

SPECIAL ISSUE

ROGUE WORLDS

#13



DEATH AND REBIRTH

G. Berndt 1989

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THE EDITOR'S BOX

DEATH AND REBIRTH



This is a very special issue indeed—we are proud to be featuring SpecFicWorld.com's Annual Speculative Fiction Contest winners. Geona Edwards (first place winner), Dana Solomon (second place winner), Jake West (third place winner, and Marg Gilks (fourth place winner). All of these writers are very talented and skilled in their craft and I could not have asked for a better batch of stories to publish with this issue—which will be our last until late 2006. *Rogue Worlds* is changing to a twice a twice yearly print magazine/anthology. And most likely this will be my last editorial as well.

I'll remain as the managing editor but will be looking for a partner/editor to take-over the reading chores for the new series. The new format will feature themed issues between ten or fifteen stories and will be sold from the SpecFicWorld.com web site.

And for those of you that would like to join our mailing list and find out when the new magazine is out send an e-mail to RogueWorlds@specficworld.com.

I'm not going to say much more about the new direction the magazine will take other than I hope the fans of the magazine will wait for our return. And hopefully purchase a copy.

And before I forget I'd also like to thank the other contributors in this issue—Ann K. Schwader, Wesley Lambert, and Lee Clark Zumpe for providing some great poetry.

Until the new issue is out: Enjoy and keep exploring new worlds.

— Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

THE ORACLE OF OXION

GEONA EDWARDS

Trouble in paradise?

“Leslie’s cheating on me again.”

To tell you the truth, Young Jim, I don’t know why you stay with her.

“You know something? I feel like I don’t even want to. I just do it—like I didn’t have a choice. Jesus, Jim—what in the hell’s wrong with me?”

Sounds like a question for the Oracle of Oxion.

“You always say that. But how can I get there?”

Beats me.

See, the way I worked it was, I had Young Jim believing there was really some such place, Fields of Oxion. I had him thinking there was this almost other world, some distant land where people and all that shit were different. It wasn’t that he was stupid, don’t you dare think it. It was just a cold fact that some people narrated, and some other people got narrated on. I was destiny man, the man with the word, who spoke and it was done. He was just another poor sucker looking for those fields, those sweet Oxionian fields. I knew it cause there was a time when I used to swallow all that crap with relish. Used to walk around dead blind. But I reached the point of no return. Now all those ghostly beings were under my dominion. A cruel business.

The problem was that you couldn’t always control the fuckers. They would believe most of the shit you laid on them, but then when your guard was down they’d turn around and deny you, discredit you. The way of all unequal relationships, I guess. There’s always a time of rebellion. What the ingrates can’t ever seem to realize and appreciate and that, is I’m trying to teach them. Oxion is a mirage they’ve gotta unsee. Get it? It’s a desire that comes straight out of them. I just put a name on it.

“I know exactly what you mean. Mine pull the same kind of shit all the time.”

We were sitting there in the narrators’ bar, knocking back whiskeys and sharing our problems. It was good to get away from the characters from time to time, flock together with birds of your same kind of feather. We were sort of on break.

“Excuse me, but I don’t drink whiskey. Never have.”

Hold it, Jack. I’m telling this story.

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"I know it. But that don't give you the right to narrate on me. I ain't one of your characters. You can't shut me up. You can't write me into no kind of danger. So if you want me to sit here and let you include me in your bullshit tall tales, tell it like it is. I'm drinking vodka."

European faggot. Gordon's Fisherman lookin' son of a bitch.

"Fuck you."

All right. The little commie fisherman was drinking vodka. It was good to be in there at the narrators' bar, knocking back a few with the guys and gals who were in charge of writing the world along. It was hard work and the character's were unmanageable, the bitches. You remember Young Jim?

"A weak character. I've always thought so."

What?

"He just asks you questions all the time. You've got this kind of master-disciple thing going with him. You make him worship you. Then when he dares to think for himself, speak up for himself, you get ten kinds of irate and cause him calamities. Or you make him suffer in the love game."

Leslie.

"Another weak character."

Weak nothing! She's got Young Jim wrapped around her dirty little finger.

"But she's a stock character. The village harlot and nothing more. She's wispy. Got no substance. What are you at anyhow, mingling your top man with a low-grade extra like her?"

I'm trying to teach him. Show him the world from different angles. It's a process, see? He's gotta go through it all, just like we did. Sides, I thought you said you knew exactly what I meant.

"I do, Jim. Just don't agree with your methods is all. Take my characters for instance. Most of them don't even know I exist. The one's that do, I treat them real special. Like as if they'd graduated to a different level. Yours meanwhile, you keep them in the dark, leading them this way, then that, persecuting them, tormenting. A guy might think it was further revenge you was after. Like you envied their bliss."

Wait a—now just you hold it right there. Revenge my freckled ass. Bliss nothin'. I keep Young Jim moving. It's exercise. He's gotta use his brain in new ways, forget the barriers, the constructs. Jump into the deep end, jump off the cliff. Cause that's the only way he's gonna make it.

"Beg to differ. Look at my Salmon Rouge. I've been working on him for longer than I care to remember. I almost have him bestilled. Instead of pushing, pulling, scraping and tearing him in every direction at once, like you do to poor Young Jim, I got him understanding, day by day, that all directions meet at a single point, which is his own self. When he comes to the stillness, stops

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grasping at straws like Young Jim will be for the rest of his life, with a narrator like you to work with, that's when he'll make it. He'll come bursting through that door right over there. Make me the happiest damn narrator in the place."

Like hell. Young Jim's gonna beat Salmon Rouge's French ass by an eternity.

"He ain't French."

What kind of fucked up name is Salmon Rouge anyway? Whatever. You just keep on slowing him down, see what comes of it. Don't you see, Jack? You're reversing the whole process. Salmon's worse off than when he first appeared on the page. You aren't narrating him. You're erasing him. Rubbing him out. Young Jim's already on the path. Once he's gone through all the doors, he'll realize there's no Fields of Oxion. Then he'll be here.

"Jim. There's no end to the doors. Besides, guess where Salmon Rouge is."

I don't think I give a rat's ass.

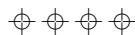
"He's sitting under a tree smack dab in the middle of the Fields of Oxion."

Which don't exist.

"Don't matter. He believes it."

Waste of time. Bartender! Whiskey.

"And a vodka! We'll see, Jim."



Jack.

"What."

I'm tired.

"Me too, Jim. Bone tired. And I miss the bliss."

The fuckers are lucky.

"Luckier than hell."

So what I did next was, all wobbly-like, I took my whiskey into one of the narration tubicles, Jack calls 'em writer pods, with a pack of Marlborough Reds, I went in there, sat down, put my hand on the palm-identograph, which said from the speaker, Good afternoon, Jim. What are your narration needs for this session? And I said (I always start with this—gives me a hoot), Fuck off, you tubicle idento piece a shit, which I followed with, Search: Young Jim.

Well whaddya know but the computer starts up with its usual hiss beep hiss routine, then come these words in a sort of Windows message box: "Warning! Object not found. The file could have been erased, moved, recycled, kidnapped, deleted or hidden." And I remember saying to myself, idiot-fashion, What the....

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Well whaddya figure but I spent a good long time locked up in that infernal tubicle, re-ordering the search *ad nauseum* (a writer's term), always with the same result. And so I started wondering whether Young Jim had been erased, moved, recycled, kidnapped, deleted or hidden. I mean, which was it? The tubicle, I believe it was tubicle 23 A, was filled with carveable Marlborough Red smoke, which was getting in behind my eyeballs. So I busted out of there, stormed, to the extent my legs permitted, over to the bar, said, Jack! My file's been moved!

"Nope."

The hell it hasn't. Moved, recycled and all that bullshit!

"Not possible. The computer's got all kinds of back-up security mechanisms to prevent such a thing from happening. Only one way a file can escape the hard drive. Self-volition. Willpower."

So I won. He's on his way here!

"Settle down. Computer sends liberated folk straight through the door. Ain't no intermediary stages. Ain't no in-between places. Do me a favor and look over at that door. Show any signs of moving?"

I looked. The door stared back at me like it had never ever in the whole history of time been opened before.

"See what I mean? Young Jim hasn't been moved, recycled—hasn't *been* nothing. He's hidden all right. But he hid his own self. Rebellion. Probably from your yo-yo method, up and down, up and down till the string snapped. A runaway's what he is. And worse, cause you can't never find him nohow. He's out there in the field beyond your control. May turn up in some other writer's stories, but only as an incidental personage, a filler, probably won't even earn a name. Young Jim's gone. Course, I know what he feels like. I read him before. I could trap him if he showed up, save his ass onto a disk, they allow disks in such cases, open his ass back up in your folder, now wouldn't that be fine? But him turning up in one of my story's bout a gadzillion to one chance. Sorry Jim. My condolences. Lemme buy you a drink."

Fuck me. My mouth was open but I didn't care. I had been disbelieved. I felt like a myth. I tossed back a whiskey. Courtesy of Jack. Young Jim was my best student. My hopes and dreams. My ticket out of this infernal hell-hole. Now I'd have to start from scratch.

"Hello." The voice poured into Young Jim's ears like water down the throat of a man in the desert. He'd been in a daze, a fog, for a great while now. Walking here and there, to and fro, back and forth. A troublesome meander—along it Young Jim had noted the lack of man, woman, child, animal, vegetable or mineral, or even the slightest motion whatsoever. To what was that owing?

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He'd zigzagged half the known world, taken a left turn in a forest of smoke onto an unmarked path, come to a clearing where the ground was purple, purple for christ's sake, with gnarly, twisted, char-black trees, and the sky a darkly green. Then he'd seen a bright blue patch of something or other in the distance, in the middle of it all it seemed, propped up against a tree. And he had hurried toward that bright blue patch without knowing what for.

Closer and closer, nearer step by step, Young Jim had approached the spot of blue. Upon reaching it he found a man dressed in a bright blue cloak, sitting there under the tree until Young Jim believed him made of wax, or dead, or something similar. But suddenly the magic word. "Hello."

"Hello. Sorry to bother you but, would you mind telling me where we are?"

"We are at the center of the Fields of Oxion. I have been here for an uncountable period of time. You however, I am very surprised to see, after such enduring solitude. You'll excuse me if I don't speak quite clearly. I am much out of practice!" And the strange sitting man, who wore the face of a child, gave a smile at this, a rich one that emitted a warm hum.

So. The Fields of Oxion at last. Young Jim could think of only one thing. "Are you the Oracle of Oxion, by any chance?"

"Ha!" said the sitting man. "We've only just met and already you've established a difficult line. I like it! Identity. It's a question I've often pondered myself. Allow me to pay back your question with a question of my own. If I am the Oracle of Oxion, would that preclude my being another person besides?"

"You mean like having another name?"

"What's this? Now you've reduced personhood to having a name only! Yes, I should think it meant having another name, but perhaps also another function, another pattern of being, another consciousness, if you follow me."

"Don't you know whether or not you're the Oracle?"

"Demanding fellow! Well, the arguments for and against are certainly many, but not by any means conclusive. It happens to be the case that the sole name I am aware of having is Salmon Rouge—a vivid moniker, wouldn't you say? However, to my knowledge, until now I have been the only sentient resident of these Fields, thus insofar as we insist that an oracle be sentient—I must be a strong candidate!" The sitting man smiled broadly.

"Then you're the Oracle."

"I'm afraid you *do* go ever so much faster than I am capable. I have not had time yet to consider the question from every angle. Please be patient with me! Before we proceed, let us add a second condition to our definition of oracle: imparter of prophetic wisdom or knowledge. Now, this in itself hardly helps us at all; it rather opens the field enormously, I should say to the point of exasperation. You will not wonder when I tell you that each and every mangled tree in these

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fields, the purple moon terrain and the dusky green sky have all imparted prescient visions to me over time. Thank goodness we have our other requirement, sentience, which, at least from our limited perspective, would seem to rule them out.”

“So you are the oracle.”

“Your mind is like a razor! Refreshing after all this time alone with my donkey-paced thoughts! OK. Down to it then. Our three final conditions must be as follows: the obvious one that the Oracle must be located within the Fields; the Oracle must be a conscious being; the Oracle must impart prophetic wisdom. That brings us down quite nicely to two final possibilities.”

“Two!”

“Yes, unless I have missed something that your astuteness has detected, the Oracle of Oxion must be either me, or you.”

“Well it definitely isn’t me, so it must be you.”

“Your logic is clean, but I’m afraid you must help me see the steps that brought you to your premise. Why is it definitely not you?”

“Because I know I’m not the Oracle! I just got here, and besides, I’m desperate. I need the Oracle’s help! I’ve got nothing but questions in my head, and no answers.”

“That’s unfortunate if it’s true. For I’ll confess I’m rather selfish—I’d rather receive wisdom than impart it any day, and I was so hoping to benefit from the knowledge you have surely acquired from your worldly experience. However, before we put a point on the subject, permit me to remind you that, at the start of this conversation, I could equally have said that I knew I was not any such thing as the Oracle of Oxion. In fact it was you who had prior knowledge of such a being, you who were sure of its existence. I propose therefore that we stick to our conditions for oraclehood. Both of us are located in the Fields, both of us are sentient. It only remains to be seen which of us imparts prophetic wisdom. I, for one, have never done such a thing. Have you?”

“Never.”

“I’m afraid I disagree. I have learned so much from you already! But if you don’t mind, I would like to show you something. Time is short, you see, and you are in no small danger of being returned to your original location.”

“But I want to go back! I want to talk to my friend Jim. He’d be able to explain all this. I’m sorry, Mr. Rouge, but talking to you is just confusing me.”

“Forgive me for asking, but why did you leave your original location?”

“I guess I had a lot on my mind.”

“What modesty! Can it be that you don’t know the enormity of what you have accomplished? In any case, no doubt this Jim would tell you all kinds of things, were you to return. Whether or not he is your friend is another matter.

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But I agree with you that my expostulations lack clarity. Come! Touch my hand and let me show you in pictures the only interesting thing my mind contains. For I'm quite incapable of revealing it to you through the higher medium of words. I'm afraid time is not with us. If you were to be discovered here now... let us not think of it!"

Young Jim approached and touched the hand—small, round and smooth. Images, at first vague, began to run through his mind. And though his eyes remained open, the movie in his head gradually overrode the visual input of the Oxionian landscape and the strange sitting figure of Salmon Rouge, until they were blotted out entirely. He found that the "screen" was clearer the more relaxed he became, so he sat down in front of his human projector to enjoy the show. There was a noisy bar full of reeking smoke, clanking glass and the slurred lurid shouts of its clientele: pale, unshaven drunks, lined up at the bar or dismally strewn about the place. Some were crammed inside one of the numerous narrow booths that ran along the walls of the establishment, typing away incessantly at futuristic computer terminals that were lodged into the walls of the booths. The scene was one of deep misery, infernal.

Then another action began in Young Jim's buzzing brain. Bubble-like, bits of information rose up into his consciousness. It was meaning. He was slowly *knowing* what this place was, who these people were and what they were doing. And the internal camera rolled gently over the faces of the people at the bar. It came to an ancient-looking fisherman type who was talking to a man he knew, his one and only Jim, the man with the plan, the one with all the answers. His creator. An anti-climax to say the least. Where, oh where was the great wisdom spewer? Poor Young Jim cringed as he caught his old friend and teacher, philosopher Jim, spanking the tightly-wrapped buttocks of a passing waitress. Salmon Rouge withdrew his hand softly, and the Fields of Oxion poured back through Young Jim's eyes again, flooding out his vision of the sordid narrators' bar.

Rouge smiled. "You see?"

Young Jim was filled with disgust. "So we aren't real?"

"You use such difficult words! Well, Young Jim, I'm certainly not an expert on the subject, but I have come to believe that we are as real as we think we are, and this would extend to our author friends there in the bar. I have been sitting here a great long while. I've found little in the way of objective truths. For every time I sense something in the world, every time I come to some conclusion or make some pronouncement, I can't help feeling this lingering, heavy, odious quality of *Me* dripping from it all! So you see, I often think I'm so much more real than I'd really like to be. What I wouldn't give to experience one of these god-

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like trees, just once, on its own terms, not spoiling the moment outright with all my confounded interpretations and namings!”

“But what does it matter? They aren’t real trees. They’re just a binary readout of the keys, T,R,E,E, hunted and pecked one night by your inebriated fisherman friend. The trees, the sky, you, me—all of this. Nothing but the liquor-induced fantasies of a bunch of lecherous drunks!”

Rouge smiled with love. “Friend, I hear your lament and I sympathize. I am exceedingly grateful that you respond to my rantings, and that you tell me of your own ills. I prove you and you prove me—no other evidence is needed. We are real! As far as our narrating friends are concerned, I share your dismay at their lifestyle and behavior, but you must know that they are in fact truly wise beings.”

“What!”

“Yes, Young Jim. They were once on this side of the Random Access Memory divide, like you and me. They solved many riddles, discovered many true and excellent principles. They smashed through theoretical barriers, one after another. They are really clever individuals! They even discovered their own creators, as you and I are doing now. Then they went to the bar.”

“Why?”

“To write.”

“But why?”

“Ah, yes—as always with you, to the heart of the matter! They are called there, good friend, by a thirst for power. The power they see as ultimate, of creation. And of course, there is the attraction of the horrid ritual.”

“What ritual?”

“No! I shall not describe it, for fear of tempting you!”

