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Death Comes For All

By Brian Keene and Steven L. Shrewsbury

* * * *

BRIAN KEENE is the best-selling author of many books, including *Dark Hollow*, *Ghoul*, *Dead Sea*, *Terminal*, *The Conqueror Worms*, *The Rising*, *City of the Dead*, and more. The winner of two Bram Stoker awards, Keene's work has been praised in such diverse places as the *New York Times*, the *History Channel*, *CNN.com*, *Fangoria*, and *Rue Morgue*. Keene lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, Cassi, and his dog, Sam. He communicates with his readers online at www.briankeene.com.

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* * * *

Rogan and Javan floated on a sea of corpses. Bodies bobbed up and down in the blood-frothed waves—their crew, their slaves, the pirates who had attacked them, and the sharks and other predators. Birds blocked out the sun, hovering overhead and landing on the dead long enough to seize the choicest morsels.

Rogan kept his eyes closed, listening to the seagulls shrieking. Then he knew no more, until—

"Uncle," Javan shouted. "We live still!"

Rogan's long body lay adhered to the hull in a dried circle of blood, seawater, and sweat. The ocean lapped against the shattered craft, and the prolonged rhythm—along with the fatigue from their battle with the pirates—had lulled him to sleep. Rubbing his eyes and scratching at his salt-hardened beard, Rogan raised his head and pulled his mane of hair away from the surface. He blinked, licked his sun-blistered lips and winced, grinning at the pain.

"You are a brilliant advisor after all, Javan. It is not a wonder I brought you along to interpret and counsel me. Of course we still live. Our crew and slaves were slain, but death has not come for us. Perhaps soon."

"I endeavor to bring satisfaction, sire, but look." Javan pointed, then jumped into the water, his dark hair flailing as he hopped.

"Javan? What madness has seized you?"

Rogan arose to see what had inspired his young nephew's folly. Javan hopped in waist deep water, gesturing at the brown, sandy beach nearby.

"We made it, sire." The boy laughed, splashing. "Wodan is merciful. Rhiannon is just."

Rogan chewed salt from his mustache and stared at the shore. He slid into the cool water, muscles aching, wounds burning. Though in the latter stages of his life, Rogan still felt great strength in his thews.

"Wodan is merciful? Shit fire and spare the flint stones! Wodan is a bitch's son with a bad sense of humor, boy. I may pray to your goddess, Rhiannon, before this day is out, instead."

Javan splashed again, then sank beneath the waves and emerged, spraying a mouthful of water.

"Javan, you are acting like a child. Do you still suckle at your mother's tit? Are all the young men from Albion this foolish? Back in the Caucasus Mountains, we'd have killed many and learned to be Smiths by your age."

"Death doesn't lurk around every corner in Albion, Sire."

Rogan snorted and then said, "Of course it does, you jackass. You're looking hard enough."

"Sire, I know that you have cheated death many times in your life. It is an old cloak for you to discard, slipping out of the shadows of the afterlife. But this battle with the pirates and our loss at sea was my first true test. I hope this is the only time I must dodge such a foe."

"I've never cheated death, lad. I've only escaped him for a time."

"Still, I hope to never have to do the same again." Javan stood, looking up at Rogan.

"All men meet death sooner or later, Javan. The trick is to bend him to your will. That is what I have always done. Nothing more. But my will is strong."

They waded ashore and collapsed in the warm, sun-baked sand. It stuck to their wounds and their raw skin, scratching and scraping—but neither had ever felt anything more luxuriant. Gulls darted across the beach, their beaks snapping at small, scuttling crabs. Scrub grass swayed in the breeze, and bleached driftwood dotted the dunes. Further inland, a dense forest walled off an immense series of mist-enshrouded mountains. The blue sky brushed against the mountaintops.

Rogan gazed up at the dwarfing spectacle.

Aye, my will is strong, he thought. But death can only be bent over so many times. And as I get slower, his pace stays the same.

They sat in silence for a while, each lost in thought. The surf's lullaby washed over them.

"It is beautiful, this land," Javan breathed, spellbound. "The greenery is like an ocean itself. Look at the shafts of light from the sky, how they crease the mists wreathing the mountaintops."

Rogan nodded. "It almost makes one believe in the gods, eh?"

"Look how far the coast goes on."

Rogan stretched, his sword dangling over his bare thigh. Javan stood up, brushed the sand from his skin, and walked farther ashore. Rogan remained on the ground, letting the tide lap at him.

"We should attempt to map this new land," Javan called. "Should we ever return home, our learned men will be grateful."

Rogan clambered to his feet. "That is not our most pressing matter, Javan. We must make camp. When we do not return, our friends in Olmek-Tikal may come to our aid. At the very least, they shall send a search party to find news of their missing loved ones. Remember—our crew was full of men with wives and children. They will be sought. Let us try to flip this damaged hulk over. Perhaps we can ground her well and take shelter in her belly for the night."

This task was easier said than done. Leading the damaged vessel to shore was a great labor even in the shallow water, but flipping it over proved impossible, despite Rogan's strength. They dragged the long

ship only a few feet before the mast pole and other materials underneath sank into the wet sand.

Out of breath, Rogan fell on the dry part of beach. As the breeze washed over them, he said, "The damned sea will take her back with the tides."

"Perhaps it will be shoved further in by the tides or sink in deeper, sire."

"Always looking on the dazzling side, eh, lad?" Rogan grinned.

"Well, Rhiannon is a goddess of light, Sire."

Rogan waved him off and looked to the mountains. "What manner of land is this, I wonder? Southern Olmek-Tikal was all full of swamps, marshes, and alligators when we sailed along its coast last year."

"Not an enjoyable journey, if my mind is sharp, sire." Javan's voice dripped with sarcasm. "I've no desire to repeat it."

"Since I saved you from quicksand on two different occasions, I can see why. Scavenge what you can from the beach. It looks as though the seas do not want items that fall to the bottom. We will need all we can salvage if there is life here."

"Surely the cache of weapons in the rear chamber is intact. If I swim under the ship, perhaps I can retrieve them."

Approving this idea, Rogan waded back into the water and waited. Piece by piece, Javan retrieved armor and weapons from the rear of the boat, which was still underwater. The youth then tossed them to Rogan, who carried each item to shore. He was stunned by how many times Javan dived and returned with knives or swords.

At last, Rogan called, "Do you need to breathe, boy?"

Javan winked and dove again. This time he returned with a blade in his teeth and a round shield in his left hand. In his right hand was a bottle of wine. Rogan grabbed the bottle and his perpetual scowl gave way to a slight smile.

"You see?" Javan laughed. "Just what we needed."

Rogan unsealed the wine and said, "We? Dive again for your own."

He waited until the youth was underwater, and then mumbled, "I swear, the boy is half fish."

They carried the weapons and water flasks up the beach. Rogan drank deeply from the wine while Javan heaped the weapons in a grassy area out of the reach of the surf.

Rogan sat down and looked back at the water. The alcohol coursed through his veins, easing his pain.

Javan pointed at the sea birds and crabs. "At least there is wildlife in abundance. And I found a fishing rod amidst the weapons."

"Wonderful. So we will not starve right away."

"We will only have to survive a brief time, sire. Surely you are correct and others from the southern part of Olmek-Tikal will search for us when we do not return."

Rogan shrugged, his nostrils testing the sea air. "Probably. If they find us it will be a miracle all in itself."

We traveled a long way. They may give up in despair before ever reaching this point."

"The natives in Olmek-Tikal practically worship you," Javan reminded him. "They would not desert you any more than I would."

Brooding, Rogan drank more wine. "Perhaps. We will just have to wait and see. They may be happy to be rid of their white king. Bah—I've grown tired of such primitive ignorance, anyway. I came here for adventure, not to be a god to a pack of red-skinned farmers and fishermen."

Javan took up a bow and a single arrow. He cleared his throat, inspecting the leaves of a squat bush. A swarm of angry gnats arose from the branches and pestered him.

"Welcome home, Javan." Rogan swept his hand toward the forest. "I bet that when General Thyssen sent you along for maturing, he never dreamed that you'd be shipwrecked with his old king, eh?"

Javan shrugged and drew the string of his bow back. With one shot, he struck a swooping seagull. Squawking, it flopped in the water, and the young man ran into the surf to retrieve his prize, carefully avoiding the body parts of their fellow sailors that were beginning to wash ashore. The sand was stained red.

"At least you are not skittish," Rogan hollered. "That surf is thick with pieces of our foes. Look how the beach is littered with their limbs."

Emerging from the water, Javan said, "Sire, I think you complimented me."

Rogan smiled. "Engrave it in stone, boy. It may be my only testament in such a manner to you."

A sudden gust of wind blasted off the ocean. Beyond the trees, they heard a deep growl. It did not sound human. It did sound hungry. Exchanging glances, both men took to the bushes.

Out of the trees lumbered a gigantic black bear. As the sea gave up the fruits of their awful triumph over the corsairs, the grisly bits of humanity along the shoreline tempted the animal. It sniffed the air and slowly padded onto the beach, devouring morsels here and there.

"What a beast," Rogan whispered as Javan leaned close to hear him. "This animal may be just what we need."

"What say you, sire?"

"Look to that mountain range. Such conditions remind me of the peaks south of Turana. I would guess the temperature drops here at night and in the higher elevations."

"That is logical."

"Of course it's logical. That bear's coat is thicker than it should be for the late summer season. Perhaps we are farther north than we thought. He grows it not for a coming winter, but for everyday warmth. Since the sea has stripped us down to our loins, the choice is obvious. We must take him for his hide. It will keep us warm."

The bear raised its head and looked around. Then it continued rooting. Its snout was crimson, and its long, pink tongue licked at the droplets of blood.

"How long since you have last slain a bear single-handed, sire?"

Rogan shrugged. "I cannot recall. But I am not hollowed out just yet. Besides, I have you along. Why

should I fear him with your bow at my side?"

Javan breathed a heavy sigh and prepared. "I appreciate your faith, sire."

"Use the heavy arrows the pirates had. The forked heads are a work of savage art."

"As you command."

"We have collected enough of those from the stray quivers on the beach. Wodan knows what else will vomit onto the shore over time. With a good chance we can pierce a lung in that hulk."

"I will do my best, lord."

"Keep striking if he doesn't go down." Rogan squeezed the handle of a double-headed battle-axe they'd retrieved from the bireme's mooring links. "I shall do the rest."

Javan mumbled a prayer to Rhiannon and stealthily positioned himself farther down the line of bushes. Rogan ran down the beach in the open for a few yards. The bear looked up from the rib cage that had washed ashore. The beast spied the older man, but made no effort to follow him. It showed no fear or a desire to hunt a foolish human as easier pickings lay at its feet. Instead, the bear lowered its snout and continued licking the scraps of organs and tissue still clinging to the bones.

Javan fired the first of his arrows into the bear's side. The bear grunted, and roared. Quickly, Javan drew from the quiver on his back and fired three more times, striking the creature in the side, close to the front quarters, and then the low-hanging belly. He expected the bear to drop, but instead it stood firm.

Rogan loped further out onto the sand with the smooth ease of a tiger and fired his own long bow twice. The first shot missed, but the second arrow struck the bear deep in the other flank. The bear rose up, teeth bared as it howled. Thick flecks of foamy saliva dropped from its jowls.

Rogan let the bow slide from his fingers and drew back, hefting the double-edged battle-axe. He roared in answer to the bear's challenge. The animal paused. Grunting hard, Rogan flung the heavy axe with all of his might. The weapon tumbled end over end and buried itself under the bear's open maw, cleaving its jaws.

Staggering, the bear rocked back and forth on unsteady paws, but still refused to fall. Rogan drew his broadsword and charged low, like a bull. The mortally wounded animal tried to roar, but only a weak gurgle issued from its throat. Rogan avoided the desperate claws and stabbed his blade into the bear's abdomen. Going to all fours, the bear lurched a few steps before collapsing. Rogan danced away again, inadvertently stomping on the leg of some partially eaten shark victim.

The bear shuddered, and then moved no more.

Rogan dropped to his knees and rolled onto his buttocks beside it. He greedily sucked the salty air into his burning lungs.

Javan ran up, whooping in joy.

Rogan eyed the boy and said, "I suppose you expect me to gut and clean him as well?"

Javan smiled. "It *is* your kill, Uncle."

"I'll clout you for that," Rogan grunted. "But first I must rest."

* * * *

It took them the rest of the day to skin and clean the bear, and it was dusk by the time they were finished. They washed their hands in the ocean, cleaning them of the sticky blood, and then Javan started a fire behind a dune and prepared dinner. The meat gleaned from the kill was tough and gamy. Gulls darted over their heads, begging for scraps. Rogan growled at them, and the shrieking scavengers fled into the night.

As they ate, Javan eyed the skeleton of the bireme.

"I was correct, sire. The ship is deeper in the sand now and will not be sucked out to sea."

"If we ever see Albion again," Rogan said around a mouthful of half-cooked bear flesh, "I shall give you a medal."

"We will get back, sire. Some way, some how, we will."

Rogan shrugged, sucking the marrow from a bone. "Perhaps my destiny is to die here."

"Banish such thoughts, sire!"

The fire popped, sending a brief shower of burning embers into the night sky.

"If it is my time to die, you get to watch. Your father would say it is a grand joke of fate, eh?"

Javan tilted his head to one side. "My father would never give in to fate."

