

Balzac's War

a novelette by Jeff VanderMeer

For Wade Tarzia - thanks

I.

"Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea."
-- Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill"

Balzac and Jamie stumbled upon the flesh dog on a day when the sky, seared white as bleached bone, split open the world and allowed any possibility. Sixteen and free of the crèche, two as one, they ran across the desert floor to the ruined city of Balthakazar.

Balzac sucked air as he tried to match her long strides, his tunic and trousers billowing in the wind as if he were a human sail. Just ahead of him he could see Jamie's tangles of black hair snarling out behind her, her burnished mahogany thighs pumping beneath the flurry of white dress plaited at the knee and drawn up between her legs. Within hours his older brother and self-proclaimed guardian, Jeffer, would track them down and, returning them to the crèche, force them to complete their lesson with the boring old water dowser, Con Fegman. No doubt Con Fegman was, at that very moment, recounting for the thousandth time how he had discovered the oasis lakes with a mere twitch-twitch of his fingers.

Ahead, the ruins shimmered in the heat, the dark metallic glints of edges and curves beginning to resolve into cracked causeways, broken down battlements, and crooked buildings fifty stories high. The city had in its demeanor, the sand ever in motion across its metal and concrete carapace, a sense of watchfulness, a restlessness.

At the fringe, where buildings slept like bald and eyeless old men, they found an ancient highway; it shook itself free from the sand as if from a dream of drowning. Once, it might have been eighteen lanes wide, but now, choking on sand, it could fit only four abreast.

Breathing hard, Balzac slowed to a walk. Sweat dripped down his face. A delicious nervousness pierced his stomach.

Jamie, hardly winded, turned her face out of the sun.

"Why did you stop?"

"Because," Balzac wheezed, "*this* is the city..."

Husks and shells, as dead as the hollowed-out, mummified corpses of tortoises and jackals after a drought: the idea of "city" stripped down to its most fundamental elements, the superfluous flourishes of paint, writing, road signs, windows, scoured away in an effort to reveal the unadorned and beautifully harsh truth. Guttled weapons embankments pointed toward the sky, but could not defend the city from the true enemy.

Jamie interrupted his reverie. "Don't just *stand* there—we've got to hurry. Your brother will find us soon."

He held out his hand.

She stared at it for a moment, then took it. Her palm felt flushed and warm.

"I'll deal with Jeffer," he said with new-found confidence, although as he led her forward he didn't dare to see if she was impressed or just amused.

Straight to the city's heart they went, the buildings encroaching on the highway, while beneath their feet, four o'clocks, cactus blossoms, and sedgeweeds thrust up through cracks in the highway pavement. Scuttling through these miniature oases, anonymous gray lizards waged a war with coppery metal scorpions that pursued with mechanical implacability, their electric stingers singing static to the wind. Con Fegman had shown them one cracked open: beneath the metal exterior lay the red meat of flesh and blood.

Balzac loved even this most deadly part of the mystery that was Balthakazar. All the crèche machines-heirlooms from centuries past--broke down regularly and had to be cannibalized to repair other machines, and yet the Con members did nothing. Even practical Jeffer must realized that some day there would be no machines at all. Some day only the dormant technologies of the city would save them.

"Look at the bones," Jamie said, and pointed at the ground. Scattered across the highway were whitish-gray shards. It made Balzac shiver to think about it. Bones did not fit his pristine, cold-metal vision of Balthakazar in its prime.

"How do you know it's bone? It could be plastic or mortar, or almost anything."

"It's bone. Why else do you think the Con members don't move us back into the city. Why they don't even want us to visit?"

"Because, at night *creatures* come out of the underground levels, *things* with sharp teeth, and they *eat* you."

Jamie threw her head back and laughed; Balzac could see the smooth skin of her neck and marveled at its perfection even as he blushed and said, "It's not funny." Yet even her laughter pleased him.

"You," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "I stopped believing in that old tale a long time ago."

Something in his expression must have given him away, because she shocked him by saying, gently, "I'm sorry about your parents - really, I am - but the only truth is this," and she bent to pick up a shard that might have been bone. "My father says no one knows what did this. If these are just old graves opened by the sands or if something killed them all off." She paused, looked at him oddly, as if weighing her options, then said, "My father brought me here when I was much younger, and I just liked the texture of the bones. I didn't know what they were. All I knew was that they felt good to touch - lightweight and with those porous grooves - and that my father was there with me after so many nights away from the crèche, showing me something that filled him with awe." She tossed the shard aside. "It's only bits of bone, anyhow. Whatever happened happened a long time ago. There's nothing to be done for them."

True enough, and it was a reassurance to know that the years had created a barrier between him and the bones, so he could look at them as curious reminders of another age. How many times had Con Fegman, or even Jeffer, retold the old legends from before the collapse of the cities, as if the mere repetition would fend off the spirits of the dead?

"Come on," Balzac said. "Let's go." This time he did not hold her hand.

The pavement became hot, cool, then hot again as the sun sliced through the spaces between structures. The landscape had changed, become both rougher and smoother until buildings were all edges or had no edges at all. Others gleamed with an odd hint of self-repair, their skins smooth and shiny.

They encountered the hull of a rusted hovercraft over which, looking like a weathered lizard, lay the leathery, discarded skin of a dirigible. Balzac did not recognize the faded crèche insignia on the wrinkled cloth. Near the hovercraft lay a misshapen rock, as tall as two or three autodocs. The top of the rock was black and shiny.

"Let's sit down for a moment," Balzac said.

"If you must."

"I must. And besides, it's not just to rest. I've got leeches fruit."

They climbed up onto the rock and lay down on its smooth surface. He handed her a leeches and bit into his own, the juice dribbling down his chin. The fruit helped to rejuvenate him and he soon became acutely aware of her rising and falling chest, the sharp lines of her legs, the faint musk of sweat. She ate the leeches in huge bites, ignoring the juice as it trickled down her neck and stained her dress.

The rock was warm and it relaxed him to lie there, so close together. Confidence rising, he tried to explain why the city intrigued him so. He spoke of its rich history, how it must be considered the home of their ancestors, how it used structural designs and technologies unknown to the crèche.

Propped up on one shoulder, Jamie gave him no encouragement. He stuttered, groping for the words that might unlock a true sense of mystery, of scale.

Stymied, he started all over again, afraid that when he opened his mouth, the words would come out jumbled and senseless.

"The city is alive."

"But it isn't," she said. "It's dead."

"But you're so wrong. I mean, you *are* wrong." He squinted at the city's outline until his eyes burned. "I see these buildings and they're like dozens of individual keys, and if I can turn enough of the keys, the city resurrects itself. Take that thing there." He pointed to a rectangular patch of sand dotted with eroded stone basins and bounded by the nubs of walls. "That's not just a box of sand. That used to be a garden or a park. And take that strip." He pointed to a slab of concrete running down the middle of the highway. "That wasn't just a divider for traffic lanes - that was a plot of plants and grass."

"You mean that you see the city as if it were organic."

"Yes! Exactly! And if I can rebuild the city, you could bring back the plants and the trees, flesh out the skeleton. There's a water source here - there must be - how else could the land support a city? In the old books, if you look, you'll see they used plants for decoration."

"Plants for decoration," she said slowly, hesitantly. Then she lay back down against the rock.

His heart pounded against his rib cage. He had made her see it, if only for a moment.

A silence settled over them, the sun making Balzac lazy, the leeches fruit a coolness in his stomach.

After a time, Jamie said, "No rain for at least a month."

"How do you know?"

"The water dower's last lesson - don't you remember, stupid?" She punched his shoulder. "Look at the clouds. They're all thin and stretched out, and no two are grouped together."

Balzac shielded his eyes against the sun and examined the clouds. At the edge of his vision, he thought he saw a series of black slashes.

"What are those?"

Jamie sat up. "I see them. They look like zynagill."

The scavenger birds circled an area east of the highway. Balzac shivered and stood quickly.

"Maybe we should go back now. Maybe if we find Jeffer before he finds us he won't be as angry."