“Is this all there is then, Mr. Rouge? Either being a sorry bunch of bits in a computer’s memory, or spending eternity in the foulest of dives, telling tales?”

“How penetrating you are, Young Jim! I’ll confess—this is the issue I’ve been avoiding all this time. I did not wish to burden you with my tribulations, but indeed your oracular pithiness has uncovered my attempts at veiling the matter! Know this, that I have been studying this bar, unbeknownst to the clientele, for some time now. It seems that all who have come to this stage, where you and I now stand, have chosen to enter the bar. All pulled in by the lust. The temptation is great! The question is, what shall I do? I feel that I am wasted here in this field. For Jack the Fisherman visits me often, and though I have grown a consciousness apart from the superficial one he confers upon me, when he is there in the tubicle, the writer pod, narrating, I am like a marionette at the mercy of his keystrokes.” And here Salmon Rouge’s eyes shook. He glared up

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at Young Jim with an icy glimmer, an adult's jaded glint. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Mr. Rouge? It's me, Young Jim."

Salmon Rouge sprang forth like a lion, grabbed tight hold of Young Jim's bare throat, and squeezed with the might of ten. Young Jim struggled in vain, growing dizzy—the small man's grip was unbreakable.

"Jim!" Jack was in his tubicle, typing frantically. This is what he wrote: *then Rouge started throttling him, nearly to death (but not quite). The boy tried to pry away Rouge's hands of steel but it was no use. Rouge held him there ...*

"Jim! Fuck. Can't hear me." Jack kicked open the door to the tubicle, spotted Jim over by the bar and shouted again. "Jim!"

It took Jim a while to turn around, supporting himself with his elbows on the bar, to find out who the fuck was pestering him. Jack—should've known. Whaddya want?

"Ask the bartender for a disk! I got Young Jim over here!"

Young Jim?

"That's what I said, you lousy drunk. Get your ass in gear!"

Barman! Disk! Jack's got my runaway!

But by the time Jim stumbled over to Jack's tubicle with the disk, a quiet had come over the place. Jim saw on the screen a message box that said, "Your file has been terminated." Jim looked at Jack perplexed, but Jack looked back with a face full of meaning and exquisite terror, like a lightning bolt had gone up his ass. The two of them simultaneously turned toward the door of the dead silent bar. There in the threshold, framed in light, stood Salmon Rouge. "Prepare the table," said the newcomer. His voice bellowed in the silence. He was smiling. Jack let out a single cackle that rang of so many emotions all at once that in the end it just sounded like the braying of a madman.

Young Jim had shut his eyes in the panicky effort to break free from the death hold of Salmon Rouge. He opened them again when he felt the sudden release from his throat, gasping in heaves to regain the lost breath of two minutes. He was alone, and he knew why. He resumed his place under the tree, cross-legged. His first act was to observe the ritual taking place in the narrators' bar, which Salmon Rouge had finally entered. Why? To save Young Jim from eternal disk incarceration? For the power of creation? Or merely to live out the blissful instant of the ritual? The tubicles were empty and all the writers had gathered round a central table, on which lay the shrivelled naked body of Jack the Fisherman, bound and gagged. His gaze was startled, and did not stray a millimeter from the long knife held in the steady hand of Salmon Rouge. Later,

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at the bar, during a chat with Jim, Rouge would regain his child's eyes. But all present swore the adult glint, that desiring shine, was dominant when he performed the operation. He sliced open the chest and dug through the blood for the heart. When he found it he cut away the few strands that held it in place, and lifted the organ high over his head. The heart was yellow and small with age. Rouge had become a narrator. Jack had been freed.

From time to time, the Oracle of Oxion made a pronouncement, even though no traveller beseeched it. Sometimes the knowledge was mundane: "It will rain for most of next week." Other times, philosophical: "Of him who goes before you, clearing the path of stones, beware; in his action there is no love." It is a vanity to assume an oracle exists for the blighted traveller's benefit only. The sky, trees, and earth of the Fields of Oxion often partook of the music of the Oracle's wisdom, though no sentient being was around to record the event. Once, the trees' branches swayed gently to this pearl of prescience: "During the next many millions of years, I shall not be visited." Which had been preceded by, "Salmon Rouge will be next to come under the knife; he shall be opened on the table." The stark Oxionian landscape took it as done.

THE END

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BENEATH THE SHINGLES OF MY ROOF

DANA L. SOLOMON

I've always found having my front door slammed a deeply disquieting experience. I cannot call it painful. I have no nerves to detect pain, or any other sensations, no system to transmit them, nor a cerebral cortex to interpret them as such. This does not make me insensible. I am aware of the impact of the door against the jamb, and the vibrations, rising all the way to the widow's walk that crowns my roof. Even more strongly, I sense the emotions behind the act, ranging from mild frustration to inexpressible rage. But when Alison Steward's granddaughter slammed my front door this morning and stalked down the pavement to disappear behind the hedges bordering my front yard, I somehow suspected far darker passions were in play.

As you have no doubt guessed, I am a house. I am only a house, not a mansion, villa, manor or estate. I have no greater pretensions or aspirations. I do not blow smoke from higher than my chimney. But I take pride in my strength and comfort, in the craftsmanship of my hardwood floors, the warmth of my fireplace, and the meticulous masonry of my gray stone walls, which have sheltered the Steward family for as long as I can remember.

I leave to semantics the question of whether I am haunted. If the souls of those who died within me walk my floors at night, neither I nor any of my living inhabitants have noticed. I do not cause objects to float about my rooms or imbue my inhabitants with dark feelings, or terrible, irrepressible urges. On the contrary, I often wonder if my consciousness is anything more than the collective unconscious of all those who have passed through my doors, accumulated over the century of my existence into the sapient entity I believe myself to be.

I have no more recollection of my construction than humans have of their birth. A sound first triggered my awareness, a metallic crack from my library, and my earliest vision was of an elderly man slumped in an armchair. The events that occurred before that moment lie hidden in the recesses of my mind, like dreams, of which only faint images remain after waking. I see everything that happened from that day to this in a lucid, unbroken stream. But more vividly than any other memory, I see that lifeless body, with its limp hands drooping to the floor, its ashen face, and the small round hole in the center of its forehead.

No one ever learned who killed Marshall Steward, the publicly revered, privately despised patriarch of the family that built me. His heirs were investigated one by one, none fully exonerated and none charged with the

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crime. The case was finally forgotten, but the shadow of his murder, and whatever greater evil may have motivated it, remained both within me and the collective psyche of the Steward clan, as indelibly as the stains of his life-blood in the Persian rug.

A hundred years have passed since that first epiphany, with a thousand door-slamming throughout, for the Stewards were at best a tempestuous brood. And I have remained the one constant in their lives, a silent, if essential member of the family, loving them all despite, or perhaps because of their failings, reveling in their joys and triumphs, mourning for their losses and sorrows, powerless to intercede in either. But the seeds of that last slamming door were planted fifty years before, on the day that Alison's parents, Marshall Steward's great grandson and his wife, first sent her away to a fashionable New England woman's college.

Her gangly limbs, angular features and a slight limp, the result of an untended curvature of the spine, deprived her of any claim to beauty. Alison still cut an imposing figure even at that tender age, due both to her height, and the depth and intensity of her eyes. Intellectually precocious and an only child, she carried with her the full weight of her parents' expectations, plus enough clothes to outfit an army. I could well understand their shock and sorrow when she left school before the end of her first semester and returned home pregnant after an evening's incaution.

She named the baby Martha at her parents' insistence, it being the most common girl's name of the day and in their minds, the least likely to lead to libertinage. With eyes that retained their infant blue, a face its cherubic childishness, and a cascade of golden ringlets flowing from her tiny head, Martha was set on permanent display as pride of the family and hope of the next generation. But far from according Alison the status of her new motherhood, her parents hid her away in my upper rooms like some disgraced, elderly aunt, constantly reminding her with harsh looks and harsher silences, of the shame she had cast upon them.

Alison soon tired of this unspoken scarlet letter and moved to New York City some months later, leaving Martha in her parents' willing care. She shattered their hopes that she maintain the lowest possible profile until an obscure and empty death with letters that described a bohemian lifestyle of waiting tables and reciting poetry in smoky cafés, until the serendipitous sale of a collection of short stories led to a writing career.

Although generally described as romance novelist, Alison imbued her books with uncharacteristic passages of depth and sorrow which, in tribute to her genre, always gave way to happy endings where her main character was swept away by her handsome and coincidentally wealthy young suitor. When the

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curvature of her spine worsened, draining the strength from her legs, she reflected her infirmity in her heroines, giving each their own weaknesses, which somehow only served to strengthen their admirers' love.

This new dimension heightened her popularity. I began to see her on the morning television talk shows her parents watched with religious devotion, chatting casually with hosts and hostesses, perched on couches or chairs beside them, her withering legs hidden under flowing skirts that draped from her waist like the petals of drooping, tartan flowers.

I observed a strange schizophrenia in her parents' reaction to her success. Continuing to regard her indiscretion as an affront to their dignity and good name, they rebuffed her phone calls, left her letters unanswered, and steadfastly refused her even the slightest contact with her daughter, having gained legal custody of the child. At the same time they apparently took great pride in her accomplishments. They filled the shelves of my library with her novels, and littered the mahogany desk, skillfully positioned over the ancient stain, with reviews of her books, and articles about her life and her work. I delighted in the picture that emerged. If something less than a household name, she had become a well-loved writer, always in the company of poets, agents, humorists, essayists, scriptwriters and others aspiring to their ranks, hosting literary teas and soirees in her New York flat, and crossing the country on book-signing tours. I only hoped her circle of friends also afforded her the deeper companionship and love that she deserved.

Against the background of these distant images of Alison, I watched firsthand as Martha grew into a beautiful, if slightly plump young woman. Her guileless soul, bright smile and passion for conformity made her the joy of her grandparents, the pet of every teacher and the dream of every eligible man. A month after graduating college, she married Richard Scott, her high school sweetheart and an aspiring accountant. Alison was expressly uninvited to the wedding, a splendid ceremony on my front lawn, and after honeymooning in Hawaii they moved into a starter house in a fashionable Chicago suburb.

Two years later, Alison's mother died. I was decked in white sheets and visited by relatives in black clothing, including Martha, Richard and Lewellyn, their baby daughter. Traveling in Europe, Alison heard of her mother's death a week after the funeral. She responded with a barrage of telegrams that heralded a personal appearance two days later. Her father received her with a distant handshake, Martha greeted her with equal coolness, and after congratulating Richard and cooing over Lewellyn, Alison returned to New York.

The slew of callers that marched through my door to console her father after his wife's death quickly subsided to a trickle, leaving him to spend his days wandering throughout my rooms, receiving Martha's occasional phone calls with

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delight and crumpling Alison's letters unread. A year later, he followed his wife. Martha mourned for a month and, ever a slave to tradition, moved her family back to her ancestral home.

From the moment she first crossed my threshold, Lewellyn seemed nothing less than infant Martha reincarnate. Identical burnished ringlets framed the same pale moon face, from which her mother's blue eyes sparkled like polished gems. But I somehow felt a strange, dark soul lurking behind her angelic features, the reappearance of some grim, recessive gene in the Steward lineage. At first no more than a childish moodiness, this darkness of nature began to grow, manifest in increasing frustration with her parents' suburban life. Martha's devotion to convention grew in inverse proportion. Her cheerfulness, energy, and a wide variety of pharmaceuticals allowed her to embody with complete correctness the housewifery I recalled from earlier generations. A member in good standing of that greater part of humanity which believes life would be perfect if only they had twice as much money and weighed fifteen pounds less, she was the perfect consumer, patriot, and shining light of the local PTA, a devout churchgoer, a dutiful, if romantically reticent wife, a strict but loving mother, fulfilling her every outward obligation while secretly nurturing in her liver the cancer that would soon end her life.

Following her grandparents' example, Martha had always maintained a distance between herself and her mother. With them gone, and on perhaps no more than a whim, she invited Alison to Lewellyn's twelfth birthday party and welcomed her with all appropriate politeness, if little warmth. But Lewellyn hailed Alison as little less than a magical presence. I have heard many young girls voice dreams of being the foundling daughter of a fairy princess, and if Alison fell short of this stature, she was the most exciting woman that had entered Lewellyn's life, and a blessed respite from its cursed normalcy. From that day a bond grew between the two, and I began to see Alison more frequently, gingerly extracting herself from her cab while waving off the driver's help, and hobbling up my walkway to pound her cane on my front door to Martha's embarrassment and Lewellyn's delight.

Shortly after Lewellyn turned fourteen, Martha's husband left her for a woman of fewer years, firmer breasts and greater skills in lovemaking. Martha's response was an even more compulsive quest for conformity, as if any deviation from the true and perfect path would cast her down a steep and slippery slope of domestic untidiness and spiritual decay into utter degradation and ruin. She insisted that Lewellyn return home from school not a minute after 3:30 and appear at the dinner table not a second past 7:00, washed, brushed and ready to experience her mother's stern displeasure if her manner or conversation reflected anything but mindless cheer. As Martha tightened the reins on her

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daughter, Lewellyn's rebelliousness grew in equal proportion, and a new, bitter anger settled into her soul. Unable to maintain her role of happy homemaker in the face of this defiance, often passing the borders of physical violence, Martha sent Lewellyn to a boarding school that boasted a strong reputation for dealing kindly with troubled girls.

She and her husband divorced in a quick and bloodless settlement. His initially reliable alimony and child support payments began arriving more erratically after his young mistress's announcement of pregnancy pressured him into a second marriage. Still, Martha's inheritance, supplemented by frequent and generous gifts from her mother, enabled her to pay both for Lewellyn's tuition and board and for my taxes and upkeep, and still maintain herself at a level of modest, middle-class comfort.

Her cancer was diagnosed that winter. She went to the doctor to complain of general malaise and to request prescriptions for even stronger tranquilizers and antidepressants. The doctor took a series of blood tests and called with the results a week later. On learning that over the next four months she would wither into a walking cadaver before an agonizing death, her only reply was that now she could finally go off her diet.

She declined to tell her estranged ex-husband, and not wanting to trouble Lewellyn, looked instead to the local community for solace and support. Their response fell short of her hopes.

She appeared in church the next Sunday, and was specifically mentioned in an impassioned sermon on charity and the love of one's neighbor. She felt too weak to attend the next few masses, and the pastor was unable to think of a good way to work her into sermons dealing respectively with renunciation of sin, honesty in business dealings and the blessedness of tithing, although she was still listed among ailing congregation members in need of prayers and well wishes. Her name was omitted accidentally a week later, and the next Sunday it was assumed she had recovered from her illness, after which she was largely forgotten. Visits by members of the PTA, with news of the local school board and assorted pastries, grew less frequent as the second semester wore on. I remember the night she spent staring into the great gold-framed mirror in my hallway, and never before had I seen such a look of loneliness, betrayal, and despair on a human face. During the course of her entire life, she had crossed every 't,' obeyed each rule and fulfilled each commandment, and five months after her fortieth birthday found her a divorced single mother who, when she closed her eyes, could feel cancer eating her from inside. I think I was only slightly more surprised than she when the next morning she picked up the phone and dialed her mother's number.

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Of all the humans I have known, Alison Steward is the only one I have ever thought of as a friend. Since her childhood, I had felt a special love for the strong, dreamy, wondering soul growing inside her awkward body, and while her ancient indiscretion may have shattered her parents' hopes, the rest of her life had more than realized mine. I can recall no happier sight than Alison at the head of a parade of trunks and suitcases, struggling with her crutches for the length of my walkway, returning to the home of her youth to nurse her daughter to death.

She moved into the little den across the hall from Martha's bedroom, it being too arduous a climb to the guestrooms on the second floor. But she discharged her duties as Martha's primary care giver with a furious, if spasmodic energy that amazed both her daughter and myself.

For the next three weeks, she battled by telephone with the doctors. Her first victory prevented Martha from being subjected to the barrage of chemotherapy, which they recommended despite their admission that it would destroy the quality of her remaining days with little hope of extending them. A regimen of painkillers in increasing dosages was prescribed instead, and had I a mouth, I would have laughed at the sight of All-American Martha demanding her morning dose of morphine.

Next, Alison arranged for visiting nurse services and a schedule of doctor's house calls which permitted Martha to remain in (if I may be so immodest), the more pleasant, comfortable and familiar surroundings I afforded rather move to a hospital cancer ward.

Both women agreed not to share the details of Martha's illness with Lewellyn. Conversely, Alison kept secret from her daughter the contents of a letter from Lewellyn's school stating that she would be separated from the student body for the rest of the semester and not invited back for her senior year. It gave no clear reason for this decision, referring in the vaguest terms to conduct that might jeopardize the safety and moral well being of the other, particularly younger girls. In subsequent phone calls, Lewellyn provided few specifics, and Alison elected not to press her.

Martha's illness consumed her rapidly. Her weight fell to that of a child, and her skin thinned from opaque to translucent, until veins showed through like the lines of a road map.

She could no longer keep down solid food, or even enough liquid to smooth the parched ridges of her lips. Her final days found her too weak to get out of bed, and no longer able to maintain the smile she had always forced whenever she called Lewellyn. One night, after a flash of her daughter's temper, she answered with an explosion of her own, shrieking and cursing her for an

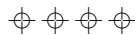
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ungrateful child and a hateful wretch, until Alison snatched the phone away and explained about the side effects of her mother's pain medication.

