"

"Uh...Dragonfire..." Donoval's words are suddenly quiet and urgent, all anger forgotten instantly.

"What?!" Dragonfire returns, turning the helmet towards the wizard/weaponkeeper.

"The sun's gone out." Donoval states tersely, pointing to the shadow which now dwells over the land.

"Don't be a moron...it's probably just a cloud!" Dragonfire returns.

"Uh...there are no clouds, Sir." Lodan gulps.

Dragonfire removes his helmet and all three look up into the sky and see a sinister shadow coalescing in front of the sun. Slowly, the shadow takes form into a huge figure...growing closer with every moment to them.

"I think we've got problems." Dragonfire is the one gulping now.

"You think?" Donoval queries, his nervousness adding the sharpness back to his voice.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 3, Group C: Confronting Shadowed Fears

Author's Note: Episode 3, Group C: Confronting Shadowed Fears
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

"Hand me my lance!" Dragonfire orders, his face suddenly congealing in purpose as the shadowy figure comes nearer the company.

"No." Donoval snaps, still angry. To add emphasis, he throws the lance to the ground.

"What?!" Dragonfire glares down from his horse. "Give me the lance,

Donoval! Or I am going to kill you!"

"Threaten me, you twit? I ought to turn you into a locust!" Donoval returns sourly. "Nobody threatens me...not so long as I am an all powerful wizard!"

"Stop acting like a spoiled brat and hand me my lance!" Dragonfire barks, having no time for this. If the wizard wants to argue, there are better times and places to bring it up...not when there is danger fast approaching. Quarrels can wait for later, Dragonfire muses angrily.

"Wish me to prove my power, fool knight?" Donoval replies angrily. "I shall stop this shadowed beast on my own... Pray that after I am done, I shall not still be angry or it shall go badly with you!"

"Are you sure about this, Donoval?" Lodan queries unsuredly.

"Oh do be quiet until I do this, or you will anger me as well!" Donoval shouts, raising his hands, he sings loudly into the shadowed oblivion above.

A dull wind whips the wizard's ragged hair back and pushes the jester against Dragonfire's horse... Dragonfire puts his helmet back on for protection, struggling to pull his heavy sword from it's sheath.

"Shadows upon the day to fall,
Come forth...listen to my call.
Stop on command thine immortal plunge,
Before my countenance explode thy lunge.
May you're existence be dimminishing,
From this plane but an imagining!!"

His Darksong pours forth, sweeping like lightening into the sky. With a crackling like a thousand forest fires, the song folds into the shadow...enlarging and enompassing it. The shadow shrieks in pain and is pulled rapidly toward Donoval. The shadow shrinks steadily as it careens toward the scarlet dubletted wizard...

"Watch out, Donoval!" Dragonfire jerks free the sword, slashing at the shadow as it plunges past him. The sword passes through the shadow creature like air and, unstayed, it slams down upon Donoval's chest.

The shadow crackles and melts into the Donoval's dublet, incorporating blurringly fast into his clothing and then, shockingly, the shadow spreads like death to his skin. Before his companions realize what has happened, the shadow sinks entirely into Donoval. His eyes shut for just a moment...and there is an unearthly silence as the wind dies.

Then, Donoval's eyes flicker open...and his pupil's are as darkest as the blackest shadows!! Dragonfire shudders backwards and Lodan steps away from the wizard.

"You once mocked me...made me carry your lance! Well, no more!!"
Donoval's voice thunders. "Prepare to meet the Wizard who will end your miserable existences!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Dragonfire and Lodan look in horror at the creature that now stands before them...cloaked in Donoval's body, yet buring no resemblance in personality. No longer insolent and whiny...he exudes only darkest power and rage!

"Uh...Dragonfire, I think I'll let you take care of this." Lodan nods rapidly, backing away.

"Thanks." Dragonfire replies darkly.

Subj: Episode 4, Group C: The Shadows of the Soul

Author's Note: Episode 4, Group C: The Shadows of the Soul
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

The power hungry roar suddenly dies in Donoval's throat and the shadows play across his eyes once more...his body convulses again, falling down upon the ground. He drops to his knees, his saliva spilling from the side of his mouth onto the sod. He shakes there a moment and then his body is still.

Dragonfire clambors off his horse, kneeling quickly as his heavy armor will allow beside the wizard. Pulling loose his gauntlet, he checks the pulse of the fallen Donoval.

"Lodan, help grab his feet!" Dragonfire orders tersely, grabbing the wizard's arms.

"Is he d-dead?" The jester stammers, walking around the horse.

"No, but we need to get him somewhere where he can recover." Dragonfire replies as Donoval's legs are hoisted up by Lodan.

"OK...lift with me. We need to get him atop the horse." Dragonfire helps pick up the man with the jester.

Together, they move him toward the horse.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 5, Group C: Beyond the Edge

Author's Note: Episode 5, Group C: Beyond the Edge
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)
(Cameo: Robert Randall as Quix'huityr)

The darksong throbs through the cave...the beat hums and slaps across the stone of it...and slowly the man on the slab opens his eyes to the world around him.

Donoval notices a dull throbbing pain in the back of his head, but, aside from that, he feels alive. Through the smoke of the cavern, he sees flickering torches, the tips of their flames melting into vapor as they writhe upon their shafts. His companions stand a little ways away from him, huddled and talking in low voices...the flickering torchlight outlining their dirty faces in golden sapphire. Dragonfire looks as though he hasn't slept for days, his gray-blue eyes dull and sunken...though, Lodan appears fairly alert, his blue eyes sparking through the dirty hair which hangs down his face.

Nearby, a huge, muscular man wearing only a ragged loincloth, assorted shell jewelry, and a massive multi-colored mask--which was tufted with rainbow feathers and bore protruding coconut eyeballs--dances in large motions and gestures.

"Yahhm..bahmmmm....slzas...nazamum!" The guttural intonation of the man in the mask rumbles out as he slammed his feet against the ground, his shell anklets clattering. Behind him, a rhythmic beat thump-kerthumps and Donoval could faintly see another member of the dancing man's tribe beating on a drum.

"Bohanna....sombana...morvana...banana...anaconda...bomadana."

"M...MOVE!" The voice which rumbles from Donoval's throat shutters a moment and then rumbles out, like the embodiment of an earthquake. The cave shakes with the sound. Everyone in the room suddenly stops doing whatever they have been doing...looking at him in shock.

