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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Sue Bursztynski

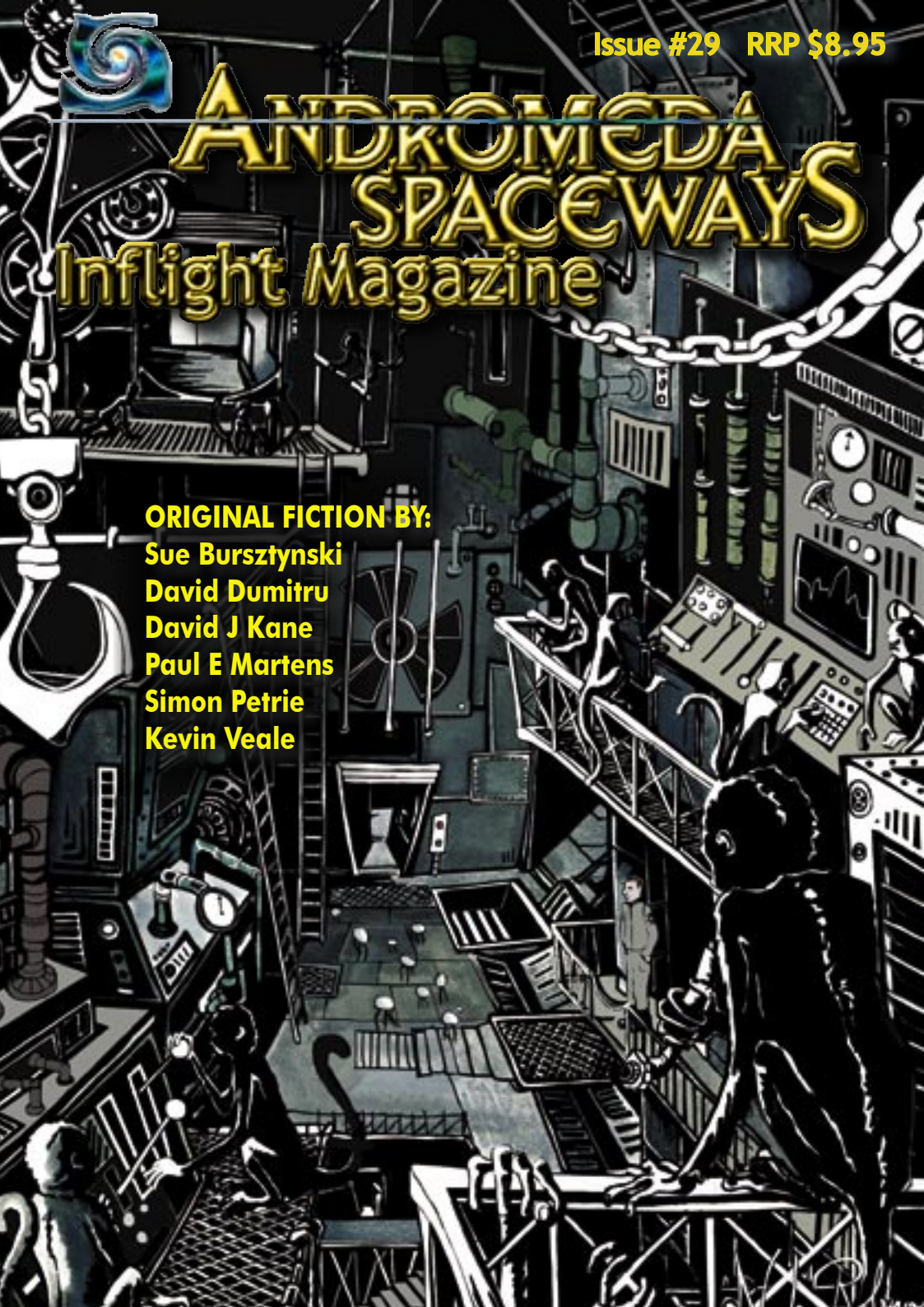
David Dumitru

David J Kane

Paul E Martens

Simon Petrie

Kevin Veale



Editorial

...Dirk Flinthart

I had plans for this issue.

I figured it might be fun to mess with the formula — to explore the possibilities inherent to the magazine form, if you will. Nothing too shocking: I thought I'd choose a general theme and select interesting stories that explored it, to create new layers of meaning through the contrasting ideas of the various writers. Simple, but nifty.

But then I had second thoughts. Not because there weren't enough stories, or that it was too hard to do. Nope. It all runs a bit deeper than that.

In the fiction world at the moment there are two opposite trends conspiring to make reading new work ever more painful. The most obvious is the commercialization of the novel: the amount of pure crap on the shelves is staggering. It's next to impossible to find an interesting new novel from a big publishing house these days. All the big boys seem to want is the same old same old, only bigger and less challenging.

Meanwhile, the short story is becoming ever *less* commercial, and is in serious danger of being wholly pwned by the Literati, a perverted subset of fiction folk that I loathe like herpes and telemarketing. I'm not the only one who thinks so, either. From a review by Sam Sacks of *Best New American Voices 2006*:

"...Without ignoring the occasional flashes of verve, the stories included are so monotonous that they seem to have been written by a single person of middling talent. All but one of them are written in the first person; a similar percentage hinge upon the narrator's difficulties with dysfunctional or deceased members of his or her family, or with ex-lovers. The tone is always confessional and saturated with self-pity. The plot and action are always negligible..."

(read the whole thing here — <http://www.nypress.com/18/48/books/SamSacks.cfm>)

To be fair, Sam is pissing at length mostly on the output of writers' workshops, but I believe you could apply his comments to many respected short story outlets. There's no money in short stuff, I guess — so the Art Nazis are moving in to claim it for their own. I haven't been able to read a 'literary' mag and keep my lunch down for a few years. Worse still, I have a nasty suspicion that 'The Art' is becoming more important than the story for a number of writers and editors in Spec Fiction too.

That's plain scary.

I took up reading SF and fantasy and horror when I was about six years old, because, goddammit, it was *interesting*. There were stories to be told. Ideas to be explored. Wild and woolly tales to be savoured. It was *fun*.

Don't mistake me: I value artistic and literate prose. I love well-crafted stories. I'm delighted that we're not condemned to bash out tales of rayguns and rockets and big-boobed blondes any more. But I'll be damned if I'm going to take a beautiful thing like ASIM, and try to turn it into some beret-junkie's post-modernist wet dream of Literary Speculative Fiction.

I had plans for this issue. I didn't chase them. Instead, I picked a bunch of stories that I liked. I hope you like them too.

Dirk Flinthart
Editor, Issue 29

ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

(November 11, 1922–April 11, 2007)

...Dirk Flinthart

“Just because some of us can read and write and do a little math, that doesn’t mean we deserve to conquer the Universe.” *Kurt Vonnegut, Novel Hocus Pocus 1990*

Kurt Vonnegut was a man who might well have been a giant of the SF genre if he had chosen to restrict himself. He was bigger than that, though. Not that he was too good for science fiction; just that he had a hell of a lot more to say than one single genre could hold. His books blended satire, black humour, science fiction and simple, observational storytelling into a unique fusion. It’s said you can recognize a great writer by their particular ‘voice’ and style. Of Vonnegut, it was unquestionably true.

If you want details of his life and career, go and pull them up off Wikipedia. What you get here is my response to the man’s life and works, and yes, his death — and from that, maybe a clue as to what he meant to Science Fiction, if there is such a capital-letters thing.

I found *Cat’s Cradle* when I was about 12. At the time, I was reading a lot of SF. Most of it was what 12-year-old SF fans with excessive reading skills get into: Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Niven, etc. I wasn’t picky, though. I’d discovered Ellison and Spinrad and Le Guin, Moorcock and Brunner too, and even though their visions were collectively weirder and often far more bleak than the Campbell-driven material I’d first encountered, the imagery and energy and imagination were still there. They were different, but they were still science fiction writers, and I enjoyed their work.

Vonnegut threw my head into a completely different space.

Cat’s Cradle is generally reviewed as a work of science fiction, and in its central plot device — an allotrope of water-ice called “ice-nine” which freezes at about 45°C and therefore has the capacity to restructure the water of the whole world into a solid — there’s a clear SF connection. The rest of it, though...even for a smart kid with a headful of Ellison, it was craziness piled on slapstick. Vonnegut’s characters varied from outrageously cartoonish caricatures through to infinitely sympathetic, beautifully rendered, hapless everyman slobs. He veered off the narrative at will, tossing in jokes, literary references, self-deprecating authorial observations, imaginary religions and philosophies, and in later books (*Breakfast of Champions*, for example), even his own crude felt-tipped pen sketches. His caricature of a puckered anus, placed into the book for no reason other than because he could, has become iconic.

As a 12 year old, I was disappointed by *Cat's Cradle*. I wanted more plot. I didn't want the world to be accidentally destroyed by some schmoie with a chunk of weird ice. I wanted the good guys to save it. I wanted a story I could understand, wrap myself around, and get into.

I didn't get it.

Vonnegut's best-known work is probably *Slaughterhouse Five*. Using concepts of time-travel to let him mess with the structure of his story, he worked to exorcize some of his own experiences from World War II, where as a POW he was one of many sent by the Germans to clean up the horrific aftermath of the Dresden firebombing. Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut's hapless time-travelling protagonist, stands both for Vonnegut and a generation of his readers, catapulted from the madness of a world war into the more subtle insanities of a world which grew directly from that conflict and those which followed. It's written with Vonnegut's trademark simplicity of style and language, and delivers up with heartbreaking clarity the helplessness and futility of a man trying to live in a world utterly robbed of sense.

That was Vonnegut in the 70s: using science fiction tropes and ideas, he offered an everyman's view of the disintegration of the 'civilised' West into the rapacious mass-market consumer culture that owns us now. His writing was strong, potent stuff, and he was careful to leaven it with whimsy and humour — even if that humour was frequently of the very blackest shade.

Was he really a 'science fiction' writer? Certainly, he started out that way with his short stories, some of which are still strong and relevant. (*Harrison Bergeron* springs to mind.) However, as his career evolved he wrote more and more outside the genre, and came to be accepted by the American literary mainstream as an important part of the canon of post-war American literary writers. Nevertheless, he is widely remembered for his science fiction, and he was a vital part of the wave of authors who gave science fiction the chance to produce "serious literature".

Read today, Vonnegut's often-experimental prose and contemporary references make some of his work feel dated. Late in his career, he abandoned fiction altogether, but remained a particularly effective social commentator and trenchant critic of the regime in which he lived. Of all the SF writers who achieved mainstream recognition, Vonnegut was perhaps the one who made the biggest difference. Even as he moved out of SF proper, he helped kick out the barriers for the rest of us, and the genre has been the better for it. As a 12-year-old, I didn't get it. Nearly 30 years later, I still don't get all of it — but I'm glad it's there so I can keep trying.

Vonnegut was 84 when he died. In August last year, an interview with him appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine. A quote from that interview: "The Army kept me on because I could type, so I was typing other people's discharges and stuff. And my feeling was, 'Please, I've done everything I was supposed to do. Can I go home now?' That's what I feel right now. I've written books. Lots of them. Please, I've done everything I'm supposed to do. Can I go home now?"

On April 11th, 2007, Kurt Vonnegut finally went home.



IS THERE A GRAND MEANING TO LIFE?

Or is it just a series of
pointless events.....



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Murder on the Zenith Express

...Simon Petrie

Gordon Mamon was the lift operator in a hotel that didn't have a lift.

The hotel, the 'Skyward Suites 270', was the lift.

Skyward was an organization that had taken the concept of multi-tasking, and embraced it so firmly as to hold it in a virtual death-grip. As well as lift operator, Gordon's job description encompassed first aid officer, complaints officer, janitor, dishwasher, room service, security officer and house detective. In his spare moments, which were few and far between, Gordon was also a crossword and trivia buff.

Gordon's life was full of wardrobe changes, since he was a firm believer in always being dressed appropriately for the duty at hand. Right now he was wondering just where he'd left his 'detective' hat. He couldn't recall having needed it before today.

He'd been called to the bathroom of a guest's suite to attend to a problem of some errant plumbing, but his knock hadn't been answered and he had had to override the door's biometric scanners to let himself in. Now he pocketed his master glass eyeball and plastic thumb, and gazed around the bathroom. There was a problem, sure enough, but it didn't look like the plumbing.

The suite's occupant, Neil B. Formey, was dressed ready for a bath, but wasn't going to be taking it anytime soon. Formey was clad only in a hotel bath towel two sizes too small for him; and Formey was dead.

Gordon reviewed what he knew of Formey, which was reasonably superficial. He'd only met the man a few hours ago when the hotel was beginning its ascent. Formey was famous, an egotistical financier and ruthless industry heavyweight from the thriving colonies of Proxima Centauri, but had kept out of the public eye as much as possible. A generous tipper (Gordon had received a C-credit for showing Formey to his room), but you felt that he expected much for that tip, and that the service delivered was just the beginning: the hotel tip as Faustian bargain. A busy man, loud, supremely confident; a man with his fingers in a hundred pies. A man, too, who apparently always licked those fingers: he was a heavyweight in a literal as well as metaphoric sense.

Gordon gingerly adjusted the corpse's bath towel for the sake of modesty, and ran an autopsy scan of the body using his handheld. The scanner's immediate

diagnosis was ‘dead’, but hopefully it would come up with something more useful after it had completed its analysis. Still, that could take hours.

There was nothing to obviously indicate how the guest had met his end. No visible marks on the body (though Gordon wasn’t game to lift that towel again just yet), no blood, no discarded weapons or misplaced items. Nevertheless, Gordon was reasonably sure that it was murder. Men like Formey just didn’t die a natural death, they’d made too many enemies.

The Skyward Suites was a *distributed* hotel, partitioned into five hundred and fifty self-contained, airtight, independent units. Each unit alternated between a four-day ‘sessile’ cycle, when it was incorporated into the hivelike conglomerate of the Skytop Plaza (a mega-hotel in geostationary orbit which served as one of Earth’s principal gateways for interstellar travel and in-system space tourism); and a three-day ‘motile’ cycle when individual units were detached from the larger structure, slotted into the massive descending drive chains of the Plaza’s dedicated space elevator tower, and propelled on the long return journey to Earth’s surface. The Plaza was rated as a five-star hotel; the individual units lacked some of the diversity of facilities and services accessible to the parent body, but still rated four stars and a brown dwarf. Not bad for a glorified elevator cubicle.

Gordon was seated in Formey’s loungeroom. He’d sealed off the bathroom and its occupant, and had decided that the loungeroom was as good as any place to set up as his headquarters for the investigation. The surroundings, so close to the scene of the crime, might well yield some subliminal clue to the murder, if only through the suspects’ reactions. Besides, the chairs were much more comfortable than those in his own quarters.

He checked the guest register. Aside from Formey, there were three other guests: Hostij, O’Meara, and Taybill. He’d have to interview each of them in turn.

Frida Hostij was a noted police negotiator from the North New South Carolina police force on Mars. She was a shapely, athletic-looking brunette who was dressed well, in good quality off-the-rack garments: Gordon, who considered himself a snappy dresser, tended to notice details of other peoples’ outfits. Still, he couldn’t help thinking that the trim short-sleeve top was, for her, a mistake, since it gave prominence to an incompletely erased tattoo on her left forearm. Gordon couldn’t keep from stealing glances at her forearm while he questioned her, but the partially-eradicated tattoo remained stubbornly indecipherable.

Hostij had been assigned the suite next to Formey’s, and there was a connecting door between the rooms. This allocation, Gordon learnt, had not been accidental: the two were romantically involved. Furthermore, they’d apparently been talking together in Formey’s suite not half an hour before he’d met his end.

“—can’t *believe* it!” she complained. “We— we were going to start a new life, at Colony 337 around Barnard’s Star! He was going to leave his wives for me! I’ll — I’ll kill him!”

“He’s already dead,” Gordon observed.

“No, I mean — whoever did this!” She breathed deeply, and steepled her hands atop the bridge of her nose before burying her face in her hands. Gordon waited a minute, and then offered a handkerchief which was disdainfully waved away. Hostij gave a healthy snort, replaced her hands in her lap, and lifted her gaze back to meet his. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and with stray moisture. “Thanks, I’m fine now,” she said. “It’s just such a *waste!*”

“Ms. Hostij,” Gordon asked. “My condolences: this is a difficult time for you.” (She snorted again, more derisively this time.) “However, I need to ask. Do you have any evidence to support your assertion that Mr. Formey was going to leave all the trappings of a highly successful career, all his family ties, to embark on a...romantic adventure with you? In a colony which, from all the media reports, is shall we say rustic to say the least?”

“*Rustic?*” she snapped. “Listen, Mr. Mammoth, or whatever your name is! I don’t have what it takes for your amateur skepticism right now. I’m telling you straight. I...didn’t...kill...Neil! I could *never* do that!”

“Yes, you could,” Gordon protested, bristling at the ‘mammoth’ slur. “You’re trained to kill in the line of duty.”

She sighed, as if dealing with a child. “Yes, alright, I’m a *cop*, I’m trained-to-kill-in-the-line-of-duty. But that doesn’t mean I could kill Neil. I could *never* kill Neil! And no, I don’t have any *proof* that he was going to leave them, he just told me so. But he was telling the *truth*. And *I’m* telling the truth!” She sounded exasperated: Gordon supposed he could hardly blame her. She reached into her purse for a make-up mirror.

Gordon persisted. “Nonetheless, Ms. Hostij, you have to admit it doesn’t look good.”

“What doesn’t look good?” she asked, glancing up from the mirror, and back again.

“Your story, I mean. You might have just found out that, in fact, he wasn’t going to leave his wives for you. We have only your word for it that he didn’t. You’re in an adjoining room, with ready access to his suite, *and* you’re trained in the use of lethal force. Means, motive, and opportunity. Plus, you don’t have an alibi.”

She clenched her fists. The look that she shot him could skin a small furry animal. “Arrrhg! But I *DO* have an alibi! Honestly, you don’t know the first thing about interrogation!” She took a calming breath. “Listen, I told you at the beginning! All the time I was in here talking to Neil, the other guy was in here too! He wouldn’t leave! Eventually I got called to reception to deal with some irregularity with my baggage. They other guy was still in here when I left.”

“What other guy?”

“Look, I don’t know what his flicking name is! The wrestler.”

“What wrestler?”

She adopted the tone normally used by primary school teachers when talking to slow learners. “How many wrestlers do you have in this place?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I should be able to find that out through my enquiries. Thank you.”

She stood to leave.

He called her back at the door. “Before you go, Ms. Hostij, do you mind telling me what the tattoo says? Said?”

“Look, it’s not important.”

“Nonetheless...”

She sighed. “Very well. It’s a membership badge. Was. Indecisives Anonymous.”

One Ton O’Meara, the champion Mexican-Irish sumo wrestler, settled himself awkwardly into the chair across from Gordon. O’Meara, dressed in a short-sleeved open-necked leisure suit, appeared rather more liberally endowed with body hair than Gordon had expected for one of his profession. In other respects, however, he fitted the mould.

Gordon asked how he was connected to Formey.

“He’s my new manager,” O’Meara answered. “Was my new manager. Suppose I’m between managers at the moment.”

O’Meara was surprisingly softly spoken for one of his stature. If Hostij was fiery, this one, Gordon surmised, was a gentle giant. Nevertheless, he may still have something to hide...

“Did you have any complaints?”

“Against Neil?” O’Meara paused. “No, look, Mr. Melon,” — Gordon winced — “he was fairer than fair to me. I’d come to see him, ‘cos I was unhappy about this gig—”

“Gig?”

“The wrestling match at the Plaza.” (There was, Gordon recalled, some sort of combat-sport convention currently being held at the hotel towards which they were ascending.) “I was nervous about it, see, ‘cos I ain’t accustomed to zero-gee wrestling. Gravity’s my friend, you might say, and zero-gee, it ain’t my friend, not so much. I ain’t never done zero-gee wrestling, and I wanted to see with Neil if it was somethink I had to go through with. Stomach’s been getting a bit unsettled, even on this trip, as the gravity falls away.” O’Meara stifled a belch. “Excuse me.”

“Go on.”

“Anyway, Neil was very understanding. He wrote me a cheque, just today, one million credits, which is a lot of money even at my level...said that I should go through with the match, even if I didn’t do too well at it. He said that even if I made a right bollocks of it, it was better to be seen to compete than to pull out at the last minute. And he said that the payment was just to, like, keep me on side, ‘cos he had big plans for me.”

“Can you show me this cheque? Do you have it?”

O’Meara reached into his pocket and pulled out a dainty black wallet, from which in turn he extracted a neatly folded rectangle of paper. He handed this to Gordon.

The cheque looked authentic enough. Except — “Mr. O’Meara, do you realise that this is dated for three days’ time?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s for after the match, see. He told me he was post-dating it, just as insurance to make sure that I did compete in the match. That was fine with

me.” He paused. “Don’t suppose I’ll be able to cash it now, him being so dead and all.”

The third guest, Trey Taybill, was the steward (and, it transpired, also astronomer, baggage handler, custom officer and booking clerk) for a Chastity Cosmic passenger flight due to depart from the Plaza in four days’ time. Gordon observed to himself that Chastity, a budget starcruiser line seeking to undercut Andromeda Spaceways on the popular routes, appeared to have the same business model as the Skyward hotel chain...

Taybill, who was returning to space from a few days’ gravity leave, had the short, slim physique favoured by Chastity’s employment officers. The budget line was notorious for offering very low upfront fares while being ruthless on excess baggage charges, and its procurement policy was in line with its cut-throat attitude to inflight mass minimization for reasons of fuel economy. As another symptom of the company’s drive to pare fuel costs, it was a prolific dumper of inflight waste: discarded Chastity meal wrappings, utensils, and used VR headsets were now rumored to be the main source of interstellar debris on the main space routes.

Gordon had done a quick background check on Taybill, as he had on the other guests. Taybill’s employment record was so clean you could eat off it, but he had a longstanding debt to the Plaza’s casino. Not a massive amount, but slowly growing despite regular payments. Gordon asked about the debt.

“Look, Mr. Mammogram,” (*Mamon*, Gordon breathed to himself. Was that so hard? Or maybe that dyslexia virus had compromised his name-badge again.) “It was a long time ago. I bet on a sure thing that turned out to be not so certain. I’m paying it off.”

“But the debt’s increasing.”

“So I like a little flutter now and then. Doesn’t everybody? Don’t you?”

“I’m not a bird, Mr. Taybill.”

The guest glowered. “Look, why you asking me about my debt? That’s old news. I’m a good employee...aren’t you supposed to be investigating a murder, or some such?”

“I’m just seeking to establish possible motives, Mr. Taybill. Anyway, who said anything about murder?”

“It’s all over the hotel. The walls have ears.”

This wasn’t strictly true, but Gordon thought that he could surmise the intended meaning.

Taybill continued. “Look, I’ve never met this Formey. I’ve never had anything to do with him, until now. Sure, I’ve seen his ugly mug in the newscasts, who hasn’t? And I guess I know him by reputation. But I’ve never seen him in person, never spoken to him. You can check that, any way you want to.”

Gordon proceeded to his next question. “Can you account for your movements between the altitudes of 2972 and 3605 kilometres this afternoon?”

Taybill wrinkled his brow. “Yeah, I was in the foyer most of that time. There were some irregularities with a guest’s baggage, and I was just completing the preflight formalities with her.”

“Which guest? And what kind of irregularities?”

“Ms. Hostij, I think her name is. She’s traveling to Barnard’s Star with us. And one of her bags was five grams over the stated value. Honestly, you’d think people would know better than to try to fiddle the system.” Taybill’s face registered disgust. “Anyway, once she’d stopped yapping and paid the two-fifty credits, I signed off on it. That was about...3400 kilometres, I think. Then I went to my room to finish up the paperwork on that. As it happens, I was just about to call on Mr. Formey after that — he’s travelling with Chastity too — when all this happened.”

“Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts between 3400 and 3605 km?”

“Well, no, I was in my room alone, but — actually, yes, they should be able to. I filed a report from my desktop console right about that time. There’s a reply from our booking clerk. You can check my desktop, if you like.”

Gordon sealed off Formey’s suite and retired to the observation lounge to mull things over. This was normally his favourite part of the lifting cycle. Earth below was a huge haze-limned ball, sliding further into night; the visible stretch of the elevator tower still glinted in bright sunlight, even though the sun had set several hours ago at the tower’s anchorage point many thousands of kilometres below. Tonight, though, the spectacle held little appeal. He had to think through the interviews he’d just completed.

Hostij had seemed genuine, but could conceivably have had a motive if Formey had not, as she had claimed, sought to accompany her to Barnard’s Star. But she hadn’t, by all accounts, had any time alone with Formey during the critical time window. She had alibis supported by O’Meara, by Taybill, and finally by the hotel’s concierge / receptionist / cleaner / counselor / gardener / childcare operator Belle Hopp, who’d been answering Hostij’s query about laundry service after the baggage issue had been settled. O’Meara *had* had some time alone with Formey, but was also in possession of a postdated cheque from Formey which was sizeable enough to constitute, in Gordon’s mind, negative motive. And Taybill appeared not to have made contact with Formey at all, with his whereabouts confirmed by first Hostij and then (electronically) by the Chastity booking clerk. Gordon had only Taybill’s word on the last, though — he’d need to check that console for himself, to verify that.

All of them seemed like honest, respectable types in their various fashions: Hostij the lovestruck hardened cop, O’Meara the sentimental but straightforward sumo wrestler, Taybill the overworked and earnest spaceline employee. None of them, when you looked at it, had a clear reason for wanting Formey dead. Of course, there could be some kind of conspiracy between them — O’Meara with either of the other guests, or Hostij with Taybill — but that didn’t go any way towards clarifying the motive, nor explaining how the deed was executed.

And, to top it off, no weapon, no fingerprints, and still no cause of death (the autopsy scanner seemed stumped, and still pronounced merely *'dead'*. Maybe it was indicating it needed its batteries changed.) Perhaps, against all of Gordon's better judgement, it really was a natural-causes case after all.

Sometimes, he knew, the best way to set your mind on a problem was to give it a different problem. At least, it worked that way with puzzles and crosswords. He wasn't sufficiently experienced to know if detection followed the same rules, but it sounded plausible. He pulled out his handheld and selected the 'Riddle/Trivia' function. He'd played this so often before that many of the items from its hundred-thousand-entry memory bank were familiar, but straight up he got a new one:

Can a dead horse travel as fast as a live horse?

