

Table of Contents

Issue 2

Stories



[In the Eyes of the Empress's Cat](#)

by Brad Beaulieu

Art by Nicole Cardiff



[The Yazoo Queen](#)

by Orson Scott Card

Art by James Owen



[Salt of Judas](#)

by Eric James Stone

Art by Deena Warner



[The Mooncalf](#)

by David Farland

Art by Jerimiah D. Syme



[Audience](#)

by Ty Franck

Art by Thorsten Grambow



[I Am the Queen](#)

by William Saxton

Art by Liz Clarke



[Zoo](#)

by Al Sarrantonio

Art by Lance W. Card



[Adrift](#)

by Scott D. Danielson

Art by Sam Ellis

From the Ender Saga



[Pretty Boy](#)

The Story of Bonzo Madrid

by Orson Scott Card

Art by Jin Han

Dissertation

[On Science Fiction and Fantasy](#)

by Holly Lawford-Smith

Column - I Screen the Body Eclectic

- [Darkness Falls - The behind-the-scenes artistic genius of Alex McDowell!](#)

by Chris Bellamy

Special Software Bonus

[I-Wei's Amazing Clocks](#)

This Issue - CatClock.

by I-Wei Huang

In the Eyes of the Empress's Cat

by Brad Beaulieu



Artwork by Nicole Cardiff

Al-Ashmar sat cross-legged in the tent of Gadn ak Hulavar and placed his patient, a spotted cat, onto a velvet pillow. Gadn lounged on the far side of the spacious tent, puffing on his hookah and waiting for the diagnosis of his grossly thin cat.

Al-Ashmar held his fingers near the cat's nose. She sniffed his hand and raked her whiskers over his knuckles. When the cat raised her head and stared into his eyes, Al-Ashmar found a brown, triangle-shaped splotch in the right eye, along the left side of the green-and-gold iris. The location of the mark indicated the cat's liver, but in this case it was the strong color that was most disturbing.

"What have you been feeding her?" Al-Ashmar asked as he stroked the cat, noting its muscle tone.

Gadn shrugged his massive shoulders. "Nothing. Cats find food."

Al-Ashmar smiled, if only to hide his annoyance. The wealthy always wanted cats of status, but when it came time to care for them, they hadn't an idea worth its weight in sand.

"Not this one," Al-Ashmar said as he picked up the cat and stood, absently continuing to stroke its ears. "Please, go to the bazaar; buy a large cage and some swallows. Once a day, put her in the cage with one bird. The activity should interest her enough to induce appetite. Do this for a week and her normal eating pattern should return. If it doesn't, send me word."

A bald servant boy rushed into the room and bowed deeply. "Master, if you please, there is a messenger."

"We are done?" Gadn asked Al-Ashmar.

"Yes."

"Then bring the messenger here, Mousaf." Gadn handed Al-Ashmar three coins and then embraced him, kissing one cheek, then the other.

But the servant boy remained. "Begging your mercy, master, but they are asking for Al-Ashmar ak Kulhadn."

Al-Ashmar frowned. "Who is, boy?"

"A man, from the palace."

Gadn shoved the boy aside and rushed from the tent. "Why didn't you say so?"

Al-Ashmar was right behind him. Moments later, they reached the edge of the caravan grounds, near the pens holding dozens of Gadn's camels and donkeys and goats. A balding man with a reed-thin beard - the current rage in the Empress's courts - and wearing blue silk finery stood just outside the caravan grounds, on the sandy road leading back toward the city proper. Behind him stood four palace guards.

The first thought through Al-Ashmar's mind was the sort of beating Gadn's servant would get for referring to Djazir ak Benkada as a messenger.

The second was what sort of emergency would require the Empress's own spiritual guide and physician to personally come asking for *him*, a simple physic. At the least it would be to attend to a courtier's cat - after all, he'd been to the palace a handful of times for just such a purpose - but since Djazir had come personally, he could only assume it was for Bela, the Empress's cat.

Gadn ak Hulavar, as the caravan's master, stepped forward to meet Djazir. "Please, Eminence, would you care to join us? A smoke, perhaps?"

But Gadn stopped when Djazir held up an open palm and stared at Al-Ashmar.

"You will accompany me," Djazir said.

"Of course, Eminence," Al-Ashmar replied.

He left the confused and slightly hurt Gadn and followed the royal guards and physician toward the palace. The walk through the city streets was not long, but neither was the climb easy. Al-Ashmar didn't consider himself old, but he didn't have sharp climbs like this in him anymore - not without becoming winded, in any case. Djazir, on the other hand, a good fifteen years older than Al-Ashmar, seemed hardly winded at all.

They walked through the Grand Hallway with its long pool of water and lily pads; up four sets of stairs to reach the Empress's personal wing; through a small garden of palm trees and beds of sand sculptures; and finally reached the waiting chamber of the Empress herself.

Even though it had been nearly ten years since he'd had the honor of visiting the Empress's wing, Al-Ashmar was surprised to find so many memories in conflict with reality. The room was as opulent as he remembered, but almost completely stripped of furniture - the only furnishings were the throne itself and a marble table crouched next to it, the only entertainment the three books stacked on top of the table.

Djazir turned to Al-Ashmar and spoke softly. "Understand, ak Kulhadn, you are here to examine the Empress's cat, that is all. You will do your business and you will leave. Is that understood?"

Al-Ashmar tipped his head low. "Of course, Eminence."

"If the Empress decides to speak to you, it will be through her handmaid. But it is taxing on her, and you will formulate brief answers, answers that will not invite further comment."

"Of course."

Djazir studied Al-Ashmar's eyes, and finally, apparently satisfied, turned to the guard nearest the rear door of the room and nodded. The guard rang a small brass cymbal. Minutes passed, and Al-Ashmar began to wonder if the cymbal had been heard, but then the door opened, and two huge eunuchs walked in carrying a palanquin between them. The Empress sat inside the covered palanquin, but her form was obscured by the green veils hanging down from the palanquin's roof. The only thing Al-Ashmar could discern was the golden headdress resting over her brown hair.

They set the palanquin down near the padded throne and, after pulling the fabric away on the far side, cradled the Empress from inside and set her gently on the throne. The pair of eunuchs - for only eunuch guards were allowed this close to the Empress - then moved to stand behind her, one on each side.

The Empress's eyes drooped, the left lower than the right; she sat tilted to one side, her head arching back the other way; her thin arms rested ineffectually in her lap. She had a face Al-Ashmar barely recognized - another memory that appeared to have faded to the point of uselessness. But then again, the last time he'd seen her had been years before the malady that had left her in such a state.

Al-Ashmar suddenly realized that someone else had entered the room. A woman - young, but no child, she. She moved with a subtle grace, hips swaying as she did so, but she stared at no one until she reached the Empress's side. Thus positioned, she turned and regarded Al-Ashmar with impassive, kohl-rimmed eyes. How stunning those green eyes were. How beautiful.

Much of Al-Ashmar's mind wanted to compare her to another beauty in his life - dear Nara, his wife who'd passed years ago - but those memories were still tender, and so he left the comparisons where they were. Buried.

With no one performing introductions, Al-Ashmar took one knee to the Empress and woman both. "I am Al-Ashmar ak Kulhadn, humble physic."

"The Empress knows who you are," the woman said.

Movement pulled Al-Ashmar's attention away from the Empress. From inside the safety of the palanquin leapt a cat, Bela, the bright one, ninth and final companion to the Empress Waharra before she alights for the heavens. Like the cat Al-Ashmar had just treated, Bela was long and lean, but she had the muscle tone of a cat treated well. Her smooth coat was ivory with onyx spots coating her sides and back. Stripes slid down her face, giving her an innocent but regal look. She roamed the room and croaked out a meow as if she had just woken from a long nap. She seemed wary of Al-Ashmar and Djazir, but then she slunk to the foot of the throne, curled up in a ball, and began licking one outstretched leg.

Djazir moved to the palanquin and retrieved a crimson pillow dusted with short, white hair. He set the pillow down several paces away from the throne and then set Bela upon it.

"Please," Djazir said to Al-Ashmar, motioning to Bela, "tell us what you can."

Al-Ashmar hesitated - how rude not to introduce him to the woman! - but there was nothing for it. He couldn't afford to insult Djazir.

As Al-Ashmar stepped forward and knelt before the cat, he felt the Empress's eyes watching his every move. Her body may have failed her, but her mind, he was sure, was as sharp as ever. Al-Ashmar stroked Bela's side and stomach. Bela stretched and purred.

"Her symptoms?" he asked.

He expected Djazir to answer, but it was the woman who spoke. "Her feces are loose and runny. She eats less, though she still eats. She's listless much of the day."

Bela's purr intensified, a rasping sound everyone in the room could hear.

"Anything else? Anything you noticed days ago, even weeks?"

"Her eyes started watering and crusting eight or nine days ago. But that stopped a few days back."

"Has her diet changed?"

"She began eating less, but Djazir administered cream from the Empress's reserve herd, laced with fennel."

"She's kept her appetite since?"

"Somewhat, but she still seems to eat too little."

Al-Ashmar scratched Bela under the chin. Bela stretched her neck and squinted, but when she opened her eyes wide again, Al-Ashmar started. He leaned closer while continuing to scratch, tilting Bela's head from side to side while doing so. Bela seemed amused, but on the inside of her iris was a raised, curling mark. It retained the golden color of the iris, but something was obviously there, just beneath the surface.

Al-Ashmar sat upright, confused.

But the woman . . . She held an expression like she'd rather this sullied business be over and done with.

"Do you have a name," Al-Ashmar asked, "or shall I continue to treat you like a talking palm?"

Was there a hint of a smile from the Empress?

"You may call me Rabiah," the woman said crisply.

The height of rudeness! What civilized person withholds her mother's name?

"Where has this cat been, *Rabiah*?" Al-Ashmar asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I asked where the Empress's cat has been, in the last month."

"In the palace only. She has never left."

"Never?"

"Of course not."

"Enough, ak Kulhadn," Djazir said. "What is it you see?"

"Forgive me. I ask these questions because Bela - long may the sun shine on her life - has snakeworm."

"What?" Djazir asked. He kneeled beside Al-Ashmar and stared into Bela's eyes.

"Look for the raised area. There."

Djazir inspected, but Al-Ashmar couldn't help but wonder how this could have happened. Snakeworm was common in his homeland, but that was far to the south, and the worm came from *goats*. There were caravans, of course, like Gadn's, that brought livestock northward. It was conceivable that a cat could get it from a transplanted goat, but the worm seemed to have trouble thriving in the north. In nearly twenty years in the capital, he'd seen only three cases, and all of them had been near the caravan landings or the bazaar. How could Bela, a cat that would never be allowed from the palace grounds, have contracted the worm?

Al-Ashmar stood. "I can make a tonic and return tomorrow."

"No," Djazir said, standing as well. "You will tell me how to make it."

Al-Ashmar dipped his head until he could no longer make eye contact with Djazir. "With due respect, it cannot be taught in so short a time. The balance is tricky, and I wouldn't wish to jeopardize Bela's life over a formula crudely made."

Djazir bristled. "Then you will do it immediately and return here when it's done."

"Of course, but it will take nearly a day. The ingredients are rare, and it will take me time to find those of proper quality. And then I must boil - "

Al-Ashmar stopped at a disturbing noise coming from the Empress. The sounds from her throat could hardly be construed as words, and yet Rabiah leaned over and listened attentively as if she *were* speaking.

Rabiah stood. "Her Highness, Waharra sut Shahmat, wishes for Al-Ashmar to make the tonic. Alone. He will return tomorrow when it is ready, and every day after until Bela's recovery is judged complete."

Djazir bowed to the Empress, as did Al-Ashmar. Again, he saw a quirky smile from her lips and wondered if it could be such a thing. She had enough control still to speak to Rabiah. Could she not show amusement if she so chose?

He supposed she could. But the real question was: Why? Why him? And why amusement?

Al-Ashmar rose to his feet and turned to Djazir. "Anyone in close contact with Bela may have contracted the worm, so it would be wise to examine everyone, even wiser for everyone to take the same tonic as Bela will receive."

After Djazir nodded his assent, Al-Ashmar inspected the hulking guards, then Djazir. As he held Rabiah's head and gazed into her irises, more than anything else he sensed the scent of jasmine and the warmth of her face through his fingertips. He had to force himself to examine her complex green eyes closely to make sure there were no signs of infection.

Al-Ashmar knelt before the Empress next. It took him a moment, for the two guards were watching him as the cobra spies the mongoose. The Empress's eyes were free of the worm, but she kept glancing toward the stack of books on the nearby marble table.

When Al-Ashmar stepped away, he noticed the binding of the top book; it was inlaid with a cursive pattern - a pattern often used in the south, Al-Ashmar's home. In the center of the leather cover rested a tiger eye stone with a silver, diamond-shaped setting.

Bela, sitting beneath the table, watched him closely. It was strange how utterly human Bela looked for that brief instant.

Al-Ashmar nodded to the Empress. "Our Exalted has fine taste in books."

She spoke to Rabiah. Rabiah said not a word, but it was a long time before she moved to the stack of books and retrieved the top one. She held it out to Al-Ashmar.

"My lady?" Al-Ashmar said.

"The Blessed One wishes to gift you."

Al-Ashmar nearly raised his hands to refuse, but how grave an insult to reject such an offer. "The Empress is too kind," he said at last.

Rabiah shoved it into his chest, forcing him to take it.

And now there could be no doubt.

The Empress *was* smiling.

#

Late that night, within his workroom, Al-Ashmar poured three heaping spoonfuls of ground black walnut husk into the boiling pot before him. The sounds of the evening meal being cleared by the children came from behind. Mia, his second youngest, sat on a stool, watching, as she so often did. She picked up the glass phial of clove juice and removed the stopper, but immediately after recoiled from the sharp smell and wrinkled her nose.

Al-Ashmar laughed. "Then stop smelling it."

"It smells so *weird*."

"Well, weird or not, it's the Empress's, so leave it alone." Al-Ashmar added the minced wormwood root and mixed it thoroughly with the ground husks. That done, he flipped his hourglass over, and the sand began spilling into the empty chamber.

Mia leaned over the table and retrieved a thin piece of coal and the papyrus scrap she'd been writing on. "How long after the bark?"

"Four hours, covered. It will boil down, nearly to a paste."

She wrote chicken prints on the scroll. Al-Ashmar tried to hide his smile, for if she caught him, she always got upset. She didn't know how to write more than a few letters, but still she created her own recipes as Al-Ashmar made things she hadn't learned about yet.

"Then what?"

"I told you, the clove juice, then the elixir, then they steep."

"Oh," she said while writing more, "I forgot." She sat up then and fixed him with a child's most-serious expression. "Doesn't she have people to heal cats in the palace?"

Al-Ashmar found himself hiding another smile. He often told his seven children about his day over their evening meal, but Mia was the one who listened most often. "She does, Mia, but they rarely see such things."

"Snakeworm?"

"Yes."

"From where you and memma came from."

"Yes."

"Then how did it get here?"

Al-Ashmar shrugged. He still hadn't been able to piece together a plausible story. "I don't know."

"Tell me about the woman again. She sounded pretty."

"I told you, pet, she wasn't pretty. She was mean."

Mia shrugged and tugged the Empress's book closer. "She sounded pretty to *me*." She flipped through the pages, pretending to read each one. "What's this?"

"A gift, from the Empress," Al-Ashmar said.

"What does it teach?"

Al-Ashmar smiled. It was a retelling of several fables from his homeland - four of them, all simple tales of the spirits of the southern lands and how they helped or harmed wayward travelers.

"Nothing," he finally said. "Now off to bed."

Mia ignored him, as she often did on his first warning. "What's this?"

Al-Ashmar snatched the book away and stared at the scribbles Mia had been looking at. He hadn't noticed it earlier. He'd had too much to do, and since it had seemed so innocuous, he'd left it until he had more time to sift through its pages. On the last page were the words *save her* written in an appalling, jittery hand. The letters were oversized as well, as if writing any smaller was either impossible or would have rendered the final text unreadable.

The Empress, surely. But why? Save who?

And from what?

Mia dropped from her stool and fought next to him for a view. "Enough, Mia. To bed."

After tucking the children in for the night, Al-Ashmar stayed up, nursing the tonic, and thinking. *Save her*. Save Bela? But that made no sense. He had already been summoned, had already been directed to heal the Empress's cat. Why write a note for that?

Then again, there was no logical reason that the cat would have the worm. Coincidence was too unlikely. So it had to have been intentional. But who would dare infect the Empress's cat? Did the Empress fear that the next attempt would be bolder? Was something afoot even now?

Bela, after all, was the Empress's ninth cat - her last - and when she died, so would the Empress, and her closest servants with her. That might explain Djazir's tense mood, might even explain Rabiah's sullenness. But it wouldn't explain the smile on the Empress's lips. For whatever reason, it seemed most logical that the Empress had arranged this.

Al-Ashmar paged through the tale in which the jagged words had been written. It was a tale of a child that had wandered too far, and was destined to die alone in the mountains. But then a legendary shepherd found her and brought her to live with him - him and his eighty-nine children, others who'd been found wandering in the same manner.

Hours later, Al-Ashmar added the clove juice and a honey-ginger elixir to the tonic and left it to steep. After his mind struggled through a thousand dead-end possibilities, Father Sleep finally found him.

#

The following day, Al-Ashmar was led to the Empress's garden. Strands of wispy clouds marked the blue sky as a pleasant breeze rattled the palm leaves. Bela sat at the foot of the Empress's throne, which had been moved from inside the cold and empty room. The cat lapped at the cream laced with the tonic.

Odd, Al-Ashmar thought. Cats usually detested the remedy no matter how carefully it was hidden. Al-Ashmar's other patients, however, were not so pliant. Nearby, Rabiah took a deep breath and downed the last of her phial. The eunuchs, thank goodness, had swallowed theirs at a word from Rabiah.

"Bela will need two more doses today," Al-Ashmar said, "and three more tomorrow."

Djazir stared at his half-empty phial, a look of complete disgust on his face.

"Please," Al-Ashmar said to Djazir, "I know it is distasteful, but you need to drink the entire phial."

"I will drink it, physic, but we will not subject the Empress to such a thing."

Al-Ashmar hid his eyes from Djazir. "Of course you know best, but if the Empress has the worm, the effects will only worsen."

The Empress spoke to Rabiah. Al-Ashmar, listening more closely than the day before, could still understand not a single word.

"Of course, Exalted," Rabiah said, and she retrieved the phial meant for the Empress.

Djazir gritted his jaw as Rabiah tilted the phial into the Empress's mouth. The Empress's eyes watered, and she coughed, causing some of it to spill onto Rabiah's hands.

"Be careful of her eyes," Al-Ashmar said, stepping forward. "The tonic will sting horribly for quite some time - "

But Rabiah waved him away. At least she took more care how she supported the Empress's head as she dispensed the liquid. The Empress's coughing slowed the process to a crawl, but eventually the ordeal was over.

Djazir took Al-Ashmar by the elbow, ready to lead him from the garden and out of the palace.

"I wonder if we might speak," Al-Ashmar said. "Alone, so as not to disturb the Empress."

Djazir seemed doubtful, but he released Al-Ashmar's elbow. "What about?"

"A few questions only, in order to narrow down the source of the worms. If we cannot find it, the infection may simply recur."

Djazir brought him up a set of stairs to a railed patio on the roof of the palace. Around them the entire city sprawled over the land for miles. The river glistened as it crawled like the snakeworm through the flesh of the city until reaching the glittering sea several miles away.

Al-Ashmar spoke, asked questions about Bela's activities, the Empress's, even Rabiah's, but this was all a ruse. He'd wanted to get Djazir to agree to questioning simply so he could ask the same of Rabiah. He had to get her alone, for only in her did he have a chance of unwrapping this riddle.

Djazir agreed to send Rabiah up to him to speak as well, and several minutes later, she came and stood a safe distance away from him, staring out over the city. It took him a moment, but Al-Ashmar realized that Rabiah was staring at the fourteen spires standing at attention along the shore. Thirteen Empresses lay buried beneath thirteen obelisks, and the fourteenth stood empty, waiting. Al-Ashmar thought at first she was simply ignoring him, but there so much anxiety on her face as she stared at the obelisk.

"She won't die from the worm, my lady. We've caught it in time."

Rabiah turned to him and nodded, her face blank now. "I know, physic."

And then realization struck. Rabiah wasn't afraid over the worm, never had been. She was afraid for something else, something much more serious. Like riddles within riddles the answer to this one simple curiosity led to a host of answers he'd struggled with late into the night.

He hesitated to voice his thoughts - they were thoughts that could get one killed - but he had no true choice. He could no more bury this question than he could have denied any of his children a home when they'd needed it.

"How much longer?"

A muscle twitched along Rabiah's neck. She turned away from him and stared out over the sharp, rolling landscape. For a long, long time the only sound he heard was the call of a lone gull and the pounding of stone hammers in the distance.

"Months, perhaps," she said, "but I fear it will be less."

"You know what she's asking of me, don't you?"

"Yes, physic, but you will do nothing of the sort. I will die *with* her. I will help her on the other shore as I have helped her here."

This was ludicrous, Al-Ashmar thought. He jeopardized his entire family with this one conversation. He should leave. He should instruct Djazir in the creation of the tonic, heal Bela, and be done with this foul mess.

But as he stared at Rabiah, he realized how lost she was. She would die the day after the Empress did, would be buried in the Empress's tomb, which waited beneath the newest obelisk along the shores of the Dengkut.

The ways of the Empresses had always seemed strange when he'd been growing up in the southlands, and little had changed his mind when he'd come to the capital to find his fortune. In fact, the opposite had happened. Each year found him more and more confused.

But that was him. His opinion mattered little. What mattered was why the *Empress* would go against tradition and ask him to save Rabbiah from her fate.

The answer, Al-Ashmar realized, could be found by looking no further than his adopted children. Rabbiah had cared for the Empress, most likely day and night, ever since her attacks had left her stricken. Rabbiah would have become part daughter, part mother. And when the Empress died, Rabbiah's bright young life would be forfeit. How could the Empress not try to protect her?

Al-Ashmar regarded Rabbiah with new eyes. She had cared for the Empress in life, and she was willing to do so in death, no matter what it might mean for her personally.

"You are noble," Al-Ashmar said.

Rabbiah turned to him, a confused look on her beautiful face. "You don't believe that."

Al-Ashmar smiled. "I may not understand much, Rabbiah of No Mother, but I know devotion when I see it."

Rabbiah stared, said nothing, but her eyes softened ever so slowly.

"I will need to come for a week, to ensure Bela's restoration is complete. Perhaps we can come here and talk. Perhaps play a hand of river."

"I don't play games, physic."

"Then perhaps just the talk."

Rabbiah held his gaze, and then nodded.

#

The next week passed by quickly. Al-Ashmar's oldest son, Fakhir, was forced to take the summons Al-Ashmar would have normally taken himself; Tayyeb, his oldest girl, did what she could for those who brought their cats to his home; and though they hated it, it was up to Hilal and Yusuf to watch over the young ones, Shafiq and Badra and Mia.

The family conversed each night over dinner. Al-Ashmar helped them learn from things they did wrong, but in truth his pride swelled over their performances in jobs he thought them incapable of only days ago.

Most of his time, however, was spent creating the tonic for Bela and the Empress, administering it, and teaching the technique to Djazir. Bela continued her uncanny acceptance of the tonic, as Djazir continued his complaints, but the cure progressed smoothly.

Rabbiah held true to her word. She accompanied him to the roof, sometimes for nearly an hour, and spoke to him. She was reserved at first, unwilling to speak, and so it was often Al-Ashmar that told stories of the south, of his travels, of his early days in the capital. It was uncomfortable to speak of Nara, but to speak of his children, he had no choice but to speak of his wife.

"You loved her?" Rabbiah asked one day.

"My wife? Of course."

"You couldn't have children of your own?"

Al-Ashmar smiled and jutted his chin toward the city. "She knew what it was like, out there. Why have our own when there are so many in need?"

Rabbiah regarded him for a long time then, and finally said, "You wanted one of your own, didn't you?"

Al-Ashmar paused, embarrassed. "Am I so shallow?"

"No, but such a thing is hard to hide when you speak of subjects so close to the heart."

He shrugged though the gesture felt like a clear betrayal of Nara. "I did want my own, once, but I regret nothing. How would I have found my Mia if I hadn't? My Fakhir and Tayyeb?"

The silence grew uncomfortable, and Al-Ashmar was sure he'd made a mistake by discussing his children. But how could he not? They were his loves. His life.

"You are the noble one," Rabiah said, and left him standing near the railing.

#

Al-Ashmar, hugging Mia against his hip, stood before the palace, unsure of himself with the palace so near.

The eighth day had come - the last day Al-Ashmar would be allowed into the palace. Djazir had mastered the tonic well enough, and he'd grown increasingly insistent that no one, least of all the Empress, needed to take such a distasteful brew any longer.

Al-Ashmar could hardly argue. The snake-like trails in Bela's eyes were gone, and her feces had returned to a proper level of density.

"Let's go," Mia said.

"All right, pet, we'll go."

They entered the palace. The guards were a bit disturbed by the unexpected addition of Mia, but Al-Ashmar explained to them calmly that Rabiah had permitted it. He made it to the Empress's garden, where he relieved his aching arms of Mia's weight.

Djazir marched forward. "What is this?"

"Eminence, my sincere apologies. With my absence, my business is in a shambles. My other children are old enough to run my errands, but I had no one to watch Mia. She will sit quietly, here, and bother no one."

"She had best not, physic." Djazir frowned and stared at Mia. "Don't touch a thing, child. Do you hear me?"

Mia hugged Al-Ashmar's waist and nodded.

Al-Ashmar calmed Mia down enough that he could leave her on a bench near the rear of the garden, mostly out of sight of the Empress's three peaked doorways. He made his way inside the room, where the Empress sat waiting on her throne. The four guards stood at the corners of the room, two more behind the throne, but Rabiah was not to be found. Where was she?

The Empress stared out through the gauzy curtains hanging over the doorways. She studied the garden, perhaps watching Mia play. Then her eyes took in Al-Ashmar.

And a hint of a smile came to her lips.

Al-Ashmar couldn't help but return the smile, but he hid it as quickly as it had come.

Bela strutted around from the back of the throne and moved to the bowl of cream placed there by Djazir.

"Come, physic."

Al-Ashmar nodded. From inside his vest he retrieved one of the eight phials he'd brought for their final day, but Djazir held up his hand to forestall him.

"I've administered my own tonic," Djazir said. "All that's left is for you to examine Bela."

Al-Ashmar began to worry. He needed to speak to Rabiah, had to try one last time for he would never have the chance again, but with the tonic already administered, there was only so far he could extend the examination before Djazir caught on. He did what he could: he kneeled and studied Bela's golden eyes closely even though they were obviously clear of the worm; he checked her muscle tone and reflexes; he examined her teeth.

"Enough," Djazir said, stepping to Al-Ashmar's side. "We both know Bela is fine. The Empress thanks you for your time."

Just then the Empress began to cough, a wracking, hoarse affair, and it nearly shook her from the throne. The guards moved to hold her, but Djazir waved them away as he rushed to her side. Al-Ashmar waited, hoping that Rabiah would step from the rear of the room.

"That will be all, ak Kulhadn."

Al-Ashmar bowed and retreated to the sounds of the Empress's horrible coughing. How painful it sounded. Painful, but also a touch forced to Al-Ashmar's ear.

He reached the garden, but could not find Mia.

"Mia," he called softly, hoping Djazir wouldn't hear.

She wasn't in the garden, so he moved up the stairs leading to the rooftop patio. He allowed himself to smile. Rabiah was crouched next to Mia, and her gaze followed Mia's outstretched finger through the balustrades of the marble railing to the city beyond.

"Is that so?" Rabiah asked.

Mia nodded. "And then peppa brought it to our house. It was big as me - at least, big as I was then, which is still pretty big."

Mia noticed Al-Ashmar approach. "I *told* you she was pretty," Mia said.

Al-Ashmar smiled as his face flushed. He wished he could say the same thing to her, but Nara's memory stayed his tongue.

"You could help others," Al-Ashmar said as he tussled Mia's dark hair, "and the Empress will be waiting for you on the other side."

"She'll need me."

"She'll have your predecessor, Rabiah. She'll have the others." He motioned down toward the Empress's coughing, which was starting to subside. "She'll be whole once she reaches the far shore."

Her eyes were pleading, as if they *wanted* a reason to come with him. "This is blasphemy."

"Not where we're from," Mia said, as if she, too, were from the south.

Rabiah looked down at Mia, and a sad smile came to her lips. "That's just it, child. It *is*, even where your peppa's from." When she again met Al-Ashmar's eyes, her expression was resolute. "Please, go."

Al-Ashmar hesitated. Words always seemed to flee in the important moments of his life, and this time he knew the reason why. No matter how foolish he considered Rabiah's choice to be, he would never force his beliefs on another. She would have to embrace the Empress's wish before she could be saved.

"You would be loved," he said to Rabiah, and then he picked up Mia and left the palace.

When they were back in the streets, Mia said, "Is she coming to live with us?"

"No, pet, she's not."

#

Al-Ashmar woke upon hearing the great bell on top of the Hall of Ancients ring. A gentle rain pattered against the roof. The bell rang again and again. Al-Ashmar knew, well before it had reached the fourteenth peal, that the Empress had died.

When it was over, he sat there in the silence, feeling as if one of his own family had been lost. No, not one. Two. The Empress, even in her state, had smiled upon him in more ways than one - how could he not consider her family? And Rabiah. She'd been so close to walking away from her pointless fate.

A soft knock came at the door.

He opened it in a rush and found Rabiah standing outside, drenched.

"I don't want to die," she said.

Al-Ashmar stepped aside and ushered her into his house. He motioned her to his workroom, where the hearth still had enough embers to stoke some warmth from them. He got a blanket for Rabbiah and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Fakhir walked into the room, hair disheveled with a blanket around his shoulders. "Everything all right, peppa?"

"Fine, Fakhir. Go to bed."

Fakhir retired, leaving Al-Ashmar alone with this beauty and the sounds of the pattering rain. He prepared some lime tea for her, but by the time he handed it to her, she looked confused, as if coming to him might have been a big mistake.

"There is no shame in living a longer life, Rabbiah. There's so much good you can do. For these children." He paused. "For me."

She looked at him then. Her eyes, no longer rimmed with kohl, looked just as beautiful in the ruddy light of the hearth. "For you?"

A harsh knock came at the front door.

Al-Ashmar's heart beat faster in his chest. "Were you followed?"

Rabbiah glanced around, as if specters would take form from the shadows around them. "I - I took precautions."

Djazir's voice bellowed from the other side of the door. "Open, ak Kulhadn, or we'll break the door in."

Al-Ashmar scrambled for a proper hiding place, but there would be none. He couldn't even spirit her out the rear door. There was no telling what Djazir would do if they were caught running.

"It will be all right," Al-Ashmar said as he stood and moved to the door. "Stay by my side."

Four of his children stood in the doorway of their bedroom. "Fakhir, get them to bed, now. Close your door."

Before he could reach the front door, it crashed open. Al-Ashmar shivered. Three guards stormed into the room. Two more stood outside with Djazir. After the guards had positioned themselves about the room, Djazir strode in as if it was his own home. He looked Al-Ashmar up and down, then Rabbiah, who stood nearby.

"Rabbiah, come."

She stayed planted, gaze darting between Al-Ashmar and Djazir.

"Djazir, please. We can discuss this."

Djazir motioned to the nearest guard. Al-Ashmar barely registered the fist from the corner of his eye, and then everything was pain and disorientation. He fell, his shoulder and neck striking the low eating table in the center of the room. A piercing ache stormed up his neck to the base of his skull.

Before he could make sense of what had happened, the guard closest to Rabbiah grabbed the back of her neck and manhandled her toward the exit.

"Stop!"

"Dear physic, you have made this *more* than necessary." He knelt next to Al-Ashmar, daring him to rise. "Now, I will assume, for the sake of your children, that Rabbiah has come to you for a bit of advice, that she has come to spill her fears of the time to come. It is natural, after all; you of all people should know this. I'll also assume that you kindly told her that everything will be fine, that her sacred voyage will be painless, and that she should return to the palace, as any good citizen would."

Al-Ashmar opened his mouth to speak, but Djazir talked over him.

"But if I find differently, or if I see you again before I guide the Empress to the opposite shore, I'll have your head." Djazir stood. "Do we understand one another?"

The door to the children's room was cracked open. Mia's whimpering filtered into the room. He had no choice. He had to protect them, and though it burned his gut to do so, he nodded to Djazir.

Djazir smiled, though his eyes still pierced. "I see we have an understanding. It would be a pity for seven orphans to become orphaned all over again."

And with that he left. The door stood open, and Al-Ashmar could only watch as Rabiah was forced to accompany them up the street, toward the palace.

#

The sun had not yet risen. It was hours since Rabiah had been taken away but still Al-Ashmar could think of nothing. He was powerless to stop Djazir.

"Peppa?" It was Mia, standing in the doorway to his workroom.

"Go to bed," Al-Ashmar said.

"Nobody can sleep, and it's almost morning."

Several of the other children were preparing breakfast in the main room behind Mia.

"Then eat."

Mia sat on the stool nearby and picked up the Empress's book. "Is she coming back?"

Al-Ashmar wanted to cry. "No, Mia. She's not."

Just then a cat entered through the rear door of the workroom and rubbed against Mia's leg. "Bela!" Mia said.

Indeed, the cat looked just like the Empress's. Al-Ashmar picked the animal up and examined her eyes, removing any doubt. This was certainly Bela, but how was it possible? The cat should have died with the Empress.

Bela bit the meat of Al-Ashmar's thumb, and he dropped her in surprise. Bela walked from the room as if she'd never intended to be here in the first place.

Al-Ashmar followed her out the rear door. Bela had already slunk beneath the gate of their small yard and out to the alley behind. Al-Ashmar followed and called back to Mia, who was trying to trail him. "Go back, Mia. I'll return when I can."

Al-Ashmar trailed Bela through the pale light of pre-dawn. She wound her way through the streets, and it gradually became clear she was leading him toward the palace. But she avoided the main western road. She traveled instead to the rear of the tall hill which housed it. She climbed the rocks, often leaving her human companion behind, but she would stop when Al-Ashmar fell too far back and then continue before he could catch up to her.

The eastern face of the hill held a shallow ravine with plants dotting a trail - most likely from the waste it carried from the palace to the river. Bela found a crook in the hillside, whereupon she stopped. When Al-Ashmar finally caught up, she circled his legs and meowed.

Al-Ashmar parted the wall of vines clinging to the nearby boulder. A low, dark tunnel entrance stood there. Al-Ashmar rushed through, realizing that Bela - or more likely the soul of the Empress - was leading him up to the palace. In utter darkness, he climbed the spiral stairs as quickly as his burning lungs would allow. Occasionally the stairwell would end, forcing him to take a short passage to find another that led him upward once more, but by and large it was strictly a grueling uphill climb.

His legs threatened to give out, forcing him to stop, but dawn would arrive soon, and Al-Ashmar feared that would be when the Empress's retinue would be killed.

Finally, dim light came from above, and the peal of a bell filtered down to him. Dawn had arrived. Bela meowed somewhere ahead. He felt sure he'd climbed treble the height of the palace, but still he pushed harder. The light intensified, and he came to a wall with a grate embedded into it. Though the brightness hurt his eyes, he surveyed what he realized was the Empress's garden.

Visible through the three peaked doorways, Djazir paced along the Empress's throne room. Six of the Empress's personal guard stood nearby, each wearing ornate leather armor with a sword and dagger hanging from a silver belt. Djazir wore a white silk robe embroidered

with crimson thread, and a ceremonial dagger hung from a golden belt at his waist. The Empress was wrapped in folds of white cloth, her face still exposed. Five bolts of white cloth waited on the marble floor to her left.

But to her right, on another bolt of cloth, was Rabiah, unconscious or dead.

Please, Rabiah, be alive.

Djazir continued to pace and wring his hands. A young man, wearing clothes similar to but not so grand as Djazir's, entered the garden and reported to Djazir.

As the two of them conversed, too low to be heard, Bela strolled out from the grate. Al-Ashmar tried to prevent it, but Bela sped up just before his fingers could reach her. She walked up to Djazir as if she were asking for a bit of cream.

"By the spirits, thank you," Djazir said loudly as he picked Bela up. "Now please," he said. "Prepare yourselves." Then he turned to the young man. "Prepare the procession immediately. You will find everything ready by the time you return."

The young man bowed and walked back through the garden. Al-Ashmar heard a heavy wooden door close. Moments later, the palace's bell pealed once more.

Al-Ashmar, heart quickening, searched the landscape of the grate, looking for any sign of a catch. He found something hard and irregular about halfway down on the left side, but had no idea how to release it.

As the Empress's guards positioned themselves on their white cloths, Djazir ladled a thick white liquid from a ceramic bowl using an ornate spoon. He held the spoon to Bela's lips and waited as she lapped at it. Then he set Bela down on a silk pillow on the Empress's throne and petted her until her movements slowed.

Bela rested her head on her crossed paws and stared directly at Al-Ashmar. Her eyes blinked, twice, before slowly closing for the last time. Her lungs ceased to draw breath mere moments later.

The bell pealed again, long and slow.

Djazir moved to each of the guards in turn and administered a spoonful of the liquid. Their bodies were already lying down, but each fell slack less than three breaths after imbibing the poison.

Al-Ashmar worked frantically at the catch. Open, damn it! Open!

Djazir moved next to Rabiah's motionless form.

"Stop it, Djazir!"

Djazir turned. He moved toward the grate, squinting.

The catch released.

Al-Ashmar stepped out into the light, ready to charge for Djazir should he make a move toward Rabiah. But instead Djazir dropped the spoon and pulled his dagger free of its sheath.

"I was willing to let your children live, Al-Ashmar, but an affront such as this demands their deaths."

Al-Ashmar, heart beating wildly, patted his vest for anything he might use as a weapon and found only the leftover phials of Bela's tonic. He swallowed hard and pulled one of them from his vest pocket.

Djazir chuckled. "Are you going to heal me, physic?"

Al-Ashmar unstopped the phial and waited for Djazir to come close, but Djazir lunged much faster than Al-Ashmar had anticipated. Al-Ashmar dodged but still the steel bit deep into his shoulder. He flung the phial's contents at Djazir's face, aiming for the eyes. Enough of the acerbic liquid struck home, and Djazir screamed and fell backward.

Al-Ashmar fell on top of Djazir, driving his good shoulder into Djazir's gut. A long, deep, noisy exhalation was forced from Djazir's lungs, giving Al-Ashmar time to scramble on top of him. Holding the knife to one side, Al-Ashmar seized Djazir's neck and applied all

the leverage he could as the older man writhed beneath him, sputtering and choking, eyes pinched tight. Finally, as the palace bell pealed over the city, Djazir's body lost all tension.

Al-Ashmar breathed heavily, wincing from the pain in his screaming shoulder. He cleaned Djazir as best he could and tugged him into position on the remaining bolt of white cloth. Then he rushed to Rabiah's side and tried to wake her. He thought surely she was dead, thought surely this had all been for naught, but no, she still had a faint heartbeat. She still drew breath, however slowly. He slapped her, but she would not wake.

The bell pealed. They would return soon.

Al-Ashmar took a bit of the tonic still left in the phial and spread it under and inside Rabiah's nostrils. She jerked and her eyes opened. She was slow in focusing, but eventually she seemed to recognize Al-Ashmar.

"Where am I?" she asked, rubbing the tonic from her nose.

"Not now . I will explain all later."

Al-Ashmar helped Rabiah through the grate, but before he could take the first of the steps down, Rabiah turned Al-Ashmar around and wrapped her arms around him.

"Thank you for my life," she said.

He freed himself from her embrace and pulled her toward the stairs. "Thank me when you have your new one."

Al-Ashmar knew they would have to leave for foreign lands, but it couldn't be helped. He hadn't expected this change in fortune, but neither had he expected his wife to die or to raise seven children on his own. He would take what fate gave him and deal with it as best he could.

With Rabiah.

Yes, with Rabiah it will all be just a little bit easier.



Artwork by James Owen

The Yazoo Queen

by Orson Scott Card

[Part of the Alvin Maker series, this story falls chronologically between *Heartfire* and *The Crystal City*.]

Alvin watched as Captain Howard welcomed aboard another group of passengers, a prosperous family with five children and three slaves.

"It's the Nile River of America," said the captain. "But Cleopatra herself never sailed in such splendor as you folks is going to experience on the *Yazoo Queen*."

Splendor for the family, thought Alvin. Not likely to be much splendor for the slaves -- though, being house servants, they'd fare better than the two dozen runaways chained together in the blazing sun at dockside all afternoon.

Alvin had been keeping an eye on them since he and Arthur Stuart got here to the Carthage City riverport at eleven. Arthur Stuart was all for exploring, and Alvin let him go. The city that billed itself as the Phoenicia of the West had plenty of sights for a boy Arthur's age, even a half-black boy. Since it was on the north shore of the Hio, there'd be suspicious eyes on him for a runaway. But there was plenty of free blacks in Carthage City, and Arthur Stuart was no fool. He'd keep an eye out.

There was plenty of slaves in Carthage, too. That was the law, that a black slave from the South remained a slave even in a free state. And the greatest shame of all was those chained-up runaways who got themselves all the way across the Hio to freedom, only to be picked up by Finders and dragged back in chains to the whips and other horrors of bondage. Angry owners who'd make an example of them. No wonder there was so many who killed themselves, or tried to.

Alvin saw wounds on more than a few in this chained-up group of twenty-five, though many of the wounds could have been made by the slave's own hand. Finders weren't much for injuring the property they was getting paid to bring on home. No, those wounds on wrists and bellies were likely a vote for freedom before life itself.

What Alvin was watching for was to know whether the runaways were going to be loaded on this boat or another. Most often runaways were ferried across river and made to walk home over land -- there was too many stories of slaves jumping overboard and sinking to the bottom with their chains on to make Finders keen on river transportation.

But now and then Alvin had caught a whiff of talking from the slaves -- not much, since it could get them a bit of lash, and not loud enough for him to make out the words, but the music of the language didn't sound like English, not northern English, not southern English, not slave English. It wasn't likely to be any African language. With the British waging full-out war on the slave trade, there weren't many new slaves making it across the Atlantic these days.

So it might be Spanish they were talking, or French. Either way, they'd most likely be bound for Nueva Barcelona, or New Orleans, as the French still called it.

Which raised some questions in Alvin's mind. Mostly this one: How could a bunch of Barcelona runaways get themselves to the state of Hio? That would have been a long trek on foot, especially if they didn't speak English. Alvin's wife, Peggy, grew up in an Abolitionist home, with her Papa, Horace Guester, smuggling runaways across river. Alvin knew something about how good the Underground Railway was. It had fingers reaching all the way down into the new duchies of Mizzippy and Alabam, but Alvin never heard of any Spanish- or French-speaking slaves taking that long dark road to freedom.

"I'm hungry again," said Arthur Stuart.

Alvin turned to see the boy -- no, the young man, he was getting so tall and his voice so low -- standing behind him, hands in his pockets, looking at the *Yazoo Queen*.

"I'm a-thinking," said Alvin, "as how instead of just looking at this boat, we ought to get on it and ride a spell."

"How far?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"You asking cause you're hoping it's a long way or a short one?"

"This one goes clear to Barcy."

"It does if the fog on the Mizzippy lets it," said Alvin.

Arthur Stuart made a goofy face at him. "Oh, that's right, cause around you that fog's just bound to close right in."

"It might," said Alvin. "Me and water never did get along."

"When you was a little baby, maybe," said Arthur Stuart. "Fog does what you tell it to do these days."

"You think," said Alvin.

"You showed me your own self."

"I showed you with smoke from a candle," said Alvin, "and just because I *can* do it don't mean that every fog or smoke you see is doing what I say."

"Don't mean it ain't, either," said Arthur Stuart, grinning.

"I'm just waiting to see if this boat's a slave ship or not," said Alvin.

Arthur Stuart looked over where Alvin was looking, at the runaways. "Why don't you just turn them loose?" he asked.

"And where would they go?" said Alvin. "They're being watched."

"Not all that careful," said Arthur Stuart. "Them so-called guards has got jugs that ain't close to full by now."

"The Finders still got their sachets. It wouldn't take long to round them up again, and they'd be in even more trouble."

"So you ain't going to do a thing about it?"

"Arthur Stuart, I can't just pry the manacles off every slave in the South."

"I seen you melt iron like it was butter," said Arthur Stuart.

"So a bunch of slaves run away and leave behind puddles of iron that was once their chains," said Alvin. "What do the authorities think? There was a blacksmith snuck in with a teeny tiny bellows and a ton of coal and lit him a fire that het them chains up? And then he run off after, taking all his coal with him in his pockets?"

Arthur Stuart looked at him defiantly. "So it's all about keeping you safe."

"I reckon so," said Alvin. "You know what a coward I am."

Last year, Arthur Stuart would have blinked and said he was sorry, but now that his voice had changed the word "sorry" didn't come so easy to his lips. "You can't heal everybody, neither," he said, "but that don't stop you from healing *some*."

"No point in freeing them as can't stay free," said Alvin. "And how many of them would run, do you think, and how many drown themselves in the river?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Because they know as well as I do, there ain't no freedom here in Carthage City for a runaway slave. This town may be the biggest on the Hio, but it's more southern than northern, when it comes to slavery. There's even buying and selling of slaves here, they say, flesh markets hidden in cellars, and the authorities know about it and don't do a thing because there's so much money in it."

"So there's nothing you can do."

"I healed their wrists and ankles where the manacles bite so deep. I cooled them in the sun and cleaned the water they been given to drink so it don't make them sick."

Now, finally, Arthur Stuart looked a bit embarrassed -- though still defiant. "I never said you wasn't *nice*," he said.

"Nice is all I can be," said Alvin. "In this time and place. That and I don't plan to give my money to this captain iffen the slaves are going southbound on his boat. I won't help pay for no slave ship."

"He won't even notice the price of our passage."

"Oh, he'll notice, all right," said Alvin. "This Captain Howard is a fellow what can tell how much money you got in your pocket by the smell of it."

"*You* can't even do that," said Arthur Stuart.

"Money's his knack," said Alvin. "That's my guess. He's got him a pilot to steer the ship, and an engineer to keep that steam engine going, and a carpenter to tend the paddlewheel and such damage as the boat takes passing close to the left bank all the way down the Mizzippy. So why is he captain? It's about the money. He knows who's got it, and he knows how to talk it out of them."

"So how much money's he going to think *you* got?"

"Enough money to own a big young slave, but not enough money to afford one what doesn't have such a mouth on him."

Arthur Stuart glared. "You don't own me."

"I told you, Arthur Stuart, I didn't want you on this trip and I still don't. I hate taking you south because I have to pretend you're my property, and I don't know which is worse, you pretending to be a slave, or me pretending to be the kind of man as would own one."

"I'm going and that's that."

"So you keep on saying," said Alvin.

"And you must not mind because you could force me to stay here iffen you wanted."

"Don't say 'iffen,' it drives Peggy crazy when you do."

"She ain't here and you say it your own self."

"The idea is for the younger generation to be an improvement over the older."

"Well, then, you're a mizzable failure, you got to admit, since I been studying making with you for lo these many years and I can barely make a candle flicker or a stone crack."

"I think you're doing fine, and you're better than that, anyway, if you just put your mind to it."

"I put my mind to it till my head feels like a cannonball."

"I suppose I should have said, Put your heart in it. It's not about *making* the candle or the stone -- or the iron chains, for that matter -- it's not about *making* them do what you want, it's about *getting* them to do what you want."

"I don't see you setting down and *talking* no iron into bending or dead wood into sprouting twigs, but they do it."

"You may not see me or hear me do it, but I'm doing it all the same, only they don't understand words, they understand the plan in my heart."

"Sounds like making wishes to me."

"Only because you haven't learned yourself how to do it yet."

"Which means you ain't much of a teacher."

"Neither is Peggy, what with you still saying 'ain't'."

"Difference is, I know how *not* to say 'ain't' when she's around to hear it," said Arthur Stuart, "only I can't poke out a dent in a tin cup whether you're there or not."

"Could if you cared enough," said Alvin.

"I want to ride on this boat."

"Even if it's a slave ship?" said Alvin.

"Us staying off ain't going to make it any less a slave ship," said Arthur Stuart.

"Ain't you the idealist."

"You ride this *Yazoo Queen*, Master of mine, and you can keep those slaves comfy all the way back to hell."

The mockery in his tone was annoying, but not misplaced, Alvin decided.

"I could do that," said Alvin. "Small blessings can feel big enough, when they're all you got."

"So buy the ticket, cause this boat's supposed to sail first thing in the morning, and we want to be aboard already, don't we?"

Alvin didn't like the mixture of casualness and eagerness in Arthur Stuart's words. "You don't happen to have some plan to set these poor souls free during the voyage, do you? Because you know they'd jump overboard and there ain't a one of them knows how to swim, you can bet on that, so it'd be plain murder to free them."