"Donoval...is that you?" Dragonfire asks hesitantly, peering into the gloom.

"OF COURSE IT'S ME." The voice rumbles out like an earthquake once more, shaking the building. Everyone shudders and he puzzled over why his voice was so loud.

"Well...a...that's amazing!" The large man with the mask states, pulling off the mask and revealing a freckled face and a bright shock of redhair, gleaming copper in the torchlight.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Donoval's voice thunders again.

"Could you stop shouting? You're liable to make me go deaf! And I have a really big gig at the Nadan Festival!" The bare-chested redhead returns, rubbing his ears. "I am Quix'huityr...and that's my band: Bondon! He plays the leathery thing there that I move my feet for." The other tribesman lifts a many braceleted arm and waves from the drum. "I'm the most powerful Dance-Sorcerer in all the Rodanni tribes! I make Darksong come to life with my beat and my feet!" Pauses a moment and grins, "Hey, did you hear that? Beat...feet! That rhymed. Maybe I

ought to be a poet!"

"WOULD YOU TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY I CAN'T STOP SHOUTING?" Donoval asks.

"Don't know. Never happened like this before." Quix'huityr shrugs.

"Too much bad mumbo jumbo. Your companions tell me you got jumped by the shadow creature. Bad muska, that is! However, you haven't changed all that much...for all that's happened."

"HAS ANYTHING ELSE CHANGED?" Donoval queries, hard edged.

"You bet." Lodan bursts out from the corner. "You should see yourself!"

"Come over here to my pool...I'll show you." The dance-sorcerer instructs.

Getting up painfull from the slab of rock he has spent the past however long on, Donoval's bones creak loudly. He puts his bare feet on the ground, glancing down to see that he is only wearing a loincloth now as well. Wincing at that, he pulls himself to his feet and lets Quix'huityr lead him to a little pool in the back of the cavern. Peering down, he is shocked to see that he is indeed different. His brown hair has turned completely black...as undifinable as pure shadow.

And on his chest, a triangle of pitch black throbs with ocherous power...like something alive.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 6, Group C: Priorities

Author's Note: Episode 6, Group C: Priorities
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)
(Cameo: Robert Randall as Quix'huityr)

Lodan watches as Donoval raises his hands tentatively...touching the black patch of shadow upon his chest. Black lightning crackles from the patch, encircling Donoval's hands in a dazzling display of darklight--yet it doesn't seem to cause the wizard any pain. The metamorphosis to this man is amazing to behold, at least in Lodan's opinion. Besides the hair as black as night and the shadowed patch on his chest, the disguised weaponsbearer now seems to be a good bit more substantial...as though he is unmovable in his stance...and, yet, he doesn't look any more muscular than he ever has before.

It had been touch and go the night before, Lodan thought to himself. Dragging the unconscious Donoval onto the horse had been like dragging a ton of pure lead bricks...as though the shadow creature which had collided with the man had somehow quadrupled his weight in the process.

Then they had had to steady his heavy body with the horse grunting under the strain as they trudged through the night. The rain had come after a time and it had turned the dirt on the trail to mud so that, with every step they took, they had been covered with the viscuous substance. Eventually the rain had stopped and the clouds parted, but it had still been well past midnight, with the moon low in the sky when they finally came across the outlying village which Quix'huityr was the dance sorcerer for. They had had to be directed by some tribal member--whose house they had banged into--to the dance sorcerer's hut.

The tribal sorcerer had taken the burden from them and they had slept soundly the night away...the village maidens stripping them to loincloths and washing their clothing. Later, they had put their clothing back on...though Donoval was quite apparently still in his loinskin as he stood in front of the pool with the energy crackling about his hands.

Lifting one of the hands around which the lightening still crackles, he shakes it and the darkening energy sloshes off like water...connecting in the air into a cohesive bolt and slamming into a clay figurine which sits next to the wall. The clay figurine explodes in a shower of shards which rain down about the room!

"Hey, watch that!" Quix'huityr objects suddenly. "That's a ceremonial whatcha-ma-thingey! That took me a month to make. You're gonna have to reimburse me for that."

"SHUT UP." Donoval returns, his voice booming again.

"Um...ok." The dance sorcerer winces from the noise.

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY VOICE?" Donoval returns, looking straight at the sorcerer.

"How should I know? I don't have no experience with any of these shadow thingies!" Quix'huityr returns. "Try that stupid magic you just did...maybe that'll take it away, or something."

"Um, maybe that's not such a good idea," Lodan points out from where he stands near Dragonfire.

"SHUT UP, LODAN." The wizard's eyes are dark as he glares balefully at the jester. "IN CASE IT'S ESCAPED YOUR ATTENTION, I'M HAVING A REALLY BAD DAY!"

Turning back toward the pool, the sorcerer puts his hands to his chest and, as the power surges around his finger tips, sings in a booming echo:

"FROM THIS POWER UPON MY CHEST,
BANISH FOR AT MY BEHEST,
THIS LOUDNESS WHICH I DETEST,

NE'ERMORE TO UPON ME REST."

Energy bursts from the shadowed patch, lancing through him until his entire body is writhing with cords of black lightning and his back arches painfully. A scream like the scream of the damned breaks his lips and every piece of pottery in the hut shatters. And the corded lightning bursts forth, wrapping around itself and snapping like a whip over his head... Then, as quickly as it has come, the lightning weakens and pulses back in on itself, returning to its shadowed home in Donoval's chest.

Donoval falls to his knees, smoke rising from the ground beneath his feet...he kneels there quivering for a moment, then shakes his head. Finally, he apparently regains his energy enough to stand to his feet...and slowly gets up.

"I think...that...did...it." He says slowly, his voice staccato.

"Auuughhhhhh!" Quix'huityr screams out, now that it is apparent he's not about to die in the power outlash of the past spell and now that he sees the disaster of destroyed pottery around the hut. "That pottery took me years to make! Get out of here...you...you!!" He sputters, apparently trying to think of something bad enough to say. "...You...you...nosebeaters!"

With that, Lodan quickly finds the group being shoved out into the elements by the now-irate dance sorcerer.

"But we didn't do anything," Lodan protests as they are pushed out into the blinding sunlight.

"I think it's a lost cause," Dragonfire winces, grabbing up his helmet and putting it back on his head. "Give it up, Lodan."

