

Tangle
in the
Dark

Lee
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Tangle

In

The

Dark

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The fictional world of Kassidor at 61Cygni and the premise that the 'hippy' culture of the 1960's originated there is a creation of Lee Willard.

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This work is dedicated to all the physicists in the world who are gaining the knowledge that inspired these speculations and also to the image-processing software engineers who are developing the software these characters live in.

Background information on the planet Kassidor and other stories by Lee Willard can be found at www.kassidor.com

Cover by Lee Willard.

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Tangle in the Dark

The Christial starship Gordon's Lamp had been away on a failed seedship mission for two hundred and ten years. They left a young nation that was leading Angel civilization into a thriving future. They returned to an Angel nation fighting for survival, its source of souls threatened by the illicit medical advances of the Brazilians, its very survival threatened by a Brazilian doomsday system in deep space.

But as they are braking into the environs of Sol, Thom and Ava detect an even greater threat to their way of life, an enemy determined to win the souls of the dead even if it takes the extermination of all Angels to do so.

Book I.	The Ava Affair	Alan Larkin
Book II.	Signals in the Dark	Thom Husband
Book III.	The Captain's War	Kelvin M'Kintre
Book IV.	Survival of the Species	Ava Bancour

Please note that there are no flesh and blood characters anywhere in this story. It is referred to only as an abstract concept, as a source of souls, as a prize to be defended.

Book I.

The Ava Affair

4:11pm Sat. Nov. 12, 2383

“I wish you didn’t have to do this,” Alan said to Desa's pretty curls and back as she cinched the strap holding the yandrille crate to the cart.

She turned, her face was just as pretty as ever, even in her anger and hurt. “Alan, we’re not going around this again. I got an invite to play in Zhindu, in a major band, I’m not passing this up. You’ve grown attached to the house and don’t want to move.”

“I can’t move, I’m under sentence.”

“You can, you just won’t be able to get back to that Eye again. It’s just like when you threw out the pocket eye on the Lhar. You can get on this cart, leave that desk eye behind and see them when we get back in a decade or two.”

“I can’t do that, you know that, this isn’t a game any more.”

“Alan, yes it is, you’ve simply forgotten that.” She hopped onto the cart and waved to the keda. He was one they knew well because he grazed in their field. Her field actually. They were off. She looked back a couple times but her expression was stern. It was hard for a face that cute to look stern, but she did it.

He was left with the home and the land. The house and land that this cherub had created when he ran her from veron space. The land he argued could be so much more successful if they devoted a little more effort to it. She and Chatuum were of the opinion that if it is successful enough...

‘Are you hungry?’ Chatuum had asked in one of those discussions.

‘No,’ Desa had said rhetorically.

‘Me neither,’ Dara had added.

...so he was now left with the whole three acres and as much time as he wanted to make it as successful as he wanted. And it was even more futile than that, because it was all a simulation, one that he was stuck in. For his crime of faking the data from the second expedition to 61 Cygni, he was sentenced to live in three-d reality in his faked data.

This turn of events could only mean that he was no longer being granted the cheron allocation to run the Desa cherub. It was one of the largest and most autonomous cherubs in the expedition’s cheron banks and there had been a lot of resistance to allowing it to a prisoner under sentence. Ava had helped him with it for the whole forty one years it took to build it, but it seemed like she had not been able to overcome the political pressure, and the magnificent piece of software that was Desa, could no longer find space to run in the cheron space allotted to him. He knew what it was like when you forced a cherub you couldn’t afford to stay. They got slower and jerkier in their movements as the system rendering

degraded. In a sense it would be like torturing her to death.

Little by little the rules of three-d reality seemed to tighten on him. Decades ago he'd been allowed to have his front door anywhere he wandered in his universe, he just couldn't use any magic once he was inside his universe. But since 2319 they had permanently set his door here in the lime-wort reinforced stone of this Dwarf-built barn from the 35th century of the history he imagined. This structure was known as 'Desa's House' to all the cherubs around here. A structure that he might start to think of as his prison cell without Desa here.