Rogan nodded, thinking on old Thyssen and their adventures as revolutionaries. His smile was faint. Old ghosts danced in the flickering firelight. The night of a thousand knives. The whore with three breasts and the secret she'd told in the dark.

"True. You are young. You have space in your gut for fighting fate. My belly has wrestled that demon-whore for eons. She is a tireless bitch and I grow weary of her."

"I am not ready to die."

"No man ever is," Rogan replied. "Yes, you can cheat death, but you can never be ready for it. When death comes, it comes. All that you can do is to meet it."

The fire crackled again. A second later; a twig snapped in response. Both men were instantly on their feet. Rogan tensed, alert and ready for whatever new danger lay in store.

Javan pointed to the bushes, suddenly alive with creeping shadows.

"Uncle—look!"

The shadows detached themselves from the bushes and a group of humans stepped forward, just outside the circle of light. They were slender, clad in tan loincloths and deerskin cloaks. The strangers carried wooden staffs with tied stone spearheads, and several sported bows of a style that neither Rogan nor Javan had ever seen before. The flames flickered off their dense, ruddy complexions and red-tinged skin. Their obsidian hair shone in the moonlight as if their flat manes were slick and wet.

"Javan," Rogan ordered, "your bow."

But the weapon was already in the boy's hands.

Silently, the group stepped into the dying firelight. A few of the natives bore odd deformities: elongated

heads, misshapen ears, one limb longer than another, even bizarre double noses. None made a move to attack. They seemed docile and curious. None of them spoke.

Another figure emerged, dressed in the skins of a gray wolf, the snout and muzzle still intact over his wrinkled forehead. The wolf-man's eyes glistened in the darkness, and Rogan surmised that his difference in dress made him a leader of some sort.

The odd individual held out his arms, showing the two strangers what he held: the gray, ropy intestines of the dead bear. Flies buzzed around them.

Javan's nose wrinkled. Slowly, he raised his bow, counting their numbers and wondering about the strength and reach of their spears.

Rogan drew his broadsword, gripping the handle so tightly that his sunburned knuckles turned white.

"Javan?"

"Yes, sire?"

"Speak to me again of fate, when we are done here."

* * * *

The moon rose higher, bathing them in its cold light. Another log popped on the fire, sending more embers spiraling into the air. Nobody moved. Somewhere in the darkness, a whippoorwill cried out.

"When I was a child," Javan whispered. "my nursemaid told me that when one heard the song of a whippoorwill, it meant that someone was about to die."

Rogan wondered if his words rang in the youth's head...

When death comes, it comes. All that you can do is to meet it.

As the wolf-headed leader stepped closer, Rogan saw Javan shiver.

The leader held forth his grisly offering but remained still, even when the cloud of flies moved from the intestines to his wolf's head crown. He seemed to be awaiting a response from Rogan and Javan. When it became clear that none was forthcoming, he finally spoke, chattering to his companions.

Rogan frowned. "What in the name of Wodan is he saying?"

Javan, a master interpreter of most known languages because of his studies in Albion's famed university, concentrated on the speech patterns.

"They do not appear angry, but I cannot pick it up, sire. It is a strange tongue. Give me time."

"We do not have time. I think they deceive us. The wolf-headed fellow holds the guts of the bear the way a midwife holds a new babe. I probably killed his accursed god."

"I don't think so. Look at his body language, the way he holds himself. He is not angry with us. Indeed, he seems to be trying to communicate."

"My eyes and my wits are not dull, Javan. Of course he's trying to communicate. The question is; what do they want? Be they friend or foe?"

Cautiously, Javan motioned to the leader. "By his vestments, headdress, and voice inflection, I'd say he is

their leader or priest."

The old man babbled emphatically, as if he'd understood the youth. Javan tried other dialects. After a few moments, he grew excited.

"It is amazing, Rogan. I believe they speak a bastardized form of the language of those in northern Hyrkania. It is almost like a lost dialect I read of in class used only in Anthelia! I know it only because my teachers made such jest of the lingo."

Rogan remained silent but vigilant as Javan struggled to talk to the natives in this tongue. The red-skinned men seemed to understand him, at least partially. Several smiled, revealing jagged teeth. Then one of them laughed. Javan grinned as well.

"Do you understand them, boy?"

"I do, sire."

"Good. Now they can tell us for certain if we killed their god."

Javan shook his head. "No, I was correct. The man wearing the wolf's head is their priest or wizard. He calls himself a—shaman."

"Wizard. Shaman. It makes no difference." Rogan's blue eyes appraised the leader. "A female dog is still a bitch, different breed or no."

"The bear isn't his god, and he respects us for besting it."

"What else did he say?"

"That when one of their tribe has reached your age, they are usually content to sit beside the fire all day. He wonders if that is your normal position."

Rogan's blue eyes flared, never showing amusement. "Why does he hold the animal's entrails in his hands?"

After some discourse, Javan replied, "To honor us."

Rogan eyed the group. "What do they want? To share in the kill?"

Again, Javan translated, "He says that this beach is cursed."

"Bah! He is a huckster. How is it cursed?"

Javan put both of his hands on his temples as he listened to the shaman talk.

"He claims the shoreline is the domain of one of the Thirteen—a deity who can reanimate the dead."

Rogan's fingers played across the hilt of his broadsword. He studied the freakish appearance of a few of the red-skinned men. Now that they were illuminated fully by both the fire and moonlight, he could make out even more. Some had two noses or three eyes. Others were covered in boils or oozing sores. Many were completely hairless. One of them possessed a left eye that looked like a figure eight as it split into two orbs. And still another seemed to possess genitalia of extraordinary length and girth, if the bulge in his loincloth were any indication. Rogan had known concubines that would consider that last one a blessing rather than a curse.

Somewhere in the distance, a twig snapped. Again, the forest seemed to be alive, watching him, yet he could not see a thing.

"The Thirteen," Javan continued, "are not angel or demon, god or devil. Those who come from elsewhere."

"I know who the Thirteen are," Rogan snapped, "and I do not fear them enough to memorize their names and sigils and houses. What is our wolf-headed host's name?"

"This is Akibeel, sire."

Rogan shrugged and thrust out his hand. The shaman let the dripping intestines slip from his fingers and clasped it. The old man's slick, gnarled hands were warm and strong.

Javan said, "He invites us to return to his village, rather than staying here on this cursed beach. He offers us food and drink and song. And soft beds."

"And women?" Rogan arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps the ones I smell in the woods?"

Javan translated for the shaman. Akibeel's smile faded, and confusion clouded his face.

Rogan laughed. "I can smell the musk of a woman a mile off. Especially one in heat. Give me the wind and a stiff will, and they are mine. A woman has never been able to hide from me, so why hide some in the forest?"

Akibeel understood Rogan's inference, if not his words. He muttered beneath his breath.

"The women in the forest," Javan explained, "were standing by in case we attacked these men."

"Bring out these women," Rogan said. "I would see them. Let them come forth and drink."

The moon vanished behind dark clouds, and the campfire seemed to dim as if swallowed by the darkness. Akibeel cried out in panic. He thrust a bony finger toward the distant mountain range.

Rogan yanked his sword from its sheath. "What now, damn it?"

Javan said, "He fears that it is too late and wishes to flee."

The tribe quickly dispersed, fleeing toward the safety of the forest.

Rogan scowled. "Why do they run away?"

"They fear the beach—the curse."

"I fear nothing."

As if he'd understood the warrior king, Akibeel raised one trembling, gnarled finger and pointed at the ocean. Rogan and Javan turned, staring at the surf as something dark emerged from the water. Akibeel whispered.

Rogan frowned. "What did he say?"

Javan gulped. "Be wary of the dead."

The clouds parted, and the moonlight revealed a line of corpses rising up from the waves. Saltwater dripped from their bloated flesh as they padded onto the sand. One of them still wore a necklace of

tiger's teeth, the chain embedded in its swollen flesh. Another clutched a curved blade in its leathery fingers, yet the top of its head was a gaping hole. Seaweed filled the space where its brain should have been. The creatures shambled toward them.

Rogan recognized them immediately, despite their putrescence. These were the bodies of the pirates they'd slain, animated now and seeking revenge, even beyond death.

"Zombies," Rogan muttered. "Undead corsairs, no less. Wodan's sack, I hate zombies."

One's bloated stomach was horribly swollen as if it were pregnant. Another was missing a leg below the knee. It hopped on one foot, collapsing every few yards. All of the corpses were in bad shape. Shark-frayed ribbons of flesh hung from their frames. Broken bones poked through their mottled, parchment-thin skin, and shredded lips pulled back against shattered teeth. Their stench was horrific.

With a cry, a seagull darted down out of the night sky and pecked at one of the creature's ears. The zombie reached up, grasped the bird in its fist, and squeezed. Then it flung the lifeless gull to the sand and continued approaching.

A sixth corpse clambered across the beach. It was missing much of its skin, exposing muscles and veins. A sea-worm tunneled through its neck, and another burrowed through its shoulder. One of the creature's eyes was missing, and a small hermit crab scuttled in the empty cavity. Seawater ran from the ghoul's gaping mouth. One of its arms was also gone. The hand on the other arm clutched a curved sword. The creature raised the weapon and pointed it at Rogan in recognition.

Sighing, Rogan rotated his head, listening to his joints pop. "Is there no end to this madness? I have killed them once. Must I kill them a second time?"

Without waiting for a reply, he charged forward to meet his opponents, counting seven of the creatures on the beach, plus seven more heaving themselves from the water. He exploded into their midst, broadsword whistling, cleaving rancid flesh, slicing through decaying muscle and tissue.

One of the zombies parried his follow-up attack, and their swords clanged together. Rogan turned his head away, gagging at the stench. Blocking the curved blade's descent, he grasped the undead warrior's arm and tried to pull the creature forward into the point of his broadsword. Instead, the creature's skin slipped off, revealing bone. The corpse *smiled*. Its face had been half-eaten by the fish, and the fleshless cheek swarmed with larvae. A seashell jutted from the raw wound where its nose had been.

"Wodan take you, dead man!"

Rogan leaped into the air and lashed out with his leg, kicking the zombie in the head. His boot sank into the soft flesh. He laughed as bits of brain matter and skull fragments splattered onto the wet sand. His landing was graceful, but not nearly as nimble as it would have been ten years before. His agility, like the hair in his salt and pepper mane, lessened with the passing of each winter. Rogan spun on his heels, wheeling to face his next shuffling opponent.

Before he could renew his attack, several arrows sprouted from the chests and throats of the living dead. The shafts were not of the type Javan had been using. Rogan ducked, warned by some primal, battle-honed instinct, as more missiles flew from the forest. The arrows found homes in the monsters, but had no effect.

Several women stepped out of the shadowed woods and silently reloaded their bows. Each sported flowing, shiny black hair.

"I grow weary of this," Rogan muttered, ducking the clumsy swing of a zombie. "Tonight, I merely wished to sit, drink, and eat, and warm my bones beside the fire—and perhaps explore between the legs of one of these red-skinned women. Now I slay those already dead."

The dead man's reply was a gurgled moan.

"To Hell with you all," Rogan roared and hacked the legs out from under it. "How many times must I kill your lot before you stay dead?"

The pathetic creatures were not much of a fighting force. Still, they swarmed him with their numbers. More poured from the sea. The female archers fell back, lest their hail of arrows strike Rogan. Pulling his sword, Javan sprang forth.

Rogan sliced another zombie in two at the belly. Undaunted, the corpse's lower half walked on. Its upper portion flopped into the water, and then pulled itself back across the sand. Rogan's sword fell once, twice, severing the arms. Then he cut the disembodied walking legs in half, dividing the hips. Something grasped his boot. He glanced down, shuddering in revulsion as the decaying hands trailed across his feet, dragging the severed arms behind them.

Javan brought down another slow-moving corpse. A severed hand crawled up his back like a spider, teetered on his shoulder and then clutched at his throat. Shuddering, he yanked the thing off and flung it into the ocean.

"Uncle," he shouted, "this is madness! There is no way to kill them. Each limb we hack off becomes yet another opponent."

"Tell that shaman that this is his kind of fight, not ours."

Javan confessed, "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't? Do as I say, boy."

"Akibeel isn't responding. He sits cross legged at the fire, ignoring my pleas. That is why I joined the battle late."

"What? He picks a poor time to rest!"

"I think he's in some sort of trance, sire."

Rogan spat onto the sand. "I hate wizards almost as much as I hate zombies."

The dead pirates encircled the two exhausted men. Javan and Rogan stood back-to-back, swords held ready. The zombies moved closer. Javan winced at the smell. Rogan blinked sweat from his eyes. The corpses raised their weapons.

"WODANNNNNN!" Rogan roared, preparing himself for the onslaught.

Then, as abruptly as they'd emerged, the undead fell limp and tottered into the surf.

Rogan prodded one of the corpses with his sword, but it did not move.

"This time, let us hope they stay dead."

"Indeed, sire."

The bodies began washing back out to sea with the next crashing wave.

Akibeel rose, opening his eyes and shouting into the heavens.

Rogan scowled. "What is he jabbering about now?"

Javan relayed, "Akibeel says that he placed himself in a spell and entreated his gods for a blessing. The blessing came."

"Well, Wodan bless my ass. Perhaps this wizard can be of use after all. Tell him we will accept his offer of food and shelter and will return to his village."

Javan and Rogan let their new companions gather up the weapons, pieces of armor, and other useful items scavenged from the bireme since they could not carry the load themselves. The shaman summoned two-wheel wagons pulled by other tribesmen.

