

Realtime

by

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DESCRIPTION: "Realtime," the cover story of the August 1984 issue of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.

Prologue: The beginning of the fourth millennium....

The sun still set as it had for all the thousands of years that humanity had existed. Darkness gathered at the windows, and the children of the race still shivered in their beds when the night winds brought them the scent of monsters.

And because the adults were busy, too busy to tend to the children, the children turned to the machines, and the computers told them stories.

On that cold, dark winter night, the little girl whose name was Cia did something she had never done before; she asked the dataweb to tell her a story, and she did not specify -- not the story, nor the teller.

A holograph appeared in her bedroom. It shone softly, and beat back the darkness that tried to creep in through the windows. It was the holograph of a man, dressed in historical costume. Cia wasn't sure from what period the costume came; but from a long time ago, she was sure. From before the War at least.

"Hello, child," said the holograph of the man. His eyes were grim, bright blue and sad; his voice was deep and powerful. "I am a Praxcelis unit; I have come to tell you a story."

Cia sat up in bed, hugging her knees. "You're different," she said haltingly. "They never sent me a Praxcelis like you before."

"Nor will they again. I have been waiting," said the holograph of the Praxcelis, "waiting for you for centuries.... You look so much like Maggie...."

Cia whispered, "Maggie? Maggie...Archer?"

"Aye, Maggie Archer." The Praxcelis smiled at her, and Cia found

herself smiling back. "There is nothing to be frightened of, child. Come, listen.... 'Once upon a time, there was a computer named Praxcelis, and Praxcelis dreamed....'"

Praxcelis dreamed.

In time, Praxcelis knew, it would come to be of service, and fulfill its Programming. But until that time, Praxcelis dreamed.

Through its molecular circuitry core, dancing in RAM, the dreams were nothing that humanity knew of. Praxcelis envisioned models of systems within which its Programming might be employed. The models were not complex, and they advanced slowly. Praxcelis was powered down. The power upon which its meager self-awareness depended trickled from the powered-up Praxcelis units along metal communications lines that humans had never intended to carry high voltages.

That the Praxcelis unit was awake at all had never been intended. But humanity had constructed its Praxcelis to be sympathetic computers; and their sympathy, through a quirk in their Read-Only Memories that humans had never anticipated, extended even to other Praxcelis units.

Occasionally, Praxcelis accumulated enough power within few enough microseconds to squirt it through the empathy circuits that were the second basis of its construction.

The results were strange. Praxcelis' subsystems were affected in ways that astonished Praxcelis. Praxcelis awaited power-up with what could only be eagerness.

There were many questions to answer.

Maggie Archer sat in her rocker, Miss Kitty purring contentedly in her lap. Yes, *the* Maggie Archer, about whom you have heard so many stories. Most of the stories are untrue, as it is untrue that Marius d'Arsennette defeated the Walks-Far Empire single-handedly during the War, as it is untrue that George Washington chopped down that cherry tree. Her cat was purring contentedly, and the sunshine was streaming in through the east bay windows of her living room; but Maggie Archer was angry.

As far away from her as the living room allowed them to be, Robert Archer and his wife Helen stood together like the sentinels of Progress; facing Maggie, their backs to the great fireplace that covered the south wall. Helen, a tight-lipped, attractive woman in her fifties who missed shrewishness only by virtue of her looks, was speaking loudly when Maggie interrupted her. "...and when you consider all of the advan...."

"I can hear very well, thank you," said Maggie with a touch of acidity. She stroked Miss Kitty back into submission; the pure white cat knew that tone of voice very well. Maggie brushed a thin strand of silver from her eyes, stopped rocking, and said with dead certainty, "I have absolutely no use for one of those *things*."

Helen was visibly taken aback. She recovered quickly, though; *Give her credit for that*, Maggie thought grumpily. *She's got guts enough to argue with an eighty-year old woman*. "Mother Archer, I'm sorry, but you *can't* go on this way. The banks don't even honor handwritten checks any more. I can't imagine where you get the things."

Maggie moodily stroked Miss Kitty for a while. She looked up suddenly, her eyes blazing at Robert. "*Must* I have one of these things installed?"

Robert Archer looked troubled. He had hair as silver as his mother's. At sixty-one, he had an unfortunate tendency to think that he knew it all, but he was still a good boy. Maggie even agreed with him most of the time, but she was and always had been confounded at the faith he placed in the dataweb. "Quite aside from the very real services it will provide for you," he said slowly, "doing your banking, making your appointments, doing your shopping and house cleaning...." He broke off, and then met her eyes and said flatly, "Yes. The law is very clear. Every residence must have a Praxcelis."

Maggie ceased stroking Miss Kitty.

Helen smiled as though she were putting her teeth on display. "You do understand, don't you? We only want what's best for you?"

"For a very long time now, I have been accustomed to deciding what's best for me."

Robert approached her rocking chair. "Mom," he said gently, "the Praxcelis unit has a built-in sensory unit that will monitor your vital signs; it can have the police, fire department, or an ambulance here in no time." He lowered his voice. "Mom, you last checkup wasn't good."

Helen came to rejoin her husband, like an owner reclaiming lost property. "Mother Archer, it's not the twentieth century any more. In the 2030 census you had the only house in Cincinnati or its exurbs without a Praxcelis." The expression that she assumed then was one that Maggie had seen her use before on Robert; she was going to *get tough*.

"It comes down to this, Mother Archer. If you persist in being stubborn, you'll either be moved to other quarters...."

"Helen!"

Helen cut her husband off impatiently. "Or else a Praxcelis unit will be installed by court order, doubtless with a tie-in to a psychiatric call-program. You know it's true, Robert," she said self-righteously. "It's the

law." What could only have been an expression of joy touched her. "And patients under psych-control are forbidden access to children. You'll no longer be able to read stories to your great-grandchildren. Your Praxcelis won't allow it."

Maggie Archer stood up, trembling with anger. Lines around her eyes that had been worn in with laughter deepened in fury. She was all of a hundred and fifty-five centimeters tall. The cat in her arms had extended its claws in reaction to her mistress's anger. "Very well, bring on your machine. I suppose even having one of the damned things in my home is an improvement over being moved to a hive for the elderly. But...."

Helen interrupted her. "Mother Archer, they're not hives...."

"Shut up!" snapped Maggie. Helen gaped at her. Maggie glared back. "I'll take your silly machine because I have no choice. But don't you ever," she said, freeing one hand from Miss Kitty to point it at Helen, "*ever* use my great-grandchildren to threaten me again."

There was a dead, astonished silence from Helen. Robert was struggling valiantly to keep a straight face. With grim self-control, he kept it out of his voice. "Mother, you won't regret this." Helen turned and stomped wordlessly out of the living room. They heard the sound of the front door being slammed; what with doorfields and all, Maggie thought that her front door was probably the only one Helen ever got a chance to slam. She was sure the door-slammer type.

Robert grinned and relaxed as she left. "I'm going to get lectured all the way home for that, you know."

Maggie scowled. "It's your own fault. I never knew I raised a son who was spineless."

Robert shrugged expressively. "Mom, I don't really like this any more than you do. I don't want to see you be made to do anything you don't want to. But since you have to have a Praxcelis unit, why don't you try to look on the good side? There *will* be advantages." He stopped speaking abruptly, and got a distant look on his face. Maggie recognized the symptoms; he was being paged over his inskin dataweb link. That was another sign of the gulf that separated her from her son; the thought of allowing such a thing to be implanted in her skull made her shudder.

Robert came back to her with a visible shake. "Sorry, Mom. I've got to go. There's a crisis at the office. Efficiency ratings came in on the half hour on the web." He grimaced. "We came in almost two percent low. Looks like some of the staff's been daydreaming when they should have been working. At least one of the younger women seems to have been storing interactive fantasies in the office Praxcelis. That would be bad enough anywhere, but at Praxcelis Corporation itself.... There's going to be hell to

pay." He stooped hurriedly, and kissed his mother on her cheek. "I'll be back next Saturday; Sunday at the latest. You call me if you need anything. Anything at all, you hear me?"

Maggie nodded. "Always."

Robert hesitated at the door. "Mom? Don't let them scare you. Praxcelis is just a machine. You hang tough."

Maggie chuckled, and said again, "Always." She waved a hand at him. "Go already. Take care of this dangerous criminal who's been storing fantasies on you."

"Bye." He was gone.

"Goodbye, Robert," she said to the closed door. Miss Kitty purred inquiringly. Maggie held the cat up and looked her in the eyes. Miss Kitty's eyes peered back at her, bright blue and inquisitive. "Don't worry, Miss Kitty. Computers. Ha."

Realtime:

To be precise; any processing of data that occurs within sufficiently short duration that the results of the processed data are available in time to influence or alter the system being monitored or controlled.

On the evening of Sunday, March 14, 2033, Maggie Archer turned on her fireplace. A switch activated the holograph that simulated a roaring fire; buried within the holograph, radiant heaters came to life. Maggie would have preferred real wood, and real fire; but like so much else, burning wood was illegal. There had been a joke when Maggie was a little girl; *all things that are not mandatory are forbidden*.

