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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

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Marissa Lingen
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André Oosterman
Steven Pirie
Anna Tambour
Brian Tillotson
Katherine Woodbury
Paul Woodlin



Andromeda
Spaceways

Ed's Itorial

...Edwina Harvey

A few years ago I did a one day “horse whispering” course. I’ve been an equine enthusiast all of my life, so that’s not so unusual. In the afternoon I got handed the lead of a beautiful bay mare wearing a loose fitting string halter. At my lightest touch she walked happily beside me, offering me her trust, confident in herself and in me. Although we had just been introduced, we were comfortable in each other’s presence as we headed in the same direction. And it was *magical!*

I get the same feeling being an editor. Those writers who are confident enough to trust you with their creative work because they know you’re both walking in the same direction are a pleasure to work with. I’ve been fortunate with this issue to have a few authors who just kept giving — coming back with better stories every time I asked them. And the trick there is to know when to stop asking! I’ve also been fortunate in selecting stories that were just about word-perfect (and I was only along for the ride), but that felt pretty magical too.

I’ll be honest, I didn’t always get what I wanted with this issue; more high humour would have been good. But I wanted what I got. I hope a few of the stories make you laugh out loud. I’m sure a few will have you smiling and maybe, just maybe, you’ll be touched by a sense of wonder, wow and whimsy, just as I was when I selected them.

Special thanks to Marianne Plumridge for providing the cover art for this issue. She was a talented artist when we were hanging out having a good time on weekends in the NSW Southern Highlands all those years ago, and her art has just gone from strength to strength. But back then I couldn’t have even dreamed I’d end up editing a great magazine like ASIM some day!

Edwina Harvey,
Editor, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* issue 24

This issue of
Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine
is dedicated to the memory of
Karen (“Womble”) Warnock,
who was an ASIM Frequent Flyer from
the very beginning.

ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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Wash and Wear

...Brian Tillotson

“The earthling is dead?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“How did it happen?” Captain Zargle coiled a tentacle around the chief scientist’s throat. Their forty light-year journey was supposed to fetch a live specimen. Now that he’d fired engines homeward, it was too late to try again. Zargle’s career was as dead as the hideous alien.

“Don’t know, sir. He died while we were decontaminating him. We followed the instructions.”

“Instructions?” Zargle’s tentacle wrapped tighter. “This is a new species, you idiot. We don’t have any instructions.”

“Printed on his sweater, sir. ‘Turn inside out before washing.’”

Poet Warrior

...Paul Woodlin

As his army prepared for battle against the rebels, Lord Hiroaki meditated within the private room of his ivy-colored tent. The scent of green tea spiced with ginger teased his nose. The window faced the rising Goddess, but he stared at the dew on the grass. His teacher had said the enlightened could see a tiny rainbow in each drop. After each morning's humbling failure, Hiroaki hoped it was just a metaphor for the seedlings of beauty and goodness inherent in each individual waiting for a stroke of light from the Goddess.

Seeing only blades and water, Hiroaki grew frustrated, but let the emotion go. As a youth he meditated to touch the gods, but now he did so to cool his temper. He believed, unlike the Shogun, in taming fires before they spread. Meditating upon the ancient poem the God told the Goddess before their lovemaking gave birth to the world, he found the tiny seed of compassion within himself and watered it.

That poem had been the center of his life ever since his mother recited it to him when he was a boy. He learned the sword and the responsibilities of lordship, but every spare minute was engaged in finding the Goddess' poetic response, lost over the ages. He'd studied poetry and gone on pilgrimages, visited the Poet Mistresses of the Pillow World and interviewed sages, but never found Her poem.

After a final, calming breath, he rose and accepted tea from his young servant boy. Sipping among the pillows and scrolls, he wished the Shogun hadn't decided to build the giant temple to a war god. It was yet unfinished but the taxes were already ruinous to the smaller lords. *If only the god (God?) didn't happen to look so much like the Shogun, I might have believed it an act of piety.*

After he finished the tea, he handed the cup to his servant and hung his swords under his cloth belt. Going into the next room, he found six officers, including his two sons, sitting around the low, light table. They bowed at the waist. Hiroaki sat cross-legged on the pillow at the head of the table and nodded.

His officers described how they'd surrounded Mento Fortress. "The enemy has dishonorably abandoned the field, hiding in the castle," said the youngest officer.

The tactically wise choice, thought the lord, but saying so would have revealed his secret sympathy for the rebels. Why can't they see the wrongness of what they do? Shoguns can be bad or good, but the office must be respected. Shoguns die, but the office is eternal.

The day comes and goes, but the Goddess is forever.

That the Lady of the Fortress would make such a mistake especially surprised him. Years ago Hiroaki had left his father's party for the gardens and overheard

the maiden Shimada from Mento reciting a poem to the Moon God. Young Shimada's words astonished him; he could have explained down to the *merest* syllable of symbolism why her poem was the closest he'd ever come to the Goddess' response. Rushing to her, he had bowed to one knee and proposed.

After a silent second, he had looked up. Her face was frozen in fear. Hiroaki wondered why. He was the heir to a great clan. Her poor if noble family couldn't expect to do better.

There is another. It is a mere man who inspired her poem.

His sword hand wrapped around the hilt of his blade, shaking with the desire to kill his unknown rival and demand her as a bride. But in the midst of her moonlit silence, he knew her poem, and the passion that gave rise to it, could not be taken but only given.

Plucking flowers kills them.

When he heard she married a wandering servant warrior he sent her — even if the letter addressed both of them — his most valuable scroll of poetry. So ancient and holy only a monk could carry it, it had to be guarded enroute by a score of warriors. Knowing it was probably within Mento Fortress, he hoped the coming battle wouldn't damage the delicate paper. He planned to order his men *not* to kill the women or set fires, but he knew in the heat of battle even the most disciplined warriors could lose control. And some of the women might be skilled warriors, as well. War was a raging fire, not to be unleashed trivially.

Old General Teruko ordered the young officer to check the guard posts. Blushing, the officer bowed, rose, and left. *He's too young to remember my wedding gift, or why I sent it*, thought the lord. *I'll have Teruko explain it to him later.*

They discussed stratagems for getting into the fortress, but the young officer returned, bowing. "My Lord, a messenger has arrived from the Mento."

What parley could they wish? He nodded at Teruko, who gave the order to allow him entry. The messenger, a yellow robed Sun Priest, balding and serene in his youthful old age, bowed to the table and held out a scroll. The officer took it, handed it to Teruko, who gave it to Hiroaki.

He unrolled it. Shimada's handwritten pictograph was the first line of a possible response to the God from the Goddess, an even more perfect one than she had said to the Moon so many years ago. More perfect than any nun or poetess before had offered, it awed him, threatened to change his heart in ways he didn't quite understand. His hands trembled, so he put the scroll down and hid them within his robes. "The table is dismissed."

Everyone left except Teruko. It was understood that "the table" did not mean the oldest servant warrior in the clan, one who had served Hiroaki's father well. "Is what Lord Mento Sato wrote so dire?"

Mento Sato, a warrior so poor he had to adopt his wife's name, yet so able her father thought him worth it. "It is not Sato who writes to me." Teruko bowed his head, understanding. "My enemy has the key to my enlightenment."

The general smiled. "That is always where warriors find enlightenment. Defeat is the teacher, death is the lesson."

"Then you haven't learned very much, have you, General?" They shared a smile. Hiroaki found comfort in the general's long loyalty even knowing no one could help

him with this. "Tell the priest I invite Lord and Lady Mento to tea at noon." *Let the Sun Goddess shine her blessings upon us. I, at least, will need them.*

Hiroaki and his surprised servant boy set up the tea table outside his main tent in plain view of his army, yet he ordered their watch posts so that they could not hear what was said. When Sato and Shimada rode into camp together and alone, the servant warriors glanced at each other. Hiroaki knew they wondered why a woman would come, but they did not understand her true importance. He never spoke of his love for Shimada, out of respect for her marriage and his own. Only those old enough to remember his youthful passions might know. They, too, kept their silence.

It saddened Hiroaki to know that something beautiful would be forgotten, lost in the respectful quiet. *Everything is forgotten someday.*

They dismounted, and the servant boy held the reins. The lesser lord and lady bowed to the greater, and Hiroaki bowed to them as equals. They sat and as Hiroaki poured the tea he could see his warriors' astonishment. He ignored it.

"Greetings. It has been too long since I last enjoyed your company."

"I know what you mean," said Sato. "You set a healthy table."

Shimada blushed, lowering her head not quite in time to hide a tired smile.

All these years, and he still speaks like a peasant, thought Hiroaki. Yet he has ruled honorably and well, until now.

"I'm glad for the restraint your men are showing our people," continued Sato.

"I know you would do no less, or more." Raising cups to each other, they drank together. "Your letter impressed me." Not wishing to dishonor Sato, he was careful to speak to both instead of only to her.

Sato swallowed and looked at Shimada, who now looked at Hiroaki. "Thank you, Lord Hiroaki."

"I am Aino for you," said the Lord. *As I have always wished to be.*

She blushed. "I have the rest of the poem, Aino. I will give it to you if you join our rebellion against the Shogun."

Hiroaki sipped his tea to give himself time to think, and his hand something to do besides tremble. *It's impossible for them to have found the response. They would be enlightened, not in rebellion.*

Yet how could she have climbed so far, and then slip?

By the time he placed his teacup back in its proper position, he had come to a decision. "If you give me the response first, then I will know if you have found it. Only then can I forswear my honor for your cause."

Sato and Shimada glanced at each other, and she nodded. They sat facing, and their pillow room eyes met. Intense shame overcame Hiroaki as he realized the privacy his request violated.

She spoke the words. In his amazement, Hiroaki could not speak. Through his knowledge of the classics and poetics, he could explain to the last word why she was right, but also why he could never have found it himself. He had wanted the words, but Shimada and Sato had felt the love.

Around him the loyalty and love his servants felt for him shone in their eyes, even in the young officer Kenchi whom Teruko had dismissed. Lady Shimada's spirit was so great it tickled his skin and warmed his bones, and her husband reflected her glory. The living green of grass was more valuable to him than emeralds.

Feeling the pain of those beneath him as his own, he knew the Shogun's actions offended the gods. Before his Goddess and servant warriors, he cried silent tears and bowed. Lord and Lady stood, returned his bow, and left under the terms of the truce.

After his guests safely returned to their fortress, Hiroaki stood and waved over his sons and General Teruko. He told the general that Kenchi was forgiven, then stood firm in his stance. "I must speak to the Shogun. If I die, you must ally with the Mento." They inhaled sharply, but he waved them to silence. "Tell anyone who asks why that the Mento are enlightened."

His servant boy brought his horse, already prepared. Hiroaki smiled upon him, patted his head, and waved over his eldest son. "My servant Jiro is now my adopted son, for he understood my intention before anyone else. Teach him as if he was any of your younger brothers."

After riding for three days, he arrived in the capital and strode into the Shogun's new open-air temple to the War God. Beneath the great statue dedicated to the god but meant to praise a mere mortal, he found the Shogun and his court. He saw the Shogun's spirit; his bravery twisted towards pride, his intelligence towards cunning.

"What are you doing here?" snapped the Shogun. "You come into my presence unwashed and unannounced?"

Hiroaki recited the entire poem, and several of the scholars and generals' eyes widened with the shock of understanding.

"You old fool! You were supposed to bring me heads, not verse!"

Knowing the Shogun's soul was dead to the gods but also that his obedience was sworn to him, Hiroaki drew his sword. Honorable life was impossible as long as his faith and duty conflicted, so he turned his blade edge towards himself. With a quick, deep cut, he fulfilled his honor in the only way left to him. As his blood seeped into the unfinished floor the court was filled with shame, but as Hiroaki lay on the stonework he only saw the first tear drops of a coming storm. Inside each was a little rainbow.

Ugly Fish

By Samantha Henderson

Only when I pointed out the B-roll
on the 11 o'clock news (slow day,
snow and tsunamis cold as slush
on a salted doorstep)

Only when I said look at that,
damn,
that's one ugly fish,
(and I admit I smirked) —

a whiskered, bulbous, humpbacked thing
gasping blue-white on a fisherman's plank
sucked from the bottom of the Pacific
never meant to see the sun —

Only when she looked, obliging,
froze, and her small smile fading,
froze, and her pale face paling,
darted to the screen, hands starfished against the glass,
sobbed, "Oliver, Oliver,
I'm sorry, forgive me."
She looked at me over her shoulder, the inner membrane
flickering,
Flickering across those blue eyes,

Only then,
did I think,
she's not from around here, is she?

The Beast's Apprentice

...Marissa Lingen

My father was disappointed that I was a boy, I think. He acted glad to have an heir, but we all knew Rosamund and Elisa were already that. Father felt safe and sure with girls, and my two older sisters had primed him for floral-scented butterfly kisses and tea parties. Which was what he needed from them, but not from me. I never found out what he wanted when I was a child. Had my mother survived, she might have known.

The boys in fairy tales always set out to seek their fortunes, but they were princes or paupers, and I was neither. I had hopes of university, a few years of study before the business needed me, before my father started to fade into his old age; and I hoped by that time my sisters, infinitely more practical and capable than I, would have convinced him that they could manage it all without me.

I dreamed of going about the university town in a long black gown, patched at the sleeves where my gawky elbows poked them out. It was my idea of luxury to be able to ignore the neighbors' opinions and pay my clothes no mind. My sisters thought nothing of this except to note that it made less work for them; my father would hear nothing of it, and I wore the best he could afford, which was fine indeed.

He left me in charge of the house when he went on his voyage, though we all knew that Rosamund, my oldest sister, would see to the business arrangements, and Elisa, my middle sister, would boss the servants, and I would do nothing at all but what I usually did: study and daydream.

There was a storm and a ship wreck, as there always are, and my father found himself in a fairy tale castle, as I hear they generally do. When the Beast came along to find the velvety yellow rose in his hand, he thought himself safe, since the stories were always of the *third* daughter — though he didn't know how he would restore his life or his fortunes, with no third girl-child to trade for them.

"My daughters don't like roses," said my father.

"And what does your son like?" asked the Beast.

My father hesitated. "Books," he said finally. "Not roses." He gasped as the stem in his hand turned into a spine. The branch sagged under its weight, and he turned it to read the gold lettering on the cover: *A History of Roses*. He let out a smothered, sighing laugh.

"He would like my roses," said the Beast.

My father shook his head. "You cannot ask for—" He stopped. "You cannot want him for unnatural— no, not Joshua, my only son, nothing else in my life would— no—"

"I am no natural creature," said the Beast, "but it may set your mind at ease to know that all residents of this place are female. Including myself."

My father stared at the Beast — unable, I suppose, to consider maternal warmth in her great clawed paws. But even bears and wolves have male and female of their kind. "My son?" he whispered.

The Beast nodded. "He will be happy here."

"Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

The Beast shrugged her massive shoulders. "You could die, I suppose, but I don't think your son would want that, or you, either."

My father's shoulders sagged as he told me this upon his homecoming. I said, as I knew I should, "No, of course not, Father! Better that you live!" I would have been devastated if my father had died to keep me from the lair of the Beast.

I was intrigued by a Beast who could grow books like roses.

I arrived at her home on horseback. Though my sisters said I sat a horse like a sack of potatoes, no son of my father's would walk to his fate, and we were not gentry enough to have spare carriages. The Beast's magic already accompanied me. As the horse took paths I had never been on, and if I watched the landscape too carefully, it blurred and made me sick.

When I got to the covered front walk, I felt a sideways tug on the reins. My saddlebags sailed off the horse and hung in midair, waiting. I dismounted and let the invisible hands take my horse away, then followed my bag into the house.

The house was cold and dark. "I had heard that there was a Beast living here," I ventured.

The invisible beings said nothing, but one of them set to lighting a fire in the fireplace, another lit candles and set two places at a banquet table. A third whisked slippers to warm before the fire. Or perhaps they were all one presence — I wasn't certain yet then.

I seated myself before the fire and was just putting the warm slippers on my feet when I heard a low voice behind me. "Your father sent you, then. I didn't know if he would."

"You didn't leave him much choice," I said.

"No, I suppose I didn't."

And since she said nothing more, nor walked any closer, I was obliged to rise and turn to greet the Beast.

I had gotten used to stalking around towering over everyone else. The Beast was a head and a half taller than me, and broader in the shoulders as well. She wore a flowing green velvet robe, and I could see why my father had initially confused her for a male; there was nothing about her that signaled woman or man, in the way humans sent those signals. Her snout was shorter and flatter than a hound's, and her ears short and flat as well. Her fur was a mixture of autumnal shades, mostly dark browns.

"Joshua," she said. "That's right, isn't it? Is it Josh?"

"Joshua," I said. "If you please."

She inclined her head. "It's a small thing to call you by your chosen name. I think you'll find we're ready to indulge you in small things."

"Thank you," I murmured.

She smiled and her short, pointed fangs took me aback. To cover my dismay, I murmured, "Have you always been — as I see you?"

“A Beast?” she said. “For that is what I am, and what you must call me: the Beast. And no, I have not always been the Beast.”

“Then how—?”

“Come with me to dinner, and I will tell you.” She offered me her arm as if I was a young lady at a ball. I hesitated a moment, wondering whether I should take offense at the reversal; but she knew where we were going, and I did not.

“Until you can find your way here yourself, my servants will guide you here in the evening,” she told me. “They will do anything you ask, as long as it is within their power.”

“Will they show me the rosebush that grows books?”

She smiled again. “That I might show you myself.”

We seated ourselves at a sumptuous dining table. I could barely see its linen cloth under the dishes it bore. The crudités were served to us by the invisible hands, but only after they’d brushed our hands with lemon-scented water. I picked at the selections nervously.

“Your father and sisters will prosper,” said the Beast abruptly. “I don’t want you to have any worries about that. My arts are sufficient to shield them from the worst the human world has to offer.”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“Oh, drat, I’ve done it again,” she said.

“Beast?” I asked as politely as I could manage with my heart pounding.

“That wasn’t meant to be a threat, Joshua. I really will take good care of your family, as much as I can.”

“I believe you.”

“But you don’t trust me.” She sighed. “It was much easier to be trusted when I was a human.”

“You were—”

“Yes, I was human. That was a long time ago.”

“When were you cursed?” I asked shyly. The invisible servants chattered for the first time, a chorus of high, twittering voices in a language I had never heard. I jumped a bit, but the Beast took no notice of them.

“It was not a curse that transformed us,” said the Beast. “Or rather, not just one. It was a swarm of curses. They hit my assistants and me...rather differently.”

“The invisible ones were your assistants, then? Assistants in what?”

She smiled, the same baring of fangs. It was less startling to me by then. “Research. What sort of a person, do you think, would have a rosebush that grows books if not an academic?”

Astonished, I bent to the soup the servants brought me, I should have guessed, should have known that it would be no snarling predator, no jumped-up animal who would have a book-flowering rosebush. Even in the old stories, the beasts were almost never as beastly as they seemed — and in her green velvet robe, with her lemony scented claws picking apart an artichoke, she didn’t seem very beastly at all.

I was grateful to be left in silence for the rest of the night.

In the morning, the invisible servants led me willingly to a hot bath and served me breakfast in my own room. They seemed cheerful, though I couldn’t have said how I knew, except that they chattered. I didn’t understand what they said, and I could barely hear them most of the time. But they babbled on excitedly in their own

language, which was not kin to any of the ancient tongues I had learned from my tutors.

I intended to spend the day learning my way around the Beast's castle, but I got sidetracked in the library, reading one of the history books in my language. The invisible servants chattered impatiently around me as dusk crept through the windows but didn't light candles for me, so I took a flint and tinder from one of the tables and lit one myself. Then I settled back into the wooden rocker and continued reading.

I didn't see the Beast in the doorway of the library, but her amused voice shook me out of my pottery shard reverie: "They meant that you should come to dinner with me."

I looked around for something to mark my place. My stomach growled, and I blushed. "I'm sorry— it just didn't occur to me that—"

"It's all right, Joshua," said the Beast. "But come to dinner."

The invisible servants hurried before us with their candles, so the way out of the library dazzled my eyes. After dinner, the Beast rose and said, "Would you like to see the book-growing rosebush now?"

"Please," I said.

She gestured, and the candelabras flew into the air and away down the hall.

The greenhouse was like none I had ever seen, with faceted windows refracting the moonlight into pale colors on the plants. The rows of bushes and trees, interspersed with beds of smaller flowers, stretched on so long that I hoped the book-flowering bush was close to the door, or I would collapse and have to sleep on one of the paths.

The Beast stopped before an ordinary-looking rosebush. "Let me see now," she said. "It gave you *A History of Roses* before. We'll see if we can convince it to do something else. That was a yellow one, was it?" She reached for a brilliant pink blossom, just about to start losing its petals. She cut it and handed it to me. I fumbled with the book that appeared in my hands: a pink velvet binding embossed with gold letters. I traced them with my fingers as I read: *The Romantick Language of The Rose*.

The Beast looked at it disapprovingly. "I'm afraid that's not a very good one," she said. "Well, unless you were a twelve-year-old girl at some king's court."

"It's miraculous that it makes books at all," I murmured, rubbing the velvet against the grain.

The Beast's brown eyes twinkled with humor. "Some might say it was miraculous for a human to do so; but I still think we should insist on *good* books from them."

I smiled. "Does the bush only produce rose-related books?"

"I'm afraid so. It's like a cat, very self-centered that way."

"Do your cats produce books as well?"

The Beast's smile faded. "We have no cats here. Only me and my servants — and, of course, the plants."

I listened. No birds or insects disturbed the greenhouse. Several fountains trickled, but it was a sterile sound. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Oh, never mind," said the Beast. "It's getting late. They'll show you to your bed."

She waved a hand, and the candelabra that had led us through the halls started back down the garden path. When I looked over my shoulder, the Beast was sitting by the rose bush with her chin in one of her paws, her furry face inscrutable. I fled as fast as the candelabra would lead me.

The next night, I followed the candles in to dinner before they became insistent. And the night after. By the fourth night, I began to have my own sense of when the Beast would wish for my company.

She always asked after my reading; I wasn't doing anything else during the day, though I didn't know if the invisible servants kept her posted on my doings. Truthfully, they probably didn't have to; my excitement at the library was plain to anyone who saw me, and I could scarcely be pried from it to eat and sleep. Sometimes I would retire to another part of the house with a stack of books in my hand. After a week, I brought one to dinner.

"Here," I said, brandishing it at her and talking around a forkful of potatoes and chives. "Here it says that a cloak of birdcloth is needed. Now, what on earth is birdcloth?"

"What indeed?" The Beast frowned; I was learning to tell her expressions apart easily. "Do you know, I have no idea. I'm sure it's in one of the books around here, but as for which one—" She shook her great shaggy head. "I really have no clue."

"Now it's going to drive me mad," I said.

"It is?" She smiled. "Here." She held out her hand, and one of the invisible servants rushed a slim blue volume into it. She passed the book over to me. The leather cover was soft and pliable, and it would slide easily into a pocket. "When you're curious about something, write it down. Write as much as you know, what else you think you can find, and where. Then you can go back and solve the problems as you get more comfortable with your research. Think of it as a puzzle book."

"A puzzle book," I repeated. "Thank you." One of the invisible hands tugged it away from me again. I stood up from the table. The book sailed over to the nearest writing desk, where it opened and patiently submitted to being written upon by an energetic quill pen. When the book returned to me, I read my name and the date on the first page in eccentric but quite legible script.

"Thank you," I said solemnly. After that, my puzzle book remained in my possession at all times, and I often made notes in it, leaving space for answers I hoped to find. The Beast took to reading my new entries every night. Sometimes she helped me find my answers. Often even she could not.

One evening after dinner we were drinking our coffee. The conversation had lagged. I believe the Beast's experiments had come to a dead end that day, and she was evaluating where to go next. As for me, I was restless and unsure of my place. I had been there long enough to know how to find the gardens, the different libraries, the dining rooms, but I had no idea where the Beast went during the day, or where she slept, so I said so.

"I don't think you need to know that," she said politely enough.

"Well, eventually I will," I said, smiling nervously.

"Why?"

"If I'm to be your— that is— if you want us to— I suppose we could use my room, but—"

"I have no use for your room."

"But my father said that you were— that there was nothing unnatural—" I faltered and found I couldn't go any further. I peered at her anxiously.

"As a point of fact," said the Beast, and she sounded amused, "I don't want you at all. At least, not in that way."

"But—" I hated the way my voice squeaked. "Why not?"

"You're crass, you're callow, you can't tell Greek from Sanskrit, and you even *smell* too young for me."

"But when my father came here—"

"I needed an apprentice."

"An apprentice *Beast*?"

"An apprentice *botanist*," she said, glaring. "Or translator, or alchemist..."

"I can do those things," I said meekly.

She nodded. "Good. See that you do, and we'll have no cause for argument."

"Yes, Beast."

Her glare softened. "You don't need to look so hangdog, Joshua. I do forgive you. I just thought you would know better than to bring such things up."

How I was to have known better, I couldn't see; but I didn't tell her that, then or ever.

I learned other things from the books, from the invisible servants' movements in the garden and the way they cut the roses and the other flowers. I learned with the Beast's telescope, her microscope, and from her wise counsel, but most of all her books. Though the invisible servants would never have let my sleeves get holed and patched, it was near enough to my dream that I could forget my family and my circumstances for days and weeks, basking in the light of knowledge beyond what I could have found at the University.