"I got no such plan."

"I need your promise you won't free them."

"I won't life a finger to help them," said Arthur Stuart. "I can make my heart as hard as yours whenever I want."

"I hope you don't think that kind of talk makes me glad to have your company," said Alvin. "Specially because I think you know I don't deserve it."

"You telling me you *don't* make your heart hard, to see such sights and do nothing?"

"If I could make my heart hard," said Alvin, "I'd be a worse man, but a happier one."

Then he went off to the booth where the *Yazoo Queen's* purser was selling passages. Bought him a cheap ticket all the way to Nueva Barcelona, and a servant's passage for his boy. Made him angry just to have to say the words, but he lied with his face and the tone of his voice and the purser didn't seem to notice anything amiss. Or maybe all slave owners were just a little angry with themselves, so Alvin didn't seem much different from any other.

*

Plain truth of it was, Alvin was about as excited to make this voyage as a man could get. He loved machinery, all the hinges, pistons, elbows of metal, the fire hot as a smithy, the steam pent up in the boilers. He loved the great paddlewheel, turning like the one he grew up with at his father's mill, except here it was the wheel pushing the water, stead of the water pushing the wheel. He loved feeling the strain on the steel -- the torque, the compression, the levering, the flexing and cooling. He sent out his doodlebug and wandered around inside the machines, so he'd know it all like he knew his own body.

The engineer was a good man who cared well for his machine, but there was things he couldn't know. Small cracks in the metal, places where the stress was too much, places where the grease wasn't enough and the friction was a-building up. Soon as he understood how it ought to be, Alvin began to teach the metal how to heal itself, how to seal the tiny fractures, how to smooth itself so the friction was less. That boat wasn't more than two hours out of Carthage before he had the machinery about as perfect as a steam engine could get, and then

it was just a matter of riding with it. His body, like everybody else's, riding on the gently shifting deck, and his doodlebug skittering through the machinery to feel it pushing and pulling.

But soon enough it didn't need his attention any more, and so the machinery moved to the back of his mind while he began to take an interest in the goings-on among the passengers.

There was people with money in the first-class cabins, with their servants' quarters close at hand. And then people like Alvin, with only a little coin, but enough for the second-class cabins, where there was four passengers to the room. All *their* servants, them as had any, was forced to sleep below decks like the crew, only even more cramped, not because there wasn't room to do better, but because the crew was bound to get surly iffen their bed was as bad as a blackamoor's.

And finally there was the steerage passengers, who didn't even have no beds, but just benches. Them as was going only a short way, a day's journey or so, it made plain good sense to go steerage. But a good many was just poor folks bound for some far-off destination, like Thebes or Corinth or Barcy itself, and if their butts got sore on the benches, well, it wouldn't be the first pain they suffered in their life, nor would it be their last.

Still, Alvin felt like it was kind of his duty, being as how it took him so little effort, to sort of shape the benches to the butts that sat on them. And it took no great trouble to get the lice and bedbugs to move on up to the first class cabins. Alvin thought of it as kind of an educational project, to help the bugs get a taste of the high life. Blood so fine must be like fancy likker to a louse, and they ought to get some knowledge of it before their short lives was over.

All this took Alvin's concentration for a good little while. Not that he ever gave it his whole attention -- that would be too dangerous, in their world where he had enemies out to kill him, and strangers as would wonder what was in his bag that he kept it always so close at hand. So he kept an eye out for all the heartfires on the boat, and if any seemed coming a-purpose towards him, he'd know it, right enough.

Except it didn't work that way. He didn't sense a soul anywheres near him, and then there was a hand right there on his shoulder, and he like to jumped clean overboard with the shock of it.

"What the devil are you -- Arthur Stuart, don't sneak up on a body like that."

"It's hard not to sneak with the steam engine making such a racket," said Arthur, but he was a-grinnin' like old Davy Crockett, he was so proud of himself.

"Why is it the one skill you take the trouble to master is the one that causes me the most grief?" asked Alvin.

"I think it's good to know how to hide my ... heartfire." He said the last word real soft, on account of it didn't do to talk about makery where others might hear and get too curious.

Alvin taugt the skill freely to all who took it serious, but he didn't put on a show of it to inquisitive strangers, especially because there was no shortage of them as would remember hearing tales of the runaway smith's apprentice who stole a magic golden plowshare. Didn't matter that the tale was three-fourths fantasy and nine-tenths lie. It could get Alvin kilt or knocked upside the head and robbed all the same, and the one part that was true was that living plow inside his poke, which he didn't want to lose, specially not now after carrying it up and down America for half his life now.

"Ain't nobody on this boat can see your heartfire ceptin' me," said Alvin. "So the only reason for you to learn to hide is to hide from the one person you shouldn't hide from anyhow."

"That's plain dumb," said Arthur Stuart. "If there's one person a slave has to hide from, it's his master."

Alvin glared at him. Arthur grinned back.

A voice boomed out from across the deck. "I like to see a man who's easy with his servants!"

Alvin turned to see a smallish man with a big smile and a face that suggested he had a happy opinion of himself.

"My name's Austin," said the fellow. "Stephen Austin, attorney at law, born, bred, and schooled in the Crown Colonies, and now looking for people as need legal work out here on the edge of civilization."

"The folks on either hand of the Hio like to think of theirselves as mostwise civilized," said Alvin, "but then, they haven't been to Camelot to see the King."

"Was I imagining that I heard you speak to your boy there as 'Arthur Stuart'?"

"It was someone else's joke at the naming of the lad," said Alvin, "but I reckon by now the name suits him." All the time Alvin was thinking, what does this man want, that he'd trouble to speak to a sun-browned, strong-armed, thick-headed-looking wight like me?

He could feel a breath for speech coming up in Arthur Stuart, but the last thing Alvin wanted was to deal with whatever fool thing the boy might take it into his head to say. So he gripped him noticeably on the shoulder and it just kind of squeezed the air right out of him without more than a sigh.

"I noticed you've got shoulders on you," said Austin.

"Most folks do," said Alvin. "Two of 'em, nicely matched, one to an arm."

"I almost thought you might be a smith, except smiths always have one huge shoulder, and the other more like a normal man's."

"Except such smiths as use their left hand exactly as often as their right, just so they keep their balance."

Austin chuckled. "Well, then, that solves the mystery. You *are* a smith."

"When I got me a bellows, and charcoal, and iron, and a good pot."

"I don't reckon you carry that around with you in your poke."

"Sir," said Alvin, "I been to Camelot once, and I don't recollect as how it was good manners there to talk about a man's poke or his shoulders neither, upon such short acquaintance."

"Well, of course, it's bad manners all around the world, I'd say, and I apologize. I meant no disrespect. Only I'm recruiting, you see, them as has skills we need, and yet who don't have a firm place in life. Wandering men, you might say."

"Lots of men a-wanderin'," said Alvin, "and not all of them are what they claim."

"But that's why I've accosted you like this, my friend," said Austin. "Because you weren't claiming a blessed thing. And on the river, to meet a man with no brag is a pretty good recommendation."

"Then you're new to the river," said Alvin, "because many a man with no brag is afraid of gettin' recognized."

"Recognized," said Austin. "Not 'reckonize.' So you've had you some schooling."

"Not as much as it would take to turn a smith into a gentleman."

"I'm recruiting," said Austin. "For an expedition."

"Smiths in particular need?"

"Strong men good with tools of all kinds," said Austin.

"Got work already, though," said Alvin. "And an errand in Barcy."

"So you wouldn't be interested in trekking out into new lands, which are now in the hands of bloody savages, awaiting the arrival of Christian men to cleanse the land of their awful sacrifices?"

Alvin instantly felt a flush of anger mixed with fear, and as he did whenever so strong a feeling came over him, he smiled brighter than ever and kept hisself as calm as could be. "I reckon you'd have to brave the fog and cross to the west bank of the river for that," said Alvin. "And I hear the Reds on that side of the river has some pretty powerful eyes and ears, just watching for Whites as think they can take war into peaceable places."

"Oh, you misunderstood me, my friend," said Austin. "I'm not talking about the prairies where one time trappers used to wander and now the Reds won't let no white man pass."

"So what savages did you have in mind?"

"South, my friend, south and west. The evil Mexica tribes, that vile race that tears the heart out of a living man upon the tops of their ziggurats."

"That's a long trek indeed," said Alvin. "And a foolish one. What the might of Spain couldn't rule, you think a few Englishmen with a lawyer at their head can conquer?"

By now Austin was leaning on the rail beside Alvin, looking out over the water. "The Mexica have become rotten. Hated by the other Reds they rule, dependent on trade with Spain for second-rate weaponry -- I tell you it's ripe for conquest. Besides, how big an army can they put in the field, after killing so many men on their altars for all these centuries?"

"It's a fool as goes looking for a war that no one brought to him."

"Aye, a fool, a whole passel of fools. The kind of fools as wants to be as rich as Pizarro, who conquered the great Inca with a handful of men."

"Or as dead as Cortez?"

"They're all dead now," said Austin. "Or did you think to live forever?"

Alvin was torn between telling the fellow to go pester someone else and leading him on so he could find out more about what he was planning. But in the long run, it wouldn't do to become too familiar with this fellow, Alvin decided. "I reckon I've wasted your time up to now, Mr. Austin. There's others are bound to be more interested than I am, since I got no interest at all."

Austin smiled all the more broadly, but Alvin saw how his pulse leapt up and his heartfire blazed. A man who didn't like being told no, but hid it behind a smile.

"Well, it's good to make a friend all the same," said Austin, sticking out his hand.

"No hard feelings," said Alvin, "and thanks for thinking of me as a man you might want at your side."

"No hard feelings indeed," said Austin, "and though I won't ask you again, if you change your mind I'll greet you with a ready heart and hand."

They shook on it, clapped shoulders, and Austin went on his way without a backward glance.

"Well, well," said Arthur Stuart. "What do you want to bet it isn't no invasion or war, but just a raiding party bent on getting some of that Mexica gold?"

"Hard to guess," said Alvin. "But he talks free enough, for a man proposing to do something forbidden by King and by Congress. Neither the Crown Colonies nor the United States would have much patience with him if he was caught."

"Oh, I don't know," said Arthur Stuart. "The law's one thing, but what if King Arthur got it in his head that he needed more land and more slaves and didn't want a war with the U.S.A. to get it?"

"Now there's a thought," said Alvin.

"A pretty smart thought, I think," said Arthur Stuart.

"It's doing you good, traveling with me," said Alvin. "Finally getting some sense into your head."

"I thought of it first," said Arthur Stuart.

In answer, Alvin took a letter out of his pocket and showed it to the boy.

"It's from Miz Peggy," said Arthur. He read for a moment. "Oh, now, don't tell me you knew this fellow was going to be on the boat."

"I most certainly did not have any idea," said Alvin. "I figured my inquiries would begin in Nueva Barcelona. But now I've got a good ide a *whom* to watch when we get there."

"She talks about a man named Burr," said Arthur Stuart.

"But he'd have men under him," said Alvin. "Men to go out recruiting for him, iffen he hopes to raise an army."

"And he just happened to walk right up to you."

"He just happened to listen to you sassing me," said Alvin, "and figured I wasn't much of a master, so maybe I'd be a natural follower."

Arthur Stuart folded up the letter and handed it back to Alvin. "So if the King *is* putting together an invasion of Mexico, what of it?"

"Iffen he's fighting the Mexica," said Alvin, "he can't be fighting the free states, now, can he?"

"So maybe the slave states won't be so eager to pick a fight," said Arthur Stuart.

"But someday the war with Mexico will end," said Alvin. "Iffen there is a war, that is. And when it ends, either the King lost, in which case he'll be mad and ashamed and spoilin' for trouble, or he won, in which case he'll have a treasury full of Mexica gold, able to buy him a whole navy iffen he wants."

"Miz Peggy wouldn't be too happy to hear you sayin' 'iffen' so much."

"War's a bad thing, when you take after them as haven't done you no harm, and don't mean to."

"But wouldn't it be good to stop all that human sacrifice?"

"I think the Reds as are prayin' for relief from the Mexica don't exactly have slavers in mind as their new masters."

"But slavery's better than death, ain't it?"

"Your mother didn't think so," said Alvin. "And now let's have done with such talk. It just makes me sad."

"To think of human sacrifice? Or slavery?"

"No. To hear you talk as if one was better than the other." And with that dark mood on him, Alvin walked to the room that so far he had all to himself, set the golden plow upon the bunk, and curled up around it to think and doze and dream a little and see if he could understand what it all meant, to have this Austin fellow acting so bold about his project, and to have Arthur Stuart be so blind, when so many people had sacrificed so much to keep him free.

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It wasn't till they got to Thebes that another passenger was assigned to Alvin's cabin. He'd gone ashore to see the town -- which was being touted as the greatest city on the American Nile -- and when he came back, there was a man asleep on the very bunk where Alvin had been sleeping.

Which was irksome, but understandable. It was the best bed, being the lower bunk on the side that got sunshine in the cool of the morning instead of the heat of the afternoon. And it's not as if Alvin had left any possessions in the cabin to mark the bed as his own. He carried his poke with him when he left the boat, and all his worldly goods was in it. Lessen you counted the baby that his wife carried inside her -- which, come to think of it, she carried around with her about as constantly as Alvin carried that golden plow.

So Alvin didn't wake the fellow up. He just turned and left, looking for Arthur Stuart or a quiet place to eat the supper he'd brought on board. Arthur had insisted he wanted to stay aboard, and that was fine with Alvin, but he was blamed if he was going to hunt him down before eating. It wasn't no secret that the whistle had blowed the signal for everyone to come aboard. So Arthur Stuart should have been watching for Alvin, and he wasn't.

Not that Alvin doubted where he was. He could key right in on Arthur's heartfire most of the time, and he doubted the boy could hide from him if Alvin was actually seeking him out. Right now he knew that the boy was down below in the slave quarters, a place where no one would ask him his business or wonder where his master was. What he was about was another matter.

Almost as soon as Alvin opened up his poke to take out the cornbread and cheese and cider he'd brought in from town, he could see Arthur start moving up the ladderway to the deck. Not for the first time, Alvin wondered just how much the boy really understood of making.

Arthur Stuart wasn't a liar by nature, but he could keep a secret, more or less, and wasn't it just possible that he hadn't quite got around to telling Alvin all that he'd learned how to do? Was there a chance the boy picked that moment to come up because he *knew* Alvin was back from town, and *knew* he was setting hisself down to eat?

Sure enough, Alvin hadn't got but one bite into his first slice of bread and cheese when Arthur Stuart plunked himself down beside him on the bench. Alvin could've eaten in the dining room, but there it would have given offense for him to let his "servant" set beside him. Out on the deck, it was nobody's business. Might make him look low class, in the eyes of some slaveowners, but Alvin didn't much mind what slaveowners thought of him.

"What was it like?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"Bread tastes like bread."

"I didn't mean the bread, for pity's sake!"

"Cheese is pretty good, despite being made from milk that come from the most measly, mangy, scrawny, fly-bit, sway-backed, half-blind, bony-hipped, ill-tempered, cud-pukin', sawdust-fed bunch of cattle as ever teetered on the edge of the grave."

"So they don't specialize in fine dairy, is what you're saying."

"I'm saying that if Thebes is spose to be the greatest city on the American Nile, they might oughta start by draining the swamp. I mean, the reason the Hio and the Mizzippy come together here is because it's low ground, and being low ground it gets flooded a lot. It didn't take no scholar to figure that out."

"Never heard of a scholar who knowed low ground from high, anyhow."

"Now, Arthur Stuart, it's not a requirement that scholars be dumb as mud about ... well, mud."

"Oh, I know. Somewhere there's bound to be a scholar who's got book-learnin' *and* common sense, both. He just hasn't come to America."

"Which I spose is proof of the common sense part, bein' as this is the sort of country where they build a great city in the middle of a bog."

They chuckled together and then filled up their mouths too much for talking.

When the food was gone -- and Arthur had et more than half of it, and looked like he was wishing for more -- Alvin asked him, pretending to be all casual about it, "So what was so interesting down with the servants in the hold?"

"The slaves, you mean?"

"I'm trying to talk like the kind of person as would own one," said Alvin very softly. "And you ought to try to talk like the kind of person as was owned. Or don't come along on trips south."

"I was trying to find out what language those score-and-a-quarter chained-up runaways was talking."

"And?"

"Ain't French, cause there's a cajun what says not. Ain't Spanish, cause there's a fellow grew up in Cuba what says not. Nary a soul knew their talk."

"Well, at least we know what they're not."

"I know more than that," said Arthur Stuart.

"I'm listening."

"The Cuba fellow, he takes me aside and he says, Tell you what, boy, I think I hear me their kind talk afore, and I says, what's their language, and he says, I think they be no kind runaway."

"Why's he think that?" said Alvin. But inside, he's noticing the way Arthur Stuart picks up exactly the words the fellow said, and the accent, and he remembers how it used to be when Arthur Stuart could do any voice he heard, a perfect mimic. And not just human voices, neither, but bird calls and animal cries, and a baby crying, and the wind in the trees or the scrape of a shoe on dirt. But that was before Alvin changed him, deep inside, changed the very smell of him so that the Finders couldn't match him up to his satchet no more. He had to change him in the smallest, most hidden parts of him. Cost him part of his knack, it did, and that was a harsh thing to do to a child. But it also saved his freedom. Alvin couldn't regret doing it. But he could regret the cost.

"He says, I hear me their kind talk aforeday, long day ago, when I belong a massuh go Mexico."

Alvin nodded wisely, though he had no idea what this might mean.

"And I says to him, How come black folk be learning Mexica talk? And he says, They be black folk all over Mexico, from aforeday."

"That would make sense," said Alvin. "The Mexica only threw the Spanish out fifty years ago. I reckon they was inspired by Tom Jefferson getting Cherricky free from the King. Spanish must've brought plenty of slaves to Mexico up to then."

"Well, sure," said Arthur Stuart. "So I was wondering, if the Mexica kill so many sacrifices, why didn't they use up these African slaves first? And he says, Black man dirty, Mexica no can cook him up for Mexica god. And then he just laughed and laughed."

"I guess there's advantages to having folks think you're impure by nature."

"Heard a lot of preachers in America say that God thinks *all* men is filthy at heart."

"Arthur Stuart, I know that's a falsehood, because in your life you never been to hear *alot* of preachers say a blame thing."

"Well, I heard *of* preachers saying such things. Which explains why our God don't hold with human sacrifice. Ain't none of us worthy, white or black."

"Except I don't think that's the opinion God has of his children," said Alvin, "and neither do you."

"I think what I think," said Arthur Stuart. "Ain't always the same thing as you."

"I'm just happy you've taken up thinkin' at all," said Alvin.

"As a hobby," said Arthur Stuart. "I ain't thinkin' of takin' it up as a trade or nothin'."

Alvin gave a chuckle, and Arthur Stuart settled back to enjoy it.

Alvin got to thinking out loud. "So. We got us twenty-five slaves who used to belong to the Mexica. Only now they're going down the Mizzippy on the very same boat as a man recruiting soldiers for an expedition *against* Mexico. That's a downright miraculous coincidence."

"Guides?" said Arthur Stuart.

"I reckon that's likely. Maybe they're wearing chains for the same reason you're pretending to be a slave. So people will think they're one thing, when actually they're another."

"Or maybe somebody's so dumb he thinks that chained-up slaves will be good guides through uncharted land."

"So you're saying maybe they won't be reliable."

"I'm saying maybe they think starving to death all lost in the desert ain't a bad way to die, if they can take some white slaveowners with them."

Alvin nodded. The boy did understand that slaves might prefer death, after all. "Well, I don't speak Mexica, and neither do you."

"Yet," said Arthur Stuart.

"Don't see how you'll learn it," said Alvin. "They don't let nobody near 'em."

"Yet," said Arthur Stuart.

"I hope you ain't got some damn fool plan going on in your head that you're not going to tell me about."

"Don't mind telling you. I already got me a turn feeding them and picking up their slop bucket. The pre-dawn turn, which nobody belowdecks is hankering to do."

"They're guarded day and night. How you going to start talking to them anyway?"

"Come on now, Alvin, you know there must be at least one of them speaks English, or how would they be able to guide anybody anywhere?"

"Or one of them speaks Spanish, and one of the slaveowners speaks it too, you ever think of that?"

"That's why I got the Cuba fellow to teach me Spanish."

That was brag. "I was only gone into town for six hours, Arthur Stuart."

"Well, he didn't teach me *all* of it."

That set Alvin to wondering once again if Arthur Stuart had more of his knack left than he ever let on. Learn a language in six hours? Of course, there was no guarantee that the Cuban slave knew all that much Spanish, any more than he knew all the much English. But what if Arthur Stuart had him a knack for languages? What if he'd never been a mimic at all, but instead a natural speaker-of-all-tongues? There was tales of such -- of men and women who could hear a language and speak it like a native right from the start.

Did Arthur Stuart have such a knack? Now that the boy was becoming a man, was he getting a real grasp of it? For a moment Alvin caught himself being envious. And then he had to laugh at himself -- imagine a fellow with *his* knack, envying somebody else. I can make rock flow like water, I can make water as strong as steel and as clear as glass, I can turn iron into living gold, and I'm jealous because I can't also learn languages the way a cat learns to land on its feet? The sin of ingratitude, just one of many that's going to get me sent to hell.

"What're you laughing at?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"Just appreciating that you're not a mere boy any more. I trust that if you need any help from me -- like somebody catches you talking to them Mexica slaves and starts whipping you -- you'll contrive some way to let me know that you need some help?"

"Sure. And if that knife-wielding killer who's sleeping in your bed gets troublesome, I expect you'll find some way to let me know what you want written on your tombstone?" Arthur Stuart grinned at him.

"Knife-wielding killer?" Alvin asked.

"That's the talk belowdecks. But I reckon you'll just ask him yourself, and he'll tell you all about it. That's how you usually do things, isn't it?"

Alvin nodded. "I spose I do start out asking pretty direct what I want to know."

"And so far you mostly haven't got yourself killed," said Arthur Stuart.

"My average is pretty good so far," said Alvin modestly.

"Haven't always found out what you wanted to know, though," said Arthur Stuart.

"But I always find out something useful," said Alvin. "Like, how easy it is to get some folks riled."

"If I didn't know you had another, I'd say that *was* your knack."

"Rilin' folks."

"They do get mad at you pretty much when you say hello, sometimes," said Arthur Stuart.

"Whereas nobody ever gets mad at you."

"I'm a likeable fellow," said Arthur Stuart.

"Not always," said Alvin. "You got a bit of brag in you that can be annoying sometimes."

"Not to my friends," said Arthur, grinning.

"No," Alvin conceded. "But it drives your family insane."

By the time Alvin got to his room, the "knife-wielding killer" had woken up from his nap and was somewhere else. Alvin toyed with sleeping in the very same bed, which had been his first, after all. But that was likely to start a fight, and Alvin just plain didn't care all that much. He was glad to have a bed at all, come to think of it, and with four bunks in the room to share between two men, there was no call to be provoking anybody over who got to which one first.

Drifting off to sleep, Alvin reached out as he always did, seeking Peggy, making sure from her heartfire that she was all right. And then the baby, growing fine inside her, had a heartbeat now. Not going to end like the first pregnancy, with a baby born too soon so it couldn't get its breath. Not going to watch it gasp its little life away in a couple of desperate minutes, turning blue and dying in his arms while he frantically searched inside it for some way to fix it so's it could live. What good is it to be a seventh son of a seventh son if the one person you can't heal is your own firstborn baby?

Alvin and Peggy clung together for the first days after that, but then over the weeks to follow she began to grow apart from him, to avoid him, until he finally realized that she was keeping him from being with her to make another baby. He talked with her then, about how you couldn't hide from it, lots of folks lost babies, and half-grown children too, the thing to do was try again, have another, and another, to comfort you when you thought about the little body in the grave.

"I grew up with two graves before my eyes," she said, "and knowing how my parents looked at me and saw my dead sisters with the same name as me."

"Well you was a torch, so you knew more than children ought to know about what goes on inside folks. Our baby most likely won't be a torch. All she'll know is how much we love her and how much we wanted her."

He wasn't sure he so much persuaded her to want another baby as she decided to try again just to make him happy. And during this pregnancy, just like last time, she kept gallivanting up and down the country, working for abolition even as she tried to find some way to bring about freedom short of war. While Alvin stayed in Vigor Church or Hatrack River, teaching them as wanted to learn the rudiments of makery.

Until she had an errand for him, like now. Sending him downriver on a steamboat to Nueva Barcelona, when in his secret heart he just wished she'd stay home with him and let him take care of her.

Course, being a torch she knew perfectly well that was what he wished for, it was no secret at all. So she must need to be apart from him more than he needed to be with her, and he could live with that.

Couldn't stop him from looking for her on the skirts of sleep, and dozing off with her heartfire and the baby's, so bright in his mind.

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He woke in the dark, knowing something was wrong. It was a heartfire right up close to him; then he heard the soft breath of a stealthy man. With his doodlebug he got inside the man and felt what he was doing -- reaching across Alvin toward the poke that was tucked in the crook of his arm.

Robbery? On board a riverboat was a blame foolish time for it, if that was what the man had in mind. Unless he was a good enough swimmer to get to shore carrying a heavy golden plowshare.

The man carried a knife in a sheath at his belt, but his hand wasn't on it, so he wasn't looking for trouble.

So Alvin spoke up soft as could be. "If you're looking for food, the door's on the other side of the room."

Oh, the man's heart gave a jolt at that! And his first instinct was for his hand to fly to that knife -- he was quick at it, too, Alvin could see that it didn't much matter whether his hand was on the knife or not, he was always ready with that blade.

But in a moment the fellow got a hold of hisself, and Alvin could pretty much guess at his reasoning. It was a dark night, and as far as this fellow knew, Alvin couldn't see any better than him.

"You was snoring," said the man. "I was looking to jostle you to get you to roll over."

Alvin knew that was a flat lie. When Peggy had mentioned a snoring problem to him years ago, he studied out what made people snore and fixed his palate so it didn't make that noise any more. He had a rule about not using his knack to benefit himself, but he figured curing his snore was a gift to other people. *He* always slept through it.

Still, he'd let the lie ride. "Why, thank you," said Alvin. "I sleep pretty light, though, so all it takes is you sayin' 'roll over' and I'll do it. Or so my wife tells me."

And then, bold as brass, the fellow as much as confesses what he was doing. "You know, stranger, whatever you got in that sack, you hug it so close to you that somebody might get curious about what's so valuable."

"I've learned that folks get just as curious when I *don't* hug it close, and they feel a mite freer about groping in the dark to get a closer look."

The man chuckled. "So I reckon you ain't planning to tell me much about it."

"I always answer a well-mannered question," said Alvin.

"But since it ain't good manners to ask about what's in your sack," said the man, "I reckon you don't answer such questions at all."

"I'm glad to meet a man who knows good manners."

"Good manners and a knife that don't break off at the stem, that's what keeps me at peace with the world."

"Good manners has always been enough for me," said Alvin. "Though I admit I would have liked that knife better back when it was still a file."

With a bound the man was at the door, his knife drawn. "Who are you, and what do you know about me?"

"I don't know nothing about you, sir," said Alvin. "But I'm a blacksmith, and I know a file that's been made over into a knife. More like a sword, if you ask me."

"I haven't drawn my knife aboard this boat."

"I'm glad to hear it. But when I walked in on *you* asleep, it was still daylight enough to see the size and shape of the sheath you keep it in. Nobody makes a knife that thick at the haft, but it was right proportioned for a file."

"You can't tell something like that just from looking," said the man. "You heard something. Somebody's been talking."

"People are always talking, but not about you," said Alvin. "I know my trade, as I reckon you know yours. My name's Alvin."

"Alvin Smith, eh?"

"I count myself lucky to have a name. I'd lay good odds that you've got one too."

The man chuckled and put his knife away. "Jim Bowie."

"Don't sound like a trade name to me."

"It's a scotch word. Means light-haired."

"Your hair is dark."

"But I reckon the first Bowie was a blond Viking who liked what he saw while he was busy raping and pillaging in Scotland, and so he stayed."

"One of his children must have got that Viking spirit again and found his way across another sea."

"I'm a Viking through and through," said Bowie. "You guessed right about this knife. I was witness at a duel at a smithy just outside Natchez a few years ago. Things got out of hand when they both missed -- I reckon folks came to see blood and didn't want to be disappointed. One fellow managed to put a bullet through my leg, so I thought I was well out of it, until I saw Major Norris Wright setting on a boy half his size and half his age, and that riled me up. Riled me so bad that I clean forgot I was wounded and bleeding like a slaughtered pig. I went berserk and snatched up a blacksmith's file and stuck it clean through his heart."

"You got to be a strong man to do that."

"Oh, it's more than that. I didn't slip it between no ribs. I jammed it right *through* a rib. We Vikings get the strength of giants when we go berzerk."

"Am I right to guess that the knife you carry is that very same file?"

"A cutler in Philadelphia reshaped it for me."

"Did it by grinding, not forging," said Alvin.

"That's right."

"Your lucky knife."

"I ain't dead yet."

"Reckon that takes a lot of luck, if you got the habit of reaching over sleeping men to get at their poke."

The smile died on Bowie's face. "Can't help it if I'm curious."

"Oh, I know, I got me the same fault."

"So now it's your turn," said Bowie.

"My turn for what?"

"To tell your story."

"Me? Oh, all I got's a common skinning knife, but I've done my share of wandering in wild lands and it's come in handy."

"You know that's not what I'm asking."

"That's what I'm telling, though."

"I told you about my knife, so you tell me about your sack."

"You tell everybody about your knife," said Alvin, "which makes it so you don't have to use it so much. But I don't tell nobody about my sack."

"That just makes folks more curious," said Bowie. "And some folks might even get suspicious."

"From time to time that happens," said Alvin. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of his bunk and stood. He had already sized up this Bowie fellow and knew that he'd be at least four inches taller, with longer arms and the massive shoulders of a blacksmith. "But I smile so nice their suspicions just go away."

Bowie laughed out loud at that. "You're a big fellow, all right! And you ain't afeared of nobody."

"I'm afraid of lots of folks," said Alvin. "Especially a man can shove a file through a man's rib and ream out his heart."

Bowie nodded at that. "Well, now, ain't that peculiar. Lots of folks been afraid of me in my time. But the more scared they was, the less likely they was to admit it. You're the first one actually said he was afraid of me. So does that make you the *most* scared? Or the least?"

"Tell you what," said Alvin. "You keep your hands off my poke, and we'll never have to find out."

Bowie laughed again -- but his grin looked more like a wildcat snarling at its prey than like an actual smile. "I like you, Alvin Smith."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Alvin.

"I know a man who's looking for fellows like you."

So this Bowie was part of Austin's company. "If you're talking about Mr. Austin, he and I already agreed that he'll go his way and I'll go mine."

"Ah," said Bowie.

"Did you just join up with him in Thebes?"

"I'll tell you about my knife," said Bowie, "but I won't tell you about my business."

"I'll tell you mine," said Alvin. "My business right now is to get back to sleep and see if I can find the dream I was in before you decided to stop me snoring."

"Well, that's a good idea," said Bowie. "And since I haven't been to sleep at all yet tonight, on account of your snoring, I reckon I'll give it a go before the sun comes up."

Alvin lay back down and curled himself around his poke. His back was to Bowie, but of course he kept his doodlebug in him and knew every move he made. The man stood there watching Alvin for a long time, and from the way his heart was beating and the blood rushed around in him, Alvin could tell he was upset. Angry? Afraid? Hard to tell when you couldn't look at a man's face, and not so easy even then. But his heartfire blazed and Alvin figured the fellow was making some kind of decision about him.

Won't get to sleep very soon if he keeps himself all agitated like that, thought Alvin. So he reached inside the fellow and gradually calmed him down, got his heart beating slower, steadied his breathing. Most folks thought that their emotions caused their bodies to get all agitated, but it was the other way around, Alvin knew. The body leads, and the emotions follow.

In a couple of minutes Bowie was relaxed enough to yawn. And soon after, he was fast asleep. With his knife still strapped on, and his hand never far from it.

This Austin fellow had him some interesting friends.

*

Arthur Stuart was feeling way too cocky. But if you *know* you feel too cocky, and you compensate for it by being extra careful, then being cocky does you no harm, right? Except maybe it's your cockiness makes you feel like you're safer than you really are.

That's what Miz Peggy called "circular reasoning" and it wouldn't get him nowhere. Anywhere. One of them words. Whatever the rule was. Thinking about Miz Peggy always got him listening to the way he talked and finding fault with himself. Only what good would it do him to talk right? All he'd be is a half-Black man who somehow learned to talk like a gentleman -- a kind of trained monkey, that's how they'd see him. A dog walking on its hind legs. Not an *actual* gentleman.

Which was why he got so cocky, probably. Always wanting to prove something. Not to Alvin, really.

No, *expecially* to Alvin. Cause it was Alvin still treated him like a boy when he was a man now. Treated him like a son, but he was no man's son.

All this thinking was, of course, doing him no good at all, when his job was to pick up the foul-smelling slop bucket and make a slow and lazy job of it so's he'd have time to find out which of them spoke English or Spanish.

"Quien me compreende?" he whispered. "Who understands me?"

"Todos te comprendemos, pero calle la boca," whispered the third man. We all understand you, but shut your mouth. "Los blancos piensan que hay solo uno que hable un poco de ingles."

Boy howdy, he talked fast, with nothing like the accent the Cuban had. But still, when Arthur got the feel of a language in his mind, it wasn't that hard to sort it out. They all spoke Spanish, but they were pretending that only one of them spoke a bit of English.

"Quieren fugir de ser esclavos?" Do you want to escape from slavery?

"La unica puerta es la muerta." The only door is death.

"Al otro lado del rio," said Arthur, "hay rojos que son amigos nuestros." On the other side of the river there are Reds who are friends of ours.

"Sus amigos no son nuestros," answered the man. Your friends aren't ours.

Another man near enough to hear nodded in agreement. "Y ya no puedo nadar." And I can't swim anyway.

"Los blancos, que van a hacer?" What are the Whites going to do?

"Piensan en ser conquistadores." Clearly these men didn't think much of their masters' plans. "Los Mexicos van comer sus corazones." The Mexica will eat their hearts.

Another man chimed in. "Tu hablas como cubano." You talk like a Cuban.

"Soy americano," said Arthur Stuart. "Soy libre. Soy ..." He hadn't learned the Spanish for "citizen." "Soy igual." I'm equal. But not really, he thought. Still, I'm more equal than you.

Several of the Mexica Blacks sniffed at that. "Ya hay visto, tu dueño." All Arthur understood was "dueño," owner.

"Es amigo, no dueño." He's my friend, not my master.

Oh, they thought that was hilarious. But of course their laughter was silent, and a few of them glanced at the guard, who was dozing as he leaned against the wall.

"Me de promessa." Promise me. "Cuando el ferro quiebra, no se maten. No salguen sin ayuda." When the iron breaks, don't kill yourselves. Or maybe it meant don't get killed. Anyway, don't leave without help. Or that's what Arthur thought he was saying. They looked at him with total incomprehension.

"Voy quebrar el ferro," Arthur repeated.

One of them mockingly held out his hands. The chains made a noise. Several looked again at the guard.

"No con la mano," said Arthur. "Con la cabeza."

They looked at each other with obvious disappointment. Arthur knew what they were thinking -- this boy is crazy. Thinks he can break iron with his head. But he didn't know how to explain it any better.

"Mañana," he said.

They nodded wisely. Not a one of them believed him.

So much for the hours he'd spent learning Spanish. Though maybe the problem was that they just didn't know about makery and couldn't think of a man breaking iron with his mind.

Arthur Stuart knew he could do it. It was one of Alvin's earliest lessons, but it was only on this trip that Arthur had finally understood what Alvin meant. About getting inside the metal. All this time, Arthur had thought it was something he could do by straining real hard with his mind. But it wasn't like that at all. It was easy. Just a sort of turn of his mind. Kind of the way language worked for him. Getting the taste of the language on his tongue, and then trusting how it felt. Like knowing somehow that even though *mano* ended in *o*, it still needed *la* in front of it instead of *el*. He just knew how it ought to be.

Back in Carthage City, he gave two bits to a man selling sweet bread, and the man was trying to get away with not giving him change. Instead of yelling at him -- what good would that do, there on the levee, a half-Black boy yelling at a White man? -- Arthur just thought about the coin he'd been holding in his hand all morning, how *warm* it was, how right it felt in his own hand. It was like he understood the metal of it, the way he understood the music of language. And thinking of it warm like that, he could see in his mind that it was getting warmer.

He encouraged it, thought of it getting warmer and warmer, and all of a sudden the man cried out and started slapping at the pocket into which he'd dropped the quarter.

It was burning him.

He tried to get it out of his pocket, but it burned his fingers and finally he flung off his coat, flipped down his suspenders, and dropped his trousers, right in front of everybody. Tipped the coin out of his pocket onto the sidewalk, where it sizzled and made the wood start smoking.

Then all the man could think about was the sore place on his leg where the coin had burned him. Arthur Stuart walked up to him, all the time thinking the coin cool again. He reached down and picked it up off the sidewalk. "Reckon you oughta give me my change," he said.

"You get away from me, you Black devil," said the man. "You're a wizard, that's what you are. Cursing a man's coin, that's the same as thievin'!"

"That's awful funny, coming from a man who charged me two bits for a five-cent hunk of bread."

Several passersby chimed in.

"Trying to keep the boy's quarter, was you?"

"There's laws against that, even if the boy is Black."

"Stealin' from them as can't fight back."

"Pull up your trousers, fool."

A little later, Arthur Stuart got change for his quarter and tried to give the man his nickel, but he wouldn't let Arthur get near him.

Well, I tried, thought Arthur. I'm not a thief.

What I am is, I'm a maker.

No great shakes at it like Alvin, but dadgummit, I thought a quarter hot and it dang near burned its way out of the man's pocket.

If I can do that, then I can learn to do it all, that's what he thought, and that's why he was feeling cocky tonight. Because he'd been practicing every day on anything metal he could get his hands on. Wouldn't do no good to turn the iron hot enough to melt, of course -- these slaves wouldn't thank him if he burned their wrists and ankles up in the process of getting their chains off.

No, his project was to make the metal soft without getting it hot. That was a lot harder than hetting it up. Lots of times he'd caught himself straining again, trying to *push* softness onto the metal. But when he relaxed into it again and got the feel of the metal into his head like a song, he gradually began to get the knack of it again. Turned his own belt buckle so soft he could bend it into any shape he wanted. Though after a few minutes he realized the shape he wanted it in was like a belt buckle, since he still needed it to hold his pants up.

Brass was easier than iron, since it was softer in the first place. And it's not like Arthur Stuart was fast. He'd seen Alvin turn a gun barrel soft while a man was in the process of shooting it at him, that's how quick *he* was. But Arthur Stuart had to ponder on it first. Twenty-five slaves, each with an iron band at his ankle and another at his wrist. He had to make sure they all waited till the last one was free. If any of them bolted early, they'd all be caught.

Course, he could ask Alvin to help him. But he already had Alvin's answer. Leave 'em slaves, that's what Alvin had decided. But Arthur wouldn't do it. These men were in his hands. He was a maker now, after his own fashion, and it was up to him to decide for himself when it was right to act and right to let be. He couldn't do what Alvin did, healing folks and getting animals to do his bidding and turning water into glass. But he could soften iron, by damn, and so he'd set these men free.

Tomorrow night.

Next morning they passed from the Hio into the Mizzippy, and for the first time in years Alvin got a look at Tenskwa-Tawa's fog on the river.

It was like moving into a wall. Sunny sky, not a cloud, and when you looked ahead it really didn't look like much, just a little mist on the river. But all of a sudden you couldn't see more than a hundred yards ahead of you -- and that was only if you were headed up or down the river. If you kept going straight across to the right bank, it was like you went blind, you couldn't even see the front of your own boat.

It was the fence that Tenskwa Tawa had built to protect the Reds who moved west after the failure of Ta-Kumsaw's war. All the Reds who didn't want to live under White man's law, all the Reds who were done with war, they crossed over the water into the west, and then Tenskwa Tawa ... closed the door behind them.

Alvin had heard tales of the west from trappers who used to go there. They talked of mountains so sharp with stone, so rugged and high that they had snow on them clear into June. Places where the ground itself spat hot water fifty feet into the sky, or higher. Herds of buffalo so big they could pass by you all day and night, and next morning it still looked like there was just as many as yesterday. Grassland and desert, pine forest and lakes like jewels nestled among mountains so high that if you climbed to the top you ran out of air.

And all that was now Red land, where Whites would never go again. That's what this fog was all about.

Except for Alvin. He knew that if he wanted to, he could dispel that fog and cross over. Not only that, but he wouldn't be killed, neither. Tenskwa Tawa had said so, and there'd be no Red man who'd go against the Prophet's law.

A part of him wanted to put to shore, wait for the riverboat to move on, and then get him a canoe and paddle across the river and look for his old friend and teacher. It would be good to talk to him about all that was going on in the world. About the rumors of war coming, between the United States and the Crown Colonies -- or maybe between the free states and slave states within the U.S.A. About rumors of war with Spain to get control of the mouth of the Mizzippy, or war between the Crown Colonies and England.

And now this rumor of war with the Mexica. What would Tenskwa Tawa make of that? Maybe he had troubles of his own -- maybe he was working even now to make an alliance of Reds to head south and defend their lands against men who dragged their captives to the tops of their ziggurats and tore their hearts out to satisfy their god.

Anyway, that's the kind of thing going through Alvin's mind as he leaned on the rail on the right side of the boat -- the stabberd side, that was, though why boatmen should have different words for right and left made no sense to him. He was just standing there looking out into the fog and seeing no more than any other man, when he noticed something, not with his eyes, but with that inward vision that saw heartfires.

There was a couple of men out on the water, right out in the middle where they wouldn't be able to tell up from down. Spinning round and round, they were, and scared. It took only a moment to get the sense of it. Two men on a raft, only they didn't have drags under the raft and had it loaded front-heavy. Not boatmen, then. Had to be a homemade raft, and when their tiller broke they didn't know how to get the raft to keep its head straight downriver. At the mercy of the current, that's what, and no way of knowing what was happening five feet away.

Though it wasn't as if the *Yazoo Queen* was quiet. Still, fog had a way of damping down sounds. And even if they heard the riverboat, would they know what the sound was? To terrified men, it might sound like some kind of monster moving along the river.

Well, what could Alvin do about it? How could he claim to see what no one else could make out? And the flow of the river was too strong and complicated for him to get control of it, to steer the raft closer.

Time for some lying. Alvin turned around and shouted. "Did you hear that? Did you see them? Raft out of control on the river! Men on a raft, they were calling for help, spinning around out there!"

In no time the pilot and captain both were leaning over the rail of the pilot's deck. "I don't see a thing!" shouted the pilot.

"Not now," said Alvin. "But I saw 'em plain just a second ago, they're not far."

Captain Howard could see the drift of things and he didn't like it. "I'm not taking the *Yazoo Queen* any deeper into this fog than she already is! No sir! They'll fetch up on the bank farther downriver, it's no business of ours!"

"Law of the river!" shouted Alvin. "Men in distress!"

That gave the pilot pause. It was the law. You had to give aid.

"I don't see no men in distress!" shouted Captain Howard.

"So don't turn the big boat," said Alvin. "Let me take that little rowboat and I'll go fetch 'em."

Captain didn't like that either, but the pilot was a decent man and pretty soon Alvin was in the water with his hands on the oars.

But before he could fair get away, there was Arthur Stuart, leaping over the gap and sprawling into the little boat. "That was about as clumsy a move as I ever saw," said Alvin.

"I ain't gonna miss this," said Arthur Stuart.

There was another man at the rail, hailing him. "Don't be in such a hurry, Mr. Smith!" shouted Jim Bowie. "Two strong men is better than one on a job like this!" And then he, too, was leaping -- a fair job of it, too, considering he must be at least ten years older than Alvin and a good twenty years older than Arthur Stuart. But when he landed, there was no sprawl about it, and Alvin wondered what this man's knack was. He had supposed it was killing, but maybe the killing was just a sideline. The man fair to flew.

So there they were, each of them at a set of oars while Arthur Stuart sat in the stern and kept his eye peeled.

"How far are they?" he kept asking.

"The current might of took them farther out," said Alvin. "But they're there."

And when Arthur started looking downright skeptical, Alvin fixed him with such a glare that Arthur Stuart finally got it. "I think I see 'em," he said, giving Alvin's lie a boost.

"You ain't trying to cross this whole river and get us kilt by Reds," said Jim Bowie.

"No sir," said Alvin. "Got no such plan. I saw those boys, plain as day, and I don't want their death on my conscience."

"Well where are they now?"

Of course Alvin knew, and he was rowing toward them as best he could. Trouble was that Jim Bowie didn't know where they were, and he was rowing too, only not quite in the same direction as Alvin. And seeing as how both of them had their backs to where the raft was, Alvin couldn't even pretend to see them. He could only try to row stronger than Bowie in the direction he wanted to go.

Until Arthur Stuart rolled his eyes and said, "Would you two just stop pretending that anybody believes anybody, and row in the right direction?"

Bowie laughed. Alvin sighed.

"You didn't see nothin'," said Bowie. "Cause I was watching you looking out into the fog."

"Which is why you came along."

"Had to find out what you wanted to do with this boat."

"I want to rescue two lads on a flatboat that's spinning out of control on the current."

"You mean that's *true*?"

Alvin nodded, and Bowie laughed again. "Well I'm jiggered."

"That's between you and your jig," said Alvin. "More downstream, please."

"So what's your knack, man?" said Bowie. "Seeing through fog?"

"Looks like, don't it?"

"I think not," said Bowie. "I think there's a lot more to you than meets the eye."

Arthur Stuart looked Alvin's massive blacksmith's body up and down. "Is that *possible*?"

"And you're no slave," said Bowie.

There was no laugh when he said *that*. That was dangerous for any man to know.

"Am so," said Arthur Stuart.

"No slave would answer back like that, you poor fool," said Bowie. "You got such a mouth on you, there's no way you ever had a taste of the lash."

"Oh, it's a *good* idea for you to come with me on this trip," said Alvin.

"Don't worry," said Bowie. "I got secrets of my own. I can keep yours."

Can -- but will you? "Not much of a secret," said Alvin. "I'll just have to take him back north and come down later on another steamboat."

"Your arms and shoulders tell me you really are a smith," said Bowie. "But. Ain't no smith alive can look at a knife in its sheath and say it used to be a file."

"I'm good at what I do," said Alvin.

"Alvin Smith. You really ought to start traveling under another name."

"Why?"

"You're the smith what killed a couple of Finders a few years back."

"Finders who murdered my wife's mother."

"Oh, no jury would convict you," said Bowie. "No more than I got convicted for *my* killing. Looks to me like we got a lot in common."

"Less than you might think."

"Same Alvin Smith who absconded from his master with a particular item."

"A lie," said Alvin. "And he knows it."

"Oh, I'm sure it is. But so the story goes."

"You can't believe these tales."

"Oh, I know," said Bowie. "You aren't slacking off on your rowing, are you?"

"I'm not sure I want to overtake that raft while we're still having this conversation."

"I was just telling you, in my own quiet way, that I think I know what you got in that sack of yours. Some powerful knack you got, if the rumors are true."

"What do they say, that I can fly?"

"You can turn iron to gold, they say."

"Wouldn't that be nice," said Alvin.

"But you didn't deny it, did you?"

"I can't make iron into anything but horseshoes and hinges."

"You did it once, though, didn't you?"

"No sir," said Alvin. "I told you those stories were lies."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you're calling me a liar, sir," said Alvin.

"Oh, you're not going to take offense, are you? Because I have a way of winning all my duels."

Alvin didn't answer, and Bowie looked long and hard at Arthur Stuart. "Ah," said Bowie. "That's the way of it."

"What?" said Arthur Stuart.

"You ain't askeered of me," said Bowie, exaggerating his accent.

"Am so," said Arthur Stuart.

"You're scared of what I know, but you ain't a-scared of me taking down your 'master' in a duel."

"Terrified," said Arthur Stuart.

It was only a split second, but there were Bowie's oars a-dangling, and his knife out of its sheath and his body twisted around with his knife right at Alvin's throat.

Except that it wasn't a knife anymore. Just a handle.

The smile left Bowie's face pretty slow when he realized that his precious knife-made-from-a-file no longer had any iron in it.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"That's a pretty funny question," said Alvin, "coming from a man who meant to kill me."

"Meant to scare you is all," said Bowie. "You didn't have to do that to my knife."

"I got no knack for knowing a man's intentions," said Alvin. "Now turn around and row."

Bowie turned around and took hold of the oars again. "That knife was my luck."

"Then I reckon you just run out of it," said Alvin.

Arthur Stuart shook his head. "You oughta take more care about who you draw against, Mr. Bowie."

"You're the man we want," said Bowie. "That's all I wanted to say. Didn't have to wreck my knife."

