

### **Terms of Engagement** by C. S. Friedman

*C. S. Friedman has published seven novels, including In Conquest Born, This Alien Shore, and the Coldfire trilogy. Her next novel, Feast of Souls, is slated for publication next March. Her first appearance in our pages--one of her rare short works--is a sprightly story of the suspicion that Ms. Friedman earned a Master's Degree from a university in the American south, but we're sure that any similarities between her life and this fiction end right there.*

I made a deal with the roaches.

Mind you, it wasn't something I *wanted* to do. The way I'd been raised, bugs were something you talked to through the business end of a can of Raid, and the language consisted of one word: *Die!* My parents' home had been hermetically sealed by window and door Experts, and any insect that mistook its climate-controlled confines for suitable territory was quickly--and terminally--taught the error of its ways. Houses were for humans, not insects.

Yes, I knew there were places where people didn't have the money or inclination to wage war so successfully against the things that crept and slithered, the same way I knew there were striped horses in Africa and creatures in Australia that carried their young in a pouch. But those things weren't in *my* world, you understand. In *my* world, the closest you ever came to a cockroach was watching an insect documentary on PBS ... and when the commercial came on you got up and washed your hands anyway, just because watching them made you feel so creepy.

Then I moved to Georgia.

I was in grad school then, and in grad school you don't get to live in a hermetically sealed environment. You live in a little apartment carved out of an aging house that boasts of "great atmosphere" and "proximity to the college" rather than things like "living space" and "working appliances." The living room wall may have had a little hole cut into it, in which a tiny air conditioner was placed in deference to "yankee tastes" (my southern friends all assured me that air conditioning was unhealthy), but its existence was mostly for cosmetic purposes, as it couldn't handle the kind of heat the Georgia sun belts out. Next door to the west would be a fraternity house, most likely, which meant an ancient mansion taken over by beer-swilling college boys with the personal hygiene habits of a sewer rat and the social habits of ... well, let's just say the cockroaches loved it there. To the east would be a sorority house, whose members valued the condition of their property a bit more than the guys did, and maintained it by partying on the street in front of your apartment instead of at their own place, leaving enough trash behind to feed a six-legged army.

At night the cockroaches would come out and dance on the sidewalk. I'm not kidding. You'd be walking down the street your first night in town, looking straight ahead like yankees are taught to do (gotta watch for muggers!), grateful that the blazing sun had set at last, when suddenly, squish! You would look down, wondering what the hell you had stepped on ... and you saw a few dozen roaches contemplating the same question. They were all over the sidewalk when night fell, celebrating the pleasures of cool concrete, or something like that, and you couldn't just ignore them or your shoes would be a mess, so you had to actually *watch* them, every step of the way, all the way home. Big ones and small ones, sturdy aggressive ones and little shy ones ... all dancing around as if they were in Times Square and the New Year's Eve ball had just dropped.

My friends assured me the big ones weren't really roaches, but some other kind of insect instead. That was supposed to make things better. I suppose when a creepy bug runs across your kitchen counter and it's three inches long (I am not exaggerating) and it looks like a roach and moves like a roach, it helps a lot to tell yourself "Hey, it's only a palmetto bug, calm down!" I mean, maybe there are some people who find that kind of knowledge comforting, but in my book it's in the same category as "daddy long legs isn't

really a spider."

Point is ... you couldn't get away from them, no matter how hard you tried.

I had one of those little apartments, complete with the air conditioner in a hole in the wall. The hole might have matched the air conditioner once, but years of vibrations and leaky drips had eaten away at the plaster surrounding, until, if you crouched in front of it just right, you could see the sunlight shining through on three sides of it. Highway for insects, to be sure. So I plastered that up, just like all the other grad students had done before me, but it didn't help much, because while you were closing up one hole there was another one being eaten away at the corner of a back window, or through the back of a closet, or somewhere else that cockroaches wanted to be.

It was war, plain and simple.

Trouble was, I was losing.

Oh, I'd started with all the best things an army can have: good spirit, excellent supplies, and a solid game plan. I had roach traps inside all my kitchen cabinets and cans of Raid in easy reach in every room, and after two months of particularly bad infestation I even got my landlord to spray the place down. All of which just serves to breed better roaches. Think about it. The ones who get caught in the traps are the stupid ones who can't tell "food" from "danger," and you just took them out of the gene pool. The ones the exterminator gets are the ones that can't run away fast enough, or maybe they are too territorial to know when a battle is lost and they need to retreat and regroup in some other grad student's apartment. Ditto the gene pool note for those guys. So the next generation, when it returns--and it *will* return--is less likely to get caught in traps, less likely to be at home when the exterminator calls, and more likely to have cousins who come for a visit when the apartment next door is being sprayed.

If you're thinking "you can't win" ... you're right.

Did you know that roaches are one of the oldest forms of life on Earth? And that if Georgia were hit with a nuclear bomb tomorrow, and the radiation was so hot that all the humans died, the roaches would get on just fine?

