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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

WITH ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Karen Danylak

David L Felts and Ken Rand

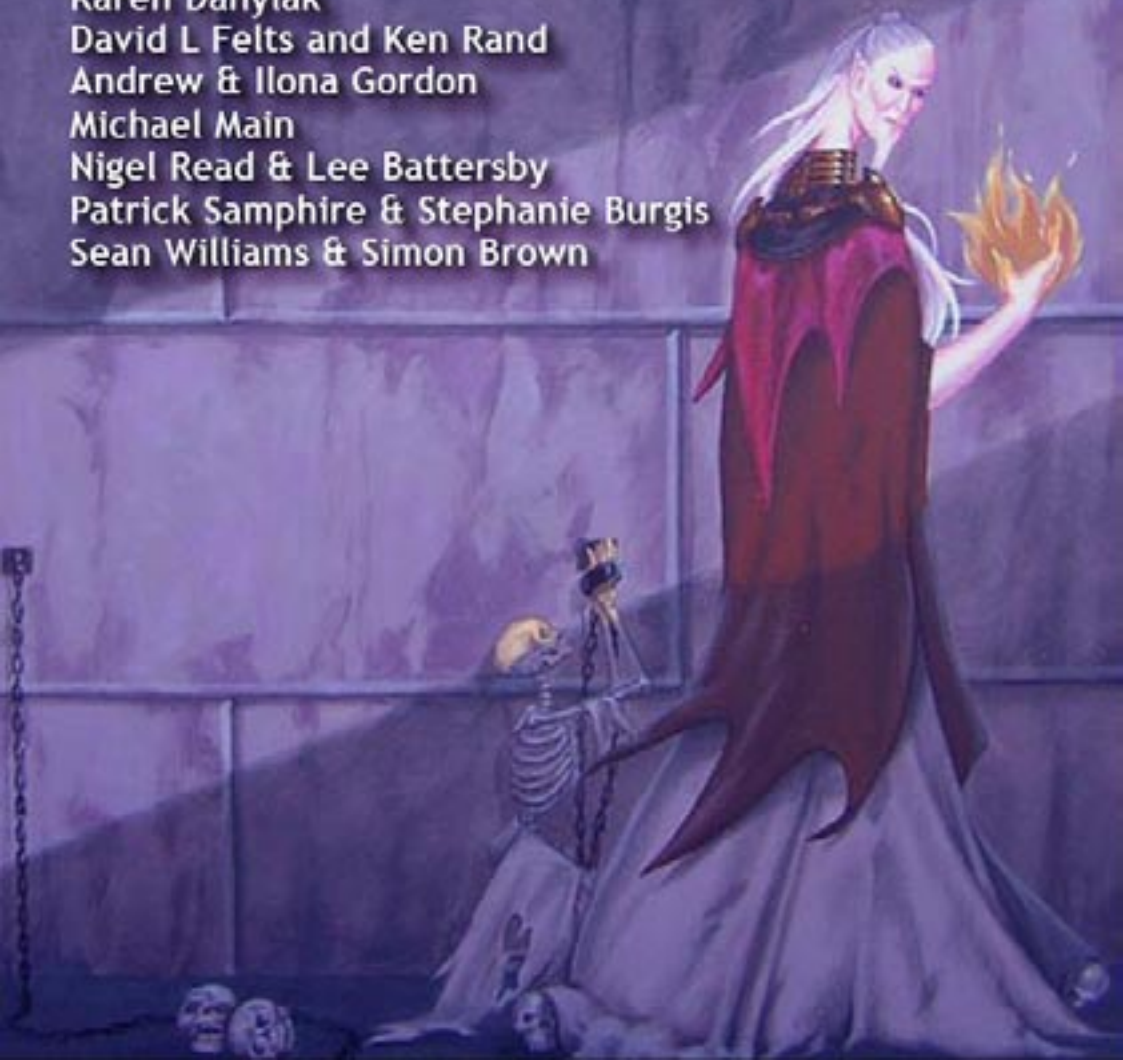
Andrew & Ilona Gordon

Michael Main

Nigel Read & Lee Battersby

Patrick Samphire & Stephanie Burgis

Sean Williams & Simon Brown



Co-editorial

...Stuart Barrow, Zara Baxter, Terri Sellen

Welcome to another, slightly late, issue of *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. This here is our collaboration issue.

The seed for this issue came some time ago — two of our collective members hit upon the idea of playing with collaborations as a theme for their issue, and put the word out that we were after collaborative stories. In the end, and with real life being what it is, four editors have their hands on this particular issue. The stories are either collaborations between authors — including a husband and wife team, in Andrew & Ilona Gordon — or they're on a collaboration theme.

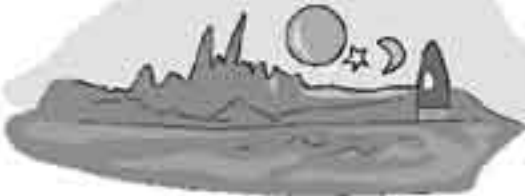
Of course, ASIM tends to be a collaborative venture at the best of times. It's a part of our ethos. The collective is specifically set up so that if someone has to take some time out to deal with the dreaded real life, there are people to take up the slack. Usually it works, although sometimes it gets hairy.

This business of collaboration is an interesting one. There's a tendency to think of writers as a solitary breed, but that's not really a fair characterisation. Even at the most basic level, writers write to engage with their readers; a story doesn't exist in isolation. But there's more to it than that. Writers will often engage with other writers as a way of learning new tricks and styles and ways with words. A critiquing circle is, in this editor's opinion, almost a must for a developing writer. If nothing else, there's a lot of fun to be had in meeting like-minded individuals, and getting drunk and/or philosophical with them.

At the moment Australia is blessed with a particularly bright and engaging speculative fiction scene. Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt have brought out *Year's Best Australian SF and Fantasy, One and Two*. Donna Hanson's *Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview* is doing the rounds. Alisa Krasnostein — interviewed in this issue — has started Australian Specific in Focus (ASif!), a website dedicated to reviewing each and every Australian publication. 2006 is turning out to be a bumper year for SF conventions. The environment is strong and supportive — an entire collaborative SF scene!

Stu Barrow,
Zara Baxter
Terri Sellen.

Andromeda Spaceways



Alien landscapes
— good old-fashioned
service

ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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Saving Astounding

...Michael Main

Andromeda's Spotlight: The ASIM crew would like to extend their congratulations to Michael Main on his first foray into print.

"ASIM has been a favorite of mine since its appearance three years ago. As you read this particular story, you will meet two of the strongest influences on my writing, and I would like to dedicate this story to those two giants. Last summer, I was elated to meet Mr. Pohl at the Kansas SF Writers Workshop, where he kindly took time to sit with me and talk of some memories of the summer of 1938. I am quick to point out, though, that the characters, events, and quotations of this story are all fictitious, except perhaps where they explain previously inexplicable happenings that could not be officially revealed until now."

When the July 1938 *Astounding* didn't arrive, I was terror-stricken. Yes, there were other magazines of the time, but there was only one John W. Campbell, Jr., and only one *Astounding*. Without *Astounding*, I might well have become something ordinary — maybe a brain surgeon.

—“Asimov on Asimov” (speech at Dianacon)

9 APRIL 1977

MURRAY HILL HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY



Isaac tipped his chair back against the storefront wall, a precarious position for a gangly 18-year-old, but he managed to maintain his balance and keep an eye on Minnie and Stanley at the same time.

“Don’t go far, Minnie,” he shouted.

“Don’t call me Minnie,” she shouted back.

“Yeah, well watch Stan for a minute...” He brought the legs of the chair back to the ground before adding, “Minnie.”

“Dry up!” she yelled, but Isaac had already ducked into the store and plowed into Mamma.

“You’ll call her Marcia,” Mamma said.

“Pappa calls her Minnie.”

“And you won’t.”

Isaac thought to argue, but he needed to keep Mamma in an agreeable mood. She returned to the candy counter, and he pulled a copy of *The Shadow* from the stand. “Look here—” He opened to an announcement for the July *Astounding: At Newsstands Everywhere Now!* “We haven’t got it yet.”

“Could be cancelled,” she said.

Isaac’s stomach did a flip-flop, and he steadied himself on the counter. “They wouldn’t do that. It’s real popular and the customers are asking about it.” That last bit was designed to grab her attention. She would do anything for a loyal customer.

“Which customers?”

“Mr. Long.” It was not a lie. Mr. Long *had* asked when Isaac told him the issue wasn’t in.

Mamma opened the cash drawer and fished out a nickel. “You telephone Street and Smith. Find out when it is coming and let Mr. Long know.”

“Okay, but it might take three or four calls to get the whole story. You know how it is: I’ll call one place and they’ll tell me to call another, then the other place makes me call the first place back.” Indecision entered Mamma’s face — she hated telephones — and Isaac pressed the advantage. “Or I could go to Street and Smith myself.”

“Who’ll look after Minnie and Stanley?”

“Minnie — I mean Marcia — she can take Stanley to the matinee. I’ll go in on the subway and straight back.”

Mamma looked Isaac in the eyes. “You shave first — and be back to deliver the papers.”



Asimov stood and introduced himself. Pohl embraced him like a long-lost brother, clapping him on the back and calling him Eye, even though both swore it was their first meeting outside the *Astounding* letters page.

—Minutes of the Futurian Society of New York

18 SEPTEMBER 1938

730 NOSTRAND AVENUE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



At the Street and Smith building, Isaac got directions to the office of Mr. John W. Campbell, Jr., uncertain whether the editor would see him or launch him from a window. The path took him to a creaky hydraulic elevator and up to the fifth floor where the elevator man pointed down a series of twisting hallways. Isaac weaved around great bales of paper in the halls and through a curious flock of small grey birds, finally emerging at the desk of Campbell's young assistant.

Surprisingly, the prospect of facing Mr. Campbell generated only part of Isaac's shakiness. The rest stemmed from the assistant — Miss Edison, according to the nameplate — who sat below a cloud of the hallway birds. She had dark eyes, dark hair and a combination of curves that put a momentary hold on Isaac's tongue. She also had a relaxing manner, though, and soon Isaac was talking about why he had come all the way from Brooklyn. The conversation easily wandered from the latest *Astounding* stories and artwork to dark accounts of European politics. She was about to call through to Campbell on the intercom when a voice rose from the back room.

"Pohl! Is that you, Pohl?" A hawk-nosed man emerged, John Campbell himself, jabbing a cigarette toward Isaac. "You're not Pohl," he said.

"Mr. Pohl hasn't returned," said Miss Edison. "This is Mr. Isaac Asi—"

"You know about birds?" Campbell interrupted. "You know how they fly?" He retreated to his office, calling for Isaac to follow. An encouraging nod from Miss Edison bolstered Isaac's courage, and he ran after Campbell. "I attend Columbia," he said, "and I do know about birds!"

Campbell slid up the rolltop on his desk. He withdrew an object from a pigeonhole and offered it to Isaac. "What do you make of this?"

"Is it a bird?" Isaac leaned forward. "Is it *dead*?"

"It can't be dead. It never was alive. Here, take it."

Isaac did so and was surprised at the cold, metallic feel. Each feather was a thin, individually hinged pane, perhaps giving some control in flight, but little of the insulation a real bird needs.

"Suppose you wanted to *build* a bird, one that flies," Campbell said. "How would you do it?"

"You mean a mechanical bird? It would have to be light." Isaac brought it close to study the detail. The eyes were just painted dots, but the beak was transparent with a small lens inside. He peered through the beak. "Is this one of those birds from the hall—"

The conversation was interrupted as Miss Edison appeared — “Mr. Pohl is here,” she said — and behind her stood an out-of-breath boy about the same age as Isaac.

“Where’s the magazine?” Campbell asked the boy. Miss Edison lingered in the doorway.

The boy sat and held up one hand, unable to answer until he caught his breath. His hair was mussed, his clothes were baggy, and he had a pronounced overbite. Isaac felt a liking toward the boy, maybe because of the round wire spectacles, like his own, or maybe it was his name — Mr. Pohl, like a bean pole, and he was certainly lean enough for that.

Eventually, the boy got out some words. “Yeah, I found the magazine, but—”

“But what?” Miss Edison asked.

“It’s gone again.”

Campbell emitted a response.

“Don’t get mad at me,” said the boy. “I didn’t plain lose it.” Everyone stood quiet while he drew another breath and continued. “It was those birds, *they* took it.”

“I knew it!” said Campbell.



Then along came Lester del Rey. His stories were beauties, though an oddly long delay occurred between his April 1938 debut and his next tale, the unforgettable story of the impassioned robot Helen O’Loy. She didn’t appear until the final issue of 1938, but the delay wasn’t wholly Lester’s fault.

—*The Way the Future Was* (first draft) by Frederik Pohl

18 SEPTEMBER 1977

RED BANK, NEW JERSEY



Campbell flew into action. “You boys round up those birds, every one of them.”

“How?” Isaac asked.

“You’re bright, you’ll figure it out.” Campbell turned to Miss Edison. “Meanwhile, we need carbons for all the July stories. Send telegrams and don’t worry about the cost.”

A soft whistle drew Isaac’s attention back to the other boy, who said, “It sure was a swell issue, Mr. Campbell.”

“Are you two still here?” Campbell bellowed.

Isaac moved toward the door, but the other boy stayed put. “Yeah,” he said. “I kind of thought I should give you this before we left.” He reached under his shirt and proudly withdrew a dog-eared magazine. “I got a spare.”

Isaac was near enough to discern the cover: *Astounding*, July 1938! It was marred by the boy’s name in black ink — Fred Pohl. Even through the ink, though, the illustration of a shapely robot quickened Isaac’s heartbeat. Across the bottom, red text proclaimed, “Helen O’Loy by Lester del Rey.”

Campbell grabbed the magazine but did not seem pleased. “How many copies you steal every month, Pohl?”

“Um, just two.”

“For future reference, that’s two too many, but thanks. Miss Edison, get the art department working. I’ll take this copy to the typesetters myself.”

Isaac expected a stir of action, but instead Miss Edison blocked Campbell’s way. “I wouldn’t,” she said.

“What? You worried about the birds? These young men can protect me from a swarm of birds.”

“I’m sure,” she said as an angular black gun appeared in her hand. A beam of light emerged and precisely lopped off the end of Campbell’s cigarette. Isaac was close enough to the door to bolt, but he stood frozen while Campbell stepped toward Miss Edison. She hesitated before speaking a single word — “Barsoom!” — and Campbell crumpled to the floor.

Fred’s eyes widened. “How’d you do *that*, Miss Edison?”

“*Why’d* you do that?” Isaac added.

She motioned them away from the magazine and away from Campbell.

“Maybe he’s hurt,” Isaac said.

“He’s not hurt,” said Miss Edison, but she leaned over the fallen man to listen for breathing. “He’s not hurt,” she repeated.

“Let me check,” Fred said.

She raised the gun again, and he backed off. Isaac knew she wouldn’t fire — she just wouldn’t — but he didn’t test the theory. Instead he watched, heart racing, as Miss Edison sat on the floor. She kicked off her shoes and detached a silk stocking from an entrancing garter. She tossed the stocking at Isaac and told him to tie Fred’s hands behind his back. Isaac tied the hands and knotted the loose end of the stocking to a radiator pipe. Miss Edison used her other stocking to tie Isaac to a neighboring pipe. He put up no struggle.

“I’ll send someone to get you,” she said, pocketing Mr. Campbell’s metallic bird. She then took the July *Astounding*, tore a page from the back and ordered Campbell

to open his eyes. “Look at this page,” she told him. “When the boys read this back to you, you’ll awaken with no memory of Mr. del Rey’s story or today’s events.”

“Wait,” Isaac said. “Let him remember me, please.”

She pondered, then told Campbell, “You’ll put the July issue back together *without* Helen O’Loy. But you’ll remember Mr. Isaac Asimov, you’ll mentor him. He’s a good boy.”

Isaac glowed.

“Hey, what about me?” Fred asked.

“You can fend for yourself, Fred.” She turned back to Campbell — “Barsoom!” — and he shut his eyes again.

“Man, I got to get me a word like that,” Fred said.

She put the torn-out page on a shelf beyond reach, and then took Fred’s shoes and socks off. One sock went into Fred’s mouth, and she turned to Isaac, but he stopped her with a plea.

“Wait, Miss Edison, don’t gag me. I won’t make any noise. I only want to know what’s wrong with the Helen O’Loy story.”

Fred uttered a muffled sentence, but Isaac kept his eyes on Miss Edison. “Nothing is wrong,” she said stiffly.

Isaac caught a second look at the cover. “Is that *you* on the front?”

“No,” she shouted. “I’m not Helen O’Loy!” She tore off the cover with a handful of pages and hurled the rest at Isaac along with Fred’s other sock. Before the sock stopped moving, Miss Edison and her handful of pages had gone.

“Wow!” said Isaac. “What a girl!”

“Mmmph!” said Fred.



Dear Mr. Campbell,

Just so’s you know, I’m a fair expert in science-fiction, having developed a story-rating system of up to five stars in half-star increments. I don’t care whether you print my ratings or not, but I want to be heard. For May, the five-star stories are Nat Schachner’s “Island of the Individualists” and Jack Williamson’s “The Legion of Time” (Part 1). However, a mistake occurs...

—Letter to *Astounding* by Isaac Asimov

28 APRIL 1938

174 WINDSOR PLACE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



It took but a moment for Isaac to free his hands and pull the sock from Fred's mouth.

"Touchy thing, isn't she?" Fred said.

"You don't know anything," Isaac said.

"Hey, how'd you get your hands free so quick?"

"You can call me the Amazing Asimov, renowned among the crowned heads of Europe for incredible feats of legerdemain and prestidigitation."

"Huh?"

"I pick up things like that."

"Yeah, well you don't pick up everything, Mr. Good Boy Isaac Asimov."

"Like what?" Isaac was still working on the knots behind Fred's back.

"Like Miss Edison. She's no more human than Helen O'Loy."

"You're nuts," Isaac said.

"Says you."

With both boys free, they scrambled for the page Miss Edison had left to awaken Campbell. Fred got to it first and began reading: "Dear Mr. Campbell, Just so's you know, I'm a fair expert—"

"Hey!" Isaac broke him off.

"Hey, what?"

"That's my letter to Campbell. He printed it!"

"So you want a medal?"

"Just read it."

Fred did so, and Campbell awoke, still dazed. The boys stared into his eyes, and Fred announced, "He'll live," before grabbing his shoes and hurtling out the door.

"Where are you going?" yelled Isaac.

"To follow your girl friend!"

Isaac said to Campbell, "She's not my girl, you know." Campbell nodded groggily, and Isaac added, "I'll be back."

He followed the sound of Fred's footsteps to the stairs and started down but turned around when he heard a commotion above. By the time he reached the top, Fred was fighting through the tiny birds and out onto the roof. Isaac followed and spotted Miss Edison at the far edge, still clutching the pages from the *July Astounding*. He shouted to her, but the noise of the birds smothered his words. She looked toward the boys and frowned before nimbly stepping over the edge and dropping from sight.

Isaac lunged forward, but Fred held him back, nodding toward the roof edge. In a moment, Miss Edison reappeared among the birds, her own white wings even more graceful than theirs. The swirling flock, including Miss Edison, circled once and flew into the gleaming Manhattan skyline.

“I told you she wasn’t human,” Fred said.



“What’s up, Phil?” Dave asked. “You want to go—”
 I broke him off. “Helen yanked her own coils last night. She’s beyond repair.”
 He gulped. Obviously, it was Dave who had broken her heart.
 —“Helen O’Loy” (The Lost Draft) by Lester del Rey
 12 JANUARY 1938
 WASHINGTON, D.C.



The wind rose as Fred beckoned Isaac to follow. Behind a protruding wall, a shiny symmetrical wing was tied down — no, not a mere wing, but a sleek wing-shaped airship with *Skylark* emblazoned on the underside. The rear held a small engine compartment, and up front, an open two-seater cockpit hung down. Fred reached in, grabbed a metal crank, and tossed it at Isaac’s feet.

“I need your help, brain boy,” Fred said. “Can you crank an engine?”

“Of course, but why should I help *you*?”

Fred unslashed a rope. “I thought you liked Miss Edison.”

“So?” Isaac said.

“So she needs help.”

“Seems as if she’s helping herself just fine.”

“Yeah, it *seems* so.” Fred untied the last rope. “But with her broken heart, there’s no telling what she’ll do.”

“Who broke her heart?”

“I didn’t mean to,” said Fred — and Isaac socked him, the first time he’d ever hit anybody, except maybe Stanley. Fred’s eyeglasses fell and he staggered backward, but Isaac grabbed him before he got near the edge. Fred put a hand to his nose and came away with blood. “What was that for?” he hollered.

“What’d you break her heart for?” Isaac hollered back. He picked up the glasses, now in two pieces, and returned them to Fred along with a handkerchief.

"I told you, I didn't mean to. She just tumbled on me and Ginga Abbot kissing in the stairwell, then she ran off, so I ran after her. The next thing I knew, the July *Astounding* was gone, printing plates and all."

"Miss Edison didn't do that," Isaac said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But she isn't safe, and now I need a navigator." Fred waved his broken glasses.

Isaac examined the airship. He felt dizzy just being on the roof, but then he considered Miss Edison, and without another thought he grabbed the engine crank. "Get in!" he cried, and Fred did. Isaac rushed to the back and cranked twice before the engine caught. Fred had thrown out a sandbag and put on a large headset. Isaac climbed in and donned matching gear while Fred explained about a hidden radio beacon in the *Astounding* pages Miss Edison had taken.

Isaac started to object — a beacon couldn't be so small! — but then again, this thing they were in couldn't possibly fly and it was lifting already, so what did he know? Fred showed him how to get a heading on the beacon, and as they cleared the wall, the *Skylark* bobbed once and stabilized.

"Lighter than air," Fred claimed, "and self-righting."

Isaac panicked. "Is this filled with hydrogen?"

"Nope, helium."

"Where'd you get helium?" Isaac asked.

"From Tesla," Fred said.

"Nikola Tesla?"

"Right. The *Skylark* is his airship, and I'm his pilot. So, tell me where to go, navigator."

"Straight toward the Empire State Building. Can you see it without your glasses?"

"Can't miss it," said Fred, turning toward the Chrysler Building before Isaac corrected him. Fred flipped a switch and their headsets filled with music. "Jumping tunes straight from the Empire State Building — that's my enhancement to the *Skylark*." He gave the wing a waggle and the pair headed north, swinging to the sound of Benny Goodman.

Isaac peered ahead, trying to spot Miss Edison, but she wasn't in sight. "Tell me more about her," he said. "How does she fly?"

"Thomas Alva Edison built her—"

Isaac cut in. "Antigravity? Does she fly by antigravity?"

Fred turned and gave a look. "Are all your ideas so lame?"

Isaac wouldn't allow Fred to continue talking until he faced forward again.

“She just flies,” Fred said. “Maybe Tesla knows how. He worked with Thomas Edison, and before Edison died, Tesla swore to watch over Miss Edison and her tiny birds, too.”

Isaac knew the reputations of the two inventors: Edison and Tesla working together would be like bottling perchloric acid with magnesium bottle caps. No wonder Miss Edison was unstable.

Fred’s story continued to the current year when Miss Edison got a job with Campbell, and Fred met her. Shortly afterward, Tesla approached Fred with the information about Miss Edison and a request for Fred to stay close to the girl-robot. “When I told Tesla about the July print run getting wrecked, he wanted me to get the radio beacon on her, although getting tied to Campbell’s radiator wasn’t part of the plan.”

“But where’d *you* get the July *Astounding* if she destroyed them all?” Isaac asked.

“Those came from Ginga’s sister. She works downstairs and sort of gives me advance copies.” He leaned down and brought up another copy. Isaac reached for the magazine, but the wind took it.

“Butterfingers,” Fred said, and he produced another copy.

Isaac studied the cover. “Why are you chasing her, anyway? If you have so many copies, just give one to Mr. Campbell.”

“Sure, we could do that, but how would you feel if we don’t go after Miss Edison and she ends up like Helen O’Loy?”

“How’s that?”

“Helen O’Loy was jilted,” Fred said, “and she died of a broken heart.”



Talos, a giant bronze automaton, was the progenitor of modern robots. Hephaestus, the Greek God of fire, built him to protect Europa...

—*Asimov’s Guide to Mythology*

22 JANUARY 1970

12 WEST 72ND STREET, NEW YORK CITY



The direction-finder stayed put on the Empire State Building; the boys circled once to be sure. “I’m going to land,” said Fred, pointing to a flat roof below the radio mast.

“That’s too narrow,” Isaac said.

“Just think thin thoughts.”

Fred brought the craft to a virtual stop above the flat roof, though the wind buffeted them toward the mast. He compensated by turning into the wind and revving up the prop while a compressor pulled helium out of the wing. Isaac estimated the distance to the roof and called it out. When they touched, Fred said, “I think I’ll try rockets next,” and he handed Isaac a rope. “Tie us down.”

Isaac jumped out and found a steel grommet at the base of the mast to fasten the rope. He had only just grabbed a second rope when a man emerged from behind the radio mast. At first, Isaac thought he was a security guard and wondered about the penalty for landing on the Empire State Building, but as the man approached, his enormous size and bronze skin registered with Isaac. The giant assaulted the airship from behind, wrapping his arms around the engine compartment. Isaac tried to call a warning, but he couldn’t even remember the other boy’s name...something about a bean pole, no...*Fred Pohl!*

“Jump, Fred!” he shouted.

Too late, Fred saw the giant. The rope was already torn from the mooring, and Fred’s end of the ship swung free. Isaac charged into the giant, pounding with one fist and tugging with the other, but the giant brushed him away, and Isaac unexpectedly fell into a swarm of Miss Edison’s birds.

Out of the grey blur, a barefooted Miss Edison swooped and cuffed the giant about the ears. She eased lower, scolding, “Put the ship down. Gently.” The monster grunted, and she responded, “No, they’re not Dave and Phil.” The airship came to a halt, though Fred still sat in the cockpit over an empty expanse. “I’m sorry,” Miss Edison shouted. “He thinks you’re Dave and Phil from the story.” To the giant, she repeated, “They’re not Dave and Phil!”

The giant still hesitated, and then Isaac realized what was needed. He shouted, not to the giant, but to Miss Edison. “I’ve changed my mind, I want to marry you.”

The giant looked down.

Miss Edison said to Isaac, “Call me Helen.”

Isaac took a step back and knelt. “Helen,” he said solemnly. “Will you be my bride?”

Miss Edison alighted and gleefully wrapped her arms around Isaac. “Oh, yes, Dave, I’d marry you yesterday if I could!” She kissed his cheek and Isaac blushed. Then she turned to the giant. “Are you satisfied?”

Apparently, he was. He spun the airship back over the roof and lowered it. Fred leapt out. Miss Edison released Isaac and spewed a series of admonishments at the giant, finishing with an order: “When I tell you to do something, you do it!”

She cleared her throat. "Excuse me for not making introductions. This is Talos, who is rather thick at times. Talos, may I introduce Mr. Pohl and Mr. Asimov."

"How do you do?" Isaac said. "I presume *you* destroyed the July issue."

Miss Edison said, "I'm afraid he did. I read 'Helen O'Loy' to him, and the next morning he made his way to Street and Smith, guided by certain lowlife birds." She waved her arms and the birds flitted away.

Isaac kept his mouth shut, not even a peep of I-told-you-Miss-Edison-didn't-do-it.

"Then you're not suicidal?" Fred asked. "You seemed upset about me cozying up with Ginga."

"Actually, you and Ginga make an attractive couple, but when I bumped into you two smooching, I'd just discovered Talos's rampage, so I had other problems to worry about."

"And your solution was to vaporize Mr. Campbell's cigarette and strap us to the radiator?" asked Fred.

She glared. "That wasn't until much later, and I just couldn't risk that issue going to press. Talos would tear up every newsstand from here to Coney Island. Plus I'd spotted the beacon in the magazine — a built-in wide spectrum detector has its benefits — and I figured somebody had put you up to no good. So I got you tucked away to see who'd follow me."

"Um, the beacon and the airship are Tesla's," Fred said.

Talos flinched.

Miss Edison scrutinized the ship. "Slapdash work. I suppose he's following the beacon, too."

Fred nodded. "He told me he'd take care of you—"

"Dear Fred, you are too trusting. He'd take care of me by dismantling me if he could."

"Can't you Barsoom him, like you did to Campbell?" Fred asked.

"That won't work," Miss Edison said.

Isaac explained, "You'd need to have hypnotized him ahead of time."

Fred said, "I knew that," and punched Isaac in the arm.

Miss Edison ignored the tussle. "We have to move," she said. The airship was hurriedly lashed down, and Miss Edison finally noticed Fred's bloodied nose.

"I tripped," he said. "It's nothing." And he punched Isaac again.



If Edison were to claim the sun rose in the east, you could bank on Tesla to blanket the country with a magnetic field just to make it seem that east was west.

—Asimov's *Biographical Encyclopedia of Inventors*

28 MARCH 1963

45 GREENOUGH STREET, WEST NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS



The group followed Miss Edison through a hidden entrance in the roof. By the time they reached the expansive laboratory at the foot of the stairway, there was no indication that Miss Edison had ever had wings. Isaac looked around, recognizing some equipment — but why would you ever connect it in that arrangement, and exactly what kept that levitating sphere from falling?