One day, when the servants had relaxed enough with me to chatter to each other in clearly audible tones. I sat very still, afraid to bring myself to their notice, lest they stop talking. I didn't understand a word they said, and despite my study of languages — growing in fits and starts in the Beast's library — I couldn't even identify what language it was in. I reached for my book and my pen stealthily and transcribed the sounds I heard as nearly as I could. They finished their work and left the room. After the door shut behind them, I thought a minute longer and wrote, "How did the Beast know which language to use with my father?"

I handed her the volume to read that night at dinner, as always, and waited. "How *did* you?" I asked the Beast when she had finished.

She smiled. "It's part of being a castle Beast. If I'd been a forest Beast, it would have been impossible to keep all of my resources intact."

I took the book back from her, turned it around, and wrote in large script, "How many kinds of Beast are there?"

The Beast laughed. "As many kinds as Beasts, I should think. If I knew, I would tell you. We don't hold teas for each other. We tend to be solitary types."

"Until now," I said.

She looked away. I blushed and hurried to ask after the roses she was breeding. We spoke no more of other Beasts, or loneliness.

And yet I thought of it. Who could tell how many years she'd been alone, with only her invisible assistants for companionship? Had she gotten them to play games with her before I'd arrived? I smiled at the thought of one-sided chess, but somehow three invisible hands at cards sobered me.

One night she asked me, quite unexpectedly, "Do you think they're all right? Your family, I mean."

"Oh, of course," I said. "Probably better off without me."

She looked at me keenly. "You're saying that to make me feel better for taking you as an apprentice."

"I won't say they don't miss me," I said, "because in all likelihood they do. But I was not, shall we say, the heart and soul of the family business."

She laughed. "No, I can see why not. Was your father disappointed by that?"

"Oh, yes and no. He thought it was proper for his son to be his heir — did not want to breathe a hint of impropriety, wouldn't have dreamed of shaming me by giving the business to my sister. But he did have her, and I— I would have loved to be shamed that way."

"Your eldest sister?"

I nodded. "Rosamund. She has a hundred times the business sense I do. Probably twice the business sense my father does. You can depend on Rosamund. She *likes* that sort of thing, wants to do it for fun."

"So the business will flourish without you."

"More than with me!"

She smiled, an expression I'd learned to recognize despite all its teeth. "And your other sister?"

"Elisa? Oh, she keeps them in the good graces of all the other merchant families. Makes sure everyone wants to trade with them in the first place. She arranges the parties and bosses the servants and all of that. You can count on Elisa, too, just not for the same things."

"They sound wonderful."

I hadn't thought about it much before. "They are. They do what they do, and no one can gainsay them."

"Not even your father?"

"As if Father would try!" I smiled fondly.

"They sound like the sort of women to make brilliant matches with amiable fellows and then do as they please for the rest of their days. An enviable life"

"I don't envy it," I said. And I stopped. After being a grubby academic, my fondest dream had been to marry an understanding woman, one of Rosamund's friends most likely, who would let me do as I pleased. I no longer envied that life. Why was that?

I wandered through the halls for the next few days, reading only a few pages of each book, not stopping to prune or tend the garden. It was obvious, of course, but I hadn't wanted to see it: I had fallen in love with the Beast. At first it was the bookishness of the life we shared that drew me in, but gradually the Beast herself had become indispensable company. It didn't even matter that I didn't know what she did all day. She was my Beast, and I loved her.

And so I told her as much that night after dinner, when we had eaten the last spoonfuls from the little cups of chocolate with delicate burnt-sugar webs wedged into them. The Beast dropped her spoon with a clatter and stood up. Automatically, I stood with her.

"Joshua, don't be ridiculous. You don't love me. You just can't bear that I didn't fall head over heels for you. Forbidden fruit."

"No. *No.*" I knew she wouldn't listen, but I had to say it anyway. "It wasn't forbidden — I expected it from the beginning. But it's more than expectations. I expected that you would be...different. Rougher."

"More violent," she said, turning her face from me.

"More *ignorant*," I said.

She sighed. "You knew I could make roses into books."

"I didn't know *you* could. I thought maybe you had a special charm. Or perhaps one of your servants did it for you."

She laughed. "They have, from time to time. When they're alarmed by something I don't know."

"I'm alarmed at what you don't know," I said. "I'm alarmed that you don't know I love you. I'm alarmed that you don't know your own beauty—"

She snarled, and I cowered. "I am not here to be decorative. I am here to do useful, productive, scholarly work."

"I know that, and you are, and I'm so glad — can't you see how glad? I've learned so much from you. But there's also the matter of your—"

"Just stop," she said. "You've entirely misunderstood me. I already told you once that I didn't have your father send you here to be my paramour. I thought you understood that."

"I did understand! But this isn't about what you wanted when I came, it's about what I want to—"

"What *I* want matters a good deal here." Her voice grew colder by the moment, and I found that I had backed into the wall. "I do not want to be *rescued* by you, torn from my home, my work, and my dear servants. And if you can't respect that—"

"I respect it!"

"If you can't respect that," she repeated loudly, "I will have to bid you farewell."

"Beast—" I started, but she was making a complex arcane gesture, and before I could finish my sentence, the world shook around me. Something struck me on the head, or I struck it, and I lay stunned and senseless.

When I came to, my sister Elisa was sighing and wiping my forehead with a cool cloth. "Here he is," she called, and I heard the sharp click of my older sister Rosamund's heels on the floor.

"You gave us a fright," said Rosamund sternly. "Are you better now?"

"I think so," I said. "What happened?"

"The gardener found you under the rosebushes, scratched and insensate," she said coolly. "I don't know what you did to that Beast, but what she did to you looks bad enough."

"I don't think she meant to," I said. "She only meant to send me home." And with that, I turned my head away from Elisa's ministering touch.

She prudently left me alone, and I looked around. Cool sheets, fresh ewer of water...and my puzzle book, perched on the edge of the bedside table. I clasped it to my chest and held it like a child with a poppet.

It took me a full day to be able to tell them of my foolishness, and when I did, they couldn't agree on which was the most alarming.

"For a Beast to refuse a member of our family!" said Rosamund. "Really, how presumptuous."

"You cannot mean that you *loved* her," Elisa put in anxiously. "Perhaps that you had strong feelings for her?"

And my father shook his head, wrinkled his forehead and rocked back and forth, saying nothing. He continued in this way for some time before Rosamund took charge of the situation. She herded him out of my bedroom with an apologetic look at me.

"It's just the shock of the whole matter," Elisa apologized for father's behaviour. "Have some broth," "Father will get himself calmed and ready to speak with you soon, I feel sure of it."

For another two days, she and Rosamund assured me of the same thing over and over. On the third day, my father finally spoke. “I thought we had lost you. Then I thought we’d gotten you back again. Now you expect me to send you back to this Beast without the slightest qualm?”

“You wouldn’t be losing me,” I said. “The Beast is powerful in the ways of magic, and she has begun to teach me what she knows. If you let me go back, I could learn to visit you whenever I liked.”

“To visit your own home as a guest,” said my father bitterly. “Before, the Beast left me no choice, but now you could stay, and I have only one son to inherit the business from me—”

“You know Rosamund is a million times the merchant I would be! She can go on running things just as she always has.”

“She is not my son.”

I spoke slowly, trying not to sound like a spoiled, lovelorn child. “Father, you know that, son or not, I have no head for trade. I would bring the family to ruin. I could be of so much more use making connections with a far land, meeting people—” From the look on his face, I saw that he didn’t believe it, and I couldn’t blame him: I had never been any good for social connections before. “You would not believe the research I can do at the Beast’s castle, Father. Some of the work could surely be used to benefit the business. And Rosamund could...” I trailed off. He still looked glum.

“You truly love this Beast.”

“I do.”

“It is— the same creature I met?”

“The very same. Oh, but Father, so much more! You didn’t have the chance to see her skill, her erudition—”

“And how do you know that she would have you back, having discarded you once already?”

“Because I will prove myself worthy of her in finding her again. Because—” And suddenly I knew, and could believe it myself. “Because she left me my puzzle book.”

I ran my fingers over the pages, runes and foreign words, spells and problems and puzzles and diagrams, all so eagerly scribbled in my own hand, with only a few corrections from the Beast. Surely she would have taken it from me if she had wanted to cut me off from my studies forever. Had she planned all along to lead me back to her? Or would my puzzles be pretty intellectual games, useless in bringing me even a step closer to my love? Only time would tell, time and study and research.

I raised my eyes again to my father’s face in hope. “I need to take this book to the university and see if I can make head or tail of it. *Please*, Father.”

He could only meet my gaze for a second. “All right, boy,” he said gruffly, staring at the book instead. “All right. Take yourself to the university — it’s what you wanted all along. But if you find this Beast, you must promise you won’t forget your home and kin.”

“Father, I never could.”

“Never but when you have some new book,” he sighed. “All right. Do as you will. I could never gainsay you.”

With some embarrassment, I recalled that this was true. “Thank you, Father,” I said quietly.

My sisters regarded me with doubt, but soon saw a bright side. “It’ll keep him out from under our feet,” said Rosamund.

"But if he runs across trouble—" started Elisa.

"Then he's a man grown and can get himself out of it again," Rosamund said firmly. I glowed with pride until she added, "Or he'll learn from what he ruins, just like anybody else."

I spent the evening alone in my room, poring over the pages of my puzzle book. The last folio was blank, and I decided to use it for notes on my quest.

About a third of the way through, I discovered my starting point: the transcription of the invisible servants' conversation. The Beast had written paraphrases in the margins. If I could find out what language they were speaking, I would know where to begin my search.

I tried to immerse myself entirely in the language section of the university library. The librarian was overworked and underpaid and had no time to help me track down phonetic notes half-remembered. I was on my own. I dug my heels in and looked through every volume I could find that might be of even the slightest use.

Sometimes I would look up from my books, whether I was at home or on the university campus, and notice how different it was from the Beast's castle. The color had bled out, like the green from autumn leaves, and while some of the browns and oranges and reds were quite striking on their own, I longed for the cool rest of green. Further, and more distressing, I had never considered myself a lover of luxury, but I missed the feel of carpets beneath my toes; I missed the luxurious leather binding in my hands when I read so many of the Beast's books; though Elisa kept a hawk's eye on the cook, I missed the perfectly spiced meals prepared by invisible hands.

The first time I requested assistance from the invisible hands and got nothing, I cried.

But it was all nothing compared to how much I missed my Beast. I tried skipping dinner entirely, so that I was not reminded of how we had dined together every night. This distressed my father and my sisters so much that I had to stop. Next I brought a book to the table, which calmed my family but often left me lost in thought at the table hours after the others had gone. When I finally found the right reference, there was no one to hear me crow.

"It's Cachonese," I told the librarian at the university. "My friends spoke Cachonese. Where is that spoken?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Cachonese hasn't been spoken for centuries."

I blinked stupidly at him, the wind knocked out of me.

"The northern part of the Kellarn Empire was once the duchy of Cachon," he offered.

"How does one get to the Kellarn Empire?"

The librarian laughed. "One doesn't."

"But I have to."

"I don't think I've heard of a ship or a caravan going into any city in Kellarn."

"But I *have* to," I repeated.

He shrugged. "I'm sorry to hear that."

I was not as downcast as I might have been. I knew more than I had, and I was not going to give up until I found my Beast again. It had been less than a month. The heroes in tales searched for at least a year, if not decades, before finding their own true loves.

It was raining that day; I was a soaking mess when I got home, and I went to the kitchen to dry myself before the fire and warm up with a mug of the cook's special

hot tea. I paged back through my puzzle book as I sipped, until I turned back to the beginning of the book and came upon the notes about the birdcloth.

“For traveling a step away,” I had written, “to places unknown and unreachable.” I closed my puzzle book and went back to the university library.

Two days later, coming in after the family had already dined, I had to admit to myself that I had no idea where else to look. I took my father’s favorite chair in the study, leaning back with my eyes closed.

“Joshua?”

I opened my eyes again. Elisa was standing by the chair. “I was just thinking. About my quest.”

“Of course. I didn’t know you were in here.”

“The library did me little good today. Did you want to use the study?”

Elisa ran her hand over my head as she had done when I was small. “No, no. I’m just glad to see you. You’re so seldom at home, I often think you’re back at the Beast’s still. Then I find you here and am surprised anew. Do you want to be there so badly that you cannot take even a minute for your sisters?”

I flushed. “I didn’t realize you wanted for my company. I’m not any use to Father and Rosamund’s business, and you know how ornamental I have never been at soirées.”

“But each of us is more than that, more than the ledgers or the social calls. We missed you. And—” She hesitated. “Isn’t there anything we could do? I know you want to find your Beast again, but couldn’t we...help? Somehow?”

I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. “I know where to go now. That much is clear. But setting foot on the road — the Beast is a step away from the world in which we function, Elisa. I believe, from something I read in her library, that I can get there if I can find a birdcloth cloak. But what that is, or where it can be found, is beyond my powers just now. If you knew, you could be of great help to me. But without that—”

“I wonder,” said Elisa, startling me out of my reverie.

“You know about birdcloth?”

“No,” she said, dimpling a little. “But I think I might know someone who would.”

“I don’t think this is in your usual—”

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?” And the look my sister gave me was so charming, and she wanted so badly to help that I found myself agreeing to take the carriage out to her dressmaker’s the next morning.

“We’ve been seeing her for donkey’s years,” said Elisa. “For absolutely as long as we’ve had proper dresses made. Mother’s godmother took us when Rosamund was twelve. And we’ve never been able to stump her, in all that time. She knows color, cut, everything.”

“She’ll have to know magic,” I said grimly.

Elisa laughed. “We’ve suspected her of it for years anyway. She makes me look petite and Rosamund look graceful.”

“Rosamund is graceful,” I said.

“You’ve never seen her out of one of Madame Shama’s frocks.”

Madame Shama, a small woman with masses of braided black hair, greeted us at the door of her salon. A cloud of lilac perfume surrounded us as she kissed my sister and then stepped back to regard me. “Elisa, darling! I see you’ve finally brought your brother. Is he to take an interest in society at last?”

"The furthest thing from it," said Elisa. "I've brought Joshua in for a travel wardrobe." "I hear travel broadens the mind awfully," said Madame Shama. "I wouldn't know, of course, as I almost never leave this very shop."

"Then I doubt you'll have what I need. I'm sorry to have wasted your time," I said.

Madame Shama put a hand on my arm. "Don't be so hasty, young man! My suppliers bring me items from many lands. What is it you desire?"

"I require a birdcloth cloak."

Madame Shama stared at me. The silence stretched out uncomfortably. Elisa cleared her throat. "Can you help him, Madame Shama?" she asked softly. "I had so hoped to be able to help him win back his love."

"Love, is it?" asked Madame Shama. "Well, that's something, at least. I'm not sure I would want to help you if it was for edification. Finding how to make the cloak yourself would make you truly appreciate what it meant. But for love, a faithful true love, perhaps something might be done. And a lover who listens to his older sister! That's rare in a young man of your years."

"Rare in any man," Elisa muttered.

Madame Shama laughed. "And so you must snatch up one that listens as soon as you find him, is that it, Elisa?"

I blinked; had my sister settled on a suitor while my attention was on my quest? But Madame Shama was herding us back into her fitting rooms. They were packed with cabinets and mirrors, gilt and ivory, and the floor was strewn with snippets of thread. "And where, may I ask, does your lady love live, that you should need a birdcloth cloak?"

"Her servants speak Cachonese," I said.

Madame Shama blinked at me and cocked her head. "Cachonese, is it? I had heard that you were in a pretty fix, young Joshua, but Cachonese — are you sure the birdcloth cloak will do?"

"It's the only hope I have," I said. "Though if it fails, I will find another."

"Youth is good at hope," she said, rummaging in one of the ornately gilded chests that graced the fitting room. "You'll need that. In our middle years, we grow better at patience, and you'll need that, too. Here, try this."

She tossed me a length of what looked like ordinary blue cotton. "Is this birdcloth?" I asked dubiously, settling it around my shoulders.

"Of course not, I'm just trying for the fit. Yes, that should do nicely."

I stared incredulously. "You have more than one birdcloth cloak for the buying?"

She smiled. "No I have no birdcloth cloak at all." She watched my face fall and my shoulders slump before adding, "I have to get the birds to make it for you in the right size."

"The birds?" asked Elisa, clearly intrigued.

"Sparrows, mostly," said Madame Shama. "Determined little devils, they are. All right, young Joshua. Here is the price of a birdcloth cloak. Sixty gold pieces."

I winced. Father had given me some funds, but that would use most of them before I had even started my journey to find the Beast.

"Or," she continued, "you must tell me something useful I did not know about my own art. For one such as you, knowledge is the most valuable coin. *And* you must not attempt to find out how the cloth is made."

“All right,” I said, though I was disappointed that I would not see the cloak made.

“You, however, may come back and learn,” said Madame Shama to my sister. “If you like.”

Elisa’s cheeks went pink with pleasure. “Could I? That would be just wonderful.”

“You won’t want to use the knowledge often, once you have it, but I’ll need to pass it on sometime, and you’re a thoughtful girl,” said Madame Shama.

I hadn’t thought of my sister that way, but she was; her social successes stemmed largely from her ability to sense what her guests would like best, from compliments to hot toddies. And she was helping me to get back to the Beast. I kissed her cheek. “You *are* a thoughtful girl,” I said. “And I do notice.”

She went even pinker and hugged me in delight. “Oh, Joshua, thank you!”

“I promise I will come to visit once I’ve settled back in. You’ll love her, I just know it.”

“Shoo, shoo,” said Madame Shama. “You go to find me something I don’t know about my own trade. I’ll fetch your sister home in my carriage.”

Three times I returned to her shop with clothing trivia, but Madame Shama already knew who had made the first paper clothing in human history and how the sumptuary laws of Mergon had led to the Mergonian skill with semi-precious stones and metals. She had fluttered her hands at me and sent me away, while my sister stood in her fitting rooms looking thoughtful. On the third attempt, I said, “The princes of the Fleet wear a wide variety of colors in their dyed robes. This variety comes from the nut they use to dye. It turns brilliantly purple at one temperature, mottled grey when it’s warmer, and so on up to a delicate blue at its hottest point. Only those princes whose retainers are brave enough to make a fire that hot can bring the blue into their garments. Thus each colour is a mark of status. The name of the nut is the dulberry.”

“The dulberry!” exclaimed Madame Shama. “Of course. Of course! I knew about the colors and the temperatures, but the dye nut had eluded me all these years. You’re paid in full, my young scholar.”

“Is my cloak done?”

“I think so,” said Elisa shyly. They brought it in, as mottled as the Fleet princes’ robes, blues and greens with a long streak of purple from collar to hem. They settled it around my shoulders. I gave each of them a kiss for luck and stepped outside.

I had hoped that the birdcloth cloak would deposit me on my Beast’s doorstep, as neat as you please. I should have known that things are never that easy. I wandered through the market streets between Madame Shama’s shop and the university. Where had I gone wrong? What had I forgotten to do?

A man in a funny red hat grabbed my arm. “You are bound for Asidya?”

“For Kellarn,” I said. “The Cachon region.”

“Asidya or Kellarn, it had to be one of the two,” he said. “I am right half the time. Come. To Kellarn I will get you.”

He took me to a ship, ridiculously long for its narrow width. I had not seen it in the harbor, and the pier it was moored to seemed in permanent shadow. I climbed aboard without a backwards glance. The captain nodded approvingly and showed me to a room.

“You need not stay in here through the voyage, but you may find it the most comfortable of your options,” he said.

And I was sick, sicker than I'd ever been before. I tried going out on deck for some fresh air on one of my stronger nights, but that was a mistake — the sky had blurred somehow, and the air seemed to snatch at the corners of my mouth as it rushed past. I retreated into the cabin, retching, and did not emerge again until I could feel that the curious motion had stopped, replaced by a normal ocean rocking; we were at a pier.

I did not speak any of the languages of the Kellarn Empire, and I had no idea what direction to go from the port town. With sign language, I managed to procure a donkey with some of what I had on my person when I'd left home. Then I thought it through, decided that the Beast did not live in any city, and left. It was dark before the answer hit me: the stars we had spent so many nights observing would tell me which way was north, and the librarian had said that the Cachon region had been in the north. I would go north and trust the stars and the birdcloth cloak to guide me.

I slept in many ditches, but not so many as I could have; months passed, but not so many as might have. The donkey and I got skilled at foraging. The cloak started tugging at me noticeably. I let it lead me in the direction it wanted to go. One day I looked down the road and saw the Beast's house. Home.

The gates swung open, and the invisible servants let me in, clucking at my travel-stained clothes and tsking at my donkey. They didn't have to direct me. When I got to the room where we'd eaten so many dinners, my Beast was already waiting for me.

"I did not invite you," said the Beast by way of greeting.

"You didn't have to. I belong here."

"Joshua, you are mortal, and I...am not, quite."

I pulled out my puzzle book and flipped back to the end. "Problem," I wrote, reading my writing out loud, "Match up mortality for Joshua and Beast." She bared her fangs in amusement. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. "If you send me away again, I can come to find you again. If I was still your snot-nosed boy apprentice, I couldn't have gotten this far."

"Perhaps not," she said.

"You never said you didn't love me," I said. "You said you didn't want me as a callow youth. And now—" I spread my hands to indicate my patched, stained robe. "I have traveled half the world for you."

"For yourself," she said.

"For us both. I have seen things you don't know. And you—"

"All right," she said. "All right! You win. You know where your rooms are. Dinner is at the usual time."

"And the servants, will they...?"

"Appear?" She laughed. "I don't think they want to. No one can stop them, but... one gets used to being invisible."

"Get unused to it," I said.

Bones

...Stephanie Campisi

“Jesus Christ, mate! There’s a bloody skeleton on our dunny!”

“It’s a *toilet*. And piss off. Skeleton, my arse. It wasn’t in the property description, was it?”

“I shit you not. Look.”

“Christ! Well, bugger me!”

“Jesus, don’t touch it! See? I told you.”

“How the hell did it get into our toilet?”

“Dunno. Reckon he died on the crapper?”

“Bloody looks like it, doesn’t it. Wait...*He*? Why’d you say he?”

“Do you see any tits? It’s a he.”

“Tits? It’s a bloody skeleton! Christ, mate, and you’d reckon the landlord might’ve noticed a Goddamn’ skeleton on the toilet, don’t you think?”

“Ah, you know what landlords are like. He probably added it into the rent.”

“Well, what are we going to do with it?”

“You’re the one who’s so keen to touch it. Pick him up.”

“Pick him up? What if it’s a crime scene or something?”

“Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you pulled his finger off.”

“I can put it back on.”

“Look — let’s just lock the door and leave him to it. Maybe he’ll go away by himself.”

“What? Like our bladders? Where the hell are we meant to pee?”

“As long as it’s in a straight line, I really don’t give a crap.”

“Yeah, righto. Well, I’ll go down to Safeway and get a bucket.”



“He’s still there.”

“Gee. Strange, that.”

“Here, put this on him. We can’t have him catching a chill, can we?”

“What’s with the beer?”

“Thought I’d take some happy snaps. Do you reckon he can hold on to it?”

“Dunno. Fosters? Don’t give a dead man Fosters. Bloody cruel.”

“Well, it’s not like he’s got any taste buds, is it?”

“Yeah, and that crap’s probably what killed him in the first place. Give him a real beer. A hair-on-chest kinda beer.”

“Nah. He’s keeping the *Fosters*. Nobody else is gunna drink it. Here we go, Bonesy, grab ahold of this.”

“Hey, gross! He’s got fingernails now.”

“Oi, don’t get all girly-girly on me.”

“Shut up. Just take your photos and get on with it.”

“Wait a sec...how’d you stick his finger back on?”

“What do you mean ‘stick his finger back on’? I’ve got his finger right here in my pocket—”

“That’s feral! I can’t believe you’re carrying that thing around.”

“I thought it might be good luck or something. Like a rabbit’s foot.”

“Well, there’s plenty where that one came from. He’s got ten fingers, all attached, and everything. It’s bloody grown back.”

“Bloody hell...mate, just take your damn’ pictures and lock the door.”



“Bud-dum bud-dum bud-dum.”

“Huh?”

“He’s got a heart. How cool is that? It’s just like hanging there in his guts.”

“Hearts don’t hang in your guts.”

“Whatever. It’s beating. Check it out.”

“Gory. Dunno why he’d bother with a heart. He hasn’t even got arteries.”

“Maybe he needs to take a shit.”

“What? Jesus, you’re a knob. Anyway, he doesn’t have an arse, either.”

“Well, he’s balancing on something. Looks cushy, too. What the heck are we gonna do with the bugger?”

“Eh, maybe he’ll grow back and stuff, and then we can ask him what he wants. Like a funeral and crap.”



“Mate, I think our man’s gonna need a shave. He’s all hairy, like with curly pubes or something.”

“Hairy? He doesn’t even have skin.”

“Does now. Under that hair. He’s got a nice tan happening, too. Reckon he was a wog?”

“Dunno. Couldn’t’ve been the *Fosters*, though, you reckon? But we’ll see if he grows a gold chain or something. Hey, don’t do that! Didn’t you hear his neck pop? How would you like it if somebody did that to your head?”

“Why not? What’s he gonna do? Besides, he’s more attractive this way.”