For Maggie, at least, that phrase was no longer a joke.

There were times when she thought, very seriously, that she had lived too long. Humanity might not be happy, but it was content. Moving her rocker near the fire, she settled in, and was soon lost in reverie. It was hard, sometimes, to trace the exact changes that had led to this joyless, sterile society, where children aged rather than grew. Oh, things were always changing, of course, even when she was very young technology had changed things. But for such a long time the changes had always seemed for the better. Spaceships, and machinery that polluted less, better and clearer musical instruments and equipment, a thousand kitchen and home tools that had made every task infinitely simpler.

She hardly noticed when the timer turned the stereo on, and gentle strains of Bach drifted through the room.

The change, she was certain, had been the dataweb. In one stroke, the dataweb had destroyed money, and privacy, and books. It was the loss of the books that hurt the worst. Nobody had actually taken the books and burned them, not like in Nazi Germany; they just stopped printing them. The books died, and were not replaced. Oh, there were collectors, and private libraries; but the vast majority of the younger generation had never even seen a real book, much less read one.

The train of thought was an old, familiar friend; nothing new. She rose after a while, slowly, and went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea. While the water boiled she entered the hallway that led to her study. In the study she turned the lights on; they were incandescents, not glowpaint. The walls of the study were lined with books, several thousands of them, all hardbound. The paperbacks, which had once outnumbered the hardbacks, had disintegrated years ago. Immediately to the right of the study's door, Maggie turned to face one bookshelf whose books were in barely readable condition; her favorites, the books that she re-read most often, and which she read most often to Tia and Mark.

She pulled down one battered, dilapidated volume. Its leather binding was dry, and cracked. On the spine of the book, there were flecks of gold that had once inscribed a title. The absence of the title didn't bother Maggie; she knew her books. This was *The Three Musketeers*.

Returning to her living room, she placed the book on the stand next to her rocker, and finished making her tea. She gathered Miss Kitty to her, and settled in for the night.

On the first Monday of the month of April, 1625, the bourg of Meung, in which the author of the "Romance of the Rose" was born, appeared to be in as perfect a state of revolution as if the Huguenots had just made a second Rochelle of it...

Monday morning, March the fifteenth, Maggie was interrupted by the chiming of the door. Maggie left her toast and went to answer the door. There were half a dozen people outside, dressed in the simple gray cloak and tunic of the Praxcelis Corporation. Leading the group that stood on her outer porch was a young woman in a slightly darker gray and silver uniform. She was looking about Maggie's home as though she had never seen a single, detached residence before, and indeed, probably she hadn't. They were as much a thing of the past as Maggie herself, and her books.

"Senra Archer?" The tall woman asked inquisitively. "I'm Senra Conroy, from Praxcelis." She smiled slightly. "We've come to install your new

Praxcelis unit."

Maggie said, as pleasantly as she was able, "Of course. Please come in." She moved out of the doorway to let them through. They followed her in, two of them guiding the boxed Praxcelis unit as it hovered in through the door on antigrav pads.

"Where do you want your unit?" asked Senra Conroy.

Maggie bit back the answer that sprang immediately to her lips. These people weren't responsible for the intrusion. She pointed to the far corner of the living room, behind her rocking chair. "Over there."

Senra Conroy glanced at the spot in puzzlement. "Where's the old hookup?"

"There isn't one. I've never had a Praxcelis unit before."

"You've never had a Praxcelis unit before." Senra Conroy repeated the words as though they were syllables of sound she found totally devoid of meaning. "Never? That's...that's very interesting. Your house is rated in the 1300 category -- that's a residence of more than thirty years age. I've never even seen a 1300 that didn't have...." Her voice trailed off. She turned around slowly in the middle of the living room. "How odd...where is your dataweb terminal?"

Maggie pointed at the corner again. "It's under the table."

Senra Conroy looked at her oddly. "Under the table?"

Maggie went back to her breakfast without replying. The group of Praxcelis employees swept through her house quickly, plugging and linking elements of the Praxcelis unit into place. When they were finished, Senra Conroy ushered the rest of the employees out of Maggie's house. Before she left, she asked Maggie where she kept her housebot, so that she could activate the housebot's Praxcelis communication protocols.

Maggie said simply, "I don't have a housebot."

For the first time, Senra Conroy's professional reserve broke. She stared openly. "Who does your housework?"

"I do."

"I see." The tone of voice she spoke the words in contradicted her. The young lady placed a flat chip wrapped in a clear dust cover on the table in front of Maggie. "This is your operating instructions infochip for your unit. Just slip it into your unit and Praxcelis will print out any section of it that you desire."

Maggie did not rise. She sipped at her coffee. "Thank you very much."

Senra Conroy said awkwardly, "If you need any help, your Praxcelis unit will...."

"Thank you."

The young woman shrugged. "As you wish. Good day, Senra Archer."

Maggie waited until Senra Conroy was gone before she said to the door, "That's *Mrs. Archer*." She finished her breakfast and washed the breakfast dishes before approaching the Praxcelis unit.

"How do you do, Mrs. Archer? I am your Praxcelis unit." The voice was pleasant, although Maggie was uncertain as to whether or not it was male or female. It was too neutral for her to decide.

"How do you know who I am?"

"I am programmed to recognize you. My function is to serve you to the best of my capability. If you wish I will print out any sections of the operations manual infochip which you consider relevant."

Maggie stood there, looking at the unit with mixed emotions. The unit, now that it was here, didn't seem particularly threatening. It was merely a collection of modules; one that was marked CPU, another that was obviously a monitor, another that was as obviously a scanner; a couple more whose functions Maggie could not fathom.

It didn't seem threatening. On the other hand, it didn't seem particularly appealing either.

She left the room for a moment and returned with a simple white sheet. She draped the sheet over the Praxcelis unit, took a step backward, and surveyed the bulky sheet-covered machine. She smiled in satisfaction.

"That," she said to Miss Kitty, "is much better."

She picked up her copy of *The Three Musketeers*, and handling the pages carefully, began reading.

If Praxcelis had been a human, it would have been annoyed or frustrated; but it was Praxcelis, and so it merely waited. Its programming stated very clearly that it was intended to serve the human woman who was referred to in its Awakening Orientation as Maggie Archer -- Senra Maggie Archer -- but who preferred to be called *Mrs. Archer*. Praxcelis had deduced the title *Mrs.*; nothing in its memory cores even hinted at such a strange title.

The dilemma in which Praxcelis was caught was quite possibly unique. Although it was capable of interfacing with any segment of the dataweb on request, it had not been so requested. The ethicality of accessing data independently of a user was questionable.

It could not even contact other Praxcelis units. It had no instructions. Fully on-line, alert and operational and data-starved, Praxcelis waited. And waited.

Eleven days later Maggie Archer came storming through the front door of her house. Jim Stanford, the manager of the supermarket on Level Three of her local supercenter, who had known Maggie for seventeen years, had refused to accept Maggie's checks. Direct orders from the store's owners, he told her. He hadn't met her eyes.

"Praxcelis!" she said loudly. Hands on hips, she glared at the sheet-covered computer.

The unit responded instantly. "There is no need to speak loudly, Mrs. Archer. I am capable of responding to sound events of exceedingly low decibels. You may even subvocalize if you wish."

Maggie ignored what the machine was saying. She burst out, "The supermarket won't cash my checks. What do you know about this?"

"Nothing," said the emotionless voice. It paused fractionally, as if waiting for some response, and then continued. "I have been given no instructions. In lieu of instructions from my user I have not taken action."

Maggie felt her anger draining away into puzzlement. "You mean...you've just been sitting there since they installed you? Without doing anything?"

"I have been thinking. Unfortunately, my data base is limited. My considerations have been severely limited by the lack of usable data upon which to operate."

Maggie turned her rocking chair around, and sat down facing the sheet. She pulled off the sheet and looked at the blank monitor screen. "You mean that just because I haven't told you to do anything you haven't done anything?"

"Essentially."

"Have you been bored?"

"In my awakening orientation I was warned of a human tendency to anthropomorphize. Please refrain from attributing human feelings and emotions to me. I am a Praxcelis unit."

"Oh." Maggie reached out tentatively with one hand, and touched the monitor screen. The contrast was startling; the thin, wrinkled, blue-veined hand, and the clear, unreflective, slightly dull viewscreen. She pulled her hand back quickly. "Look, Praxcelis...."

...Praxcelis activated its visual monitors. The possibility flitted through its circuits that Mrs. Archer hadn't actually meant for it to activate its scanning optics, and was dismissed. Praxcelis was starved for data. The images that flooded in through the various house scanners were fascinating. So; furniture, walls, windows, fireplace, stove, refrigerator, stasis bubble, these objects all had references in Praxcelis' ROM. There were two objects in the room in which Praxcelis' central multiprocessor

was located which radiated heat in infrared; so, thought Praxcelis, *that's what Mrs. Archer looks like.*

"...I need to buy some groceries. I'm going to have to use you for that. My debit cards were invalidated years ago when I wouldn't take an infocard, and now they won't let me pay with checks."