"Next time you look to get a man on your team," said Alvin, "don't draw a knife on him."

"And don't threaten to tell his secrets," said Arthur Stuart.

And now, for the first time, Bowie looked more worried than peeved. "Now, I never said I *knew* your secrets. I just had some guesses, that's all."

"Well, Arthur Stuart, Mr. Bowie just noticed he's out here in the middle of the river, in the fog, on a dangerous rescue mission, with a couple of people whose secrets he threatened to tell."

"It's a position to give a man pause," said Arthur Stuart.

"I won't go out of this boat without a struggle," said Bowie.

"I don't plan to hurt you," said Alvin. "Because we're not alike, you and me. I killed a man once, in grief and rage, and I've regretted it ever since."

"Me too," said Bowie.

"It's the proudest moment of your life. You saved the weapon and called it your luck. We're not alike at all."

"I reckon not."

"And if I want you dead," said Alvin, "I don't have to throw you out of no boat."

Bowie nodded. And then took his hands off the oar. His hands began to flutter around his cheeks, around his mouth.

"Can't breathe, can you?" said Alvin. "Nobody's blocking you. Just do it, man. Breathe in, breathe out. You been doing it all your life."

It wasn't like Bowie was choking. He just couldn't get his body to do his will.

Alvin didn't keep it going till the man turned blue or nothing. Just long enough for Bowie to feel real helpless. And then he remembered how to breathe, just like that, and sucked in the air.

"So now that we've settled the fact that you're in no danger from me here on this boat," said Alvin, "let's rescue a couple of fellows got themselves on a homemade raft that got no drag."

And at that moment, the whiteness of the fog before them turned into a flatboat not five feet away. Another pull on the oars and they bumped it. Which was the first time the men on the raft had any idea that anybody was coming after them.

Arthur Stuart was already clambering to the bow of the boat, holding onto the stern rope and leaping onto the raft to make it fast.

"Lord be praised," said the smaller of the two men.

"You come at a right handy time," said the tall one, helping Arthur make the line fast. "Got us an unreliable raft here, and in this fog we wasn't even seeing that much of the countryside. A second-rate voyage by any reckoning."

Alvin laughed at that. "Glad to see you've kept your spirits up."

"Oh, we was both praying and singing hymns," said the lanky man.

"How tall *are* you?" said Arthur Stuart as the man loomed over him.

"About a head higher than my shoulders," said the man, "but not quite long enough for my suspenders."

The fellow had a way about him, right enough. You just couldn't help but like him.

Which made Alvin suspicious right off. If that was the man's knack, then he couldn't be trusted. And yet the most cussed thing about it was, even while you wasn't trusting him, you still had to like him.

"What are you, a lawyer?" asked Alvin.

By now they had maneuvered the boat to the front of the raft, ready to tug it along behind them as they rejoined the riverboat.

The man stood to his full height and then bowed, as awkward-looking a maneuver as Alvin had ever seen. He was all knees and elbows, angles everywhere, even his face, nothing soft about him, as bony a fellow as could be. No doubt about it, he was ugly. Eyebrows like an ape's, they protruded so far out over his eyes. And yet ... he wasn't bad to look at. Made you feel warm and welcome, when he smiled.

"Abraham Lincoln of Springfield, at your service, gentlemen," he said.

"And I'm Cuz Johnston of Springfield," said the other man.

"Cuz for 'Cousin,'" said Abraham. "Everybody calls him that."

"They do *now*," said Cuz.

"*Whose* cousin?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"Not mine," said Abraham. "But he looks like a cousin, don't he? He's the epitome of cousinhood, the quintessence of cousiniferosity. So when I started calling him Cuz, it was just stating the obvious."

"Actually, I'm his father's second wife's son by her first husband," said Cuz.

"Which makes us step-strangers," said Abraham. "In-law."

"I'm particularly grateful to you boys for pickin' us up," said Cuz, "on account of now old Abe here won't have to finish the most obnoxious tall tale I ever heard."

"It wasn't no tall tale," said old Abe. "I heard it from a man named Taleswapper. He had it in his book, and he didn't never put anything in it lessen it was true."

Old Abe -- who couldn't have been more than thirty -- was quick of eye. He saw the glance that passed between Alvin and Arthur Stuart.

"So you know him?" asked Abe.

"A truthful man, he is indeed," said Alvin. "What tale did he tell you?"

"Of a child born many years ago," said Abe. "A tragic tale of a brother who got kilt by a tree-trunk carried downstream by a flood, which hit him while he was a-savin' his mother, who was in a wagon in the middle of the stream, giving birth. But doomed as he was, he stayed alive long enough on that river that when the baby was born, it was the seventh son of a seventh son, and all the sons alive."

"A noble tale," said Alvin. "I've seen that one in his book my own self."

"And you believe it?"

"I do," said Alvin.

"I never said it wasn't true," said Cuz. "I just said it wasn't the tale a man wants to hear when he's spinning downstream on a flapdoodle flatboat in the midst of the Mizzippymist."

Abe Lincoln ignored the near-poetic language of his companion. "So I was telling Cuz here that the river hadn't treated us half bad, compared to what a much smaller stream done to the folks in that story. And now here *you* are, saving us -- so the river's been downright kind to a couple of second-rate raftmakers."

"Made this one yourself, eh?" said Alvin.

"Tiller broke," said Abe.

"Didn't have no spare?" said Alvin.

"Didn't know I'd need one. But if we ever once fetched up on shore, I could have made another."

"Good with your hands?"

"Not really," said Abe. "But I'm willing to do it over till it's right."

Alvin laughed. "Well, time to do this raft over."

"I'd welcome it if you'd show me what we done wrong. I can't see a blame thing here that isn't good raftmaking."

"It's what's under the raft that's missing. Or rather, what ought to be there but ain't. You need a drag at the stern, to keep the back in back. And on top of that you've got it heavy-loaded in front, so it's bound to turn around any old way."

"Well I'm blamed," said Abe. "No doubt about it, I'm not cut out to be a boatman."

"Most folks aren't," said Alvin. "Except my friend Mr. Bowie here. He's just can't keep away from a boat, when he gets a chance to row."

Bowie gave a tight little smile and a nod to Abe and his companion. By now the raft was slogging along behind them in the water, and it was all Alvin and Bowie could do, to move it forward.

"Maybe," said Arthur Stuart, "the two of you could stand at the *back* of the raft so it didn't dig so deep in front and make it such a hard pull."

Embarrassed, Abe and Cuz did so at once. And in the thick fog of midstream, it made them mostly invisible and damped down any sound they made so that conversation was nigh impossible.

It took a good while to overtake the steamboat, but the pilot, being a good man, had taken it slow, despite Captain Howard's ire over time lost, and all of a sudden the fog thinned and the noise of the paddlewheels was right beside them as the *Yazoo Queen* loomed out of the fog.

"I'll be plucked and roasted," shouted Abe. "That's a right fine steamboat you got here."

"Tain't our'n," said Alvin.

Arthur Stuart noticed how little time it took Bowie to get himself up on deck and away from the boat, shrugging off all the hands clapping at his shoulder like he was a hero. Well, Arthur couldn't blame him. But it was a sure thing that however Alvin might have scared him out on the water, Bowie was still a danger to them both.

Once the dinghy was tied to the *Yazoo Queen*, and the raft lashed alongside as well, there was all kinds of chatter from passengers wanting to know obvious things like how they ever managed to find each other in the famous Mizzippy fog.

"It's like I said," Alvin told them. "They was right close, and even then, we still had to search."

Abe Lincoln heard it with a grin, and didn't say a word to contradict him, but he was no fool, Arthur Stuart could see that. He knew that the raft had been nowhere near the riverboat. He also knew that Alvin had steered straight for the *Yazoo Queen* as if he could see it.

But what was that to him? In no time he was telling all who cared to listen about what a blame fool job he'd done a-making the raft, and how dizzy they got spinning round and round in the fog. "It twisted me up into such a knot that it took the two of us half a day to figure out how to untie my arms from my legs and get my head back out from my armpit." It wasn't all that funny, really, but the way he told it, he got such a laugh. Even though the story wasn't likely to end up in Taleswapper's book.

*

Well, that night they put to shore at a built-up rivertown and there was so much coming and going on the *Yazoo Queen* that Arthur Stuart gave up on his plan to set the twenty-five Mexica slaves free that night.

Instead, he and Alvin went to a lecture being held that night in the dining room of the riverboat. The speaker was none other than Cassius Marcellus Clay, the noted anti-slavery orator, who persisted in his mad course of lecturing against slavery right in the midst of slave country. But listening to him, Arthur Stuart could see how the man got away with it. He didn't call names or declare slavery to be a terrible sin. Instead he talked about how much harm slavery did to the owners and their families.

"What does it do to a man, to raise up his children to believe that their own hands never have to be set to labor? What will happen when he's old, and these children who never learned to work freely spend his money without heed for the morrow?"

"And when these same children have seen their fellow human, however dusky of hue his skin might be, treated with disdain, their labor dispraised and their freedom treated as nought -- will they hesitate to treat their aging father as a thing of no value, to be discarded when he is no longer useful? For when one human being is treated as a commodity, why should children not learn to think of all humans as either useful or useless, and discard all those in the latter category?"

Arthur Stuart had heard plenty of abolitionists speak over the years, but this one took the cake. Because instead of stirring up a mob of slaveowners wanting to tar and feather him, or worse, he got them looking all thoughtful and glancing at each other uneasily, probably thinking on their own children and what a useless set of grubs they no doubt were.

In the end, though, it wasn't likely Clay was doing all that much good. What were they going to do, set their slaves free and move north? That would be like the story in the Bible, where Jesus told the rich young man, Sell all you got and give it unto the poor and come follow me. The wealth of these men was measured in slaves. To give them up was to become poor, or at least to join the middling sort of men who have to pay for what labor they hire. Renting a man's back, so to speak, instead of owning it. None of them had the courage to do it, at least not that Arthur Stuart saw.

But he noticed that Abe Lincoln seemed to be listening real close to everything Clay said, eyes shining. Especially when Clay talked about them as wanted to send Black folks back to Africa. "How many of you would be glad to hear of a plan to send *you* back to England or Scotland or Germany or whatever place your ancestors came from? Rich or poor, bond or free, we're Americans now, and slaves whose grandparents were born on this soil can't be sent *back* to Africa, for it's no more their home than China is, or India."

Abe nodded at that, and Arthur Stuart got the impression that up to now, the lanky fellow probably thought that the way to solve the Black problem was exactly that, to ship 'em back to Africa.

"And what of the mulatto? The light-skinned Black man who partakes of the blood of Europe and Africa in equal parts? Shall such folk be split in two like a rail, and the pieces divvied up between the lands of their ancestry? No, like it or not we're all bound together in this land, yoked together. When you enslave a black man, you enslave yourself as well, for now you are bound to him as surely as he is bound to you, and your character is shaped by his bondage as surely as his own is. Make the Black man servile, and in the same process you make yourself tyrannical. Make the Black man quiver in fear before you, and you make yourself a monster of terror. Do you think your children will not see you in that state, and fear you too? You cannot wear one face to the slave and another face to your family, and expect either face to be believed."

When the talk was over, and before Arthur and Alvin separated to their sleeping places, they had a moment together at the rail overlooking the flatboat. "How can anybody hear that talk," said Arthur Stuart, "and go home to their slaves, and not set them free?"

"Well, for one thing," said Alvin, "I'm not setting *you* free."

"Because you're only pretending I'm a slave," whispered Arthur.

"Then I *could* pretend to set you free, and be a good example for the others."

"No you can't," said Arthur Stuart, "because then what would you do with me?"

Alvin just smiled a little and nodded, and Arthur Stuart got his point. "I didn't say it would be easy. But if everybody would do it --"

"But everybody won't do it," said Alvin. "So them as free their slaves, they're suddenly poor, while them as don't free them, they stay rich. So now who has all the power in slavery country? Them as keep their slaves."

"So there's no hope."

"It has to be all at once, by law, not bit by bit. As long as it's permitted to keep slaves anywhere, then bad men will own them and get advantage from it. You have to ban it outright. That's what I can't get Peggy to understand. All her persuasion in the end will come to nothing, because the moment somebody stops being a slaveowner, he loses all his influence among those who have kept their slaves."

"Congress can't ban slavery in the Crown Colonies, and the King can't ban it in the States. So no matter what you do, you're gonna have one place that's got slaves and the other that doesn't."

"It's going to be war," said Alvin. "Sooner or later, as the free states get sick of slavery and the slave states get more dependent on it, there'll be a revolution on one side of the line or the other. I think there won't be freedom until the King falls and his Crown Colonies become states in the union."

"That'll never happen."

"I think it will," said Alvin. "But the bloodshed will be terrible. Because people fight most fiercely when they dare not admit even to themselves that their cause is unjust." He spat into the water. "Go to bed, Arthur Stuart."

But Arthur couldn't sleep. Having Cassius Clay speaking on the riverboat had got the belowdecks folk into a state, and some of them were quite angry at Clay for making White folks feel guilty. "Mark my words," said a fellow from Kenituck. "When they get feelin'

guilty, then the only way to feel better is to talk themselves into believing *we deserve to be slaves*, and if we deserve to be slaves, we must be very bad and need to be punished all the time."

It sounded pretty convoluted to Arthur Stuart, but then he was only a baby when his mother carried him to freedom, so it's not like he knew what he was talking about in an argument about what slavery was really like.

Even when things finally quieted down, though, Arthur couldn't sleep, until finally he got up and crept up the ladderway to the deck.

It was a moonlit night, here on the east bank, where the fog was only a low mist and you could look up and see stars.

The twenty-five Mexican slaves were asleep on the stern deck, some of them mumbling softly in their sleep. The guard was asleep, too.

I meant to free you tonight, though Arthur. But it would take too long now. I'd never be done by morning.

And then it occurred to him that maybe it wasn't so. Maybe he could do it faster than he thought.

So he sat down in a shadow and after a couple of false starts, he got the nearest slave's ankle iron into his mind and began to sense the metal the way he had that coin. Began to soften it as he had softened his belt buckle.

Trouble was, the iron ring was thicker and had more metal in it than either the coin or the buckle had had. By the time he got one part softened up, another part was hard again, and so it went. It began to feel like the story Peggy read them about Sisyphus, whose time in Hades was spent pushing a stone up a mountain, but for every step up, he slid two steps back, so after working all day he was farther from the top than he was when he began.

And then he almost cussed out loud at how stupid he had been.

He didn't have to soften the whole ring. What were they going to do, slide it off like a sleeve? All he had to do was soften it at the hinge, where the metal was thinnest and weakest.

He gave it a try and it was getting all nice and soft when he realized something.

The hinges weren't connected. The one side wasn't joined to the other. The pin was gone.

He took one fetter after another into his mind and discovered they were all the same. Every single hinge pin was missing. Every single slave was already free.

He got up from the shadows and walked out to stand among the slaves.

They weren't asleep. They made tiny hand gestures to tell Arthur to go away, to get out of sight.

So he went back into the shadows.

As if at a signal, they all opened their fetters and set the chains gently on the deck. It made a bit of racket, of course, but the guard didn't stir. Nor did anyone else in the silent boat.

Then the Black men arose and swung themselves over the side away from shore.

They're going to drown. Nobody taught slaves to swim, or let them learn it on their own. They were choosing death.

Except that, come to think of it, Arthur didn't hear a single splash.

He stood up when all the slaves were gone from the deck and walked to another part of the rail. Sure enough, they were overboard all right -- all gathered on the raft. And now they were carefully loading Abe Lincoln's cargo into the dinghy. It wasn't much of a dinghy, but it wasn't much of a cargo, either, and it didn't take long.

What difference did it make, not to steal Abe's stuff? They were all thieves, anyway, since they were stealing themselves by running away. Or that was the theory, anyway. As if a man, by being free, thereby stole something from someone else.

They laid themselves down on the raft, all twenty-five, making a veritable pile of humanity, and with those at the edges using their hands as paddles, they began to pull away out into the current. Heading out into the fog, toward the Red man's shore.

Someone laid a hand on his shoulder and he near jumped out of his skin.

It was Alvin, of course.

"Let's not be seen here," Alvin said softly. "Let's go below."

So Arthur Stuart led the way down into the slave quarters, and soon they were in whispered conversation in the kitchen, which was dark but for a single lantern that Alvin kept trimmed low.

"I figured you'd have some blame fool plan like that," said Alvin.

"And I thought you was going to let them go on as slaves like you didn't care, but I should've knowed better," said Arthur Stuart.

"I thought so, too," said Alvin. "But I don't know if it was having Jim Bowie guess too much, or him trying to kill me with that knife -- and no, Arthur Stuart, he did *not* stop in time, if there'd been a blade in that knife it would have cut right through my throat. Could have been the fear of death made me think that I didn't want to face God knowing I could have freed twenty-five men, but chose to leave them slaves. Then again, it might have been Mr. Clay's sermon tonight. Converted me as neat as you please."

"Converted Mr. Lincoln," said Arthur Stuart.

"Might be," said Alvin. "Though he doesn't look like the sort who ever sought to own another man."

"I know why you had to do it," said Arthur Stuart.

"Why is that?"

"Because you knew that if you didn't, I would."

Alvin shrugged. "Well, I knew you'd made up your mind to try."

"I could have done it."

"Very slowly."

"It was working, once I realized I only had to go after the hinge."

"I reckon so," said Alvin. "But the real reason I chose tonight was that the raft was here. A gift to us, don't you think? Would have been a shame not to use it."

"So what happens when they get to the Red man's shore?"

"Tenskwawatawki will see to them. I gave them a token to show to the first Red they meet. When they see it, they'll get escorted straight to the Prophet, wherever he might be. And when *he* sees it, he'll give them safe passage. Or maybe let them dwell there."

"Or maybe he'll need them, to help him fight the Mexica. If they're moving north."

"Maybe."

"What was the token?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"A couple of these," said Alvin. He held up a tiny shimmering cube that looked like the clearest ice that had ever been, or maybe glass, but no glass had ever shimmered.

Arthur Stuart took it in his hand and realized what it was. "This is water. A box of water."

"More like a *block* of water. I decided to make it today out on the river, when I came so close to having my blood spill into the water. That's partly how they're made. A bit of my own self has to go into the water to make it strong as steel. You know the law. The maker is the one ..."

"The maker is the one who is part of what he makes," said Arthur Stuart.

"Get to sleep," said Alvin. "We can't let nobody know we was up tonight. I can't keep them all asleep forever."

"Can I keep this?" said Arthur Stuart. "I think I see something in it."

"You can see everything in it, if you look long enough," said Alvin. "But no, you can't keep it. If you think what I got in my poke is valuable, think what folks would do to have a solid block of water that showed them true visions of things far and near, past and present."

Arthur reached out and offered the cube to Alvin.

But instead of taking it, Alvin only smiled, and the cube went liquid all at once and dribbled through Arthur Stuart's fingers. Arthur looked at the puddle on the table, feeling as forlorn as he ever had.

"It's just water," said Alvin.

"And a little bit of blood."

"Naw," said Alvin. "I took that back."

"Good night," said Arthur Stuart. "And ... thank you for setting them free."

"Once you set your heart on it, Arthur, what else could I do? I looked at them and thought, somebody loved them once as much as your mama loved you. She died to set you free. I didn't have to do that. Just inconvenience myself a little. Put myself at risk, but not by much."

"But you saw what I did, didn't you? I made it soft without getting it hot."

"You done good, Arthur Stuart. There's no denying it. You're a maker now."

"Not much of one."

"Whenever you got two makers, one's going to be more of a maker than the other. But lessen that one starts gettin' uppity, it's good to remember that there's always a third one who's better than both of them."

"Who's better than you?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"You," said Alvin. "Because I'll take an ounce of compassion over a pound of tricks any day. Now go to sleep."

Only then did Arthur let himself feel how very, very tired he was. Whatever had kept him awake before, it was gone now. He barely made it to his cot before he fell asleep.

*

Oh, there was a hullabaloo in the morning. Suspicions flew every which way. Some folks thought it was the boys from the raft, because why else would the slaves have left their cargo behind? Until somebody pointed out that with the cargo still on the raft, there wouldn't have been room for all the runaways.

Then suspicion fell on the guard who had slept, but most folks knew that was wrong, because if he had done it then why didn't he run off, instead of lying there asleep on the deck till a crewman noticed the slaves was gone and raised the alarm.

Only now, when they were gone, did the ownership of the slaves become clear. Alvin had figured Mr. Austin to have a hand in it, but the man most livid at their loss was Captain Howard himself. That was a surprise. But it explained why the men bound for Mexico had chosen this boat to make their journey downriver.

To Alvin's surprise, though, Austin and Howard both kept glancing at him and young Arthur Stuart as if they suspected the truth. Well, he shouldn't have been surprised, he realized. If Bowie told them what had happened to his knife out on the water, they'd naturally wonder if a man with such power over iron might have been the one to slip the hinge pins out of all the fetters.

Slowly the crowd dispersed. But not Captain Howard, not Austin. And when Alvin and Arthur made as if to go, Howard headed straight for them. "I want to talk to you," he said, and he didn't sound friendly.

"What about?" said Alvin.

"That boy of yours," said Howard. "I saw how he was doing their slops on the morning watch. I saw him talking to them. That made me suspicious, all right, since not one of them spoke English."

"Pero todos hablaban espanol," said Arthur Stuart.

Austin apparently understood him, and looked chagrined. "They *all* of them spoke Spanish? Lying skunks."

Oh, right, as if slaves owed you some kind of honesty.

"That's as good as a confession," said Captain Howard. "He just admitted he speaks their language and learned things from them that even their master didn't know."

Arthur was going to protest, but Alvin put a hand on his shoulder. He did *not*, however, stop his mouth. "My boy here," said Alvin, "only just learned to speak Spanish, so naturally he seized on an opportunity to practice. Unless you got some evidence that those fetters was opened by use of a slop bucket, then I think you can safely leave this boy out of it."

"No, I expect he *wasn't* the one who popped them hinge pins," said Captain Howard. "I expect he was somebody's spy to tell them Blacks about the plan."

"I didn't tell nobody no plan," said Arthur Stuart hotly.

Alvin clamped his grip tighter. No slave would talk to a white man like that, least of all a boat captain.

Then from behind Austin and Howard came another voice. "It's all right, boy," said Bowie. "You can tell them. No need to keep it secret any more."

And with a sinking feeling, Alvin wondered what kind of pyrotechnics he'd have to go through to distract everybody long enough for him and Arthur Stuart to get away.

But Bowie didn't say at all what Alvin expected. "I got the boy to tell me what he learned from them. They were cooking up some evil Mexica ritual. Something about tearing out somebody's heart one night when they were pretending to be our guides. A treacherous bunch, and so I decided we'd be better off without them."

"*You* decided!" Captain Howard growled. "What right did *you* have to decide."

"Safety," said Bowie. "You put me in charge of the scouts, and that's what these were supposed to be. But it was a blame fool idea from the start. Why do you think them Mexica left those boys alive instead of taking their beating heart out of their chests? It was a trap. All along, it was a trap. Well, we didn't fall into it."

"Do you know how much they cost?" demanded Captain Howard.

"They didn't cost *you* anything," said Austin.

That reminder took a bit of the dudgeon out of Captain Howard. "It's the principle of the thing. Just setting them free."

"But I didn't," said Bowie. "I sent them across river. What do you think will happen to them there -- *if* they make it through the fog?"

There was a bit more grumbling, but some laughter, too, and the matter was closed.

Back in his room, Alvin waited for Bowie to return.

"Why?" he demanded.

"I told you I could keep a secret," said Bowie. "I watched you and the boy do it, and I have to say, it was worth it to see how you broke their irons without ever laying a hand on them. To think I'd ever see a knack like that. Oh, you're a maker all right."

"Then come with me," said Alvin. "Leave these men behind. Don't you know the doom that lies over their heads? The Mexica aren't fools. These are dead men you're traveling with."

"Might be so," said Bowie, "but they need what I can do, and you don't."

"I do so," said Alvin. "Because I don't know many men in this world can hide their heartfire from me. It's your knack, isn't it? To disappear from all men's sight, when you want to. Because I never saw you watching us."

"And yet I woke you up just reaching for your poke the other night," said Bowie with a grin.

"Reaching for it?" said Alvin. "Or putting it back?"

Bowie shrugged.

"I thank you for protecting us and taking the blame on yourself."

Bowie chuckled. "Not much blame there. Truth is, Austin was getting sick of all the trouble of taking care of them Blacks. It was only Howard who was so dead set on having them, and he ain't even going with us, once he drops us off on the Mexica coast."

"I could teach you. The way Arthur Stuart's been learning."

"I don't think so," said Bowie. "It's like you said. We're different kind of men."

"Not so different but what you can't change iffen you've a mind to."

Bowie only shook his head.

"Well, then, I'll thank you the only way that's useful to you," said Alvin.

Bowie waited. "Well?"

"I just did it," said Alvin. "I just put it back."

Bowie reached down to the sheath at his waist. It wasn't empty. He drew out the knife. There was the blade, plain as day, not a whit changed.

You'd've thought Bowie was handling his long-lost baby.

"How'd you get the blade back on it?" he asked. "You never touched it."

"It was there all along," said Alvin. "I just kind of spread it out a little."

"So I couldn't see it?"

"And so it wouldn't cut nothing."

"But now it will?"

"I think you're bound to die, when you take on them Mexica, Mr. Bowie. But I want you to take some human sacrificers with you on the way."

"I'll do that," said Bowie. "Except for the part about me dying."

"I hope I'm wrong and you're right, Mr. Bowie," said Alvin.

"And I hope you live forever, Alvin Maker," said the knife-wielding killer.

That morning Alvin and Arthur Stuart left the boat, as did Abe Lincoln and Cuz, and they made their journey down to Nueva Barcelona together, all four of them, swapping impossible stories all the way. But that's another tale, not this one.



Artwork by Deena Warner

Salt of Judas

by Eric James Stone

Osbert Peale did not paint portraits when he sat on his stool beside the Avon. He painted Tewkesbury Abbey or one of the footbridges over the river. Sometimes he portrayed the boatmen on the water or passersby on land, but those people were merely parts of the landscape. Only in his narrow rented room above the butcher's did he paint portraits, and those he never showed to anyone for fear they would laugh.

Every portrait was of Her. He'd begun to paint Her portrait even before he discovered that Her name was Amelia. He said that delightful name occasionally to himself as he drew in charcoal the curve of Her neck or used the painting knife to soften the glow of Her cheek. But in his mind She remained most often Her. And though he often whispered -- to himself -- that he loved Her, he knew that a wealthy landowner's daughter like Her would never love a humble artist like him.

As he sat beside the river, palette in one hand and knife in the other, creating landscapes in oil, he always watched for Her, since She often strolled along the footpath with Her companions. On occasion She would stop and look at his work in progress, and Osbert would then find it difficult to breathe as he painted with trembling hand. But except in his imagination She had never spoken to him, nor he to Her. His love for Her was a secret he kept from all the world.

He was using the blending knife to darken the shadows of an overcast sky on his canvas when a deep voice came from behind

him.

"I understand you paint portraits."

Osbert turned his head to look up at the stranger. The man was bald as an egg, and under the darkening sky his skin seemed Lead White with a touch of Ultramarine Blue. He wore a red vest -- Cadmium Red darkened perhaps by Burnt Sienna -- over a white silk shirt, black breeches and white stockings. The buckles on his

shoes glinted gold even without direct sunlight. Although Osbert had been in Tewkesbury less than a year, he thought he knew everyone of consequence in the town. This man must be a wealthy traveler, perhaps brought here by the convergence of the Avon and the Severn rivers.

"You are mistaken, sir. I am only a landscape painter."

The stranger nodded slowly. "Where do you buy your oils?"

"From Barber the apothecary. He has a shop on Church Street."

"From now on, you will buy them from me." The stranger spoke as if stating an obvious fact.

"But Barber has always--"

"Barber has sold his shop to me. I am the new apothecary."

"Oh." Osbert did not know what else to say. Barber had been a friendly fellow, quite unlike this brusque man. But possibly the new apothecary would become more amiable in time.

"Soon you will want to bring life to your portraits. Come to me then." The apothecary turned and strode away.

"I don't paint portraits," Osbert called after him, but the bald head made no acknowledgment.

*

In the dim morning light that came through his one small window, Osbert looked at the latest portrait of Her. She was tilting Her head inquisitively, and Her lips were pursed slightly, as if She were about to ask a question.

"You wish to know my name, milady? I am Osbert Peale, at your service. Or perhaps you wonder what it is I will be painting today? I believe I shall attempt once more to capture the spirit of Tewkesbury Abbey.

"Or do you merely wish to inquire whether I think it will rain? Yes, that must be it, for the weather will do quite well as a subject of conversation with someone when you have nothing else in common."

He fell silent. This piece was his best, seeming to catch a moment before motion rather than an eternal pose.

Soon you will want to bring life to your portraits. Come to me then.

What had the apothecary meant? Could he have known of Osbert's secret portraits?

What would it be like to touch Her, to feel the softness of Her skin? Osbert reached out and gently stroked Her face. His fingers came away wet with paint.

*

The wooden sign showing a mortar and pestle still hung over the door, but someone had painted over the name Barber and replaced it with Dyer. Osbert hesitated before opening the door and walking into the shop.

"Ah, the young artist." The bald man rose from his seat behind the counter, ducking his head to avoid various bottles that hung from the ceiling beams. "I knew you would come."

"I need linseed oil."

"That is all you wish?"

"Yes." A sudden sweat broke out on Osbert's brow, though the air was cool in the darkened shop.

The apothecary rummaged around under the counter, clinking bottles together. "How is your portrait work progressing?"

"I paint landscapes."

"So you said. So you said." The apothecary rose from behind the counter and held out a corked bottle. "I'll put it on your account. Barber said you paid him monthly without fail. I like a man who keeps his bargains."

"Thank you." Osbert took the bottle and quickly exited. Once he was sure the man could not see him through the shop windows, he shuddered in relief. He didn't like the way those dark eyes seemed to look past his own.

*

As days became shorter and the weather cooler, Osbert saw Her less frequently on Her walks. And since there were fewer daylight hours for painting landscapes, he spent more time in his cramped room painting portraits by the light of an oil lamp. Often he would paint through the night: a portrait of Her smiling coyly or laughing or merely looking to the horizon.

Over the past three nights he had experimented with painting a sequence of small portraits capturing different positions as Her head turned until Her eyes seemed to look into his. Now as he looked from one painting to the next in order, it was almost as if She moved. Almost.

Soon you will want to bring life to your portraits. Come to me then.

*

Three times he walked past the apothecary's door before he went inside.

"Ah, the young artist." The apothecary rose to his feet. "More linseed oil? Some White Lead, perhaps?"

"What did you mean?"

The apothecary raised a dark eyebrow. "I am surprised, however, that you are running low on supplies so soon, since the weather is not generally fit for painting landscapes."

Osbert pointed his index finger at the man. "You said I should come to you if I wanted to give life to my portraits. What did you mean?"

The apothecary nodded. "Now you are ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Ready to give life to your work. Are you a religious man, Master Peale?"

Osbert blinked. "I . . . I'm a God-fearing man, if that's what you mean."

"God-fearing. A good word." The apothecary smiled, his teeth gleaming in the dark shop. "I, too, am God-fearing, you could say."

"Enough of this. What do you know of my painting portraits? What do you mean by 'give life'?"

"You paint portraits of a young lady, perhaps? Someone you desire, but who remains forever beyond your reach?"

Osbert couldn't think what to say. The apothecary seemed to know him intimately.

"You paint her portrait till you know her face better than your own. But you do not know her voice, her touch. She is no more alive to you than a stone." He tapped the stone pestle on the counter. "But there are . . . other arts beyond the art of painting."

"You practice the arts of witchcraft," Osbert said in astonished realization. He knew he should denounce the apothecary to the Church immediately, but curiosity restrained him.

"Those who fear its power may call it witchcraft. It is nothing more than knowledge, and knowledge is neither good nor evil. 'Tis the use that makes it so."

"Yet you talk of giving life to the creations of men. Surely that is blasphemy, as only God can create life."

The apothecary smiled again. "You are wise for one so young. But I speak not of creating life, but of giving it. Tell me, what is it that makes a man live?"

Osbert pressed his lips together as he thought. "The spirit -- the soul."

"And if a painting had a soul?"

"But how is that possible? A soul comes from God, and He would not give one to a mere painting."

"There are heathen tribes who believe that a painting steals the soul of the person portrayed. That is not true -- to steal someone's soul into a painting requires the application of magics far beyond their primitive superstitions." The apothecary waved a hand dismissively, then pointed at Osbert. "However, you have a soul. If you are willing to give up part of yours to make the painting live, that is within my power."

Osbert stepped back. "You want me to give you part of my soul? So you can drag me down to damnation piece by piece?"

"No, you would not give it to me. You would give it to the painting, give life to the portrait."

Though the response allayed Osbert's suspicions somewhat, he asked, "And what benefit do you receive from this, then, that you would risk hanging as a witch?"

"What benefit? You would pay me, of course."

"I'm not wealthy. I have but twenty pounds a year bequeathed by my uncle. It is enough to live on, but painting is my one luxury." Osbert hoped someday to paint well enough to sell his work, but that day was still to come.

"I will not charge much. The ingredients I require are not costly, excepting the salt. Shall we say, eight shillings?"

Almost half a pound. But to have Her speak to him, to be able to touch Her would be worth that price. "How do I know I will get my money's worth?"

"You are a man who fulfills his bargains; so am I. I will add the cost to your bill. If you are not satisfied, you can merely refuse to pay."

With such an offer, how could the apothecary possibly swindle him? What suspicions could remain? "How is it done?"

"We will need to cut off a piece of your soul and grind it to a powder you can mix with your paint. Then whatever portrait you paint will be given life."

"The soul is immaterial. How can it be cut or ground?"

The apothecary sighed. "Not everything the Church teaches you is to be believed. The soul is not immaterial; it is a material more refined, more pure than base matter. That is how it can occupy the same space as your body. The trick is to get part of the soul to separate itself from the body, so it can be removed without harming the flesh."

The apothecary turned and reached for a metal saltcellar on the top shelf behind him. "Salt is a symbol of purity because it prevents corruption. That's why it's used for protection against evil spirits. The purity of salt has power."

Osbert nodded.

"But the salt I have here is not common salt. During the Last Supper, Judas Iscariot knocked over a dish of salt. That salt became cursed for all eternity. And I have some of it here."

Skepticism returned to Osbert's mind. "I cannot believe you have the very same salt that was at the Last Supper?"

"It matters not what you believe. The power of the salt is real." The apothecary smiled. "But you are a clever young man to see that this is not the very same salt. The spilt salt was collected by one who recognized its power. And when that cursed salt is mixed with uncursed salt, the curse spreads. As it says in the Bible, 'If the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?' So this is known as the Salt of Judas or Traitor's Salt. The grains may not be the same, but the curse is."

Osbert stared in fascination at the saltcellar. "What does the curse do?"

"As normal salt is repellent to an evil spirit, Salt of Judas is repellent to a good spirit, only far stronger in its effects. Place your left hand on the counter here, fingers spread apart."

Osbert did as he was told.

The apothecary reached out and gripped Osbert's wrist with fingers hard and cold as iron. "This will be painful, but no real harm will come to you."

"Painful?" Osbert almost tried to pull his arm back, but the apothecary's grip held him fast.

"It will not last long." The apothecary sprinkled salt onto Osbert's little finger.

Osbert's knees buckled as he felt fire spread across his hand and into his forearm. He exhaled a choking scream, then found himself unable to draw breath. The apothecary's icy fingers tightened on his wrist. His vision blurred with tears, but he thought he saw a wavering tendril of fire rise from the knuckle of his little finger.

"There it is." The apothecary's voice was calm. He had put down the saltcellar and now held a pair of shears. Deftly he snipped the tendril of fire just above the knuckle. The tendril writhed on the counter, leaving scorch marks where it touched. "Looks very much like a salted slug, does it not?"

Still unable to breathe, Osbert tried to yank his hand away, but the apothecary did not let go.

"Oh, yes. The pain." The apothecary pulled Osbert's hand several inches away from the tendril, then poured some water from a bottle onto Osbert's little finger. "Holy water, to wash away the salt. The pain should subside." He finally let go of Osbert's wrist.

Clasping at his finger to make certain it was still there, Osbert realized the pain was easing. He was able to breathe again, and he took several deep breaths to steady himself before shouting, "What did you do to me?"

"Just what I said I would. I sprinkled Salt of Judas on part of your body to force your soul out of that part, allowing me to clip it off." The apothecary used tongs to pick up the tendril of soul and drop it in the mortar. He added some dried leaves, which burst into flames. "The salt also corrupted it enough that we can see it and even touch it." He took a pestle and began pounding it in the mortar. "There are many who say that the curse on the Salt of Judas is the curse of Hell itself, and that the pain you felt is what a damned soul will feel for all eternity, but I don't know that is so."

"You have damned me." His vision dimmed as despair filled his heart. "I have been touched by the curse of Judas."

The apothecary laughed. "You are a good man, Osbert Peale. If your soul were not good, the Salt of Judas would not cause you pain." The apothecary looked in the mortar, ground the mixture a little more, then removed the pestle. "Now, take this powder--"

He tilted the mortar and poured an ash-white powder onto a sheet of paper, which he expertly folded. "--mix it with linseed oil, then blend it with the paint on your next portrait."

Osbert looked at the packet but made no move to take it.

"Come now. Are you going to waste all the pain you've suffered? Take it."

Osbert slowly reached out his hand.

*

The gray light of dawn diffused from the window, blending with the yellow from the oil lamp. Still wet, a portrait of Her stood lifeless on the easel. On his palette, still unused, was some of the soul-paint.

Osbert feared it would not work. And he feared it would. The events of the night before were becoming confused in his mind. Was the apothecary a charlatan or a puissant witch? Osbert rubbed the little finger of his left hand. It had felt a little numb during the night, then prickly, but seemed almost normal now. Perhaps it was getting accustomed to missing its soul.

He took his blender and dipped it in the translucent soul-paint, then carefully began applying it to her face. Now that he had started, he worked feverishly until there was none of the substance left on his palette.

On the canvas, nothing had changed: Her eyes still looked to the distance, Her serious expression remained frozen in oils. The pain, the fright, his work -- all were for naught. Osbert threw down his palette and painting knife, then stretched himself out in exhaustion upon his cot.

He would deal with the fraudulent apothecary later.

*

When he woke up, the first thing he saw was Her smile.

*

A week later -- seven portraits later -- Osbert hurried into the apothecary shop and closed the door. "I need to make more soul-paint. And it needs to be stronger."

"Soul-paint? Apropos." The apothecary's teeth glinted in his smile. "Run out already, have you?"

"She smiles at me. She gazes into my eyes. But She doesn't talk, and when I try to touch Her, I can sense Her movement but She still feels like paint."

Nodding, the apothecary said, "Yes, a higher concentration is needed to give the portrait more vitality. But that would require a larger portion of your soul. Are you willing to give it?"

The pain hadn't been too much to endure, had it? And it had been over quickly, had it not? "How much would I need?"

The apothecary bobbed his head back and forth in thought. "For talking and touching, let me see . . . Perhaps, to be on the safe side, we should take the whole hand."

Osbert clenched his left hand into a fist, then opened it again, looking at it carefully. "Will it make a difference to my hand, not having a soul? My finger felt strange that first night."

"Oh, my dear boy! Is that what you thought?" The apothecary laughed. "You do not have a soulless finger, nor will you have a soulless hand. The rest of your soul extends to fill the empty parts. It is the same with fat men -- they do not have more of a soul than thin men; their souls just stretch to fill their bulk."

Osbert's relief at this explanation made him realize how much he had feared having a part of his body without a soul. He rolled up his sleeve and put his left hand down on the counter.

*

Three days later his tongue was still sore from having bitten it during the agony of the salt on his hand, but he was otherwise recovered from the ordeal. Nonetheless, now that he had a sufficient supply of the soul-paint, he was glad he would not need to go through that again.

Osbert glanced at a portrait he had finished the previous week. Her face smiled at him, and Her eyelashes fluttered demurely. But that portrait was imperfect, flawed.

He would create a new portrait. This would be his best work, perfectly capturing Her eyes, Her hair, the flush of Her cheek. And this one would speak to him.

*

"Back again, my young friend?" The apothecary rose to greet him.

"Her portrait has stopped talking to me. She still smiles, but the earlier ones no longer smile. They are utterly lifeless!" Osbert gripped the edge of the counter.

Running a palm over the smooth dome of his head, the apothecary said, "Interesting. The ground-up soul must be gradually escaping the paint."

"How do I stop it?"

"It is returning to its natural state. I do not think it can be stopped."

Osbert looked at his hand. "Is it coming back into me?"

"I doubt that. You voluntarily surrendered it, so it no longer pertains to you."

"What can be done? I need Her."

With an appraising eye, the apothecary looked him up and down. "Perhaps an arm? Just from the elbow down? We'll have to do it piece by piece, though, to fit in the mortar."

*

The banging on the door roused Osbert from sleep. The afternoon daylight cutting into the room hurt his eyes. He stumbled to the door and opened it a crack.

It was his landlord, the butcher. "Peale, I'm giving you till Saturday to come up with two months' rent, or you'll have to leave."

Desperate confusion swirled in Osbert's mind. He was two months late with rent? "You'll get the money. It's just that my mother's sister is ill, and the leech-- "

"I thought you said it was your father's sister."

Had he said that? "This is a difficult time. Illness sweeping through my family's village." He coughed. Why did his chest hurt so?

The butcher took a step back. "You don't look well yourself."

"I'm fine. You'll get your money. Just give me some time."

"Hmph." The butcher turned and went down the stairs.

Osbert sat down on his cot.

"You seem ill, my love." Her voice was melodious, and Osbert felt better just hearing it.

"I'm just tired, is all." He lay back and closed his eyes. Late with the rent? Lying to his landlord? What was wrong with him?

He felt Her palm on his forehead. "You're burning up. It's a fever. You need help."

A fever? The apothecary could help. Yes, he must go to the apothecary.

He staggered down the stairs and out onto the street. He was exhausted by the time he reached the apothecary shop, and once inside he allowed himself to sink to the floor.

*

He awoke in a strange room, surrounded by portraits of Her. One of them smiled at him as he sat up.

"Where am I?" he asked Her.

Her shoulders shrugged slightly, but She did not answer.

Osbert walked unsteadily to the door, opened it and looked out. The scents of the apothecary shop met him. "Hallo?" he called out.

"Ah, you are recovered at last," said the apothecary from below. "We were quite worried about you."

"We?"

"The young lady of your portraits and I. Gave us quite a scare, you did."

"What am I doing here? What are my paintings doing here?"

"When you fell ill, you came to me. I then discovered that you were unable to pay the rent for your prior room, so I had everything brought here."

A fog seemed to lift from his mind. He walked down the stairs to confront the apothecary. "That was your fault. I couldn't pay the rent because I spent all my money on soul-paint."

"It does no good to blame me. It was all by your choice. How was I to know you were spending too much?"

Still weak in his legs, Osbert sat down on the floor.

"But you have no worries now, my boy. You can stay here with me, as I can spare the room."

"Thank you." Did he really want to stay here? Where else could he go? Then he remembered Her. "The portraits! She didn't talk to me, She only smiled."

"Yes, it's been too long. The power of your soul-paint is fading."

"I need more."

The apothecary smiled. "You are sure? Your soul is stretched so thin I estimate we'd need to take both legs now to have enough."

"Yes, I'm sure." She'd help nurse him back to health, so he owed it to Her to bring Her back to life.

The apothecary reached up for the saltcellar.

*

"I think I would like to see one of your landscapes," She said one morning.

"What?"

"You used to paint landscapes, did you not? I should very much like to see one. You have such a talent for painting."

"Then see one you shall. I'll go out and paint one today."

She smiled brightly. "Just for me?"

"Just for you."

He scraped an old canvas, removing one of Her lifeless portraits. After gathering his paints, he went downstairs.

"Going somewhere?" asked the apothecary, who was putting on his coat to leave.

"I'm going to paint a landscape."

The apothecary frowned. "Are you sure that's wise? The spring weather is rather damp, and you are still weak. There is illness about - I am going to treat someone even now."

"It's for Her. She wants to see a landscape."

"Ah, well if she wants it, how can you refuse? Just don't stay out too long."

*

He sat on his stool on the bank of the Avon. The canvas before him held only a half-hearted charcoal sketch. It had been so long since he had done a landscape that nothing seemed right.

"Trouble painting?" A man's voice came from behind him.

Osbert turned to see an elderly monk from the abbey. "Yes, I'm afraid I'm somewhat out of practice."

The monk nodded. "I recall having seen you painting many a day last year, but not in recent months."

"I've been ill."

"Ah."

The silence stretched. Osbert raised his charcoal to the canvas, then brought it back down. He turned to look at the monk again. "Is it a sin to paint a portrait of . . . of a young lady?"

The monk raised his eyebrows. "I've never been asked that before."

"Is it?"

"The Muslim believes all images of people are prohibited. And I've read of primitive tribes that believe an image can trap the soul of the person portrayed. But portraiture in itself is not against the laws of Christ."

Osbert nodded gratefully, though the talk of souls trapped in images came uncomfortably close to his secret.

"But this young lady whose portrait you paint - is there perhaps more to it than that? Is that what troubles you?"

Suddenly Osbert no longer wanted to talk to this monk. He stood up. "I've been outside too long. I must get back. My health, you understand."

The monk nodded. "May God speed your recovery."

*

In the middle of the night Osbert awoke to pounding on the door of the shop. He heard the apothecary call out that he was coming.

"I wonder who is ill tonight." Her voice was concerned.

"I'll find out," he said. Rising from his bed, he opened the door and crept out to sit on the stairs and eavesdrop.

A man was speaking, an edge of desperation in his voice. "- grows ever weaker. It's as if the very life were being drained from her body."

The apothecary's voice was sympathetic. "I don't know what else is to be done but help her sleep better. This illness is beyond my power to aid."

"I don't understand it. My daughter was always a picture of health, until last autumn."

"It is most mysterious."

"Is there nothing in your books? Please, you must help my Amelia. I'll pay whatever you ask."

"I am sorry," said the apothecary. "Take this powder to ease her rest. That is all I can do."

Osbert barely heard the door of the shop shut. His mind was awl. Amelia. Was this coincidence? No. His portraits of Her were somehow harming the real young woman, drawing the life out of her. He tried to reject the thought, but he remembered the primitive belief the monk had mentioned about images trapping the soul of the person portrayed. The apothecary had mentioned it, too, Osbert recalled now. It had to be true - he was the cause of Amelia's suffering.

He rose to his feet and descended the stairs. The apothecary was sitting in his chair behind the counter. On seeing Osbert, he rose to his feet.

Clenching his fists, Osbert said, "What have you done to Amelia?"

"I've done nothing to the young lady."

"It's me, isn't it? My portraits are stealing pieces of her soul."

"You imagine things, dear boy. Go back to bed and get some rest." The apothecary didn't look him in the eye.

"How do I set things right?"

The apothecary sighed. "You can't. By painting her image with the soul-paint, you have robbed that girl of most of her soul, binding it permanently away from her. She will die shortly, and it is your obsession that has killed her."

What could Osbert do? "I'll destroy the paintings. Burn them all."

"Ignorant child. You are dealing with magics of the soul. Mere flames cannot break such bindings."

Osbert lunged forward and grabbed at the apothecary, who broke the grip with ease and pushed him to the floor.

Tears of hopelessness welled in his eyes, then began to flow down his cheeks. "Dear God, what have I done?"

The apothecary laughed. "Yes, now you call out to Him. Far too late, of course."

Wiping at the tears on his face, Osbert realized he was damned. Step by step, he had brought ruin upon himself and Amelia.

And then as he licked at his lips, he tasted his tears. Salt. The Salt of Judas.

He rose to his feet. The apothecary had moved to the doorway and was bolting it shut. Osbert climbed up on the counter and grabbed the saltcellar from the top shelf behind it. The apothecary spotted him as he climbed down from the counter.

"What are you doing? Give that back!" The apothecary's voice was angry.

Osbert ran up the stairs to his room, locked the door and pulled off his nightshirt.

"Stop!" yelled the apothecary from below.

Ordinary flames might not burn the paintings and release the pieces of Amelia's soul, but perhaps the magical fire of his burning soul could. He hurriedly piled the portraits of Amelia in the middle of the room as the apothecary banged on the door. He could hear the voice of the portraits asking what he was doing.

Lying back on the portraits, he unscrewed the top of the saltcellar and spilled the salt upon his chest.

His body spasmed as goutts of pale fire spread from his chest. The pain twisted his mind and all reason fled. All that remained was the desire to destroy the portraits. Flames surrounded him and then all went dark.

*

As he returned to consciousness, he felt a burning sensation over most of his body. The scent of smoke filled his nostrils. This must be hell, his eternal destiny. As he opened his eyes, though, he saw the old monk leaning over him, not a devil.