“It’s bloody disrespectful! And what if it turns around or something, like on *The Exorcist*?”

“Ah, piss off. He doesn’t have tendons or muscles or any of that shit. But he is growing a nice head of hair.”



“I thought you said he didn’t have tendons.”

“He didn’t yesterday. What’re you feeding him? *Osmacote*?”

“Well, put his head back around.”

“You were the one who said it was disrespectful. Bloody hypocrite.”

“Yeah, but I don’t like the way he’s looking at me.”

“He could do with some *Clear Eyes* or something, couldn’t he. Reckon he was a pothead?”

“Christ, who knows. Definitely on steroids, though.”

“Yeah?”

“C’mon! The guy is *built*. Got better muscles than the two of us put together, and he’s been dead Christ knows how long. Now, put his head back around.”

“All right, but you owe me. Shit!”

“What the—”

“The bastard bit me!”

“Piss off! He didn’t!”

“Bloody well did. Damn it, I’m bleeding like Russian royalty. How’d your chompers get so sharp, you dead bastard? He’s got jaw muscles like that *Hellraiser* bloke.”

“Yeah, those are some gnashers, aren’t they? We could muzzle him, I s’pose. Like Hannibal Lecter. Got any wire?”



“Right, that’s it. I’m not going back in there again.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You should see the bastard in there. Stomping around like he owns the place. Sorbent everywhere, like he’s trying to dress himself up as a mummy or something.”

“Huh? I dunno about your family, but my mum wears clothes.”

“Christ. Just how’d *you* get into uni, huh?”

“Oh, right, I get you now. He probably cut himself shaving or something.”

“Don’t bet on paying off your HECS anytime soon, mate. But, anyway, you’ll reckon the toilet paper is bloody nothing when I tell you about him trying to throttle me with his jewellery.”

“Ah, so he *was* a wog.”

“Bloody oath, yeah. Looks like a bloody Don: fish an’ chip greased hair and a finger twitching for a trigger. You should hear him. Screaming all this retarded shit. Revenge and underworld-type stuff. Reckons I stole his mag wheels.”

“Well, what are we gonna do with him? He should really be paying some of the rent, hey. You know, I bet he was a dole bludger.”

“Don’t you get Centrelink?”

“Yeah, but that’s different. I’m studying.”

“God, listen to him! He’s like Wes Craven with anger management issues. Feral.”

“Is that him? Sounds like a pneumatic drill. He’ll bash down the dunny door at this rate.”

“*Toilet*. You were the one who said we couldn’t say dunny.”

“Yeah yeah. I reckon we should call a doctor, find out what to do and shit.”



“The Doc says to reinforce the door, add some more locks and stuff. If we keep him in there and stop feeding him—”

“Just hang on a tick. You’ve been feeding him?”

“Course I bloody haven’t.”

“Don’t give me that crap...I was wondering where the leftovers were going every night.”

“Yeah? Well, so what? It saves on dishes, doesn’t it? And when was the last time you had to clean a plate, huh?”

“All right. I’ll give you that.”

“Yeah, but anyway, Doc says Jaws should be back to normal in a week or so. Says to use pepper spray if we really need to.”

“He said to use pepper spray?”

“Nah, I just made that up. T’d be funny, though, hey? That’d teach the bastard not to steal my Clean & Clear.”

“Give him a break. He’s got a few more skin problems than you, I reckon. So, what are we supposed to do with him when he’s dead again?”

“Get him the buggery off the dunny, I guess. Dunno about you, but I’m sick of shitting in that bucket. I guess we could wrap him up in those Coles Green bags. Nobody’d ask any questions then. Just doing our bit for the environment and shit.”

“At least he will have slimmed down a bit by then.”



“Hey, mate, what’d you do with that finger you pulled off our skinny skele’ buddy?”

“The hairy thing? Chucked it down the kitchen sink. Gave me a bit of grief in the plughole, but it went down after a few rinses. Why?”

“Yeah, I thought you might’ve. Seriously, you’re worse than the missus flushing her little white mice.”

“Yeah?”

“Definitely. Reckon you could call a plumber?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Good. Cause we have a slight problem with a Hairy McLairy dead guy in the kitchen, and he’s making some demands on missing body parts.”

Spotting Starwhales

...André Oosterman

I took a deep breath, then disengaged the autopilot and flashed forward. With a metallic hiss, the electric power shut down and plunged the flight deck of the funnel-ship into an eerie darkness. I rested my hands on the hydraulic controls, and waited for my eyes to spot a suitable wave.

The vast electromagnetic field in front of me blinked out of existence. Without warning, the stars burst into a fountain of supernovas. The light turned into a million blurry lines, which spread out across the viewing pane and began to rotate at frantic speed. I observed the kaleidoscope of glowing matter with professional detachment, knowing that searching for patterns would be suicidal. My passenger was unaware of this. As a precautionary measure, I had put him to sleep.

Before long, the kaleidoscope faded away, and droplets of light started raining down the viewing panel. The rain assumed a rhythm, as it always did, bombarding the ship with tangible sheets of hard radiation. It was pulsating now, as if in synch with the heartbeat of an unseen cosmic being.

Soon, I would choose a wave.

Time passed by in slow, stroboscopic increments. The whirring of the ventilation system had stopped. Except for the heavy breathing of the old man, the silence was total. About half a minute had passed since I'd flashed forward. I would have to make a decision within the next twenty seconds, or accept that we'd wasted half a dozen terawatts and five weeks in deep space.

Wave top!

In one fluent motion, I pulled the mechanical lever and ignited the chemical boosters on both sides of the flight deck. The ship didn't seem to budge, but a cursory glance at the view panel and a burst of adrenaline told me that I'd got it right.

I relaxed. There was nothing left to do now, except ride out the wave and make the occasional adjustment with the lever. In less than a minute, the ship would leave this never-never land of warped space-time and slide back into normality. I sat back and started humming the first lines of an old song. *Blue, blue...*

A rational little voice told me to concentrate. I knew I should save my breath and follow protocols, but I ignored the voice and allowed sheer exhilaration to get the better of me. I kept humming all the way, to celebrate my unexpected return to non-space, to enjoy the ride to the full.

Because, let's face it, there's nothing like surfing a funnel-ship on the wave front of a c-nic boom.



I met Menko the day I was fired. He was waiting for me outside the headquarters of the Cartel, alone.

When I left the dome and stepped outside, my stomach churned at the sight of the starlit sky and the vast, empty spaces around me. I found myself standing on a large, rectangular platform with a panoramic view over Lake Arlen — a shimmering sea of blue light surrounded by a semicircle of jagged, alpine mountains. Across the lake, I could make out the tall spires of the city. On another day, I might have enjoyed the view.

To my relief, the platform was nearly deserted. After a year of solitary confinement aboard the *San Lorenzo* and several weeks in the Cartel's medical facilities, the bustle of a crowd would have overwhelmed me. I clutched at my sole possessions, a sealed plastic bag that contained a bundle of dirty clothes and a few personal effects. My pockets were empty, except for a chipcard that might keep me going for another six months — if I was careful.

"Mr. Delaney, I presume," said a voice.

I turned around, startled. A few meters to my left, a stocky man was leaning against the polished wall of the dome. His white summer suit presented a marked contrast with his dark face and black, cropped hair. His smile seemed almost apologetic — as if he knew what had happened to me. According to the data that started streaming down my retina, he probably did.

Tabesse Menko Dh'ailasie, male, Nilo-Ethiopian, fifty-two years old, unaffiliated, unmarried, non-voting, recruiter of Surfers, holder of high-level access codes to Cartel archives...

"What do you want?"

"I have a job for you. One of my clients is looking for a Surfer. Interested?"

"Piss off," I said and made way for the escalator at the end of the platform.

"I will," agreed Dh'ailasie. "If you tell me you've quit surfing." He raised his head towards the heavens, as if to challenge me.

In spite of myself, I looked up. A handful of funnel-ships dotted the sky, their hydrogen-hungry electromagnetic fields stretched out for hundreds of miles. The Nebula had risen above the cityscape like a curtain of faint mist. From Earth, New Shanghai, Esperanza, and some of the other Pre-Consolidation worlds, it was supposed to look like a horse head. From Alnitak, it looked rather less poetic — a crumpled blanket of blue stardust.

"Are you in the market or not?"

I sighed. "It's no secret that you've cosied up with the Cartel. You know they've decommissioned me."

Menko nodded. "They say you went 'whaling. Did you?"

Had I really seen those mythical beings? I still couldn't be sure. When I'd encountered those massive ghostly shapes, I'd surfed away on spare fuel and ended up ten light years from my intended destination. A desperate act. The act of a madman, according to the Cartel medics.

"Your medical record doesn't show anything," prodded Menko.

So what? The Cartel has kicked me out, and you can't change. Nobody can."

"I'm not talking about the Cartel."

"Who else needs Surfers these days?" I asked out loud, more to myself than to Menko.

"A man named Kurt Krämer," whispered the velvety voice of the recruiter.

I twitched my eye, searching for information, but my ret-screen didn't respond to the name query. The entry didn't exist in the deep datamines of Alnitak.

For the first time in my life, my ret-stream had remained blank.



Menko's hover slid toward the city like a lazy shark. I asked about Kurt, but the recruiter countered my questions with vague, meaningless answers.

Ten minutes later, Menko took a sharp turn and entered an anti-grav shaft. This surprised me. I suspected he wanted to gain altitude to cross the mountain ridge, but the hover kept on rising. Menko sealed off the cabin and activated the hover's life-support systems.

"Where are we going?" I demanded.

"To Kurt's place," grumbled Menko, shifting his attention to the navigation panels in front of him. "Where else?"

Inside the 'grav shaft, a handful of yellow, globular objects passed us by in rapid succession. Oxygen shipments, I guessed — fresh supplies for the installations in orbit. The city had shrunk to a pale blue dot below us.



It wasn't hard to see why Kurt had chosen to live in space. His tight bodysuit painted the contours of his legs with cruel precision. They were thin beyond belief. At the bottom of Alnitak's gravity-well, the man would be confined to a wheelchair.

The rest of his body seemed in excellent health, as if to compensate for the sorry state of his legs. His white hair had never thinned, although his face was deeply lined. He must have been in his late seventies, more than twice my age.

Once again, I attempted to access the ret-stream. As before, it didn't respond.

"Welcome to my humble abode," said Kurt. He introduced himself with a firm, anachronistic handshake.

The orbiter didn't look humble to me. It was equipped with advanced docking facilities and its compartments seemed large enough to accommodate half a dozen people for an indefinite period of time. Judging from the view through the windowpanes, the orbiter was rotating at a sluggish pace, creating a gravity field of no more than 0.2g — tailored, I suspected, to the needs of Kurt's spindly legs.

He seemed to guess my thoughts. "A rare strain of polio," he explained, as he must have done a thousand times before. "It no longer troubles me. I'm glad you're here, Mr. Delaney. In fact, I was waiting for you." He gestured at a comfortable-looking couch in the center of the compartment.

"Waiting for me?" I echoed. "Why?"

Kurt chuckled. "To be fair, I wasn't waiting for you specifically, but I was waiting for a Surfer to become available."

I'd left the Cartel less than an hour ago. Kurt had acted fast. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm an old man, Mr. Delaney. I want to explore space before my health prevents me from doing so." He paused, seated himself in front of Menko and myself, then continued. "I've managed to acquire a funnel-ship, but I don't have a Surfer. People with your talents are rare. And, as you know better than most, the Cartel ensures they remain rare."

Kurt was right. Individuals with surfing potential were uncommon. Long periods of solitude in deep space, and the destabilizing effects of the passage through non-space required an unusual mixture of character traits. The ideal Surfer was sociable yet solitary, flexible yet unimaginative, skilled yet uncreative, selfish and ambitious, with bone marrow to spare. The Cartel cornered the market, as it always did. Surfers were locked in with exclusivity contracts, which would only end in the event of death or old age. Or decommissioning, of course...

"Rare," I admitted, "but not that rare. Why me?"

"Because you're available," said Kurt. "And because I can't afford to wait much longer."

"It's been five years since a capable Surfer was decommissioned," clarified Menko. His dark face assumed a reddish hue, as the globe of Alnitak came into view.

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter if you have a ship and a pilot. The Cartel doesn't like competition, and it has the clout to block any flight from Alnitak that doesn't have its blessing. I'm not talking about political pressure only. Ask Menko for details, he knows."

"Mr. Krämer is aware of the need for security," said Menko. "As you've probably noticed, you can't find him in the datamines. The mines can't find him, either. This orbiter is data-shielded."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Delaney has a valid point," conceded Kurt. "But one that doesn't apply to scientific expeditions. The Cartel is a commercial operation. It has agreed to leave science alone."

"Do you think the Cartel is going to take your word for that? Who says you're not going to change direction after the first flash?"

"The University of Alnitak says so — it's sponsoring the expedition. More importantly, our object of study is nowhere near a commercial port-of-call. In fact, it's far away from anywhere. We're going into the Nebula."

"The Nebula?" I snorted. "What for?"

"Studying star formation *in situ*," said the crippled billionaire, eyes glittering. "It hasn't been done before. And this is the right time. For unknown reasons, formation intensity follows a cycle of twenty-eight years. This is a peak year."

I had to admit, Kurt might just pull it off. Who would want to stop an old man pursuing an innocent pet project?

"What about the return trip?" I asked, trying to picture the flight plan. "There are no planets or stars in the Nebula. Where does our grav-assist come from?"

"We don't need any. We pick up hydrogen from the Nebula to fuel the engine. We will not stop or even change direction, so we won't need to break. As soon as we've completed our observations, we'll return to Alnitak — surfing. A short, but highly rewarding trip."

I considered this. The trip shouldn't take long. Because of the relatively high hydrogen densities in the Nebula, the funnel should pick up enough fuel to keep the engine running at full capacity. Unexpectedly, my ret-stream became active again.

Kurt was feeding me an outline of the flight plan. The return trip to the outer areas of the Nebula would take about five months. A second feed consisted of a service contract.

“Are you in, Mr. Delaney?”

I sighed. The money was good, better than anything I would be able to find in the city. And, as a *persona non grata* with the Cartel administrators, I would not get another opportunity at surfing. It was this, or a one-way trip to the bottom of the anti-grav shaft.

Somehow, I must have indicated my approval, because Kurt smiled and issued my first advance payment by ret-stream.

He'd never even asked about my medical record.



The funnel ship was not what I'd expected. It was spacious, hyper-modern and equipped with superb navigational and entertainment facilities. Unlike the Cartel, Kurt didn't care about cost cutting to make a profit.

Under normal circumstances, a funnel-ship would need at least seven weeks to build up sufficient energy levels for a flash. Because of the hydrogen-rich environment at the fringes of the Nebula, we did it in five.

The Cartel had bought Kurt's cover story, it seemed. At any rate, it never showed any interest in us.

A month after our launch from Alnitak's orbit, I started preparing for our first flash. The hydrogen engine was already energizing the electromagnetic field. Supercharged ions flickered with impatience, and made the image of the Nebula look like an overexposed photograph. Soon, the field would begin to resonate and create the wave front that would allow us to breach light speed. Depending on the wave, we'd cover a distance of up to one light year in less than two minutes.

A few days later, we were ready.

“You know what you're doing?” asked Kurt, after I'd injected the old man with a mild anesthetic.

“You bet,” I grinned.

Kurt smiled, but said nothing. As soon as he was asleep, I strapped myself in the pilot seat and flashed forward.



...and with a peculiar clunk, the ship dropped back into normal space-time. The electrical systems sprang to life with an audiovisual cacophony of flickering lights and screeching whirs. I scanned the displays We'd surfed about 1.2 light years, more than I'd expected.

My spirits dropped as I glanced at the mass spectrometer. The carbon density of the Nebula was several multiples higher than it should have been. I checked and re-checked the instrument, but it seemed in working order. The operational parameters of the electromagnetic field confirmed my suspicions.

The funnel was raking in elements that the hydrogen engine couldn't process.

A few minutes later, Kurt awoke and conjured up a bottle of wine and two crystal glasses from a hidden closet. “Time for a little celebration,” he announced with a grin.

He poured me a drink, but I refused. Instead, I showed him a printout of the spectrometer.

To my surprise, Kurt understood the implications at once. “The funnel collects contaminated fuel,” he muttered. “The engine can’t process it, but there’s no way to filter out the carbon. The engine will choke.”

“That’s right,” I said, taken aback. “How did you know?”

Kurt gestured at his legs. “We’re two of a kind, Delaney. I thought you’d guessed by now.”

I should have trusted my instincts. The old man had space-legs. “You — a Surfer?”

He nodded. “A decommissioned Surfer, just like you.”

“Decommissioned? Why?”

Kurt Krämer laughed without mirth. “For the crime of spotting starwhales.”

He’d answered my question with perfect sincerity. He believed he’d actually seen those mythical beings. No wonder my medical record had never interested him.

Still, Kurt’s story didn’t make sense. “If you’re a Surfer, why did you hire *me*? Why don’t you fly this ship yourself?”

“Because I can’t. I’m not familiar with the latest generation of funnel-ships. In my days, it took us dozens of jumps to cross a light year. With an old ship, it would take me years to reach the Nebula.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For security reasons. The less you know, the less you can tell the Cartel.”

“So why do you tell me now?”

Kurt shrugged. “It doesn’t matter anymore. We’re a light year away from the nearest Cartel representative.”

“Soon we won’t. We have to get back to Alnitak to refit the engine.”

The old man shook his head. “We don’t have time for that.”

“And why is that?”

“The starwhales,” said Kurt softly. “I want to see them once more, before I die.”

I felt sad. “The starwhales exist in our minds, Kurt. Not in the Nebula.”

“I saw them, Delaney. I saw them just before my last flash — with my own eyes. Just like you did.”

I looked away. “In truth, I don’t know what I saw, Kurt. Not anymore. Even if starwhales do exist, how are you going to find them?”

Kurt looked at me with a mischievous smile. “I have reason to believe there’s a connection between the starwhales and the intensity of star formation in the Nebula.”

I shifted my attention to the controls. “We’ll look into that after we’ve modified the engine.”

Kurt’s voice hardened. “We don’t have time for that. We will not turn around.”

“The carbon density—”

“I’m prepared to take the risk, and so are you,” said Kurt.

“Really? You just told me you don’t know how to fly this ship.”

Kurt grinned. “I’ve instructed Mr. Dh’ailasie to go after your hide if you return without me or before your contract expires. His enforcement people will be happy to collect a handsome fee.”

I did not doubt that Menko would blow the whistle if the old man would pay him to do so. “Damn you, Krämer,” I said, my voice much louder than needed. “I just want you to fix the engine. Why take an unnecessary risk?”

“Because the starwhales will be gone if we return first. Don’t you see?”

“No, I don’t. What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ve been here before, Delaney,” said Kurt. “I was in the Nebula, at the height of the previous cycle. That’s when I first saw the ‘whales, twenty-eight years ago.”

“Kurt,” I said, not knowing how to begin. “Starwhales are a myth. Nobody has ever been able to detect them. Even if they do exist, we will never find them. They disappear at the touch of a tracking signal. They’re allergic to tightbeam, radar, radio, infrared, you name it. If you ask me, they’re allergic to humankind in general. You’re chasing ghosts.”

“Not true,” said Kurt. “We have evidence—”

“What kind of evidence? All we have is a handful of uncorroborated stories from decommissioned Surfers, such as me...”

Kurt smiled. “I do not expect you to believe me, Delaney. In fact, I do not expect anybody to believe me.”

I understood why he had hidden his true motives. He was right. No one would have believed him.



With a heavy heart, I prepared myself for the final flash. The past few weeks, Kurt had searched incessantly for his beloved starwhales, but they remained out of range, or had fled as soon as they’d detected our ship. Assuming they existed, of course.

I sedated my passenger for the second time since we’d left Alnitak, and entered the pilot seat with a mixture of apprehension, excitement, and dread. I looked forward to surfing the ship, but didn’t relish the prospect of engine malfunction.

For once, I didn’t choose the largest possible wave. There was no need to maximize flash distance — the center of the Nebula was less than 0.4 light years away.

When the ship returned to normality, my senses betrayed me. For reasons beyond my understanding, light streamed into the compartment even before the electrical systems came on-line. The viewing panes were filled with glowing shapes of blue and white, some of them stationary, some of them passing by with dizzying speed.

I’d seen these shapes before, in a short-lived moment on the *San Lorenzo*. This time, they didn’t flee.

At 0.2c, we were slowly overtaking a bluish cloud on starboard. I checked our velocity and programmed a course correction, ignoring the spectrometer, which had begun to emit a warning sound. Seconds later, the ship was level with the cloud, maintaining a constant distance of approximately two-thousand kilometers. It had sharpened into an image of heart-stopping beauty. The Cartel medics were wrong. I had not hallucinated.

We were drifting alongside a herd of starwhales.

They moved through the Nebula with sluggish, wave-like movements, seemingly unaware of the funnel-ship. To me, they looked like real whales, but flatter, more elongated, with black oval spots on the sides of their otherwise dark blue hulks. The computer was recording the ‘whales from every possible angle, collecting irrefutable proof of their existence and my sanity.

I glanced at my controls, desperate for information on these majestic creatures. Most of the starwhales were hundreds of miles long. They mainly consisted of hydrogen, with traces of heavier elements. A wafer-thin membrane of carbon enclosed the hydrogen, keeping the interior of the ‘whales just above freezing point.

Carbon, I thought with a shudder. The Nebula was littered with the decomposed corpses of starwhales...

None of the ‘whales showed visible signs of a propulsion mechanism. Yet, they moved as fast as the funnel-ship, which was cruising at a fifth of light speed.

“They’re magnificent,” whispered a voice.

I looked around and smiled at Kurt, who had just woken up. He was standing behind me, facing the viewing pane.

“They are,” I said softly. I offered him my hand. “Honor is due. I’m glad I was wrong.” He accepted my apology without taking his eyes off the ‘whales. He then walked over to the viewing pane, and pressed his face against it like a child caught up in the magic of looking at Christmas lights.

I re-engaged the autopilot and stood next to him. Kurt had focused his attention on a large starwhale to our right, oblivious of anything else.

The large whale had left the herd and was now floating above it. A few moments later, it started shaking, sending a tidal wave of spasms down its ethereal back. The spasms grew more pronounced and assumed a rhythm, first slow, then faster, building up to an unmistakable climax. And when it came, I finally understood.

In its dying moments, the starwhale was venting vast clouds of hydrogen through the mile-high orifices on its sides, completing its part of the cycle.

“My God,” murmured Kurt. “They’re seeding the stars.”

The Cat Story

...Anna Tambour

Because the editor said he hates cats but nowhere near as much as he hates cat stories, the cat story was immediately attracted to him, found him, followed him home; and as the editor opened his apartment door, slipped in between his legs, unnoticed.

The editor's home is small and cluttered in a most attractive way, to those who like this mess. Instead of a table to sprawl on, there are piles and piles of books. Instead of tasselled pillows beckoning from the sofa, papers perch in perilous piles across its lap. Instead of...there are many *instead ofs*, but the point is, the apartment was the cat-story nightwear cliché.

The editor rummaged in his backpack and dumped it by the door. He made his way five steps to where, standing, he cooked his dinner (three minutes to cook, two more to wait) and ate it, his mouth like a trout's — gape and snap — though his throat vibrated *hmm hmm* while he chewed. When he finished that, he reached and grabbed a pint of ice cream out of the fridge. He chomped hard spoonfuls, bared teeth biting the spoon. He finished the pint, noticed its emptiness, closed the fridge door and licked the spoon clean. His bed was five steps away through the maze. He dumped himself on it and reached for the remote. His eyes occupied themselves independent of his brain, as did his sense of humour, for he startled himself by laughing once.

A loud commercial woke him. The evening was almost dead.

His bath was five steps away. He turned on the taps, then picked his way back through paper piles till he found — *this one*. It promised.

He laid the thick wad on a cross-the-tub tray-table, stepped into the tub, wiped his fingers on a towel, and picked up the first page. A no-slip rough strip stopped his slack-skinned arse from sliding.

At the 4 am four-car-pileup sound of the garbage truck's compactor, the editor clucked in annoyance. The bathwater was cold as forgotten coffee, but his left cheek was hot, the inside of his right lip chewed raw. That screech distracted him, but only for a moment. He finished the page he'd been reading and picked up the next. Mentally, he was seven years old again, stretched out on the floor under his bed, left cheek red from rubbing it as he read, feet numb, book faint-star lit by a flashlight with a dying battery...

The editor placed the last page top-down on the pile and stretched his neck. It was almost time to go to work. He felt weak, but not from lack of sleep, cramp

of cold and inactivity. No, this was pure emotion. *A promise kept.* He was sorry he'd finished the book, in that way you wish you could stay in some special state forever—even the state of fear. *Oh yesss.* The editor had *never grown up*, his parents tsked, which was why, perhaps, he was such a damn fine editor.

He let out some water and turned the hot tap with his toe. *Edgy as a mouthful of razor blades.* The author? An unknown. The editor began to dream, as even old editors do.

And that's when the cat story jumped into the bath.

F&(*^\$@!!!! or F*&(*^\$@ing bloody ridiculous! you say?*

Almost true. But this is a *swimming-cat* story. Though they prefer rivers and oceans, and temperate temperatures, they adapted, as did the original swimming-cat story (from Turkey, if I recall correctly).