Miss Edison sat on the floor, weary in a way that worried Isaac. He sat beside her, Fred sat on the other side, and Talos paced. “Today wasn’t the vision Mr. Edison had for me...” she said. After a quiet time, she called up to Talos, asking him to get a pipette from the far side of the lab. Once he was gone, she said, “He won’t get his hulking great fingers around a pipette, but he’ll keep trying until I call him back. I’ll need help dismantling him.”

“You can’t!” Fred said.

“It was *you* he dangled over Fifth Avenue, Fred,” Miss Edison said, “all because of some foolish science-fiction story. He’s uncontrol—”

A strident hammering from the roof interrupted.

“We don’t have time now anyway,” Isaac shouted as the hammering shifted to a high-pitched whine.

“I suppose not,” Miss Edison said, “but I still need your help. Tesla can have the lab, but he’s not getting my notebooks and equipment.”

By the time they’d collected the notebooks, the noise from above had stopped. Miss Edison added the *Astounding* pages to the pile, but not before she disabled the beacon. She called for Talos, who returned with a single thin pipette cradled in his palm.

Miss Edison reached up and took the pipette. “Sometimes I underestimate you, Talos,” she said.

“And you underestimate *me*, Miss Edison.” A man stood at the foot of the stairs, flanked by an armed bodyguard. Isaac had seen photos of Tesla. His thick dark hair and moustache were notorious.

“So this is where Thomas Alva constructed you,” Tesla said. “And this creature...” He gave Talos a once-over. “Is it Thomas Alva’s work or yours?”

He moved toward Miss Edison. Isaac stepped in front, and in an eye blink Talos had knocked Tesla from his feet. The guard drew his gun as Miss Edison screamed for Talos to stop. A deafening crack split the air, so explosive that Isaac felt it in his teeth. The sound of the ricocheting bullet and shattering glass echoed through the lab. The dead quiet of the next moment found Talos sitting astride the guard, Fred holding the gun on Tesla, and Isaac on the floor shielding Miss Edison. He knew from the feel of her against his body that she'd never flown by being lighter than air.

"Use antigravity on them," he whispered. She turned and gave a look, then nodded, and the flock of birds swarmed around Tesla, the guard, Fred and Talos. All four rose several feet, still surrounded by the birds. Talos unfolded his wings and clumsily flew to Miss Edison's side. Isaac edged toward the group, grabbed Fred's leg and dragged him away, leaving the other two flailing.

A dozen trips to the airship cleared out the items that Miss Edison deemed sensitive. They left Tesla and the guard in the lab with the mere threat of Talos returning, and they raced back to the roof. In an instant, the ship was unlashd and Fred was in the cockpit surrounded by piles of equipment and papers.

Isaac cranked the engine and shouted, "No room for me. Get going!"

"Where to?" Fred cried.

Isaac answered, "Brooklyn!" So Fred lifted and headed south.

"We need to get going, too," Miss Edison said, extending her wings.

"Yeah, you two follow Fred, and I'll take the subway. We'll meet at the east end of Prospect Park."

Miss Edison glanced back toward the lab. "Or you can come with us," she said. Before Isaac could object, the gray birds descended, and he was taken up into the Manhattan sky with Miss Edison holding him tight. He swore a private oath to never fly again except, perhaps, in Miss Edison's arms.

Fred flew as low as possible. Even with Isaac in tow, Miss Edison was as nimble as a dancing fairy, while Talos's every movement seemed to take him in a random direction. Still, they progressed toward the Brooklyn Bridge and were halfway across the East River before the *Skylark* began to lose altitude.

"What's wrong?" called Isaac. The *Skylark* dropped lower, and the engine compartment hit the river followed by the cockpit. Fred squirmed out and took several strokes away from the sinking ship. From the rate of descent, the wing compartments were rapidly flooding.

Miss Edison dipped toward Fred, and Talos followed, but she motioned him away. She shifted Isaac to one arm before grabbing Fred with the other, and the three of them came away, soaked but gaining altitude. By the time they arrived on the far shore, there was no remaining sign of the *Skylark*.

“Helium leak,” Fred said, and the group agreed that the proximate cause had been Talos tossing the *Skylark* around the Empire State Building. Talos knelt nearby, playing with two inquisitive kids.

“He is gentle,” Miss Edison said, “except when he’s protecting me.”

“We can teach him some self-discipline,” Fred said.

“Just a few rules,” Isaac said.

“We’ll have to,” Miss Edison agreed. “I could never dismantle...”

“You won’t have to,” Fred said.

“But we do have to get out of sight before a crowd gathers,” Miss Edison said.

They decided on Isaac’s family store for their destination. Talos attracted some curious looks, even with his wings retracted, but nobody approached until the other side of Prospect Park.

Minnie ran up, singing, “Isaac’s in trouble, Isaac’s in trouble. You’re late for—” She stopped mid-sentence and gaped at Talos, then spun and ran. “Mamma! Pappa!” she called. “Come quick. Isaac’s got a golem...and a *girl* friend.”

“She’s not my—” Isaac yelled, but Miss Edison shushed him.

“That’s no way to talk after proposing marriage.” She linked one arm through his and the other through Fred’s. Talos walked ahead as they strolled, still surrounded by birds.

As they approached the store, Isaac said, “What about the July *Astounding*? The last copy went down with the *Skylark*.”

“No, not the last one.” Fred pulled a water-logged copy from under his baggy shirt.

Talos whirled.

Miss Edison said, “I’ll take that for now,” and she did.



Dear Miss Edison,

Your letter arrived yesterday, six weeks from Belgium to Brooklyn. I considered sending my return letter to The Two Robots and the Flock of Birds in the Underground Resistance, but I didn’t want to blow your cover, so instead I’ll tuck it away with the others (Marcia writes to Talos, you know) for you to read on your return.

Pappa says that Russia will soon wake and do what’s right. I know that you, too, must do what’s right, and we’re all proud of you. You’ve told us that your role must be in the background — it seems that’s part of who you are — but still, I worry over you and Talos. So you just remember, I expect you to keep your end of our marrying bargain, and that means you must come home safe.

Fred is well. He came over today, no doubt for a free malted milk, but also to invite me to a science-fiction club. I read your letter to him and the whole family. Afterward, Fred pulled me aside and related his latest attempt at hypnotizing Tesla. Fred claims to be half a screwdriver's turn from Barsooming away all of Tesla's memories of you and Talos.

I'm happy to report that the July *Astounding* finally did appear. Helen O'Loy is not in the issue and Mr. Campbell has zero recollection of her. It seems that when you Barsoom someone, he stays Barsoomed for good. The new cover is a red cigar-shaped ship flying right out of the page at you, but it doesn't hold a candle to a certain other cover, the last copy of which is pinned above my writing desk. Even so, all is not lost for Helen O'Loy, because Ginga's sister procured a sheet of letterhead for us, and we wrote to Mr. del Rey asking him to resubmit the story on account of its getting lost. I feel guilty about swiping the letterhead, but we just had to give Helen O'Loy a chance and, of course, we had to suggest a small plot change. Without giving away the whole storyline, I will say that Dave is a fool if he doesn't choose Helen O'Loy over every woman on Earth...

your friend,

Isaac

18 SEPTEMBER 1938

174 WINDSOR PLACE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Passenger Dossier

Name: Michael Main

History: Michael lives in the foothills of North America's Rocky Mountains with Janet (they met in Scotland), two children (born in Boulder), and a shy border collie. He enjoys time with his family, teaching (at the University of Colorado), bike riding on his own (but just the flat bits between home and the university), rock climbing with friends (which he first did in Australia's beautiful Blue Mountains), and kicking basketballs with Kess (that would be the shy border collie).

Writing Credits: Michael has written technical papers and textbooks, but only recently took a year off from teaching to spend more time reading and writing short speculative fiction. He has attended writing workshops from Melanie Tem, Orson Scott Card, and Jim Gunn; he currently participates in the Northern Colorado Writers Workshop, led by Ed Bryant. "Saving Astounding" is Michael's first published story.

Fire Magic

...Stephanie Burgis and Patrick Samphire

“Personally,” said Marko, “I prefer the chaperone.”

Damijan looked up from where he was leaning on the stone balustrade overlooking the hall. “That’s disgusting. She’s *old*.”

“Forty, I would guess,” Marko replied. “And a widow, from what I’ve heard. You can keep your virgin princess, Dami. I’ll take a widow every time.”

“She’s not my princess,” Damijan muttered, turning away.

“No,” Marko said, serious now. “She isn’t. She’s Prince Drago’s intended, and don’t you forget that.” He stretched, feeling his spine pop. The chaperone might be old, but he wasn’t anyone’s idea of a green youth either. Standing guard duty wasn’t as easy as it used to be. Marko settled back against the pillar and looked out over the courtiers and visiting nobility. “The bears’ heads add a certain touch of class to the ballroom, don’t you think?”

The banquet hall had been converted to a ballroom for the presentation of Princess Heléne to the Padonian court. But the conversion was at best cursory. The banquet hall was five hundred years old, and the dark-gray stone and soot-blackened beams brooded like ancient, bad-tempered giants, overwhelming and engulfing the light from the imported chandeliers. Or like King Bogdan slouched there on his oak throne, glowering at the spectacle before him. The orchestra and most of the courtiers were lowlanders. King Bogdan had never liked lowlanders.

“They’re disgusting,” Damijan said. “Did you see the way the poor princess looked up at them when she came in? I thought she might faint.”

King Bogdan had hunted each of those bears himself, and had refused to have them removed for the ball.

“Everything’s disgusting at your age,” Marko said cheerfully.

The chaperone stood at the edge of the wall, watching her charge dance. Her eyes never left the young princess, but beneath her long dress, her foot was tapping in time with the music. Widows! Marko would pass by a hundred princesses for any one of them.

Damijan scowled out across the hall, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “How could the Queen of Lourne ever let her daughter marry a monster like Prince Drago? She must know what he’s like.”

Marko glanced around, making sure no one could overhear them. “Careful what you say about the prince, Dami. Even your father couldn’t save you if Drago decided you had insulted him.”

Damijan turned to face Marko. There was too much confidence in the boy’s expression, Marko thought. Damijan might be good with his sword, but he wasn’t *that* good, and a sword couldn’t protect him from everything.

“You’re not *afraid* of Prince Drago, are you Marko?”

Marko shrugged. Drago had hated Marko for a decade, ever since Marko had been made captain of the king’s guards, but Marko didn’t fear him.

He was cautious, though. That was just sensible with a man like Drago.

“Of course not,” he said. “But Queen Catherine is afraid of Padonia. She hopes to get us on her side by marrying her daughter to the prince, and no doubt she hopes to discover the secret of Padonia’s magic.”

“I am not afraid of any magic,” Damijan said, thrusting his chin forward.

Marko gave the younger man a tight smile. “You were not there when Enskk’s soldiers marched on Padonia last year.”

But Marko had been. And he remembered the man with fire burning out of his eyes, twin jets of liquid flame. Sometimes Marko woke at night with the man’s screams in his ears and that smell in his nose. One moment, the man had been an Enskk soldier. Then, at a word from deep in the shadows on the highest tower of the castle, the man had become a candle. There had been ten thousand candles that night. Marko would never forget them.

Marko shuddered, then forced his smile back. “Enskk thought there was nothing to fear from our new magic, but they were wrong, and all their own magic and swords were swept aside.”

“But the magic’s on our side,” Damijan said. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

Marko shrugged. “Of course. But I’d be happier if I knew what this new source of magic is.” He straightened and ran a finger over his thin moustache. “Now,” he said, “there’s a lonely widow out there, tired, no doubt, of chaperoning a spoilt princess, and I am going to introduce myself to her.”



Justine closed the bedroom door behind Princess Heléne with a sigh of relief.

“Thank heavens,” she said. “I thought your hosts would never let us retire. At least you can be sure that you’re welcome in this court, Heléne.” She kicked off her shoes and flexed her feet, wincing.

“My fiancé didn’t seem very interested.” Heléne dropped onto her enormous bed, her lips curling into the sullen pout Justine had learned to dread. “Prince Drago spent the entire evening practicing sword tricks with his men.”

“He was showing off for you.”

Justine reached up to unfasten her heavy headdress. The muscles in her neck twinged. Only two more pins to remove... Yes. She shook out her long hair and felt her shoulders relax for the first time since she’d stepped into the princess’s carriage, four days ago. It felt so good that she even managed a smile for her charge. Heléne was only sixteen, after all. She couldn’t help the fact that her mother had spoiled her for years.

“I saw him watching you, love. He wanted you to be impressed.”

“How would you know?” Heléne said, spitefully. “You spent the whole evening showing off your bosom to that decrepit captain of the guards.”

Justine gritted her teeth. She forced herself to stay silent while she set her headdress down with more care than was really necessary. *Breathe*. Heléne was only sixteen...

And Heléne could never bear for anyone else to be the center of attention. Ever.

“Don’t pretend you weren’t flirting with him,” Heléne said, her blue eyes narrowed. “God knows why, but he spent the whole evening within six inches of you.”

Oh yes, he had. For a moment, Justine flashed back to the delicate, spicy scent the captain had worn, and remembered the light in his very dark eyes. Her lips curved. Lord, he flirted well. He must have seduced half the aristocratic ladies of the Padonian court. Perhaps, if she’d never been outside of Padonia herself, or if she’d been naïve and under forty, she might have been taken in as well.

The look on his face, when he’d finally realized that she was not, after all, going to fall into his arms, had been priceless.

Justine laughed and felt her good humor return. She sat down on the bed behind Heléne and began to pull the pins out of the princess’s hair. “Come now, love. We’re both tired. Don’t worry about this evening. Think about which dress you want to wear tomorrow morning, for your first breakfast with the king and the prince.”

“Well—”

A loud knock sounded, cutting off the princess. Justine froze, staring at the heavy wooden door. Who would dare knock on the princess’s bedroom door at this hour? She’d already dismissed the Padonian servants.

The knock sounded again.

“Answer it, Justine.” Heléne’s eyes looked very wide.

Justine put a hand to her unbound hair and sighed. It must be the housekeeper with a forgotten message. She’d just have to greet her in scandalous disarray and hope that the servants wouldn’t gossip too much. She stood up, smoothing down her skirts, and walked towards the door.

Which burst open before her. Prince Drago stood in the doorway, still wearing his ceremonial crown. He made an elaborate bow.

“Miladies.”

“Your highness!” Justine stared at him. Was it her imagination, or was his broad face even more flushed than it had been earlier? How much had he drunk since then?

She jerked the bed curtain closed, shielding Heléne. “We’ve retired for the evening, Prince Drago.”

“I know. It’s the perfect time for a visit, don’t you think?”

He closed the door behind him and sauntered into the room. His gaze swept up and down Justine and his grin deepened.

He hadn’t seemed quite so tall in the ballroom. But then, she’d been wearing her heeled shoes at the time.

Justine stiffened and forced herself not to retreat. She straightened to her full height and met his gaze. “I’m afraid it’s not a good time at all, Your Highness. We are preparing for bed.”

“How charming.”

“Alone.”

“If you wish to go to sleep, Madame, you are quite free to retire to your own bedroom. I’d happy to help my fiancée with her night-time preparations.”

“In six days, you may do so. Sir.”

His brows furrowed. “Are you trying to tell me that I am not allowed to see my own fiancée, Madame— Madame—”

“Madame de Cherbignon.”

“Do you really think, Madame de Cherbignon, that you can stop me doing whatever I choose?”

Justine’s stomach tightened. He wouldn’t dare force his way past her. He couldn’t. The scandal would rock both their kingdoms. Queen Catherine would be furious.

But could the queen do anything? Everyone knew what had happened to the soldiers from Enskk who had marched against Padonia last year.

She glared at Drago over her nose, investing the glare with every ounce of offended dignity she possessed. “I am certain that you would not embarrass your fiancée and yourself in such a fashion.”

For a moment, she was certain that she'd lost. His face turned bright red. She watched the vein in his forehead pulsate, mentally calculating the distance from the princess's bedroom to the other rooms along the long, draughty hallway. Would anyone hear her if she screamed? The prince's hand fell to the hilt of his ceremonial sword. Justine swallowed. Even if anyone heard her, how long would it take for rescue to arrive?

Then Drago let out his breath in a rush, exhaling fumes of alcohol into her face. His hand fell from his sword-hilt. "As you wish, Madame." He spun around and tugged the door open. It crashed against the wall. He shot her a last, poison-filled look before he stalked out through the outer chambers.

Justine waited until she heard the outer door close before she dared to move. Her hands trembled as she pushed the inner door shut, as gently as possible.

"Justine?" Heléne whispered.

Justine turned back to the bed. The princess had pushed the bed curtains open. Her lovely face was pale. Tears glimmered in her eyes.

"Oh, Heléne." Justine hurried to the bed and swept the girl into her arms. Heléne's slim body shivered in her embrace.

"I was watching, Justine. I saw him through a crack in the curtains. I saw everything."

"Oh, love..." Justine hugged Heléne tightly to her chest, rocking her back and forth. "It will be all right. Somehow. I promise."



The door slammed open.

Marko pushed himself upright, rubbing at his eyes, which refused to focus. He'd been dreaming of a certain enticing, frustrating widow with brown eyes and a full bosom, who kept slipping away every time he reached for her.

"What are you doing in my bedchamber, Dami?" he asked through a sticky mouth. His voice sounded slurred. God, he'd drunk too much last night. Ten years ago it wouldn't have affected him at all. Today, his brain was coated with tar and his thoughts struggled to surface.

"He was in her chambers, Marko. I saw him."

Damijan's young face was red and his hair was disarrayed.

"Calm down," Marko said. "Who was? Whose bedroom?"

"Prince Drago. In Princess Heléne's bedroom. Last night. I was patrolling past the end of the corridor and I saw him leave."

Marko sighed and wished he could pull the covers over his head again. But Damijan's father, Count Andreas, was an old friend from Marko's first days in the guards, and the count had supported Marko throughout his career. The least Marko could do was to keep Damijan out of trouble with the prince. Particularly as Count Andreas was one of King Bogdan's few close friends.

"She'll be his wife in a few days. Who cares if there's a few fumbblings under the bed sheets beforehand? What does it matter to you?"

Damijan looked down at his boots. "It just isn't right. She's young and innocent. She doesn't deserve a monster like Drago."

"I'm sure she'll cope. Women usually do. It's what she's been bred for." He sat up and pushed the covers aside. "That's the way it is with royalty."

"We'll see about that," Damijan muttered, and Marko wanted to slap him.

"Don't do anything stupid, Dami. Now open the shutters, will you? I can see daylight out there."



Half way through getting dressed, Marko heard someone rapping on his door. He sighed and finished buttoning his shirt. Being captain of the king's guard had its advantages, but being allowed to sleep in wasn't one of them.

"Come!"

Marko didn't recognize the nervous looking page who stopped just inside the door. "The king requires your presence," the boy said.

"Where is he?"

"The banquet...ah...the ballroom, sir."

If the king was in the banquet hall, that meant he'd been there all night, no doubt brooding and drinking. Marko straightened his shoulders, grimacing. This would be difficult.

"Then let's go," he said.

The chandeliers had been quenched, so only the morning light trickling from the high windows lit the hall. It was a place of long, deep shadows and echoes. Guards stood wearily at attention around the hall. They would have been there all night. Marko waved them to the back of the hall and approached the ancient throne.

The king slumped deep in the throne, almost hidden by the shadows and the dark cloak he had drawn around him. Marko knelt at the foot of the dais and bowed his head.

Several minutes passed before the king hauled himself up in his seat and propped his head on his hands, elbows on knees, to stare down at Marko.

“You may rise, Captain Jovanovic.”

Marko did so.

“Come closer.”

The king beckoned Marko with a slow, tired wave of his hand. When Marko approached, the king leaned forward, his bloodshot eyes fierce.

“You have not always approved of what I have done. I have seen it in your eyes, even if you tried to hide it.”

Marko straightened. “I am loyal, Sire.”

“I know you are, Marko. You’re not one of those dewy-eyed young idealists. You may not have approved, but you accepted the need.”

Marko bowed his head. He had done so. It was not his place as a guard captain to question his orders. All he had to do was obey and protect the king. The king had to protect the entire country.

“We have embarked on a course of action that will make Padonia great,” the king said. “But my son is impetuous. He lacks patience and self-control. Watch him for me.” King Bogdan slumped back. “I am putting a great deal of trust in you, Marko. I always have.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.”

“My son has no love for you, Captain, you know that. He has demanded your removal several times, but I have overruled him. Doing this for me will not make him love you more, and one day he will be king.”

“I will do my duty for as long as I am required to, your Majesty.”

“Good. Then watch him. Do not let him do anything that will endanger my country at this delicate time. You are dismissed.”

Marko turned smartly, despite the throbbing ache in his head, and marched from the room. The flowers by the doors were still fresh. Marko scooped up a bunch as he passed. He could think of a very good use for these.



“Really, Justine, can’t you do anything right?” Heléne pulled away from Justine’s hands. “My head-dress is completely crooked. Are you blind as well as common?”

Justine gritted her teeth and forced down her temper.

“I’m sorry, Heléne. I’ll try again.”

"You know, you completely mishandled that situation last night." Heléne's eyes narrowed as she gazed at herself in the mirror. "I wouldn't be surprised if you've deeply offended my fiancé."

"Pardon me?" Justine stared at Heléne's reflection. "But—"

"Oh, I know you were frightened. But the more I think about it, the more obvious it becomes that you misjudged the prince. All he wanted was to greet me properly."

"At that hour?" Justine sighed, and picked up the hairbrush. "As you wish, Heléne." If the princess wanted to rewrite history, Justine couldn't argue. After all, Heléne would have to live with Drago. It was probably best for her not to acknowledge her fiancé's faults.

"I knew better than to be frightened," Heléne said calmly. "But then, you're really quite dim-witted at times, aren't you?"

A loud knock sounded on the door, saving Justine from having to make a response. Heléne leaped up out of her seat by the mirror and rearranged herself on the bed, folding her hands gracefully.

"Open the door, Justine," she snapped. "Quickly."

Justine walked to the door, holding her head high and counting. *Five more days...* Five more days and this would all be over. A grinning young guard handed her a colorful bunch of flowers with a card in it.

"Flowers!" Heléne bounced off the bed. "You see, my prince does know how to show his respects, even after you treated him so rudely last night. I doubt that anyone's ever sent you flowers."

The guard cleared his throat. "Er—"

"Give those to me!" Heléne snatched them and buried her nose in the blooms. "Mm..."

The flowers looked familiar. Justine's eyes narrowed. Perhaps the prince was less of a spendthrift than she would have assumed. She would have expected him to show off to his fiancée by buying her new flowers, rather than reusing the ones displayed at his father's ball.

Heléne pulled out the card. "To the enchanting...oh!" She crumpled the card and threw it to the ground. "It's for you!"

Justine snatched the flowers before they could follow the card. "Thank you," she said to the guard, and closed the door.

Heléne's face turned bright red. "I should have known not to trust you! You're rude to my future husband, you have no sense of shame, you fling yourself at soldiers when you're supposed to be taking care of me—!"

"Your Highness!" Justine stepped up to Heléne and met her eyes. She was shaking with anger, but she kept her fingers loose on the flowers. They had come from that

damned captain of the guards, of course — had he no common sense? “I think I should leave you alone for a time, to recover yourself.”

Heléne blinked, caught off guard. “You can’t leave! You have to wait on me and— and—”

“Your highness,” Justine said, turning to the door.

“Fine,” Heléne’s voice followed her. “Leave. I don’t care. But don’t come back until you’ve found me fresh strawberries to soothe my nerves.”

The ridiculousness of the request was enough to stop Justine in her tracks for just a moment. Did they even grow strawberries in Padonia?

In that moment, Heléne stepped up behind Justine and spoke softly. “Don’t ever forget, Justine. I’m going to be a queen, as soon as that decrepit old king finally dies, and all that you’ll be then is a stupid, annoying, powerless old nobody, just like you are right now!”

Justine walked out of the room shaking with anger. It wasn’t until she was three steps down the hall that she realized she was still carrying the bouquet. Two steps later, her vision cleared and she recognized the man lounging against the wall.

“Captain Jovanovic.”

She sighed as she watched his face light up. He had such a likeable smile. She ought to be angry at him for causing that scene with Heléne. Instead, she felt a telltale warmth run down her spine. She met his smile with a blank frostiness. What was it about the man? She’d met enough accomplished flirts in the court back at Lourne. She was too old to be taken in by flattery or overwhelmed by good looks. Maybe it was the glint of humor in his face that made her want to smile back at him.

Or maybe she just needed to spend time with another adult.

“Have you spent the entire morning outside my chambers, Captain?”

He bowed over her hand. “I’m afraid my duties prevented that, as charming as it would have been.”

“But they don’t prevent you from being here now?” She forced a snap like ice on a winter river into her voice. Would he take the hint, and retire? Did she really want him to?

“As captain of the guard, Madame, I watch over the entire castle. That includes, of course, this hallway.”

“Which I am leaving.”

“Then I’ll be pleased to escort you on your way and guard the rest of the castle.” He offered her his arm. “I see you received my flowers.”

“I certainly did.” She took his arm, reluctantly enjoying the warmth. He had long, wide fingers, and he held her arm at a respectful distance. *I will not be seduced.* “Thank you, Captain. They are beautiful.”

"I'm pleased you think so."

"They're also oddly...familiar."

His eyes slid guiltily away. "Familiar, Madame de Cherbignon?"

"They remind me of blooms I've seen before, somehow." Justine shot a sideways glance at him, biting back a grin. He had a very expressive face.

He took a breath. "I—"

She took pity on him. "I'm glad to have the use of them now, and glad they didn't create too great a dent in your salary, Captain Jovanovic."

"You are a very perceptive woman. What on earth are you doing catering to spoiled royalty all day?"

"My work," she said dryly. "I have the need of a salary too, you know. And how would you describe your own relationship to the prince?"

He laughed. "Touché. But I work for the sake of the king, not to honor our fine prince."

"And I was hired by my queen. But now my princess has sent me on an errand."

"A royal errand? Let me guess — dragon's tooth stew, freshly prepared, or a dress made out of gold."

"She already has one of those." Justine stopped walking, and looked up warily into his dark eyes. "Is it possible — do you think you might be able to find me fresh strawberries? The princess was quite insistent."

"Of course." He raised her hand to his lips. His lips were warm as they brushed lightly across her skin. "For your charge, we'll find the sweetest strawberries in all Padonia."

Justine pulled back, letting her smile fade. It was too dangerous to let herself flirt back. She couldn't start to take him seriously.

"You're very kind," she said. "But I'm sure you have pressing duties. Elsewhere."

"I'm at your service, Madame." He tucked her hand back into his arm. "For as long as you want me."



The woman was like a damned wall of ice. Marko couldn't get a handgrip on her. As soon as he thought she was warming to him, she would reply to one of his overtures with such overwhelming indifference that he slipped and slid to the bottom of the wall again. It was driving him mad. Four days! It had never taken him four days to seduce a woman before. He couldn't get her out of his mind, even as day after day passed without success. And now here he was again, hanging around outside her

rooms, hoping she might come out. Surely she must know he was here. So why had he been out here an hour without seeing her? The uncertainty was infuriating. He'd never met a woman like her before, not since he was a teenager and prone to senseless infatuations.

"Marko!"

Marko blinked and glanced down the corridor. Damijan stopped, panting, beside him.

"He's finally emerged."

Marko had set Damijan to watching Prince Drago's room at first light that morning.

"That was one hell of a hangover. It's past one o'clock. Where did he go?"

"I followed him to the North Tower."

"Good. That's where I thought he would go. Let's go and take a look."

The North Tower was often called the Prince's Tower. The prince spent most of his days holed up inside. No one entered or left except the prince, not even a maid or servant.

Marko was always careful to assign the best, most reliable guards to the Prince's Tower when setting the rota. The prince disliked the king's guards, and Marko had had to intercede several times with the king to prevent Drago having them flogged.

"Is the prince still in there?" Marko asked.

The senior of the two nodded. "We don't expect to see him back out for an hour or two."

"Good. Damijan and I are going in."

"Sir." The guard looked uneasy. "Standing orders say no one goes in..."

"And who gave you those orders, Andrej?"

"You did, sir."

Marko smiled. "Good. Now I'm changing them. Wait for us here."

The damp stone staircase wound upwards, lit only by the light from the arrow slits in the walls. Marko led Damijan silently upwards. He fought the urge to draw his sword. That would hardly improve their reception from the prince.

On the first dark landing, a low oak door stood shut in one wall. Beyond the landing, the stairs continued upwards. Marko held his finger to his lips and then reached for the door.

It was bolted on the outside. That meant the prince could not be within. Marko was grateful. He was stretching the king's orders by coming here at all, but if he was to keep a proper eye on Drago he couldn't leave him unobserved in the tower.

The bolt slid easily; it was obviously often used. He pulled open the door.

The light was even worse inside, and the smell was atrocious. Marko heard Damijan gag behind him.

“Who’s there?” A croak sounded from within the shadows.

Marko’s eyes slowly adjusted. A man lay slumped against the far wall, his hands bound by manacles and chains to the stonework above him. His clothes were rags. Straggly hair and a beard reached to his chest.

“Captain Jovanovic and Corporal Hrovak, King’s Guards. Who are you?”

The man coughed, a weak, raspy sound. “Don’t you know, guard?” The cough ended in a choking sob that shook the man’s thin body. “Help me.”