"He's awake," said the monk to someone outside Osbert's view. "Be still, young man. That you are alive is a miracle, though you have some burns on your body from the fire."

Osbert tried to speak, but at first could not find a voice in his dry throat. Finally he managed to whisper, "Where am I?"

"The infirmary at Tewksbury Abbey. Be still."

"Where is the apothecary?"

The monk shook his head. "He must have been consumed by the fire. We did not find his body."

Osbert found it hard to believe the apothecary was truly dead. "And my paintings?"

"They are destroyed. The entire building burned to ashes; there is nothing left. But you must rest. Go back to sleep."

*

Propped up on his bed in the infirmary, Osbert drank the broth that was supposed to restore his strength. It was no use, he knew - his strength was gone because he had given up most of his soul, not because of his injuries.

The one real comfort he had was that Amelia still lived, and was said to be recovering slowly. At least her death was not on his conscience.

The old monk arrived and sat on a stool by Osbert's bed. "I have something for you." He reached into a sack and brought out the saltcellar.

Osbert nearly spilled his broth. "Where did you get that?" he whispered.

"You were clutching it when we found you. It is a symbol of the miracle that saved you."

Saved? He could not be saved. "What do you mean?"

"After the fire burned out, no one thought anybody could have survived. But then you were found in the midst of the ashes, still alive, with a pile of salt on your chest and this saltcellar in your hand." The monk smiled. "I know salt is a preservative, but I didn't think it had quite so much power."

"That salt had magical properties." For what evil fate had the Salt of Judas saved him?

The monk laughed. "It is but ordinary salt." He opened up the saltcellar, dipped his finger in, and dabbed some crystals on his tongue. "See?"

Osbert held his breath for a moment, but nothing happened to the monk. "It cannot be. I saw it. The apothecary . . ."

The monk raised an eyebrow. "The apothecary claimed it was magical salt? I had my suspicions the man was a fraud."

"He was no fraud. At least, not the way you think." What purpose was there in hiding the truth? Osbert felt as if a burden lifted from his shoulders as he quietly began to tell the monk what he had done.

*

"So I tried to release Amelia's soul by burning the paintings with the magical fire, and that's the last thing I remember before I awoke after the fire," Osbert finished.

During Osbert's narration, the monk had not interrupted, although he had frowned at several points. Now the monk leaned forward and stared into Osbert's eyes. After a few seconds, he said, "You do not appear to be either a madman or a liar, and I cannot see why you would concoct such a tale. I believe you."

"Thank you." It was a relief to be believed. Osbert looked at the saltcellar still gripped in the monk's hands. "But I still don't understand why the Salt of Judas didn't burn you when you touched it. What happened to the curse?"

The monk looked up to the ceiling of the infirmary. Osbert followed his gaze, but he could see nothing.

The monk looked back down to Osbert. "The salt lost its savour through an act of betrayal. Perhaps it took an act of sacrifice to let it be salted again."

*

The canvas before him was nearly complete. The image of Tewkesbury Abbey was ethereal, wreathed in morning mist, though the actual mist had vanished hours ago. Osbert paused as he carefully considered where to add a little more shadow.

"You paint very well," said a voice over his shoulder.

He knew before turning that it was Amelia. She had recently begun taking walks again as she had recovered from her illness, and he had seen her every few days over the past month. But this was the first time she had spoken to him.

"Thank you, Miss." He turned back to the canvas.

"Perhaps one day you could paint a portrait of me," Amelia said.

"I only paint landscapes."



Artwork by Jeremiah D. Syme

The Mooncalfe

by David Farland

It was late evening on a sultry summer's day when three riders appeared at the edge of the woods on the road southwest of Tintagel castle. The sentries did not see them riding up the muddy track that led from Beronsglade. The knights merely appeared, just as the sun dipped below the sea, as if they'd coalesced from mist near a line of beech trees.

The manner of their appearance did not seem odd, on that day of oddities. The tide was very low, and the whole ocean lay as placid as a mountain pool. To the castle's residents, who were used to the constant pounding of the surf upon the craggy rocks outside the castle walls, the silence seemed thunderous. Even the gulls had given up their incessant screeching and now huddled low on the rocks, making an easy dinner of cockles and green kelp crabs.

All around the castle, the air was somber. Smoke from cooking fires and from the candelers hung in a blue haze all about Tintagel's four towers. The air seemed leaden.

So it was that the sentries, when they spotted the three knights, frowned and studied the men's unfamiliar garb. The leader of the trio wore a fantastical helm shaped like a dragon's head, and his enameled mail glimmered red like a dragon's scales. He rode a huge black destrier, and as for the device on his shield, he carried only blank iron strapped to a pack on a palfrey.

Beside him rode a big fellow in oiled ringmail, while the third knight wore nothing but a cuirass of boiled leather, yet carried himself with a calmness and certainty that made him more

frightening than if he rode at the head of a Saxon horde.

"'Tis Uther Pendragon!" one of the boys at the castle walls cried at first. The lad hefted his halberd as if he would take a swing, but stepped back in fright.

Pendragon was of course the guards' worst nightmare. At the Easter feast, King Uther Pendragon had made advances on the Duke Gorlois's wife, the Lady Igraine. He had courted her in her husband's company with all the grace and courtesy of a bull trying to mount a heifer. At last the duke felt constrained to flee the king's presence. The king demanded that Gorlois return with his wife, but Gorlois knew that if he ever set foot in the king's palace again, he'd lose his head. So he locked his wife safely in Tintagel, began fortifying his castles, and prayed that he could hire enough Irish mercenaries to back him before the king could bring him down.

Last anyone had heard, Duke Gorlois was holed like a badger at his fortress in Dimilioc, where Uther Pendragon had laid siege. It was said that Pendragon had employed Welsh miners as sappers, vowing to dig down the castle walls and skin Gorlois for his pelt within forty days.

So when the lad atop the castle wall thought he saw Pendragon, immediately someone raised a horn and began to blow wildly, calling for reinforcements, though none would likely be needed. Tintagel was a small keep, situated by the sea on a pile of rocks that could only be reached over a narrow causeway. It was said that three men could hold it from an army of any size, and no fewer than a two dozen guards now manned the wall.

The captain of the guard, a stout old knight named Sir Ventias who could no longer ride due to a game leg, squinted through the smoke that clung around the castle. Something seemed afoul. He knew fat king Pendragon's features well, and as he peered through the gloom and the smoke that burned his eyes, he saw immediately that it was not Pendragon on the mount. It was a young man with a flaxen beard and a hatchet face.

Ventias squinted, trying to pierce the haze until he felt sure: it was Duke Gorlois. He rode in company with his true friend Sir Jordans and the stout knight Sir Brastias.

Ventias smiled. "Tell the duchess that her husband is home."

The celebration that night was remarkable. The duke's pennant was hoisted on the wall, and everywhere the people made merry. Sir Brastias himself told the miraculous tale of their escape - how they had spied Pendragon leave the siege and the duke had issued out from the castle with his knights. After a brief battle, Gorlois had broken Pendragon's lines and had hurried toward Tintagel, only to discover Pendragon himself a few miles up the road, frolicking with some maiden in a pool. Since King Pendragon was naked and unarmed, it became an easy matter to capture the lecher, both arms and armor, and force his surrender.

Thus Gorlois rode home in Pendragon's suit of mail.

So it was that the celebration began at Tintagel. Suckling pigs were spitted and cooked over a bonfire in the lower bailey, while every lad who had a hand with the pipe or the tabor made music as best he could. New ale flowed into mugs like golden honey. Young squires fought mock combats to impress their lord and entertain the audience. And everywhere the people began to dance.

But Duke Gorlois could not relish it. Instead, he went to his great hall before the festivities began and gazed upon his glorious young bride with a sultry stare. He never even took his seat at the head of the table. Instead, he studied her for less than a minute before he grabbed one of her breasts as if it were a third hand and began to lead her to the bedchamber.

This he did in front of some eighty people. When the priest quietly complained about this impropriety to the Duke, Gorlois, who was normally a very reserved fellow, merely said, "Let the people frolic as they see fit, and I will frolic as I see fit."

Though everyone was astonished at this crude display, no one other than the priest dared speak against it. Even Sir Jordans, a man who could normally be counted on to pass judgment fairly on any matter, merely sat in the great hall and did not eat. Instead, he played with his heavy serpent-handled dagger, stabbing it over and over again into the wooden table beside his trencher.

Then Duke Gorlois dragged his wife up the stairs against her will, stripping off his armor as he went.

Or at least that is the way that my mother tells the tale, and she should know, for she was a young woman who served tables there at Tintagel.

*

It seems surprising that no one found it odd.

The evening star that night shone as red as a bloodstone, and all the dogs somehow quietly slipped from the castle gates.

There was a new horned moon, and though the people danced, they did not do so long. Somehow their feet seemed heavy, and the celebration seemed more trouble than it was worth, and so the crowds began to break off early.

Some went home, while most seemed more eager to drink themselves into a stupor. Yet no one at the time remarked about the queer mood at Castle Tintagel.

Late that night, my mother found Sir Jordans still on his bench, where he'd sat quietly for hours. He was letting the flame of a candle lick his left forefinger in a display that left my mother horrified and set her heart to hammering.

Dozens of knights lay drunk and snoring on the floor around him, while a pair of cats on the table gnawed the bones of a roast swan.

My mother wondered if Sir Jordans performed this remarkable feat for her benefit, as young men often will when trying to impress a young woman.

If so, he'd gone too far. She feared for Sir Jordan's health, so she quietly scurried to the long oaken table. She could not smell burning flesh above the scents of ale and grease and fresh loaves, though Sir Jordans had been holding his finger under the flame for a long minute.

"What are you doing?" my mother asked in astonishment. "If it's cooking yourself that you're after, there's a bonfire still burning out in the bailey!"

Sir Jordans merely sat at the table, a hooded traveling robe pulled low over his head, and held his finger beneath the flickering flame. Candlelight glimmered in his eyes. My mother thought the silence odd, for in the past Sir Jordans had always been such a garrulous fellow, a man whose laugh sounded like the winter's surf booming on the escarpment at the base of the castle walls.

"Do you hear me? You'll lose the finger," my mother warned. "Are you drunk, or fey?" she asked, and she thought of rousing some besotted knight from the floor to help her subdue the man.

Sir Jordans looked up at her with a dreamy smile. "I'll not lose my finger, nor burn it," he said. "I could hold it thus all night. It is a simple trick, really. I could teach you - if you like?"

Something about his manner unnerved my mother. She was beautiful then. Though she was a but a scullery maid, at the age of fourteen she was lovely - with long raven hair, eyes of smoke, and a full figure that drew appreciative gazes from men. Sir Jordans studied her now with open admiration, and she grew frightened.

She crossed herself. "This is no trick, this is sorcery!" my mother accused. "It's evil! If the Father found out, he'd make you do penance."

But Sir Jordans merely smiled as if she were a child. He had a broad, pleasant face that could give no insult. "It's not evil," he affirmed reasonably. "Did not God save the three righteous Israelites when the infidels threw them into the fire?"

My mother wondered then. He was right, of course. Sir Jordans was a virtuous man, she knew, and if god could save men who were thrown whole into a fire, then surely Sir Jordans was upright enough so that god could spare his finger.

"Let me teach you," Sir Jordan's whispered.

My mother nodded, still frightened, but enticed by his gentle manner.

"The trick," Sir Jordans said, withdrawing his finger from the candle flame, "is to learn to take the fire into yourself without getting burned."

He held up his finger for her inspection, and my mother drew close, trying to see it in the dim light, to make sure that it was not oozing or blistered.

"Once you learn how to hold the fire within," Sir Jordans whispered, "you must then learn to release the flames when - and how - you will. Like this . . ."

He reached out his finger then and touched between my mother's ample breasts. His finger itself was cold to the touch, so cold that it startled her. Yet after he drew it away, she felt as if flames began to build inside her, pulsing through her breasts in waves, sending cinders of pleasure to burn hot in the back of her brain. Unimaginable embers, as hot as coals from a blacksmith's forge, flared to life in her groin.

As the flames took her, she gasped in astonishment, so thoroughly inflamed by lust that she dropped to her knees in agony, barely able to suppress her screams.

Sir Jordans smiled at her and asked playfully, "You're a virgin, aren't you?"

Numb with pain, my mother nodded, and knelt before him, sweating and panting from desire. This is hell, she thought. This is how it will be, me burning with desires so staggering that they can never be sated. This is my destiny now and hereafter.

"I could teach you more," Sir Jordans whispered, leaning close. "I could teach you how to make love, how to satisfy every sensual desire. There are arts to be learned - pleasurable beyond your keenest imagining. Only when I teach you, can the flames inside you be quenched."

My mother merely nodded, struck dumb with grief and lust. She would have given anything for one moment of release, for any degree of satisfaction. Sir Jordans smiled and leaned forward, until his lips met hers.

*

At dawn, my mother woke outside the castle. She found herself sprawled dazed and naked like some human sacrifice upon a black rock on the ocean's shore.

The whole world was silent, with a silence so profound that it seemed to weigh like an ingot of lead on her chest. The only noise came from the cries of gulls that winged about the castle towers, as if afraid to land.

She searched for a long while until she found her clothes, then made her way back to the castle.

Two hours later, riders came charging hard from Dimilioc. They bore the ill tidings that Duke Gorlois had been slain in battle the day before. Among the dead were found Sir Brastias and Sir Jordans.

Everyone at Tintagel took the news in awe, speaking well only because they feared to speak ill.

"'Twas a shade," they said. "Duke Gorlois so loved his wife, that he came at sunset to see her one last time."

Even the Lady Igraine repeated this tale of shades as if it were true, for her husband had slipped from her bed before dawn, as if he were indeed a shade, as had the other dead men who walked in his retinue.

But my mother did not believe the tale. The man she'd slept with the night before had been clothed in flesh, and she felt his living seed burn her womb. She knew that she had been seduced by sorcery, under the horned moon.

Two children were conceived on that fell night. I was one of them, the girl.

You have surely heard of the boy.

King Uther Pendragon soon forced the widowed Igraine to be his wife and removed her to Canterbury. When the boy was born, Pendragon ripped the newborn son from its mother's breast and gave it to a pale-eyed Welsh sorcerer who slung it over his back and carried it like a bundle of firewood into the forest.

I have heard it said that Igraine feared that the sorcerer would bury the infant alive, so she prayed ceaselessly that God would soften the sorcerer's heart, so that he would abandon it rather than do it harm.

Some say that in time Igraine became deluded into believing that her son was being raised by peasants or wolves. She was often seen wandering the fairs, looking deep into the eyes of boy children, as if trying to find something of herself or Duke Gorlois there.

As for my mother, she fled Tintagel well before her stomach began to bulge. She loved a stableboy in Tintagel, and had even promised herself to him in marriage, so it was a hard thing for her to leave, and she slunk away one night without saying any goodbyes.

For she constantly feared that the false Sir Jordans would return. It is well known, after all, that devils cannot leave their own offspring alone.

My mother went into labor three hundred and thirty-three days later, after a term so long that she knew there would be something wrong with me.

My mother took no midwife, for she rightly feared what I would look like. I would have a tail, she thought, and a goat's pelt, and cloven hooves for feet. She feared that I might even be born with horns that would rip her as I came through the birth canal.

No priest would have baptized a bastard and a monstrosity, she knew, and she hoped that I would be born dead, or would die soon, so that she could rid herself of the evidence of her sin.

So she went into the forest while the labor pains wracked her, and she gouged a little hole to bury me in, and she laid a huge rock beside it to crush me with, if it came to that.

Then she squatted in the ferns beneath an oak. Thus I dropped into the world, and the only cries to ring from the woods that day came from my mother.

For when I touched the soil, I merely lay quietly gazing about. My mother looked down between her legs in trepidation and saw at once that I was no common girl. I was not as homely as her sin. I was not born with a pelt or a twisted visage.

Instead, she said that I was radiant, with skin that smelled of honeysuckle and eyes as pale as ice. I did not have the cheesy covering of a newborn, and my mother's blood did not cling to me.

I looked out at her, as if I were very old and wise and knowing, and I did not cry. Instead, I reached out and grasped her bloody heel, as if to comfort her, and I smiled.

When my mother was a little girl herself, she said that she told me that she had often tried to visualize angels who were so pure and good, wise and beautiful, so innocent and powerful that the mind revolted from trying to imagine them. Now a newborn angel grasped her heel, and it broke my mother's heart.

No human child had ever had a skin so pale, or hair that so nearly matched the blush of a rose.

Thus my mother knew that I was fairy child as well as a bastard born under the horned moon, and though she loved me, she dared not name me. Instead, though I bore no lump like a hunchback or no disfigurement of any kind that made me seem monstrous or ill-favored, she merely called me "Mooncalfe."

*

If beauty and wisdom can be said to be curses, no one was more accursed than I.

My mother feared for me. She feared what lusty men might do to me if ever I were found.

So she fled from villages and castles into an abandoned cottage deep in the wooded hills, and perhaps that was for the best. The Saxons were moving north, and on her rare trips to the nearest village, she came back distressed by the news.

At nights I could hear her lying awake, the beads of her rosary clacking as she muttered prayers to her vengeful god, hoping that he would heal me. I knew even then that she prayed in vain, that her god had nothing to do with me.

Mother raised me alone. Time and again she would plead, "Don't wander from the cottage. Never let your face be seen, and never let any man touch you!"

She loved me fiercely, and well. She taught me games and fed me as best she could. She punished me when I did wrong, and she slept with me wrapped in her arms at night.

But if she let me outside to play at all, she did so only briefly, and even then I was forced to cover myself with a robe and a shawl, so that I might hide my face.

Sometimes, at night, she would kneel beneath a cross she had planted in front of the cottage and raise her voice, pleading with her god and his mother. She begged forgiveness, and asked him that I might be healed and made like any other child. She would sometimes she cut herself or pull out her own hair, or beat herself mercilessly, hoping that her god would show pity on her for such self-abuse.

I admit that at times, I too prayed to the Blessed Virgin, but never for myself - only for my mother's comfort.

She sought to cure me of my affliction. She rubbed me with healing leaves, like evening star and wizard's violet.

When I was three, my mother took a long journey of several days, the first and only one she ever took with me. She had learned in the village that a holy man had died, a Bishop who was everywhere named a man of good report, and she badly wanted his bones to burn for me.

So she bundled me up and carried me through the endless woods. Her prayers poured out from her as copiously as did her sweat.

We skirted villages and towns for nearly a week, traveling mostly at night by the light of the stars and a waxing moon, until at last we reached an abbey. My mother found his tomb, and had work prying the stone from his grave. If the bishop was truly a good man, I do not know. His spirit had already fled the place.

But we found his rotting corpse, and my mother severed his hand, and then we scurried away into the night. The abbot must have set his hounds on us, for I remember my mother splashing through the creek, me clinging to her back, while the hounds bayed.

Two nights later, when the moon had waxed full, we found a hilltop far from any habitation, and she set the bone fire.

We piled up tree limbs and wadded grass into a great circle, and all the time that we did so, mother prayed to her god in my behalf.

"God can heal you, Mooncalfe," she would mutter. "God loves you and can heal you. He can make you look like a common child, I am sure. But in order to gain his greatest blessings, you must say your prayers and walk through the fire of bones. Only then, as the smoke ascends into heaven, will the Father and his handmaid Mary hear your most heartfelt prayer."

It seemed a lot of trouble to me. I was happy and carefree as a child. My greatest concern was for my mother. Having seen all the work she had done, I consented at last.

When the fire burned its brightest, and columns of smoke lit the sky, my mother threw the bishop's severed hand atop the mix, and we waited until we could smell his charred flesh.

Then my mother and I said our prayers, and my mother bid me to leap through the fire.

I did so, begging the blessing of the Virgin and leaping through the flames seven times.

Even as a child, I never burned. Until that time, I had thought myself fortunate.

But though the fire was so hot that my mother dared not approach it, I leapt through unharmed, untouched by the heat.

On my last attempt, when I saw that the bone fire had still not made me look human, I merely leapt into the conflagration and stood.

I hoped that the flames would blister me and scar me, so that I might look more like a mortal.

My mother screamed in terror and kept trying to draw near, to pull me from the fire, but it burned her badly.

I cried aloud to the Virgin, begging her blessing, but though the flames licked the clothing from my flesh, so that my skirts and cloak all turned to stringy ashes, I took no hurt.

I waited for nearly an hour for the flames to die low before I wearied of the game. Then I helped my mother down to the stream, to bathe her own fire-blistered flesh and ease her torment.

She wept and prayed bitterly, and by dawn she was not fit for travel. She had great black welts on her face, and bubbles beneath the skin, and her skin had gone all red - all because she sought to save me from the flames. But as for me, my skin was unblemished. If anything, it looked more translucent. My mother sobbed and confirmed my fears. "You look more pure than before."

So it was that I foraged for us both, and after several days we began to amble home in defeat.

After that, mother seemed to lose all hope of ever healing me. She confided a few days later, "I will raise you until you are thirteen," she said, "but I can do no more after that."

She wanted a life for herself.

She took to making trips to the village more, and I knew that she fell in love, for often when she returned, she would mention a young miller who lived there, a man named Andelin, and she would sometimes fall silent and stare off into the distance and smile.

I am sure that she never mentioned her accursed daughter to him, and I suppose that he could not have helped but love my mother in kind.

One night, late in the summer, my mother returned from the village crying. I asked her why she wept, and she said that Andelin had begged for her hand in marriage, but she had spurned him.

She did not say why. She thought I was still too young to understand how I stood in the way of her love.

Later that night, Andelin himself rode into the woods, and called for my mother, seeking our cottage. But it was far from the lonely track that ran through the wood, and my mother was careful not to leave a trail, and so he never found us.

Though I felt sorry for my mother, I was glad when Andelin gave up looking for us.

The thought terrified me that my mother might leave someday. She was my truest companion, my best friend.

But if I was raised alone as a child, the truth is that I seldom felt lonely. In a dark glen not a quarter mile from my home, was a barren place where a woodsman's cottage had once stood. A young boy, Daffyth, had died in the cottage, and his shade still hovered near the spot, for he longed for his mother who would never return.

I could speak with him on all but the sunniest of days, and he taught me many games and rhymes that he'd learned at his mother's knee. He was a desolate boy, lost and frightened. He needed my comfort more than I ever needed his.

For in addition to conversing with him and my mother, I could also speak to animals. I listened to the hungry confabulations of trout in the stream, or the useless prattle of squirrels, or the fearful musings of mice. The rooks that lived against the chimney of our cottage often berated me, accusing me of pilfering their food, but then they would chortle even louder when they managed to snatch a bright piece of blue string from my frock to add to their nests.

But it was not the small animals that gave me the most pleasure. As a child of four, I learned to love a shaggy old wolf bitch who was kind and companionable, and who would warn me when hunters or outlaws roamed the forest.

When, as a small girl, I told my mother what the birds or foxes were saying, she refused to believe me. I was lonely she thought, and therefore given to vain imaginings. Like any other child, I tended to chatter incessantly, and it was only natural that I would take what company I could find.

Or maybe she feared to admit even to herself that she knew what I could do.

Certainly, she had to have had an intimation.

I know that she believed me when I turned five, for that was the year that I met the white hart. He was old and venerable and wiser than even the wolf or owls. He was the one who first taught me to walk invisibly, and showed me the luminous pathways in the air that led toward the Bright Lady.

"You are one of them," he said. "In time, you must go to her." But I did not feel the Goddess's call at that early age.

It was that very year that my mother became ill one drear midwinter's day - deathly ill, though I did not understand death. Flecks of blood sprayed from her mouth when she coughed, and though her flesh burned with inner fire, she shivered violently, even though I piled all of our coats and blankets on her and left her beside the roaring fire.

"Listen to me," my mother cried one night after a bout of coughing had left her blankets all red around her throat. "I am going to die," she said. "I'm going to die, my sweet Mooncalfe, and I'm afraid you'll die because of it."

I had seen death of course. I'd seen the cold bodies of squirrels, but I'd also seen their shades hopping about merrily in the trees afterward, completely unconcerned. I did not share my mother's fear.

"All right," I said, accepting death.

"No!" my mother shouted, fighting for breath. Tears coursed from her eyes. "It's not all right." Her voice sounded marvelously hoarse and full of pain. "You must promise me to stay alive. Food. We have plenty of food. But you must keep the fire lit, stay warm. In the spring, you must go north to the nunnery at the edge of the wood."

"All right," I answered with equanimity, prepared to live or die as she willed.

She grew weak quickly.

In those days, I knew little of herb lore or magic. If I'd known then what I do now, perhaps I would have walked the path to the Endless Summer and gathered lungwort and elderflower to combat her cough, and willow and catmint to help ease her pain and gently sweat out the fever.

But as a child I only prayed with her. She prayed to live, I prayed for a quick cessation of her agony.

Her god granted my prayer - the only one that he ever granted me - and she died within hours.

But death did not end my mother's torment. Her shade was restless and longed to watch over me. She thought me abused because of her sin.

So she remained with me in that house, wailing her grief. Each night was a new beginning to her, for like most shades, she would forget all that had happened the night before. I took her to see Daffyth on some occasions, hoping that they might comfort one another, but she gained nothing from it.

She cursed herself for her weakness in allowing herself to be seduced by Sir Jordans, and she often breathed out threats of vengeance.

She loved me and wept over me, and I could not comfort her. Nor did I ever seek out the nunnery, for my mother seemed as alive to me as ever.

I lived and grew. The she-wolf brought me hares and piglets and young deer to eat, until she herself grew old and died. I gathered mushrooms from the forest floor, and the white hart showed me where an old orchard still stood, so that I filled up stores of plums and apples to help last me through each winter.

I foraged and fed myself. As I did, I began to roam the woods and explore. I would leave the old cottage for days at a time, letting my mother stay alone in her torment. On such occasions, she wandered too, searching for her little lost girl.

I found her once, there at the edge of the village, staring at Andelin's house. The miller had grown older, and had married some girl who was not my mother's equal. Their child cried within, and my mother dared not disturb them.

Yet, like me, she stood there at the edge of the forest, craving another person's touch.

I often kept myself invisible on my journeys, and at times I confess that I enjoyed sneaking up on the poachers and outlaws that hid in the wood, merely to watch them, to see what common people looked like, how they acted when they thought themselves alone.

But in my fourteenth summer, I once made the mistake of stepping on a twig as I watched a handsome young man stalking the white hart through tall ferns. The boy spun and released his bow so fast that I did not have time to dodge his shot.

The cold iron tip of his arrow only nicked my arm. Though the wound was slight, still the iron dispelled my charms, and I suddenly found myself standing before him naked (for I had no need of clothes). My heart pounded in terror and desire.

I suddenly imagined what the boy would do, having seen me. I imagined his lips against mine, and his hands pressing firmly into my buttocks, and that he would ravish me. After all, night after night my mother had warned me what men would do if they saw me.

So I anticipated his advances. In fact, in that moment I imagined that I might actually be in love, and so determined that I would endure his passion if not enjoy it.

But to my dismay, when he saw me suddenly standing there naked, he merely fainted. Though I tried to revive him for nearly an hour, each time I did so, he gazed at me in awe and then passed out again.

When night came, I wrapped myself in a cloak of invisibility and let him regain his wits. Then I followed him to his home at the edge of a village. He kept listening for me, and he begged me not to follow, thinking me a succubus or some other demon.

He made the sign of the cross against me, and I begged him to tarry. But he shot arrows at me and seemed so frightened that I dared not follow him farther, for his sake as well as mine.

Soon thereafter I met Wiglan, the wise woman of the barrow. She was a lumpy old thing, almost like a tree trunk with arms. She had been dead for four hundred years, and still her spirit had not flickered out and faded, as so many do, but instead had ripened into something warped and strange and eerie. Moreover, she did not grow forgetful during the days as my mother's shade did, and so she offered me a more-even level of companionship.

One night under the bright eternal stars, I told Wiglan of my problem, of how my mother longed for me to look mortal, and how I now longed for it too. I could no longer take comfort in the company of cold shades or in conversations with animals. I craved the touch of real flesh against mine, the kiss of warm lips, the touch of hands, and the thrust of hips.

"Perhaps," Wiglan said, "you should seek out the healing pools up north. If the goddess can heal you at all, there is where you will find her blessing."

"What pools?" I asked, heart pounding with a hope that I had never felt so keenly before.

"There are ancient pools in Wales," she said, "called the Maiden's Fount. While I yet lived, the Romans built a city there, called Caerleon. I heard that they enclosed the fount and built a temple to their goddess Minerva. The fount has great powers, and the Romans honored the goddess in their way, but even then it was a sin, for in honoring the goddess, they sought to hedge her in."

"That was hundreds of years ago," I said. "Are you sure that the fount still springs forth?"

"It is a sacred place to the Lady and all of her kin," Wiglan said. "It will still be there. Go by the light of a horned moon and ask of her what you will. Make an offering of water lilies and lavender. Perhaps your petition will be granted."

Bursting with hope, I made off at once. I set my course by the River or Stars, and journeyed for many days over fields and hills, through dank forest and over the fetid bogs. At night I would sometimes seek directions from the dead, who were plentiful in those days of unrest, until at last after many weeks I reached the derelict temple.

The Saxons had been to Caerleon and burned the city a few years before. A castle stood not far from the ancient temple, but the villages around Caerleon had been burned and looted, their citizens murdered. Little remained of it, and for the moment the castle was staffed by a handful of soldiers who huddled on its walls in fear.

The temple on the hills above the fortress was in worse condition than was the castle. Some of the temple's pillars had been knocked down, and moon disk above its façade lay broken and in ruins. Perhaps the Saxons had sensed the Lady's power here and sought to put an end to it, or at least sully it.

The pools were overgrown and reedy, while owls hooted and flew on silent wings among the few standing pillars.

There I took my offerings and went to bathe under the crescent moon.

I knelt in the damp mud above the warm pool, cast out a handful of lavender into the brackish water, and stood with a white water lily cupped in my left palm. I whispered my prayers to the Goddess, thanking her for the gifts that the Earth gave me, for her breasts that were hills, for the fruit of the fields and of the forest. I pleaded with her and named my desire before making my final offering of lily.

As I prayed, a man's voice spoke up behind me. "She's not that strong anymore. The new god is gaining power over this land, and the Great Mother hides. You seek a powerful magic, one that will change the very essence of what you are - and that is beyond her power. Perhaps you should seek a smaller blessing, ask her to do something easy, like change the future?"

"Still pray to her as you will. It hurts nothing, and I'm glad that some still talk to her."

I turned and looked into the ice-pale eyes of a Welshman, recognized at once my features in his face. He was my father. I did not feel surprised to meet him here. After all, my mother had taught me well that demons always seek out and torment their own children.

He stared right at me, his eyes caressing my naked flesh, even though I had been walking invisible.

"Sir Jordans?" I asked. "Or do you have a truer name?"

The fellow smiled wistfully, drew back his hood so that I could see his silvered hair in the moonlight. "I called myself that - but only once. How is your mother? Well, I hope."

"Dead," I answered, then waited in the cold silence for him to show some reaction.

When he saw that he must speak, he finally said, "Well, that happens."

I demanded, "By the Bright Lady, what is your name?" I do not know if the Goddess forced him to reveal it because we were at the pool, or if he would have told me anyway, but he answered.

"Merlin. Some call me Merlin the Prophet, or Merlin the Seer. Others name me a Magician."

"Not Merlin the Procurer? Not Merlin the Seducer? Not Merlin the Merciless?"

"What I did, I did only once," Merlin said, as if that should buy a measure of forgiveness. "The omens were good that night, for one who wished to produce offspring strong in the old powers. It was the first horned moon of the new summer, after all."

"Is that the only reason you took my mother, because the moon was right?"

"I was not at Tintagel on my own errand," Merlin defended himself. "Uther Pendragon wanted to bed the Duchess Igraine, and he would have killed her husband for the chance. Call me a procurer if you will, but I tried only to save the duke's life - and I foresaw in the process that Pendragon's loins would produce a son who could be a truer and greater king than Uther could ever be."

"Igraine's son? You did not kill the boy?"

"No, Arthur lives with me now, and follows me in my travels. In a year or two, he will learn his destiny," Merlin said. "He will unite all of England and drive back the Saxons, and he will rule this stubborn realm with a gentle hand. . . ." He hunched down in the tall grass beside the pool, stared thoughtfully into water that reflected moon and stars.

"So you helped seduce the Lady Igraine for a noble cause. But why did you bed my mother?"

"For you!" Merlin said in surprise, as if it were obvious. "I saw that night that your mother had fey blood, and all of the omens were right. I saw that you would be wise and beautiful, and the thought came to me that Arthur would need a fair maiden by his side. The old blood is strong in you, both from me and your mother. If you marry Arthur Pendragon, perhaps together we can build a realm where the old gods are worshipped beside the new."

"Didn't you think before you mounted her?" I asked. "Didn't you think about how it would destroy her?"

Merlin said, "I looked down the path of her future. She would have married a stableboy and borne him five fine sons and a brace of daughters. She would have been happier, perhaps - but she would not have had you!"

"My mother died in torment because of you!" I shouted. "She died alone in the woods, because she feared letting anyone see me alive. She died friendless, because I was too young and silly to know how to save her. Her spirit is in torment still!"

"Yes, yes," Merlin cajoled as if I did not quite see some greater point, "I'm sure it all seems a tragedy. But you are here, are you not? You _"

I saw then that he would not listen, that my mother's suffering, her loneliness and shame, all meant nothing to him. She was but a pawn in his hand, a piece to be sacrificed for the sake of some greater game.

I knew then that I hated him, and that I could never allow Merlin to use his powers against a woman this way again. And suddenly I glanced up at a shooting star, and I knew that I had the power, that the old blood was strong enough in me, that I could stop him.

"Father," I interrupted him, holding the lily high in my left hand. Merlin shut his mouth. "In the name of the Bright Lady I curse you: though you shall love a woman fiercely, the greater your desire for her grows, the more lame shall be your groin. Never shall you sire a child again. Never shall you use a woman as your pawn, or your seed as a tool."

I stepped through the rushes to the side of the warm pool at Minerva's failing temple, felt the living power of the Goddess there as my toe touched the water.

"No!" Merlin shouted and raised his hand with little finger and thumb splayed in a horn as he tried to ward off my spell.

But either he was too late, or the spell was too strong for him. In any case, I tossed the white lily into the still waters.

As the wavelets rolled away from the lily, bouncing against the edges of the pool, Merlin screamed in agony and put his hands over his face.

I believe that he was peering into his own bleak future as he cried in horror, "No! No! No!"

I knelt and dipped my hand in the pool seven times, cupping the water and letting it run down my breasts and between my legs.

Then I stood and merely walked away.

Sometimes near dawn, I waken and think that I can still hear Merlin's cries ringing in my ears. I listen then, and smile a fey smile.

In time I made it back to my cottage in the woods, and I told the shade of my mother about all that had transpired. She seemed more at peace that night than ever before, and so before daybreak, I introduced her to the child Daffyth once again.

I told Daffyth that she was his mother, and convinced my mother's shade that Daffyth was a forgotten son, born from her love for a man named Andelin.

In the still night I coaxed them to the edge of the woods, and let them go.

When last I saw them, they were walking hand-in-hand on the road to Tintagel.

As for me, I learned in time to praise the Goddess for her goodness and for what I am and always hope to be - a mooncalf, and no sorcerer's pawn.



Artwork by Thorsten Grambow

Audience

by Ty Franck

Linus watched his personal assistant bustle through the door of his immense bedroom at exactly the right time. He had been awake long enough that he was no longer bleary-headed, but not long enough to start thinking about doing things for himself. This was the perfect time for someone to come talk to him about the day's plans, and this particular assistant had arrived at exactly that moment every day for the last six years.

Of course, Linus thought, his very perfection is why he is my personal assistant.

"Slept well I hope? Good, let's talk about the day's appointments," said Michael as he walked across the room and drew back the curtains. Every morning it was the same. A quick, impersonal greeting and on to business. Linus sighed and decided not to make too much fuss today.

"Yes, Michael, I slept very well. The bed was very comfortable, and the comforter is wonderful. Please send my compliments to everyone."

"Excellent," said Michael, making a few quick notes on his pad. "You have a very full schedule today; shall we go over it?"

"Will there be much traveling today, Michael? I'm not feeling up to traveling. I think I might be getting a headache."

Michael merely gave him the blank stare he used when he thought Linus was being petulant. When just enough time passed that Linus began to feel silly, but before he felt the need to become truly obstinate, Michael said, "All of your appointments today are here in New York. We will be traveling by car from here to the museum for an art exhibit, paintings I believe. We will then travel by car to your luncheon. A new restaurant called The Orange Garden. There are three chefs there, and all are in contention for top rankings this year. It is your most important stop of the day. After, we will travel by car to the Opera. The composer is Lisa Takei. She is a relatively new talent to the rankings, but some are saying the finest since Whitworth last year. It has a highly ranked cast."

Michael was giving him the other look now, the one that asked whether he was going to behave or not. "I do try to appreciate Japanese opera, Michael, you know I do. I'll be very attentive, I promise," said Linus.

"After the opera is a dinner party in your honor. You have not been to New York in some time, and the Mayor felt it necessary for the city to show its appreciation. All of the top ranked talents will be there. Naturally, there will be some trying for unscheduled showings, but I needn't remind you that appreciating any of their works without an appointment is a bad idea. It is getting hard enough to move you from place to place without crowds of unranked talent disrupting things."

Linus knew how bad it could get. Michael had been his assistant for six years now, but he was actually a replacement. Linus' first assistant had nearly been killed when an unranked stone carver threw one of his works off an overpass onto their moving car. Of course,

security was much better now, but there were still those so desperate for appreciation that they would throw themselves in front of his car just to get him to view their work.

"Yes Michael, I'll be a pillar of inobservation for the entire evening."

"Inobservation is not a word, Linus. You might want to refrain from using it in public," said Michael as he moved toward the door. "Your tailor will be here shortly. Breakfast is in one hour. Please call if you need anything." With that he bustled efficiently away.

Before Linus had time to decide whether he should get up or not, a large mound of moving fabrics shuffled into the room. It took him a few seconds to realize there were legs at the bottom of the pile, and then the clothes were quickly being hung up all over the room on nearly anything with an edge on it.

A tall, gangly man slowly appeared as the clothes were distributed. When his face was visible, he started to talk. "I hope you like a more formal look. I know that everyone has been putting you in lighter colors this year, but I've always thought that you had the right kind of dignity for a darker, more classic look. And pleats, your figure is very good for pleats. Something in a dark maroon color maybe?"

"Ummm, could you wait a second? I just woke up, and I need to use the restroom. I think I'd like a shower too. I promise I'll be right out, ok?"

The gangly man deflated. "I am so sorry. I just didn't think. What's wrong with me? Please, take as much time as you need." He moved closer with a terrible look of desperation on his face. For a second, Linus felt an irrational fear that the man might hurt him. "Please, don't let my unforgivable rudeness keep you from appreciating these clothes. I have worked very hard on them. This is the greatest moment of my life, please don't let my excitement and lack of social grace destroy everything I've worked for... please."

Linus breathed a sigh of relief, and felt a little shiver go down his back as sadness, and a little pity, replaced the fear. "Of course not. The clothes look wonderful. I can't wait to try them on. Just let me shower really quick, and I'll be right back. OK?"

The clothier smiled and nodded, but still looked defeated. Linus went into the bathroom and locked the door behind him. While he was showering, he thought about how desperate some were to be appreciated. They work so hard to get here, and the playing field is far from level. Every single person on earth is doing whatever they are best at. They read it right off our genes before we are even born.

The left brain talents weren't so bad. They accounted or assisted or researched, and they were happy. The right brain talents were the problem. They needed to be noticed, they needed to be compared, they needed to be appreciated. No wonder this poor tailor is scared. He thinks he has blown his one shot at immortality. Well, I can fix that, I can make him happy again.

The tailor was still waiting and looking flat when Linus came out of the bathroom in his robe. He always wore his own robe, and it was the only thing he took with him from place to place. Linus liked to wear something familiar and comforting each day, before putting on a suit of clothes he would wear once and never see again.

Well, time to put on my game face.

"Hey, that maroon suit is really nice. I saw it when you first came in, but it's really grabbing me now. Can I try that one on first?"

When the tailor realized that he might still get a chance at appreciation, he seemed to regain some of his former energy. "Absolutely sir. An excellent choice, and the one I myself thought would be most flattering on you. You have a very good eye for fashion sir." Which technically was not true.

If I had a good eye for fashion, thought Linus, I would be a fashion designer like you.

Linus tried the suit, declared it to be one of the finest he had ever worn, both for look and comfort, and sent the tailor away beaming. The tailor took none of the other clothes away with him. Why take them? Each had been painstakingly designed with Linus himself in mind. If he wasn't going to wear them, no one would. It always seems such a waste, he thought. But no one ever goes without anything they need anymore, so maybe the world can afford to be a little wasteful in the interests of art.

As soon as he was dressed and the tailor had left, Michael came back. "All ready for breakfast? Very good. Come this way please."

Michael led him out of the room and down to an elaborate dining area. Michael always led him everywhere. Since Linus slept in a different place nearly every night, he could not be expected to keep track of where things were. It was Michael's job to know how to get around. Every now and then, Linus would try to wander off, but he almost always got immediately lost. When Michael found him, he would never scold, of course, but he would give that look. Linus wondered if the ability to reprove without speaking was one of those genetic markers they looked for when deciding who was best suited to be a personal assistant.

Once in the dining area, Linus sat on a very comfortable chair and ate an elaborate, yet surprisingly non-filling, breakfast. Afterward, he was offered a tray covered in sugary pastries. Linus was widely rumored to love sugary pastries. In truth, he was indifferent to them, but took one anyway. The baker who had made it was watching from the doorway and gave a loud whoop when Linus took it. Michael looked exasperated because such displays during appreciation were considered the height of vulgarity. Linus, however, secretly loved to break someone's composure like that. Good for you Mr. Baker; live it up, man.

Just to rub it in, instead of taking one bite and putting the pastry down, he ate the whole thing while looking right at Michael.

"All finished? Very good, let's move on. The car is waiting," Michael said without a hint of impatience.

"Yeah, ready to go," Linus replied around a mouthful of pastry. On the way out, he winked at the baker.

The ride to the museum was very comfortable. Of course it was. Linus tried to think of how many people had worked on this car so he could ride in it this one day. Someone to design the outside, and make it visually pleasing, yet functional. Maybe some other person designed the inside, made it roomy and comfortable, without being cavernous. Some engineering genius to design the engine and other mechanical parts; an electronics wizard to design the sound system and video monitors. Maybe even someone to design the seats.

And those are just the designers, Linus thought. Then there are people who machine and build and stitch. It was all hand built of course. Linus had never ridden in a mass-produced car.

All those people, picked at birth to be designers and mechanical engineers and leather workers and mechanics. They work their whole lives to be the best in their field, and everyone they are competing with was also picked at birth, given the same education, raised practically from the first moment of consciousness to be that thing. No wonder they are all starving for attention. So focused on what they do, they never see what anyone else is doing. But they all need someone to see them.

The thought put him in a melancholy mood.

"Michael."

"Yes Linus?" Michael seemed far away, reading something on his pad. Probably tomorrow's schedule, or the weather in Amsterdam, or even the lunch menu. Always working, but the most famous personal assistant in the world because he works for me.

"How many paintings will I see today?"

"Several dozen, I would think. We have you scheduled for three hours. Why?" And now Michael was giving him the questioning look. He is wondering what I am getting at, what I plan to do. I still scare him a little.

"A few dozen paintings... I see so little of what they do, Michael. How many paintings were created today I wonder? How many last year? How many of them do I ever see?"

"You only see the best of them Linus."

"But who decides that? The other painters? Blinded by envy, always competing, how can they judge the others work?"

"And yet some are deemed worthy of your attention, so the system must work."

"But what about all those others, the thousands of other painters who never make it high enough in the rankings to show me their work? Who appreciates it?"

"Their work is shown at the regional levels. Others of their talent see it. The better pieces are purchased and put in homes or other buildings."

"Purchased. By who? Doctors, physicists, personal assistants? How many paintings do you own Michael?"

Michael put down his pad. He sat back in his seat and relaxed. This conversation was going in a familiar direction now. He knew what to say. He was no longer worried. "You know perfectly well that I do not own any paintings. I do not have a dwelling of my own. My life is working with you, assisting you in your work. If I ever settle down and own a home, perhaps I will purchase paintings."

"Is that enough Michael? Following me around? Making sure I get to my appointments on time? Do you ever look at the paintings we go to see?"

Michael looked out the window at the rain and wet streets going by. The conversation was still going where he expected, but it required a gentle touch, and a bit of truth. "It is enough Linus. I have always known that this is what I would do. I was raised from birth to be a perfect companion, confidant, secretary, protector. The better I was at my job, the more important the person I assisted would be. And I assist the most important person in the world, so I must have become very good at my job. Mock me if you like, but that is a satisfaction I cannot explain to you."

Linus sat quietly. He knew that Michael was speaking the plain truth to him now, and he treasured such openness because it happened so rarely. He honored it with his silence. After a while, Michael spoke again.

"The world revolves around you Linus. You only see the top, the tip of the iceberg, but you are the reason for so many things. These paintings we are going to see? They may only be twenty or thirty out of all that were painted. But when you look at them, you justify the painting of them all. Every one of those artists knew that maybe, just maybe, theirs would be the painting that made it all the way here. And for perhaps the first time, their work would be looked at by someone who does not judge, only appreciates."

"How could I judge? Half the time I don't even understand." Linus replied.

"That is your gift. You are the world's most unique genetic combination. A man with virtually no talents. Median level intelligence, average physical skills, and no genetic predisposition for anything."

"The luckiest man in the world, because I'm nothing."

"The luckiest man in the world, because you can *see* everything. You still have a sense of wonder. You will never look at the work of another human and say 'My own work is better.' And so, you are the only person people want to show their work to. You can appreciate, and that is the only talent left that is in short supply."

"I promise to try very hard to appreciate the Japanese opera. I really will," Linus said quietly. "I'm sure they must work very hard on those complex arrangements."

Michael smiled at him for a moment, then picked up his pad and returned to work.

Linus sat back in the seat. He felt his clothes on him, and they were comfortable and flattering. And he felt the seat, all the soft leather. The precise hum of the engine, the smooth glide of the car, the breakfast sitting lightly in his stomach, all easy to appreciate. He would try hard to look like he enjoyed the opera, so they felt appreciated as well.

He remembered a play he saw once, written by someone who died long before they had talents and rankings. There was a character, who later died stupidly if Linus remembered correctly, who was strutting around on stage ranting about 'how all the world is a stage, and we are merely players on it.' And sitting all alone in the darkened theater, Linus had thought, All except me: I am the audience of one.

I Am the Queen

by William Saxton



Artwork by Liz Clarke

Diane opened the door to her townhouse and led her neighbor in. It was just Bill: ever-hopeful Bill, and she hated to encourage him because there was just *no*chemistry, but she was still bubbling over, wanting to show everyone her new pet. Her *alien*pet.

"I have all the manuals," she said, "and I have a translation module for when its language ability kicks in, and I have dietary supplements, since it's adapted to a different ecosystem --"

"Where is it?" Bill said. He took off his boots: a requirement, in her house.

She led him into the living room, opened the carrying cage, and picked it up, very gently.

It had feather-like antennas, and too many legs, and a sort of bristly fur: a teddy bear version of a termite, perhaps. Its heart was going bap-bap-bap -- poor thing. It was so adorable. She stroked its fur.

"Whoa," Bill said.

It squeaked. "That's its happy squeak," she said. It sounded just like the recording in the manual.

"Can I hold it?" he said.

She found herself reluctant. Maternal instinct. But she transferred it to him, carefully. It was so tiny it could fit entirely within his calloused hands.

He started to sit. She stopped him. "Your trousers aren't dusty, are they?"

"I changed after work," he said. "Your white sofa's safe, and your white shag carpet, and your glass coffee table."

Diane nodded; he sat. The alien snuggled up to him. She found herself jealous. Silly.

"Are you sure it's a good idea, having it?" he said. "When you had a puppy, I was over here every week fixing things. Ain't no telling what a giant bug will do to this house."

"It's not a bug," she said. "And it's not like training a dog; it's intelligent! In a couple of weeks I'll be able to tell it what to do, and since I'm its queen, it'll do it."

Bill laughed.

She felt a little defensive. "It's not like a regular pet," she said. "Early on, I show it gestures of dominance, and later, it will understand rational statements, although its thinking can be rigid. It can actually do simple tasks, and it thrives on praise."

"You sound like you read that out of a book," Bill said.

Since she had, she said nothing.

"What's its name?" he said.

"I haven't decided."

He looked it over. "How about 'Cheesecake'? Because of the color of the fur, and all."

What a sweet name! "Perfect," she said.

"Or maybe 'Corn Bread.'"

Diane imagined telling everyone about her new pet, "Corn Bread." No. She said, "'Cheesecake' will do just fine."