The editor screamed, his knees hit the tray-table, and he jumped with the coordination of a wooden doll, out of the bath (but not before the nail of his right big toe — or was it the cat story's paw? — caught the rubber bathplug and pulled it free). The tray-table flipped and landed manuscript-first upon the womb-warm turbulated waters where a's, b's, x's, two pt's, words and paragraphs, characters, plots and subplots, and a generous half a million commas swirled off the pages and rushed in a pushing-each-other tumult down the convoluted apartment-house drain, which accepted them with greed, sticking out its lascivious tongue and lapping the letters off each page and pulling the words in and down till every page was recycled white again and the tub shone with nothing but a four-letter-word amount of black, in a little marooned curl, like a hair. And then the drain uttered an apartment-house-shaking belch: replete with contentment, ebullient with thanks.

The editor heard nothing (not even the burp), having passed out when he smashed his coccyx against the tub's edge. Or possibly it was the moment before, when his head hit the sink.

That manuscript, unbelievably, was the only copy. Yes, it's true. This still happens. This particular author thought he had backed up his book on a disk, but definitely *did* delete it from his computer to prevent someone stealing it over the net, through some Trojan horse.

And what of the cat story? When the editor leapt, the cat story did too, landing on top of the toilet tank. At the knell of the last echo of drain-belch and bone-shatter, the cat story finished washing itself dry, casually vomited, and walked out of the editor's life.

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Tarans

...Simon Brown

Henry Gillette was gagging on his tongue.

“Sir, shouldn’t you put something in his mouth?”

Bhunu shook his head, and put his ear closer to Gillette’s mouth.

“But, sir, his fit is getting worse—”

“It is not a fit, Mrs Worth, it is a trance.”

“It looks like a fit to me,” Mrs Worth said under her breath, but Bhunu ignored her, his brow furrowed in concentration. For a long while the only sounds she could hear were Gillette’s gasping and the thrashing of his arms against the Persian rug, and then something that could almost have been a word.

Bhunu heard it as well. He grunted in satisfaction and looked around. He grabbed a flower vase from a side table, took out the roses and poured the water over Gillette’s face. The Englishman coughed and spluttered, then sat up, red-faced and wet.

“Sir, are you all right?” Mrs Worth asked.

Gillette blinked at her as if she was some apparition. “Hello, Mrs Worth. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“You were inconvenienced, sir,” she said weakly.

“What Mrs Worth is trying to say is that she came in just as you started your trance,” Bhunu explained.

“I thought you were having a fit, sir!”

“Ah, Mrs Worth, thank you for your concern, but I don’t suffer from...” he paused to give greater effect to his French accent “...le grand mal.” He stood up and made a pretence of brushing down his clothes.

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked uncertainly.

“Tea would be nice,” Gillette said, and looked inquiringly at Bhunu, who nodded sharply. “For two, if you please, Mrs Worth.”

Mrs Worth studied the faces of the two men, hardly believing that after what had just happened all they wanted was a cup of tea. Henry Gillette was a proper English gentleman, and mostly looked the part: of somewhat below average height, tending to roundness, light brown hair parted down the middle and with sidewhiskers and moustache, he could have walked unnoticed into almost any club in London. He had a gentle face with slight grey patches of eczema on the cheeks and grey eyes that very occasionally were red and irritated. He dressed

in the best of clothes, but they always seemed rumpled as if they were a size too large for his frame. Bhunu was the exact opposite in almost every way: well over six foot in height, thin as a bean pole, and with deep black skin that in afternoon light sometimes seemed to reflect a reddish colour like mahogany. His head was as angular as his body, his hair short and tightly curled, and he wore rimless glasses that made his brown eyes seem too large even for his face. He had the most beautiful hands Mrs Worth had ever seen on a man. His clothes, too, were of the best quality, but he dressed with more care and finesse than Gillette.

She managed something like a curtsy and hurriedly left the room.

“You gave our new housekeeper a surprise, Henry,” Bhunu said.

“So it would seem. Now, did you catch anything useful?”

“Two words. They sounded like ‘Mill fern.’”

“Mill Fern? How extraordinary. Haven’t a clue about that, I’m afraid.”

“A person’s name, perhaps?”

Gillette shrugged and sat on the chaise longue. Bhunu sat in the chair especially made for his long frame. For a moment neither said anything, both lost in thought. A robin warbled in the tree outside the sitting room’s south window; beyond that could be heard the clapping and whir of a passing hansom.

“Could it be a place name?” Bhunu suggested.

Gillette’s face brightened. “Come to think of it, I have a vague recollection of a road sign with a word on it. That must be it! But which country? England, I assume... perhaps we should consult the orbis terrarum?”

“I will get the atlas,” Bhunu said without a hint of sarcasm.

“Good man.” He tried to look languid. “I do feel so weak after a trance.”

As Bhunu left to go to the library, Mrs Worth reappeared, performed another curtsy, went to the dumb waiter and hauled up a tray heavy with the makings of a good morning tea. She brought the tray to the side table that until recently had played host to a flower vase.

“If I remember correctly, sir, it is milk and one sugar for you and a spot of lemon for Mr Bhunu?”

“That’s right, Mrs Worth, but it is not Mr Bhunu. Just Bhunu.”

“He has no other name, sir?” She started pouring the tea.

“Surely. You could call him ‘your Highness’, but he dislikes that kind of formality. His full name, you see, is Prince Manukosi Bhunu Nxumalo, son of Sekwati, grandson of Shoshangane, once great general of Zwide and subsequently leader of the Ndwandwe people of Gaza—”

“Please, Mr Gillette!” she cried. “You are confusing me!”

Gillette nodded understandingly. “If you find it difficult to remember it all, and you are uncomfortable with Bhunu, you may call him Edward.”

Mrs Worth spilt some of the tea. “Sir?”

“Bhunu is actually two people in one, Mrs Worth; one is Prince Manukosi Bhunu et cetera et cetera, late of southern Africa, and the other is Sir Edward Mason, late of Mayfair.”

Mrs Worth considered her gentleman employer for a moment, unable to decide whether or not he was making fun of her.

“I do not tell a lie,” Gillette said, reading her mind. “However, to keep it simple, why don’t you just call him Bhunu?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, submitting, and finished pouring the tea. For the second time that morning, she hurriedly left the sitting room. She and Bhunu passed each other in the hall, and he could not help noticing her expression.

“You have been explaining to Mrs Worth about me, I see,” Bhunu said as he passed the atlas to Gillette.

“She brought the matter up, in a roundabout way,” Gillette admitted.

“Perhaps you should never discuss the issue at all?” Bhunu said, less a suggestion than a plea. “I am tired of people looking at me not because I’m from Africa, or because I am a prince, but because they think there is an Englishman somewhere inside me as if I swallowed him live.”

“It would be difficult to tell anyone the real story and explain how you saved Edward’s soul by risking you own,” Gillette countered. “*Real* magic is something that is not supposed to happen in 19th century England.”

“I hope we do not have to hire another housekeeper. That would be the third this year, Henry. It is getting excessive.”

Gillette sighed. “I know, I know.” He opened the atlas to its index. “Mill...fern. No, no...but wait! There is a Milvern — in Yorkshire!” He flipped the atlas to the appropriate page and let his pointer hunt around for a few moments. “Aha!” he declared. “It’s not far from Bradford.” He passed the atlas to Bhunu, his finger over the spot.

“Is it accessible by train?”

“Everywhere in England is accessible by train.”

“You said that about Burhdale,” Bhunu said flatly, settling back into his chair, stretching his long legs out before him.

“Well, train and carriage,” Gillette said, tugging at an ear lobe. “It was only a four hour ride.”

“It was a very cold and very wet four hours.”

“You are in England now, and must get used to it.”

“That is what Edward says.”

Gillette looked up, interested. “Really? Such mundane stuff? I thought you two only communicated on matters spiritual.” He closed his eyes and smiled. “Ha! Matters spiritual. A tautology in reverse. I wonder if there is a term for that? What does Edward say?”

Bhunu sighed. “Edward has nothing at all to say about it.” He passed back the atlas. “What should we do about Milvern?”

“I’m tempted to leave it alone,” Gillette said honestly.

“But you will not do that. You only have a trance when someone or something is under grave threat from the spiritual realm. We have responsibilities.”

“You almost died at Burhdale,” Gillette pointed out.

“From pneumonia. The ghost we found was no trouble at all.”

“Thanks to Edward,” Gillette said and stood up. “But you are right, of course. We will go and see what we can see.”

“Or not see,” Bhunu added, remembering the ghost.



As it turned out, Gillette and Bhunu had to walk many miles to reach Milvern; fortunately it was a mild autumn day with light clouds scudding across a blue sky sharper than any they saw in London.

"It's the light," Gillette explained to Bhunu. "It is so much purer here. Every detail is clearer."

"It is the lack of fog and coal dust," Bhunu said. "I remember my home was like this. No where in the south of England is clean anymore." His voice was faintly disapproving.

"Cost of civilisation, old boy," Gillette said.

"The cost of greed," Bhunu replied.

"That's Edward speaking."

Bhunu only grunted.

The land around them undulated with bare, brown hills topped by tussocks of tough grass. Everywhere were black-faced sheep that regarded them with faint curiosity, and the occasional cow that seemed bored chewing the cud. Once a shepherd regarded them from the top of a hill, but made no reply to their greetings, not even waving; he rested on his crook as if it was a third leg, his head moving as he followed the pair until they were out of sight.

"How far to Milvern, do you think?" Gillette asked Bhunu, slightly put out that his friendly overtures had met with no response. "I hope the villagers are feeling more courteous."

"We are here, Henry," Bhunu said, topping a rise.

They looked down on a collection of cottages buttoned to the yellow road winding its way around hills and on to the horizon. In the north of the village, setback somewhat from the road, was a church surrounded on one side by glebe and on the other by a graveyard. In the south, closest to the companions, was an old coach inn with a courtyard and gallery. A few minutes later they reached the inn, found the bar and ordered two large glasses of the local brew. The innkeeper, who identified himself as Wattler, was a small bald man with narrow eyes and feathery ears; he seemed pleased to have such early custom, although Bhunu made him stare.

"A pleasant town," Gillette said conversationally.

"Indeed, sir," the innkeeper said, but some of his jollity disappeared.

"Don't see many inns like this these days," Gillette continued easily.

"No, sir. The trains have done in the coach. Not much need for stables and courtyards. Shakespeare played here once, with the King's Men, or so they say, because we had a gallery. Hardly anyone comes here nowadays."

"Really? Shakespeare? How absolutely wonderful." Gillette sipped his beer and made appreciative sounds.

"Is it a large town?" Bhunu asked.

"About sixty, sir. Another two hundred or so hereabouts, on farms mainly. There's a quarry nearby, too."

"And a lovely little church, we saw," Gillette chipped in.

"That's right, sir. St Everilda-in-the-Valley."

"Norman, is it?"

The innkeeper's face hardened. "I'd say so, but I'm no expert. Maybe even earlier. You need to talk to the rector, the Reverend Fleet. He knows the local history better'n anyone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to attend to."

“Before you go,” Gillette said, “we’d like two rooms.”

“As you wish, sir,” he said reluctantly. “How long will you be staying?”

“A night, maybe two.”

Bhunu and Gillette took their drinks to a table near the main window and looked out over the town. The houses were mainly Tudor and Stuart in origin; the few more modern buildings looked grey and drab in comparison, but more solidly made.

As the two men finished their drinks more of the locals drifted in; most threw them a cursory glance before ignoring them, and some ignored them altogether. When their glasses were empty, Gillette and Bhunu wandered up to the church. They passed very few villagers, and then mostly children who returned smiles but otherwise held back and pointed in wonder at Bhunu.

Like the village, the church was made up of a combination of styles.

“Yes,” Gillette mumbled to himself, indicating its base. “You see, Bhunu? The innkeeper was right. Saxon brickwork, quite rough. Now these, of course,” he said, leading the way around to the side and indicating the arched windows just above his head, “are definitely—”

“Norman,” Bhunu finished for him. “I know.”

“Oh,” Gillette said, looking vaguely disappointed he was not allowed to continue showing off his architectural knowledge. “Edward told you, I expect.”

Bhunu shook his head. “I read history at Oxford, remember? Dreaming spires and church windows are all part of the curriculum.” Bhunu adjusted his glasses and studied the windows in more detail. “In fact, early Norman. Similar to the church at Saint-Etienne.”

“Can I help you two gentlemen?”

A black-haired man with a wide nose and dark pillows of flesh under his eyes had appeared around the corner of the church. He was dressed in expensive black pants and frock coat, and wore a dog-collar and wide-brimmed clerical hat.

“Ah, you must be the local minister,” Gillette said. “Fleet?”

The man regarded them both coolly. “The Reverend John Fleet. I am the rector of St Everilda-in-the-Valley. You are strangers.”

“You make that sound like an accusation,” Bhunu said.

The rector frowned. “Not at all. We’re just not used to them. Milvern is out of the way, a small farming community that offers very little to the casual traveler.”

“Well, there is the inn with the gallery,” Gillette said, but Fleet did not seem any more impressed than before. He cleared his throat. “And the church, of course. Very interesting combination of Saxon and Norman.”

“You are interested in church architecture?” Fleet asked.

“Of course!” Gillette said expansively. “Who would not be interested in our country’s ecclesiastical past?”

Fleet seemed to consider that for a moment, and then said, “Not just Saxon and Norman.” He pointed to the graveyard set back from the church entrance. “Examine the nearest crosses, just under the yew tree.”

“Celtic, perhaps?” Gillette ventured. “So often sacred sites are maintained, and not just from one generation to the next, but one civilisation to the next as well.” He advanced on Fleet and grasped the man’s elbow. “How long have you been rector here, if I may ask?”

Fleet glanced at the hand, then at Gillette's round, pleasant face, and almost smiled. "Thirteen years, ever since I finished at Cambridge."

"Then you must know a great deal about this church and the parish it serves." Gillette was now maneuvering him down the street towards the inn.

"More than you might guess," Fleet said proudly. "My father is both bishop and land owner hereabouts. Milvern has been my family's demesne for several hundred years."

"Demesne?" Bhunu asked, following a little behind. "That is an interesting choice of words."

Fleet sighed. "Yes, I know it sounds archaic, but these are our lands, and the people who use it do so as our...tenants."

When they entered the inn, the villagers already there, including Wattler, looked somewhat askance at the sight of the rector, and quickly looked away. Fleet himself seemed genuinely uncomfortable instead of insulted.

"Would you like a drink?" Gillette asked. "There is a great deal I would like to talk to you about."

Whether it was his welcome in the inn or the prospect of being interviewed by Gillette, Fleet shook his head. "I am a busy man, sir. Perhaps we can talk tomorrow, at the church?" He attempted a smile and quickly withdrew.

"He did not even inquire as to our names," Bhunu said, more disappointed than disapproving.



The inn filled with locals after sunset. When Gillette and Bhunu came down for dinner they found no welcome, and received no more than a stiff "good evening" if they themselves made any advance. At first Bhunu attracted his share of stares, but then all the patrons determinedly avoided looking at or talking to the strangers. Only Wattler, reluctantly, had any time for them, and then only to suggest they eat apart from everyone else in a small upstairs dining room.

"We do not wish to antagonise anyone, naturally," Gillette said. "We will do as you recommend."

The dining room had two wide latticed windows, one that looked out over Milvern's street from where the church could only dimly be made out in the growing darkness, and the other over the courtyard. "This must once have been the 'royal box' for any performances," Gillette mused. "I suppose it has many years since anyone performed here. From before the coming of the steam train. It is not a very welcoming place."

"Neither is London if you are a stranger," Bhunu said quietly.

Gillette regarded his friend for a moment. "No, I suppose not. Especially if you are...from Africa."

"Black, you mean?" Bhunu shook his head. "If anything, that has given me a slight advantage. I am a spectacle, you see. It helps that I am a prince; it makes me more than simply exotic."

"You must miss Africa a great deal."

"Africa is a big place. I miss my home, but I have been in England now for most of my life, both refugee and hostage. What I miss is freedom of action."

"You do not have to say in England."

“The British government and my uncle do not care where I am, so long as it is not in the land where I was born, and that is where I want to be more than anywhere else.”

Gillette asked, almost tentatively, “And does Edward want to see your homeland?”

Bhunu was perfectly still for a moment, then shook his head. “I do not know. It is not one of those things about which he wishes to communicate with me. Or about which he can communicate with me.”

Just then Wattler and a kitchen hand appeared with food and drink. They set up a table and left, neither saying a single word to the guests.

“Do you feel anything here?” Bhunu asked. “Any sign of the spiritual world forcing its way into our own?”

Gillette shrugged. “Not really. There is an inkling, like the start of a headache, but nothing concrete.”

“Is it stronger near the church?”

Gillette shook his head. “Edward has nothing to say?”

“I would tell you if he did.”

“I was only asking because...” He paused, cocked his head to one side. “Did you hear something?”

“People enjoying themselves downstairs now that we are no longer among them,” Bhunu said. He frowned in thought. “Although they sound almost as if they are forcing themselves to have a good time.”

“From outside, I mean.”

Bhunu listened more carefully then. “I think...a child crying somewhere. One of the houses nearby.”

“Two children,” Gillette said. “And further away.”

Both men were very still, then.

After a while, Bhunu asked in a hushed tone, “Have you noticed everyone downstairs has fallen silent?”

“Yes.” Gillette went to the window looking over the street. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

Now the sound of crying children was loud enough to hear without any effort, as if every child in the village suddenly had woken up from the same nightmare. More, the sound was drawing closer and closer until both men were sure the children were wailing right under their window, and then passed up the street towards the church before finally fading away. At the end all that could be heard was a crow somewhere out in the fields.

“How extraordinary,” Gillette said, his face drawn.

The two men went downstairs, Bhunu remembering to take a lantern, and on the way passed Wattler carrying a tray with more food.

“Don’t go outside, sirs!” he called after them.

But they ignored him and a moment later were on the street looking up at the church. At first they saw nothing, but then Bhunu drew Gillette’s attention to the ground. The dust on the beaten dirt road was crisscrossed and scarred with the impressions of shoes, boots, horse shoes, bare feet and wagon wheels, but one kind of print was superimposed over all of them and led in one direction, from south of the village and north to the church.

“They are the prints of a dog,” Bhunu said.

“Hounds,” Gillette corrected him. “Big hounds, and a whole pack of them.”

“But we saw no hounds, Henry,” Bhunu pointed out. “Nor did we *hear* any hounds.”

“I don’t suppose Edward has any comment to make now?”

“Edward says Milvern is in a great deal of trouble,” Bhunu replied.

After trying to dissuade Bhunu and Gillette from going outside, Wattler then tried to dissuade them from going into the downstairs inn on their return, but again they ignored him. They found what must have been a good part of the village seated around tables. Some glanced their way, but most determinedly, almost fiercely, stared at their drinks or at the flames in the single large fireplace. Their faces were uniformly haggard and pale.

Wattler was close behind them and quickly took his place behind the bar. “Drinks, sirs?”

“What happened?” Gillette asked loudly enough to be heard by everyone.

No one answered.

“Obviously this is not the first time something like this has occurred,” Gillette continued, undeterred. “Your expressions alone tell me that much, and the fact that no one came out onto the street with us. Not only has this happened before, but you know what is causing it.”

For a long moment no one said anything, then a single weary voice said, “God’s causing it.”

“Shut your face, Horey!” Wattler spat.

Bhunu faced Wattler. “Something very wrong is going on here in Milvern. Unless someone tells us what it is, we will not be able to help.”

All eyes settled on them, then.

“No one can help us,” Wattler said.

“We’ve helped others in trouble,” Gillette said. “Ghosts in Burdale—”

“Don’t know no Burhdale.”

“Sorcery in Oxford.”

“Don’t know Ox—”

“Yes you do,” Gillette said, almost gently.

Silence.

“Whose children are they?” Bhunu asked.

Now all the villagers looked at Wattler. He shook his head. “We cannot say anything,” he grumbled.

“Of course you can,” Gillette said. “They are all your children, am I correct?”

“No one’s children anymore,” said the same voice that had spoken out before. A thin man with bent shoulders stood up from a table on the other side of the room. Hands reached out to pull him down but he shrugged them off. “Not even God wants them. They’re thrown away.”

“Horey—!” Wattler started.

“Some are our children,” another voice said. A woman stood up from a table on the other side of the room; she was so slight she could have passed for a girl except for her face, which was haunted by more than years.

“Becky Vere, you shut up, too!” Wattler shouted.

“You shut up, Wattler! You ain’t lost no one!” Wattler subsided, but the expression on his face was almost apoplectic. She turned to Bhunu and Gillette. “Some of the children are ours. Some belonged to our parents’ generation, some to generations before that.”

Gillette was shocked. “How long has this been going on?”

“No one knows for sure,” Becky Vere said. “At least a hundred years. Maybe more.”

“Ever since the Fleets owned these lands,” a third voice said, but no one stood up to own it.

“You still haven’t told us why,” Bhunu said. “What has happened to Milvern?”



Bhunu and Gillette found the Reverend Fleet sitting in his church early the next morning. He was in the front pew, holding a copy of the bible, slowly shaking his head from side to side as if warding off sleep. The pair sat in the pew behind Fleet and waited.

“I expect they told you it was all my fault,” the minister said eventually, looking around at them with a sallow face. The skin under his eyes was a dark purple and sagged like folds of heavy cloth.

“Not in so many words,” Bhunu said.

“When’s the last time you slept?” Gillette asked.

“Sleep?” Fleet shrugged. “I cannot remember.”

“Does this happen every night?”

“Very rarely, maybe once every year or two, until recently. Now once a month, or more.”

“The villagers say the crying comes from their children. They say they lost four children in a landslide last year”

Fleet laughed hollowly. “Their children? Well, yes, I suppose. Children from Hell. Isn’t that where the tarans go?”

Bhunu and Gillette exchanged puzzled glances.

“Tarans?” Bhunu asked.

“The unbaptised. I thought they went to Limbo, but father tells me that’s popish nonsense. He says the unbaptised go to Hell. Well, if they do, they come back again.”

“Unbaptised? Why weren’t the children baptised?”

Fleet drew a deep sigh and looked away from them. His hands gripped his bible so tightly his knuckles stood out white.

“Reverend Fleet,” Gillette said gently, “I think we can help, but we need more information.”

“Help? How can you possibly help? God has set his universe in stone. No one can break its rules.”

“Your father’s words?” Bhunu hazarded.

“Yes. Always his words. His Grace Bishop William Fleet, seventh Earl of Ilkshire. Priest, nobleman, father, landowner, judge. Always his words, especially when you are only a third son.”

“What if God is not like that?” Gillette suggested. “What if God gives us ways to save the innocent? Tell me, why were the children not baptised?”

“The parents would not pay,” Fleet said in a small voice.

“But surely the poor need not pay,” Gillette said in surprise. “‘Suffer not the children’, is that not what the lord says?”

“Not in coin. In servitude. The parents of the children must promise them to my father.”

Gillette and Bhunu were surprised into silence.

“It is antiquated, I know,” Fleet started. “But it has been the way hereabouts since our ancestor Earl Robert Fleet was given these lands by King Henry VII, the first Tudor; the lands had been among the personal possessions of the deposed and butchered Richard III, and were the most likely to rebel. A heavy hand was necessary.”

“And has never been lifted,” Bhunu finished. “Where were they buried?”

Fleet shook his head. “I am not sure. Somewhere south of the village.”

“Which is why the procession heads north to the church,” Bhunu said.

“That is my guess,” Fleet said. “And I hear them coming and can do nothing about it.”

“And what about the paw prints?” Bhunu asked. “We saw fresh paw prints on the road, but neither saw nor heard any hound.”

“They are yeth-hounds,” Fleet said, his voice was wavering. “They are headless dogs from Hell that hold the souls of tarans; tarans cannot move by themselves.”

“Goodness,” Gillette said, somewhat awed. “I do not think I’ve ever faced *those* before.”

“You speak as if facing the denizens of Hell was your daily occupation,” Fleet said, a note of hope creeping into his voice.

“Well, nightly occupation,” Gillette corrected him. “And not always things from Hell. There are other places, Reverend, some even worse, believe it or not” He glanced at Bhunu. “Is Edward saying anything?”

Bhunu closed his eyes in concentration. When he opened them he said, “Edward says we might be able to help.” He looked at Fleet. “But we will need your cooperation.”



“We are going to get pneumonia again,” Bhunu said, pulling his great coat tight around his thin frame. A light rain fell from a black sky. He was leaning against an old fence by a field on the side of the road heading south from Milvern. In one hand he held a spade, one of two borrowed from Wattler.

“You will get pneumonia again,” Gillette pointed out, stabbing the ground with his spade. “I don’t get pneumonia. I have the stalwart English constitution that is immune to the cold and wet.”

“I never got so much as a chest cold before Edward joined me.”

The conversation stopped abruptly. Gillette stared at his feet.

“It has been over a year now, Henry,” Bhunu said, edging his rain-speckled glasses up his nose. “You can talk about it, you know.” Bhunu tried a smile. “I will not spear you.”

“What was it like?”

“I don’t remember a great deal. There was a fire in a house in Oxford. I was passing by and saw it. When I went in you were near the door, unconscious. Further

down the hallway was Edward, barely alive. And then there was the thing he was holding.”