But a sudden intensity and narrowness had crept over Jamie's features - a stubborn look Balzac had seen many times before. It was the look she wore in class when she disagreed with her teacher. It was the look she wore with her friends when they wanted to do something she didn't want to do.

"No," she said. "No. We should go see what they've found." She shimmied down the side of the rock, folded her arms, and stared up at him. "Well?"

Balzac stood atop the rock for several seconds, his pulse rapid, the weal of sky and sun burning above while all around lay the highway, littered with bones. Only when he looked into Jamie's eyes and realized she doubted him did he move; even then he hesitated, until she said, "If you don't go, I'm going alone."

She held out her hand. Her palm was calloused from hard work. He grasped it awkwardly, leaning against her compact weight as he jumped down off the rock. As they came together, her lips brushed his cheek; where she had kissed him the skin tingled and flushed bright red. He could smell her hair, was caught between its coolness and the heat of her lips.

But she was already moving away from him and before he could react, she shouted, "Catch me if you can!" and sprinted down the highway, smiling as she looked back over her shoulder.

He stood there for a moment, drunk with the smell and feel of her. When he did begin to run, she had a lead of more than a city block. Even worse, she didn't so much thread her way through the fields of broken stone as charge through them, leaping curved girders as blithely as if playing coddleskatch back at the crèche. To see her run for the joy of it, careless of danger, made him reckless too, and as much as his nature would allow he copied her movements, forgetting the zynagill and their destination; watching only her.

Balzac had gained so much ground that he bumped into her when she finally stopped running.

A mountain of sand rose above them. Vaguely pyramid-shaped, it buttressed the sides of a massive amphitheater. Balzac could just see, at the top of the sandpile, winged phalanges curling out from the circular lip. Above, the zynagill wheeled, eyeing them suspiciously.

Jamie moved away from Balzac. She pointed at the sand and bent to one knee. Balzac knelt beside her, saw what she saw: an outline in the sand, seven times larger than his own palm, so large that at first he didn't realize it was a pawprint. A greenish-purple fluid had congealed inside the pawprint. Several more indentations followed the first, leading up the side of the amphitheater, gradually obscured by a huge swath of sand where a heavy body had dragged itself forward.

Jamie traced the paw's outline and sand fell inward.

"Whatever it is, it's hurt," Balzac said. "Probably dangerous. We should wait for Jeffer."

"No. Let's at least walk up to the top and see if we can find it." Jamie softened the rebuke with another

dazzling smile that made his ears buzz.

Helpless, Balzac took her hand when she offered it. He let her lead him as they trudged up the slanted wall of sand, parallel to the purple trail until, his sense of balance nearly betraying him, his muscles aching, they stood at the lip, blasted by the sudden wind.

He looked out across the city. Now, finally, it revealed the mystery of its structure: a broken pattern of radial spikes piercing to a center to the southeast, obscured by the sun and the distance. The sight confounded him, and he almost lost his balance for a second time. No longer did he have to fill in the gaps with his imagination. The buildings at the center of the spokes, those would have to be governmental or administrative in purpose; this would explain their archaic shapes, the arches and the domes. The remains of one-to-three story buildings immediately north of the center had to be the former homes of the city's leaders. Each revelation led to another until he forgot his chapped lips, the grumblings of his stomach, and the beast. He could have stood there forever, linking the city's streets in his mind, but Jamie tugged on his arm and pointed down, into the amphitheater.

"Look," she said.

The amphitheater had concentric circles of seats, most nubs of plastic and metal. Railings trailed off into open space while a series of gap-toothed entranceways spiraled down into the circle of what had at one time been a stage but now could only be called a hundred-meter-wide depression. At its center a large, black hole spiraled farther downward. Halfway between the edge of the stage and the hole lay a dark shape, onto which the zynagill, leathery wings aflap, would land and then relaunch themselves. Not a single zynagill used its double-edged beak to saw at the flesh.

"It's some kind of animal," Balzac said. "And it's dead. Satisfied?"

Jamie stared at him, then peered into the amphitheater again, as if weighing his unease against the mystery of the beast.

"Jeffer needs to see this," she said. "It might be important to the crèche."

"He'll just get mad at us."

"You worry too much," Jamie said. "Stay here - I'm going down."

"Wait," he said, but he was already climbing down into the amphitheater because he knew he couldn't stop her.

By the time they reached the stage, Balzac noted with satisfaction that Jamie was breathing hard. A thin layer of sand covered the stage, broken only by the animal's purple-tinged drag marks. Jamie ran forward. Balzac followed cautiously behind. The zynagill loitered, their leathery hooded heads bobbing nervously, then rose as one, the rasp of their wings, the sudden cry of alarm, making Balzac think he saw movement from the body itself.

The body lay on its side, heavy flanks rising to the height of Balzac's chest. A dog. Coarse, black fur covered the body and the legs, sparser only at the paws, which ended in dulled double-edged hooks. The jowly, horrific head ran into a muscular, thick neck that disappeared into the torso without delineation between the two. The head lay against the ground and from the open mouth the purple tongue lolled, running over fangs longer and more numerous than Balzac's fingers. A pool of green and purple liquid had congealed near the mouth. The dog's eyes, staring blankly into the far wall of the amphitheater, shared the purple tint of the tongue, although they were partially hidden by loose flaps of skin; these same flaps camouflaged a bulbous knot of tissue, twice as large as a clenched fist, that jutted from the

forehead. The beast could not have died more than an hour previous and yet it had an unnatural, almost mechanical, stiffness. The curled, taut quality of the limbs made him wonder how it could have walked or run. He had a sudden, chilling image of the creature dragging itself across the desert floor. The thought of the creature crippled disturbed him more than the thought of it whole.

Jamie knelt beside the forepaws. She took one paw in her hands.

"It's raw."

Five pads formed the underside of the paw. The pads had been worn to redness and the sides of the paw were as smooth as wind-washed stone.

"This beast traveled a long way just to die here. I wonder where it came from - another city or maybe even from beyond the desert. How could anything with such thick fur come from the desert?"

"It looks dangerous to me."

"It's dead, Balzac."

"Even so."

Balzac's gaze traveled the length of the creature and beyond until, lightheaded with dread, he realized the beast's destination: the hole. The hole that must spiral down into level beneath level, threading its way through catacombs without number, musty and old, where lived the creatures from nightmare.

"Jamie. Jamie, we should go. We should find Jeffer."

"Too late now. He'll find us." She did not bother to look up, but held the paw gently in her hand. "Such a distance to travel."

The sun beat down, hot and withering. It stung Balzac's eyes and brought beads of sweat dripping onto the bridge of his nose. But, despite the sun, the creature had no smell, no stench of decay. This creature had padded across the desert, the mountains, perhaps, and seen things Balzac could only imagine, and it had had the singleness of purpose to head for the darkest hole it could find when its legs had begun to give out...and it had no smell.

He wanted to run, to finally leave Jamie behind if she insisted on being so foolish. But, foolish or not, she was right: it was too late, for at that moment Jeffer appeared above them, staring down from the lip of the amphitheater.

II.

"It seems to him there are a thousand bars,
and behind the bars, no world."
-- Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Panther"

Ten years after the amphitheater, on the forty-eighth night of the war for Balthazar, Jeffer saw Jamie for the last time and his mind wobbled strangely. He stood on the third story balcony of the crumbling, baroque building he had chosen as a resting place for his men, but seeing her he was suddenly adrift, the stone beneath his feet shockingly porous, apt to fall apart and spill him onto the street below. Seeing her, he could not help but curl inward, downward, into a spiral of memories, surfacing only much later to the

implications of her existence below him. Almost in self-defense, his thoughts circled back to the one ritual that had proven impervious to change: when he slept in those years before and after the amphitheater, he would dream of the oasis lakes reflecting the stars. In his dreams, the lakes transformed themselves to light-choking, frictionless surfaces, as motionless as, as smooth as, lacquered black obsidian, the stars that fell upon the lakes screaming down like shards of broken, blue-tinted glass. Other times, the lakes became the land and the surrounding desert metamorphosed into thick, churning oceans through which swam fish flipped inside out so that their organs slithered and jiggled beside them.