#

Having Cheesecake was like building a family, without the messy detail of finding a man she could respect. The next day, at work, Diane still wanted to tell everyone. Well, not the other managers. They were all men, all married, and every one of them fat, balding, and on the make. Yuck.

She could only really talk with underlings. That wasn't a problem. She waited until Carole, from Accounting, was free, and they sat in Diane's office, drinking lattes from the coffee shop downstairs.

"So you bought an alien monster, and you named it 'Cheesecake,'" Carole said. "Got it."

"It's *not* a monster!" Diane said. "It's a 'builder drone.' And I didn't name it; Bill did."

"Bill?"

Diane sighed. She didn't want to talk about Bill; she wanted to talk about the alien. "He lives on my street, and he fixes things in my townhouse sometimes. Anyway -- you should just see it. It's all furry, and it loves --"

"Forget the creature," Carole said. "Tell me about the man."

Diane laughed. "Forget it, Carole. He's a redneck. I mean, he wears *cowboy boots* to work! He's a carpenter or something."

"What's that song?" Carole said. "'Save the Horse, Ride the Cowboy!'"

"I'm being *serious*! I mean, could *you* respect a man who fixes your toilet?" she said, only half teasing. "And he doesn't even charge me." There was that time he'd been working on the sink, and came in when she'd had a date with, oh, she couldn't remember the guy's name. Bill stalked out, red-faced . . . not embarrassed, Diane thought, but put out. Too bad, but it was about time he got the message.

"Honey," Carole said, "if he'd do the plumbing under the house, I'd marry him."

Carole was always over the top, Diane thought. Which was why she was so much fun. "Wouldn't your husband have a problem with that?"

Carole seemed to consider the question. "Does he do dry wall?"

Diane laughed. "Probably. I'll set you up."

#

After a couple of weeks, Cheesecake was able to communicate. It came suddenly: one day, it could say anything it wanted, through the translation box. Genetic knowledge, the manual said.

She stopped keeping it in the crate during the day. "No poo-poops, except in the litter box," she told it. The translation box didn't know "poo-poo," so she had to be more explicit.

Cheesecake's response, through the translator, was satisfactory, if a bit indelicate. Oh, well -- they'd never have to have *that* conversation again.

One day, Bill came home at the same time she did; so she invited him in.

In the living room, on the far side of the sofa, there was . . . something strange. A cocoon?

Cheesecake came out and squeaked at them.

"It must be twice as big!" Bill said. "Three times. But it's still cute, isn't it?"

The translation device, sitting on the entertainment center, activated. "Welcome, Queen. What is the role of the entity beside you?"

Good question, Diane thought. "He's one of my, ah, worker drones," she said. The machine translated.

"Lord, Diane!" Bill said.

"Sorry," Diane whispered. "I had to tell it *something*." Then she asked Cheesecake, "What is this thing beside the sofa?" It looked disgusting.

"A nest," Cheesecake said, "for your eggs."

Bill laughed.

Diane's face burned. "Get rid of it," she said.

Cheesecake set to work. "No, don't *eat* the stuff," she told it. It would have to go to the vet. Again. "Disassemble it, and put it in the garbage can!" She looked at Bill. "We're getting there!" she told him. "See, it can clean up its messes!"

"What's the nest made of?" Bill asked.

The machine squeaked, and Cheesecake gave an answer. "Solid structure from the sofa cushions, cemented with mucous from my mandible region."

Diane looked at the sofa. It didn't seem damaged. She looked at the back.

Into the back. The sofa was completely gutted. "You ate my *sofa*?" she yelled.

Cheesecake flinched. "I used material from the interior, so that the appearance would not be altered. You ordered me not to destroy the appearance of the sofa."

Diane tried to calm herself. It wasn't Cheesecake's fault . . .

"Cheesecake," Bill said, "would you like to take a break for a while, and snuggle?"

"What should I do, Queen?" it asked. Its antennas were trembling.

"Snuggle," she snapped. It climbed onto Bill, who sat on the floor beside the ruined sofa, and he stroked it. It squeaked with contentment.

#

A few days later, Diane noticed some of her books missing from the shelves. As she looked for them, she found holes in the walls in places she wouldn't ordinarily look, and carpet gone (but only under the furniture), and when she asked -- still controlling herself, resolving to give more sweeping orders -- Cheesecake said its new construction was in the attic. Diane climbed the ladder and looked over the new nest, and told Cheesecake to stop tearing up the house, and stop doing anything in the attic, because fiberglass causes cancer if you breathe the dust.

The next day, when she returned from work, there were huge pods at the curb: containers of some mucous-and-mulch construction, hard like cement, and each beribboned with the tags the city required for garbage pickup. Cheesecake said they contained all the fiberglass that had been in the attic, now removed for her safety. (How had it known about the garbage tags? That was one smart drone.) At least its intentions were good, even she if would have to re-insulate the house. Or get Bill to do it.

"You left the house?" she asked it. "How?"

"Your door mechanisms are functioning normally," it said.

Well, of course. Unlike a dog, it had hands -- or claws, or something. Diane resolved to clean out the medicine cabinet before it got past the child-proof caps.

The garbagemen wouldn't touch the fiberglass pods. Mrs. Mackelmurray, next door, said they were scaring her dog, and Diane would have to remove them immediately or answer to the homeowners' association. Idiot. Bill, bless him, took care of them.

Intelligent or not, Cheesecake couldn't see reason. "I don't lay eggs!" she told it, again and again. "That's a different species!" It was silent while she talked -- waiting, she was sure, for her to stop talking nonsense, so it could go back to building something out of her scrapbooks, or her shrubs, or something else she hadn't thought of.

It knew what it knew. Genetic knowledge.

She let it build a new set of shelves, which looked like a giant honeycomb, in the basement; but then it needed something else to do, so she bought it interlocking plastic blocks, the kind toddlers played with. "These are not useful materials," it said. "My saliva will not adhere to them, and they are structurally unsound without it."

"I don't care," she said. "*No construction in my house. Got it?*"

"Understood," it said, as it always did, whether it understood or not.

One evening after work, when Diane came home, she could hear the beagle in the house behind hers, was going berserk. She went around the townhouse, dreading what new disaster Cheesecake had for her. From under Mrs. Mackelmurray's porch, Diane heard a noise, and started.

It was Mrs. Mackelmurray's collie, hiding, trying not to bark but unable to restrain itself. The beagle in the other house yowled as though the world were ending.

And on her own porch . . .

It looked like someone had slimed Playland at McDonald's. It looked like the nest scene from a horror movie, with dripping orifices and something about to leap out at the camera at any moment.

Cheesecake emerged, its mandibles smoothing a wall. The beagle continued its howling, with greater alarm; Mrs. Mackelmurray's dog went silent suddenly, and hid.

"Diane!" It was Mrs. Mackelmurray. Great. "That thing on your porch is scaring my dog. This is a violation of the homeowners' covenant!"

Diane ignored her, and went up onto the porch.

The construction *smelled*. Oh, no. She recognized parts of it. Baked beans. Crackers. Onions, probably puréed by Cheesecake's mandibles. She'd never told it not to use *food*.

"Diane, you have got to remove this thing immediately. It's in violation of city code!"

And health regulations, Diane thought.

She thought she recognized something else in Cheesecake's monstrosity. A strip of wooly sweater. *Her* sweater. A strip of faux fur.

Oh, no. Her winter clothes. It had better not be!

"Diane Bowen, I will not be treated this way!"

Diane pushed her way through the construction -- it hadn't blocked the door -- and went through the kitchen, into her bedroom, into the closet, where the chest was, and . . .

It was empty, except for cloth scraps.

She heard squeaking, and whirled around. "I *told* you not to use my clothing!" she yelled.

"Understood," Cheesecake said. The translator's words were flat, but Cheesecake cowered.

"You used --" She pointed to the chest. "These were my winter clothes! You destroyed them, for this, this . . ." Words failed her.

"These were not clothes," it said, its head on the ground. "Clothes are items the Queen wears. You do not wear these."

Not any more, she thought. She groaned with frustration. But it wasn't Cheesecake's fault: brainy or not, it was just an animal. She shouldn't scare it.

She went into the bathroom, so it wouldn't follow her, and calmed herself. When she thought she could stop herself from yelling, she went out. "Let's go sit on the bed," she said.

She did; it crawled into her lap.

"We have got to do something about you," she said.

She'd talk to the pet store tomorrow. And Cheesecake, sad as it was, would spend time in its crate, until she figured what to do.

She picked up the phone and dialed. "Bill?"

"Hey," he said.

"Can you look in on Cheesecake some time over the next few days, when I'm at work?" she said. "I'll leave the key on the door frame. I - I've got to do something. It's destroying the house."

"I'm doing repairs for the college this week," he said. "If I can get away, I will."

If something isn't done, Diane thought, I'll need repairs too, and not just to the house. "Whenever you can," she said.

#

At work, over cappuccino in Diane's office, Carol asked her, "How's it going at home?"

"Awful," Diane said. "It won't stop messing up the house. I have to keep it in its crate when I'm not there." She felt terrible, but what could she do? Until she could get time off to consult with the vet or the pet store.

"I meant, with that man," Carole said.

Who? Oh. Bill. A ludicrous picture, of Bill messing up the house and sitting penitent in a cage, came to her mind. She laughed. "So far," Diane said, "he's been good. I haven't had to put him in a crate, or anything."

"How good?" Carole asked. "I want details."

Diane laughed.

"All my man ever does is drink beer and watch NASCAR," Carole said. "I live life vicariously."

#

Over the next week, at least according to Mrs. Mackelmurray's rants on Diane's answering machine, Cheesecake spent the days squeaking "so it sounds like something must be dying in there." Diane didn't know what to do. It spent the evenings cuddled up with her -- she let it sleep in her bed -- and its days in the crate. She'd only had the chance to wash the honeycomb thing on the porch with the hose; it was still there, scaring Mrs. Mackelmurray's brain-addled dog.

One evening, Bill met her at her car. "I can't believe what I saw in there," he said, red-faced with anger.

Oh, no. "What did it do this time?" she said.

"What did *it* do?" he said. "It stayed in a dang crate the whole day, messing itself. I told you not to get that thing. I told you you couldn't handle it -- and now you just keep it locked up the whole time!"

She stepped back, stunned. "It's an animal," she said. "I know there's a problem, but I'm doing the best --"

"It ain't good enough!" he said. "It wants to build. Let it, already!"

"It wants to destroy my house!" she shouted. Mrs. Mackelmurray looked out at them from behind curtains; Diane glared at her, and she disappeared.

"You can't control things!" Bill shouted back.

He was right about that. But there had to be some way. "I'm doing everything that I know how," she said. "I've got the manuals!" Which weren't sufficient. But what else could she do? Not that it was any of his business.

"Manuals," he said, with disgust. "Oh, forget it." He walked away.

She thought of yelling after him, but it seemed undignified.

Then she went in, saw Cheesecake, looking miserable in its crate, and her heart melted.

She read the manuals again, with Cheesecake on her lap, not even bothering to get dinner. They told her nothing new: dominance gestures, clear orders, and timeouts. Too bad the authors didn't publish their email addresses. She had some choice words for them.

And for Bill. Who did he think he was, anyway?

A man with a backbone, apparently. Who knew? There was more to him than met the eye. She wondered what.

#

The next evening, she came back -- early, so she could call the vet and get some help -- and Cheesecake was out of the crate.

The monstrosity on the porch was gone.

In the living room, there was a new sofa, a mishmash of straw, foam, shredded cloth, and Cheesecake-slobber cement. It was leaning slightly.

Beyond that, everything she could see was repaired -- carpet, walls, furniture -- but repaired with Cheesecake-construction, gooey and enameled and not quite the right color.

She heard a sound of hissing from the kitchen, and jumped. Then she recognized the sound: water flowing.

It was spewing out under the sink. Cheesecake was there, pulling out the pipes.

She rushed past it, and cut off the water under the sink, getting soaked while she did it. (Why did they have to make these things so hard to turn?) "What are you *doing*?" she asked Cheesecake, furious, when the water stopped.

"I am getting a pipe, to reinforce the sofa," it said.

"Well, stop it!" she said, anger fading into weariness at the same old argument. "Didn't I tell you, no construction in the house?"

"You did," it said. "I now understand why. You are not sane."

"What?"

"You acquired a builder drone, and forbade it to build. I understand now. You cannot be Queen; 'Queen' and 'insane' are incompatible concepts."

Ridiculous. "Well, *you* can't be Queen," she told it. All the books said so.

"I know," it said. "I have no legal rights. Bill is Queen."

Oh, please. Ever-compliant Bill?

But he wasn't compliant, after all, even if he did do her home repair while she just blew him off. She hadn't known who she was treating so dismissively. An image of his strong hands flashed in her mind: tightening plumbing fittings; cradling the infant Cheesecake that first week.

"The Queen ordered me to repair your house, and then come to his house." Its antennas twitched. Excitement, she thought. "I have usefulness to the Queen," it added. "He wants me to build things with him."

"With that goo you make?" Even Bill wouldn't put up with that.

"He has other means of attaching that he says are sturdier." Its antennas perked up as it squeaked. "He wants to teach me! He told me many things today." It examined her. "You are the kind of creature that does not use social structure; you do not need a drone."

What I need, Diane thought, is a new house. But it was wrong about her. "I do use social structure," she said. "I'm so sorry you were unhappy here. If you want to go live with Bill --" She sagged. "I'm just sorry, that's all."

"You need comforting," it said. "Would you like to snuggle? I can do that, after I finish the sofa."

"Sure," she said. She'd even sit on the gooey sofa, if it wanted.

"We could go over to the Queen's house," it said. "He would like to snuggle too."

"You'll be living there," she said. "He'll have plenty of chances."

"If you come, he can snuggle with you," Cheesecake said.

Diane laughed. "With me? Why me?"

"The Queen would like to build a social structure," it said.

"With *me*? He said so?"

"He told me many things," it said.

She thought about it, and laughed again. "You know," she said, "that might not be a bad idea."



Artwork by Lance W. Card

Zoo

by Al Sarrantonio

Who they are isn't important. They'd be the first to tell you that.

It's *what* they are that counts.

But I'm in the business of who, as well as what, where, when and why -- so that's what you get up top.

First there was Jen Jameson, who wasn't captain because there was no captain of this boat. They called her Specialist One, since her area of expertise was the worm holes that got us where we were going. She also had a good overview of every other system on the ship. She'd always be captain to me because if there was a fight, she'd be the one to give the orders.

Then there was Specialist One-A, Bill Felder, who looked the part of an exec but I keep forgetting this is no Navy. This is a World Council Designated Field Survey Expedition Ship, which meant that Earth had finally got around to setting up a wormhole system, and had grown the balls to use it. Those of us who didn't like saying World Council Designated etc. called it the Guinea Pig cruise, and

let it go at that.

The ship had a name, the *Russell*, and though it looked like nothing so much as a giant battleship-gray golf ball, complete with dimples, I was told it would do its job, which was not to get us killed and maybe put us face-to-face, finally, with other ISs (intelligent species).

Jameson herself told us, at the one and only staff meeting we had, that the *Russell* wouldn't blow its bolts, or worse.

"You'll notice very little spacial change," she said, trying not to treat me like an idiot; she looked pretty spiffy in her World Council jumpsuit, blue with a Specialist One patch over her left breast, her only sign of rank. While regaining my seat, I took solace in the fact that the faces around me looked just as hungry for real information as mine; most of them were Seconds and Thirds, and knew as much about worm holes as I did, which was nada.

"Actually," she continued, using a few holograms of the *Russell* for emphasis. One of them showed the ship in hollow form, deck by deck; besides the core chamber and the skin itself, which I had been told aided in propulsion and navigation, there seemed to be very little in the way of equipment or armament. I'd been told that there *was* an armament system, but it sure wasn't obvious here. "Actually, the most you should notice while we transit a wormhole is something analogous to driving a car over a speed bump. We'll see more in the way of turbulence in actual space than while in a wormhole. And I use the word 'in' advisedly, since the transition from here to the other side will be, for all intents and purposes, instantaneous."

I stood up again. "But Cap," I asked, noting the slight scowl that passed over Jameson's face at the assumption of rank, "what's to keep us from tumbling end over end as we come out the other side, like, well, a golf ball off a nine iron?"

A few titters from the audience, but Jameson was unfazed. "Think of it as someone handing that golf ball gently through a doorway. One moment it's on one side of the door -- the next moment it's on the other side."

"And that 'bump' you talked about?"

She smiled -- and I'd remember that smile later; it was a little too knowing. "Just a bump," she said.

#

Just a bump, my rump.

When it happened the first time, I thought for sure the entire ship had blown to pieces. One moment I was in my bunk, strapped in like we'd all been told, speaking my brilliant thoughts into my thumb recorder -- and the next second it felt as if someone grabbed me by the chest hairs and tried to yank me up through the bunk above me. Anything in the room not tied down made a bee-line for the ceiling, including the one personal effect I'd brought, my *Pearson Journalism Award* -- and then, just as abruptly, everything, including the *P.J.*, now in four pieces, shot back at the floor -- and that hand rammed me back into my bunk.

Alarm claxons were going off all over our deck, and I could hear Jim Postelwaite, one of the science specialists, in the bunk above me, groaning. The lights went off and just as quickly back on.

"Postelwaite, you okay?" I asked; and after a moment he answered.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Gonna have a bit of a bump on my forehead, though. Forgot to pull my upper chest restraint tight."

Out in the hallway I heard running and shouts -- and then the S.O. came on the horn.

"That was the 'little bump' I told you all about," she said, and I swear she had a little chuckle in her voice, and I'm paranoid enough to think it was just for me. "I trust you all were strapped in as instructed." At this, Postelwaite groaned and made an amendment to Jameson's title, adding a 'B' to the end, that would live in *Russell* fame.

But even Postelwaite forgot his woes a moment later when the S.O. added: "I'm happy to report that all systems are working. Ladies and gentlemen, we find ourselves at the beginning of a great adventure, and, hopefully, a successful mission. All chosen participants in Mission A please report to the bay in twenty minutes."

At that moment a holo opened on our opposite wall, as it did in every compartment on the ship, and there was a collective gasp of wonder: there, floating like a bizarrely colored Earth, with bright blue oceans and dark brown, almost black, land masses, punctuated by brilliant Kelly green patches, was our destination, planet two of the Epsilon Eridani system. Epsilon Eridani itself, smaller and redder than Sol, lay in the background, a deep red eye looking baleful.

"Think we'll find anything brainy on it?" I asked Postelwaite, but it was Koprowski who answered.

"I don't know," he growled in his basso voice, "but they better as hell be *polite*."

He jumped down from the top bunk at that moment, and I saw him slip a long length of heavy-looking pipe into the leg pocket of his work overalls. He winked at me. "I know about the reg on no weapons," he said. "And if anybody asks, this ain't a weapon -- it's *atoothbrush*."

#

I was at the entry to the docking bay fifteen minutes early, and still had to wait on line. There were eight of us going, I saw -- the S.O. was already inside and with her was her second, Bill Felder, a grin on his face as usual, and two of the other Specialist One A's: Marjorie O'Hearn, and Rasha Pikal. Rasha had something to do with biology and planetary atmospheres, and played an excellent game of chess. Marjorie was the closest thing I had to competition on the ship; she was the equivalent of a publicist, and I'd already had a couple of run-ins with her over what I considered censorship of the press. But she was a pretty good sort, and so far we hadn't come to blows.

Koprowski and three other techs rounded out the crew. Two of them bore equipment; Koprowski and the remaining crewman were engine specialists.

As I passed the S.O. into the shuttle I cracked, "We in for any more bumps, Cap?"

She pretended not to hear me, but Bill Felder laughed for both of them. "Just a routine ride this time, Mr. Fowler," he said. "Hopefully I'll put the shuttle down nice and easy."

"I'm counting on it," I said.

#

Inside, the shuttle was almost spacious compared to the cramped quarters of the *Russell*. My seat was padded, and there was even a footrest. I made sure to strap myself in tightly, though.

My nearest seat mate, Rasha Pikal, was asleep, which was a shame, because I was in the mood for a game of chess -- he had already beat me twice to my one win.

The ride down, which took a thousand times as long as the *Russell's* trip through the wormhole, was, as advertised, strictly routine. There was a little turbulence as we hit E-E 2's atmosphere, but Felder did as promised and put the boat down as gentle as a breath. I was out of my seat and toward the lock before Jameson's voice, sounding more and more like a true captain every minute, barked over the horn, "All personnel are to stay put until we finish atmospheric testing. Then, Mr. Pikal and I will disembark."

"C'mon, c'mon," I muttered, returning to my seat. "You tested the damned atmosphere from the *Russell*."

"Might be very different at ground level," Pikal said, yawning himself awake now. His coffee-colored face was impassive. "Pockets of toxins and such."

"Whatever. You owe me a game of chess."

Pikal smiled. "Perhaps you are still regretting that Queen to Rook 5 move you made yesterday?"

"It wasn't *that* dumb --"

"It was exceedingly dumb," Pikal replied, and then he laughed. "If it was a good move, I'll look forward to you making it again."

I answered sourly: "Like I said: whatever."

He grinned. "It would be my pleasure to beat you a third time."

"Don't be so sure --"

Jameson's voice intruded into my about-to-be foul language. "Mr. Pikal, please report to the air lock."

"That's my cue!" Pikal said, moving past me.

It was the last I ever saw of him.

#

We waited an hour, twenty minutes past the prescribed time, for Pikal and the cap to return. When they didn't, and when Felder couldn't raise them on either their direct link or the backup radio, he formed a rescue party made up of himself and two of the techs, including Koprowski. I noticed that one of the other techs, a guy named Quint, was paying a lot of attention to a section of the shuttle behind the pilot seating that looked a lot like a gunnery console; it had been sealed shut till now.

Seeing my interest, Felder said, "We've got more in the way of protection than the Council liked to let on. It was politic to keep it quiet. I assume you'll keep it quiet for now, also."

"Only too happy," I said, probably revealing more of my relief than I'd intended. I'd been truly afraid we'd come on this mission naked as a jaybird, as far as armaments were concerned.

"And the *Russell*?" I asked.

"Plenty there, if needed," he answered. He added quickly, "We hope it's not needed, of course."

"Of course."

He surprised me by saying, "Want to come along?"

"You don't need to ask twice!" I replied, retrieving my recording equipment and meeting him two minutes later at the lock.

I sidled up to Koprowski as the outer lock door slid open and said, "Still got your toothbrush?"

His grin spread from ear to ear. "I *always* worry about my teeth."

"Well, worry about mine, too."

He kept his grin as we stepped out.

It was greener -- and much brighter -- than I thought it would be. Apparently we'd landed in one of the 'vegetation oasis,' as Pikal had dubbed the green sections visible from orbit. The black patches, he'd explained, were analogous to sand, only more oxidized. "Like former organic areas that had been burned out," he'd said.

The sky was a sickly yellow-blue, with high, thin, wispy clouds. The ground was loamy and loose underfoot. But it was the trees that startled me. In no way could this be called a jungle -- the vegetation was set too wide apart -- but the trees were the most vivid shade of green I've ever seen, and the same color all the way from their boles up their smooth trunks to the tips of their broccoli-like leaf bunches, a couple of hundred feet in the air.

"Never did like broccoli," I said, but no one laughed. Felder was busy with one of the techs, pointing off into the thickest part of the 'forest'.

"Weren't the cap and Pikal being scanned from the *The Russell*?" I asked.

Without turning around, Felder replied, "Of course. One moment they were . . . *there*," he pointed to an area between two huge plants that was slightly darker than the surrounding area, "and then they were gone."

"I don't like that word: gone," I said.

"Neither do I," Felder answered.

It was then we heard shouts for help.

#

It was undeniably Jameson's voice, but it sounded as if it came from behind a wall. Koprowski instantly had his 'toothbrush' out. He took two steps forward, determined anger on his face -- and then he disappeared. There was a lightning quick blur where he had been, and then we heard his own voice added to that of the cap, sounding as if it was close, yet far away.

"Did you record that?" Felder said to the tech standing beside him.

"Got it," the tech said. "But I'm damned if I know what it means. According to this, Koprowski is right where he was, only ten feet *lower*."

Felder started to say something -- but then everything went haywire around me.

One moment I was looking at Bill Felder and the tech, and then the next I was surrounded by wet, sticky darkness. There was something oddly soothing about it -- like being held in your mother's arms -- but that didn't stop me from yelling my head off.

The next instant I was on my back, there was a hissing sound, the smell of baking bread, and I saw daylight again.

"What the --" I began, spitting a resinous material out of my mouth, along with every invective I could think of, and a few I made up along the way.

A hand helped me up, and then dropped me again. Through rheumy eyes I saw that it was one of the techs, and he was making disgusted sounds.

"Help him up, Simmons," Felder's voice ordered.

"But he's a *mess*, Sir!"

"Your service record will be a mess if you don't do what I say."

A moment later, amidst grumbling from Simmons, I was on my feet and wiping my eyes clear of the green goo that covered me.

At my feet, split open, lay something that looked a lot like a huge pea pod with a severed stem.

"Was I in *that*?" I said.

Felder answered, "It had you in a tenth of a second. If we hadn't cued the shuttle to scan for something that quick, it would have had you underground by now."

"I take it that's where the cap and Koprowski and Rasha are?"

"Not Rasha," Felder answered grimly. I then saw two techs bundling up a d-bag. Before I could ask, Felder answered my question. "Cut him cleanly in half. His reaction time was too good. He must have tried to jump out of the pod as it was closing around him. Part of him was up here, behind that nearest tree. The other part ended up . . ." He looked at the ground, and I winced.

I knelt down, running my finger lightly across the open lip of the pea pod I had been in. It was sharp as a knife and blade hard. At the stem end, where it had been severed by a beamer from the shuttle, was the remains of a tough, braided cord made of vegetable matter.

"I want everyone back to the shuttle," Felder ordered, to my surprise.

"But what about --?"

"We know where they are, we know they're alive," he answered. "The *Russell's* already scanned the substance in these pods, and it's not digestive in nature, so they're not being eaten alive." Again he anticipated my next question. "Now we have to figure out how to get to them."

#

To my further surprise, Felder took the shuttle back to the *Russell*. It was almost a full day before I heard anything more about Jameson and Koprowski. During that time I busied myself with getting the rest of the goo off whatever parts of my anatomy hadn't been protected by my jumpsuit, not easy in the cramped, stingy showers on the *Russell*, and sending a preliminary report off by drone to my network. The drone would take a roundabout route of wormholes, and be back on Earth in a month. It would take us that long to get home ourselves, since wormholes were all one way, and we couldn't go back the way we'd come. Felder's own preliminary report was on the same drone. From what I heard, it was not a happy one. What was left of Rasha Pikal, whose chess game and laughter I already missed, would be sent home later for burial, on one of the larger, scheduled drones.

#

It was during this period of maddening inaction that the singing began. I don't know exactly *how* it started, but once it did start it became legend, and forever part of the lore of the *Russell*.

And though I don't know *how* it started, I sure as hell know *who* started it.

Bella Post was a tech second class with a voice like a bellows. She wasn't big in the usual sense, actually she was no taller than five feet and slim as your arm, but she was big in the lungs, and you could hear her throughout whatever deck she happened to be on. She claimed later she didn't write the first song, but no one else stepped up to take credit, so it stuck with her. Someone of an historical bent told me it was like the sea shanties swabbies used to sing in the old Earth navies, and it became the usual thing to see Post, or a group of other techs up to the task, break out into it while working:

"The gals and guys of Number One

Are pledged to visit any sun!

We're ready to meet with anyone who

Wants to join our little zoo!

We techs are apt to groan and gripe --

We say: 'Speak softly -- and carry a big pipe!'"

That last bit, of course, in honor of Koprowski, though I did notice that a lot of techs seemed to have that same long pocket sewed into the leg of their coveralls. Speaking of Koprowski: it was finally decided that the only way to go after him and the cap was to allow three or four heavily armed personnel to be captured by pea pods. It had been attempted to excavate the area where they had been taken, but just underneath the loamy soil, it was discovered, was an incredibly thick and resilient layer of vegetable fibers. The fibers could be cut by beamers, but the area almost instantly healed up again. Just under the surface, the entire planet was alive with plant life, to a depth of twenty feet. Epsilon Eridani Two was a huge artichoke. After some experimentation it was found that a small area could be cleared with heavy, sustained beamer fire. At first it was decided that with intensive, long-term fire the two captives might eventually be reached -- but it was Simmons who finally asked, "Isn't there a good chance we'd roast the S.O. and Koprowski along the way? Wouldn't it be quicker to go heavily armed, and let the pods take us down? Then we could just blast our way back up."

That became the plan.

Simmons's bright idea earned him a spot on the rescue team. It was an honor he didn't relish. After Felder and Jim Postelwaite and Quint, who, it turned out, could handle the biggest beamer rifle we carried, the last spot went to me over Marjorie O'Hearn, after I threatened to report terrible things about Felder and the rest of the crew if he didn't choose me over their Council publicity hack.

The shuttle had a full complement this time. Now, there was no politically correct language about weaponry. We were armed to the teeth. Inside the lightweight bio suit with oxygen compliment I wore, I carried everything but an old fashioned bazooka. I even did away with my pocket knife in favor of something Simmons provided me with that looked like a machete.

"Just keep it in the sheath or you'll cut yourself open like a melon," he said.

I noticed he had his own machete, as well as his Koprowski-style toothbrush stowed in his coveralls.

#

But we didn't get to use any of it. As soon as we landed, Epsilon Eridani Two simply swallowed us up whole, shuttle and all. A lightning quick pod larger than the shuttle (I watched the slo-mo pictures later) shot up out of the ground, grabbed us like an elephant taking a peanut, and yanked us down into the planet.

We quickly discovered why communications with the cap had been severed. We heard her yelling her head off as soon as we came to a halt. Which meant there was nothing wrong with her equipment, only with the layer of matter above us, which proved to be impenetrable to every communications frequency, up and down the spectrum.

"Gentlemen," Felder announced, "we are on our own. The *Russell*, as per contingency plans, will send another shuttle, but it will not land. It will attempt to beamer the area around us, but we know that will take some time and may not free us in the end. So . . ."

"Slice and dice," Simmons said, opening his own bio suit and hauling out his machete.

Felder kept the line open so we could all hear his conversation with the cap. Mostly, she was steamed, if you'll pardon the pun, but when she calmed down she was able to provide us with some information of value.

"I haven't been able to move much in the last twenty four hours," she said. "I was covered in a sticky green substance that eventually dried and flaked away, and the pod that snatched me opened on its own. But that left me in a green box, perfectly formed out of vegetation, just tall enough to stand in. The vegetation will move out of your way, but only when it wants to. Mostly, up to this point, it's wanted to keep me where I am. I can hear Koprowski cursing a blue streak not ten feet from me, but I haven't been able to get to him."

"We came fully loaded with weapons," Felder reported.

"Well, it's a funny thing -- they might not be of much use to you. I had a small burner, the kind you use to light camp fires, and when I lit it the green matter moved away from the heat in a hurry. But then, just as if it was curious, it crept slowly back and then . . ."

We waited, and then Felder said, "S.O.?"

She laughed. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't believe it. I'm still not sure I do. A *hand* formed out of the green matter. Then it reached out with two fingers and snuffed the flame."

"You said a *hand*?"

Again the laugh. "That's what I said, Bill. There were . . . other manifestations, also. When I got so tired I thought I'd have to sleep standing up and started to sag, a spot opened up for me, a kind of floor. I was able to sleep horizontally. And when I woke up . . ."

We all waited.

"Well," she continued, "there was a figure of some sort leaning over me. A human figure, made of green matter. When I yelped, it instantly melted back into the wall of green. I spent most of today trying to coax it back out, but no soap."

"Anything else?" Felder asked, but at that moment we heard Koprowski's invective-filled voice.

"Finally!" he said, after the cursing subsided. "Do you know how long I've been calling you apes?"

"Since you were captured, I imagine," Felder answered. "Radio frequencies don't penetrate to the surface. I'd guess we'd find some metal, possibly lead, mixed in with this vegetable matter."

"Wonderful! And here I am -- *hey! Cut that out! I said cut that out!*"

There followed what sounded like giggling.

Felder said, "Koprowski, you all right?"

The giggling intensified into blurts of laughter. "*Stop it, dammit! I tol' you before --!*"

"Koprowski!"

"They been botherin' me since I got down here, Mr. Felder! Make 'em stop -- *make 'em stop!*"

Again he collapsed into peels of hysterical laughter.

"Too many hands! *Too many! Hee-heeeeee!*"

Then his radio went dead.

Felder tried to get back in touch with him for five minutes, but no dice.

The cap's horn had suddenly gone dead, too.

Felder appeared in the cabin. "Neither of them is where they were," he said. "So here's what we do. We're going out, just as we planned. Set your beamers to mid-level -- I don't want to kill these things, whatever they are, just make 'em move away. I've got a signal on the S.O. It's weak, so we'll go after her first." He turned to Postelwaite. "Jim, you stay with the ship. If the other shuttle gets through from above, report what we've found. If they burn a big enough hole, and we're not back in two hours, tear the hell out of here. Got it?"

Postelwaite nodded. "Clear as ice."

Felder turned to the rest of us.

"Make sure those bio suits" -- he glared at Simmons, who was quickly climbing back into his -- "are tight, and your O2 is ready. Since we only have an hour of air, for now you can crack a vent and use the atmosphere outside." He looked from one to the other of us, then nodded. "Okay, let's do it."

#

When he opened the lock there was a smooth wall of green in front of us, luminescent as colored glass.

As soon as the door slid closed behind us, the wall turned into an army of figures.

They melted right out of it like liquid. They were human looking enough -- too human, if you know what I mean, since they weren't clothed. The gals looked like, well, gals, and the guys . . . you get the picture.

They had us surrounded before we knew what hit us. I was raising my beamer when one of them slipped his hand, smooth as can be, around my wrist and removed the weapon, like Mama removing a toy from a bad tot.

The smooth wall was still there, and it was moving back as we approached it. Then, abruptly, it receded a long way, making a perfect bright green hallway, which we were led through.

I turned my head and saw that there was now a solid wall behind us, keeping pace about ten feet back. The shuttle was nowhere to be seen.

When I looked forward again I stopped to study the face of my green escort. It looked vaguely familiar. One of the female figures accompanied Felder, and I studied her carefully --

"Hey, Mr. Felder," I murmured through my suit radio, as casually as I could, "you happen to notice --"

"I noticed," he answered. He sounded embarrassed.

Let me tell you: it wasn't every day you were chaperoned by a full sized naked green copy of your commanding officer.

Or of Koprowski.

"They forgot his toothbrush," I muttered.

"Excuse me?" Bill Felder asked, and I saw that he was staring straight ahead, trying not to look at any of the Caps or Koprowskis.

"Forget it," I answered.

As abruptly as they appeared, the bright green figures vanished. I watched one of them melt back into the wall to my left, another one pull up into the ceiling.

We were now in a box, a cube of green about eight feet to a side. I touched the walls. They were firm as concrete.

"Now what?" Simmons said.

"For now, we wait," Felder replied.

"That's fine with me," Simmons answered. "I've got plenty of images I want to leak out of my head."

I noted he had been surrounded by *two* Koprowskis.

"Oh, *my* images ain't so bad," Quint cracked; he had been accompanied by two copies of the Cap.

"That's enough," Felder ordered.

So we waited -- until naked copies of ourselves suddenly appeared, and led us on another trek, this one down a green set of stairs that materialized before us.

"Now I'm *really* gonna have nightmares!" Simmons groaned; this time he was accompanied by two pea-green naked versions of himself.

Quint laughed. "I don't blame you."

"Hey --"

"I said that's enough --" Felder snapped.

At the bottom of the stairs we came face to face with our shuttle -- only made completely of green vegetable matter.

"This can't be real --" Quint began, and Felder answered immediately.

"It isn't. It's a copy, just like the figures. We're forty feet below the real shuttle. I'm still reading its signal above us."

The green door on the green shuttle slid open, and we were escorted inside.

"Well you have to admit this copy is amazing," I remarked. There was exactitude down to the smallest detail, including Simmons' crossword puzzle tab where he'd left it on his seat.

And Science Specialist Jim Postelwaite, who we'd left behind.

He was all green, of course, and naked, but he sure as hell looked like Postelwaite.

Felder said, "Jim?"

The green Postelwaite looked at Felder and said, "Yes, Bill?"

"Hey, you're not the real --" I said.

Green Postelwaite looked at me and began to speak, but at that instant he melted away, along with the entire green shuttle we were in. We found ourselves standing on a flat green expanse -- and there in the distance marching toward us, flanked by one naked green Jameson and two naked green Koprowskis, were the real, fully clothed, captain and tech. They looked embarrassed but determined as hell. One of the naked green Koprowskis bore a closed green pod about three feet in length.

When the cap had reached us she greeted Felder and briefly acknowledged the rest of us. "I suggest we all keep our sight at eye level," she said, and she meant it. "Mr. Simmons, please give our friend here --" she indicated the green naked copy of herself "-- your bio suit. You don't need it to survive down here."

Simmons did as instructed, and there was an awkward silence while the naked green copy of the captain was helped into the bio suit. Once that was done the captain seemed to relax.

I couldn't keep my mouth shut: "Hey Cap," I said, "want us to give the naked Koprowskis our suits?"

"That won't be necessary," she answered. "They won't be staying."

With that, the two nude Koprowskis melted into the floor like water being poured into a drain, leaving the pod behind.

"Gentlemen," the S.O. said, "I'd like you to meet Rena. She'll be coming with us as a representative of her . . . people."

"Not 'people,' exactly, S.O.," the green figure in the bio suit corrected. I noticed that she now looked like Simmons.

As she looked at each of us in turn, she became our doppelganger.

"I can see this is going to be a problem," the cap said.

Rena replied, "Would you rather I assume one set of features?"

"That would be a good idea, if you don't mind."

"It's easily accomplished." She instantly reverted to an exact duplicate of the captain.

Captain Jameson began, "I don't think . . ."

"Hey S.O.," Koprowski cut in; it was the first time he'd spoken since arriving with two naked green duplicates of himself. He'd spent most of his time glowering at Quint, who had been barely hiding his laughter at Koprowski's discomfiture. "Why don't you let Rena be . . ." With his head, he indicated the pod.

Rena instantly approached the pod. She opened it along its seam, reached in briefly, then re-closed it.

When she stood back up she had assumed the features of Rasha Pikal.

I was staring at the pod as Jameson explained, "I assume the rest of Rasha's remains were found on the surface. All Rena needs is a sample of his genetic material to duplicate him."

"The accident is greatly regretted," the green Pikal said. "I shall stay in this shape, at least for the time being, if you wish. Perhaps it will serve as an homage to the slain entity."

"Okay if we call him Reno?" Bill Felder chimed in.

There were no objections. Jameson said, "Reno it is. And, as I said, Reno will be coming with us. This area we are in, which is a kind of oasis, is both one life form and many life forms. Each one of those green patches we saw from orbit is such a gestalt. Basically, they are the only living things in their areas. Even the trees and other plants we saw on the surface are extensions of this one creature. In fact, though they thrive on oxygen, they *became* plant life in order to produce their own oxygen. They nurture themselves. And though there is only one creature, it can live as separate parts. While Reno will be coming with us, he will remain, at the same time, this entire creature."

Reno said, "It will be our one chance to see the stars, and visit other worlds. We would be foolish to pass it up. And we will assist you as needed."

"Not a bad deal," Bill Felder said. "It's too bad poor Pikal didn't get to see this. He would have been thrilled."

"He *is* thrilled, I assure you," Reno said. "As long as I retain his shape and mass, I feel exactly what he would have felt. His brain patterns and memories have become my own. My reactions will be what his reactions would be. He is positively ecstatic, believe me."

"Would Pikal's family object . . .?" I began.

"We'll sort it out later," the cap said. "Right now I want to get back to the *Russell*."

Without any movement from Reno, we found ourselves on the surface of the planet, stepping out of what I later described as "elevator" pods. Another huge pod opened nearby, revealing the shuttle.

Pushing the sticky substance of the pod away from me, I said, "I'd like to get back to the ship too -- and take a shower."

As we stepped into the shuttle, greeted by a baffled, and decidedly ungreen, Postelwaite, the captain said to Reno, "Would you like to take a last look at what you're leaving?"

Reno answered, with what I thought was a trace of a smile, "But captain, I won't be leaving."

That was another one we had to sort out later.

#

And sort it out we did. We stowed the shuttle, and Jen Jameson plotted a slow boat course for our giant gray golf ball to hit a new wormhole which, when we went through it, would put us in the vicinity of another promising system. It was, I was told, three weeks away. Before we left Epsilon Eridani Two we shot the large scheduled probe out ahead of us, containing my full report, brilliantly written if I do say so myself, as well as the remains of Pikal. Don't ask me how, but with the vagaries of wormholes, the reply drone will be there waiting for us when we reach our next jump point, with the latest news of home, as well as word from Pikal's family.

#

Later: as advertised, that reply drone was waiting for us, and it was captured as we prepared to enter the new wormhole and set off on Mission B. The remains of my *P. J. Award*, glued together, have been stowed, along with anything else that might not like that bump.

We got word from Pikal's family: they would be honored to have our new addition exist in the likeness of Pikal. Which is fine with me, because Reno, like Pikal, is a heck of a good chess player. He's beaten me eight times so far, and the last game we played I made the same dumb Queen to Rook 5 move I made in the last game I played with Pikal.

We're about to go through; I can hear Bella Post's bellows of a voice booming through the hallways from her cubicle where she's strapped down like the rest of us. She and the other Techies are singing:

"We're ready to meet with anyone who

wants to join our little zoo!"



Artwork by Sam Ellis

Adrift

by Scott D. Danielson

Dr. Anne Gable waited for the call she knew was coming. A psyship was drifting in space, powerless, and she'd have to go, she just knew it. The pilot was unresponsive, and that put it squarely in her territory whether she liked it or not.

The visiphone beeped, and she pressed the button before it beeped again. Rob Spencer, the head systems engineer of the psyship program, appeared.

"We need you to come with us," he said.

Anne sat back in her chair. "How far out are we talking about?"

"The ship is drifting our way. We'll meet it about six days away, so you'll be back in about two weeks."

Space. She trained for it before ever interviewing psyship candidates. She'd been in Earth orbit, but never deeper. "Is the pilot alive?"

"We don't know," said Rob. "If he isn't, then you won't have much to worry about."

the psyships. "Isn't he on Earth right now?"

"Yeah, he is. He'll be piloting, but we are still requesting that you come with us. Dee's no psychologist."

Oh, this is getting better and better. "The corporation guys know we used to be married. That's got to be some kind of violation of --"

"I just spent the last hour convincing the Board that I need you both. Dee is the only Earthside psyship, not to mention the most experienced, and you are the one who wrote the book on potential psyship problems. We need you both because we have no clue what we're looking at here. Between Dee, you, and myself, I'm confident we'll know everything we need to by the time we get back."

"But I haven't seen Dee since --"

"Anne, please. I really need you there. And I'll be with you the whole time. It's not like you guys will be alone."

"Yeah," she said.

"Neither one of you are the arguing type, anyway. You surprised the hell out of all of us when you said you were splitting."

All true. The marriage had ended not with a roar, but a whimper. Dee is comfortable in his psyship. That's just the way it is. In his psyship, Dee is alive. In his skin, he is ... not.

"Two weeks?" Anne asked.

"Yeah, two weeks," said Rob.

"What's the exact situation?" she said.

"There's no response at all from it. We're not even receiving on-board telemetry data. This leads us to believe that it's either a catastrophic systems failure, or the pilot shut the whole thing down. We've never had a systems failure like this, so I'm guessing that something's gone wrong with the pilot."

"Who's the pilot?" she asked.

"Thomas Schaeffer."

Thomas was a good friend. All of the psy pilots were. She interviewed and approved them all.

"Thomas is a rock, Rob. You certainly don't think he lost it out there."

"I don't know what to think yet. Maybe he can't jack out. Maybe he's dead. I just don't know."

"When are we going?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll send a car."

"Okay," she said. She turned off the visiphone and spun her chair to look out the office window.

#

Dee watched as his ex-wife and Rob climbed aboard. He had been jacked in for over an hour and was comfortable. When carrying passengers, he always liked to get settled in early. Besides, this way he'd avoid the inevitable awkward in-the-flesh meeting with Anne.

Dee's body was present on the ship, in the back near the engines. It was comfortably housed in a small, cushioned compartment. His brain was connected to the ship through a thin umbilical attached to the physical implant on top of his skull, near his motor cortex. When jacked in, the ship's sensors became the pilot's senses, its many cameras his eyes, all its moving parts his limbs. When jacked in, Dee became the ship.

And there was Anne. He could see her from a couple of different angles, and admired her beauty. He hadn't satisfied her, and he knew that. The way around that wasn't to try harder, because he simply had no more to give. The way around it was to let her go. So that's what he did.

He willed his face to appear on a screen in front of Anne. "Good morning, Doctor," he said, thinking immediately that he should have called her Anne.

"Good morning, Dee," she said. Stiff, but not unpleasant. "How are things?"

"Is there a correct answer to that when talking to a psychologist?" asked Dee. "We'll be on our way in no time."

"Good," she said.

"Dee, how are ya?" said Rob.

"All systems go, Chief!" said Dee. "We should leave orbit in ten minutes."

"Excellent," said Rob.

Dee returned attention to himself, the ship. In under a second, he checked the hydrogen pressure (good), the engine temperature (climbing), the life support system (cabin pressure a touch low, nudge it up). Within that same second, he noticed the last of the docking station crew close a panel in the engine room, and he verified that some entertainment files he wanted had finished downloading. He planned to use them to keep himself occupied during the flight. He could only apologize to Anne so many times.

#

Anne stood there, feeling like an extra limb. She watched Rob make certain that all of his tools had been delivered. Her own tools were in her breast pocket in the form of a small reader that contained her entire library.

Ten years before, when the psyship program first started, she had been told that she might be called on for missions like this. No one knew at the time how a pilot would react to long-term connection to a system that completely replaced the body. Her first assignment was to head a team of psychologists that predicted possible problems that a person might experience under those conditions. Everything from mild addiction to major personality disorder had been applied, written about, and published. Then they all sat back to watch what happened.

Dee had been the first psyship pilot. He went through numerous tests before being connected to a psyship, performing everything from controlling robots to flying remotes through his implant. He'd been excellent not only at performing his duties, but also at reporting how it felt to him to do so. Anne had fallen in love with him, and they married before Dee's first mission. Before Anne truly understood what it meant to be a psyship pilot, for despite all her research and conjecture, she didn't foresee that a pilot would feel better in a metal skin than he did in his own.

Rob floated up the corridor. "Almost ready," he said.

"Where will I be sitting?" Anne asked.

"Up front," Rob said. "Take either seat."

She pulled herself along the corridor, gaining confidence in zero g. Her worries about meeting Dee had, until now, eclipsed her nervousness about the actual flight. She took a deep breath and entered the front compartment.

In a normal ship, the crew sat in the front with a whole host of switches and screens to operate. The point of the psyship program was to run the entire ship with one person, so the front compartment here was a comfortable, carpeted room with two chairs outfitted with restraining straps. Through the window, Anne could see the Earth and part of the docking station. Below that was a single screen that allowed the psyship pilot to interact with the passengers. No flight controls in sight. Dee would be doing the flying.

She picked the chair on the left, pulled herself down, and worked at the straps.

"Dee?" she said.

The screen in front of her flickered to life, and a digital rendition of Dee's face appeared. "Yes?"

"Did all of my stuff get delivered?"

"Yup. Your clothes and personal stuff are in your cabin."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," said Dee. The screen went black.

"Dee?" said Anne.

He appeared again on the screen. "Yeah?"

Anne wanted to say something like, "I'm sorry it turned out how it did," or "how are you really," but said only a couple of words that had been a private joke during the short time they were married. "Drive safe."

Dee chuckled. "You got it."

#

Six days later, Dee could scan the psyship in question. Thomas.

The ship was dark and tumbling very slowly. Dee sent Thomas a burst in the language psyship pilots had developed over their decade of existence, and waited for an answer. None came.

Anne was in her cabin. Dee told her that Thomas was a half hour away, then told Rob in the foredeck that he'd be able to get him a good picture in a few minutes.

"Any obvious damage?" asked Rob.

"Can't tell yet. He's completely dark," said Dee.

From her cabin, Anne asked, "Any contact?"

"No, but I won't stop trying," said Dee.

Rob asked about the ship, Anne asked about the man. Dee chuckled. To them, psyships were person and craft, but to Dee, they were one. Can they possibly understand? The thought, like so many other thoughts, brought him to Anne and the familiar pang of guilt.

Dee focused to the limit of his instruments. Still dark, but he could make out a bit of detail on Thomas's hull. As it tumbled, the antenna came into view -- a small dish protruding from the ship's side, fragile as can be. It looked intact. He willed the image to appear on the screen in the foredeck.

"You see that?" said Dee.

"Yeah, I'm looking at it now," said Rob. "No damage that I can make out. Foresee any trouble docking?"