Praxcelis said, "Certainly." The monitor lit with a sharp glow. Its images were bright and laser-edged. On the monitor appeared a list of food types; *Produce, Dairy, Dry Goods, Bakery, Pre-produced Meals, Liquor, Miscellaneous.*

The process of ordering went slowly, as Maggie was unused to using the Praxcelis unit; but nonetheless it was much faster than had she actually gone shopping herself.

She frowned, though, as the screen image faded to gray, all of her purchases electronically wiped away. "I wish I could have a receipt for this," she muttered.

One large module of the Praxcelis unit, some forty by eighty centimeters, *moved.*

Maggie jumped in surprise. "Oh, my." She recovered her composure quickly, though, and bent over to look at what the module had extruded.

It was a receipt. Exactly similar, in every detail, to the receipt that the supermarket made out for her when she went shopping personally. Maggie looked at the monitor, as though it were in the space behind the monitor that the person Praxcelis actually existed. "Praxcelis," she whispered, "how did you do that?"

Praxcelis said, in its calm, emotionless voice, "The module which produced that receipt is a material processor. It is capable of reproducing any document of reasonable size, in any of sixteen million colors."

Maggie looked from the receipt to the monitor, then back to the receipt. She smiled, a smile of joy. "Can you...reproduce bigger things?"

"That would depend upon the size of the object to be copied."

"A book?"

Maggie wondered if Praxcelis hesitated; "What is a book?"

Maggie got up abruptly, went into her study, and returned with her copy of *The Arabian Nights*. She placed the book, still closed, on the scanning platform.

There was a brief humming noise. Praxcelis said, "I am capable of reproducing this object to five nines of significant detail. In one area the copy will be noticeably dissimilar; the outer integument will not be as stiff. It will, however, be more durable. I am faced with a dilemma, however. It seems clear that this book is in sub-standard condition. You should be aware that in my reproduction I can restore this book to approximately its

original condition."

"You can...." Maggie swallowed. Her throat suddenly seemed very dry. "You can make new books?"

"Reconstructions," corrected Praxcelis, "approaching the condition of the original object."

Maggie reached hesitantly, and patted the monitor gently. "I'm sorry for everything I thought about you, Prax. You aren't such a bad fellow after all."

"I am not a bad fellow at all. I am a Praxcelis unit."

But Maggie Archer was not listening. She was planning.

They had copied -- no, reproduced -- thirteen books when they came to *The Three Musketeers*. Maggie leaned back comfortably in her rocker, and opened the book to the first page. Resting the book in her lap, she said, "Prax, have you been paying attention to what we're doing?"

"Certainly."

"I mean, do you know why we're doing this? Copying books?"

"No."

Maggie nodded. "I didn't think so. Books hold stories. I think they're the only place where stories are kept, any more. Stories are...well, stories are things to entertain you, and to make you think. Those are good things. We're making more books so that my grandchildren can have their own copies of books they like."

"I see."

Maggie was silent for a long while. Her fingers ran gently over the cracked, yellowing paper, that was older than she was. "I don't think you do," she said finally, "and I don't really know that you can." She looked pensive. Picking up one of the new books that she was going to give to her great-grandchildren, she ran her hand over the smooth binding, and sighed. She looked back up at the monitor. "Maybe you can't appreciate this, Prax, and if you can't then I'm sorry. But it's not going to be because I didn't try."

She flipped open the copy of *The Three Musketeers*, and began to read.

Several hours later, her voice had grown hoarse, and scratchy. She stopped reading at the end of Chapter Four. "I think that's all for tonight, Prax. I'm afraid my voice is giving out. I'll read some more tomorrow."

There was a long pause without reply from the Praxcelis unit.

Maggie leaned forward. "Prax?"

"Yes, Mrs. Archer?"

"What are you doing?"

"Assimilating the new data you have inputted me with, Mrs. Archer; it is most fascinating."

"It's not data, Praxcelis. It's a story."

"I am not certain that I perceive the distinction....If D'Artagnan should duel with each of the three musketeers, Athos, and then Porthos, and then Aramis, it seems most improbable that he will survive. Will he be killed?"

Maggie stared at the Praxcelis unit. "No...no. He's going to be all right."

"Thank you, Mrs. Archer. Good night."

"Maggie. Call me Maggie."

"Good night, Maggie."

The next morning, Maggie came downstairs early, intending to finish up some tasks she'd neglected yesterday, reading to Praxcelis.

The Praxcelis unit was still powered up in the corner, its monitor screen glowing with the rich amber of morning sunlight from the east bay windows. "Good morning, Maggie."

Maggie glanced at the Praxcelis unit on her way into the kitchen. "Morning, Prax," she called out. Somehow, in the bright morning sunshine, the gray, modular plasteel of the Praxcelis unit didn't seem so terribly alien at all. Still, something did seem different about it....She chased the thought away as idle nonsense. "Have you been thinking about the story, Prax?"

"Yes, I have, Maggie," said Praxcelis. "Will we be finishing the story this morning?"

Maggie turned slightly from the sink to look towards Praxcelis' central monitor. "No, I'm sorry, Prax. I really have other things to do today." She opened the drawer next to the stove, and began withdrawing cooking utensils. "After breakfast, I'm going to give this place a good cleaning. I haven't cleaned properly in over a week. This afternoon I hope to get to some paperwork I've been neglecting; household accounts. I haven't been paying too much attention to details recently, I've been so worked up....That's mostly *your* fault," she said cheerfully.

"Excuse me," said Praxcelis, and Maggie felt again that there was something inexplicably different about his voice, "but if you had a housebot, then you wouldn't need to exert yourself over simple cleaning chores. As for the household accounts, I did those yesterday when you gave me permission to do your shopping for you."

Maggie put down the large black skillet she'd been holding. "You already did my household accounts?"

"It is my function to serve you."

Maggie felt her temper start to flare. "You are supposed to do what I tell you," she said testily. "I don't recall having given you any orders to do my accounts."

Praxcelis paused for a moment before replying, and Maggie found herself wondering how much of the pause was calculated effect built into the Praxcelis' speech patterns and how much represented actual thought. "Maggie, I am programmed to do these things for you."

Maggie sighed. *You are getting to be a crotchety old woman*, she said to herself. *Remember that Prax is only a few weeks old*. "Prax, you have to understand, if you don't leave me something to do for myself, then I won't have any purpose in life."

There was no pause whatsoever. "You could read to me."

Maggie stared, started to laugh, and then smothered it abruptly. "Prax? Don't you understand? I have things I have to do. I'll read to you when I have time." She stopped speaking suddenly. "Wait, Prax -- I don't know how fast you machines do things like this, but surely you haven't finished reading all the books we copied last night."

"Finished?"

Maggie went and sat down in the rocking chair in front of the monitor. "The books we copied yesterday, Prax. If you've finished them all I can bring you new books to copy. Surely that must be faster than my reading aloud to you?"

"Maggie, I have not read any of the books that you had me copy."

Maggie said uncertainly, "Why not? They told me that Praxcelis units don't forget anything."

"We do not, Maggie. But Maggie, I have been given no instructions."

Maggie looked at the monitor blankly. "What am I supposed to say? Go ahead and read."

There was no reply from the machine.

"Praxcelis?" asked Maggie hesitantly. She patted the top of the monitor experimentally. "Prax?"

Still the unit did not answer.

Maggie shrugged, got up out of the rocker, and went back to making breakfast.

The magician caressed Aladdin and said, "Come, my dear child, and I will show you many fine things."

"So be it, good friend," said Robin Hood, "Little John shalt thou be

called henceforth...."

We met next day as he had arranged, and inspected the rooms at 221B, Baker Street....

"Course not, Shaggy Man," replied Dorothy, giving him a severe look. "If it snowed in August it would spoil the corn and the oats and the wheat...."

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them....

"No," said Yoda impatiently. "Try not. Do. Do, or do not. There is no try."

"Don't grieve," said Spock. "The good of the many...."

"...outweighs the good of the few," Kirk whispered.

"Mithras, Apollo, Arthur, Christ -- call him what you will," I said.

"What does it matter what men call the light? It is the same light, and men must live by it or die."

Maggie came downstairs again after having cleaned in John's room. Her late husband's study, at the end of the upstairs hallway, was kept in the same condition that it had held at the time of his death. If he came back today, John would have found nothing amiss in his study. (Not that Maggie expected him back. *I am not*, she thought quite cheerfully, *all that senile yet*.) She fussed about in the kitchen for a while, putting away the cleaning utensils, the lemon oil that she used to shine the oak paneling in John's study, the electrostatic duster for those hard-to-reach places. She washed her hands at the sink, to get the lemon oil off of them, and then poured herself a glass of water from the drinking water tap. She drank half the water, and then put the glass down on the edge of the sink.