Once, he had found Balzac at the oasis lakes, alone, his bony, frail body naked from a midnight swim, skin flushed blue with cold. Balzac's smile of greeting had suddenly shifted to doubt when Jeffer told him the news; and then Jeffer could see the darkness invading his brother, that luminous, expressive face blank with self-annihilation.

The images, the content, of the memory maintained a blurry constancy, across a dozen years, so that Jeffer could always conjure up the pale blue gloss of Balzac's face, lit from within, and the awful curling of his lips, through which he sucked air as if he were a deep lake fish, slow and lethargic in the cold, dying out of water.

What had he told Balzac at the time? The exact words had been erased from his memory; they lingered only as ghosts and he knew them only by their absence, the holes they left behind. The event itself he remembered with perfect clarity. He had been in a service tunnel with his parents, all three struggling to fix a clogged wastewater conduit sensitively located next to a main support beam. Polluted water streamed onto the tunnel floor. They all knew the dangers of compression, how that stream could become a flood. The portable light they'd brought with them flickered an intense green, staining the white tunnel walls as they toiled silently. The air, recycled too many times, tasted stale. Above them groaned the weight of five underground levels, enough rock, sand, and metal to bury them forever.

When it began to look as if the patch on the conduit would hold, Jeffer took a break, turning away to sip from a water canteen. He was sweaty and covered with grit. He faced the blinking red light that beckoned from the exit and wondered idly whether there would still be time to get in a quick drink or a game of cards before night shift.

Behind him, like a door slamming shut, the supporting wall collapsed. Deafened, he heard nothing, *felt* the weight of sand and rock suddenly smother the tunnel.

He knew.

Before he spun around.

His parents were dead.

The foreknowledge strangled the scream rising in his throat, sent it imploding into his capillaries.

Kill the messenger, Jeffer thought. *Then maybe the message will die too.*

Seeing Jamie on the street below, Jeffer knew of no way to protect his brother from the image of her.

It was two hours before dawn, and as Jeffer stood on the third story balcony the wind blew out of the southwest, cold and oddly comforting against his face. He hadn't showered or shaved for three weeks and there were holes in both his shoes. Sleep had become a memory, no more or less diaphanous than all the other memories, which crept in when he wasn't on his guard, because there was too much time to

think.

Also from the southwest came the smell of gunpowder and the acidic stench of flesh burned by laser. Gouts of flame revealed dirigibles on fire, their barrel bodies cracking like rotten, orange melons. There, amid the fiercest fighting, the crèche leaders had decided to use most of their remaining laser weapons. Spikes of light cut through the jumbled horizon of rooftops. The enemy hated light. It could not use light. Every spike of light extinguished was a human life snuffed out.

Jeffer's men, sequestered inside the building, numbered four. He could no longer lie to himself and call them a unit, or pretend they had any mission other than survival. Sixteen men had been killed in less than three nights. Of the rest, Con Fegman, wounded, had become delirious; Mindle counted as no more than a dangerous child; and Balzac...Balzac he could no longer read, for his brother hid beneath his handsome features and revealed himself to no one. Even their sole remaining autodoc - a portable, two-meter-high model with wheels and treads - had become increasingly eccentric, as if, deep in its circuitry, it had succumbed to battle fatigue.

Their predicament had become so dire that Jeffer found himself giggling at the most unexpected times. For over two hundred hours they had been cut off from communications with their superiors. The four of them had fought and fled from the enemy through tunnels, aqueducts, the ruins of old homes, and across the cracked asphalt of a thirty-six lane highway.

Through it all - the deadly lulls and the frenzies of violence - Jeffer had survived by fashioning a new identity for himself and his brother: they were refugees fleeing the past, and their best strategy had proved to be the simplest: in the unraveling of their lives to forget, to disremember, to exist purely in the *now*. They had successfully eluded the past for two nights running and yet, somehow, she had found them again.

The war had extended into the heart of the desert winter, the buildings that crowded the street etched in sharp, defining lines by the cold. But how to define her? She walked in the shadow of her own skin, lit by the intermittent flash of laser fire. Was she human? She loped along the chill pavement of the street below, nimble and dainty and muscular as she navigated the long-abandoned barricades.

Jeffer stared, his body stiff. His breath caught in his throat. Centuries slow, he picked up his rifle from the balcony railing.

"Who is it?" Balzac's tired voice, muffled, came from the room at Jeffer's back. They had barricaded themselves in and had booby-trapped the stairwells. Inside the room, the autodoc produced a thin, blue-tinted light that couldn't be seen from the street.

The pale, moon-faced boy Mindle, a refugee from a northern crèche already destroyed by the invaders, sidled along the wall until he was close enough to whisper, "Is it her again?" Mindle's voice held no fear, no surprise. Only Mindle's body registered such nerve end pricklings; at his spiritual core he had been frozen solid for a hundred years. Jeffer had seen too many like him in recent months as the crèche sent younger and younger men into battle.

"Keep Balzac quiet," Jeffer whispered back. "If she hears him...get Con Fegman, if he's able, to watch the door."

Mindle nodded and, wraithlike, disappeared into the darkness.

Below, Jamie began to cry out Balzac's name in the plaintive timbre of one who is lost and alone and afraid.

Balzac muttered a few words and Jeffer heard Mindle's soft voice, calm and reasonable, coo a soothing reply.

The shape on the street below stiffened, sneezed, and said, "Balzac, my love?"

Balzac's voice in reply: "Is it - could it?"

Mindle cursed. Jeffer heard a scuffle, a strangled cry, and silence, his gaze never straying from her. Lost and afraid. How could he ever consider her someone he had known? The sounds of her aloneness, her confusion, struck him as faintly pitiable, that she should, in any manner, try to recreate her former life. Such a curious double image: to see her on the street below and yet to remember all the times when Balzac had invited him over for dinner, Balzac and Jamie both exhausted from twelve hours of overseeing their reclamation projects in Balthakazar. She had never seemed vulnerable while arguing with him over the Con's latest decisions or about how to adapt the hydroponics hangars to open-air conditions. The lack of hardness in her now, the weaning away of any but the most dependent attributes, made him wary.

The stone wall behind him bruised his back. He didn't play the statue very well; he was sweating despite the cold and he imagined his breath as a vast, unmoving field of ice particles.

Perhaps, as on the two previous nights, she would miss them, would pass by, rasping out her song.

Jeffer raised his rifle to his shoulder. *Pass by*, he wished desperately. *Pass by* and be gone. He did not want to risk the sound of a shot. Come dawn, they would move elsewhere, maybe come across another unit and cobble up enough numbers to mount a counter offensive.

Pass by. Even better, remake history. Let Balzac come to me swimming at night at the oasis. Let Balzac tell me of our parents' death. Let him be the eldest and follow me to Balthakazar.

She stopped directly beneath his balcony, at an extreme line of fire. She sniffed the air. She growled deep in her throat.

"Balzac, are you there?" Such a reedy, ghostly voice.

She paced in a circle, still sniffing.

Jeffer allowed himself to be seduced by the fluid grace, the single-minded purpose behind the strides, the preternatural balance, for she was still beautiful.

She stopped pacing. She stared right up at him with her dead violet eyes, the snarl of fangs below the mouth.

"Jeffer," she said.

His finger closed on the trigger. The red tracer light lit up the pavement. The bullet hit the pavement, sent up a rain of debris.

But she was not there.

He could already hear her - *inside* the building. Battling through their booby traps. Barricades ripped apart, flung to the side.

"She's coming up!" Jeffer shouted, running back into the room. "She's coming up!"

Mindle and Con Fegman stood against the wall farthest from the door. Balzac sobbed, curled in a

corner, guarded by the autodoc. It was clear Mindle had propped Con Fegman up and that the old man would fall down given the opportunity. Which left Mindle and himself to stop her. Mindle had their last two laser weapons, a rifle and a hand-held beam. He aimed the rifle at the door. They both knew it had only two or three more charges left.