Well, the answer seemed obvious — no — but he suspected there was a trick behind it. He couldn't see, however, what the trick was. He paused the trivia program and selected a couple of crosswords, one easy and one a fairly challenging cryptic, to unwind a little further. Then, still none the wiser, he clicked for the answer to the riddle.

No. Under British law, a motorized horse transporter can travel at 30 miles an hour through urban areas, but if the horse dies the vehicle becomes a carrier of horseflesh and must immediately slow to 20 m.p.h.

Surprisingly, this sparked something. He thought, now, he could see a good and compelling motive...

He placed a call to the Chastity business counter at the skytop plaza. His call was answered by the receptionist / sales assistant / chaplain.

"Chastity, Helena Handbaskett speaking. Can I help you?"

Gordon gave his details. "I'm working on a murder investigation down here. I need to know the flight data and ticketing arrangements for four of your passengers."

"I'm sorry, we're not supposed to release that information, it's confidential." She paused and leaned conspiratorially into the mouthpiece to whisper to him. "Look, according to your record you have thirteen thousand frequent flier points with us. If you're prepared to cash those in, I can give you the information you need. Just don't tell my supervisor."

"Who is your supervisor?"

"For the moment, me."

"Uh, I'll try not to. Also, while you're at it, if you could send a full description of your passenger and freight handling policies and procedures, that would be very useful."

"I'm sure we have that somewhere." She adjusted her glasses. "Do you want all of that as a facsimile, an email, a direct download..."

He'd need a hard copy, for his records. He put on his best TV detective voice. "Just the fax, ma'am. Just give me the fax."

He'd always wanted to say that.

The documentation, when it arrived, told him everything he wanted to know. Hostij was ticketed on the flight, four days' time, to Barnard's Star. O'Meara wasn't booked on any outward flights. And Taybill was on the crew list for the departure, three days from now, for Proxima Centauri.

Most intriguingly, Formey had been booked on both the Barnard's Star *and* Proxima Centauri flights. Now that was curious. Was Formey attempting some vainglorious application of quantum duality to the ticketing process? He couldn't be on *both* flights...Gordon checked the time of purchase. They'd been booked only seconds apart, about a week ago. He'd purchased them, then, at the same time. This, to Gordon, suggested that he was seriously entertaining the idea of starting over with Hostij, but wanted an escape route if he changed his mind in the interim. And neither ticket had been cancelled...

He read further through the documentation. Yes, *this* was what he'd suspected. This was what tied it all together.

Gordon used the eyeball and thumb once more, to enter the guest's room. He knew roughly what he was looking for, but wasn't sure where to find it. Wardrobe... suitcase...bedside drawer...kitchenette cupboard...bathroom cabinet...all negative. It *had* to be here somewhere!

Wait a minute. He looked again at the bedside digital clock. *That* didn't look like Skyward's usual model! He carefully picked up the electronic clock, turned it over, examined it. Yes, this confirmed his suspicions. Now, where was the activator on this thing?

He pressed three buttons before he found the one that gave the desired effect. Even though he'd been partially expecting it, the sudden apparent materialization of Neil B. Formey, tyrannical multi-sesquillionaire, was startling. Not least because the animated tycoon was at least three metres tall. He twiddled the control surfaces on the 'clock' until he found the magnification controls. Now...that looked more realistic.

The holographic projection was indeed remarkably lifelike. Presumably, some of the controls on the 'clock' would dictate motion, and perhaps the setup was also designed to convey sounds, some simple phrases and such. However, he didn't need to check that out right now. This should be enough to—

"Boy, you sure lucked out," the voice at the doorway commented, with a nasty edge. "Ordinarily, I bet you couldn't solve a two-piece jigsaw puzzle without looking at the picture on the box."

Gordon turned to face the figure in the doorway. His attention was first commanded by the weapon that was directed at him. This was only natural since, aside from the evident lethality of the piece, it was also the weapon that had spoken at him. He recognized it as one of the most feared items of portable weaponry in known space. A needle gun.

“Shoulda stuck at washing the dishes, lift-boy,” the gun jeered. “Your snooping has just got you into a whole plateful of trouble.”

Although the needle gun’s jeers and verbal jabs could induce apoplexy in the exceptionally weak-hearted, they weren’t usually fatal. Rather, they were a novelty feature designed to improve the weapon’s sales. It was the gun’s ‘sticks and stones’, rather than the names it called him, which would hurt Gordon. Sticks and stones being in this case, he strongly suspected, the gun’s standard-issue ammunition: flechettes of cryocooled water ice which encapsulated a lethal neurotoxin. The hardened ice needles were of subcellular thickness and incredibly sharp (‘sharper than a thankless child’ was the sales tag, he recalled), and capable of piercing skin and muscle without leaving any marks discernible to the naked eye. The neurotoxin, too, was necrodegradable, so that the whole projectile had a remaining lifetime, when fired, which was only slightly greater than that of its victim. A ruthless weapon, and one with a nasty sense of humour.

“For someone called Gordon, you ain’t exactly flash,” the gun commented sardonically.

Gordon managed to wrest his gaze from the gun and lifted his face towards his assailant’s.

“Look, for pity’s sake, don’t do anything you’ll regret,” he pleaded.

“Regret?” the gun scoffed. “What could anyone possibly regret about snuffing out your miserable existence? And what in hell’s name do you think you can do to protect yourself against a Deadly-Sirius 357 Needle Gun?”

“I have the law on my side,” Gordon responded. He had to admit, it sounded weak even to him. He’d have to do better than that. I will *not* go gentle into that good riddance, he told himself. “Go on,” he said. “Tell me why you did it.”

Taybill shrugged. “Look, if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll just shoot.” He stepped fully into the room and allowed the outer door to close, sealing off Gordon’s only feasible escape route.

Taybill did not look at ease with the weapon he deployed. His face was pale and tense, his hands were unsteady, and his aim was poor. To counter this, the gun’s ammunition pretty much obviated the need for a keen eye: if a round hit you anywhere, you were more or less assured of death.

Gordon’s mind pulsed with the unfamiliar problem of a life-and-death puzzle. He was keenly aware that every action, every word choice, on his part was critical. A skilled negotiator (such as Hostij) might well be able to talk Taybill down, to convince him that the sensible thing was not to take another life, but Gordon wasn’t Hostij. He was under no delusion that he had anything like the required verbal skills to defuse Taybill. Furthermore, the needle gun was semi-autonomous and perfectly capable of firing itself if it felt the situation warranted it. Any attempt by Gordon to dissuade Taybill would probably therefore be disastrous. His best hope, and that only merely as a tactic for delaying the inevitable, was to keep the dialogue going. Time was all he had to play for now.

“Tell me why you did it,” he asked again.

“Why should I bother?” Taybill asked. He was nervous enough, he might just fire the gun accidentally.

“Humour me,” Gordon said, desperately. “Look, I already know why you did it. I just want to check if I’m right.”

“Don’t believe you, lift-boy,” the gun sneered. “You couldn’t figure—”

“No, I’ll prove it,” Gordon interrupted, frantically playing for time. “It was the transport charges, wasn’t it? That, and the gambling debts—”

“I’ve had it!” Taybill snapped. “Every month, another payment off my gambling debts, and then they go hike up the interest rates! I’ve been going backwards for the past year! You don’t know what it’s like...I work twenty-five hours a day, seems like, and it’s just never enough. And Formey, one-fifteen kilos of excess baggage, dead weight, at fifty credits a *gram*, just for shipping him back to Proxima Centauri. It was the answer to all my problems! I mean, most passengers, there’d never be enough in the estate to cover that kind of expense, they’d just ask for burial-at-space, but Formey’s families, they’re loaded, they could cover that without even blinking. I’ve got the transmission all set to go, official Chastity letterhead and everything, just as soon as I finish with you here.” His fingers twitched on the gun’s trigger housing.

Gordon swallowed. “And the projector? That was so, from Chastity’s perspective, Formey took the flight as a *live* passenger, am I right? So you could then just pocket the baggage payment from Formey’s family, and nobody at Chastity would be any the wiser. You know, I wasn’t at all suspicious of you until I remembered that you’d named yourself as an alibi.”

“What d’you mean?” Taybill asked. The needle gun was starting to hum in a way that couldn’t be good. Powering up for something.

“You *are* the booking clerk, right? So that email confirming that you were at your desktop when the murder was committed, that originated from your own computer. You sent yourself an email, confirming your whereabouts, and you changed the timestamp on it with no problems and no inconsistencies because *the whole thing never left your computer.*”

“See if you’re so smart dead,” the gun jeered, and Taybill’s finger closed on the trigger—

The room thumped as though hit by a small earthquake. Taybill was suddenly knocked prone by the flattened door. A larger-than-life figure stepped through the broken doorframe and cast his eyes around the room, eventually coming to rest on Taybill’s broken form beneath the heavily-dented door.

Gordon hadn’t known that sumo wrestlers could move so fast.

O’Meara helped Gordon pull the door off Taybill. The latter was plainly dead, though whether this was the result of the impact, or due to the fact that the needle gun had burst apart in the crash, couldn’t be determined. Might never be known.

“I hope I wasn’t out of line there,” O’Meara said, earnestly staring into Gordon’s eyes. “I was just walking to my room, and I couldn’t help but overhear — your corridor walls must be pretty thin, I could hear every word.”

Thank God for mass minimization, Gordon thought. In the right places, at least. “No,” Gordon replied. “No, you did good. It was him or me. And frankly, I’m glad it was him.”

“So what was all that about?”

“Look, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can tell you anything more than you overheard. And I’m afraid I have to ask you not to tell anyone else about this for now. I’ve got to make a report on this, and then we’ll both need to talk to the police once we get to the Plaza. Paperwork — you know...”

Gordon eyed O’Meara up and down, left to right. Taybill had been hoping for Formey’s weight in gold, but *O’Meara*...O’Meara was worth two Formeys, at least. Two Formeys, plus change. “Listen, word of advice. Just...be careful next time you book a flight on Chastity Cosmic.”

“Not to worry,” O’Meara responded, with a toothy, open smile. “I always travel Andromeda Spaceways.”

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Greg Hughes
2007

Scattersmith

...David J Kane

I arrived a few minutes early and paused to catch my breath at the top of the stairs outside the meeting hall. Although it was a cold, clear morning, sweat dripped down my lower back and my legs burned. No phial hung from the leather cord around my neck, and I sorely missed my wife.

"You're getting old and out of shape," said Gung Gung from within my head. "Soon you'll be too fat to fly, Paddy, and then where will we be?"

"Shut up," I whispered. "I'm 33. And I'm eating for two, remember. I've still got abs of steel."

"Molten steel. Stuffed with fat."

I tapped my stomach defensively, like a pregnant woman in late second trimester. It wasn't that bad. Gung Gung was a father of lies.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned around, almost tripping over my concertina briefcase. I hoped I hadn't been heard. Gung Gung had lived in my head since the day Chloe was murdered in what we liked to call 'the accident'. But I still hadn't got the knack of telepathy. It was unnatural: like snorkeling.

A perky girl-woman of around nineteen skipped up the stairs effortlessly. She had a bouncing, auburn pony-tail, a guitar case strapped across her back and she wore a blue baby-doll dress that exposed taut, tanned arms and shoulders. She doubled over in front of me to tie up her right shoe, stood up, flashed me a smile and set off toward the hall, humming.

"Not everyone thinks I'm past it," I said.

"Stop embarrassing yourself," said Gung Gung. "I know women. That wasn't flirting. She pities you. We all do."

I ignored the graybeard, and followed the Guitar Girl into the college hall. My brother-in-law, Jason, was late back from Ulaan-Baatar; and we were enrolling him to ensure his absence wasn't noticed. We'd covered his tracks well enough. But I was nervous.

"Don't worry about it," said Gung Gung, rudely reading my thoughts. "He's fine. Probably too busy yurting Mongolian lasses to worry about making contact."

The old man was trying hard to convince himself the boy was safe. Jason was Gung Gung's only grandson. We both hated the fact he had to make the trip alone. But we had no choice. We weren't qualified to do it.

The hall was huge, designed for mass graduations. The chairs had been pulled out and the students, clad almost universally in black, covered the space like a pimped porridge of asphalt.

For some reason — perhaps to attract the overseas kids whose parents funded the college — the stage hall had been decorated like an Emperor’s palace. Floodlights had been installed, giving the hall the ambience of a 7-Eleven at two on a Sunday morning. The stench of warm beer in plastic cups added to the atmosphere.

“You should feel at home, old timer,” I said, pointing at faux columns plastered with tinfoil dragons. “Aren’t you from the the Christmas Decoration Dynasty?”

“Funny fat-man,” said Gung Gung. “Let me remind you, I am Malay; *your* dad was Chinese.”

“Right. You guys were playing jungle games with orangutan while my family reviewed affairs of state.”

“Cowering in hutong-hovels, more likely,” he muttered. “Nursing head sores from scraping all day to their superiors — all 500 million of them. And let’s not forget your mother’s clan, digging for fungus with their fingers on the shores of Irish bogs. And you do take after your mother.”

“Touché,” I said, smiling. He was right. I had my mother’s height, pale skin, and brown, curly hair. The fact that I hadn’t dashed my head against rocks to rid myself of Gung Gung suggested I had also inherited her patience.

I approached a woman seated regally at the reception desk. She was globular and lumpen, like a gelatinous snow-woman and her fingers were dry-withered sticks with rings. She was scrabbling about like a cashier in a windstorm, trying to keep a heap of brown bags stacked neatly. The plastic bags were emblazoned proudly with the words ‘Recycled’.

“Welcome to Enrolment Day,” she whined, lifting up a bag like an arthritic crane. “Here is your information kit, and here,” she said, fumbling about in a jar for a few moments, then opening her fist into the bag, “are some complimentary condoms.”

“What the hell kind of place is this?” said Gung Gung acidly. “No grandson of mine is going to waste his seed shooting into synthetic sheep intestines. My line must continue.”

“Please,” I said. “Do you have to be that graphic? I don’t want to think about my brother-in-law having sex.”

“Perfectly understandable,” said the jellied snow-crone, thinking I’d been addressing her. “But we feel strongly at this college that young adults need to be educated fully so that they can make rational choices about sex.”

“Ridiculous,” snorted Gung Gung into my head, enjoying my embarrassment. “Tell this she-blob that young bucks will always run wild, no matter how many sermons they prattle-preach.”

I declined. Instead, I nodded my thanks at the receptionist, stuffed the bag into the inside pocket of my suit jacket, and strolled into the main body of the hall.

I surveyed the room, looking for the pre-med counter. Then, for no reason, my throat tightened and my hands started to shake.

“Careful,” whispered Gung Gung, all business. “I smell Blackgum.”

“Jason!” I said, alarmed. “Do you think—”

“Shhh,” commanded Gung Gung. “Your guard is low. They may have been watching us.”

I studied the room, sniffing for the outsider. This was not going to be easy. At enrolment, the students were strangers to each other. Many masked their natural

hair color and scent, whilst others had pierced and tattooed themselves beyond recognition.

“Let’s trance up,” said Gung Gung.

I shook my head. “Not here. There’s too much youth about. The place stinks of fear. It could go wrong.”

I reached into my briefcase and pulled out my cell phone. I had switched it off, so I held down the on button until it lit up and sang its introductory jingle. Then I flipped it over, impressed the buttons into my palm and chanted a muted summons.

Spikes jutted silently from the 1, 3, 7 and # keys into my skin. I had expected it, but still flinched, gripping the cell tightly as the blood pooled in my palm. There was a dreadful lap-sucking sound, and the phone convulsed and erupted claws, fur and teeth.

Cupping phone to face like a commuter furtively calling his mistress, I whispered instructions in bad Mandarin and released the monotreme’s spirit. I felt its sticky poison spur caress my wrist and pause. Then the creature slipped down my leg and scampered away across the floor.

“That thing doesn’t respect you,” said Gung Gung. “One day he will plunge that hook of his straight into your arm and that’ll be it for us. I will kill it before I let that happen.”

“You will do nothing,” I said, knowing I would struggle to stop him if he willed it. More than ever, Jason needed our protection and Gung Gung would do anything necessary to defend him.

I watched my helper scuttle up and down the room. Though hard to control, he was worth the aggravation. My practices are not tidy, but only a trained Smith could see a platykuk work the room. After a few minutes, he found his mark.

She sat off to the left side of the hall, nestled quietly between the college caving and kayaking societies. She was plain and frumpy. Her face was caked in a frozen mudslide of makeup that emphasized, rather than distracted from, her ordinariness. What gave her away was near invisible, but not to platykuk.

She was a Blackgum. Most likely, she’d not been spawned that way. Maybe it was even temporary: soul siphoned by a herd of spirits. If so, I’d just sit with her, wait until the brats returned, and then scold them. But what I feared more — particularly with Jason meant to be here — was something worse.

“Got her, then,” said Gung Gung, always fast with the obvious. “Let’s finish this, get the kid enrolled and then find him.”

I stepped behind an outlandish green and gold chess club banner, and muttered an Irish ditty-chant my mother had taught me. Then I pulled the glamour down over my head and set off towards the girl. Almost immediately, I felt the extra attention.

“Told you you were falling apart. Didn’t need pretty-boy smocks a few years ago.”

“Just a bit of insurance,” I said morosely. “Plenty of people around. We don’t want this to get messy.”

I could almost hear Gung Gung’s smirk. The old man was as subtle as an earthquake. We were unlikely to come out of this Alpine fresh.

I stepped up to her table and was about to introduce myself when she surprised me by speaking first.

“Hi,” she lisped. “Interested in caving?”

A slattern spelunker. Guess it made sense in a way. But I was not expecting a chat. Most Blackgums are the strong, silent type, though they come in all shapes and sizes. Lacking imagination, most gravitate towards cliché: bloodsuckers, shape-shifters, blobs and other monsters with zippers down their bellies. This one looked like a sullen teenager that had been grounded for summer.

“She’s fresh,” muttered Gung Gung.

I nodded: things were harder when they talked. It was hot under the lights, especially under the glamour, but she wore a thick woolen turtleneck and blue cord jeans and seemed as cool as an ice-block. Almost human, but for her head, which she held at almost forty-five degrees from centre, like an inquisitive sparrow.

“Um, hi. I’m actually here for my kid brother. He’s into caving.”

“Sure,” she said, stroking her fire hydrant legs. “You look too young to have a *kid*-brother starting college.”

“That’s what happens when you start dressing ten years younger than you are,” said Gung Gung.

“Thanks. He is t...*five* years younger than me. Look,” I said, leaning in and doing my best impression of bedroom eyes. “It’s a bit stuffy in here. You want to go get a drink?”

She righted her sparrow head and looked from side to side. Some things hadn’t changed since I’d been at college: the Caving Club was hardly beating people back from its doors. “OK. Sure. Let’s go,” she said grabbing her satchel and duffel coat.

“Great pick-up line,” huffed Gung Gung. “Is that the same one you used to ensnare my grand-daughter?”

If I remembered things correctly — and I’d been pretty drunk at the time — it was Chloe who had done most of the ensnaring. Embarrassed outrage fluttered between my ears. Some memories couldn’t be quarantined from Gung Gung’s part of my brain. But head-sharing was part of the deal; and we both had to cope with it.

“I’m Sam, by the way,” said the cave girl, bringing me back to the task at hand.

“And I’m John,” I said, stooping over. “There’s my cell. I must have dropped it.”

I straightened up and grabbed Sam’s hand and led her away towards the exit. A faint suck-pulse and an echo of evil throbbed through her palm. This was no spirit joy-ride. The theft was irreversible. She was gone.

My glamour started to slip, so I stepped up the pace.

“You in a hurry, mister?” she said, then laughed. “I like that.”

“Life’s too short to dilly-dally,” I answered, feigning interest in the corpse.

“Too short to dilly-dally,” cooed Gung Gung in a schoolgirl voice. “You should have been a philosopher, not a lawyer.”

“Then you’d still be living in that stone hut in Taiwan, rather than a ritzy mansion,” I shot back, whispering under my breath.

“What?” asked Sam.

“Bit of tension,” I said, sleazily. “In my shoulders. Must be excited. Don’t know why.”

Sam smirked, reached over and massaged my neck. Despite myself, I blushed. Had he still owned any, Gung Gung’s eyes would have rolled.

We exited the hall and walked down a flight of stairs, side by side, in silence. When we reached the stairwell, we turned to each other. Like a french horn player with braces, she pressed her lips together in the approximation of a smile.

Gripping Sam's left shoulder, I pushed her gently through the fire doors to the landing, lent her up against the wall and squatted slightly, dropping my briefcase quietly onto the floor. She closed her eyes, and opened her mouth, waiting.

Sam's gums were black and bloody. Her teeth were razors, and her breath was mulched manure. I felt her bind the fire doors from the outside. She was hungry for my soul: anything to fill the vacuum.

My glamour died with a loud pop, and she opened her eyes, surprised. I snapped her slavering jaws together and smashed her head into the wall until it cracked open and shards of teeth fell out.

The creature roared and kicked out at me, her half-severed tongue flopping out of her mouth. Wafts of heated blue cheese and peat, mixed with blood, assailed me and I fought the urge to gag. I blocked her feet with my right fist, and punched her off-balance with my left. She fell face down and smacked her battered head onto the concrete floor.

I stomped on her neck, hearing it crack, and bent down to rip open my case. Yanking three grapple-darts from their casings, I kicked her over onto her back and jammed silver barbs into her bug eyes. Then I reached into my coat, grabbed my phone and shoved it down her convulsing throat.

My ravenous helper tore the Blackgum apart. I pinned her down, my knees on either side of her pelvis, my hands muzzling her gnashing mouth. After a few minutes, platykuk emerged from the left sleeve of her turtleneck, covered in stinking gore, but clearly sated. He had left no flesh, just broken bones draped in skin, which I pulverized with a grind-song as I toweled and turned off my exhausted helper. I stacked Sam's remains in my briefcase for proper burial later and latched the case shut.

"Nice work," said Gung Gung, begrudgingly. "Bit sloppy at the end, though, and you took too long. We could have been caught."

I said nothing, breathing heavily. Truth told, it had been far too easy.

"What's wrong?" teased Gung Gung. "Did I hurt your feelings?"

"She should have sensed us and run — especially as the glamour slipped. She was too new, still acting human — not just mimicking — like she didn't know anything else."

"Forget it," said Gung Gung. "A dead Blackgum is a good Blackgum."

"But I'm thinking the snatch may have happened in one go this morning."

"Which means —" said Gung Gung.

"Which means we're in trouble."

I didn't need platykuk to locate our next quarry. Breaking Sam's binding on the fire doors took far too long. Gung Gung had remained uncharacteristically silent the whole time, and I knew he was worried — especially if Sam had been waiting for Jason.

The last thing I expected as I finally kicked open the doors was a rabid clutch purse. Its black, glo-mesh hide glittered attractively, but its maw was broken glass and its pouch and base were pocked with hundreds of tiny legs.

With an excited yodel, it ran at me and leaped onto my right leg. With its clasp anchored to my shin, it inched itself up my suit pants like a rock-climbing millipede.

I reached for platykuk, but his battery was dead. So I inhaled and spun, scanning the room for help. I could feel Gung Gung's will swell and press against my skull, ready to incinerate the feral accessory before it made it past my kneecap.

"Don't do it, Gung Gung," I whispered, my lungs straining. "We don't want its master to know we're here."

For once, Gung Gung heeded me, and shrank back into his corner like a trained labrador. I continued to spin, turning blue, the clutch clinging to my shin with determined zipper-teeth. Half-dazed, I found two willing spirits and started a discreet — but quick — summons.

The brown paper bag crackled in my jacket pocket and I slumped to the ground, woozy. The purse continued its ascent up my leg, nuzzling the back of my knee. Waiting for the tide of blood to return to my head, I felt my pocket thrum and pulsate. I reached into my jacket for the bag, then snatched my hand back away from its heat.

Two conjoined condom packs leaped from the wrinkled mouth of the bag, and cart-wheeled down my torso. The aluminum packaging melted away and two latex snakes erupted from their nests. They slithered down my leg and burrowed into the glo-mesh flanks of the shocked clutch.

The purse howled and released my leg, falling heavily to the ground. It picked itself up and retreated unsteadily up the stairs on its ciliated legs. As it ascended, my prophylactic warriors continued to worry its innards.

I wiped sweat from my brow, picked up my case, and watched the purse's writhing escape. "For a college of 20,000 kids," I said to Gung Gung, "this place has less spirit than a carpark."

"Those things did the trick," huffed Gung Gung, "though I prefer tooth against claw any day."

"Let's go bat-fowl its boss," I said, and stomped up the stairs, following the signal from my half-sated helpers.

From the hall entrance, I turned to the left and then left again, towards the Fine Arts faculty. I walked up the stairs, and down a narrow corridor, turning to the right to discover the clutch's cadaver slumped against a door at the end.

I edged forward and booted the purse away from the door. With thanks, I released the condom spirits and then looked at the wooden door. A crooked page of A4 was tacked to it: "Wiccan studies, 2.30 p.m."

"I don't get this," said Gung Gung. "College covens back in fashion. Children playing with matches. TV has a lot to answer for. If Chloe could see this—"

"She'd cast up a hex-storm they would never forget," I smiled, thinking of my late wife's talents and temper.

Nervously, I put down my suitcase and pulled out my pipe and lighter. Behind the door was a entity that could devour a Smith's soul.

My hands trembled as I lit the pipe and inhaled. After a few puffs, smoke billowed from the mouth of the pipe, redolent of rotten fish oil.

Usually, I prefer it clean: fasting, spinning, sweating — even a good drum ceremony beats drugs to kick my powers into gear. But I needed to trance up in a hurry and a few tokes can do the trick in an emergency. Not great for the short term memory, but few lasting effects if you know which mushrooms to use and where to get them.

Gung Gung whistled with delight as I drew the smoke into my lungs and out through my nostrils. A notorious junkie before the accident, I'd once found him slurping ayahuasca ale in bed. My abstinence as a Smith Gung Gung compared to a Texan ranch owner going vegan. But it was my body, my choice.

I sat down, cross-legged, and rested a minute, waiting to hear the colors. My mood lightened and I stood up, turned the brass doorknob and shouldered open the door.

Four of them sat in a semi-circle in front of a wall of bookshelves facing me. Four white, middle-class, educated women. And three in great danger.

The Zealtor and I locked eyes. "Be careful," said Gung Gung — quite unnecessarily.