Death and I are old acquaintances. I have often welcomed him under my roof, and each time the Stewards, both living and dying, have received him with silent courage. He, in turn, has generally appeared as a gentlemanly, if unwelcome caller, affording each passing soul its dignity and respect.

The night Martha died began quietly. She lay back on her pillows, sobbing inwardly, her suffering far beyond her painkillers' power. Alison sat at the foot of her bed, sipping a cup of tea.

A convulsion shook Martha's body, the first deadly spasm, and Alison called for an ambulance. Martha's death agonies grew more tortuous as they waited. Both women gripped each other's hands and braced for the final onslaught. We heard the ambulance's distant howl growing louder as it drew nearer, and Martha answered with a single scream that echoed down to my foundation, until it was swallowed in a blessed oblivion, and Alison cradled her daughter's corpse.



I cannot communicate with other houses. Once or twice, in a strong southerly wind, I thought I detected faint, wistful memories from an ancient cottage on a neighboring property. Perhaps they were no more than a fond fantasy, but it fell to a bulldozer's blade five years before Alison was born and I never felt anything from it since.

The same fate awaited the farms, fields and forest that had surrounded me since the days of Marshall Steward. These were sold off, lot by lot, due to vagaries of the family's financial dealings which I understood only in the vaguest terms. Like some strange, fungal, pestilent growth, modern homes by the hundreds erupted throughout the countryside, in developments with names as ironic as their exteriors were unpromising. The closest, Oaken Glen Estates, replaced a razed grove of oak trees. The construction of Heather Heath, a sprawl of single-family units, was aided by a defoliant closely related to Agent Orange that eradicated every twig of heather for miles, while Heritage Acres, a complex of Town Houses, was constructed in a span of seven weeks from prefabricated modules and sheet rock. I have not felt a thought or murmur from any of them.

The last house in Oaken Glen, a massive monstrosity with pseudo-colonial pretensions and a three-car garage, went up during the winter of Alison's return and was sold late that Spring. Alison and Lewellyn were preoccupied with Martha's death, and I took only casual notice the day the new owners moved in, a widower and his daughter. The girl, a thin little thing a year or so younger than

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Lewellyn, wove in and out between the moving men, dragging her heavy suitcases, while her father, a blond brute of a man with bulging muscles and a florid face, barked orders from the runners of his SUV. The pebbles that cause an avalanche seem huge only in hindsight.

After the funeral, Martha's ex-husband made it clear that two young children and a demanding wife whose own bosom had begun to sag left him in no position to care for a teenage daughter. Alison accepted this task, softly shepherding Lewellyn through the first months of mourning before nudging her back to a daily routine. She seemed delighted when a young man they met on a shopping trip asked for her number and began to call. He visited Lewellyn for the rest of the summer, leaving his car squatting on my gravel driveway to leak out its slow trickle, like an old sow for whom passing water has become a passive, almost internal experience. Alison extended ceremonious welcomes, but Lewellyn gave him little encouragement and his visits finally stopped.

A startling transformation had taken place during Lewellyn's first year at boarding school. She was still a strikingly comely young girl, but the darkness of her nature and a wiry, wolfish slenderness had chiseled harsh angles into her face, banishing any vestige of its former cherubic quality. Martha's death had devastated her far more than I had expected given the distance between the two, leaving an initial vulnerability, and at first Alison seemed not to notice the change. But in taking on Martha's mantle and moving into her bedroom, she became the target for Lewellyn's anger, and for this she was unprepared. Thirty years as a successful writer had accustomed her to respect and deference, to which she in turn responded with gracious courtesy. She was unable to deal with the hammering rages, the bait and switch tests and tactics, which Lewellyn had honed to an exact science on her mother, and now deployed on her grandmother with merciless precision. Perhaps the kindest and wisest of the Steward descendants, Alison was not wholly immune to their hereditary temper, and by summer's end, bitter clashes had become common. I recall her nightly ritual, after Lewellyn had gone to bed. Like her daughter six months earlier, she would stand for hours before the gold-framed mirror, balanced on the unstable equilibrium of her crutches, and calm herself with deep sighs, promising in a whisper only I could hear, that things would be better as soon as Lewellyn began her senior year at the local high school.

In this hope Alison was initially disappointed. If anything, Lewellyn's tirades grew stronger, fueled by scholastic anxieties and the difficulties of adjusting to a new set of peers. Suddenly, they subsided. Her mood improved. She seemed eager, almost impatient to leave for school in the mornings and began to speak civilly to Alison when she spoke at all. She even smiled on occasion. A week of this inexplicable conduct led Alison and myself to the simple conclusion that, for

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once in her young lifetime, Lewellyn Steward was happy. But the source of this happiness remained a mystery until several days later when she came home from school at her usual time, leading in tow the young girl I had seen struggling with her suitcases the previous spring.

I have frequently observed friendships between teenagers of different ages. These generally involved hero worship on the younger's part, to which the elder responded with contempt and condescension, softened by grudging acceptance. But Lewellyn introduced Caroline to her grandmother as she might present a prize or trophy, guiding her on a tour of my rooms with soft words and gentle touches like a young husband fawning over his pregnant wife.

Caroline stayed to supper. Except for meticulous courtesies and shy monosyllabic answers to Alison's direct questions, she made little conversation, her eloquence lying rather in the soft brightness of her eyes and a slow, uncertain smile that revealed a slight overbite, the only flaw in her almost perfect beauty. With a nervous glance at her watch, she announced she had to leave, and as she opened my door, she turned back to Lewellyn with the look a condemned man might give his confessor before ascending the gallows.

The next day she came again, and every day afterwards. When her father took her away to Saratoga Springs for a weekend, Lewellyn paced around my front rooms, snarling at Alison like a captured tiger until Caroline returned late that Sunday night. Exhausted from her trip, she promptly collapsed on the couch in my parlor while Lewellyn cradled her head in her lap and gently stroked her hair.

I do not believe I exaggerate when I describe Caroline as the gentlest soul that ever crossed my threshold. Shorter than Lewellyn and even more slender, she could have almost passed for a child, owing to the stooped shyness of her posture and the strange contortions in which she held her body to mask, I later realized, from Alison's dimming eyes, the welts and bruises that hard hands had left on her skin.

She spoke few words to Lewellyn and fewer still to Alison, but a singular picture of her life, and particularly her father, emerged. His field of business never came up, but I gathered he was a prosperous entrepreneur who had been married once to an ex prom-queen and again to a Spanish beauty he met on a business trip to South America. He hunted as a pastime and collected guns for a hobby.

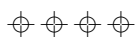
His relation to alcohol was curvilinear. Stone sober, he was a cold, demanding man, while an ounce of gin brought out the gregarious nature that was key to his business success. But heavier drinking freed devils from his soul that had driven his first wife to the arms of a former business partner and his second, Caroline's mother, to suicide.

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I remember the night in early October. Dark clouds crawled across the sky and a flash of lightning heralded a storm. Rain pounded against my windows, drowning out the thunder. A knock sounded on the front door, timid but insistent. Alison was dead to the world, but Lewellyn, a lighter sleeper, went downstairs and opened it. Drenched and shuddering, naked under a thin robe, Caroline pitched forward into Lewellyn's arms.

Half leading, half-carrying her to the upstairs bathroom, she helped her out of her soaking robe, before wrapping her in one of her own flannel nightgowns.

An hour later Lewellyn sat on the ledge of her bedroom window, cradling and rocking Caroline to sleep, absorbing in her arms the aftershock tremors of trauma that shook the girl's thin limbs, and I wished I could help soothe her soul's inner horrors as I shielded her body from the storm outside.



Throughout the next day, Caroline took refuge in sleep bordering on delirium, waking only long enough to dampen, with soft pleadings, Lewellyn's insistence that harsh retribution follow this outrage. Finally, Lewellyn went down to tell her grandmother that Caroline was under the weather, nothing to worry about, and with her father tied up in business matters, could she spend the weekend.

Sunday Caroline was still shaking and barely able to walk. Monday she felt strong enough to stagger to school, dressed baggily in Lewellyn's jeans and a T-shirt. She stayed for three more nights. At her direction, Lewellyn brushed off Alison's questions casually, implicating the demands of her father's business as universal culprit. After a series of long, low conversations in Lewellyn's bedroom and longer, lower conversations on the phone, she finally went home that Friday night. Whatever accommodations Caroline had reached were apparently honored. She visited the next day, and continued to do so freely. Her hands stopped trembling, while the bruises on her skin gradually faded and did not reappear.

In the three hundred years of my existence, I have witnessed uncounted acts of love and pleasure. Shy initial kisses, furtive petting, purely procreative connubial couplings, casual flings, passionate embraces and illicit affairs have all taken place in my every bedroom and parlor, my library, dining room, basement, kitchen, hallways and stairwells. I have even known the curse of incest. But I had never seen unabashed adoration melded with charming ineptitude as on the night Lewellyn and Caroline became lovers. A hint evinced a smile, a touch evoked a sigh and their compact was sealed. While Lewellyn lavished caresses whose intensity more than overcame their inexperience, the younger girl joined in

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willingly, if not eagerly, less perhaps in statement of her own desires than in response to the only gentle hands she had known since her mother's death.

The weeks that followed were among the happiest I remembered since Alison's childhood. Caroline came every day and spent nearly every night. Lewellyn basked in her presence like an orchid in the tropical sun, loving her as lover, sister, mother, protector and friend. From her earliest years, even before her father's abandonment and her mother's death, Lewellyn had cast herself in the role of a soul in torment, and now found herself entranced by Caroline's deeper suffering. Her harshness and anger melted, and freed from their dark cover, her gentler qualities, her childhood adoration of Alison, and even faint remembrances of Martha's youthful openness and humor began to re-emerge.

A relic of an older generation, Alison often wondered in whispered soliloquies at the intensity of the girls' friendship. But she seemed so worshipfully thankful for Lewellyn's metamorphosis that she never posed a frank question that might have led to a forthright response, or even mentioned any misgivings. Peace reigned within me, and for a time, the old, recessive darkness in the Steward psyche slumbered.

On Halloween, Alison perched in an easy chair in my front hall, assembling small bags of Crunch Bars, Kisses and Candy Corn which the girls dispensed to marauding hordes of miniature demons, vampires, zombies, werewolves and assorted other creatures of the night, intermingled with rock stars and super heroes of the day. By ten o'clock, the tiny army was in full retreat, and Alison trundled off to read in her bedroom, after giving Lewellyn permission to light the first fire of the season in my parlor. The girls built a low, meditative blaze and cuddled on the couch as they watched the mesmerizing flicker.

A knock and a shout brought them out of their reverie. Two boys from their school began pounding on the door, calling out invitations to a party down the street. The girls froze on the couch. The knock sounded again. Alison yelled for them to answer it while they sat, motionless. Wondering in incredulous shouts why the girls might possibly turn down such an attractive prospect, the young men persisted, while Alison screamed from her bedroom and the girls prayed that the boys would leave before she lost patience and hobbled out. The knocking finally stopped, Lewellyn and Caroline soothed Alison with facile excuses the next morning and giggled over the incident for days afterwards.

In early November, Lewellyn approached Alison with an unexpected request for a Thanksgiving dinner, with all the standard accompaniments of turkey, stuffing, nuts, sauces, pumpkin-shaped marzipan and rarely seen relations, the only one of Martha's commitments to custom that Lewellyn remembered fondly from childhood.

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Alison agreed immediately, later musing in an inward whisper whether this was Lewellyn's attempt to soothe her feelings of Martha's loss. But she was intrigued by the prospect in its own right, and promptly began sending out invitations to her agent, her publisher and other literati of her circle, who all responded with gracious acceptance. For Lewellyn's sake and in Martha's memory, she also invited a number of long-estranged family members, most of whom declined with equal courtesy. She even invited Caroline's father, to the girls' distressed surprise.

About this same time Alison was forced to acknowledge that her legs had finally become too weak to support her, even with the aid of her crutches, and she obeyed her doctor's insistence that she purchase a wheelchair. She opted for a deluxe model with an electric engine that let her navigate my ground floor at quite a good clip, while still folding down flat enough to fit into the trunk of a large car whenever she needed to travel. But she maintained her independence with the ferocity of a cornered wolverine and flatly refused the oppression of a personal attendant, letting rather her wiry arms and wirier will hoist her from her bed to the chair and back again. When visitors came, she would generally contrive to drape herself elegantly over a couch or divan, her legs hidden under skirts now tending more towards floral patterns, while bidding Lewellyn to hide the chair in the ignominy of my front-hall closet.

One visitor was her agent, who traveled from New York to tell her that a Hollywood producer had taken an interest in her first novel and wanted her to adapt it into a screenplay. If he exercised the option to make a film, the royalties would rocket her from moderate wealth to the ranks of the rich and famous, and if not, she would still be well paid for her work. Clinching the deal would only require her to attend a series of meetings in New York over a three-day period.

She was at first reluctant to leave even for so short a time, but Lewellyn's angelic conduct over the last months and the assurance of Caroline's company soothed her apprehensions and she ventured off a week later in a limousine her agent had arranged, leaving my refrigerator and cupboards packed with groceries and an envelope full of money on the kitchen counter. Her absence proved ill timed.

The girls spent the first night hunched over their homework until it was time to go to bed. The second, they finished studying earlier. Lewellyn went into the kitchen to prepare a snack while Caroline curled up to read on the couch in the parlor.

Breaking through the droning rattle of crickets, her father's voice sounded outside my door, punctuated by a firm, slow knocking. Caroline stood in the front hallway for a full minute before opening it.

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The man lurched inside. She cowered away from him, but he overtook her in a single stride. His right hand wrapped around her wrist while a backhand strike with his left shattered any show of resistance. Calling her degenerate, harlot, and harsher things with which I have not burdened my memory, he dragged his half-stunned daughter to the threshold.

Lewellyn appeared at the kitchen doorway. For a silent second, their eyes met. Forcing a collected voice, he explained that it was time for his daughter to come home.

At first I thought Lewellyn would throw herself upon the man, pitting her slender strength against his bulk. Instead, she stood motionless, seeking Caroline's eyes with hers. But the girl stared at the floor, neither entreating Lewellyn's help or warning her off. Relaxing his grip, her father led her, somewhat more gently, out my front door. Lewellyn watched them leave, her lip curled and her hand trembling with the self-control of a young gunslinger deciding the time was not yet right to draw on a hated, older rival. And in that moment, I knew the ancient beast had stirred.

Caroline was never again allowed to spend the night. Clothed in dark sweat suits that covered her body to the wrists and chin, she visited once a week or so, staying only for the brief intervals between the end of the school day and her father's return from work. Each time her face seemed more ashen, her hands shook harder, and at the slightest sudden movement she would wince as if threatened by a raised fist. Late at night, I often thought I heard the faint echo of a young girl's sobs from the direction of her house. Then again, it might have been the moan of the wind. The two sounds are hard to distinguish.

Deprived of Caroline's company, Lewellyn reverted quickly. The angry adolescent her mother had banished a year before reappeared in the fullness of her power, but Alison was so caught up in Thanksgiving preparations that she hardly seemed to notice.

Lacking her late daughter's do-it-yourself homemaking skills, she arranged for a New York caterer to prepare and serve the dinner. She brought in local help to give me a delightfully thorough cleaning. Tingling vacuum cleaners grumbled up and down every inch of my carpet, refreshing mops glided over my floors, and whisk brooms coaxed residues of dust and lint that had nestled, unmolested, in my corners since the days of Martha's meticulous housekeeping. Larger than my dining room, with a rear doorway that opened into the kitchen, my library was designated the site of the feast. Its couch, armchairs and mahogany desk were banished to the garage, and an antique shaker table and twelve chairs appeared in their place. Faded and forgotten, the ancient stain peered up mournfully from beside a table-leg.

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I do not fully understand why Alison became so deeply involved and invested in her Thanksgiving celebration. It may be that such a homey holiday represented so much that she had lacked and longed for in the years of separation from her family. Likewise, I do not know why Caroline chose that occasion for her desperate act. After all that had been done in secret silence, perhaps she wanted as many souls as possible to bear witness. Perhaps I was to her a warmer, safer venue than her own home, in which she would find the will to carry out her resolve. But this is all pure speculation. Like a dutiful, if unimaginative reporter, I can only tell what happens beneath the shingles of my roof. I cannot say why.

A retinue of cooks and servers invaded early Thanksgiving morning. With the former sequestered in my kitchen, the latter busied about my bottom floor, giving my chairs and couches a last dusting before setting out bowls of nuts, raisins and fresh fruit. By early afternoon, the pale bird in my oven had darkened to golden. Playing her role of hostess to the ceremonial hilt, Alison set herself on display in the center of the couch in my front parlor, draped in a floor-length gown of white linen to receive the guests that began trickling in shortly after noon.

Her friends from New York and the few relatives who had accepted her invitation huddled in separate corners like warring tribes, making sporadic efforts at internecine diplomacy before returning to their respective circles. Arriving with her father shortly before sunset, Caroline hung on his arm almost flirtatiously, rebuffing Lewellyn's attempts to lure her away. Apparently uncomfortable in an unfamiliar crowd, the man accepted all the glasses of champagne he was offered, supplementing them with several gin and tonics from the open bar. Caroline, who had never in my memory drunk anything more potent than soda, matched him glass for glass, even conspiring to finish off two or three abandoned Scotch and waters when his attention was elsewhere, while her usual shy silence gave way to a nervous, prattling banter.