"Give me the rifle," Jeffer said. "Keep the other one - a cross fire."

Mindle nodded, threw the weapon to him. Jeffer caught it. His heart pounded. His hands shook. He flicked the safety.

Mindle said, "Soon now. Soon now." He rocked back and forth on his heels. His eyes were dilated. He licked his lips.

They heard the scrabble of claws upon the stairs. Heard the rasping of her breath.

The terror left Jeffer in that instant, as if he had become as cold as Mindle. He wanted her to come through that door. He wanted to kill her.

The sound of claws faded. Silence settled over the room.

Jeffer looked at Mindle in puzzlement.

Mindle smiled and winked. "Just wait. Just wait."

Then she hit the door with such force that the metal shrieked with fatigue.

"Balzac! Open the door!"

Another blow to the door. An indentation the size of her paw. A growl that would have ripped up Jeffer's insides a minute before.

"Go away," yelled Con Fegman, who fell, thrashing, in the fever haze of his infection.

"Balzac! Open the door!"

Balzac looked up from his corner. Jeffer could see the anguish in his eyes.

"Don't," Jeffer said.

The door tore open as if it were paper.

Metal and stone exploded into the room. Jeffer was yelling but Balzac couldn't hear the words. She stood there - huge, black, half-seen in the autodoc's blue glare. She shook herself, debris fluming out from her body. Mindle dove into Balzac's corner and caught him in the ribs with an elbow. It drove the air out of Balzac's lungs. Before he could get to his feet - to warn her? to protect Jeffer? - she leapt at Jeffer. Jeffer's laser rifle flashed and burned her hindquarters off. His lover screamed and, trajectory altered, landed in a bloody, crumpled heap beside him, brought to a stop by the wall.

The body thrashed, the claws whipping out from the pistoning legs. Balzac ducked, covering his head with his hands. Con Fegman, struggling to his feet, was ripped by a claw and sent reeling by the impact. The front legs sought traction, flailed, and the great jaws beneath Jamie's head gnashed together, opening reflexively only inches from Balzac's throat. Fangs the size of fingers. Breath like an antiseptic wind.

Blood spattered over the blunt muzzle. He could see the tiny pink tongue muscles tensing and untensing spasmodically.

Jeffer shouted an order to the autodoc. The autodoc lurched over on its treads, extended a tube, and stuck a needle into what remained of the flesh dog's left flank. The flailing died away. The great jaws lost their rigidity and rested against the floor. Blood seeped out from beneath the body, licking at Balzac's drawn up feet. Con Fegman moaned.

Balzac sat up against the wall, unable to look at his beloved. An endless sing-song ran through his head: if only, if only. If only Jeffer had let him talk to her while she was still on the street, perhaps he could have persuaded her to go away - and perhaps he didn't want her to go away. He let out a deep, shuddering sigh and stood on trembling legs.

Mindle blocked his path, so close he could smell the boy's rotten breath.

"Kill it," Mindle hissed, his face white with hatred. "Kill it now!"

Mindle's eyes had narrowed to knife points. Balzac looked away - toward Jeffer, toward Con Fegman.

Con Fegman, in a misty, far away voice, said, "I can't see anymore. I can't bear to see anymore," and covered his eyes and began to weep.

Balzac pushed past Mindle, turning his shoulder into the boy so he stumbled backwards. He went over to Con Fegman and knelt beside him, looked into his ancient face. Such sadness, such shame, that one of the crèche's elders should be dying here, like this.

Balzac took one of Con Fegman's hands, held it tightly in his own.

Con Fegman grinned with broken teeth and said, "I need water. I'm so thirsty."

"I'll get you water. Autodoc - Con Fegman. Full medical."

Balzac stood and allowed the autodoc to do its job. It injected tranquilizers, enveloped Con Fegman in a sterile white shield and, away from meddling eyes, went to work on him.

"Don't waste ammunition," Jeffer said. "It's dying anyhow. It can't hurt us."

"No, she can't hurt us," Balzac said.

Mindle's hand wavered on his laser. Balzac stared at him until he lowered it.

"Jeffer," Balzac said. "Please, get him out of here. The traps. Have him redo the traps."

"I'm here," Mindle said. "I'm in the room."

Mindle's hot gaze bore down on him, and he tensed, prepared to defend himself should Mindle decide to turn against them.

Jeffer nodded to Mindle. "Go downstairs and fix the barricades. Put up more traps. I'll keep watch on the balcony. At dawn, we move out."

"And will we take that thing with us?" Mindle asked, in a voice sweet as poison.

"No," Jeffer said and stared pointedly at Balzac. "I promise you we won't take her with us."

"*Compassion!*" Mindle spat, but he headed for the door.

Balzac watched him - a man-child, both ancient and newly-born, gaunt but innocent of hunger. Balzac couldn't blame him for his rage, or for the madness that came with it. He could only fear the boy. He had always feared the boy, ever since he had come to the crèche: an albino with frazzled, burnt white hair sticking up at odd angles, and eyes that made Balzac want to recoil from and embrace Mindle all at once. The eyes hardly ever blinked, and even when he talked to you, he was staring through you, to a place far away. Mindle had scoffed at their reclamation project, had not seen the point in the face of war. Why did they persist when they knew what they knew? Perhaps, Balzac thought, they had simply refused to believe in the proof Mindle brought with him.

It had been Mindle, a refugee from the north, who had articulated the growing unease of the Con members - the first to put a name and a face to the enemy. Before him, there had only been disturbing phenomenon: strange, ungainly creatures lurking at the edge of campfire and oasis; dismembered human corpses not of the crèche; then little gobbets of divorced flesh with cyclopean eyes that twitched like epileptic rats as they walked and, when dissected, proved to be organic cameras, *click-click-clicking* pictures with each blink of the single liquid blue eye.

Mindle had brought them a present, unwrapping the corpse of one of the enemy at a Con meeting. It was the only body yet recovered, badly burned and curled up into a fetal position like a dead black cricket, but still recognizably mammalian. Weasel-like. Two meters tall. Fangs snarling out from the partially-peeled back muzzle.

"At first, they walked around in plain view, directing their troops," Mindle had told the Con members. "Darting here and there, sometimes on four legs, sometimes on two legs. A meerkat hybrid, no doubt a left over from biotech experiments before the Collapse, with a much bigger skull and an opposable thumb. *Made* creatures. When we captured this one, they went into hiding, and now they only send their servants, the flesh dogs..."

Watching the grimace of Mindle's features, the hatred embedded there, Balzac had felt a prickle of unease, as if Mindle were not the messenger, but the presence of death itself.

With Mindle gone, Balzac turned to Jamie, her face set like a jewel in a ring, nearly buried by the folds of tissue on the flesh dog's head. Clinically, he forced himself to recall the little he knew about such symbiosis: Jamie's head had been cut from her body and placed in the cavity usually reserved for the flesh dog's nutrient sac; the nutrient sac allowed the beast to run for days without food or water. Her brain stem had been hardwired into the flesh dog's nervous system and bloodstream, but motor functions remained under the flesh dog's control. She could not shut her eyes without the flesh dog's approval, and although she kept her own eyes, they had been surgically enhanced for night vision, so that now her pupils resembled tiny dead violets. Sometimes the wiring went wrong and the symbiote would fight for muscle control with the flesh dog - a condition that ended with uncontrollable thrashing and a slow death by self-disembowelment.

Jeffer stumbled over a chair and Balzac became aware that his brother still shared the room with him.

"Why don't you leave, too," Balzac said, anger rising inside him.

"You shouldn't be alone. And what if there were others? I need to watch from the balcony."

"There's no one with her."

"I'm staying. You'll hardly know I'm here."