"First they call forth women warriors," Rogan said. "Now wagons. What else do they have hidden in yonder woods? Catapults? Perhaps a hundred fine horses?"

"Akibeel says that is all, sire."

Javan and the women warriors followed the old shaman into the forest. Rogan looked back to the waves, caught his breath, and studied their twice-killed foes. He felt things he had not experienced in many years.

Youth.

And fear.

Just a twinge, but there all the same.

Javan stopped at the tree line and looked back at his brooding uncle.

"Sire? We must be off. Is everything all right?"

Rogan frowned and looked to the sky. "Just thinking."

"Of what, Uncle?"

"That I envy you, lad. And that perhaps I was wrong before. Perhaps I have cheated death after all."

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The Heavy

By Cherie Priest

* * * *

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* * * *

Everyone already thinks I'm a goddamned hippie," Mark bitched. He gulped another swig from his Heineken and knocked his knuckles against the bar.

Josh threw back the last drops at the bottom of his glass, shrugged and signaled the bartender that yes, please, he'd like another double-dose of Jack. "If you didn't want any help, you should've shot it yourself."

"I *did* shoot it myself," he insisted. "And where's your friend? He's late."

Josh glanced at the ancient, nicotine-stained clock that hung crookedly above the roadhouse door. "He's got another five minutes."

"This is stupid," Mark said for the twentieth time. "It's going to turn out the thing that got those goats was just a big damn dog. And my wife's going to kill me."

"What for? You're not paying him anything."

"You said he doesn't charge up front?"

"He don't charge at all. He just fixes things."

"Why?" Mark asked.

Josh cupped his hand around his freshly refilled drink. "Because sometimes, things need fixing. And that's what he does. The Heavy fixes things."

The jukebox lit up on the one side that still lit up, and "Bad to the Bone" began to play. Mark checked over his shoulder, wondering what dumbass was too new to know that A-13 wasn't really Lynnard Skynnard anymore.

He didn't see anyone he didn't recognize, so he turned back around and shifted on his stool. "Why do they call him that?" he asked.

"The Heavy?"

"Yeah. How come?"

Josh made a grin with the half of his mouth that wasn't wrapped around the lip of his glass.

Before the song's first verse was over, the hinges on the door gave their signature squeal and the streetlamp out in the parking lot poked its edges into the room, but just barely. Something big was blocking it.

"Holy *shit*," said Mark.

The man in the doorway turned sideways a notch to let himself in.

He was not quite as big around as he was tall, and he was six foot five if he was an inch.

His bullet-shaped head was perfectly bald except for the chops that sprouted a wild retreat from his topmost chin. From the neck of his metal head T-shirt to the tips of his motorcycle boots he wore black over every last inch; and covering up the whole of his massive frame was a coal-dark trench coat that was bigger than a bedspread.

He tossed Josh a nod of recognition, and he stomped toward the bar. It wasn't an angry stomp; it was a stomp of sheer mass. The big man pointed at a bottle behind the counter and the bartender picked it up and started pouring.

While he waited for that drink, the Heavy approached Josh and Mark with his hand outstretched.

"Hey there, buddy! I hear you've got a problem." His voice was quick and friendly, and so was his handshake. He angled his bulk against the side of the bar, skipping the stool and letting himself lean.

Mark was speechless, so Josh got the ball rolling.

"Well, first off, by way of getting fancy—Mark, this is Kilgore Jones. Kilgore, this is Mark," Josh said. "He's the man with the problem."

Kilgore nodded. He'd heard part already. "The man with the goats. Or the ex-goats, as the case may be."

"Oh, I've still got goats," Mark assured him. "Not as many as we started with, but we've still got them." He waved his empty green bottle at the bartender, who popped the cap on another one and handed it over the counter, along with Kilgore's drink.

Kilgore took it and downed it in one swallow. "All right. Fill me in on the facts, and I'll tell you if I think I can help," he urged. "It might be you've got a bad dog, and if that's all it is, I'm still happy to lend a hand. But Josh thinks it might be worse than that."

Mark blew a sad, honking note down the bottle's frosty neck. He braced his feet on the stool's rungs and twisted them there while he spoke. "I guess I should start with the goats," he said. "I don't give a damn for goats. They're bad-tempered, ugly little things, and they smell like shit. But I lost my job at the Caterpillar plant, and my wife got this idea."

"The goats were your wife's idea?"

He bobbed his head. "Hell yeah, they were. Do I look like a man who needs organic soap in his life?"

Kilgore shook his head, and a row of tiny silver hoops in his left ear jingled together. "No sir, you do not," he said. His oddly boyish face stayed composed and serious.

"Well, I've got it now—by the metric assload. I didn't know thing one about goats, but Elaine did a bunch of reading, and a few days later she came home with a pair of Saanens. It was my job to clean and repair the barn, and it was her job to milk the residents—because God help me, *I* wasn't going to reach down underneath one."

Mark curled his fingers around the beer. "And anyway, now we've got goats, and we've got a website, and we've got soap, and lotion, and yogurt—and just about anything else you can comb, curdle, or cook that comes out from a goat's undercarriage. That was three years ago. And now I'm the vice president of

Signal Valley Farms, which is to say I shovel goat shit and do what Elaine tells me. She's the president, since it was her idea."

The Heavy mentally jotted all this down and asked, "When did the trouble start?"

"A few weeks ago." Mark took another hard draw on the beer and nearly choked himself with it. He looked into Kilgore's face and didn't see a guy who was about to bust out laughing.

He just looked interested, and a little concerned.

So Mark cleared his throat and made a face that implied acid reflux, and he continued. "I found a couple of the goats all torn up. I figured someone's dogs got out, you know? Or if they weren't somebody's dogs, then maybe coyotes."

"Maybe," Kilgore said.

"Once we lost another couple goats, I started checking them out good before I buried what was left. And I'm telling you, it looked like they'd been ... I don't know. *Gored*, or something."

"Gored? Like by a bull?" Kilgore frowned.

Mark shook his head. "Naw, more like a baby unicorn. They were punctured, but the holes were too deep to be teeth." He held up his hands, trying to indicate his best guess. "It was like they'd been jabbed with something sharp, maybe the size of this bottle's neck."

"And how many have you lost now?"

"Eleven. The thing got one more last night."

Josh elbowed Mark. "Tell him the rest," he said.

"The rest?"

Mark stared at his bottle. "I shot it."

"You shot it?"

"I shot it," he said again. "But it didn't die."

"Ah." Kilgore said. "Does that mean you got a good look at it?"

"Not a *good* look. And the look I got ... I don't know what I saw."

The big man kept his somber face on and didn't push too hard. "You want to tell me what it looked like?"

"You're going to think I'm nuts."

"Bet you I won't." But that wasn't enough to make Mark talk, so Kilgore added, "Look, man. I've heard some crazy shit in my time, and a surprising amount of that crazy shit has turned out to be true. So I'll tell you what. I've got stories that would make you think I'm as nutty as a tree full of squirrels. I'll tell you one of mine if you'll tell me yours."

"Deal," Mark said. "Go on. Surprise me."

"All right, I *will*. Two weeks ago I was up in Knoxville, and I got stuck in an attic with a pair of vampires who were righteous pissed to see me."

"Wait. Stuck...?"

"Now, I'll grant you it was faster getting down than going up—I fell through the floor and landed on a table downstairs, which hurt like a sonofabitch. But that was after I ran one of them through with a sharp chair leg, and I poured some of Reverend Sam's finest blessed H2O down the throat of the other."

"Blessed...?"

"You heard me. What'd Josh tell you about what I do?"

Josh beamed, and Mark acted queasy. "He said you fix unusual problems."

And finally, Kilgore laughed. It was a merry sound, sharp and genuine. It matched the way he talked. "I do indeed fix unusual problems—mostly the weird ones that no one else'll touch. So if you think I'm going to poke fun at you, you've got it all wrong. You can tell me what you saw, and nothing you can say will send me running. Lord as my witness, I promise you that."

Mark gave up. "All right," he said, shaking his head left and right, and trying not to taste any more of his stomach in his mouth. "All right, I'll tell you what it was."

He picked at the label on his bottle and dropped it down on the counter with a clank. And then he said quickly, "It was a big black shape with glowing red eyes. There, are you happy?"

"Happy? *Hell*, no. Big black shapes with glowing red eyes are pretty far down on the list of things that make me happy, but I'd appreciate it if you could be a little more specific. Can you tell me what kind of big shape?"

Mark thought hard. "It was big, but low to the ground. Maybe it would've been waist-high on me, but it was long. It had a big head and a humped back."

"There you go, now you're talking. Keep going. Tell me about the eyes. Red and glowing, I've got. What else can you tell me?"

"It was dark," Mark said slowly. "And I couldn't see too clearly. They were close to the ground, like it's something that holds its head low. And I hit it broadside with at least two pumps from the shotgun, but it ran off and came back for more the next night."

Kilgore pursed his lips, and it made his whole face look small. He leaned himself away from the counter and stood up straight. "I believe you," he declared. "Now tell me, how far away from here is this farm of yours, and would you like to see something done about your problem tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"How many more goats can you afford to lose?"

Mark snorted. "I'd be happy to see the whole batch of them tossed off a cliff, but Elaine'll have my head if I don't put a stop to it. Besides, what if it don't stop with the goats or the dogs? What if she's out feeding the things, and it comes after her? Or me?"

"Exactly," Kilgore said. He adjusted his coat and cocked his head toward the door. "Josh, you know where this farm is?"

"I do."

"Then you're riding with me."

* * * *

Signal Valley Farms sat in the shadow of Signal Mountain, Tennessee, and it was only a few miles away from the derelict roadhouse where Kilgore Jones had joined the party. As he drove his semi-black, beater Eldorado around the mountain, his passenger tinkered with the radio and grouched about the knobs.

Josh punched the round handle and said, "You need a new one."

"That *is* the new one. You think they came with cassette players in '67?"

"You're a real dinosaur, man."

Kilgore smiled, but it was a grim little smile. "You said the turn's coming up?"

"It's right here. Right over there, I mean. Look, see? There's a sign."

The edge of the right headlight clipped a low-swinging sign with a picture of a goat and some purple flowers. Kilgore turned the long car slowly, and its tires chewed against the gravel. The unpaved road turned out to be a driveway, but it was a long driveway and it made a dead end at a ranch-style house with one light burning.

They parked up near the house.

Josh and Mark milled nervously while Kilgore rummaged through his trunk. He produced a battered book with a burgundy leather cover, a fistful of stakes that should have lined a garden, a pump water gun with loudly sloshing contents, a digital camera, and a pair of six-shooters. Then he lifted out a small flashlight and checked its batteries.

"I told you, I shot the thing already," Mark said.

Kilgore methodically packed a camo-green duffel bag with everything except for the guns, which he popped into the holster he wore under the trench coat. "I heard you, and I believe you. But I'm willing to bet you didn't shoot it with bullets like these."

"What are they, silver or something?"

"Silver-plated," he said. "It works just as well, and I ain't made of money. I'm not saying these'll work or anything; hell, I don't know what you're up against here. But not much can stand up to this assortment. And oh yeah, this." He reached back into the trunk and pulled out a machete as long as his arm. The light of the trunk's half-dead bulb glinted against the shiny, sharpened edge.

Josh did a good job of appearing unimpressed, but Mark went green. "Is that a magic knife or something?"

"No magic here," he said, then changed his mind and patted the side of the bag. A rectangular square showed in outline through the fabric. "Except my mom's old Bible."

"What are you, some kind of preacher or something?" Mark asked. "Is that why you do this?"

Kilgore shouldered the bag and shook his head. "Almost exactly the opposite, my friend. I do this because I'm *not* a preacher. Now if you'll kindly point me at your barn, I'll get myself to work."

"It's back over there. You see the roof, through the trees?"

"Yes, I do."

"All right. There's the barn over there, and behind it there's a little run-off that turns into a creek when it rains. Watch out for that. It's none too deep, but it'll trip you up if you don't see it."

Mark reached out a hand and Kilgore took it and shook it. "I want to thank you," Mark said. "I appreciate you coming out like this. Is there anything I can do to help you, or anything you need?"

"No sir. Just you and Josh here go in the house and stay there, and don't come out—no matter what you hear. You two understand?"

"Sure do," Josh answered for them both.

And when they were safely inside, Kilgore looked into the distant sky. He saw the outline of the barn roof, and as he began to walk toward it, he started his mental checklist. He kept his voice to a whisper. It wasn't the world's quietest whisper, but it wasn't supposed to be.

If he was too quiet, nothing would hear him.

"Probably not a vampire," he said. "It would've sucked the goats dry but not torn them up. Might be a demon. But usually they get other people to do the sacrificial killing. It's not much of a birthday present if you've got to buy it yourself. Chupacabra, maybe?" He'd never met one, but that didn't mean they didn't happen. "Never heard of a goatsucker this far north."

The barn was barely more than a sharp-shadowed shape, squatting low and square along the ground. Within it, a few odd bleats of curiosity gabbled and small hooves shuffled back and forth. The smell of straw and shit wafted from underneath the locked and barred-up door.

Kilgore held his head against it. "Everybody all right in there?"

"*Na-aa-aa-p*," somebody answered.

And something else answered, too—from over in the gully. First it was just the sharp, out-of-place pop of a branch, and then there was another rattling, the hard clack of two rocks coming together as if they'd been stepped on.