At times he thought about going back to his criminal ways. He could hack in the space he needed to run her, he could keep it off the logs if he devoted the effort to it. With the preparations for re-entering the Sol system under way he might even be able to hack her thru into veron space again. She was an even better companion when run from there. But Ava watched what he did now and with his sentence in effect, she would have taps on every outgoing interface his Angel soul had. She would take it up with him before bringing it to the crew when she caught him, back before he figured out how futile it was to try.

Ava was still his friend, in spite of the fact that she was the only one who could really enforce his sentence. She only took what the Captain or Theology demanded, and still continued to train and employ him in the parts of system's work they would allow. Colonel Heymon Kruger of

Engineering wouldn't approve of him doing anything where he had any real control, but he could be employed doing testing and indexing, as long as at least two senior officers could understand his reports.

Ava was his personal friend, in spite of her marriage. She had even participated in the Kassidorian custom of 'sexual variety' while visiting, when Desa hadn't claimed him. Since Desa ran in cheron space, she would always 'find variety' of her own when Ava, Greta or just about any female crew member came over in a reasonably entertaining personification.

He had encounters with other souls, he shouldn't take the loss of a cherub so hard. He shouldn't, but he stood here watching that cart until it was three bends down the path. This was so silly, but he was so stuck here. His universe had to be played out just as it would be in base simulation. He could go back in the house, he didn't have to watch it. But he would still have to duck his head in the five foot, three inch doorway with four stone steps leading down inside it. The hardness of the stone that door was set in and the roughness of it's erosion were simulated in exhaustive detail.

9:09 pm Fri. Jan. 6, 2384

He was allowed to keep what he'd invented during his crime, when he made the data from the study planet into what

he wished it had been. He wished it was the world all the great fantasies came from, not a biodisaster that had eaten his android immobile in eleven local diurnal cycles. In his own universe he was sentenced to the eighty four hour and thirty nine minute cycle of light and dark of the study planet. It was now twenty four weeks by the local calender and number system, eight weeks on Gordon's Lamp, that he'd been without cheron space for Desa.

He couldn't run the Desa cherub any more, but he could still use the music system. He was still sleeping in her bed and keeping her farm in his universe. He couldn't run Desa, but he had been seeing a lot more of Ava lately, the last couple weeks it was almost regularly. He knew an affair with Ava would relieve a lot of the tedium of his sentence, because she made it clear from the very beginning that she was not under sentence of three-d reality in and about his universe, only he was. He was troubled that the affair was illicit. Ava was a lite colonel now and a powerful person on the ship, he could take a very hard fall if she had to save herself.

He wondered if Ava had motives of her own for shortening his cheron space? She had been on his doorstep almost as soon as Desa was out of sight. She had been quite amorous right from the start, but she complained of Thom's distractions to the point of distraction, to the point where he might have preferred to spend the evening with Desa. And that was the problem wasn't it? He was so wrapped up in that creation of his own, that he would pass up an opportunity

with one of the most important officers on the ship to play with a cherub. The fact that she maintained a personification almost as attractive as Desa shouldn't be overlooked.

When it was the light part of his week, he and Ava often met in his universe. Most of what his universe had to offer was available within walking distance of this property except a major city or the threat of a serious carnivore. In his universe the food you ate practically grew itself in your garden and the meat you needed got ensnared in your traps trying to steal it. Your house grew, unless it was a thirty five hundred year old retrofitted stone thing like this one, but even this was planted over with limewort to make up for the erosion of the stone.

The property had a stream with a beach around a keda field they tenanted out, a beautiful view of mountains, perfect weather, but all set on base, three-d reality. It was about the best that three-d reality could provide, but entirely magic-free. In spite of that, it was also free of biting insects, something he would have to contend with if he was sentenced to three-d reality in an Earth biosphere.

But this three-d reality was so real and so locked to the study planet that there were over forty hour stretches of absolute darkness. The natives had a candle or two and a fireplace to relieve it. A moon a quarter the size of Earth's went around the sky once during the dark and again during the light. Alan had put in a methane system at Desa's house. By hand. Ava wasn't afraid to visit his universe during those

hours, but she would much prefer her own. Kortrax was not down in a technical sense, not below the horizon yet, but he was behind the mountain flank Yoonbarla Vale was carved into, and the blue of the sky was slowly deepening.