At five foot, she was dressed in a beaded black flapper dress with white pumps married disastrously with blue stockings. She was in her mid-to-late forties, with mousy brown hair plastered to one side with hairspray, and a bonnet perched on her mongoose-shaped head. Smudged, black-rimmed glasses framed her weak, green eyes.

Encased in the shell of this Charleston-clubbing librarian was the most dangerous creature I had encountered since the accident. Without thinking, I raised my hand to the cord around my neck, fumbling for the missing phial. Zealtors don't loiter in colleges lecturing wannabe witches. This was a trap, but one not designed for me.

Gung Gung recoiled and masked himself as the Zealtor looked away to bind the door behind me. Her eyes flashed amber as she perceived a Smith and scanned for what she sought. Icy void sucked at my skin.

"Welcome, Jason," said the Zealtor telepathically. "Where are the witch-whore's soul-ashes?"

Furious at her slur, I shuddered, and resisted the temptation to strike. She wanted me to.

I glanced at the others, and smelt their innocence through wafts of baby powder and anti-dandruff shampoo. To the Zealtor's right sat two women in their late teens. Both goths, they were painted white, pierced, and clad in black. The woman on the Zealtor's far right was heavy, with cuts and welts carved into her incongruously tanned arms; the other was desperately thin, with glassy, bug-eyes peering out of a furry face. To the Zealtor's left, half facing me, was the Guitar Girl.

"Sorry to interrupt you, ladies," I said, gauging the effects of the pipe. "Would you mind breaking for a few minutes so I can have a word with your teacher?"

Before all hell broke loose, I wanted to get the women out. I hoped the Zealtor would release them, if only as a trade for me. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but worth a try.

"Don't call us ladies," hissed the Guitar Girl, swiveling to face me fully.

“Eva’s right,” snorted the fat girl with brown arms. “We’re not ladies. Address us as equals, or not at all.”

“And we do mind, by the way,” spat the thin, furry girl primly. “This is our time with the Goddess, and we pay for the full 60 minutes a week.”

“More likely,” whispered Gung Gung, recovering from the shock of encountering a Zealtor, “her dad pays.”

“Goddess?” I asked.

“You got a problem?” said the hefty, carved girl. “When the Goddess returns, you and your patriarchal power structures will be out on your asses.”

I was shocked — something not easily achieved in my line of work. This was worse than I thought. “Goddess? Returns?”

“Stop parroting everything they say,” snapped Gung Gung from behind his partition. “Get your mind on the game: the Zealtor dies today, or we will.”

Fair call. Momentarily, I had taken my eye off the Zealtor. She stood in the middle of the room, arms raised above her head, testing my power, smirking. Far from overwhelmed.

I flinched as the first barrage hit me. To the pupils, the Zealtor and I appeared motionless. But, on the spirit plane, the Zealtor bombarded me with fire, raking spirit-claws up and down my ribs, scratching at my intercostal muscles, her sulfuric stink spread over the back of my throat like paste.

The Zealtor lowered her arms and spirit-claws. With her physical palms facing upwards, she looked down at the girls benevolently like a nun, smiled and said: “No, dear ravens. All are welcome to suck at Mother’s teat. Let us pray for the interloper.”

The temperature dropped, as the women lapsed into prayer, bonding their spirits to the Zealtor. Only Eva kept her eyes open, glancing at me as if slightly embarrassed by the theatrics.

“Clever move,” grunted Gung Gung. “We can’t strike without hitting them in the crossfire.” I could tell Gung Gung’s rage was getting the better of him; and his will was expanding. This time, I was happy to let it.

Like a tone-deaf monk, the Zealtor sang: “Mother. Down with medicine and law and science and art. Your wisdom heals. Your powers give us strength. Let us suckle.”

“Let us, Goddess,” answered the women in unison.

I scoured each of the women’s spirits. I found low self-esteem and incompatible goals. They wanted to belong to the crowd and to stand out; to be at peace, and to live a life of action and excitement. I found young humans, straddling the divide between purpose and Blackgum.

“Zealtor-beast,” I shouted, my head spinning. “Your speech is tired. There is mud in your heart, and blood on your lips. You will not win today.”

The Zealtor laughed and hissed telepathically: “I will find your sister’s ashes, Guttersmith, and devour them. She will live in me forever, and I will destroy your kind with her power.”

For a moment, the room darkened. The two goths flickered out of existence. Eva remained rock solid, not looking at the Zealtor or the girl-disciples. Hope: I had found doubt, a way in.

“Eva,” I said. “Listen to me.” The Zealtor swung towards Eva and smiled at her endearingly. Behind her the goth girls reappeared.

“How dare you interrupt,” said Eva, glowering. “This is our space. We come here to be connected to the spirits of all living things. Why do you interfere?”

Muttering furiously, Gung Gung slithered out of my left ear and down my cheek; a leech. Tucked behind my ear, he latched his jaws and anterior suckers into the space between my jaw and lobe, lightly drawing drugged blood, swelling in size and weight, whistling as he worked.

The Zealtor was easily my match. She knew it. But she’d been expecting an apprentice Smith and didn’t know about the accident. As far as I could tell, she had no inkling of the crazy old man drinking my blood. She couldn’t know about his grand-daughter’s curse.

My eyes rolled back into my head. I tasted amber-green and caressed the outlines of Gung Gung’s whistle-notes. I felt the old trickster’s tendrils sweeping the room, carefully avoiding direct contact with the Zealtor.

“Paddy,” hissed Gung Gung, blood trickling down the back of my neck and he disengaged. “She’s not here just for the ashes.”

“What?” I said.

“The pretty one’s an Ankh. A bloody Ankh.”

We needed more time to figure this out. A surge of power coursed through my spine and groin. I hurled a cock-call to the books stacked on the shelves behind the Zealtor.

The cries of gluttonous tomes muffled the crackles as Gung Gung’s spirit-wings unfurled behind my neck, and fell flat across his thorax and abdomen. Gung Gung dropped to the floor, almost invisible and silent, and crept across the room toward the destroyer.

“Yes, Eva,” said the Zealtor, obliterating the rowdy books effortlessly. She sounded slightly less sure of herself, perhaps wondering at my audacity in the face of such firepower. “Let us all pray to the holy darkness. To the Goddess’ womb.”

“Womb,” intoned the goth girls, now dead-eyed, black-gummy mouthpieces for the Zealtor. The room stunk of rancid oranges. I soul-squinted and saw Gung Gung’s purple-black haze forming behind them like dirty halos.

I turned to Eva, my eyes falling on her open guitar case. Trying to keep the Zealtor’s attentions on me, I said to the young girl: “Eva: you think she speaks a parable. A metaphor. But believe me when I tell you that the Goddess is real. And you should fear, not worship, her.”

“No,” said Eva. “She is about the resurrection of intuition over analysis.”

The Zealtor’s spirit-claws broached my chest and scratched at my heart. Her belly scales gouged my thighs as my feeble counter-chants failed even to distract her. Poison flooded my soul.

“Yes, Eva. Intuition,” said the Zealtor, in a sing-song voice. “Of feeling over thought. Of nature over artifice. Of fertility, regeneration.”

“I want to believe,” said Eva, looking at me and then to the Zealtor. “Tell me how.”

“No one should do that for you,” I grunted, trying to sound persuasive as a sliver of the Zealot’s spirit-sting slipped beneath my right eyeball and tugged playfully at my

optic nerve. “The Goddess will give you certainty, yes, but she is life without choice, shelter, technology or laws. She infects and corrupts more than she exalts or cleanses. She hunts for a way back. She hungers to return, and the Zealtor thinks you are the way.”

“The Goddess is beauty,” intoned the self-mutilated goth, her arms now blackened tree stumps, teeming with glassy termites.

“Freedom for women over man-tyranny,” said the anorexic fluff-face, her cheeks sprouting ropes populated with knitting ticks and cockroaches.

“Nonsense, filth,” bellowed Gung Gung, materializing suddenly as he entered deep trance. “Death is democratic. Life is not. Goddess shrines do not mean women-worship. Your priests lick the Virgin’s feet; but abhor women as unclean traitors.”

Gung Gung’s spirit erupted into the form of his mother, the Red Moth. S/he disemboweled the Blackgums and destroyed their howling faces. Gritting my teeth against the stench of shredded bowels, I seized the opportunity to throw off the distracted Zealtor and to fish my darts from my pockets.

“The Goddess is not a feminist, Ankh,” Gung Gung ranted. “She is the ultimate misanthrope.” Then the old man gobbled the Blackgums whole and collapsed back into my head, incorporeal and unconscious.

The Zealtor screamed. The room pulsed three times and she fell to her knees, thunderstuck by the feedback from her destroyed creatures’ suck-souls. “Eva, listen,” she said, holding her anger in check. “I want you to be perfect.”

The Zealtor had her back to me. I summoned the guitar, harshly plucking its strings from the frets. I pulled the strings taut and propelled them at the Zealtor, garroting her neck and slashing her arms. She wailed, digging into her flesh to pull the sawing strings out.

“You don’t need to be perfect, Eva,” I shouted. “We’re not meant to be. Trying too hard brings disaster.” I closed in on the stricken Zealtor. She was recovering and there wasn’t much time.

“What are you?” asked Eva, shaking violently and in tears. “Demons?”

“Close,” I said standing over the Zealtor and commanding the strings to hold the thrashing monster down. “I am a Scattersmith. But just a man.”

Smiling, I slashed my wrist with the barb of my dart. Blood spewed into my right palm. Eva screamed as I bent down and slopped blood onto the floor. Dipping the dart’s feathered tail in the puddle of sticky red, I circle-basted the Zealtor with a containment call.

The Zealtor pulled free of the last string just as I completed the blood-circle. Searing heat in the space between my eyebrows signaled her desperate attempt to summon her helper.

“You’re not the brother. What are you?” she screamed.

“Your end,” I sneered, dripping sweat and spittle onto her face. “Are you looking for your silk purse? Now sow’s ears, and dead at that.”

The Zealtor’s unrequited summons confirmed the truth of my words and she screamed again, outraged. She clawed at my throat — physically this time. Her green eyes projected a brilliant white light. Clearly in shock, Eva looked up, transfixed, and advanced towards the circle.

Bleeding out fast, I rocked on my heels and countered. Gung Gung and I were spent, so I drew on Jason, clouding the Zealtor's pure white light. I pitched a dart at the Zealtor's left eye and scattered her white light into a prism-dump of colors and collapsed.

"Eva!" shrieked the Zealtor, pointing at me. "He's down. Break the circle. Free me and we'll unleash paradise together."

Stricken, on the verge of blacking out, I watched impotently as Eva approached the circle.

And hesitated. And stopped.

"I don't know what you are," she said to the Zealtor. "But you're not human, and people are more important than ideas." She turned her back on the Zealtor and walked away.

Trapped, the Zealtor screamed and exploded into flames, her beaded blouse and hairspray happy accelerants. The creature tore out fists of crackling scalp mixed with melted hair and devoured them. "My brothers will find the witch's ashes and then eradicate the Smiths," she hissed. Then her head caved in and she fell back into shadowy nothingness.

Aching in every limb, torn in spirit, I crawled to Eva. She lay on her side, her legs tucked to her stomach, rocking gently. "Good, you did good," I said.

Then darkness.

I awoke to the faces of two angels flirting outrageously.

"Hi Paddy, Gung Gung," said Jason. His grey eyes twinkled as he looked with undisguised lust at Eva, who was bandaging my wrist expertly. "I felt you pulling hard, and came straight from the airport."

Jason picked up a shard of smashed guitar, using the opportunity to show off his muscular arms. "Looks like you had one hell of a party."

"Chloe?" I asked, too tired to sit up. "Is she—"

"Yes," he grinned, unlatching the empty phial from his belt loop and clipping it onto the cord around my neck. "Her soul-ashes are under the protection of the Kaleidoscope."

"You found it? They let you?"

"Moth-blood runs in his veins," said Gung Gung. "I knew they would admit him."

"Chloe would be proud of you," I said, closing my eyes.

"Thanks, Paddy," said Jason, pleased with the praise, but distracted, obviously satisfied that I'd live. "You want to introduce me to your friend?"

Eva smiled. Inside my head, Gung Gung chuckled and went back to sleep.

A Day in Her Lives

...Kevin Veale

The iPod tapped against Dr. Anita Dean's hairy chest with the rhythm of her booted footsteps. It was bastard weather, there was no arguing that. Sheets of rain stripped heat from the world and turned it a dull and shapeless grey. Her oilskin wasn't enough to prevent her feeling miserable.

By any rights, she should be inside. Inside and out of the weather.

The voice in her ears was firm. Keep moving, get out of the city. Anita settled into an easy, distance devouring stride, hunching shoulders into the oilskin to present as small a target to the rain as possible. As she did, she listened to the mantra.

"You are Doctor Anita Dean," her voice said, sounding rich and matronly. "Your priority is to make your way out of the city on foot. If possible, collect food and other supplies as you move. Track Five contains items you should seek, and how to store them. This message will recycle every three minutes, no matter what audio-track you choose. The weather forecast for Wednesday the 30th is..."

Anita strode on. She was getting warm now, despite the chill wind and rain, so clearly she needed to keep moving. Anita had a distinct awareness that exercising under an oilskin in the rain *always* made her balls itch. She paused for a moment, stride easing. There was something incongruous about that idea. Chewing the concept for a moment, she dismissed the problem as a lost cause.

The street was heavily parked up, and the otherwise empty centre lanes were dotted with cars, some parked, some crashed.

It was certainly an odd start to the day.

Brian's shirt clung to him wetly as he ran down the street under a depressing grey sky. Rain rattled down in cold windblown sheets, making him squint his eyes and shiver as the two of them ran hand in hand.

"Your name is Catherine Petersen," he barked, tone uneven as he jogged. "You're twenty-six, a taxi driver originally from London in Canada and you arrived here in Seattle last June."

The two of them scuttled down the street, Brian's face numb from the cold. He recited the details he'd learned by rote, speaking as soon as they came to mind.

"Now do me."

The woman's blue eyes glinted sharp steel. Brian wished he had her calm, even as she clutched his hand like her life depended on it.

"Brian Taretsky, legal position with the city council. Twenty-eight, single, soaking wet, Michigan born and bred, you should be used to this weather."

"This from the Canadian."

She snorted before continuing her monologue. Brian clutched at every detail she told him until Catherine's eyes flickered to his.

"I don't know where to go from here, Brian," she said, eyes intent and voice controlled. Two streets of dormant concrete buildings stained dark with rain faced them, funnelling the sighing wind over their wet clothes.

"Don't worry," he said quickly, "We need a supermarket. There has to be one near here. Look for a mall."

She threw up an arm, eyes contemptuous. "We want out of the city *fast*, not to go shopping! Quick, do me."

Brian clenched his jaw and sighed. Arguing was something they couldn't afford. They were lifelines, it was that simple. To soothe her, he began again.

"Your name is Catherine Petersen..."

Drops of water bounced from the pavement like a chilly mist climbing up the heavy flapping ankles of his trousers. It must look absurd, he thought, two adults pelting through the rain clutching each other's hands.

There was probably nobody watching anymore. Hell.

Brian held Catherine's hand tighter. The absence of street noise was surreal, oppressive, alarms in the distance muted by the storm. Catherine started telling him who he was.

He began to smell smoke. *Not* a good sign.

A vast stain of soot consumed buildings in the distance, dragging the clouds to ground level in the drifting blur. The rain smelled of acrid things he couldn't name. He *should* know something about it, but there was nothing except a nagging sense of dread. The most frustrating part was the impossibility of knowing whether the dread was because he'd forgotten, or because of *what* he'd forgotten.

They *needed* to get out of the city. They crested a corner at the top of a gentle hill and he was reminded *why*. The tangle of cars abandoned in the middle of the streets, a colourful mechanical flotsam, would be impenetrable to further vehicles. Hell. At least a dozen people wandered nearby or sheltered under the awnings of dull commercial buildings like wet sparrows. A man in a dark business suit, thin faced and bleeding from a head wound, ran towards them from one of the crashed cars. By the time he reached Brian, he'd slowed to a jog and wore a confused expression. Wincing, the man touched his scalp. As his fingers came away bloody he ran again, shouting for help. Brian's stomach lurched. He clenched Catherine's hand in his.

In ones and twos, the bedraggled people drifted towards them. Brian swore under his breath. He and Cath looked like they knew what they were doing, so of course they'd draw the bewildered like flies.

"We have to get out of here, Cath."

"No shit, Brian. And the name's Catherine."

Flickering red neon signage caught his attention for a moment over her shoulder, so Brian pointed to it.

“Catherine, there’s a mall a couple of blocks away. We can get food there, and we’re going to need supplies to get the hell out of here.”

Cath seemed frozen between the approaching people and the neon signs. “We need a car more than we need food...”

Bullshit, but deal with that later... “What’s a better place to find an undamaged car than in a car park?”

Biting off a reply, Cath nodded sharply. Brian squeezed her hand for a silent two-count and they darted past the gathering group of the genially confused. Their sudden movement startled the crowd, voices crying at them disjointedly.

“Don’t run, please—”

“Where are you going?”

Memories fired in a child of perhaps ten: “Thief! Stop, thieves!”

Brian ignored the plaintive, desperate voices. The two of them had been through this before, during the — how long had they been doing this? Hours? Days? Brian felt a yawning pit ahead of him and concentrated on the lights of the mall coming through the rain. Repeating the verbal lines tying him to Cath kept him focused, and assuaged the fear he’d forget them. He had a responsibility to her. Possibly the only responsibility that mattered, or would ever matter again for all he knew.

From the outside, the mall looked like anyone would expect. As the sliding doors opened to let the two of them in, muzak jingled. Brian shifted his weight uneasily, water squishing in his shoes.

“There’s going to be a lot of people in here, Cath.”

“It’s Catherine, and I don’t give a damn, Brian. Do me.”

It was a quick method of ending an argument. Brian bit off the syllables to Cath’s lifeline while surveying the mall lobby. It looked almost normal, diffuse lighting reflecting off beige tile on the floor and glass shop fronts. A woman wearing mall colours and an *Ask Me!* T-shirt waited patiently beside an info booth, along with an assorted queue of other would-be shoppers. It was almost funny, but the laughter caught in Brian’s throat. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to stop. Cath studied the store plan while Brian spoke of her identity.

“Supermarket’s on the upper floor. You sure we shouldn’t just steal a car?”

Brian shook his head. “You saw the state of the road out there. It’s not likely to be any better through the city. We need to assume we have to make it out on foot.”

Cath looked at him. “On foot.”

“I don’t see any alternatives safe enough to plan for.”

She looked away, face thoughtful as they walked towards the escalators. “I’m a cab driver, Brian, so I’m well aware that this is going to be a bitch. Do-able though.”

Brian stepped on to the escalator and Cath told him who he was. Hell. They were almost falling into a routine. He began forming a mental list of what they would need when they were carried onto the second floor. More milling shoppers waited for them. Brian did his best to ignore them, his cold clothes making him shiver. It was hard to think amid the drifting noise. Hard not to second-guess his own thought processes.

It was hard not to constantly try to remember whatever he might have forgotten.

“We’re going to need to wander around here briefly,” Brian said eventually.

“Why?” Cath demanded.

“Because there are things here we’ll need, which we won’t remember till we see them.”

“We might not remember them even then, Brian. We don’t know.”

Silent for a moment, Brian considered the *Ask Me!* woman waiting at her own information desk. “I think that we’re less affected by this than the others.”

Cath snorted. “If we were any worse, we would never have been able to have this conversation. Do me.”

As Brian spoke, they walked through the mezzanine floor towards where the floor plan said the supermarket would be. Cath’s eyes widened suddenly and darted towards a passing store.

“Brian, we— “

“*Keep listening, Cath!*” Brian snapped, panic tight in his gut. “If we stop now, I’ll forget the rest of who you are!”

Cath looked like he’d slapped her, face angry and pale, but she stopped and let him finish her memories. As he finished, she pointed at a stand of books by the entrance to the store.

“Had some of them in my cab, Brian,” she scanned the covers with her eyes. “Maps. We need one, and something to write with while we’re here.”

She reached over and grabbed a street map of Seattle, then a handful of pens from a jar on the book-store desk. Brian eyed her uncertainly, almost startled when Cath smiled. She flicked through the map pages and said, “We can figure out where we want to go with this, and write down where we’ve been. That way, even if we forget, we’ll have a better idea of what to do and where to go.”

Cath looked relieved under the soft mall light. Brian smiled for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Come on,” he said. “Do me, please, then we can get to the supermarket and figure out how to get out of here. The map was a damned good idea, Cath.”

She flashed a smile and didn’t correct him about her name.

The supermarket, when they found it, appeared to be where many of the people remaining in the mall were. Cath finished giving Brian back to himself while he grabbed a trolley, then looked at him.

“Where do you want to start?”

Brian shoved the trolley and scanned the aisle-signs, hoping not to look too competent for fear of drawing attention.

“Jerky?” he said thoughtfully. “Trail rations? Cans? Food that doesn’t need cooking, in case the power goes off... We shouldn’t bulk down with perishables...”

Catherine considered him doubtfully. “The power’s not going out unless something else goes wrong. Cans are heavy.”

Brian had been thinking about this. He was almost irritated that Cath hadn’t, meaning he had to spell it out. The trolley coasted to a halt as Brian turned.

“What if it isn’t just Seattle?”

They stared at each other in silence for several seconds before Brian began her litany. Catherine listened, before loading jerky into the trolley.

“You’re right, we should go through the whole supermarket, Brian. Remind ourselves of things we might need,” she said with a focused intensity. Brian nodded, telling her who she was while they grabbed more food.

The two of them turned the corner, past a young girl crying for her mother. There were two young women trying to figure out who she belonged to. Further down the next aisle, a boy of eight with tousled blonde hair devoured chocolate bars off the shelf. He looked up every ten seconds or so, eyes wide and expecting intervention, unsure which approaching adult might belong to him.

Feeling ill, Brian clung to purpose by reciting Catherine’s world. They collected bottled water and dry food, Cath grabbing bundles of band-aids, disinfectant and medicine. A weeping middle-aged Asian woman in a charcoal business-suit weaved towards Brian and clutched his arm.

“I cannot get out! Where are the children?”

Brian’s mouth worked while he flailed for something to say, but the woman recoiled suddenly and cried out “Who are you?” before running away. He watched her run unsteadily down the aisle, aware of Cath’s worried gaze. Suddenly, he was also aware that he couldn’t remember what had gone wrong.

“Can you remember what caused this?” he asked, wondering what showed in his eyes. Cath inhaled slowly and pushed drying hair out of her eyes.

“Well hell, Brian.”

Brian took a deep breath. “It’s okay. We need to get out of here, find somewhere safe. Do you think we pay for any of this?”

Her laughter was harsh. “That depends if anyone makes us.”

Screams and an unintelligible roar came from the end of the aisle near where Brian thought the check-out counters were, making them both jump.

What next?

Wordlessly, they pushed the trolley closer to the sounds of mayhem. A tall man with startling blue eyes and torn jeans lashed at people with a belt.

“None of you live here!” he roared, “Get the hell out of my home!”

For a split second his eyes met Brian’s, and then the man charged at them.

“Put down my stuff!”

Brian grabbed the trolley and ran as fast as he could, nearly tripping over its wheels. He felt heavy footsteps on the tile behind them as he ran past the check-out counters, then toward the exit. The doors slid open without being touched, the movement surprising him. It was at least three seconds after he went through the door before he realised Cath wasn’t with him.

Brian turned to see her grab a large corrugated bottle of water from a sale display. With a tearing shriek, she swung it at the head of their pursuer, all her weight behind it. The blow knocked him totally off balance. He staggered into the side of the door with a sharp *crack*.

The guy was bleeding from a vicious cut across his forehead when Cath stepped over him. She walked calmly up to their trolley, breathing heavily, her eyes the same hard grey as they’d been all day. He absently went through the facts Cath had taught him about herself, then she did the same for him. Behind them, the man said, “But it’s *my* stuff...”

He put his head down on the bloodied beige tile and wept. Brian stared at him until Cath caught his attention.

“Polaroids, Brian.”

“What?”

“We’re not getting out of the city today. That much is obvious. We need to be able to identify ourselves. I saw some in the aisle before we were attacked,” she jerked her thumb over a shoulder, “and they reminded me. I’ll go get them.”

“What do we need one for?”

“Identification, Brian. We’re going to wake up tomorrow morning and I want to make sure we know who we are when we do.”

Panic went through him, iced electricity from his scalp to the soles of his feet.

“Cath, when did I move here?”

His vehemence startled her. “What?”

“When did I move here from Canada?”

She blinked rapidly and inhaled. “But — you didn’t, Brian. I did.”

Blood sang in his ears. “How sure are you?”

“Shut up.”

“How sure—”

“*Shut up*, Brian.” Cath’s snarl was feral beneath those intense grey eyes. Tight silence hung between them. After an immeasurable time span, she said evenly, “I’m going to get some cameras. Wait here.”

Watching Cath step over their fallen attacker, Brian felt numb. He didn’t know anything. His entire world was built on sand, but in a way Cath was right: They could function while nobody drew attention to that fact. He watched Cath as she jogged back into the supermarket and was able to keep line-of-sight until she went around the corner. After only a moment, she came back with Polaroids in her hands.

“Which way to the car park?” she asked tonelessly when she reached the trolley. Their assailant hadn’t moved, a thin trickle of blood pooling under the side of his face. A quick examination of the mall guide they’d used to find the supermarket gave them directions.

They travelled silently, speaking only to refresh each other’s identity. The water in Brian’s shoes felt almost warm now, but still squelched whenever he shifted his weight. The rest of his clothes were dry against his skin, but he was chilled beneath them. Nearing the doors, Brian saw that the rain had stopped for the moment across a plane of cars beneath the concrete roof of the car park, matching the colour of the sky.

Feeling distant, Brian watched Cath head out through the doors and then study something over them. So much had happened that he had no coherent chain of events to explain. How had he met Cath? Did they even know each other? What had brought them together like this?

Distant, thoughtful and numb.

Cath crowed suddenly, finger embedded in the index of her map.

“Found it!” she cried. “I know where we are!”

Brian caught hold of her hands and the map, stilling them long enough to follow her finger. *Seattle. Renton. Cascade Shopping Centre.* The words felt familiar, but he couldn’t make them fit anything he knew. Brian sized up cars, pushing the trolley out

into the silent aisles which smelled of car fumes and rain. Something they could break into and have some hope of starting...

Except *he* didn't know how.

He turned to ask Cath and found her standing with her knuckles clenched white around the map, her face pale and unheeding of her own tears.