“The cynanthrope. We had been hunting it for many days, but it was more cunning than any creature we had pursued before. I remember entering the house with Edward, each of us holding a lantern and silver dagger. It must have taken us by surprise.”

“Edward had obviously stabbed it in the chest, but not before it had thrown away your lantern. That’s what started the fire, I presume. I went to Edward. He looked at me, and I knew he was dying. Then the creature moved.”

“Did Edward speak to you?”

“Yes. But I do not know if he actually mouthed the words or just spoke inside my head, but I did as he asked. I put my hand around Edward’s and helped him stab the creature again. It died. Edward died. I died. Then a moment later I was alive again, and Edward was somehow, somewhere, inside of me.”

“Silver and skin,” Henry said, almost to himself. “One of the most powerful magics.”

There was a long pause and Bhunu said, “Why would Reverend Fleet not help us?”

Faintly on the wind, the sound of children, crying. Or perhaps, thought Henry, just the rain getting heavier. He put out his hand. “He is more afraid of his father than the yeth-hounds.”

“Do we need his help to finish this?”

The sound was closer.

“I don’t know, not exactly. Does Edward say anything?”

“He thinks Fleet needed to help for his sake, not ours or the tarans.”

Now the crying seemed to be all just south of them, and in the next instant swelled around them and then past, rushing north.

“N-now,” Gillette chattered. “Before I change my mind about this.”

The two friends followed the crying, heading towards the church, their spades slung over their shoulders. No one in the village came out to see them, not even to peek through a window. The clouds above parted for a moment and Gillette glanced up for a glimpse of moonlight and a dusting of stars.

“Henry?” Bhunu said and pointed ahead.

Gillette looked down. He thought he saw a mass of black hounds as big as pit ponies tramping up the road, their coats in the moonlight somehow translucent and shiny at the same time. Then the clouds closed over and the vision disappeared.

“Fleet was almost right,” Bhunu said, swallowing. “The hounds each have half-a-head.”

The rain started falling in heavy sheets.

“Quickly,” Gillette urged. “They are almost there!”

The two men broke into a run and reached the church glebe. The sound of the wailing children filled the air. Gillette felt his eyes brim with tears and he wiped them away. Bhunu was ahead of him and had already reached the graveyard in the church grounds. He dug a small grave, no more than a foot long and a few inches deep, then started on another. Gillette joined him, crying out, “Find peace here! This is God’s land! Find peace here!”

By now Bhunu was on his third grave, and Gillette on his second. They were placing them side-by-side, in two neat rows. Rain filled the shallow depressions they had made, but they kept on digging anyway.

“This is your path away from suffering!” Gillette told the night, hoping the tarans, somehow, could hear and would understand. “Eternal sleep and rest!”

He was not sure if it was his imagination, but he thought the wailing was lessening in intensity. For a brief moment he was afraid it meant the children were being taken away from the church by the yeth-hounds, but then he heard for the first time the sound of the hounds themselves, a deep, angry growling that seemed to come from the ground itself.

“I think it’s working!” he told Bhunu, and started on another grave while shouting into the night, “This is holy ground and is yours by right!”

“How many do we have to dig?” Bhunu asked.

“I don’t know! Until the crying stops! Just keep digging!”

Now Gillette could definitely hear the hounds, the growling climbing into a baying.

“The yeth-hounds are getting angry!” he warned Bhunu.

“No!” Bhunu shouted back, trying to be heard over the sound. “I don’t feel any threat from them! And nor does Edward! They’re not from Hell, Henry! They’re trying to help the tarans!”

“In God’s name, what are you doing?”

Both men turned towards the church. Reverend Fleet was stumbling towards them, shouting at them, the rain plastering his clothes to his body.

“This is my church! This is my family’s land! You have no right!”

“For Heaven’s sake, man!” Gillette shouted back. “We are finding a place of rest for all the lost souls of these children! What God would stop us?”

“My God!” Fleet shouted. He came up to Gillette and wrestled the spade out of his hands, forcing Gillette backwards, then started scooping mud into the tiny graves. Gillette tried to take the spade back but lost his footing and fell. Fleet shouted in triumph and raised his spade to strike Gillette, but Bhunu was there first, grabbing Fleet’s arm and forcing him away.

Then, before Fleet could do anything else, he was sent flying away from the graves. The baying of the yeth-hounds swirled around Gillette and Bhunu and towards the priest. Fleet screamed as he was lifted into the air, screamed again as his coat and vest and shirt were ripped from his body, and screamed one last time as his chest blossomed blood and bone. The quivering corpse hung suspended in the air for one long moment and then was hurled over the graveyard, over the church wall, and landed in a wet thump on the other side, away from sacred ground.

Bhunu, despite his shaking hands, was able to help Gillette to his feet, then he recovered the spades and held out one. “Now, Henry, before we go completely mad, let us finish this work.”

Gillette shook his head. “There is no need, my friend. Listen. The crying has stopped. The hounds have gone. The tarans are at rest.”



Gillette sneezed, misting the train window through which he had been looking out. He glanced around to make sure no one else in the carriage had seen, then surreptitiously wiped the window with a pocket handkerchief.

“How fortunate you are, Henry,” Bhunu said, “to have the stalwart English constitution that is immune to the cold and wet.”

“Well, at least we achieved what we set out to do,” Gillette snuffled. “The spiritual world is quiet once more. For the moment.”

Bhunu stared out the window towards the bare brown hills rolling by. The rain was still falling. Grey clouds filled the sky. There were very few trees in this part of the world, and the place looked cold and lonely.

“Haunted,” Bhunu said to himself, and then to Gillette. “Did we really achieve what we set out to do? Aren’t you forgetting John Fleet?”

“I will never forget John Fleet,” Gillette said forcefully. Then, exhaustion filling his voice, he said, “I think God demanded a sacrifice for the souls of the innocent.”

Bhunu caught Gillette’s gaze. “And tell me, Henry, what will God demand to quell the spirit of the sacrificed?”

The Coming of the Space Crawl

...S Hutson Blount

“Is that it?” asked Cadet Penny Guilder. “It sure doesn’t look like much.”

Pilot-lieutenant “Zang” Henry smiled, not quite chuckling, at her disappointment. “Sayso-VanDutch there is one of the largest bodies found in the trans-Pluto belt,” he said. “There’s just so little light that it doesn’t show up well in the telescopes, even from close up. Nothing looks like much out here.”

“Yes,” said Monitor-lieutenant Ariana Anvari, “just one of the many thrilling attractions of deep patrol.”

Cadet Penny couldn’t see Lt. Anvari inside her monitor station, but recognized the tone she had begun to think of as Anvari’s Raid Warning Voice.

“Oh, I suppose your old mates in the interceptor crews are finding their own ways to kill the time,” Henry said, responding to the thrown gauntlet, “seeing as how they’ve got a difficult job to do of their own. If they didn’t have those little rockets of theirs holding down the landing pads, why, there’s no telling what might happen. Sudden windstorm on Mars might sweep those pads away, for instance.”

“I’m sure they’ll take that chance, Zang.” Anvari said with poison sweetness. “I mean, if something should happen out here and we need some actual firepower to pull us out of it. The interceptor force isn’t above charity work.”

“The mouth on you, woman!” Henry affected his most wounded voice. “Double-A, you ever considered a new career as a short-order waitress? I know some diners in New Detroit that would be glad to have you.”

Anvari’s voice again wafted out from the concealment of the monitor’s enclosed turret seat. “Have you ever thought about renting yourself out as a bridge abutment? There’s a road near my family’s place in Isfahan that’s never been the same since the last attacks. You seem large enough.”

Penny studiously kept the rocket’s main telescope trained on the fuzzy disc of the planetoid and tried not to eavesdrop. She was uncertain why Anvari’s transfer from one branch of the Patrol to another caused such conflict. They never *seemed* to have any ill will left after their daily verbal sparring. Was their incessant quarreling a hobby, or did they actually dislike each other? After a week in space with them, she remained unsure. The battle seemed over for today, and the long greenhouse canopy of Patrol Rocket *X119* was filled only with the noises of clicking relays and humming transformers. *X119*’s electronic brain had been busy shaping up the numbers for the final orbit-matching burn when an alarm buzzer sounded.

“Secure your station, Cadet!” the pilot called over his shoulder as he reached for the main thruster verniers. Only when Penny had pulled the acceleration netting

over herself and cycled the travel lock for the telescope did Zang actually touch the controls.

The rocket seemed to settle back onto itself as Henry gently laid on power. *X119*'s atomic engines pushed against their mountings, and the notion of aft became the visceral reality of down. As acceleration replaced the weightlessness the crew had experienced for days, Cadet Penny found herself lying on her back, breathing suddenly an effort. Henry flew by the plotted numbers, while Anvari kept the count, stopwatch and slide rule working to back up the electronic brain's plot.

In a few hours, Sayso-VanDutch was discernable as a starless patch outside the canopy. The engines went quiet, and everything floated again. Penny suppressed the sensation of panic as her body readjusted itself to extended freefall.

Anvari clicked off her stopwatch when the engines shut down and checked the number. "Very smartly done, Pilot-Lieutenant."

"We aim to please, Ma'am."

The three released themselves from the acceleration mesh. Anvari floated back to the observer station.

"Find us a landing site, Cadet," said the Monitor-Lieutenant as she came gliding up. Free of her mostly-enclosed cocoon at the monitor station, Lt. Anvari was hummingbird-agile in freefall, her silver Space Patrol uniform liquidly reflecting the stars and cockpit lights alike.

It had taken Penny this long just to get free of her restraints, and she had to rush to get the 'scope unlocked and pointed again.

"How does it look?" Anvari prompted.

"Weird, Ma'am. Have a look." Penny unfolded the projection viewer from the observer's panel. It took a few seconds for the tubes to get warmed up, but shortly the viewer lit with a magnified image of the planetoid's surface.

"It isn't focused," Anvari said, reaching past Penny to dial in the settings herself. The monochrome surface wavered and fogged as the telescope's lenses rearranged themselves on command.

"I had some trouble with that, myself. You can focus on the major features, but not the flat areas." Penny didn't move to demonstrate, not wanting to get in the way while Lt. Anvari still had hands on the controls. Cadet Penny Guilder had learned that particular lesson very early.

"I'd have to second your analysis, Cadet. It's weird."

"It looks like two asteroids got mashed together."

"That part's not all that uncommon, actually. When two bodies impact with enough energy to cause some thermal effects, sometimes it can fuse them before they rebound from each other. It depends on the exact composition, of course, but you do see it." "It's these soft-looking areas that concern me. Until we establish what's going on, the rocket will stay tethered at a distance."

Penny wanted to ask more, but Lt. Anvari was clearly preoccupied with the problem. The entire point of Cadet riders on missions was for them to learn by observing and doing; helping the mission crew rather than make the mission crew stop and teach them.

"You *know* I could land there," came Lt. Henry's voice. "I landed a rocket on top of New Detroit Dome once."

Penny had to stifle a giggle as Anvari rolled her eyes and lip-synched the often-repeated line.

Soon, a port had opened between X119's gleaming exhaust nozzles, revealing a barbed spike. Propellant gases crystallized behind the tether harpoon as it was fired away from the rocket, trailing an uncoiling skein of thin high-tensile line into the darkness. After the impact, the plastic core of the tether line hardened, supporting the rocket atop what had become a five-mile-long rigid wire. The planetoid was unusually dense, but its surface gravity was still essentially negligible.

Anvari and Henry had donned spherical vacuum helmets and fastened on rocket belts. Penny looked concerned when they strapped on holstered needle-ray pistols.

"Ma'am, do you really think there'll be trouble? Are the Kayzark here?"

The Monitor-Lieutenant drew her ray gun and inspected it briefly, tugging on the lanyard to make certain it was secure to her belt. She had a distant, grave expression. "It could be, Cadet. That's why we have *the Space Patrol*."



The Space Patrol! Rocket heroes of the Interplanetary Age! Defenders of the Earth against the menace from Beyond!

For, in AD 1951, the alien Kayzark opened the Vortex in the outer reaches of the Solar System. No nation of Earth was prepared for the onslaught of the invaders or their terrible atomic horrors!

No continent was spared the invader's heel. Eventual defeat was certain, with Humanity doomed to a choice of slavery or mass disintegration!

Yet, the awful specter of annihilation was a goad to the mind and hand of Terrestrial genius. Armed with precious captured samples of the Kayzark machinery of war, now Science was brought to bear as the great equalizer!

Liberation! After ten years of fire from above and resistance from embattled Earth, the aliens' weapons were turned on their masters and the Kayzark Saucer Horde were driven back into the Vortex! As Humanity expanded from the mother world in a new wave of exploration, a valiant few were drawn from every state and creed to stand duty keeping watch on the skies: the Space Patrol!



"Yes, Sir," Penny said doubtfully. "I'll wait here."

"We'll be checking back on our helmet radio every few minutes, Cadet," said Lt. Henry, folding himself with difficulty into the cramped airlock. "If we miss two call-ins, or launch one of these signal flares, send the Red Nine signal." The button on the rocket's main radio panel was covered by a guard wired shut to prevent false alarms. RED 9 DISTRESS, it said in threateningly-large letters.

"It's all under control, Sir."

Henry smiled at her and dogged the 'lock door shut behind him. Machinery bumped and vibrated in the walls around him as the airlock pumps conserved as much breathable air as possible before releasing him to the void.

Lt. Anvari was waiting on him outside, connected to the ship's heavy tether line by a much smaller loop of the same material. "Ready, Zang?" she asked, her voice tinny and close in Henry's helmet.

“Shall we dance?” he asked, connecting himself to the tether as well. Anvari’s answering scowl didn’t register over the radio.

With short bursts from their rocket belts, the two Space Patrolmen were at once skimming along the tether line towards the dark planetoid’s surface. Lights built into the fin extending from their dome helmets, like miner’s lights, illuminated only the tether line and each other. Reflections made the helmets opaque from the outside, turning the two into faceless silver shapes suspended on a thread.

When Sayso-VanDutch began to loom close enough to be touched by the beam from their lamps, it was time to start braking, cinching their loops tighter against the heavy harpoon line. The planetoid was a gray wall, rapidly becoming a horizon. The ghostly touch of real gravity was just enough to give them a visceral cue as to which way was down. The harpoon had impacted on one of the areas that were fuzzy in the telescope image. The reflected light grew stronger as the surface grew nearer, shadow lengthening radially away from the harpoon. Under the shifting, multiple lights, it looked like the entire surface was moving.

Anvari and Henry touched down lightly, freeing themselves from the tether and moving carefully in the planetoid’s one-thirtieth gee. The broken horizon raggedly divided the sky into halves of stars and no-stars. The farthest points they could see were a few thousand yards away due to the curvature of the tiny world’s surface.

“Double-A, is that— is that *grass*?”

Henry knelt on the blasted rock surface, examining the wiry spikes coming out of the ground. They were about a foot long, thinner than a pencil and translucent like gypsum. Hundreds of them in every direction, stretching as far as their lights could reach. Most were bent crazily, nearly touching the surface again on their free ends.

“It’s got to be mineral,” Anvari said. “There’s no energy out here for any organism to use, alien or not.” She adjusted her radio link. “Penny, we’re on the surface.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I can see you in the scope. Your lights are making everything easier to see.” The rocket’s twenty-inch reflector could gather quite a bit of starlight, making the suit lights the equivalent of a camera flashbulb. “Is that grass?” Penny added.

“No. Anvari out.”

Henry was still examining the streamers. “Look how they’re curved. Each one points to the base of another one.” He grasped one in a silver-gauntleted grip and pulled. “They’re tough. They bend a little, but don’t break.”

“I’m sure the lab-coat crowd in Science Section will be fascinated, Zang. Let’s find out what else is going on here.” Ariana Anvari did not consider herself overcautious or overprotective, and certainly not superstitious. The movements in her peripheral vision were shadows from the streamers, that was all. The two figures moved slowly, occasional touches of boot-toe to rock keeping them drifting along. Neither wished to use their rocket belts to get around, partially because it was a prodigal use of propellant, but mostly because it was a matter of pride in technique. Both wanted the satisfaction of watching the other have to admit defeat and need mechanical assistance.

“This wouldn’t be the first false alarm Dantreeves sent someone after,” Henry radioed, bouncing ahead of Anvari. “She’s got Kayzark on the brain. Sent Ghant and Thomaston out after a comet, thinking it might be a Kay base saucer last month.”

“Zang?”

“Nobody’s *ever* seen them this far from the Vortex, not even during the bad years of the war when they were invested all over the system. I think the Kays know they’re beaten. I think Old Lady Dantreeves just wants as many rockets away from the station at once as she can arrange. Probably saves on supplies.”

“Zang.”

“You get any of those synthetic eggs in last month’s supply run? Better than the real thing. Ghant and Thomaston didn’t get any. I wonder what we’re missing right now.”

“*Maynard!*”

“Double-A, are you forgetting our arrangement about not using that name?”

“Then start responding to the nickname,” Anvari snapped. “And come over here and look at this.”

Henry had bounded on for a quarter-mile past where Anvari had stopped to examine some surface feature. It took him a few moments to return.

“Look. The rock texture there.”

“Looks chewed up. Like somebody took a grinder to it.”

“There are signs of it all around here. Like someone was extracting ore.”

“Miners?”

“We’re too far out for that. No miner would spend the fuel to come out here.”

“Pirates?”

“Too far from the main shipping orbits.”

They stood carefully to avoid launching themselves off the surface. Local escape velocity was almost achievable on muscle power. Their helmet lamps swept across the tangle of curved, glittering streamers that adorned every flat surface.

“Zang, when we first landed, did you notice anything moving off in the distance?”

“No.”

“Good. Me neither.”

They both drew their needle rays.



“X119, come in.”

Penny returned to the radio set. “This is Patrol X119, go ahead.”

“Cadet, we’re investigating some clues on the surface. This planetoid may be inhabited. Keep watching the areas around us for anything moving.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The word ‘inhabited’ carried a chilling ambiguity that Penny wished she hadn’t heard. The telescope responded as it had before, but now she was unsure if she wanted to see what it showed. Was the Enemy here? The last major Kayzark attack had happened when she was ten years old. She remembered the trip to the shelters as having been a kind of adventure vacation; the only source of fear had been the looks on her parents’ faces. Her father had been disappointed that she hadn’t followed him into La Grange University, and her mother had been adamant that she choose any career except the Space Patrol, but their expressions on that one day had made Penny Guildler determined that she would never wait helpless in a shelter again.

The planetoid’s surface looked the same: starkly lit where Ariana and Zang were moving around, dimly so over their local horizon where only starlight struck it. The

sun was not much more than one star among many this far away, yet the 'scope could make much more detail over a much wider area with even its diminished radiance. Penny checked the charts and figured the rough local sunrise in her head. It was fairly soon, so she began concentrating on the areas where the terminator line would cross first.



“Okay, I definitely saw something moving that time.” Anvari had her back pressed against Henry’s as they scanned the rocks.

“Where?”

“There’s a draw, or crater, or something about two hundred yards that way.” Anvari pointed with her gun. “It was moving out of that.”

Henry tried to look over his shoulder and in every other direction also. “Belts?”

“Yeah. Go.”

They triggered their rocket belts in near-unison, jetting up and away into a parabola that would land in the folds and fractures of the area of the planetoid where its halves had crushed together. Before impact, they fired their rockets again with practiced ease and braked to a near-halt. Both landed ungracefully in the uncertain footing of the curved spikes, which were especially thick here.

“It was over by me,” Anvari said, righting herself.

“What’d it look like?”

“It was small. Or maybe just low, or partly concealed in one of these fissures.”

“Maybe we should turn off our lights. You know, make ourselves less conspicuous.”

“Sure. You first.”

The lights stayed on.

“Double-A?” Henry’s voice sounded wavery to Anvari, even over the helmet radio. “Are you moving that rock by your foot?”

“Let’s say, just for the purposes of this discussion, that I’m not.” Anvari did not look down or allow any change in her scan pattern. Or her voice. “Why do you ask?”

“I think you should move my way, just a little.”

“Okay,” she said, still fighting for control of her composure. “I’m going to do that now.” She’d planned a slow, non-threatening glide out of Zang’s line of fire, but ended up in a wild, spastic cartwheel over his head, landing with ray pistol aimed at where she’d been.

The rock they’d drawn their sidearms on resembled nothing so much as a child’s drawing of what an asteroid should look like: a sphere, studded at irregular intervals with overlarge craters that looked more like small volcanoes than impacts. It was slightly darker than the brown-gray of the planetoid and about a foot across. One of the craters on the thing’s surface held on to the free end of a translucent spike, as if it were impaled upon it. As they watched, the creature (for a creature it surely was) released its grip on the spike.

“Nasty-looking teeth in those mouths,” Henry noted. “All of them.”

It began to rise off the surface again, extruding from another mouth that had been on the lower surface a new spike of the same material as all the others. The spike grew, lifting the spherical alien off the surface as it did so. After it had grown to the familiar length, the spike bent and deposited the creature on the ground again. As

they watched, the cycle began to repeat. They remained spellbound as the crawler moved along a few more spikes.

"It never lets go of the surface," Anvari said, after remembering to breathe. "It starts the next streamer before letting go of the first one. It's evolved in freefall somehow."

"Look," Henry pointed. "It's eating the rock."

Instead of moving on, the crawler was using its current streamer as a base to move its body around, pressing its various mouth-craters against the surface. The Patrol spacers could feel the vibrations through their boots as it worked, and could see the teeth marks it was leaving in the rock.

"Hate to get in the way of those," Henry said.

As if it had heard this radio broadcast and no other, the crawler stopped chewing and lifted itself on the streamer. The spike bent back towards Henry, lingering in mid-stride on its tip like a huge, stalked eyeball.

The crawler was on Henry's back before either of them realized it, covering three yards in an eyeblink, rolling and extruding six spikes to get there. Another streamer was glued onto Henry's suit leg where it climbed onto him. Henry had fired his pistol reflexively, the sweeping needle ray missing the fast-moving crawler and slicing streamers and rock in a shower of sparks and dust. Anvari held her finger off the trigger for fear of hitting Henry.

"GETITOFFME GETITOFFME!"

"Zang, it's chewing on your rocket belt. Take it off, quick!"

Crystallized flakes of rocket fuel were spreading from where the crawler's metal teeth had already ground through the belt's fuel tank. Henry was slapping at the belt's latch frantically, finally releasing it. He flung it and the attached alien away, to come to rest entangled in the field of old streamers. The spike the crawler had left jutting from his leg like a parasite.

Anvari fired short bursts from her ray pistol (while Henry added much longer, more erratic shots) until the dust settled and they could see pieces of the creature tumbling away. "They're after the fuel," Anvari said quietly.

Henry was still shaken after a pause. "What do you mean, *they?*?"

Anvari gestured up at the outcropping, where a dozen more crawlers stood poised on the end of new streamers.

"Double-A, does your belt have enough juice to get us both back to the rocket?"

"I'm inclined to doubt it."

Anvari slowly unlatched her belt, tossing it towards the crawlers in the near-flat arc of three percent Earth gravity. The creatures stopped scavenging for particles of spilled fuel as soon as it stopped moving and swarmed over the new belt as quickly as their deceased predecessor had moved. "Come in, *X119*," she said flatly. "Come in, Cadet."

The two spacesuited figures looked at each other.

"Penny?"



Sayso-VanDutch rotated with maddening slowness. Penny had stopped checking the cockpit chronometer every twelve seconds and concentrated on searching the planetoid for any signs of Enemy activity.

When the shadow appeared, creeping into visibility at the edge of her 'scope picture, she immediately felt angry with herself. Her calculations had been wrong! It hadn't been local night at all — the gloom had been local day. Penny floated back over to Zang's station to retrieve a slide rule to find her error and find out how long she'd have to wait for daylight to come back. After several unsuccessful attempts to discover computational problems, she decided to recheck her fix on the stars.

They were where they were supposed to be. More troubling, the shadow terminator wasn't moving opposite the direction of the planetoid's rotation.

The telescope revealed only the faintest traces of movement in the shadow as it moved along. A great, fluid movement of...? Penny couldn't think of anything likely. It looked like a fast-moving landslide or flood, but it didn't move exclusively downslope, and in one-thirtieth Earth gravity, shouldn't have moved that rapidly anyway.

The flood was approaching the site beneath the rocket where the harpoon was buried. The fixed reference point of the tether line would allow her to calculate the speed of the phenomenon's movement when she made her report to the Lieutenants.

The tether line seemed to have grown a series of curved filaments, spaced as regularly as teeth on a comb. It couldn't be fraying line, since the line wasn't woven. The filaments all curved their free ends towards the rocket, Penny noticed offhandedly.

There were some irregular machinery noises from the propulsion section, which she'd have to investigate after calling in. *X119*'s radio set seemed to have trouble regaining the carrier, which was odd, since the vacuum tubes were already warm from previous uses.

"Patrol *X119* for Lt. Anvari, come in, please."

There was static, then nothing. The panel lights went out. The radar panel went dark a few seconds later. The Red Nine Emergency button beckoned silently. Thirty rockets and crews from the base above Titan could be here in a few days if she broke that wire and pressed the button beneath. It would be completely within her orders to do so. But it wouldn't help Zang or Ariana one bit and would mean several days of sheltering here while someone else came and faced the trouble.

Alarming grinding noises came from aft of the firewall, in or near the atomic pile compartment.