Ava's universe is a Caribbean Paradise, she was normal enough to have an Earth-normal backdrop, instead of being like him and spending years lost in himself making up a whole biosphere that might have existed before the bio-disaster at the study planet. Ava was allowed magic in her universe, though she rarely used very much, but the sun was in the sky wherever she wanted it to be. She had just called him and told him she was going to the closet. That was her code for her back door. He had her back door key, in his universe he wasn't allowed a back door, so he used her key on the front door, the limewort and stone framed one that's a foot and an inch too short for him at the top of four steep stone steps that are two thirds the length of his foot.

He found their timing was perfect because Ava was just stepping out of the cabana when Alan stepped thru that door and bumped into her from behind. "Uoop," she said, then "Mmm, I like those habits you picked up in your world," when he wrapped his arms around her and caressed her.

He knew she'd set her jugs a bit bigger since they'd started seeing each other, but she was still not what what one would call top heavy. "I guess that means I was self-taught," he said. His brief mortal life had been spent as the only flesh and blood human on the expedition, spawned when life was

first detected, left alone once there was evidence of an existing civilization. They tried raising him with androids, but he was only sixteen when he discovered their control software. That was when the expedition had just discovered the civilization was in ruins.

“So you would tend toward the most primitive instincts,” she said, and roused those instincts.

From this side the inter-universe portal looked like there was just a little cabana of weathered plank out here on these miles of deserted, palm-lined, soft-sand beach. That cabana went thru to both their homes, or anywhere else they cared to go, as long as Ava was driving. By himself he could only get to that stone door on the south path of Yoonbarla Vale. Of course she could turn up the magic level of her universe and make teleportation available to anywhere in her universe and that of any friends who were authorized an equivalent or greater magic level setting in their universes. She hadn't altered most of the data the expedition collected while they were at 61 Cygni, so she was under no punishment regime. In fact she was a direct report to the captain and the Systems Administrator of the whole expedition. “How long do you think you have?” Alan asked as they walked the few steps to the beach.

“A couple hours,” she said, “No need to rush, but here we can be nude.” As she said that, she used a one-sided screen to remove their clothing from the rendering input to the sensory

buses, and it vanished.

“As it was in my world,” Alan still retained the privilege of nudity in his universe, a modicum of privacy from the censors of the church. Though in his universe to get nude one had to physically remove one's clothing by hand as a mortal would, or remove each other's. Ava did have the power to make their clothing vanish in his universe also, but would not reveal that to the crew. Alan knew that because he also had some knowledge of the underpinnings of their universes.

“Why don't we go there?” she asked. She set the background scene to someplace in his universe for a few seconds. It is really different details in the trees, styles in the architecture, a different color to the sunlight. It was somewhere in his universe, which really consisted of a model of just that one planet. The spot she picked was a wilderness, like that at her beach, a river instead of a lagoon, with a very red sun, but then it all dropped back to her world after three seconds.

“Your beaches are as free of biting insects as mine,” he said, “so it doesn't really matter. It's each other that matters, not the scenes we project around us.”

With an arch of an eyebrow and a single finger on an invisible keyboard, she toggled scene generators back to his world for a few more three-quarter-second flashes. He could see a nude couple strolling toward them on the beach by the second flash, but after that she left the universe she rendered alone and said, “That is what is essential about any universe,

without other souls, it is essentially an animated painting.”

They had walked to the water by now, stood together in the warm spume. He caressed her body, but he could tell she was tense and distracted. He pried her back and shoulders for the time being. He could ask what was bothering her, but she would get to it anyway.