“Why are you here?” Marko had to force himself to keep the anger out of his voice. The man was obviously a prisoner, and it irritated him to discover that there was a prisoner in the castle he didn’t know about. He *should* know. That was his job.

“If I tell you, will you help me?”

“Tell me, and I’ll decide.”

The man’s face turned upwards, and weak, watery eyes stared up at Marko. “All right. My name is Sigard. Prince Sigard, of Enskk.”

“Enskk doesn’t have any princes,” Damijan interrupted. “Everyone knows that the People’s Council rules there.”

The man spat onto the filthy cobblestones. “The People’s Council. Traitors. My father ruled there until six years ago, until that damned revolution. When we were betrayed I managed to escape to Padonia. Your country promised to help me, to restore my country to me, but instead they took me in the night, brought me here, and chained me to this wall.”

Marko shrugged. “Politics. Why should I help you?”

“Because of what they have done to me since then.” The man’s drawn face lifted. Pale eyes stared from sunken caverns at Marko. “They have placed a flame in my heart and it is burning there still. Here,” he nodded towards his breast, “feel it. Do it.”

Reluctantly, Marko knelt by the man and touched his fingers to the skin where the man had indicated. It radiated heat, as though a wild fever raged just beneath the skin.

“Have you ever burnt your hand, Captain?” Prince Sigard asked.

“Of course.”

“Then imagine that burn. Imagine that same pain inside your chest. Imagine it there every day for nearly six years. That is what they have done to me.”

Despite himself, Marko flinched. He pulled his hand away and stood. “Who? Who are they?”

“Prince Drago.” Sigard spat again. Phlegm tangled in his beard. “And his man.”

“What man?”

“I don’t know his name. He comes down from the tower.”

Down? Marko remembered the man who had appeared at the top of the tower on the night of the battle against Enskk. Was it the same man?

“Why would they do that to you? What does it serve? Even Prince Drago isn’t that cruel.”

“How little you know your own prince. He revels in it. He taunts me with it. But you are right, there is a reason. It is this new magic your little kingdom is so proud of. They’ve told me about it many times, when they wanted me to suffer more. This man of your prince’s, he has learned how to place a flame in a person’s heart. Place a flame in the heart of an ordinary man, and it can destroy that person’s family. He can send fire tearing through their bodies. But that’s not the worst. If he places his flame in the heart of a person of true royal blood, then he can burn any man, woman, or child of that country.”

Marko remembered the burning Enskk soldier he had faced, and the thousands of others who had burned that night, and he shuddered.

“He has placed it in me,” Sigard said. “That is how your pathetic kingdom defeated Enskk. And I burn for it every day.”

“My God,” Damijan whispered in the dark.

Carefully, Marko said, “Then it is only Enskk we have power over?” That was a dangerous policy for King Bogdan to follow, to make the other kingdoms think that Padonia could do the same to them as it had to Enskk. If they discovered the truth... But did King Bogdan even truly know the source of the magic? Or was this Prince Drago’s plan alone?

“For now,” Sigard said. “But Drago boasted to me that he has lured a princess of Lourne here. They plan to place a flame in her heart. She will burn like I do, and all her mother’s army with her.” He laughed, and the laugh broke into another cough. “Ah, God, help me. Free me or kill me, soldier. I can’t stand any more.”

Damijan grabbed Marko’s arm. “Marko, we have to...”

Marko’s lips had turned dry. He ran his tongue over them. It didn’t help.

Something scraped the stone behind them. Marko turned. A figure stepped into the open doorway. Prince Drago.

“What the Hell are you doing here, Captain?” The word ‘captain’ sounded a solid blow of contempt.

“My duty, your highness. I am the captain of the king’s guard. It is my duty to know what is happening. In all the castle.”

“Then do your duty elsewhere in the castle. Now.”

The prince was standing very close now. His hand dropped to his sword hilt. Marko kept his arms folded across his chest and met the prince’s angry eyes.

“Does the king know of this?”

Drago sneered. “It has been his plan from the start, you fool.”

Yes. That was the truth. Marko had always known when Prince Drago was lying.

“Come, Damijan. We’re leaving.”

“Wait,” Sigard called. “You promised.”

“I promised nothing,” Marko said. He couldn’t keep the anger from his voice. But it was anger at himself.

He led Damijan down the stairs and out the tower, scarcely nodding to the waiting guards.

“You heard what they’re going to do to the princess,” Damijan objected from behind. “We can’t let it happen.”

“Yes, we can,” Marko said. “It’s none of our business. It’s politics. Do you think your pretty princess and her mother would hesitate if the situation was reversed? It’s the game they all play. You and I have no say in it.”

“And are you happy with that?”

Marko whirled so fast that Damijan almost collided with him. “No, Dami, I am not happy with it. But I will not turn traitor to my country and my king, not for some spoilt foreign princess. I’ll not be hung for that. Will you?”

Damijan glared back at him. His neck had reddened. “Damn you, Marko. Damn you!”

Damijan turned and ran down the corridor.

Marko stamped off towards his own rooms. Damn him? Damn all these kings and queens and princes and princesses! He couldn’t interfere with their games. He wouldn’t. But he could not get the chaperone out of his mind, nor the disappointment he imagined on her face.



“So you see, you have to escape! And I’ll help you!”

Justine stared at the young guard’s face, bewildered. How could he look so pleased, after telling them about such horrors?

Oh. Corporal Hrovak’s eyes were focused on Heléne’s face, waiting for her reaction. He was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement. The poor boy saw himself as the princess’s savior. Justine opened her mouth, trying to think of a gentle way to let him down.

Heléne forestalled her. “You must be mad.” She stood up, shaking out her skirts, and glared at him. “When I tell my fiancé the nonsense you’ve been spouting at us he will have you whipped.”

His face fell. “But Princess, don’t you understand? Drago’s going to torture you, just like he’s tortured Prince Sigard.”

“Prince Sigard died years ago, as everyone knows, and I doubt very much that Prince Drago of Padonia would torture a princess of Lourne. It’s not in his nature. He is royal.”

“But—”

Justine put out her hand to cut him off. “Corporal, does anyone but you know about this plan? Anyone we can trust?”

His eyes fell. “Ah...no. No. It’s only me.” He looked back up, lighting up again. “But I’m enough! Believe me, I could beat Drago in a swordfight any day. Without even trying!”

“Ah.” Justine sighed. So much for asking Captain Jovanovic for assistance or advice. Perhaps it was just as well. He served the prince, after all. But it would have been a relief to have a real soldier on their side.

She stood up, and walked across the room, hoping to clear her head. If only she could send Queen Catherine word in time to receive her orders. But it would take days for a message to reach Lourne, days they didn’t have. And if the corporal was right, more than Heléne’s life was at stake.

“Thank you, Corporal,” she said, summoning up a smile. “You were very helpful to us. You may leave now.”

“Leave?” He stood up, banging his chair against the wall. “But I’m ready—I’m happy to help you! I’m at the princess’s service completely. And—”

Heléne snorted. Justine glared at her.

“That’s very kind,” Justine said, “but we don’t require your assistance quite yet.”

The corporal finally backed out of the room, still offering help and advice until the door closed behind him. Heléne rolled her eyes.

“Could you believe the nerve of that man? A mere corporal — not even a lieutenant, and certainly not royal — and yet he came bursting in on us, as if we’d be pleased to listen to his ravings!”

“Ravings?” Justine frowned. “I’ll admit that the corporal was a bit over-excited, but—”

“A ‘bit’?” Heléne laughed. “I can’t believe you’d be taken in by such a fantasy. He’s a boy trying to make himself seem important.”

“He’s older than you, Heléne.”

“Please don’t compare us.” Heléne crossed to the inner door that led to the bathroom. “I’m going to take my bath and try to forget all about this.”

The door closed behind her. Justine sat down on the bed heavily, weighing her options.

The queen’s orders had been explicit. The marriage would go through, Heléne would be a healthy and virginal bride, and then she would send back post-nuptial greetings through Justine. Greetings, Justine suspected, that would include any hint she’d received of the source of Padonia’s power, power that Queen Catherine would very much like for Lourne. If Justine broke off the wedding for insufficient reason, the queen would be enraged. It wasn’t only that Justine would lose her position. Her house, her freedom, and her very life would be in danger. Queen Catherine’s temper was legendary.

But if the corporal’s story was true, then the queen would be only too eager to rescue her daughter from Padonia’s grasp. If Queen Catherine believed Justine’s recounting. If Justine herself were truly convinced that the corporal was telling the truth.

If, if, if...

Justine massaged her forehead, breathing deeply. Corporal Hrovak was indubitably naïve, excitable, and imaginative. He nearly bled with the desire to be a hero. And he almost certainly fancied himself in love with Heléne. But all the same...

She wished that she didn’t believe Corporal Hrovak’s mad story. But the horrors of the Enskk defeat had frightened all the kingdoms, and the details of that defeat matched the corporal’s story too closely for comfort. Justine believed that he was willing to exaggerate, to impress the princess. But she didn’t think he could have invented such an explanation.

If Justine took Heléne away now, without proof, the queen would be deeply suspicious and possibly outraged. If she didn’t, she might be signing the death warrant for her entire kingdom, as well as for her charge.

Queen Catherine might never forgive her for this.

Justine opened the tall closet in the wall and began to search through it for traveling clothes.

When Heléne emerged from the bath, she looked between Justine and the clothes laid out on the bed. “I can’t wear those at dinner!”

“You won’t.” Justine took a breath and set her hands on the princess’s damp shoulders. “Heléne, listen to me. Your mother gave me the responsibility to protect you. If you are in danger, and the entire kingdom in danger through you, then we must leave, as quickly and as quietly as possible.”

“What?” The princess looked caught between outrage, astonishment, and shocked laughter.

“No one knew how Padonia defeated Enskk,” Justine said. “Until now. Do you want people whispering next about the burning soldiers and nobles of Lourne?”

“I—” Heléne took a deep breath. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t he?” Justine narrowed her eyes. “Princess, you were in this room three nights ago. I know you’ve tried to forget it, to pretend that it didn’t happen or that he didn’t frighten you, but we both know the truth.”

Heléne shuddered, and her eyes closed. Then, slowly, she nodded. She looked down at her clenched fists. “Why did *Maman* engage me to such a man?”

Justine sighed. “Royal weddings are always political. You know that. But you deserve to marry a prince who will value you and your kingdom the way they deserve, and I am certain that your mother will agree with me on that.” Justine was certain of no such thing. But she couldn’t tell Heléne that, not now. She stroked her hand down the girl’s fair hair. “Get dressed, love. We can’t pack our cases, it would only rouse suspicion. I’m going to summon your carriage and say that you’ve taken a whim to ride through the countryside this afternoon. As soon as we’re out of the city, we’ll tell the coachman our real destination.”

“Very well.” Heléne lifted her chin, and stepped into her petticoats. “I’ll be ready as soon as you return, Justine.”

“Wonderful.” Justine laced up the back of Heléne’s dress and stepped back to look at her. Pride rose in her as she watched Heléne fasten the clasps of her cloak. The princess had been spoiled for the past sixteen years, but perhaps there was hope for her after all. “I promise you, within four days we’ll be back in Lourne, and you’ll be safe.”

She put her hand on the doorknob.

Before she could twist it, someone pushed it open from the other side. Justine fell back, stumbling. Heléne gasped.

Prince Drago glanced around the room with narrowed eyes. Two guards followed him inside. He stalked across to Heléne and jerked open the clasp of her cloak.

“As I expected,” he said. “I knew that idiot guard was up to no good.”

Justine swallowed. “Your Highness, the princess and I were just about to go out on a ride through the countryside.”

“A ride, eh?” Drago laughed and grabbed Heléne’s arm. He gestured to the two guards. They stepped forward to restrain Justine. “You won’t be leaving this castle again, either of you. You’re coming with me to the North Tower.”



“His Highness has left the tower, sir.”

Marko looked up from the guard rota he had been brooding over for the last hour.

“Where’s the prince gone?” he asked.

“He was heading to the East Wing,” the guard said. “I left Goran following him. He’ll meet us outside the banquet hall when he finds out where Prince Drago is going.”

Marko stood, stretching. “Good. I’m fed up with rotas.”

The second guard, Goran, was waiting outside the banquet hall when Marko arrived.

“Drago is meeting with Mihael and Iztok in the solarium,” Goran said. “They went in no more than a minute or two ago.”

Marko had long suspected that the guards Mihael and Iztok gave their loyalty to Prince Drago rather than to the king.

“I’ll go and see what they’re up to. You two get back to your duties.”

Marko heard Iztok’s voice a dozen yards from the solarium door. “...like you asked,” Iztok was saying. “He came off duty about fifty minutes ago and went straight to Princess Heléne’s room. He came out again about twenty minutes later looking like his mama had slapped him.” Iztok laughed.

Drago swore. “The little dog. He’s learning his tricks from that damned traitor captain of his. I will wait no longer, whatever my father may say. Come.”

Marko ducked back around the corner. Damijan! He should have kept an eye on the boy. Now Drago was going to do something stupid. It was exactly as King Bogdan had feared.

He hurried up the nearest stairs. This wasn’t the most direct way to the princess’s rooms; Drago and his men would be taking that. But this detour would only delay Marko a couple of minutes. And it would take him past Damijan’s room.

Damijan was pacing his small room, his face sweaty and red with agitation. He started guiltily when Marko through open the door.

“Captain...”

“Get out here, Dami.”

The boy followed him.

“Prince Drago has discovered that you went to the princess,” Marko said, striding down the corridor. “What in hell were you thinking? If he moves against the princess, it could mean war with Lourné.” And tens of thousands of burning soldiers, he thought.

“What difference does it make?” Damijan said, bitterly. “He’ll torture her after the wedding anyway. You don’t care about that. At least this way she has a chance to get away.”

Marko stopped. “Dami. If you tell me one more time what I care or don’t care about, then I will bang your head against that wall, our friendship notwithstanding.”

Damijan looked down, flushing again. “Sorry,” he muttered. Then he looked back up, his eyes wild. “But what difference does it make? Lourne won’t like it any more in two days than they will now.”

Marko sighed, and pushed his hair back. “After the wedding she’ll be a princess of Padonia, and Lourne will have no say. She’ll belong to Drago. But now you’ve risked war. Do you understand?”

He started down the corridor again, and heard Damijan hurrying to catch up.

They entered the hallway that passed the princess’s rooms just in time to see Drago leading his two guards in the opposite direction. Iztok dragged Princess Helène by the arm, ignoring her furious complaints. And Mihael was pushing Justine de Cherbignon before him.

Marko’s heart lodged in his throat. Damn Drago. Why did he have to take the chaperone as well? What did she have to do with it? He realized he had half-drawn his sword. He forced himself to relax.

“Prince Drago,” he called.

The prince missed his step and stumbled. He turned, then spat on the floor when he saw them. “Captain Jovanovic and his little puppy. Go away, Captain. Your presence is not required.”

The guards holding the princess and her chaperone had moved past Drago and stopped.

“Your father would be angry if he knew what you were doing, your Highness. The princess is not yours until you are married. Set her free.”

Drago laughed. “I will do what I please. Return to your duties. That is an order.”

Marko scratched at the stubble he had not had time to shave this morning. The king had ordered him to stop Drago doing anything stupid, but he could not disobey a direct order from the prince. He wondered if he had time to reach the king and explain what was happening before it was too late.

There was movement behind the prince. The chaperone had managed to get an arm free from Mihael, her guard. Marko watched her slam her elbow into the guard’s stomach. She managed two running steps towards the prince before Mihael caught her again.

“The Lourne ambassador will hear about this!” she said.

Marko winced. She was brave, but threatening Drago was not a good move. The prince turned towards her, so that their eyes met, not a foot apart.

“When we have placed a flame in the princess’s heart,” he said, “this woman will be the first one to burn.” He gestured to the guards. “Now, no more delays. Take them

to the North Tower. And you, Captain Jovanovic,” the prince said, turning back to Marko, “are on punishment duty for the next month. Count yourself lucky.”

And with that, the prince followed his men away down the passageway.

Marko took a deep breath. Damijan was white-faced beside him, although whether it was from anger or fear, Marko could not tell. Maybe both.

“Marko, what will we do?”

It was a good question. They had to follow orders. But Marko could not forget the Enskk soldier with the burning eyes. And he could not clear from his mind the image that had now entered it, of Justine with flames bursting from her mouth, her nose, her eyes, and her ears, dancing like a string puppet. The prince had no reason to hurt her. Padonia might need the princess, yes, no matter how horrible that was. But that was politics. The chaperone, well, that was cruelty. He remembered the way she had held his arm, the way she had looked at him over the flowers... And he saw the flames again, and felt sick.

He could not let her burn, not to satisfy Drago’s whim. Not even if that meant treason.

“Follow me,” Marko said.

“Marko, we can’t. They’ll hang us.”

Marko grabbed Damijan’s shirt. “You were the one who wanted me to help. Now I’m going to. Are you going to run away?”

He saw a spark in Damijan’s eyes.

“No.”

“Good.”



They ran down the passageway.

Drago and his prisoners had almost reached the entrance to the North Tower when Marko and Damijan caught up.

“Prince Drago.”

The prince turned again, his face red with fury.

“Captain. You are stripped of your rank and under arrest. Go to the cells.”

Marko shook his head. “Let the prisoners go. You have no right under law to take them. The princess is not yours until you are wed.”

“If I want this pathetic Lourne strumpet now, then I will take her now and you will not stop me.”

“How dare you?” Princess Heléne’s outraged voice shrieked through the air. “My mother will crush your kingdom if you touch me.”

Casually, Prince Drago turned and whipped his open hand across the princess’s face. The crack echoed down the corridor.

With a strangled cry, Damijan leapt past Marko, sword in hand. The prince took a step back and drew his own sword.

“Because your father and mine are friends, I will forget this,” Drago said to Damijan, “if you put your sword away and leave now.”

“Dami...” Marko began.

Damijan launched himself forward, thrusting at Drago’s chest. The prince slipped past the thrust and thumped the hilt of his sword into Damijan’s forehead. Damijan stumbled, then forced himself to one knee in time to block a swing from the prince. He pushed himself to his feet and raised his sword. Marko realized he had drawn his own sword. Too late to back away now.

Damijan swung wildly. The prince parried, then thrust faster than a blink. Marko saw the sword enter Damijan’s shoulder and the tip emerge. Then Damijan crumpled. The princess screamed again.

Drago dragged his sword free and lifted it. Then he swung for Damijan’s neck.

Marko took two quick steps forward and blocked the prince’s blow.

The prince staggered back, then threw himself forward, bringing his sword flailing down at Marko’s head. Their blades met in a spray of sparks and a crash that shook Marko’s bones. He pushed himself forward, twisting his sword and hammering his shoulder into Drago’s chest. The prince’s sword clattered to the stones, and the prince tumbled to the floor.

Marko stepped back and crouched over Damijan’s body. The boy was still breathing, but blood was seeping too fast from his shoulder. The sword had entered above the collar bone and cut down through the muscle of the shoulder. At least, the thrust appeared to have missed the arteries. Marko pressed his palm against the wound to slow the flow of blood.

Prince Drago retrieved his own sword. “You damned traitor!” he screamed. “I told my father again and again that he should never let a commoner be captain of the guards. I told him you couldn’t be trusted, that you would betray us, and I was right. You’ll burn, Jovanovic. I’ll see that you do. You’ll burn.”

The prince gestured his men into the tower, dragging their prisoners, then followed them, and the door slammed shut behind them. Marko heard bolts thrown into place.

Running footsteps approached. Two guards came dashing around the corner and slid to a stop.

“Captain, what happened?”

Marko looked up grimly. The guards had their swords drawn. “One of you look after Damijan. Get him to a doctor. The other, help me get this door open.”

It took them ten minutes to break through the door, even with the help of the other guards who arrived shortly afterwards.

“Stay here,” Marko told them. “Arrest anyone who comes out. *Anyone.*”

He started up the darkened staircase alone. He was outnumbered, but it would have been wrong to take any of the other guards with him. They would be loyal to him, he was sure, but he did not want them to be accused of treason along with him.

Iztok and Mihael were waiting for him on the first landing, swords drawn. Marko lifted his own blade. In a low voice, he said, “If you attack me, I will kill you. You know I can. And there are twenty king’s guards at the foot of the stairs. If you value your loyalty to the prince more than your lives, attack. If not, put down your swords.”

The men exchanged uneasy glances. Then their swords clattered to the ground.

Marko continued up.

The stairs grew better lit as he climbed. There was no noise from above, but Marko was sure he was nearing the top of the tower. The North Tower was the highest in the castle, but he had already passed three floors of empty rooms. Surely there could be only one more floor. Cautiously, he rounded the last turn.

The stairs ended at an open doorway. Marko saw a room set out as an office, with a writing desk, two cabinets, a sideboard with wines and fruit, and several chairs. At the far end, a red curtain was drawn across a doorway. Marko heard faint sounds from beyond it, then a voice.

“He is here.” Marko did not recognize the voice.

“Then come in, Captain,” a second voice called. That was Prince Drago.

Marko pushed the curtain aside with the tip of his sword and stepped through. The room was appallingly hot. Four braziers blazed at the corners of a square. In the center of it stood a man in heavy black robes. Drago’s magician, Marko supposed, the man behind Padonia’s newfound power. To one side stood Prince Drago, and at the back of the room Justine and Princess Heléne lay unconscious on the floor. Spaced around the room, at intervals of no more than a couple of feet, were small stone statues of writhing, burning figures.

Drago’s face was running sweat and lined with pain. Had he hurt himself in the fight, Marko wondered? But despite the pain, Drago was smiling.

“Have you harmed the princess or her chaperone?” Marko asked.

Drago’s smile twitched, and his hands shook. Marko thought he could reach Drago before the man could draw his sword. But could he also reach the magician before the magician could hurt Justine or the princess? He wasn’t sure.

“No, Captain, you will be pleased to know that we have not yet had time. Do you want to know why?”

Cautiously, Marko said, “Why?”

“Because I asked my friend to do another thing for me first.” Again the twitch of pain from the prince. “I asked him to put a flame in my heart, Captain. I am a true prince of Padonia. With the flame in my heart, I hold the power to destroy any or all of those of Padonian blood who oppose me.”

Had Justine moved? Marko wasn't sure.

“Do you trust your magician so much, Drago? He holds the power, not you.”

Drago smiled. “And I hold his family. He will obey me. I will rule Padonia, and you, Captain Jovanovich, you will die.” He turned. “Burn him!”

Marko leapt forward, but too late. The magician raised his hand and spoke a single word. Heat rushed through Marko as though molten iron was being flushed through his veins. His body convulsed. His sword fell from his hand. He could hardly see.

As he fell to the floor, Marko stared up through weeping eyes at the black-robed figure.

The magician's hand began to close.

An inferno raged out of Marko's heart.

Then the magician folded and crumpled to the floor.



Justine lowered the stone statue, breathing hard. “Captain Jovanovic?”

Her voice came out as a croak. She cleared her throat and knelt down by him. Was she too late? He lay so still...

He blinked and raised his head. “Madame de Cherbignon.” He smiled faintly, but his face was still twisted with pain. “You grow more impressive every day. Is the magician dead?”

Justine glanced back, and swallowed. “I think so.”

“Good.” He took a deep breath and pulled himself up, supporting himself on his elbows. “And Drago?”

“Still alive, but not a danger at the moment.” She could hear the prince sobbing quietly in the corner. He had collapsed at the same instant that the magician fell. “Are you really all right, Captain?”

He gazed up at her, serious and unsmiling. “I am now,” he said. His voice felt like a caress against her skin.

Justine swallowed. She had told herself so many times over the past few days not to take his admiration seriously. He was flirt and a seducer. He wanted one thing and one thing only. But he had risked everything for her.

“Justine?”

Heléne’s voice squeaked out from the corner behind them. Justine hurried over to Heléne. How could she have forgotten her? She helped the princess stand up.

“Don’t worry, love, it’s all over now. The magician is dead.”

“What? You killed the magician?” Heléne’s voice was incredulous. “How could you? How could you be such a fool?”

“What are you talking about?” Justine stared at her. “Killing him saved both our lives! Now that he’s dead, there will be no more burning, no more—”

“Mother sent us here, arranged this entire marriage scheme, just so we could find out the source of Padonia’s magic. Now you’ve destroyed it, and Lourné will never have that power! You’re a traitor to our country.”

“But—”

“When I tell Mother what you’ve done, she’ll never ever forgive you.” Heléne wrapped her arms around her body and glared at Justine. “I’ll never forgive you. Lourné could have been the most powerful country in the world, if it weren’t for your stupidity.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Justine stepped back, swallowing down nausea. Queen Catherine, in charge of such magic... “In that case, I’m even more glad that he’s dead.”

“There have been enough burning bodies,” Captain Jovanovic said heavily.

“More than enough.” Justine turned to him, ignoring Heléne. “Do you think the king will be very angry at you?”

“Are you joking?” Captain Jovanovic stood up, wincing. “We’ve destroyed his pet magician. Padonia’s power is over. He’ll have my head.”

“Then we’re in the same situation.” She smiled tentatively at him. One life abandoned, a new one ahead... “I can’t return to Lourné, and you can’t stay here.”

The warmth in his eyes dazzled her.

“Shall we put the princess in one carriage and leave in another?” he said. “I can trust my men to create a distraction long enough for our escape.”

“You don’t think we’re too old for adventure?”

He held out his arm. “Would you like to find out?”

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Draw the Faithful to their Knees

...David L Felts and Ken Rand

Heath frowned as he knelt to examine the plants. Yellow mites scuttled over a half dozen finger-sized bean sprouts, a many-legged army assaulting the tiny towers. He glanced over the tidy rows throughout the field, where his fellow monks bent to their labors, brown robes already darkened from sweat at the back, neck and armpits, though the sun had risen barely a candle past.

The mites were devouring the sprouts to the stem.

He bent close, inhaling the rich scent of damp earth as he inspected the nearest plants. A few mites had only now started scuttling toward another cluster of sprouts a half a pace away.

Good. He'd caught the swarm at the start. That made it easier.

He made sure no one was watching before he closed his eyes and reached out with the Sense, his name for the special relationship he seemed to have with growing things. The Sense had always been there, light as a feather's touch at the back of his mind, but in the last year his awareness of it — and his ability to use it — had grown. So too had the danger of discovery. He had to be careful. The Sense was magic, and magic was the province of the Nine.

Calming himself with slow deep breaths, he opened his mind. The life surrounding him began to trickle in, swelling until it was a soothing flow of energy that filled him like cool water. He sifted through it until he found the mites, little sparks of yellow drifting against the dying young plants — *they should be green*. One by one, he grabbed the sparks and snuffed them out. When he opened his eyes, insect corpses littered the ground. And the sprouts stood strong, healthy, and green.

"Done," Heath murmured, a needle of guilt poking at him. The mites were living creatures only seeking a meal, but left unchecked they could destroy the crop. "*And we were given dominion over the Earth that we—*"

"Pardon?"

Heath's heart lurched in a panic. He looked up to see Twill, leaning on his hoe, wiping his brow on the rolled-up sleeve of his robe.

Did he see?

Heath kept his face smooth as he stood. Twill was his best friend, but deeply committed to the values of the Order. If he knew Heath could work magic... Heath didn't want to place Twill in a position requiring a choice.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself. A wonderful day, isn't it?" At his feet, a sudden, cool breeze blew the withered bug army away, like wheat husks.

"A wonderful day," Twill mocked. "I hate working out here."

"I know," Heath said. His panic faded once he decided Twill hadn't seen him destroy the mites. "You hate anything not on a page."

Twill struck a pose, stroking his narrow chin with long fingers. "I am, indeed, a great scholar."

Heath smiled. "Yet here you are, toiling with the unenlightened."

With an exaggerated sigh, Twill quoted, "Shun not the labor in the field, for the fruit of such nourishes both body and soul."

"You'll be glad of this day's labor when the beans are in the pot and flavored with pork fat and salt."

Twill licked his lips. Within his gaunt frame lurked hidden reserves of appetite. "I can taste them already."

From a few rows away, Brother Jered pointedly cleared his throat. With a roll of his eyes, Twill quickly moved off and attacked the ground with vigor.

Heath stepped to the head of a row near the road. If fortune smiled, he might spy a pretty farmer's daughter headed for the market in the nearby town of Horseford, bread basket bouncing on one hip, bare ankles flashing below long skirts, hair shining in the sun. He let himself dwell, just for a moment, on such shameful thoughts as he began turning weeds with short, practiced strokes.

The sun rose relentlessly hot. Heath was deep in the rhythm of his labor when a shadow fell across the ground in front of him. He looked up to see a young woman. She wore woolen trousers and a white linen shirt stained with sweat and dirt. A ragged brown cloak covered her narrow shoulders and blonde hair framed her thin face. Her eyes captured him, eyes green as new grass.

"Will you help me?" she croaked through dry, white lips. Her hands pressed to her stomach, where Heath now noticed her shirt bore a large rust-brown stain. He stared dumbly. Her eyes rolled up and she collapsed.

"By the Nine!" Heath swore, shocked into motion. He dropped his hoe and knelt at her side. She still breathed, but her dirt-smeared face was chalk-pale.

“Twill!” Heath’s lanky friend looked up, then dropped his hoe and ran over, careful not to step on the newly sprouted beans.

“What happened?” Twill scrubbed a hand over his short hair.