And, with the slam of the hut's door, they find themselves outside once more.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 7, Group C: The Road to Rage

Author's Note: Episode 7, Group C: The Road to Rage
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

"So, are you starting to notice any other effects from that shadow thing?" Lodan asks for what must be the millionth time.

Donoval scowls but says nothing, stalking along with the shadow cloak tucked tightly about him. He created the bizarre cloak soon after they were thrown out of the dance sorcerer's home. Apparently, he was able to gain mastery of the shadows enough to cause them to form around him

in a solid cloak. Aside from that, Dragonfire hasn't noticed the wizard doing much so far in the way of magic...seeming more apt simply to concentrate on the road ahead of him, attempting to ignore the jester.

The evening sun beats hard upon the group as they make their way through the now dry roads away from the Quix'huityr's home village of Calsor. The knight is beginning to notice that Donoval has become more and more preoccupied as the journey has progressed. And not just due to the heat, Dragonfire surmises from his hot mount, sweat beading down his face.

Beyond that, the wizard seems angry...perchance due to being thrown out of the hut so rudely, or maybe due to some other reason. Whatever the reason, he is decidedly out of sorts now--and the fact that Lodan can't seem to keep his mouth shut pestering the wizard doesn't seem to be helping things.

"Y'know, I have a cousin who supposedly got possessed by shadows," Lodan adds helpfully, kicking at a rock ahead in the road with one of his curl-toed slippers. "They say she went totally insane and had to be locked away. Think that might happen to you? If so, we'll miss you....but, if not, that's Ok and..."

Dragonfire wishes the jester would shut up and pay attention to the fact that Donoval's about to blow his top if he doesn't get left in peace. However, observation has never been Lodan's best skill...nor is tact or diplomacy, which ruled out asking him quietly to can the commentary.

Much as a clockwork can be accurately gauged, so could the anger building in Donoval be accurately gauged, visibly building in him. Lodan's comments weren't the only irritant, of that Dragonfire was sure now...something festered deep within the wizard's soul. Something which would cause him to explode at the closest available person: Lodan.

And, after a time, the expected outburst from Donoval finally comes. Whirling, the wizard screams at the jester...

"Would you just..." The anger builds like lava in the wizard, until it froths and bubble in his eyes. "...SHUT UP!!!" The words thunder from his mouth and as he loses control, his rage apparently overtaking him, his eyes fill with shadow once more!

The shadow cloak merges with his shadowed eyes, folding in on the wizard and giving him gargantuan stature. Black lightning crackles around his huge body and a gargantuan hand like a claw lifts itself up.

This time, Dragonfire frees his sword quickly, spurring his horse toward the shadow beast!

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 8, Group C: What Was Lost...

Author's Note: Episode 8, Group C: What Was Lost...
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

The rage pours through Donoval's veins and hatred colors his view, tinting it all dark in the aftermath. Shadows play across his vision and dark, whispery voices call to power in his mind. He longs to let the power consume him...to become one with him. The darkest desires and hopes of his soul. The desire to be anything that people would remember...dangerous and ominous... Why should he want to be anything to these people?! His mind shrieks in gleeful fury.

Better to destroy them and rewrite history! History was written by the conquerors...and with this newfound power, he could be one of those conquerors! Humanity was worthless anyway...he hated them all. Let them all cower before him if they would!

In his exalted grand thralls of mental activity and musing, he was unaware that, even now, he was throwing thunderbolts at his companions. They were just so many shadows in his vision...vision which was becoming consumed by the night. Shadows so deep that a person could get lost for eternity...yet power so great that they could throw all those who opposed them away. Who needed other power!

As the shadow's song pours through his mind, a part of Donoval realizes how twisted it all is. And, at that moment, he sees past the shadows...sees his companions crouched in fear...trying not to have to hurt him, and yet afraid lest he kill them. They were terrified...

Screaming as loud as any demon spawn, the tormented creature Donoval had become turns and runs into the night...the sound of his own ragged breathing intermingling with the threats of the voices. The promises...

He runs until he can run no more...and yet the voices scream! Calling to him. He falls to his knees, then to his stomach, trying to plug his ears as he does. He pants and pants...laying their, suddenly powerless in the wake of the shadows...

Finally, he falls asleep.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 9, Group C: ...Now Is Found.

Author's Note: Episode 9, Group C: ...Now is Found.
(Group C: Dragonfire--Jeremy, Lodan--Nathan, Donoval--Chris)

The lively roar of the water contrasts with still tableau in front of Dragonfire's eyes. Lodan slides off the horse next to him, gasping.

The man that lays here seems piteable now...though he was fearsome so

short a time ago. The shadow cape which had shrouded him has dissipated and his feet and calves are torn bloodily by the night's run through rocks and brambles. Self-inflicted cuts and lacerations trace a crimson road map around his chest and abdomen...with dirt now mixed into the blood to make a hardening copper crust. His loincloth is rumpled and his companions look away, not wanting to see more of their companion than they care to. A pool of drying mud from the drool which has dripped from his mouth encircles his head in the dust and his ribs slowly rise and fall with his breath.

And, just ahead, barely a hundred meters away, a mighty river roars.

"Should we help him up?" Lodan asks softly.

"Of course," Dragonfire removes his helmet and rolls his eyes a moment. Typical, he thinks, then he sets the helmet atop the large saddle of the warhorse. The horse whinnies softly in the morning air.

With that, the huge knight moves over to the sleeping Donoval... He shakes his fallen companion on the shoulder, one hand lingering on the hilt of his sword in case he be waking the shadow beast instead.

"Wh-what-t-t?" Donoval's voice creaks out rustily as he shakes his head and begins to try to spit the dirt out of his mouth, sputtering like a cat hacking up a hairball.

"Donoval, are you OK?" Dragonfire asks, looking into the sorcerer's eyes.

"Wh-who's Donoval?" The man asks, his voice now as blank as his eyes. "You're Donoval!" Lodan nods, peering above the two.

"I am?" The man's face remains blank.

-----To Be Continued!-----

Subj: Episode 10, Group C: Forget-Me Not

Episode 10, Group C: Forget-Me Not

(Group C: Dragonfire -- Jeremy, Lodan -- Nathan, Donoval -- Chris, Galengran -- Jon)

Donoval's eyes remain blank and unknowing, even as the campfirelight flickers across his lacerated face. Dragonfire makes the tea with care, Lodan handing him the brewing pot with a rag around it's iron handle to stave off burning.