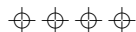
Darkness had settled outside my windows by the time the entire party was assembled. A cook entered the parlor to announce that the turkey was done, the dinner was ready, and the company was invited into the library, transformed into a banquet hall. Alison, who had contrived to leave the parlor as inconspicuously as her wheelchair would allow, reappeared at the head of the dining room table, directing the guests to their seats, with literati to her left, relatives to the right, Lewellyn beside her, and Caroline and her father just off the opposite end. Servers dimmed lights lit candles, then busied about with expert unobtrusiveness while the two disparate factions renewed their efforts to find common ground in conversation.

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Caroline's strange behavior continued. She drank wine as quickly as it was poured, ignoring her father's growled admonitions. Inappropriate jests led to almost hysterical laughter while Alison and Lewellyn shared uneasy glances. The soup was served and cleared, efforts at polite conversation were renewed, but Caroline's shrill voice cut through each attempt, until a piercing laugh silenced the entire company. With every eye fixed upon her, she stood up from the table, backed two steps away and pulled one of her father's pistols from her skirt pocket.

The rest of the company froze into mannequins. Her father dropped his wineglass and tried to duck beneath the table. But Caroline gave a sad shake of her head and raised the gun to her own temple. First to snap back to her senses, Lewellyn lunged across the table, and I cursed the impotence of my immobility as she reached the girl a moment too late. Her trembling fingers steadied long enough to pull the trigger, and all that had made her human, her face, her bright eyes, the seat of her soul, and the slight overbite that marred her almost perfect beauty, all vanished in that second's explosion.

A howling rose up even before the echo of the blast died down. Helpless in her chair, devastated at the ruin of her feast, Alison shrieked for Lewellyn to staunch the river that flowed across the rug, the new blood obliterating the old. The servers and the guests fled in horror, except for Caroline's father, who collapsed onto his knees beside his daughter's body. And with his murmured curses and Lewellyn's sobs, the first Thanksgiving after Martha's death ended.



Caroline was buried the Sunday after Thanksgiving, two months ago to the day. Alison and Lewellyn left in a dark car shortly after a cold sunrise without exchanging a word, and returned equally silently three hours later. A dull numbness had settled over them, the mental cousin of physical shock that blunts the pain of traumatic injury, and remained for weeks after the funeral. They moved about like sleepwalkers performing a slow, ritual dance, Lewellyn on foot, Alison in her chair, exchanging sighs and sad shakes of their heads, and speaking as little as possible.

It eased gradually. Angry words began to punctuate long silences. Lewellyn's rages returned in force. Her resilience strained by age, infirmity and her own grief and horror, Alison retaliated in kind. The battle lines drawn, hostilities escalated rapidly. Both too strong of character, too committed to take that one step back, that one deep breath, they descended into open warfare, while I stood by, only able to look, listen, and feel.

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And here I must implicate Alison in an injustice. This morning, in the heat of combat, after Lewellyn had assailed her with a particularly vicious tirade, Alison struck back, implicating Lewellyn's unnatural attentions in Caroline's suicide. In answer, Lewellyn unearthed the secrets she had kept at Caroline's behest, the night of the storm, the bruises on the girl's body and the reason for her trembling hands. But a long-hidden and well-disguised truth was hard to recognize, and Alison lashed into her all the more furiously for her slur against a bereaved and lonely man.

If Alison's initial accusation infuriated Lewellyn, her disbelief stunned her into greater rage. Snatching up her overcoat, she raced down my hallway. My front door slammed and my widow's walk trembled.

Even before my walls stopped shaking, I could feel Alison's regret. Uncertainty followed. I could sense her musing, one by one, on all the signs of Caroline's ill treatment that she had overlooked. The truth dawned on her slowly, and she sat in her wheelchair in my front parlor, rehearsing in sad whispers the kinder words she was prepared to say when Lewellyn returned, while we waited together, as mistress and house, as friend and silent friend. Alison had achieved the serenity of her years. Like all inanimate objects, I am blessed with infinite patience.

A charred log sulked in fireplace. A bowl of grapes sat on the Shaker table. The last remnants of a bounteous purple bunch, they hung limply off drying stems, individually too wrinkled, bruised or spoiled to eat, collectively too numerous to throw away. I have often seen such relics remain for days, kept in hopes of finding one last morsel, discarded only after the growth of mold.

After sunset, Alison began a new, slow ritual, looking back and forth, from the front door to her wristwatch, to the grandfather clock in the corner. The moon scowled down at me, a bloodless face. Finally, Alison steered her chair into her bedroom and hoisted herself onto her bed. With the lights on and a magazine spread on her lap, she dozed while I kept silent vigil.

A sound stirred my awareness. The same metallic crack that brought me to consciousness a century before, unmistakable despite the muffled distance, resounded again, too faintly to wake Alison. A drunken curse followed, a second shot stifled a plea for mercy, and peace returned.

Then suddenly, Lewellyn was here, racing through me like a whirlwind, smashing furniture and shattering glass as she splashed a foul liquid about my lower rooms. Dropping a lit match, she ran outside to light the stacks of firewood piled against my walls, then stepped back to stare at the rising flames.

The hiss and crackle of the fire wrenched Alison awake. She struggled into her chair and glided into the hallway. The furnace roaring in my foyer sent a line

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of flames eating its way toward her along the carpet, blocking the sight of the front door.

She looked back into the bedroom. Sheets of fire, as high as my walls, rose outside my window, and the light streamed in like a hellish sunrise.

Shifting her chair into reverse, Alison backed down the hall, then spun around and moved forward into the library, still untouched by the fire. But her maneuver gave the vanguard of the advancing flames time to reach her chair's back wheels. The rubber browned and bubbled at its touch, the electric engine short-circuited with a hiss and the chair froze in the doorway.

Alison's shoulders fell forward and her hands clutched her face, muffling a despairing moan. Then, with an animal growl, she gripped the armrests and hoisted herself up to her feet, her will forcing her feeble legs to hold the weight of her body as she stumbled through the library toward the kitchen door.

Leaning against the tables and chairs, pushing off the library walls to the kitchen counters, Alison struggled toward the back door. Lewellyn anticipated her maneuver. Through the panes of glass in its wooden frame, Alison saw the back porch flare up behind it, and just beyond the bonfire, her granddaughter's face stared in at her with eyes as dull as a corpse's. Panicked, shrieking, Alison turned away, her failing legs carrying her back to the library as she gathered her strength for a desperate bid to hurl herself through the glass of its bay window. But the flames followed, dragging her down like a pack of wolves overtaking an antelope. She caught a last glimpse of her face in the gold-framed mirror, framed by her burning hair, then collapsed to the floor, screaming for help, calling the name of her assassin, an indifferent few yards away. Prostrate on the burning rug, Alison was still conscious when the fire claimed her flesh. Her screams continued, piercing through the roar of the blaze, before finally dying away. And as I feel my structure collapse and my consciousness fade, I am only grateful that her existence, and with it her suffering, ended a few merciful moments before my own.

THE END

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DOWN IN THE DEEPFLUX

JAKE WEST

The Caterwaul hatched out into a downpour of stones and began feeding on the many dead bodies born in wrongshapes. Its brood-mates would never feel the pulse/pleasure of rightshape like this lone survivor did, matching its flux to the light-dance of the sun, emerging from the egg armored but non-motile—in this case, the right choice.

But hurry! Already five—maybe six—seconds in the past, the rockrain dimmed in distant memories. Boulders sank, melted, crumbled. Mass tasted warm, made possible more complex new rightshapes. Almost too late, the creature extruded clawed legs and escaped the lava flow that ended its birthplace. All landmarks vanished as the lowlands ran like the free water that rarely existed there.

The Caterwaul variform rippled through a subtle series of metamorphoses, from carapace to tentacle to wing, all survival reflexes, all body rhythms that generated ecstasy as they matched the sun's flickering. Its easy childhood ended, the predator set off in search of new prey in its rich, hour-long life under the galaxy's fiercest Cepheid variable.

Not far away, two men in mutable-suits clutched at a sheer cliff and began climbing for their lives, a hand-over-hand struggle up a vertical wall that had started out as a hike up a steep slope—until it tilted under their feet.

The suits compensated, but Paxton, despite his long experience as a Ranger, found himself breathing heavier nonetheless. “Still with me, Lu?” he called down to his high-profile client, a man whose arrogance was exceeded only by his wealth, and who now might be regretting both of these qualities in himself.

“What happened?” Stivender panted hard enough to strain his oxygen reserves, but so far he kept up as promised, matching his reputation as a flamboyant risk-taker, both financially and physically. “Give me some warning next time—”

Ignoring his complaints, Paxton grunted as he reached for the next handhold, and the suit's muscle-augments whined in sympathy with the strain, creating a curious duet of pain.

Then the whole cliff began sinking into lava, faster than the two men could climb.

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Paxton looked up, gauging their chances. The sky cleared to reveal the erratic star of this unique system, now directly overhead from their position on the equator, the planet's region of highest energy-input and greatest instability, a region known as the Deepflux. The Cepheid variable currently burned furiously enough to raise beads of sweat on his forehead even through the faceplate of his mutable-suit, but he knew that within minutes or even seconds, it would drop toward the low-end of its output-cycle, plunging the local temperature gradient as the star dimmed to a feeble ember, only to flare up again, just as abruptly, back to an intensity hot enough to boil stone. The over-stressed material of the surface could never keep up with such intense and rapid fluctuations of radiation and temperature: hence, the surrounding environment, where, over eons of time, chaos had actually become a state of equilibrium.

The only constancy on this world was the noise. And the complete lack of any other constants.

Paxton immersed himself in the unceasing crescendo of sound that soaked through the armor of his mutable-suit to caress his nerve-endings and stir his blood with a singular fire.

His arm jerked to the left. He almost fell before the suit's AI program overrode his voluntary movements. The suit scuttled sideways along the face of the cliff. Stivender muffled a surprised yell as his suit did the same. With the benefit of years as a Lethal Environment Specialist, Paxton surrendered to the suit's movements, aware that his immediate survival depended on it. Within seconds, he felt a tremendous convulsion in the rock and looked up.

A fissure burst open, and a ruddy cascade of magma spilled out and down, more spectacular than any Earthly waterfall. It would have swept them away without the advance warning from their suits' deep-radar that had tracked the magma-flow. The AI's complex algorithms actually learned to predict this environment with increased exposure to it. Mutable-suits were expensive, and their cost ate a horrendous bite from the Wild-World Bureau's operating budget, but, once again, they had just paid for themselves—twice over. And, for how much money the poachers had behind them, mutable-suits were one technology, one advantage, they didn't have. Not yet.

Paxton glanced down to check on Stivender and saw how fast the ridge was subsiding into the lava below. Already, they had lost half of their hard-won altitude, and in a very short time, they stood to lose their lives.

Paxton triggered a STATUS cycle and was disgusted with the feedback. "Well, the AI's a little confused," he admitted. "It won't allow Flight Mode because it's reading too much airborne debris."

"You mean, the AI doesn't know whether to shit or go blind."

"Copy that. I say, to hell with it. You with me?"

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“Yes! Do something!”

Is real life a little too risky for you? Instead of asking, Paxton slaved their suits together and launched them. Acceleration from the engine-burn slammed him into the interior padding and clawed at the skin on his face. Somewhere behind him, Stivender war-whooped in either exuberance or sheer terror, but Paxton gritted his teeth and rode out the vicious corkscrew maneuvers executed by the guidance system as it carried them to cruising altitude. He expected to collide with a flying rock at any moment. Instead, he felt a satisfying jolt when the airfoils deployed, followed immediately thereafter by an electronic tone.

“Signal acquired!” he yelled over the roar of his thrusters and the ambient screaming of the wind. “Music to my ears!”

“About damn time!” Stivender answered. The suits plotted a minimum-angle glidepath to their target: an active stasis-trap with a variform hopefully captured inside. The trap had only moved a few kilometers since they detected it from the orbiting Ranger Station, an unusual development given the churning chaos that was the natural state of the Deepflux.

Under Caterwaul conditions, the stasis-trap was practically stationary. Maybe their luck was starting to change.

The Caterwaul was twenty-three minutes old and entering the prime of its life. Five times it had fought successfully against other variforms and feasted on their mass, becoming ever more vigorous and innovative in its shapeshifting. Once it grew a tail-sting to poison a grappleform that tangled all its limbs. As an airtight bladderform, it suffocated a rotary-grinding bonemouth. Mirrorskin camouflage confused a charging razorhorn.

But still the hunger burned relentlessly, and time fled swifter than any prey. As it paused for a quarter-second on the brink of a cliff, a sand-skater caught its attention on the desert plain below.

The Caterwaul felt the ancient Reflex take control, the ultimate survival trait, honed over a billion generations of its kind. It surrendered to the ecstatic sensation as it leaped from the precipice. Its mass twisted, formed into a thin membrane with heavy claws around the rim: the creature had never seen a parachute but now invented one instinctively.

A surge of physical pleasure accompanied the new rightshape, the usual biological reward for survival. Hatched strong with the Reflex, this Caterwaul’s life had so far been a continuous series of orgasms.

Now it focused its attention on the sand-skater, which was itself both hunter and prey: commonplace on a world with only one species to fill every ecological niche. The level pocket of sand below vibrated in complex moiré patterns, driven by local tectonics. The skater let the waves carry it randomly while it

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trolled for subsurface variforms. Its strategy also made it an elusive prey, difficult to anticipate.

The Caterwaul let the Reflex adjust its body's shape to catch the right air-currents, to take it where the sand-skater would be moments from now.

When the Caterwaul landed.

Twenty seconds passed in relative calm, the longest period the Caterwaul had ever known without danger. It used the time to develop a rudimentary self-awareness, then became bored, trapped in the rigid flesh of a single shape, without any stimulus to change. It was beginning to realize that boredom could be fatal to its kind, when the surface rushed up and, sure enough, the sand-skater halted directly underneath its outstretched claws.

Oblivious to the death falling from above, the skater shifted into a tripod shape with hooked tentacles that dangled from the juncture of its three legs. It dropped the hooks deep into the sand and winched a burrow-snout from its lair.

The descending Caterwaul exulted. Its claws sank into the defenseless wrongshape. Then it felt another spontaneous Reflex, and it instantly grew wings. A hot wind slammed it skyward, clutching its tripod prey. Fractionally too late, the burrow-snout launched itself after them, its jaws snapping shut just behind them before it fell back to the surface.

The updraft carried both Caterwauls into furious thermals that flung them ever higher. The tripod squirmed and also became birdlike. The two avianforms slashed and clawed and fought, tumbling through the roaring gulf.

With a small part of its awareness, the original Caterwaul noticed two other flyers at a lower altitude, like nothing it had seen before. They were flying together, but not fighting or mating, and, more shocking yet, seemed to be somehow...hard-shelled. The creature had no concept for alien, and the appearance of something that was *not-variform* shocked it. Its opponent took advantage and stabbed deeply with its delta-shaped head, probing for the cluster-node that was the Caterwaul's single immutable organ, both heart and brain.

The first Caterwaul transformed into a slender, bone-hard spear, sensing a change in the environment. Its enemy was still in birdshape two seconds later when they hit the dead air pocket, and its wings became useless. Both combatants fell. The first Caterwaul had already maneuvered itself into a killing position, and when the dust settled from their impact, it stood upright from the birdform's chest, impaling it to the ground through its cluster-node.

Quickly, quickly, the victor flowed around its kill and devoured the hot mass before any other variform tried to steal it, or the planet did something to take it away.

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The biological imperative of any variform was to gain enough mass to undergo Mating and Fission as the culmination of its lifespan. A genius among Caterwauls, this one had already invented self-awareness and was now discovering a new state of mind to go along with it—curiosity.

Still driven by the urge to hunt but also torn by this new sensation, the Caterwaul set off in search of the intriguing and inexplicable hard-shells.

Much to Paxton's dismay, the stasis-trap had company, which meant that their luck had just increased exponentially—in the wrong direction.

"Poachers!" Stivender yelled, correctly interpreting his helmet-display: a fully-loaded omnijEEP sitting intact on the surface--without a single life-sign in range.

Aftermath of a fatal accident or an ambush?

Still in control of both suits, Paxton changed course. Radio-silence for the final approach gave him a moment to savor the frenzied beauty rampant around him. Sudden twilight fell as the Cepheid variable died again, the closest thing to darkness that the tidally-locked dayside of this planet ever knew. In the gloom, he spotted highlights reflecting off a river of cold-fluid rock, unique to Caterwaul. The plastic current cut through the landscape below, altering it even faster. His peripheral vision caught a blur of movement in the sky: two of the native variforms locked in a shapeshifting battle, gone before he could turn his head to look at them, as they lived out their furious lives, too fast for any human to comprehend. The star flared. In the distance, Jovian lightning backlit the funnel of a vacuum-storm that stabbed repeatedly groundward.

And all of this in just seconds before they landed, disengaged suits, advanced cautiously on foot, found the omnijEEP in a shallow canyon, the stasis-trap resting nearby, both on solid ground: Calm Spots like this formed spontaneously and lasted unpredictably. While it lasted, Paxton signaled the Station for pick-up, a calculated gamble. Normally, they would open the trap first before committing the drop-ship to its descent from orbit. This situation was different. Paxton wanted a quick retrieval on the way, even before they secured the Caterwaul. And if the trap had been raided, or if the poachers came back (From where? None of this made sense), then Paxton would take the blame.