Balzac waited until Jeffer had stepped out to the balcony. Then, thoughts a jumble of love and loathing, he forced himself to stare at his lover's face. The face registered shock in the dim light, stunned as it began to recover itself. As he watched, the eyes, pupils stained purple, blinked rapidly, the full mouth forming a puzzled smile. Balzac shuddered. She looked enough like the Jamie he remembered for love to win out over loathing. He had known it would; deep down, in places he would never reveal to anyone, he had hoped Jamie would track him here. He had assumed that once she had found him again he could bring her back from the dead.

Looking at her now, he had no idea what to do.

"Balzac? Balzac?" That voice, no longer strong, demanding and sexy.

He was so used to her being the stronger one, the one who had an answer for everything, that he couldn't reply. He couldn't even look at her. Throat tight and dry, legs wobbly, he took a step toward Jeffer. Jeffer was only a silhouette, behind which rose the night: a ridge of black broken by faint streaks of laser fire.

"Help me, Jeffer."

"I can't help you."

"What should I do?"

"I would have shot her in the street."

"But you didn't."

"I didn't."

"Balzac," Jamie said. The disorientation in her voice frightened Balzac. He ground his teeth together to stop his tears.

"She can still hurt you," Jeffer said.

"I know," Balzac said. He slumped down against the wall, his shoes almost touching Jamie's head. The floor was strewn with dirt, pieces of stone, and empty autodoc syringes. Beside Balzac, the flesh dog's entrails congealed in a sloppy pile.

"Balzac?" Jamie said a third time.

Her eyes blinked once, twice, a miracle for one who had been dead. She focused on him, the flesh dog's head moving with a crackly sound.

"I can see you," she said. "I can really see you."

You're dead, he wanted to say, as if it were her fault. *Why aren't you dead?*

"Do you know where you are?" Balzac asked. "Do you know who you are?"

"I'm with you," she said. "I'm here, and it's cold here."

The effort too much, too soon, with the flesh dying all around her, Jamie's eyes closed to slits.

Balzac wondered if what he saw was not just a carnie trick, if beneath the flesh lived nothing more than an endless spliced loop, a circuit that said his name and tried to seduce him with the lie that Jamie lived, long enough for it to drive him mad. Jamie had died. He knew that; if he saw her now, she was ghost cloaked in flesh, as dead as the city of powdering bones. The same war that had given the city a false heart - a burning, soul-consuming furnace of a heart - had resurrected Jamie. Yet he must assume that she was more than a shadowy wisp of memory, because he could not prove her ghostliness, her *otherness*. What cruelty for him to abandon her should she be aware. And trapped.

Jamie had died on the front lines a week before, *then* and *now* separated by a second and a century. His recollections were filtered through a veil of smoke and screams, the dark pulsating with frantic commands. Particular moments stood out: the irritation of sand grit in his shoes; a lone blade of grass caught *just so* between yellow and green; an ant crawling across an empty boot, its red body translucent in the laser glow; the reflection of an explosion, the burnt umber flames melting across the muzzle of his rifle; the slick feel of Jamie's grime-smeared hand in his, her pulse beating against him through the tips of her fingers.

Crowded together in long trenches, they had been only two among several thousand, waiting. They did not talk, but only touched, not trusting words.

The flesh dogs appeared promptly at twilight, bringing silence with them in a black wave. They wore the masks of friends, the guise of family. They jogged and cantered across the fires: fueled by a singleness of purpose, pounding on shadow muscles, ripping swathes of darkness from the night so as to reimagine themselves in night's image. Eyes like tiny dead violets. An almost-silent ballet of death.

Then, on cue, they halted, forming a solid, uniform line. They stood so still it would have been easy to think they were a row of ancient statues built on the order of a brilliantly deranged despot.

In the lull, Balzac hugged Jamie one last time, taking comfort in the way time became timeless in the embrace of her body.

Above, dirigibles coughed and grunted with the effort of discharging missiles, flashes of light catching ground combatants in freeze frame.

As the flesh dogs came into range, in such numbers that the ground reverberated with the thunder of their passage, the defenders of the trench opened fire: the spitting sparks of lasers and the rhythmic *phutt-phutt* of rifles entwined in an orgasm of recoil and recharge. It took immense discipline to stand in the teeth of such a charge. The rifle in Balzac's hands seemed heavy, difficult - it wanted its head, and in the heat of battle it was all he could do to keep it aimed and firing, his finger awkward on the trigger.

In reply to the defenders' barrage: a chorus of bone-thin voices attached to alien bodies, a thousand ghosts wailing across the ruins in the timbre of old friends pleading for their lives, calling out to the living by name.

It brought madness bubbling to the surface, so that the defenders shot and recharged with incredible speed, shouting back their own hatred to block out the voices, obliterating the present that it might not obliterate the past.

As the wave broke over them, the tableau dissolved in confusion. Mostly, Balzac remembered the stench of gunpowder as he loaded and reloaded - but more slowly now, mesmerized by the carnage - and the fleeting images through the smoke...Huge bodies flung without reason or care...a dark blue-black wall of flesh...the swiftness of them, almost as fast as a dirigible, so that a blink could cost a life...Sinuous muscles, caricatures of human faces as wincing passengers...The bright black slickness of spilled oil...Throats ripped from bodies...bodies fallen, whirling and dancing in the jaws of the flesh dogs...flesh

dogs toppling, sawed in half or legs cut off, crawling forward...others, shot in the head, falling over on their backs.

Through the black-white-black of dirigible flashes, Balzac saw Jamie fall in stop-gap motion *and his heart stopped beating* away from him into the darkness *he couldn't see her anywhere*. As he put out his hand to pull her up, she was no longer there.

"Jamie!"

A flesh dog galloped toward the breach in the line left by Jamie's absence. He spun, shot it, and jumped to the side, the fangs snapping inches from his throat. It slammed into the trench, dead. He got up...and when he looked back toward the gap in the line of defenders, she still hadn't filled it, hadn't regained her feet as he'd expected, even when the dirigibles scorched the night into day.

In his panic, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think.

"Jamie!" he shouted over the screams and detonations. "Jamie!"

And the echo passed along the line to him: "Retreat! Fall back! Breached! Breached!"

A death sentence for Jamie. A section of the trench had been overrun and to avoid being flanked they must fall back. The retreat, a haphazard, broken-backed affair, piled confusion on confusion, some soldiers running away while others commenced a vigilant rearguard action to allow stragglers to cross back over what was now enemy territory.

A dirigible exploded directly overhead, the impact knocking Balzac to the ground. Swathes of burning canvas floated down on the combatants. Molten puddles crackled and hissed around Balzac as he got up. Mechanically, he haunted the burning ground, searching for his beloved with his infrared goggles. He dove into ditches, crawled through the most dangerous of fire fights, lending his rifle only long enough to clear a path to the next embattled outpost. Each minute of failure added to the heaviness in his chest, the rising sense of helplessness.

Later, he would recall the black-and-red battlefield as if he had been aboard a dirigible; he would even remember watching himself run across the treacherous ground: a tiny figure leaping recklessly between trenches, scurrying through flames without hesitation. Other times, he would remember it only as a series of starts and stops. He would be running and then fellow soldiers or flesh dogs would be all around him like a sudden rain, and then he would be alone again, his thoughts poisoning his skull.

Only the sight of the creature saved Balzac from the endless searching, for it was only then that he realized Jamie must be dead.

He sat down heavily, as if shot, and stared at it as it bustled about its business some thirty-five meters away. It was so sleek and functional and not of this world - so much more *perfect* than anything perfect could be - that for a moment Balzac could not imagine its function: it was merely a beautiful piece of artwork, a thing to be admired for its own clockwork self. How could humankind compete with such a creature? He watched it with mounting dread and guilty fascination.

It scuttled along on cilia-like feet, almost centipedal, and yet it was clothed in dense, dark fur - long and low to the ground so that it seemed to *flow*, a species composed of the most elemental combination of flesh and bone. The head, which swiveled three hundred sixty degrees, reminded Balzac of a cross between cat and badger, the bright, luminous eyes and curious smile of muzzle conspiring to make the beast almost jolly. Thin, Balzac thought at first. Thinner than thin, the spine caved in on itself so that its back appeared to have been scooped out with a shovel, leaving a long, low compartment walled in by

shoulders and flanks. The smooth-squishy sound it made with its thousand limbs he had heard before, on the battlefield, as a low, underlying counterpoint to the screams and explosions.