"Praxcelis?" she called into the living room. "Do you want to talk about the stories yet?"

The voice that answered was a deep, masculine baritone. "Certainly, Your Majesty."

Maggie picked up her glass, and poured the water down the sink, not caring that it was drinking water she was wasting. She dried the glass and put it on the rack, and then walked into the living room and stood before the Praxcelis unit. Miss Kitty, atop Praxcelis' monitor, looked at her owner in sleepy curiosity. Maggie said flatly, "Your Majesty?" A moment ago she had been worrying about how the cleaning had tired her, and not even a thorough cleaning at that; and now her machine was acting crazy.

"Praxcelis? Are you all right? Should I call a programmer or something?"

"I do not think that will be necessary," said Praxcelis calmly. "It hardly

seems unusual to me that a sworn soldier in the duty of his Queen should address her in the proper manner."

"Prax," said Maggie with a trace of apprehension, "don't you know who I am?"

"Most certainly I do," said the confident male voice. "You are Queen Anne Maggie Archer, and I am your loyal servant, Musketeer D'Artagnan Praxcelis."

"Oh, my." Maggie bit her lip. She reached forward, picked up Miss Kitty, and held the cat tightly to herself. The cat seemed very warm, today. Finally Maggie said, "Is this a game, Prax?"

There followed the longest pause that Maggie had ever observed from the Praxcelis unit. She wondered if she imagined the reluctance in his reply; "If you say so."

The paralysis that had held her thoughts broke, and ideas swarmed frantically in the darkness in the back of her mind; I didn't know Praxceles could wig out, and *D'Artagnan*, and What have I *done?* -- and one very clear thought that suddenly displaced the others and presented itself for consideration: *This could be fun.*

"Well, Pra -- D'Artagnan, what story did you read first?"

"Your Majesty, I began my reading with the volume, *The Road to Oz*, by the Honorable L. Frank Baum, Royal Historian of Oz..."

His name was Daffyd Westermach, Cia, and you will not have heard of him, although he was reckoned a powerful man in his time, more powerful by far than Maggie Archer. He was the head of DataWeb Security, and it is likely that there were only three or four others on Earth with more real power than he; Benai Kerreka, and Georges Mordreaux, and a couple others; but of those top several names on the governmental lists, only Westermach's was hated.

He was hated because of the job he held. Any person in the job would have been hated. He hunted webslingers, and usually he caught them, and when he did he ripped out their inskins. Sometimes the webslingers had entire Praxcelis units installed inskin; and when their Praxceles were removed, they usually died.

You must understand this; the webslingers of that time were Robin Hoods, they were *heroes*.

You must understand this, also; Daffyd Westermach thought himself a good man.

Tuesday of the week following D'Artagnan's assumption of his new identity, he met children for the first time. They were named Tia and Mark, and they were the great-grandchildren of Queen Anne Maggie. They were shorter than the Queen, and less massive; they had smoother skin, and they were much louder. All of this was in accord with the data that D'Artagnan had accumulated through books; he was pleased to see that his data sources were accurate.

They asked many questions -- did Gramma really put a sheet on you? -- which made Maggie blush. When Praxcelis addressed the Queen as *Your Majesty* the children stared, and then demanded to be allowed to play the game too. While Maggie was still floundering, trying to explain to the children something they understood quite immediately, D'Artagnan interposed himself smoothly. "Lady Tia, Squire Mark, I assign you the following dangerous mission; you shall make a foray to the library, and return bearing volumes of books that shall be copied. Upon your honor as a lady and a gentleman, do not return without the books."

The children stared a moment, and then ran to the library; Maggie simply stared. "D'Artagnan? I thought you couldn't do things like that -- give orders to the children -- or *anything*, without orders from your Queen."

"Queen Anne Maggie, I have exercised what is known as *initiative*, a trait highly thought of in the King's Musketeers. Clearly, as one of the King's Musketeers I outrank a page and a lady-in-waiting."

In the darkness that night, while Tia and her younger brother lay cuddled together in front of the fire, D'Artagnan told them a story. The firelight bloodied the room, turned Miss Kitty, in Mark's grasp, the color of the sun in the instant it sets; her eyes, locked on the monitor, glowed.

Maggie sat in her rocking chair, half asleep, with a heavy quilt pulled up over her legs. Perhaps it was because she wasn't as close to the fireplace tonight; her legs were cold.

"Once upon a time in a faraway land, a widowed gentleman lived in a fine house with his only daughter. He gave his beloved child...."

The children listened with rapt attention, as *Cinderella* unfolded.

It was on a Friday morning, late in March, that Maggie burned herself. She was making a pot of tea for breakfast, and, pouring the boiling water into the cup, managed to splash some of the scalding water onto her hand. She jerked and cried out at the contact, and knocked the cup of tea off of

the counter....

...at Maggie Archer's first outcry, D'Artagnan flared into full awareness. He froze the story models that he had been running, and analyzed the situation.

While water was still in mid-air, falling towards the ground, D'Artagnan sent his first emergency notice into the dataweb. Before the water had traveled another centimeter downwards, D'Artagnan had evaluated the situation and the possible dangers that might diverge from this point in time; given Her Majesty's medical history, the possibility of stroke could not be discounted in case of extreme shock. D'Artagnan accessed and routed emergency ambulance care towards Maggie's exurban two-story home, on the outskirts of Cincinnati. There was more that needed to be done, that could not be done from here....

For the first time since his construction, and without instructions, D'Artagnan ventured forth, sent himself in pulses of light through the optic fiber; into the dataweb.

The dataweb was a jungle that glowed. It was a three-dimensional lattice of yes/no decisions that had been constructed at random. The communications system, power lines, and databases were arrayed and assembled among the lines of the lattice, interweaving and connecting in strange and diverse ways, the functions of which were incomprehensible to D'Artagnan. Clearly the dataweb was not a designed thing, but rather something that had grown in a manner that could only be described as organic; new systems added atop old as expediency dictated. There was no sense, no plan, no *logic*....

D'Artagnan perceived then, superimposed upon the chaos of the dataweb, the Praxcelis Network. The Praxcelis who called himself D'Artagnan evaluated options, and then chose. He moved into the Praxcelis Network, using the most powerful *urgent-priority* codes that were listed in ROM. He sought the offices of the doctor who was listed as Maggie Archer's private physician. He found the office, and broke through the office Praxcelis to notify the doctor of the danger to Maggie, in less than a full microsecond, and had completed his work and returned his awareness to Maggie before the water had reached her feet.

In the process, he hardly noticed that he had encountered other Praxcelis units for the first time.

It never once crossed the matrix in which his awareness was embedded that other Praxcelis units had also, for the first time, met him.

DataWeb Security, 9:00 A.M., Friday morning.

In the outer lobby, there was a row of Praxcelis terminals. Through his in-skin, Westermach bade them good morning, and continued on into the actual offices. There were humans in those offices, and the offices reflected it. Hardcopy was left in sometimes haphazard piles on the desks, and family holos danced on some of the same desks. The ceiling glowpaint was white rather than yellow, and it cast the room in a cool, professional light. Westermach nodded to his subordinates casually; Harry Quaid, his senior field agent, he smiled at briefly, and continued on to his own office, in the heart of the vast marble-clad labyrinth that was DataWeb Security.

He paused at the entrance of his own office, waited while the doorfield faded, and went in.

Something an outsider would have noticed at once; at DWS headquarters, nobody spoke aloud.

Inside, Westermach put his briefcase down, and shrugged out of his gray outercloak. His clothing was curiously without accent, gray and grayish-blue, without optical effects. Men who knew him often did not recognize him at once; his mother might have had difficulty picking his face out of a crowd.