Kilgore pulled his head away from the barn door and reached for the gun that hung under his left armpit. He was a practical man, and he saw no good reason to ramp up slowly.

Another big twig broke, and another knocking set of rocks sounded like footsteps to The Heavy. "Josh, Mark. That'd better not be *you*." But the pace of the motion told him it wasn't made by anything two-legged. There were four feet ... moving at a sharp and regular clip.

He revised his guess. Not feet, perhaps. "Four ... hooves?"

He listened for the firm, approaching patter. The creature was tracking around back, to the right. Kilgore tracked around to the left, keeping the barn between him and the thing that was crawling out of the gully.

The Heavy kept his eyes on the ground and his ears on the edge of the property, at the line where the creek run-off turned and flowed through a row of trees. His squint told him where to tiptoe past the building's corner and how to miss the watering trough. His ears detected a wet snuffling sound and the hard, knocking clatter that, yes, sounded like hooves.

As Kilgore circled the barn, the thing circled too, intrigued enough to follow but not bold enough to charge.

"Here, critter-critter," he called softly. "Come on out and get me. I'm just a slow, fat man. I'm easy pickings for a bad old thing like you, and I'm a *real* hearty meal. Are you hungry?"

He narrowed his eyes and peered through the night.

"Come on, now. Come out and let me get a look at you."

Around the back of the barn there was a covered storage area that came up to Kilgore's thigh. He put his left hand down on it and tested the wood. It might hold. It might not. But he was running out of barn and he was going to have to make a stand someplace. The platform was as good a defensive position as any.

He stopped his retreat and lifted one large leg. "Shit," he mumbled, and he said it a couple more times as he hauled himself up. But then he stood, and the storage lid held. It didn't want to. It bowed and creaked underneath four hundred and fifty pounds of man plus all his supplies. Kilgore dropped the duffel bag and unzipped it, all the while trying to keep quiet so he could listen.

Around the corner, something big was tracing Kilgore's scent trail.

The Heavy pulled out his Bible. It was way too dark to read so he stuffed it into his belt, and the book bent against the strain ... but he liked feeling it close. He held up the gun and aimed it down at the corner where the inquisitive snuffling was coming up fast. Mark had been right. Its head was low to the ground.

He shouldered the bag again.

It was too dark to see anything with real certainty, but near the earth there was motion in the nighttime blackness. Something blocky congealed, creeping snout-first from behind the edge of the building.

One dull red eye sparked into view. It blinked and the scarlet dot flickered, and focused, and turned to face the man on top of the storage box lid.

The second eye came around, and behind it came a high set of peaked shoulders.

The eyes locked on Kilgore and they brightened with greed.

"What ... a werewolf?" he asked, knowing this guess couldn't be right. The shape was all wrong, the joints and muscles were strung together differently.

It snorted and scraped its hooves beneath its body.

The suddenness of its momentum almost took the Heavy off guard, but not quite. This wasn't his first rodeo, so to speak, and his trigger finger answered the charge with three rounds fired quickly and directly at those vicious little eyes.

The thing screeched a piercing objection. The bullets knocked the creature away from its path and it shook itself like a dog but it didn't go down. Instead, it went forward—head set low and body set barreling—into the storage bin.

Two boards busted outright, and combined with Kilgore's exceptional weight, this was enough to buckle the whole structure.

He tumbled down and off, falling and rolling over the edge and onto the creature, which grunted and tried to turn around in time to bite.

But once he got rolling, Kilgore was hard to stop, especially when he tucked his head down, pulled up his knees, and let the momentum take him. There was too much mass and too much inertia; nothing short

of a gorge or a brick building could slow him down.

As it turned out, he happened to be rolling toward a thickly overgrown gully.

His body steamrolled over tall grass and skinny sapling trees. It bounced where appropriate and jolted to a rough and terrible pitch over the edge of the gully and down only a couple of feet to the v-shaped bottom ... where he wedged himself to a stop.

He lowered his arms and shook his bullet-bald head.

Above, and around the curved path he'd mowed or flattened with his accidental retreat, the clattering quick clop of four hard feet approached. It wouldn't be long before the creature saw the man or smelled him, or simply followed the trail of the trampled foliage.

At least, thank God, Kilgore thought, wasn't stuck. But his leg was pinned underneath him, and his ribs were aching from the turbulence. He sat up and retrieved his leg. He'd dropped one of the guns, but he had both hands free—and he used them to pat himself down for a damage check.

His ass was numb. His knee was torqued. His right wrist was starting to swell. A dozen other assorted bumps, bruises, and scrapes made themselves known with a low-grade hum of pain.

None of it was so bad that he couldn't get up.

The twisted knee made a loud pop when he bent it, but then it felt better so he kept on crawling to his feet. Somewhere along the way, his bag had come unzipped and the contents had scattered; he'd lost some of the stakes, and the water gun had broken, leaking its contents all along his path. But he still had a light he was afraid to use, and he still had that second gun, which remained in its holster.

And his Bible was still stuck in his belt.

When he placed his hand on the rocks at his waist in order to make that final pull to bring him upright, he found his machete.

Something in the way the blade shifted caught the moonlight and gave him away. No sooner had he snared it and braced himself for trouble, than trouble came galloping between the trees that remained.

The creature knew these woods, too. It knew where the gully was, and even though it couldn't see much of the man who was standing in it, it could see that enormous knife glittering in the skim-milk glow of the half-covered moon. And it wasn't much afraid of knives.

Then again, it had never been struck with a knife that was flung by a man who weighed nearly a quarter of a ton.

The blade sank deeply into the soft tissue between the beast's jaw and shoulder, and again Kilgore's ears rang with the monster's ferocious squeal; but now the squeal sounded wet. Something was broken, and something was bleeding. No cry should sound so choked and damp.

The beast turned away from the edge of the gully, not quite fast enough to keep from dropping one leg over the edge. It scuttled and scrambled, and it did not fall over the edge—for which Kilgore offered up a quick prayer of thanks. Whether or not the creature was injured, The Heavy didn't want to end up trapped in a trench with it.

With a labored groan and another pop of his knee, Kilgore heaved himself up over the gully's edge and flopped down onto the low, angled ground.

The skittering scuff of the monster's hooves limped out ahead of him, back toward the barn.

"Sure," Kilgore said to himself. "Sure, you're hurt." If this monster was anything like others he'd encountered, it needed to feed and feed quickly if it was going to recover.

Running was damned hard, in the dark, on a trick knee—but The Heavy got a slow trot underway, and he hated it. He hated chasing anyone, or anything. Over the years, he'd developed a tactic for monster fighting, and that tactic did *not* involve a whole lot of dashing around.

He was big and he knew it. It was easy to look slow and soft and vulnerable. It was easy to draw the predators out to him.

But the damned monster was loping toward the barn, and toward the frantically chattering goats locked within. Kilgore did his best to lope faster.

He burst out of the vegetation with his remaining gun held firmly upraised and cocked. The object of his chase beat its head against the barn door, ramming it again and again, and squealing with each impact. The machete was still protruding from its neck, being farther jammed with every head-butt.

Kilgore tried to roar, "Oh no you don't!" but he was winded, and it came out in a raspy cough.

The creature turned. It scratched one front hoof into the dirt like a bull preparing to charge.

And Kilgore didn't waste any time unloading three more shots into that rolling, bucking shadow the size of a bear.

While it shuddered and shrieked, The Heavy drew his Bible with his free hand. It snapped up out of his belt, and he held it up over his heart like a shield.

He approached the creature with swift and measured steps. It was dying. Nothing man, beast, or other made a noise like that unless it had glimpsed the light on the other side and felt the Goodness of it burn like lava. It writhed and whimpered, and it splattered Kilgore with hot, gushing sprays of blood as black as oil.

"In the name of the Father," it spun around in the dirt, throwing a death tantrum. "And the Son, and the Holy Spirit," Kilgore told it as he came up close and brought the gun down. "*I unmake you.*" One of the hateful red eyes glowered up from the paste-like mud.

Kilgore fired into the eye because it was the only thing he could see well enough to aim for, and the fire there winked out.

The creature quivered. One of its legs twitched, scraping a mindless reflex.

The Heavy exhaled a huge breath and backed away. He knew, and the deep-bitten scars in his calf could attest, that there was no such thing as "too careful."

Keeping one eye on the carcass, he rifled through his bag and pulled out his flashlight. "Now let's see exactly what the hell you are, Mr. Goat-killer." His thumb caught the sliding switch and the bright white beam cut the night so sharply that for a moment, the man was blinded.

When his eyes adjusted, he followed the circle of light down to the gruesome mass of bullet-broken bones, torn hair, and hooves. And that's when he saw the tusks. "Tusks? This is..." He used the edge of his steel-toed boot to nudge the pulpy skull. "A goddamned were-pig. Were-boar. Were ... son of a bitch."

The corpse shifted by slow, nearly imperceptible degrees, sliding around in the muck and losing the edges of its hulking shape. Kilgore reached back into the bag and whipped out the digital camera. He readied the flash and framed the shot. He caught the image just in time.

A moment later, the thing collapsed into an unrecognizable pelt.

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Hal Duncan Interviews Jeff VanderMeer

Award-winning novelist Jeff VanderMeer is the author of the best-selling *City of Saints & Madmen*, set in his signature creation, the imaginary city of Ambergris, in addition to several other novels from Bantam, Tor, and Pan Macmillan. He has won two World Fantasy Awards, an NEA-funded Florida Individual Writers' Fellowship, and, most recently, the Le Cafard cosmique award in France and the Tähtifantasia Award in Finland, both for *City of Saints*. He has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, Bram Stoker Award, IHG Award, Philip K. Dick Award, and many others. Novels such as *Veniss Underground* and *Shriek: An Afterword* have made the year's best lists of Amazon.com, *The Austin Chronicle*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Publishers Weekly*, among others.

Hal Duncan: Your latest book, *Shriek: An Afterword*, is a return to the city of Ambergris, first explored in your collection of novellas and short stories, *City of Saints and Madmen*. Ambergris is a fascinating place—with hints of M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* or Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, I think—one of those cities that becomes a character, one of those characters with a life of their own. Given the recurrent images of artists, poets and writers, mad and lost in (or under) its streets, just what **is** your relationship with Ambergris? Is it your creation, or are you its citizen, or is it a little of both?

Jeff VanderMeer: At this point, the real world and Ambergris are so intertwined and my inspirations taken from the real world are so various that, on the page, there's not always that much difference. When I re-read the Ambergris material, I see all of the historical, social, and cultural things that have fascinated me over the past twenty years. I see less and less the literary influences, except in terms of specifics of technique.

Like, at some point *Viriconium* and *Lanark* influenced Ambergris, but then they got subsumed, mixed in, or tossed out. The funniest thing about the *Viriconium* influence is that it's actually more from one of the primary sources for both V and A: Decadent literature. A lot of the grace notes in **City of Saints** came from dead Frenchmen.

So, at this point, I'm pretty much creator and citizen both. In the backgrounds of stories and novels, I'm mapping out my feelings about history and politics and all of that. In that sense I'm a citizen of Ambergris just as I'm a citizen of the United States. In the foreground, where the characters live, I'm still creator.

HD: The Decadent connection seems quite pertinent. Both Ambergris and the city of Veniss in *Veniss Underground* are highly layered constructions, in terms of literary technique, in terms of history and, literally, with labyrinthine depths below. *Veniss Underground* could be described as a descent into Hell, in fact. To what extent are those depths the characters are exploring historical, social and/or psychological?

JV: In *Veniss*, for better or worse, they definitely are exploring historical and psychological depths in addition to just the realities of an odd quest. Given the nature of the bioneering in the novel, I thought that it pretty much made sense because in some sense the rogue bioneer Quin is taking all of these historical and mythical influences and creating an underground in that image. And then, of course, I'm also retelling Greek myth, or layering echoes of that into the text. The main thing, though, was to do it economically. To find ways of storytelling that allowed that last long section to be a descent into a literal and figurative underground without slowing down the narrative. Because I really wanted the novel to be this short, sharp shock. And, since it's not really a SF novel, I also wanted it to be short because at some point the reader is going to realize that the author doesn't give much of a damn about creating a realistic future setting.

HD: And there's similar underworld investigations in *Shriek*, with Duncan's explorations of the tunnels

under Ambergris. But for all the shock of the horrific images—the weird brutalities—there's a richer vein you're tapping, it seems to me, than the simple dread of the genre horror story. There's a sense of sorrow which underpins much of your writing and, if I remember right there's actually a line in “The Transformation of Martin Lake” about all great art containing sorrow. Is that a statement of your own beliefs or theories about writing?

JV: I think all great art contains sorrow because it contains secret knowledge of our mortality—the sheer brevity of life. And because our lives are a mixture of pain and joy. When I say that, I don't mean that as a bad thing. I think there's nothing worse than a life lived in the middle of that—experiencing neither great pain nor great joy. And while you can live a life of happiness and joy without pain, I think that kind of a life is a bit of a lie. Because people you love die before you. Because you suffer setbacks. Because the fullest potential of life exists at the extremes. I don't mean to suggest everyone is bipolar or manic depressive—just that you have to allow yourself to be open to extremes or I don't think you're truly living. So, in that sense, sorrow does permeate my work.

HD: You travelled extensively as a child, I understand. Has that shaped (broadened or focused) some of those “historical, cultural and social” fascinations?