"*I don't know where we've been,*" she hissed.

Brian let the trolley coast to a halt, instantly irrelevant.

"Cath, it'll be all right, we—"

Arms taut around the map, she pulled away and drew a sobbing breath. Unable to even argue, Cath shook her head sharply and refused to look Brian in the face. He coaxed the map from her, ignoring the growing panic in his own gut.

They didn't have time for this.

Flicking to the right page, Brian said, "Look, it's okay. We're here, right? You found it. So where we've been *doesn't matter*. We know where we are. We have supplies." He studied the map. "Providing we move east, we're going out of the city as fast as we can, so we're not losing anything by not knowing where we've been."

She looked at him, face swollen from the tears, trying to steady her breathing. He took the pencil, highlighted their shopping centre and drew an arrow south-east, labelling it *Fastest route out of city. Help this way.*

"See? Even if we forget everything else, we can still read the road signs for where we are when we forget, and there are instructions here. It'll be okay."

She hugged him then, a warm presence against his chest in a tackle that may have surprised her as much as it did him. Brian awkwardly hugged her back, thinking of the sheer hate that had filled her eyes when he'd blurred their lives, allowing their mask of mutual competence to slip.

When she pulled away, Cath was all business, once more telling him the details of who he was. Brian absorbed all of it, but then a cold thought crawled to attention.

Both of them were basing their identities on Chinese-whispers. Would it be sensible to emphasise key parts of what they remembered, focusing on how they were going to find help? Brian's jaw clenched. There had to be help. If the nebulous doom they were running from wasn't limited to Seattle, they were just playing for time.

He waited for Cath to finish before reciting her facts. Rain started again, a gentle rising hiss kicking up the scent of moisture from the pavement outside the mall.

"We need to get out of here on foot," Brian stated.

"But there are cars all around us!"

"Do you remember how to start one? When we'd never find one of ours, even if we had one here?"

There was silence for a moment. Cath scribbled *Go on foot* underneath the instructions he'd written earlier on the map, and they went looking for an exit. While they moved, Cath flicked through the map-book then grinned brightly, surprising Brian with how much her face changed for that instant.

"Once we get out of here, Brian, we're finding a hotel."

Hotel. The word had associations which came from nowhere in particular and made Brian pause. He had to have that wrong. He looked across questioningly and saw the smile slide from Cath's face.

“Brian, we can’t. I didn’t mean — It’s late in the day, and we need somewhere to rest...”

Huh. The *assumption* in Cath’s eyes made him feel like a soggy, overgrown schoolboy. Brian resented that, resented the idea that she would presume to know his mind, and worse, that she’d conclude sex would be the first thing on his mind. Christ. He could feel her misreading his silence and expression.

“Be ruthless, Brian. If we did anything *worthwhile*, could you stand to know that you’d forget? We can’t afford that,” she said softly, before reciting his memories back to him.

Brian spotted a ramp, curling down towards some unseen lower level, and wordlessly turned towards it. He considered again the stunning anger Cath had shown him earlier. He glanced at her now, awkward in the silence and her reading of the reasons for it.

They were lifelines, but that didn’t alter the fact they were nothing to each other aside from safety. He could say something, but what would be the point? They still needed each other. Their identities could be defined solely by mutual loathing, and they’d still need each other. He watched Cath read street signs over the edge of the car park, frowning into the rain. Something in his silence felt like surrender, irritating Brian further.

Ruthless. Yeah, that was him all over.

Hands in her pockets, Doctor Anita Dean looked out across the blocks of commercial buildings and apartment blocks that faded into local suburbia. The weather was clearing, but according to what notes she’d recorded on the iPod, this was not going to last. Even without rain, blades of wind sliced down the streets, harsh and cold even through the layers of oilskin and heavy sweater beneath it.

“Do *not* remove the ear-pieces,” came her voice. “This is another reason to ignore distractions. You cannot help them. The only thing you can do to contribute is to get out of the city and to seek whatever authority you can find. Your name is Doctor Anita Dean...”

The message had been stressed to her repeatedly, and the reminder gave her new purpose. Anita picked up speed, her stride lengthening. She was idly curious as to what had happened, but mostly she felt glad to be out of it. Whatever it was, it didn’t sound good. She needed to get out of town, another fact that had been stressed to her. This street had to travel out of the city sooner or later, it was just a matter of when.

Listening to the comforting mantra, Doctor Dean was aware she could hear distant speech through the curtain of her own voice. She was uneasy about this. All the information she possessed argued that other people were seriously bad news. The air was tinged by the scent of distant smoke, and black plumes curled cancerously from several points in the suburbs ahead.

Movement flashed from the periphery of Anita’s vision. She turned towards it in time to see a man in a suit running at her, yelling something muffled by the veil of her own voice. She casually brushed aside a wild punch with one arm, flowing with

the movement to drive her other fist into her attacker's side with her weight behind it. The man dropped to the ground gasping while Anita's mind reeled.

How the *hell* had that happened?

Staring morbidly at the guy clutching his gut and trying to breathe, Anita replayed events in her head. Everything had happened instinctively, but where had those instincts come from? She was a *doctor*. She didn't know how to fight!

But she didn't remember medical school, either. She knew this instantly, a cold fact squatting in her mind like a toad.

Shaken, she turned her hands over and looked at them like they belonged to someone else. They were strong. Weathered and tough. Not doctor's hands.

What *kind* of doctor was she?

Why didn't she know?

No. She took a deep breath and centred herself. People were a distraction. She had to get out of the city and find the authorities. The man at her feet claimed she was a kidnapper through her curtain of noise, radiating hate from his snarling face. A distraction, nothing more. Anita concentrated on her own voice, feeding her certainty and direction.

She was Doctor Anita Dean, and she had to get out of the city. She turned in the direction she'd originally been moving and strode down the street, hands in her pockets against the bitter cold.

The gait was an easy one to fall into. She was used to it, long stride eating up the distance while relaxing into the endless calm of her recorded voice. Night was falling now, making the wind feel colder as the light drained from the day. Soda lights turned on at the roadsides, soft glowing cores that took some time before flaring to full brightness. It was hard to hear anything else through the recorded voice, so she focused on the regular impact of her boots on the pavement and the dragging bite of the wind.

The road she walked along became a cul-de-sac over a gentle rise, deep in suburbia now and away from the commercial buildings and apartment blocks she had travelled through before. The chill air smelled of wood smoke, and occasionally of other burned things that were harsher and harder to identify.

"Do not worry about becoming lost," her voice said calmly in her ears. "If you travel generally up-hill and away from a cluster of large buildings beside a body of water, you are moving away from the city. Keep going, and you will eventually reach help. Your name is Doctor Anita Dean..."

Anita turned a corner away from the visible buildings of the city under a sign reading 'Fife Street'. She found a small crowd of people, running children and some fires flaring merrily from drums on the roadside. Some were walking down the block and knocking on doors, others carried what appeared to be food and supplies to a pair of houses, outside which the crowd was gathered. Uncertain, Anita kept walking towards them but tried not to get noticed. They didn't *look* threatening, but she didn't understand much of what was happening. It would be easier if they ignored her.

It didn't work.

A smiling woman darted towards Anita. She and — now that Anita looked — the rest of the people outside were dressed warmly against the cold. A pile of umbrellas were propped near the door of one of the houses.

“Hi,” she said brightly. Anita slowed, but wasn’t sure what to say.

“Do you want to come in with us? We’re collecting food and people in the houses here.”

Shaking her head, Anita said, “No thanks, I have somewhere I have to be.”

A man’s voice? But — No! Concentrate on something else. Don’t get distracted.

“What are you doing that for?” Anita said, trying to distract herself as she walked past.

“Seemed the easiest thing to do. Nobody is sure what belongs to who, so we’re gathering everything together and sharing till this all gets sorted out.”

That sounded reasonable and unthreatening, but the voice in her ears chose that moment to remind her to focus on getting out of the city.

“Good luck and thanks, but I have to keep moving.”

The woman smiled. “Well, good luck. Be careful. It’s going to be cold tonight.”

Everything felt very dreamlike as Anita strode past the small cheery crowd around the fires. It looked like they were only around the fires because the two houses were nearly full, and some other people were working on opening a third house nearby. She kept walking until the crowd passed out of sight around another suburban corner. Anita turned left, since that was more obviously moving away from the city, and a comment from the iPod caught her attention.

“If at any time you desire to sleep, or if night falls, go to Track 31.”

That was good timing. She clicked across to the relevant track and heard, “You are Doctor Anita Dean...”

The familiar caress of sound anchored her again, the words flowing past before saying, “You wish to rest, or night is falling. You need to find a suitable car, and to smash the small window at the sides near the rear with a heavy object like a rock. Then reach in and unlock the door.”

The voice described the process while Anita listened intently.

“Cars are more appropriate than houses, since houses will attract confused people, and few will remember that the car you’re in is theirs. You will also need paper and a working pen. If you cannot find these in the car or on your person, continue until you can find these items. Your name is Doctor Anita Dean...”

Searching her pockets, she found a cloth bag that was labelled — when she unrolled it — ‘Dean — iPod accessories’, and a pen. What she needed now was paper.

She kept walking away from the city. Through the reassuring murmur of the iPod she could hear that the wind was rising. The clear air also carried what sounded like distant sirens or possibly burglar alarms. It was hard to tell which, and her recorded voice was adamant that she should never take out the ear-pieces. Shoulders hunching against the growing chill, Anita fell back into the pulsing rhythm of her feet on the road. The iPod reminded her at intervals that she sought a car and paper. It wasn’t long before she found one, large, square and a deep blue shade. It was far enough off the road that there were half-steps provided under the doors.

A half-brick made short work of the small triangular window in the back, once Anita had seen scraps of yellow paper across the back seat. She opened the doors and climbed inside, flicking the tracks on the iPod to where it told her the instructions continued.

Climbing into the front seat of the car without the obtrusive wheel, Anita ensured that the doors were all locked. She was far from the broken window, which she packed with plastic bags from under the back seat. The iPod told her to label her name clearly on the paper she found in the back, along with directions. The instructions told her how to plug the iPod into what it called a 'cigarette lighter', and how to find it. She then placed the machine so it would be the first thing she saw upon waking.

Anita felt warmly satisfied when she was done. She'd put a lot of planning into this, and it was all working out. Anita folded her arms with her hands in her armpits, nestled within her oilskin with the collar turned up. Her knitted woollen hat worked almost as a pillow, but kept shifting on her scalp. It wasn't comfortable, but she was tired and it would do.

The whining of the wind, gusting strong enough to rock the car gently, was the sound to which she fell asleep.

Brian shivered behind the trolley as he rolled it downhill and back towards the city. The cold was under his skin now, numbing his muscles and turning his fingers to senseless leather. Cath looked up at street signs nearby, drawing a dotted line on their map labelled 'back-tracking.' All the hotels listed in their road-map were a good distance back towards the city from the shopping mall. Although neither of them was certain, they reasoned it was unlikely they'd been travelling towards the smoke and uncertainty of the city earlier in the day. Nothing looked very familiar. He wondered how Cath felt.

He spoke the details of her life back to Cath listlessly. The wind dragged at his clothes like an intangible stream of anaesthetic while he spoke. The rain had stopped and the sky was actually clearing, but an increasingly clear night meant that it was going to be *damned* cold outside with the wind. Brian repeated himself during Cath's litany to correct a statement made incoherent with shivering. Christ. If they'd been to a shopping mall as the map claimed, why the *hell* hadn't they found warm clothes?

Cath waited for him to finish his recital before pointing to a corner on the other side of their road.

"Closest motel should be down that street, Brian, it won't be long." Her expression was focused as she read the map under streetlights, but she sounded reassuring. Brian blinked. Did he look that miserable? He kept pushing their trolley and fought to focus as Cath ran through the facts of his identity. Whatever had happened to him over the course of today, Brian was exhausted.

He avoided thinking about it in too much detail; the terrifying absence of any recollection was too much to deal with. What he did know was the bone-deep ache in his muscles and his feet, the tightness in his neck and shoulders, and how hard it was to think. The sense of relief when they reached the white neon sign of the motel,

mixing and pooling with the orange soda-light from the street lamps, was palpable. He could finally rest.

Cath nodded to him and strode ahead to check out the call-in desk. Brian followed, pushing the trolley. The motel was a small spread of ruddy buildings on the zone where commercial buildings blended with suburbia. The call-in desk seemed separate from the actual rooms, two storeys of lodges splayed across the section behind a car park. They needed the key to at least one ground-floor room. The threat from intruders would be reduced if they were on the second floor, but they'd need to carry their trolley up a flight of stairs. Brian really couldn't face that idea right now. Cath returned from the central building looking speculative.

"There's nobody in there, so we can pretty much have what we want."

Brian peered at the numbers on the side of the rooms. "Looks like if there's anything under ten, it'll be on the ground floor past the car park."

Cath ducked back in through the door and Brian could see her moving around through the window. She waved a thumbs-up and returned.

"Number eight," she said with satisfaction. "And I've found a pad of paper. Let's get the trolley over there and start warming up."

Telling Cath who she was in a shivering mumble, Brian leaned on the trolley as he plodded across the car park. There had to be a heater or something in the room. Something. A hot shower. A change of clothes. Anything. It seemed an eternity before Cath unlocked the door. The two of them hauled the awkward trolley over the threshold before shutting the door against the cold, Cath reminding him of himself all the while.

It seemed so much warmer simply to be out of the wind.

Cath turned on the heater along one wall while Brian manhandled the trolley to somewhere it might block off less of the room. The room was carpeted in blue, with white, flower-embossed wallpaper and lit with warm beige, much nicer than the harsh street lighting.

The two of them were talking much less now. Was he imagining it? Did he even remember a difference? They'd become an efficient unit at the expense of something fundamental, and Brian didn't know what it was. He felt tired. *Soul* tired.

Wordlessly, he dragged out a sheaf of the motel notepaper which Cath had found. Brian pulled it apart so that they each had a half thickness of the original pad, and uncapped a pen from his pocket. It was monogrammed: B M T. Brian Taretsky, as Cath had told him. What was the 'M' for? Did it even matter? He wondered where and when he'd bought the pen, or if it had been a gift. From who? It was all so much damned *effort*. Handing the pen to Cath, Brian said, "I'll do you, and you can write it down. Clearly, so you can read it tomorrow morning."

He waited for Cath to get comfortable, the pad across her knees, then said, "Your name is Catherine Petersen," beginning the litany once again. "You're twenty-six... From London in Canada... Taxi driver..."

The phrases had almost ceased to have any meaning to his conscious mind, melting into a ritualised pattern of sounds. If he forgot everything, would it feel like that on a wider scale? Fading into an endless world of patterns without meaning?

They completed one side of the verbal exchange that had held them together, Brian speaking patiently while Cath wrote everything down. Part-way through the speech, Brian realised that once the two of them completed this last exchange, they were free of each other. Or at least free of some of their obligation. They'd been given back to themselves. There was something dreamlike, almost reverent about the silence in the hotel room after he'd spoken. He prepared to accept Cath's benediction.

"Brian Taretsky," Cath mused, "Twenty-eight years old and from Michigan. City council lawyer..."

She read through her mental catalogue of his defining features and Brian wrote it all down on his half of the pad. His handwriting seemed spidery and unfamiliar on the page, increasing the feeling of disorientation and distance within his own skin. Eventually he was done, covering two-and-a-half sides of paper with everything anyone knew about who he was. It seemed small and vulnerable set out like that on the page.

There were two beds within the room. They had wordlessly chosen one each, and set up their pages on the individual bedside tables under hastily found paperweights. Brian wrote a large label for his centred around the phrase 'YOUR NAME IS' which he drew in last, as an afterthought. The last thing they needed was confusion.

Cath unwrapped the disposable Polaroid camera she'd taken from the supermarket and followed the instructions on the back. She awkwardly handed the camera to him and sat on the edge of her bed, hands in her lap. Brian figured out the controls and snapped off several pictures for Cath to scrutinize. While they waited for the pictures to develop, Cath turned the camera on him.

How is it supposed to feel to be posing in order to be identifiable to yourself?

How do you think you should look?

Brian decided that he was never going to look natural or relaxed. They took the time to pick a picture which looked the least terrible and labelled them clearly to attach to their sheets of information.

Brian yawned and considered his bedside table.

"There's something missing," he said eventually.

He dragged a chair out from the edge of the room and put his papers on it with the photo on the top, so as to catch his attention. Gnawing a thumbnail, he asked, "Are there mirrors in the bathroom?"

"No idea. Should I check?"

"Couldn't hurt. If we set these up so that we see ourselves in the mirror, that'll help connect us to the photos and what's written on the paper."

Blanching at some unvoiced thought, Cath went into the bathroom and returned with a large shaving mirror for her side. She vanished into the bathroom again and eventually announced, "I can't get the other one off the wall."

Brian pulled himself to his feet and grabbed a can from the supermarket trolley, along with a thick sheaf of unused pages from the pad.

"It's okay. I'll deal with it," he said, voice hollow in his ears. Cath obligingly backed away from the wall mirror, so he threw the can at it. The sound of smashing glass was shocking in the enclosed space. It felt *real* somehow, cutting through the dream he was drifting in. Cath's face was all eyes and mouth when she spun on him.

“Brian, what the fu—”

“—This is easier,” he shrugged, cutting her off. He used the folded paper to pick up one of the larger mirror shards, and put it on the chair beside his photograph. Silent while he cleaned up the glass in the bathroom, Cath watched him from the bed.

“We should be able to make good time tomorrow,” she said awkwardly, looking at her feet. “We have the map, and we know where — Oh! I’ll find the hotel and highlight everything before we go to bed.”

Brian used a wet towel to sweep up any remaining shards from the mirror. Behind them, the room was warming up pleasantly, the heater ticking gently as the radiator expanded. Satisfied the bathroom was safe, Brian put the dented can back with the rest of their food supplies. Cath leaned over, movements tentative, proffering the map book. She’d highlighted the motel at the end of the dotted line they’d travelled from the mall, and drawn a new arrow from the motel out away from the city for tomorrow. There were even labels to explain everything.

“Do you think that’s enough?”

Nodding, Brian managed a smile. “I think that’s fine. Why don’t we do each other again, then shower to warm up before we go to sleep.”

Relaxing somehow, Cath listened while he told her who she was. Once that was done, Brian leaned against the doorframe while Cath reciprocated, running the water in the shower so it would be hot by the time she was done.

They located towels and robes for each of their showers, then Brian climbed under the hot spray and lost himself in bliss. He could almost feel the heat pouring into gaps in his bones, washing away any awareness of time and any sense of the world aside from being warm and edgeless.

He came close to falling from the shower when he opened the door, dull and stupid with the heat. The towel was perfect, soft and warm, though he didn’t remember turning on the towel-rack. It didn’t matter. Brian dried himself off in a disconnected dream-like space before wrapping a towel around his waist and pulling on a thick robe. He found Cath sitting on the edge of her bed, reading and rereading her notes. It looked like she’d been reading his notes as well. For the first time he remembered, she seemed to actually be scared.

“I don’t know how I know you, Brian. How we met. Do you know? You could be anybody.” Her laugh was brittle.

Christ. Brian’s head felt full of lead shot, an unthinking mass bearing him down. This had happened before, hadn’t it? He didn’t know, but he felt irritated Cath was dragging this over the coals again and that wouldn’t make sense unless... No. He didn’t *know* anything.

“It’s disorienting, I know,” he said, chattering emptily while his brain hung dead and unheeding behind his eyes, “But it doesn’t really matter. We’re here, and we need each other.”

Cath seemed to see the sense in that and nodded, sniffing. She reread her notes again till Brian interrupted. “Have a shower. It’ll warm you up before bed and you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Did that even make sense?

Did he even care anymore?

Brian walked past her to his bed. He waited for her to move into the bathroom before climbing under the covers in his boxers. The mattress pulled any remaining energy from his body within moments and sleep claimed him.

The next thing Brian knew was darkness broken by dim stains where light crept past the heavy curtains. He heard Cath breathing in her bed across the room, and then the slither of moving cloth.

Her breath was hot in his ear.

“Do me, Brian,” she breathed. He could tell she was smiling and didn’t know how. Pulling away, Brian turned on the light while fighting for consciousness. Cath cocked her head at him but wasn’t smiling anymore. Her eyes were still intent.

He ached and all he wanted was *sleep*.

I don’t know you, Brian thought fiercely, You sure as hell don’t know me, and I’m not even sure I like you.

“No, Cath,” he said as evenly as he could manage. “If we have sex now, before we’re done we’ll think we’re with strangers.” The idea had associations which would normally chill him to the core, but in this case he felt irritable distaste more than fear.

“I don’t want that, Cath. I’d rather we stayed...friends.”

Her eyes were hard in the soft light. “Are we friends, Brian?”

“Well, yes...”

“Then call me fucking Catherine.”

There was silence while they considered each other in the darkness. Catherine hesitantly slipped closer again, biting her lip.

“Look, let’s just...hold each other, right?” she said haltingly. “I don’t want to be alone in the dark.”

She slid in beside Brian and he put an arm around her shoulders, feeling her shake as she wept silently into his chest.

Gnawing chill woke the man in the car, seeping into his feet and his hands till unconsciousness was impossible. It was an uncomfortable way to wake up. His hands were in his armpits but that hadn’t been enough to keep the cold from them, and the way he’d twisted into a ball within the enclosed space sent tight spasms through his back. He needed to move around, to stretch, but that wasn’t going to get him warm. Peering through the fogged glass of the windscreen and windows showed him nothing but darkness punctuated by the glowing blobs of street lamps. It was night. Early or late, he couldn’t say.

How long had he been here?

Why was he sleeping in a car?

He didn’t *feel* hung over...

It was then that he saw the sign.

You are Doctor Anita Dean, and the iPod is yours. Put on the ear-pieces and press Play on waking.

Huh. That was interesting. Picking up the silvery rectangle beneath the arrow on the sign, ‘Anita’ turned it over and found that it was attached to cords trailing to two

small plastic lumps and to the console at the front of the car. The note mentioned ‘ear pieces’, and the plastic things were labelled ‘L and ‘R’...

Sorting them out took a little time, particularly with numbed fingers. ‘Anita’ pressed the Play button and heard a woman’s voice. Then someone knocked on the window, a heavy silhouette through the condensation. They said something unintelligible, garbled by the sound from the ear pieces. ‘Anita’ jerked them free.

“What?”

The silhouette outside the car peered in the window and said, “‘Allo. We were just wondering if you want some food.”

Food? When *had* he eaten last?

“Yeah,” he said vaguely. “Thanks.”

Steam billowed between them as ‘Anita’ climbed from the car. The new arrival jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards a sign reading *Fife Street*.

“We’re in a bunch of houses around the corner. There’s food. We’re, uh, collecting more.”

“More?”

“Food. And people.”

Anita eyed him. “Yeah? Why?”

“Nobody knows what’s what or what belongs to who, so we’re sharing everything. But help is coming.”

He was a solid man, the skin of his face shiny and tight where it showed. He talked like he never needed to think about the words, and his certainty was infectious. Laughter drifted from the houses as the two of them neared, a clump of five or six homes with white painted walls and steel roofs of different colours. Anita’s guide knocked on the door of one of the central houses, a single-floor building of brick and white-painted woodwork under a red roof. They were greeted by smiling strangers.

“And who are you?” one man asked knowingly. The people inside, six that he could see, waited on his reply.

“I...don’t know,” the man who had been Anita said after a time. Their smiles broadened.

“Then you’re definitely one of us. Come in.”

A hot mug of something was pressed into his hands as he was ushered onto a brown sagging couch beside a glowing heater. The five men and two women seemed content to let him be, returning to companionable chatter. A return to anchorless civilisation was disorienting and yet safe. He drifted with the ebb and flow of voices, warming himself and drinking until one of the women said apologetically, “Do you mind if we call you Caleb?”

“Huh?”

“We’re working down the list,” she said, holding out a small book entitled *The Smallest Big Book of Baby Names*. The first name not marked in the male section was Caleb.

He nodded, blinking, unsure what was expected of him. She smiled at him and wrote out a sticky tag with the name on it. The woman had a warm smile, an extra chin and he knew somehow that she had children.

"I'm Carla," she said. "Are you tired, or do you want to see some of the other houses?" She checked a sheet of paper and seemed struck by a new idea. "We could introduce you to Abby. She's the one who had the idea about the names."

"Should I learn the names of everyone here?"

The noise died down at his words before the rest of the group resumed chattering. Caleb wasn't sure, but it sounded like the same conversation he'd initially walked into. Carla leaned over and whispered, "Doesn't matter. You wouldn't remember."

There came another knock on the door, revealing a dark young woman swaddled in cold-weather clothes, her exposed skin chapped from the wind.

"Abby would like us to do a head count for all the names," she said, eyes focused on some middle-distance as she concentrated.

The people in the room looked to one another and nodded as they stood. It made sense. Caleb had the impression that much of what these people were told made sense to them, whereas he seemed to be more curious. What did that mean?

He cleared his throat. "A head count?"

The new woman didn't look at him, her face a mask of concentration. "Abby says we should write down all the name tags we have and then all the houses should give the lists to Abby."

There were smiles at the novelty of it. But this *had* to have happened before for the process to make sense... Then again, did it matter? He joined the household in locating nametags and writing them down. They explored the house together for the first time again, noting the tags of sleepers as they found them. Some of them woke, heralding tears, fear and confusion. Caleb saw them hugged and held, comforted until the confusion made sense, the universality of the experience used to feed a feeling of community instead of fear.

None of it felt familiar. Caleb was involved in a process that he was not emotionally part of, but he helped along with the rest. Once every room in the cosy house had been searched, he volunteered to go along with the messenger, Brenna, when she returned the list to Abby. It seemed the thing to do.

The wind outside was particularly bitter after the warmth of the house. A shift in the stain of light at the horizon suggested dawn was coming.

The house to which Caleb followed Brenna was quieter from the outside than the one he had just been in. A distracted woman under a heavy layer of red terrycloth robe opened the door and ushered them inside. Caleb trailed Brenna into a kitchen decorated in white tile, the pair of them following Abby. She looked at him sharply when he stood in the kitchen doorway before grabbing his nametag.

"Damn, damn, damn," she said as she sat at a table covered in papers. Then her eyes were sharp and on his again.

"There used to be an Alexander and an Andrew. They're here," she prodded the papers on the table, "But nowhere else. Like they died."

Brenna clearly didn't know how to react either when Caleb glanced at her. Abby stabbed at the papers again.