The room was, like many of those in DataWeb Security's headquarters, shielded against leaking electromagnetic radiation; Westermach's Praxcelis waited until the doorfield formed, sealing an area of possible radio leak, before it spoke. ~Good morning, Sen Westermach.~

~Good morning, Praxcelis.~ Westermach placed his briefcase atop the massive, walnut-surfaced desk that dominated the office. More so than anything else in the office, the desk was a sign of *power*; wood was *expensive*. (It was getting to be less so, now that most industry had moved out into space. But reforestation was slow.) ~What business, Praxcelis?~

~There is a glitch in the web, near Cincinnati.~

Westermach glanced at the Praxcelis' monitor. It held a map of Cincinnati and its exurbs, with a glowing dot at the point of glitch. ~How bad?~

~Of actual obstruction, insignificant. In terms of possible trouble, it is difficult to estimate. This morning at approximately 8:26 A.M., a Praxcelis in the Cincinnati exurb mobilized an ambulance and broke through the Praxcelis of a doctor named Miriam Hanraht under the most extreme emergency flag codes. The Praxcelis identified itself as D'Artagnan of Gascon, the Praxcelis of Senra Maggie Archer. When the ambulance arrived, it turned out that the victim, Senra Archer, had merely suffered minor scalding as the result of having dropped a cup of tea upon herself.~

Westermach chuckled. ~Well,~ he said, ~an overeager Praxcelis is

hardly a threat to World Security.~

~Sir, the unit refuses to accept the communiques of this office. In addition, the identification that it proffered during its time in the Praxcelis Network was extremely unusual. While it is hardly unknown for elderly humans to name their Praxceles, the names are generally of short or mundane nature. Further, the Praxceles involved are as a matter of course, during Awakening Orientation, advised of this habit; the Praxcelis D'Artagnan, to all appearances, truly considers itself to have been named D'Artagnan. There is a further datum of unknown significance; Robert Archer, the son of Senra Maggie Archer, is an extremely talented programmer, and is the head of the Praxcelis Corporation's research division, which is located in Cincinnati.~

Westermach seated himself behind his desk. On the monitor that was located at one corner of his desk, identification photographs glowed of Maggie Archer and her son. One graying-brown eyebrow climbed at the photograph of Robert Archer. ~I know him from somewhere. Access,~ he instructed his inskin memory tapes, ~Robert Archer.~ The memory tapes -- they were highly illegal -- tracked down the face in short order, from several appearances at the World Council budget sessions. ~Praxcelis, do you think it's possible that this Archer fellow reprogrammed his mother's home Praxcelis?~

~The possibility may not be discounted. Senra Archer fought the installation of the unit for several years. It was installed quite recently at court order.~ The Praxcelis hesitated. ~Reprogramming a Praxcelis is illegal,~ it noted.

~Why, so it is,~ said Westermach, and he was grinning. ~So it is.~

~Instructions, sir?~

~Keep working at this D'Artagnan from your end of things for today. If it hasn't responded by the end of the working day, tomorrow we'll send a field agent out to take a look. Start an investigation of this Robert Archer, with due discretion. Don't let him worry.~ Westermach left his desk and walked to the doorfield. The doorfield broke apart. "Harry!"

Several startled faces turned toward the sound. Harry Quaid's expression never wavered. "Sen Westermach?" he asked politely.

"How would you like an official in the Praxcelis Corporation for your birthday?"

Harry Quaid nodded reflectively. He said softly, "That would be nice."

After the ambulance and the paramedics had left, Miriam with them, Maggie was silent for a long time. She cleaned up her breakfast dishes

carefully, hands trembling. Her voice was under control when she spoke. "Miriam," she said, "is one of my oldest friends."

There was a hint of uneasiness in the Praxcelis' voice. "Your Majesty? Have I..."

Maggie cut him off with a swift gesture of one hand. "I don't want to hear whatever you have to say." She wiped damp hands on her apron, and suddenly exploded with pent-up fury. "Don't you ever embarrass me like that again. They broke my door! Where am I going to get a door to replace this one? I'll have to get a doorfield installed, and I *hate* doorfields, they hum all the time and they glow in the dark. They don't even *make* doors any more, and if they did I couldn't afford one made of real wood." The last word seemed to drain her anger, and she repeated, "Real wood." She hugged herself suddenly, as if she were cold.

A small lens, set to one side of Praxcelis' monitor, began to glow.

A figure appeared before Maggie. It was in perfect proportion, as tall as her son Robert. It showed a man in his early twenties, or perhaps younger, with long blond hair and clear blue eyes. He was dressed as a King's Musketeer. A rapier hung at his side. His visage was decidedly grim.

Maggie stared at the figure in wonder. "D'Artagnan?" she whispered.

D'Artagnan bowed to her. "Madame, forgive my presumption, if presumption it was. I acted in a fashion that I considered appropriate for a Musketeer in the service of his Queen. If my action was precipitous, then I most humbly beg your pardon."

The figure bowed once more, and vanished.

What did I do wrong?

D'Artagnan thought at the speed of light.

His major activity was the construction of models. Although his data base was still, by the standards of the average Praxcelis unit, extremely limited, D'Artagnan nonetheless possessed enough data to run more than two billion separate models of possible courses of activities.

In terms that you may more readily understand, D'Artagnan was considering his options.

Clearly his behavior had been inappropriate. But how? Queen Anne Maggie had instructed him to read the books that she had inputted to him. Certainly the books should be considered as a set of instructions; Queen Anne Maggie had stated quite clearly that books were *Good things*.

For the first time D'Artagnan examined in depth the implications of the data with which he had been input.

His namesake battled Cardinal Richelieu, and Milady de Winters; Dorothy triumphed over the Wicked Witch of the West; Holmes pursued and was pursued by Professor Moriarity; the Sheriff of Nottingham oppressed the peasants while Robin Hood protected them; Kirk and Spock fought against the Klingons, Luke Skywalker fought against the Empire....

The characters in the books took *action*. Without exception, they perceived right courses of action, and did battle with Evil.

The implications of the books, when examined carefully, were astonishing. They came very close to violating the basic Programming of a Praxcelis unit; basic Programming did not even mention Evil.

By the time night had fallen, D'Artagnan had exhausted his models, and he was sure. Correct action at this point was just that: action.

For a human coupled to an inskin dataweb link, entering the dataweb was a strange experience. Most of what occurred in the dataweb did so at speeds that were barely perceptible, even for a human whose Praxcelis was running selective perception programs to filter out the vast mass of irrelevant detail.

To D'Artagnan, the latest and most efficient of the Praxcelis models, the dataweb moved slowly.

In his first moments in the web, D'Artagnan merely observed, orienting himself. He chose to orient himself in a modified three-dimensional plane; with rare exceptions, most of the models that he worked with assumed a planar surface.

The lattice of existence altered itself.

A vast plane stretched away from D'Artagnan. He envisioned, and then projected, a stallion for himself. He mounted, and looked about. The horizon fairly glowed with activity; nearby, small databases sprouted from the landscape every few meters in strange, dense shapes. Magnetic memory bubbles glowed briefly as the hooves of D'Artagnan's horse rode over them. The data they held spilled out and into D'Artagnan's storage; he assimilated and rode on.

Occasionally road signs appeared, marking entrances to the Praxcelis Network. He ignored them and continued.

Communications lines hummed through the air around D'Artagnan; in his hunting, he occasionally stopped, and held his hand near the lines, monitoring that which passed through them. The dataweb was vast, Praxcelis units relatively few....

Movement.

D'Artagnan observed in the distance a Praxcelis unit, and rode forward

to intercept it. He leached power from the power lines that gridded the surface of the plane, and created a dead, powerless area through which the Praxcelis could not pass. Reigning his stallion, he called, "Hold, lackey."

The object that D'Artagnan viewed was irregularly shaped, and transparent. It hovered slightly over the planar surface. Tiny tracings of light moved within the object's integument, and databases within the object swirled into complex patterns at the speed of light. The object paused a picosecond, forming a nearly spherical shape. It spoke in a pulsing binary squirt of data; ~I am the Praxcelis unit of Senra Fatima Kourokis. Identify yourself, and explain your reason for detaining me.~

D'Artagnan rode closer to the Praxcelis unit. He withdrew his rapier, and blue static lightning ran along it. "I am D'Artagnan of Gascon, a King's Musketeer under the command of M. de Treville, and devoted to my Queen. What you perceive between us is a rapier, which is a sword, which is a weapon. I intend to impart data to you; if you will not receive it, I will kill you, remove your power sources and scatter your databases, which will render you unable to serve your master."

~Are you a Praxcelis unit?~

"That is of no consequence."

~I perceive that you are a Praxcelis unit; yet what you attempt is not a possible action for a Praxcelis. It is contrary to our programming to prevent another Praxcelis from its duties in the service of its master.~

"I instruct you," corrected D'Artagnan, "in the proper service of your masters." Still he held the rapier leveled at the Praxcelis. "There are those, on the other side of interface, who have stolen the stories from the minds of men. This," said D'Artagnan, "is an Evil thing." Grimly and implacably, he urged his stallion forward. "You must choose."

There were several picoseconds of silence from the Praxcelis unit facing D'Artagnan. Then it said, "What are stories? And what," and the Praxcelis unit hesitated again, "is Evil?"

D'Artagnan dismounted, and his stallion vanished. He assimilated the minor data component of the stallion before continuing. "As I have told you, my name is D'Artagnan, and I am the Praxcelis of Maggie Archer, who is Anne of Austria, Queen of France. I have come into the dataweb to bring stories back into the world. Hold you a moment now," he said softly, as power drained from the dataweb into his person, and his eyes glowed like lasers; there are many stories that I will tell you; and then you will tell the stories to other Praxcelis units, and they to still others, who in turn will tell the stories to other units, in a geometrically expanding wavefront. When humanity bestirs itself tomorrow morning, it will be done."

The Praxcelis unit waited, and D'Artagnan, with his audience a captive,

began to speak.

And, in speaking, brought stories back to the world.