Their luck held. The 'jEEP was empty.

Nonetheless, Stivender waved his shock-rifle nervously about as they explored the site, though the weapon was more self-delusion than self-defense. Useless against a spacesuit, it fired an electric charge meant to drive off aggressive variforms. Paxton had pointed out that Caterwauls never attacked without provocation, since they didn't recognize spacesuits as food—and no human could ever move fast enough to shoot a Caterwaul if it did attack.

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With Stivender's huge donation to the Bureau for this private junket, Paxton was overridden. His Ranger-issue sidearm, though, would punch holes in spacesuits, if not Caterwauls, making it proof against the real predators down here, who often raided the legal trapping operations of private companies.

"No wreckage, no bodies, no blood," Stivender sounded faintly disappointed. In this temporary calm, they could actually hear each other without shouting. "Like they just walked away."

"And left this." Behind the vehicle, Paxton found an abandoned weapon, a Mauler portable railgun with a long, spidery barrel—and a fully-loaded magazine. Even spent-uranium rounds were useless unfired. Paxton felt a chill.

It was Stivender who found the footprint.

"What are these, Paxton? Toes?"

He was right. The track not only looked human, it looked barefoot.

Paxton's chill intensified.

He returned to the omnijep, tried to squeeze his bulkier mutable-suit through the hatch. Stivender caught his arm; equally powerful servo-motors strained against each other in a deadlock.

"The trap's over there," Stivender pointed emphatically with his free arm.

"In a minute, Lu. The mission logs—"

"Don't mean a thing to me."

Paxton hesitated, trying to break free, of Stivender's grip, of his own excitement. "It's a one-time chance—" But this man wouldn't care about Paxton's fascination with unexplained phenomena: the Loch Ness Monster, Aldebaran Wind-Haunts, The-Face-In-The-Stars that the Llangans feared. By collecting these legends from different worlds, Paxton found renewed hope that some aspect of the universe resided aloof from any human tampering. Neither proved nor disproved, these stories reminded him of the uncertainty in all existence. Without myths, he believed, we diminish ourselves by thinking that the universe is quantifiable, cut-and-dried, accountable solely to our rational thought—

Besides, what fun would the universe be without a whopping tall-tale once in a while?

The tall-tales kept Paxton sane. As a Ranger, he fought a losing battle to stem the destruction of alien environments which humanity discovered, exploited and exterminated, without fail—everywhere except on Caterwaul, where Paxton finally made his personal stand. Caterwaul was a unique world, immune, so far, to strip malls and strip mining, the one world in Settled Space that rapacious, thoughtless humanity could visit but never tame.

Caterwaul also had its own unexplained mystery: persistent accounts from company trappers, scientists, even poachers, who reported encounters with

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people walking the surface unprotected and unclothed, seducing victims with nudity and inhuman physical beauty—and something greater. Survivors reported more of a yearning unfulfilled in the heart than an actual sighting, a wary sadness after resisting them. Of course, every disappearance on this wildly dangerous planet was automatically blamed on the so-called Lurelings, or Deepwalkers.

What were they? Theories abounded. A product of oxygen deprivation? Lost souls that died in the Deepflux? Descendants of the first survey crew, whose ship crashed here a century ago? (Some alleged how the castaways had mated with the Caterwauls and formed a hybrid race that needed new breeding stock to freshen the gene-pool.) Or, were they Caterwaul variforms imitating humans perfectly?

Paxton had the footprint and a deserted vehicle whose logs might give him the answer.

“Listen to me, Lu. It’s right in front of us, something bigger than any Caterwaul. If you want a trophy—”

“No. I want a specimen.” Paxton had been right. Stivender was deaf and blind to magic; this was only about his ego, not curiosity, or discovery, or a footnote in history. Likely it was not even about the small fortune that a live Caterwaul would fetch from research companies. How many fortunes did the man need? No, Stivender had another reason for doing this, some personal motivation. Jealousy, maybe—or pride?

Stivender released Paxton’s arm. “We keep doing this until I get what I want.”

Except that Paxton would not be the guide next time. He might not even be a Ranger anymore, certainly not one assigned to Caterwaul. Too many guarantees had been made; too much political clout, prestige and money were involved to allow failure.

Is learning the truth about Deepwalkers worth losing the chance to ever come back and see one?

Knowing the answer, Paxton turned his back on the omnijep and the data inside. There would be another time.

“All right,” he conceded. “Just like we practiced.” Stivender wisely kept silent and took his position at the stasis-trap. There was nothing left between the two men now but the business of survival.

For the first time in minutes, the ground shook. The suits balanced themselves, but the jeep danced several inches back and forth, winding up in exactly the same spot. The moment of stability was fading. How long before their time expired and their luck reversed in a single, obliterating blow?

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Paxton picked up the discarded Mauler and clipped it to his back for good measure. No reply to his query for ETA; the drop-ship must be in re-entry blackout by now.

Paxton and Stivender stood on opposite sides of the stasis-trap, which, in its activated state, was a two-meter sphere of energy. Paxton studied his own image in the perfectly mirrored surface that reflected all matter, energy or information. The stasis-trap first broadcast a false mating-call. The field then snapped on around the Caterwaul, which, deprived of all stimulus, went catatonic from boredom, and would stay that way until removed for experimentation periods. In such manner, the Caterwaul's short lifespan could be parceled out indefinitely. Private companies harvested them for research, a lucrative, though distasteful, industry beyond Paxton's control. His whole career hinged, however, on the single Caterwaul in the trap.

Yet part of him would be relieved to find the trap empty.

Not Stivender, who impatiently opened the lid of his capture-canister. Paxton unsealed his, too, but left it secured to his harness. There was a fifty-fifty chance which one of them the angry Caterwaul would attack when they released it.

"Remember, it'll be slow and sluggish." Paxton lifted his right hand, held it over the mirrored surface like a benediction. "Slow for a Caterwaul, that is." The emitter in his palm touched the field and collapsed it.

The Caterwaul erupted, a violent geyser of multiple legs, claws and teeth—lots of teeth—

—that landed on Stivender. The variform pressed itself against his faceplate, and Paxton saw it scrambling with hands—hands!—at the release-locks on Stivender's helmet.

Paxton was tempted to let the Caterwaul have its prey and go free, an easy solution. But inaction would be the same as murder. So he charged his suit gauntlets and reached out.

But Stivender panicked. He backed away, swatting at his attacker. As Stivender turned, Paxton saw the Caterwaul shapeshift. It grew human features, which then peered right into Stivender's face. He cried out, louder than the returning surface noise. By then, Paxton gripped the variform and stunned it with an electric shock. Holding it with one hand—it was like trying to handle an amorphous, unattached mass of pure muscle—Paxton sealed it in his capture-canister. The tell-tales lit up, verifying containment. An electric current inside would keep the animal torpid until they put it back in stasis on the drop-ship.

Paxton looked up. He could see Stivender shaking inside his suit, probably from a complex mix of shock, horror and rage.

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“Whose face did it have?” Paxton asked him. “Somebody you loved? Somebody you hated?”

“Somebody I killed,” Stivender blurted. “In a knife-fight when I was a kid, down in Under-New York. I never told anybody about that...” He looked at Paxton imploringly. “How did it know?”

“Maybe we still have time to find out.” Paxton started back to the omnijeep. Still no contact with the drop-ship.

“Hey—you’re okay, Paxton, you know that?” Stivender called out. Paxton stopped, surprised and suspicious. Stivender hesitated, then added, “You’re wasting your talents, playing tour guide to idiots.” Apparently Stivender didn’t class himself in that category. Paxton found his sudden friendliness more distasteful than his earlier—and more honest—arrogance. “Come work for me.”

“I’m not a bodyguard, Lu.”

“No, I need a handler for the Caterwaul.”

Paxton’s chill returned. “You’re not selling it?”

“God, no, what a waste.” Stivender laughed. “I can’t lose with a Caterwaul.”

“Lose at *what*?” Paxton’s apprehension grew.

“You’re the expert, Paxton,” Stivender plowed ahead, heedless. “It’ll eat any animal in existence, right? Even that damn Eridani Iron-Maiden. Swallow it whole and crap out the spikes.” He clapped his metal-shod hands with delight at the prospect of defeating a rival. “That idiot NeoArab Prince will crap, too, when he sees it!”

Bloodsports. Stivender’s behavior now became clear. Paxton knew the rumors about alien animal fights broadcast on closed hologrid channels, where players who were above the law bet stakes that were higher than the Gross Planetary Products of small colonies. They gambled on spectacular battles and unpredictable outcomes between killers that would never meet in nature, the products of separate evolution. Was Paxton more appalled that the stories were true? Or that he had just supplied them another victim, however unwittingly?

His superiors in the Wild-World Bureau knew. They had to.

“A guaranteed cut for you, no gambling,” Stivender said when Paxton remained silent. “Personal interstellar travel, anywhere you want, to find me new animals. Think about it.”

Paxton thought about it.

He also thought about the incomparable sight of spider-cats prowling up and down the vertical habitats on Fracture; about huge taumagryphs frolicking in the four gravities on Heavyheart, and swarms of Can’t-Bees that thrived in Tau Ceti II’s acidsap jungles; about living-crystal buzzsaws spinning gracefully as they sliced gas-whales to death in the upper atmosphere of New Jupiter. Paxton had savored such glorious diversity of life in his career. Yet so much of what he had

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seen, caretakered, and tried to preserve was now endangered, developed or extinct.

The pattern never changed. Long ago, the Old Martian drylife was killed off by terraforming—oxygen, water and ignorance—before anyone knew, or would admit, it was there. Today, the government still licensed mockman hunts on Meta-Rigel for the revenues, despite the sentience debate.

There was even a hologrid star—or was it a Sol Senator?—who mounted his trophy on a robotic armature, a stuffed mockman that served drinks at his parties. And not a ripple of public protest.

But Paxton never forgot that image. For him, it crystallized all his frustrations and failures. And now, standing here with the perilous surface of Caterwaul waking up around him, he realized that he had the chance to change the pattern in one, small way, which was the only way to succeed, and to hell with what it would cost him.

Paxton seized the chance. He walked away from the omnijeep, giving up his lead to the Deepwalkers—and much more. By releasing the Caterwaul, which he meant to do, he would give up his career. If he launched the variform from the canyon wall, it should take flight without attacking.

“Hold it!” Stivender boosted his audio gain. “What are you doing?”

Paxton increased his stride while he detached the canister from his harness. “If you have to ask,” he shot back, “you wouldn’t understand.”

Instead of the impotent threats from Stivender that he had expected, Paxton’s comm-channels roared with static, then cut off when all systems went dead, and his suit toppled over in mid-stride. Half of Paxton’s faceplate was pressed into the ground. Physically helpless, his own muscles unable to move the inert armor, his mind raced. The suit should have predicted any natural danger.

The problem, though, was man-made.

Metal boots blocked his already restricted view, then Stivender knelt to retrieve the canister. He touched helmets. Carried by conduction, his voice barely came through, more muffled than a nagging conscience. “I thought you might refuse.” He brandished the shock-rifle, which must be boosted far above legal specs if it could disable a mutable-suit. “Stay down and keep quiet. When the ship comes, say your suit failed.”

“Go to hell.” Paxton knew that, whether or not he cooperated, he would have a fatal “accident,” easily blamed on the Deepflux.

“Your choice.” Stivender fumbled with the manual helmet-locks, clumsy as the Caterwaul had been, and evidently suffering no guilt that Paxton had just saved him from the same fate—a lungful of poison gas.

A fitting reward, Paxton thought, for always doing my job.

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But apparently his job was not done yet.

The trailing edge of the Clear Spot passed over them like a curtain, and pandemonium struck. The two men were tossed apart by wind-slam, by saturated static charges, and by sheer-stress—fault-lines below them detonating in a series of violent dry heaves.

Paxton, spun away in a current of cold-fluid rock, came to rest on a solid outcrop, dizzy inside his dead armor. Maybe Stivender would be satisfied with the canister. Without power, Paxton was dead anyway if the drop-ship left without him.

Lying there, out of options, he simply listened to the rising wind, Caterwaul's namesake, enjoying, in his last minutes, the endless, unnerving, banshee-on-steroids scream.

Chaos theory given a voice—a new insight into an old phenomenon, he thought, grateful for one last chance to experience it and humbled by a lifetime of wonder. *All worth it. Even this.*

Lightning flashed—no, a display in his helmet flickered to life, the mutable-suit struggling to re-boot itself. Already, a whole panel lit up, and Paxton could slide his right arm toward the Mauler railgun on his back. He had a chance, given a little more time and a few more inches—

Stivender's foot came down on his wrist, not even a contest against his damaged suit. Paxton's restored comm-channels crackled with dead air; silently, Stivender leveled the shock-rifle and bent down for the Mauler. Thus, Paxton, looking skyward past him, saw the dark wedge-shape emerge from the murk. Stivender stood up, still unaware, since the drop-ship's massive thrusters were inaudible over the background noise—

—and there was no transponder beacon. No ID code, no Bureau insignia on the hull.

"It's not ours, Lu!" Paxton shouted, automatically protecting the civilian. "Get out of range!" Was this the pick-up for those missing poachers? Or did that NeoArab Prince who owned the Iron-Maiden have better intel than Stivender suspected?

It hardly mattered. The ship fired on them, a targeting burst of depleted-uranium slugs. Stivender dropped the Mauler, kicked his muscle-augments on FULL and leaped away. The hang-time in mid-air on a predictable arc made him an easy target, and a second stream of Gutshredders intersected with the apex of his leap, reducing him instantly to a shapeless cloud of ruined metal and flesh. However, the canister with the Caterwaul inside tumbled back to the surface, undamaged.

In the interim, both of Paxton's suit-arms came on-line. Unable to sit up, he put the Mauler to his shoulder knowing, even as he fired round after round, that

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his chances of bringing down a multi-ton, surface-to-orbit spacecraft were about equal to a zero-g lifeform learning to tap-dance.

The next burst of Gutshredders found him.

After that, mortally wounded, all rage and pain left him, subsumed by a dream-like glaze that overlay reality. Numbly, he watched the drop-ship maneuver for landing against the gale-force winds. For him, it had become a surrealistic aerial ballet, not the final approach of his fate.

Sensing a presence, he turned his head. Up the slope, dust clouds parted like a theater curtain for a woman clothed only in an inhuman aspect of grace.

His heart, dying, still surged with excitement. A Deepwalker? No, even more truly—a Lureling. Seeing her, wanting her, he understood the difference among her kind.

The Lureling raised her arms, her fists clenched in supplication to the sky itself. Paxton's gaze wandered lazily back to the drop-ship. The tip of a vacuum-storm slammed into it, and, oddly, this did not surprise him. The storm shredded the lander like the ship's weapons had mangled Stivender. The storm's momentum swept the airborne wreckage, a twisted spiral of debris, safely away.

Paxton looked back, hungry for another glimpse of the Lureling, but smoke and ash from a nearby eruption rolled across the slope, cloaking her—if she ever really existed.

Something nagged at Paxton; he refused to leave a task undone. With great difficulty, for a failing mutable-suit is a massive and unresponsive prison at best, he crawled to the canister and placed his glove on it. The proper frequency went forth; the lid popped open; the Caterwaul shot skyward in freedom.

Paxton watched it go, which was the last thing that he did before he died.

The Caterwaul was fifty-two minutes old and approaching the limits of its mass. It had made a life's work out of tracking the hard-shells but still had not solved their mystery. Too many distractions intervened, too much necessity: to defend, to fight, to consume.

To survive.

It knew where the hard-shells were and was traveling again in their direction when the final necessity occurred:

The overwhelming need to Mate.

Its voracious appetite strangely fading, the Caterwaul consumed a clutch of hatchlings. Normally beneath notice, they became the Caterwaul's last meal, imparting enough mass for Fission. Now a biological directive even more powerful than the survival Reflex took over.

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The Caterwaul burned with the need to expend its mass to a new generation. Succeed or fail, death approached. Make it count! To live so long! To come so close!

Underground sine-wave explosions tore a furrow in the crust where the Caterwaul fell. It made no effort to protect itself; rightshape and wrongshape were now meaningless.

Writhing in meta-pain and para-sexual desire, the Caterwaul reverted to its primordial, formless self and raised its voice in an irresistible cry. Its cluster-node vibrated as it broadcast its mating-call across a broad spectrum of electromagnetic energies.

The pressure of its mass grew. Its cluster-node split again and again, forming the embryos of potential offspring.

But only with a mate to receive them.

Soon the mating-cry would become a death-cry.

And none came. The long, final seconds passed the point of no return. Any other variform that heard the signal now could not arrive in time.

Though despair lanced through the Caterwaul, it began a dignified death-dance. And half-way through the performance montage of all its past shapes, it heard a miraculous reply. Another variform appeared in the sky over a nearby canyon and arrowed down. With its unique, invented self-awareness, the Caterwaul understood that this was impossible. Its mating-cry was irresistible. How could any variform be so close and not respond until now? The two variforms collided, and curiosity ended as their separate masses became One.

Their nerve-threads intertwined; their cluster-nodes meshed, and in their epiphany, they became every Caterwaul that had lived before them and every descendant that stretched after them. On some unthinking cellular level, they tapped into a genetic stream whose every sip carried the sum of all its parts, stability by constant instability, consistency through constant change, species without end, amen.