With all the streamers anchored over her faceplate, Anvari couldn't see Henry any more. From the tickle of gravity, she could tell that she was plastered upside-down against a fissure wall. She wasn't sure how far Henry had gotten when the wave of crawlers had crashed over them, attaching their unbreakably-tough spikes to everything they touched along the way. After establishing that the adhesive the crawlers generated was stronger than the material of their suits, she'd finally stopped struggling and think of a way out of their problem.

Henry was still well within radio range, though.

"Would you like to reconsider your assertion that there couldn't possibly be any organisms living out here?" He asked.

Anvari wished there were a way to send glares over the radio. "Would you just concentrate on helping me get us out of this?"

“I ran out of ideas when I saw my ten millionth one of those things.”

“Do you still have either of your flares?”

“They were on my rocket belt, just like yours. And even if I did, I couldn’t move to get it.”

“I don’t plan on dying here, Zang.”

“That’s good to hear, but I think we both might have to revise our calendars real soon, here.”

“They don’t seem to have any attraction for the minerals in our bodies or suits, so I don’t think they’ll eat us.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t cheer and dance right away.”

“How much air do you have left?”

“Enough that I’ll die of dehydration first.”

“We’ll keep trying to raise Penny. She’ll have figured out something’s wrong by now.”

“If those things haven’t gotten to the rocket, too.”

A light blinked on inside Anvari’s helmet. The amber pip flickered a few times, then stayed lit. “On that happy note, we have a new problem. But I think I just figured out how the Crawl live here.”



The thick leaded-glass ports allowing narrow vision into the housing of the rocket’s atomic pile revealed nothing to Penny, which in one sense was a relief. Unfortunately, it did nothing to solve the mystery cause of the noises and malfunctions. Penny greatly desired the security of a ray pistol in case this was a Kayzark attack of some sort, but discharging a needle ray aboard ship would be more hazardous than enemy action. She settled for a stunner and a stout wrench.

The helmet went on right away. Decompression drill was a plebe religion at the Academy. She had her spacesuit on over her silver uniform and locked into the helmet without having to think about any of the steps. It took some self-convincing before she was ready to use the airlock, to go outside and confront the problem. The inactivity of the radio was the convincer — if the rocket’s main set was down, then she had to get her suit radio outside the hull to hear them if they called.

The automatic cycle didn’t work now. Penny had to fumble with the hand valves to vent the airlock. The outer door opened to the void and the unknown.



“A naturally-occurring atomic pile,” Henry repeated.

“Yes,” said Anvari though gritted teeth. “Like the one in Africa. The screwy gravity figures told us this rock was unusually dense. Enough heavy isotopes in one or both pieces of Sayso-VanDutch have been compressed into a space small enough to react faster than ordinary decay. The core of this rock is hot, in temperature and radiation. That’s what gives these creatures energy to metabolize minerals so far away from the sun. And now we’re getting a pretty heavy dose of radiation.”

Zang eventually broke a long, contemplative silence. “We *really* need to get off this rock soon.”

“Thanks for that analysis.”

“Does that mean that these crawling things are technically plants?”

“Taxonomy isn’t my field. I blow things up for a living.”

Their helmet speakers crackled softly. “...Is that you, Ma’am?” said a new voice, faintly.

“Penny? Penny!”

There was much whooping and cheering. When Anvari was able to shout both of them down, she asked, “Where are you, Penny?”

“I’m outside the ship right now. There’ve been a lot of malfunctions, including the main radio. I heard you on my suit radio as soon as I opened the outer door.”

Anvari looked at her dosimeter light and swallowed. “Cadet, listen very carefully. Lt. Henry and I have been immobilized on the surface. You’re going to have to find a way to cut us out of here. We don’t have our rocket belts, and we’re receiving a high dose of gamma rays from the planetoid.” She briefly explained her natural atomic pile theory to Penny.

“Ma’am, a lot of equipment is out of commission right now. The radio, radar—”

“We’ll take care of it when we get back up there, Cadet. If you can only hear us while EVA, write all this down and make yourself a checklist. Penny, can you read me?”

“Just a minute Ma’am, there’s something moving in the dorsal avionics blister.”

“*They can climb the tether!* Penny! Get rid of your rocket belt! They’re attracted to it somehow!”

A howl of static whitened the noise in Anvari’s speaker.

“The stunner doesn’t seem to bother it, Ma’am. I’m trying something else.”



The rocket belt sailed away, almost tumbling out of sight before he safety line stopped it. In her haste to obeyed Anvari’s order promptly and jettison the belt, she’d failed to transfer the tether to another fastener on her suit. By her count, that made the sixth EVA movement regulation she’d broken since leaving the airlock, but there wasn’t time to worry about it now.

It would cost her the other weapon in her arsenal, but she figured the little thing couldn’t mass any more than the sturdy omniwrench. She would apply a little basic physics. Penny wound up as best she could in the confines of her suit, and threw the wrench at the round alien. It was a pretty good throw, by her own estimation. Of course, basic physics applied to her, as well. Her boots left *X119*’s side as she recoiled from the throw, casting her outwards into space.

The wrench hit the crawling alien, caromed off, and spun away towards the planetoid’s surface. The crawler reeled on its stalk but didn’t let go. Then, faster than Penny would have given it credit for moving, it had laid a line of spikes in a sudden dash for the airlock door. Penny knew she was falling, even if she were still technically moving upwards. She supposed she had five miles to think of something. Her life wasn’t flashing before her eyes, fortunately, as she was quite busy at the moment.



Lt. Henry tried to convince himself the warmth was just his own body heat trapped by the too-efficient insulation of his suit and not the planetoid’s radiation going through him.

A faint red glow cut in through the milky crystalline mess of the alien spikes covering his helmet.

“What’s that, Double-A?”

“A flare, maybe?”

“How much longer can we last?”

“Not long.”



Penny could add to her list a seventh and eighth reg she was breaking: she probably wasn’t supposed to store pyrotechnics in her uniform pockets, and she was pretty sure that launching a flare and hanging onto it wasn’t something you were supposed to do. The tiny rocket that propelled it didn’t generate temperatures that would harm her gloves. She wasn’t sure about the flare’s bursting charge, so she was keeping careful count of seconds of burntime. When she got down to one, she released the flare, allowing it to accelerate away from her, bounce off *X119*’s fuselage, and detonate in a blinding shower of red sparks. When her vision cleared, she could see that she’d gotten enough impulse to make it back to the airlock hatchway, maybe a little more than she needed.

Penny entered the airlock feet-first, not as perfectly aligned with the hatch as she’d originally thought, and landed in a heap. She felt her ankle twist painfully beneath her as she grabbed for a handhold to keep from rebounding back out into space. She came to rest face-to-mouth-crater with the crawler.

It moved slightly on its stalk, pausing from using another of its mouths to try to grind through the airlock bulkhead. Penny reached carefully into her sleeve pocket, retrieving her remaining flare. She held it by the handle, in proper launch mode this time.

“Come on, Globie,” Penny said, though she knew it couldn’t hear her across the vacuum in the airlock. She waved the flare as if teasing a cat. “Get the nice rocket snack.”

Despite being in a vacuum, it *could* sense the fuel in the flare’s rocket. The crawler lunged forward, ingesting the flare up to half the handle. Penny pulled the trigger, and covered her helmet with her arms as much as she could.

This starburst wasn’t as bright as the last one, and there was a lot more burnt-out alien carcass left over than she recalled, too.



“*X119* for Anvari,” came the radio call, after an unbearable delay.

“Penny!” Lt. Anvari spoke louder and faster than she’d intended. “What is your status?”

“I got rid of the creature, Ma’am. I’ve cut the anchor line to prevent any more of them from getting up here. I used the attitude jets to push the ship away from the planetoid.”

“Are you all right?” Zang cut in. Anvari didn’t stop him.

“...I’m fine. But everything aft of the firewall is an awful mess. I don’t trust anything in the pile or the motors.”

Imprisoned in her suit, Ariana Anvari found it safe enough to shed huge weightless tears without fear of discovery. “You can’t come down here with a belt.

If you do, the crawlers will swarm you just like they did us. If the ship only has reaction controls left, then you'll never get to us in time. From where you are, a hand-held ray isn't precise enough to cut us free. Call for help," she added, bitter rather than afraid.

"I sent the Red Nine five minutes ago. But they won't be here in time to help!"

"We know, girl." Zang's radio voice had a flat finality to it.

"What if I could shut down the source of the radiation?" Penny's impossible question hung there in the silence. Anvari realized she was gaping instead of answering when Penny continued, "If the two halves of the planetoid each contain a subcritical mass, then cutting them apart would stop the reaction, right? That would give us plenty of time. Aren't the ship's ray cannon powerful enough to do it?"

Hope, that most powerful and addictive toxin, flooded Anvari's mind. "Yes, and yes. And, you could conceivably kill us instantly."

"It'd be preferable to dying of radiation poisoning, either way," Zang added.

"Can you talk me through how to use your chair, Ma'am?"



The ray cannon director wasn't too different than the search telescope, Penny kept telling herself. She blocked from her mind images of the terrible energies now at her command incinerating Henry and Anvari by an errant twitch of her hand at the controls. There wasn't time to rehearse. She aligned the crosshairs of the attack scope on the edge of Sayso-VanDutch, right where the surface buckled and folded from the impact that had fused them.

"Unlock and arm the battery," Penny recited to herself, pulling the red-and-yellow striped grip. Panels on X119's ogival nose slid open, freeing the long tubes of the ray cannon mount to slide out. They clunked solidly into place, the most reassuring noise the rocket had made in a while.

"Match director bearings." She flicked open the molly-guards for the director synch system, and pulled the toggles beneath. The rocket's nose cone turned on its axis, and the cannon tubes simultaneously pivoted to aim the whole battery in the same direction as the attack scope pointed.

"Range correction," Penny continued to whisper to herself. She dialed in the number she'd estimated; radar wasn't working. Compression rings on the ray cannon tubes slid forward, focusing the rays on the unusually-near target.

Penny took a deep breath. "And, fire." She stepped on the foot pedal trigger. A dagger of pain reminded her that she'd used her bad ankle. She bit her lip and watched the lightshow.

Sayso-VanDutch erupted where the rays intersected it, bright ejecta lit from the blue-violet inferno of the impact. The liberation of mass began to slowly propel the entire asteroid across Penny's line of fire. She held down the trigger pedal, ignoring the hurt from her ankle while correcting her aim.

The line of fire marched across the cratered landscape.



The ground shook beneath them. What they could see outside looked a great deal brighter. The crawlers scattered in a panic, layering them deeper in the translucent

spikes. As the tremor built in intensity, Anvari swore she could hear Zang laughing over the radio. She'd reprimand him later, if they lived.



Brevet-Lieutenant Penny Guilder stepped off the lift back into the infirmary ring at Yeager Station. Her ankle gave her a little problem with weight on it, but she was pronounced fit for duty shortly after her field promotion. She admired the view of Titan outside the station window, with the rings behind it, slowly rotating past as the station spun. She hobbled along until she found the appropriate ward.

"Hey there, hero!"

Zang grinned and used a cane to reach Ariana's bed. Prodded awake with a snort, she put away her ready insult when she saw Penny.

"Congratulations," Anvari said sleepily.

"I just came to see how you were doing."

"Bored," said Henry. "We've got another week of blood filtering to go through. I hear they wanted to rename half the rock after you."

Penny nodded. "I thought they should just split the names. It's asteroid Sayso and asteroid VanDutch now. Science Section has a mission out there now. The word is the Crawl is from the other side of the Vortex."

Anvari rubbed her eyes. "What about you?"

"Back to Mars," she said. "Flight school."

"You're going to have that Red Nine call on your record, not mine. Good luck, Lieutenant," Anvari said. Said it like she said things to Zang, or to Old Lady Dantreeves.

Zang grinned like he couldn't help it. "Goodbye, Penny. Send us something contraband from Mars."

Penny saluted, and limped out of the shelter back into the wild, dangerous universe.



Another insidious plot by the Kayzark has been thwarted by the dauntless bravery of Earth's protectors! What new treachery creeps toward humankind from beyond the Vortex even now? Whatever the call, whatever the need, the Space Patrol stands ever-vigilant!

Sleep soundly, people of Earth!

Harry, the Wife, and Mrs Robson, Hell's Temptress from Number Six

...Steven Pirie

When Harry *really* thought about it, when *the wife* had him trussed in his kitchen apron and up to his elbows in soap suds in number four's sink, he worried about Mrs Robson and her garden gnomes. Did they *really* snarl at him whenever they caught him peering over the fence into number six? Did Hellish things with tentacles *really* lurk in the muddied waters of Mrs Robson's ornamental pond? Had he *really* seen the *flytraps* near the fence take number three's cat when the moon was full?

Perhaps the trick, then, Harry mused, was not to really think about it at all, particularly as peering into Mrs Robson's garden held certain *rewards*.

"I tell you, Sid," said Harry, Friday night, when he'd escaped *the wife* and he and Sid and Colin were in the Coach and Horses on the High Street. "She does her weeding with no underwear on. All that up and down and stretching, it's enough to drive a man insane."

Being on the short side, Harry had to stand on a box to *accidentally* peer over the garden fence at Mrs Robson. There were lots of boxes strewn against Harry's side of the fence. Even *the wife* had mentioned how the top of Harry's fence was the best painted for miles around.

"I expect she's one of them modern girls," said Sid.

Colin shook his head. "I hear Mrs Robson is a witch from Hell. My Maureen says she mixes with odd sorts from the other side of the moors, and my Maureen knows all about odd sorts. You want to be careful, Harry, she might be casting a spell on you."

Harry stiffened. *The trick was not to really think about it at all.* "What, by flashing me her nether regions?"

"Could be a modern witch," said Sid.

Colin wagged a finger. "My Maureen says Mrs Robson has buried four husbands, two of them quite possibly before they were done with life. So, all I'm saying is watch your back."

"She's certainly a temptress and no mistake." Harry paused to gather his next words carefully. "Perhaps I should let her know I'm seeing what I'm seeing, if you know what I mean. Perhaps I should be a bit more forward."

"Won't your wife mind you being a bit more forward, Harry?" said Sid.

Harry frowned. Aye, there was *the wife*, always *the wife*. He could never really escape *the wife*.

On the way home, staggering and drunk under a moonless sky of a million stars, Harry worried over spells and wives, witches and temptresses. He had a brewer's paunch and a barber's-ruin hairline, so it was not every day that temptresses bothered him unduly. Even in his prime he'd never once fought a woman off. He'd stumbled into *the wife* while his guard was down at Aunt Maud's funeral, and she'd married him to spite him. She'd said she couldn't bear the thought of Harry enjoying a single life, as if it were her feminine duty to imprison him to a lifetime of washing the dishes and vacuuming the carpet. Harry sighed; *the wife* was never likely to do the weeding without her underwear.

Harry turned into Sunshine Terrace. The houses were in darkness apart from Mrs Robson's at number six. He wondered how these days the street was unnaturally empty, even in daytime, as if its residents were so often away. At Mrs Robson's window he paused, listening to the music within. It was hypnotic and sensual, and the light was warm, soft and, welcoming; Harry couldn't help peering inside. He hoped he'd see Mrs Robson naked and beckoning upon the sofa, but as his nose pressed against the glass the lights went out, and all Harry saw was his own dimmed reflection peering back. He saw a drunk and lonely man, distorted in someone else's windowpane. Life, thought Harry, can be so cruel.



Next morning, in number four, *the wife* cooked breakfast for one. Harry made do with stale Cornflakes.

"I'm staying with Judith for a few days," *the wife* said. Harry thought she looked sprightly, full of purpose, a woman on a mission. "Her Norman's ran off with the floozy from number twelve, so I expect she'll be in need of a bit of sisterly support."

"That's nice, dear," said Harry.

The wife glared. "I want the place kept clean while I'm gone. I've told Mrs Parry from number one I'll be away, and she says she'll keep an eye on what you get up to. So, no having Sid and Colin around; I don't want the drains blocked again."

"No, dear."

Harry watched her leave. She was a big woman; carried her own gravity with her. Number four always seemed *lighter* for her departure, as if oppression might be something physical, tangible, a snake that would wrap itself about his chest and make his breathing laboured. Dodgy breathing did things to a man's brain, everybody knew that. Harry wondered if oppression was something a man such as he might fight; when *the wife's* not there, of course. Oppression can only be fought in a moment's freedom.

Harry waited until *the wife* turned the corner away from Sunshine Terrace. The sun broke through the clouds and he felt its warmth upon his face. Behind him, coming from the garden at number six, he heard the familiar rasp of Mrs Robson's lawnmower. It was a calling, a siren song of sorts suggesting that Harry might worship at the shrine of forbidden female form. Harry reached for his Wellingtons, and his coverall with its pockets full of hardening paint brushes, and hurried outside into the delicate morning.

“Um, “morning,” said Harry over the fence, when courage took him and the gnomes seemed docile. He dabbed a balding paint brush absently at the air. It traced invisible runes of mischief on the day.

Mrs Robson looked up from her weeding. Harry licked his dried lips. He doubted he'd ever spoken to a woman without underwear. Oh, there had been *the wife*, of course, back in the days when the mood took her, when even *she* was bothered by womanly needs and wayward hormones. But even then, fumbling and thrashing about in the dark of number four's bedroom, he was never quite certain if *the wife* was *divulged*, as it were. It wasn't something he could quite bring himself to ask.

Mrs Robson paused in tending her flytraps. Harry shivered – in a quick glance through the corner of his eye it appeared as if Mrs Robson was picking bones from them. He wasn't sure if the flytraps shook in the breeze or if they clung to their prized bones like determined mongrels.

“Hello, Harry, isn't it?” said Mrs Robson.

Harry nodded. “Nice flytraps, very...*fierce*.”

“Prize winners,” said Mrs Robson. “This one is Belial, and that one Beelzebub, and the big one against the fence is Mephistopheles.”

With the calling of each flower's name, the skies darkened and thunder grumbled. Harry was unsettled. The gnomes grinned now, and the ornamental pond around which they stood steamed and gurgled. And it was as if they knew Harry was snared as fast as any flytrap might spring.

But it was Mrs Robson's eyes that chilled Harry most: They were deep eyes full of fire and ice, and devils and demons. Harry stared long into that abyss. *The wife's* eyes could be fearsome like that, but even they were shallow by comparison. At least with *the wife's* eyes he could climb out and go to the pub now and then.

Mrs Robson reached for her pruning shears and her skirt stretched taut against her thighs. Harry shivered at the sight.

“Wonderful,” whispered Harry, shaking, fearful, and suddenly cold.

“You can come round for a closer look, if you like,” said Mrs Robson.

Harry wobbled on his box. It was not really an invitation, more an *expectation*. *The wife* often added *if you like* to the end of her sentences, and it was always clear Harry's liking mattered little.

Harry nodded with enthusiasm. “I'll be round right away, Mrs Robson.”



That evening, in the Coach and Horses, Harry was in a fine mood. He bought drinks for Sid and Colin, and even tossed a coin in the Salvation Army woman's tin. When the coin landed, Hell's hounds growled across the night, and she scurried away ashen faced and crossing herself. Sharon, the brash barmaid, hovered by with the tip jar, Hell's hounds or not.

“He looks like he's had his nookie,” said Sharon. The empties pressed to her bosom spread the sun-moles on her skin. They curled like a road map to her nipples, like Braille landing lights to lust-blinded pilots. A temptress, too, thought Harry; they're all temptresses, the lot of them.

“God help him if his wife finds out, eh?” Sharon added.

Sid laughed, and Colin spilled his beer. But the sudden mention of *the wife* chilled Harry's soul. What would *the wife* say when she found out he'd been cavorting with demons from Hell? She'd probably go around to number six to give Mrs Robson an earful, and then all Hell would let loose. Even with all he'd seen during the day in number six, he wasn't sure if Hell was up to *the wife's* ire. It was the stuff of the apocalypse. *The wife*, after all, was herself a demon in carpet slippers.

"A man can smile, can't he?" said Harry. "It doesn't mean he's been up to no good."

"Not like that," said Sharon. "I should know. I've seen a few smiles like that in my time."

"Who'd have known," said Sid, "Harry with a mistress on the go? I'd have thought you'd have enough to do coping with *the wife*."

"I'm not coping with anybody," said Harry, hearing the waver in his voice. Notcoping? That was probably about right, if he *really* thought about it. Though the trick was not to really think about it.

"It's because *the wife's* away," said Sid.

"No, it's not that." Harry felt distant. He felt different, but it was something more than the brief respite from *the wife*. Somehow he felt less *Harryish*, as if Mrs Robson and her gnomes and her legions of the damned stirred hidden depths within him. "I think maybe it's because *Harry's* away."

Sid grinned, and Colin raised an eyebrow. Sharon shook her head slowly.

"You're away, all right," she said. "You're away with the mixer."



Later, in number six, it was dark. Harry wasn't quite sure how he'd arrived there. He'd intended to go straight home, particularly as he'd spotted Mrs Parry from number one on sentry duty behind her twitching curtains. Drawn to number six, Harry stood alone in Mrs Robson's living room, the temptress's scent heavy in the air; lingering and dangerous, and yet strangely alluring. Behind it, below it, other less wholesome aromas lurked, as if there were dead things behind the sofa, corpses under the cushions.

"Mrs Robson?" Harry called into the gloom. "Are you there?"

The air moved, as if invisible things jostled and fought. Something moaned, and something else sighed. Harry felt something cold and fleeting like a fine mist on his neck. He stepped away from it, pushed further into Mrs Robson's lair.

At the stairs leading down into the cellar, Harry stopped. There was no cellar, now; instead a lens swirled, a portal into the depths of Hell. In its maelstrom there were people Harry knew – Mrs Trent from number three, Mrs Clarkson from number nineteen, Young Susan from number twelve – most of the neighbours. They writhed and thrashed and fell. It was difficult to tell if they did so in agony or ecstasy. And there amongst them was...

The wife.

Harry felt Mrs Robson appear at his shoulder.

"I don't understand," he said. "What's it all about? What are you doing with *the wife*?"

Mrs Robson pulled Harry back into the living room. "Do you know the difference between right and wrong, Harry?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

Mrs Robson shook her head. "No, I mean *really* know the difference."

"I suppose so."

Harry thought of *the wife*. They'd had good times, he supposed, somewhere back in the depths of time when Harry's world was new and full of promise. Yes, they'd thrashed about in number four's dark, and it had not been perfect and just so, but it was *their* dark, and *their* thrashing, and there was a sense of unity. And then things had settled, and other things had worsened and grown stale, and yet more things happened. So when did it first occur to him he might do unpleasant things to *the wife*; things with rat poison and sharpened knives, things with bin bags and the newly dug patio? At what point did the cliff tops stop being just a place to watch the sunset?

Not that he'd ever *do* such things, surely? Such things were wrong, weren't they?

Harry cleared his throat. "Are you saying all these people in the cellar don't know right from wrong, Mrs Robson?"

"They've all been here to number six, and I asked them all the same question."

"And the ones still here gave the wrong answer?"

Mrs Robson grinned. "Maybe, or perhaps they gave the *right* answer."

"But why show them to me?"

"I have a rule, Harry: the first to give me the answer I want will free all. Will you take the challenge?"

"Can I think about it?"

"You have until Thursday, Harry."



Next morning, the gnomes in Mrs Robson's garden didn't even bother in pretending to be lifeless. They threw rocks over the fence, and called insults to Harry in their wind-weathered voices.

"Still thinking, short boy?" they called.

"Will you be joining us soon, dog face?"

"There's a place around our pond just right for you."

"Ever made it with a gnome, fatso?"

"We don't get *wood*, we get *stone*; lasts for decades; nicely sore on the old..."

Harry slammed number four's kitchen window shut. It was odd, but if the house felt full for *the wife's* presence, it now felt drained and diluted for her absence. He had the freedom to go and do what he liked, yet what use was freedom if it wasn't fought for? Such freedom seemed cheap and shallow, poorly won.

Harry dried the dishes. In truth, they were already dry, but it felt comforting to maintain *the wife's* kitchen standards even though she wasn't there to police them. There was comfort in routine. And all the while the thought nagged: what could the temptress want to hear? It must be something fundamental, something universal and basic and *true*, something worthy of freeing tortured souls.

He peered out at the laughing gnomes and snapping flytraps, seeing for the first time that Mrs Robson's grass was black and scorched and dead; that beyond the opened door of her garden shed *infinity* spun with the flowerpots, sickening with vertigo; that Mrs Robson's patio was a vast, undulating ocean; that goblins stalked

wildebeest across her lawn and the wildebeest thrashed and howled when they caught them.

Harry hung the dishcloth to dry upon the dishcloth rack. *The wife* will not like this, he thought, not like it one bit. She was never one for imprisonment, in Hell or otherwise. She'll not approve of wildebeest wandering about. I'll have to do something. I'll have to devise a plan.

Harry found his coat and went to the pub. He'd always found lunchtime in the pub was a good place for planning. He'd made some of his best plans in the Coach and Horses. Over a lunch of beer and peanuts, Harry told Sid and Colin his tale.

Colin shook his head. "I can accept the demon gnomes and stuff, Harry," he said. "But it's hard to think of anyone trapping *the wife*."

Sid agreed. "Not purposefully. I'd understand if she was trapped by accident and her captors let her go again sharpish, like a wasp tangled in a spider's web.