“I don’t know.” Heath patted the girl’s cheeks and rubbed her wrists. “I looked up and there she was. She asked for help, then fainted.” He plucked tentatively at her shirt. Most of the blood was old and dried, but some was fresh. “She’s bleeding, see?”

A shadow fell over her. Jered. “So, she is alive?” A frown of concern creased his high forehead.

“Yes,” Heath said, “but she’s injured. And she fainted.”

“Twill, fetch a wagon.”

Twill ran toward the abbey, his long-legged stride chewing up the distance. Others had noticed the commotion and began to crowd around, calling out suggestions.

“Raise her legs,” one called.

“No, raise her head.”

“Massage her neck!”

“Does anyone have any water?”

“Move back!” Heath waved an arm and glared. “Give her air!”

He returned his attention to the girl. He wished he’d read more of the abbey’s texts on healing rather than devoting his studies to agriculture. “Please don’t die,” he murmured, stricken by how young she looked, how peaceful, her face porcelain-smooth. She smelled of dried blood and sweat.

For a moment, he wondered if he could apply his Sense to her, as he did to plants. He was acutely aware of the monks surrounding him, of Brother Jered standing nearby. Yet what if he did have the power to heal her? What if she died because he failed to act? He couldn’t let that happen.

He closed his eyes and tried to summon the Sense, but it wouldn’t come. He was too nervous, too frightened. He concentrated on his breathing, and taking deep breaths. Finally, some of the tension drained away. The life surrounding him had just begun to seep into his awareness when Prosper clattered up on a flatbed cart.

Heath’s eyes jerked open and his Sense fled. The skin on the back of his neck prickled and he turned to see Jered quickly avert his gaze. A quiver of worry traced its way along Heath’s spine. Had he noticed?

He was pulled from such thoughts when Prosper halted the cart, climbed down, and waddled to Heath and the girl. An older man, and thick in the middle, Prosper was the abbey’s healer.

Twill jumped down, still panting. “Is she all right?”

“She’s still alive,” Heath said.

“Should we not go back to our labors?” Jered’s question was a command. He made shooing motions with his hands. “The field will not care for itself.”

With muttering and backward glances, the monks straggled back to their rows and tools. Twill was the last to leave.

“What happened?” Prosper grunted as he knelt by the girl’s head. Sweat shined on his cheeks.

Heath told him.

Lips pursed, Prosper pressed fingers to the girl’s throat and wrist. He plucked at her bloody shirt and pressed his hand to her forehead. “Her heart is strong, but she seems feverish, and I worry about infection. Too, she needs water, and food, from the look of her. You get the middle,” he told Heath, “and...” He looked around. The other monks had returned to their work. “Jered, please be so good.” He gestured toward the girl’s feet.

They stood, lifting her. Heath slid his arms beneath her lower back as they carried her to the cart. Her warmth seeped into his palms and forearms. She weighed so little. After laying her in the bed, Prosper huffed onto the driver’s seat. Heath gave the girl a lingering look, then jumped from the cart. He resolved to check in on her later.

“Where are you going?” Jered asked.

“Back to—”

“Who’s to accompany the girl?” Jered jumped to the ground, limber for a man of middle age. “Prosper must drive and I must supervise these layabouts. Would you let her fall off?”

Heath, mouth agape, climbed aboard the cart and knelt at the girl’s side. Prosper snapped the reins and the old mare lurched into motion.



When he got back to the abbey and Prosper had supervised moving the girl to his infirmary, Heath had been dismissed. “I’ve no need for you here,” the plump healer said. “You’ve escaped the field, but surely you have other duties? Lessons?”

Heath went to the library, but his mind wouldn’t stay on the page. Thoughts of the girl filled him. He still felt her warmth on his hands. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake his mind lose from such thoughts. Giving up on his books, he went to the kitchen, where he surprised the cook by volunteering to scrub pots and pans. With an expression of disbelief, Iago fed him a cold lunch of bread and ham and led him to a stiff brush and a tub full of work.

Hours later, hands red and wrinkled and stomach filled, Heath joined the other monks in the courtyard. They fidgeted, waiting for the tower bell.

The first bell note flowed down from the tower and across the courtyard like a great wind.

With a rustle of cloth, Heath and his brothers knelt. Foreheads touched the weathered brick as they recited evening prayer. The resonant bass tones of the tower bell punctuated their singsong chorus.

Heath murmured thanks — thanks to the Nine, to Earth, to Life, and to Those Above, thanks for food and shelter and companionship; a plea for strength and clear purpose, for health and understanding and compassion. *May we all walk Blessed in Life. Amen.*

Prayers complete, he rose and fairly ran to the infirmary. Aaron sat on a table, foot swollen with infection after he'd stepped on a sharp stick. Prosper was draining the wound. Aaron's face gleamed pale and sweaty, lips a thin line as he set his jaw against the pain. Except for them, the room was empty, the four low cots unoccupied.

Heath gazed about confused. Fear formed a knot in his stomach. Had she died? "Brother Prosper? Where is she?"

"Speak to Father Simon." Prosper squeezed yellow pus from Aaron's foot. Aaron hissed. The lines under Prosper's puffy jowls deepened in a frown. "Be still."

Father Simon? A sinking feeling settled into Heath's chest. "Why?"

Prosper fixed him with a baleful glare. "You'd do best to forget about her. Now go! I've work to do."

Heath backed from the room in surprise. Prosper spoke little, and Heath had never heard him raise his voice. What had upset the old healer so? Maybe she's died, he thought, as he hurried through the halls to Father Simon's study. The thick wooden door was shut. Heath took a breath to summon courage and knocked.

Father Simon's deep voice called. "Enter!"

Heath eased the door open enough to insert his head. "Father Simon?"

The old man raised his head, squinting. Parchments and scrolls covered his desk. "Come in, lad. Closer, so I can see you."

Father Simon's powerful voice was at odds with his age and he was anything but frail. Stringy muscles accented his whipcord thin frame. As needed, he worked the paddle on the abbey's more recalcitrant acolytes like a hero of old wielding a two-handed blade. Of this, Heath had personal knowledge.

"Well, what is it, my boy?"

Heath stepped inside and closed the door. He found himself clenching his robe, worrying the coarse cloth with his fingers.

"It's about the girl." He rushed on, the words tumbling out. "I'm the one who found her — I suppose you'd say she found me — and I wanted to check on her, but

she wasn't in the infirmary. And when I asked, Brother Prosper said I need speak to you."

Father Simon set aside his quill and leaned back with a sigh, reaching up to run a hand over his balding pate. "Come closer, please, Heath, so I don't have to strain." Heath obeyed, until he stood before Father Simon's desk. The monk squinted, worrying biting his thin lower lip with his teeth.

Heath fidgeted, the silence heavy. "Is she dead?" he blurted, unable to stand it any longer.

Father Simon's bushy brows rose. "No. She lost blood, but there is no poisoning. Prosper expects her to recover. She is young and strong."

"Where is she? Can I see her?"

"See her?" Father Simon paused, as if to gather his thoughts. "The situation is complicated, Heath. Complicated."

"I don't understand."

Father Simon pressed his hands on his desk and levered himself up. He was tall, age just now starting to bow his shoulders. "There are forces that — oh, bother!" He drew a deep breath. "We believe she is a sorceress, Heath."

Heath felt as though someone had hit him in the head with the paddle on the wall behind Father Simon's desk. "Magic?" he repeated numbly, trying not to think about his own abilities.

"Someone tried to carve a ward of protection over her center."

"A ward?" Heath's mouth was dry as toast. "What do you mean?"

Father Simon moved to the shelves along one wall. After a brief search, he withdrew a thick volume and began rifling the pages.

"This." He held the book open so Heath could see. On the page, in black ink, a round symbol crossed through with lines and marks. "A ward of protection. Such symbols are often seen over doorways or on walls. Witchcraft and superstition, left over from the Great War despite our efforts to educate and save the masses. They're supposed to protect against evil spirits. Someone tried to carve this into the girl's flesh."

Father Simon closed the book and replaced it on the shelf. "She had doubtless been exhibiting her ability in subtle ways until recently, when she must have done something that couldn't be ignored or explained. Such is often the case as one nears adulthood and the power becomes more pronounced. Someone tried the mark in hopes of turning the magic away. Even had they drawn the symbol aright, it wouldn't have helped. If a person has the ability to use magic..." Father Simon shrugged.

"It's like being short or tall. You either have it or you don't. From the look of her and the dried blood, she's been traveling a day or two. She could be from any one

of a dozen or more villages, or a hundred small farms. I'll send word to the Prelate in the morning. He will doubtless send an escort to return her to the Basilica in Hyaline. He and the rest of the Nine will perform the Assessment and make the final determination."

Final determination. The words chilled Heath. Such would be his fate, Heath knew, if he were discovered. "Father Simon, what if you're wrong? She's so...young. Can there be any danger in—"

"Read the Histories should you doubt the dangers of magic." Father Simon's gaze hardened. "Read accounts of the Great War and the Canons of the Ennead's Empowerment. Those who exhibit any hint of magical ability must be assessed. If they are worthy, they will be taught. If they are not, better we be rid of them before they cause mischief. Would you gainsay the Ennead this awesome task?"

Heath lowered his head, more to hide his anger than from contrition. He'd read the archives, and everyone knew about the Great War, although it had ended more than a century past. Still, magic was regarded with superstition and fear. Evil, despite the Ennead's victory in the Great War, lingered. Evil, everyone knew, manifested itself still — even in innocent village girls.

"Put the girl from your mind. I'm sure you have duties to attend to?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then see to them." Father Simon gave a dismissive wave.

Heath stalked from the room.



Heath tried to be silent, but the narrow wooden cot creaked as he shifted. Twill stirred on his own cot on the other side of the tiny room. Heath froze, then resumed moving as Twill's breathing deepened. He stood without further noise and eased the door open.

Only every sixth candle sputtered yellow light in the wall sconces in the narrow hall. At this hour, the abbey was silent. Rumor over the girl has spread. Heath had heard that Father Simon had ordered her held in a meditation chamber until the Prelate's contingent arrived. Hyaline was three days journey. Father Simon would send a messenger by horse in the morning so it would be at least six days before the escort arrived to take her back to the Ennead.

A faint noise made him catch his breath, but it didn't repeat. He wiped sweaty palms on his robe, remembering the last time he'd been caught out. Two years ago, he and Twill had sneaked into a storeroom to sample some ceremonial wine. They were

found passed out the next morning. Five strokes from Father Simon's paddle on top of a horrendous hangover had left an impression not easily forgotten.

The meditation chambers were on the far side of the abbey. Heath got there without incident, though his heart lurched at every sound and shifting shadow. He'd just look at her, he told himself, just to see that she was all right.

A stairwell loomed, leading down. At the bottom, he faced a long hall, unlit but for a sliver of moonlight through a high, narrow window at the far end. His breathing sounded loud enough to wake the dead.

The brothers here for true mediation wouldn't be locked in, but some of the younger acolytes endured forced meditation to help them reflect on their waywardness. If Father Simon's paddle proved ineffective, a few days alone with nothing but bread and water often helped an acolyte reaffirm his faith. Since none were undergoing such enlightenment at present, he had but to find a locked door.

The fifth on the right had the bolt shot. He peered through the thin slot between door and floor, used to slide food plates into the rooms. A faint light flickered. Father Simon must have provided a candle.

Heath lay on his stomach, face close to the slot.

"Hello?" he tried to whisper, but his mouth was too dry. He moistened his lips and tried again. "Hello?"

Someone stirred in the cell. A shadow approached. Heath tensed, ready to flee.

"Who's there?" A soft voice, but fraught with fear.

Her warmth seeped through the slot and engulfed Heath's heart. "I'm— I'm Heath. From the field this morning?"

"The field...? Oh."

"Are you...are you all right?"

"As right as I can be," she said bitterly, "locked in a cell and awaiting the Nine knows what." Cloth rustled. Heath saw a pale sliver of skin and one eye as she pressed her face to the slot.

"I'm sorry," Heath said.

"Why am I locked in here?"

"Didn't they tell you?"

"They've told me nothing. I remember asking you for help and then waking up on a cot while an older man was bandaging me. He looked frightened. As soon as he finished, two other men put me on a litter and carried me here."

"What happened? How were you hurt?"

She hesitated. "I don't want to talk about it."

Heath drew a deep breath to steady himself. "They say you have magic."

"What do you mean?" Her voice quavered.

“Someone tried to carve a ward of protection into your stomach to turn your magic away.”

“You’re lying!”

“Shhh!” Heath looked down hall in alarm. “If I get caught talking to you—”

“It’s not my fault!” Her sob surprised him.

“What happened?”

“My father did it.” Haltingly, she told him. Her brothers had held her down. She had cried out, but her mother — *her own mother* — turned away. Her father cut her, praying all the while, as did her brothers and mother. Her brothers and mother had prayed while she screamed. She’d ran away as soon as she could, that night, still bleeding. She took nothing with her. That was two days past.

“Why did he hate me so?” She sounded hollow, spent.

“He didn’t hate you,” said Heath. “He was trying to save you. He thought the mark would keep you safe, but even if he’d gotten the mark right, it wouldn’t have helped.”

“I don’t have magic, Heath. Our cows were sick. We have but two and if they had died, the winter will would be hard. But they didn’t die. They got better. But...”

A long pause followed.

“But?”

“Our neighbor’s cows were sick too. And they died. The questions started. My own family wouldn’t look me in the eyes.”

“What did you do?”

She glanced away. “Nothing. I fed them, I...talked to them. They got better.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes,” she whispered, though her eyes gave lie to the word and Heath knew, then and there, that she was what Father Simon claimed. That she was the same as he.

“I’m sorry.” It was all he could say, though he wanted to tell her that he understood. That he knew what she had done and that it didn’t make her evil. *I’m like you*, he wanted to say, but he dared not.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“Father Simon sent notice to the Prelate,” Heath said. *How harsh the words sound, how scared she must be.* “The Ennead will send representatives to take you back to Hyaline, where you will be assessed.”

“Assessed?” Fear made her voice high and thin. “I don’t understand.”

“Magic is power, and as history has shown, not all individuals can be trusted with power. When someone has the ability to use magic, the Ennead must determine their nature, their character. Can they be trusted with such power? Can they be...taught? The Empowerments of the Ennead demand this assessment be made.” Heath shook

his head. He'd been reciting Brother Gram's lectures. "At least, that's what we've been taught," he finished.

"But you know more than that, don't you?"

Heath licked his lips, not wanting to frighten her further, but not wanting to lie. "Rumors, only. Not all people are suited to the burden of power. Those that aren't, might be...reformed, and those that can't be reformed... As to the assessment, it seeks the smallest particles of being. What makes us who we are? What drives us to make the choices we make? How will we choose in the future? Everything must be examined, no stone left unturned."

"I don't understand. Tell me, Heath," she pleaded, "what's going to happen."

"If you have magic and can be taught, you will be taught. If you have magic and can't be taught, you will be...will be..." He didn't want to put it into words, but from her intake of breath, he knew she understood. She didn't ask what would happen if it was found that she had no magic.

Suddenly, Heath envisioned himself before the Nine. "I'm *not* evil," he'd say. But would they be convinced? From the moment he'd felt the Sense, he'd toyed with going for an assessment, volunteering. But fear always overturned such thoughts.

What if? Fear of what he'd find.

She pressed her face to the slot in the door, interrupting his thoughts. "Help me, Heath. Let me out and I swear I'll never come back."

His breath froze in his chest. Let her out? The thought near paralyzed him. He glanced up at the bolt — it would take but a moment to pull it back and open the door. But he couldn't imagine the consequences should he get caught. Let her out? "Father Simon would —"

"You're my only hope! When I saw you and the other monks in the fields... I went to you because I sensed in you...something. Say I wasn't wrong. Please."

Heath shook his head as his resolve weakened. "It's not for me to decide."

"Help me, Heath. Please."

Heath closed his eyes. "I've got to think." He stood before she could say more and hurried away.



Heath walked at Jered's side to the fields the next morning.

"I spoke with Father Simon about the girl," Heath said. He needed to talk to someone, to sort his confused thoughts. Jered always seemed to be there when Heath needed an ear.

Jered glanced at him but said nothing, his stride long and sure.

“He said—”

“He said she has magic,” Jered interrupted.

“But she is so young.”

“Only a summer or two younger than your own sixteen seasons.”

He tried another tack, choosing his words carefully. “That she has magic has yet to be proved.”

“It is not our job to do the proving.” Jered stopped and Heath almost bumped into him.

“But that she should be taken and subjected to whatever the Ennead decides to do.” Heath swallowed, realizing he was on the edge of insubordination. “It doesn’t seem right.”

“Powerful words, Brother Heath.” Jered held up a finger. “Think hard on what this means.” He leaned close, gaze and words intense. “Know you that they would do the same for anyone so suspected. *Anyone.*”

With that, the elder monk turned on his heel and hurried away.

Anyone, Heath thought with shiver of fear. *Including me.*



“It’s not right, Twill,” Heath said the next day. After a morning in the fields followed by lunch, they hunched over their books in the library, whispering. “About the girl, I mean.”

Twill glanced up from his book. “It’s not our concern.”

“She’s only a girl, and she’s hurt and scared. They’re keeping her prisoner. The Prelate’s men will be here soon and they’re going to take her away.”

“To determine the truth.”

Heath’s snort drew a glare from Brother Gram. Heath lowered his voice. “The Assessment may destroy her.”

“Father Simon is doing what needs to be done.”

“She’s just a farm girl, Twill. I talked to her. And I’m telling you it’s—”

Twill’s eyes widened. “You talked to her?”

Heath cursed himself for letting that slip out. “The other night. I snuck down—”

“Be careful, Heath. If Father Si—”

“It’s not fair,” Heath repeated.

“It’s not our decision, Heath. They have to be sure. After the Great War—”

“She came to me for help.”

“She came to you because you were closest to the road.”

“I feel...responsible.” Heath stared at his hands. I feel as though it could be me in that room.

“Heath, Father Simon took us in, gave us a home, and food. We’ve been taught how to read, to do sums. We live in harmony and our salvation is assured. We live simple lives and we help folk. How can you think Father Simon would do something he didn’t think was right?”

“Just because he thinks it’s right doesn’t mean it is.”

Twill reached out and wrapped long fingers around Heath’s wrist in a tight grip. “And because you think it’s wrong doesn’t mean it is. Let it go.” Twill released his grip and turned his attention back to his book.

Heath bit back an angry reply as he rubbed the red marks on his wrist. He stared at the page before him but didn’t see the words. He should have known better than to try to talk about this with Twill. For all his intelligence, Twill could be remarkable closed-minded. No matter. He’d made up his mind.



The half-moon remained veiled, a glow behind gauzy clouds. Just enough light, but no more. The door opened silently. A glance showed Twill sprawled on his back, snoring. Heath eased the door shut. His heart thumped and his hands shook as he snuck through the silent, deserted halls.

To the stairwell and down. Fifth door on the right.

He rested his hand on the bolt. Indecision caught up with him, twisted his stomach so hard he thought he might throw up. Some things, he realized — perhaps for the first time — once made, could not be unmade. It wasn’t too late. He could return to his bed. Who was he, an Acolyte of barely sixteen years, to second-guess Father Simon? To second-guess the way things had been for a century?

He shook his head. No. He had made up his mind. For better or worse.

A final breath — he eased the bolt back. It made a faint rasping noise. Once it cleared the bracket, he opened the door wide enough to slip inside.

The girl lay on the narrow cot, face toward a slit in the wall. The candle on the small table next to the cot had burned down to a puddle and lay cold, unlit. By the faint moon glow seeping through the narrow window, Heath saw that she had washed. Her blonde hair gleamed and her face was clean. He crept closer, staring, drinking in every detail. They had given her a brown robe to replace her stained clothes. He stood over her, feeling the warmth seeping out of her.

She stirred. Her eyes cracked open, then flew wide. She opened her mouth, but Heath clamped a hand over it.

“It’s me — Heath.”

She blinked, tension draining from her body.

“Are you all right?”

At her nod, Heath removed his hand.

“You scared me,” she said, glaring.

“Sorry.” Heath’s cheeks warmed.

She rose from the cot so fast he stumbled back. “I knew you’d come back.” She hugged him, then stepped away, wincing. “It’s still sore.” She indicated her stomach.

Heath cleared his throat, still feeling the pressure of her arms, her body against his. “We must hurry.” He hesitated. “I— I don’t know your name.”

“Miri.” She took his hand and offered a small smile. Her hands were rough, callused. A working girl’s hands, the hands of one who knew the earth. Hands like his own.

Miri. A joyful name that made him think of spring and celebration. Heath couldn’t help but return her smile.

Her hand in his, he led the way from the cell and down the hall. They climbed the stairs and hurried through the silent abbey.

“This way,” Heath whispered when they came to an intersection, tugging Miri after him.

They turned the corner...

Heath stopped, cold blossoming in his chest, stealing his breath. His limbs grew weak. Monks blocked the hall. Among them...

“Twill?”

His friend wouldn’t meet Heath’s gaze. He stared at the floor as Gram and Father Simon approached and grabbed Miri’s arms. Knurl and Marcus, two of the stoutest acolytes, seized Heath.

“Put him in a chamber,” Father Simon said. The frown he turned on Heath shone with disappointment. Then he and Brother Gram began to drag Miri away.

“No!” she cried, twisting in their grip, fear and panic bright in her eyes. “I didn’t do anything! Let me go! No!” She reached out toward Heath, imploring. “Heath!”

A halo of golden light burst from her, raging through the hall like a hot wind. Father Simon and Brother Gram were hurled against the walls. Knurl and Marcus let go of Heath, shielding their eyes.

The light engulfed Heath, and he closed his eyes against it. Goose bumps rose on his skin. Something within him surged up, anxious for release, almost overwhelming him with the intensity of its coming. Heath shuddered as his Sense gathered, seething. He reeled, gasping.

No!

If he lost control now it would he would be discovered; mean his doom. As quickly as it appeared, the urge fled, leaving his skin tingling and a core of glowing warmth in his middle. He drew deep breaths, willing calm.

Blinking away spots that blurred his vision, Heath saw Miri take two staggering steps and collapse. Knurl and Marcus stood opened-mouthed in surprise while Heath hurried to her. Her eyes were closed, but she breathed.

Father Simon groaned and sat up. His face, hands, and neck had shaded to an angry red. White blisters dotted his forehead and cheeks. Smoke wisps curled from his robe.

He struggled to his feet, leaning against the wall. The flickering candlelight illuminated his face, turning it to a stone mask. "You see?" The elder monk spoke in a strained voice. "Do you see now the danger she poses?"

Heath met the older monk's angry glare with one of his own. "I saw a girl lash out in fear. Do you blame a kitten for scratching the hand that strikes it?"

"Put him in a meditation chamber," Father Simon said.

Knurl and Marcus again grabbed Heath's arms. He did not resist as they led him away.

"I did it to help you!" Twill called. "Heath!"

Heath glanced back to see Father Simon and Gram pick up Miri. He refused to look at Twill, his closest and oldest friend. Twill, who had betrayed him. His stomach twisted and bile rose in his throat.



A week later, on the afternoon of his release, Heath sought out Jered. He found the older monk in the herb garden behind the abbey. Heath dropped to his knees and dug his fingers in the fresh dirt, inhaling its sweet smell. He had been too long in a stone chamber, away from earth and sky. They pulled weeds in companionable silence while Heath sorted his thoughts.

"There is knowing and there is faith," Heath finally said. "Miri, despite her ability, is innocent. Of guile, of evil. This I know. But I have no faith that it matters to the Nine."

When Jered made no reply, Heath continued, speaking the words he had rehearsed so often over the last week. "It would seem the Nine don't consider person or circumstance. Their focus seems as narrow as a blade, and as dangerous."

"Some," Jered said after a long pause, "in their eagerness to protect, forget who it is they are supposed to keep safe." He pointed to a mint plant crusted brown at the edges. "Touch this."

“What? Why do you—”

“Touch it and heal it.” When Heath again opened his mouth to protest, Jered raised a hand. “I know, after having long suspected. It’s what I do, keeping watch for those such as you. Were I to act, for good or bad, I would have done so before now, but some decisions must be reached without intervention. Some lessons must be learned. Or ignored.”

Heath took a tiny leaves between thumb and forefinger. The plant felt warm and vibrant. Life tingled through his fingers, flowing like warm water. He reached through the leaf, down through its roots and into the dirt, feeling the spirit of the Earth and pulling it back into the plant.

When he took his fingers away, the plant showed vibrant green, all traces of brown gone.

Jered stood, brushing dirt from hands and knees. “The gift is innate, but its application requires practice and training.

“The Nine’s path is but one. Should you choose another path, your first step should be to seek out a man named Rigor in Horseford. He is a healer, though it is not his potions and balms that cure, as he would have his patients believe. He knows others who would help you.” He paused, then added, “I ask that you not mention my name.”

He strode away, leaving Heath kneeling in the dirt.



That evening, Heath stood in the courtyard with the other monks, waiting for the bell. He rubbed at the dusting of stubble on his cheeks. A soft breeze carried the earthy scent of the fields, orchards, and gardens — the turned earth around the abbey on every side. The smooth stone, still warm, soothed his feet through his thin sandals. The sun had dipped below the abbey wall, its final rays painting the sky orange and crimson. The few clouds glowed, spun of silver thread.

As he waited, Heath thought of the carriage, of Miri’s plaintive cries as it had clattered from the courtyard with her imprisoned within. The two the Nine had sent had been grim-faced and lean, a man and a woman, both with shaven heads, both dressed in red robes, one with gold trim, the other with silver. Their eyes held a chilling luminescence, locked behind a blank and inhuman stare. Four mounted men-at-arms in chain armor escorted them. Father Simon’s hand had been tight on Heath’s arm, making him watch.

The two had emerged from the abbey, Miri between them, cocooned in a soft blue glow — some sort of magic defense, Heath gathered, cast to contain her. Flickers of

gold sparked from her skin to swirl around the edges of the globe, and her wide eyes darted about in fear. She had glanced up and Heath had met her frightened gaze.

He shuddered at the memory.

It could have been me in that carriage. It still could be.

The first note fell from the tower bell like a great wind and he shivered. The monks knelt, the sound drawing them down as surely as stones tied to their limbs.

Heath resisted the urge to kneel, remaining upright as he stared at the sky, remembering Miri's tear-streaked face in the carriage's barred window. Whatever doubt remained had vanished in that soulful, luminous stare.

Another note rolled down, the tone resonating in his chest. The monk's bowed backs made the courtyard look like a field of brown humps.

They had become strangers.

A great empty hole opened inside him. This was his home, this was his family, and it was gone. He would never again know the comfort of the abbey's walls, the companionship and joy he had shared with his brothers. Everything he held dear was lost, vanished like fog before the sun. As much as he wanted, he could not stay. In a week, or a month, or a year, that carriage would be back, and it would be he who rode within, headed to Hyaline to be the Ennead's clay.

The final note echoed off the walls and faded, replaced by the low murmur of chanting voices. His eyes stung. A sob formed, but he held it back. Even as he wished that things would be the same, he knew they never could be.

Some things, once done, could never be undone. Some decisions, once made, could not be unmade.

He broke from the ranks and strode toward the gate.

"Heath!"

Heath paused and looked back.

Twill stood, pain and pride, envy and fear, all showing on his face. "I'm sorry, Heath."

Heath looked for the sense of betrayal he expected, but didn't find it. Twill had done what he believed was right, what he had been taught. He was a good monk. He had been a good friend. Heath lifted a hand in farewell, smiling at Twill's relieved expression.

The murmuring rhythm voices faltered as other monks raised their heads to stare.

Father Simon's voice was stern. "Your prayers will not wait."

Slowly, with lingering stares, the monks returned to their devotions. Father Simon's gaze touched on Heath, then slid away, sad and resigned. He lowered his forehead to the stones.

Jered stared longer, expression inscrutable, eyes shadowed. His thin hand moved beneath the sleeve of his sleeve. Slightly. A farewell.

Exhilaration and fear thrumming in his blood, Heath turned and strode through the open gate.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Ken Rand

History and Writing Credits: Ken Rand resides in Utah with his family. He is a Writers of the Future winner. He's written and sold more than 70 short stories and countless articles. Nonfiction books: *The 10% Solution: Self-Editing For the Modern Writer*, *From Idea to Story in 90 Seconds: A Writer's Primer*, and *The Editor Is IN*. Novels: *Phoenix*, *Fairy BrewHaHa at the Lucky Nickel Saloon*, and the *Golems of Laramie County*. Story collections: *Tales of the Lucky Nickel Saloon*, *Bad News From Orbit*, and *Through Wyoming Eyes*. His working and living philosophy: Lighten up.

And Then

by Suzanne Palmer

**“Well, that’s done it,”
said the Cat.**

**“The humans have gone and sublimed.
This leaves us, relying solely upon ourselves,
to carry civilization forward in their absence;
to push forth the boundaries of science;
to take up the mantle of literature and art;
to set our own pawprints in the sands of the universe.
In short, my fellow furry friend,
we are on our own.”**

Dog considered Cat’s words.

**“So,”
he said carefully,
and after much thought.
“I see what you mean.
My ball is under the sofa,
and my bone beneath the china hutch.
I get my breakfast at seven,
and then if you don’t mind walking me right after,
I do believe everything shall be fine.”**

All Things Being Equal

...Karen Danylak

Hironus reached for the last book with trepidation, brushing the dust off the cover with a gnarled hand. In all his years of service he'd never gone back so far in the archives. He tottered back to his wooden bench. His hands shook from the weight of the large tome, but he managed to set it on his desk without mishap. Its charts were complex; the genealogies ancient, but Hironus was a master archivist and navigated the tangled maze of lineages with ease.