But although the beast stunned him with its perfect strangeness, the function it performed stunned him more.

As he watched, the beast threaded its way through the scattered corpses. Finally, at the body of a young man with open, vacant eyes, and a thin line of blood trickling from the mouth, the beast came to a halt. Then, with a discernable "pop," spinning wildly, the expression on its face insanely cheerful, the beast's head unscrewed itself from its body and, with the aid of cilia positioned beneath its now autonomous head, lifted itself over the edge of its own shoulders. Once it had sidled up to the head of its victim, the beast grunted twice and two appendages emerged from the thick fur: a powerful blade of bone and a two-thumbed hand. The blade came down, slicing through the man's neck. Almost simultaneously, the hand grasped the dead soldier's head and placed it over the hole left by the departure of the beast's head. It waited for a moment, then pulled the man's head, which had been "capped" with a pulsing purple slab of flesh, back out of the hole. Balzac watched with horrified fascination as the hand then tossed the capped head into the scooped out cavity of the beast's body. Both blade and hand disappeared into the beast's grinning head, which then rolled and huffed its way back onto its own neck and twirled twice, before the whole nightmare contraption scuttled on, out of sight.

Leaving Balzac alone, with the dead.

After the battle, behind the lines, they put him in Jeffer's guerilla unit. Jeffer would watch over him as he always had in the past.

Jeffer placed his hand on Balzac's shoulder. Balzac flinched and Jeffer realized that the gesture was unappreciated, but he tried by an act of will to put all of his love and fear for Balzac into that simple touch of hand on shoulder. Love. He might not have admitted to love a few years ago, beyond the love expected by blood, but Jeffer had seen an unlikely transformation come over Balzac.

Balzac had always been handsome, to the point of callowness, with piercing green eyes and a firm chin. But slowly, as he and Jamie became closer, and especially in the year after their marriage, Jeffer had seen the callowness stripped away. A certain *weight* and *depth* had entered the perfect lines of his brother's mouth, a seriousness and mischievousness which illuminated the eyes. It was as if a fear had conquered Balzac simultaneous with his love for Jamie - fear for the death of his beloved, that their love could not last forever - and that these entangled twins of fear and love had peeled away the callousness like a molting lizard skin.

Jamie had remarked on it during a tour of the Balthakazar reclamation projects, as they sat and watched Balzac out in the sun, badgering the engineers.

"I don't know if I would still love him," she said. "Not if he was just handsome. I used to love him for his mouth and his eyes and his awkwardness, and I wanted to protect him." She flashed the smile that had driven dozens of men to despair. "Now he's grown up and become real."

The memory haunted Jeffer as he said to Balzac, "It will be okay. You don't have to do anything. It won't be long..." Jeffer suddenly felt weary. Why must he comfort others at those times he most needed comfort? The muscles in his throat tightened. Ever since he had been left with an eleven-year-old boy who could never again quite be just his little brother it had been this way.

"I should have rolled in the dirt and disguised my scent," Balzac said. "I should have become someone else. Then she couldn't have found me. Ever. I shouldn't have let her find me. *But where's the kindness in that?*"

Jeffer smiled at the mimicry of Mindle's favorite phrase.

"Kindness?" Mindle said, surprising them both. Eyes bright and reptilian, he stood in the doorway.

"Kindness? How can you speak of kindness? There's no room for it. We've no need of it."

Jeffer half expected Mindle to crouch down and lap up the blood pooling around the flesh dog's body. Who could predict the actions of a child who had never been a child?

"Are you finished with the barricades, Mindle?" Jeffer asked.

"With the barricades? Yes."

"Then wait outside until dawn. Stand watch from the second story window."

Mindle stepped inside the room. He licked his lips. "Yes, sir. But first I thought we might interrogate the prisoner."

"The prisoner will be dead soon."

"Then we must be quick - quicker, even," he said, and took another step into the room.

"Take up your post on the second floor," Jeffer ordered.

Mindle took a third step into the room.

Before Jeffer could react, Balzac snatched up Con Fegman's rifle from the floor. He aimed it at Mindle.

Balzac said: "Go. Away."

Mindle smiled sweetly and turned to Jeffer, one eyebrow raised.

"Do as he says, Mindle," Jeffer said. "And, Balzac - put down the rifle!"

Mindle shrugged and turned away.

Balzac tossed aside the weapon and hunkered over the flesh dog's body. His brother's gauntness, the way the autodoc's light seemed to shine through him, unnerved Jeffer. Such an odd tableau: his brother crouched with such love and such gentleness over the massive body of the flesh dog, as if it were his own creation.

Jeffer tottered forward under the spell of that image, his intentions masked even from himself, but Balzac waved him away.

"Please, let me be," Balzac said. "Watch the window. Watch Mindle."

Even as he nodded yes, Jeffer hesitated, wondering for the first time if he could aim a rifle at his own brother. He walked over to the balcony and watched Balzac and Jamie from the darkness. Jamie's face was pale, her lips gray. The beast's flesh surrounded her like a rubbery cowl.

He marveled at the affection in Balzac's voice as his brother touched the creature's face and asked, "How do you feel?"

"Cold. Very cold. I can't feel my legs. I think I'm dying. I think I'm already dead, Balzac. Why else should I feel so cold?"

Balzac flinched and Jeffer thought: *Think? Feel? Can it do either?*

"It's a cold night," Balzac told her. "You need a blanket. I wish I had a blanket for you, my love."

"Cold. Very cold," she said, in a dreamy, far-off voice.

"I'll find something for you," Balzac said, his voice cracking with grief. "Jeffer, I'm going to look through the supplies downstairs - maybe there's a blanket. Watch her for me?"

"She's almost...I mean, I don't think we have a blanket."

"I know! I know that. Just watch her."

Balzac scabbled to his feet and fled through the ruined doorway, leaving Jeffer with the enemy. As he circled her, he wondered if he should kill her.

"Who is there?" Jamie said. "Are you cold too?"

At the sound of that voice, Jeffer stepped away from her, made sure she couldn't see him. What if she recognized him? What if she spoke his name again? What then?

In the corner, Con Fegman stirred and said, in a sing song voice, "The sand toad told the sand itself and the sand told the toads and the toads told the sand and...and...and..." He faded back into unconsciousness, the myth trapped between his withered lips.

Jeffer tried to ignore Con Fegman. He had so resigned himself to the old man's death that he sometimes started in surprise during Con Fegman's moments of lucidity, as if a ghost had drawn breath.

"I want to get up," Jamie said, face tightening as she strained to move the flesh dog's leg muscles. "I can't seem to get up."

Jeffer knew better than to interrogate her. If he couldn't shoot her, he would have to content himself with watching her.

In the early days, before the full-fledged invasion, he had volunteered to help capture and interrogate such surgically-altered specimens. They never had much to say and, anyhow, who could tell if what the prisoners said was authentic or preprogrammed? The heads when separated from the bodies would live on unimpaired for two or three hours, and perhaps there was a hint of miracles in this delayed mortality, but surely nothing more.

Locklin, the subject of Jeffer's final interrogation, had believed in miracles, and as Jeffer stared at Jamie he could not help but see Locklin's face superimposed over hers.

Locklin had laughed at him even during those moments of the interrogation that most resembled torture. When asked a question, the creature would say its name and make a low bubbling laugh through its flesh dog and human mouths. The violet eyes would widen, his craggy, heavily-tanned and scarred face sprawled across the flesh dog's forehead. "I am Locklin today, but tomorrow? You will all be me."

Locklin claimed to come from a crèche located in the far north, nestled against a frozen sea. Cliffs four hundred meters high sheltered them from the arctic winds, and from these same cliffs came the enemy, in great numbers, on a winter's day when many of the crèche were dying from cold; the heaters had failed

and the crèche's leadership had wavered on whether to wait out the weather or to abandon the crèche.