The water hisses like a serpent, steam billowing from the clay cup, as it emerges the herbs...and a fragrance like cinnamon and aloe washes forth. The wizard grabs the cup in shivering hands, gulping down the contents as fast as he is able without burning his lips and sighs...his body stilling for a moment as the warm washes over him.

“Don’t you remember a thing?” Lodan asks curiously, rocking back on his haunches, peering across the fire.

“I remember only finding myself at the bank of a river...with you two looking at me.” Donoval returns, a sharpness comes to his voice at the need for the repetition of this unchanging answer. “Who I am or where I hail from, I cannot recall. It might as well have been that I was born full-formed from the earth upon that muddied bank this day as had anything else happen to me in my life. You claim I am Donoval and a wizard...but neither of those hold any truth to me. I dislike the thought that I should have so awful a name or work at so innane a position. If it be so, you shall need to prove it to me...”

Dragonfire sighs and rises to his feet, looking around into the night...feeling almost as though there is something watching them. He puts on his helmet out of habit and peers for whatever might out there. He knows not what it could be...but it feels as though it is there. Lodan notices his companions apparent concern...as well as his annoyance with the now memorieless Donoval. As usual, the wizard is being difficult...even if he doesn’t have his old memories with him.

From out of nowhere, deep purple light suddenly echoes forth...coalescing into a crackle of energy which snaps across Dragonfire’s armor! And before Lodan even is able to rise to attempt aid to his friend, the huge knight changes...morphs before his eyes into a slim elf with a shock of bright red hair and flashing blue eyes, all clad in silks and looking with terror in his gaze.

“Where am I?” The man looks around in confusion.

Lodan brings his sword to bear as he finishes his rise, his teeth gritting.

“The correct question is, who are you?!” The jester’s eyes narrow. “And what did you do with Dragonfire?!”

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 11, Group C: Re-allying

Episode 11, Group C: Re-allying
(Group C: Lodan -- Nathan, Donoval -- Chris, Galengran -- Jon)

Being sucked out of his castle had done little to improve Galengran's overall opinion on life. First the assassins then this... It had taken every diplomatic skill in his body to get the crazy court jester to put down his sword and not kill him. Now, as he looks down at the brooding embers of the morning fire, he wonders even more why he's come here.

Meanwhile, the man called Donoval seems to do nothing more than stare into space...his gaze darkly turned to the ground, the embers alive in

his eyes. A brown cloak is thrown over him, but, beneath the half-open front of the cloak, there pulses a heart of darkness across the man's ribcage. Galengran shudders, wondering what seems to possess the man.

The jester, his blonde hair plastered to his head by dirt and sweat combined with the tattered tri-tailed hat, turns a piece of meat on a spit over the reddened coals.

Away in the distance, over a hill, the sun is rising...turning the sky to the crimson of the sparking embers. The wispy clouds which line the edge of the sky seem torn like pulled fleece and dyed with blood. Beyond the reach of the scarlet rays of the rise, the sky retreats to pure violet and then black, specks of whitest light still visible in the ebony remnant of night.

There is a chill to the morning, and Galengran wishes he had had a chance to bring something a little more sturdy than his silken suit of elven office, which, while beautiful, did little to stay the chill. He scoots closer to the fire.

"You feeling alright this morning, elf prince?" Lodan asks, raising his voice so it carries past the sound of the rushing river which flows scarcely a score yards distant. Apparently, Galengran's movement has brought him to the attention of the jester.

"I suppose," Galengran shrugs. "Don't really know how much better I will feel so far from the palace, especially with Nyrtzian on the loose."

"You mentioned that last night." Lodan nods, a shrewd look on his face. "So you need us to catch this nursingian thing? One of your sorceress released it while she was trying to summon an elemental, you said. So, that's why you called Lord Jex? 'Cause you couldn't deal with it?"

"Nyrtzian." Galengran corrects sharply, unliking the implication in the last question. "I think tha--"

His voice suddenly breaks off as he looks eye to eye with the hitherto unresponsive Donoval! The man is now growling, saliva dripping down the side of his lips, and his eyes are consumed with shadow. His lips begin to curl and the growl changes to a snarl, the weaponbearer's hands wrenching into animalistic claws.

Galengran gulps, realizing that he is face to face with his prey at this very moment.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 12, Group C: Shadow Puppets

Episode 12, Group C: Shadow Puppets
(Group C: Lodan -- Nathan, Donoval -- Chris, Galengran -- Jon)

The elven prince leaps to his feet, wrenching for his sword before he realizes that he no longer has one. He blanches as Donoval rises, black energy crackling from his chest and eyes now. Shrugging his shoulders, the wizard causes the brown cloak to explode into tatters...and the shadow which throbs from his chest wraps around him, coalescing into a cowed cape of pure night.

"You have yet to pay for that which you owe me, Galengran," the man/beast snarls from his saliva bedecked lips.

Galengran gulps again, recognizing the voice from his past. And, in his heart, he hopes the creature doesn't gain vengeance for that which it is entitled to. For that which it is entitled to is great... And Galengran regrets ever being foolish enough to torment a creature simply because it was locked in another realm of space. No prison is truly inescapable, especially with enough time. And now, the creature has all the advantages.

Lodan stands by the wayside, looking somewhat surprised by the emergence of the shadow creature...but not nearly as much as Galengran would have assumed he should have.

"Come on, Donoval," Lodan states matter of factly, a tone of condescension in his voice as though he's talking to a small child. "You tried this trick last time... It didn't work and you all but got yourself killed in the escape. The same thing will happen to you--"

"Jester, how the man Donoval has kept from strangling you, I don't know," the creature hisses, looking entirely unlike the man who's body inhabits. "However, I suffer no such compunctions." With that, like a beast who has been incited from a direction he didn't anticipate but likes one target as well as another, he turns on the jester.

"So be it...I must trounce you then," Lodan nods, sheathing his weapon. "However, out of respect for Donoval, I will not kill you however."

"What are you saying?!" Galengran turns on the jester, frenzy in his eyes. "Kill him! Kill him! If you don't kill him, he'll kill you."

"Donoval would never kill me." Lodan assures him confidently, a tight smile on his lips.

"Forget Donoval...this creature wears your friend's body, but that is all that remains!" Galengran shouts tersely. "He has already killed your friend..."

"I don't believe that," Lodan's eyes narrow, shaking his head.