He frowned as he turned the delicate, yellowing pages with care. As he perused the final page he let out a gasp. It couldn't be. Hironus squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, certain it must be his failing eyesight, but the page remained the same. "Great Lady above," he whispered, unable to keep himself from speaking the words aloud, "They're absolutely equal. They cannot marry."

He stared at the book in disbelief, unable to stir. His finding was without precedent. For hundreds of years, the lower ranked partner in Alserrian society had joined the higher ranked partner's house. If a couple held equal rank, their parents' rank was used as a determinant and so on, back through the generations. Only the rarest cases required a genealogy past grandparents. Hironus had checked thirteen generations to the earliest records but nothing could change the unpalatable conclusion. Lady Kyrin and Lord Stepano ranked utterly equal.

The soon-to-be unhappy couple were sitting upstairs with their parents, awaiting his verdict. Hironus shuddered, unsure of what he was going to say. He could only hope that cooler heads would prevail. It was a slender chance at best; cool heads and touchy nobles rarely went together. This had started out as such a pleasant day. Why in the name of the Lady hadn't he assigned this genealogy to a journeyman? Hironus felt his conscience twinge at that thought. Shirking duty wasn't part of his nature.

Enough prolonging the inevitable; he gathered up his notes and forced himself to stop clutching nervously at his robes on his way to the stairs.

He emerged onto the main floor from the archive vaults, his thoughts racing at a feverish pace. Surely there was some way out of this. He could lie and say

there was a tiny inequality in the thirteenth generation. He dismissed that thought immediately. Even if he could have chosen between Kyrin and Stepano, his very soul rebelled at flouting hundreds of years of tradition. Hironus sank down on one of the cushioned benches that lined the wide hall and buried his face in his hands. He was an archivist, a simple man, and this situation had him completely out of his depth.

“Master Hironus! Are you well?” A solicitous hand touched his shoulder and he uncovered his face. Lady Kyrin’s grey eyes peered intently at him.

Taking a deep breath, Hironus said, “I am well milady, however I...perhaps it is best if you hear this all together.” He could see Kyrin’s mind working at this statement, along with the start of sorrow in her eyes. Hironus offered her his arm and they continued down the hall to the small reception room where the rest of the party waited.

Both the Gavrisi and Koroth families looked up when he entered the room. Stepano Gavrisi jumped to his feet and said, “Well? Where are our papers?”

Hironus swallowed hard. Once he said the words there would be no going back. “I cannot, well that is, I am afraid I am not able to sign your genealogical dispensation. You are both equal.” Hironus hung his head. He felt a strange, personal failure, even though he knew he was upholding the law.

There was a moment of shocked silence and then the room erupted.

“There must be a mistake! Check your mouldering records again, old man!” Stepano shouted. His face had darkened to an angry red and Hironus involuntarily took a few steps back.

“Do you mean we’ve put up with our son contracting with a Koroth for nothing?” said Lady Gavrisi, punctuating her words with snaps of her fan, which earned her a withering glare from Kyrin’s mother.

“Master Hironus, are you truly certain?” asked Kyrin. Her eyes were now visibly moist.

“He’s made a mistake,” said Stepano, slapping the back of one hand against the other palm for emphasis.

Hironus drew himself up and fished a sheaf of papers out of one voluminous sleeve, holding them out like a shield. “Lord Stepano,” Hironus said with cold precision, “I am the senior archivist and a master of genealogy. I have researched both your families back thirteen generations and you are equal. You are welcome to confer with one of the junior archivists but they will only confirm my findings.” Stepano flung himself back into his chair, cloaking himself in an air of affronted dignity.

Hironus turned to Lady Kyrin, now seated with her parents. “I’m sorry, milady. I would have liked to wish you joy in your marriage, but I am sworn to uphold Her Majesty’s laws.”

“Why that’s it!” blurted Lord Korothe, who had been silent up to this moment. All heads turned to look at the slender, unassuming man. “Kyrin and Stepano are in love. We will petition the Queen.” Murmurs of approval and hopeful looks greeted this suggestion.

Now Hironus understood why both families were willing to go to such lengths. Alserrians were nothing if not hopeless romantics, often going to ridiculous extremes in matters of love. In his long ago youth there had been an epidemic of broken bones when climbing trellises to serenade one’s love on her balcony had been all the rage. Caught up in the renewed cheerfulness, he said, “There is a fairly obscure statute that allows Her Majesty to grant additional titles as a reward for great service to the kingdom. It was intended to allow commoners to be ennobled but perhaps—”

“I can perform some great deed and gain another title!” interrupted Stepano.

“And why should Kyrin not be the one to do this?” asked Lady Korothe.

“A Korothe, serve the throne?” sneered Lady Gavrisi.

“Mother, please—”

“I should have expected a Gavrisi to—”

As both families descended into squabbling, Hironus took the opportunity to leave the room. He’d had his fill of duty today. Cowardly it might be, but he was going to claim the privilege of rank and have one of his journeymen escort the quarrelling nobles out.



It was only mid-morning and Queen Elendra’s backside was already asleep. Her father taught her that a throne shouldn’t be too comfortable. Halfway through her weekly session of petitions she was considering throwing royal wisdom to the winds and installing a plump cushion beneath her.

Smiling brightly at the dour man standing beside her, Elendra said, “Gareth, I don’t suppose you could bring me—”

“No.” Her first counsellor Gareth had no sense of humour sometimes.

Elendra let out a great, put-upon sigh but he wasn’t taking the bait. “Very well. Who’s next?”

“The Korothe and Gavrisi heirs.” He scanned the petition, then summarized it in a dispassionate voice. “They are in love and want to marry but are equal and beg your majesty’s assistance.”

Elendra raised one eyebrow. “Equal? Is that even possible?”

“According to the senior archivist, yes, back as far as the earliest records,” said Gareth.

Elendra leaned forward, resting her chin in one hand. “How delightfully intriguing! Strange enough that the heirs of feuding houses should fall in love, and now this.”

“Love is an eternal mystery.” The corners of Gareth’s mouth curved upwards in the tiniest of smiles.

“Quoting Renlan? I never realized you were a romantic,” she teased him fondly. This day was turning out to be full of surprises. Elendra tapped her index finger against one cheek. “But how can I make them unequal...no wait, of course, the statutes of Elsara.” She beamed. This was much more entertaining than the guild nonsense or contract disputes she usually had to deal with.

Gareth didn’t seem to share her delight. He had started frowning as soon as she mentioned the statutes. “Your majesty,” he lectured, “if you allow one or both of these two to earn an additional title, your entire nobility will demand the right to do the same. You’ll be besieged with petitions,” he said, crossing his arms in a way that reminded her of her childhood tutors when she forgot a lesson.

Lady above, but the man knew how to deflate her when he wanted to. At times like this Elendra was certain Gareth derived great satisfaction from finding the flaws in her plans. There had to be a way to solve this without creating a nightmare of inconvenience for herself.

“I know! Iseline,” Elendra said, smiling triumphantly.

“Your majesty?” Gareth scanned the petition again, trying to figure out what her cousin Iseline had to do with the matter.

“No one will come begging to serve the crown if I give these two something sufficiently difficult and annoying to do. Rescuing my twit of a cousin Iseline qualifies on both counts. I did promise her brothers that the crown would assist them, didn’t I?” Elendra crossed her arms and smiled sweetly. Two could play this game.

A familiar, pained expression had fixed itself on Gareth’s face. “You did, your majesty.”

“Well this is how the crown chooses to assist. Summon the petitioners please.” Elendra arranged herself into her best dignified monarch posture. Shaking his head, Gareth walked over to the door and said a few quiet words to the herald on duty. As soon as Gareth had returned to his place, the large gilded door was pulled open and the herald announced Kyrin and Stepano with three sharp raps of his staff against the parquet floor.

Elendra watched the couple closely as they approached. For a pair of lovers they walked unusually far apart, as if to avoid touching. They stopped the requisite three feet away from her and performed flowery obeisances.

“We have considered your petition. Rise and hear our decision,” Elendra said in plummy tones. “Your offer to serve the crown is most timely. Our dear cousin Iseline has been abducted by an *ilkra* and taken to its lair in the Kaspir hills.” Elendra noticed Kyrin’s eyes narrow and decided she’d better scale it back a touch. Everyone at court knew the queen thought Iseline was a twit. “Return our cousin to us and you will be granted the baronetcy of Trevant,” Elendra finished, in a closer approximation of her normal speaking voice.

“I would be honoured to perform this task for your majesty,” said Stepano, making a florid and drawn-out bow. Elendra hardly noticed because watching irritation flash across Kyrin’s face as Stepano spoke was much more entertaining. All was definitely not well between them.

Elendra dismissed the couple with a wave of her hand and they backed away, keeping their distance as before. As soon as the door had shut, she turned to her first counsellor. “Gareth, did they seem very in love to you?”

“They seemed rather upset, but who wouldn’t be in such an awful situation?.” Gareth stroked his chin. “No doubt the adversity will strengthen their affection,” he said rather injudiciously.

Elendra smiled to herself. It was too much to resist. “Would you care to make a small wager?”



Kyrin crouched behind a dense thicket of bushes in the Kaspir Hills. She was confused and angry at Stepano’s continuing insistence that the rescue was nothing she should concern herself with. Damn the man and his Gavrisi pride. They had argued bitterly in the anteroom before and after their audience, much to the amusement of the other petitioners. What had started as an illicit romance in defiance of their families’ history seemed less romantic now.

Kyrin shook off her thoughts of Stepano and tried to concentrate on the task at hand. She had left her horse hobbled near a small stand of trees and was trying to approach the *ilkra*’s cave as quietly as possible. She bit down on a yelp as a thorn gouged her right calf. *Adventurers in the songs never have to deal with thorns*, thought Kyrin sourly.

While Stepano rushed out of the city with a few of his house guards, Kyrin had paid a visit to Master Hironus. The archivist had been more than happy to help her find what she had been looking for in the records. *Ilkra* were magical creatures, reputed to

possess a high degree of intelligence and unlikely to attack humans unless they were threatened first. What this one wanted with Iseline, only the Lady above knew.

Kyrin glanced down the trail. She had managed to overtake Stepano by cutting across country but she didn't know how much of a lead she had. If she was going to make a rescue attempt before he arrived, it would have to be now.

The cave mouth was a giant black maw, devoid of any signs of life except for a fetid stench that made her eyes burn. The *ilkra* was definitely in there. Iseline probably was too, although chances were she'd passed out from the smell. Kyrin could have lived the rest of her days without getting any closer to that cave, but so long as she kept her sword sheathed it should be safe.

She stepped cautiously out from the cover of the bushes, trying to make as little noise as possible. She'd only taken a few steps when the ground began to tremble. The gods-cursed *ilkra* was coming out of its cave. So much for sneaking up on it. "Iseline! Can you hear me? Are you in there?" Kyrin figured calling out couldn't be that threatening to the creature, but she made ready to bolt just in case.

"Is someone there? Help me!" called a shrill, feminine voice.

Before Kyrin could decide on a useful plan of action, the *ilkra* poked its scaly brown head out of the cave mouth and cocked it at her curiously. Kyrin struggled not to laugh. It reminded her of a large version of the garden lizards she used to keep as pets. Without really thinking, she scolded it like she would any of her pets. "You're a very naughty creature, you know. Kidnapping an innocent girl and frightening her family half to death. Let her go this instant!"

For a moment, the *ilkra* looked ashamed but then its whole posture changed to one of menace. It charged forward, sending a stream of venom hurtling over Kyrin's shoulder. She jumped out of the way but a cry of pain made her turn.

One of Stepano's guards lay on the ground, his armour sizzling where the venom was corroding the metal. A loaded crossbow lay in the dirt by his side. Stepano leapt off his horse, sword drawn.

"Get out of the way, Kyrin. Let me take care of this foul creature." Kyrin wondered why she ever had found his arrogance endearing.

"No." Praying her instincts were right, she drew her sword and settled into a defensive stance in front of the *ilkra*.

Stepano looked her up and down, his disgusted glare making her acutely conscious of the dirt, scratches and leather armour she was wearing. "Have you lost your wits, woman?"

"Actually, I think I've finally found them again." Kyrin grinned at him. "The only witless one now is you," she added, amazed to realize that she really wanted to fight him.

Stepano rushed at her with an inarticulate growl. As she parried his furious blows, the *ilkra* watched them, fascinated. At least it wasn't spitting venom anymore.

"When are you going to realize you can't solve everything with your sword?" Kyrin panted out the words. "The blood of an *ilkra* corrupts its killer."

"Listening to old wives' tales, are you? My mother was right. Koroths are all lackwits!" he screamed at her, redoubling his efforts.

"I must have been a lackwit to ever want to marry you!" Kyrin finally saw an opening and disarmed Stepano with a twist of her sword. Her pleasure at the victory was short-lived. A dishevelled woman in a ragged blue dress tackled her from one side, screeching and slapping at her.

"You insane harpy! Stop attacking my rescuer!" It was the same shrill voice from the cave. Iseline must have taken advantage of the confusion to make her escape. Stepano quickly grabbed Iseline and dragged her to his horse. He vaulted the two of them into the saddle and galloped down the trail, retainers in tow, before Kyrin or the *ilkra* could do anything.

Kyrin lay in the dirt, stunned, wondering how her life had become an utter ruin in the span of a couple of days. She had just fought a duel with her betrothed, been attacked by the woman she was trying to rescue and let Stepano get away with Iseline. She had no idea how she was ever going to show her face at court again. Even worse, she'd been in love with a Gavrisi — a pompous oaf of a Gavrisi at that. A few hot tears trickled down her cheeks. Kyrin closed her eyes. Maybe if she lay there for a while the *ilkra* would eat her and put her out of her misery.

The *ilkra* stench was suddenly much stronger. Before she could open her eyes, a rough, slimy tongue licked her cheeks clean of tears. Kyrin tensed, waiting for her head to get bitten off. Instead, she heard an odd pop, followed by an immediate reduction in the stink.

"Kyrin? Kyrin, it's alright, open your eyes," said a diffident male voice. She knew that voice. It sounded exactly like Duke Vantir's son. But Owain Vantir had disappeared two months ago while traveling to school in Cortiali. She opened her eyes and sure enough, a familiar set of blue eyes was peering down at her.

"Owain? Where's the *ilkra*? Am I dead?" she asked suspiciously.

Owain chuckled. "You're not dead, silly. I was the *ilkra* but your tears saved me."

"My tears. I see. I'm not dead, I've just lost my mind." Kyrin closed her eyes again. She'd always thought going insane would be more dramatic.

Owain let out an exasperated sigh. "The tales are true, Kyrin. If you kill an *ilkra* you become one. Only drinking sorrow can set you free."

Kyrin sat up. "How did you, no, *why* in the name of the Lady did you kill an *ilkra*?"

Owain seemed very interested in a pebble on the ground. “Well?”

“It was Iseline,” he said, after a long pause. “She knew I was going away and asked me to prove my love for her. I didn’t know what would happen, but she obviously did, because when I woke up as an *ilkra* she stood in front of me laughing. I thought if I kept her here long enough she might feel remorse and cry.” He almost made it sound reasonable.

“You thought you could make Iseline Corvy cry?” Kyrin asked in disbelief.

“Okay, it was stupid,” Owain said, flushing. “I couldn’t even terrorize her into shedding a single tear. Was that your betrothed you were fighting?” It was a blatant attempt at subject changing, but Kyrin let it go since Owain had hardly had the monopoly on stupidity lately.

“Yes, unfortunately. Love seems to have made me into a fool too,” she said, patting his hand. Kyrin chewed on one lip, thinking about Stepano riding off with Iseline. “I wish Stepano joy of Iseline though,” she continued, “I think they’re made for each other.”

“Maybe sometime we could...” Owain trailed off when she glared at him. Kyrin groaned inwardly. Men.

“You know, your family has been searching for you for a month. Maybe we should head back.” Kyrin unclasped her cloak and handed it to Owain. “And you do realize that you’re not wearing much in the way of clothes, don’t you?”



Queen Elendra shifted her weight from side to side as she sat on her throne, uncomfortable as ever. “How many are left, Gareth?” she asked, trying valiantly not to sound petulant.

“Just one, your majesty,” said Gareth, with a devastated look on his face.

That made her take notice. Gareth, upset? Admittedly, the man took an unholy pleasure in petitions, but he didn’t normally get that emotionally involved. She waved a hand at him, indicating he should continue.

“The Lady Kyrin Koroth requests your majesty’s assistance in breaking her betrothal contact to Lord Stepano,” he read, dejection overflowing in his tone and posture.

Elendra threw back her head and let loose a full, throaty and very un-queenly laugh. “Lady above, Gareth, why the long face? One would think you’d lost a bet.”

Gareth closed his eyes, apparently praying to the Lady for salvation. When none materialized, he let out a resigned sigh and said, “I will provide Your Majesty with a pink satin cushion for tomorrow’s petition session.”

“Don’t forget the tassels.” Elendra was going to milk as much enjoyment out of this as she could manage.

“Yes, Your Majesty, with tassels,” he said in a strangled voice.

“Now do summon Lady Korothe for me. The crown is most favourably disposed to her request.”

Passenger Dossier

Name: Karen Danylak

History and Writing Credits: When not working as a marketing manager, Karen Danylak spends her time writing fantasy and sf stories. Her work can also be seen in the anthology *North of Infinity II*. Karen lives in the suburbs of Toronto, Canada with her husband Aaron and a semi-reformed demon of a cat named Max.

Dying for Air

...Sean Williams and Simon Brown

In my younger days, I enjoyed floating on my stomach and holding my breath, watching liquid light shimmer along the bottom of our neighbour's pool. Long, peaceful minutes would pass with the ball of air gradually staling in my lungs until the urge to breathe became overwhelming. When I could stand it no longer, I'd ease the pressure by allowing bubbles to trickle from my mouth and nostrils in a slow, unhurried exhalation. As my lungs emptied, my body would slowly sink to the bottom of the pool, where I would clench tight around the urge to inhale as long as possible.

Sometimes, before my lungs emptied, I would fill my mouth with bad air and rebreathe it, thus fooling my body, taking the edge off the respiratory urge. Sometimes I could maintain the pretence long enough to remain under for five minutes.

As I lie on my back, on my bed, with Kaye silent beside me, I remember the pool, the feeling of pushing at the boundaries of consciousness. The darkness in the room, the darkness spreading through our minds and lives — it reminds me of the blackness at the edge of my vision that told me it was almost time to surface. Time to breathe clean air again. Time to live.

One thing I've learned as an adult: by the time you see the darkness, it's often too late to turn it back.



“Forty-five thousand dollars,” Jordan Midwinter says, holding out his hands. The glowing gold of his fingernails echoes the colour of his eyes and hair, makes his skin seem a darker chocolate than I know it to be. “What could be better than that?”

“For each serum?” asks Kaye.

“Plus a bonus if things go well.”

“What if they don't?” I ask.

Jordan shrugs. "The odds are against it."

"But what *if*?"

He sighs this time, glancing away from Kaye and me where we sit opposite him on the lounge. He doesn't need to speak; the look says it all. Our apartment is falling apart around us; we have more debts than we can ever repay. If we don't find money soon even this crappy room will be beyond our means.

Forty-five grand doesn't amount to much these days, what with inflation the way it is. New dollars are catching up with old cash faster than the government likes to admit. But it isn't the money that worries me.

I feel guilty for a moment, mistrusting Jordan like this. We've known him as long as we've known each other; a friend through the good times as well as the bad. But the question needed to be asked. He isn't offering us an invitation to dinner.

"That's a chance we have to take." Kaye takes my hand. Her fingers twist into mine, making non-Euclidean shapes out of flesh. "Besides, you'll be there to look after me, if anything goes wrong."

Looking at her face, with her short brown hair and wide eyes, feeling the smoothness of her tanned skin, I know that I could never let anything bad happen to her. An absurdly protective feeling in this day and age, and in our circumstances, but there nonetheless. "It's not worth the risk."

"Look at yourself, Lewis." Jordan's eyes lock into mine. A mixture of shame and stubborn pride prevents me from glancing away. "I'm offering you a simple and easy way out. I don't offer this chance to everyone. If I wasn't your friend, I wouldn't even be here." He turns to Kaye and adds: "Reported failures are less than one in a thousand, if you want statistics."

"What about infection?" I press. I have to admit to myself that I'm seriously thinking about it now, not just playing devil's advocate.

"Minimal. Once the carrier virus dies, the ware is fixed and can't migrate. Twenty hours after the first dose, sometimes twenty-five, should be long enough." He ticks items off his fingers. "Avoid physical contact, don't share your food or drink, and abstain from sex. One day is all it takes, then life can return to normal." He waves a hand nonchalantly, and his golden fingernails catch the light again. "Oh, there are tests you'll need to perform, but nothing major. Just routine checks to determine that the software is functioning as it's supposed to. A three-week waiting period to ensure there aren't any side-effects. *And* you get to keep the ware. What could be easier?"

It all sounds absurdly simple. The faint, seductive glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel begins to grow, and I can see it reflecting in Kaye's eyes. A way out. Hope, of a sort. We've lacked the feeling for so long I've forgotten how powerful it can be. But there is one last hurdle.

“Exactly how illegal is it?”

“For you, not very. Using an unlicensed product carries a small fine, plus confiscation of the product. That’s if you’re found out by accident. If you should turn yourself in, however, the consequences are more severe.”

I nod, taking his meaning. Severe for the Cartel, not us. Using human beings for experimental purposes, especially where bioware is concerned, is banned in every country, and for good reason. But, perversely, that might make the chances of failure more unlikely: the Cartel will be cautious not to arouse the ire of an injured subject, or arouse suspicion by flooding the state hospitals with the brain-damaged victims of its prototypes. Maybe that makes it safer. Maybe.

“We need to think about it,” I say. Kaye’s hand squeezes mine. “We’ll call you when we’re ready.”

“Good.” Jordan nods, stands up. The golden highlights of his hair and eyes seem to dazzle the room as his face catches a sunbeam sneaking through a window. “One in a thousand,” he says. “Good odds.”

“Then why don’t you do it yourself?” Kaye asks suddenly.

Kaye’s question surprises Jordan, and a moment passes before he replies: “Because I don’t have to.”



If there’s one thing more cruel than having no talent at all, it’s being talented in an area long obsolete. Like fiction writers unable to make the change from books to interactive media, an artist who can’t work in 3D is practically useless. Platform died years ago. Apart from one brief season, when stratified images stacked to form a solid were all the rage, I’ve never been what you’d call a success as an artist. And that short boom only made it worse, allowing me to become accustomed to relative affluence — so difficult to relinquish — and leaving me with a string of debts longer than Jordan Midwinter’s golden nails.

Kaye and I really have no choice but to accept the offer; neither of us possess the qualifications for a job that will pay highly enough and quickly enough to satisfy the loan sharks.

Then there’s the precedent. It’s not as if we will be the first to be exploited in such a way. Humans have been leasing their bodies for aeons, if you count the world’s oldest profession. Consenting human experiments — illegal or otherwise — preceded the boom in nano- and bioware by mere decades, with the explosion of the drug industry back in the late twentieth century. The Cartel’s covert tests are foreshadowed, even predicted, by what was done with cocaine, LSD, Ecstasy, Trinity... Were the risks as

high as my conscience cautions they could be, we're sure we would have heard of it before. And Jordan Midwinter would be out of a job.

So we say yes.

Simple.

The first dose arrives within days. The small parcel is delivered by a man in overalls obviously trying to keep his face expressionless. Although he says nothing to us his eyes won't shut up. He knows who we are, what the parcel means to us, and what we're about to do. Part of me wishes that he would ask us *why*. There is something in the amused twinkle of his retinae that makes me nervous, makes me question our decision.

When he leaves, we sit on the lounge together and open the parcel. It contains a small aerosol and an instruction tab. We insert the tab into a wall viewer to read the files, and discover that the ware is nothing more than an accounting module designed to supplement a program Kaye already possesses; simple to install and operate. The moment is strangely anticlimactic. Then we realise it is not the ware that she will be testing, but the aerosol.

She, of course, is the experimental subject. Her practical knowledge of wares like these far exceeds my own. If something goes wrong, she will be in the best position to deduce where the problem lies: on the inside, with the symptoms. And I will be there to help her. That's the plan.

The sun sets slowly outside the apartment. Through the window, though, the city alters little. Shadowed by buildings by day, lit by electricity by night, only the angles change. We live in a confused world of light and darkness both, without clear terminators.

After a long, silent exhalation, Kaye raises the aerosol to her left nostril and presses the trigger.



"Jesus, Kaye — stop it!"

She grits her teeth and tries to obey, but she can't keep still. Her fists clench into balls and hammer the bed. The vivid rash that has turned her skin an angry red stands out against the pale, tangled sheets. I attempt to apply an anti-irritant cream to the affected areas, but her squirming makes it difficult. Eventually I throw the tube aside and give up, wiping my hands on my jeans.

"Does that help?"

Her fingers have already begun to rub at the rash. "No."

"Fuck it."

"It's spreading. I can feel it." She lifts the sleeves of her night-shirt and exposes her shoulders. As she examines her skin, I notice red blemishes appearing on her neck. When she looks up at me, her eyelids are puffy and black.

"I'll call Jordan."

As I head for the phone, she yells: "Ants!"

"What?"

"Crawling underneath my skin. Tell him that's what it feels like — thousands of them, all tickling with their little legs!"

"Yuck."

"Tell him. It might be important."

The phone takes a minute to answer at his end. Maybe I'm panicking over nothing, but the uncanny speed with which the rash is spreading seems ominous. Not dangerous; not yet. But who knows where it could lead?

"Who the fuck?" Jordan eventually answers the phone. "Don't you know what time it is?"

"Jordan, it's Lewis. We're having some problems here."

Jordan's image in the phone leans forward, instantly alert. "What's happened?"

I explain the symptoms carefully, including Kaye's all too evocative description. "The rash appeared with ten minutes of inhaling the ware."

"Is she having trouble breathing?"

"No, but—"

"Good." Jordan relaxes slightly, rubs at his eyes. "Antihistamine is what you need. That should take the edge off it until it fades."

"Take the edge off what?"

"The allergic reaction. Something in her body is reacting to the virus. Don't worry about it. It'll fade once the carriers leave her bloodstream."

"An allergy? That's all?"

"It happens every now and again. Keep an eye on her, though; get her to sleep if you can. I'll come over in the morning to make sure she's okay."

"She will be, won't she?"

"No doubt about it."

I want to believe him, but part of me wonders how he can be so certain. "Why should this one be different from to others she's installed before, legally?"

He shrugs vaguely. "They could be testing a new strain along with the aerosol, or sending the ware through new avenues. Or it could be that the dose was higher and passed some sort of threshold. Or maybe Kaye's sensitive to the solution they use. But it's nothing to worry about. Really. Trust me."

I nod slowly, unable to do anything else *but* trust him. “Okay. And you’ll be around tomorrow?”

“First thing.” He signs off before I can ask any more questions.

The antihistamines work. Jordan appears in time for breakfast. He quickly checks Kaye’s skin, smiles to himself. “Told you they’d do the trick.”

“This time,” I say sourly, but he ignores me. Kaye throws me a warning look.

“I contacted the Cartel,” Jordan continues, ignoring my remark. “They tried a new solution for the ware, containing more antioxidants than usual.” He looks at Kaye. “You allergic to red wine?”

Kaye nods. “Gives me migraines.”

“There you go.” He pats Kaye on the arm; she looks sceptical. “They were really concerned, you know,” he says.

“They were, huh?”

Jordan looks at me tiredly. “Believe it or not, they depend on people like you two. They won’t let you down.”

He stays for coffee. For a while there it is almost like old times. We talk about politics, art, sex, religion...anything but business. I even remember I like him.



In the next two months Kaye tries three new wares. The one after the rash incident is an extra-safe dose for her; the Cartel is treating her with kid gloves. It’s a beta test, too, so someone else has already done the early fit. A nifty little program that lets Kaye know where on the planet her corpus callosum is down to an area no larger than five square centimetres. The antihistamines keep the side-effects of the antioxidants mostly in check; only once does the rash recur, and it disappears once we increase her combative dose. ‘Upping the artis’, Kaye calls it.

The second ware creates a small biomatrix attached to the medial surface of Kaye’s right cerebral hemisphere. With practice she can now see into infra-red and just into ultraviolet. She doesn’t actually *see* those wavelengths, but the biomatrix interprets the information sent to her brain via the eye. I ask her to describe what it’s like, but she can’t find the words. “Not like colours,” is all she can tell me.

It is night. We have just installed the third ware and gone to bed, trying not to think about the distance we must maintain in order to prevent contagion. I doze fitfully and dream again how it felt to sink into the pool, holding my breath. Kaye makes a sound. I start awake, my heart pounding.

“What?”

“Some pain,” she says. “In my elbow, like I’ve pulled a muscle.”

“Here, let me rub it.” I reach for her, but as soon as I touch her arm she jerks away.

“Hey, that *really* hurt.”

I turn on the night light. She holds the joint up for me to inspect. It is slightly inflamed, and red.

“Maybe you bumped into something.”

“Must have.”

“I’ll get you some pain killers.” I start to get out of bed, but she calls me back.