"They were here. I know it, but they are gone from all memory."

"Why are you here?" Caleb asked, the question bubbling out before he was consciously aware of it. He'd known moments ago, he was sure.

Abby flitted back to her piles of paper. “Help is coming. We’ll be safe if we wait here for them.”

Something *fit* within that concept, some intrinsic sense of truth. Waiting patiently while Abby fiddled with lists on the table, Caleb turned things over in his mind. He was disconnected to anything that was happening here, but it felt right. He believed that this community was something worth helping, even if he wasn’t part of it.

Abby cursed viciously, making Brenna jump and attracting Caleb’s attention. “There was an Anne and a Bridget once, too.”

“I could go looking for them,” Caleb offered, startled by the sound of his own voice. Abby was surprised for a moment before her gaze turned measuring.

“How will you find them?”

Oh. Right. Caleb dropped his gaze, then frowned.

“I have a name tag. Will they?”

Abby smiled broadly, a new respect in her eyes. “Good man. Good thinking.”

She wrote something out on one of her papers, climbed to her feet and pressed it into his hands. Caleb read it. 22 Fife St. He looked to Abby.

“That’s where we are. Have as much food as you need and rest if you wish. We appreciate this.”

Caleb turned the proposal over before saying, “Have any bacon?”

The meal that followed was hurried but plentiful. Strangers trickled in, woken by the smells of cooking, all blank and in need of reassurance or explanations. In the end, Caleb was quite ready to leave. The sensation that he’d met these people or seen them go through this before was maddening.

Abby provided him a battered local roadmap as he made for the door. She padded after him with a piece of paper reading *22 Fife St*, which turned out to match another he found in his pocket.

“Thank you, Caleb,” she said with informal warmth. “And remember, help is coming.”

Caleb smiled thinly as she shut the door. He put his hands back in the pockets of his oilskin after pulling the grey woollen hat down over his ears, striding out into the cold clear light of dawn.

Dark and close, the room was comfortably warm. He shifted under the covers, aware of something weighing on his chest. A protesting mew came from under his chin, cutting through the drifting webs of sleep. Groping for a light switch yielded a painful actinic flash, revealing a startled and tousled woman eyeing him in surprise.

Time froze.

Eyes locked. The woman blinked several times as her face drew into an awkward smile. One of her hands was bunched in a short tuft of dishevelled hair.

“Uh, hi,” she said.

What the hell do you say? She was at least stripped to the waist and he had no idea who she was. Nudity and lack of recognition didn’t sit together well. For that matter, how did he get here?

“Okay,” he said slowly, “I don’t know of any other way to put this, but do you know why we’re here?”

The smile vanished from her suddenly arctic eyes. Hurriedly he said, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean anything — who am I?”

He noticed the growing alarm in her expression. “Do you know how you got here?” he asked haltingly.

Silence. He slowed his breathing and felt his pulse follow after a moment. “Come on,” he said, “Let’s see what we can find...”

She darted away with sheets wrapped around her and never once took her eyes from him. Great. Coils of resentment tightened in his gut, driving heat to his face.

Yeah. I’ve *done* something to bring you here. Right. Thanks.

While staring at the carpet with his jaw clenched, he spotted the photos.

“I think I’ve found something...”

Peripherally aware of her moving behind him, all his attention was reserved for the piles of paper by the photos. Movement flashed at him from a piece of broken mirror as he reached out. It held a stranger, bleary, blue-chinned and in need of more sleep and some peace. A pit yawned under him then, treacherous and vast.

Who the hell am I?

He froze, shaking, and she reached past him for the handwritten pages.

“People are losing their memories,” she read, her voice disdainful though she couldn’t conceal the tremor lying beneath it. “You need to move together and take turns reminding each other who you are every few minutes. It’s all written down for safety now, but tell each other anyway to be safe. You can trust each other.” Her eyes were venomous then. “Try to get out of the city. There’s a map with where you’ve been and where you should go. The food in the trolley is yours.”

She lanced him with a killing gaze. “You expect me to fall for a fucking prank this thin? What, they call you the Cuddling Rapist? Who the *hell* do you take me for?”

Painfully tired, he didn’t need to deal with this. Silent, he cradled his pile of papers and read through them. The handwriting was unfamiliar and spidery, making him feel alien and out of place. Was this even him?

“As far as I know,” he said heavily, “The door isn’t locked. Take whatever you want and I’ll go back to bed. Tell the cops where I am if you want. I’m past caring.”

She watched without comment as he climbed under the covers again, eyes like blades of ice.

“And what happens if the note isn’t wrong?” she said in a tight hiss.

“Christ, lady. I think when it happens, we’ll know. I plan to be asleep at the time. Leave or don’t. Your call.”

He’d barely been able to read the name on his little dossier, a sigil closer to a signature than anything else, one that named him a Ben. Ben must have been in a hurry, but he certainly didn’t need to deal with this. Whoever he was.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, the woman tightened up and stared at him. Sheets pinned with elbows against her sides, she looked ready to abandon them and attack him with those white knuckles if he coughed wrong.

“This says my name’s Catherine,” she said in a flat statement.

Lovely. Feel the trust.

“Ben,” he mumbled. “Night.”

He pulled the covers over his head to block the light and had a flash of Catherine looking more lost than he knew how to describe. Sounds of her moving aimlessly about filtered through his fading consciousness and Ben began drifting away.

A vicious electronic howling filled the air, scything him from sleep. Ben jerked his head from the covers. Catherine hunched in shock, staring in the direction of the noise.

“What do we do?” she whispered.

Inhaling slowly, Ben sat up. “Well, we have some instructions from ourselves. Not a bad place to start.” Catherine nodded, so he climbed from the bed, collected her dossier and began to read.

“Your name is Catherine Petersen...”

The incessant wailing droned on as he spoke. Catherine’s eyes widened as she figured out the impact of what he was doing for her. Modesty and paranoia forgotten, she dressed as he remembered for her. Once clothed, she reciprocated while Ben peered through the curtains towards the noise. He could see other lights from — was this a motel? Huh. There were people drifting towards a building which seemed to be the source of the noise. Smoke, cut to ribbons by the wind, made a vague haze in the dawn light. Ben waited for her to finish his litany, concentrating on all the details she had to give him. He thought he’d remember it.

“We need to leave.”

“What? Why?”

Ben dropped the curtains back. “Because this noise isn’t going to stop and I’m getting a headache. There’s no point staying, and according to us we have places to be.”

“You make it sound funny,” Catherine snapped.

Ben pulled on his clothes, dried on the towel rack and said, “It isn’t?”

Catherine gave him a hard look and silence lay between them for a moment before she said, “Come on, help me lift the trolley outside.”

It looked like a cloudy start to the day and a cutting wind blew, though the day was bright between the clouds. The two of them dragged the trolley out of the door between them. Catherine studied the map. Eventually she said, “We need to go eastwards. Ish.”

“Which way is that?”

She lined up along the street, then pointed past the source of the noise.

Ben sighed, raised his eyebrows and pushed the trolley through the car park. Partway there, he began repeating Catherine’s facts from the list without thinking, pushing the trolley with his other hand.

The shrieking building was glass-fronted and multi-storey. A sign claimed it to be a dental clinic, the building gently leaking smoke. Frightened faces peered between curtains in nearby houses. People, dressed for sleep, cowered at the noise. Other more raucous individuals capered around the street and in the building itself. Ben could see their movement through the windows, along with thicker curls of smoke.

“Looks like bad news, Cath.”

Her expression tightened suddenly and she snapped, “Call me Catherine, Brian.”

Ben looked at her, shaken. “Brian?”

She shrugged uncomfortably.

Before Ben could ask anything else, gleeful shocked screams poured from the building. Water streamed from the ceilings wherever Ben could see in the windows. He saw a woman wearing a robe and little else grab a standing lamp and dance with it under the spray. A subdued *snap* and she was flung to the floor like a doll. Flickering light played across the blinds of the lobby as the raucous dancers fled, screaming in earnest as denser smoke filled the air.

Ben grabbed Catherine and pulled her close to the trolley as the crowd tore past and ran down the street. The air was increasingly hard to breathe. Cath’s voice shook gently as she recited Ben’s facts while the two of them pushed the trolley past and away from the noise.

The key fit. Her relief was a tangible thing. She’d tried so many cars, but she finally *remembered* which one was hers. She was having such a spacey morning. She remembered it now, though, walking around it in the chill wind. A large square blue car with a broken window at the back where she’d plugged it with plastic. Yes, she remembered it now.

She climbed in, needing the step to get into the car and out of the wind. Huh. There were things all over the front of the car — hey. There was a note.

The message was concrete and left no room for argument. She was Doctor Anita Dean, and the iPod belonged to her. There was a moment of sorting out the cables attached to the player and the ear-pieces before she followed the instructions to push the button with a right-pointing arrow. A voice — her voice! — poured past her. Anita felt instantly grounded, more coherent than she had in, well, it must have been days.

“You are Doctor Anita Dean. Your priority is to make it out of the city on foot...”

Anita concentrated on the voice. It must have been important for her to have recorded this, but she’d just found her car. She must have made the recording assuming the car was unavailable somehow. Adrift in a sea of reassuring instructions and information, Anita’s arms and legs flowed through the motions, starting the car and putting it into gear. Someone must have borrowed it recently, since the seat was way too far back. She rolled the seat forward and adjusted it, and found that the mirrors all fit her eye line perfectly. That didn’t make any sense! Shaking her head, she pulled a seatbelt over her jacket and set off. The streets were clear of pedestrians or traffic. In fact, she could see very few people at all as she drove. Odd. It wasn’t that early in the morning, was it?

After only five or so minutes of being carried along by the recorded voice and the memories of her hands, Anita had to slow the car to a gentle halt. Cars filled the road like abandoned toys. Anita dug into her glove box, dimly remembering a need to show registration when stopped like this. At least she hadn’t been drinking.

Odd. The registration was for a Ruth Meade. Maybe she collected it from someone after an accident or something. Did you do that?

No one came to check on her car. Anita drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and kept waiting.

“You are Doctor Anita Dean. Your priority is to make it out of the city on foot...”

On foot? Anita blinked. Well, maybe there were problems with the road all over. The recording had mentioned the importance of the bag that went with it, so Anita carefully bundled up all of the cables and attachments, putting them in the bag with the rest of her gear. She climbed out of the car.

There were people moving around now. Drifts and clots of them wandering about, seeking direction. What on earth had happened here?

Two people, an elderly woman with cuts on her hands and a young man in a muddy casual shirt approached. It looked like they were going to try and talk to her.

The voice in her ear firmly told Anita something about ignoring people.

She couldn't do that! She was a doctor. She had responsibility.

Anita hooked one of the ear-buds out so that she could still focus on her recorded messages. She surveyed the two bedraggled arrivals and the other lost people for a moment, inhaling slowly.

“My name is Doctor Anita Dean,” she announced in a clear voice which carried in the chill air. “Our priority is to make it out of the city on foot...”

The map was their guide, following the trolley along cracked suburban pavements and cold roads. Ben and Catherine took turns pushing the trolley and marking their progress turn by indelible turn. The instructions aimed them at what the map said was a highway southeast, and the suburbs crawled past.

Catherine turned her head back towards the way they'd come, back at the city.

“We're making progress,” she said after a time, “There's a haze of smoke over the city, so we're getting further away.”

Ben snorted. “Or more of the city has caught fire by now.”

Catherine's expression didn't change. “Either way, we're making progress.” She turned to him with a half-glance and said, “Do me, Ben.”

Had he always found her so sharp and cold?

He folded her notes so he could hold them in one hand and push the trolley at the same time.

“Your name is Catherine Petersen—”

“Huh,” Catherine said thoughtfully, “Why are we doing this?”

“This is important!” he hissed.

“You're reading off the sheet, Ben. Give it here and save us time. Why didn't we think of this before?”

Ben breathed slowly and considered the idea as sheepishness warred with a bottomless tide of panic within him. Catherine reached over and snatched her papers, lip curled and ugly with...contempt? A flick of her wrist sent his dossier into the trolley. Ben grabbed the sheets before the wind could finish snatching them away. As cold and distant as all he had forgotten, Catherine said, “This will be easier.”

The wind dragged at the papers, caught with his fingertips. Ben's pulse drummed in his ears as his face twisted with emotions he'd lost the names for.

Her voice was like the wind, soft and cold.

“We need each other, Ben. We still need each other. But I don't know you.”

Swallowing hard past the clenched jaw, Ben read from his notes. He held them the same way he'd squeeze her throat at that moment, pushing the trolley against his chest.

The silence was only broken by the scuff of soles on pavement and the rattling scrape of trolley wheels. Ben eventually said, "What's the map say?" his voice a bark in his ears.

"We should nearly be there," she said distantly. "Then we can follow it easily."

The wind rose, smelling of rain and chilling the air. The two of them squeaked onward as suburbs faded before them, replaced by an opening space which filled with concrete and the abandoned husks of cars glinting in the fading light. A dark shoe beneath a hedge caught Ben's eye. It was connected to a high-school boy curled up warmly against a man with scarred knuckles and tattoos who twitched in dog dreams.

Don't wake up, Ben thought, *You won't be more comfortable than you are now.*

He could see more people than he had in a while. They peered nervously through windows, from behind trees. There was *noise*... He could hear voices in the distance.

"People," Ben said, swallowing. "I'm not sure about the people."

Without turning, Catherine said flatly, "This is the way out, Ben. Other people are using it too."

Ben felt mounting, sourceless tension as they crawled down the on-ramp, further into the open. Something hung in the air beneath the lowering clouds, waiting for its moment while the pressure of the wind rose.

"Ben!" Catherine hissed. It took a moment to recall that she meant him. He could see them too. People roamed all over the highway, amid the frozen river of assorted vehicular flotsam.

But that wasn't the most pressing concern.

Ben wasn't his name.

It began to rain. Water, driven by the rising wind, cut visibility to nothing. The wind, in turn, was drowned out by an uneven discord of howls and cries as a sorrowful motley of humanity were again assaulted by new experience.

It was a stampede.

Ben had enough time to see Catherine turn towards him, panic in those grey eyes. She tried to say something, but then the wave of bodies was on them. The trolley went over in a shattering jangle of cans, forcing him to dive out of the way or be pinned against it by the terrified runners. He clung to his pages against the crush of people, fighting his way into the clear towards where Catherine had been. Buffeted by shoulders and blinded by rain, Ben peered into the storm. She'd only been a few meters away. Now — *nothing*.

Panic tore at him. She was gone. The pages. Had he lost any of them? Would he notice?

The paper bowed as it unfolded, absorbing the rain. Ben read as if trying to engrave the words on his brain before they could be lost. The ink — why ink? There had been a reason — began to run, turning his identity to spreading stains on a substrate of mush.

Illegible. Irretrievable. Finished.

Someone knocked against his shoulder but this didn't penetrate the fugue. Ben stood still, cradling the ruined pages.

He waited to be lost in the maelstrom.

No!

He had to find her!

The sodden paper shell of a life was useless now, so he threw it away. The panicked movement in the narrow aisles between cars and along the edges of the highway faded. People cowered in or under vehicles from the rain, while some bolder souls stumbled through the storm staring at the sky.

He had to find her.

The fact he couldn't remember her name was a sliver of ice in his mind. How long ago had he read from his pages before they were lost? Would he remember?

He howled defiance into the storm.

His name was Brian — Ben? — Petersen!

He was a lawyer for a taxi company!

Originally from London! In Canada!

He was gone.

He had to find her.

Moving past a dull green SUV, he skidded on someone's spilled cans and ran into a woman with cold grey eyes. They stared at each other for moment before running into the storm.

Dawn greeted Sergeant Faden through the hastily erected wire of the quarantine camp. The blowers in his clean-suit sealed him off behind a hiss of air, muting everything outside. It was hard to be detached given the circumstances, seeing the afflicted wandering out to meet them or being carried in, but the wall of sound made it all dreamlike.

Someone walked towards him, another clean-suited figure with officer's pips painted on the shoulders. Faden stood to attention.

"Captain McFarlane."

"Thank you, Sergeant," she said simply. "Report."

McFarlane wore her clean-suit like a second skin, easy under the weight of the backpack of batteries, air and fans. She had the bearing of someone who dealt with fatal details as a matter of course.

"Quarantine facilities are up, Captain, and we've kept the perimeter secure, more for our safety than theirs." He paused to consider the pall of smoke over Seattle. "Lot of confused people out there, Captain."

"There are. And I understand you have your men out herding people towards us with food and firm instructions."

Faden responded with a neutrally affirmative "Sir."

McFarlane's lips curved slightly. "Good thinking, Faden."

More silence.

"Captain?" Faden asked eventually.

“Yes?”

“What’s next?”

She sighed. “Next’ is the long road, Sergeant. We get people here without them hurting themselves and get to work. Some of them are going to need us to come to them rather than leaving on their own.”

“We’re going to need more tents for quarantine.”

“All of the bases will. And more staff from USAMRIID and the CDC, which we’re working on.”

Faden chewed on his ideas, thinking aloud. “No real looting as such... What do we do about the fires? We have a cause yet?”

The Captain winced. “Cause? The biggest one is what happens when the flight crew of a 747 taking-off at Sea-Tac suddenly have no idea what they’re doing and start fighting the plane. The rest is minor, the kind of thing that could have been prevented by cutting power to the district if we’d been able.” Shifting her weight, she said, “Don’t worry Sergeant, the long road is what we’re on, but it’ll work. The labs here are only going to get bigger, and the more people we can relocate to the bases, the more information we’re going to be able to get.”

It was true they’d sort it out in the end, the personnel from USAMRIID and the CDC and all their gear, but that didn’t hide that they had no idea what had caused this, less idea how to proceed. They lacked even an idea for what level of quarantine was needed. The long road planned for the worst case, even if it was the slowest.

Hell. What did he know?

Faden watched the sunrise for another few moments, the roar of the blowers in his ears.

The map in her hands was the only instruction she had left. There was an arrow. A highway. She thought she was on it. The only question she was actually curious about anymore amid the legions seeking answers was how she’d know when she’d gone far enough.

Her throat was tight and threatened tears, a vast unnamed pool of emotion she had no clues to comprehend. *Why* did she feel this way? What had she lost?

She nearly wandered right past the man in the yellow plastic suit. He was calling to her when she noticed him, had been for a little while. Who was he? What did he want?

He wouldn’t answer her questions. Kept telling her that she was safe and that it would be okay. Pressed a bundle into her hands that smelled delicious. Told her to keep walking.

Her feet hurt. She was tired.

There was another man in an odd suit. Both their voices were strange, now that she thought about it. Distant, like through a tube. This one had bottles. Said it was water. Said to keep walking.

She still didn’t know what was missing, what absent part of the world made it all wrong somehow.

There were more men in suits telling her where to go now. None of them knew when she'd be able to stop following the map.

She ate the food. Drank the water. Felt so *tired*.

Eventually, there were two yellow-suited men with bags. They asked her to put the map in their little bag and to empty her pockets. She told them she didn't understand, so they showed her. She'd been carrying things the whole time. They put them in a bag. One opened something from her pockets and said, "See? Sometimes they don't look," and wrote out two sets of words. One went on the bag. The other went on her wrist and locked with a click. Catherine Petersen, it said.

Yellow men herded her along. There was a room, made of fabric and full of beds and sleeping people. Other yellow men watched.

She didn't care anymore. Tired, sore, and she'd lost something important.

She curled up and slept.

The day became stranger for Faden as the sun climbed across the sky. He wasn't sure he could call them refugees... The *patients* shambled out into the catchment areas and into the base itself almost faster than they could be processed. And they weren't even the whole problem. McFarlane prodded a map spread on a field-table. He, other personnel from the army, and strangers from the CDC stood around it with them.

"We're having trouble where the population density increases. Most people don't pose a threat, but some remember enough to know this must have been done *to* them. Those individuals are very suspicious of organised behaviour and can be dangerous, particularly to our suits. Worse, they frequently infect other people with their ideas. It looks like the afflicted will accept concepts, providing they're put across with sufficient certainty or conviction." She paused. "Not much we can do which won't reinforce the idea we're a threat, so we wait for them to come out to us and, as you'll have noticed, they are. Resources are being pressured all around the city perimeter, but more supplies are inbound. What we need are more tents, the rest we can deal with." McFarlane turned to a blue-suited CDC Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Bird?"

Bird nodded to the assembled crew. "We've been finding people coming out of the city with name-tags already, sticky labels attached to their clothes. They all seem connected to a 'Fife Street' by papers they carry, so we're organising a team to go in and investigate that area. If you find anyone with a label, send them over to us. Also, there is a definite range of severity in the symptoms displayed by the afflicted population. Some people remember nothing, others remember enough to be more confused. Be careful. Any questions?"

There were none, so McFarlane said "Dismissed," quietly and turned back to the map with Bird. Everyone else went their own ways in a disciplined scattering of toy-truck yellow suits. Faden was immediately hailed by one of his unit as soon as he turned on his suit radio.

"Henderson here, Sarge. Got trouble."

"Details, Henderson," he barked, heading towards where PFC Henderson had been working.

“Bunch of people who don’t want to be separated, Sarge. Just inside the main patient-processing area.”

That didn’t make any damned sense. Why wouldn’t they want to be separated? Faden strode towards a single yellow figure isolated in a tangled clot of at least thirty people.

“Henderson?”

A flushed face turned towards him in the marooned suit.

“They were walking out together, Sarge, but they don’t know why. Now they won’t be separated.”

Faden considered the crowd, some of whom were eyeing him nervously. They were conspicuously missing the concert-admission style plastic bracelets which their names should be on.

“Private, where are their bracelets?”

Henderson flushed further. “Haven’t finished processing them yet, Sergeant.”

“Get their wallets and I’ll see what I can organise.”

“Uhm...” Henderson looked at the full rubbish sack he held in one hand. Faden’s jaw tightened.

“Private, have you removed their ID without tagging them?”

“I was getting them to empty their pockets and things when they panicked about being separated!”

Faden stepped closer to Henderson so that their plastic faceplates touched.

“Let me explain some grim, meat-hook realities to you, Henderson. We *can’t* separate these people until we try to process them, *if* we can, and there’s no goddamned *room* for them to be kept separate in. Christ — no, I don’t care what you were thinking. Private, you have volunteered to mind these people when we find them somewhere to be. Understand?”

Henderson looked appropriately miserable, but as Faden turned away there was a further clamour from the crowd.

“We need it back!” one man in a Hooters T-shirt called stridently.

“What?” Henderson snapped. “What the hell do you need?”

All eyes dropped to his sack as their faces became more panicked, tightening and baring teeth.

They didn’t know.

“We need to get out of the city together on foot!” a woman in a faded denim jacket hissed savagely. Faden’s eyes narrowed as he noticed name-tags here and there in the crowd.

“Give it back, Private,” Faden said tiredly. “It doesn’t matter at the moment. You find these people bunks together, stay with them and don’t let them leave till we get them processed or move them in with the other people we can’t ID. I don’t care if it takes weeks, you are officially den-mother. And make sure I know where you’ve parked them. We need to ask these people some questions. Clear?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Henderson mumbled as Faden walked away.

“Sarge?” Henderson called from behind him. Faden turned, aware his expression was stony as Henderson asked, “What should I do with their stuff, sir?”

Faden sighed. "Put them in adjoining bunks where you can find the room, and give the sack to one of them. Hell, ask them to pick someone to hang on to the bag for them."

Henderson gestured with the bag at the crowd of ragged people, making Faden realise how feral their body-language was. Some of them had been edging behind Henderson while the two of them had been speaking. They probably would have mugged him for the bag, or worse, if he hadn't handed it over to the guy in the Hooters shirt who'd spoken up...

Shit. They did *not* need this today.

The room smelled funny, and the walls and ceiling snapped and billowed in the wind. It was the voices that made it impossible to sleep. She wasn't sure where she was. Why she was there. Looking around, she didn't know any of these people. Nothing was familiar.

She set sore feet on the floor of the fabric room and felt something shift under one sole. It was a bag with some objects in it, nothing familiar, but it was next to her bed. Was it hers?

She paused. Nobody else was paying any attention to it. A man in a shirt that read Hooters was in the bed next to hers, but he was totally still.

Emptying the contents onto the bed revealed a bewildering array of wires and other things. Nothing familiar. There was a silver rectangle which looked like the most solid piece of equipment there. It was attached to wires and two small plastic lumps. Hmm. For some reason, she associated them with sound. They were labelled L and R. In the spirit of investigation, she placed one in her left ear and played with the silver box. Nothing happened for a time, and then there was a sudden voice in her ear. Sound and identity flowed into her. She listened for all she was worth.

She was Doctor Anita Dean. All of this did belong to her.

She had to get out of the city on foot. Outside the city would be the authorities. Hmm.

Anita climbed to her feet and walked out towards the door to the room. A man in a yellow suit blocked the way and watched her as she moved. He looked at her wrist, then let her past. Interesting. Outside the room, there were no buildings to be seen, just rows of more fabric rooms.

She wasn't in a city.

Why was he interested in her hand? Oh. There was something wrapped around it. She read what it said, but that didn't make any sense. Something had gone wrong somewhere, because she didn't know any Catherine Petersen woman. Or did she?

What *did* she know?

She needed to find authorities. Wandering experimentally back into the room found the man in the yellow suit glaring at her. It looked like she might have found some, whatever else was going on.

Anita sat down and listened to herself explain what to do next.

“Sarge?” Henderson’s querulous voice drifted over Faden’s suit radio.

“What now?” he barked.

“There’s something you should see.”

Faden swore to himself, shifting to a private frequency so he could deal with Henderson quietly. And at length. Faden stopped when Captain McFarlane said, “Trouble?” and raised her eyebrows. He sighed.

“Apparently, Captain. I’m just not sure what kind.” He switched to include Henderson. “What, precisely, is the situation Private?”

“Woman asked me to give you something, Sergeant.”

“She did *what*?” McFarlane interrupted, her voice sharp. Faden was incredulous.

“Just that, sir. Gave me a bag to pass on to someone in authority, she said.”

Faden and McFarlane exchanged a nonplussed glance. “She was very insistent, sir.” Henderson finished lamely.

McFarlane’s eyes were intense and focused. “Where is she, Sergeant?”

Faden nodded for her to follow him, internally wondering just what the hell was going on. Henderson met them outside one of the billeting tents with a rolled bag in his hands, handing it over to the Captain before hovering at attention. She pulled the bag open and prodded at the contents.

“What are we looking at, Henderson?” Faden growled.