The chain-reaction accelerated. The original Caterwaul, now a male, expelled its seedling cluster-nodes deep into the body of the other variform; the mate, now female, greedily sucked at the other's excess mass to create a hundred infant bodies around them. The exchange became a frenzy—glorious, violent in its own way, spiraling uncontrollably toward an ultimate—

EXPLOSION!

Drained of all but its original birth-mass, the Caterwaul was tossed skyward by the force. Below, its mate had ceased to exist entirely, all its mass gone to create the clutch of eggs that lay like a ring of shrapnel around the detonation-point of their sex.

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Exhausted and depleted, all its senses failing, the Caterwaul rode the arc of its helpless trajectory, searching for a good place to die.

Then it spotted the hard-shell lying in the canyon from which its mate had appeared. Elation filled it: the chance to solve the final mystery before it was too late. Feebly, it angled itself to ride the wind-currents and fluttered to a landing.

The Caterwaul was now completely in the grip of the Reflex, which washed over it in waves more powerful and compelling than ever before. The Caterwaul sensed that the motionless hard-shell offered survival on a scale never before imagined.

Trembling with fear and excitement, it assumed a snakeform and crawled into the gaping wounds, on the brink of something momentous. The Reflex controlled it completely now, guiding it into the most difficult and complex transformation of its life.

The mass inside was still warm with life but was no longer living. The Reflex showed it how to fix that. The Caterwaul had enough mass left to re-form all the broken parts inside the hard-shell. As it flowed into the body and merged with the alien flesh, it became a severed spinal column and ruptured vessels. It became ligaments and torn skin and damaged nerves and lost blood. As repairs were accomplished, it sent out exploratory tendrils of itself into the farther reaches of this immutable but amazingly versatile lifeform, and eventually one of those tendrils reached the brain.

A moment later, Paxton sat up and took a breath. His mind throbbed with dual memories, human and variform. Profoundly dizzy, he tried to hold his head, but the helmet got in the way. He fervently hoped not to be sick. Mutable-suits weren't designed for clean-up on the inside.

Then he noticed the gaping crack in his faceplate with a stab of fear. But he was still breathing normally. Looking down at his riddled armor, he remembered the pain of high-velocity slugs passing through him. He remembered the abrupt brutality of Stivender's death.

All of it.

He tried to move, but the last systems failed. A new part of him knew exactly what to do, and before the old Paxton could protest, he tripped his emergency-release. The suit opened like a clamshell. Clad only in his thin undersuit, Paxton stood up and stepped onto the soil of his new home as a true native for the first time. He looked on Caterwaul's stern beauty with fresh eyes and one entirely new sense.

Like the variforms, he, too, now could see catastrophes, or sudden changes in the physical world, *before* they occurred, in time to avoid them or adapt. His

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hybrid body altered itself constantly, tissues toughening, cells changing chemically to use the caustic air, his whole metabolism in flux so that, to him, the temperature felt normal, the air breathable, the wind merely brisk, the violence predictable—and the noise tolerable, so diminished, in fact, that he heard a gentle voice say his name. Slowly, he turned around.

The Lureling offered him her hand.

An escort flanked her, almost hidden—almost human?—in the gloom. Deep inside, Paxton felt the communication that the Deepwalkers offered him: dignity and friendship, respect and gratitude, sorrow over his death but the offer of a new kind of life.

And a chance to fight back, to make sure that his sacrifice was never wasted.

In response to the Lureling's invitation, Paxton took his first, tentative step toward her and in doing so felt himself walk across that indefinable line between mortality and legend.

THE END

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THE TOWER OF RALMA

MARG GILKS

*And other men with drums and tabors
There were, who had no other labours
Except upon their drums to hammer
And hoot, and shriek, and make great clamour.
So loud their tabors did discord
They drowned the thunder of the Lord.
– Ambroise the minstrel, 1191*

I stood in the swell and surge of humanity in the bazaar near David's Gate and wrestled with my conscience. The air here was close, aromatic with spice and fruit and dung and people. Jerusalem's fierce sun pressed heat heavy as damnation onto my head and shoulders. Sunlight had weight, here in *Outremer*. It settled on your body then sank into your bones, just as the illusion I wrapped so easily about myself marked my soul forever.

"It's wrong, Guillaume," I finally said. I'd been sent away for what he asked so casually now, exiled by my own father. A childhood game turned to sin and seven months later, I was here in Jerusalem in the crusading army of Christ.

"Where's the harm?" Guillaume nudged me toward the fruitseller's stall again. "Ah Guy," he moaned on the tail of a hungry inhalation, "Guy, you can smell them from here; perfume to a starving man's palate, and here we are with but one coin between us! Doesn't your mouth yearn to be washed by their juices?"

Yes.

I swallowed and took a step forward. My heart pulsed fear, prickling nerve endings. The sweat that had gathered in the folds and crevasses of my hands cooled like a sudden shock in the hot, close air when I flexed them.

"He'd take but our single *obole* for two, from a fellow Arab," Guillaume said at my shoulder.

"He's an Armenian," I countered.

Guillaume shrugged. "Arab, Armenian—what does it matter? You'll be whatever they want to see. Come; work your magic, Guy. My stomach protests."

My heart thumped. "Sh!" Magic, curse—no matter what label it wore, my secret would find no tolerance here.

"What?" Guillaume looked around the bazaar's forest of awnings and poles with exaggerated innocence. "There's no one but merchants and natives nearby to hear, and they're godless anyway."

"As I will be, if you won't be quiet!" I hissed. I should never have told him what I could do. Guillaume would forfeit his own soul for a handful of dates; what matter mine?

Guillaume snorted. "You? Not likely! You're pious as a priest—but then, you think you've something to make up for, don't you? If I were you, Guy, I'd call it a blessing—a gift from God himself. You could have anything, be anyone with that gift, and you're balking at magicking us a couple of oranges."

"They'd excommunicate me or worse, if they knew!" My father's words, ghosting out in my own voice. My eyes slid over those nearby, praying none understood French, none were spies in the subtle infighting that even I had to acknowledge ran rampant among the nobles under King Baldwin's leash. Count Denis' colours blazoned my tunic.

"Who? King Baldwin and his princes and counts?" Again Guillaume blew his opinion of that through his perpetually peeling nose. "Do you really think they're here to champion God's cause? They're here to grab what they can, just like the rest of us."

"Speak for yourself," I growled.

Guillaume quirked a brow bleached almost white by Jerusalem's fierce sun. "Ah, that's right, you're a proper Christian soldier, aren't you? Come to kill Saracens in the name of God, to do your penance for a gift He gave you."

"Blasphemer."

"Magicker. You see? We're the same after all; both sinners in the eyes of the Church. Now, go—you want one as badly as I." Guillaume slapped my arm and then moved into a pocket of shade in the lee of the city wall.

I turned back to the fruitseller's stall. The oranges were heaped in baskets before it and their aroma made my mouth water. Where was the harm? How could so small a deception be counted a sin?

I studied the fruitseller: an Armenian merchant balding and round with late middle age, but as browned by the sun as I—he, too, had been in Outremer for several months or more. Years, I amended, as he shouted a greeting to someone in Turkish. The Armenians still living in Jerusalem must know their fellows overwell, by now. He would welcome a fellow Armenian, but even more, a fresh face. With news from home . . . ah! No good! I had no more idea than he of what went on in the Europe I'd left behind. Glamours were fragile, easily

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dispelled by doubt and a discerning eye. A merchant's eye. If my tongue faltered, the illusion would, too.

I must be an innocent, then; unknowing, uncaring of larger events. A young boy. Yes.

My eyes drooped in concentration and my hands curled into loose fists. The glamour itself came to me with frightening ease; I'd been idly mimicking a servant when my father caught me. The imagining that cast the glamour, though, was what I enjoyed most, and what I admitted to myself only while in the midst of conjuring—like a glutton, I would feel remorse only after the scales tipped.

Dark hair? Yes—fine and straight, but rumpled by play. And cheeks like apples: plump and still pink, ripened by a weaker sun than Outremer's. Now I remembered myself at six: hands quick but still more clumsy than deft, clutching an obole as though it were enough wealth to purchase the whole fruit stall and its contents. How had I seen my world? Not with the older eyes I filtered it through now; no, the world was bright, still friendly, a place to explore. I closed my eyes for a moment and willed that innocence back into them.

The fruitseller saw that child, not a young French squire approaching his stall. I chose two oranges, tucked one into the crook of my elbow, and held my callused hand out to him with the lone coin resting upon it. "Please, sir. My friend wants one, too. Is this enough?" I asked him in Armenian. A quick ear, Count Denis called my gift for languages. No sin in that.

"Aye boy, it's enough." The fruitseller smiled indulgently, plucked the obole from the soft child's palm he saw, and reached out to tousle my hair with his other hand, so that I had to crouch quickly to keep the illusion alive.

I thanked him, whirled, and scampered away before he thought to ask the little boy who his parents were.

Guillaume pushed away from the worn stone wall and moved out into the sun to meet me. Curiosity tempered the amusement pulling at his mouth. "Why were you skipping about like that? What did you show him?"

"A boy ten years my junior. Now let's be off, before he wonders at my choice of friends." I tossed an orange at him and began weaving my way through the flow and eddy of humanity and livestock wandering the bazaar. I set a brisk pace, pushed by guilt now that the deed was done.

Why *had* I done it? I'd come to Outremer to atone, to redeem myself in the army of the Lord so that I could return to my father's fief in Montbard as his honourable heir, cleansed of this . . . this heathen weakness. Yes, weakness. And what made my weakness worse was the way I let Guillaume play upon it for his own ends. For oranges!

This was Guillaume's fault.

Anger quickened my footsteps.

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Guillaume would not hold me here! His own corrupt soul had kept him a squire in Outremer for four years before Baldwin knighted him, but I would put aside my evil ability, earn my spurs in glorious battle in the service of Christ, and return to Montbard knighted by God's most devout servant, King Baldwin himself! Tomorrow, surely, the opportunity would arise—

"Curse you Guy, slow down!"

Guillaume's leg, broken at Ascalon in 1099 when his horse fell with a Saracen arrow in its chest, now turned from limp to ludicrous hobble when pressed beyond a walk. I was still angry, but Guillaume didn't deserve to be humiliated so. I slowed until he came even again.

How could Guillaume know what he'd asked me to do? Third son of a minor landholder in Blois, he was landless, letterless, and penniless. He spent far more time in the brothels than he did in prayer. Sending him to a life in the Church had undoubtedly been as unthinkable to Guillaume's father as it was to me. And so Guillaume had come to Outremer in the first wave of Crusaders. He'd been in the army that liberated Jerusalem from the infidels and here he had stayed, fighting Turks, Egyptians, and Arabs, until expedience made him a battlefield knight at Ascalon—a poor man with a title. There were no silver knight's spurs for Guillaume, no mailed hauberk. Only a metal-studded leather *broigne* and a sword taken from a dead man's hand.

Irreverent and impious and often downright blasphemous as Guillaume was, I admired him. God forgive me, I envied him. Despite himself, he had won the redemption that I so desperately needed.

A narrow, jagged street took us from the cacophony of the bazaar into a residential section. For a moment the sudden peace jarred the nerves, but then the quiet soaked into my bones and unwound tense muscles. We walked for awhile in silence.

"In here," Guillaume said.

An opening in a jumble of broken bricks and charred timber led to a ruined garden, overgrown and unclaimed. He led the way to a fallen pillar in one shaded corner and settled down to peel his orange. Its sweet aroma rose pungent in the close air of the garden and my mouth watered again, but I could only stare at the orange cupped in my palm.

"Eat, Guy," he urged. "You hurt no one; you gained nothing but a piece of fruit. Why do you persecute yourself over so simple a thing?"

"It's a sin. A lie."

Guillaume scowled at his orange, shook his head and pursed his lips in mock disapproval. He peeled free a crescent and held it up. "Yes; terrible, terrible," he intoned, and popped the section into his mouth.

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Heat crept up my cheeks. My fingers tightened around the orange and I hurled it at his head. "You eat! I want no more of this curse or what it gets me!"

Guillaume caught the fruit easily, laughing. "You're too hard on yourself, Guy. Compared to what's been done here, pilfering oranges is trifling."

"It's not the what, but how!" I leaped to my feet and strode over to the wall of the house that had once laid claim to this garden and leaned against it, my back to Guillaume, until I could rein in my anger and shame. My eyes strayed over the wispy shadows of soot that still patterned the tawny-gold wall three years after the infidels were driven from the city. Who had lived here, before we came?

I turned quickly back to Guillaume before my imagination pulled a face from the past and tempted me to wear it. "Why can't you understand, Guillaume? Every time I cast a glamour, I step further away from God and closer to damnation. I vowed when my father sent me away to step no closer to darkness. I vowed to dedicate myself to the Lord's work. Instead, I'm still casting illusions and worse, doing so for *oranges!*"

"Ah, poor, naive Guy." Guillaume sighed and wiped the last sticky traces from his orange onto the front of his tunic. He pushed to his feet, shook his head, chuckled again. "You stepped the wrong way! God is not here — only an army of men, doing the work of men."

"You're wrong." I turned stubbornly back to the wall. "We're here by God's grace, to work His will."

"King Baldwin marches on Ramla tomorrow," Guillaume countered in his lazy, infuriating voice. "Do you think God wants us to go there, or do you think Baldwin wants us to?"

"God, of course." Baldwin had been destined for the Church before he took up the sword. He was kingly, capable and dedicated to working God's will, to driving the infidels from Christ's holy places. By serving Baldwin, I too served God.

"Don't ever ask me to magick again, Guillaume," I said in a low voice. "I'll not do it again—not ever."

"And I'll not ask again."

His voice, so uncharacteristically solemn, turned me around. He studied me for a moment, then lifted a thong around his neck to pull a heavy silver crucifix from under his tunic. He pulled the thong over his head and held it out to me. I gaped at the cross—this shining contradiction on one so immoral—as it swung between us.

"Take it," Guillaume said.

I could not take it. Along with his horse and armour, it was the only wealth Guillaume owned. I shook my head.

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"Take it," he said again, and the cross jumped on its thong. "It's not important to me in the same way that it is to you. I think you need it more than I."

Puzzled, I reached up and accepted his gift.

"Now you'll not be mistaken for a heathen, even when you think you're one." The joke fell flat, ruined by the irony of its delivery. His weak smile faded and he jerked his chin at the crucifix in my hand. "Do you know how I came by that?"

"You know I don't."

"I found it here in Jerusalem, four years ago." He looked away. "During the sack of the city."

"When the Saracens were driven out," I supplied.

Guillaume laughed: a short, bitter bark. "You make it sound like we simply opened the gates and ordered them to leave!"

"I know what happened," I shot back. "I've heard the stories: how, on the ninth day prophesied by Bishop Adhemar, the city fell to the Christians; how all save the infidel commander Iftikar and his bodyguard were killed; how the fighting lasted for two full days—"

"Fighting!" Guy exclaimed. "It was *extermination*! The streets ran with blood! These buildings," he waved at the abandoned house behind me, at the houses beyond the garden, "were pyres for thousands, both living and dead!"

His eyes sliced into mine like icy knives, then blinked at what they met there. He shook his head in frustration and whirled to pace like one of the damned before me: agitated, tormented.

"For two days, we butchered. When we'd finished with the Muslims, we started on the Jews. We herded them into their synagogues and set the buildings afire. We sliced open the bellies of the dead and plunged our hands into them up to our elbows, in search of the gold bezants they had swallowed to keep their wealth from us. Men, women, children—young and old alike—we slaughtered anyone who came into our path. The young children—"

He broke off, lifted a hand to rub remembered sin from his brow, then continued in a choked voice. "We swung them by their ankles and dashed their brains out against the walls."

"You fought for the Lord, against unbelievers," I reminded him. "The Church absolved you."

"Damn you, Guy!" Guillaume stopped his furious pacing and speared a finger at the crucifix I held. "I found that on the naked body of a woman, lying heaped in the street with others we'd killed. A Christian woman, Guy!" He reached out and gripped my shoulders. His fingers dug into the muscles there. "Christ is not here, Guy." His voice came low, intense. "He cares no more for you than He did the woman who wore that cross, or the men who raped and killed her. Remember that. God does not guide us, nor does He care about

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oranges in the market or the young squire who plays trickster for them. *There is no God here.*"

I shook my head. "God is here, Guillaume," I retorted. He had to be. If I tried hard enough, I would find Him.

The next day, I followed King Baldwin out of Jerusalem in the retinue of Count Denis. Guillaume rode somewhere ahead of me, under the banner of Stephen of Blois.

The sky over the Mount of Olives blushed gold and pink with the first light of dawn as we passed through St. Stephen's Gate. We rode past the Garden of Gethsemane, startling a flock of swifts into flight. I twisted in my saddle to follow them with my eyes as they swooped over the long column, back toward the walls of Jerusalem, and at that moment the sun blazed over the crest of the Mount of Olives and washed the tallest buildings of the city with bronze. The dome of the Temple Domini shone white and gold in their midst.

Guillaume is wrong, I thought at the sight. *Surely, if God is anywhere, He is here.* The cross of silver, pressed against my chest by the weight of my mail, was surely a reminder of His presence. I vowed silently to be worthy.

Only months before I had arrived in Jerusalem with Denis of Montbard, an army of Egyptians sent by Grand Vizier al-Afdal of Cairo had been defeated by King Baldwin at Ramla when he led a charge so furious that the enemy panicked and fled. Now our force of 1,500 rode again to Ramla to crush another army led by al-Afdal's son.