Harry nodded. There *was* something waspish about *the wife*, busy and hovering and lethal in the sting. "Well, it's true it's not like *the wife* to go landing in webs," he said. "But she's there — languishing in torment, clear as clear — and so is half the street. I feel it's my husbandly duty to do something about it."

"Careful," said Colin. "The last time *the wife* had you doing husbandly duties you walked with a limp for a month."

"Aye," said Sid. "And *the wife* was in a foul mood for weeks afterwards, like you'd not done it *right*. Women are fussy about it being right."

Harry sighed. "But I have to do something. I'll have to give it my best thoughts."

"Mine's a pint, while you're thinking," said Colin.

"Rum and coke, for me," added Sid.

Harry sighed. "Somehow, lads, I don't think you're quite taking all this seriously."



Alone in bed that night, the answer came to Harry in a dream. It was not a pleasant dream; it was full of *the wife*, for a start.

She was a tarantula, huge and hairy and menacing, and *he* was her mate, miniscule and quaking in her web, little more than a spot of lunch after copulation. *She* was the queen of some terrible, dark universe, and *he* was a lowly courtier so often on the wrong end of the royal boot. *She* was a brooding thunderhead, and *he* was alone in a damp field, slumped and pathetic in his copper-plated headgear, and awaiting such terrible discharge as only *the wife* might muster.

"Why should I care about you?" said Harry in his dream. Thunder grumbled, and the queen's court gasped. The spider lurched up on its gruesome legs ready to strike. "You've made my life a living Hell over the years."

The wife shrugged, yet it seemed to Harry that with his question she had diminished a little and he had grown. "It's what *wives* must do," she said.

The queen's courtiers *whooped* and applauded. Harry noticed Colin and Sid amongst them, as were all the Coach and Horses' regulars, grinning and pointing and yelling and screaming. And Mrs Robson was there, with her gnomes and demons and snapping flytraps, and all the neighbours Harry had seen swirling in her number six Hell. To the front, Sharon the brash barmaid's breasts swung freely as if to orchestrate the derision.

But Harry was growing. Harry was bigger than they were; more fearsome than tumbling breasts and howling nobodies.

"No, that's not true," he said. "It *could* be true, but it doesn't have to be."

"What does that mean, Harry?" said Mrs Robson.

"It means we don't *have* to be anything. We have free will, the right to choose what we are."

Now the rabble was silent, and *the wife* was shrunk to nearly nothing.

"Very good, Harry," said Mrs Robson. "But will you remember that when you wake?"

The thought worried Harry, too. "We'll see, Mrs Robson, we'll see."



Thursday dawned bright and breezy. It was surely a fine day to confront demons straight from the pits of Hell. Harry stood upon a box in number four's garden, peering over the fence at Mrs Robson's back door. The Temptress was naked and beckoning, framed by the doorway. Perfumes wafted over the garden; the scent of lavender and honey, with only the merest hint of death and decay.

"Will you be joining us today, Harry?" said Mrs Robson. "They're all here now, Colin, Sid, and Sharon, and *the wife*, of course. They've always been here, you know."

Harry shivered. That was the problem. *Hells* didn't appear overnight in gardens next door. They were always there, in a way, lurking in one's head, and everyone knew they could draw on their powers, could pull stuff out at will to hurt and maim with words or actions or both. *The wife* had spent a lifetime doing so.

"You asked me if I know right from wrong," said Harry. He felt the gnomes stir and the flytraps stiffen. The goblins paused in their bothering of the wildebeest. "I have your answer."

"Oh?"

"The answer is *no, I don't*."

"Everybody knows right from wrong, Harry."

"No, that's just the point. Everybody *thinks* they know better, but they don't *really* know anything different from anybody else. And the trick is to live and let live, and to not *really* think too hard in case you start believing it yourself."

Mrs Robson grinned. "Yet you wanted to shove *the wife* under a bus. You picked up a timetable and everything. You thought about fiddling with the wires on her hair drier. You often left the manhole open at the bottom of the garden by the washing line."

"Yes, but not now. Understanding and mutual respect is the answer; there is no true right and wrong, just opinion. We are what we are, all with our own flaws and faults. We are as God made us, nothing more. So, you can put your pants on and I'll trouble you to return *the wife*, please, Mrs Robson, and all the others, too. I expect the lesson is learned."

Mrs Robson grinned. "My, you have grown, Harry," she said. "It's taken an age, and a sharp lesson, but at last you've grown."



Number six is just number six, now. There are no lippy gnomes or fearsome flytraps near the fence. The grass is green, not black, and Mrs Robson tends to her flowerbeds fully and respectfully covered below.

It's quiet next door. Only if the wife thinks to bully Harry, or if Harry wonders about rat poison and the wife's favourite buttered scones, do they hear the hint of howling wolves at number six.

"Hell is still lurking," Harry murmurs. "Always there ready should we let it back in."

And then Harry grins, and the wife cooks breakfast for two, and Sid, Colin, and Sharon are less brash and opinionated down at the Coach and Horses. The barest ripple in Mrs Robson's ornamental pond is little more than the breeze. Not tentacles, just the breeze. And Harry is finally happy with his lot.

The Second-Hand Bookshop of Al Hazred

...Chuck McKenzie

“Rover! Geddown!”

Releasing the customer’s leg, the shoggoth burred sheepishly back to its basket next to the door. Al smiled an apology, sighing inwardly as he noted the intricately carved Tsathogguan casket the customer was carrying. *Selling, not buying.* “Sorry about that. How can I help you?”

The customer plonked the casket down on the counter. “Um...I’ve got some books I’m wanting to sell.” He glanced around the darkened interior of the shop, at the haphazard maze of rickety, floor-to-ceiling bookcases stacked with countless piles of yellowing tomes. His expression — one all-too-familiar to Al — was of thinly veiled contempt. “Wondered if you might be interested.” He leant against the counter, then recoiled, brushing dust from his elbows.

Al nodded wearily. *Think I don’t know the bloody place is a shambles? The Old Ones’ benevolence doesn’t extend to new shop-fittings. If I could just scrape together enough to get a wood-whisperer onto regenerating the shelves...* “Well, let’s see what you’ve got...” He began to pick his way through the contents of the casket, taking the books out one-by-one and stacking them on the counter. “*The Book of Eibon...*”

“Very collectible, I believe.”

Al examined the inside cover, and shook his head. “Twelfth edition. Ten-a-penny, What else have we got here? *Revelations of Glaaki, The Ponape Scriptures, Unaussprechlichen Kulten* — all Readers’ Digest editions. Hmm...*Cthâat Aquadungen*—” A Deep One, quietly browsing through the ‘Fisheries & Wildlife’ section, looked up, an expression of mild interest on its piscine features. “—abridged,” finished Al, and the Deep One went back to browsing. “*The Pnakotic Manuscripts...Cultes des Goules...nice copy of The R’lyeh Text*—”

The customer smiled hopefully.

“—but I’ve got half-a-dozen copies already. Ditto *De Vermis Mysteriis* and *Dhol Chants* What’s this? *The Necronomicon.*”

“Surely *that’s* got to be worth something?”

Without turning, Al gestured to the laden shelf behind him. “I’ve got copies coming out of my Yuggoth, and half of *those* are first edition, skin-bound. Yours is just an Arkham House paperback.”

The customer didn't bother to hide his disappointment. "So...what *can* you give me for them? I'm really just trying to clear out my attic."

Al shook his head slowly. "Well, I'm afraid I can't really offer —" *anything*, he had been going to say, but something at the bottom of the casket caught his eye. His breath caught in his throat. *It couldn't be!* "—ah, that is—" he surreptitiously removing the book from the casket, placing it face down behind the stack on the counter, "— I can't offer any more than...say, twenty?"

The customer looked doubtful. "Well..."

"As I say, I've already got most of these, and they're not worth much anyway." Al licked his lips. "Thirty?"

The customer shrugged. "Yeah, okay. Thirty, then."

Al nodded, pulled the Flint of Azathoth and a small glass vial from a drawer, and rolled up his sleeve. Bunching his hand into a fist, he made a small, expert cut across his forearm. "Here we go..." He held his wrist over the vial, allowing a thin dribble of blood to collect therein. "And there's thirty CCs." He applied a swab of gauze to the cut, while the customer sealed the vial and tucked it away in a shirt pocket.

"Well, I guess every little bit counts at the weekly offering," said the customer. "*Cthulhu fhtagn!*" he added, hastily.

"*Cthulhu fhtagn!*" echoed Al.

The customer nodded, then left, taking the empty casket with him.

Al watched him go. Then, with trembling hands, he picked up his prize, turned it over, and regarded it with feverish eyes. There was no way *this* was going out on the shelves! It would be locked away, protected by elder signs, to be brought whenever the moon was gibbous; its every word pored over in minute detail, until the arcane knowledge therein was his.

And then—

Al glanced around at the worm-ridden, ancient shelving, the rotting wood mucous-stained and acid-etched by years of customer abuse. He grinned. There were going to be some changes around here. Oh, yes. *Changes*.

He scanned the title of the book once more.

Better Homes & Gardens — Building Bookcases (A DIY Guide)

Impersonal

...Katherine Woodbury

I learned my company was splitting when Mewser drew me aside in the hall. “Not the best mix,” he said, “consultants and us programmers. It’s not like nobody saw it coming. We’ve still got to play house though. Our lease has another two years. We’re going to share you with Jacobitz,” he said.

“I’d rather just work for you.”

He leered pleasantly.

“So would I, Clarissa, but frankly we can’t afford you. We’re giving you a personality split to make things easier. Hey, at least you still have a job.”

I went home as myself: Clarissa Bradon. I entered the office the next morning as Janet. Lisa took over after lunch.

Personality splits never keep the same names. “Alternate-names maximize individual growth and responsibility,” claim the Psychiatrists for Work-Place Disorders. “It is best for the health of the employee to clarify personality splits as a necessity of working place economics, not a reflection of personal inadequacies.”

Janet is Jacobitz’s secretary. She is inflexible, a workhorse, the sort of person who says, “I hate not being busy.” The sort of person who keeps little projects floating all day long so she is always in a state of rush.

Lisa is task-oriented. “Get it and get it over with—” that’s her policy. “As long as I do the work,” she says, “why should I have to account for my time?” She reads at her desk and surfs the Internet between projects.

Janet and Lisa hate each other.

Today, Janet — who loves post-it notes — came in to find the desk swept clean. No memo pads, no yellow stickies. “How could she do that?” she shrieked to the Jacobitz supervisor. “I needed those telephone numbers!” And after lunch, Lisa was fuming about her Internet links. “She deleted My Favorites. Can you believe that?”

Janet threw out Lisa’s stuffed frog — the one I got as a promotional gimmick from Froggy Fax Supplies which Lisa sat on top of the computer. “He’s friendly. He helps me think.” Lisa refuses to water Janet’s plants, and Janet blames her when they die — “I come in early. I have to make the coffee. I do everything around here.” Lisa uses a Dilbert Desk Calendar. Janet thinks Dilbert is too “confrontational” and tried to replace him with Far Side. Mewser recommended keeping both.

Janet filed complaints about Lisa with Jacobitz who spoke to Mewser. Mewser said, "Hey, Lisa, be careful with Janet's stuff, will ya?" and Lisa rolled her eyes and said, "She is so uptight."

Janet no longer makes complaints. "No one listens," she tells the calendars. "What's the point?"

"Things are getting better," Mewser said yesterday to Lisa, and Lisa reminded herself not to say, "In a pig's eye." Lisa likes her job. She wants to get along with Janet.

Lisa doesn't know Janet is planning to kill her.

Janet leaves razors in the desk drawers. Lisa says, "Damn it, she is so flipping careless." Janet dribbles cleaning fluid into our coffee mug except that Lisa doesn't drink coffee. Janet broke the back support for the desk chair. Lisa fell out of it in front of three marketers and a visiting consultant and laughed herself sick.

Janet isn't obvious. She smiles whenever Mewser employees ask for Lisa: "Could you leave her a note? I want her to edit this letter for me." Janet never, never leaves the note.

Lisa doesn't either. When Jacobitz employees ask for Janet, Lisa says, "Why don't I do it? No need to bother Janet." Lisa is smart, and she works fast, and she wants the job. Permanently. So does Janet. It's a tight market right now. Janet knows that Lisa is doing her work: "Oh, Lisa did it," Jacobitz employees say on their way to the elevators. You don't mind, do you?" and Janet smiles and says, "No problem" and thinks of another way to kill Lisa.

I called Mewser from home to warn him, but Lisa's personality kicked in when he answered the phone.

"Hey," Lisa said. "You want to go to a movie some time? Hang out?"

The supervisor is forty-five and married with two kids.

He said, "Thanks very much, Lisa. Catch me later, hmm?"

I called the police.

"We don't handle work-place issues," the sergeant said shortly.

I called the Psychiatrists for Work-Place Disorders.

"Don't worry about it," said the soothing voice that answered. "It will work itself out. The personalities have an instinctive desire to get along."

"Why can't I just cope with the company separation on my own?"

"You would find it far more upsetting to your peace of mind. During these periods of disturbance, the split or alternate personalities carry the burden of the stress. When the disturbance has passed, the personalities are shed. Even if Janet is trying to hurt Lisa, no one will blame you."

"I might blame her if I end up with a broken neck."

"Oh, that won't happen," the voice cooed.

The next day Lisa had to be sent to the emergency room to have her stomach pumped.

"Food poisoning," the doctor told me. I'd re-emerged at five o'clock.

"Janet tried to kill her."

"Janet's your primary personality?" He examined my chart. "Clarissa?"

"Yes, I'm Clarissa."

He gave me a tilted smile. "I really do think it's food poisoning. I doubt a primary personality would harm a secondary."

“It isn't the first time.”

They sent a psychiatrist to talk to me.

“These fears are typical. Give it a few more weeks. Work personalities were created to maximize production and minimize stress. Just think what you are being spared.”

The next day was Saturday. I walked to work, meandering amongst the portrait stalls in the Art District, lingering near the fountain across the street from my companies' building — Mewser & Jacobitz, now Mewser Technologies; Jacobitz Consulting. I strolled across the street, I opened the door.

And Janet kicked in. Naturally. Janet is the sort of person who would come to the office on a Saturday. She was happy to be there. She hunted amongst her stacks of papers for Lisa's extra work, but Lisa never leaves things, especially over the weekend. Janet tidied her piles and reorganized the drawers and took out her trash at which point she submerged, and I escaped.

On Monday, Janet planted an explosive (stolen from the Firewall room) in the front-desk keyboard.

“Power overload,” Mewser said.

The doctor looked askance. “Those are powerful burns.”

“Janet's trying to kill Lisa,” I said, and Mewser groaned.

“That's idiotic. Personalities don't try to kill each other.”

“Can't you give me a new one?”

“We like Lisa.”

“Replace Janet.”

“She is a good worker. Sorry — the way things are now, Jacobitz would never agree to a change. We can't even get them to pay the cable bill.”

“What about depersonalization?”

Mewser shook his head. “You can bet Jacobitz won't foot the bill for that. We need to stick to this approach a little longer—” He caressed my shoulder. “Okay, honey?”

He left. It was after five, and his wife would have dinner ready.

The burns hurt. The doctor gave me painkillers and went away, and I lay and watched the ambulance lights from five floors down silently pattern the room's walls.

The next morning, I coated my hands with poison. Janet bites her fingers when she is thinking.

“Don't you think,” the doctor said to Jacobitz, “there could be a problem here?”

“She's fine. She's got the flu.”

I put pins into the snack that Janet eats during her break.

“What the hell is going on?” Jacobitz asked Janet, but Janet won't tell her. She suspects Lisa and now she is afraid.

“This is crazy,” the doctor said when I re-emerged. “You're just hurting yourself.”

“You noticed?”

The psychiatrist said, “I think it would be much better for the personalities to work this out.”

“They can't work it out,” I hollered. “They don't meet for coffee. They don't have anything in common. They never see each other. I hate them.”

The psychiatrist was shocked. “That's a terrible thing to say.”

“I didn't ask for these personalities. Why should I be asked to like them?”

“They are saving you anxiety.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

“Personality splits are a wonderful asset. Don't give up. I'm sure you will find that Janet never meant to harm Lisa.”

The police came and talked to Jacobitz and to Mewser.

“We don't handle work-place problems,” they told the doctor on the way out.

Janet blames Lisa for the poison and the pins. Her fear makes her desperate.

“My job,” she hisses as she files memorandums and orders supplies. “This is my job. What am I suppose to do — just sit back while she sucks up to everyone? I work harder than she does. I'm more efficient. It's so unfair.”

Lisa wants the job too; we haven't finished paying off our car.

I stayed up late, rewriting my resume, composing cover letters, tracking down references. I didn't eat. I couldn't sleep in the hot-filled hours when I tried. Janet fainted one morning; Mewser found Lisa collapsed by our desk.

“Thought about quitting?” the doctor said to me.

“I can't afford depersonalization on my own. I need my company to pay for it.”

He snorted. “Stingy bastards. Wish I was on Jacobitz's payroll. You'll never get that operation if you can't stick it out.”

“I might not survive long enough.”

Another of his wry smiles. “You can cope.”

I coped. I e-mailed letters to Janet every night.

“People are laughing at you. They meet together and say what a terrible secretary you are. They exchange stories about your mistakes, the time you put a call through to Ben instead of Glenn and the time you put all the letterhead in the printer upside down.”

I sent Lisa work: packages from Jacobitz containing double-sided, three-hole punched twenty page articles to be copied and mailed to the enclosed addresses. Mail arrives at noon, and Lisa emerges directly after lunch.

Lisa grumbled. “This is so pointless,” but she doesn't like to leave the work for Janet, even though it's Jacobitz material, and she doesn't like to ask since Jacobitz would say, “Leave it for Janet.”

Lisa made the copies. I sent more packages.

And more letters to Janet. “They talk about getting a new receptionist: someone prettier with a better phone voice, someone who doesn't forget to order staples and doesn't refill the coffee machine with Hazelnut Cream.”

Janet cried at her desk that day.

“I can't do it,” Lisa shouted at an employee who wanted her to fax a quote to Hong Kong. “Can't you see I'm busy?”

I'd sent her six packages from Jacobitz: five hundred ripped and stapled pages to be copied, faxed and bound. Lisa had to leave the copying for Janet who didn't even take the opportunity to get the better of Lisa, she was so demoralized by the nasty e-mails I'd sent:

“They don't care how hard you work. They don't notice. You're barely human to them—”

“I need to go home,” Janet told Jacobitz, but Jacobitz never lets people go early. She hates employees who take advantage, who don't work all their hours.

Janet won't countermand authority. She stayed.

“Nerves,” I wrote to Janet that night. “You’re nervy. Dysfunctional. A problem employee. You think they don’t notice? I notice. I know exactly what you did yesterday when you went to the bathroom and cried.”

Janet screamed. She ran into the elevator and huddled against the wall. “Go away, go away,” she screamed at the blank, maroon walls. She fell forward, cracking her head, and Lisa emerged, disoriented. “I don’t work till after lunch. What am I doing here?” The elevator lurched up to the fifth floor, and “Oh, dammit,” she said because the mailman was standing by the desk; he held seven large packages in his arms.

“No way,” Lisa said. “I won’t do it. I quit.”

Mewser patted her back. “You can’t quit.”

“Why not?” Jacobitz came out of her office. “Frankly, I think Lisa is too independent. Janet can take over.”

“Wait a minute,” Mewser now. “Hold on. Lisa is ours. We don’t want a full-time Janet. Lisa—”

“I quit,” Lisa said. “You can’t make me work.” She hunched over the desk, arms crossed atop the seven packages. Times New Roman letters stuttered under her eyelids.

The doctor shook his head woefully.

“Janet’s crazy,” I said, voice cracked. “Lisa quit.”

“They want a refit. They’re going to take it out of your paycheck.”

“I’ll kill them too.” I closed my eyes. “Or steal all their money. Want to share it with me?”

He sighed, and I drifted into unconsciousness.

When I woke, Janet was gone. The fretting, inferior terror had abandoned its possession. I drifted into work, searching for Lisa, waiting for her breezy contempt.

Nothing. I organized my files, throwing out useless memos, deleting old e-mails, including my e-mails to Janet.

“So,” Mewser leaned over the desk, “Janet?”

“Paula,” I said and nudged him with my shoulder, flirtatious-like. “Paula’s my name.”

His eyes widened. He didn’t move away. I gave him another nudge and let him caress my shoulder.

“Well, well, I always thought you wanted more,” he said.

Jacobitz came in an hour later. “Hello. You are?”

“Stephanie,” I said. “Let me help,” sliding several financial files out of her pile.

“Sexual harassment charges?” the doctor asked me a month later. “Mewser says you’re crazy.”

“It’s Paula,” I shrugged. “She thinks he raped her.”

“Jacobitz claims you forged checks.” Eyes lowered to my chart.

“You know Stephanie: not an honest bone in her body:”

He grimaced, turned a page over.

“It’s in my file, isn’t it?” I said. “The refit?”

“It’s in the file.”

“Hospital billed them for it?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the problem?”

“They want another one. Rebecca, an introvert, and Melody, obsessive-compulsive.”

“Do they?” I leaned forward, hand against his cheek: Paula is such a flirt. “Beneficial for you. I wonder what kind of crimes Rebecca and Melody will commit?”

Cool, gray eyes met mine. A tilted smile: charming in such a dishonest man.

He charged for a refit which never happened and not a little of “Stephanie’s” money has appeared in his bank account.

“Another refit,” he said, and marked it in the chart.

I went about my business.

Going for the Hat-trick

...Edwina Harvey interviews Sonny Whitelaw

Sonny managed to get three books published in the same week early in 2005: *The Rhesus Factor*, *Ark Ship* and *City of the Gods*.

Sonny recounts that *Ark-Ship* was published as an e-book in December 2004, “at exactly the same moment I was sitting down for dinner in London with the publishers of the Stargate novels.” She already had a contract with the publishers of *Ark Ship* to print another novel, *The Rhesus Factor*.

They were her first books published, but prior to her “overnight success” Sonny has had several hundred articles published, having worked as a freelance photojournalist with work published in such magazines as *Australian Photography*, *National Geographic*, and *Penthouse* (France). It was how she primarily made her living while living on Vanuatu for twenty years restoring sailing boats, running dive charters, SCUBA diving on active volcanoes and building up an inbound tour company, acting as tour guide for volcanologists, anthropologists and epidemiologists.

The Rhesus Factor, which she describes as a “factional eco-thriller”, came about when two friends — a volcanologist and an epidemiologist — tried to talk Sonny into finishing her thesis over a jug of slightly ashy margaritas drunk on the edge of an erupting volcano. She soon chucked the thesis idea, and concentrated on this book instead. It’s set in 2015 and at first many publishers dismissed it as science-fiction, then after 9-11 changed the world, they rejected it because it was too close to the truth. With its themes of global warming and bio-terrorism, the book was cited by an alarmed politician in a sitting of the Queensland parliament.

Sonny sees herself more as a futurist than strictly a science-fiction writer. With her scientific background, her stories rely heavily on cutting edge science, as well as projecting that science into the future. Her novel, *Ark Ship*, though set five hundred years in the future, and described by the author as “pure space-opera”, contains a projection of our current understanding of physics, with the caveat that our understanding of any science changes on an almost daily basis. Sonny likes to subscribe to numerous science magazines to ensure her grasp of science remains cutting edge.

While her original novels may have allowed Sonny to express herself as a futurist, her Stargate novel, *City of the Gods*, allowed her to explore her fascination for anthropology and mythology.

In 2003, having seen about three quarters of the Stargate episodes in no particular order, and her curiosity piqued to fill the gaps, Sonny bought her son the Stargate DVD collection for Christmas, intending to watch it herself from the beginning and in order. With her daughter and her daughter’s boyfriend also keen Stargate fans, the DVDs ended up being played almost non-stop in the family home, having what Sonny claims

was a subtle brainwashing effect on her. Sabine C. Bauer, who had just completed *Stargate SG-1: Trial By Fire*, was critiquing a short story that Sonny had written, and claimed Sonny seemed to be channelling Jack O'Neill. The only cure would be to write a *Stargate* novel.

Sonny explains that the *Stargate* novels are primarily “stand alone” works. *City of the Gods* is set near the end of the fifth season, though it does follow on from a season three episode called “Crystal Skull”. While a TV episode has time and budgetary constraints to adhere to, novels know no such bounds, so they are all written “to be stand alone movie length mega budget episodes”. Even the size and the cover designs of the novels seem to reflect that “they are literary extensions of the series, taking the stories to places that television simply could not”. At a time when CGI and special effects can accomplish so much in both TV series and movies, it’s interesting to see this acknowledgement that sometimes the best pictures are in the reader’s heads.

Stargate has run for nine seasons now, and is shooting a tenth, while the spin-off series, *Atlantis* is now in its third year. Part of the success appears due in good part to the likeable and believable characters. While a television episode relies on the actor to utilise body language and dialogue to communicate a character’s thoughts, a novel allows the reader to better explore what’s in the character’s mind.

Any author writing for a pre-existing universe that has an army of fans walks a narrow line. Opinions on what a character would or wouldn’t do, or how two characters would interact run hot on fan-based lists. By exploring aspects of these complex relationships you run the chance of attracting the fans’ wrath. Fortunately the feedback Sonny has received so far on her *Stargate* novel has been positive. She applauds the support she was given by her editor and publisher, remarking that writing a *Stargate* novel is more like a team sport, which makes it “a hell of a lot of fun”.