Pointing at the iPod, the Private tentatively said, “She said you needed to hear track eighty, Sergeant.”

Faden looked from the iPod to Henderson. “Find someone with some speakers that will work with this thing, and do it quickly. Failing that, find someone who can pump it over the suit radios.”

Henderson nodded, relieved to have a task he was more familiar with. “Should I take it with me sir, so we can try to fit something into it?”

McFarlane was still lost in contemplation as the two men talked, eyeing the contents of the bag and prodding them with a suited finger. She pulled out a small item between thumb and forefinger.

“That’s fucking eerie, sir,” Henderson breathed.

“Thank you, Private,” McFarlane said with a thin smile, “Succinctly put.”

Faden felt lost.

McFarlane’s eyes glinted with something like amusement when she caught his expression. “This, Sergeant, is one of those very attachments designed to broadcast the player over radio frequencies.”

Her eyes never left the player, a curl at the corner of her lips. For Faden, the tension that came from incomprehension faded, replaced by the sensation of coming close to something vast and unseen in deep water.

The Captain wordlessly attached the little metal accessory and tuned it towards their suit frequency. She had problems using the wheel control through the suit gloves. Suddenly a voice that sounded as though it belonged to an authoritative woman in a hurry poured over the radio.

“My name is Doctor Anita Dean. The recordings on this iPod were prepared on the assumption that the outbreak is both localised and eventually contained. My colleagues and I believe the agent is viral.”

Faden found himself yelling into the radio for a CDC team till McFarlane punched him in the shoulder and shushed him.

“At the time of this recording, we have samples of infected blood but have not isolated the agent itself. The samples are in a secure lab in our facilities, and the location is on this recorder along with relevant pass-codes. In case power was lost to the facility, we have uploaded all our data to a non-local server. The login is ‘beeble’, the password, ‘brox’. These uploaded files will be updated past the release of this recorder. There are copies of our findings so far saved in a folder on this iPod, entitled...”

Something caught her attention as the wind brushed it. There was a plastic bracelet with a name on it attached to her left wrist. Catherine Petersen. It didn't ring any bells. The apparent Catherine wandered back towards one of the cloth rooms. There was nothing to do and no one to answer her questions, let alone help her form ones from the vast sea of confused wrongness which hung over the world. She felt she'd done something important, though the details were losing themselves.

Nothing to do but rest and wait for answers.

There were shouting men in yellow suits running around outside in a state of great agitation. She ignored them and searched for an unoccupied bed.

A man walked the other way down an aisle of sleepers, wearing a bemused expression. They realised at the same time that they were pondering their own bracelets. He bent forward and looked at hers.

“You must be Catherine Petersen.”

“And you're... Brian Taretsky.”

He looked at her, shifted his weight and inhaled a part breath. She could tell questions were coming. She shook her head.

“Sorry, no idea.”

She sloped away towards an empty bed and heard his tread move away.

“Good luck,” she said vaguely over one shoulder. “Nice meeting you.”



Of Loaves, Fishes and Mars Bars

...Sue Bursztynski

"You're a night early, you know," said the innkeeper as he laid the Passover table.

"I know," said Yosef. "But tonight is the Essene Passover and the Teacher agrees with them. He spent some time in their community a few years ago."

The innkeeper snorted. "The Essenes! That bunch of crazies? The sun by the Salt Sea dries up their brains!" Yosef merely smiled and the innkeeper sighed, continuing to set down dishes. "Ah, well, a good thing you booked for tonight. Tomorrow everyone and his dog will be in Jerusalem for the feast and I couldn't have accommodated you. How did you manage to get the lamb sacrificed early, by the way?"

"I have a friend in the Temple who also has Essene sympathies."

"Ah. Friends in high places...Damn. I'm a cup short. I'd better get one from downstairs."

"No need. I have one we can use." Yosef went to his pack and pulled out something wrapped in linen. As he unwrapped it, the innkeeper saw a simple vessel, well-polished, if a little battered.

"Is that a cup? Looks like a bowl to me."

"It will do. The Teacher has used it before." Yosef smiled reminiscently, remembering the loaves and fishes...and that wine at the wedding. "It's special, even if it doesn't look much. I brought it back from Britain on my last trip. They called it a cauldron."

"A cauldron?" The innkeeper burst out laughing. "That little thing? I use a cauldron to cook supper for my customers!"

"Nevertheless." Yosef put the cup tenderly by the Teacher's place-setting.

"Well, I'd better finish up here and bring the wine. Your friends will be here soon."

Yeshua and his disciples arrived soon afterwards. It was a memorable evening.

"Tea, Gandalf?" The teddy bear didn't reply, but Elanor didn't expect him to. His real name was Jean-Claude and he had been her mother's bear. When she had needed an extra guest for her dolls' tea-party in the cubby-house out in her grandparents' back yard, she had grabbed him from the display in Mum's old room.

The other dolls were her own. Nana had been horrified when Elanor had cut off her Barbie doll's hair and glued it back as a beard. After that, she'd only bought Elanor cheap supermarket dolls. They now sat on the table where she had placed them, staring at her from under their beards. Each was named for one of Tolkien's thirteen dwarves. Barbie was Thorin Oakenshield, of course.

She'd run short of teacups, though, and recruited the silver bowl in which Pops kept the change for newspapers and bus fares. She knew that it had been in the family for a very long time, but didn't think her grandfather would mind. She had tipped the coins out carefully to be put back later.

Pity the party didn't include any real scones, seed cake, chicken, pickles, raspberry tart or any of the other things mentioned in Tolkien, she thought as she pretended to pour tea. She was hungry, but dinner at her grandparents' place was at the same time every day and it was an hour away. Even a Mars bar would be nice right now.

She lifted the silver cup to her lips, pretending to drink, and was startled when something fell out of the cup and hit her mouth.

"Ouch!" The something fell on to the table.

It was a Mars Bar. Puzzled, she looked into the cup — empty — but when she tipped it up another chocolate bar clunked on to the table.

Elanor had recently read the story of Aladdin and wondered what would happen if she rubbed the bowl. When strenuous rubbing failed to produce a genie she shrugged and ate one of the sweet treats, keeping the other one for later.

Over dinner she asked Pops about the bowl.

"What, this old thing?" He looked surprised. "I've had it since just after the war. Your gran and I got it with our wedding gifts from the family back in England. We have relatives in Somerset."

"Isn't that where King Arthur lived?" She'd been reading some of her parents' books.

"Could be. If he existed. There's a place called Cadbury where Camelot might have been — there was a fortress there, anyway. And there's Glastonbury, where he's supposed to have been buried. Our family has been farming out that way for centuries. I don't know where the bowl came from, but I got it from a cousin. *He* inherited it from another relative who died in London during the Blitz — that's when England was being bombed by the Nazis. He said he didn't want the responsibility, whatever that meant, and that I should take care of it. Can't see why. It's pretty cheap and tacky-looking, isn't it? But I do feel sentimental about it." He smiled affectionately at the bowl. "Funny thing, though. I always seem to have enough money for fares and papers, even if I haven't put anything in for a while... Why do you want to know, anyway?"

"Oh, just wondered..." She wasn't going to mention the chocolate; her grandmother would complain if she had spoiled her appetite for dinner. "I played with it today. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not." He helped himself and her to more salad. On the television in the corner, the Doctor and Romana fled a monster...

“Look, I’m *sorry!* What else do you want me to say?” her sister Lorien protested. “You weren’t there and someone had to clean up. Nana wants to sell the house and go to a retirement village as soon as she’s out of hospital. She can’t take sixty years of junk with her.”

“You don’t have to make it sound as if I was away on purpose,” Elanor said. “You know perfectly well I was reading a paper at a conference in Oxford. I did want to come back as soon as I heard, but I couldn’t get a flight straight home. Mum said I’d miss the funeral anyway and I might as well carry out my commitments, that Pops would have wanted me to — which he would, by the way. Look, I don’t care about the rest of the stuff and I’m sorry you had to do the clean-up by yourself, but he was going to leave that bowl to me.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know?” Lorien argued. “I’d never have thought that would be in his will. I mean, an el cheapo base-metal bowl he used for change? It went to an op shop, along with the cheaper crockery and those kitsch lamp-stands. There was so much stuff in that tiny cottage, I can’t even tell you which op shop — I divided it among three.”

Elanor shook her head mutely. What was the point of griping? What point, now, to tell Lorien that she’d taken the Holy Grail to an op shop? She’d never believe it anyway — Lorien was so mundane, she’d called her children Susan and John, the most prosaic names she could think of. She even called herself Lauren.

Elanor decided she might as well just get the op shop addresses from her sister and see if she could find the thing.

She’d been reading a paper on the subject of “Arthur: from Epic Hero to Master of Ceremonies In Middle English Literature” at a conference in Oxford. There, she had, of course, made pilgrimage to the *Eagle and Child*, where Tolkien and his Inklings friends had been in the habit of going for a pint and then, because it was too late for the funeral anyway, had contacted her relatives in Somerset. Her grandfather’s cousin, Brian, and his wife Mary now lived in Glastonbury, where she had visited them. They had made her welcome and Brian had been willing to answer her questions; he was the one who had given Pops the bowl.

“It’s pre-Christian. No, lass, we don’t know where it comes from. We aren’t even the first family to look after it. I can’t tell you why it’s survived so well, but then, it is...what it is. Remember that scene in Malory’s *Morte D’Arthure* where the Grail comes floating into the great hall in Camelot and suddenly, every knight has the food he likes best?”

Thinking of the Mars Bars, Elanor grinned and nodded.

“Well, there are stacks of stories about horns or cauldrons of plenty, and not only in Celtic myth.”

“No indeed,” agreed Mary. “There’s the Greek myth of the horn of plenty. There’s even a Norse story about a mill that ground out food until someone wanted salt and forgot how to turn it off; that’s how the sea got salty.”

“So there’s nothing especially holy about the cup,” Brian said. “Anyone can use it, can’t they? Which is why it has to be hidden. What if some government got it? Or an industrialist? Or someone who wanted to do chemical warfare? So, after Arthur’s knights made fools of themselves chasing the thing, my guess is that some peasant took it. What was he going to use it for, if he didn’t know what it was? Maybe it made his beer taste better, or last longer. And it looks cheap, yes, but it’s tough. It was going to last. Let’s say he passed it on to his son and — well, you get the picture. Eventually someone worked out what it was and decided to keep it hidden. The best way to keep it safe was to make sure ordinary people had it.” He saw the look on her face. “Oh, come now, lass! You didn’t think it was somewhere in the desert, guarded by a mystical order of knights, did you?”

Elanor *had* imagined that, actually. Hollywood had a lot to answer for.

These days it was safe because no one believed in such things any more. Well, it *had* been safe until her sister had given it away. Oh, well, at least it hadn’t gone to the tip.

She sighed and put on her coat, took an umbrella from the rack in the hallway of her sister’s home and went out into the rain, feeling a sudden wry amusement at the notion of being on a quest for the Holy Grail.

The first shop was run by an organisation that bought old computers for Job Club. The woman at the counter didn’t remember, but checked on her computer the records of the last couple of weeks. That reminded her and she said that everything had been packed in cartons and had taken hours to sort.

The bowl wasn’t on her list.

Elanor went to the next shop, which was run for the benefit of the local church. The shop was small, cramped and dark and didn’t have a computer. The woman there said she was only part-time and hadn’t been there when Lorien came in. But she waved a hand at a corner where more recent donations were stored till there was room for them and invited Elanor to look. It wasn’t in any of the boxes and the handwritten sales records didn’t mention it.

By now it was nearly five p.m. and the dark clouds from which rain was still drizzling turned day into evening. She doubted the third place would be open and, whether or not the bowl had already been sold, going the next morning wasn’t going to make any difference. She would have tea and a toasted sandwich and go home to mark some first-year student papers.

St. Kilda was not short of food places, from expensive restaurants for the yuppies who came for the Sunday craft market to fast-food outlets and dubious burger joints where drug deals took place. Although it was an expensive place to buy real estate, it was also a place where street folk roamed and families lived in poverty in shabby buildings that had once been part of a Victorian era seaside resort.

Elanor entered a small greasy spoon cafe and sat by the window, gazing out at the rain. As she sat there, a craggy middle-aged man walked in, shaking the rain from his umbrella, and smiled at her. The four other tables were full, and he asked if he might share hers.

“Thank you,” he said as she waved a hand in invitation. “I need a quick meal before I go to work for the evening.”

“They know you here, do they?” she asked as the waitress waved, inquiring if he wanted the usual.

“Oh, yes, I’m a regular. I do a lot of night shifts and just don’t have time to cook.”

He smiled again and she warmed to him. She liked his face, despite the broken nose that he’d never fixed, for whatever reason. It was — kind. Like her grandfather’s, really, if not as old. She missed Pops badly.

“So, what do you do?” she asked, actually wanting to know.

“My day job? I fund-raise quite a lot. I’m on about six committees. If I didn’t get paid for that, I couldn’t do what I really want to do.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, help out people on the streets. There are a lot of them here, as you probably know. Tonight I’m helping the local mission distribute food and warm clothes.”

“It must be good to be doing something important.” She meant it, too. Somehow, what she did seemed — irrelevant. “I’m a university academic specialising in Arthurian literature. That just doesn’t seem to matter when people are going cold and hungry.”

“But that’s going to happen anyway,” he pointed out. “Someone has to be interested in more than just surviving. We need food for the soul too. Why not King Arthur?” He chuckled. “Do tell me about it while we eat. My name is Leo, by the way.”

“Elanor.”

“Like the Queen of England?”

“No, like the flower in *The Lord of the Rings*. E-l-a-n-o-r, no second e. My parents are Tolkien nuts.”

“Really? I love that book. I read it when I was in hospital once, recovering from boxing injuries. It told me that ordinary people can be heroes and you can’t imagine how important that is to me, even now.”

Now she thought of it, she’d heard of him. Leo somebody, a former boxer who was now doing social work. He was living proof that an ordinary person could be a hero, if anyone was. Street kids and old winos alike loved him. He didn’t judge. Mind you, his boxing background probably came in handy when someone was hurting someone else, or when they resented his “meddling”.

She told him about her studies, enjoying it all the more because he listened with real interest. Finally, though, he looked at his watch and stood up.

“Sorry, I’m due at the food van. If you’d like to come and help out, you’d be very welcome.”

“I’d love to, but not tonight. I have some essays to mark and you can see I’m not really dressed for it.”

“All right, then. I’m going again tomorrow night. Why don’t you meet me here about this time and we’ll go together?”

“Sounds good,” she agreed impulsively. “I’ll be here.”

He gave her a card in case she needed to call him and was out the door before she realised she hadn’t given him her information.

Next morning, she had some time before she had to be at work and went to the third shop, which was run for the local street mission. The place was unusually

large and airy for an opportunity shop, filled with goods of all kinds, from clothes to crockery and books, many of them in decent condition. The woman at the counter, a motherly soul, looked up from her knitting and smiled.

“Yes, dear? Are you looking for anything in particular or just browsing?”

“Actually, I was looking for a specific item,” Elanor said. “My grandfather died a little while ago and some of his things were donated to your shop by my sister. One of the items was of — sentimental value to me. I’m quite happy to buy it back,” she added.

The woman frowned thoughtfully, putting down the needles and wool. “Can you tell me what it was? We had a large donation not long ago, a deceased relative. It might have been your sister who brought it.”

“A metal cup about yay big.” Elanor held her hands apart. “Have you seen it?”

The woman’s face changed. Elanor wasn’t quite sure how to describe the expression. Startlement. Panic. Worry. Guilt. She wasn’t sure which. Maybe it was all of them. Of two things Elanor *was* sure: the woman had seen the cup and she knew what it did.

Now what?

The lady smiled and resumed her knitting. “Yes, I did see it. I’m afraid I sold it yesterday. I’m so sorry. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Elanor wasn’t giving up just yet. If she had to, she would follow the woman home, but in case she had misread the other woman’s expression, she tried again.

“It really was important to me. My grandfather let me play with it when I was a child. He said I could have it one day. Is there any chance you’d know who bought it?”

“I don’t keep records of my customers’ addresses and in any case, it would be confidential.” Seeing Elanor’s face, she said honestly, “The gentleman is one of my regular customers. I’ll speak to him when he comes in next, if you’ll leave your phone number. But I can’t promise he’ll give it back. He liked it and said he could do with something to keep his keys in. He’s always mislaying the things.”

There was a ring of truth about that and in any case, there wasn’t much she could do for the moment. Elanor left her phone number and went to her classes, fully intending to do some investigation.

That night, she returned to the cafe in Fitzroy Street, thinking at least she could spend the evening doing something worthwhile. But when she arrived, the waitress, seeing her, said, “Oh, you’re the lady who was here with Leo last night. He left you a message because he didn’t have your number. He had to leave early, but he’d still be pleased to see you at the food van tonight. I’ll give you the directions, okay?”

It was a lane behind the shopping centre. Elanor knew her way there and didn’t need the details. Thanking the waitress, she wrapped herself in her heavy coat and set off.

Turning the corner, she worried at first about her safety. These small streets were unsafe, usually dark and inhabited only by people doing drug deals and other dubious transactions.

Except that this particular area wasn’t unpopulated, and it wasn’t dark. Young mothers, punks, elderly winos, thin teenagers, all came and went, and they were

carrying more than a cup of soup and a sandwich. There were entire bags of groceries in the arms of those coming towards her. One woman with a pram had supplies of nappies and tinned baby food as well.

And the light coming from ahead was a strange shade that didn't look to her like street lighting. There was an odd *glow* about it.

Over the heads of the crowd, she saw the van, a large one about the size of a caravan, with open flaps. Leo and two others were handing out groceries. One of the volunteers was the woman from the op shop.

The glow came from the van, but it wasn't caused by the electric light. It came from an old, cheap-looking bowl made of a metal no one could identify. It was a lot bigger than the cup she had lost. Perhaps it stretched when necessary, which explained the bags of groceries. A cauldron indeed.

Somehow, she had known, deep down, where she would find it.

Elanor remembered what Brian had said of the Grail and agreed with him. It wasn't especially holy. It just did what it did. It was safest with ordinary people who didn't know what it was for. She had worried: what if someone in power got hold of it? Used it for the wrong thing? Even now, she panicked, as she made her way through the crowd. The word would spread. Police would hear about unusually large amounts of goods being handed out and want to know where they came from, in case they were stolen. And from there...

Leo looked up from his work and, seeing her, smiled and waved her over to the van.

Oh, the hell with this. It wasn't Tolkien's Ring, after all, which must never be used. It was a cauldron of plenty that had been around for a very long time, being wasted on improving the taste of beer, making change for an old man's newspapers, producing chocolate for a small child. Perhaps it was time someone took a chance and let it be used the way a Holy Grail ought to be used. Well, maybe not Malory's version. *That* Grail, if recovered by Arthur's knights, would have ended up in some monastery church, being worshipped by monks.

But she was quite sure that a certain left-wing radical from Galilee would have approved of this. He would probably have had something pithy to say about the waste of his cup over the last few centuries; he certainly wouldn't have wanted it lying around a museum — or a church, for that matter.

Elanor climbed the steps of the van.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "What can I do to help?"



Nicola L
P.A.

The Color of a Brontosaurus

...Paul E Martens

"There's no question about it." Stu Gehrig knew his voice was too loud, but his news was so big it took an extra effort to make it fit into the phone. "The fluorine dating says they're the same age!"

"Oh." Apparently, Stu's excitement wasn't something his wife could catch over the telephone.

"You don't understand. If the human femur has been in the ground as long as the allosaurus bone, it means the human must have been a time traveler!" He paused to give her a chance to insert a new and improved 'oh.'

"And, if it is a time traveler," he continued when she didn't avail herself of the opportunity, "it means that time travel is possible and, if I can find a time traveler, there's a chance I can hitch a ride and see dinosaurs for myself! Imagine! Was ouranosaurus a sailback or a humpback? What noise did a parasaurolophus make? What color was a brontosaurus? God! It makes me want to run out and grab people and ask them when they're from."

"Stu." Marcy showed she could pack as much inflection into a word as anyone. "Don't go totally nuts about this until you're *really* sure. I know you're excited, honey, but take it easy, okay? Don't do anything that might ruin your career."

"Don't worry. Have you ever known me to go off the deep end before?"

Avoiding the question, Marcy asked, "What do Renee and Joel think?"

"Oh, shit! I was supposed to meet them in the lab ten minutes ago. But I wanted to tell you first. I've got to go! Love you!"

There was only one light on in the lab, directly above a table on which rested a large square of sandstone. Bones were still set in the rock. Two people stood on opposite sides of the block, the light bathing their faces, chests and hands in its glow, leaving their backs in shadow.

"If it's a hundred fifty million years old, it can't be human," Renee Lynn was saying. "But, it's human." She sounded like she was saying two plus two equals a green plastic fish. The facts didn't add up to a logical answer. Reflections from the gold ring in her eyebrow danced as she shook her purplish hair. In the dark, her black clothes made it seem as though she had only hands and a head.

Joel Besser pointed his goatee and his thick, black-framed glasses at her and spoke from his mountain top. "It's obviously a hoax." His tone brooked no argument, unless you knew how often his pronouncements were wrong.

"How?" asked Renee. "How did someone plant a human bone with an allosaur's, in solid rock, without leaving a trace?"

Joel tabled a direct answer to her question with a wave of his hand. "There's no other explanation possible. I, for one, will not be known as the victim of another Piltdown debacle."

Stu cleared his throat, but, before he could offer his alternative, Renee said, "Creationism."

"What?" Joel choked on his coffee.

"Come up with something else, then. Those people claim that if dinosaurs existed at all, they were around at the same time as humans. What if they're right? Here's the evidence. How else can we interpret it?"

Joel spluttered, "Nonsense. Unscientific, superstitious balderdash."

Stu said, "I don't think we should go public with that idea yet, Renee. Do you?" It occurred to him that they might not be entirely receptive to his idea, either.

"Well, no. I wasn't saying anything about going public about anything. I just think we should consider it, that's all. Don't we have to test any reasonable hypothesis?"

"Reasonable? You call that reasonable? It's preposterous." Joel had more to say, but Renee was looking at Stu.

He nodded. "Yes, we do. And we have to consider that it might be a hoax, too. And any other theories we come up with." Maybe he was wrong. Maybe time travel wasn't the only possibility. "Whoever he was, there he is. All we have to do is figure out how and why he came to be there."

They contemplated the fossil.

Finally Joel said, "All right, we're not going to find any answers just standing here staring. Um, Renee...I don't suppose..."

"Yes, Joel. I've got more coffee in my office. Yemen Mocha. You can grind the beans. Coming, Stu?"

"In a minute." Stu couldn't take his eyes off the femur.

You're a scientist, he told himself. An imagination is a useful tool, but facts are what count. Measurements.

But they'd done the measurements. There came a time when you had to decide what the measurements meant; you had to reach a conclusion.

There was no doubt that the femur was that of a modern human. Not a proto-human, or some previously unknown dinosaur. Joel and Renee had arrived at the same answer. It was demonstrable, provable. When they finally did release news of the discovery, people might argue about it, but they'd be unable to refute it.

But how did they answer the next question? How did the bone come to be embedded in solid rock millions and millions of years before such a bone could have existed?

It *had* to be a time traveler. There was no other answer. Or was that just what he wanted to believe?

He stared at the fossil, feeling a sense of displacement, like one of those near-death experiences where someone looks down on his or her own body. Only he was looking at just a piece of himself. Where was the rest of him? How had it happened?

“Coffee’s ready.” Renee’s voice made him jump.

“On my way.” He shook his head to clear it, ashamed at himself for getting carried away. It wasn’t him. How could it be? It probably wasn’t a time traveler at all. It wasn’t possible.

Was it?

“Maybe it’s a hominoid, not a human at all.” Joel wanted it to be anything but human.

“No, it’s human. Besides, how would that be any better? There’s still a hundred thirty million years between the allosaurs and the earliest hominoid,” Stu said.

“What about the radiocarbon dating?” Renee asked.

Stu shook his head. “It’s too old. The results are meaningless. And the uranium-lead dating just confirms the stratigraphical evidence.”

“It’s a hoax,” Joel said for the millionth time.

“How?” Renee and Stu said together, with just the same tone of frustrated annoyance.

After a moment, Renee hesitated, then said, “All right. So man existed at the same time as the dinosaurs.” She looked at the others, her jaw set. “Right?”

“No,” said Stu. “It’s the bone of a fully evolved human. It’s not merely homologous, it’s human. We’d have to ignore everything we think we know about evolution, pretend that homo sapiens regressed to homo habilis then back again. That can’t be true.”

“Unless evolution isn’t true,” Renee said, more to herself than to Stu and Joel.

Stu bit his lip, then said, “It has to be a time traveler.”

The others exchanged raised eyebrows before turning on Stu.

“Not amusing,” said Joel.

“Yeah, can we be scientific about this, please? Let’s stick to reality. I’d like to at least have a *chance* of getting grants in the future. Or maybe you can ask your time traveler if I’ll get any grants and save me from worrying about them. While you’re at it, ask him when I’ll meet the man of my dreams.”

“Really, Stu,” said Joel. “I think we should concentrate on figuring out how the bone was planted there. Who could have done it? And why?”

“It’s not a hoax, Joel,” Renee said. “Stop being so paranoid. Why can’t you accept my explanation? I’ve checked and some Creation Scientists have pretty decent credentials.”

“‘Creation’ and ‘Scientist’ do not belong in the same sentence, let alone in a description of one person. I will not give credence to fanatics pushing some sort of religious agenda, no matter how plausible they may appear to susceptible minds.”

Eyes narrowed, Renee asked, “Are you talking about me?”

Stu left. Obviously they didn't take his idea seriously enough to even argue with him. Were they so lacking in vision and romance? Or was he suffering from too much?

To see a carnivore try to make a meal of an armored herbivore. A mother tending a nest of dinosaur hatchlings. Those were the kinds of images that drew him to paleontology in the first place. If he had a chance to transport himself back in time, to put to rest the controversies, answer all the unanswerable questions, would he take it? Even if it meant being imprisoned in rock for a hundred and fifty million years?

How, though? He seemed to remember reading that some sort of time travel might be possible, in theory, anyway. Something about tachyons, or wormholes, or something. He didn't have the physics background to invent time travel himself, eliminating at least one Science Fiction cliché, at least. So someone else did, or would. All he had to do was find a time traveler and ask for lift.

Maybe an ad in the paper. "Wanted: Time Traveler for scientific expedition. Respond to Box 555, c/o this newspaper."