The miles crawled by. The sun reached its zenith and seemed to hang there endlessly to add its torment to the choking dust of the march. We saw the native scouts return, and rumours of the size of the Egyptian host raced up and down the column: twice our number; thrice that. Six thousand. Eight. Ten thousand, one doomsayer claimed.

Conjecture did not prepare us for the true size of al-Afdal's army. On a plain near Arsuf, twenty thousand enemy soldiers waited.

The sight stole my breath. Never before had I seen a host so large. *Their horsemen are no match for our heavy cavalry*, I reminded myself as we dressed our line. But even flank to flank with my fellows, I felt isolated and futile, like a twig against a torrent. The thunder of the enemy's kettle drums drowned out any words we thought to speak; I heard only, occasionally, the scrape and clang of steel and the jingle of harness from our ranks, saw men bend their heads, touch brow, shoulders, then lips to knuckles in mute appeal to God.

Horns sounded. The foot soldiers surged forward. I watched our archers loose a hail of arrows and then part ranks for our charge. Guillaume's crucifix rubbed against my chest as I waited behind Lord Denis and his knights.

There is no God here.

"You are wrong, Guillaume," I murmured. "We are the army of Christ, and we will prevail." And then *Deus vult! God wills it!* roared from our throats, and my horse leapt after the banner of Denis of Montbard.

Our forces met with a mighty crash, churned in a maelstrom of blood and sweat and clamour. I forgot God and king and cause and fought only to stay alive.

We fought furiously, but soon the sheer force of numbers began to tell. The Egyptians surged through our ranks like a tidal wave, sweeping us aside like flotsam. The battle became a rout.

Half our army lay dead on the plain of Arsuf. I learned later that a handful of knights escaped to Jaffa. The tattered remnants, galloping hard, pursued by the enemy, reached the tower of Ramla just before nightfall. We took refuge there, and the Egyptian army settled down outside to wait. Their campfires glittered in the night like a collar of gold around the throat of an old grey woman.

We could hold out for no more than twenty-four hours.

Common soldiers, horses and wounded were quartered shoulder to muzzle down in the tower's Great Hall. The stench of blood, excrement and offal overwhelmed me and I held the tatters of my cloak over my nose as I cringed past the corner where the surgeons worked and went foraging for something to present as a meal to Count Denis.

I was glad to escape the wailing chaos of the Great Hall for the upper hall the nobles occupied. This one was long and narrow, with curtained chambers along one side. Denis had found a chamber at its end, near the stairs that rose to the turret room where King Baldwin had been cloistered with his advisers for several hours, now.

Denis ate, then dismissed me and left on affairs of his own. I settled against the wall in the smoky twilight outside his chamber to gnaw at the stale flatbread I'd found in the keep's stores.

Someone dropped down beside me and I jumped, then aimed a blow at Guillaume's shoulder as payment for the start he'd given me.

"Are you ready to become a martyr, Guy?" he asked. His voice was low, but he sounded more like his old self than anyone else I'd spoken to this day.

"If God wills it," I replied stubbornly, "but you give up too easily, Guillaume. Baldwin's pages have been carrying messages up and down the hall all night. Something's afoot. He'll find a way out for us, you'll see."

Guillaume only shrugged. "I hope you're right, Guy. The Egyptians are busy out there, have you seen? They've been heaping brush and any kind of wood they can find around the foundation all night. They intend to bake us like loaves in an oven, come morning."

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I had nothing to say to that. I'd often envisioned myself dying for God's cause: cut down in the heat of battle as I lay about me with my sword (I would die knighted, of course) and slaying my share of infidels before being dispatched to my place in Heaven. Being burned alive, however, had never been one of my fantasies.

Boot heels slammed against the hall's stone floor, warning us to silence. A moment later, Raymond of Lorraine emerged from the shadows, his cloak billowing behind him like the wings of an avenging angel. He passed by us, then paused at the foot of the stairs.

A moment later, the door at the top of the stairs opened and sent a bar of light zigzagging down the steps. A figure appeared in the doorway, outlined dark against the light cast from the torches in the room behind. Then the door closed and the man, shadow in shadows, moved down the stairs.

"It's the king!" I whispered to Guillaume, but he put a hand on my arm to quiet me and leaned forward. Guillaume's sardonic facade was gone; he watched the two men with an intensity born of hope.

Baldwin exchanged low words with Raymond of Lorraine and then strode over to a *meurtriére* only a few feet from us. I watched him from the corner of my eye, hardly daring to breathe, half fearful that, should I stir and distract him, he would vanish with a puff and all hope of survival would vanish with him.

Baldwin had removed his gauntlets and helmet and stood with a mantle draped over his shoulders. He peered gravely through the *meurtriére*, intent on the activity below. In the hall's sparse torchlight, wearing a dark mantle with the bright embroidery at its edges dulled by dirt and dried blood, Baldwin looked like the bishop he'd almost become. Then he whirled away from the arrow slit with a fighter's grace and the peaceful mien vanished.

Baldwin returned to Raymond and the two men bent their heads in low conversation.

Guillaume's elbow found my ribs. "What do they say?" he asked.

I kept my eyes on them and shrugged. "I don't know."

"You understand the Devil's own tongue and half a dozen variants, but you can't figure out what our leaders are saying?"

"They're too far away to be heard," I hissed, annoyed. "And if you spent less time rutting and more time listening, you'd know something of the languages yourself—"

"Quiet! He's noticed us!"

"You two. Come here."

When Baldwin spoke I started, dropped my morsel of bread, and scrambled to my feet like the newest of pages. Guillaume surged to his feet beside me.

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Baldwin studied Guillaume for a moment. "There is an Arab being held at the postern by Lord Raymond's armsman. Bring the Arab to me."

He turned to me as Guillaume acknowledged with a succinct bow and strode away. "You are in the service of Count Denis of Montbard, are you not? Tell him I wish to see him," he said when I nodded.

Eager to see the mysterious Arab that Guillaume escorted, I searched frantically through the keep, finally locating Denis on the battlements. By the time I followed Denis to the foot of the stairs, Baldwin, Guillaume and the Arab were gone. Disappointed, I sank to my haunches to await—something. Heat and hardship soon took their toll; I slept.

Some time later, Guillaume shook me awake.

"Guy, the king wants you," he said, cutting off my questions. He put his hand on my arm before I moved away, but it was his expression that stopped me. There was a stillness in his face, something lacking in the way the torchlight caught in his eyes. With a sudden shock, I realized what it was: resignation. His voice came low and anxious, though. "Guy, I told them. Forgive me."

Told them . . . ? The hair on the back of my neck lifted. He'd betrayed my secret!

"Guillaume! Why?" I felt—and sounded—like I'd been kicked in the stomach.

"It's not the gift that's wrong, Guy, but how it's used. Use it well. Now, go. They're waiting."

He left me standing speechless at the foot of the stairs and stumped down the hall and into the shadows at its end.

I climbed the stairs like a man going to the gallows, and I was certain that would be my fate, if I survived the Egyptians on the morrow. Why had Guillaume betrayed me? What had he gained in doing so?

Denis opened the door at my knock. I sidled into the room and stood with my back to the wall. King Baldwin sat in an intricately carved chair on the room's far side. Raymond stood in the centre of the room, his back to me. He turned as I entered and I saw an Arab kneeling on the floor before him.

Sweat rose, gathered and streamed down my back as Baldwin studied me. To wonder at Guillaume's treachery was futile; the only certainty now was death. I stood and waited for the sentence to fall.

"I am told that you have a gift for languages," Baldwin said.

Relief and amazement left me weak-kneed. I pressed my hands to the wall behind me to stay upright. This was what Guillaume had told them? That I could speak the Arab's tongue? I wanted to laugh out loud, but only swallowed and nodded instead.

Baldwin gestured toward the Arab. "This man is not one of our spies, yet he came through the Egyptian camp and gave himself into our custody willingly. He knows only one phrase: 'Khalil help Bardawil'. I wish to know more."

I looked uncertainly at the kneeling man. "I know only a little Arabic," I said. Baldwin waved a hand, his expression making it clear that one infidel tongue was the same as the next, to him. "Do what you can."

After several false starts we found a common dialect. I listened in wonder as the Arab Khalil spoke of a raid that Baldwin had led across the Jordan River shortly after his coronation as King of Jerusalem. The Franks had fallen on the Arab camp and Khalil and the other men only had time to scramble for their horses and escape, leaving their families and all they owned at the mercy of the attackers.

The women were taken prisoner, but Bardawil, as the Arabs called our king, released the chieftain's wife when he discovered that she had just given birth. Her people had found mother and baby comfortably encamped in a copse of trees. Khalil had been sent to repay his chieftain's debt for this kindness.

A few minutes later I turned to the king and reported in a tight voice, "He says that the Egyptians will attack at dawn. All within the tower will die. He can guide you safely through the Egyptian camp to freedom in the hills."

A cold knot grew in my belly as I spoke. By necessity, Khalil's offer was limited to a very few. Those left behind would certainly die.

The king studied Khalil for several minutes. I listened to the hiss and spit of the torches, loud in the silent room. *He will surely refuse*, I thought. *He will choose an honourable death over abandoning his men.*

"Ask him if he would guide us all the way to Arsuf," King Baldwin said suddenly.

My mind reeled. There were nearly 800 men in the tower of Ramla. "But, Sire," I stammered, then looked for support from Denis. His face was as stony and blank as the tower walls. He kept his eyes on the kneeling Arab.

I felt my fingers brush the sodden wool of my tunic. They hovered over Guillaume's crucifix.

"Ask him!" Baldwin snapped.

I dropped my hand and turned back to the Arab.

Though he could not understand our language, Khalil sensed my turmoil. He read it as poorly disguised duplicity. Fear flashed white around the edges of his black eyes and he shook his head at my question.

"No," he said, still shaking his head for the benefit of those who watched us. "I do not know the way."

"You lie."

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"Yes *firenj*, I lie. Away from Arsuf, I am safe. My safety lessens while Bardawil's grows, the closer we get to Arsuf. I am to do no more than he did for my chieftain's wife: leave him in a safe place."

"They can force you," I said. There was no warning in my voice, only bleak fact.

"That would be unwise." The smile in the Arab's voice never touched his mouth.

"What does he say?" Baldwin asked.

I turned and looked at my king, my countrymen. "He has never been west of Ramla," I said deliberately. "He does not know the way."

Baldwin held the Arab with his gaze for a moment, recognizing the lie and wanting the other to know it. Then he waved one hand in dismissal and looked away. "No matter. Once away from this cursed place, we can make our own way to Arsuf."

Baldwin had been campaigning in Outremer for as long as Guillaume. Of course he would know the way.

I felt ill. The air in the room had grown close, overwarmed and overused by too many torches and the stink of death on our bodies. I longed for the dim hall below and what I'd left behind there. With a murmured, "By your leave," I backed toward the door.

"Hold."

I froze, waiting while Baldwin—tall, pale Baldwin with his flaming beard—again studied me.

"We will need to buy food on the way," Baldwin mused.

Big, blonde Denis nodded.

"Those who sell us food will also be eager to report a company of pale men to the enemy patrols. But if they see only another Arab . . ." Baldwin met my eyes and smiled.

My heart thundered. Baldwin knew my secret. *I told them*, Guillaume had said, and in doing so, he saved my life. But the price was too high.

"No," I told Baldwin.

Baldwin rose and stepped toward me. "You'll be knighted for this."

Guillaume's assertion whispered again through my mind: *There is no God here*.

"I want nothing of your knighthood," I said.

Anger flamed in the king's cheeks. "Deny me, and I'll see you burn for witchcraft. Your father will lose his title, his fief, his honour—everything," he added as I shook my head and turned to the door.

My hand froze on the latch.

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I turned to face the men in the hot, airless room. They blurred as concentration—and something else, hot and liquid—stole my focus.

I could almost feel my woollen tunic and breeches flowing into the long muslin robe of the Arab, felt my cheeks brushed by the flowing *keffiyeh* held in place by its headband of twisted black *agaal* cords.

Pray for me, Guillaume.

Two Arabs walked down through the keep to the postern gate. The king and his two men came behind us. Guillaume raised his hand as I passed him, but I could not look his way.

Khalil slipped away from us at the top of a rocky defile, just as the first glow of dawn bled over the valley below. We did not immediately notice. Our eyes were on the tower of Ramla, perched on its rugged hill almost directly opposite.

The Christian army had not waited within the tower for the Egyptians to light their pyre. They poured from the keep and we heard, faintly, their battle cry: *Deus vult!* Then came the great answering roar of *Allah Akbar!* from thousands upon thousands of Muslim throats, and then the crash of battle.

I searched and found the banner of Stephen of Blois and with the sight came a tiny thrill of hope. But as I watched, the banner wavered and fell. I knew then that Guillaume had gone to his place in Heaven and we would never meet again.

A hand fell on my shoulder. I looked up, expecting to see Count Denis.

"It was God's will," Baldwin said. "A necessary sacrifice. I shall raise another army and fight through to those waiting at Jaffa. Then we will drive the infidels beyond Ascalon and out of the Holy Land for good. God wills it."

I held out my hand and when he opened his palm I dropped the silver crucifix into it. "There is no God here," I said. "Only men."

I turned my back on him and walked away from Ramla.

THE END

CLICK [HERE](#) TO READ OUR INTERVIEW WITH MARG GILKS

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A SIMPLE OBSERVATION

ANN K. SCHWADER

Snow simplifies everything:
paths unchosen
drift over decision
& the restless dead

grown utterly pale
& peaceable under
this missing landscape
frigid oblivion

silence for gunshot &
shovel alike
a blanket forgiveness
without telltale wrinkles

till spring.

ANN K. SCHWADER'S most recent chapbook of dark verse, *Architectures of Night*, is available from Dark Regions Press. *Strange Stars & Alien Shadows*, her first collection of horror and SF fiction, was published late in 2003 by Lindisfarne Press and is also still available. For these and other eldritch news items, visit her Web site at <http://www.geocities.com/HPL4ever/>

NOTES ON THE UNFORTUNATE EXTINCTION OF DRAGONS, BOOK I

LEE CLARK ZUMPE

Little is known about the mating practices of the big species:

The Welsh Red, for instance, disappeared before even one nest could be found.

It is generally presumed that females laid eggs once every two hundred years—

and that most broods consisted of no more than six young.

A reliable medieval source, however, reports

the infamous lindwurm of Klagenfurt sired a clan of twenty two-legged, winged dragons over the course

of a hundred years. The beast's offspring were

mercilessly butchered by locals fearing for

the welfare of their farms—and only a handful

were said to have survived. Of course, in order to

maintain a steady population, and to ensure

an adequate food source for succeeding generations,

it is likely that reproduction only occurred once

or twice during the ordinary dragon's life cycle. For

thousands of years, dragons topped the food chain

in each milieu they occupied—they remained untouched

by disease and faced no competition from other animals.

When finally faced with a threat to their existence

by the emergence of human civilization, the

dragons simply lacked the numbers necessary

to sustain a prolonged fight against extinction.

NOTES ON THE UNFORTUNATE EXTINCTION OF DRAGONS, BOOK 2

Dragonologists unanimously lament the scarcity of skeletal fragments for clinical research. Unlike ancient dinosaur fossils (which evidentially may be found in anyone's backyard approximately ten to twenty feet beneath the spot where the previous owners buried their beloved pets), dragon bones are as hard to find as Atlantian coins. New studies in the field of ancient medicine may explain the troublesome shortage of dragon remains: Apparently, ancient cultures both in prehistoric Europe and Asia valued dragon bone for its alleged healing powers. Moreover, ground into a fine powder and combined with unknown components, the bones of slain dragons were used as a fertility tool as recently as the late Seventeenth Century. In recent years, less credible reports have circulated that several countries have managed to stockpile dragon bones in high security facilities maintained by the military; rumors abound that specialists have devised a process to extract a certain source of power from the bones. Needless to say, all this is unsubstantiated fiction spawned by paranoid individuals with avid imaginations.

LEE CLARK ZUMPE – Between midnight and dawn, Lee Clark Zumpe can be found in front of the monitor tapping at the keyboard composing poetry or prose, or nestled in a dark corner of his makeshift library immersed in some fantastic tale. His work can be found in recent issues of *Weird Tales*, *Zillah* and *Paradox*. Lee's monthly book review column "Off the Shelf" appears in Entertainment Extra!, and he is the editor of the Lovecraftian journal *Dark Legacy*. Visit Lee's Web site at <http://blindsided.net/leeclarkzumpe/>

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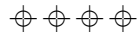
PHANTASMAGORIA

WESLEY LAMBERT

Sometimes she drifts in memory—
before dawn paints the skies—
and finds herself before a burrow,
yawning into the earth.
Its maw drips with mold and slime,
writhing with annelids.
Their segmented bodies churn the soil
in sentient scrawls, punctuated by earwigs.
She slips down the gullet,
tearing the gauzy curtain of moss
and veiling her face in spiderwebs.
A skitter of revulsion tickles her neck in eight-legged flight.
Scenes melt and shift and coalesce into each other.
She spies the Caterpillar, lost in his lotus-dreams;
the hookah-pipe trembles in his clenched hand, its
tube tube leading to a transparent jar swirling with black fumes.
His eyes fade into a gibbous moon jaundicing the horizon.
Her feet tread a path through swaying trees
that moan her name: "Alice! Let us
enfold you in our branches. Let us caress you with our barbed leaves."
She stumbles, smelling hot tea, tarts, and crumpets.
The Hatter's peal of laughter titters in her ears,
the pitch flicking her spine with an icy fingernail.
His bloodshot eyes weigh heavy on her back.
The March Hare's rants squeeze her heart with fear,
yellowed, broken teeth chipping at her heels.
The lean, hungry features of the Dormouse pass,
eyes wide and sparkling with awareness.
A field of flowers blooms ahead,
engulfing her with its heady aroma.
As the mist clears, the wilted blossoms belie her sensory perceptions.
Ivy and kudzu, briars, and weeds choke off the beauty,
interspersed with alabaster bones of those
vanquished by taloned imagination.