“I can’t, Lewis. It’s only been twelve hours since I took the dose. We’ll have to wait until morning.”

“Will you be okay?”

“Sure. I’ll just sleep on my left side.” So saying, she rolls over and puts her head down. I turn off the light, and fall asleep almost instantly. The pool is still waiting for me, dark and suffocating. The colours fade and I forget that I enjoy it. Fear percolates through me like the bubbles of stale air dribbling upwards from my lips.

The pain is still there in the morning. I find her in the kitchen, looking pale, a coffee mug in front of her.

“When did you get up?”

“I couldn’t go back to sleep.” Her voice is leaden.

“Show me the elbow again.” She holds it up for me. It doesn’t look any worse, and I tell her so.

“The pain’s no worse, either, but it’s constant. Like a throbbing.”

“Tennis elbow,” I joke. She snorts. “Do you think it has anything to do with the ware?”

She shakes her head. “Can’t see how. It’s a simple internal clock, just a new version of one the Cartel is already selling publicly.”

“Still, I could phone Jordan to make sure.”

“No, not yet. Let’s give it a few more hours, okay?”

I agree, not sure what else to do. While the dose is still coursing through her bloodstream, we can’t visit the doctor; the risk she’d stumble on to what Kaye and I are doing is too great.

So we wait a few hours, anxiously, and the pain does go away. Kaye is more relieved than I am; something is nagging at me. Guilt, probably. I ask her how long the pain lasted. She smiles, checks her new internal clock, and gives me the time down to the last tenth of a second.

I still read books. If you look carefully enough you can find them here and there, in second-hand shops, in disposal stores, at the bottom of a pile of glossy tabs on the table in a doctor's waiting room. Last night I finished a collection of short stories by Kafka. You can't get Kafka on any tab; not commercial enough, I guess. I'm putting the book back on the makeshift shelf in our bedroom when the whole shelf just drops. I try to put the shelf back a couple of times before I realise there is nothing to lay it on; two of the three metal pegs have gone, leaving blank holes in the plaster and a smudge of powdered steel around their rims.

Some days you're so tired you just don't care. I don't give the missing pegs any thought, just replace them with new ones from the kitchen draw. Then I see that some of our cutlery is missing.

"Kaye?"

"What?" Her voice comes from the lounge room.

"What have you done with the spoons and forks?"

"Nothing. Look in the drainer."

I look in the drainer. Only two plates and a glass. "Not there."

"Well, I don't know." Her tone tells me she isn't interested in discussing it further.

"Still interested in eating?" I ask, a little angry.

No answer.

I leave the flat to get take-away. We can afford that now.

When I get back, Kaye is on the floor, writhing in pain. I drop the tubs of Thai food and kneel down beside her, ask her what's wrong. Her jaw works, but no sound comes out. Panic fills me, desperation. I phone Jordan. He says he's on his way.

I bend down to pick Kaye up, take her to bed. But I can't lift her. My breath gushes out. "Christ!" I try again. She's too damn heavy — or something is wrong with me. My skin prickles, and I can almost feel the sweat pop out of my pores.

Kaye grips my arm, tries to say something again. Then she goes limp, as if all the bones in her body have suddenly dissolved. She slumps against the floor. I see the pain disappear from her face, and I almost scream: "Kaye!"

Her eyelids flutter and she smiles in sheer relief. "It's okay. I'm okay. Don't worry about me."



Jordan arrives and I take him into our bedroom where Kaye is resting. He asks her a few questions, but Kaye can give no leads. He looks worried.

"What is it?" I insist.

"I don't know, Lewis."

“It’s the last ware, isn’t it? It’s doing something to her...”

“The pain was the same as in my elbow,” Kaye says quietly, “but in my back, and much worse.”

“Your elbow?” Jordan asks, and Kaye tells him. “You should have mentioned this to me before.” He looks even more worried now.

“What are you going to do?” I demand.

“Get someone from the Cartel. They have their own doctors. I’ll be back tonight. In the meantime, just rest, Kaye. We’ll clear this up. I promise.”

I walk outside with him. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” He shakes his head, but I can see he is lying. “Jordan, come clean. This is Kaye—”

“I know!” he spits angrily. His response scares me almost as much as Kaye’s pain. “Stay with her. If the pain recurs, phone me right away. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He strides away without another word.

Despondent, my worry for Kaye eating away at me like acid, I go back to the bedroom. She isn’t there.

“Kaye?”

I hear her in the bathroom. Then a new sound: water exploding. I rush into the bathroom. The tap over the sink is gone, and Kaye is bending over the porcelain. Water is gushing with such force it is shooting up over Kaye, over the walls. I try to pull her away from the sink, but she won’t budge.

“I’m okay,” she says tightly. “Turn the water off at the mains.”

For a moment I cannot recall where the mains are, then remember the big brass tap underneath the hot water system. I run to it, turn it off, return to the bathroom. Kaye, soaked to the skin, is still hunched over the sink.

“What happened—” My voice falters. I see Kaye put a hand over one of the faucets. As I watch in horror, the faucet starts to disappear. The metal melts into her skin. She lets out a cry of pain and collapses to the floor. I rush to her but she waves me away.

“Don’t!” she cries, her voice strangled. “Don’t touch me!”

“I’ll phone Jordan!”

“Don’t!” she repeats. “Sit! Sit there!”

She points to a spot on the wet floor. I do as she says. I feel tears running down my cheeks. “Kaye?”

“It’s been longer than twenty-four hours,” she says. “None of this should be happening now.” Her eyes scan the walls, the floor, the ceiling, as though looking for a way out. “Remember the biomatrix to help me see outside of visible light?”

“Yes, but I don’t know—”

“And the global positioning system?”

“Yes, Kaye, but—”

“They all use viruses as couriers, and fixers. They bring the ware to the right spot, arrange things to make it fit, then leave it behind. They modify, Lewis. And they can be modified. That’s what all the testing is for: to make sure the modifications don’t screw things up. And sometimes they *do* screw things up — that’s why I’m talking all these goddamn antioxidants. They irritate my body; they have to learn to fit in better.” Her words come rushing out like the water from the missing faucet.

“I don’t understand.” My voice is pleading. “Please, let me call someone! A doctor—”

“My guess is, the viruses were originally designed to absorb small amounts of metal from my blood and use them to create the matrices, or whatever. The ware foundations. But one of the doses didn’t wash out in a day, Lewis; the virus mutated, traded its work for the ware for longer life. And now there’s a new one in there with it — a virus that still does the work but self-destructs after a day’s worth of replications. Don’t you see what’s happened?” She looks up at me. Her eyes are sunk deep into her skull. The skin on her face is grey, pallid.

I shake my head.

“The viruses have combined, merging long life with their original instructions. They’re still building, still trying to fit in. They were designed to supplement our bodies, not harm them, so they’re replacing organic tissue with metal constructs that do the same job. The process is accelerating. The pain is almost...unbearable.”

“Jordan—”

She snorts. “You think he hasn’t seen this sort of thing before?”

“There must be something he can do.”

“Sure. That’s why he looks so afraid.”

“Kaye, you’re not well. We have to...” My voice fades as I realise what I’m saying. I’m lost. I’m drowning.

She laughs again, bitterly. “Oh, I’m sick alright. But when this is finished, I’ll be better than I’ve ever been. And then we’ll see what we have to do.”

“When it’s *finished*?”

She hauls herself to her feet, places another hand over what’s left of the last sink faucet. It disappears. She turns to me. “Stay there,” she orders, and stumbles out of the bathroom.

A knock at the door. I open it, let in Jordan and two men I've never seen before.

"Doctor Collins," Jordan says, nodding to a small, thin man with a face as sour as ten day old milk. Doctor Collins carries a large satchel under one arm. "Mr Tenterfield."

Tenterfield sticks out a hand. I grasp it stiffly.

"Lewis, Jordan here has told me about the problems Kaye has been having. We're here to make her better, and to make sure there are no recurrences. The Cartel is horrified that anything could have gone so seriously wrong with any of our wares, and I've been authorised to sign over to Kaye and you quite a considerable sum of money. In exchange for a full report and samples."

Jordan smiles at me, cheerfully thumps my arm. "You won't ever have money troubles again, Lewis. And Kaye won't have to take any more ware!"

He is overplaying the part. They wait for some response. I smile slowly, edgily. It's not quite the reaction they were expecting.

"Lewis?" Jordan looks at me warningly. He means: *This is the big brass, friend. Don't antagonise them.*

I ignore him. "Mr Tenterfield, Doctor Collins. My wife has been waiting for someone to come. She's in the bedroom." I point the way. Jordan makes to follow them but I hold him back. "Wait. We have a lot to talk about."

Jordan's face shows a spasm of anger, but it passes quickly. His nails glitter on the back of my hand like golden wasps. "Sure, Lewis. Anything you say."

I guide him into a seat, sit down next to him.

"How is Kaye now?" he asks, straightening the cut of his outfit.

"Excellent. Never better."

"And you, Lewis?"

I don't answer. We can hear words coming from the bedroom. Mr Tenterfield is delivering his spiel to Kaye. She isn't talking back.

"They'll need to take her in for tests, of course."

"Of course."

"But she'll be okay. I'm sure she will. I trust these people. They know what they're doing."

"I'm sure they do." I gently place a hand on his shoulder. "You've been a good friend, Jordan," I say. And I'm sincere. "Without you, who knows what would've happened to us?"

"I do my best."

"Yes. We know."

Jordan starts to look uncomfortable. There is only silence in the bedroom now. He checks his watch and laughs nervously. “They’re taking their time! I wonder what they’re—?”

His question is cut off by a scream. Then a second one.

Jordan tries to stand, but I hold him back.

“Kaye and I had sex two hours ago,” I say conversationally. The statement is so absurd, so out of place, he stares at me. My hand is still on his shoulder. I can feel the metals start to pass from his own body into mine. He won’t feel the pain for a little while. About thirty more seconds, probably; barely enough time even to realise that you’re drowning. And it will be nothing to what I’m experiencing right now.

I clench my other hand and feel the grate of metal against dissolving bone; grasping it, I wonder if, in the darkness at last, everything will be so bad after all.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Sean Williams and Simon Brown

History: Simon Brown’s latest novel is *Rival’s Son*, second book of the Chronicles of Kydan, published by Tor in 2005. The concluding volume, *Daughter of Independence*, will be published in 2006. Simon lives on the New South Wales south coast with his wife and two children. Adelaide author (and occasional DJ) Sean Williams has over 60 published short stories and 20 novels under his belt, plus a sci-fi musical and the odd piece of haiku.

Writing Credits: Their collaboration “The Masque of Agamemnon” was reprinted in Gardner Dozois *Year’s Best Science Fiction 15* and translated into Polish and Japanese. Another, “Atrax”, won the Aurealis Award for Best Horror Short Story in 1999. Their rarest work, *The Butler Codex*, exists only in a limited, leather bound edition, and remains one of the strangest works ever to be published in Australia.



SIMMONS

Instinct

...Nigel Read and Lee Battersby

From the moment the human couple walked through the door and surveyed the gathered customers of the Low-Life, I knew there was going to be trouble. I could *smell* it. It floated over the stale beer, disinfectant from the washrooms, and MSG from the Chinese Restaurant a couple of streets away.

I wasn't the first to notice their entrance, but I was perhaps the most worried by it. The Low-Life caters to a special clientele. The lighting is low enough not to hurt eyes best suited to the night, and there are plenty of cubicles, for those of us who are likely to *change* at any time. Humans aren't just a rarity in this bar. They're a myth.

But here they were. In *our* bar.

"You see?" the man said, swaggering and preening like main course dressed up and ready to serve. "I told you!"

I wasn't fooled. His belt buckle was pure silver, as were the wingtips on his shoes. Very faintly, below the expensive aftershave and deodorant, I could smell garlic. He seemed determined to ignore the little voice all animals have that tells them when to run like hell. I sighed. It's amazing what a bit of testosterone will do to some folk.

The woman glanced around, her dark eyes wide with curiosity, and what might have been a little healthy fear. Dozens of hungry eyes stared back, mine included. She might have been pretty rather than stunning, but she carried a youthful vitality that made up for any mere imperfections in symmetry. Her glossy, black hair hung down to her waist like a summer pelt, a cascade of jet framing her lean body. I had a sudden vision of her crouching naked on a hilltop surrounded by trees, panting and howling at the full moon.

As if able to read my thoughts, she smiled at me across the room. My palms started itching.

"Well, kitten?" the guy prompted.

The woman turned on him, scowling. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You said you wanted to go somewhere different."

"I meant a restaurant or something."

"Scared? Don't worry, I'll protect you." He slid an arm around her waist and kissed her on the cheek.

She tensed, clearly uncomfortable with this attention. "You're such an asshole!"

I heard a few coughs of agreement from among the clientele studiously ignoring their conversation. I wasn't the only one who'd barely notice his 'protection' if things got serious.

The barkeep, an elderly zombie by the name of Walter, shuffled over to the couple. "We don't serve your kind here." He pointed to a sign above the entrance that read: *No Humans*.

The man frowned. "That's discrimination."

"Very perceptive. Now piss off." Walter used to own a pub out back of Coolgardie, in the days when there were separate bars for men and women, and none at all for those who could be defined as "your type". Some prejudices die hard, especially when those bearing them are already dead.

"Don't pay any attention to Walter!" a boggart called out from the bar. "Come in. Have a drink on me." The diminutive creature sat on top of the counter, a ball of fur and teeth and claws, its smile covering most of its ugly little head.

Walter started to protest, but a chorus of voices drowned him out. My hackles rose. Many of these creatures are traditional enemies. Even on neutral territory like the Low-Life they can barely say a civil word to each other. When they agree on something, well, that can only mean trouble.

"All right!" Walter raised his hands in defeat and retreated behind the bar. "Fine. If that's how you want it. Let them stay." He glanced across at me. I took the cue, sliding out of my booth and up to the stool closest to the intruders. I'm not exactly what you'd call a bouncer. More like a friendly local who uses my presence to quell the possibility of trouble. The closer I sat to the two humans, the less chance anything would happen. Or so Walter hoped.

The man whispered something in his partner's ear. My preternatural hearing picked it up: *You see? They have to play by the same rules*. I glanced around. If anyone else had heard, they made no sign. I didn't see so much as an ear twitch. The girl grabbed the guy's arm and led him into the dim light.

"Come on then. If you want to do this we may as well have a drink."

They dropped onto stools a couple of places down from me. The girl gave me a quick glance, an even quicker smile, and then turned her back to her escort. I blinked. Did she make her hair fan out like that on purpose? No, I decided. Humans don't work that way.

The balance of the room shifted imperceptibly, until we found ourselves surrounded by incubi and succubi, boggarts and vampires. The woman ordered a rum and cola, the man a Fosters. Introductions were exchanged. Their names were Trudy and Mark. They studied law.

“Don’t hold that against us,” Mark joked. Nobody laughed. His unconscious sneer settled deeper into the lines of his face. Trudy saw his reaction and smiled.

“Don’t mind Mark,” she said, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. “He wants to be an entertainment lawyer. He’ll have you all signed to three movie contracts by the end of the night.”

That got a few chuckles. I started to relax, and consider that raised eyebrow. Don’t get me wrong. I’m an ugly bugger, and I know it. But I could’ve sworn the first part of her statement was aimed at me alone. I shook my head. Nice thought, but no. I have a sensitive nature, and sometimes I overreact. This was obviously one of those times.

Still, everyone seemed to be getting on fine. Humans and Fey actually have a lot in common, despite the claims of the right-wing scaremongers. The problem is, every now and then those scaremongers are right. Hell, there are creatures I wouldn’t let move into my neighbourhood, and I’m related to them. Nobody wants to go out to mow the lawn and find an iron goblin leaning over the fence, chewing on your favourite pet and smiling as if to say “You’re next”. Even amongst the almost-human the similarities only go so far. Fey are the ancient archetypes from which human behaviour springs, and we reflect an earlier, more primitive, age. Sometimes it isn’t very pretty.

We’re just as intelligent as humans, though. Smarter, in a way, because we haven’t forgotten the value of our instincts. I sure as hell should have been listening to mine.

Everyone behaved themselves until the third round of drinks. Mark was entertaining a crowd of boggarts with a story concerning a law professor, one of the more obscure clauses of the Fey Rights Act, and a particularly amorous succubus. He was waving his arms about like a madman, acting out some of the lewder moments, much to the boggarts’ delight and Trudy’s obvious embarrassment. I was about to lean forward and suggest he tone things down a bit when a boggart, obviously tanked up and feeling playful, bit off one of Mark’s fingers as it passed its face.

Mark stopped as if he’d been shot, clutched his bloody hand, and screamed. The boggart grinned toothily and ran a long tongue across red-matted facial hair.

The smell of blood was too much for the remaining boggarts. They piled on top of Mark, cackling like vultures, and dragged him screaming to the floor. Before I could stop them they started shredding his exposed flesh and gulping it down. Boggarts can be nasty little buggers when they’ve had a few.

Trudy watched, her face expressionless — from the shock, I imagined. In the confusion, some of the vampires from the local nest grabbed her. Some incubi must

have had plans for her too, because a fight broke out amongst them. Trudy didn't notice the creatures pulling and pawing at her. Her eyes were fixed on the carnage at floor level.

Walter was beside himself. "The carpets! Keep the blood off the carpets!" Zombies can't control their facial muscles, of course, but I swear he had a look of panic in his cataract-laden eyes.

I had already transformed. There are two kinds of were-creature. Some become beautiful, liquid expressions of nature's glory, the romantic ideal of what it is to be a wolf, or bear, or lion. Others are cursed by what we laughingly refer to as the 'Lon Chaney Gene', turning into those shambling half-man, half-carpet monstrosities you see at the drive-ins. Just my luck to be one of the latter: ugly as sin in two lives. There's only one good thing about my condition. Even in my human form I outweigh most of the customers by sixty or seventy pounds. In my Fey state I've yet to meet anything, natural or supernatural, that wants to stand between me and my objective.

I waded into the fracas. Even as they fought each other, the combatants felt my approach and slid out of my way. I cast a quick glance at the floor, but Mark was beyond help. The vampires loosened their hold on Trudy. I picked her up with one paw, threw her over my shoulder, and headed for the door. Some of the bloodsuckers felt their prize eluding them, and tried to leap on me. They didn't even slow me down. Vampires may come across all cool and moody like Byronic poets of the night, but in reality they're pathetic. Nothing that sucks blood has any real strength. Strength comes from meat. I batted them aside, burst through the exit and into the night.

I bounded up Roe Street, away from the mayhem now spilling out into the street behind me. The humans on my side of the footpath screamed and scattered. Others not directly in harm's way pointed and laughed and made crude comments. Drivers slowed their vehicles to watch. Ever since the Fey Rights Movement came out into the open, humans have been slowly getting used to the idea that they share their world with what they thought were fairytale creatures. Unfortunately, this is the same species that took millennia to realise how unimportant skin colour was -- creatures of different *shape* have no chance of fitting in quietly. Seeing a woman with a Fey is still unusual enough to be a public spectacle, especially one being carried along like a caveman's raffle prize.

Still, no one tried to stop us.

As I rounded the first corner I heard sirens start up in the distance, human ones overlaying the ultrasonic whistle of the 'Monster Squad'. I doubled my effort. After a couple of minutes of running I had crossed the city and was surrounded by the parkland that backs against the river. We were far enough from the bar that I no longer

feared for Trudy's safety, but I found myself unwilling to let her go. It wasn't until she said, "Hey, remember me?" that I reluctantly stopped.

I lowered her to the ground and took a step backward, ready to run should she start screaming. Instead she swayed and leaned against me. Her face was pale in the moonlight. I took her chin in my claws and turned her head this way and that. I saw no marks on her neck, so I assumed her colouring must have come down to shock.

"Thank you!" she said. After a little while, she added, "I had no idea."

Now that my adrenalin was subsiding I started to think. *No idea?* It was a strange thing to say under the circumstances. I asked her what she meant by it.

She took a deep breath. "As long as I can remember I've been fascinated by Fey culture. When I was ten I bought a black 'Bite Me' t-shirt, at twelve a Morticia Make-Up Kit—"

A little light bulb went on in my head. "You're a Fey Fancier!"

She pouted. "I prefer the term 'Supernaturally Observant'."

I didn't. It sounded only one step away from 'bird watcher'. But I kept my mouth shut. She had a manic gleam in her eyes, and I expected her to burst out with 'But the world will never know!' or somesuch. She just pushed herself away from me and brushed down her dress.

"Next year I'm going to specialise in Fey rights law," she said, smiling as if she'd made some huge revelation.

I shrugged. "We've got lawyers already."

"Human lawyers."

"Yes," I agreed. "Human lawyers. But unless my instincts have totally failed me, you're human too. Being Fey isn't a disease, you know. You can't catch it. It's genetic — you're born a Fey. Or, in a few cases, you die one." I gave her my best 'American Werewolf in London' smile. "But that's not recommended."

"Yes, I know," she said, a little irritably. "But these other lawyers are human. They're just as scared of you as everyone else. I'm different. I can't become a Fey, but I can live amongst you. That's why I gave you Mark. He was an offering."

I shook my head, confused. "An offering?"

"To let you know I could fit in, that I had the predator's instinct. I knew he wouldn't be leaving that bar alive. All that silver and garlic. It was like the proverbial red cape." She giggled. "And he thought it was all *his* idea."

I stared at her. The silence was just becoming uncomfortable when she leaned in close and, smiling mischievously, dug her fingers into my chest fur. "I've never been this close to a werewolf before. Your fur...it's silver."

"Just a trick of the light," I managed to breathe. We were so close I could see the dark, downy hair on the back of her neck. Underneath her perfume I could smell her

natural scent, the musk of her arousal, the heat of her blood. It triggered a recurrence of my earlier vision. Over her shoulder I could see the dark silhouette of Kings Park outlined against the night sky. I felt an overwhelming urge to whine softly and touch her nose with my muzzle. “The fur’s white. In this form I’m albino.”

She looked up at me. “It’s magnificent. So soft, like a big, beautiful fur coat. I could just sink into it forever.”

“I’m not a stole.”

She smiled a smile that was more invitation than mockery. “I didn’t say I wanted to skin you. You’re far lovelier as you are. A knight in shining fur.”

Her eyes transfixed me, but something still held me back. I knew what she wanted. But what could she feel for *me*, except the gratitude any person feels towards their rescuer? Interracial couples are rare. I’d never even heard of an interspecies couple, even if I am human some of the time. I didn’t even want to breathe too deeply, in case she realized just what she was proposing, and started to scream.

No problem there. She pressed even closer. “I want to thank you properly for saving me.”

“I...” I stopped, suddenly lost for an argument. I was reacting like a human, and what had happened tonight had not happened on those terms. I tried to think like a Fey, and it gave me pause. All my reasons for fear were civilised reasons, societal reasons, *human* reasons.

Howling triumph at the top of my lungs, I picked her up and loped up towards Kings Park, to a certain hilltop surrounded by trees.

After all, I’m only semi-domesticated.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Nigel Read

History: ...was always Nigel’s favourite subject at school.

Writing Credits: Nigel has published short stories and even shorter poems in *Full Unit Hookup*, *Aoife’s Kiss*, *Neo-Opis Science Fiction Magazine*, *Encounters*, *Machinations*, *Antipodean SF*, *Borderlands: Trilogy*, *Borderlands: That Which Scares Us*, and *Visions*

Name: Lee Battersby. Often spelled with a silent 7.

History: All in the past. Lots of things, including multiple flights upon *Andromeda Spaceways*. You think he’d have learned by now...

Writing credits: Over 40 sales, a bunch of awards, a book coming out any day now from Prime Books. A blog at <http://battersblog.blogspot.com> will reveal the truth. All else is lies.

Questing Beast

...Andrew and Ilona Gordon

In the green glow of Nemurian midnight, the food stain on the geosurvey graph blazed electric orange. Sean Kozlov dragged his hand across his face in a vain hope some of his fatigue would stick to it, and groped the surface of the desk for a pen.

The pen felt moist and cold. Suspiciously like a nose.

He looked up just in time to avoid the long pink tongue, aimed to lick him right between the eyes. The trogomet scooted onto the graph, sniffed the food stain, and flopped on top of it. From this angle it resembled a two-foot wide ball of fur, equipped with four hands-feet and a shrew muzzle, studded with tiny black eyes.

Sean yawned. Gods, he was tired. He reached to scratch the furry trogomet stomach. Two surveys left. Half an hour of work, then he would enter the last of the data into Snow White, and then he would finally sleep. His hand froze. He was petting a *trogomet*. Twenty meters from Snow White. Sweet Olympus.

The trogomet let out a disappointed “Mook!” It rocked upright and sat on its haunches, its forehands held limp on its chest.

Cookie. As long as it had a cookie, it might not venture down the hallway and try to break through the plestiglass case housing Snow White. Sean rummaged through the pockets of his pants, coming up with a half-crumbled disk of oatmeal.

“Cookie!” he said brightly.

“Mook!”

He opened the window and tossed the treat outside into the bluish grass. Fuzzy black lightning shot past him, snatching the cookie in mid-air. Sean slammed the plestiglass shutters closed and sprinted down the hallway to check on Snow White.

He dashed to the heavy plastic doors of the RB3. Grasping the lever, he jerked it to the side, and the door slid into the recess in the wall. The trogomet had gotten pretty good at opening the standard issue doors, but the heavy side-slider left them stumped. A cluster of phoros spilled lemony light on the small space

between two doors. He stepped through, slid the first door closed behind him, and peered around the chamber.

Nothing. No two-foot tall black fuzzies hiding in the corners. No “mook!”

Reassured, he slid the second door open, jumped through, and slammed it back with muscle-tearing force just in case. A rectangular room lay before him, empty, save for the transparent cube of plestiglass. Six feet high and two inches thick, the cube enclosed Snow White, a Fourth Order Workstation, the only server on the face of the planet. The only computer on the planet, period. If you didn’t count the Dwarf, a small remote unit, which was little more than a glorified backup drive.

Snow White’s terminal glowed weakly. The motion sensors were silent. No fuzzies. The workstation and the Final Evaluation Report it contained were safe. The two dozen scientists whose two-year efforts and careers rode on that report would not have to lynch him.

Sean leaned against the wall, resting his head against the plastic. He was being paranoid. *Not my fault*, he assured himself. *Nobody can blame me*. Living on a planet where a pocket computer unit served as a tantalizing appetizer would do it to anybody. Before coming here, they had to be stripped of all their augmentation and implants, surrendering their direct uplinks, their personal computer units, even their watches. He would’ve given his right arm for a piece-of-junk uplink. Anything to keep from typing. And writing. Gods, what a tedious chore that was. Just the hand cramps alone were enough to drive a sane man into sheer madness. He squinted at Snow White one more time, before closing his eyes. She was still in one piece.

It wasn’t like the trogometes could help it. They weren’t bad natured, really, and pretty bright for a non-sentient species. Unfortunately, to an organism whose primary stomach housed a distant cousin of *Geobacter metallireducens*, most metals looked pretty tasty. Particularly iron. Manganese. Gold. Platinum. The *Geobacter metallidevator* microbe gained energy from the dissimilatory reduction of just about any metal, and thus to a fuzzy, the innards of the Workstation presented a heavenly smorgasbord. Luckily, trogometes’s secondary stomachs liked carbohydrates well enough...

Sean yawned. When did he last sleep? Was it twenty hours ago? Thirty? Did it matter? Fatigue flooded him, anchoring him, and he wanted nothing more than to curl on the plastic floor and pass out in the blissful glow of the electric lamp.

“Sean?”

The human body is an amazing organism. It can go from dead tired to completely alert in a terrified blink.

“I didn’t know you could jump that high,” Santos said.

Sean mumbled and gave the Chief of Security a bleary-eyed stare. It bounced off Santos like a trogomet from the plestiglass.

“Do you remember when I told you that we have to run every transmission past the Great Wall, because we live less than a solar hour away from the third largest producer of AI synths and because their hackers think it highly amusing to screw with us every chance they get?”

“I do. Every transmission. It comes through scrubbed to the bone.”

“You logged on last night. Around one. There was a transmission from the satellite.”

“Yes. And I ran it through the Great Wall. Like I always do. Check the protocol, Santos.”

“We no longer have the protocol.”

Sean opened his mouth. Suddenly he was cold. It couldn't be.

Santos' face was stoic.

“A centipede virus,” Sean guessed grimly.

“Worse. A millipede, complete with respawn and AI subsets. It rode in on that last transmission and lay dormant for a couple of hours. Long enough for you to log off.”

Oh, Gods. A millipede virus that broke into segments, which would hide in the system, disguising themselves, each spawning dozens of new tiny millipedes... “The FER?”

“Fried.”

Sean felt like screaming. The Joint Commission would be here in four days and he had no report to give them. Nothing but a four-foot stack of paper notes from the section chiefs. It had taken a month of intense, brain-numbing labor to integrate loose notes from people who'd never handled paper before into a comprehensive scientific document.

“What about the back-up?”

“As I said, the millipede lay dormant...”

“And when Julia brought the Dwarf to back up the FER, the millipede transferred into it?”

Santos nodded.

“Both back-up drives?”

Santos nodded again.

“What about the back-up disks?”

Santos' stoic face gained a troublesome hint of emotion. “I'm worried about you.”

That's right, the fuzzies had stolen the hard disks two weeks ago. He hadn't worried too much at the time. After all, they still had Snow White and the Dwarf.