"But the m'kat," Locklin offered near the end, contempt for Jeffer poisoning his voice, "they fixed us up! Ho! They surely did. Immortality in return for service - a fine, fine body that will run forever, and we said *yes!* We said *yes*, all of us shivering in that frozen place...as most of you will say yes in your turn."

Always it was flesh dogs fashioned from members of this particular crèche that Jeffer found least like a poorly animated holovid. If some responded like sand through a sieve to his questioning, then these hardened types were steel traps. For they had not just pledged allegiance to the "m'kat" but worshipped them; giving up their children to immortality and abandoning their old religions. This betrayal of species terrified Jeffer. Among the Con members it was the greatest of all fears: to be captured by an enemy that did not know mercy as humans knew it, an enemy unparalleled in the art of psychological warfare. To be sent back in the guise of a flesh dog, mouthing your own name or the name of your beloved as the creature fought you.

Only now did Jeffer realize he had talked to Locklin too much, for as he watched Jamie, Locklin's hypnotic words drifted in and out of his thoughts: "*You could live forever this way, if you would only submit...*" A great sadness welled up inside Jeffer, for he and his brother had become estranged; it was there in Balzac's words, in his face: that the love he had for Jamie had become monstrous, had taken him over and eaten him from the inside out. Did Balzac sense a truth to Locklin's words that escaped him? A chill crept into Jeffer's skin. He could already foresee an outcome monstrous beyond imagination and he told himself he would not help *in that way* - he could not - and he tried to convince himself this was because he loved his brother, not because he stood alone in the same room with a creature so familiar to him and yet so alien. Would Balzac ever forgive him.

Mindle had been Balzac's hateful shadow as he rummaged through their meager cache of supplies for a blanket. The boy had said nothing, had followed almost without sound, but Balzac could feel that gaze blasting the back of his head, scorching his scalp. He didn't mind; better to know where Mindle was than not. At times on his mini-quest, he even tried talking to Mindle, and took a perverse pleasure in his facade of cheeriness, knowing it must make the boy burn even brighter. Burn, then. Burn up.

But there was no blanket, and with each step back up the stairs, the facade faded a little more until he could barely walk for the weariness that pulled at him. On the third floor landing, Balzac heard Mindle's retreating footsteps and was glad of it, not wasting time with a taunt, but ducking into the room where Jamie still lay in the autodoc's blue light. Jeffer stood to one side.

"I couldn't find a blanket. You can go back to the window."

Jeffer gave Balzac a wan smile, but Balzac only slumped down beside Jamie.

"Jamie," he said when Jeffer had gone back out onto the balcony.

"I'm cold." A voice like an echo, rich with phlegm or blood.

"Cold like the oasis lakes - do you remember the oasis lakes?"

He thought he saw her mouth curl upward. She gave a little hiccuping laugh.

"I remember. I remember the cold. It makes me sneeze." Then, doubtful: "That was a long time ago..."

The water had been cold. They'd dived in together, into the hardness of the water, swum through it, their

muscles aching. They'd snorted water, gurgled it, luxuriating in the decadence of so much water, and surfaced to kiss, breathlessly under the stars. Her lips had tasted of passionfruit and he had pressed her into the shallows where they could stand, then moved away from her shyly, only to find her pulling him back toward her and putting his hand between her legs; making sharp, quiet sounds of pleasure as his hands moved lightly on her.

But, faced with her in the flesh, he could not hold onto the memory of the emotion. It dissipated into the grime and darkness: a dimly-glittering jewel against whose sharp edges he could only bleed.

"We made love there," he said.

Silence.

Dawn would come soon and they would have to move on while they had the chance.

Jamie whimpered and moaned and cried out in her half-death, half-sleep. He was cruel (wasn't he?) to prolong her pain.

He could feel Jeffer staring at him. If not Jeffer then Mindle. Mindle hated him. Jeffer loved him. But they both wanted the same thing.

Balzac let his gaze linger over Jamie's face, the thickness of it which had overtaken the grace, as if the architects that had put her back together could not quite recreate their source material. This was the woman who had worked side by side with him to rebuild the city, she planting trees as he excavated and drew plans. He had even grown to enjoy the planting - long hours, yes, and the work made his fingers bleed and blister but he had liked the smell of dirt, enjoyed the rhythms of the work and the comfort of her presence at his side.

He thought of the times he had made love to her on the cool desert sand under the stars, and how they would sneak back to the crèche in the years before they were married, there to lie in bed for hours afterwards, talking or telling stories. The sweet smell of her, the taste of her tongue in his mouth, these were *real*, as was the peace that came over him when he was inside her, so very close to her, as close to her as he could, to be inside her and looking into her eyes.

He owed it to her. If he loved her.

In agony, he ran to the balcony, pushing Jeffer aside, and beat his fists against the stone railing.

"Listen to me: it's better this way," Jeffer whispered. "Come morning, there's a good chance we can come under the protection of a larger unit. If we can only survive - "

"Shut up!" Balzac hissed. "Shut up or I'll yell and *they'll* all hear us."

"Should I leave?"

"Leave? No...but I don't want to talk. I don't want to *think*...I just want to stand here for a moment."

"That's fine. That's fine. I'm your brother, Balzac, *your brother*. I don't want to hurt you."

Balzac tried to slow his breathing. He leaned on the railing and looked out across the city. Dawn soon, and still the dirigibles burned and still the darkness closed in around them. A hundred shades of darkness for a hundred different tasks - darkness to cover buildings; darkness to cover pain; darkness to cover thoughts; darkness to cover the light, and the light, when it came, only emphasized the darkness all the more. He could no longer hear the faint, ghostly shouts from the front lines; the darkness had swallowed

the voices, too.

For the first time, looking out over not only the ruined city but the ruins of his own ambition, Balzac felt the pull of that darkness, felt overpowered by it. He was tired. He was so tired. He began to weep. He could not bear it. He must bear it. He could not. He must.

Where into that darkness had she been taken? Where had the scuttling creature dragged her? Had it dragged her into the hole at the center of the amphitheater? Some place underground where the darkness grew thick and unfettered - in the tunnels under the city, wherever *they* had their headquarters, where the creatures from nightmare used to live before they were displaced by the enemy. It hurt to imagine such places. They scared him more than anything. All he could imagine was suffocating dirt, the tunnel imploding and burying him alive.

What sort of immortality had she found there? When they'd reawakened her, had she pleaded with them? Did she know, even now, exactly what had been done to her?

And if he took her back there, could they live together, in the darkness, all alone with only one another for company amongst the ghouls and ghosts...

"Help me to imagine it, Jeffer."

"Imagine what?"

"Never mind."

A red wound bled across the horizon. Balzac stared at Jeffer. Jeffer looked away.

"I know I have to do it," Balzac said.

"You don't. I'll do it for you."

"No. I have to do it."

"Then do it."

Balzac nodded and walked back to Jamie. He leaned over her, touched her face once again, smoothed back a strand of hair. Strange, the calm that settled over him.

"Balzac?" she said in such a questioning tone that he almost laughed with grief.

"Jamie. Jamie, I have to ask you something. Do you hurt, Jamie? Jamie, do you hurt a lot?"

"I'm so cold," she said. Then something clicked behind her eyes and he thought he saw the old confidence.

"Close your eyes then, Jamie. I swear, Jamie. This won't hurt. Jamie, it won't hurt. I wouldn't lie. Not to you, Jamie."

"I know, my love."

He exchanged weapons with Jeffer: his rifle for Jeffer's laser. Then, hugging the flesh dog's head to him, he adjusted the setting on the laser for a needle-thin, ten-centimeter-long blade. If he cut the throat, she might last for a few minutes, in pain. But if he could spear her through the head...his hand wavered and for a moment every atom, every particle, that made him Balzac streaked in opposite, splintered directions. If only she wouldn't stare at him...