There are more books in the pipeline for Sonny. A new novel, *Chimera*, was published in December. With a co-author, Beth Christensen, a *Stargate Atlantis* novel is to be published in April, and a third *Stargate* title is already being planned. So, too, is a sequel to *The Rhesus Factor* and *Chimera*. Who knows? Sonny might be looking at pulling off another hat trick sometime soon.

The Rhesus Factor (science fiction/ecothriller)

Paperback published by Double Dragon (Canada) ISBN: 1-55404-225-9

Available through Amazon.com. RRP US\$16.99

e-book ISBN: 1-55404-237-2

Available at ereader, fictionwise and at www.double-dragon-ebooks.com RRP US\$5.99

Ark Ship (science fiction)

Paperback published by Double Dragon ISBN: 1-55404-228-3

Available through Amazon.com, RRP US\$18.99.

e-book ISBN: 1-55404-209-7

Available at e-reader, fictionwise and www.double-dragon-ebooks.com RRP US\$5.99

Stargate SG-1 City of the Gods (science fiction)

Published by Fandemonium UK under license to MGM ISBN: 0-9547343-3-5

Available through Galaxy Bookshop (Sydney) Infinitas Bookshop (Parramatta) and Amazon.co.uk RRP UKP5.99. Galaxy is selling it for \$21.95

Conan the Romantic

...Ian Nichols

The Romantic period is variously dated as lasting from 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution, or 1798, the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*¹ to 1824² or 1832³. An extended chronology dates Romanticism from 1770 to 1870, thus recognising the early writings of Blake and Burns as Romantic.⁴ However, what could be called the Romantic Tradition, or the Romantic influence can be said to have had a far more lasting effect. In both poetry and novels, the characteristics of the Romantic Movement persist to the present day; "It is only recently that any really significant turning away from Romantic paradigms has begun to take place, and even that turning away has taken place in a dramatic, typically Romantic way."⁵ *The Critical Poet* lists these aspects of Romanticism:

- "a) an increasing interest in Nature, and in the natural, primitive and uncivilised way of life;
- b) a growing interest in scenery, especially its more untamed and disorderly manifestations;
- c) an association of human moods with the "moods" of Nature – and thus a subjective feeling for it and interpretation of it; a considerable emphasis on natural religion;
- e) emphasis on the need for spontaneity in thought and action and in the expression of thought;
- f) an increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of the imagination;
- g) a tendency to exalt the individual and his needs and emphasis on the need for freedom and a more personal expression;
- h) the cult of the Noble Savage."⁶

These fundamental ideas of Romanticism made themselves felt in poetry, prose, music and the visual arts. Novels that feature many, if not all of these attributes, extend from Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* through Melville's *Moby Dick*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to far more recent works, particularly in the Fantasy Genre, such as Juliet Mariller's *Wolfskin*. In the visual arts the precursor to Turner and Constable was William Blake, in music Hector Berlioz was associated with Romanticism. It is probably the great Romantic poets who are most familiar as the epitomes of Romanticism; Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Byron. With Coleridge, Wordsworth briefly enunciated some of the ideals of Romanticism in the advertisement of the first printing of *Lyrical Ballads*:

“while they are perusing this book, they [the readers] should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favorable to the author’s wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.”⁷

Wordsworth went further in the Preface to the 1800 edition:

“and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted.”

And:

“The Reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and are utterly rejected, as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription. I have wished to keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him.”⁸

Nature the Arbiter

In essence, Wordsworth rejected the Neoclassical view of the world which preceded him, a view in which there was an ordained order, a place for everything in a universe created by humanity, wherein law was something determined for and by cultures, and instead promulgated a world view in which Nature was the arbiter, in which precedence played no place outside of Nature, where the artifice of culture was ephemeral before the vast forces of Nature. In *Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth celebrates the natural:

“—Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth.”

A feeling echoed throughout his poetry, and fundamental to the Romantics' philosophy.

Byron not only wrote of, but acted out the life of the Romantic hero. In his *Written After Swimming from Sestos to Abydos* he enacts the myth of Leander, thereby privileging the concept of the individual hero, the single person who makes a difference by a heroic act. He develops this in *When a Man Hath No Freedom to Fight for at Home*, wherein he celebrates the idea of fighting for freedom, and puts forward that a man must "battle for freedom wherever you can." Thus we see a picture of the Romantic hero beginning to emerge; one who is indomitable in surviving the challenges of the natural world and fights for freedom.

It is, perhaps, in Shelley's *Ozymandias* that we find the Romantic concept of the triumph of Nature most clearly shown. In it the "traveller from an antique land" relates the story of an ancient king whose pride in his achievements made him think that they would last forever:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Is inscribed on his statue. But nothing remains:
"—boundless and bare
The Lone and level sands stretch far away."

Nature has, with due patience, worn away the works of the king, his city, his statue, his world, until only remnants are left. Civilisation is ephemeral, and will rise and fall at the whim of nature.

Keats, too, was a celebrant of the individual hero and of the natural world. The very titles of some of his best-known works identify aspects of Nature: *On the Sea*; *Ode to a Nightingale*; *Ode to Autumn*. Other works which are apparently titled after works of culture, such as *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, still investigate the closeness of that culture to the natural world. The individual as hero is characteristically present in *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*, with its portrayal of Cortez staring at the Pacific. In his valorisation of Greek and Roman culture Keats was praising a world that had remained incorrupt, because it was closer to Nature, to natural values.

Conan as Romantic Hero

Conan the Barbarian was the creation of Robert Ervin Howard of Cross Plains, Texas, in twenty-one short stories and one shortish novel, all written between 1932 and 1936. Howard wrote a few other drafts and fragments which were found after his death in 1936. It is unlikely that Howard would have claimed that he was a Romantic; he saw himself, rather, as a toiler in the commercial workplace: "I'm merely one of a huge army, all of whom are bucking the line for meat for their bellies – which is the main basic principle and eventual goal of life."⁹ Compare this with Shelley's concept of the poet:

"Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel

not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”¹⁰

Despite this difference of opinion over the concept of the creative writer, it is possible to judge writers more by what they produce than what they say about themselves, and the vision of Howard, in terms of his created world of Hyboria and the character of Conan, was a Romantic one.

Hyboria itself was built on the remains of earlier civilizations¹¹, as was the world of the Romantics built on the “lost worlds” of Greece and Rome. The civilizations of Atlantis, Lemuria, Thuria, the Picts and others vanished in a cataclysm, save for a few survivors. There are relics of these lost civilizations that exist throughout Conan’s Hyboria, fragments that emerge from the sand as does the broken statue of Ozymandias in Shelley’s poem. However, on Conan’s world these are often sinister rather than the remnants of the decayed civilizations represent ancient magic and ancient evil.

Howard says, of Hyboria:

“—the kingdoms of the world are clearly defined. The kingdoms of the Hyborians — Aquilonia, Nemed, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Koth, Ophir, Argos, Corinthia, and one known as the Border Kingdom — dominate the western world.”¹²

This is the world where:

“Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the world under his sandaled feet.”¹³

Conan is, by definition, a barbarian. He is Cimmerian, which is one of the northern lands that does not fall in the ambit of the civilized kingdoms listed above. When he first has contact with civilization is not known, but it is probably on a border raid or an attack on a border town. In *The Tower of the Elephant*, chronologically the first of the Conan stories, although not the first to see publication, he is described as “a tall, strongly made youth. . . . His cheap tunic could not conceal the hard, rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist and heavy arms. His skin was brown from outland suns, his eyes blue and smoldering; a shock of tousled black hair crowned his broad forehead. From his girdle hung a sword in a worn leather scabbard.”¹⁴ He is clearly an outlander and, more importantly, does not speak the ‘language’ of civilization; he is not aware of the customs of the culture, and he is immediately described as a “barbarian.”¹⁵ He is unable to dissemble or cope with the mockery that is presented as a custom of civilization. “He saw no humour in it, and was too new to civilization to understand its discourtesies. Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their head split, as a general thing.”¹⁶ This is one of the first pieces of evidence of Conan’s representation of the Noble Savage in the stories. He is too simple and honest to understand civilized rules for civilized rudeness.

Further evidence of Conan’s naivety is found in *Queen of the Black Coast*, when he explains the reason for his hasty departure from Argos:

“By Crom, though I’ve spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

—today I was hauled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad [who had killed a guardsman] had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wrath, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. Sothen, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge’s skull; then I cut my way clear of the court, and seeing the high constable’s stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts.”¹⁷

It immediately becomes clear that Conan privileges friendship over the law, and disregards the ‘civilized’ notion that duty is to a higher authority than a person, it is to the abstract ideas of ‘state’ or ‘society.’ It is also plain that he privileges the individual over the group. This is another aspect of Romanticism, that the individual can make a difference, that one person can stand against that which they do not think is right.

Conan and Nature

Another aspect of Romanticism that exists within the Conan stories is their regard for nature. This is shown very clearly in *The Frost Giant’s Daughter*, wherein Conan quite literally pursues on the one hand and combats on the other the mythic personifications of nature. In an epic race, he chases down the temptress daughter of Ymir, one of the “gods of ice and snow” that rule the land where he encounters her. In his pursuit of her he must defeat her two giant brothers, who seem to be creatures of the ice and snow:

“The scales of their mail were white with hoar-frost; their helmets and axes were covered with ice. Snow sprinkled their locks; in their beards were spikes of icicle; their eyes were cold as the lights that streamed above them.”¹⁸

Many of the Conan stories take place against the background of the natural world. Fifteen stories take place in a natural or rural setting. Only six are set in cities or towns, and in one of these Conan must battle a creature that is a super-ape, another representative of Nature. In one other the guardians of a tower are lions, defeated by drugs from the ‘black lotus.’ One is a police procedural, necessarily set in a town. In the remaining three stories Conan has become king of Aquilonia, which necessitates setting the story within an urban setting. Even so, in *The Scarlet Citadel*, Conan expresses the difference between himself and civilized men in no uncertain terms after he has been deposed, while he faces his conqueror:

“You sit on satin and guzzle wine the people sweat for, and talk of divine rights of sovereignty — bah! I climbed out of the abyss of naked barbarism to the throne and in that climb I spilt my blood as freely as I spilt that of others. If either of

us has the right to rule men, by Crom, it is I! how have you proved yourself my superior?

I found Aquilonia in the grip of a pig like you – one who traced his genealogy for a thousand years. The land was torn with the wars of the barons, and the people cried out under suppression and taxation. Today no Aquilonion noble dares maltreat the humblest of my subjects, and the taxes of the people are lighter than anywhere else in the world.”¹⁹

Apart from the valorization of the barbarian ethic of might justifying right, the speech is directly within the Romantic tradition of denial of privilege attained through tradition or lineage. It directly opposes the Neoclassic concept that the privileged classes were justified in their position, simply because they had been born into it. In fact, Conan enunciates the revolutionary credo of Romanticism, as much as Byron did with his own support of the Greek revolution and other Romantics with their admiration of the French revolution.

This attitude that all people have equal right to respect exists in other Conan stories, again emphasizing his role as a Romantic hero, as well as a Noble Savage. In *Black Colossus*, he ennobles the commoners and second sons — “paupers, patricians, younger sons, black sheep”²⁰ — when his knights fail him in battle through their arrogance. In *The Hour of the Dragon* he fights with the commoners, the Gundermen infantry, rather than with his knights. “They gripped their spears and waited, their fierce hearts swelling with pride that a king should fight on foot with them.”²¹

Conan even, in *A Witch Shall Be Born*, takes on almost messianic proportions, except he refuses to die.

“By the side of the caravan road a heavy cross had been planted, and on this grim tree a man hung, nailed there by iron spikes through his hands and feet...the perspiration of agony beaded his face and mighty breast...blood oozed sluggishly from the lacerations on his hands and feet.”²²

Conan saves himself from this situation by killing a vulture which attempts to gash his face. This attracts the attention of some desert wanderers who cut him down and force him to ride, without water, through the desert as a test of his fitness. He survives, and visits a similar test on his rescuer, then frees the people of the town from the rule of a witch and an adventurer, who he, in his turn, crucifies. But there is a difference:

“You are more fit to inflict torture rather than to endure it...I hung there on a cross as you are hanging, and I lived, thanks to circumstances and a stamina peculiar to barbarians. But you civilized men are soft; your lives are not nailed to your spines as are ours. Your fortitude consists mainly in inflicting torment, not enduring it. You will be dead before sundown.”²³

It is Conan’s barbarian nature that allows him to triumph constantly, and Howard, through one of his characters, avers to Conan that it is what civilization will return to:

“‘Barbarism is the natural state of mankind,’ the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. ‘Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.’”²⁴

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I outlined some of the aspects of Romanticism. Do the Hyborian stories of Conan the Cimmerian address those aspects? They certainly demonstrate an interest in Nature, and in a natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life. They show an interest in untamed, disorderly scenery especially. They emphasize that spontaneity, as in the steel-trap reactions of Conan, will always win out, and that spontaneity is to be trusted more than cold calculation. They certainly do exalt the individual, in the person of Conan, who is the very epitome of the Noble savage. There are some aspects that are less clear. The question of 'natural religion' remains in doubt, although it could be argued that the religions mentioned, pagan as they are, are closer to a natural than the organized religion of our current society. Even the organized religions in the stories seem to be descended from nature. There is some evidence of the association of human moods with the moods of nature, since Conan is constantly aware of the natural world and its manifestations, or even of his own senses in regard to them, as when he detects Murilo, in Rogues in the House, by a barely discernable scent he has sniffed once some days before. Is there importance attached to the power of the imagination? Within the pulp genre, this was a given. The entire world of Hyboria is a fantastic invention of Howard's imagination.

It seems an inevitable conclusion that the series is Romantic in nature, and that Conan is a Romantic hero. But there is one more thing. In the context of fantastic literature, the series was not revisionist, but revolutionary. It rejected the carefully wrought, thoughtful story in favour of one that foregrounded passion and action. It fulfilled the most important function of Romantic philosophy, although Howard would never have believed himself a philosopher, in that it resulted in a creative freedom of the mind and spirit, not only for Howard, but for those who followed the path he, like his creation Conan, trod into a new world.



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|---|--|
| 1 Abrams, 4th ed p165 | 13 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2, 295 |
| 2 The Critical Poet | 14 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 26 |
| 3 Abrams, 4th ed p165 | 15 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 27 |
| 4 A Guide to the Study of Literature, Brooklyn College | 16 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 28 |
| 5 A Guide to the Study of Literature, Brooklyn College | 17 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 116 |
| 6 The Critical Poet | 18 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 109 |
| 7 Lyrical Ballads, 1798 | 19 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2, 327 |
| 8 Lyrical Ballads, 1800 | 20 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 206 |
| 9 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 538 | 21 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2, 548 |
| 10 Shelley, A Defence of Poetry | 22 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 257 |
| 11 See "The Hyborian Age" in The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1 | 23 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 290 |
| 12 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1, 7 | 24 The Conan Chronicles, Volume 2, 190 |

ASIM reviews

The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction And Fantasy.

Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt, eds.

Mirrordanse books,

250 pp, \$19-95

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

There will always be controversy, to some degree, over any collection entitled "best." Best by what criteria? Best from what time/area/definition of the genre/s? Is it fair? Does it play favourites? Ultimately, for the reader and the reviewer, these questions do not matter. The editors of this collection are quite clear about their research: "we read every speculative fiction story we could find by Australian residents, published anywhere in the world. Nearly four hundred stories by one hundred and seventy writers. One and a quarter million words of fiction."

They are also clear about what guided their choice: "Australian writers draw on the vast, often unforgiving, landscape we live in, the multicultural nature of the society around us and the lessons we're trying to learn from our history. The best stories feature characters in conflict with the idea, in search of resolution. The best stories provoke, inspire and entertain."

Given this, there is little room for criticism if the editors have stuck to their guns, as they appear to have. The only question that remains for the reader is are the stories any good?

There are absolute gems. The much-awarded, appreciated and discussed "Singing My Sister Down", by Margot Lanagan, leads off the collection. An eerie story of strangely wrought feelings, one which is, to my mind, a horror story, rather than F or SF. The very thought of a slow execution while the subject is surrounded by her family, keeping up her spirits and encouraging her to bear her death proudly gives one a shudder up and down the spine. It is the execution of the story which makes it so chilling, the matter-of-factness of the process, the reasonable attitude by everyone, even the victim, that gives you a little knot in the stomach. This is an excellent story, so good at doing what it does that I was glad when it was over.

Terry Dowling's "Flashmen" has elements of both magic realism and cyberpunk. Set in a future where aliens have landed, it gives a vivid description of those who try to limit the damage done by these strange constructs. It also puts forward a major ethical problem, a very real problem in these troubled times. A problem which is answered with brutal honesty in the story, however unsatisfying the unavoidable answer.

Damien Broderick's "The Meek" is another story executed with cool expertise. It, too, presents the reader with an ethical problem, and another honest answer. It is almost a parable of the future, a future where nanotechnology can obey the Law of Unexpected Consequences, and does.

"The Tale of Enis Cash, Smallgoods Smokehand", by Brendan Duffy, is a

Dadaesque excursion into dragon-slaying and smoked goods. It is a true flight of fancy, with little discernable planning. Things just seem to happen. That said, it is full of imagination and simply good fun. It is, indeed, a nicely lightweight story that balances the fairly weighty content of the rest of the anthology.

For me, the standout story was "Bones", by Rjurik Davidson. It is the story of a jazz band, and the magical effect they have on people. What makes it stunning is the sheer feel of the story, the way it sets up the smoky jazz clubs of the forties and the odd people who habituated them. It is truly eerie, almost mystical, yet packed with characters who are utterly realistic, for the time and place, while being just that touch off-centre. It is the very first story I've seen by this author, and I would love to read more of his work.

Without going into detail about the rest of the stories in the book, they all range from competent to very good. There is really not a single weak story there. As I intimated at the beginning, it would be futile to speculate whether these are really the best or whether there was some obscure magazine that had a stunning story in it. Equally, there would be little point in questioning the judgement of the editors. This is a good anthology, a representative sample of Australian genre writing, thoughtfully chosen and well presented. If you want to find out what's happening in the field, or if you just enjoy reading good fiction, it should be on your bookshelf.

THUD

By Terry Pratchett

Doubleday, 362 pp.

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

In some ways, this novel is about a game that exists in the Discworld. In some ways it's about the Koom Valley ambush. It's also about parenthood, responsibility, stubbornness, politics, religion and cows. Particularly about cows. And it's all tied up in a police procedural.

There's trouble in Ankh-Morpork. Koom Valley day is approaching, when trolls and dwarves celebrate their twin victories and defeats at the epochal, almost mythical, battle by getting drunk and hitting each other. This is, as any avid reader of modern fantasy would know, typical behaviour for trolls and dwarves, but this year it's different. People are being killed and there are mysterious dwarves digging tunnels under the city. On top of this, the whole celebration has turned nasty, and threatens to turn the city into a replica of the battle, dead bodies and all, so it's up to Sam Vimes and his men (and werewolves, and dwarves, and trolls, and zombies and Nobbsses and, in this particular case a vampire) to sort it all out and set it all right.

Of course, the grags, the dwarf equivalent of high elves, are opposed to it. They want to keep it all in the family, so to speak, and let the battle begin. Of course, their real purpose is to get to the site of the historic battle and destroy the evidence they have found that it went a little differently from what the legends say. That's a big part of the picture.

The picture in question is *The Battle of Koom Valley*, by Methodia Rascal, and it's been stolen from the museum. Fifty feet long and ten feet high, it's rumoured to

have the secret of Koom Valley buried in its multiple images of mayhem, destruction and mountains. It's amazing how rumours like that turn out to be true. (Hint for the Discworld connoisseur, this is the take on *The DaVinci Code*). The truth is in the painting, if you know how to look for it, and it's just lucky that Lady Vimes made a complete copy of the work as a school project.

After sorting out the immediate problems of the city, such as halting a battle between dwarves and trolls, Vimes and his able assistants head to Koom Valley to solve the mystery of the painting, and why the painter was scared of chickens. For once Vimes enlists the aid of the wizards, although he doesn't, since the meeting that took place never really happened. Their flying coaches get them there in plenty of time, even to the point of Vimes telling the story of *Where is my Cow* to his son every night, right on the dot of six o'clock. He is infected by a symbol, falls over a waterfall and is swept into an underground cavern, but paternal dedication and sheer Vimes stubbornness win out. Little Sam gets his story, Sam is rescued and the problem of what really happened at Koom Valley is solved to everyone, except the villains', satisfaction.

Sometimes Pratchett books are hard to put down, and sometimes you finish them only to immediately start reading them again. I didn't find that with this book. It is eminently readable and as entertaining as ever, but it's a bitty book. It doesn't have that sparkle of its immediate predecessor, *Going Postal*, or the belly-laughs of *The Truth*. It seems more like *Monstrous Regiment*, in that it seems made up of odds and ends of ideas that Pratchett didn't quite know what to do with. At that, it isn't as funny as *The Thief of Time*, which seemed to exist only to explain away the anomalies of the Discworld universe, or have the depth of *Night Watch*, which served a similar purpose in the personal history of Sam Vimes. I don't think it's the best book in the series, but even an imperfect Pratchett is preferable to some of the monstrous muck that is heaved onto bookstore shelves. It's not great, but it is Pratchett.

Weapons of Choice

John Birmingham

Pan Macmillan, 520 pages

Reviewed by Ian Nichols.

My general distaste for doorstep books is well-known. Fat, overblown, overly detailed novels which list every stitch on milady's dress or every rivet on the spaceship or every molecule of a DNA sequence. A pox on them all, I say. Which makes this next statement difficult to write: I really wish this book were longer.

This is not for the lack of essential detail, because it's all there. Nor is it because the setting, characters or the plot are not developed, because they are. But sometimes you just want to keep reading of events in the world of the novel. Sometimes it's just so fascinating that you don't want to put it down.

Weapons of Choice is not set a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. The first part of the book is set in 2021, and the rest in 1942. Sound familiar? It resembles the premise of *The Philadelphia Experiment*. In that case a modern supercarrier was transported back to the day before Pearl Harbour. In this case an entire task force of the not-too-distant future is transported, by an experiment gone wrong, back to a few

hours before the battle of Midway, in November, 1942. What happens from there is quite different. The supercarrier landed in open seas, and few people even knew she was there. The task force lands in the middle of Admiral Ray Spruance's ships, on their way to inflict a costly defeat on Japanese Admiral Yamamoto. The results are in many ways predictable. Before identification and détente can be achieved, there is a battle, where both fleets are damaged. For this, and another significant reason, the battle of Midway never happens, and history is changed.

What distinguishes this from other alternate-history novels is that a delicate and fascinating balance is achieved between the action, the technology and the sociology. Action is as well described as anything in Tom Clancy. The technology sounds right; it's not the same as today, but believably advanced just far enough. The imagination does not have to stretch to swallow it, nor are there tedious passages of explanation. The meat of the story lies in the more subtle premise: what would be the effects of the social changes that have taken place in eighty years on the locals of 1942? The effect of female black combat officers on armed forces that still call their black members niggers, and where the only women who go close to war are nurses who patch up the real soldiers? The effect of vessels from the Japanese Defence Force allied with the USA and England? How would thousands of armed forces personnel from a few years in our future affect a world which had never heard of computers, birth control pills, *The Female Eunuch*, JFK, Martin Luther King, The Rolling Stones, Rap music, the Sexual Revolution, Islamic jihads, Auschwitz or Prozac?

A further dimension is provided by the reason for the task force's existence in 2021. It has been formed to restore order in an Indonesia which has been taken over in a bloody revolution by Islamic fundamentalists calling themselves the Caliphate. Its international nature is because it has been formed by the UN, and that body has involved itself because the world has been at war, with terrorists, from now until then. The people of the 2021 task force have been fighting for twenty years in a world where conflicts can erupt at any time, in any place. There is a chilling line spoken to a 1942 officer concerning suicide bombers: "That was the future."

Even though there are one or two stylistic lapses where idiomatic Australian expressions are put into the mouths of American characters, the writing is seamless. The pace is fast and furious in the action scenes and contemplative without tedium in the more reflective scenes. There are moments of graphic gore and moments of light humour, including some arch references to other Australian writers and other works in the same genre. The romance is handled with just the right touch, as is the mystery. This is a multidimensional novel.

The conclusion does not tie up all the loose ends, and there will be sequels. There must be sequels. If there are no sequels, every reader of the novel should make a pilgrimage to John Birmingham and Pan Macmillan and threaten them with money or violence, whatever it takes, to make them happen. I, for one, will be living in suspense until the next novel.

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.

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Simon Brown's latest book was *Rival's Son*, the second volume of the Chronicles of Kydan, published by PanMacmillan in Australia in 2005, and published by DAW in the US in 2006. In 2006 he also has a collection of short stories called *Troy* coming out from Ticonderoga Publications and the last book in the Chronicles of Kydan, *Daughter of Independence*, coming out from PanMacmillan.

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Stephanie Campisi is a darkly mysterious character often seen carrying suspicious packages on trains and around universities. This story was originally meant for ASIO, but an unfortunate typographical error saw it published in ASIM instead. Similar errors have resulted in her work being published or slated for publication in *Borderlands*, *Shadowbox*, *Farthing*, and *Flesh & Blood*. In light of this, she has vowed to improve her typing skills.

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