"Then give me the sword and I'll kill him!" Galengran screams.

"Why are you so anxious to die?" The Nyrtzian asks, turning back to

Galengran. A shadow shrouded hand flicks out to the elven princes chest, and thoughtful amusement runs across Donoval's face. "I'll kill you soon enough. I am not short of memory...I remember all the times you tortured me. You thought you were safe...but you shall be no longer. I will show you the true definition of pain!" He chuckles humorlessly, then turns back to the jester.

"Oh, well, now...attack!" Lodan nods, giving his opponent the first strike.

"If I strike first, it takes away the sport," Donoval's eyes are shadow but his mouth snickers darkly. "You attack, boy."

Angered at the demeaning term, Lodan kicks a mighty roundkick into Donoval's head... He might as well have kicked a brick armoire for all the good it did. Dancing back in pain, Lodan winces on his now tender foot.

"It's been good fighting with you, old man, but prepare to die!" Donoval raises one of his hands high into the air...shadow converging around it in the form of a giant claw.

Terror shines for the first time in Lodan's eyes and Galengran winces.

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 13, Group C: Flight Into the Day

Episode 13, Group C: Flight Into the Day
(Group C: Lodan -- Nathan, Donoval -- Chris, Galengran -- Jon)

The shadow rolls into a claw, about to slash down at the hapless Lodan. Then, as though a new thought flashes behind the shadows of his eyes, the beast shoves the jester away violently.

"Save yourself, Lodan!" The beast shrieks, the shadows receding from his eyes for a moment. And, for a moment, in the midst of the shadow, Donoval was back...

Then, with a shriek, he leaps back and runs toward the river. Shadow bursts from the pulsing center of his chest, ripping out across the river. Shadow pulses for a moment and then coalesces into shadow bridge...

With another scream, Donoval runs onto the bridge, speeding away...

-----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 16 - Groups A, B, C: A Shift of Acts

The night moon rises high and clear above the plains...the sky aglow

with purpled miasma of midnight black blended with silvered moonlight.
The trees silhouette like wraiths against the sky...

Below the high sky, Donoval shifts in his sleep...the shadow brooding about his form. It flits and snaps in its darkness...a caged and angry beast of prey. Bound to this mortal, it shrieks silently in the night. No one can hear it...or the rage which washes through it. The hate it feels beats so strongly within it that it is all but washing the beast away!

If only it could loose this human from it...it is tired of it. But it is as inextricably bound to him as he is to it. Unless... The shadow thinks...pouring through it's darkened mind into the lore it contains within itself. Of a long-lost spell...to push out the intruders in the land. To push this one from him...

And as the spell pours forth from the beast...shadow builds around it... And suddenly, with a gust of darkened power, energy bursts forth from it's form... Consuming with it the form of Donoval.

The gust of energy whips across the land...whipping from the face of the land other heroes...Talia Jenea...Celestia...Lodan... Dragonfire...Darshek...and many others.

And, as suddenly as they have come, they are gone. The shadow beast laughs evilly to itself. The land is it's to attack now...

"Hello, old man," the elven wizard's voice echoes suddenly near the now-unshielded shadow creature.

The beast whirls in horror...to see it's old nemesis, Dharvell. How did he find it??? The shadow-catcher the wizard holds is already activated...the prism ripping into the beasts inner portions.

And, with another silent scream, the beast is pulled into the inner recesses of the catcher...back to it's otherworldly prison to scream.

Those displaced by the shadow's spell shift through an ethereal void...pulled toward a new horizon...a new dimension in the infinitely branching tree of time and space. And, as they arrive in this reality, they forget who they were...what they used to be... All that remains, is their names...and infinite mysteries for them to discover about themselves.

In the City of New Paris...the rain drips from the broken down eaves of an duracrete builing. The sound of someone screaming tears through the misty air of the night streets.

Talia Jenea shakes her long mane behind her, shuddering as she pulls the trench coat tighter about her silver evening gown. There has to be a better job than a lounge singer in the java dives down here, she muses nervously. She reaches a hand into the purse which hangs from her shoulder...checking the blaster she keeps cocked there. Should do, for now...she thinks. And walks down the street, stepping past the potholes...and trying to keep the hem of her gown out of the infested puddles.

----To Be Continued-----

Subj: Episode 17: Prepared to Perk -- Groups A, B & C

Silence.

Nothing stirred in the office of Darshek Reklaw, P.I., save the second hand's slow rotation on the antiquated clock which hung on the wall and Darshek Reklaw's retinas as they looked up at the clock, then back down to his desk, then around the simple room--looking for something...anything...to happen.

Even the holo-scenes, which were projected behind the clear glass of the realistic-looking "windows" in the office and showed a street scene of the ancient city of Chicago in the 1920's, weren't displaying any action. Thinking darkly that there was probably a glitch in the projector's digital circuitry, Darshek sighed in disgust. It would be just another disappointment in an already disappointing day.

The tall, lean man rubbed his hand through his curly, brown hair, replaying over in his mind for the millionth time how this day had come about in the first place...

A floating rift which existed in a netherworld...a fragment of space and time which is completely separate from all known dimensions and is called..."The Crossroads." It is said of those who claim much, that the Crossroads are the hub of time/space from which all dimensions branch forth...a hub which inherently carries nothing. However, within this nexus of supposed nothingness resides a capsule of time and space known only as "The University." A section of a dimension long forgotten, the original founders of The University knowingly rent the fabric of space and time on which it once stood with new technologies to escape the darkness and turmoil their dimension was in over a thousand years ago. The intact section of cosmic fabric on which the University was situated, drifted toward the vacuumous nothingness of The Crossroads like a toy boat drifts toward a tub's drain when the stopper is pulled. There it has resided ever since.

It is within the buildings which comprise the physicality of the University that Darshek Reklaw resides. A student and resident, he

walked the manicured lawns between the expansive, ancient brick buildings wondering what life must have been like when their was more to the world than just this campus floating in the abyss of nothingness...when he could have looked into the sky above the campus and seen stars and moons, instead of the oily black which covered the sky, oozing up from the horizons, and required that special lights be kept constantly flooding the walkways and byways of the community. At times it grew so dull here that Darshek wished for the old days...when there were more things to do...anything to break the dullness...