All of which does not comfort you when it's three in the morning and you wake up because something with six legs and antennae has decided your face is the place it wants to be.

I won't bore you with tales of all my many losing battles. They were the same battles that women have fought since the beginning of time, and I lost them for the same reasons my cave-dwelling ancestors probably lost them ten thousand years ago. Whatever you do to roaches, they figure it out and learn how to work around you. And even if you manage to kill a bunch of them off there are always more, ready to take their place.

One day I was at a friend's house. There were a lot of people over, mostly grad students griping about one class or another, and our host was doing something at the sink when he let out a yelp suddenly and called us all over. We came running, but by then the thing he'd seen was gone.

"They've adapted!" he cried, and he told us breathlessly of a pair of roaches he'd seen, with translucent shells that *matched the formica*. Yes, those creepy bastards had finally bred a variation that allowed them to match kitchen counters, making them all but invisible in a modern urban environment! It was Darwinian evolution in action, and we were all pretty damn awed by it.

You know what was creepiest about that moment, in retrospect? That not one of us doubted it had happened! Not one of us doubted that roaches were indeed adaptable enough to evolve a slick change

like that, and do it in time to cash in on current countertop fashions, before the colors all changed and they were visible again. But in fact they hadn't done that, I found out later. It turns out that when roaches are first born they have naturally translucent shells for about a month, that darken as they harden later. But did we ask back then if that was possible? No. Did we harbor *any* doubt that the roaches had done what my friend claimed, and developed a new weapon in the eternal war for kitchen dominance? Of course not. Roaches might be our enemy, but they were a respected enemy, and we did not kid ourselves one iota about their capacity to innovate, genetically or otherwise.

That night I made a deal with the roaches in my apartment. That is, I offered them a deal. Since I'd spent the better part of two years killing them, they were understandably wary of sending anyone out to parley with me, but I went into the kitchen where I knew most of them were hiding and I told them my plans loud enough for all to hear. I figured they'd let me know if it was acceptable or not.

"Look guys," I said. "I can't stand you being here, and you're obviously not going to leave no matter how many times I spray the place, so we've hit a kind of stalemate. I'm betting you don't like this situation any more than I do. So I'm going to offer you a compromise. You can live in my apartment all you want, you can eat all the food you can find that's out in the open, when the lights go off ... but *I don't want to see you*. Does that sound fair?"

I listened for a minute, and there were no roaches telling me I was being unreasonable, so I went on. "Here's the deal, guys. Every room I go into, I'm gonna turn on the light first. No more of me wandering around in the dark; you'll all have fair warning that I'm coming. When you see that light, you go running for cover. And anyone who's out of sight by the time I arrive is safe. I won't set traps for them, I won't spray their homes, nothing. The rest ... the rest are fair game."

It was a devious plan, and I'm not sure the roaches fully grasped its brilliance. You see, not only was I offering to spare those roaches whose behavior was suitably discreet, I'd be breeding their good habits into the swarm. By killing *only* those who stayed out when the lights were on, I'd be giving the reproductive advantage to those who instinctively ducked for cover right away. Eventually I'd have bred in that quality to the local population as a whole, and voil! I'd never have to see another roach again.

Darwin was a genius, wasn't he?

"Oh," I added, as I left the kitchen (turning out the light as I did so), "stay out of the bedroom too, would you?" I didn't offer a deal to cover that but I thought they might be willing to throw it in, good faith gesture and all that.

I should note at this point that my boyfriend thought I was a raving loon. That isn't quite as judgmental as it sounds, since on a normal day he didn't think I was exactly a poster child for rational thinking. That's because he was a business major, and anything that could not be graphed out on a chart or broken down into a spreadsheet format was, for him, not worth paying attention to. Since I was an artist, that included most of my life. So he spent most of his time with me trying not to express what he *really* thought about my profession, which was all right because at least he tried. What more could you ask out of a poor business major? The sex was pretty good, at least. That made up for a lot.

But this was evidently too much for him. "*You made a deal with the roaches?*"

"It's an experiment in natural selection," I tried to explain. "You see, Darwinian theory--"

But he wasn't having any of it. He lectured me for half an hour on the craziness of trying to make deals with insects, which made me wonder if the sex was really *that* good, after all. I mean, even an artist has her limits. He came one step short of saying I was crazy enough to be committed, but only just one step. Listening to him rage, I wondered what the roaches thought of it all, from their hidden spots in the

kitchen. God knows he was ranting loudly enough for every roach in the apartment complex to hear him.

Could I actually alter a species to suit my needs? Was the mere thought of doing so the ultimate in hubris, or simply my own adaptation to our shared environmental problem? If the roaches in my apartment came to bear a genetic predisposition to "play by the rules," might they, in their romantic dalliances with neighboring roaches, pass the lesson on? My friends were fascinated by these and other questions, and demanded daily dispatches from me on how things were going in the War Zone. One even expressed regret that he had not studied my roach population before my experiment began, so that he could use the results as part of his master's thesis.