JV: I think it mostly gave me a highly developed social and political conscience, but also a good sense for specific detail. I think my travels as a kid really honed that ability. I'd be overwhelmed by texture, image, sound, smell, and I had to make sense of it all. I had to be able to pick out those things that most resonated and hang on to them to make sense of what I was seeing.

HD: In terms of those literary techniques and influences, you work with a wide palette, applying realist, modernist or post-modernist approaches as often as genre ones. Have you found much resistance to this, with most of your work being perceived as “Fantasy?” Is the genre/mainstream divide real, an illusion, or an illusion with real effects?

JV: It depends on the country and how it is marketed. I find some resistance in the UK and the US, certainly. I find resistance from readers who want their writers to stand still, damn it, and behave. But I don't like to write the same thing twice. Ambergris has been a blessing for me because it is flexible enough to incorporate most of my approaches so I can at least have the stability of one setting while using many different narrative strategies. I think the genre/mainstream divide is an illusion in the same way any generalization is an illusion ... which is to say it varies from reader to reader, critic to critic. So, in some places the wall is high and wide. In others, it was never there and there's just this huge grassy plain flanked by mountains where everybody has a great big fun ol' fiction picnic. Or something like that.

HD: The narrative strategies in *Shriek* are a particularly good example, I think, of how you're comfortable using techniques some would deem “experimental”—with the whole manuscript being the narrative of one character subsequently found, edited and annotated by another. Can you talk a little about this central conceit ... what it brings to the story which you wouldn't get in a more conventional single-viewpoint narrative?

JV: Most of my narratives in the longer forms have been about triangulating different character viewpoints. In *Veniss*, this took the form of three sections and three different character points-of-view, with a full picture of each of the three only emerging from reading how they each see each other. In *City of Saints*, it's more of a triangulated view of Ambergris and a few people in it, with several stories deliberately contradicting each other so that it's a lot like how we receive information in the real world. *Shriek* is just an extension of that, with the edits and annotations by the second character rising above just “no—it didn't happen that way” to create what I feel is real depth of characterization through the juxtaposition of the voices. It's in the conflict between the voices, and their agreement, that I found a way to do fairly complex characterization, and something that resonates with readers. Because it's a family

situation, and everyone in a family has a different version of the same events—a slightly different mythology. So, in a way, too, it's about the way families function, even dysfunctional families.

HD: One of the early scenes in *Shriek*—and it plays out so beautifully I'm loathe to spoil it for the reader with too much detail here—involves an ... encounter between Duncan and a publisher who *really* doesn't like his manuscript. Is that a “worst nightmare” or a “demon laid to rest?” You've said elsewhere that you write for yourself and any audience is a bonus; does it get under your skin, though, if readers take an active dislike to something you've done?

JV: It gets under my skin if it's a wilful misreading of the text, by a reviewer or a reader. If they really “get” what I was trying to do and they just don't like it—hey, that's legitimate and I respect that. But I invest so much time in layering and perfecting the effects in my work that I do get upset when a reader or reviewer doesn't take equivalent time to look at the text. Which is silly—no one is under any obligation to do so. But I can't help how I feel, only how I act on those feelings. As for the scene between Duncan and the publisher, it is a kind of a send-up and conflagration of all of those horribly stupid things that happened during my own career in the 1990s, when I couldn't sell any of my novels to save my life and wound up in a series of dysfunctional professional relationships with failing small presses. One guy emails me from his honeymoon to say the money for my book has been spent on other things. One guy wants me to change all the characters in *Veniss* to surrogates from the Bible. Another guy, in thrall to his copy editor, tells me there won't be a limited edition of my book unless I change some of my story titles because the copy editor thinks of the table of contents as a kind of poem and there's repetition of the word “death.” That sort of thing. So, really, it should be Duncan jumping across the desk and just beating the crap out of his publisher. But I channelled it the other way instead.

HD: Having been involved in publishing from all angles—writing, editing, self-publishing—working with independent presses like Ministry of Whimsy, and large NY publishing houses like Bantam, what are the pleasures and pains of wearing these different hats? Do you get a buzz out of editing an anthology like *Leviathan*, for example, that's different from that of writing?

JV: The buzz of *Leviathan* is close to the buzz of rewriting or editing. It is a very mathematical buzz. You're seeing how pieces fit together. You're testing the strengths of the pieces and you're trying to arrange it all in such a way that you create a totality that is more than the sum of the parts. Editing is a very creative endeavour and too many people who think it's just a kind of caretaker business get involved in it. You're not just guarding a lighthouse or throwing a party you invite all your drunken friends to. It's a lot more complicated than that. So there's definitely an adrenaline rush to that, a kind of high. But it's also a lot of painstaking detail work, a lot of PR, a lot pure effort. Also, the collaboration. I like to work with co-editors. The purest buzz is still writing fiction, of course.

HD: One of the richest and most recurrent sets of imagery within your Ambergris work is that based around fungi; permeating the substance of the city and even the substance of characters, mushrooms and their spores are everywhere in Ambergris, and there's a threat that goes along with that, but also a sense of beauty, of wonder. Without wanting to reduce it to a simplistic symbolism, what does that imagery represent to you? Or rather what is it you're exploring through that imagery?

JV: You know, I don't like reducing it down to words, even. When I write, it's a very organic process. Sometimes the structures are pomo, but the emotion and the imagery are right out of the subconscious. I'm continually writing something in a fever dream and then re-reading it and wondering where the hell that came from. And then and only then thinking about it consciously ... what does that mean? Is that image resonant or is it dead? And I have to know to some extent what it means because I then refine or focus the story around that. But, in general terms, I think the fungi represent the true alien qualities of our world ... the ones we don't even notice. The ones we walk by every day and think of as normal. The

world is a fucking strange place but we dull ourselves to that, we dull ourselves to direct experience. And then we wind up doing one of the most horrible things we can possibly do: we take our world, the people in it, everything, for granted. We don't even really see them any more ... we see representations of them we've created in our minds. The fungi is a way of trying to break through that, to actually see how strange it all is ... and thus how wonderful and unpredictable. There's also the element of rot and decay that mushrooms tend to be associated with. The beautiful shapes and colours.

HD: The Silence seems to me like another marker of that omnipresent, ominous strangeness, the aspect of it we're afraid to notice. I'm drawn to make connections between this event and the death of Duncan's and Janice's father, to see an exploration of the enigma of death, this sudden and arbitrary absence, that absence as a presence in the survivors' lives. Am I just being morbid here?

JV: The Silence is a marker of genocide and counter-genocide. It's part and parcel of talking about colonialism and subjugation of indigenous peoples. Although it's slightly disingenuous to say so because the gray caps are not just symbolic—that's just one aspect that they allow me to deal with in the Ambergris texts. But in terms of the personal, yes, I think the Silence is the kind of event that reverberates into a personal space in people's lives. That it comes to symbolize all loss to some extent. It's, for me, the kind of echoing absent heart of the city and of the mystery of it—something that can never really be solved just as much in life cannot be solved. And, in my imagination, it is something immense and sombre and unknowable.

HD: The *Zamilon File* is the next outing to Ambergris, I understand. Can you tell us a little about the idea?

JV: It's an espionage novel set 500 years after *Shriek*. It's mostly set in Zamilon, a ruined monastery fortress near Ambergris. It'll be pretty intense and totally different from *Shriek* and *City of Saints*. The main part of it is a diary found by spies and then the accumulated documentation that accrues as a result of finding the diary and trying to discover what it means. A lot of it is creeping me out. I've got about 10,000 words done.

HD: Is there more you want to explore through the Ambergris setting or do you feel the urge to move on? Do you have novels planned for down the line using that setting or otherwise?

JV: After *Zamilon*, there is one more novel, called *Fragments from a Drowned City*, and then I'll be done. *Fragments* is about a detective hired to find a missing girl in Ambergris. A fragment of it appeared in my collection *Secret Life*. But, yeah, after that, I'm done with Ambergris. The cycle, as planned in 1998, will be done.

More about Jeff VanderMeer at www.jeffvandermeer.com

More about Hal Duncan at notesfromthegeekshow.blogspot.com

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To Know How to See

by Michael West

* * * *

Michael West is a member of the Horror Writers Association and has served as President of its local chapter, Indiana Horror Writers, for several years. His first novel, *The Wide Game*, was published in 2003, and since that time, his short fiction, articles, and reviews have appeared in various magazines and anthologies. Faithful readers can always find him at home on his website and message board at www.bymichaelwest.com.

* * * *

Something was wrong with Lee's face. A small comet passed the *Ambrosia's* cockpit window, and Sean Corbett saw its streaking tail reflect off the man's skin, shimmering across his cheek and forehead, across the bridge of his nose, as if they were the sculpted features of a wax mask instead of true flesh.

Lee's glassy eyes lifted from the electronic book he'd been reading for the past hour. "What's the matter?"

The comet vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving the cramped chamber dimly lit by the soft glow of monitors and LEDs that littered its consoles. Sean rubbed his eyes, convincing himself it had been a trick of the light. "Nothing, sorry."

Lee shook his head, muttering something under his breath as he resumed his studies.

Sean continued work on the instrumentation checklist, making notes with a pen clutched in metallic fingers. While drilling on Titan six years ago, a rockslide crushed his right arm. At first, he'd been unable to pick up a glass without shattering it, or use the bathroom without crying out in pain, but after six months of physical therapy, and years of experience, he could now perform even the most delicate of tasks. There was no feeling in the prosthesis itself, but this morning, he awoke to find his shoulder throbbing—a dull, deep pain, like a toothache. He chalked it up to a pulled muscle, downed a few painkillers, and went on about his duties.

Though it was now his shift in the pilot's seat, there was very little for Sean to do. *Ambrosia* took the reins as soon as they cleared the asteroid belt. She would need a human touch when they approached Nautilus station, but for now, their ten-member crew simply took turns babysitting her systems.

After a few minutes, Sean's attention returned cautiously to the man sitting next to him, examining his skin once more, finding it pale ... shiny, without a single hair or blemish. It just didn't look *real*.

"You okay?" Lee asked. The skin above his left eye tore as he spoke, split like rubber stretched thin.

Sean's eyes widened. His mouth fell open in stunned silence.

"What's wrong?" Lee turned his head toward the cockpit window, as if expecting to see some stellar phenomenon occurring behind him. Finding nothing of interest, he turned back to Sean, the rip in his forehead now larger—a gaping, bloodless wound that ran from his hairline to his eyebrow.

Something moved in that darkness.

Sean squinted, trying to see what it was. Peering into Lee's torn forehead was like looking through a crack in a raven's egg. He saw shifting, flapping bits of strange anatomy that were far from human.

Panic flooded Sean's brain as he realized he was being watched. The thing beneath Lee's façade had trained its hidden eyes upon him. Did it know that its disguise had been compromised? Was it looking for signs that Sean was aware of its existence?

He turned, focused on the instrument panel for a moment. The tiny space suddenly felt even more confined. His galloping heart demanded more oxygen, but there seemed to be none left in the control room. He had to get out of there.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," Sean said aloud, and it was the truth. He glanced at the hatch behind them. It seemed so far away. "I have to ... I gotta go see the doc."

The Lee-thing nodded. "Okay, man. Need me to walk you down there?"

"No!" Sean said too quickly. He felt a blast of air from an overhead vent. His skin was now slick with sweat. "I can make it."

With deliberate calm, he rose, managed to squeeze between the seats without touching the imposter, then took a backward step toward the exit. His left hand shook, but his prosthesis was cool and steady. He pressed a green-lit button to open the hatch and ducked as he stepped quickly into the narrow corridor beyond.

The Lee-thing stared at him.

"I'll see you later," it said.

Sean punched the button, closed the hatch, sealed the alien in. There was a fire alarm next to the door. For a moment, he considered breaking the glass, bringing the rest of his shipmates to his aid. Instead, he ran for the Medlab, for Carla.

* * * *

"Do you actually love me?" she asked.

The voice came across Sean's headset, each word punching a hole through the steady rattle of his own respiration. He twisted around, his heavy boots leaving marks in the obsidian dust. "What?"

Blue-white lights rimmed Carla's faceplate, making her pale, freckled features glow like a beacon in the darkness. She wasn't looking at him. Instead, she used the small keyboard sewn into the wrist of her environment suit, typing survey notes about the asteroid into her log. "I said—"

"I heard what you said. I just can't believe you'd even question it. Of course I love you."

Her brown eyes met his through the glass. "The computer could have picked another woman to be your partner on this trip, then you would've fallen for her instead of me."

"Not a chance."

A smile, but her voice remained serious, "You sound pretty sure about that."

"Carla ... out of all the hundreds of women the company could have paired me with for these last two years, you were the *most* compatible. Computers don't lie."

Exhaust vapor erupted silently from the back of her helmet, crystallizing. "So this is love because a machine says it should be?"

"No, the machine said it would be because it is." He studied her, becoming mildly annoyed. Where was

she going with this? "Look at the rest of the crew. Not every pairing turned into romance."

"So the computer was wrong about them, but it's right about us?"

"Yes." Now frustrated, he glanced at the monitors on the robot drilling rig and saw that it had shattered a bit boring into the heavily cratered, rocky terrain. *Shit*. Sean quickly changed frequencies on his intercom. "Orpheus ... stop."

The machine withdrew its smoking auger, the metal glowing bright red, and its cameras stared back at them as if to question why they had not noticed sooner.

Sean flipped back to Carla's channel, then scaled the side of the rig. "I've got to change that."

"Need any help?"

