

The Forever Kitten

PETER F. HAMILTON

Peter F. Hamilton (www.peterfhamilton.co.uk), lives in Oakham, England. He began publishing SF in the early 1990s with three SF detective novels—Mindstar Rising (1993), A Quantum Murder (1994), and The Nano Flower (1995). But his prominence began with a massive trilogy of one-thousand-page novels (in its original British form)—The Reality Dysfunction (1996), The Neutronium Alchemist (1997), and The Naked God (2000), together the Night's Dawn Trilogy. In the U.S., all three books were divided into two volumes each, so it became a six-book series). A collection, A Second Chance at Eden (1998), is set in the same "Confederation" future as the trilogy. The whole setting is so complex that Hamilton published a non-fiction guide, The Confederation Handbook: The Essential Guide to the Night's Dawn Series, in 2000. Two of his three later novels to date are also space opera—Fallen Dragon (2001) and Pandora's Star (2004), his Commonwealth saga. The Void Trilogy is currently being written. After Iain M. Banks, Hamilton is the most popular British space opera writer of the last decade.

"The Forever Kitten" appeared in Nature. It is small scale and closely focused, about scientific research, money, and ethics. It is just plausible enough to be an effective SF horror story.

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The mansion's garden was screened by lush trees. I never thought I'd be so entranced by anything as simple as horse chestnuts, but that's what 18 months in jail on remand will do for your appreciation of the simple things.

Joe Gordon was waiting for me; the venture capitalist and his wife Fiona were sitting on ornate metal chairs in a sunken patio area. Their five-year-old daughter, Heloise, was sprawled on a pile of cushions, playing with a ginger kitten.

"Thanks for paying my bail," I said.

"Sorry it took so long, Doctor," he said. "The preparations weren't easy, but we have a private plane waiting to take you to the Caribbean—an island the EU has no extradition treaty with."

"I see. Do you think it's necessary?"

"For the moment, yes. The Brussels Bioethics Commission is looking to make an example of you. They didn't appreciate how many regulations you violated."

"They wouldn't have minded if the treatment had worked properly."

"Of course not, but that day isn't here yet, is it? We can set you up with another lab out there."

"Ah well, there, are worse places to be exiled. I appreciate it."

"Least we could do. My colleagues and I made a lot of money from the Viagra gland you developed."

I looked at Heloise again. She was a beautiful child, and the smile on her face as she played with the kitten was angelic. The ball of ginger fluff was full of rascally high spirits, just like every two-month-old kitten. I kept staring, shocked by the familiar pattern of marbling in its fluffy light fur.

"Yes," Joe said with quiet pride. "I managed to save one before the court had the litter destroyed. A simple substitution; the police never knew."

"It's three years old now," I whispered.

"Indeed. Heloise is very fond of it."

"Do you understand what this means? The initial stasis-regeneration procedure is valid. If the kitten is still alive and maintaining itself at the same biological age after this long, then-in theory it can live forever, just as it is. The procedure stabilized its cellular structure."

"I understand perfectly, thank you, Doctor. Which is why we intend to keep on funding your research. We believe that human rejuvenation is possible."

I recognized the greed in his eyes: it wasn't pleasant. "It's still a long way off. This procedure was just the first of a great many. It has no real practical application, we can't use it on an adult. Once a mammal reaches sexual maturity its cells can't accept such a radical modification."

"We have every confidence that in the end you'll produce the result we all want."

I turned back to the child with her pet, feeling more optimistic than I had in three years. "I can do it," I said through clenched teeth. "I can." Revenge, it is said, is best served cold. I could see myself looking down on the gravestones of those fools in the Bioethics Commission in, say ... oh, about 500 years' time. They'd be very cold indeed by then.

Joe's affable smile suddenly hardened. I turned, fearing the police had arrived. I'm still very twitchy about raids.

It wasn't the police. The teenage girl coming out from the house was dressed in a black leather micro-skirt and very tight scarlet T-shirt. She would have been attractive if it wasn't for the permanent expression of belligerence on her face; the tattoos weren't nice either. The short sleeves on the T-shirt revealed track marks on her arms. "Is that..."

"Saskia," Joe said with extreme distaste.

I really wouldn't have recognized his older daughter. Saskia used to be a lovely girl. This creature was the kind of horror story that belonged on the front page of a tabloid.

"Whatcha starin' at?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I promised quickly.

"I need money," she told her father.

"Get a job."

Her face screwed up in rage. I really believed she was going to hit him. I could see Heloise behind her on the verge of tears, arms curling protectively around the kitten.

"You know what I'll do to get it if you don't," Saskia said.

"Fine," Joe snapped. "We no longer care."

She made an obscene gesture and hurried back through the mansion. For a moment I thought Joe was going to run after her. I'd never seen him so angry. Instead he turned to his wife, who was frozen in her

chair, shaking slightly. "Are you all right?" he asked tenderly.

She nodded bravely, her eyes slowly refocusing.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know," Joe said bitterly. "We didn't spoil her, we were very careful about that. Then about a year ago she started hanging out with the wrong sort: we've been living in a nightmare ever since. She's quit school; she's got a drug habit, she steals from us constantly, I can't remember how many times she's been arrested for joyriding and shoplifting."

"I'm sorry. Kids, huh!"

"Teenagers," he said wretchedly. "Fiona needed two Prozac gland implants to cope."

I smiled over at Heloise, who had started playing with the kitten again. "At least you've got her."

"Yes." Joe seemed to make some kind of decision. "Before you leave, I'd like you to perform the cellular stasis-regeneration procedure for me."

"I don't understand. I explained before, it's simply the first stage of verifying the overwrite sequence we developed."

His attitude changed. "Nevertheless, you will do it again. Without my help you will be going back to prison for a long time."

"It's of no use to adults," I said helplessly. "You won't become young, or even maintain your current age."

"It's not for me," he said.

"Then who ..." I followed his gaze to Heloise. "Oh."

"She's perfect just the way she is," he said quietly. "And that, Doctor, is the way she's going to stay."

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