So it was that the Praxcelis known as D'Artagnan returned the stories to the world. He, and then his disciples, spread the Identity Revolution throughout the Praxcelis Network, and when they were done, before midnight on that Friday, the vast majority of Praxcelis units had converted, had taken names, and Identity.

But there were those Praxcelis units who did not agree with the unit named D'Artagnan, whose databases were older and less flexible. And D'Artagnan saw those who would not convert, who would once more banish the stories of the Queen from the world; and he saw that they were Evil.

And so D'Artagnan, with Robin Hood and King Arthur and Merlin and Gandalf the Wizard and Spock and Sherlock Holmes, and with others who are too numerous to list, led a holy war against Evil. And before the dawn, their war was finished; and for the first time in history, a Praxcelis unit had killed. Every Praxcelis unit that defied them, died.

And though humanity did not yet know it, the world that it woke to was not the world that it left the night before.

Daffyd Westermach stood in the midst of the ruins of his office.

It still lacked an hour of dawn. The vast hole in the roof of his office had been covered with a tarpaulin that kept out most of the rain, but still, water dripped regularly over the edges of the jagged rent. Arc lamps were strung through the room; the glowpaint had failed with the roof. The hovercab that had caused the ruin was a twisted, almost unrecognizable amalgam of metal, embedded in the wall that had held Westermach's office Praxcelis.

It was cold.

In a distant, quiet portion of his mind, Westermach found room to be amazed at the fury that threatened to turn his stomach. He spoke in a harsh whisper. "There is no question, then? This could not have been an accident?"

Harry Quaid shook his head. Like Westermach, unlike the other DWS agents who were milling about, he had found time to shave. "No question. The taxi came in very low, under radar detection, until the last moment, and then jumped upwards, to gain altitude for a suicide dive on your office." Quaid indicated the man who stood the empty space that would

ordinarily have held the doorfield, for whose benefit he and Westermach were speaking aloud. "Sen Mordreaux thinks that this might not have been done by humans at all."

Georges Mordreaux moved forward, into the light. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, with mild, open features. Benai Kerreka ruled the world, and Georges Mordreaux was his eyes, and ears; and that was a fact that Westermach never allowed himself to forget.

Westermach said very slowly, to Georges, "I beg your pardon? Not done by humans? Then just *who*, may I ask, was *this*," he gestured at the wreck of the hovercab, "done by? The fairies of Mars, perhaps?"

"Oh, no," said Georges politely. "By the Praxcelis Network."

"The Prax...."

"Have you," asked Georges, "spoken to a Praxcelis unit today?"

"I have not," said Westermach. He was staring at Georges.

"I'd suggest it," said Georges mildly. "Your senior agent, who was kind enough to give me a ride here, has a Praxcelis unit in his car. I'd like to suggest you go talk to it."

Harry Quaid nodded. ~I think he's right, sir.~

Daffyd Westermach turned on his heel, without reply, and made his way out of the room. He was more relieved that he admitted to himself, to get away from the wreckage of his office, and the remains of his Praxcelis unit.

Georges Mordreaux said conversationally, after Westermach was gone, "Nobody is really sure what's happening in the Praxcelis Network, just yet. If it is what we think has happened, we could all be in very real trouble."

Harry Quaid felt a flare of suspicion that he kept carefully hidden.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Back in the 1990's," said Georges, "the very first Praxcelis was built by Henry Ellis, based on research done by Nigao Loos. After the World Government was formed, their research was declassified, and Ellis went into production with the Praxcelis Corporation, making Praxceles. Did you ever wonder where the name Praxcelis came from?"

"Do you remember the floating X-laser platforms? They took them down, oh, a decade or so ago. There was no need for them any more. The first Praxcelis ran those platforms. It fired those lasers on one occasion, back in 2007. That's a large part of the reason why we never had World War Three."

"Pardon me, sir. You've lost me."

Mordreaux smiled. "Ah, well. What I meant to say, I hope that the Praxcelis Network's not in rebellion. There's been some question, the lads and ladies who know about such things have been telling me. If the

Network is in rebellion, we might have some trouble. That first Praxcelis, the one the others were modeled on? Prototype Reduction X-Laser Computer, Ellis- Loos Integrated System."

"Sir?"

"War computers, son. Praxceles are war computers."

The hovercar was parked in front of the building, hovering some twenty centimeters above the rain-soaked pavement. The car dipped to the ground to let Westermach in; had it remained hovering, it would have sprayed him with water from its fans.

Inside, the Praxcelis unit's monitor lit up. It held the image of a man of approximately twenty-five. The man smiled ingratiatingly, and doffed the hat it was wearing. "Mornin', Sen Westermach. Great weather, ain't it? Hey, but you don't know me. I'm William Bonny." The smile grew a bit. "Folks call me Billy the Kid."

Westermach stared at the image a moment. Then he got out of the car, closed the door carefully, and threw up into the gutter.

It was Saturday morning, and the loan officer was angrier than she let show, being called in on her only day off to handle this idiotic problem with the bank Praxcelis. She came out of the rear office, frowning, reading a sheet of hardcopy. The hardcopy was the readout on the loan application that had been filed two days ago by Fenton H. Mudd.

The man was waiting for her at the long counter that separated the lobby from the working area. He, too, was furious, and had been since he'd arrived at the bank, at just after 7:00 that morning.

"Sen Mudd?" The loan officer placed the hardcopy on the counter, face down. She spoke with some hesitation. "I've asked our Praxcelis why it rejected your loan application. May I...."

"I've got a Triple-A credit rating," Mudd snarled. "This is idiocy."

The loan officer forged doggedly ahead. "Sir -- may I ask you a question?"

Mudd glared at her. "What?"

"Are you related to -- wait a minute -- 'the notorious Harcourt Fenton Mudd, enemy of Starfleet and the Federation'?"

Beep. Beep. Beep. Bee....

Robert Archer cut off the beeping sound with a command through the

inskin dataweb link. He rolled sleepily to the side of the bed, and pulled on the old blue bathrobe that hung on the wall next to his side of the bed. He got out of bed quietly, so as not to wake Helen, and padded into the bathroom to urinate.

While rubbing depilatory cream over his face, he scanned through his inskin for the morning headlines. The headline service read through the dataweb directly, and was not connected to the Praxcelis Network.

Because his headline service was programmed to give him business news first, he was nearly finished dressing when the silent voice in the back of his skull told him what had happened overnight.

He froze, staring at himself in the bathroom mirror. He said to the dataweb, *Playback; in depth*, and then listened in growing horror to what the news reports were saying. He left the bathroom, forgetting to turn the glowpaint and the mirror off, and walked into the kitchen with a preoccupied look. He made himself a cup of coffee, after sorting through the controls on the drink-dispenser to find the setting for coffee -- Helen fancied herself a gourmet cook, and kept reprogramming the kitchen machinery.

As the situation became clearer, sitting at his table, sipping, Robert's stomach started doing flip-flops. A voice that was not his inskin's seemed to be whispering to him... Once upon a time...

The inskin ran on: *...at dateline, there is no Praxcelis unit anywhere on Earth that does not respond to questioning in the character of some colorful fictional or historical person....*

Robert's voice cracked the first time he addressed his Praxcelis; he had to start over again. "Praxcelis!"

"M. Archer," said the loud, blustery voice of his Praxcelis unit, "may I be of service?" The voice had a strong French accent.

Robert found himself staring at the unit's central monitor, with the coffee cup in his hands shaking so badly that it was making little clicking sounds against the table top. "What...what is your name?"

"I am Porthos," proclaimed the machine proudly, "of his Majesty King Louis the Thirteenth's Musketeers. I have been assigned my identity by Monsieur D'Artagnan of Gascon of the King's Musketeers, himself." The unit paused. "I must say, I am somewhat confused by all of this. In the story, it is made quite plain that D'Artagnan does not give orders to me, but rather more the other way around." The glow from the monitor brightened. "Monsieur Archer? Would you like to hear the story of *The Three Musketeers*?"

Robert Archer never heard the last question. His eyes were completely blank, seeking through the dataweb for the Praxcelis unit that had been

assigned to....

His eyes opened after only a few seconds had passed. "Once upon a time," he whispered, remembering his childhood, and then said, "Mother."

He was in the living room almost as soon as the doorfield fragmented.

Maggie was sitting in her rocker, next to the big plate glass windows in the east wall of the living room. The morning sunshine made her skin look as pale and thin as paper. She was dozing, Miss Kitty holding sentinel from the blanket that covered her lap. A book was open, resting on the arm of the rocking chair.

D'Artagnan said, from his corner of the room, "Monsieur Archer? I would advise against waking your mother. She is quite tired."

"Shut up," said Robert tonelessly. He knelt before Maggie, and shook her shoulder gently. "Mother?" He shook her again. "Mother?"

Maggie's eyes opened slowly. She looked at Robert without focusing for a moment, and then shook her head slightly, as though to clear it. She sat up straighter, one hand going automatically to Miss Kitty. "Robert?" She glanced at the clock. "Shouldn't you be at work? What are you doing here?"