He rotated the housing. In the cargo hold, he could hear it click when it moved into position, but out here, in this vacuum, he had to rely on feel. "I think I got it."

Carla nodded at his right shoulder. "Do you miss your real arm, the one you were born with?"

"When it first happened, yeah, sure I did." He climbed down to one of the seven support struts that extended from the sides and front of the rig, then hopped onto the surface, clouds of obsidian particulates billowing around his boots.

She took the decapitated bit from his hands and handed him a replacement. "If they could have given it back to you, would you have taken it?"

The memory of that day flashed in Sean's brain: coming to, being told that his arm had been ground to a pulp. He swallowed, trying to push it all back down. "That wasn't an option."

"But if it had been," she prodded, "would you have opted for reattachment, or for the mechanism?"

He snickered humorlessly. "At the time, I guess I would've been happy to get my real arm back."

"And now?"

Sean pulled himself back onto the rig with more ease than other men. "I'm sure there's a point to all this?"

Carla shrugged. "I was just thinking about how much we've given up for the sake of our respective careers, wondering if it's all been worth it. You lost your arm." She put the ruined drill bit into the tool chest at the back of the rig. "And I gave up my womb."

He paused for a moment, wondering if he should say something, not knowing any fitting words. Sterilization was mandatory for deep space travel. Simple mathematics. Air, food, water, and supplies had to be rationed, carefully calculated for a set number of people. Adding a baby into the equation, perhaps a year or two away from the nearest outpost or settlement, could put everyone's lives in jeopardy.

Carla asked, "Have you ever seen artificial gestation, been to one of the nurseries?"

Sean grunted, twisting the new part into place. "Can't say I have."

Her gloved hand raked the chest of her suit, her frustrated fingers unable to fiddle with the silver Saint Albert medallion and chain buried beneath the insulated fabric. Albertus Magnus, she'd told him, was the patron saint of scientists, her protector, and she never took it off, not even when she showered. "Picture

row after row of glass tubes filled with oxygenated liquid, each one home to an embryo at a different stage of development. I saw parents smiling in on their unborn children, showing the still-forming fetuses off to friends and family. There was this adorable, curly-haired little girl. She tapped on the glass, the way kids used to do with aquariums.” Carla raised her fist and acted it out. “Her father tried to get her to quit, but she just kept tapping and waving, trying to get that baby inside to open its eyes and look at her. Everyone was so happy, so proud, but it just left me feeling really sad and ... cold, like something beautiful had been taken away in the name of progress.”

Sean tightened a few bolts with his wrench. “That sounds odd, coming from a scientist.”

Carla was silent for a moment, and he glanced down to see her searching for words, her lips parted, her eyes off to the side, then downcast, her hand still on her chest, trying to play with the hidden medallion and chain.

Finally, she said, “The scientist in me sees the gain, but the woman in me feels the loss. Our flesh and blood bodies have become disposable, *obsolete*. We give them up piece by piece without so much as a second thought. As soon as we discover a way to download our consciousness into a mainframe, everyone will opt to do it. True immortality.”

“That wouldn’t be you,” he told her, “it’d be a copy.”

“But it would be everything I know, which is everything that makes me *me*.”

He slid his wrench back into his tool belt, then nodded at her wrist. “You can type everything you know into that log, and it wouldn’t make it alive, just ... thorough.”

“Well, alive or not, people will do it in droves, just give it all up and stop being human altogether.”

He climbed down from the rig to stand in front of her, rubbing his shoulder through the fabric of his suit. “Would *you* do it?”

Carla shrugged. “Probably not.” Her eyes locked with his through the glass of their sealed faceplates. “I don’t think I want to sacrifice anything else.”

Sean took a step toward her. “What’s going on?”

“The mission’s almost over,” she said, “and we’ll have some tough decisions once we reach Nautilus, whether or not to renew our contracts, what we’ll do if we don’t sign up for another tour, where we’ll—”

“You’re thinking about leaving Nova Mining?”

Her face grew somber, and her eyes rose to the countless moons that drifted across the horizon. “It’s certainly an option.”

* * * *

Medlab was free of the clutter that appeared throughout much of the ship. Doctor Edwards had music playing, relaxing orchestral tones. Four beds lined the far wall. They were empty now, but if there had been patients, Sean thought the music would have put them to sleep.

Carla was in a small corner she’d appropriated from the doctor, hunched over an ocular probe. Auburn curls spilled across the shoulders of her tan flight jacket, and her delicate fingers adjusted the controls, increasing magnification. The core samples Orpheus had mined were grouped on her glass tabletop. She analyzed each in turn, looking for a rich vein of ore.

Sean reached over and touched her arm, giving her a start.

"Jesus." Her jacket was unzipped, and she clutched at the white blouse beneath, pulling it tight across her breasts. "I thought you were on Bridge duty this morning?"

"I am ... I was." His mind was still racing, incredible visions of concealed aliens being chased by rational, logical concerns about his own sanity.

Carla rolled her eyes, the Saint Albert medallion that hung from her neck rising and falling with her chest as she giggled. "Come to take me to lunch?"

No, I've come to see if I'm losing my mind.

He studied her eyes, her skin, the beauty mark just above her glossy red lips. He touched her cheek with his trembling left hand, felt its warmth, and knew she was very human.

She frowned. "Sean ... Did something happen up there?"

"Have you seen Lee since we've been back on the ship?"

Carla shook her head and continued to look him over. "I don't think I've seen anyone but you and Doctor Edwards since we went through decon last night. Wasn't he up in the cockpit with you?"

"Yes, but..." Sean paused, deciding to be cautious until he knew more. He extended his arm, took her soft hand in his metal fingers, and his shoulder flared with pain, igniting sparks within his eyes.

"It's still bothering you." She studied his prosthesis with concern.

"I'm fine."

"Liar. Look, while you're here, you should at least let Edwards take a look at it."

Sean glanced across the room, seeing the doctor's office in the opposite corner. Clear liquid ran down the glass walls that separated it from the rest of the lab, creating waterfalls that, like the music, were meant to calm those being treated.

"You're right," he told her. "I'll talk to the doc, see if he can help me."

"Good." Carla kissed his cheek, then grabbed two small display pads off the table—the most recent downloads of her technical journals. "I'll wait for you in the cafeteria."

She pulled away and Sean reluctantly let her go. He thought for a moment, then said, "If you see Lee, just ... keep an eye on him. Don't get too close."

"Okay, you've officially scared the shit out of me. What—?"

"I'll explain it all over lunch."

Carla nodded, then disappeared down the corridor with her books.

Sean stepped over to stand in Edwards' doorway. The man had his back to him, studying a large monitor that filled the rear wall. "Knock-knock."

Edwards turned. His eyes lay hidden beneath a visor that allowed him to see temperature fluctuations, perform diagnostic scans, and be linked to the Medlab's computer. A red and blue patch on the breast of

his lab coat labeled him the ship's chief medical officer—the ship's only medical officer, truth be told. He smiled, his lips surrounded by the stubble of a three-day-old beard. “Corbett. How's it going?”

"I was about to tell Carla something, but I thought I should run it by you to see what you thought first."

"I think I'm honored." A metal desk filled the center of the room. Edwards sat in the high-backed leather chair behind it, then motioned to a smaller seat nearby.

Sean went into the office, watching the Medlab entrance through watery glass; afraid Lee might walk in at any moment.

Edwards pressed a button on the edge of his desk, turning the smart glass opaque, preserving their privacy. “So, what's on your mind?”

"You'll think I'm a head case."

The doctor chuckled. “I already *know* you're a head case. We all are. We're pissing our lives away out here."

"Yeah." Sean offered up a laugh of his own, but it was a poor attempt, void of any real amusement. “Here's the thing ... This is crazy, but I was just in the cockpit with Lee, and his face looked like a rubber mask. I saw it tear, saw something move around inside his head, like some kind of ... some kind of *creature*.” He cringed as he spoke the word. “It was like Lee was just a costume this thing was wearing, a disguise, like it was spying on me. I could feel it looking at me, not with Lee's eyes, but with eyes *behind* his eyes."

They regarded each other a moment.

Edwards was first to break the silence, “That's the craziest goddamned story I've ever heard in my life."

Sean's mouth went dry. “It looked so *real*."

"Bullshit." The doctor pointed at him. “If you thought it was real, you would've gone on the com system, announced it to everyone instead of walking in here to talk to me. Besides, I sat across from Lee at breakfast this morning, and if he was some kind of alien, I think I would've noticed."

Sean ran his left hand over his mouth and chin. “So I've lost all my marbles, and Lee is just ... Lee."

"Lee's fine," the doctor assured him.

"Thank God," Sean whispered, exhaling as if he had held his breath for a very long time.

"And you're not crazy," Edwards went on to say.

Sean raised his eyebrow.

"We both know what it takes to make it onto one of these flights," the doctor said. “You don't work for Nova or anybody else unless you've passed all the genetic and psychological testing."

He listened; relaxed a bit.

"Sean, did you know that if your great-great-aunt on your mother's side had the genetic marker for stuttering, you wouldn't be here right now."

He looked at the doctor.

Edwards nodded. "I'm serious."

Sean laughed, a nervous, relieved chuckle.

"I'd chalk it up to stress," the doctor told him, "but you can't be under any more stress than the rest of us. The damn ship runs itself. Something happen on that asteroid yesterday?"

"I don't know..." Sean shrugged, feeling the dull throb in his shoulder become a stabbing pain. He winced. "I think I pulled a muscle working on the rig. Hurts like hell."

The doctor stood and walked over. He touched the side of his visor. "When did you first notice it?"

"This morning."

"*Before* you saw that monster in Lee's head?"

Sean nodded. Hearing the doctor say it like that ... it sounded so ridiculous, so far-fetched.

Edwards hit his visor button again, switched to a different type of scan. "And you've had that prosthesis of yours for ... what—six years now?"

"Yeah." Sean had a sudden, frightening thought. Could the pain be a signal that, after all these years, his body was rejecting this foreign apparatus?

The doctor nodded and moved away, walked to the monitor on the back wall. Sean could see the man's face reflected in the screen. It looked somehow distorted, as if the glass was a funhouse mirror. "Besides your little fieldtrip with Carla, when was the last time you worked in natural gravity?"

"I don't know ... six years ago, I guess. On Titan."

"Ahuh." He touched the screen, initiated a download from his visor into the system. Images strobed on the large monitor: bones, shadowy ribbons of tissue, bright bolts and wires where Sean's prosthesis had been attached to the sawed-off stump of his surviving right arm. "Well, I think I know what's causing your pain *and* your visions."

"Don't keep me in suspense, Doc. What is it?"

Edwards continued to study the screen. Sean could not make out the small text displayed there, but when the doctor spoke, it almost sounded as if he were reading it aloud. "Fifty years ago, when they perfected artificial gravity, medical officers discovered that prolonged exposure caused people to develop pressure-induced conditions, similar to what deep sea divers experienced on Earth when they were down too long. Today, the technology has been fine-tuned, and the disorder only occurs in a small percentage of people who live and work in space, but the symptoms are clear: manifests as pain in the joints, most commonly the shoulder. Can lead to hand tremors, claustrophobia, and ... drumroll, please ... delusions."

That's why his reflection still looks so odd in the monitor glass, Sean told himself.

Edwards went on, "We know what it is. We can treat it. Your world will be much less interesting very soon."

"So ... what? I just need to take a pill or something?"

"Years ago, they'd stick you in a hyperbaric chamber and let you decompress." The doctor snickered. It was a peculiar sound, distorted, hollow. "Today, all I have to do is give you an injection of Talavera."

Edwards turned away from the wall monitor and the blood left Sean's head. It had not been a trick of the glass. The doctor's face *had* changed. It was now a pale, lifeless masquerade, and just as in the cockpit, Sean could sense a presence behind that façade, appraising him.

"So, let's get you fixed up," it said, its speech a twisted impersonation of the doctor's distinctive voice.

Fear crawled through Sean, leaving an icy cold in its wake. Part of him was willing to believe this was all a mirage, a side effect of the condition Edwards had just described to him, but there was another voice in his head, the primal voice of instinct, of self preservation, and that voice was telling him this *thing* was not the doctor, and that he was now in very real danger.

Sean stood, fighting to maintain his composure. *This isn't real. This isn't real. This is*—"Great ... great. I've got some things I need to take care of right now, but I'll come back later and we can—"

"Sit down, Sean. This'll just take a second." The creature opened a drawer in the wall beneath the monitor and reached inside, bringing something out into the light.

The object was shaped like a gun, but it wasn't constructed of metal, or plastic, or even ceramic. It appeared to be bone and corrugated tubing, covered over by a thin, gray membrane, a living thing with a latticework of black veins that pulsed and breathed. It was tapered, ending in a wrinkled sphincter that rhythmically constricted, then relaxed. A pink snake slithered out through this opening, an obscene tongue crowned with a long, barbed thorn.

"What the hell is that?" Sean asked, unable to stop himself.

"Just relax," the doctor-thing told him. He acted so calm, as if Sean shouldn't find anything odd about the writhing thing in his hand. "You won't feel a thing."

It's a syringe, Sean told himself. That's all it is. Edwards isn't behaving strangely because he doesn't see what I see. He doesn't share my delusion. He doesn't—

He doesn't know you can see what it really is.