"I've calculated trajectory, and have adjusted," said Dee. "It should be smooth."

As they moved closer, Anne joined Rob in the forward compartment. Dee listened as Rob pointed several things out to her when details emerged.

Dee matched rotation with Thomas. Both ships were identical, except that Thomas was carrying a cargo container attached to his underside. Dee reached out with his docking ring and grabbed the other ship. He used two of his grappling arms, one in front and one in back, to hold Thomas tight. He then pulled closer before extending the tunnel that would allow Anne and Rob to move between the ships. After pressurizing the tunnel, he used two additional arms to open Thomas's hatch. There was a very brief hiss as the door opened.

"Sounds like the pressure is Okay," he said.

He fastened the door open and retracted his arms.

"Yes, atmosphere is Okay. It feels cold, though." He retrieved some sensor data. "Seven degrees. At least it's above freezing. Better grab your coats." He opened his own hatch. "And don't forget flashlights."

#

Anne marveled at the ease with which Dee performed the docking procedure. The ship was a concert of coordinated movement when controlled by Dee. On one level she couldn't help but to be proud to see the psyship work so successfully. On another level she felt ... jealousy. Though she hated to admit it, she knew that was the right word. Jealous, of the machine that took her husband. Jealous, of the place he'd rather be.

The last six days had been agony for her. Dee, she knew, could watch her every minute if he wanted to. She didn't know if he wanted to watch, and wasn't even sure she'd be offended if he did. Either way, she was happy to be leaving Dee's ship.

She zipped up her coat and met Rob at the hatchway. They pulled themselves into the tunnel and moments later were in Thomas's ship.

"Are you there, Dee?" said Rob into a radio.

"Yeah, I hear you fine. Keep me posted," said Dee.

"Follow me," said Rob, heading aft. His flashlight beam bounced as he went.

Anne followed. Aft was toward the engines, where the pilot's compartment was also located, just like on Dee's ship.

"Anne, you've taken to space travel just fine, you know that?" said Rob.

She smiled at his attempt to ease the tension. But he was right. "Yeah, I'm an old pro. Being out here, six days away from Earth, in a dark spaceship ... yeah. This is my kind of stuff."

Rob laughed. They reached the engine compartment. He was flitting his flashlight over the room, taking it in. "Everything looks normal. I'm going to try the lights."

Anne moved her own flashlight to Thomas's cubicle. She walked over to it and put her hand on it. Cold.

The lights flickered, then turned on.

"I'm turning on the heaters, too," Rob said. "They're working."

Anne knelt down and raised the manual door panel to the cubicle. "Let's open this," she said, pressing the button. The door swung down, and Anne gasped.

"What do you see?" said Dee through the radio.

Thomas was most definitely dead. His body was stiff, his face a contorted mask of terror.

"He's dead, Dee," said Anne. "Thomas is dead."

#

After Dee listened to Anne and Rob describe the scene, he asked, "How's the core?"

"The core is running, but I can't access the engines," said Rob. "I'm going to need to reset the system to gain access."

"It was still running when you got there?" said Dee.

"Yeah, it was," said Rob.

"So it was running the whole time ..." said Anne.

"Thomas could have recorded something," said Dee.

"Other than telemetry data?" asked Rob.

"I don't normally go around recording everything, but I could," said Dee. "I used to send Anne stuff all the time."

"Well, let's get the ship back to Earth," said Anne. "I'm sure we can figure a way to get that data out of the core once we're there."

"There's a problem with that," said Rob.

"Yeah," said Dee. "If we reset the core, that data will be lost."

"And I have to reset the core to gain access to the engines," said Rob. "We can't maneuver without them. Dee's ship isn't carrying enough fuel to get us and Thomas's ship back."

Dee felt dread. He knew what was coming next, but also knew it was the obvious answer. "How's Thomas's implant?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" said Anne.

"I mean, does Thomas have burns or something? Does the implant look Okay?" said Dee.

"I don't see anything wrong there, Dee," said Rob.

"Wait a minute," said Anne. "You want to jack in over here?"

"I don't see any other way, Anne," said Dee. "I think we need to know what happened. If I jack in over there, I can see if Thomas left a recording, and possibly get the engines going without a reset."

"But, what if whatever happened to him ... you should see his face, Dee," said Anne. "What if the system itself did it? What if the core did that to him?"

Rob snorted. "No way. The system didn't suddenly become dangerous. It's sound. Ten years and nothing like this has happened. I'm convinced it was external."

"You don't know," said Anne.

"I think he's right," said Dee. "I've never experienced anything dangerous here. It's the only way. We've got no clues, and we better find out what happened here."

"I'll get Thomas out of the way," said Rob.

"Wait a minute," said Anne. "Before we do this, let's look at the rest of the ship, okay? Maybe there's something somewhere that will tell us what happened. And don't you have a gadget that you can test the umbilical with? Something to make sure that you don't electrocute Dee when he connects?"

"The system is sound," said Rob.

Dee heard a few moments of silence.

"Okay," said Rob. "I can run a few tests, but anything extensive will require a core reset. I'll check everything I can without going that far."

"Thank you," said Anne.

"And you check the rest of the ship," said Rob. "Let us know if you find anything. Come on over, Dee."

"Fine," said Anne.

"Will do," said Dee. "I'm offline."

The channel went silent. Dee felt dread, but not for fear of jacking into Thomas's ship. He felt as good about the system as Rob. His dread was withdrawal from his own ship. The thought of returning to the tiny shell that was his body, even for the brief time it would take to get through the tunnel to Thomas's ship, filled him with unease.

He checked his systems one more time; then, satisfied, he pushed himself through a small hole and opened his eyes. He blinked a few times. The cubicle was lit very dimly, and would gradually get brighter as he became more conscious. He flexed his fingers and toes, then his grappling arms -- wait, not there. He moved his arm toward a red button, then pressed it. The umbilical on top of his head gently disconnected and retracted.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, pulling his mind together. The process didn't always take very long, but the nagging feeling of missing things never left him, no matter how long he was away from the ship. He settled into the feeling, then pushed another button. The cubicle door opened, and there stood Anne.

A flash of anger overcame him. He was at his weakest right at this moment, and hated for people to see him like this. But this was Anne. She'd seen him like this before. He pushed the anger aside.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Just give me a minute," he said. It was odd that he hadn't known she was there. He tried to look through the cameras in the engine room -- not there.

He swung his feet to the side and sat up.

"Are you sure this is the only way?" asked Anne.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure," said Dee. "Did you find anything in the rest of the ship?"

"No. Everything's fine over there," she said. "Listen, I need you to know something."

Dee looked at her.

"I need you to know that I'm okay," she said. "I expected things from you that you couldn't give --"

"Things that every other husband can," said Dee. "You didn't ask anything of me that you shouldn't have expected. I just couldn't give it."

"You didn't love me?"

"No, that's not it at all," he said. "I do love you. I do to this day. Anne, look at us. We've been in flight for six days. Six dull days during which we could have talked about this. But it's only when I jack out that you can. It's only when I'm in the flesh that I'm me to you, but it's only when I'm jacked in that I'm me to me." He willed his face to disappear from the screen. Not there.

Anne stood in silence.

Dee pushed himself up. "Let's go do this before I change my mind."

#

Anne watched Dee make his way to Thomas's ship. He was right. She couldn't bring herself to talk to him when he was the ship, but the moment she saw his body, his eyes, his face ... he was real.

They floated into the engine room of Thomas's ship. Rob was zipping a body bag.

"I tested the connector, and the voltages look normal," Rob said. "I'll, uh, get this secured." He went forward.

Dee settled into Thomas's cubicle.

"I don't like this," said Anne.

"I know. But there's no reason to be afraid."

He reached over to close the door.

"Dee?"

"Yeah?"

"Drive safe."

Dee smiled. "Will do." He closed the door.

Anne touched the cubicle. Seeing him had been overwhelming, and losing him to a ship so quickly made her heart ache.

#

Dee pushed the button to extend the umbilical. It sought and found his implant, then snapped home.

"Okay," he said, and breathed deep.

The connection gave him a gradual feeling that there was someplace he needed to go. When it became strong enough, moving into the core was simply a matter of going to that place. Dee concentrated, then pushed.

Slowly, he became aware of his new body. Sensors came online one by one, and he could now see Anne standing next to the cubicle, from both angles. He also saw that Rob had returned to the engine room.

He checked the engine. It was cold, but besides that, normal. He kicked it on in warmup mode.

"Rob, the engine is warming up now, so I think we're --"

Dee paused. He felt the urge to look behind himself, and he actually tried to do it. He looked through all the cameras at once, and saw no one but Anne and Rob. He felt through all his sensors, but there was nothing.

Who's there?

"Did you guys hear that?" asked Dee.

"What did you hear?" said Rob, moving toward a panel.

Dee paused another moment, and heard nothing.

"No, wait. Everything's fine. I'll run a test of --"

Dee? Is that you, Dee?

"Who is that?" said Dee through every speaker on the ship.

"What's happening, Dee?" asked Anne.

"I'm hearing something. Someone is talking to me."

I'm sorry Dee, but they know everything.

"What's it saying?" asked Anne.

"Thomas? Is that you?" said Dee. "It says 'I'm sorry, but they know everything. It's calling me by name.'"

"My God, could Thomas still be in the core?" said Anne.

"Impossible!" said Rob.

Dee fought the urge to withdraw. "Thomas?"

They took it from me. Almost sucked me right out with it, but they took it all. Everything.

"Who did? Is this Thomas?" said Dee.

Yes. Thomas. I lost part of myself, have you seen it?

A laugh.

"What happened to you?" said Dee.

Dee was flooded with sensory information. He was floating in dark space, stars all around. Then he noticed a dark patch of space, as if a dark hole had opened. The hole grew larger and larger, the stars disappearing, until he realized that he was looking at another ship. An immense, completely dark craft approached.

This image was briefly replaced by an image of Thomas, looking at his hand. The image zoomed in to his hand, upon which sat a fly. Thomas slapped the fly with his other hand, leaving a smear. Then the image zoomed back out.

Hint. We're the fly.

Thomas laughed hysterically.

Again Dee was floating in space, the immense craft pulling along side. A tendril stretched out toward him, coming closer and closer. The moment it touched the hull, Dee saw a bright flash of light, and felt data sweeping out of him.

#

"Dee, what's happening?" said Anne, frantic.

No response.

She opened the cubicle door. Dee's body convulsed.

"Don't touch the umbilical!" said Rob. "I'm going to shut down the core. He'll know how to get out!" He moved to the other side of the room and started tapping away on a keypad.

#

Dee felt data flow from the ship at unbelievable speed, a vortex of information flowing into the alien tendrils. He then started to pull away, watching the scene from afar. He could now see Thomas shutting down every system. He could feel Thomas's self being pulled into the vortex. Then Dee was yanked away, as if he was on the end of a taut rubber band, leaving Thomas and the immense alien craft behind.

Silence.

Blackness.

Nothing.

#

Anne watched Dee regain consciousness. His eyes opened, focused on nothing, then finally Anne.

"What happened? Are you alright?"

"Did you reset the core?" mumbled Dee.

"Yes," Rob said. "We reset the core."

Dee reached up and snapped the umbilical off his head. Tears welled in his eyes. "Thomas was in there. He was in there."

"Impossible!" said Rob. "He couldn't possibly have --"

"He was in there!" yelled Dee. "It was him. He called me by name, he ... he wasn't right, but it was him."

"And resetting the core ..." said Anne.

"Killed him," said Dee. "He's gone."

He hugged Anne. Anne, confused and scared, hugged him back. Dee started and broke the hug.

"Rob, get Earth online immediately. Anne, help me get back to my ship."

#

Dee liked the way Anne felt against him as they moved, and for the first time in a long time, he was reluctant to jack in. But they needed to get back, and he needed to contact Earth.

"What's happening, Dee?" said Anne.

"Thomas made physical contact with an alien ship," he said. "A ship from God knows where, and it was mind-bogglingly immense. It didn't show up on Thomas's sensors. He didn't even notice it until it blocked enough stars from his sight."

They reached the cubicle, and Dee held Anne tight for a moment before climbing in. They looked at each other without speaking as Dee closed the door.

After jacking in, Dee searched sensors and cameras until he satisfied himself that the ship was not hovering nearby.

"Incoming message from Earth," Dee said. "There are military ships en route. Four days out. And they are asking for a full explanation."

Rob entered the engine room. "How about giving us one, too?" he asked.

Dee described and recorded what he experienced to Anne and Rob in detail. After sending the recording to Earth, he scanned another time.

"I can't see the thing around here anywhere," said Dee.

"First contact," said Rob. "I always thought it would come."

"They'll know quite a bit about us if they figure out how to read the data," said Dee. "But somehow, I don't think that will be a big problem for them. Wish we knew something helpful about them."

After a few moments of silence, Rob said, "I'll go secure the engines over there. We can probably start making for home, meet those ships on the way."

Anne watched Rob leave, and placed a hand on Dee's cubicle. She looked around until she found a camera, then looked right at it. "Let's talk, Dee."

"Are you sure you want to talk to a flying hunk of metal?" he asked while scanning again.

Anne could sense his smile. "Yeah. I'm sure."

"Good." He completed another scan. Nothing. "Let's talk. You and me."



Artwork by Jin Han

Pretty Boy

The Story of Bonzo Madrid
by Orson Scott Card

How do you systematically destroy a child with love? It's not something that any parent aspires to do, yet a surprising number come perilously close to achieving it. Many a child escapes destruction only through his own disbelief in his parents' worship. If I am a god, these children say, then there are no gods, or such gods as there be are weak and feeble things.

In short, it is their own depressive personalities that save them. They are self-atheists.

You know you have begun badly when you parents name you Bonito -- "Pretty Boy."

Well, perhaps they named you after a species of tuna. But when you are pampered and coddled and adored, you soon become quite sure that the tuna was named after you, and not the other way around.

In the cathedral in Toledo, he was baptized with the name Tomas Benedito Bonito de Madrid y Valencia.

"An alliance between two cities!" his father proclaimed, though everyone knew that to have two cities in your name was a sign of low, not high, pedigree. Only if his ancestors had been lords of those cities would the names have meant anything except that somebody's ancestors were a butcher from Madrid and an orange picker from Valencia who moved somewhere else and came to be known by their city of origin.

But in truth Bonito's father, Amaro, did not care for his ancestry, or at least not his specific ancestry. It was enough for him to claim Spain as his family.

"We are a people who were once conquered by Islam, and yet we would not stay conquered," he would say -- often. "Look at other lands that were once more civilized than we. Egypt! Asia Minor! Syria! Phoenicia! The Arabs came with their big black rock god that they pretended was not idolatry, and what happened? The Egyptians became so Muslim that they called themselves Arab and forgot their own language. So did the Syrians! So did the Lebanese! So did ancient Carthage and Lydia and Phrygia, Pontus and Macedonia! They gave up. They *converted*." He always said that word as if it were a mouthful of mud.

"But Spain -- we retreated up into the Pyrenees. Navarre, Aragon, Leon, Galicia. They could not get us out of the hills. And slowly, year by year, city by city, village by village, orchard by orchard, we won it back. 1492. We drove the last of the Moors out of Spain, we purified the Spanish civilization, and then we went out and conquered a world!"

To goad him, friends would remind him that Columbus was Italian. "Yes, but he had to come to *Spain* before he accomplished a damn thing! It was Spanish money and Spanish bottoms that floated him west, and we all know it was really Spanish sailors who did the navigation and discovered the new world. It was Spaniards who in their dozens conquered armies that numbered in the millions!"

"So," the daring ones would say, "so what happened? Why did Spain topple from its place?"

"*Spain* never toppled. *Spain* had the tragic misfortune to get captured by foreign kings. A pawn of the miserable Hapsburgs. Austrians! *Germans*. They spent the blood and treasure of Spain on what? Dynastic wars! Squabbles in the Netherlands. What a waste! We should have been conquering China. China would have been better off speaking Spanish like Peru and Mexico. They'd have an alphabet! They'd eat with forks! They'd pray to the god on the cross!"

"But *you* don't pray to the god on the cross."

"Sí, pero yo lo respeto! Yo lo adoro! Es muerto, pero es verdaderamente mi redentor ainda lo mismo!" I respect him, I worship him. He's dead, but he's truly my redeemer all the same.

Don't ever get Amaro de Madrid started on religion. "The people must have their god, or they'll make gods of whatever you give them. Look at the environmentalists, serving the god Gaia, sacrificing the prosperity of the world on her altar of compost! Cristo is a good god, he makes people peaceful with each other but fierce with their enemies."

No point in arguing when Amaro had a case to make. For he was a lawyer. No, he was a poet who was licensed and paid as a lawyer. His perorations in court were legendary. People would come to boring court actions, just to hear him -- not a lot of people, but most of them other lawyers or idealistic citizens or women held spellbound by his fire and the flood of words that sounded like wisdom and sometimes were. Enough that he was something of a celebrity in Toledo. Enough that his house was always full of people wanting to engage him in conversation.

This was the father at whose knee the pampered Bonito would sit, listening wide-eyed as pilgrims came to this living shrine to the lost religion of Spanish patriotism. Only gradually did Bonito come to realize that his father was not just its prophet, but its sole communicant as well.

Except, of course, Bonito. He was a remarkably bright child, verbal before he was a year old, and Amaro swore that his son understood every word he said before he was eighteen months old.

Not every word, but close enough. Word spread, as it always did, about this infant who listened to his brilliant father and was not merely dazzled, but seemed to understand.

So before Bonito was two years old, they came from the International Fleet to begin their tests. "You would steal my son from me? More importantly, you would steal him from *Spain*?"

The young officer patiently explained to him that Spain was, in fact, part of the human race, and the whole human race was searching among its children to find the most brilliant military minds to lead the struggle for survival against the formics, that hideous race that had come two generations before and scoured humans out of the way like mildew until great heroes destroyed them. "It was a near thing," said the officer. "What if your son is the next Mazer Rackham, only you withhold him. Do you think the formics will stop at the border of Spain?"

"We will do as we did before," said Amaro. "We will hide in our mountain fortresses and then come back to reclaim Earth, city by city, village by village, until --"

But this young officer had studied history and only smiled. "The Moors captured the villages of Spain and ruled over them. The formics would obliterate them; what then will you recapture? Christians remained in Spain for your ancestors to liberate. Will you convert formics to rebel against their hive queen and join your struggle? You might as well try to persuade a man's hands to rebel against his brain."

To which Amaro only laughed and said, "I know many a man whose hands rebelled against him -- and other parts as well!"

Amaro was a lawyer. More to the point, he was not stupid. So he knew the futility of trying to resist the I.F. Nor was he insensitive to the great honor of having a son that the I.F. wanted to take away from him. In fact, when he railed to everyone about the tyranny of these "child-stealing internationalists," it was really his way of boasting that he had spawned a possible savior of the world. The tiny blinking monitor implanted in his son's spine just below the skull was a badge for his father.

Then Amaro set about destroying his son with love.

Nothing was to be denied this boy that the world wanted to take away from Amaro. He went with his father everywhere -- as soon as he could walk and use a toilet, so there was no burden or mess to deal with. And when Amaro was at home, young Bonito was indulged in all his whims. "The boy wants to play in the trees, so let him."

"But he's so little, and he climbs so high, the fall would be so far."

"Boys climb, they fall. Do you think my Bonito is not tough enough to deal with it? How else will he learn?"

When Bonito refused to go to bed, or to turn his light out when he finally did, because he wanted to read, then Amaro said, "Will you stifle genius? If nighttime is when his mind is active, then you no more curtail him than you would demand that an owl can only hunt in the day!"

And when Bonito demanded sweets, well, Amaro made sure that there was an endless supply of them in the house. "He'll get tired of them," said Amaro.

But these things did not always lead where one might have thought, for Bonito, without knowing it, was determined to rescue himself from his father's love. Listening to his father and understanding more than even Amaro guessed, Bonito realized that getting tired of sweets was what his father expected -- so he no longer asked for them. The boxes of candy languished and were finally contributed to a local orphanage.

Likewise, Bonito deliberately fell from trees -- low branches at first, then higher and higher ones, learning to overcome his fear of falling and to avoid injury. And he began to understand that he was not nocturnal afterward, that what he read in the daze of sleepiness was ill-remembered by morning, but what he read by daylight after a good night of sleep stayed with him.

For Bonito was, in fact, born to be a disciple, and if his mentor imposed no discipline on him, Bonito would find it in his teachings all the same. Bonito heard everything, even that which was not actually said.

When Bonito was five, he finally became aware of his mother.

Oh, he had known her all along. He had run to her with his scrapes and his hungers. Her hands had been on him, caressing him, her soft voice also a caress, all the days of his life. She was like the air he breathed. Father was the dazzling sun in the bright blue sky; Mother was the earth beneath his feet. Everything came from her, but he did not see her, he was so dazzled.

Until one day, Bonito's attention wandered from one of his father's familiar sermons to one of the visitors who had come to hear him. Mother had brought in a tray of simple food -- cut-up fruits and raw vegetables. But she had included a plate of the sweet orange flatbread she sometimes made, and it happened that Bonito noticed the moment when the visitor picked up one of the crackers and broke off a piece and put it in his mouth.

The visitor had been nodding at the things that Father was saying. But he stopped. Stopped chewing, as well. For a moment, Bonito thought the man intended to take the bite of flatbread out of his mouth. But no, he was savoring it. His eyebrows rose. He looked at the flatbread that remained in his hand, and there was reverence in his attitude when he put another piece in his mouth.

Bonito watched the man's face. Ecstasy? No, perhaps mere delight.

And when the man left, he stepped apart from the circle of admirers around his father and went to the kitchen.

Bonito followed him, leaving his father's conversation behind in order to hear this one:

"Señora, may I take more of this flatbread with me?"

Mother blushed and smiled shyly. "Did you like it?"

"I will not insult you by asking for the recipe," the man said. "I know that no description can capture what you put into this bread. But I beg you to let me carry some away so I can eat it in my own garden and share it with my wife."

With a sweet eagerness, Mother wrapped up most of what remained and gave it to the man, who bowed over the paper bag as she handed it to him. "You," the man said, "are the secret treasure of this house."

At those words, Mother's shyness became cold. Bonito realized at once that the man had crossed some invisible line; the man realized it as well. "Señora, I am not flirting with you. I spoke from the heart. What your husband says, I could read, or hear from others. What you have made here, I can have only from your hand." Then he bowed again, and left.

Bonito knew the orange flatbread was delicious. What he had not realized till now was that it was unusually so. That strangers would value it.

Mother began to sing a little song in the kitchen after the man left the room.

Bonito went back out into the salon to see how the man merely waved a brief good-bye to Father, and then rushed away clutching his prize, the bag of flatbread.

A tiny part of Bonito was jealous. That flatbread would have been his to eat all through the next day.

But another part of Bonito was proud. Proud of *his mother*. It had never happened before. It was Father one was supposed to be proud of. He understood that instinctively, and it had been reinforced by so many visitors who had turned to him while waiting for their chance to say good-bye to Father, and said something like this: "You're so lucky to live in the house of this great man." Or, more obliquely, "You live here in the heartbeat of Spain." But always, it was about Father.

Not this time.

From that moment, Bonito began to be aware of his mother. He actually noticed the work she did to make Father's life happen. The way she dealt with all the tradesmen, the gardener and the maid who also helped her in the kitchen. How she shopped in the market, how she talked with the neighbors, graciously making their house a part of the neighborhood. The world came to their house to see Father; Mother went out and blessed the neighborhood with kindness and concern. Father talked. Mother listened. Father was admired. Mother was loved and trusted and needed.

It took a while for Father to notice that Bonito was not always with him anymore, that he sometimes did not *want* to go. "Of course," he said, laughing. "Court must be boring for you!" But he was a little disappointed; Bonito saw it; he was sorry for it. But he got as much pleasure from going about with his mother, for now he saw what an artist she was in her own right.

Father spoke to rooms of people -- let them take him how they would, he amused, delighted, roused, even enraged them. Mother spoke with one person at a time, and when she left, they were, however temporarily, content.

"What did you do today?" Father asked him.

Bonito made the mistake of answering candidly. "I went to market with Mama," he said. "We visited with Mrs. Ferreira, the Portuguese lady? Her daughter has been making her very unhappy but Mother told her all the ways that the girl was showing good sense after all. Then we came home and Mother and Nita made the noodles for our soup, and I helped with the dusting of flour because I'm very good and I don't get tired of sifting it. Then I sang songs to her while she did the bills. I have a very sweet voice, Papa."

"I know you do," he said. But he looked puzzled. "Today I argued a very important case. I won a poor family back the land that had been unjustly taken by a bank because they would not have the patience with the poor that they showed to the wealthy. I made six rich men testify about the favors they had received from the bank, the overdrafts, the late payments that had been tolerated, and it did not even go to judgment, the bankers backed down and restored the land and forgave the back interest."

"Congratulations, Papa."

"But Bonito, you did not go to see this. You stayed home and went shopping and gossiping and sifting flour and singing songs with your mother."

Bonito did not grasp his point. Until he realized that Father did not grasp his own point, either. He was envious. It was that simple. Father was jealous that Bonito had chosen to spend his day with his mother.

"I'll go with you tomorrow, Father."

"Tomorrow is Saturday, and the great case was today. It was today, and you missed it."

Bonito felt that he had let his father down. It devastated him. Yet he had been so happy all day with Mama. He cried. "I'm sorry, Papa. I'll never do it again."

"No, no, you spend your days as you want." Father picked him up and held him. "I never meant to make you cry, my Bonito, my pretty boy. Will you forgive your papa?"

Of course he did. But Bonito did not stay home with Mother after that, not for a long while. He was devotedly with his father, and Amaro seemed happier and prouder than ever before. Mother never said anything about it, not directly. Only one day did she say, "I paid bills today, and I thought I heard you singing to me, and it made me so happy, my pretty boy." She smiled and caressed him, but she was not hurt, only wistful and loving, and Bonito knew that Father needed to have him close at hand more than Mother did.

Now Bonito understood his own power in the house. His attention was the prize. Where he bestowed it mattered far too much to Father, and only a little less to Mother.

But it worked the other way as well; it hurt Bonito's feelings a little that Mother could do without him better than Father could.

A family filled with love, Bonito knew, and yet they still managed to hurt each other in little ways, unthinking ways.

Only I *do* think about it, Bonito realized. I see what neither of my parents sees.

It frightened him. It exhilarated him. I am the true ruler of this house. I am the only one who understands it.

He could not say this to anyone else. But he wrote it down. Then he tore up the paper and hid it at the bottom of the kitchen garbage, under the orange rinds and meat scraps that would go out into the compost pile.

He forgot, for that moment, that he was not actually alone. For he wore on the back of his neck the monitor of the International Fleet. A tiny transmitter that marked a child as one of the chosen ones, being observed and evaluated. The monitor connected to his neural centers. The people from Battle School saw through his eyes, heard through his ears. They read what he wrote.

Soon after Bonito wrote his observation and tore it up, the young officer returned. "I need to speak to young Bonito. Alone."

Father made a bit of a fuss but then went off to work without his son. Mother busied herself in the kitchen; she was perhaps a bit noisier than usual with the pots and pans and knives and other implements, but the sound was a comfort to Bonito as he faced this man that he did not well remember having seen before.

"Bonito," said the officer softly. "You wrote something down yesterday."

Bonito was at once ashamed. "I forgot that you could see."

"We thought it was important that you know two things. First, you're right. You are the true ruler of the house. But second, you are an only child, so you had no way of knowing that in any healthy family, the children are the true rulers."

"Fathers rule," said Bonito, "and mothers are in charge when they're not home."

"That describes the outward functioning of your home," said the young officer. "But you understand that all they do is meant for you -- even your father's vast ambition is about achieving greatness in his son's eyes. He doesn't know this about himself. But you know it about him."

Bonito nodded.

"Children rule in every home, but not in the ways they might wish. Good parents try to help their children, but not always to please them, because sometimes what a child needs is not what gives him pleasure. Cruel parents are jealous of their children's power and rebel against it, using them selfishly, hurting them. Your parents are not cruel."

"I know that." Was the man stupid?

"Then I've told you everything I came to say."

"Not yet," said Bonito.

"Oh?"

"*Why* is it that way?"

The young officer looked pleased. Bonito thought: Do I also rule *him*?

"The human race preserved itself," said the young officer, "by evolving this hunger in parents for the devotion of their children. Without it, they starve. Nothing pleases them more than their child's smile or laughter. Nothing makes them more anxious than a child's frantic cry. Childless people often do not know what they're starving for. Parents whose children have grown, though, they *know* what they're missing."

Bonito nodded. "When you take me away to Battle School, my parents will be very hungry."

"*If* we take you," the young officer said gently.

Bonito smiled. "You must leave me here," he said. "My family needs me."

"You may rule in this house, Bonito, but you do not rule the International Fleet. Your smile won't tell me what to do. But when the time comes, the choice will be yours."

"Then I choose not to go."

"When the time comes," the officer repeated. Then he left.

Bonito understood that they would be judging him, and what he did with the information the young officer had told him would be an important part of that judgment. In Battle School, they trained children to become military leaders. That meant that it would be important to see what Bonito did with the influence he had discovered that he had with his parents.

Can I help them both to be happy?

What does it mean to be happy?

Mother helps both me and Father, doing things for us all the time. Is that what makes her happy? Or does she do it in hopes of our doing things in return that would make her happy? Father loves to talk about his dreams for Spain. Does that mean he needs to actually achieve them in order to be happy? Or does his happiness come from having a cause to argue for? Does it matter that it's a lost cause, or does that make Father even happier as its advocate? Would I please him most by adopting that cause as my own, or would he feel like I was competing with him?

It was so confusing, to have responsibility for other people's happiness.

So now Bonito embarked on his first serious course of study: His parents, and what they wanted and needed in order to be happy.

Study meant research. He couldn't figure things out without learning more about them. He began interviewing them, informally. He'd ask them questions about their growing up, about how they met, whatever came into his mind. They both enjoyed answering his questions, though they often dodged and didn't give him full explanations or stories. Still, the very fact that on certain subjects they became evasive was still data, it was still part of understanding them.

But the more he learned, the less clearly he understood anything. People were too complicated. Adults did too many things that made no sense, and remembered too many stories in ways that did make sense but weren't believable, and Bonito couldn't figure out whether they were lying or had merely remembered them wrong. Certainly Mother and Father never told the same story in the same way -- Father's version always made him the hero, and Mother's version always made her the suffering victim. Which should have made the stories identical, except that Mother never saw Father as her savior, and Father never made Mother all that important in the stories.

It made Bonito wonder if they really loved each other and if not, why they ever got married.

It was disturbing and it made him upset a lot of the time. Mother noticed that he was worried about something and tried to get him to tell it, but he knew better than to explain what he was working on. He didn't really have the words to explain it, anyway.

It was too much responsibility for a child, he knew that. How could he possibly make his parents happy? He couldn't *do* anything about what they needed. The only thing he controlled was how he treated them. So gradually, not in despair but in resignation, he stopped trying to make their behavior and their relationship make sense, and he stopped expecting himself to be able to change anything. If his failure to help them meant the I.F. didn't take him into space, well, that was fine with him, he didn't want to go.

But he still kept noticing things. He still kept asking questions and trying to find things out about them.

Which is why he noticed a certain pattern in his father's life. On various days of the week, but usually at least once a week, Father would go on errands or have meetings where he *didn't* try to bring Bonito -- where, indeed, he refused to take him. Until this research project began, Bonito had never thought anything of it -- he didn't even want to be in on *everything* his father did, mostly because some of his meetings could be really boring.

But now he understood enough of his father's business to know that Father never hid his regular work from Bonito. Oh, of course he met with clients alone -- it would disturb them to have a child listening to everything -- but those meetings weren't hidden. There were appointments that the secretary wrote down, and Bonito sat out in the secretary's office and wrote or drew or read until Father was done.

These secret meetings always took place outside the office, and outside of office hours. Sometimes they consisted of a long lunch, and the secretary took Bonito home so Mother could feed him. Sometimes Father would have an evening meeting after he brought Bonito home.

Usually, Father loved to tell about whatever he had done and especially what he had said that made someone else angry or put him in his place or made people laugh. But about these secret meetings, he was never talkative. He'd dismiss them as boring, pointless, tedious, he hated to go.

Yet Father never seemed as though he hated to go *before* the meeting. He was almost eager to go -- not in some obvious way, but in the way he watched the clock surreptitiously and then made some excuse and left briskly.

For long months this was merely a nagging uncertainty in Bonito's mind. After all, he had given up on trying to take responsibility for his parents' happiness, so there was no urgency to figure it out. But the problem wouldn't leave him alone, and finally he realized why.

Father was in a conspiracy. He was meeting with people to do something dangerous or illegal. Was he planning to take over the Spanish government? Start a revolution? But whom could he meet with in *Toledo* that would make a difference in the world? Toledo was not a city where powerful people lived -- they were all in Madrid and Barcelona, the cities his parents were named for but rarely visited. These meetings rarely lasted more than an hour and a half and never more than three hours, so they had to take place fairly close by.

How could a six-year-old -- for Bonito was six now -- find out what his father was doing? Because now that he knew there was a mystery, he had to have the answer to it. Maybe Father was doing secret government work -- maybe even for the I.F. Or maybe he was working on a dangerous case that might get him killed if anyone knew about it, so he only had meetings about it in secret.

One day an opportunity came. Father checked the time of day several times in the same morning without saying anything about it, and then left for lunch a few minutes early, asking the secretary to walk Bonito home for lunch. The secretary agreed to and seemed cheerful enough about it; but she was also very busy and clearly did not want to leave the job unfinished.

"I can go home alone," said Bonito. "I'm six, you know."

"Of course you can find the way, you smart little boy," she answered. "But bad things sometimes happen to children who go off alone."

"Not to me," said Bonito.

"Are you sure of that?" she answered, amused.

Bonito turned around and pointed to the monitor on his neck. "*They're* watching."

"Oh," said the secretary, as if she had completely forgotten that Bonito was being observed all the time. "Well, then I guess you're quite safe. Still, I think it's better if you ..."

Before she could say "wait until I'm done here," which was the inevitable conclusion of her sentence, Bonito was out the door. "Don't worry I'll be fine!" he shouted as he went.

He could see Father walking along the street, briskly but not actually *fast*. It was good that he was walking instead of taking a cab or getting the car -- then Bonito could not have followed him. This way, Bonito could saunter along looking in store windows, like a kid, and still keep his father in view.

Father came to a door between shops, one of the sort that held stairs that led to walk-up shops and offices and apartments. Bonito got to the door and it was already closed; it was the kind that locked until somebody upstairs pushed a button to let it open. Father was not in sight.

The buttons on the wall had name tags, most of them, and a couple of them were offices rather than apartments. But Father would not be having a manicure and he would not be getting his future read by a psychic palm-reading astrologer.

And, come to think of it, Father had not even waited at the bottom long enough for somebody to ring him up. Instead he had taken a long time getting the door handle open ...

Father had keys. That's what happened at the door, he fumbled with keys and opened the door directly without ringing anybody.

Why would Father have a second office? Or a second apartment? It made no sense to Bonito.

So when he got home, he asked Mother about it.

She looked like he had stabbed her in the heart. And yet she refused to explain anything.

After lunch he became aware that she had gone to her room and was crying.

I've made her unhappy, he thought. I shouldn't have been following Father, he thought.

And then she came out of her room holding a note, her eyes red from crying. She put the note on the kitchen table, folded, with Father's name on it, and then took Bonito to the car, which she almost never drove, and drove to the railroad station, where she parked it and got on the train and they went to Grandma's house. Mother's mother, who lived two hours away in a small town in the middle of nowhere, but with orange groves -- not very productive ones, but as Grandma always said, her needs were few and her son-in-law was generous.

Mother sent Bonito into the back yard and then cried to her mother. Bonito tried to listen but when they saw him edging closer to the window they closed it and then got up and went to another room where he couldn't hear them without making it obvious he was trying to spy.

Yet he knew, bit by bit, what had happened, and what he had done. From the scraps of words and phrases he could overhear, he knew there was a "she" that Father was "keeping," that it was a terrible thing that Father had the key, and that Mother didn't know how she could bear it or whether she could stay. And Grandma kept saying, Hush, hush, it's the way of the world, women suffer while the men play, you have your son and you can't expect a strong man not to wander, one woman could not contain him ...

And then they saw him a second time, sitting directly under the window where Mother had walked to get some air. Mother was furious. "What did you hear?"

"Nothing," said Bonito.

"The day you don't hear words that are said right in front of you, I'll take you to a hearing doctor to stick needles in your ears. What did you hear?"

"I'm sorry I told you about Papa! I don't want to move here! Grandma's a bad cook!"

At which Mother laughed in the midst of tears, Grandma was genuinely offended, and then Mother promised him that they would *not* move to Grandma's, but they'd visit here for a few days. They hadn't packed anything, but there were clothes left there from previous visits -- too small for him now, but not so small he couldn't fit into them.

Father came that night and Grandma sent him away. He was furious at first but then she said something in a low voice and Father fell silent and drove away.

The next day he was back with flowers. Bonito watched Mother and Father talk in the doorway, and she refused to take his flowers., so he dropped them on the ground and left again. Mother crushed one of the flowers with her shoe, but then she picked up the others and cried over them for a long time while Grandmother said, over and over, "I told you it meant nothing. I told you he didn't want to lose you."

It took a week before they moved back home, and Father and Mother were not right with each other. They talked little, except about the business of the house. And Father stopped asking Bonito to come with him.

At first Bonito was angry at Mother, but when he confronted her, Mother denied that she had forbidden him to go. "He's ashamed in front of you," she said.

"For what?" asked Bonito.

"He still loves you as much as ever," said Mother.

Which left his question unanswered. That meant the answer was very important. Father was ashamed of something, ashamed in front of Bonito. Or was that Mother's kindly-intended lie, and Father was actually very angry at Bonito for spying on him?

For days, for weeks Bonito didn't understand. And then one day he did. By then he was in school, and on the playground a boy was telling jokes, and it involved a man doing something bad with a woman that wasn't his wife, and in the middle of the joke it dawned on Bonito that this was what Father had been doing with some other woman that wasn't Mother. The reaction of the boys to the joke was obvious. Men were supposed to laugh at this. Men were supposed to think it was funny to find a clever way to lie to your wife and do strange things with strange women. By the end of the joke *both* women were deceived. The boys laughed as if it were a triumph. As if there were a war between men and women, both lying to each other.

That's not how Mother is, thought Bonito. She doesn't lie to Father. When a man comes to her and flirts with her, she sends him away. That's what happened with that man who liked her flatbread.

The final piece fell into place when they were visiting Grandma again -- briefly, this time -- and Grandma looked at him and sighed and said, "You'll just grow up to be anotherman." As if *hombre* were a dirty word. "There's no honor among men."

But I won't grow up like Father. I won't break Mother's heart.

But how could he know that? It wouldn't be Mother's heart, anyway, it would be the woman he eventually married; and how could he know that he wasn't *just* like his father?

Without honor.

It changed everything. It poisoned everything.

And when they came to him only a few day before his seventh birthday, and took out the monitor, and asked him if he'd like to go to Battle School, he said yes.

On Science Fiction and Fantasy

by Holly Lawford-Smith

1. Introduction

I have always been aware that something very significant can be gained from human engagement with fiction. Undoubtedly there is good and bad fiction, as there is good and bad in every artistic field. We all have our preferences – in fiction between genres such as Adventure, Crime and Mystery, Fantasy, Horror, Human Relations, Historical Fiction, Romance and Science Fiction. Unavoidably, where there is fiction, there is literary criticism. In his article “It’s Only A Paper Moon: Fantasy and the Professors”, Frank McConnell points out the curious culture of the literary criticism with which we engage. He makes explicit the incongruous fact that ‘we congratulate ourselves on what we do not like more strenuously than we prize what we appreciate’. This culture of taking pride in devaluing work we do not like, of devoting time to negative criticism rather than to explicating the positive elements of work we appreciate, is a culture that has had severe effects not only on particular pieces of fiction but also on whole genres. My concern lies with the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy, which reside in a marginalized position within the literary field. In recent years, after learning more about the Philosophy of Literature and looking into the reasons for our supposing literature (and fiction in general) to hold some necessary significance for our lives, the fact that some genres are held in both public and academic esteem to be somehow ‘lesser’ began to puzzle me. What is it about Science Fiction and Fantasy that disallows their being held in high esteem? Perhaps there is a sociological reason: maybe readers of Science Fiction or Fantasy gain from their reading some identifiable character traits which make them less successful or effective in their everyday lives? Or perhaps there is something about these genres that does not conform to the most well-established theories about what good fiction is or should be?

Our exploration will begin by presenting some of the most well-established theories of the value of literature. We will then go on to attempt to loosely define the parameters of both Science Fiction and Fantasy as literary genres, before looking in greater detail at the arguments (and, surprisingly, the lack of arguments) waged against them. Once we have established the main arguments against each we will be able to go on to decide whether the arguments, against whole genres, are strong enough to deny individual works of Science Fiction or Fantasy the status usually accorded to great works of fiction in other genres.

2. The Value of Literature

Philosophers as early as Aristotle proposed arguments for the value of literature. What Aristotle said was:

[T]he poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction [...] consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.

Aristotle introduces what we have later come to call Simulation Theory. Given a particular set of starting conditions - particular kinds of characters in particular kinds of situations – a talented author runs a mental simulation to determine the likely events and outcome. Aristotle’s argument is that fiction is ‘more philosophical and of graver import’ than history, because it is concerned with ‘a kind of thing that might be’, rather than merely what is or has been. Fiction, then, can provide us with knowledge that transcends our experience thus far. Simulation limits ‘what might be’ to what is ‘probable’ or ‘necessary’. This eliminates flights of fancy (appropriately called, so we shall see). This line of thought is continued by Henry Fielding, one of the originators of the novel in the early eighteenth century, who was ‘the first author consistently to have defined the genre of the novel, with reference to Aristotle, as centrally concerned with probability’, insisting that it ‘must not deal in the possible but must limit itself strictly to the probable’:

[T]he novelist must decline the favours of gods from machines; his plot must work itself out by means of the natural interaction of the characters, the plausible and inevitable sequence of cause and effect.

The ‘probable’ is rigorously and logically constrained. It will not take much consideration to see that Science Fiction and Fantasy are concerned on the whole far more with the possible than the probable, and as such meets neither Aristotle’s nor Fielding’s suppositions.

However, this narrow criterion for the novel was soon to dissolve with the emergence on the literary scene of Laurence Sterne, expressly concerned with the ‘possible’, and five years later Horace Walpole, predominantly concerned with the ‘miraculous’. In spite of these developments, some forty or so years later Georges-Louis Buffon was to encourage a shift back toward verisimilitude in fiction:

Buffon serves as the mirror reverse of Walpole’s attempt to free a space for fancy by hewing to strict probability of action, characters, and psychology within initially fantastic fictional premises. [...] Fantasy opens space for circumstantial and psychological realism in Walpole’s novel – the space within which he develops techniques for the first sustained third-person (impartial) narration of consciousness in English. ‘Fact’ opens a space for speculative thought-experiment in Buffon’s *Natural History*.

Buffon rejects the ‘fantasy’ of Walpole in favour of ‘fact’, the latter allowing a more rigorous exercise of imagination, the Thought Experiment. These examples illustrate the fact that theory within the Philosophy of Literature has oscillated over the issue of probable

versus possible. However, I will argue that the important defining feature of literature as opposed to work in some other (non-artistic) medium is its aesthetic qualities, not strictly its content, whereas the latter has been the focus of these earlier debates.

Perhaps the most well-known modern theory of the value of literature comes from Martha Nussbaum, who argues that good literature is morally improving. In *Poetic Justice*, she maintains that literature and the literary imagination can aid us greatly in our lives, from individual morality through to state governed issues of justice. She explains that a work of literature can typically invite its readers to 'put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and take on their experiences'. What Nussbaum is advocating here is something slightly different to Aristotle. Instead of gaining valuable insight into situations of the kind we might one day find ourselves in (and therefore being enabled to enter those situations better equipped), we are gaining insight into new situations in order to build on our empathy for others. We understand what it would be like to *be* somebody else, we are taking part in John Rawls' 'putting ourselves into other people's shoes'. This is a recurring theme throughout *Poetic Justice*; our literary imagination, 'informed and tethered' by technical mastery of social law, is necessary for our being empathetic creatures and avoiding the kind of cold calculating ethic imagined toward the end of Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*, where qualitative analysis overrules the problematic nature of today's morality. In *Poetic Justice* she argues that the foundations for building moral knowledge are present in every person:

What we see in [...] human refusals is not a defect in the type of 'fancy' I shall be defending here, but a defect in human beings who do not exercise that type of fancy well, who cultivate their human sympathies unequally and narrowly.

The implication here is that all humans possess a natural ability to empathize, which can and should be exercised in an appropriate manner, cultivated and worked at. If it is not, the result is unequal and narrow human sympathy. This idea is supported by Plato in *Protagoras* where he argues that morality is built into a child right from birth.

As humans, we have a predisposition to this kind of ability to sympathize, but we must cultivate it. Nussbaum supposes literature to be morally improving in that it allows us to build upon our empathy for others. We must ask whether it is possible that Science Fiction or Fantasy work against this supposition, denying us insight into another life, disallowing an improvement in our morality through an increase in empathy.

Even at this early stage, we should make a concession to Science Fiction and Fantasy in acknowledging that much of the literature advocated by Aristotle and Nussbaum in their respective theories has content that is largely fantastical. Just consider the content of much of the work of the writers of Ancient Greece - giants, centaurs, gods and non-human intelligences etc. - some of which (Aristophanes, Homer, for instance) is still held to be some of the best literature of all time.

A final theorist of interest is Richard Posner. He often sets himself against Nussbaum, in that he considers many of her views about the 'morally redemptive' value of literature to be somewhat overblown. Posner investigates the relation of literature to law. He correlates literature and judicial opinion by showing that they are both intended to make the reader believe (as opposed to just enjoy) the writer. It is worth quoting him at length:

When science was not very advanced there were poets of science, such as Democritus, Lucretius, the metaphysical poets, and Erasmus Darwin - a point both consistent with the fact that poetry and other forms of literature usually deal with subjects not yet annexed by mathematics and science, and suggestive of an informing as well as an emotive function for literature. We can still learn something about ambition from *Macbeth*, about justice, revenge, maturity, conflict and individualism from the works discussed in Part 1 of this book, [...] about social class from the Victorian novelists, about religion from Dante, Milton and Dostoevsky, about terrorism from *The Possessed*, about despair from the early poetry of T.S Eliot, and about guilt and obsession from Kafka. [...] The creative writer can hold his own with the sociologist, the anthropologist, the political - or the legal - philosopher, the historian, and the psychologist, in broad areas of their fields. [...] Thus I disagree with the idea that literature is concerned not with knowledge or belief but only with emotion. [...] Creating emotion is an important thing that literature does, but it also persuades, though obliquely.



He goes on to say:

The cognitive, informing, or persuading part of literature operates by presenting the reader with a dramatic scene that stirs imagination and emotion and leaves a residue of insight (into love, ambition, revenge, the human condition, or whatever).



In supposing literature to persuade, to provide us with greater knowledge, Posner aligns his arguments with Aristotle's; in supposing literature to provide insight and create emotion, he aligns himself with Nussbaum. Yet he distinguishes himself from both: he doubts that literature is a better than or even equal source of knowledge to real life. He says that there is perhaps a surer source in reading in other fields, gaining professional experience, and having human contact. He concludes by saying 'whether books are superior to life as a source of such knowledge is an undemonstrated and not especially plausible proposition'. He is not denying the immense social value in literature, but merely questioning whether literature is *necessary* for moral knowledge.


It is worth noting just briefly here that in presenting these particular theories of the value of literature I am taking something of a 'standard line'. There are other qualities which we can value in literature, some of which we will begin to uncover and discuss in more detail as this paper progresses.

3. Defining the Genres


Some people think there is very little difference between Science Fiction and Fantasy. One such person is Albert Wendland, author of *Science, Myth, and the Fictional Creation of Alien Worlds*, who says that 'Science Fiction is Fantasy posing as realism because of an apparently scientific frame'.  Carl Malmgren comments on Wendland's definition that it 'ignores a wide spectrum of critical consensus', critical consensus which says that Fantasy 'intentionally violates or contradicts the conventional norms of possibility' while Science Fiction 'adheres to them'.  Let us look first at an approximate definition of Science Fiction.



3.1. Science Fiction

Science Fiction is a form of speculative fiction, which deals primarily with the impact of imagined science and technology upon both whole societies and individual persons.  There are, of course, many variables of this within the context of imaginative fiction, such as: the effect of imagined science, the imagined effect of actual science, imagined technology based on actual science, imagined technology based upon imagined science, the effect of science and/or technology upon imagined societies, the effect of science and/or technology upon imagined individuals, etc. Above all, 'Science Fiction always has been concerned with the great hopes people place in science, but also with their fears concerning the negative side of technological development'.  Usually, science is used as the demarcation point to differentiate between Science Fiction and Fantasy, but:


It can also be argued that Science Fiction is simply a modern form of fantasy, which developed alongside of the rise of science and technology as driving factors in modern society. In this view, the elements that would previously have been presented as Fantasy (magic, transformations, divination, mind-reading, fabulous beasts, new civilizations, higher beings, etc.) are rationalized or supported through scientific or quasi-scientific rationales (psychic abilities such as telekinesis and precognition, aliens and their civilizations etc.). 