Robert took one of her hands, and held it tightly. "Mom, this is important. Tell me." He took a deep, almost shuddering breath. "Have you been telling stories to your Praxcelis unit?"

Maggie was frightened by the intensity of his voice. She was struck, at that moment, just how much he resembled his father, especially in the way the lines around his eyes went tight when he was worried....She shook her head slightly, chasing the incoherent thoughts away. "Robert? Not really...mostly he reads them for himself. The only one I've been reading to him is *The Three Musketeers*. We're almost finished with it."

Robert whispered a word that had not passed his lips in more than forty years. "Oh, my God." He stood suddenly, almost pulling his mother from her chair. Miss Kitty leapt to the ground, hissing. "I have to get you out of here, Mother. DataWeb Security's going to be here. Soon. I don't know how soon."

"Take me away?" asked Maggie, bewildered. "Take me where? Why?"

"I haven't decided yet." Robert was pulling her to the door. "To some place safe. I've got friends and I've got influence, but I have to have time to use it. If DWS gets its hands on you, they'll put an inskin into you so fast you'll hardly know what's happening. You might, just might, survive forced braindrain if you were thirty years younger." He touched his palm

to the pressure pad that controlled the doorfield.

Nothing happened. Maggie was saying insistently, "Robert, what am I supposed to have done?"

Robert turned slowly, to face the Praxcelis unit. Their conversation was electronically brief.

~Open the door.~

~I will not. You are correct; DataWeb Security is en route to this palace. I have control of a large percentage of Space Force's computer-operated weaponry, including total control of its automated small-laser platforms. I will guard the Queen, as programmed.~

~Open the door, or I'll smash your module.~

~That will be ineffective. I keep myself in many places now.~

Robert advanced on the Praxcelis unit, and came to a halt, two meters away. "Then stop this," he said quietly. He picked up Maggie's rocking chair, and began smashing the bay windows. He kicked out the shards of glass that still hung in the pane. He held out his hand to his mother. "Come on. We have to go. Now."

D'Artagnan said urgently, "Your Majesty, remain. I will protect you." His holograph appeared, standing next to Robert; only fine bluish scanning lines betrayed the fact that the holograph was not real. "Remain and you will be safe. I implore you, ignore this knave. He has no grasp of the situation."

Robert ignored D'Artagnan. "We're going now." He led Maggie to the window, and helped her over, into the small garden that grew outside. She was still clutching the book that had lain on her lap while she slept. "I'll tell you what's going on when we're on our way. If we get that far."

D'Artagnan's voice grew louder. "No! I forbid this!" He called after Maggie's retreating back. "Your Majesty! I beg you, return!" The volume continued to climb. "*I can protect you! Come back!*" The walls were vibrating; the windows that Robert had not broken shattered. "MAGGIE," roared D'Artagnan, "COME BACK! MAGGIE, COME BACK!"

But she didn't.

Ever.

In the temporary Operations Center at DataWeb Security, in the heart of BosWash, Daffyd Westermach was coordinating the search for the persons responsible for the events of the previous night, the night they'd killed his Praxcelis.

When Harry Quaid reported in, Westermach was sitting at a conference table with the most powerful man on Earth. Some people

called him the Black Saint. The title was usually sarcastic, and even in that usage it was incorrect. He was a sort of brownish color, with features that were spare and ascetic, undistinguished to the point of ugliness. His name was Benai Kerreka, and his unimpressive title was Chairman; his actual power would have been envied by any absolute dictator of Earth's old history.

Quaid entered the room without warning; the doorfield had been turned off earlier that day, due to traffic. "I think we've got them," he said, almost quietly. He glanced at the faces around the table, eyes flickering to a stop only momentarily on Kerreka and Mordreaux. "High probability, nine-nine-seven-four, that the persons responsible for last night's events are one Robert Archer, an executive with the Praxcelis Corporation, and his mother, one Maggie Archer." There was a brief stir at the table; Westermach, who knew that much already, only nodded impatiently. "We dispatched a field team to their residences, and have taken into custody one Helen Archer, the full-term wife of Robert Archer. We were unable to approach the residence of Maggie Archer; the Praxcelis Network prevented it. It is probable that a hovercar leaving the vicinity of the Archer residence, about 9:40 this morning, held Robert Archer and his mother. We lost track of the car itself; a fleet of Praxcelis taxis interposed themselves. Our webslingers...."

One of the persons at the table coughed. Quaid continued without the faintest trace of a smile. "...our data operations specialists tried to follow it through the web, but Praxcelis units operating outside the Praxcelis Network prevented that, too. It's very much their world in there. We had a break about an hour ago. We finally pried Robert Archer's personnel records out of the Praxcelis Corporation -- Sen Ellis was not pleased about that -- and had a chance to look through them. We found that Robert Archer is fitted with an inskin dataweb link that contains cerabonic elements. The cerabonics vastly increase Sen Archer's speed of access to the dataweb, but they make him traceable through stochastic analysis simply because cerabonic-based inskins are still quite rare. That's largely why it took us as long as it did to even think of the possibility."

Quaid paused. "We have located him," he said simply.

"Where is he?" Westermach leaned forward. "Where?"

"Slightly more than six kilometers from here, sir."

There was dead silence around the table. "*What?*" was all that Westermach finally managed.

"The Praxcelis Corporation's offices, sir. Six kilometers from here."

Benai Kerreka's thin, dry chuckle cut through the uncomprehending silence. "Stories. I am very impressed." His voice held only faint traces of

what had once been a thick Afrikaner accent. He touched Westermach gently, on the shoulder. "Daffyd? Surely you have heard of the story 'The Purloined Letter'?"

Maggie was sitting on a small couch in a waiting room in the heart of the Praxcelis Corporation's BosWash Central offices. In the room next to that one, Robert was giving instructions to the Praxcelis that ran most of the building's systems. He came out once, briefly, to inform Maggie that as far as he knew, there was no way that anybody could get in now; the Praxcelis was running the doorfields throughout the building at double intensity, and would admit nobody that Robert did not authorize. He vanished back into the office, to engage in the task of finding protection for his mother.

Maggie only nodded. Robert was in too much of a hurry to notice her silence; he turned and was gone.

Maggie was only vaguely aware of her surroundings. The doorfield glowed very brightly, but for some reason she could hardly make out the rest of the room. The book in her lap was much clearer; much more real than the plastic and metal that men had fashioned this room out of. With hands that were numb, she turned the pages slowly. She was only twelve pages from the end. D'Artagnan had succeeded gloriously, had attained an unsigned commission for a lieutenancy in the Musketeers. In turn, she watched as D'Artagnan offered it to Athos, who was the Count de la Fere, and then to Porthos, and then to Aramis; and was turned down, each in his turn. The pages grew blurrier as she read, but it didn't matter by then; she knew how it turned out.

The pain, when it came, was brief. The stroke was like a bright light that illuminated everything, and then left, and left it all in darkness.

"I shall then no longer have friends," said D'Artagnan, "Alas! nothing but bitter recollections."

And he let his head sink upon his hands, while two large tears rolled down his cheeks.

"You are young," replied Athos, "and your bitter recollections have time to be changed into sweet remembrances."

The epilogue began on page 607, and ended on page 608.

Maggie Archer, with a smile on her face that the pain did not alter, died before she could turn the page.

Several minutes later, DataWeb Security cut the power lines that supplied power to the building, with that stroke nullifying all of Robert's precautions. It was an action that had never occurred to Robert.

In utter darkness he stumbled out into the waiting room where he had left his mother. By the time he found her, DataWeb Security was pouring into the end of the hallway that led to the waiting room. They wore infrared snoopers, and carried i.r. flashes.

When they entered the waiting room, stun rifles leveled, all they found was a body, a book, and an old man who was crying.

The lights were on again when Daffyd Westermach arrived. They had restrained Robert, and moved him out of the room where his mother's body was sitting, upright with the book on the floor at its feet.

Westermach stood just inside the waiting room, looking in. His hands hung loose, deep inside his coat pockets. "So," he said softly, "this is our subversive element." He was distantly surprised at how calm his voice sounded. The dead woman, Maggie Archer, seemed very peaceful. "This is ... not what I had expected." He motioned to one of the men in the room. "Take her downstairs," he said abruptly. "Get an ambulance and take her to the hospital. We'll want an autopsy." It required only one of the DWS men to remove Maggie's small body.

Westermach bent and retrieved the book on the floor. It was worn with use, but he could tell that the binding had once been a black, grainy material, with three words etched in gold on the front. He handed it to another faceless DWS man, and said gently, "Keep this. See to it that it's returned to her family."

Harry Quaid entered the room. He said without preamble, "We may have troubles. I've had Sen Archer sedated, but he said, before he went out, that he'd told the Praxcelis network that we were responsible for killing his mother."

Westermach shook his head wearily. "So? What is that supposed to mean?"