A rabid reader of stories of the Old World, specifically mysteries and detective stories, Darshek had been persuaded to consider breaking the monotony the University at times offered and bring back a profession which dimensions and centuries had long since forgotten: the private investigator. Basing his view of ancient investigators largely on an early 20th century fictional PI called "Dixon Hill", as well as gaining a tremendous amount from tales of Sherlock Holmes and Elliot Ness, Darshek had decided that...with the proper set-up...he too could become ensconced in the provocative and exciting life of a PI.

He had gained the use of a room in an unused building at the University from the Administration and been granted the right to refurbish it in any way he chose. With the help of his ever present buddy, and admitted "lackey", Donoval, they had remodeled the two little rooms the Administration had allotted them. Choosing to make the rooms look as though they were literally from the 1920's, they had managed to sim-fab an antique desk, a creaking leather chair that rocked back, a couple of leather, straight-backed chairs, a coat rack, and a wooden door with a glass pane in it which bore the black title, "Darshek Reklaw, P.I." and which had a pull-down blind behind the glass...not to mention the faux-"windows" which showed street scenes of Chicago and the antique clock with the actually moving "hands."

Then he and Donoval had pre-fabbed a couple of old-style trenchcoats, shoulder holsters, suits with matching fedoras, and pairs of polished wing-tips. The only things that they dressed in that did not appear to come from that time in human history known as the 1920's were the high powered blasters which they had stuffed in their holsters.

Illegally stealing a dimensional portal generator that the University still had cold-stored in a long-abandoned tunnel which wound beneath the campus, Darshek and Donoval had set the thing up in the anteroom in front of the door to Darshek's office, so that, if anyone came through the portal from another dimension, the first thing they saw would be the door in front of them bearing the words, "Darshek Reklaw, PI," printed on its glass pane. With that set up, all the two of them had to do was turn the thing on and test it out.

After a few days of testing it and Donoval, who happened to be a mathematics and circuitry genius, making a couple adjustments, they were reasonably sure that the thing worked properly. As he had long since decided that most of his clientele would come from other dimensions

where life wasn't nearly as peaceful and monotonous as it was here at the University, Darshek's desire was that the generator flash an open portal on every available world with a glowing sign above the portal which would tell where the portal lead and to whom. As there are as many different dimensions per core dimension as their are possible decisions for every sentient being in that core dimension and in its branching dimensions to make, such a plan would be impossible...however, Donoval was able to jury-rig the generator so that it could flash the portal in five million dimensions at any one time and then built in a randomizer so that it would, after the portal was open for an hour in any dimension, rotate to another dimension...and so on, thus enabling the greatest number dimensions to be served.

With this decided, Darshek...feeling a tremendous sense of excitement...had had Donoval power up the generator and waited for his first client to step out of the portal to knock on his door...

And waited...

And waited...

....and waited...

...and waited...and waited...and waited...

Now he had been waiting for over six hours and no one had come through the portal yet.

Darshek was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea after all. Why should this great plan of his work, anyway? It had seemed so cool when he and Donoval had been thinking about it...but now that it was set up, he wasn't so sure how brilliant it actually was. Maybe it was just another stupid idea come up with by a number 1 slacker and his equally slacking friend...

Darshek sighed as the old arguments he had heard all his life which had discouraged him every time he had ever tried anything once again played through his mind. Sometimes he felt like such a loser.

As he sat mired in his sad reverie, the portal in the anteroom suddenly crackled with life, flashing bright carnelian light through the plate window in the door for a moment. Darshek bolted up in his chair, his blood instantly pounding in his ears in excitement and not a little trepidation, his hand sliding beneath his suit jacket to the butt of his blaster...just in case.

The emergence from the portal was no strange creature or mysterious man from another dimension, but instead was the familiar, buzz-haired, trench coat- and fedora-clad figure of his friend, Donoval. He now carried a couple of flat boxes covered with printing in his hands...

"Yo, man...Darshek. You gotta check this out." Donoval declared without preamble, turning his wiry figure slightly so he could bump open the door with his butt, and walked into Darshek's office, dropping the hot, steaming boxes on the polished mahogany of the desk. "Real pizza, bro! Not that cardboard crap, like they serve in the Cafeteria...but REAL pizza like our ancestors used to eat! It's da bomb, man!"

"Yo!...Yo!" Darshek stood up and slapped his friend on the back of the head, an irked look on his face. "What'd I tell you about using that portal?"

"Huh?" A dumb look flashed blankly on Donoval's face.

"I said not to use it." Darshek reminded, shaking his hand at his friend in exasperation and then continuing, "It's just for customers, bonehead!" He shook his head again and sat back down, disappointed that someone more intriguing hadn't appeared. "When did you get into that thing, anyway? I didn't leave where I've been sitting since we opened..."

"Uh...yeah, you did." Donoval shook his head in disagreement, raising his eyebrows in exasperation. "When you had to go to the john and you had me watch the portal for you. I got hungry--"

"You're always getting hungry!" Darshek interjected.

"So do you!" Donoval responded indignantly. "Just 'cause I was the first one to use my head well enough to think to use that portal generator to get some munchies--"

"The portal generator you weren't supposed to be using in the first place!" Darshek interrupted, standing back to his feet again so that he could carry on the animated conversation with his friend with less restriction.

"A portal generator I helped fix, let me remind you." Donoval pointed out.

"Well... Who found the portal generator in the first place?" Darshek in turn reminded him, making a mock-questioning expression on his face.

"Yeah, that's right." Donoval admitted momentarily and then came back with, "But who found out where the tunnel was in the first place? Hmmmm?"

"Yeah but--" Darshek's next comment was cut off in his throat as he suddenly realized that he and Donoval were no longer the only one's standing in his office...

A striking red-head in a low-cut, emerald dress wearing six-inch heels was now standing in the doorway--slits on either side of her long skirt

cutting all the way up to the middle of her alabaster thighs. Darshek gulped...forgetting his next statement entirely.

"Pardon me, boys...Am I intruding?" The voice was breathed through full, sensuous lips, carrying a vague accent which neither Darshek nor Donoval could identify. They both looked over in shock at the woman. A deep green hat with a black veil partially obscured her face, yet her lips were clearly visible...crimson as fresh blood.

Gulping, Darshek tried to recover his demeanor, straightening from the slightly bent position he had just been in.

"Why of course not, Ma'am." He smiled and swept the pizza summarily off the table with his left hand. As Donoval scrambled helter-skelter for the pizza...catching it just barely before it was splattered across their new office's walls...Darshek stepped smoothly around the desk, nimbly avoiding Donoval at his feet, and extended his hand to the woman, saying suavely, "Darshek Reklaw..." He paused a moment for effect. "Pl...at your service, ma'am."