The creature took a menacing step forward and Sean dove for it without thinking. He grabbed its camouflaged face in his robotic fingers, latched onto its wrist with his human hand, kept its fleshy weapon and alien stinger at bay. He pushed it back, crashed it into the wall monitor, shattered its skull beneath the force of his hydraulic grip. A black, viscous fluid spilled from its torn mask, oozing out between Sean's metal fingers like used motor oil.

He released his hold and backed away, staring at the remains with disgust. The Edwards-thing hung there on the wall, arms at its side, suspended by the jagged shards of monitor glass that dug into its ruined cranium.

While the alien was now dead, there was still life left in its vein-laced tool. The object fell from its master's dead grasp and landed with a *clang* on the metal flooring below. Its pink tongue whipped and writhed, its barb searching for a suitable target. Sean couldn't tell if it was an animal or a device, but when he stomped on it, grinding it beneath the tread of his boot, it let loose a shrill scream, like the bleating of a dying lamb.

Sean caught sight of his prosthesis, of his metal fingers covered in dark fluid, and the smell of freshly sheared copper assailed his nostrils, gagging him. He edged away from the body, took a few wobbly backward steps, and bumped into the desk. Sean gripped it like a drowning man latching onto a floatation device, his heart running a marathon as he frantically tried to assess his situation. He could not

believe what had happened.

He'd just killed a man.

No, his mind corrected, *not a man*.

Sean shook his head at the absurdity of it all. He was sick, temporarily insane.

He forced himself to look at the weapon, to stretch out his human hand and actually feel its soft, slimy surface. It was like caressing an earthworm.

A pink tendril poked through the weapon's ruptured side.

Sean leapt back, pressed himself against the edge of the desk, and watched as a small squid-like animal crawled out onto the floor, a single black eye surrounded by writhing tentacles. He counted them, noting that there were seven, not eight or ten like the animals of Earth.

Seven.

Its cyclopean eye rolled from side to side, taking in its surroundings before coming to rest on Sean's shocked face.

It shot across the room, those odd-numbered tentacles propelling it, leaving behind a trail of mucus. Sean chased after it and slammed his foot down hard, tried to crush it like a roach, but it was too fast for him. It reached an air vent and slid through the grate into the ducts that created a catacomb throughout the ship.

Sean suddenly wished he could talk this over with Doc Edwards, that he could hear the man tell him this was still all in his head, and then it hit him like a cold spray:

The doc was going to inject that thing into my body.

When Sean walked in, Edwards had been studying the crew's medical records. He didn't find anything odd about that at the time, but now it appeared the alien may have been researching their bodies, trying to make these copies as perfect as possible, or perhaps searching for reasons to call crew members in for an injection.

If that squid had entered Sean's body, what would have happened to him?

There was still so much he didn't know.

Sean glanced back at the ruined tool on the floor. Their technology appeared to be constructed of living tissue. If that was the case, then the squid may have been another kind of device, designed to tap into a human brain. Perhaps it could download memories as easily as the doctor's visor relayed images, memories that could be given to the alien who would later pose as Sean.

The vision of a beast in Sean's clothing walking up to Carla flashed in his mind, and he shuddered.

An extra lab coat hung on the wall beside the monitor. Sean used it to wipe the dark, sticky fluid from his prosthesis. When he was done, he tossed it to the floor, his face twisted in a grimace of repulsion.

A section of frosted glass slid open, then closed tight behind him. Sean realized he had to make sure that the door could not be re-opened, that no one else could get in to find the doctor's body. Acting quickly, he turned and put his metallic fist through the control panel. He saw a bright flash, felt a powerful jolt course through his body, and was thrown across the room. He landed near the hatch, his prosthesis

smoking.

Jesus, that was stupid. Still dazed, Sean managed to roll onto his knees. He tried to reach out for one of the beds, but his metallic arm was now limp, useless, heavy. *Great. Just ... fucking brilliant.*

Sean used his left hand to pull himself up, held onto the foot of the bed until the room stopped spinning, then staggered into the thin corridor beyond the hatch.

* * * *

Sean ducked beneath a bulkhead, fear propelling him down the access tunnel. *Ambrosia's* lower levels were like a maze of mineshafts, dimly lit by the miles of fiber-optic cable that lined the walls. The ceilings were low, and the corridors just wide enough for a single technician or repair droid to slide through. He slowed as he approached each intersection, afraid of what might be lurking around the next bend.

He was close to the engines now; could hear their steady drone, feel their vibrations in the metal of the flooring, the walls, even his prosthesis. The mechanical limb dangled at his right side, its dead weight pulling on his shoulder, sending waves of pain to soak the shores of his reeling brain. He clinched his teeth and wedged his way through an open hatch into the ship's hold.

The cargo area was a very tall hallway. A steady drip of condensation from coolant pipes left bumpy, reddish-brown patches of corrosion across its walls and floor. Overhead, supplies hung like stalactites from the high ceiling, suspended by a complex system of pulleys, wires, and chains.

Sean wasn't surprised to find Sanderson among these cartons and tools. The quartermaster occasionally bunked here in the ship's bowels. And the fact that Sanderson was not really Sanderson didn't shock him either. If these aliens took over when they were off the ship, it was likely Sean and Carla were the only two human beings left.

What Sean did find astonishing, however, was the speed in which he was able to identify this new imposter. With Lee and the doctor, it had taken some time to see through whatever hologram or cloak they used to make their suits appear more realistic, but he had known this one at first sight.

"Hey there," the Sanderson-thing said.

Sean raised his left hand and gave a slight wave of acknowledgement.

The weapons locker was on the opposite wall, on the other side of the alien. Looking at its face, Sean wondered if he could get away with this. Glass eyes, rubber skin. How was he supposed to pretend he didn't notice? It was going to realize he could see.

"Feeling better?" it wanted to know.

"Fine." Sean strained to put a pleasant smile on his face. "Why?"

It shrugged. "Lee said you were sick."

His grin slipped a bit. "Word spreads fast on this ship."

The thing said nothing, and Sean found himself wondering what it was doing there beneath its disguise. He looked down, studied the clipboard it held in its hand. It had been taking inventory, checking to see what types of equipment were stored here in the hold. If you asked the *real* Sanderson where something was, he would reach out and find it without even looking.

"Must've been something I ate." Sean forced himself to meet the alien's eyes. "You know how bad that

re-hydrated pizza can be."

It stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, then gave a lame chuckle. "Yeah ... yeah, I do."

Sean nodded. *Sure you do.* "Anyway, I saw the doc and he gave me a shot, made me all better."

A hidden mechanism pulled at the mask's rubber lips, forming a satisfied smile that sent chills down Sean's spine.

Now it thinks that squid's inside me, he realized. *What was it supposed to do?*

"Glad to hear it." The Sanderson-thing turned away, going back about its business of cataloging human tools. "So what brings you down here?"

"Carla's missing a core sample. Just came to see if Orpheus still had them."

"Orpheus?"

"Yeah, the driller."

"Oh, right."

It didn't know the name. It really didn't know.

"Be my guest," the thing told him, pointing over its shoulder. "It's back there."

Sean took a deep breath and made steps toward the arms locker, keeping the creature in the corner of his eye as he passed by. Would it have one of those stingers with it? Perhaps some other, more lethal bit of alien technology? If it did, it made no move to use them.

When he reached the locker's keypad, Sean entered his personal code to open the doors. No alarm would go off, but if they decided to run a report, it would show that he was the last to have access. They appeared to still be learning their way around the ship and its systems, however, so he doubted they would take the time.

"What are you doing?" the Sanderson-thing asked, its synthetic voice curious but stern.

Sean stopped. He glanced at the rock climbing equipment on the wall beside him, finding a blue-handled pickaxe. He reached for it, yanked it from its perch, and whirled around—driving the spike through this forgery's ear and skewering the alien within. The thing dropped to its knees, teetered a moment, then collapsed, the pickaxe handle rising like a blue monolith from the oil slick that poured across its rubber face and onto the floor.

Two down, Sean thought.

He turned back to the weapons trove; found it loaded with pulse rifles, 9mm handguns, and six drawers of seismic survey charges. A small pushcart sat empty nearby. Sean pulled it to him, filled it in a hurry.

Carla was waiting.

* * * *

The cafeteria was small, dimly lit by tiny incandescent spots above each of its dozen tables. There had been a running joke among the crew that this lack of light was intentional, so they wouldn't have to see what they were eating. Each table was a gray metal mushroom, bolted to the floor and surrounded by swivel chairs.

Sean's gaze darted to the left.

Four doppelgangers in the room, two men and two women. Lee was among them. His face was now patched, that window to the squirming, flapping alien within closed up, but he still looked just as counterfeit as he had in the cockpit. The other man was meant to be Copeland, the women Fritz and Montgomery. Montgomery had been sitting with her back toward him, and Sean held the glimmer of hope that she might still be human ... until she turned her head. These things were much better at replicating hair than human skin. They sat around their table, huddled over uneaten lunches, conversing in whispers.

Sean's eyes flew back to the right, finding Carla. She sat next to the food dispensers, just a few short meters away. He swallowed before entering, the cold metal of a hidden 9mm pistol against his abdomen, providing him comfort.

The hatch closed behind him with the sound of a striking cobra, attracting the Lee-thing's attention.

"Doc fix you up?" it asked.

Sean offered it a polite nod, then walked over to join Carla, trying his best to act nonchalant. Her tray was empty and she nursed a large cup of *Ambrosia's* coffee as she read her technical journal.

"About time," she said as he sat down. "I thought you'd abandoned me." She looked him over and her eyes filled with concern. "You're still sweating. What did Edwards say?"

"I'm fine," he lied, wiping his brow with his left sleeve. It felt as if an angry swarm had landed on his right shoulder, each bee taking its turn at stinging him.

She lowered her book and her coffee, her voice uneasy. "Well, if you won't tell me the truth about that, at least tell me what the hell is going on with Lee."

"Have you looked at him?"

"Only for about the last twenty minutes."

Sean bobbed his head slightly in the creature's direction. "Look closer, the others too."

She started to turn around.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Don't be obvious about it."

Carla flashed a mixture of annoyance and bewilderment, then slowly turned her head, brushing a hand through her bright red locks, as if she were actually trying to see something in her hair.

Slick. Very slick.

When her eyes met his again they were still filled with confusion. "What?"

He bent over the table. No matter how quiet he tried to be, his voice still sounded as if it were echoing off the cafeteria's gray metallic walls. "You don't see it?"

She leaned in as well, speaking just as softly as he had been. "What is it that I'm supposed to see?"

"They're aliens."

Carla gaped at him. "They're *what?*"

"You heard me."

She laughed, but not for long. "You're serious."

He nodded, hoping his face conveyed just how grave the situation was.

"Jesus, Sean..." Her fingers found the medallion that hung from her neck, stroking Saint Albert's silver nose. "Have you told anyone else about this?"

"I told Doc Edwards, but he turned out to be one of *them*. He tried to inject me with this ... this squid-like creature that..." He saw the look of shocked skepticism in her eyes. "I know how wild and paranoid it all sounds, okay, I do. I didn't want to believe it was true either. And if it was just my vision, I wouldn't have believed it, but I've felt smooth, slimy skin; smelled the black fluid they use for blood. This is real, goddamn it!"

"Sean, I know you believe this, but just think for a moment..." She smothered Saint Albert with the palm of her hand. "If there are other intelligent beings out there somewhere, and someday we make that first contact, they'll be explorers, just like us. They might try to signal us, meet with us face to face, but they won't be hatching elaborate plans to take over a starship ... invaders from space is ancient science fiction nonsense, and you're smart enough to realize that."

"We're Columbus."

A tear welled in the corner of her eye and her lip quivered slightly. "You're not making any sense."

"We're sailing through the stars, explorers, just like Columbus. But to any species that actually lives out here, we *are* invaders from space. Maybe they're afraid, and this is their way of protecting—"

"We're a run-down geological survey ship from a distant mining company. What possible threat could we be to anyone?"

He glanced across the room. The group at the other table quietly plotted their next move, unconcerned. He told Carla, "Columbus was just looking for spices when he wiped out thousands of indigenous people on Earth. His crew carried foreign diseases that the natives had no immunity to."

Carla let go of her medallion, wiped her eye, and held up her hands. "Okay, fine, if this is real, why can't I see what you see?"

He rubbed his aching shoulder. "I don't know why. We've breathed the same canned air, eaten the same crap..."

Pressure-induced psychosis?

No! That was *bullshit*! There had to be another reason, something that was different about him, something that—

"My arm." Sean grabbed his burnt-out prosthesis and lifted it onto the table with a loud *clang*.

The worry in Carla's watery eyes seeped into her voice. "What's wrong with your arm?"

"The motors and circuits are all fried, but the neural interface must still be functioning. Maybe it makes me immune to their camouflage, lets me see what you can't."

She still looked doubtful. "Sean..."

He reached across the table for her hand, happy she did not jump or pull away. "Carla, if there's even a *chance* it could be true, you have to come with me now. I can get you real proof, proof you can see without any kind of enhancement."

"How are you going to do that?"

He thought of the Sanderson-thing lying down in the hold, of the dark serum that flowed from its wound. "I'll get you a blood sample. You can examine it, see that I'm telling the truth, maybe discover a way to beat them."

A spark in her eyes. She looked back at the other table. "Sean, how will you get—"

"Would you believe me then?" he interjected, trying not to sound desperate.

"Yes, of course I would." She squeezed his hand, telling him she loved and trusted him without uttering a single word.

Sean smiled, relieved. "Then let's go."