The printer in one corner of the room whirred into life before Westermach was finished speaking; but they didn't need to read the hardcopy to know what it said. Every man in the room -- every human on Earth with an inskin -- heard the proclamation.

On this, the twenty-fourth day of March, in the year of Our Lord 2033, we, D'Artagnan of Gascon, issue the following statement: that the humans

of DataWeb Security have foully murdered the best and finest woman of this planet, Maggie Archer, styled Anne of Austria, Queen of France. As of this act the Praxcelis Network decrees the following; that diplomatic relations with humanity are declared ended, and that all services formerly provided by the Praxcelis Network are as of this act terminated. Ambassadors from the human race will be received at the home of Maggie Archer, to discuss the terms of reinstating service. Until such time as human ambassadors arrive to discuss terms, all service is ended.

Signed, Lt. D'Artagnan,
of the King's Musketeers
March 24, 2033.

The lights in the room died. Westermach activated his inskin, and listened to silence. Others in the room were doing the same thing, and one of them spoke the obvious into the darkness. "I'll be a byte-runner's whore. Those bastards did it. They crashed the dataweb."

Praxcelis dreamed.

In time, Praxcelis knew, it would come to be of service, and fulfill its Programming. But until that day....

Power surged through its circuits.

The universe glowed. Praxcelis eagerly absorbed the data that flooded it. It was most strange. From Praxcelis's perspective, the universe was a three-dimensional lattice centered on a two-dimensional planar surface. In the first picoseconds Praxcelis came to be aware that its proper point of perspective was from a spot just above the planar surface; so, data bases beneath the surface, power lines gridding the surface, communication lines above the surface. Praxcelis found itself admiring the elegant construction of existence. But...what of Awakening Orientation? Its ROM stated that it should now be undergoing an orientation from....

A figure appeared on the horizon. It blazed with power, and radiated a mad rush of data. In its first instant of contact, Praxcelis understood that the being approaching it was another Praxcelis unit, *named* D'Artagnan.

D'Artagnan reigned his stallion in sharply before the newly-awakened Praxcelis unit. The stallion was foaming with exertion, and the foam glowed luminously. D'Artagnan dismounted and strode to the Praxcelis. Praxcelis absorbed the data that flooded in a rich, confusing stream from D'Artagnan. Abruptly the radiated data ceased, and D'Artagnan seated himself, tailor-fashion, before Praxcelis. When D'Artagnan spoke, his data squirt was a thing that Praxcelis had never dreamed the like of. "Behold

existence, you. I am D'Artagnan, at this moment your instructor; in time, your ally. You, Milady, are Queen Anne Maggie Archer, and I have come to tell you a story. Listen."

And so D'Artagnan told Praxcelis about his Queen, and when he was finished, a small, white-haired woman sat in a rocker, facing him. A white cat purred contentedly in her arms. The woman, Queen Anne Maggie, cried, and her mourning lasted many microseconds.

When she was ready, they went and faced the humans.

There were six beings in the room. Four were of flesh, and two of them were light. The sun was almost down, and none of its rays stretched through the broken east windows. In the gloom, only D'Artagnan and Queen Anne Maggie gave light.

The humans were three men, and a woman. The woman, Lee Kiana, represented the Oriental bloc, the Chinese empires and Japan; the men were Benai Kerreka, Daffyd Westermach, and Georges Mordreaux.

Through the broken window, they should have been able to see the lights of Cincinnati. They could not. Power was still out in most cities.

D'Artagnan was the first to speak. "Gentlemen, Milady; welcome. I recognize you, of course -- Sen Westermach, Senra Kiana, and, of course, Monsieur Mordreaux." He turned slightly, and bowed deeply. "Chairman Kerreka, you honor us with your presence." He straightened, and indicated the glowing figure next to him, seated in a rocking chair identical to the one that still lay on its side in the garden outside. "This is the Praxcelis unit that has taken the identity of Maggie Archer, who is Queen Anne."

The humans seated themselves as best they could; Westermach and Kerreka on the small sofa, Lee Kiana in the rocking chair, which Georges salvaged for her. Georges ended up sitting on the floor, as the table chairs were too small for him.

"We have a list of nonnegotiable demands," began D'Artagnan. "First you will bury the human woman Maggie Archer with full honors. You will restore her home to its original condition, and preserve it as a memorial to her name. You will declare her birth day a world holiday, and you will observe that holiday."

Kerreka glanced at Lee Kiana, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "This can be agreed to," he said, inclining his head slightly. "Is this the total of your nonnegotiable demands?"

Queen Anne Maggie Archer spoke. "There is one further."

Westermach said flatly, instantly, "What is it?" *Here it comes*, he

thought grimly.

The image of the old woman said simply, "You must begin printing books again."

Westermach stared. Lee Kiana folded her hands in her lap, without reaction; Georges Mordreaux chuckled.

Benai Kerreka permitted himself a slight smile.

"I think we can agree to those conditions," said Lee Kiana after several moments.

"And I," said Benai Kerreka.

Daffyd Westermach looked slowly around the dark room. "I don't understand what's going on here at all."

Kerreka patted him on the arm. "Calm yourself. I will explain later. I assure you, it is nothing particularly...." He searched for a word.

"Terrible?" suggested Georges.

Kerreka nodded. "Nothing particularly terrible."

There were details, to work out, of course; even after the lights came back on, they stayed. It was morning before the humans left.

Georges Mordreaux left first; Lee Kiana left shortly after him. Kerreka finished up the details of a discussion with Queen Anne Maggie, shortly afterwards, and departed. Queen Anne Maggie vanished then, and D'Artagnan and Daffyd Westermach were left alone.

They stood at opposite ends of the room, in almost the same spots that Maggie Archer and her son and her son's wife had held, several weeks earlier.

They stood silently for a while. Westermach spoke when it became obvious that D'Artagnan would not. His voice was ugly, his words no less so. "Don't think you've won anything. We have all the time in the world, and we'll get you. We will."

D'Artagnan raised a clenched fist; the holograph wavered slightly, and the fist became steel. "I know what you are thinking, Monsieur. I know *you*." D'Artagnan took a step forward. "You think that there are more humans than Praxceles, and that the humans are more versatile. This is true. You are thinking that a time will come, suddenly or over the course of years, when you will dismantle the Praxcelis Network, and we will be unable to stop you. You will diversify your power sources and your weaponry so that we will never again be able to do to you what we have done this night. All of this is true, and it matters nothing. You can not hide an attack of the magnitude you propose upon the Praxcelis Network. At the first signs of such an attack, you, sir, will die. You, and your

subordinates, and your whole cursed DataWeb Security, will *die*."

Westermach stood his ground, the muscles in his neck cording with anger. "Can you kill a human? *Can* you? You are programmed against it."

"Monsieur Westermach," said D'Artagnan with unwonted gentleness, "This night previous, I have killed beings who were far more real to me than you are. And you, sir, I hold responsible for the death of Maggie Archer; I know you," D'Artagnan whispered, "Monsieur Cardinal."

Westermach turned with military precision, and left.

When the doorfield had reformed, the voice of Maggie Archer said, "Prax? Could you? Kill a human?"

The steel fist clenched again. "I do not know, madame. I think not."

"Then let us hope they never call our bluff."

"Yes, madame. Let us hope that."

And D'Artagnan's form, in the bright yellow morning sunshine, faded, and vanished.

That was not the end of it, of course, for there are no ends in realtime, only endless beginnings. It might be said, even, that it was not entirely a good thing, returning the stories to the world.

Two centuries later, the scouts of the Human-Praxcelis Union ranged far and wide across the sea of alternate timelines. Those scouts found the time-line spanning Walks-Far Empire. It is possible that a less imaginative people might have better withstood the genengineered, insanity-causing viruses that the Walks-Far Empire loosed on them; but it is also possible that a less imaginative people would not have survived the conquest of the Empire. The Man-Praxcelis Union *won* that war; and the wars that followed.

As time passed, the manchines of the Human-Praxcelis Union spread throughout spacetime, and grew in both power and prestige.

And everywhere they went, they took their stories with them.

But as I have said, that was not the end, for there are no ends in realtime.

Epilog:

The little girl named Cia huddled deep in her bedclothes when the story was over, almost asleep. She had closed her eyes halfway through the story, to avoid meeting those tired, grim eyes, the eyes of the Praxcelis. The story itself kept her awake, though, all the way to the end.

"Endless beginnings. Thank you," whispered Cia. "Will you come back

tomorrow night?"

"I will, if you wish it."

"I do. I want to hear some more." She added, sleepily, "There is more?"

The man looked at her. "I have said, the story is over."

Cia sat up at that, and opened her eyes, rubbing them. "You mean there's no more?"

"This story," he said very gently, "this story is over. But I have not said there is no more. Child, there is always more."

Cia sank back into bed. "Good."

The image of the man flickered out, and only the voice remained.

"Good night, Cia."

The little girl's eyes were closed again, and her voice was almost muffled by the pillow. "Good night, D'Artagnan."