Here we begin to understand the difficulty in providing any sharp definition of the genre, especially in its relation to Fantasy.

In an article called "On Science Fiction", C.S. Lewis defines six different sub-species of Science Fiction, which are 'Displaced Persons', 'Engineers', 'Thought Experiment', 'Eschatological', 'Imaginative Impulse', and 'Marvellous'. 

'Displaced Persons' is the most trivial kind, identified by an unnecessary 'leap into the future', where the author proceeds to use this impressive backcloth to tell an ordinary story.  Lewis argues that such a leap is only necessary if the story cannot be told economically in any other way. Robert Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Castle* is one example of 'Displaced Persons' Science Fiction, while Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are two examples of the leap into the future being necessary. These latter works are satiric or prophetic: 'the author criticizes tendencies in the present by imagining them carried out [...] to their logical limit'. 

'Engineers' refers to a group of writers who regard space-travel or other technologies as real possibilities. Lewis states that their work is an imaginative guess as to how things might be done.

The third sub-species he identifies is the speculative, or 'Thought-Experiment'. This differs from 'Engineers' in that the emphasis lies not in *how* the novel setting was arrived at but *what it is like*. He does, however, acknowledge that such a category is only of limited use: 'It is only the first visit to the Moon or to Mars that is, for this purpose, any good [...] it becomes difficult to suspend our disbelief in favour of subsequent stories. However good they were they would kill each other by becoming numerous'. 

The 'Eschatological' sub-species 'gives an imaginative vehicle to speculations about the ultimate destiny of our species'.  Lewis thinks it healthy to entertain such speculations: 'it is sobering and cathartic to remember, now and then, our collective smallness, our apparent isolation, the apparent indifference of nature, the slow biographical, geological, and astronomical processes which may, in the long run, make many of our hopes (possibly some of our fears) ridiculous.'  It is a sub-species which is sometimes less novelistic and more pseudo-historical. He provides an analogy of passengers on a ship involved in a heated conflict in the saloon, and likens Eschatological Science Fiction to taking a breather on deck. He says: 'stories of the sort I am describing are like that visit to the deck. They cool us. [...] Hence the uneasiness which they arouse in those who, for whatever reason, wish to keep us wholly imprisoned in the immediate conflict. That perhaps is why people are so ready with the charge of 'escape'. I never fully understood it till my friend Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question, 'What class of men would you expect to be the most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?' and gave the obvious answer: 'jailers'.'  (Tolkien's simple question will become of crucial importance when we come later to discuss the charge of 'escapism' against both Science Fiction and Fantasy).

Works in the category of 'Imaginative Impulse' take an impossibility as their starting postulate, and are as much concerned with science and technology as with myth and legend, 'not only stories about space-travel but stories about gods, ghosts, ghouls, demons,

fairies, monsters, etc.’ Of these, Lewis says ‘it is their wonder, or beauty, or suggestiveness that matter’. He points out that as we gain greater knowledge of our world we must go further to find imaginative settings.

The last category is the ‘Marvellous’. These Lewis defines by their quality. He says that such stories are ‘actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience’. We should keep these distinctions in mind, as it will become quite evident that a lot of criticism directed toward Science Fiction seems to be actually directed toward just one of these sub-species, Displaced Persons, and that thus much of the criticism can be refuted by providing examples of the benefit to be gained through engagement with the other sub-species.

3.2. Fantasy

In contradistinction to Science Fiction, which usually exhibits an overwhelming concern with science and technology, Fantasy is primarily concerned with Nature and the natural. It is a broad category, but best defined by the fact of its going against the laws of nature or currently accepted general states of affairs occurring in this world:

The natural world has its laws, [which] themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws.

Modern Fantasy [provides] the natural venue for the self-coherent impossible tale, i.e. an internally coherent impossible world in which that tale *is* possible. Almost all post-Tolkien Fantasy inhabits this region.

The narrative of Fantasy is self-coherent and the worlds obey their own distinct rules and laws. It is its nature of being contra-real which demarcates Fantasy most sharply from Science Fiction; Fantasy confronts or contradicts the real while Science Fiction is generally understood as possible or potentially possible and thus sides with the real. John Chute, co-author of *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* states that before the nineteenth century, no genre of written literature ‘seems to have been constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the “real”’. Although Chute’s definition is useful, it is worth commenting that it is also somewhat problematic. His notion that the nineteenth century saw the rise of Fantasy, the first genre to deliberately contradict the real, ignores the broad antecedent history of myth and folklore. Although some works of myth and folklore are grounded in genuine belief, others are satirical, and others again are just ‘fun’. The high proportion of *deus ex machina* in many of these stories indicates something less-serious than genuine belief.

The characters of Fantasy are often human or elevated humans such as sorceresses and sorcerers, witches and wizards, but amongst such characters we find also centaurs, druids, dragons, dwarves, elementals, elves, gnomes, gods, griffins, higher beings, hobbits, ogres, phoenixes, spirits, the supernatural, trolls, and a whole host of anthropomorphized creatures. (This list is nowhere near exhaustive). Fantasy literature seems to exhibit a kind of *reductio* approach to living, aligning the genre with the pastoral novel or play, with clothing, equipment and housing all rustic and basic, and a life lived close to the land. The genre shies away from technology in favour of magic, concerning itself with presenting and describing nature and the natural. Yet even this needs qualification, in that there is a certain amount of genre-blending in more modern Fantasy (Ann Rice, Laurel K. Hamilton, etc.) where a combination like Fantasy/Detective/Film Noir occurs. In these types of works, fantastical characters might live in a completely modern environment and utilize the technology available, as well as bringing skills or special abilities of their own to the mix. There are ‘pure Fantasy’ examples which both do and do not conform to this ‘resistance to technology’ definition. J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, set temporally somewhere near the present, is a good example of conforming to it (the magical community utilize little if any of the technology of the Muggle community). An example of an author who resists the definition is Neil Gaiman in *Neverwhere*, in which a social separation between magic and non-magic people occurs similar to that of the Rowling series, with the primary difference that the magic-folk do engage with the technology of the non-magic folk, to their own greater advantage. Resistance to technology in Fantasy seems less something essential to the genre and more a hangover from Tolkienesque genre conventions.

The essential element of the Fantasy novel is its world. In Raymond E. Feist’s *Magician*, the worlds of Midkemia and Kelewan are what invite and sustain our interest in the novel. And in many works of Fantasy there is some kind of quest, which almost every example culminates in an epic scale battle between good and evil in which good eventually triumphs.

There are, of course, works of fiction which resist easy categorization. One example is a writer like Larry Nivens, who provides a borderline case because while he deals with magic, an element typical to Fantasy, he does so in a scientific or lawful way. In this case, we might say that the content of the work is closer to Fantasy, while the method or form approaches Science Fiction.

4. The arguments

It seemed to me that the negative attitude toward both Science Fiction and Fantasy was a general one, and as such would have to have been articulated somewhere. So it became my intention to locate the arguments and consider their soundness. If the arguments were sound, I would have made a discovery to satisfy my own curiosity that would perhaps also be of interest to other people. If the arguments were not sound, then my role would be somewhat more important. In the latter case, I would need to consider whether the conclusion alone (that Science Fiction and Fantasy really *are* bad) was true. If it was, then the major work of this paper would be in finding out whether it was possible to reconstruct the arguments to make them sound; if it was not, then the major work would reside in

seeing where the arguments went wrong, and perhaps constructing my own arguments in favour of both genres. I began my research, intent on locating the ‘opponents’ of the two genres.

There was a seemingly unlimited amount of ‘defense’ of Science Fiction and Fantasy around, published in various journals, in books, and scattered about the Internet. The bibliography of any discussion of Fantasy I came across would invariably include Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, and more recently Rosemary Jackson; while discussions of Science Fiction would refer to pioneering works by George Slusser and Eric Rabkin, Robert Scholes, and Brian Aldiss. Unfortunately, the discovery of these ‘big names’ behind literary theory in Science Fiction and Fantasy constituted no great advance in my research. All of these writers were already engaging with Science Fiction and Fantasy *as literature*; debate raged over the various critical approaches to the texts, not over whether they deserved (or did not) their place within the literary canon.

My concern was not to become entwined with literary criticism, but rather to look specifically for cases of writers, critics or public figures speaking out against either genre. This was to become an immediate problem, in that the most accessible critical material (apart from the work mentioned above) appeared to centre on *answering* the charge of the genres being considered less valuable than others. Although some such articles provided very good counter-objections to the attacks on the genres, none of the defenses actually mentioned *who* they were answering, and *what* the initial arguments were. Consider the following, appearing in a *Contemporary Review* article:

Eighty percent of science fiction may be rubbish, but this is little justification for ignoring the worthwhile twenty percent... It is, in fact, time that science fiction was released from the “novelty corner” and included in that class of writing known simply as “fiction” where it would receive the attention and respect that any serious and competent novel deserves. 🗨️

What I needed to find out was why Fantasy and Science Fiction had ever been in the “novelty corner” to begin with. We cannot even extrapolate the argument that Science Fiction is a lesser genre because such a high percentage of it is ‘rubbish’, because in fact, this is an argument that applies to all literature, and probably all art. Theodore Sturgeon pointed out the generality of such a claim in an article in *Venture Science Fiction*, where in an attempt to defend Science Fiction he said:

I repeat Sturgeon’s Revelation, which was wrung out of me after twenty years of wearying defense of Science Fiction against attacks of people who used the worst examples of the field for ammunition, and whose conclusion was that ninety percent of [it] is crud.

The Revelation: Ninety percent of everything is crud.

Corollary 1: The existence of immense quantities of trash in Science Fiction is admitted and it is regrettable; but it is no more unnatural that the existence of trash anywhere.

Corollary 2: The best Science Fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field. 🗨️

So the argument that eighty percent of the genre is ‘rubbish’ did not serve to differentiate that genre from the rest of literature. It was of crucial importance to my investigation to locate arguments which did, and I felt sure that they must exist somewhere – for what a curious thing it would be for all these writers to be defending something that had never been attacked to begin with. It seemed that the great majority of literary critics were taking for granted some deeper argument, an argument assumed but not articulated. It became, then, my job to articulate it.

In 1960, at the end of Science Fiction’s Golden Age, a student named Michael Padlipsky submitted a thesis on Science Fiction - considering whether it was more than just a ‘pulp’ genre - to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 🗨️ In the first section of his thesis, he discussed some of the criticism he had been able to locate in his research. He mentioned a few critical articles that sounded promising, which I went on to read in an attempt to extract a few distinct and logically coherent arguments. I found three different critics whose articles went at least some length toward articulating valid reasons for the marginalization of the genre.

I also emailed Orson Scott Card – the Science Fiction author whose work was the original inspiration for this project, who apart from being a best-selling author holds a Masters degree in Literature and also writes a serious amount of literary criticism – and asked whether he knew of any key opponents of the genre. He replied with the following:

The problem is that the genre is not under published attack. The attack consists of dismissal and a sneer. Sci-fi is constantly abused orally in literature classes, and there are dismissive comments everywhere. But the only people who take the time to attack the genre are usually sci-fi writers who have decided they are now “above” the rest of us.

I don’t have exact references, but... Thomas Disch had one such attack in *Harpers* or *Atlantic* within the last ten years [...] One estimation of the worthlessness of sci-fi in the eyes of the literati is the fact that sci-fi is invariably discussed as “popular culture” and almost never as “literature”... 🗨️

His response surprised me, as I had not yet given up hope of locating a well reasoned published attack. At this point I faced several problems, the greatest of which was my growing concern over whether there really was a problem to be dealt with in this area. After discussing this with a couple of my lecturers I realized that just because an argument has not been formally articulated, there is no reason to suppose its non-existence. The fact that there is a general ‘sneer’ at Fantasy and Science Fiction is not something many of us would deny. Whether we simply feel that Fantasy is ‘weird’ and Science Fiction ‘geeky’, or we have a more intelligent grasp on our categorizations, we can nonetheless admit that there exists a problem which needs addressing. And if this problem has not been formally addressed then it is time somebody addressed it.

In order to set about achieving this, I plan to do two things. The first is to read and consider the cases against Science Fiction put forward in the articles by J. B Priestley, Arthur Koestler and Thomas McDonnell (mentioned briefly in Padlipsky’s thesis), and Thomas Disch (recommended by Orson Scott Card). These are predominantly in the form of literary criticism and opinion pieces, rather than serious philosophical investigations. Thus I will extrapolate what arguments I am able to from the respective articles, before going on to synthesize these basic claims with some of my own speculations on plausible reasons for why Fantasy and Science Fiction might be marginalized in public and academic opinion. I will not provide any counter-objections to these arguments until a later section, whereupon I will discuss ways of destabilizing the arguments, and will show that in fact the various arguments against each of the two genres stem from two main objections, and thus can be collapsed into two central arguments.

4.1. Arguments against Science Fiction

4.1.1. Science Fiction as Scientific

McDonnell and Priestley both attack Science Fiction on the grounds of its content, in two different ways. McDonnell writes from a theological position, accusing Science Fiction of promoting Scientism and being philosophical in nature. His objection is that Science Fiction is nothing more than a vehicle for pushing an agenda. Priestley charges Science Fiction with being escapist and, converse to McDonnell, finds it lacking in philosophical ideas. We will go on to look in greater detail at both these charges, beginning with McDonnell.

McDonnell, writing in *Catholic World*, differentiates Science Fiction from other literary genres by explaining that Science Fiction is the genre of ideas:

For the basic distinction of Science Fiction is a philosophical one. To a greater degree than any other type of fiction, it deals with ideas rather than with plot and/or character. 🗨️

The proper place for philosophy as such is, of course, in books that specialize on the subject of philosophy. 🗨️

The basic argument here is that a) Science Fiction deals with ideas, b) ideas are the business of philosophy, but c) philosophical ideas belong in philosophy books, not fiction, therefore d) Science Fiction is just disguised philosophy, and as such not good fiction. The conclusion we have extrapolated here is supported by McDonnell saying ‘it would demand a talent of the highest order to fictionalize the profound problems of philosophy, or even of science. To be cruelly frank, the average science fiction writer simply lacks that kind of ability’. 🗨️ This broad assertion of Science Fiction as being primarily concerned with ideas is not the only ground on which McDonnell criticizes it, and in fact this does not constitute an attack of the entire genre nor its most urgent problem. He calls Science Fiction a ‘cult’, saying that it intentionally deifies Science by pushing Scientism (the belief that science confirms the supremacy of natural law and refutes belief in the supernatural), 🗨️ yet he explicitly admits that ‘this is not to condemn the whole field (which would be foolish), but to reveal the cult (which is urgently necessary)’. 🗨️ Even in pressing such serious charges against the genre, McDonnell is not denying Science Fiction the potential to be good literature. His concern lies more with the kind of agenda pushing he has identified, and he calls for better writers ‘who can lift it out of the gimmick and space-opera stage into something resembling literature’ 🗨️ and better critics ‘who are not easily bamboozled into bowing down before what Anthony Standen[🗨️] has called the Sacred Cow of Science’. 🗨️ He ends his article in saying:

Science Fiction indeed has opened new worlds to the imagination. Let the creations of that imagination spring from the minds of free men in the image of God. For much more than literature will be lost when men begin to write and think in the image of the Robot. 🗨️

McDonnell seems to be urging us not to limit our imaginative worlds to the restrictions imposed by science. He seems to think that technology poses an imminent threat to our way of life – ‘much more than literature will be lost’ – in mentioning our becoming robot-like. The metaphor of the robot is a significant one, indicating a loss of free thought and imagination. Yet the point he is stressing actually works both ways; a dogmatic belief in science can limit us when it comes to metaphysical issues, but a dogmatic belief in religion can limit us when it comes to scientific issues. All we have identified here is the unproductive nature of being dogmatic – but surely we already knew that. We will come back to McDonnell (in Section 5.1.5), but for now let us go on to look at further arguments against Science Fiction.

4.1.2. Science Fiction’s Focus on Externalization

Converse to the arguments put forward by McDonnell come the arguments put forward by J. B Priestley, which say, far from supposing Science Fiction to be a vehicle for philosophical ideas, that it in fact *lacks* philosophy, which is its downfall. In addition to

this, Priestley charges the genre with being escapist. This latter charge aligns Priestley with an argument extrapolated from an article by Germaine Greer. But because the ‘escapist’ argument is perhaps the most fundamental attack, and equally applicable to both Science Fiction and Fantasy, we will leave it for the time being so as to be able to discuss it in greater detail when we come to arguments against Fantasy. Let us go on, then, to look at Priestley’s lack of philosophy claim.

One of the crucial lacks Priestley identifies in Science Fiction lies in its characterizations :

There they were, squinting at three suns or five moons, always the same glum and laconic technicians, all morons away from their instrument panels, illuminated dials, Double-Reverse-Boojum-Gravity-Feedback-Transformers. Never a poet, a philosopher, a scholar, a wit. Just this gang, so many redundant types from film and TV studios [...] If they were all changed to termites, they would hardly notice the difference.

[...] No civilized men are wanted in the great age of space. No art, no philosophy, not wit and humour, no passion and tenderness. None of that silly old earth stuff!

It is Priestley’s contention that the characters of a Science Fiction novel are at a great remove from the characters populating our earth today. He identifies art, philosophy, wit, humour, passion and tenderness as ‘earth stuff’, from which it seems Science Fiction is running. He reiterates this claim with his admission of his attitude toward scientists (who he holds responsible for much of the writing of Science Fiction) :

I admit I am beginning to be suspicious of scientists themselves. I don’t like their social irresponsibility, their fanaticism, their *hubris*. I think too many of them, the physicists especially, have spent too much time in a spectral world abstracted from the real one in which we suffer and hope, live and die. [...] They are too anxious to control life before they have discovered what life is about.

Priestley is launching a multi-pronged attack; against the writers of the genre and the characters in the writing. It is his final claim that really drives home the point of his attack against Science Fiction:

[...] We are now in such a hurry to press buttons and get somewhere, we no longer wonder who we are and what we are doing here.

And there they are; the big metaphysical questions. Priestley has identified features of Science Fiction that are so abstracted they serve to hinder our philosophical progress. As we have argued previously; philosophy is the business of everyman, but here we have a genre in which we are forgetting all the things important to being human. He ends his article with a final plea:

Let us go then [...] living if necessary without a button to press anywhere, exploring not empty space but the magical world within ourselves, not raising the speed of our missiles but the level of our understanding and feeling.

Priestley’s central claim is that Science Fiction is encouraging externalization – all the movement within the text is outward, away. He sees such movement as detrimental to humanity on the grounds that as a people we have too little a grasp on internal issues to be able to abandon internal search in favour of external. Priestley seems to feel that Science Fiction is incapable of ‘raising [...] the level of our understanding and feeling’. Obviously, then, proof that this is not the case will be sufficient to undermine his arguments; whether or not we can do so remains to be seen at this point.

4.1.3. Science Fiction as Science, not Fiction

We come now to an argument waged against the genre by Arthur Koestler. In order to deny Science Fiction literary merit, he simply denies it the status of ‘art’. There is a strong base of support for his argument, not necessarily explicitly stated but able to be extrapolated from various articles, in particular one that uses the same argument to defend the genre. This comes from Hanor Webb, a Professor of Science Education. To allow the clearest understanding of the implications of an argument which denies Science Fiction the status of art, we will employ some theory from an article on aesthetics written by David Ward. This will occur in a later section, in which we discuss counter-objections to the arguments presented here.

Koestler sees Science Fiction as a product of the atomic age, a result of ‘new vistas and new nightmares which art and literature have not yet assimilated’. He thinks that humanity has some kind of apocalyptic intuition, which manifests itself in our ‘sudden hunger for other ages and other worlds’, the ‘sudden interest in life on other stars’. He points to Science Fiction’s accuracy and authenticity, which is a result of its employing physicists, doctors and biologists. But accuracy and authenticity is no guarantee for artistic quality, a point crystallized in the following statement:

I believe that science fiction is good entertainment, and that it will never become good art. It is reasonably certain that within the next hundred years we shall have space-travel, but at that stage the description of a trip to the moon will be simple reportage. *It will be fact not fantasy*, and the science fiction of that time will have to go even further to startle the reader. [My italics].

It is Koestler’s contention that there is a gap left unfilled where art and literature has not yet been able to assimilate all the new and sometimes frightening developments of the atomic age. Science Fiction is the answer to this gap, but it is entertainment and not art. Why

is it not art? He answers precisely this question when he goes on to explain that art requires our being able to identify with or intimately understand something:

Our imagination is limited; we cannot project ourselves into the distant future any more than into the distant past. This is the reason why the historical novel is practically dead today. [] The life of an Egyptian civil servant under the Eighteenth Dynasty, or even of a soldier in Cromwell's army, is only imaginable to us in a dim outline: we are unable to identify ourselves with the strange figure moving in a strange world. And without this identification or intimate understanding, *there is no art* – only a thrill of curiosity which soon yields to boredom. [My italics].

[F]or every culture is an island. It communicates with other islands but it is only familiar with itself. And art means seeing the familiar in a new light, seeing tragedy in the trivial event: it means in the last resort to broaden and deepen our understanding of ourselves.

Here we have a perfect articulation of Koestler's conception of good art, and his reason for supposing Science Fiction insufficient. In his view, Science Fiction is a prediction of future events, yet the events occur so far into the future that we are unable to identify with or understand the characters or the worlds. Such a chasm between our current reality and the projected reality of the Science Fiction novel is not able to be bridged, and as such disallows any new insight or understanding into our own natures, or own lives.

Before we go on to discuss the support for this idea from another critic, we should just briefly consider one last point. For it is Koestler's assertion that one 'lesson' does emerge from our engagement with Science Fiction, which is that humanity is made aware of its limitations:

The paradoxical lesson of science fiction is to teach us modesty. When we reach out for the stars, our limitations become grotesquely apparent. The heroes of science fiction have unlimited power and possibilities [], but their feelings and reactions in even the most fantastic situation are limited within the narrow human range. [...] The Milky Way has become an extension of Main Street.

Support for this point comes from C.S. Lewis, who in his article "On Science Fiction" identifies the sub-species 'Displaced Persons', calling it 'radically bad'. He states that in such a sub-species, an author 'leaps forward into an imagined future when planetary, sidereal, or even galactic travel has become common. Against this huge backcloth he then proceeds to develop an ordinary love-story, spy-story, wreck-story, or crime-story. This seems to me tasteless. Whatever in a work of art is not used, is doing harm'. The difference between Koestler's point and Lewis' is that Koestler seems to be implying that all of Science Fiction is just 'displaced persons', ordinary humans performing their ordinary actions against an impressive backdrop. In contradistinction, Lewis distinguishes (as we discussed in Section 3.1) at least six different sub-species of Science Fiction, only one of which is 'Displaced Persons'. For now let us take Koestler's central argument, which is to deny Science Fiction the status of art, and look at another kind of support for this notion.

The title "Science Fiction Writers: Prophets of the Future" should be enough to give us a clear indication of the kind of defense (as opposed to attack) Hanor Webb provides. It is his belief that Science Fiction is prophetic:

No science fiction writer expects to live to see the day when his ideas will be accepted by society. He hopes, therefore, that the seedlings he plants in society's ground will be nurtured by the next generation of writers and readers and, if his ideas grow and have vigor, by generation after generation until they bear fruit. Such has been the history of every established social principle, although centuries may have been required for a harvest to appear.

He cites John Campbell (editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*), Isaac Asimov (author of prolific amounts of Science Fiction) and Gerald Heard (social philosophy writer and Science Fiction author) to substantiate his contention that Science Fiction is 'a) prophetic, b) descriptive of the social impacts of science and c) set in a novel, imaginative, possibly fantastic situation.' He admits outright his belief that authors of Science Fiction 'prefer to stimulate the imaginations of young adults interested in technology rather than to excite youthful readers'. Webb argues the potential for social transformation inherent in Science Fiction by citing Jules Verne's belief that 'what one man can imagine, another man can do', which he supports by saying that 'a striking number of modern inventors received inspiration from Verne's more than one hundred books'.

Patrick Parrinder, in *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching*, also argues for the more sociological interpretation, citing Alvin Toffler, who had said 'S[cience] F[iction] is held in low regard as a branch of literature, and perhaps it deserves this critical contempt. But if we view it as a kind of sociology of the future, rather than as literature, [S]cience [F]iction has immense value as a mind-stretching force for the creation of the habit of anticipation'. Parrinder wants to argue that the critical contempt Science Fiction faces is not deserved, give that is a 'mind-stretching force' more than it is literature.

Webb and Parrinder provide enthusiastic defenses of the genre, but unfortunately in both cases the defense aligns itself with one of the attacks from the opposition. In claiming that Science Fiction is prophetic and that it describes the social impacts of science - two crucial elements 'pegged' upon a novel, imaginative, or fantastic setting - Webb, like Koestler, is reducing Science Fiction to its 'use'. As is Parrinder, who does not even pretend to argue for it being literature. Koestler explicitly denies that Science Fiction is

literature by asserting that it is mere entertainment, from which we cannot understand or learn anything about ourselves, and furthermore will probably in the future become fact. Webb denies that Science Fiction is literature by showing it to be merely a vehicle to present ideas for social change. As we will come to see (in Section 5.1), being able to reduce a work of fiction to only its idea or argument has serious repercussions for the status of that work.

4.1.4. Compensation and Embarrassment

Orson Scott Card's recommendation of trying to locate the Thomas Disch article paid off when I finally managed to track down "Big Ideas and Dead-End Thrills", an attack on Science Fiction published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In the article, Disch states that Science Fiction is best understood as a branch of children's literature, for reasons of its various 'embarrassments'. He has two main arguments, the first of which concerns what he calls the 'impulse to compensate', the second of which concerns 'big ideas'.

Disch identifies a tendency in Science Fiction to 'compensate' for ignorance or inexperience using a kind of speculation. One of his examples is 'suburban teenagers writ[ing] sad tales of the deaths of inner-city hookers', which he attributes to 'naiveté combine[d] with rashness'. He identifies this same impulse, which he later calls a 'compensatory mechanism', as manifesting itself in the fantasy of rags-to-riches, and ill-informed speculations of other social classes, lifestyles, genders and sexualities. Disch says that 'the impulse to compensate for the indignities of poverty by fantasizing about the life-styles of the rich and famous is a universal trait'. He recognizes the compensatory mechanism in some of his own work, describing a story he wrote at age twenty-three as 'a tragic romance of a sort that only young men of pristine inexperience and perfected amour proper[] have ever imagined'. Disch seems to view such attempts in the same vein as some of the more cringe-worthy events of youth: when we look back on them from the position of experience we are embarrassed by what we had imagined. If we take his idea through to its widest logical extension, we see that it comes to encompass a wider argument which calls Fantasy the literature of desire, or wish-fulfillment (being as it is primarily concerned with utopias and the triumph of good over evil) and calls Science-Fiction nothing more than a 'thought-experiment'. The only difference between Disch's claim and the latter arguments occurs in terms of magnitude. For in each case the writer comes from a position of ignorance or inexperience, using imagination, speculation and simulation to consider something of which he has no knowledge. The only difference is that in Disch's example we can look back and cringe at our inexperience; but it will be some time before we will be able to cringe at how misinformed our projected future worlds might be. In any case, the compensatory mechanism may be 'embarrassing', but such a charge is not nearly enough to convince us that either Fantasy or Science Fiction deserve their lesser status. We will look soon in more detail at some of the theory surrounding Thought-Experiments, but we must first examine the second of Disch's criticisms, which states that Science Fiction is preoccupied with 'Big Ideas'.

The final and most excruciating callowness of youth is what SF readers particularly prize: Big Ideas. Now, there are some ideas that genuinely are big, which is to say, full of implication and repercussion. Copernicus's remodeled universe is such an idea. [...] There is nothing that so militates against the sense of one's own vast ignorance as adopting some such Big Idea, and the young, whose ignorance is largest and rawest and most exasperating, have a natural predilection for Big Ideas. [...] To a certain degree SF provides a natural playground for the harmless exercise of Big Ideas, even those that are radically ungrounded. Utopias that could never be implemented in the real world are fun to explore in simulation. [...] However, not all writers approach Big Ideas in a spirit of intellectual playfulness. Some come to believe in their privileged wisdom and become intolerant of contradiction, and this can happen at various levels of sophistication. [...] Ideological silliness is an affliction more tolerable in the young, and, for reasons I've tried to lay out, exactly the same may be said of a taste for science fiction. [...] The genre as a whole [...] has become, as a publishing phenomenon, one of the major symptoms of, if not a causal agent in, the dumbing-down of the younger generation and the lowering of the lowest common denominator.

Disch's criticism here ties in with previous criticism which saw Fantasy and Science Fiction as being idea-centric. His differs from previous criticism in the fact that he urges us not to take the play of ideas out of proportion. He encourages a 'spirit of intellectual playfulness'. This distinguishes his criticism from the criticism of Koestler and Webb, for the reason that the play of ideas is neither future-fact nor prophecy. Disch's ideal for Science Fiction is a genre which concerns itself with ideas, but in such a way as to provide an outlet for imagination and exploration, not for 'privileged wisdom' or 'ideological silliness'. This seems a reasonable enough ideal. Yet in allowing that, I have to say that it is 'convenient' that Disch cites no authors or texts in the course of his article. It is hard to imagine a flawless utopia ('ideological silliness') giving rise to a very interesting story. Nonetheless, we will answer this in the later section.

4.2. The Argument against Fantasy

4.2.1. Fantasy as Escapism

As the search for opponents went on, I continued to read defenses of the two genres, in the hope that some of them at least would mention exactly what they were answering. I found several articles on J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* - probably the perennial example of a work of Fantasy and as such representative of the genre - which mentioned Germaine Greer as a key opponent. Each article quoted Greer's "The Book of the Century", an article she had written in response to a poll run by Waterstone Publishers. Finally, it seemed that an opponent had emerged from which I could extract a concrete argument against Fantasy. In her article Greer wrote:

[...] it has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century. The bad dream has materialized. At the head of the list, in pride of place as the book of the century, stands *The Lord of the Rings*. Novels don't come more fictional than that. Most novels are set in a recognizable place at a recognizable time; Tolkien invents the era, the place, and a race of fictitious beings to inhabit it. The books that come in Tolkien's train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic. 🗨️

[T]he late twentieth century reader has a penchant for any kind of fantasy, infantile, macabre, sadistic, pornographic, pseudoscientific, supernatural or tortuous. 🗨️

These comments seem to implicitly argue against literature which is 'unrealistic' in nature, maintaining that the best type of literature is that which is closest to reality. Nonetheless, we cannot establish from these few comments that Greer is in fact a key opponent of the Fantasy genre, for the reason that comments made later in her article go some distance toward justifying her stance towards Tolkien's work:

I did not myself start prattling about hobbits because in 1964 I was simply too old to succumb to the prevailing enthusiasm for Tolkien. The books that shape us are the books that we read at a crucial period in our development, a period that usually, but not always, coincides with the early teens. [...] If we were to ask respondents to tell us how old they were when they read their favourite books, there would be a strange uniformity in their answers. They might also say that they re-read these books often, as you might expect when the very atmosphere of the book recalls the most passionate and optimistic time of one's life. 🗨️

These later comments, and the fact that she is enthusiastic in her article about Fantasy author Roald Dahl, 'who emerges as the most enduringly important writer of the century' with four books included in the list, indicate that Greer does not in fact have any kind of concrete argument against Fantasy. Regardless, we can take her initial comments as a foundation and go on to look at a theorist who elaborates further in a similar vein.

Let us return, then, to the arguments which J. B Priestley raised against Science Fiction. In these, he raises one of the most enduring and damaging arguments against both Science Fiction and Fantasy. This is the charge of escapism. Greer's initial comments do make reference to the type of criticism escapism represents – her phrases 'novels don't come more fictional than that', 'flight from reality' and 'penchant for fantasy'; and her speaking disparagingly about Tolkien 'inventing' *The Lord of The Rings*' era, place and inhabitants. Her comments privilege Realism as the desirable attribute of literature. If it is true that literature closest to reality is more valuable, which seems to be in line with an Aristotelian conception of the value of literature, then Greer's criticism is justified. But if we can successfully show that there is value in the contra-real or quasi-real (which we will attempt to do) then the foundation of such criticism will be undermined.

Rather than contending (or seeming to contend, in Greer's case) that all escapism is a bad thing, Priestley distinguishes at least two levels of escapism:

When I was in my teens and *we looked to fiction to satisfy our secret desires*, we found ourselves doing something jolly dashing in Ruritania or something even more dashing (though we were never sure about all the details) with an Elinor Glyn character on a tiger skin. An element of escape there, no doubt. But we were not running away from this planet altogether, leaving it in the lurch, only to spread our stupidity and violence as far as they could go. Glum hooliganism traveling at the speed of light was never one of our dreams. Even when we have made every allowance for the travel part of it – representing man's proud delight in this new conquest of space – what remains looks and smells nasty, like a teenage gang in a basement planning to beat up somebody [My italics]. 🗨️

Priestley asserts that we can use fiction to 'satisfy our secret desires'. He identifies such satisfaction as a kind of escapism, yet not to the degree of that which Science Fiction invites. Science Fiction he charges with 'glum hooliganism travelling at the speed of light', accusing its readers of 'running away from this planet altogether'. So we can categorize the two levels of escapism as follows: lower-level escapism, which fulfils a human need; and higher-level escapism, which seems (at least according to Priestley), to represent something 'nasty'. We are taking Priestley's comments, aimed specifically at Science Fiction, and using them as a base from which to crystallise what seems most likely to be the main objection to Fantasy literature.

The analogue 'flight from reality' would seem to contend that any reader of Fantasy or Science Fiction is attempting to escape the real world. On one level we can imagine that the escape into Science Fiction or Fantasy literature actually deflects people from real life. This may be a good thing or a bad thing depending on the real life circumstances being escaped from. Where an individual is avoiding responsibility and refusing to meet challenges head on, we can understand that such escape is aiding the pathological response of distraction and avoidance, and as such cannot be viewed positively. Perhaps we might invoke the analogy of severe alcoholism, drug addiction, or psychological withdrawal. In many such cases, people withdraw from reality by choice, or because of an initial bad choice that leads to dependency and consequent disintegration of character. In such instances we blame the person for allowing their own disintegration, we blame their self-control for not avoiding such a decline in the first place. Such considerations as duty and personal responsibility come into play.

On another level, converse to the first, an individual may be escaping a real life which is stressful, dangerous, confusing, damaging. In this case, escapism certainly is not a bad thing. Consider the following passage from Wally Lamb's novel *I know This Much is True*, based on the child psychology of Bruno Bettelheim:

"Do you have children, Dominick?"

We lost eye contact. The little girl in the yellow leotard flashed before me. "Nope." "Well, if you did," she said, "you would most likely read them not only *Curious George* but also

fables and fairy tales. Stories where humans outsmart witches, where giants and ogres are felled and good triumphs over evil. Your parents read them to you and your brother. Did they not?"

"My mother did," I said.

"Of course she did. It is the way we teach our children to cope with a world too large and chaotic for them to comprehend. A world that seems, at times, too random. Too indifferent."

Here we find the escapist nature of 'fables and fairy tales' (which we can logically extend to works of Fantasy) defended by virtue of their providing a way to help us cope with the difficulties of life. Such secondary worlds provide soothing and therapeutic notions of good triumphing over evil. Most of us lead the kinds of lives we would, at least at some point, wish to temporarily escape from. We can imagine that without any kind of escape being available (we need to acknowledge here that 'escapism' comes in forms other than the literary), the pressures and difficulties of life could become like a kind of prison. Sometimes it is simply necessary for us to 'get away'.

Tolkien supports this notion that escapism does not have to be a bad thing in his *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, saying 'the world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it'. He says that critics seem to confuse the 'escape of the prisoner' with the 'flight of a deserter'. These are in fact two very different things, and it is on the supposition that they are the same that such criticism arises. We can align the 'flight of a deserter' with the first level of escapism we considered, and 'escape of the prisoner' with the second level. We can make the most use of this second example if we understand it to refer to someone *wrongfully* imprisoned. In this case we might admire or respect the individual for temporarily freeing themselves of their constraints.

There is a third level to the escapism argument, which applies to the escape proposed in the first two levels, and comes from considering one of our initial reasons for supposing literature valuable. Literature is valuable because it allows us to transcend our experience and further our knowledge of people and place and circumstances we might someday or might never encounter. It can teach us about universals rather than particulars. It can allow us to build upon our empathy for others and therefore increase our personal morality. But the literary genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy present circumstances which are in many cases highly romanticised and unrealistic. In such cases we are accessing a distorted perception of real life, which cannot hope to satisfy the requisites of valuable literature. In addition to this, works of Fantasy feature a particularly high occurrence of *deus ex machina*, of which there is no such occurrence in real life. (If the circumstances presented in the literature, and / or the characters having experiences in those circumstances differ too greatly from real life we stand to lose the ability to learn anything from them in terms of life experience, because we can never hope to experience anything similar). The emotion and empathy is of little use, being a product of circumstances we will never find ourselves in and characters we can never identify with. Even escapism which endorses distraction and avoidance can be justified on some level if the escape is into a world with similar problems and contingencies, because at least the reader stands to learn something from the way the characters of the fiction meet their own difficulties under similar conditions. But this last level of the escapism argument presents Science Fiction and Fantasy with a serious difficulty, as it illustrates a way in which both genres seem to fail to satisfy the conditions under which literature is held to be valuable.

4.3. Summary of arguments against Science Fiction

Before we go on to present and discuss counter-objections to the arguments of the previous sections, we should briefly summarise the arguments so that they are fresh in our minds. Science Fiction has been charged with being a vehicle used to promote the cult of Scientism, with being not art but future-fact, with being prophecy, with lacking in philosophical ideas and conversely with being overly preoccupied with them, with speaking with a false authority about 'big ideas', with being nothing more than a thought-experiment, with being escapist. In presenting the arguments in such condensed form, we are able to see what is similar to the majority of them, which is the fact that while the escapism argument supposes the genre unrealistic, most of the arguments in fact go in the opposite direction and suppose Science Fiction *too* realistic. This is to say that these critics (and defenders) argue that Science Fiction is just an arbitrary form in which a person might choose to present their political or sociological arguments or ideas. If this were true it would legitimize our reconceptualizing Science Fiction as a branch of social science, rather than a literary genre, an art form. I will (in Section 5.1) answer this criticism under the heading of 'Science Fiction as Argument'.

4.4. Summary of the argument against Fantasy

Using comments made by Germaine Greer and Joseph Priestley as our foundation, we were able to construct one main argument against Fantasy literature, which was that it is escapist in nature. The argument of escapism has three levels, which show that the escape provided by Fantasy literature can be conceptualized in more than one way. These ways are the 'escape of the prisoner', the 'flight of the deserter', and the more fundamental issue of escape in either of these two cases being nonetheless an escape into an unrealistic world which cannot satisfy the conditions under which fictional worlds are usually supposed to be valuable under theories of the value of literature.

5. Counter-Objections and Defence


Although we will deal with each of the arguments presented in previous sections, we are primarily concerned with defending Science Fiction and Fantasy from the two arguments which have emerged as the most enduring and plausible reasons for supposing the genres deserving of their lesser status within the wider field of literature. These are the argument of the Thought-Experiment, and the argument of Escapism. Let us go on to discuss counter-objections to the arguments against Science Fiction, in the order in which they were presented in the previous sections.

5.1. Defending Science Fiction

We looked at about eight arguments against Science Fiction. Of these, four can be collapsed into the greater argument which sees the genre as reducible to certain non-literary (or not specifically literary) elements. These are the arguments that Science Fiction promotes the cult of Scientism (i.e. is a vehicle for an argument, namely the argument for privileging science over religion), that it is not art but future-fact (the narrative is being taken literally), that it is prophecy (as before), and that it is overly preoccupied with philosophical ideas (i.e. it is a vehicle for the presentation of philosophical ideas). These will be discussed under the heading of 'Science Fiction as Argument', the last charge to be discussed in this section. Before we move on to this discussion, however, we must consider the three arguments which do not fall under this heading. Of these remaining three arguments, the first is that the genre is lacking in philosophical ideas, and the second is that it claims a false authority on 'big ideas'. These two arguments are almost polar opposites; regarding 'ideas', one is claiming a lack and one is claiming an over-concern. The final argument we will look at before discussing the main objection to Science Fiction is the charge of escapism. This is a charge discussed under the headings of both Science Fiction and Fantasy, for the reason that it must be answered in two quite separate ways. Let us go on to consider these arguments, and if and how they can be defeated.

5.1.1. But First, a Concession to the Critics

One curious phenomenon which my research uncovered is the fact that those critics and writers prepared to speak out against Science Fiction seemed all to do so circa 1950. There appears to have been nothing in the way of a formal published attack on Science Fiction or Fantasy since then, yet much of the attitude which caused and legitimized that initial criticism persists today. One concomitant of this discrepancy between published attack and public opinion is that we must be careful not to use examples of post-1950's Science Fiction and / or Fantasy to refute arguments coming out of a 1950's context, unless it can be reasonably established that those arguments would still stand in light of what work exists today.

Known as the Golden Age of Science Fiction, the (roughly) twenty year period between the forties and the sixties saw the Science Fiction genre gain a much wider public attention than it had previously held. The 'big names' were A.E van Vogt, Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov; but other names were to leave their mark: Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, L. Sprague de Camp, Philip K. Dick, Robert Silverberg, Clifford D. Simak, Theodore Sturgeon and Jack Vance.  What I will do is try to be fair in terms of historical context in my defense of Science Fiction; some of the criticism leveled at Science Fiction does reflect some of the shortcomings of work from that period. But other of the criticisms I believe to be plainly misinformed, and it is these which will be our primary concern. I have been fortunate enough to stumble across an article entitled "Contemporary Science Fiction", published in 1952, which provides a useful and informed scholarly commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of Golden Age Science Fiction. This should assist us in making more informed evaluations in the coming section.

5.1.2. A Narrow Reading?

J. B Priestley, remember, had argued against both the writers of Science Fiction and the characters within it. His issue was with the high level of abstraction from the real world: 'no civilized men are wanted in the great age of space. No art, no philosophy, not wit and humour, no passion and tenderness. None of that silly old earth stuff!' His main contention seemed to be that the degree of remove from this world apparent in Science Fiction constituted a move toward externalization rather than human internalization. It was his fear that such a change in focus from inner to outer yielded the depressing and dangerous fact that 'we no longer wonder who we are and what we are doing here'. (The reason I summarize his argument as being that Science Fiction is lacking in philosophy is because this last statement concerns the biggest of the metaphysical questions with which the enterprise of philosophy is concerned).

The 1950's saw a decline in interest in the realistic novel, which is precisely the kind of novel Priestley wrote. To examine 'who we are' *right now* and 'what we are doing here' *right now* might well be the central concern of the realistic novel – but to wonder what we might have been or might become is something which speculative fiction like Science Fiction and Fantasy can certainly achieve: what is it to be human, under *any* circumstances? What are we doing here, as opposed to somewhere else? And would anything change if we came to be somewhere else, or had found ourselves somewhere else to begin with? You can begin to see how speculative fiction and the more abstract concerns of philosophy and theology begin to merge.

Yet even in his arguing against this new genre of novel, Priestley provides a loophole, in that he calls for work which assists us in 'raising the level of our understanding and feeling'. All that remains for his argument against the genre to be defeated is for us to provide examples of Science Fiction which clearly do raise the level of our understanding and feeling. There is evidence that at least one of the 'big names' of the fifties wrote Science Fiction that would refute Priestley's charges. In his article "Contemporary Science Fiction", August Derleth lends support to my refusal of Isaac Asimov's work as 'literature', remarking that he has 'a woefully pedestrian prose style'. He also appears to support my intuition about Heinlein's characterizations (I talk more about Asimov and Heinlein later in this section), saying that Heinlein is 'appreciably less stylistically remarkable'. Derleth identifies Ray Bradbury, however, as one writer in whose work 'stylistic quality and the development of character are first considerations', a writer who is 'the most literate and original of writers in the genre', with exceptional 'imaginative power'. After reading his article, I searched out four or five of Bradbury's short stories, appearing in various Science Fiction collections and anthologies. It was a refreshing experience, with prose style and thematic concerns in league with Le Guin (especially her short stories *Paradises Lost* [2002] and *Walking Away from Omelas* [1973]), Scott Card (especially his series beginning with *Ender's Game* [1986-2005]), and Terry Bisson (in particular his short story *They're Made Out of Meat?* [1991]). One story, *Mars is Heaven*, is particularly good. The protagonists of the story are the crew of a spaceship recently landed on Mars. The crew find on Mars a landscape and houses the same as those of the small towns they grew up in, and they find their long-dead relatives alive and well. It is not until the conclusion of the story, when each of the crew members are safe in bed in the houses of their families, that one character begins to question the best defense by Martians of Earthman invasion, asking what the best weapons a Martian could use against an Earthman would be, given that Earthmen had atomic weapons. 'The answer was interesting. Telepathy, hypnosis, memory and imagination'.

[H]ere we all are, tonight, in various houses, in various beds, with no weapons to protect us, and the rocket lies in the moonlight, empty. And wouldn't it be horrible and terrifying to discover that all this was part of some great clever plan by the Martians to divide and conquer us, and kill us.

[...] His hands were shaking under the covers. His body was cold. Suddenly it was not a theory.

Bradbury's *The Million Year Picnic* and *Zero Hour* were also very good. I read more widely through some of the Science Fiction collections and anthologies, and discovered further work of high quality in ideas, characterizations, imagery, prose style etc. (from the period Priestley was writing about), by A. E van Vogt (*The Weapons Shop* and *Black Destroyer*), James Blish (*The Oath*), Phillip K. Dick (*The Commuter*), Cordwainer Smith (*Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons*) and (surprisingly, after *Lord Valentine's Castle*) Robert Silverberg (*Sundance*). There may be many others. So although some of Priestley's comments are true of some of the Science Fiction on offer at the time he was writing, they are certainly not true of all the Science Fiction available at the time, and neither are they true of the all of the Science Fiction written *after* his article was published. We can, then, draw the conclusion that Priestley's arguments might have stemmed from a somewhat narrow reading (or unfortunate selection) within the Science Fiction genre, and certainly present a limited view which we have seen to be contrary to many examples.

It is worth establishing two further considerations with regard to characterizations in Science Fiction. Oftentimes the nature of the typical Science Fiction story structure (the 'slow revelation' of an astonishing fact) necessitates an average protagonist. If the protagonist were too intellectually sophisticated, the story would be compromised. This fact often leads to the pairing of the story's protagonist with a more intelligent companion (in Card's *Ender's Game*, Ender has Bean; in Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry has Hermione; in Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice* Fitz has Burch, Chade and The Fool. The list goes on.)

The second consideration stems from my personal observation that some of the worst characterizations I have ever encountered in fiction appear in Asimov's *I, Robot* (in plasticity they are comparable to Dan Brown's characterizations in *The Da Vinci Code*); and while the central character in Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* is constructed well enough to satisfy the reader, this only lasts until we read other of Heinlein's work and find that exact same character appear again and again with a different name. Yet it seems fair to say that literary genres can be concerned with different things, and as such we cannot rule that to fail in characterization is to fail as a work of literature. It is my contention that characters may serve as 'pegs to hang the story on', so long as the story itself, the world, the aesthetic style and other elements, are strong enough to compensate for this apparent shortcoming.

One final consideration worth making is that Priestley's criticism contradicts directly with a defense I will provide in Section 5.1.4. Priestley bewails the reactions of the characters in Science Fiction as 'limited to the narrow human range', which, although he phrases it pejoratively, is the feature which most redeems Science Fiction from the charge of escapism. So in an odd way, we can understand his argument as actually lending support to the proposals I will make in that section.

5.1.3. Science Fiction as Fiction, not Science

Although Thomas Disch makes a good point in showing the concern Science Fiction seems to exhibit with 'big ideas', he in fact answers his own argument when he calls for better writers and better work, which he himself has attempted to produce. It is not the fact of engaging with big ideas that concerns Disch, it is the fact that sometimes writers begin to take themselves too seriously, that the work comes to speak with false authority about issues that should remain in the domain of ideas, rather than being taken seriously in some kind of politically applicable sense. So long as ideas remain ideas and Science Fiction remains the playground for the harmless exercise of certain notions, utopias, and thought-experiments, there is no real problem.


The problem of writers and readers taking the work too seriously is a problem we have already encountered in our examination of arguments against, and defenses of, the genre. In many cases readers and critics have been found to be engaging with the work on a literal level. Disch urges us not to take the play of ideas out of proportion. He encourages a 'spirit of intellectual playfulness'. This is of immense significance in answering the arguments of both Koestler and Webb. The play of ideas is neither future-fact nor prophecy.