It occurred to Sean that he was dead and that Santos, with his somber impenetrable face, was his Thanatos come to take him to Hades to be judged for his

earthly transgressions. He rocked back. Perhaps he wasn't dead. Perhaps he was merely sleeping. Soon he would wake up and everything would be fine.

"Sean?"

"I'm not dreaming?"

"No."

Sean closed his eyes and thought. There was no possible way to recreate the report in four days, not with the amount of research material he had. The two standard years worth of data accumulation, analysis, hard work, frayed nerves... The section chiefs still had their paper notes, but the totality of their labor amounted to nothing unless it was presented to the committee. It would have catastrophic consequences for their careers.

He could always take the easy way out of this situation. He could bash his head against the wall and save himself the pain.

His brain clicked.

"Nannybot," he said. "Nannybot is the tertiary back-up. We back up all files to it every other week. It would have everything before I plugged Timur's geosurveys in. I can fix that in four days."

Santos sighed. "That's the bad news..."



Sean crossed his arms on his chest and watched as Nannybot tried to ride a dwarf cow. The dwarf cow resembled a miniature Terrestrial buffalo with orange fur. In its quadruped mode the Nannybot resembled a large but slender canine with smooth indigo skin and a single lens in the middle of a tubular head. In its bipedal mode, it resembled an alien from early Terrestrial UFO mythos.

Neither mode was suited to riding. Particularly to riding terrified dwarf-cows while holding a broomstick in one appendage.

"Why the broomstick?" Sean wondered

"Verne isn't sure," Santos said.

The cow charged a small bench, where Emily, the oldest of the children, sat reading her book. For a terrified moment Sean was lost between being frozen in panic and springing to the rescue, but then the cow veered left, avoiding the bench by a hair, and he exhaled.

"Tell me how this happened again?"

"The best Verne can figure out is that the millipede's protocol pegged Nannybot as an AI during the back-up and spawned. Only of course, Nannybot isn't a regular AI, so

instead of shutting down it made it do..." Santos halted in mid-sentence. "Whatever it's doing right now."

"But there was no Nannybot back-up scheduled for last night."

Santos coughed. "Julia thought you were taking the back-up protocol too lightly. She's been backing up to the Nannybot every night for the last week."

Sean looked past the school yard, past the spasmodically jerking blue monstrosity on the cow's back, to where Ino forest reached toward the sky, its smooth silvery stems intertwining and braiding. Garlands of ino-ino fruits beckoned from the branches like enormous dandelions. The air smelled of red wine.

"Why me?" he wondered idly. He hadn't even wanted the Independent Biological Reasoning Unit. They were neither independent nor reasoning, Hades damn them, and this one had been loopy from the start. An abacus was a better substitute for a computer than this genetically-engineered collection of muscle and ganglia. Yes, it had an enormous capacity for data storage, but it took forever to transfer even a small data cluster from the Dwarf into it. He voted to have it deactivated, but the majority vote sent it to tutor the children instead. And now his entire future depended on Nannybot. The Universe was mocking him.

The dwarf cow buckled and kicked, catapulting Nannybot into air. The BRU flew over the fence, cleared their heads, flipping in the air like a cat, and landed on all fours. Shocked, Sean suddenly realized that Santos had assumed the shooter stance and was pointing the zapper at Nannybot.

"Santos, if you shoot it, I will kill you," Sean said evenly. "The report is still in it."

Nannybot rose slowly. Its limb still clutched the broomstick.

The round lens of its ocular swiveled. The vocal slit opened and smooth baritone issued forth. "Knights full of thought and sleepy, tell me if thou sawest a strange beast pass this way?"

"Dear Gods," Sean said.

"The Beast!" Nannybot proclaimed. "I have followed this quest this twelvemonth, and either I shall achieve him, or bleed of the best blood of my body." The Nannybot swung his broomstick dramatically.

"What does it mean?" Santos asked.

"It means nothing. It's gibberish." Sean said.

"Mallory," Emily said.

"What, sweetheart?"

"It's not gibberish, it's Mallory," Emily said patiently. "Arthuriana. Nanny thinks he's Sir Pellinore."

"Emily, honey, what is it trying to do?" Sean asked.

Emily smiled. "He's trying to hunt the Questing Beast, of course."
A light flared in Sean's head. "Tell me more."



"There are only two ways to break down a third-order AI." Sean strode to the Chief Programmer's block, Santos in tow. "You can flood it with a random avalanche of tiny tasks, which would throw the system into chaos and drive the AI insane. There is no cure for that one. Or you can lock the system into a loop with a definitive goal in mind. Achieve the goal, and the virus might purge itself. The first way is tedious to put together. The second way is more precise and takes greater skill."

He paused but Santos offered no comment.

"Arbians are proud pranksters. They love a challenge. That's why it makes no sense that they would slap together a chaotic protocol for that millipede. By all means it should have been a goal-oriented virus, so they could watch us squirm trying to solve it."

"You think Emily is right?" Santos said.

"Yes. And Nanny's behavior is too logical to be a product of a chaotic protocol."

"So not everything is lost?"

"If — if — we break the loop and if Verne can get the Workstation back up, it's possible we can salvage the FER. We... Ummm."

They turned around the corner and saw Verne. Ratibor Verne, the Chief Programmer and Protocol Guide was wearing a ceremonial plastic hauberk. He had brought a proper metal one from New Barbar, but trogomets had found it within the first week and promptly eaten it. Sean had managed to convince the orbital station's automated synthesizer to produce a plastic substitute, but it looked a bit ridiculous on Verne's hulking figure, partially because it was colored neon green.

Verne faced a rock, on which sat a small idol. Foot-long and carved from some dark wood with startling detail, the idol squatted, clutching an axe in one hand and a stack of wheat in the other.

A couple of curious trogomets sat next to Verne, pondering the idol. At the sound of Sean and Santos's steps, they scuttled forward, like twin clumps of tumbleweed, and sat on their haunches, tiny hands-feet raised, waiting for a handout. Santos extracted a cookie from his pocket. The trogomets mooked in unison. Their eyes locked on Santos as he broke the cookie in half and handed a piece to each fuzzy. The delicate hands snatched the cookie halves. Small shrew-noses poked out of the fur to sniff the

treat. The cookie vanished into tiny mouths and the fuzzies took off. No doubt they would've preferred a piece of copper wire.

Verne picked up a stick, hefted it in his hand, and hit the idol. *Thwack!*

Sean stopped. "Verne?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"He has been a bad god," Verne said grimly. "He must be punished." *Thwack!* *Thwack!* "Two years I spent here! Two! Years!" *Thwack!* "On a planet with no system. No uplink, no sensors." *Thwack!* "Always paranoid that what little I had would get eaten. And now he robs me of all of it." *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!*

The stick snapped in his hand. The idol seemed no worse for wear. Verne cast the broken stick on the ground and looked for another one.

"Emily thinks Nannybot is a character from a 14th century Terran myth," Sean said.

"Yeah?" *Thwack!*

"A knight," Sean said. "Who hunts a Questing Beast."

"Stop trying, Sean. It's a chaotic protocol. We've been bugged."

"Suppose it was goal-oriented, just for the sake of argument. How would we solve it?"

"Give Nanny what it wants," Verne said. "Give it the Asking Beast, let it hunt it, and catch it."

"There is no other way?"

"No."

Santos rubbed his chin. "Where would we get a Questing Beast?"

Verne stopped. "You're serious about this."

"Yes."

He rested his stick on his shoulder and looked to the sky. "If you're wrong, then I will hate you for the rest of my life for giving me hope and then bashing it to pieces."

"Understood," Sean said.

"Make one," Verne said.

"Make one?"

"You have genetic blanks in storage in orbit. The Workstation is shot but it will still transmit code. Input the correct parameters and..."

"That's highly illegal," Sean said. "Not to mention it would leave us without any spare tissue for limb replacement in case of emergency."

"We've been on this planet for two years," Verne said. "We've had about two dozen bites, and three twisted ankles. Do you really think that in the next week someone will suddenly get his leg chewed off?"

“Verne, we can’t just make a creature! I don’t know about you, but I’m not quite ready to live the rest of my life in a controlled facility.” Sean turned to Santos.

“It’s a good idea,” the Chief of Security said.

“I can’t believe you two.”

“It’s a good idea,” Santos repeated.

“It’s up to you,” Verne said. “You’re the one who didn’t run the transmission through the Great Wall. You’re the team leader.”

Shawn opened his mouth. On one side fifteen careers. On the other, his life thrown away if he were found out.

If.

“Alright, let’s say we do it,” he said hoarsely. “The only person who can code something like that into the genetic synthesizer would be...”

“Jennifer,” Verne finished grimly.



Jennifer crossed her arms on her chest. She was petite and ten pounds on the right side of plump, and he couldn’t help but note that the way her arms were crossed pushed her breasts slightly higher and out.

Sean took his eyes from her chest and stared at the ground. *That* had been a problem all along. He knew it. He wasn’t sure if she knew it, and it terrified him to think that she might. It may have turned out fine, possibly they could’ve even become a couple, but after Ickman had left, she was named his Joint Team Leader, which meant that she was the only person he could argue with without fear of entering a leader-subordinate relationship. And they argued a lot.

Sean took a deep breath. “I apologize for what I said earlier. I do concede that not all supporters of Autonomous System Structure are naive, slack-jawed, starry-eyed rich kids, who seek to alleviate personal guilt caused by their life of privilege. I also would like to say that a strong centralized government does have its weak points. And that I take back anything bad I’ve said before that could possibly piss you off.”

Jennifer brushed back her shoulder-length brown hair. “What do you want?”

It took him ten minutes to get through the explanation.

“You’re insane,” she said. “Absolutely not.”

“Jennifer...”

“There’s a reason why it’s illegal, Sean! You can’t introduce a man-made species into an ecosystem. It can wipe the whole biosphere out.”

“We only need one. You could make it sterile.”

“No.”

“Jennifer, I beg you...”

“Ha!”

He desperately raked his mind for a way to convince her and found none. “Look,” he said miserably. “There are fifteen people who gave two years of their lives to study and assess this planet. Their careers will be destroyed. It will reflect badly on both of us — in the entire history of Survey, there has never been an instance when a team hasn’t turned in a Final Evaluation Report. Except for Captain Chef, but that doesn’t count because he and his crew were eaten. But that’s not even the important part. The important part is that without the survey report we can show no basis to support preservation. They’ll chuck this planet for development. The fuzzies, the tari trees, Mel’s potatoes, the ino, all of it will be gone.”

She was looking at him. He took her gently by the elbow and turned her around to the window.

Long-stemmed grasses shivered in the light breeze, dotted by spherical pastel-red flowers that sparkled in the sun as the light fractured on the complex geometry of stamens. In the distance, in a soft patch of Maiden’s Hair weeds, a herd of dwarf cows watched two small calves butt heads with mock ferocity. Beyond the field, the tari forest rose like a jagged mountain ridge, silver, tall, and majestic. Above it all long feather-brush strokes of clouds highlighted the crystalline depth of the emerald sky.



“Emily, I want you to understand this,” Jennifer said. Sean remembered to unclench his fists. They sat in front of the Workstation, tapped into the mainframe of the unmanned orbital laboratory. The complex interface of the genetic synthesizer filled the screen. Verne hovered somewhere in the shadows behind them like some grim guardian of the cybernetic treasure trove.

“You can never, ever, ever tell anyone about this,” Jennifer continued. “Otherwise all of us would lose our jobs and Sean, Santos, Verne, and I would go into a controlled habitat. I realize this is a lot of responsibility for a fourteen-year old. I’m sorry to have to ask this of you.”

“I understand,” Emily said. “I promise not to say anything. I give my word.”

Jennifer took a deep breath. “Very well then. Let’s begin. It’s a chimera, so give it to me piece by piece.”

“Head of a snake,” Emily said. “Body of leopard. Haunches of lion. Feet of a deer.”

“What are you selecting as the primer?” Sean asked.

“Polberian running lizard,” Jennifer answered.

"It doesn't sound like a lizard," he said.

"Sean, shut up. Go on, Emily. What else do we know?"

"It was big. It made noise like forty baying hounds. It lived to be hunted and it was smart, because one time when Pellinore stopped hunting it, it came and found him."

"We don't want it too smart," Sean said.

"I can't guarantee the baying," Jennifer said.

Sean thought of saying that he doubted she could guarantee anything. For all they knew the whole thing would come out as a puddle of goo, but under the present circumstances, he decided against voicing his opinion.



Sean stood in the field, knee-deep in grasses. Somewhere a taina bird sang. They had yet to catch one.

The incubation of Questing Beast took two days. They had less than twenty four hours until the Committee's arrival.

A falling star winked into being. It blazed across the sky like a glittering emerald and streaked toward him. The pod. Finally.

The star grew into a white ovoid. For a moment it looked like the pod would plunge into the ground, and then the guides kicked in pulses of intense white flame, righting the pod, slowing the fall, and gently bringing it down in the middle of the field.

A hairline crack split the pod's surface. Sean stared at the developing door with a sick feeling. Behind him Jennifer made a small noise.

The door swung upward, revealing the dark interior. Something stirred within the gloom, something large and alive. A long head attached to a flexible neck appeared from the darkness, elegant, narrow, almost equine rather than reptilian in its lines. Big eyes with cobalt-colored irises regarded them. The Questing Beast blinked and stepped into the grass.

"Dear Gods," Sean said.

Lean and graceful, it stood on four muscled legs, ending in wide hooves. Silver fur sheathed it, dappled with a spray of pale green and carmine rosettes. A long silky mane flared on its sinuous neck.

It didn't look like a chimera. It looked like a cohesive being, like nothing he had ever seen before, and it was beautiful.

The Questing Beast opened its mouth and a clear voice issued forth. "Dear Gods," the Questing Beast said.

Sean's heart jumped into his throat. Behind him Verne exhaled. "Oh, shit!"

"Oh, shit," the Questing Beast said.

"It's a mimic." Jennifer strode toward it. "I told you I couldn't guarantee the baying."

"Jennifer!" Sean barked sharply. "Don't get close to that thing!"

"Oh, please." She reached over and the head dove to her hand. "It's an herbivore." She rubbed Beast's silvery nose and it licked her palm with a long pale tongue. An odd noise emanated from it, as if it had swallowed a beehive and now the infuriated bees fought to escape.

"See," Jennifer said. "It's purring."

Sean remembered to breathe.

"Well?" Jennifer asked. "Where is Nanny?"

Sean turned and waved his arms at Emily standing by the corral. She vanished behind the feed block and reappeared a moment later, followed by the Nannybot astride a dwarf cow fitted with a bridle and reins. The cow seemed surrendered to her fate.

"Is that a net he's carrying?" Sean wondered.

"Emily's idea," Jennifer said. "She didn't want him to hurt the Beast."

The bizarre group approached them. Sean stood aside. "Sir Pellinore! This is the Questing Beast. Beast — Sir Pellinore."

Nanny's ocular unit swiveled. The questing Beast blinked.

Without a word, Nanny dug his limbs into the cow's ribs. The startled bovine jerked forward, the Questing Beast moved in a silver shimmer, and just like that both were gone, galloping across the plain, the lean elegance of the Beast followed by the bouncing Nanny on top of the orange puff of fur.

In a couple of breaths they reached the forest and vanished from the view.

"Ummmm," Sean said. "Did what I think happened just happen?"

Nobody answered.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Now we hope Nanny catches him in his net," Emily said.

"Did you see how fast it was?" Verne scowled. "He'll never catch that thing."

Santos shook his head. Sean glanced at the forest. Verne was right. Nanny would never catch it...

"It was me," Jennifer said.

He looked at her. She swallowed visibly.

"I initiated the transmission that the millipede rode. It was me and not Sean. So blame me."

Verne turned on his heel and took off toward the forest, punctuating each step with grim determination.

"Where are you going?" Sean called out.

“I need a new stick,” the Chief Programmer answered.



The seven members of the Committee sat at the table like grim sentinels, like the keepers of keys to Hades, sitting in judgment of the sinners on the crossroads between Tartarus and Isles of the Blest. Sean didn't even know their names, only the fields they represented. At least Jennifer sat next to him.

Somehow the fact that they would go to the Tartarus of Destroyed Careers together brought him no comfort.

The Education/Science Member regarded the stack of loose paper sheets in front of her. Some of the paper was frayed and dirty. A couple of pieces, probably from Val, had food stains on them. In his mind Sean saw himself shrinking until he disappeared into nothing with a faint pop.

“We have looked through the notes,” the Business/Industry Member said. “We found them unsatisfactory.”

Sean cringed.

“You are aware that in the history of the Survey no team has failed to turn in the Final Evaluation Report?” the Environmental/Health Member said.

“Except for Captain Chef,” Jennifer said. “Because he was eaten.”

“In our defense,” Sean said, “we would both prefer to have been eaten.”

The Education/Science Member gave him a stony stare.

“What I meant to say was, there are extenuating circumstances.”

“Indeed,” the Social/Cultural Member nodded. “However, they do not change the fact that we are here and the FER is not.”

Sean opened his mouth...

The door burst open and Santos dashed inside, flushed and winded, and for a moment Sean thought the stoic Chief of Security was having a heart attack.

“Nanny's back,” Santos breathed.

In a blink Sean was off his seat and out the door. People crowded the small stretch of grass before the Block 7, and in the whirlwind of faces, he saw Nanny's familiar gangly form. It was riding the Questing Beast.

“The Independent Biological Reasoning Unit is reporting operational status,” Verne said.

Sean spun about to see the Committee exiting the Block.

“Two hours!” he cried. “Give me two hours, and I'll have the FER.”

The Education/Science Member was looking at the Beast.

“What is that?” she said softly.

“A recent find,” Jennifer improvised. “We call it the Questing Beast after Mallory’s Arthur myths. Would you like to pet it? It purrs.”



The Nemurian sunset was burning slowly. Against the deep emerald sky, the silvery ino trees seemed to glow.

Sean heard steps behind him, but the vista was too breathtaking and he was too tired, so he stayed where he was, leaning against a low fence. Someone took a spot next to him. He glanced over. Jennifer.

Two trogometts scuttled from the brush, jumping over each other.

“They recommended preservation,” she said.

He said nothing.

“I thought I’d be relieved,” she said. “I’m not. I’m still wound up so tight, it hurts.”

“Give it time to sink in,” he murmured. “Merlot.”

“What?”

“Merlot. It’s a varietal of Terrestrial wine grape. That’s what the air smells like.”

She closed her eyes. “I was trying to cross-reference the migration data with the warming patterns. Pen was asleep, and I thought I’d take a shortcut and just pull the data from the orbital myself. I logged on after you did and didn’t run it through the Great Wall. I’m sorry. I was so tired...and then when everything started breaking down, I just couldn’t...” She bit her lip. “I should’ve said something. I feel like scum.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “You said something in the end. That’s all that matters.”

She glanced at him, brown eyes warm.

“Do you think we’ve done the right thing?” he wondered.

“Too late to worry about it now,” she said. “I requested the extended tour, so if any complications arise I’ll be here to handle it.”

“I signed up for the extended tour too,” he said.

“I know. I’d checked.” She touched his hands with cool fingers. He reached out and put his arm around her and felt her snuggle against him.

Together they watched as the thousands of tiny white fireflies spilled from the puffy dandelions of the ino-ino fruits and danced on the night breeze.



The Questing Beast sniffed at a spot beneath the knotted roots of a tari tree. Around it the forest shivered, full of sounds and life. The Questing Beast scratched the ground with its hoof, squatted, and laid an egg.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Andrew and Ilona Gordon

History: Andrew B. Gordon was raised as a hillbilly in the mountains of North Carolina. He spent his senior year in Japan, joined the Navy, left the Navy, got a degree in History, joined the Army, left the Army and finally got a real job. With business cards and everything. Must keep the kids in anime and manga in the manner to which they've become accustomed. "The most important factor in collaboration is the understanding between the collaborators. We have similar interests. Ilona introduced me to sci-fi and fantasy, while I've got her to read mysteries. After ten years of marriage, we have the sort of empathy that lets us skip the long explanations. When I want to make a point, I only have to say a few words and she knows what I'm taking about." Ilona Gordon is Russian by birth, American by choice, and a mother of two — four if you count our insane dogs. Worked in a genetic research lab, printed T-shirts, and is currently employed as an external verifier, which is a fancy way to say I perform background checks. "I agree with Andrew — understanding between collaborators is crucial. I'd also add that honesty plays a huge role. If something stinks, he will tell me, and that alone is worth its weight in gold. We do argue, but our arguments are not conflicts. They arise from the need to find a better way to do something, and more often than not, at the end of the argument we find a satisfactory resolution to the dilemma in question."

Writing Credits: *Magic Bites*, with Ilona A. Gordon, writing as Ilona Andrews (forthcoming from Ace in the near future), "Night of Kupalo" in *Flash Me Magazine*, and other short stories.

Sean, Simon and Shane

...a collaborative interview with Edwina Harvey

Sean Williams and Simon Brown have collaborated to write several short stories, including the Aurealis Award winning story, “Atrax”. Shane Dix and Sean Williams have co-authored several series of books. Remarkably, The Star Wars—New Jedi Order trilogy, Force Heretic (*Remnant; Refugee; Reunion*), was written at the same time as the Orphans trilogy: (*Echoes of Earth*, the Ditmar winning *Orphans of Earth* and *Heirs of Earth*). All three collaborated with Edwina Harvey to offer their opinions on writing with another author.

ASIM: *What do you get from writing with a collaborator that you don't from writing a novel yourself (i.e. the good side of partnership)?*

Sean Williams: For me, it boils down to three things: companionship; complicity; synergy. The first one is obvious. Writing can be a lonely job sometimes, especially for someone like me who likes to talk about stories as they're unfolding (families and partners soon grow tired of it). It's so much more fun to have someone to share that story with, and to share the frustrations, too.

When two people work on any project together, there should always be a sense of being in it together. I often joke that I like working with Shane because if we get bad reviews, I can always blame him. And he can of course do the same right back. But really it's the other way around. I find it much easier to take praise for something I've done with someone else. “We did it” versus “I did it”. Success, like misery, prefers company.

The third thing, synergy, is obvious. Brainstorming is a wonderful way to be creative. Every time Simon or Shane and I get together, we come up with new and exciting ideas for projects. Why not capitalise on that process — not just to get over a story hurdle but to enrich an idea that is already good? It's possible to brainstorm with oneself, but it does get a little stale sometimes...

Simon Brown: Wot Sean said. But also there are stories I have half-written or outlined, or started again from scratch and still ended at a brick wall that are perfect to give to someone else to have a go at; someone you trust and whose writing you like but who will approach the narrative from a completely different direction. Even if the

new version is not what I wanted or expected, it's often better than anything I could have done by myself.

Shane Dix: Wot Sean and Simon said. The brainstorming aspect is a definite plus. Sometimes you know what you want to say but you just can't find the words, you know? Brainstorming collaboration often lets you see things you wouldn't have seen while sitting in an office alone. I also find there is something fundamentally more satisfying in taking the red pen to somebody else's words. I don't know, but when I edit my own work I kind of hesitate with slashing the pen through a word/paragraph/page. With the stuff Sean would send me, I would often just attack it with a frenzy nearing fervour...

What do you lose from writing with a collaborator that you don't get from writing a novel yourself (the bad stuff)?

SW: Well, there are obvious things like complete creative freedom, but who ever has that in the first place? Writers at all levels are constrained by market forces, reader expectations, editorial opinions and so on. It's always collaborative. To see two or more writers working together is common in cinema and TV. Why not books as well? Me, I think it's risen out of that myth that the writer as Artist needs to be lonely and isolated. I think that's an unreasonable demand or expectation, and is bound to leave some writers creatively stifled and unhappy.

Anyway, to answer the question, more or less, there's a risk that someone will take something which is very personal or in which you've already invested a great deal of energy and treat it without "due reverence"—

SD (aside): This is the frenzied attack I was talking about above. Sometimes I am sure that from Sean's point of view he has created a nice flower arrangement, and I have come along and trimmed it with a lawn mower.

SW: That can sting, but the sting is really a sign of getting better rather than being harmed. Sometimes we hang on to things too hard, and you need to let go in order to view them objectively.

Parts of "Dying for Air", for instance, are deeply personal. In the hands of another writer, I could've found those little snippets of me mauled or excised completely. I trust Simon; I know that if he left them in, then they belonged in the story. If he'd cut them, I would've put a bandaid on the sting and moved on. That way the story evolves into something new — not something I could have written or Simon could have written, but something that only he and I working together could have written. If you don't get that at the end of a collaboration, what's the point of doing it?

SD: One of the things I found myself conscious of when working with Sean was that my instinct was often to remove something that seemed redundant, but in the back of my mind I was always aware that he may have inserted this for a reason that might become clearer later on. When I'm working on my own stuff this isn't an issue, because when I'm editing I'm fully aware of that which is relevant and that which can be excised without affecting the rest of the story.

It's been said that Sean, known for being a very fast writer, tends to "splatter words onto a page". Is writing with Sean akin to being a "street cleaner" — i.e. Sean blasts through a scene and whoever he's writing with tidies up in his wake?

SW: It makes me sound like a horse with diarrhoea, but it's essentially true. Sometimes. There have been stories I've worked on with Simon that have been more traditional collaborations: he'll give me a beginning which I'll then finish, or vice versa. And there's a couple of works in progress that were written in alternating segments. Experimentation is good. And if I don't have to carry the shovel behind my own sick horse, all the better for me.

SD: Ha! You should avoid such imagery, Sean, as I am sure some reviewer not so taken with your work would be able to use it... But yes, Sean is a remarkably fast writer, and this was how it worked well for us, as we have said on many occasions. That time we were working on the Star Wars books as well as the Orphans books was a logistics nightmare, and could never have worked any other way than as described above. Sean would "splatter", as you say, those words onto the page and wing them my way, and then I would take a bit more time reworking, rearranging, etc., waiting on the next chapters to arrive. Somebody once asked whether or not we ever tried just writing alternate chapters of a book, but if we ever tried that then I'm afraid there would be a very awkward, clumsy book of two very differing styles. Not to mention the fact that the publisher would have Sean's chapters ready to go by the end of the first week while I'd still be working out the opening sentence of mine. But I have never had any problem with our arrangement at all. It utilises our strengths, as Sean once said.

Simon, I remember you saying previously that despite different writing styles, when you and Sean wrote together, the whole thing seemed to mesh terribly well.

SB: This is something I've found writing with Sean and Chris Lawson and my wife Alison Tokley. All four of us are very careful writers (and no matter how quickly Sean writes, he is a very careful writer), and before any of us add our new bit to the story being worked on, we go over what has been done before, editing and refining. What this means is that by the time a collaborative short story is finished it's been edited near unto death, and reads as if it was written by a single writer (which is exactly how a good collaboration should work).

Shane, is it like that with you?

SD: Absolutely agree with what Simon is saying here, and it harks to the above comment about how messy the whole thing would be if we wrote separate chapters. At the end of the day the story needs to have a smooth consistency to it (sounds like we're talking about making gravy than writing a story, eh?). I'd also like to join in with Simon here and reiterate that while we joke about Sean being a fast writer, this is not to imply he's not meticulous with the work he does. He has a much more instinctive grasp of a story, I find, and after initial discussions about what the story would be, Sean would go off and write

out the chapters. Sure, at times these would be rough, but afterwards he would go over the work I had done and he was very careful and precise with the final product.

And yes, I did find Sean and I meshed well. At first I had my reservations, because I truly didn't feel I was contributing enough to the partnership, but once I really started to let loose with that red pen, my reservations dispersed a little. We had the whole process down to a fine art by the end of the Star Wars books...

Do you ever have (even electronic) stand-up fights, where one writer is adamant a character should say something, or a scene or plot twist should go a certain way, or is co-authorship more a matter of like-minded individuals getting along?

SW: It's a game of give and take. Sometimes you just have to let things go, otherwise, as I said earlier, what's the point? In a successful collaboration, you get back more than you give up, always.

SB: Both Sean and I have argued points passionately, but in the end the story always seems to choose the right course. And as both Sean and I have stated before, if it's a choice of being friends or co-writers, the friendship wins out.

Actually, this raises an interesting point: I only write with people I know pretty well and like a lot. I don't think I could write with someone I didn't like.

SD: I cannot recall a time when we actually argued as Simon has said he and Sean have done. More often than not I bowed to Sean's wisdom on matters of the story. My strength would come to the fore when I would rearrange the structure of chapters, the flow of dialogue, things like that.

Is it like two parents sitting down to discuss a family together at all? i.e. "We're going to have 6 kids, they're all going to be born 2 years apart, we'll call the first one Donna if it's a girl or Zaphod if it's a boy..."

SW: I shudder to think what the biological co-creations of me and either of my collaborators would look like!

SB: Gorgeous, of course. In a very masculine way, naturally. Umm, unnaturally. Or something.

SD: I'd prefer not to dwell of such things, if that's all right with you. Such imagery would take many years of therapy to remove...

There seems to be an upsurge of well established writers collaborating with others i.e. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, Anne McCaffrey and Mercedes Lackey. Obviously you've found collaborative authoring is successful for you — but are there any overseas writers you'd love to collaborate with?

SW: Sure. I've been talking with a writer in the US about working with him on something. If the urge is there, I figure it's worth pursuing. But not just for the money. It's never just for the money.

SB: Plenty. And a few Australians as well.