No.

He would have to figure out a time/place a time traveler would want to go, get then/there and try to figure out who was from the future.

No problem. After the fact. The Crucifixion, the sacking of Rome, the Lincoln or Kennedy assassinations. Obvious choices. But how do you know beforehand?

Stu's favorite dinner, baby back ribs, cole slaw and potato salad, sat practically untouched in front of him. "Just think of it, Marce. The sights. The sounds. The smells. Roars and screams. The buzzing of giant insects. Footsteps that shake the earth. Trees crashing as they're crushed or shouldered aside by passing monsters. I want to go back, Marcy. I *have* to go back."

Marcy didn't say anything. Some part of Stu's mind recognized that her blond hair was newly permed, some part of him knew he'd ignored the offer implicit in the kiss with which she'd greeted him, but his enthusiasm had swept him past such considerations.

"Stu," she said finally, as if calling him home. "Honey, you don't know that you *can* go back. Even if it is the bone of a time traveler, how do you know there are others?"

"There would have to be others. It isn't logical that this guy would be the only one." He shook his head. "No, they must be around somewhere. The trick is how to find them. I thought of things like sports playoffs, and movie premiers, and news conferences. But those things are all taped anyway. It's not those kinds of things time travelers would want to see. It's the surprises, the spontaneous banana peels of history they would want to witness. And, by definition, there's no way to know about those things in advance." He reached for his glass of water as he said, almost to himself, "Unless you make your own."

"What do you mean? Like, go out and assassinate somebody?" Marcy sounded as if she could almost believe he might.

“No, of course not. Although, somebody like...No. No. I would never hurt anyone. You know that, don't you? I wouldn't even risk it by burning the Reichstag, or blowing up Parliament, or something.” He looked at her face. “Really!”

“Stu.” It really was amazing how many different meanings she could make that one syllable have. “I know how much this means to you. But remember Erin Whitten.”

Stu turned red. “That was a long time ago. I was just a kid.”

“I know. And it doesn't make me love you any less. But the fact that you would suggest a source that didn't exist, knowing she would get caught, just so you could take her place on a field trip does suggest you can go too far.”

“It was a Robert Bakker dig,” he mumbled.

“I just want you to think about it before you do something you might wish you hadn't.”

“I will. I just wish I knew what I *can* do. It's as if I'm standing still and the dinosaurs are all rushing away from me.”

She smiled at him. “You know, even though I worry about you, your passion for dinosaurs is part of why I fell for you. When you came into my class lugging about a ton of fossils and then managed to get a roomful of nine year olds excited and quiet at the same time; when I saw the look on your face, I knew I was going to marry you. You'll figure out something. I believe in you.”

Marcy was on the phone when Stu dragged himself, two cameras, and a camcorder into the house.

“Never mind, Renee, he's here.” She hung up and ran to Stu to hug him. “Where have you been? I woke up and you were gone and I had no idea where you were. I kept calling the museum and no one there knew where you were, either. Why didn't you call? Where have you been?”

He gently disengaged himself and dropped into a chair. “I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking that something would happen somewhere and I wouldn't be there to see it and the time travelers would get away. I've been walking all over, waiting for something, anything, they might want to see.” He hung his head in weariness, or defeat, or both. “Nothing.” He looked at her. “What am I going to do, Marcy? The idea that there might be even the slightest chance for me to see living dinosaurs is burning in me like a sun, giving off too much light for me to see anything else, too much energy to sit still.”

“Stu...”

“I know it's stupid! It's preposterous! It's futile. It's unscientific. But I have to do *something!*” He slumped. “I have to face the fact that nothing significant is going to ever happen around here. Hey! When are you going to New York? That's in the next week or two, isn't it? Why don't we go now, tonight?” He started to get up but Marcy wouldn't let him.

“Stu, calm down. You're not thinking. What are the odds that you'll come upon some momentous event by chance? Has it ever happened before? Why would it

happen now just because you want it to? Come to bed and sleep in it. Maybe you'll come up with something else."

He looked at her as if contemplating making a break for it. Finally he said, "All right. I'll try. But what am I going to do, Marcy?" He sounding like he was praying.

"I want to go public." Stu's office had already been crowded before Renee and Joel came in. Books, pictures, and models of dinosaurs sprouted from every surface, including the ceiling.

"No. Absolutely not." Joel closed the discussion, his arms folded over his chest.

"Go public with what?" asked Renee, ignoring Joel. The ring in her eyebrow was gone, and her hair was a very ordinary brown.

"With what we found. That there was a human bone with the allosaurus fossil, apparently the same age."

"No. I refuse to allow it." Joel pointed his goatee at Stu, then Renee, then back at Stu.

"And what do we say we've concluded from that?" Renee's eyes locked with Stu's.

"We say it's proof that time travel is possible." He stared back at Renee without wavering.

An unintelligible noise burst from Joel.

"Why, Stu? Even if we agreed with you, which we obviously don't, it's just asking to be ridiculed."

"Right!" shouted Joel.

"Because it's the only explanation. And even if they laugh at us, they'll have to at least think about it. Somebody in a lab will say, 'Hmm, what if it's true? How would it be possible? How would I go about it?' And just presenting the possibility could lead to its becoming an actuality."

"But if it is a time traveler, doesn't that mean that time travel gets invented, whether we have a press conference or not?"

Stu's brow wrinkled as he considered the question. "Well...Maybe it's...Look, I'm not interested in the philosophy of time travel, just the practicalities."

"Practicalities? Stu, you're talking about time travel. You might as well talk about the practicalities of taming a hippogriff. And I still don't see what you hope to accomplish."

"All right. What if time travel gets to be an important technology? And our press conference somehow triggers its development. Wouldn't someone from the future want to be there at the beginning?" He looked at the others, trying to will them to get excited. "And if we can find a time traveler, then we can go back and see what it was like. No more digging in the dust and the rocks for hints of the past to color our imaginations. To be among the living, breathing, running, climbing, flying, roaring, touchable creatures whose graves we plunder. How can you want to live in a world of fossils when you know there's a door into a world where dinosaurs live?"

He thought he had them. He thought he could see them remembering why they had gotten into paleontology, what it was like to be excited. For a moment they seemed tempted by the adventure. For a moment they looked like they were ready to join him on a trip into the past. For a moment.

“No, Stu.” Joel’s words were filled with regret. “That’s a fantasy. We have to deal with life as it is, not as we want it to be. We have to worry about our jobs. About grants, and donations, and our reputations. We just can’t risk it.”

“Renee...?”

She turned away from him. “No.” Her voice broke slightly before she continued with more resolve. “No. I think you’re wrong. I think there was a Flood. I think these fossils prove it. The Book of Job refers to Behemoths and Leviathans. I think they were dinosaurs.” She clenched her jaw. “And I’ve already scheduled a news conference with Dr. Fletcher of the Institute of Biblical Science. He intends to show the fossils to the world as proof of the literal truth of the Bible.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Stu.

“Unacceptable!” said Joel. “Totally unacceptable.” He grabbed his head with both hands as if to keep it from exploding. “Have you both gone insane? This isn’t a museum anymore, it’s become a madhouse.” He took his hands from his head and made them into fists which crashed down on Stu’s desk. “I won’t allow either of you to make my entire career a laughing stock. I’ve got thirty years invested in my reputation and I won’t -- I *can’t* -- let you destroy that. I can’t let you destroy *me*!” He glared at them, his eyes wide with horror, or rage, or maybe even a touch of the madness he claimed was in them. “I won’t.”

The other two stared after him as he left the room.

“Renee...” Stu began.

She shook her head. “No, Stu. That’s the way it is.” She started to leave, too. “I’m sorry,” she said, so quietly he wasn’t even sure she was speaking to him.

“It’s over,” Stu told Marcy over the phone.

“What do you mean? What’s over?”

“Everything. Joel went nuts and destroyed the fossil.” His sigh came over the phone like the breath of a tear. “I guess he felt like Renee and I were ganging up on him, trying to ruin him. Like we were both trying to come up with a theory more outlandish than the other for the sole purpose of wrecking everything he stands for. They found him with a hammer, pounding and pounding on it ‘til there was nothing but dust.”

“Oh, Stu. Will the museum press charges?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. It doesn’t matter.”

“What about Renee?”

“Who cares? She’s as crazy as Joel. I think she’s going to work for that Biblical Institute.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I guess I’ll just try and forget the whole thing ever happened.”

"I'm sorry, hon."

"It's my own fault. I got my hopes up so high about the press conference, it hurt more when they came crashing down on me." He snorted. "I guess I just wanted to at least be known as the 'Father of Time Travel,' and then maybe someone would send me back in time as a reward or something. It was a stupid idea." He sounded like one of Marcy's third graders trying to convince himself he really didn't want to go to that dumb old birthday party anyway. "At least now we can go to New York like you wanted."

"Oh." Marcy sounded surprised. "No. I mean, not this weekend. You're too upset. We'll go some other time."

"It would probably be good for me. Get my mind off this whole mess for a while. I know how much you were looking forward to it."

"But, you can't just give up. There's got to be something else you can try."

The thought of how lucky he was to have found Marcy spread through him like a sip of hot chocolate on a cold dig. Hey, a dig! "Maybe there is. It's a long shot, but what about the dig where we found the bone? What if this still somehow leads to the invention of time travel? Finding the bone could turn out to be a turning point in history. A pivotal moment that time travelers would want to be part of. Just think, they wouldn't have to be just passive observers, they could be *participants*. There were people coming and going all over the site. It would have been easy to mingle in and no one would have known."

"But that's already happened. How would that help?"

"Don't you remember? That dig was like a second honeymoon for us. You took pictures! Of everything. And everybody. There's *got* to be a clue in those pictures. Dig 'em out. I'll be home in a few minutes."

"Who's this?" Stu held up a picture from the stacks on the table and pointed for Marcy.

She leaned over his shoulder and said, "That's Joel, Stu."

"No, no. This guy. Here. The one by the bushes."

"That *is* a bush."

Stu used his magnifying glass to peer at the photograph. "Are you sure there isn't somebody trying to hide in there?"

"Stu, you've got to stop. You've been looking at these things for two days. Have you even slept? Look at this mess. Lists of names and addresses, piles of pictures. You've got indexes, and cross references, and drawings, and maps. And how are we going to afford the phone bill you're running up? I don't know if I should call a doctor or strangle you."

With an effort, Stu tore his eyes away from the debris on the kitchen table and looked at her. "I don't know what else to do, Marce. I don't know if I'll find what I'm looking for, but I have to try. I *have* to." Tears of frustration swam in his eyes but didn't fall.

Marcy's tears weren't so shy. She bit her lip, hugged Stu, and left the room.

Stu looked after her a moment. What if he got trapped in the past and never saw her again? What if he was able to return to the present but somehow changed history so she was never in his life? Could he choose between the past and Marcy?

The corner of a photograph caught his eye. Where was that grad student from? What was his name? He reached for his lists and charts.

Stu was sitting on top of a brontosaurus. It was green, like grass in spring before it gets mown. They were with other brontosaurus, all devouring vegetation nonstop. He could see more dinosaurs around them, more kinds than he had ever imagined. The air was sharp, as if it hadn't yet been worn out by being filtered through billions of lungs for millions of years. Although he was dwarfed by the giants whose world he shared, he felt like the Lord of Creation. Like Adam in the Garden. But where was his Eve? Where was Marcy?

"Stu. Stu, wake up." Marcy was shaking him gently.

"Huh?" He sat up. Pieces of paper stuck to his face from the piles on the table. "I guess I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"You mean, 'what day is it?'" She smiled at him. "It's Saturday. And I'm leaving to take the train into the city."

Stu rubbed his face and blinked. "Oh, jeez, is it time to go already? Give me a couple of minutes to shower and get changed."

"No, it's okay. There isn't time. I'll just go by myself this time. Besides, you're still working. I didn't want to interrupt you. Did you find anything?"

He grimaced. "Not even a hint. Maybe it would be good for me to take a break, get a change of scenery and come back fresh."

"Oh, honey, I wish I'd known. I would have wakened you earlier. But I've got to get out of here right now if I'm going to get the train." She bent over for a kiss and a hug. "I'll see you tonight. Love you."

After she'd gone, he surveyed the jumble that covered the table, and a good bit of the floor next to it. Junk. Meaningless junk. The pictures told him nothing. As far as he could tell, everyone at the site had been accounted for. No one looked suspicious or seemed to pay undue attention to the spot where they found the bones. He could be sure of that, at least, because there was a whole stack of pictures of the area just before they'd known something was there.

For about the thousandth time, he picked up a shot of him with a 'Eureka!' look on his face. There were people working. A couple leaning on shovels and talking. But not one person was looking his way, not so much as a surreptitious peek.

He closed his eyes and saw all the dinosaurs that ever were stampeding away from him, getting smaller and smaller, the thunder of their passage getting fainter.

He couldn't let them go. There had to be a way. He was just too stupid to see it. He grit his teeth and picked up the list of names and phone numbers.

He was sitting on the couch in the living room when she got home that night. The muted television provided the only light in the room, flickering over him like a kaleidoscope. He'd been staring at the set without really seeing it and his eyes were still unfocused when he turned to face her.

Marcy started slightly when she saw him, like a grounded teenager caught coming home after sneaking out of her room. "Hi, honey, taking a break?" She started toward him, but stopped.

"It's you, isn't it?" His voice was like that of a ghost confronting his murderer; haunted, accusing, without hope.

"What?" Her laugh sounded forced. "Of course it's me. Who were you expecting?"

He shook his head. "You know what I mean."

She studied him, as if searching for a cue to tell her what she should say.

"I saw the news tonight," he said. "What a lucky break that you decided to go to New York without me today. Or maybe you weren't anywhere near the crowd in Central Park."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Tell me, do the people of the future ever find out exactly what that guy said that was so moving? Or, I guess that's what your job was, huh? Did you record it? Never mind, I'm probably not allowed to know." He clenched his teeth, trying to keep his pain in until it burst from him in an anguished, "Why?"

"Because I love you." Her tears were falling now. "I didn't plan to fall in love with you." She paused for a breath. "We can't pick a time to arrive right to the minute. I was several months early so I had to get a job, make a living, using credentials prepared for me, just in case. I was just trying to get by until it was time to find out what I needed to and go home. I wasn't supposed to fall in love. I certainly wasn't supposed to get married. When I did, I figured I would just get the information and send it ahead without me so I could stay here with you. I was willing to give up my life in my own time for you. Then you found that bone and started going crazy about time travelers and I didn't know what to do." She took a step toward him. "Stu, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" he said, as if he'd never heard the word before. "For what? For laughing behind my back while you watched me stumble around, desperately searching for a time traveler who was right next to me the whole time? For being able to give me what I want most in the world and not even giving me a hint that what I wanted was even possible? No problem. In fact, I'll forgive you in advance if you want to open my chest and take a bite out of my heart."

"You don't understand!"

"Then tell me. Make me understand. How could you do this to me, Marce?"

She sat in a chair across the room from him. "Okay. You're right. I am from the future. I came to record that speech that caused such a stir today. It turns out that there were some important people in the crowd that heard it. Eventually Stephon Hardesty's words lead to real world-wide cooperation, what we think of as a golden age. But there was never a definitive record of exactly what he said in his first speech. It's one of those pivotal moments you were talking about. That was my mission."

“Does that mean you’ll be leaving now?” he said, as if it had already happened.

She made fists which she didn’t use. “I don’t know. I should. It’s not cheap to send someone through time. I have an obligation to the people of my present.” She looked at him. “But I don’t want to leave you.”

He snorted.

She got angry. “Go ahead and laugh. I guess it is pretty funny that I don’t want to leave you when you were so anxious to leave me. How do you think it made me feel to have you spend every waking moment trying to figure out how to get a hundred million years away from me?”

His mouth opened.

“Oh, that’s different, isn’t it? Why? Why is it all right for *you* to want to leave *me*?”

After a minute, he shrugged and said softly, “It is different.” He looked at her as if she were the only thing in the world. “I love you more than any person I’ve ever known. I didn’t even know it was possible to love anyone like I love you. If I lost you I would be in pain for the rest of my life. But I would still live. But what kind of life would I have if I knew I had a chance to go back in time and lost it? How could I go on looking at the dry bones of long dead creatures, knowing that their living flesh was almost within my reach? If I’d never seen that damned bone I could have gone on with the way things were, I could have been happy just to be with you. Not anymore. I have to go back. You can give me my heart’s desire. You have to let me go.”

“I can’t.” The words came from her as if it hurt her physically to say them. “The device is calibrated to the chemistry of a specific person. That way it can’t be stolen or used accidentally. It can send non-living materials, so I can send back the recording I made today. But I can’t send you.”

He stared at her as if he’d been shot between the eyes and his brain knew he was dead before his body was aware of it.

“I can’t go either, actually,” she continued. “My chemistry has changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, remember when you said that you wanted to be the Father of Time Travel?”

“Yeah...”

“What if I told you that it might be literally true?”

“What are you ..?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“You’re... What?” He was stunned, then confused, then a hundred other emotions, as if someone were flicking through the channels of his brain. “Pregnant!” He let out a whoop. “Marcy! A baby!” He jumped up and grabbed her out of her chair in a hug, and whirled her until they were both dizzy. “Oh, maybe I shouldn’t do that sort of thing. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He stood still. “Wait. You said that I’m going to be the Father of Time Travel.”

She shook her head, smiling. “I said you *might* be.”

“Wow, imagine. My son is going to invent time travel.”

“Or daughter. And *maybe*.”

He did a double take. She responded with a Mona Lisa smile.

“I get it. You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Nope.”

“So I can’t go back in time now, but...someday?” His voice rose hopefully.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe! C’mon, Marce. Maybe’s not good enough. I have to know. Is there still a chance for me? Is the femur mine? Give me something.”

She wouldn’t look at him.

He gave her a mock glare. “Okay, be that way. I’ll just assume it *will* happen. Someday.” He grinned. “All right. I can wait. Hey! We’re going to have a baby!”

Chris Gehrig had an arm around Marcy’s black-clad shoulder to comfort her. “Are you okay, Mom?”

Marcy dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and smiled sadly. “I’ll be all right. We had a good, long time together. How about you? How are you holding up?”

Chris fought against an attack of tears. “I don’t know. I feel like I failed him. He wanted so badly to go see his dinosaurs. At the end, I think he was just hanging on because he thought I could do it. But I couldn’t. And when I finally had to admit that I just wasn’t ready, I think the disappointment killed him.”

Marcy took Chris by the shoulders and waited until their eyes met. “Listen to me. Your father was very, very proud of you. He knew that you’ll eventually accomplish what you set out to do. He knew it. Your work on time travel let him hope and there’s no better life than one filled with hope. If he had been able to travel back to the Mesozoic, he couldn’t have survived anyway. He might have died horribly.” She kept eye contact until she felt she’d gotten her message across, then said, “Now, you go on and make sure everything is ready for the trip to the cemetery, and give me a few minutes alone with him.”

When she was by herself with the coffin, she lifted the lid and smiled at what was left of Stu. “I’m going to miss you, old man. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you your heart’s desire while you were alive. I wouldn’t have, even if I could. How could I if it meant living without you?” She took a small machine out of her purse and put it in his lifeless hands. She kissed him and touched a switch on the device.

“Good bye, my love,” she said, closing the lid. “Watch out for the allosaurus.”

From the Inside, Out

...David Dumitru

I. Dilemma

Andy Monahans watched the little biobot squirm around on the factory floor like some greasy, hairless mouse gutted alive by a miniature, underpowered laser cutter, which was basically the case. The bots were crazy like that, always bumping into each other and tripping each other up. They reminded Andy of thumb-sized sausages, only with sorry-looking mouse eyes and toothpick limbs made of carbon fiber and equipped with miniscule screwdrivers and soldering irons and lasers. The bot thrashed about, and Andy thought about lunch. Nuggets, of course. He didn't much like sausages.

But lunch wasn't for a while yet. Andy looked around the factory floor to see if the monkeys were watching. You had to stay on your toes. The monkeys weren't good for much of anything but pushing buttons and turning knobs but they thought they ran the place. And they were quick. They'd steal a nugget right out of your hand if they saw you eating on the production floor. Boykin, Andy's boss, had told him once that the company was experimenting with the monkeys. "Monkeys work cheap," he'd said.

"So do we," Andy had replied.

"But the monkeys don't complain about it," Boykin had said.

Boykin was a smartass. Like Andy, he was an organic, a walking, talking soup of unengineered DNA. Unlike Andy, Boykin went around acting proud of it, like the fact that his parents didn't put up the cash for a genetic boost in the womb was a sign of holiness or something.

There were only two monkeys on-shift and they were way over on the other side of the plant, fighting over which one of them got to pull a lever. Andy dug a meat-'n-veg breakfast nugget out of his overall pocket, wiped the lint off it and popped it in his mouth. The monkeys must have noticed the movement. They stopped fighting and turned their heads. Andy pretended not to notice. The monkeys went back to fighting. The bot with the gash in its gullet was still writhing around down there on the floor. Andy swallowed the nugget and counted. It took the bot another twenty-three seconds to shut down.

When at last it stopped moving, Andy swept the body into a gutter running along the wall. A swarm of saprophytic nanobots, visible only because they

traveled in huge herds with the blue-green hue of rotting flesh, poured out of their nests on the walls and the ceilings and followed the bot's body into the gutter and down through a drainage grate into the recycle unit under the floor. That was where Boykin worked. The 'phytes would eat what was left of the bot's flesh, leaving only the toolkits behind, clean and shiny and all ready for Boykin to sweep into a bin with a thousand others from all over the factory. Then Boykin would send the parts to the subbasement, to Assembly, where the bots were born limbless and hairless and mouthless and programmed to use their toolkits and the whole thing would start again. The Ikinshut Children's Firearms Corporation was nothing if not efficient. Even a regular bloke like Andy could see that much.

Behind him, there was a small, wet sound, like the sound his mother made when she spit a chewed-up nugget on the floor for Ginger the Fifth, her cheap, toothless, street-cooked re-gen cat to suck on. Andy turned in time to see three of the bots pulling another bot out from under one of the machines. The machine had taken a good-size bite out of the injured bot's side. One of the monkeys came over. It stood there, all sloppy and idiot-eyed the way monkeys do, staring at the offending machine, bobbing around, picking at its testicles, trying to look smart, like Boykin. Then it pulled on one of levers and punched a knob on a big monkey-keyboard on the wall and went away. Andy watched the bot shut down. It looked painful. Andy was glad he wasn't a bot. And he was glad that the bots didn't have mouths. If they had mouths, they might scream, and Andy would be faced with a dilemma. He'd have to think about whether he felt sorry for the bots, and when he decided he didn't, he'd have to think about whether he should pretend to feel sorry for them even if he didn't. He wouldn't, but that wasn't the point. The point was that he'd have to think about it, right there in front of the monkeys.

Andy swept the bot into the gutter. The other bots scattered. He was a busy man. The ring tone in his ear told him he had a call waiting. He tapped the subdural implant just in front of his ear and launched himself onto the 'werk. His contact lenses painted his retinas with the new Pleezers 24/7 erectile chewables ad starring a celebrity trannie chick from the surgery channel of the Celebrity Health Network. Andy remembered the operation. It still gave him nightmares. The ad faded out and Andy's caller came into focus.

"Ikinshut customer care," Andy said. When he'd taken the job, nobody had said anything about call-center duty. But Andy didn't mind. It gave him an excuse to get out of the factory and see other people. He saw himself as a communicator, a multitasking friend to the luckless consumer in his or her hour of need. And he figured it was like job security. It was, at least, one part of the job the monkeys couldn't do.

The voice on the other end sounded irate. The video feed was all over the place and he couldn't get a good look. It was a lady. She was babbling on and on; something about a kid and an eyeball.

"Okay, now let's calm down," Andy said, following the prompts as his 'tacts painted them across his field of vision. "I need to ask you some questions."

She said something about foreign call-centers and why the hell couldn't she talk to someone in Bangalore.

“Is this a problem with an Ikinshut Hungry Hunter assault product or an Ikinshut Playtime unit with revolving chamber?” Andy asked. He stroked his chin. He knew that the customer, if she was looking at her display, was seeing an animated avatar in a nice suit, not Andy in his factory overalls with bot grease and saprophyte crap all over them.

The lady said something that might have been intelligible if Andy had been paying attention, but Andy didn’t catch it. He said. “I’m going to list several model numbers now, please stop me when I reach the model number of the product in question.” He toggled to the avatar screen while the lady yammered something about somebody’s head and a bunch of blood. He started reading off model numbers. He stroked his chin again and watched as the avatar stroked its chin as well. Andy tried a sympathetic smile. The avatar smiled. Cool. Andy shook his head back and forth really, really fast. The avatar did the same. Ripper. Andy raised his arms over his head and danced like a monkey...

“Monahans!”

It was Boykin. How the hell?

Andy noticed that the customer was jabbering away like she was talking to somebody who was listening. He shut down the call. Across the plant, the monkeys were doing monkey things, scratching themselves and then putting their fingers in their mouths.

Boykin looked angry.

“You were spying on me,” Andy said.

“Of course I was spying on you,” Boykin said. “Whaddayathink? It’s my job to spy on you.”

Andy looked at Boykin and Boykin glared back at him. There was movement in Andy’s peripheral vision and he glanced at the floor. The bots had gone crazy; crazier than usual. They were zipping all over the place, zapping each other with soldering irons and laser cutters, pulling each others’ toolkits out by the sockets, leaving gaping, oozing wounds. It would have been funny, but Boykin didn’t look like he was enjoying himself. On the other side of the factory one of the monkeys started jumping up and down, screeching and throwing his hands all over the place.

II. The Fancy Hat

It took a few minutes to get the bots all settled and back to doing whatever the hell they were supposed to be doing.

Boykin seemed to know what was bothering them, but he wasn’t saying. It wasn’t hunger. Even Andy knew that much. He knew it because he said, “Maybe they’re hungry.”

Boykin said, “Whaddayadim? They don’t get hungry. They’re intraviscerophageous. They eat themselves from the inside out. It’s cheaper that way. No mouths.”

Andy nodded. Ouch. He felt sorry for anyone who had to go around remembering a word like that. Even Boykin.

After that, there was a disciplinary meeting. The meeting consisted of Boykin and Andy sitting across a table from each other in the break room with one of the monkeys sitting on a cabinet next to the coffee machine with its tail in its mouth.