And the news was ... it was working. Sure, it was weird for me at first, reaching into the bathroom to flick on the light a full minute before I looked inside. And sure it was messy at first, with all the roaches that hadn't gotten with the program needing to be dispatched before anything else was done. Sometimes in the middle of the night you just want to do your business and go back to bed, you know? But damn it all if after a few weeks there weren't fewer and fewer roaches to kill. I knew I hadn't gotten them all, so it had to be that the rest were learning the house rules. Maybe they would teach their young, and help the Darwinian thing along.

My boyfriend still thought I was a loon. In fact, the better my experiment was proceeding, the more upset he seemed to get about it. "You're obsessed with the damn roaches!" he accused, in a tone of voice that made it clear the *real* crime was that I was not obsessed enough with him. "Do you really think they give a damn about this 'treaty' you have with them?" He even got mad at me for leaving the bathroom light on when he was sleeping at my place. But I knew he wouldn't respect my deal with the roaches enough to turn it on himself, and I didn't want any of my well-trained little roommates being trapped in the spotlight when they hadn't had fair warning. How could I expect all *their* people to respect our deal, if *my* people didn't?

One night we had a really big fight. I'd gone a month without seeing a single roach anywhere, and, well, it *was* a big deal. People who love you are supposed to share your triumphs, right? Or at least pretend they do? But he just got angrier than ever and went off on a tirade about how anyone whose life revolved around the learning curve of roaches (he said it that way, "learning curve," as if it was some business thing he'd charted out) maybe didn't belong in his life. So I yelled back, and then I cried, and he finally stopped yelling at me but he didn't cry, and finally we made up. Sorta. We had sex anyway. But there's only so many times sex can fix a broken relationship, and I felt somewhere in the middle of it like we'd just passed that point.

It was an oppressively hot night, and the little air conditioner in the living room wall was gamely doing its best, but it was a long stretch between there and the bedroom, and in the summertime cool air only gets so far before the Georgia humidity beats it to death. I tossed and turned and I guess I finally woke him up, because he whispered to me, "You okay, babe? You need anything?" You could tell from his tone of voice he felt a little guilty about the fight we'd had, which was fine by me.

"Just hot," I said. It would have been a lot cooler without someone else in the bed, but that wasn't the kind of thing you said out loud. "Could you get me a glass of water, maybe?"

He nodded and got up to do it. I heard him pad his way to the kitchen in the darkness. For a brief moment I thought I should remind him about the lights, and then I thought, *screw him*. He didn't respect my deal with the roaches, let him trip over a few in the dark. Maybe then he'd appreciate what I had accomplished and respect the rules of the house.

The bed was a lot cooler without him in it. I found a spot in the middle without any body heat at all and snuggled into it. In the distance I heard the fridge door open and the ice tray crackling as he broke the

cubes apart. Ice. Good thought. I could almost forgive him, for bringing me ice. Then there was a big thump, which I thought at first was the fridge door closing, but it really wasn't like that at all ... and then silence.

"Hey!" No answer. I called his name. Still no answer. There was an odd scraping sound then, and the glassy tinkling of ice cubes hitting each other. So he was still moving around in there, anyway. "You okay?" It really was dark. I shouldn't have let him feel his way in there without some kind of light.

*He knew where the light switch was. He wanted to prove a point.*

Finally he had just been gone too long for comfort. I got up from bed myself and went to the doorway, slid my hand around the doorjamb and flicked on the hall light. Counted to ten. Then I walked down the empty hall to my kitchen. It was quiet now, but I could see even from around the corner that he'd left the fridge door open. I slid my hand around the corner and turned on that light, then counted to ten. Then entered.

All quiet.

No boyfriend.

There were ice cubes on the floor. They were already starting to melt. Some of the water had been dragged in little trails across the linoleum, to a place right under the sink. The cabinet doors there were partly open, as though someone had been getting something out of it when he was interrupted.

Or been putting something in.

I just stared at it for a few minutes and then walked very slowly to where the open cabinet was. I didn't keep anything under there as a rule, so there wasn't really any reason a person should have to look inside. No reason at all. I considered the open doors for a moment and then reached out and shut them both. It was easy for a person to do. Would have been harder for bugs to manage those big, heavy doors ... especially if their little hands were already being used for something else.

I guess maybe I could have done something else instead. Screamed my head off, maybe, or called in the exterminators, or turned on all the lights in the house and then transferred to some other college far, far away, where I never had to look at a Georgia cockroach again. Something like that. But I had *told* them they could have any food they found, when the lights were off. And they *were* staying out of the bedroom, just like I'd asked them to.

The bed had cooled off a bit by the time I got back to it, which was something, anyway. I lay in bed for a while listening to the silence, and then slowly drifted off to sleep.

It's always easier to sleep alone in the summer.