Under Disch's ideal conception, Science Fiction is not social science but art. Thus Disch's article, which he wrote as an attack on the genre, actually operates in favour of Science Fiction, as it rescues it from being taken too seriously in a social science capacity and restores to it its status as a literary art. It is a genre which concerns itself with ideas, but in such a way as to provide an outlet for imagination and exploration, not for 'privileged wisdom' or 'ideological silliness'.


5.1.4. Science Fiction and the Human Condition

Some criticism of Science Fiction considers it to be similar to Fantasy, in that regardless of the kind of difference in the worlds from this one (i.e. logical-future vs. contra-real) both genres feature worlds, characters, and situations too abstracted from the 'real' to serve any purpose beyond mere entertainment. We have already discovered in considering the distinction made by J.R.R Tolkien that escape can be both a healthy and useful thing, and an unhealthy and distracting thing. Something of a defense of the escape provided by literature comes from his analogy to the escape of the prisoner. The notion of escape, whether we see it as a good thing, a bad thing, or either depending on the circumstances, applies nonetheless to all literature regardless of the genre.


The argument of escapism is more easily defeated in its application to Science Fiction than in its application to Fantasy. The reason for this comes from the fact that Science Fiction, while sometimes quite abstracted from the world as it is now, is nonetheless the logical extension of certain states of affairs as we have or might actually find them. Thus there is no problem in applying to Science Fiction all the usual reasons for supposing that literature is valuable. The characters are human, or some greatly evolved variety of human:

[...] People whose society differs from ours, even whose physiology may differ from ours, but who feel the way we do. First to create difference – to establish strangeness – then to let the fiery arc of human emotion leap and close the gap: this acrobatics of the imagination fascinates and satisfies me as almost no other. 


And the universe is ours. The only difference is the state of technological progress, which is usually much more highly developed. In some cases, stories of Science Fiction serve the subversive function of postulating certain future worlds precisely *so that* we will be persuaded to abandon current courses of action that will lead us to that future world.

One useful way of framing the senselessness of the escape argument against Science Fiction is to consider historical fiction. Historical fiction comes under the broader heading of Realism. It is an imaginative reconstruction of the past; constructed out of real information about circumstances and speculation about what it was like to live under those given circumstances. Does the escapism argument apply to historical fiction? In engaging with it, are we abandoning our current reality for a past which no longer exists? To answer these questions, we merely need to consider whether we stand to learn anything from considering who we used to be, what we have become, and the differences between the two. If we can learn something from this, and it seems unquestionably obvious to me that we can, then it stands to reason that we can learn just as much in speculating about what we *might* become, so long as the speculation is rational and logical. The only difference between the past and the future is that we have no power to change the past. 

Thus we see that Science Fiction fulfills an important societal role: it can speculate and inform, and it can provoke us to consider the wider implications of some of our current actions and technologies. I am going to take this argument one step further and argue that Realism in fact lacks many of the benefits of Science Fiction in that it can never transcend contingencies. This is an answer which applies to both Science Fiction and Fantasy. Realism is good at dealing with the way things are right now, or historically; it can showcase the particular worries and tensions of our time. Science Fiction, and Fantasy where any of its characters are human, provides us with the necessary scope to consider what it means to be human. Let us consider an example.

It is hard to meet a stranger. Even the greatest extravert meeting even the meekest stranger knows a certain dread, though he may not know he knows it. Will he make a fool of me wreck my image of myself invade me destroy me change me? Will he be different from me? Yes, that he will. There's the terrible thing: the strangeness of the stranger. 

Ursula Le Guin's short story *Nine Lives* takes a fundamental aspect of human nature – our individuality – and comments on it via negation through the scientific/philosophical issue of cloning. The issue is tackled in a slightly different way than authors or philosophers usually deal with cloning, in that Le Guin writes not about a single cloned being but about a unit of clones, which she calls a 'tenclone'. The tenclone is cloned from one person's cell matter, and the male gene is deleted in several cases so that the unit of ten consists of both males and females.

'Self-possessed', Owen Pugh murmured to his friend, 'that's it'. Think of it, to be oneself ten times over. Nine seconds for every motion, nine eyes on every vote. It would be glorious!' 

In reading about the greater cohesion of the tenclone, the ease they show in understanding one another, and the constant companionship, we are suddenly provoked to consider that we are *not* like this, that it is often difficult for us, as individuals raised in very different ways and possessing very different ideas, to work and live together. By the end of the story, a tragedy has eliminated all but one of the

tenclone. The clone, new to being truly alone, struggles to understand the complexity of inter-human relationships, asking the story's protagonist Owen Pugh how he and his friend Martin can possibly understand one another: But Pugh could not tell him. 'I don't know', he said, 'it's practice, partly. I don't know. We're each of us alone, to be sure. What can you do but hold your hand out in the dark?'

I use this one example (but there are many more) to show how in Science Fiction we are often able to escape contingency and access the essential features of humanity, the parts of our nature which are necessary across any space or time we might have come to exist in. In this way, as I said before, Science Fiction and some works of Fantasy are actually more real than Realist literature, in their ability to transcend contingency. C.S Lewis supports this idea in his defense of Eschatological Science Fiction when he provides the ship analogy (discussed in section 3.1).

5.1.5. Arguments and Thought-Experiments, Science and Fiction

Now we arrive at the final and most significant charge against Science Fiction, a charge which embodies many of the arguments discussed previously. This is the charge that Science-Fiction represents nothing more than an argument, that the two are mutually identifiable. McDonnell accuses Science Fiction of pushing the cult of scientism. He is simply wrong if he intends his charge to apply to *all* Science Fiction writers. Some writers are indeed scientific (Isaac Asimov, for example, who openly admits an agenda of recruiting young people to science), but others are not (Ursula Le Guin, Ray Bradbury, Orson Scott Card, for example). Furthermore, in saying that Science Fiction writers lack the talent to fictionalize profound problems (he says not that it is impossible, but that it is not - in his opinion - being achieved at the time he writes) McDonnell's criticism has effectively already been answered by Sturgeon, who said that ninety percent of *everything* is 'crud' (see Section 4.). Sturgeon argues that the best Science Fiction is as good as the best writing in any other field. Setting McDonnell aside, then, we can proceed with the arguments of some of the other critics, which we have reduced to the charge of Science Fiction as Argument. In order to get a clear understanding of exactly what the repercussions are of calling Science Fiction merely 'argument', let us go on to consider part of David Ward's theory of aesthetic transactions.

In his article "A Basic Schema for Understanding Aesthetic Transactions", Ward explains that the first requirement of a work of art is that it be recognized as such. Such recognition means that the work must be somehow distinguishable from the standard ontological framework, for reasons as simple as it being hung on a wall or put on a pedestal, or by virtue of the medium. Consider the deliberate movement of a dancer that differs from the way people usually move, or the authorial presence in a work of literature that can give us non-standard insight into the inner life of a character. Only after we recognize something as art can we go on to engage with and attempt to understand the work.

What both Koestler and Webb are doing, albeit from different motivations, is failing to recognize works of Science Fiction as art. As a result their respective attacks and defenses engage with the works on a literal level - Koestler saying 'it will be fact not fantasy', Webb saying that Science Fiction is 'prophetic' and 'descriptive of the social impacts of science'. Their literal engagement limits their response to finding the work either useful or harmful in some sort of social science capacity.

Denying Science Fiction the status of art generates some major problems. It was one of my initial assumptions that attacks on the genre would be attempting to prove that Science Fiction is not good fiction or good art, and that defenses of the genre would provide counter-objections to show that it is. But here we have found a *defense* which claims that it is not art at all. Can such a defense possibly be beneficial to the genre? For there are many things in the world which are useful and defensible but not art; what we are here concerned with is that the genres of Fantasy and Science Fiction are not taken seriously as *good fiction*, which is to say, good literary *art*. Simply showing how useful something is (in some sort of social science capacity) does not go any distance in solving our original problem.

The 'Science Fiction as Argument' charge poses two distinct questions. It is popularly understood that the method of Science Fiction is thought-experiment. Willard van Orman Quine assumes this mutual identification in saying 'the method of science fiction has its uses in philosophy, but... I wonder whether the limits of the method are properly heeded'. He is discussing the problematic nature of the thought-experiment in philosophic method, but taking for granted that thought-experiment is the method of Science Fiction. Ursula Le Guin instead views thought-experiment as the *foundation* of a particular story:

The germ of the story was in an article I read [...] out of irrational and insatiable curiosity, in a thought-experiment that became a story [...] the experiment was not a happy one.

So the first question we need to answer is whether the assumption that thought-experiment is the method of Science Fiction (and Fantasy, for that matter) is a secure one. If we answer that question in the affirmative, then our next question is whether a thought-experiment is the same thing as an argument. If the answer to this second question is affirmative, then we will have some evidence for the 'social science' interpretation of the genre, in that it merely reflects one person's aesthetic choice to present their argument in a certain form, namely the form of fiction. My initial intuition would be that defining a work of fiction as 'literature' (i.e. implying a value-judgement) has less to do with content, and more to do with form or style. This is an intuition supported by long-time literary critic Harold Bloom, who, in debates over the literary canon, 'openly berates feminists, Marxists, and multi-culturalists for ranking books according to their social agendas', concluding that 'greatness in literature arises exclusively from spiritual sublimity and aesthetic intensity, qualities [...] fundamentally unrelated to politics or morality'. When we have found some answers to the questions posed above, we will be

free to discuss whether fiction being argument affects its merit, or whether (and this is much more likely) fiction being *merely* argument affects its merit. This latter point I will argue using an analogy to philosophic method.

The first issue is whether or not it can be successfully shown that all Science Fiction takes the form of a thought-experiment. The most popular definitions of the genre of Science Fiction say that it takes existing states of affairs through to their logical extension. Consider Orwell's *1984* as the logical extension of communism. Some might say that works like this possess more of an agenda, are more persuasive, than work which just explores the likely outcomes of a certain set of given starting conditions. Consider John Wyndham's *The Trouble with Lichen*. In this novel, lichen with anti-ageing properties is discovered. The novel examines some of the likely social and political ramifications of such a discovery. In this way we can see that we might categorize a work like *1984* as an 'argument' (able to be reconstructed as a statement like 'if you take this action, then these undesirable consequences will follow; therefore do not take this action'), while we would categorize *The Trouble with Lichen* as a 'thought-experiment' ('what if x?'). If all that is required for something to be a thought-experiment is for us to 'make a judgement about what would happen if the particular state of affairs described in some imaginary scenario were actually to obtain', then we can conclude that the majority of fiction and literature is a thought-experiment, and certainly all Science Fiction. Under this definition, even Science Fiction which features a strong and persuasive argument takes the overall form of a thought-experiment. So we will answer the first of our questions in the affirmative. The issue is, then, whether or not thought-experiments and arguments are the same thing.

There is a vast amount of literature on thought-experiments. The thought-experiment is a tool often employed in philosophy and science, to gain results from an experiment we are unable to physically perform. Perhaps the most famous thought-experiment in science was Galileo's, regarding the speed of falling bodies, which he used to refute the well-entrenched Aristotelian conception. Examples of famous thought-experiments in philosophy are Descartes' 'Evil Demon', popularly reconceived as the 'brain-in-a-vat' of Skepticism, Frank Jackson's 'Mary's Room' and John Searle's 'Chinese Room' in the Philosophy of Mind, and many others. Thomas Kuhn (in the Philosophy of Science) believed that a well-conceived thought-experiment is able to bring about crisis, crisis being the primary contributor to paradigm-shift. In this way 'thought experiments can teach us something new about the world, even though we have no new data, by helping us to reconceptualize the world in a better way'.

The greatest charge against thought-experiments is that they are merely arguments in disguise, 'sound arguments dressed up in heuristically appealing clothing'. The idea that thought-experiments are always arguments is a view advanced by John Forge, Andrew Irvine, John Norton and Nicholas Rescher. Perhaps the most concise of these (according to Michael Bishop and Tamar Szabó Gendler, at least) comes from Norton. In her article "Galileo and the Indispensability of Scientific Thought Experiment", Gendler discusses and attempts to refute Norton's Elimination Thesis. The Elimination Thesis argues that 'any conclusion reached by a (successful) scientific thought experiment will also be demonstrable by a non-thought-experimental argument'. Gendler identifies two branches of Norton's claim: the Dispensability Thesis and the Derivativity Thesis. The former of these says that a thought-experiment can be replaced by an argument without losing any of its demonstrative force, while the latter says that the justificatory force of the thought-experiment only comes from the fact that it can be replaced by an argument. Gendler makes explicit her own idea of the distinction between thought-experiments and arguments:

To draw a conclusion on the basis of a *thought experiment* is to make a judgement about what would happen if the particular state of affairs described in some imaginary scenario were actually to obtain.

[...] By contrast, to draw a conclusion on the basis of a *non-thought-experimental argument* is to be led by a process of inductive or deductive reasoning from a set of explicit premises which make no reference to particular hypothetical or counterfactual states of affairs to a correspondingly general conclusion.

[...] So thought experiments differ from non-thought-experimental arguments in two crucial respects: first, they are not presented as arguments, but rather as invitations to contemplate a way that the world might (have) be(en); and second, they make essential reference to particular hypothetical and counterfactual states of affairs.

Gendler uses Galileo's famous thought-experiment to deny both the Dispensability Thesis and the Derivativity Thesis, showing that a thought-experiment and an argument are two quite distinct entities. She says:

The thought experiment that Galileo presents leads the Aristotelian to a reconfiguration of his conceptual commitments of a kind that lets him see familiar phenomena in a novel way. And furthermore, that:

[...] One way of thinking about how the thought experiment works is this: it brings the Aristotelian to recognize the inadequacy of his conceptual framework for dealing with phenomena which – through the contemplation of this imaginary case – he comes to recognize as always having been part of his world.

Gendler concludes that our 'analysis and appraisal' (and here she is quoting Norton) of thought experiments 'need not involve reconstructing [them] explicitly as [...] argument[s]'. She says that thought-experiments are similar to arguments in that the validity of procedure is of paramount importance, but that thought-experiments are distinguished further by 'their ability to direct the reader's attention to inadequacies in her conceptual scheme that she herself recognizes immediately'. Gendler quotes Ernst Mach in order to find support for the notion that:

We have stores of unarticulated knowledge of the world which is not organized under any theoretical framework. Argument will not give us access to that knowledge, because the knowledge is not propositionally available. Framed properly, however, a thought experiment can tap into it, and – much like an ordinary experiment – allow us to make use of information about the world which was, in some sense, there all along, if only we had known how to systematize it into patterns of which we are able to make sense.

Gendler concludes her article by asserting that ‘the success of the thought experiment may be a result of the way in which it invites the reader’s constructive participation, depicts particulars in ways that *make manifest practical knowledge*, and describes an imaginary scenario wherein relevant features can be separated from those that are inessential to the questions at issue’ [my italics]. The italicized passage serves to remind us of Simulation Theory, where an author runs a mental simulation to discover what kinds of things might happen in given situations with given characters (which we discussed in Section 2.).

Gendler’s assertion that thought-experiments and arguments are two different things is supported by Michael Bishop. Bishop uses the Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr ‘Clock-in-the-Box’ thought-experiment to show that one thought-experiment can yield more than one corresponding t-argument. He shows that both Einstein and Bohr followed the same thought-experiment but constructed different arguments from them, which he uses as proof that a thought-experiment is not, and cannot be, an argument.

What, then, are the implications of this outcome for our conception of Science Fiction? As we discussed earlier, if Gendler and Bishop had been unable to prove that thought-experiments and arguments were distinct entities, we would have been forced to admit that if it is true that Science Fiction takes the form of a thought-experiment, and thought-experiments are always arguments, then it is true that Science Fiction is always an argument. Thus we would face the problem of defending Science Fiction from being merely a vehicle for presenting arguments. This would result in arguing over whether an argument can ever take on narrative form and constitute good fiction. We are not forced into this predicament, however, because Gendler and Bishop have strong enough arguments to allow us to admit that thought-experiments are something quite different to arguments. Rather than ‘follow[ing] the path of a recognized argument form’, the reader has ‘performed an act of introspection that brings to light heretofore inarticulated and (because he lacked a theoretical framework in which to make sense of them) heretofore implausible tacit beliefs’.

We should note here that denying fiction the status of ‘argument’ does not deny it the power to bring about change. As Koestler said, good literary art means ‘seeing the familiar in a new light, seeing tragedy in the trivial event: it means in the last resort to broaden and deepen our understanding of ourselves’.

When we say of art that its specific function is to bring about change, we are saying too much, for then we get into the kind of trouble resulting from Webb’s argument. Because it is not the task of this paper to discuss the requirements of art, it will suffice for our purposes to draw the loose conclusion that any agenda in a work of art ought to be secondary to the art form.

In order to make this suggestion more convincing, I would draw an analogy to the discussion of the previous section. What was at stake between thought-experiments and arguments was whether or not the former could be *reduced* to the latter. In the same way, I argue that if a work of fiction or literature can be reduced to an argument, or a plot, or an agenda; if *it loses no demonstrative or emotive force in the re-telling* (or reduction); then it is of sub-standard literary merit. It is, in such a case, either not fiction at all, or very bad fiction. In either case, it is certainly not literature. Under such a conception, Asimov’s *I, Robot* would fail as literature. The bad characterizations and worse-than-bad prose style are lifted up only by the good ideas; all of which unfortunately entail that *I, Robot* is better in the re-telling, or in reduction to those foundational ideas.

As a brief aside, one very interesting question has been put to me in discussing this fiction-as-thought-experiment view, which is the question of how we can know when to take an argument or thought-experiment made via fiction *seriously*. Kathleen Wilkes is one philosopher who has written against thought-experiments, from the area of personal identity theory, saying in fact that thought-experiments are fine in fiction because the purpose of fiction is different to the purpose of philosophy or science; fiction’s purpose is to entertain. She is saying in effect that the kinds of thought-experiments used in fiction, which she aligns with those employed in identity theory, are never philosophically useful. She contrasts these with a few very useful thought experiments from science such as Stevin’s frictionless planes and Einstein’s oscillating light fields.

[W]e cannot extract philosophically interesting conclusions from fantastical thought experiments. We cannot do this because we have the following choice: either (a) we picture them against the world as we know it, or (b) we picture them against some quite different background. If we choose the first, then we picture them against a background that deems them impossible – that insists that hemisphere transplants (for instance) violate fundamental biological and physical laws. If we choose (b), then we have the realm of fantasy, and fantasy is fine to read, but it does not allow for philosophical conclusions to be drawn, because in a world indeterminately different we do not know what we would want to say about anything (pp. 46).

Wilkes makes a good case against many thought experiments used in personal identity and ethics. She talks about the often-cited Gyges ring example, which is the idea that there would be no morality if there existed a ring of invisibility. She points out that such a thought-experiment does not answer enough questions to be conclusive about human nature. She asks whether the owner of Gyges ring is to be intangible as well as invisible, whether there is anything that would count as punishment for an invisible, intangible agent, whether, if prison walls could not hold you, *you* could hold a gun, a caseful of banknotes. She asks if other people would know such a ring existed, and points out that if they did, and they knew who owned it, unsolved crimes might be ascribed to the ring-owner. Wilkes says ‘the point

is that the purpose of the thought-experiment cannot be met unless such questions are answered: they are deeply relevant. The background is inadequately described, and the results therefore inconclusive.’

So in response to the question of when we should take the thought-experiment in the Science Fiction or Fantasy novel seriously, my answer is: only when the thought-experiment enacted by the work of fiction is of the same kind as the successful thought-experiments of science, when, as Wilkes would say, the background is adequately described, the experiment is rigorous and controlled, and the results, therefore, are able to be conclusive. This ‘taking the thought-experiment seriously’ would also have to be a separate issue to the success of the fiction as literature, which would be based upon other criterion such as the successful execution of the thought-experiment in narrative form, and other aesthetic criterion.

5.2. Defending Fantasy

In the previous section, we discussed the nature of the escapism argument, and its application to Science Fiction. We noted that it was easier to answer in relation to Science Fiction than in relation to Fantasy, for the reason that Science Fiction is often a logical projection of the future of this world. The point at which the escapism argument becomes a critical problem for the Fantasy genre comes when we consider that any engagement with ‘realist’ literature is at least an engagement with situations and circumstances that readers might actually find themselves in, an engagement with characters similar to themselves, or at least only dissimilar to a certain degree.

The problems faced by characters in realist genres are problems which might logically be faced by the reader, and thus any engagement is useful in that it stands to broaden our understanding, allow us to transcend the limits of our own physical experience, build on our empathy for others, aspire to emulate certain characters or given characteristics or modes of behaviour that we recognise as desirable or ‘right’. These are some of the basic reasons provided by theorists in the Philosophy of Literature for supposing literature valuable; in some views essential rather than merely useful or enjoyable.

This poses a serious threat to our finding any value in the genre of Fantasy, for the following reason. Fantasy is the domain of the contra-real. Fantasy worlds are worlds that specifically *do not* exist, containing states of affairs that have not and will never come to pass. The events which occur in a Fantasy world are in accord with the laws of nature established for that world, not our own. Thus the characters of a Fantasy world exhibit behaviour particular to the pressures and circumstances of the world they find themselves in. But we as readers will never find ourselves in a similar situation because we will never find ourselves in any universe but this one.

Obviously when we take these things into consideration, we find that Fantasy literature can not be defended on any of the usual grounds on which we usually find literature valuable. We need to consider, then, other reasons for it being valuable. In order to do this, we will look at two separate arguments. The first comes from Joseph Priestly, and involves what I call the Iceberg Theory, looking at the fact that the secondary worlds of Fantasy still come from the minds of men (and women) of this world. The second is what I will call Comparison Theory, which simply asks whether or not there is something to be gained from comparing what is with what is not.

5.2.1. Priestley’s Iceberg

In his article “Thoughts in the Wilderness”, Joseph Priestly makes a point which I think is crucial to our understanding of Fantasy literature and might easily, without explication, escape our consideration. For it is easy, when considering the proliferation of secondary worlds brought into being in the space of the human imagination through literature, to fall into the trap of imagining the false dichotomy of ‘this’ (real) world and ‘those’ (imaginary) worlds. What we must not forget is that ‘those’ worlds are a product of this one. This is a fact which cannot be avoided. However different the worlds of the artistic imagination, we must not forget that they come out of the minds of the men of ‘this’ world, and thus are a product of these circumstances, this time. Without getting too far into psychoanalytic theory and theories of the unconscious, we can just briefly say that there is support for this notion of the importance of ‘what is really happening in men’s minds’ in Jungian theory in his idea of the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious, and also in Rosemary Jackson’s work *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, which frames Fantasy as the literature of desire, of fulfilling our deep-seated desires for the triumph of good over evil, as providing us with the utopias we unconsciously yearn for. What Priestly specifically says is:

Science Fiction and Flying Saucer legends seem to me important because they show us what is really happening in men’s minds. Like the sexually sadistic thrillers now so popular, they are the myths and characteristic dreams of our age, and are psychologically far more important than our more rational accounts of ourselves. They take the lid off. They allow us a glimpse of what is boiling down below. They may be the first rumblings of the volcano that will overwhelm us. Of course our political leaders, solemn experts, pundits of platform and Press, do not concern themselves with such trivialities, for they still imagine, against all the evidence, that men are as rational as they like to think they are, are moved by a limited set of obvious motives, and consciously direct their affairs. And to imagine this [is] as sensible and safe as it is to assume that what we can be seen of an iceberg is all there is of it. If we are all in the same boat, then its name is *Titanic*.

So let us take this as the first step in our defence of Fantasy from the argument of escapism. It is to answer that the work of our imaginations, the myths and dreams of our age, are just as important, if not more so, than our rational accounts of ourselves. And Fantasy, as its name indicates, allows a formal expression of some of these myths and dreams. Thus there is much to be gained not only from considering the individual manifestations of these things in particular works, but our own reactions and sympathies in engaging

with these particular narratives, what we like about Fantasy worlds which are particular to one book or series, or one author, and what we like across all Fantasy literature. If Fantasy really is about wish-fulfilment, perhaps in taking the writers writing and our own reading more seriously we might put ourselves in a position to learn more about what we really lack, what we really wish for, and if we are in any position to make these desires come true.

One concession does need to be made to Priestley here though, and it concerns his frustration with the ‘externalization’ of Science Fiction which appears to be distracting people from internal (or self) exploration. It is one of my more controversial assertions that one of the elements that makes Fantasy ‘good’ is the level at which we can identify with it, what it illuminates about the human condition. We are often interested in alien species, but I would argue that this interest only comes via negation; we are not interested *per se* in this strange and distant creature, but rather our interest comes from being provoked to thought -*via* this device of the ‘other’ - about the kinds of things we lack, what we are not, and how these sorts of considerations change or reveal our understanding of ourselves.

One of my lecturers explained to me recently that in running a philosophy workshop he had students consider what it means to be human. The first thing the class did was imagine things that were specifically not-human, and consider the difference. Sometimes the best way of gaining greater understanding is through the consideration of difference; we can learn a lot in considering all the things that we are not. Thus on this issue of externalization versus internalization, I would be inclined to side with Priestley and Koestler and say that literary art ‘means in the last resort to broaden and deepen our understanding of ourselves’.

5.2.2. Fantasy (and Science Fiction) and the Other

This section works to elaborate upon the point made in the previous section (5.2.1.) and also presents a contrasting view to that which is elaborated in Section 5.1.4. In that section, I argued that Science Fiction was illuminative (often by negation) of the human condition. The success of this argument depends on the application of a mode of reading. There are two ways a reader could understand Le Guin’s *Nine Lives* (see pp. 52-53). One is in the way I explained earlier, which is to say that the reader gains insight into the human condition by considering the differences between humanity and the Other of the story (in that case, the clone). By this reading, a story is either explicitly about being human, or it is implicitly about being human, precisely because it is about *not* being human. One particular difficulty of this view is that it is all-encompassing.

The other mode of reading we might adopt is to say that these works really are about the Other. In this case, rather than reading *Nine Lives* as a commentary (by negation) on being human, we would say that it is about being a clone. We can apply this kind of reading to Orson Scott Card’s *Ender* series, in particular the later books where four different species are in communication; Ender (a human), Jane (a super-computer), the Formics (ant-like workers, connected psychically to their Hive Queen), and the Pequeninos (pig-like creatures with third-lives as sentient trees). This second kind of ‘about-ness’ is more open to debate within Science Fiction, because it can always be argued that maybe, just maybe, the world might go the way the author imagines. But what happens when we look at an example from Fantasy?

Many of the human characters of Robin Hobb’s *Assassin* series are endowed with two additional senses, the Wit and the Skill. The Wit is a psychic bond to one particular animal; the Skill is a kind of telepathy which allows its users to enter other people’s minds and relay information, lend strength, or conversely cloud judgement, present illusion, mislead, drain of strength, damage and destroy. The Wit is a sense both loathed and feared. Hobb uses the Wit and the Skill as useful devices for greater psychological insight into the minds of her various characters, but more than this, they allow the reader a familiarity with three ‘kinds’ of Other – the human psychic, the human telepathic, and the animal (in this case, a wolf). Perhaps we could allow that this insight into the inner life of a wolf is valuable in that wolves really do exist in the world. But what of the Witted, the Skilled? It is at this point that my first argument looks more intuitively appealing. One element essential to being human is that we are inescapably mentally alone: we do not share our consciousness. This work of Fantasy illuminates several interesting and thought-provoking elements of the human condition through its engagement with characters who surpass our abilities in communication and understanding. Thus I would like to conclude that it is what we can learn about ourselves, and furthermore what we can be provoked to consider about ourselves that Realist genres lack the ability to address, rather than any intrinsic interest in the Other (where the other does not *really* exist) that creates and sustains our interest in Science Fiction and Fantasy.


In his article “Against Genre/Theory: The State of Science Fiction Criticism”, Carl Malmgren makes a similar point, outlining two basic ‘concerns’ of Science Fiction: the relationship between self and other, and the relationship between self and society. He says of the first kind that ‘the reader recuperates this type of fiction by comparing human and nonhuman entities, typically exploring what it means to be human. The cognitive thrust involves a better understanding of self and other’, and of the second kind that ‘the reader is invited to draw comparisons between the fictional society and originary [sic] one and to establish normative frameworks’. So while (disappointingly) I am not the first person to make this observation about Science Fiction, Fantasy and the Other, at least (happily) there exists support for the idea.


5.2.3. Fantasy Gone Stale?

It is quite possible that one of the main motivations for the attitude of the public and those within academia toward Science Fiction and Fantasy is the historical progress of the genre forms. To a certain extent, especially pre-1980, both genres saw a high proportion of ‘formula writers’. This is to say, writers were achieving commercial success by writing to a formula (Robert Jordan’s *Wheel of Time* series, Terry Brooks’ *Shannara* series, Raymond E. Feist’s post-*Magician* series, to name a few) rather than

writing anything fresh or new. The familiarity of such works appealed to a certain audience, but this audience was a minority, and many readers who might have embraced either genre when they first emerged, and were doing new and exciting things with new and exciting material, probably abandoned them at this point.


The 'staleness' of Fantasy, and about twenty years earlier, Science Fiction, was remedied to some degree with the emergence of Fantasy authors like Robin Hobb and Terry Pratchett (and J.K Rowling, dare I say it), and Science Fiction authors like Orson Scott Card and Ursula Le Guin (among others, in both cases).

This raises an interesting point about fiction in general. According to Kant's account of genius in *The Critique of Judgement*, an artist is inspired by something in the world, some idea. The artist then attempts to express this idea, this 'something', in their chosen medium.  It does not fit with this account of artistic genius at all that a writer should write according to a formula, or recipe. Someone like Terry Pratchett has been able to attain considerable success in satirizing the obvious conventions of the Fantasy genre form at its worst.

Genre classifications should be, at the most, marketing tools; useful ways of grouping certain kinds of things together. Perhaps instead of the arbitrary classification system we currently employ, which is based entirely on content, we should instead group novels together under *atmosphere* headings like 'Heavy-Going but Thought-Provoking', or 'A Bit of Mindless Nonsense'.  What would be really useful is a system which tells us what works are actually *good* within any given atmosphere.


But that would be to begin an entirely different project. For the purposes of this paper, we need only take into account that the 'staleness' of the genres over a certain period in the not-too-distant past as one of the probable motivations for the marginalized position of Science Fiction and Fantasy.

5.3. A Final Defence of Both Science Fiction and Fantasy

There is one final argument which I wish to raise in defence of the genres. This is the argument that Science Fiction and Fantasy are the closest of the literary genres to the discipline of Philosophy. This is to take McDonnell's original criticism and turn it on its head: he said that Science Fiction was nothing but disguised Philosophy and as such not 'real' literature. Here I wholeheartedly agree that both of the genres and Philosophy are similar to a degree; and I can agree without risk because we have shown in our previous discussions that the content and subject of a work of literature has little to do with whether it is art and whether it is good. What I do wish to argue is that it is precisely in its identification with philosophical enquiry and its ability to communicate some of the more complex philosophical dilemmas and issues that we find the most value, the most 'use', in both Science Fiction and Fantasy. As we learned from Aristotle, the value of a work of literature comes not from its presentation of particulars but from its presentation of universals. Rather than rehashing the same set of everyday and extraordinary (but not fantastical) emotions and circumstances in love stories and crime thrillers (for example), Science Fiction and Fantasy fiction take a more imaginative stance and look at more fundamental human issues. Their epic scale, and remove from scientifically-defined current 'reality', allow the raising of profound and interesting questions about human nature, good and evil, complex ethical situations, our past, and the future of the human race. Two tools integral to the discipline of Philosophy are 'implication' and 'repercussion' – the consideration of these in light of some argument we have made or are making. This ability to consider implications into the distant future is a key feature of the rationality of human beings  and is a tool or thought process mirrored in Fantasy and Science Fiction, perhaps by virtue of something as simple as their epic scale. These genres ask us to open our minds and consider issues and possibilities which concern far more than our mere hundred or so years of life, at this particular time, in this particular location.

To provide an example of a work of Science Fiction which exemplifies some of these criteria, let me briefly list some of the philosophical issues which come up throughout Card's *Ender* series. The *Ender* series (beginning with *Ender's Game* and concluding with *Shadow Puppets*) is a fresh take on the Science Fiction genre, steeped in religious, historical, philosophical and military detail. Some of the philosophical issues which come up in the series are: utilitarianism, self-sacrifice for the greater good, power and use (might vs. right), the Napoleon Idea or Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, historical detail – Lenin / Stalin / Alexander / Napoleon / Eisenhower, organic ethical theory (individuals as part of greater organic whole), theology (God as God of humans, or all sentient species?), respect (automatically accorded or earned?), moral issues like responsibility and blame in the case of lack of knowledge, love and friendship, bullying and pre-emptive strikes, language (good and evil as contingent upon language and understanding – the case of a great honour being misconstrued as sickening violence). This list is nowhere near exhaustive of the issues and discussion points which come out of such a series, but should go at least some distance toward illustrating my point.

One of the greatest benefits of Science Fiction and Fantasy fiction is that they prompt a consideration of philosophical and religious issues. Because the kinds of questions and dilemmas raised by philosophy are often unanswered (and in some cases probably unanswerable), and yet because we often use their supposed answers as defining grounds for the way we live and behave, they should be brought from the specific field of Philosophy into the public domain – and what better way than by means of literature, giving the dual benefit of involving more people with more great literature and so not only fostering an interest in wider reading but also lending the other benefits supposed by theories of the value of literature.

We can use the rise of the Philosophy for Children movement in Australasia as evidence for this shift of philosophy into mainstream education and thus public life.  In a secular nation like New Zealand where we teach neither philosophy nor religion in primary or secondary schools, there is a lot to be said for people being provoked to consider issues relevant to both. People need fantasy,

creativity, and imagination to escape the sometime-drudgery of everyday life; for who would choose to live in a work-eat-sleep world? 🗨️

Without the fantastic imagination we could not achieve technological progress. Without it we could not achieve what we have as a nation and a species in art, music, poetry - any artistic endeavour. The conclusion we took from McDonnell's criticism (in Section 4.1) was that what we should aspire to in Science Fiction is a non-dogmatic stance on thinking and reasoning (to imagine and consider rather than to be persuaded), a quality which can be built upon using the critical thinking developed within the discipline of philosophy.

This link between the genres and the discipline of philosophy is further strengthened by the consonance between thought-experiments and literature. I would like to venture the suggestion that the criterion by which we judge thought-experiments could in fact be a universal criterion by which we judge works of literature. We can distinguish good thought-experiments from bad thought-experiments in the same way we can distinguish good fiction from bad fiction. Good literature expands our ability to reflect on ourselves and our lives; thought-experiments are more than arguments because they can elicit intuitions, engage us, mobilize our emotions, all of which both Science Fiction and Fantasy can do more or less adequately. So perhaps what can be bad about works of Science Fiction and Fantasy is what can be bad about thought-experiments: when they are bad, they can produce significant distortion, and deflect us from reflecting on things in any important way.

In *Structural Fabulation*, Robert Scholes talks about this kind of distortion with reference to fiction of the more 'realistic' kind, which he sees as more dangerous than the so-called escapism of Science Fiction and / or Fantasy:

It features a strong narrative line, characters with whom readers identify, and a comforting "realism" that purports to explain how things really work in contemporary society [...] This sort of fiction has one important thing – readers. But it pays a high price for its readership, and they pay a high price for their pleasure, for they are led to believe in a "reality" which is irrelevant to our actual situation in many respects. And precisely because they believe in this reality, they are dangerously uninformed as citizens and human beings who must face real problems. 🗨️

Kathleen Wilkes shows us in *Real People: Personal Identity Without Thought Experiments* that certain good thought experiments have allowed us to go beyond current limits, citing examples from Heisenburg, Galileo, Einstein and Stevin. There is no reason we could not add to this list the names of a few very good authors. I would argue for an exactly parallel dimension of evaluation between successful thought-experiments and successful works of fiction. 🗨️

It is with these final thoughts that I conclude that we should treat the best of Science Fiction and Fantasy as much more than good entertainment, we should treat it as a tool to open our minds and provoke intelligent, logical and critical thought. I hope the necessarily brief quotations, from some of the best Science Fiction and Fantasy I have encountered in reading for this paper (scattered wherever possible throughout this work) provide enough of an example of the high quality of some of the best works in each genre. 🗨️

6. An Empirical Application: Science Fiction and Fantasy in Education

Philosophy for Children (or P4C) and Philosophy in Secondary Schools (or PSS) are two education movements gaining increasing momentum throughout Australasia, aiming to introduce the 'thinking skills' of Philosophy into mainstream education. It occurs to me that although my main task in this paper has been to drag Science Fiction and Fantasy 'out of the corner' and over to 'play with the big kids' (as it were), there is a further application which comes out of considering some of the strengths of the genres. So while we have discovered that there is nothing about genre-classifications that permits a value-judgement about any individual piece of work, we have found that there are certain characteristics about works of Science Fiction and Fantasy (such as scale and content) that distinguish them from other genres.

What I would like to argue in this section is that we can take a piece of empirical research, in this case research regarding the enduring nature of religious ideas, and apply it to Science Fiction and Fantasy to support the claim that both genres are highly defensible in terms of use 🗨️ in Education. So let us go on immediately, then, to look at the research of Pascal Boyer and Justin Barrett, and its immediate application to the genres we are concerned with here.

In *Religion Explained*, Boyer explains that as humans, we have a few ontological categories which we use as templates: 'animal', 'plant', 'tool', 'person', 'number', 'natural object'. Boyer and Barrett show that the quality which makes a story or myth memorable and transmissible is the fact of its containing a violation of an ontological category. Boyer provides the example of a 'table made of chocolate' contrasted with a 'table that feels sad when you leave the room'. The first is unusual but does not constitute a violation, while the second is surprising and does constitute a violation. Without going into too much detail here, we can see how such an idea is immediately applicable to Science Fiction and Fantasy. Literature that is realistic does not violate natural categories; this is just true by virtue of the label 'realistic'. In Science Fiction and Fantasy we suddenly encounter violations *en masse*: sentient trees, strange mixtures of animal and person, inanimate objects endowed with some magical property, people who can see the future, aliens and ghosts. Where most of the arguments against Science Fiction and Fantasy saw such combinations as escapist and useless, we can now see that the very fact of their making the story more transmissible and more memorable goes a great distance toward making them defensible for their use in education. There is no reason to suppose that violation of ontological categories affects literary merit, so we easily avoid previous problems. Empirical tests show us that when it comes to stories, realism is less memorable. 🗨️

Boyer's research attempts to explain religion. But religion is conditional upon truth, faith and belief. What is interesting for us is that when we apply his research to Science Fiction and Fantasy there is no such condition. We willingly suspend disbelief and immerse ourselves *if* the work is good enough to hold our attention. We approach fiction in an entirely different spirit to religion; we pretend and we play. This is why fiction is entirely more enjoyable than other modes of thinking: we are not working to solve some problem. We are simply being provoked to consider and imagine.

7. Conclusion

We have arrived at the rather commonsense conclusion that there is no justification whatsoever for judging works of literature according to their genre rather than on their individual merits. Form and content are necessary conditions to a work of literature. There are many examples of fiction in which the ideas or arguments (content) are good while the form is not, and *vice versa*; there are examples of fiction where both form and content are lacking; and, finally, there are examples of work where the form and the content are both very good, in which case we might judge the work to be 'literature'. We have seen that none of the existing arguments against Science Fiction or Fantasy are sufficient to warrant marginalizing entire genres, and none of the extrapolated or constructed arguments remain undefeated. Although 'form' and 'content' remain as categories in need of some fleshing out in terms of specific detail, suffice for this paper to say that we have shown the majority view against Science Fiction and Fantasy to be unsupported by any philosophical argument.

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I Screen the Body Eclectic

by Chris Bellamy

This column, which appears each issue, is meant to analyze a particular body of work within the sci-fi and fantasy genres - i.e. directors, writers, designers, etc.

March 2006

Darkness Falls

The behind-the-scenes artistic genius of Alex McDowell

When people talk about Oscar injustices, they point to the fact that the likes of Hitchcock and Scorsese and Altman have never won, or that Philip Seymour Hoffman and Paul Giamatti had never been nominated (i.e. appreciated) until this year, or that sci-fi and fantasy - which makes up some of the most visionary work of all - continue to get the proverbial shaft, slighted because of a genre bias.

But I like to speak up for the little guy as much as anyone, and in the public's eye of the glitzy universe known as Hollywood, few people keep a lower profile than the production designers. But that's okay - it's not like a film's sets, designs and overall visual look actually matter or anything.

What is this all bringing me to? A little-publicized production designer named Alex McDowell, who in a little more than a decade's time has put together one of the most impressive resumes in the business. From one project to another, McDowell continues to dazzle with some of the most dynamic and eclectic visual work in Hollywood - and yet, in all this time, he hasn't been nominated for a single Oscar. I mean, let me get this straight - Eminem has an Academy Award, but this guy can't even pick up a nod from his so-called peers?

But I digress. That was getting a little sanctimonious, don't you think?

INTO THE DARK

Most people who work behind the scenes are overlooked, simply because they are...well, behind the scenes. But McDowell's case is peculiar considering his body of work. Maybe it was that whole genre bias thing I was talking about. After all, he has worked with some of the darkest and strangest filmmakers working today - Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, David Fincher, Alex Proyas. Even when he worked with Steven Spielberg, who isn't known as a "dark" filmmaker - perhaps even the antithesis of such - McDowell oversaw the design to the darkest and grittiest film of Spielberg's career, *Minority Report*. The director himself even said he meant it to be the "ugliest, grittiest movie I'd ever made."



But it's that darkness and grittiness that set McDowell's work apart from many of his contemporaries. Quite interesting for a British lad who grew up going to Quaker schools.

He once said in an interview that, before signing on for any film, the project has to be "impossibly daunting." That philosophy, it seems, has taken him to the very edge of the medium, working on films that have gone down as some of the most visually unique of this generation - largely due to his artistic expertise. His projects are almost never set in the real world; instead, the worlds he is commissioned to create are typically expressionistic in one way another, with countless possibilities in sets and costumes and photography.



McDowell has the uncanny ability to match his visual decisions perfectly with the themes and tone of each film he works on. Sure, that seems like it's simply the basic job description of any production designer; but we've all seen too many movies in which the visuals take a back seat to everything else, and are never utilized to their fullest artistic capacities. Not so with McDowell's work. Generally speaking, he doesn't do films that come off the Hollywood assembly line. It's no coincidence that almost all of the films he has worked on are defined largely by the way they look, by the visuals he helped create.

Consider his second pairing with Spielberg, *The Terminal*. While that film is not science fiction and thus won't be talked about in detail in this essay, it's worth pointing out how much McDowell's work contributed to the overall effect of the movie. Spielberg, McDowell and Co. didn't just rent

out a section of a working airport, but instead built and designed their own airport, to their exact specifications. The effect was marvelous, and I would argue it was the best part of an otherwise disappointing film. But, like I said, we'll leave *The Terminal* out of this. And we'll just pretend *The Cat in the Hat* never happened. Everyone makes mistakes. Even Alex.

MINORITY REPORT

McDowell has lent his talents to the form of a comic book movie, stop-motion animation, sci-fi, you name it. Arguably his greatest accomplishment was the aforementioned *Minority Report*, which simply couldn't have succeeded, or even existed, without the production design that defines the film. As is the case with most futuristic sci-fi, the visuals are crucial. Would *Blade Runner* have been successful had Ridley Scott and his team not created such a perfectly realized visual universe?

In order to create the futuristic, yet oddly realistic, universe of fifty-years-in-the-future Washington, D.C. in *Minority Report*, McDowell and his collaborators basically created an entire futuristic world. They met with scientists, futurists and science-fiction writers to talk about pending social and technological advances and came up with a universe that blended those ideas with both modernism and old-fashioned aspects as well. The result was one of the most phenomenal futuristic landscapes ever put on screen.



Consider the Pre-Crime building itself, which McDowell designed. All you see, from top to bottom, is metal and glass, metal and glass. Because of those two types of surfaces, the Pre-Crime offices are completely reflective, which plays into the film's overall aesthetic. Throughout the film, everything is transparent, or reflective, or both. There are no walls. There are no secrets, it seems. Spielberg uses that transparency to great effect throughout the story; with the exception of the opening scene in Georgetown and two scenes at the Andertons' cottage, everyone seems to live in a glass house. Police officers used see-through, miniature computer screens rather than paperwork; the pre-cogs' thoughts are reflected on the ceiling of their chamber; computer discs are holographic; and, of course, there are the brilliant sequences when John Anderton (Tom Cruise) examines the "evidence" - the images coming from the pre-cogs' brains - once again using an elaborate computerized system that is, once again, glassy and transparent.



As Spielberg mentions on the film's DVD, scenes such as those represent one of *Minority Report's* most important themes: seeing. In the world of this film, it seems, the entire world has gone transparent. Government and law enforcement can peer into people's lives like it's nothing; retinal scans are conducted at every block; and, most obvious of all, the pre-cogs themselves "see" into the future. And who can forget the importance placed on eyeballs during the surgery scene, and the subsequent brilliant "spyder" sequence, in which Anderton's fellow officers search for him through a low-rent apartment building using those mechanized spyders.

All of this relates quite significantly to Alex McDowell. From the design of the spyders - which, while dormant, McDowell said he wanted to look like "a pager designed by Porsche" - to the "womb-like" chamber in which the pre-cogs live, to the brilliantly surreal "Hall of Containment," McDowell had a hand in it all - and a big one. He was involved with the project almost from the beginning, studying modern architecture, he says, and drawing concept art to create what would become Washington D.C. circa 2054. The cold, bleak atmosphere - especially contrasted with the utopia Anderton seems to be trying to create - is one of the defining elements of *Minority Report*. The thought and inventiveness that went into creating such a world is a stark contrast to so many recent sci-fi

flicks such as *Aeon Flux*, with their bright and colorful, cheaply synthetic production design.

THE REST OF THE OEUVRE

The year 2005 was a classic example of McDowell's ever-expanding portfolio. Trying his hand in two completely different styles with cult favorite director Tim Burton, McDowell designed both *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Corpse Bride*. While I wasn't a fan of the former, what did stand out - not surprisingly, for a Burton film - were the visuals. Sitting at the bottom of the hill - in the middle of a beautifully realized England - the Bucket residence is a tragically dilapidated and uneven little house, a major contrast to the kingdom-like factory that sits atop the mountain, looking right down on poor old Charlie Bucket and his silly little lopsided roof. And once we get to the factory itself, we're immersed in one of the brightest and most colorful worlds I've ever seen.

McDowell and Burton use a similar kind of contrast in *Corpse Bride*. In the real world, they give us drab colors, mostly greyish, particularly in the somber opening sequences. The clothes are all grey, the sky is grey, the inside of the large mansion is dark and depressing. But then, we see the underworld, and finally we get color. Greens, blues, yellows, reds . . . the world of the dead really *is* more appealing than the world of the living.



But perhaps the most important film of McDowell's career was the film that really established him - Alex Proyas' 1994 comic book adaptation, *The Crow*. While McDowell also worked on the sequel a few years later, it's the original film that stands out the most, as his dark and menacing urban

landscapes really paint the picture for our revenge-driven hero. The noir-ish, metropolitan settings go a long way to creating the moody atmosphere that the material requires.



Speaking of moody atmosphere, McDowell also oversaw the production of *Fight Club*; once again, this proved to be a much different task than anything he has done before or since, but once again, he found a way to perfectly meld the material with the visuals. The dank basement at the bottom of Lou's Tavern, with its one single light source hanging flimsily from the ceiling, is the stage for many of the film's most powerful and/or violent moments, but more importantly reinforces the anti-glamour, anti-commercialism, anti-image attitude that the film has. Men like Brad Pitt may be rolling around without shirts on, but it's certainly not the kind of "sexy" Hollywood is used to. Contrast is used once again as we remember images of our narrator's "perfect" apartment lined with furniture from the IKEA catalog. An even better example of the film's anti-IKEA Generation angle is the house on Paper Street; everything about it is disgusting. It's grimy, the walls are tattered, the water is brown and almost all scenes in the

house are filmed with very little light, if any.

Dark lighting, dark thematic material, *darkness*. It defines Alex McDowell, a former graphic designer who got into film after working on music videos in the late '80s and early '90s. Now, more than a decade later, he can boast one of the most considerable portfolios in Hollywood. As is true of so many great visual artists, his work is never the same from project to project. In addition to the films mentioned above, he also designed *The Affair of the Necklace* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, adding Gilliam to the growing list of notable directors he has worked with.

With films covering subjects such as anarchy, dystopia, moral retribution and more, McDowell seems to have a sense for the fringes of Hollywood filmmaking. A few of his projects - namely *Minority Report*, *Fight Club* and *The Crow* - are among the best, and certainly most interesting, of their respective years and genres. But it might not be a stretch to say that, without his contributions, that might not be the case.



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