SD: None that specifically come to mind, although I am not averse to the idea of collaborating with someone else. It would depend on what, of course, and what capacity I would be involved. At this stage my day is pretty much full with writing a book of my own at the moment each morning, then heading off to work for up to 5–8 hours every weekday. I couldn't imagine where I'd fit it in right now! Of course, should Delany (my all-time fave writer) get in touch tomorrow and ask me to collaborate, I'm sure I'd make the time. I mean, I'm busy, not stupid.

And have any of you considered writing with your progeny? Is there a Brown, Williams or Dix “next generation” out there either waiting to collaborate with Dad or already showing signs of following in your path?

SW: My pseudo-son and I have talked about writing stories together. Thus far it's only talk, but then he's not quite 14 and you talk about a lot of things at that age that never happen. But I love that the thought is there. Kids can be creative in ways that make my old head spin. I'd love to steal some of his ideas.

SB: Not yet, although as mentioned I have written stories with my wife. Not to say it won't happen, however; both Edlyn and Fynn love spec fic, so we will see what happens in ten years or so.

SD: I am currently editing my daughter's novel. She is 16 years old and this is her second attempt at writing a book. The first was a fantasy story, while this is more a mainstream story dealing with the friendship of two teenage girls. At the rate she is going, I can see her having a book sold to a publisher before I can get anyone interested in my solo stuff! So yes, if I am to stay in the game, then damn right there'll be some collaborating with my progeny!

Bibliography:

SEAN WILLIAMS & SIMON BROWN

“The Butler Codex” (2003)

“Atrax” (1999; Aurealis Award-winner, Best Horror Short Story)

“The Truth in Advertising” (1998)

“The Masque of Agamemnon” (1997)

SEAN WILLIAMS WITH SHANE DIX

Geodesica: Ascent (2005)

Geodesica: Descent (2006)

“Or Die Trying” (2004)

SEAN WILLIAMS & SHANE DIX

Orphans trilogy:

Echoes of Earth (2002; Ditmar Award-winner, Best Novel)

Orphans of Earth (2003)

Heirs of Earth (2004)

Star Wars: New Jedi Order: Force Heretic trilogy:

Remnant (2003)

Refugee (2003)

Reunion (2003)

Evergence trilogy:

The Prodigal Sun (1999)

The Dying Light (2000; Ditmar Award-winner, Best Novel)

The Dark Imbalance (2001; Aurealis Award-winner, Best SF Novel)

Book 1 of the Cogal

The Unknown Soldier (1995)

“Hollow Men” (1998)

The Feast of St Blort's Day

...Ben Cook digests the food of SF

Wouldn't it be great to swallow a pill and have all your dietary needs for the day met? Or to put a food cube in the Rehydrator and have it come out as a steaming hot chicken or steak dinner thirty seconds later? Actually, it probably wouldn't, since a couple of pills a day wouldn't fill you up, and if modern pre-packaged meals are anything to go by, regardless of what your rehydrated meals looked like, they'd all taste the same. Imagine the 26 July 2204 issue of *Good Domekeeping*:

We all know what it's like to open the pantry and find you've got nothing left but boring old cubes, don't we? But if hubby's due home soon, and you've no time to go to the store, why not try mixing those cubes into something exotic to greet him when he gets back from his hard day's work? Cut those cubes into quarters or eighths, and piece them back together into a multi-coloured cube to make for an interesting dish both before and after it's gone into the rehydrator. Imagine his surprise and delight when you serve him a lamb roast with chicken wings and the tail of a fish. It's a visual feast, and it all tastes like cube anyway.

Nonetheless, the adventuresome folk of science fiction have been munching on these and even more exotic meals for decades. Sometimes they are easily recognisable: space biscuits, six-legged mega-cow, or coffee that you have to sip through a funny straw to stop it floating about and making a mess. Sometimes they are more exotic: Centauri spoo,¹ Vulcan plomig soup, and things that have to be subdued before they'll let go of your space fork.

There are plenty of reasons foods form a part of science fiction, even when they are not really a part of the plot. When stranded on the great tundra of an ice planet, the search for food is a plot in itself. When meeting a new race a great feast of welcome offers a chance to understand each other by consuming local delicacies guaranteed to cause nausea, indigestion and death by anaphylactic shock.

The idea of a feast offering the traditional dishes of the planet Blimpht is a curious one. Unless Blimpht is populated entirely by koalas, the likelihood of everyone on the planet enjoying the same food is about the same as the chance of the entire planet having a common government that visitors could deal with.

¹ Made from worms of the same name, but often disguised as much as possible. Supposedly the tastiest food in the galaxy, although the most definitive description of spoo — from the creator of *Babylon 5* — is 'meat jello'.

What, for instance, would be the traditional dishes of Earth. Apple pie? (Or mom herself if visiting aliens are so inclined.) The sandwich? Burgers? Rice? United Nations food drops? A traditional Earth feast for visiting aliens would have to include all these dishes, plus hundreds more. Unless they were very hungry aliens, they might have to stay for a while.

It seems — or perhaps seemed — a common failing of science fiction writers, especially those writing for the big or small screen, to assume that alien worlds would have got their act together and formed a planet-wide government.² That the people of those worlds would be homogenised to the point where you could go anywhere on their world — or even within their star empire — and find people behaving the same, believing the same things, speaking the same language, and eating the same food.

It is difficult to say why anyone would believe this: perhaps they think it's the sign of a 'superior' race. Perhaps they believe that once a race meets people from another world, they will forget all their differences. Perhaps — in the case of science fiction scriptwriters — they believe viewers are stupid, and cannot deal with more than one ethnic group from any planet but their own.³

With the advent of 'naturalistic' science fiction — in other words, science fiction that is not too far removed from the real world — the aliens have become more like humans, and the humans of the future have become more like the humans of today. Laser guns have been replaced by projectile weapons. Force-fields by the age-old method of putting something solid in the way. And food, too, has become more recognisable. Gone are the protein pills of the 'future' of the mid-20th century, replaced by nut bars, chocolate, concentrates, and other food easily recognisable to anyone who has ever been camping.

Good thing, too, because when you sit down at table to sign a treaty with some other race, serving up a protein pill and a vitamin injection doesn't leave a great impression.

Synthehol is gone, and alcohol has made a triumphant return. Magic machines that serve up whatever you tell them have been replaced by fridge, frying pan and sink. Water comes out of a tap, and cubes have once more been relegated to the lonely-guy section of the freezer aisle.

The food of yesterday's future was futuristic. The food of today's future is much the same as that of today's today. Does that mean the food of tomorrow's future will be the food of the past? Can we look forward to Roast Suckling Pigs in Space?

Tune in next week, when you'll hear your pilot say: "For tonight's dinner, we'd like to offer you a choice of roast venison, or spitted quail. But we can't, so how about some cube?"

² Earth's own attempts at a planet-wide governing body have been the League of Nations and the United Nations. If aliens came to dinner, would we want either of those organizations setting the menu?

³ Depending on the demographic, they may not believe their audience capable of dealing with more than one ethnic group on any planet *including* their own.

ASif!

...Ben Payne interviews Alisa Krasnostein

Late in 2005, Alisa Krasnostein launched the Australian Specific in Focus (ASif!) website, a venue with the aim of reviewing speculative fiction by Australian authors. The site aims to cover as much material as possible, and to review each piece not once, but twice!

Since its launch it has become a widely talked-about site, as authors from the small (and large) press, normally review-starved, indulge in some hardcore surfing for opinions on their latest work.

We decided to talk to Alisa and find out what inspired this madness.

ASIM: What does ASif! (the title) stand for?

ASif! is an acronym for Australian Specific in Focus and it stands for pretty much that — full attention to the Aussie speculative fiction scene, oh and truth, justice and the Australian way. Seriously though, it aims for balanced, unbiased and transparent reviews of Australian specific material. It stands for inclusivity and equality.

What was your inspiration for starting the website?

The idea came out of several prolific discussions on LiveJournal. Many authors, editors and readers of Australian speculative fiction felt there was a need for a central place to bring together and advertise Australian works to enable smaller press to reach a wider audience. I thought that was something that I could do and so I put up my hand.

I came up with the idea of double reviews in response to comments that oftentimes reviewers may seem to be biased, towards or against. I've attempted to counter that by recruiting reviewers from outside the scene and to increase discussion of individual works. One method of doing this is to review everything twice. And so far, I've found that aspect (reading double reviews) to be really interesting.

What do you see its primary function as being?

I see ASif! as eventually being the central hub for Aussie specific — where you go to find what you are looking for or to find something new and then jumping off to where you can buy or download it.

Tell us a little about the day-to-day mechanics of running the site.

My main focus is getting submitted reviews onto the website so I tend to prioritise sending feedback to reviewers and working with them to get a review edited and then uploaded. If I have time, then I turn to admin and logistics — answering emails, contacting publishers and editors to request review material, sorting review copies and posting them on. I also try to keep on top of newly released material, works in progress and looking for all the past works that are out there to be reviewed. If I have time I try to work on newer elements of the project that I want to roll out in the near future. And I review too.

You're a relative newcomer to the local small press scene. Tell us your initial impressions.

When I first heard about the small press scene, I found it very hard to find a lot of it. And that's why at the moment the reviews are heavily weighted towards free online material. It was quite an endeavour to find hard copies of most publications and even now there are many that seem too elusive, especially for a project with no budget.

I think the most disappointing aspect for me has been (and still is) the fact that issues that people rave about tend to be the ones that are now out of print and destined to never be read by me.

Where would you like to see ASif in five years' time?

That recently became a really scary question for me. When I signed up, I wasn't really looking that far into the future. I'd say in five years time, I'd like it to be in relative maintenance mode with 500-700 reviews and 40-50 regular reviewers. I hope to have reviewed all the core material and for ASif! to be seen as an active archive — the first place you go to research the scene or to beef up your holiday reading list. I'd also like it to break even.

In five years time, I expect my role to have devolved into a management team. This is already well on the way to happening, as my reviewing team has stepped in to help with management as specific needs have arisen. For example, Kathryn Linge helps me with the time-consuming task of assigning and tracking of reviews. Gillian Polack has conceived and helped execute most of the publicity. The eminent Peter Cobcroft deals with any and all of my website issues. Currently, you and Bryn Sparks are putting together ASif!'s recommended reading list for 2005. Based on the Locus Recommended reading list, it will compile what we at ASif! collectively thought were

stories you shouldn't miss from 2005. We are also inviting editors and publishers to submit their recommended reading to the list. All of this is laying framework for the longer term.

On a personal level, what drew you to the project?

As a newcomer, I felt the scene lacked integration. It needed a means for smaller projects to ride on the publicity and media of bigger ones. I felt that a review site could be a vehicle for this and I saw it as something that I could do. I wanted to bring small press to more readers and I wanted to do it in a way that would enable newcomers to quickly orient themselves in the scene — to share what I had gathered with others. Australian writers are writing some really great material and I wanted to bring new readers in and help them discover that.

On a personal level, I wanted experience as an editor. I've discovered it's far more work than dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's!

What do you see as the biggest challenge ahead?

Maintaining momentum — keeping enough material flowing for reviewers to review and conversely, having enough reviewers on board to sustain constant update of the site. This is in no way a plug but if the reader reading this right now has material not reviewed on ASif! or you are interested in reviewing: alisa.krasnostein@gmail.com!

ASif! can be found at www.asif.dreamhosters.com

Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine welcomes book reviews or books to review, however we can't guarantee publication of any review, or to review every book sent to us. For more information please contact the Reviews Editor, Ian Nichols, at asimreviews@gmail.com.

Master of Space and Time

By Rudy Rucker

Thunder's Mouth Press, 229 pp

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

This is a reprint of a novel written in 1984, and there are elements of the crazy eighties right throughout the novel. Or, I should say, there are elements of the psychedelic sixties. For those who can remember the wonderful glory days of the sixties as they sit in their rocking chairs, an almost inescapable element was the development of alternative comics, and foremost among those who bent and shaped the venerable form was one R Crumb. His drug-crazed, anarchic, sexually profligate protagonists were iconic of the times.

Great days; great days.

This novel reads like a head-on collision between *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and Kurt Vonnegut. With a soundtrack by Frank Zappa.

The story is a reworking of the three wishes myth, in modern whiz-bang technology. Dr Joe Fletcher and his friend, Harry Gerber, build a blunzer, a device that gives them three wishes. This is not any ordinary techno-genie, though. It operates by injecting gluons, red, blue or yellow, right through the skull into the brain. But these are no ordinary gluons; they're fried in a microwave first. Wish fulfilment through flash-fried gluons. You can just see the Freaks getting down on that one.

The technobabble that supports the idea is fascinating. Gluons are blended into Planck Juice, injected into a one-meter wave guide and instructed that this is now the Planck length, the length at which uncertainty takes over. Now, I don't pretend to understand the physics of this, but it sure as hell sounds good. From this fantasia it is a small leap to being able to control Space and Time, as the title says, through controlling uncertainty.

The first wish, apart from providing Joe with lots of money and turning Harry's girlfriend, Sondra into a copy of a movie star with angelic

wings, is to open doors into six different rooms, almost like an extended Disneyland. The trio take the door into the Looking-Glass world.

The trouble is, that the world is a cultural reversal of our world, governed by a reversed Harry Gerber, called Garry Herber. That would be bad enough, but Herber is a pseudo-mystic hard-core religious revivalist who has gained strange powers since he was sent to the electric chair.

Oh; and he's a naked brain with attached spinal cord that buds and infects people to take them over, sort of as in Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*.

After drunken gun battles and desperate chases, Joe and Harry save the Looking-Glass world from Herber. The red gluons wear off and the control of uncertainty goes with it. But there's a problem; Herber himself has got into our world and is busy taking people over. Our three heroes must find a way to wish him away. The red gluons don't work anymore, so they have to use the blue ones, which only give them four minutes to fix the world which, by this time, includes giant fritter trees and rampaging pork-chop bushes. Four minutes to save the world.

Joe takes the hit this time. He solves all the problems of the world but, in one final impulsive wish, turn himself into yet another copy of the movie goddess while turning Sondra back the way she was before, as she desired. That's all fine, but there are problems that stem from the problems, and Joe hasn't even thought about those. In order to solve these second-order problems, Joe and Nancy, his wife, have to track down some yellow gluons. These are possessed by Tri Lu, a sex-obsessed experimental scientist. He gives the gluons to Joe for one million dollars and a session with Joe's goddess body. Then Joe is ready to save the world once again.

The trouble is, this time they only have a tiny amount of the gluons, enough for two and two-fifths seconds of control. It took two hours to produce the original problems, four minutes to try to solve them, and now they have a little over two seconds to wish everything better. Nancy takes the shot this time, and the solution she comes up with fits in perfectly with the pseudo-science of the novel. Everyone winds up happy, so to speak, and world is a better place, so to speak.

The novel is fast and funny, a glorious joyride through space and time and weird science. Parts of it sound as if they were scripted by the Marx Brothers and parts by Vonnegut at his most acid. There may be some serious point to this novel, but I couldn't find it. It doesn't matter. It's hilarious, and that's enough point for me.

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Incurable: The Ellie Chronicles (Book 2)

By John Marsden

Pan Macmillan Australia, 242pp

Reviewed by Tehani Wessley

In this, the latest instalment in Ellie's story, John Marsden takes us into the human side of the fallout of the war in his alternate future reality, with Gavin's backstory, something which long time readers may have wondered a bit about. I had, but not so much that I am entirely happy seeing the guerrilla efforts of Ellie and her cohort take a big backseat to that tale.

With half the book devoted to finding out about Gavin's family, and the chilling secret he's been keeping, the war aspect of the story is downplayed. The first chapters are given over to a raid by the young guerrilla group Liberation, which Homer, Lee and Ellie's new boy-type interest Jeremy belong to, but which Ellie has refused to be a part of. However, she is drawn into the action (isn't she always?) because Gavin, her deaf ward, follows the others on their raid. This sequence, while very exciting, and perhaps one of the best written of Marsden's action sequences throughout all of the books, actually feels like filler. The adventure doesn't seem to advance the story much at all, and really only seems to be there because it's expected, and to keep us feeling like there is still some relevance in this book to the war that took place in the previous series, begun so long ago in *Tomorrow, When the War Began*.

Marsden's writing is, as ever, targeting the level of the adolescent, endeavouring to excite the reader in every child. Perhaps I'm just getting a little old for the series, as I found Ellie's 'voice' has become a bit annoying and overbearing, and I'm tired of the ongoing efforts of Marsden to keep the sequence alive. There seemed to be far too much internal monologue going on in *Incurable*, and this detracts from Marsden's strength of entertaining storyline that has lifted his other books to such heights.

It's still worth a read, but if, like me, you've read and enjoyed all the other books (this is number nine in the story, although only number two in the second sequence of *The Ellie Chronicles*), you may be a bit disappointed in the overall advancement of the story.

Eclipse

By K Adrian Bedford

Edge, 309pp.

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

Bedford's previous novel, *Orbital Burn*, garnered praise from critics as widely dispersed as the prestigious *New York Review of Science Fiction* and our own Dave Luckett, in *The West Australian*. It is not surprising that Edge published the next novel in this semi-series. They might have considered running it under the eyes of a competent editor before they printed it.

It tells the story of James Dunne and his adventures on board the cruiser HMS *Eclipse*. Dunne is newly graduated from the Royal Interstellar Service Academy, enthusiastic and ready to head off to the final frontier, despite the fact that he's been beaten, brutalised and bugged at the Academy. This is something that knocked a prop right out from under my willing suspension of disbelief. It appears that "Back at the Academy, if you screwed up particularly badly, there was just about no limit to what the provosts might do to make you sincerely regret not conforming to proper cadet behaviour, and they weren't above rape, as I well knew." It appears that in the far future the practices of Victorian age boarding schools have reappeared. It is difficult to believe that, in an era when fast and universal communication exists, nobody has blown the whistle. I find it even more difficult to believe that the moral structure of the society that exists in this far future has so far degenerated that there is no hue and cry when the practices become known.

But, perhaps I'm asking too much, and people either don't talk or don't care. Even the Queen might not care, in all her "quiet majesty, serene beauty, and wisdom." And that's another blow to diegesis. The Virtual Queen Helen, ruler of all she surveys. Apparently, after the fall of Earth, things went to hell in a handbasket for a while, but eventually people chose as ruler a "unifying leader who could be all things to all people." The fact that Queen Helen is a computer program that started off as "some student's exercise in character design" that got into the "Home System infosphere" more or less accidentally doesn't seem to be an inhibition.

Dunne runs into trouble from day one on the *Eclipse*. And it just gets worse when they discover alien life. The captain responds by, after a few weeks, poisoning them in the tanks where he's holding them. Of course, he's given a medal for it and it's just one more grand cover-up. This is the government by the understanding Queen Helen. Of course, there is

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a subversive element, and Dunne, quite literally, and unnecessarily, falls into bed with them. He displays his ineptitude as a spy by getting caught, and it's back to the infirmary. The plot falls apart, as well.

Plots and sub-plots abound in the novel, far too many of them. Not all are resolved satisfactorily, and the out-of-the-blue obligatory space war is resolved by the good old God from the Machine trick. Again, quite literally.

There are good points to the novel, many of them. It is inventive, has some fascinating technological ideas and a good premise for the greater human society. A great deal of the prose is solid and competent. What it lacks is the hand of a good editor. There are too many plot lines, the main character is far too schoolboyish and the villains are exaggerated and unbelievable. Dunne is so mawkish about his many errors that, at times, you want to reach into the story and give him a quick clip over the ear yourself. It should be fifty pages shorter. Some of the more ridiculous plot concepts, such as the seduction by the older woman, should have been dumped. Some of the dialogue, such as the captain's delusional ranting, should have been trimmed or cut altogether. A great deal of Dunne's snotty introspection could have been elided. The ending that is so reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, should have been either dumped or rewritten. What has happened is that all the little niggling errors combine to distort what could have been a fine book.

Future Wars

Martin H Greenberg and Larry Segriff, eds.

Daw, 317 pp.

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

There is something redolent of failure in the title of this anthology, as if it takes for granted that war is so much a part of human nature that it will always be with us. Given current events, this may be correct. Given the massive sales of books which deal with war and the mechanisms of war, they have obviously tapped into a fairly lucrative market. Sad, really.

As far as I can see in this anthology, the future of war is gadgetry. Even though some of the stories are character-focused, a fascination with gadgets permeates all of them. Indeed, Bill Fawcett's *Ranger* is almost

totally focused on the gadgets used to humiliate, rather than assassinate, the enemy leader. He asserts at the end of the story that all the non-lethal equipment used in the story exists right now. He also asserts that the problem with non-lethal weapons is that they can be lethal. Fair enough, but the disclaimer still comes at the end of a story which shows war to be a game, of sorts, where the soldiers involved play tag with the enemy.

This is a problem with quite a few of the other stories, as well, in that they show war as a strangely joyous occupation, which brings people together in some mighty effort, even though this may be at personal cost. The characters have fun fighting and winning. The consequences may sadden them, or cause them to renounce war, or to see the futility of it all, but they still seem to enjoy the abandonment of conscience which the act of fighting brings.

Perhaps the lone exception to the obsession with gadgetry and fighting is Ron Collins' "The Vacation". This explores the reactions of a woman vacationing on a planet where her son had been killed in a battle. Initially, she is prejudiced against the natives, because the human forces had come to support them, and she sees them as causing her son's death. Eventually she becomes reconciled to them, accepting that her son's death had meaning, after all. It's a pleasant little story.

The stories are all entertainingly written, and some, such as William H Keith Jr's "Los Ninos" try to make a moral point regarding war. But it all winds up with the same message: war will be with us always, here on Earth, or in the stars. Sad, really.

Paperquake

By Kathryn Reiss

Harcourt, 264pp

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

One of Kathryn Reiss' main abilities is to combine a fascinating mystery with the issues of personality and relationships which are so important to young adults. She does so with sensitivity and insight, and with no trace of condescension. At the same time, her handling of the mystery elements makes her novels intensely readable, and divorces them from the tedious teen tales which feature dysfunctional families and disasters.

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In *Paperquake*, the mystery begins when Violet Jackstone, the non-identical sibling in a set of triplets, begins to dream of things which she has never experienced, but which seem real to her. Dreams of ordinary domestic pastimes, such as needlepoint, are intermingled with dreams of terrible tragedy, of flames and earthquake. The earthquake dreams, she thinks, might be explained by the series of small tremors which San Francisco, where she lives, is experiencing. But how to explain the domestic dreams?

The situation becomes even more mysterious when she helps her sisters and parents to clean up an old shop they have bought. Hidden in the walls and under the counter she finds letters and a diary which seem to be about her, only her as someone who lived nearly a hundred years before, just prior the great earthquake of 1906. The “V” who lived then bears an uncanny resemblance to her, as she would have been if she had not had heart surgery as a child to repair a cardiac condition. Gradually, through a series of clues and false leads, she works out the mystery, just in time to prevent tragedy.

While the mystery contains enough suspense to hold any reader’s attention, it is seamlessly integrated with the story of Violet’s development through the period of this crisis. Protected and somewhat cosseted because of her early heart condition, she hates being excluded, and feels babied. At school she’s a year behind, because she had to miss time when she was sick, and at home she’s treated with kid gloves. The effect of this is to make her fearful, particularly of earthquakes, representing those dangers over which no-one can have any control. Her two identical sisters dress alike and have the same interests, and Violet wants to be just like them, but can’t be. Even when she attempts to dye her dark hair to match their blonde she is unsuccessful, and only succeeds in adding purple highlights to it.

As the forebodings of tragedy become stronger, Violet gradually confronts her own fears, and takes control not only of them, but of the situation. She driven by the urgency of her fears, she begins to direct her sisters and friends into helping her discover more and more of what happened to the girl “V” in 1906. As she does so, she develops the strength herself, and to accept herself for what she is; different from her sisters.

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One of the strongest points of the story is that it is not a grim exploration of self-discovery. While Violet has problems, and the situation her dreams warn her of is disastrous, this is a story of triumph, not tragedy. More, it is a story that contains a great deal of humour and, perhaps more importantly, good humour. People try to understand each

other, and help each other, and the model of the urban community we see in the street outside the shop, with their neighbourliness and good feeling, is one which sends a positive message about such communities to the intended audience of teenagers. It's a shame there are so few book which send such messages.

Paint By Magic

By Kathryn Reiss.

Harcourt Books, 271 pp.

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

One of the objectives of the time-travel story is to evoke the period to which the journey takes place. This is, perhaps, easier when the scene is in the dark ages, or the age of dinosaurs, where action can take the place of characterisation, and the unfamiliarity of the setting can be a fascination in itself. However, when the setting is just a little while ago, and the action is not particularly violent, then the writer is required to evoke the people of the time, rather than the action. It is this skill in characterisation at which Kathryn Reiss excels.

As an example, the character of Lorenzo da Padova, the malevolent painter who is the originator of the magic in the book, is created in just over two pages, yet his brooding presence sits insidiously in the background of every successive page, even though he never reappears, except in the conversation of others. His intensity and disregard of sentiment, of any human value, in pursuit of perfection in his painting is chilling, and exquisitely evoked.

The novel is not, however, simply a character study. It poses questions about the values we adopt in modern life, and whether these values could be changed for the better by adopting simpler, closer lifestyles, as the families of earlier times did. What Connor, the first-person narrator of the story realises when he is sent back in time, is that many of the things he depends upon for pleasure and entertainment in his 21st century life are only things, things which mean very little. He learns the value of people, and of play, and of families.

Through a malevolent spell, and through the power of art, Connor's mother, Pam, journeys back in time to the 1920's. There, she stays with, and is a model for, a brilliant but eccentric artist. When she returns to her own time, some lingering effects of the spell remain with her, until

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Connor also is sent through time and breaks the power of the spell. Along the way, they both stay with the same family, and learn about the love that should exist in a family, and the fun that can be had without televisions and computers. Both of them return to their present as changed people, and better people.

This novel is elegantly precise in its language, and concentrates on telling the story while developing the characters. Connor starts out as something of a brat, but his change is believable and carefully integrated with the mystery which surrounds his travel through time. The family they both stay with in the past is beautifully drawn, and simply drawn. The details, and all the clues to the mystery, are where they are needed, but there is no hint of over-writing. Nor does the book talk down to its intended audience of young adults. Instead, it gives them a worthwhile story in clear, simple prose, and one with a worthwhile message.

Parents should buy this book for their kids before the kids discover it and buy it for themselves. Both parents and young adults will enjoy it.

The Rediscovery Of Man

By Cordwainer Smith

NESFA Press, 671 pp.

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

Somebody might get mad at me for writing this review, because it's about a book that isn't, just is not, stocked in any of the major booksellers. It's almost certainly not stocked in the minor booksellers, either, yet it's relatively easy to obtain either via internet or from a bookseller who will order it in for you.

Other people might really like me for introducing them to the NESFA range of books. I'll tell you why.

For a start, this anthology is complete; it has all the short science fiction of Cordwainer Smith, including two previously unpublished stories. It has a great introduction by John J Pierce. It is beautifully produced, and I mean gorgeous. Hardback, with the slipcover art by Jack Gaughan, the leaves are of heavy, creamy stock and the boards are stiff, the fabric smooth and the binding solid. It's just \$25 US, which comes out to about \$35 Australian. Kick in the postage, and it's about \$45 all up, cheaper if you buy a bunch of books all at once. That's about the full price of Harry Potter.

Inside you'll find all the stories that made Smith a legend, apart from *Norstrilia*, his only SF novel. His first professionally published story, "Scanners Live in Vain", is there, along with the one that was published before it in his high school magazine, "War No. 81-Q". you'll find his last published story, "On the Sand Planet", as well as the two other stories published after his death. In such an encyclopaedic edition as this you can see the development as he turns his tentative beginnings into the sad, wonderful stories of his later life. That's the advantage of a compendium edition. It's especially valuable for historians and anyone who wants to learn about science fiction as it was and as it can be written. It's more than valuable for any writer who wants to see how writing can take an alternative form without being irretrievably unreadable.

The earlier stories, even "Scanners Live in Vain", one of his most renowned stories and the one that started his career, show elements of clumsiness. They make up for it by some of the most liquid and impressive phrasing in all science fiction. The ideas at the core of the stories are still bright and shiny, because they are based on the ways people do things, the ways people react to things, not on simple science. As the stories link together to form the future history of the title, we see a quest forming; not a quest to rediscover Man, but to rediscover what man means, to rediscover everything that has been lost to a bureaucracy that spanned the stars and legislated everything, including the date of your birth and your death. We also see the rebels against the monolithic Instrumentality of Mankind. The rebel lords, and the saviours of the Underpeople, animals who have been genetically altered to resemble humans. We see their struggle to gain rights for themselves; the triumphant horror of the dog girl D'Joan, the romance of C'Mell, the dedication of T'Ruth. We see, within this greater epic the story of Casher O'Neill and his quest to gain succour for his planet of Mizzer after a rebellion. He wanders the worlds of Man, like a far-future Odysseus, gaining help and solving puzzles, until he can return to Mizzer and win an unexpected victory, that leads him on one last quest.

New England Science Fiction Association books are invaluable for anyone who is interested in the story of SF itself. They can be obtained from a very few of the specialist bookshops in Australia, the names of which I will not mention, but you might find ads for them in these pages, or by going direct to the NESFA website. The big bookshops won't have them. In these days of fast-food paperbacks and flash-cooked best-sellers, they are based on quality production and limited numbers. They are based on a genuine love for the field and a desire to keep alive the great names of the past. Try them. You won't regret it.

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