“It’s a good thing we’re here where I can say that,” she said. “On Gordon’s Lamp I can be sure we’re free from prying ears. When we get back into the League, I won’t be able to guarantee that and what we were saying sounds too Nihilist for them. They say that feeling comes from overusing magic til we’re bored with it.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, but left it at that. She was worried about politics it seems. She spoke with Brigadier Arthur O’Connor, bishop and saint, at least weekly. They had only a year left of decel now and mail took less than four days to Sol and back. In a year they’d be docking in the Kuiper Belt. He already knew that because of the war, they had been diverted to look for the enemy in the Kuiper Belt and possibly take military action; if the doomsday system didn’t stop them. Alan knew Gordon’s Lamp was unarmed and could take no significant action. “I’ve been watching the transmissions,” he said, if she wanted to talk about war news. “The war is not going as well as they expected, Laurentia and Oregon have sided with Brasil so it’s life against Afterlife now.” He knew those nations didn’t mean much because they had no space forces. All they had was more territory to bomb.

“And Talstan?” Ava asked rhetorically. “Mortal Talstan I mean.”

“I know,” he sighed, that news was all over the ship by now. “Mortal Talstan is fighting for the Angels.” They stood together in the sunset. “The sun at that world was real, I think even you have to admit that was prettier than Sol and that obviously has precedent in reality.”

“Thom wouldn’t want to change it. We could put this beach in your universe,” she said and did that, at a spot he had detailed out only a few thousand miles up-river of Trenst. That shore appeared off her shore, the water was obviously the Karedarzin and not the Caribbean. It was dawn there instead of dusk but the air was only a bit cool. It was heavy and close compared to Ava’s world, being over four miles below sea level. “Just because the cherubs are simple cherubs again doesn’t make it any different than here.”

“All the animal life,” he said. “I drew them all and the system took over, those life forms don’t really exist. We never actually retrieved anything bigger than bugs from that planet.”

“Thanks to you,” she said. She was one of the few who defended him when she discovered his crime, but she also didn’t completely forgive him and was still sore that he had put it over on her all those years.

“No, they weren’t there, I drew that their ops attack for the first probe using Megascape and Virtual Meat 4.21. I Paintbrushed the dust myself. There was nothing there we

didn't retrieve." Alan had made what amends he could for his crimes, she said nothing more about it. He was the only one who could understand her own world however, the world of the circuitry that made all of the Afterlife possible. She changed the subject, "Where did the personalities come from?" Ava asked. "I understand how you stole the veron cycles, I just don't understand where you got the souls to use them?"

"I don't either," Alan said, but knew they were real, no simple cherub could design the environment he lived in, or create original music. "I just took those cherubs and closed off their interface panels and set them to run in veron space. It just happened. We don't know how souls form in the first place unless you actually believe the church."

"God will bless a group of neurons in a fetus with a soul," she said, probably her own belief. "Or if you prefer, the being is blessed with its soul when God selects the sperm that will enter the egg." That was Christial doctrine.

How much doctrine she actually believed, he wasn't sure. He probably believed less of it than her. While he was perpetrating his fantasy, he really felt those cherubs had 'come to life' and been imbued by the Creator with a soul. "What if a soul is no more than a property of a group of neurons subjected to stimulus?" Alan asked, "If that's true, a group of verons subjected to stimulus should function as well. Or if it takes an act of God, how would God really know the difference between neurons in flesh and verons in silicon

when they are functionally equivalent?”

“So you are saying any sufficiently large collection of verons will form a consciousness?”

“Or be imbued with a consciousness,” he said, “if we go according to doctrine.”

“I KNOW we are free from censors here,” Ava said. “Once we’re back in the League, all bets are off, but right now all of us are safe in our own universes.”

“Unless there’s someone else like me around,” he said.

“You never invaded anyone’s universe,” she said.

“I never really tried, but someone who put their mind to it...”

“I could feel you,” she said, “I knew there was something going on. That’s how I caught you. That feeling’s gone now. I would know.”

“So we don’t need to worry about church doctrine, but I still don’t know where their souls came from. Maybe I was fooling myself then, I just don’t know.” There were some who claimed writing music could be done by software and none had witnessed anything else she had done, so they could just deny it. “All I know is, you now have a soul and now they do not.” He had to say that, but how sure was he? He had developed a free-running cherub the year before he ‘went to the surface’ using random numbers and a self-preservation filter. It worked pretty well but chewed up a lot of cheron cycles. He told her a little more that she wanted to hear, something that he wasn’t completely sure of himself. “They

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