She graciously took his hand, her grip feeling surprisingly chill to Darshek. Smiling again in return, he asked, "Would you like to have a seat, miss...??"

"La Chatte. Ms. Telana la Chatte." She replied helpfully, smiling softly.

"Ms. la Chatte." Darshek nodded and pulled out one of the leather chairs for her to sit on. "Of course."

With that he walked around his desk once more, sitting in his own chair. "And this is my associate," he waved his right hand vaguely to indicate Donoval who was still trying to get control of all the pizza boxes, "Mr. Leinad."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Donoval nodded to her, having all he could do to keep the pizza boxes in his hands from falling to the ground. With that, he hurried out the door to see if he couldn't get rid of the pizza's somewhere.

"A strange chap," Ms. la Chatte observed after Donoval had left.

"But as good as they come, let me attest to that," Darshek nodded, then decided to get down to business. "So, what can I help you with, ma'am?"

"A murder." The words rolled off her tongue like the icy chill of death itself, sinking its frigid grip into the bonemarrow of all those who heard. "I need you to find the slimeball who killed my brother."

"So that the appropriate authorities can throw him into prison?" Darshek queried sympathetically, intrigued as much by the lovely woman as by the assumed sadness of the story she was now alluding to.

"No." Her voice remained dispassionate as she continued, "I want you to find him..." She paused.

"...So that I can kill him with my bare hands."

Darshek gulped, the temperature in the office seeming to drop to zero in the span of a second.

"I'll pay you three hundred per day with a thousand dollar advance and a hundred thousand purse after you've found me my brother's killer and I've had a chance to return the favor." She continued. With that, she slid one of her manicured hands into the neckline of her dress, pulling forth a wad of money. Holding it briefly with her scarlet-polished fingernails, she tossed it across the table top so it landed in front of Darshek. Then she produced a silvery cube in her hand, adding, "This'll tell you about the rogues you'll be up against as well as a little of the history of my dimension." She sent the holo-cube skittering across the table like a di in craps, Darshek catching the metallic cube in his hand and sticking it into a pocket of his wardrobe.

"All right." Darshek nodded briefly, starting to have serious doubts about what he had gotten himself into here.

"Does that mean you'll take the case?" The woman arched her eyebrows, the movement showing through the fish-net veil.

"Yes." Darshek replied confidently, feeling allot less sure of himself than his brief agreement would suggest.

"Thank you." She nodded, then rose to her feet. "I will be back in the morning when you've had time to review the notes on the cube."

With that, she turned on her heel and walked out the door, departing through the portal in the anteroom, which crackled to life as the energy grid consumed her.

"Dimension #436321, Class #12, Type Standard." The holocube chirped to life as Darshek tapped the button at the base of the cube. Donoval, now back from discarding the pizzas, bent over Darshek's desk to get a better view of the strange device. "Nation of Origin: United Conglomeration of States...City of Origin: New Paris, Fayette..."

The box paused a moment and then a transparent globe appeared, floating in the air above it. For all intents and purposes, the globe looked fairly similar to maps that Darshek had once seen of the world the University had once been a part of. The view zoomed in close on a fairly large landmass which tapered off in peninsulas in the north and the south. The entire continental landmass the hologram showed turned pink and the words, "United Conglomeration of States", appeared in white

across it. A bright blue spot appeared on the nation in northeast section and the words, "New Paris", appeared in white next to it.

"Brief Synopsis of National History:" The box continued. "Discovered in the 1530's by the French explorer Phillippe Lacroix, the continent of New Europa was settled by French immigrants soon after. In 1682, the French Colonies gained their independence from France in a bloody war. While still staving off a scattering of privateers from Spain and the nearly annihilated country of England, the French colonists came up with a new treatise of governmental policy and declared themselves a new and separate country. Within a century, the entire continent of New Europa was a member of the U.C.S. The national language was French until, in the 1790's, the government began letting English refugees enter U.C.S. This choice would prove later to be the downfall of the French language...for within a hundred and twenty years, English had become so widely used that virtually none of the inhabitants of the U.C.S. spoke French any longer and it was no longer taught in the public schools. Later, the U.C.S. began to establish a name for technological and economic innovation and, up until the 2050's, the U.C.S. was the leading economic, technologic, and military nation in the world."

The box clicked a moment and then continued, "Summation of Directly Related National Events: In the year 2054, a drug cartel in Columbia began to realize the potential of a new drug which produced unimaginable narcotic effects in users: coffee. The coffee plant had long been thought to be only a weed to workers in Columbia. However, when it was discovered that grinding the beans of this plant down and running hot water through the coffee grounds produced a narcotic liquid which had ten times the effect of Nirvana and five times the addictiveness of the most addictive drugs, cartel leaders realized that they may have found the ultimate drug. No one had any clue of the addictive quality of those first few shipments of coffee beans as they passed through customs into the U.C.S. By the time it was realized that coffee was a powerful drug, it was too late to stop it...nearly 95 percent of the population had tried the new drink that was a fad at diners all across the country. Over 80 percent of the population had become coffee addicts, unable to control the cravings they had for the bitter drink. Customs checkpoints fell to shreds in the course of weeks as customs agents would let cartels haul shiploads of coffee into the country if they would only be allowed a few pounds of the brown beans, a grinder, and a percolator. Law enforcement collapsed as cops and detectives left their principles by the wayside to simply get another shot of the drink that was already developing a nickname: Java. With breaking the laws caring no penalties, the society of the U.C.S. declined into a state of crime, decay and gang warfare. Drug dealers dealing pounds and pounds of the lethal beans ruled sections of turf in every major city."

The box paused again. Darshek scratched his head trying to take all the information in and Donoval shook his head in disbelief.

"In the city of New Paris, the drug dealers who rule the streets are as follows:" The box flashed a picture of a beautiful blonde wearing a

black silk jumpsuit into the air, replacing the map. "Melinda Kecinzer. An ex-Kroznov agent from the old Russke-Asian Union, she went free-lance about five years ago and has become one of...if not THE...most feared drug czar in New Paris. She has a reputation for extreme dispassion and ice-cold ruthlessness."

The picture of Kecinzer was replaced by a holo of a tall, broad-shouldered man with ruddy cheeks and brown hair wearing a tuxedo.