Boykin yelled a lot while Andy tried to look like a guy who might be thinking about whatever it was Boykin was saying. Andy was in fact thinking that he could have really used one of those avatar things right then. It was hard work trying to look all sincere with all the yelling going on and Boykin's big, meaty head in his face like a huge, splotchy ball of nugget meat. It made him thirsty. There was a bar across the street. They had beer. If he had that avatar thing, Boykin could yell at it while Andy went to the bar. Everybody wins but the monkey.

When Boykin finally stopped yelling, he went to the cabinet where the monkey was sitting and took out a thing that looked to Andy like a wad of tin foil. Boykin hefted the thing in his hand and tossed it to Andy.

"What's this?" Andy asked.

"Whaddayathink?" Boykin said. "It's a friggen hat. Put it on."

"Put it on?"

"Put. It. On," Boykin said. "There's a 'werkblock in it. So you can't go online while you're on duty."

"What about the call center?"

"No more call center for you, Monahans," Boykin said. He tilted his head to the side, pointing to the monkey. "He's taking over your call center duties."

"But..." Andy sputtered, "he can't talk."

"The avatar'll do the talking."

Andy reflected that he had never actually trusted the avatar. Andy un-crumpled the foil hat and sat for moment with the it in his lap. On the counter next to the coffee machine, the monkey was looking at him with a stupid monkey grin on his face, like he was laughing.

"Put it on," Boykin said.

"I quit," Andy said.

"Right." It was Boykin's turn to grin like a monkey. He shook his big, naked head. "And lose your benefits?"

"Benefits?"

The monkey picked up a coffee mug and threw it at Boykin's head. Andy was impressed. The monkey had a pretty good arm. The mug missed Boykin by a couple of meters, but it left a nice-size dimple in the wall. Andy put the hat on. A man had to fight for his dignity, of course, but a man also had to think about his benefits if he had any.

Boykin stood up and scowled at the monkey and left. Apparently, the disciplinary meeting was over.

Back at his station, the bots were busy tinkering with things and scurrying around. A couple of them looked up at Andy as he approached and then went back to work. Andy watched them for a while. What else could he do? He was used to the 'werk streaming tunes and chats and customer calls into his head and painting his eyeballs

with overlays all the time. Now all he had was the bots and the whir and sizzle of their toolkits. Andy picked one of the toy guns sprayed a couple of hundred rounds into the ceiling.

It was a quiet gun. No louder than cat breaking wind, which in Andy's experience were pretty quiet unless you happened to be standing on the cat at the time. The projectiles hit the ceiling with a clatter and fell back down to the factory floor in a shower of plastic and metal and little tufts of the hairy fungus nests where the saprophytes lived. At Andy's feet, a dozen greasy bots ran around picking up the pellets and dropping them into a hopper.

The monkey that had been in the meeting came over and stood for a time, squinting at the tin foil hat on Andy's head. After a second it started dancing around and patting the top of its head with both hands and making goobaaa goobaaa monkey sounds. Andy couldn't believe it. Being made fun of by a monkey. Then he noticed that the bots had stopped working. They kept looking at the monkey and then at Andy with their little black mouse eyes like holes drilled in their hairless, oily faces. Andy was sure that if they'd had mouths, they'd be laughing at him, too.

A couple of the bots were looking a little wobbly on their spidery carbon tube legs. Serves 'em right, Andy thought. Now that he knew what they ate, which was themselves, he surmised that they were getting ready to shut down and get eaten by the saprophytes. Andy thought about stomping on them, and he would have, but he had his benefits to think of — maybe. Instead, he tried to ignore the monkey and picked up his broom. He cocked the broom. He stopped cold. The expiring bots were looking up at him, and they were...quaking. Andy was amazed. He hadn't even known that he knew that word. It would have been funny, should have been funny; the way the bots were stumbling around like they were. But with all the quaking going on, and with the fuzzy-yet-fairly-certain feeling in his head that, as a rule, quaking wasn't always a funny thing, Andy just couldn't work up a decent laugh. Damn.

The monkey had quit its monkey dancing. It looked at Andy out of the corner of its eyes with its head turned to one side. It grabbed its butt cheeks end with both hands and then stuck all thirteen of its fingers in its mouth. The sick bots fell over one at a time and lay still. Andy stood there, broom in hand. Four of the other bots wandered off, their stiff, creepy little legs making tick, tick, ticking sounds on the factory floor as they went.

It was the kind of moment people use stupid finger gestures or scribbly writing to talk about. A (ital) moment (end ital). Andy had never had one before. It gave him a creepy feeling, like he was supposed to be thinking about stuff that he really didn't want to think about. And with the monkey watching. What if he got it wrong? Would the monkey be able to tell he was getting it wrong?

Andy looked at the ceiling to get out from under the monkey's stare. The saprophytes were massing around their nests. They'd sensed the dead bots. Dead. Andy had never thought of it as death before.

"Monahans!" It was Boykin.

Andy jumped. He scanned the area. No Boykin. Only the monkey.

“Whaddayathink you’re doing, Monahans?” It was definitely Boykin’s voice. But it was small, like it was coming from far away, and high, like somebody was squeezing Boykin’s nuts while he was shouting.

The monkey was looking at the freight elevator that Boykin used to get to his station in Recycling. Not wanting to give the monkey the satisfaction of beating him to the punch, Andy didn’t exactly follow the monkey’s gaze. When at last his eyes just happened to settle in the same general direction in which the monkey was looking, he saw the four bots that had gone walkabout during the *moment* a moment ago. Andy forgot all about the monkey. Three of the bots were pulling a miniature wagon they must have soldered together out of parts from the recycle bins below. The fourth bot was riding in the little wagon, barely able to stand, wobbling back and forth, wearing Boykin’s head like some kind of big, fancy hat on a stick.

The entourage came reeling across the floor and stopped at Andy’s feet. Andy looked closer. Boykin’s head tilted back a little so the eyes could meet his own, but there was no life in them. There was blood dripping from Boykin’s nostrils and the corners of his mouth. There was a mix of burn marks and tiny, ragged cuts where the neck had been severed to remove the head. It was pretty sloppy work, but who was Andy to talk? He didn’t think he could have done much better. And you had to give it to the bot that was actually wearing the head. What a little champion. Boykin’s head had to outweigh it a hundred to one. Those carbon fiber limbs were quality stuff, no question about it. The mouth quivered and came open.

“MonahansMonahansMonahans! Blah Blah Blah. I’m Boykin! Bossybossyboss!” And then the head twitched and one of the eyes slid closed and then popped wide open again. A wink. The mouth curled up into a nasty, bloody grimace that Andy decided was supposed to have been a smile. The bot was making a joke. Sarcasm, the one truly universal language.

The monkey came slowly over to Andy’s side. It pointed to Andy’s head and Andy bent low. The monkey took the tin foil hat and dropped it to the floor.

Immediately, Andy’s ‘werk access rebooted and his ‘tacts painted an Ikinshut customer care avatar on his eyeballs. The avatar tipped its head and smiled.

“Thanks,” Andy said.

III. Happy Hour

At first, the bartender didn’t want to serve the head. The monkey, he served. Andy, he served. But he drew the line at the head. Andy was ready to go storming out in protest, but the monkey liked the place and the monkey was buying so Andy stayed. In any case, the line the bartender had drawn against serving Boykin’s head turned out to be more of a dotted, permeable, suggestion of a line than a real barrier. Using the avatar, the monkey hacked into the Ikinshut accounting node, accessed Boykin’s credit files, and negotiated a bribe. Within minutes, the booze was flowing and everybody was happy.

With most of Boykin gone, Andy reckoned that he was the boss now, and with the promotion came responsibility. He had to set an example. He drank two beers straight away and chased them with four shots of nameless, bottom-shelf whiskey. He set

the wagon with the head in it on a table near the stage so the bots could take turns wearing the head and using the mouth to shout insults at the strippers the way Andy showed them to do. He stuck one end of a couple of straws up the head's nostrils and the other end into a pitcher of Singapore sling. The drink, of course, just leaked out the bottom of Boykin's neck into the wagon and onto the table. But what the hell, the bots seemed happy, and that was what was important. Andy left the head and the bots to their fun and went to stand at the bar. He motioned for the monkey to follow him. The monkey came over climbed up on Andy's shoulders and ran its hands over the tattoos on Andy's scalp like it was picking bugs out of his non-existent hair.

Andy looked back across the room at the bots staggering around on the tabletop with the head in the wagon in the middle. They looked drunk. He reckoned that some of the booze was probably soaking into them regardless of their lack of mouths. The music was loud, high pitched, and way too cheerful. Andy checked the playlist on a crawler embedded in the surface of the bar. No wonder. It was an oldie band called The Monkeys singing about some last train to some asshole place called Clarksville. Andy looked at the monkey. The monkey shrugged, trying to look all innocent.

Andy let it go. He waxed philosophical whenever he drank. It was a character flaw, he knew, but he coped with it. "It's tragic, if you think about it," he said.

The monkey sucked on a finger and then stuck the finger deep into Andy's right ear. The customer care avatar appeared. It was a woman. Andy was sure it had been a man before. The avatar said, "What's tragic, Andy?"

Andy thought about it. "Well, tragic is like when you...when somebody...when..." he was stuck.

The avatar said, "We know what tragic means. It means sad, especially involving grief or death or destruction, as in an archetype, a literary or dramatic framework. What we meant was, what is it that's tragic that you were about to comment on?"

Andy reached up like he was going to smack the monkey in the head but he stayed his hand. "Lay off with the smartypants talk," he said.

"We're sorry, Andy," the avatar said. "And you're right, it's tragic."

"You bet your little monkey butt it is," Andy said. He was past the philosophical stage of his buzz. He wished the monkey and the avatar would keep up. It was then that he noticed that the monkey wasn't drinking. It made him suspicious. He was trying to think of something to say when his attention was yanked in an entirely other direction, abruptly, cruelly even. His head spun. Something was happening on the stage. The dancer, an obese he-she with two sets of enormous breasts, was screaming. The bartender was shouting. It was a small, dark, bar with a bad, bad smell and all the yelling was just making it worse. Andy glanced back at the table. Boykin's head was still there, but the bots were gone.

The monkey vacated Andy's shoulder and leapt onto the bar. Andy approached the stage. It was about the size of a manhole and the carpet, once possibly red, was worn and spotted brown and black from mishaps entailing fluids that even Andy wasn't sure he wanted to know about. All four of the bots were up there, jittering around, gyrating, their toolkits flailing. They were dancing. One of them had gotten hold of the dancer's sequined G-string and was prancing around in it like a pea-sized, old fashioned drag queen. Another bot pointed its laser cutter at the sequins, bouncing

pinpoints of red and blue light all around the room like one of those mirror balls that never seemed to go out of style.

The bartender took the dancer in his arms and rushed whisked him-slash-her off the stage. The dancer's foot was bleeding where one of the bots had gouged it with a screwdriver. As he passed Andy on the way back to the bar, the bartender said, "Out. Now. And take the head with you."

"Okay, okay," Andy said. He was hurt and not a little angry that his new friends were having such a hard time being accepted into society. He thought about suing.

The monkey climbed up on Andy's shoulder again and the avatar showed herself and said, "It's all right. Andy. People aren't used to them yet. The bots aren't exactly what you'd call street legal yet. And, in retrospect, you can see why. There are, um, issues, you might say, to be straightened out."

"Yea," Andy hung his head, "I know what you mean. They can't hold their liquor."

"We were thinking more along the lines of the head thing," the avatar said, "but in any case, we ought to be going now."

Andy rounded up the bots and Boykin's head. The bots were plainly too pissed to drive so Andy used the stripper's G string to pull the wagon along behind him. It was dark outside and the wagon wheels squeaked some as the little troupe made their way down the street. After a few blocks, one of the wheels came off and Boykin's head fell out with a thump. Like the bots who built it, Andy realized, the wagon wasn't designed for endurance. He picked up the head and turned it over and looked inside. The bots had wired it to work the muscles. There was a little canister of compressed air hooked with a rubber hose to a hunk of tissue partway up the neck. Boykin's voicebox. The head was heavy, and without a bot inside of it to work the parts and make it talk, it wasn't nearly as funny as it had been. He dropped it back into the lopsided wagon and it fell out again.

"Screw it," he said. One of the bots immediately obeyed, plunging its flathead driver into Boykin's old brainpan, lifting the head and spinning it around and around. Now that was funny. But it didn't last long. The bot seemed tired, and let go of the head after a few seconds.

Andy noticed a kind of shadow in the shadows, a dark spot in the dark. Only it was bluish green, glowing faintly, and moving. The saprophytes. One at a time, the bots fell over and lay still. Silent and somehow graceful, the saprophytes poured out of the darkness and swarmed them.

The monkey sniffed the air and the avatar said, "Pity we didn't take more time to talk with them. We should have liked to know them a little better."

"Maybe they didn't have much to say," Andy offered.

The monkey stretched and yawned. The avatar flickered. "Perhaps you're right." The monkey yawned again. "Well, on that rather poignant note," the avatar said, "We think we'll call it a night. It's an early day tomorrow."

Andy was confused. He agreed that the decaying bots and the stale head were a little hard on the nose, but he'd thought that the monkey was going to come home with him and let him have plug'n'play sex with the avatar. He thought that if he really had benefits coming, that would be a good one. Maybe the monkey was shy. Maybe

it was too soon to get into avatar-sharing. Andy didn't know. He said, "Right. I'll see you tomorrow."

The monkey squatted on the sidewalk and defecated. It looked deeply into the pale gray murk of the midnight sky. The avatar said, "We're sorry, Andy. We thought you understood. We won't be needing you any longer. This was sort of your retirement party. Yours and Boykin's, though it appears to have worked out somewhat better for you than for Mr. Boykin."

With that, the monkey picked up a handful of scat and threw it at the head, a half-meter distant, missing it completely. The monkey turned around and crab-walked back down the street towards the factory. The blue-green saprophyte colony, finished with their meal, followed.

"What about my benefits?" Andy called out. There was no answer. The monkey turned a corner and vanished. The avatar appeared one last time. She wiggled her fingers at him like she was waving goodbye to some idiot little kid and said nothing.

"Women," Andy said. He saw the carbon fiber toolkits the saprophytes had left behind, the remains of his bot-buddies laying there on the sidewalk all broken and scattered like toothpicks on a party platter after everybody's gone home. It made him sad. He hadn't been invited to a party in a long, long, time. It also made him hungry. He knew there was an all-night nugget stand around the next corner. Maybe they were hiring. It might even be a good job, making nuggets for people. And secure. Everybody knows that monkeys can't make nuggets.



On Adrian Bedford

...Edwina Harvey

Like several Australian authors in this genre, K.A. (Adrian) Bedford's three novels, published by Canadian speculative fiction publisher Edge Publishing, are selling very well overseas, and he is gaining a strong reader following there, so much so that he was doing autograph sessions at LaconIV, the 2006 Worldcon. His talents have not gone unnoticed in Australia either; his first novel, *Orbital Burn*, was nominated for an Aurealis Award, and his second novel, *Eclipse*, won an Aurealis Award

K.A. Bedford's three novels: *Orbital Burn*, *Eclipse* and *Hydrogen Steel* aren't your usual sort of trilogy. Set in the "medium to far future", these books are all "stand alone" novels sharing the same background, or universe, while telling three different stories. There's very little character overlap even though major characters in later novels may appear in the background of earlier novels.

Bedford says he can sympathise with readers who find one or two books in a trilogy or series, but then can't find all the volumes to complete the epic and may miss out on a vital part of the plot, or else an introduction and background to a vital character. The conscious model Bedford's working from is CJ Cherryh's *Merchanter* books where individual books tell individual stories which all fit into a larger storyline.

The first of the three, *Orbital Burn*, tells the story of a homeless, broke cybernetically enhanced dog and a dying defective android boy who hang around a spaceport. When the android boy disappears, the cybernetic dog hires a detective to find him. It's a quirky book pitch that immediately caught my imagination and had me wanting to read the book. Bedford explained that he'd been haunted by these two main characters for ages before finally having a "eureka moment" late one night, when he got the idea to add a detective and put them into a mystery story. The book just clicked together and got written very quickly after that.

The second novel, *Eclipse*, described as a "psychological military thriller", is set on a starship patrolling unexplored space. It drew its inspiration from a string of media reports about abuse in military establishments. A *Star Trek* fan

from an early age, Bedford admits it was watching an episode from the original Star Trek series that gave him his “eureka moment” that time. The story follows a junior officer on his first space assignment in the Royal Interstellar Services, (interesting to note there’s a monarchy in Bedford’s universe), commanded by a captain showing signs of madness.

With the third book, the recently released *Hydrogen Steel*, Bedford returns to a mystery theme. *Hydrogen Steel* features a female detective, Zatte McGee, and her companion, a retired secret agent, trying to solve a murder that turns out to be part of something much larger. Bedford found he enjoyed writing these characters so much that he intends to return to them for future mysteries.

When I suggested there seemed to be a growing trend in combining science fiction and mysteries, Adrian noted there had been a readership of this type of SF for quite some time.

He obviously enjoys combining the two, and exploring his self-made universe isn’t likely to stop at the first three published novels. There are more books planned in the future to satisfy his growing league of readers.

Reviews

Axis of Time Trilogy

Weapons of Choice; Designated Targets; Final Impact

by John Birmingham

Del Rey Books

Reviewed by Dirk Flinthart

This review falls under the category of “Local Boy Made Good” rather than “Absolutely Must-Read SF”, but don’t let that slow you down. Birmingham — the ur-slob from Brisbane who brought everybody’s dirty underpants to light with his infamous share-housing saga *He Died With A Felafel In His Hand* — has jumped feet first into Matthew Reilly/Tom Clancy territory with this trilogy of books on an alternate history of World War II. The books, entitled *Weapons of Choice*, *Designated Targets* and *Final Impact*, chronicle the progress and outcome of the Second World War after a massively-powerful naval task force from the year 2021 gets hoiked backwards in history due to a nasty wormhole accident, and pops up just in time to comprehensively sod up the US fleet that is about to give the Japanese their first serious hiding at the Battle of Midway.

There’s a lot to like about the three books, and for a writer whose previous forays into fiction have been largely about crime, comedy and share housing, Birmingham does a pretty good job pulling the threads together. He distinguishes himself from Reilly, Clancy and the rest of the testosterone-enhanced crew by considering not only the technology and the action, but the severe social impact and dislocation caused by a truly enormous dump of 21st Century technology and lifestyle on the world of 1942. How do the contemporary military feel about women in command of ultra-powerful submarines? What kind of outcome can you expect when you confront 1940s rednecks with a black American marine colonel? How will the society of the US react to 21st century attitudes to sex, drugs, homosexuality, religion, etc?

In other words, Birmingham’s characters have a whole lot of problems on their plate, not least of which are the designated Bad Guys. To keep things interesting, Birmingham makes sure that the Germans, the Japanese, and most importantly the Stalin-led Soviets get hold of significant chunks of 21st century super-technology too, and in very short order, World War II starts to become an extremely different sort of place.

Being Birmingham, there’s quite a lot of sly humour tucked away through the books. Innumerable character names are cribbed from real world characters, ranging from the rather well-known (Helen) Demidenko — who becomes a bogus research facility in the Ukraine — down to completely obscure friends and acquaintances of the author. For my money, the most entertainment comes from the character-thread of an SAS Major by the name of Harry Windsor, who carves a bloody swathe through all three books with considerable panache and a great deal of self-deprecating humour.

The biggest problem with the books is probably not the fault of the author. Birmingham has tackled an epic subject, and done well to convey the sweep of historical events through the eyes of individuals over the period of the greatest conflict the world has (n)ever seen. However, there's really just not enough room. They're not small books — my trade paperback versions run past 300 pages each — but in dealing with the ramifications of a changing social order, the radical revision of World War II and the reconstruction of history itself, there's just not enough time and space to give the major characters room to develop. This isn't to say the characters are static, or clichéd. Simply that there are rather a lot of them, and in moving from viewpoint to viewpoint to keep the action in sight, we rarely get much depth or real insight — and that's a shame, because most of the characters are complex, nicely realized creations.

The trilogy will probably have trouble nailing down a readership, though. It won't please the diehard Clancy/Reilly readers because it's way too thoughtful. The battle-hardened 21st Century players (they've been fighting an ongoing multilevel war since 2001 against irregular but increasingly well-armed, well-trained and dangerous Islamic insurgents around the world) who provide the mainstay of the character gallery don't always come off as the good guys, even when facing down Nazis and Imperial Japanese. Despite that, there's no schmaltzy nostalgia for a lost era of innocence: the 1940s characters have their own issues.

Likewise, it will probably not draw the hardcore SF audience — it's definitely action-focussed and thriller-based, and although there's plenty of future tech on display, there's a lot less concern for the nuts and bolts of how it works, and a lot more interest in how it affects the people who encounter it.

The final word? Well, yes, the books may well fall between two worlds, but that doesn't mean they're not worth reading. The Axis of Time books are fast-moving and entertaining, with kick-ass action sequences and plenty of humour. A solid dose of thoughtful socio-historical crystal-ball gazing doesn't hurt the mix at all.

THROUGH SOFT AIR

By Lee Battersby

Prime Books, \$24-95

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

I actually didn't want to review this book. Hell, it wasn't even a review copy, I had to go and buy it when no-one was looking. I skulked back to my room at the convention hotel and refused to open it, refused to read it then and there. I put that reading off until quite recently, like this very day. You see, I know Lee and like him very much. He's a moody bastard, but we agree on some odd things, and I like everything of his that I've read, but that's not all that much. Certainly not the previously unpublished ones, nor a few of the published ones. I really didn't want to open the book and find it to be mediocre, because then I would have been faced with the choice of not reviewing it or giving it a mediocre review; damning with faint praise.

I need not have worried.

It's a beautiful book.

If you were a fly on the wall at any gathering of editors or reviewers (the two don't get together much) you'd probably hear each group bewailing a couple of things. One would be the price of drinks over the bar, and the other would be the difficulty in finding writers who have a solid, distinct voice. Too much the same, they would cry, all bland and imitative, he sounds like her sounds like him, you can't tell the difference any more. With Battersby, you can tell the difference. He has a distinct voice, a distinct viewpoint, a distinct world.

It would be silly to go through all the stories and tell you what's good about them, or what could be better, and what could be better is a very subjective judgement, anyhow. There are twenty-five stories in the book. Every single one of them is praiseworthy, but some are truly outstanding.

There are two Father Muerte stories, "Father Muerte and the Theft" and "Father Muerte and the Rain". The first is a riff on the primitive belief that a camera steals someone's soul when it takes a photograph. The riff is amusing and the story is solidly plotted, with a setting that evokes Marquez's South America or Conrad's Congo. So well-realised that you should avoid drinking the water. But that's not what makes it hum. The character of Father Muerte, the mysterious wielder of strange powers and weaver of strange spells, is as brightly drawn as a face in the mirror. He is enigmatic, a little surreal, and he gives power to the story that goes beyond the narrative.

The second is a little deeper, and extends the boundaries of the Costa Satana, where Muerte's village is set. This time, something has been lost which must be regained, but Muerte cannot go to recover it himself. He sends an emissary, and that leads to problems with which the Father must deal. But the guts of the story, again, lies beyond the narrative. It's in what we find out about the Satan Coast, and the village, and Muerte and his friends. Battersby is not just writing stories here, he's creating a mythology.

Like Lee, I have a fondness for old movies and old movie actors. All those years ago, when channel ten in Sydney first opened for business and they bought up a whole bunch of old movies that nobody else was interested in, I'd stay up all night when I got home from the theatre and watch the stars, and the not so stary. *Stalag Hollywood* is a brilliant piece that encapsulates the weariness, the desperation of the production-line studio system. It takes the idea to its extreme, enclosing actors in a work-camp, relegating them to films as their performances wax and wane, treating them like the slaves some of them were. It is a piece of de-mythologising. The denouement, when it comes, is surprising, and has the Battersby touch of surrealism, and the even greater touch of sympathy.

For me, the story that stands out above the rest is one that, I would submit, is the most personal. In the afterword to "Dark Ages", Battersby speaks of the death of his first wife, and the birth of a child with his new wife. Death and life are the powerful forces that drive this story of an immortal who wants to die, and of his children. It is utterly poignant, to the point of anguish, and a glimpse into what is all-too-real, all-too-sad. It is, quite simply, beautiful. It is previously unpublished.

I said that Battersby has a distinct voice. In the introduction, Geoff Maloney talks of the darkness that underlies Battersby's stories, and I agree with him. Even in the brightest moments, there is a whisper of chill wind, a shadow. The echo of human sadness, human courage, can be heard, louder or softer, in every single story.

About the authors...

Paul E. Martens is highly improbable, but, apparently, not impossible. He loves his wife, Patti, and his son, Nick, and is tolerant of everybody else, at least initially. His webpage is www.sfw.org/members/Martens.

Kevin Veale is a PhD student and teacher of Media Studies at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, and is studying how storytelling is changed by the form of media the stories are told through. "A Day In Her Lives" is his second publication in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*.

David Kane is a freelance writer. Born in Australia, he lives and works in Hong Kong, paying the bills by writing copy for an investment bank. Not surprisingly, he dreams of demons; and his horror and fantasy fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies, magazines and webzines including, most recently, *Agog! Ripping Reads*, *Reflections' Edge*, *Afterburn SF*, *Dred Tales* and *Byzarium*.

Sue Bursztynski lives in a beachside suburb of Melbourne, where she works as a teacher-librarian and writes for children and young adults, for the most part. Her books have appeared in Australia and overseas, including a Chinese edition of one book. She has also written articles for children's magazines, and reviews other people's books regularly for *January Magazine*. This is her fourth story for *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. The paper Elanor read in Oxford was actually the subject of Sue's Honours thesis in English. Sue wants it known that she is not owned by a cat, though she does have a monstera plant called Herman.

As he writes this, **David Dumitru** is sitting in a small town in the state of Illinois in the heart of America's great Midwest. The town is named Champaign. There are signs everywhere proclaiming this fact. There is a major university not five kilometers from the hotel in which David now sits. David is considering the juxtaposition of these two things; a university town that seems to have a collective spelling problem. It is, he thinks, a sign of things to come. Remember: the monkeys are watching.

Simon Petrie is ostensibly employed as a researcher in computational chemistry. Most of his published work is therefore supposedly factual, but along the way he's managed fiction publications in *Jabberwocky*, a magazine for NZ children, now extinct (that's the *magazine* which is extinct), the *Annals of Improbable Research*, and most recently the *AntipodeanSF* webzine and now ASIM. He lives, if you can call it that, in Canberra.

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