His hand steadied, and with it his resolve. Two smooth strokes and he had separated the node of tissue that contained Jamie. There was no blood; the laser cauterized the wound instantly. Her eyes still stared up at him though her lips did not move. He held her against him, closed her eyes, kept the rifle in his right hand, reactivated the normal settings.

When he looked up Jeffer was staring at him in horror.

Balzac's shoulders sagged, the weight of darkness too great, and then he righted himself, found his legs.

Jeffer took a step forward, as if to block the door.

"Don't. Don't do that," Balzac said.

"Balzac! Leave her be."

Tears blurred Balzac's vision; he wiped them away viciously with his forearm. Seconds were as precious as water now; he could not waste them.

"I can't do it, Jeffer. I. Just. Can't."

"You can! You know you can. You remember how I was after...after our parents died? You remember how I was? You brought me back. *You did that.* I can do that for you. I know I can."

"And if you do? I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear it. *I can't lose her too.*"

"It's too late. You'll lose her anyway."

"Not if I find them in time. I've got an hour. Two, maybe."

Silent as an executioner, Mindle appeared at the door, his hand-held laser aimed at Balzac.

"*Mindle, get out of here!*" Jeffer screamed, raising his own rifle. The barrel wavered between Balzac and Mindle.

Mindle's eyes had the fatal density of dead stars.

"Shut up, Jeffer," he said. "If he moves, I'll shoot him."

Into the deadly silence crept the first light of the sun. Grainy yellow rays revealed them all as tired, grime-smearred, gaunt figures frozen in time, while Con Fegman stared with sightless eyes directly into the sun. Balzac could hear his brother's muttered prayers, could sense the tension in Mindle's trigger finger. He looked first at one and then the other, their shadows flung against the far wall.

Looking down into her sleeping face, Balzac knew he was impervious to the other voices, the voices that were not hers. For her sake, he had to get past Mindle, make it to the doorway, and onto the street below. The odds were bad, and yet he felt at peace: the darkness was still with him, cloaking and protecting him.

Vaguely, he heard Jeffer tell him to put down his rifle and Mindle scream that if he took a single step he was a dead man, but their words came from very far away. They could not touch him - not Mindle, not his brother. No one but Jamie. The darkness covered his face like a veil. He caressed Jamie's cold cheek with one trembling hand.

"Goodbye," he said. He threw his rifle in Mindle's face. He ran toward the door. Behind him he heard Jeffer's slow, drawn-out shriek of loss, and then the ice-heat of Mindle's star exploded against his back.

The force drove him forward, knocked the breath from his body, and he was falling through the doorway, falling into the darkness of the stairwell - and kept falling, a numbness enveloping his body, until the darkness was complete and it was no longer the stairwell but the black oasis lakes, and he was diving into and through them, the wet wave and wash licking blackly at his limbs, and just when he thought he might fall forever, he caught himself.

Sand, bright sand, beneath his feet, the grains like glittering jewels. He looked up - into the glare of late afternoon - and saw Jeffer staring down at him from the lip of the amphitheater. Jamie saw Jeffer a moment later and gasped in surprise.

Jeffer stalked down to them, cold-shouldered and stiff, sand spraying out around his boots. Balzac had risen from his position near the beast, thinking Jeffer would give them both a thrashing.

But instead, Jeffer became very quiet and asked them if they were all right. Balzac said yes and Jamie asked how he had found them.

"The zynagill," Jeffer said, still staring at the beast. "I thought you might be dead."

Before Balzac could speak, Jamie laughed and said, "No. *It* is. What do you think of it?"

"I think you should get away from it." Jeffer walked closer.

"It came from underground," Balzac said.

"It came from far away," Jamie said. "Look at its paws."

"It's like something from the old books," Jeffer whispered, skirting the edge of the beast as if it were poison. "We should burn it."

"Burn it?" Balzac said. "But it's dead."

"Burn it," Jeffer said.

But it was too late. They heard a leathery, cracking sound and the flesh dog's bulbous forehead split open and out struggled a creature the size of a man's heart. It glistened with moisture and, seeming to grow larger, spread its blue-black wings over the ruins of the flesh. It had all the delicate and alien allure of a damselfly.

"It's beautiful," Jamie said.

The creature gazed at them from one red-ringed eye (luminous amber, with a vertical black slit). The bone-thin legs ended in razor claws. The wings rose and fell with its breathing, which was steady and unruffled. The wings were those of a fallen angel, miraculous in that the black, shiny surface reflected greens and purples and blues. They were monstrously oversized for the body and the beast flapped them to keep its balance.

Jeffer moved first, fumbling for his gun, and the creature, alarmed by the motion, moved its wings more vigorously.

Balzac put himself between Jamie and the creature, his swift embrace so tight she could not move, though she struggled against him.

Before Jeffer could aim, the creature launched itself into the air and spiralled up through the flock of hovering zynagill, scattering them in all directions. It made a swift pass over the amphitheater, still gaining

altitude, then veered abruptly toward the west and began to pick up speed, soon out of sight.

Jamie wrenched herself from his grasp. "Why did you do that?!"

"I didn't want it to hurt you."

"I don't need your help," she said, but when he looked into her eyes, he saw a sudden awareness of him that had not been there before. It sent a shiver through his body.

"What does it mean?" Balzac asked Jeffer, whose face was still clouded with thought.

"I don't know. We will have to tell the Con members."

"Where do you think it went?" Jamie asked.

"I think...I think it was a messenger. A beacon. I don't know."

"It was incredible," Jamie said.

The afternoon shadows so emphasized the brazen lines of her eyes, nose, cheekbones, that her image burned its way into Balzac's heart. He would have willingly lost himself in her, if only for the mystery he could not unravel - that her beauty was as luminous and sharp-edged as that of the winged creature. He experienced a rush of vertigo, fought for his balance on the edge of a darkly-glittering future that would bind her to him beyond any hope of untangling.

Then: falling again, willingly, in a surge of happiness, a laugh escaping his lips as he focused with contentment on the grand adventure of their lives together.

Jeffer and Mindle stood side by side at the top of the stairs, looking down through the early morning gloom of dust motes. Mindle shook with spasms of tears, undoing all the savagery of his face. Below, on the landing, Balzac's body lay sprawled, a wide, black hole burned through his back. His hands were tightly clasped around the flame-distorted head of Jamie, whose lidless eyes stared sightless at them. Even in the shadows, Jeffer could see the thin, pale line of his brother's mouth fixed in a smile.

An emptiness Jeffer could not quantify or describe opened up inside of him. For a moment, he could not contain it, and he looked over at Mindle, intending to kill the boy should he discern even a trace of mockery upon that ancient face. But the tears had washed away the predatory sarcasm, the bloodlust, and he was almost vulnerable again, almost boyish again.

Jeffer slung the laser rifle over his shoulder and motioned to Mindle.

"Come on - if it's safe, we can bury them in the amphitheater," he said.

Horror, yes, and pain, and sadness - and yet, this relief: it was over. It was finished. And this final thought, this joy, which overcame the guilt: *I'm alive. I survived it.*

Mindle looked disoriented for a moment, as if he had been dreaming or listening to a distant and terrible music. Then the mask slid back over his face and he sneered, muttered a hollow "Yes," and followed as Jeffer walked down the steps to the body of his brother, the sun warm on his back.

Afterword

I wrote "Balzac's War" as a result of reading a story in high school about two Irish brothers who find themselves on the opposite sides of the conflict, forced to shoot at each other. I also had been chilled to the bone by the human-faced dog in the Donald Sutherland remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I found myself writing a story about identity and loss of identity--and the decisions that must be made during wartime.

The novella went through about 15 drafts, trying to get the mix of viewpoints in the right proportion. At one point, Gardner Dozois at Asimov's expressed interest in a 4,000-word rewrite of the story that focused only on the central situation of the men huddled in the building, but this, to me, did not adequately convey the complexity of the situation. Nor did it seem to me that a strict chronological order to scenes would suit this particular story. So another element of concern in the rewrites was getting the mix of present and past correct. In short, I learned a lot by writing this story.