"Jacques Privette." The box paused a second, then added, "Often known by his nickname, 'The Tenor', both because it is said he has an excellent voice and because he claims he always makes his victims 'sing' before he kills them. Beneath Kecinzer, he holds possibly the most clout in New Paris."

The picture of Privette was replaced by a holo of a wiry man with brown hair and a wispy goatee, wearing leather and holding two large, wicked looking gun. He looked more like a jazz musician than a drug boss.

"Thomas Brun." The box announced. "Also known as 'Tommy Two-Gun.' He is never seen anywhere without his twin Rapid-Fire blaster cannons. He is the last of the big drug dealers in New Paris."

The holo faded and the box asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"Um...Do you have a run-down on the people who work for the different drug bosses?" Darshek asked thoughtfully.

"Only a partial database of Melinda Kecinzer's employees are available from this database. It is possible that other databases may include more comprehensive data and information on the other drug dealers you seek. Do you wish to see the data which is available?"

"Yes." Darshek responded, nodding.

The box flashed in rapid succession the list of names, faces, and jobs of the various employees of Melinda Kecinzer:

A slight man with sandy brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses appeared. "Benjamin Wahs. Personal hacker for Melinda Kecinzer."

The next holo was of a tall, muscular man with shoulder length blonde hair and matching goatee, wearing a dark, double-breasted suit and mirrored sunglasses. "Jean Ydennek. Also known as 'The Iceman.' Personal hit man to Melinda Kecinzer."

A holo of a medium-size brunette wearing a white silk blouse with black silk pants and black slippers replaced the large enforcer's image. "Jane Sloan. Commonly known as 'The Right Arm of Kecinzer.' A kung-fu master and physical protector to Melinda Kecinzer."

The one after that was of a small, dark-haired, Jewish man with glasses

wearing a gray trenchcoat. "Robert Blankovitch. Coffee bean smuggler to Melinda Kecinzer."

The picture vanished, replaced by nothing.

"No other records are available."

Then there was silence.

The cluttered, falling-down streets of New Paris were clogged with misty puddles which slowly filled higher as a steady drizzle pocked their surfaces. A fog settled menacingly around the ramshackled and crumbling structures which composed the city, obscuring the night sky with its vapory grip. Lights shown uncertainly here and there in the distance, their flickering luminescence leaving hazy auras in the fog...revealing sections of the moss-grown and water-dripping concrete and durasteel which the buildings were constructed of. Somewhere, a high-pitched scream of terror sounded, its watery echo warbling for a moment and then...in deadly allusion...was silent.

The patter of the rain almost drown out the crackling noise the portal made as it appeared suddenly, its flashing luminescence bathing the fog in a bluish glow for a moment. Three figures stepped out of the portal and then it was gone.

"Uh...Donoval." For a second the hardened detective motif Darshek had assumed slipped and, due to his genuine worry, referred to his friend by his first name. "Are you sure you're going to be able to open that portal later when we need to get out of here?" Darshek ask, adjusting his fedora and pulling his trench coat tighter around his body, trying to keep out the forebodingly chill fog.

"Course I'm sure, Darshek." Donoval, then realizing that he had let his hardened detective's lackey motif slip, amended, "I mean, "Course I'm sure, Mr. Reklaw," before concluding with, "What do ya take me for? A loser?" Donoval returned archly, adjusting his own trench coat and fedora in imitation of his partner.

"You said it, man...not me." Darshek reminded him, raising his eyebrows in implication.

"Shut up, Reklaw." Donoval shook his head, his eyes narrowing.

"Follow me this way, if you would, boys," Ms. la Chatte turned on her heel and strode into the mist. The white dress and heels she now wore made it too easy to lose her in the fog, so Darshek and Donoval quickly sped up their gait so as not to be left behind.

They waded through the mist after her, stepping over massive cracks in the streets and leaping across puddles. Like shadowy wraiths scurrying

through the dim night, they hurried rapidly up a number of blocks of the shattered city. Every now and then, the muted flash of blaster fire could be seen off in the distance...followed often times by shrieks of pain...and, sometimes, sickening "Thudddd!"s. Trying to ignore the chaos, Darshek walked even more hurriedly after the copper-haired beauty.

After over a dozen blocks, the woman stopped.

"This is the building where my brother was murdered." Ms. la Chatte stated, indicating a tall building which rose high into the misty oblivion of the fog, until most of it was little more than a wavy silhouette to those who stood at its base. "Room 325." With these words, she pressed a silvery card into his hands. "Knowing New Paris, I doubt the cleaning staff will have touched the room." She laughed humorlessly. "When you have found the killer, use this transponder to contact me." She handed him another metallic cube, this one gleaming golden. "You have your advance and the rest of the money will be paid you when you have found my brother's murderer and I am satisfactorily done with him or her." With that, she turned once more and vanished into the fog.

"But waittttt..." Darshek's voice faded into the darkness...answered only by silence.

"This looks like the place," Donoval pointed toward the sunken recess in which a sliding, faux-wood door was mounted, metallic streaks peeking through the wood-colored enamel in places where years of sliding back and forth had allowed the coat to be worn down by friction points in the molding on the edge of the entrance. The tarnished, brassy plate at the top of the door, while bedraggled and hanging crooked, bore the numbers "325" still etched in its grimy surface.

Looking down the long-since fallen into disrepair hallway on either side of the door, Darshek nodded in agreement. "Yes, Mr. Leinad. I do believe this is the place." The Old World accent he assumed with these words would have made Donoval laugh if the setting in which they were murmured weren't so stark...the very air seemed to suck the humor from a man's soul like a vampire sucks the blood from his veins.

"'Sherlock Holmes', right?" Donoval asked softly, sliding his hand into his suit pocket to finger his blaster.

"Elementary, my dear Leinad. Now come," Darshek's eyes flashed dangerously as he pulled forth the access card in one hand and his blaster in the other. "The game is afoot!"

Whipping the card through the scanning bay set into the side of the door's molding, the door rumbled grudgingly to life and slid into the side recess groove, laying wide the inner room.

The stench of death assaulted Darshek's nose as he strode into the darkness, blaster flicking around the dim room...searching for anything that might present danger. Elbowing a light pad on his right, the light panels in the room flickered to life...soaking the room with an antiseptic glow--revealing the ghastly scene before them.

-----To Be Continued!-----