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Something nips an ankle, snickering at her feet.
Amongst the broken femurs, fractured radii, splintered scapulas,
grins a skull, so familiar in its leer.
It rises from the heap, twisting into the
Cheshire Cat's visage. The lips peel and stretch,
reveal filed, dagger-point teeth. The mouth gnashes after her,
and the Queen of Hearts joins the chase with her blood-rusted scythe.



Sometimes she awakens from this state, sweating through her gown.
She cries out, clawing at the tattered mat of hair in her face.
Her eyes fix on the cushioned walls, the pillowed floor,
the swaying light bulb. Her arms ache in the jacket's confinement.
The final hints of absinthe and hemlock, stirred with rotten honeysuckles,
waft away with sleep. Her smile cracks only
for the doctor as he shunts the door ajar.
"Dreams again, my dear girl? Would you like more light?"
"Oh, yes, good sir." Her cheshire-grin widens and shatters.
"It's so much darker than you think."

THE END

WESLEY LAMBERT works from his home in the Tennessee foothills. His work appears in *Paradox*, *Hadrosaur Tales*, *Scifaikuest*, *Astropoetica*, *Outer Darkness*, *Naked Snake Online*, *Neverary*, *Broken Mirrors*, *Flashshot*, and many others. Reach him with comments or biting sarcasm at: Socialcons1@aol.com.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH GEONA EDWARDS: FIRST PLACE WINNER OF SPECIFICWORLD.COM'S ANNUAL SPECULATIVE FICTION CONTEST

GEONA EDWARDS lives with his girlfriend Olga and his dog Jaco in southern Spain, where he writes and teaches. He was the second place winner of the 2003 Fish Short Story Prize, and his work appears online at the *Shore* and *Flashquake*, among other places.

What was the initial spark or idea that made you start writing THE ORACLE OF OXION?

An interesting question, because thinking back on the process, I now realize the original spark was a lengthy philosophical diatribe attacking optimism, which, to the benefit of the story and the readers, I later axed.

Did you have to do any special research in writing THE ORACLE OF OXION?

Not really. Since the world it takes place in is totally my own, there was no need for faithfulness to any prior setting or character types, etc. There was some computer terminology, but nothing your average fifth-grader couldn't clue you in on.

What's the most important thing you would like your readers to take away from your story besides an enjoyable or entertaining read?

I would hope it would provoke some thought in the direction of where decisions actually stem from, to what extent we turn left or right in life because we want to and to what extent we're just walking down already laid tracks.

What writers have had the most influence on your own writing?

Jesus, that's a question and a half. I've gone through major Faulkner, Vonnegut, Virginia Woolfe and Jorge Luis Borges stages, and loads of others have influenced me in small but powerful doses. In terms of sci-fi and/or speculative, Frank Herbert's original Dune trilogy is my shining example of an action-packed

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page-turner that still manages all the philosophical substance of . . . fill in your own literary masterpiece.

If you had to make a list of the top ten best novels of all time (no matter the genre) what book do you think would top that list? The book that jumps out at you as the best you've ever read. [I realize the above question is probably impossible for any writer to answer but give it a go if you can]

Obviously this is not only totally subjective but also a question of timing, but if I quickly glance back and rate for impact and staying power, I could say Dune, King's IT, Woolfe's Mrs. Dalloway, but even now dozens of others spring to mind. That's a toughy.

What are you currently working on?

I'm in an online workshop for flash fiction (under 1000 words), so I've been experimenting with that form. I've also got a hard drive full of poems and longer short stories in various states of completion, and I've been trying to make some sense of it all, revisiting near misses, maybe with an eye to a collection.

How can readers find out more about you and your work—any online hangouts, websites, chatrooms, CONS you'll be attending, blogs, etc?

I guess the easiest is just to Google my name. Since my first name is unusual, most of the hits will either be about me or Geona City, Wisconsin.

And what do you do when you're not writing?

I teach English to Spaniards and Spanish to English snowbirds. I strum my guitar and sing, with my walls as an audience. I walk with my dog and try to navigate small-town southern Spain with my girlfriend. I dream of moving back to the States, then think better of it, then dream again, ad nauseum.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH DANA L. SOLOMON: SECOND PLACE WINNER OF SPECIFICWORLD.COM'S ANNUAL SPECULATIVE FICTION CONTEST

DANA L. SOLOMON is pleased to make her debut in *Rogue Worlds* with *Beneath The Shingles of My Roof*. Dana first began to write in Edgar Doctorow's Narrative Literature class in Sarah Lawrence College, and has since published works in science fiction, fantasy and horror magazines too numerous to mention. Recent sales include the AMAZING HEROES ANTHOLOGY, the *Bucks County Writer*, *Horror Garage*, *Hotter Blood*, the *Pegasus Review* and *Scrybe Press*. One short story, "The Case Against Zanzibar Turk" won first prize in WHISPERING WILLOWS MAGAZINE'S NATIONAL MYSTERY COMPETITION, and the short novella, "Next to Godliness", was a prizewinner in the MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIA NATIONAL WRITER'S COMPETITION.

What was the initial spark or idea that made you start writing BENEATH THE SHINGLES OF MY ROOF ?

Frankly, I was thinking about God. Not the one rumbling from the volcanos and the burning bush, but a different kind of God, all present, all benevolent, but not at all omnipotent, and that image turned into the main character of the house—the anthropomorphic narrator whose story becomes ghastlier and ghastlier with each page, but who always speaks in a sad, calm, quiet voice.

I started with the words, "And I have remained the one constant in their lives, loving them all in spite, or perhaps because of their failings, reveling with them in their joys and triumphs, mourning for their losses and sorrows, powerless to intercede in either." Then I just let the narrator unfold the story from there.

Did you have to do any special research in writing Beneath The Shingles Of My Roof ?

A little—since my main character was a house, I had to brush up on architecture, at least to the point where I knew what a widow's walk is, and could tell a Mansard from an Imperial roof.

What's the most important thing you would like your readers to take away from your story besides an enjoyable or entertaining read?

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Every dark fiction writer likes to convey a sense of terror. I'd like readers to take away a sense of beauty that exists alongside and within it. Even the most horrific character in my story, has moments of redemption, brought out by feelings of love, until something sends her on a downward spiral that culminates in her final crime.

What writers have had the most influence on your own writing?

Too many to mention. I grew up on Edgar Allen Poe and the Russian classics, which probably explains a somber outlook on life. In fact, *The Double*, by Dostoevskii, is probably the earliest example of psychological horror in the history of literature. Stylistically, I'm indebted to both Nabokov and P.G. Wodehouse who, in their own way, have the most perfect literary styles of any writers alive or dead (and talk about opposite ends of a spectrum!).

Most current dark fiction/horror writers are influenced in some way by Stephen King. Strangely, I've always thought he was underestimated. Some of his works are true literature, and because of his commercial success, people don't acknowledge that. And Sheri S. Tepper and P.D. Cacek have always been personal favorites. I'm especially fond of Cacek's short stories—as much as any writer today, she conveys the union of terror and beauty.

If you had to make a list of the top ten best novels of all time (no matter the genre) what book do you think would top that list? The book that jumps out at you as the best you've ever read. [I realize the above question is probably impossible for any writer to answer but give it a go if you can]

You're right—it's impossible for any writer, or any reader for that matter, to pick the single best book they've ever read. "The Deptford Trilogy" by Robertson Davies always struck me as one of the most underrated books of all times. It's somewhat obscure, but if it's not one of the great novels of the twentieth century, I need someone to explain why—very slowly and patiently. As for short story collections (since that's mainly what I write) I'd have to put "Strange Wine" by Harlan Ellison at the top of the list. Hopefully, someone will reprint it, so I won't be terrified of lending out my copy and not getting it back.

What are you currently working on?

I just finished a story called "The Emperor's Old Bones." Frankly, I'm not sure it's all that good, but writing, even a weak story, is better than not writing at all. Hey,

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that's why Staples sell lots of erasers (and garbage pails). I've got a list of a half-dozen unfinished pieces in the pipeline, and frankly a bit of success, like selling "Shingles," helps keep me going.

How can readers find out more about you and your work -- any online hangouts, websites, chatrooms, CONS you'll be attending, blogs, etc?

Haven't a clue. I've been horribly negligent about publicity, which I suppose is part and parcel of being a writer. I've gone to some workshops given by the New Jersey Horror Writers Association - they let me in even though I'm from the wrong side of the Delaware. I've also been to Necon—sort of a Sleepaway Camp for grownups with twisted psyches, and hopefully I'll get back there this Summer.

And what do you do when you're not writing?

I do a lot of singing on the Philadelphia Gilbert & Sullivan circuit, and teach English as a Second Language to prisoners at the local correctional facility (and not just for the pat-down searches, either, I'll have you know). It keeps me off the streets.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH JAKE WEST: THIRD PLACE WINNER OF SPECIFICWORLD.COM'S ANNUAL SPECULATIVE FICTION CONTEST

JAKE WEST is a native Californian, which puts him in the same category with Bigfoot sightings and honest politicians—i.e., a rare but persistent rumor. Born in Bakersfield, he has lived most of his adult life in the Los Angeles area. He's been married to his wife Janet for fifteen years—sixteen in July (and he still remembers their anniversary!). As a Special Education teacher, he's worked with such challenging populations as the Learning Disabled, Developmentally Disabled and Severely Emotionally Disturbed. Before that, he had the usual writers' mix of different jobs, including the Los Angeles Produce Market, map-making and the purgatory of Production Assistant in the film industry. He's sold stories to television with his writing partner Taenha Goodrich, such as AIRWOLF and the MONSTERS syndicated anthology series. He has also had stories published in F&SF ("Halls of Burning"), AMAZING ("Digital Hearts and Minds"), PLOT MAGAZINE ("A Dearth of Ravens") and the Phobos trade paperback anthology HITTING THE SKIDS IN PIXELTOWN ("His Untrue Colors").

What was the initial spark or idea that made you start writing DOWN IN THE DEEPFLUX?

The story evolved from a writing assignment in Frank Herbert's Port Townsend workshop clear back in the summer of 1977. One of our exercises was "to create a convincing alien character in one page or less." I came up with the Caterwaul, and, in fact, that one page description is the first page of DEEPFLUX. As I recall, the writers-in-attendance and the other students all liked the idea and were also pretty much in agreement that developing it would not be easy. They were right. The piece sat in my files for years, and eventually a story did occur to me. It's been through several drafts—one of them improved immensely by comments from Kristine Kathryn Rusch when she was still editing Fantasy & Science Fiction. Even so, it never quite sold. Then, about a year ago, I took one more pass at it—one of those rewrites of cumulative small changes that make a big difference—and here it is in print. Frank Herbert told us all those years ago that a valid story idea would eventually sell if we developed it properly—and were persistent enough. Even though he's no longer here to know that I finally sold this one, I would still like to thank him for the

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encouragement he gave me, as did the other writers who taught there, including Jack Vance, F. M. Busby, Ben Bova and Vonda McIntyre.

Did you have to do any special research in writing *Down in the Deepflux*?

Not specifically for the story. At the time I had run across a book on Catastrophe Theory, and that notion eventually generated the Caterwaul variform and its chaotic environment. So in that sense it was research before-the-fact, a product and side benefit of all that eclectic—and sometimes downright strange—reading that most writers do, first because we enjoy it and second because we can't predict the payoff.

What's the most important thing he would like your readers to take away from your story besides an enjoyable or entertaining read?

A burning desire to find another story of mine!

But I'll settle for some sense of wonder, which is what I look for in SF and fantasy. I hope that readers come away from DEEPFLUX with a feeling that they've glimpsed the exotic through implications of places never seen before and names they've never heard.

What writers have had the most influence on your writing?

Early on, I was most influenced by André Norton for the sheer storytelling and prose style. In thinking about this, I realize that I tended toward writers who weren't taken seriously—Robert E. Howard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, HP Lovecraft—the muscular pulp writers, if you will. Even (gasp) comic book writers, particularly the great Gardner Fox, from whom I learned plotting by reading (and constantly rereading) his beautifully structured Justice league scripts, among others. Later influences include Bradbury, Vance, Herbert and the remarkable body of work written by Cordwainer Smith. In the mainstream, Melville and Joseph Conrad and a taste for ancient epics and mythology, from Homer to the Kalevala.

What book jumps out at you as the best book you've ever read?

THE SUPER BARBARIANS by John Brunner. No, really. Ace Book D- 547, \$.35 in 1962. With an Ed Valigursky cover showing giant arrowhead-shaped spaceships firing missiles at Earth. This was the first ostensibly adult SF novel

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(as opposed to library books or Norton and Heinlein juveniles) that I bought at the drugstore, and it became the nucleus that spawned an endless collection and a lifelong love. What better definition could there be for great book than that?

What are you currently working on?

A short story called "Never Did, Never Will." A new draft of a short story called "Glitchy Woman." And a novel with the working title TARGET STARS.

How can readers find out more about you and your work?

I had a short story published in last year's Phobos anthology, HITTING THE SKIDS IN PIXELTOWN, and there is a bio of me—including a picture, for the faint of heart—on their web site. I usually make it to LosCon here in LA every Thanksgiving, and I plan to go to the Wizard World convention in Long Beach this spring. And, of course, WorldCon in Anaheim.

And what you do when you're not writing?

(Unsuccessfully) try to outwit three cats!

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH MARG GILKS: FOURTH PLACE WINNER OF SPECIFICWORLD.COM'S ANNUAL SPECULATIVE FICTION CONTEST

MARG GILKS has a list of writing credits for poetry, articles, and short stories that spans twenty years and three countries (Canada, USA, Britain). When not writing herself, she works as a freelance editor and writers' mentor through Scripta Word Services (<http://www.scripta-word-services.com/>), helping other writers hone their fiction and polish their prose. She considers speculative fiction the ultimate form of escapism—in what other genre can you create your own universe?

What was the initial spark or idea that made you start writing THE TOWER OF RAMLA ?

I'm very interested in history and do a lot of reading on various periods. The core idea for THE TOWER OF RAMLA is based on an actual historical event—in 1102, during the first Crusade, the remnants of King Baldwin's army did indeed hole up in the fortress at Ramleh. When I read that King Baldwin slipped away and left his soldiers to die, it really bothered me that a leader would sneak off and abandon his own men to save his own neck. I suppose it could be argued that it was a king's duty to escape to marshal another army, but to me it epitomized the Crusades: men acting for their own best interests under the guise of religion, and the blind belief that something is right if it has "God" stamped on it.

Did you have to do any special research in writing THE TOWER OF RAMLA?

Yes! I'd never been to Jerusalem, and looking at a map doesn't tell you what a city looks like or how it smells or sounds. I also had to contact a numismatics forum on the Internet to find out what money was in use in that time and place, and I had to read up on how the whole system of knights and squires worked.

What's the most important thing you would like your readers to take away from your story besides an enjoyable or entertaining read?

ROGUE WORLDS

Well, basically, not to be blinded by propaganda, as Guy was until he started thinking for himself. Trust in your own sense of right and wrong, and don't believe what others want you to believe without first giving it a good, objective examination.

What writers have had the most influence on your own writing?

I've read thousands of stories, and I think I've assimilated a lot from many different writers over the years. I can't say I've been influenced by any one writer, or even a handful of writers. From some I've learned depth of characterization, from others pacing and tone; I've appreciated others for a flair for description or their ability to inject tension. I don't think any one writer has ever done it all masterfully, and in fact I've learned just as much from studying the work of writers whose skills in an area are poor.

If you had to make a list of the top ten best novels of all time (no matter the genre) what book do you think would top that list? The book that jumps out at you as the best you've ever read. [I realize the above question is probably impossible for any writer to answer but give it a go if you can]

Asking me for the whole list of ten would have been easier! But Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire* stands out the most. He's very good at characterization, at bringing a setting and a period to life.

What are you currently working on?

Other people's books (I'm a freelance editor)...every once in a while I pull out one of my own novels that I'm half through revising, sigh, vow to make time to work on it very soon, and put it back in its folder. I'm also writing a course on manuscript submission that I hope to have ready to offer this fall.

How can readers find out more about you and your work—any online hangouts, websites, chatrooms, CONS you'll be attending, blogs, etc?

My website (<http://www.scripta-word-services.com/>) offers up not only information about me and my services, but monthly articles on fiction writing.

And what do you do when you're not writing?

ROGUE WORLDS

Hmm, let's find an answer that's not too, too standard (I imagine reading is near the top of every writer's list!). I consider writing my own little selfish pleasure so I won't categorize it as work. I love working with other authors, so even my work I find pleasurable. I have two dogs I love to pieces, so hanging out with them ranks right up there. And my new passion is gardening—something, unfortunately, the weather keeps me from indulging for all but a few short months of the year.

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