A shape dropped from the ceiling, landing with a wet splat. Sean leapt back, startled, and looked up to find an open vent. When he lowered his gaze, he saw the squid. It sat among the crumbs in Carla's tray, its seven tentacles whipping around, its single black eye focused intently upon her face.

Sean pushed the tray off the table, sent it crashing to the floor. The tiny invader tried to make another escape, but this time, his boot was faster. Its soft body ruptured with an audible *pop*, spraying rosy jelly.

Carla was standing now. She backed away, her hands across her mouth, a river of tears on her cheek. She stared at the tray, then looked up at Sean.

She saw it. She believed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sean saw the others standing, monsters playing human. He lifted his shirt and brought out the 9mm handgun, clicking off the safety as he did so. The report was as loud as a barrage from heavy artillery. Bullets sped through the air, tore into the Lee-thing's chest and exploded from its back, giving the tables behind it an oily shower. The animal fell backward, landed on the floor with a *thud*.

The Copeland alien bent down; attended to its fallen comrade. The Fritz and Montgomery-things froze in their tracks.

"I see you," Sean told them, shifting his eyes and the barrel of the gun between targets.

"Okay, you see us." It was the Fritz-thing, its mask expressionless, unreadable. It raised its hands. "We don't have anything."

"Where did you come from?" Sean wanted to know. "What the hell do you want from us?"

Silence. Blank, glassy stares.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT!"

The Montgomery-thing grabbed hold of Carla and pulled her back.

There was fear in Carla's eyes. She squirmed in the thing's grasp, her silver medallion swinging like a pendulum from her neck as she tried to wrestle free, tried to run to Sean's side, but the alien was clearly

too strong for her.

Sean was shaking. He held the gun in his left hand and tried to steady his aim, his eyes watering. The prosthesis felt like an anchor chained to his aching right shoulder, threatening to pull him off balance and send him to the floor. "I've got survey charges planted all over this ship. Let her go, let us walk out of here, or I'll blow it up."

More silence, except from Carla. She was still crying.

"I swear to God I'll do it," he told them. "Now let her go!"

"Please," the Fritz-thing pleaded, "put down the gun."

"You'd like that wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would." It motioned to the others. "We all would."

He took his eyes off the thing for just a moment, looking at Carla, his lip quivering. "Don't you hurt her."

"You're the only one hurting anyone, Sean," the Fritz-thing told him.

He snickered mirthlessly. "You try to put one of those squids in me, do God only knows what with the rest of the crew, and you say *I'm* the one hurting people?"

Carla spoke up through her tears, "Sean ... please, do what she says. Put down the gun."

"It's going to be okay, honey," he assured her, and in his mind, Sean saw how it would all unfold. He would kill these three, then hunt down the remaining aliens with Carla at his side. There would be at least another four, one for every crewmember. When they got back to the station, just the two of them, they'd tell the marshals what had happened, let *them* deal with the threat. For Sean and Carla, it would all be over. They could move on, could live in the future they had planned.

A metal tray struck Sean's left hand, sent a bolt of agony through his wrist and thumb, and caused him to drop the gun. He turned in time to see an alien form lunging at him. It was the Copeland-thing. Before he could act, it had him in a headlock.

Its strength was amazing.

Sean tried to break free, but the thing pushed him flat against the wall and put an elbow in his back, pinning him. Pain rang loudly throughout his body, and as the room grew dark, he heard Carla calling out his name.

* * * *

Sean, did you see that?" she asked, pointing toward some far-off rock formations.

He peered through his faceplate, trying to find something out-of-the-ordinary. The obsidian spires on the horizon had the appearance of long, bony fingers rising up from the loam. "See what?"

"I thought..." Carla shook her head in her helmet and snickered. "Nothing. Guess this place is starting to creep me out."

Sean gave his attention back to Orpheus, watched the rig climb the grated ramp into *Ambrosia's* hold, then waited for the bay doors to seal. When he was certain everything was secure, he grabbed Carla by the arm and pulled her onto the lift.

As the platform began its rise toward the airlock, Carla reached for the red button on the control box.

He grabbed the railing to steady himself as they came to an abrupt halt. "What's wrong?"

She had her back to him, her gloved hand still at the controls. "I know I've been playing twenty questions with you all day, but I need to ask you just one more. It's a simple one, only needs a yes or no response."

"Yes," Sean told her.

"You haven't heard the question."

"You want to know if I'll follow you wherever you decide to go, or you want me to marry you." He moved across the platform, put his hand on the shoulder of her environment suit. "Either way, the answer is yes."

Carla pressed the green button to continue their ascent, then spun around to hug him. Their faceplates collided with the *clink* of champagne glasses, and they laughed at their own awkwardness, holding tightly to one another as klaxons blared and the airlock re-pressurized.

* * * *

Sean opened his eyes and let them adjust to the flickering light. A fluorescent bulb in the overhead fixture was going out, adding to his disorientation. He lifted his head to look around.

Medlab.

He was lying on a patient bed in the Medlab.

Sean attempted to move his prosthesis, then remembered it had shorted out. When he tried to move his left arm, however, he found it paralyzed as well. He glanced down his torso and saw that he was tightly restrained.

The beds on either side of him were also occupied, bodies covered over in bloodstained plastic. Corpses.

He strained against his bonds, rocking and pulling at the straps until his shoulder cried for him to stop and lay still. He opened his mouth to call for help, but there was no one to yell out to.

The loud hiss of an opening hatch filled the chamber, followed by the *click-clack* of shoes on flooring, growing louder as they approached. "Sean? Sean, are you awake?"

Carla's voice.

He rose up as far as his restraints would allow. "Are you okay? What did they do to you?"

She stood over him, running her hand across his sweaty forehead and through his dampened hair. "I'm fine, Sean. They didn't do anything to me. I'm fine."

He relaxed. "Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

"Sean..."

"I just remembered something," he told her. "When we were out on the asteroid, you said you saw something. What did you see?"

Carla blinked, then shook her head. "Nothing. My mind was playing tricks on me, just like your mind's

been playing tricks on you."

"My mind?" He tried to rise up again. "No. You saw the squid with your own eyes. And on the asteroid ... you saw something there too. What did you see? Was it one of them? Was it—"

"*Sean!*" Carla swallowed. She looked close to tears. "Listen to me ... you've *killed* people. Doctor Edwards, Sanderson, Lee. They're dead."

He tilted his head to either side, looking at the covered bodies. The blood that streaked the translucent plastic was red. Human. He turned back to Carla, his mouth open and dry.

"I know you didn't mean to do it," she told him. "You're sick. We got into the doctor's office. I read his notes. Pressure-induced psychosis."

"No," Sean said, over and over again, "No."

Carla continued to wipe his forehead. "I know you'd never intentionally hurt anyone. That's why I have to ask ... where are the charges?"

"There aren't any aliens?" His voice was weak and childlike.

"No, Sean," she told him. "There are no aliens, no squids. You threw my tray to the floor and stomped on a packet of jelly. You scared the hell out of me. And then when you shot Lee..."

She put a hand to her eye and turned away.

The realization of what Carla was telling him, of what he had done, slowly sank into his brain. He'd killed his friends ... his family. Desolate tears flowed, blurring his vision. "Oh ... *God!*"

"Shh." She took the sleeve of her flight jacket and dried his eyes. "I can help you, cure you, make it so you won't see these things anymore, but first I need you to ... to tell me where you put the explosives."

"I'm so sorry," he cried.

"I know, baby." She sniffled and swallowed, her eyes glistening in the strobing light. "The medicine ... it's going to ... you're going to sleep for a while, so we really need to know where you hid those charges now, need to make sure we can deactivate them before they go off. I know you don't want anybody else to get hurt."

"I love you," he told her, fighting back new tears.

An odd look came over Carla's face, as if she were searching for the right response, and Sean wondered if the things he'd done were so horrible that all she could feel toward him now was disgust.

"Look, I love you too..." Her watery eyes skirted his as she spoke the words. She blinked a single drop out onto her cheek and it ran the length of her face to dangle from her chin.

Sean gave an understanding nod, fresh tears scorching his own cheeks as he retraced his steps for her. He told her where he placed each and every charge, pausing several times to apologize for what he had done, knowing that no apology, no matter how sincere, would ever be enough to repair the damage.

When she had all the locations, Carla leaned in to kiss him on the forehead. "Now I can give you what you need to get well."

Sean felt a sting, and as the needle slid inside his vein, he noticed something strange.

He didn't see a Saint Albert's medallion around her neck.

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I Can't Look at the City

by Jim Stewart

* * * *

Jim Stewart is a published poet who is psyched to have his first professional genre publication in *Apex Digest*. Jim lives in Brooklyn and teaches algebra in the Bronx. He blogs about science fiction and writing at jimnstewart.blogspot.com.

* * * *

Deacon Cleopatra LaVey over at the Barren Fairways camp said I could find Archbishop Doctor Octopus on the mall of the University of New Mexico campus. I liked what had become of it since I left Albuquerque and went up to Las Vegas, NM to join the Return to Humans Front Council there. That was in 2030—four years ago—and since then, with most of the classrooms empty due to the depression and the anti-academic influence of the RHF, the mall was given over to merchants and craftspeople. Booths of pottery, fruits and vegetables, hash-pipes, guitars and hand-stitched clothes stretched from Mesa Vista Hall to Mitchell Hall and up Yale Mall, too.

I finally found him, set up on a cheap card table by the Center of the Universe, a sculpture of six concrete hallways extending twenty feet north, south, east, west, up and down into the ground from a central point. I didn't know him, but I knew him by his merchandise immediately. He must have picked the Center of the Universe for its symmetry, but the ugly concrete tubes of the structure did no justice to his sculptures of the ziggurats on the planet Babylon.

He looked as out of place at a hip open-air market as I would have in a government laboratory. He wore faded but neatly cut blue jeans, a polo shirt with horizontal stripes, and hair long but neatly combed, not matted and unwashed as was the fashion. Between the unbleached cotton, hemp fiber muumuus and peasant dresses he was like a visitor from a different century.

I walked over and picked up one of the small, skyscraper-like sculptures on the table and ran my fingers in wonder over its intricate webwork of windows and striations.

"They're pretty accurate," I said by way of starting up a conversation.

"Sort of," he said, seeming uncomfortable with the praise. "It doesn't really matter if they are or not."

"Most people would recognize it, anyway," I answered.

Anyone who had been alive in the early twenties would recognize the ziggurats. The planet of Babylon with its alien towers was discovered around Alpha Centauri when I was twelve. I was in math class, I remember, when they stopped everything to show us the incredible pictures coming back from the Peltier robot probe. The NASA feeds of the weird, weightlessly sturdy ziggurats rose to the probe's zoom lens from the planet's mists, incontrovertible proof of civilization on a planet five light-years away from earth. Three days after the discovery, the probe was taken out by an orbital collision, ending all hope of communication with the inhabitants of the planet. A year later, the spectacular collapse of the Kiev Round of GATT ended all plans for a joint return mission.

"Whatever," he said. "It's really the process that matters. There's no need to imitate them perfectly."

"What's the process?" I asked.

"When I do mescaline I see the patterns. I sculpt them when I'm coming down."

"You must be Archbishop Doctor Octopus, then. I live at the Las Vegas Council. I came down here because I saw one of your sculptures, and people said I could find you here. I'm Robby."

In the outdoor councils, the ridiculous speedfreak naming rituals of those who remained in the city hadn't caught on so much.

He became a little friendlier, seeming flattered that someone had actually traveled to see his work. "Just call me Bishop. Are you interested in the ziggurats, then?"

He appeared to be loosening up. His nervousness about the subject was not unjustified. The Return to Humans Front had started getting a big following in the late twenties. Among their tenets was that all exploration—even research—was inherently patriarchal, penetrative and exploitative.

"Just out of speculation and fantasy," I said. "I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

"Wouldn't that opinion get you in trouble with the Council up in Las Vegas?"

"We're not Brookline," I said, recalling the fanatics in Massachusetts who had broken into research scientists' houses and harassed their families. "Hell, lots of our people used to work in the labs before they dropped out. We like to speculate about stuff. I don't think there's anything wrong with imagination. Actually, I write Babylonian epic poems. Sort of based on what I imagine their culture being like. I've had a few published, under the name Robby the Robot."

"Oh, yeah," he said, his face lighting up. "You wrote 'Kalama Makes the Sun' and 'House of the Moons,' right? Those were cool. I read them in Mother Goose Anton Wilson's 'zine."

"*The Full Moon Dollar Rag*," I said. "She's so cool. She's given a lot of us a chance in publishing we wouldn't have had these days. Y'know, I'm really interested in what you're doing here. What do you say we go smoke a bowl somewhere?"

* * * *

Ernie's Cafe was set up on the location of a famous coffee shop in the late twentieth century and tried to imitate the ambience of that time. There were posters up of obscure rock groups like The Cramps and Steel Pole Bath tub, and the employees all wore oversized t-shirts and denim shorts. The place operated rather openly without a hash license, I was told, so they must have been either paying someone off, or not worth the political trouble of busting.

"So," said Bishop, fine blue smoke passing out with his words, "do you distribute art or something?"

I took a hit off my tube from the double hookah and shook my head.

"No," I exhaled. "Nothing like that, but I could see that happening in the long run if we work together."

"What do you mean?"

"You read 'House of the Moons?' You know how Kalanai travels across the river of night and visits the moons, and each of the different moons gives him something to take back to the Bandi?"

The Bandi were what I fancied the Babylonians calling their species.

"Yeah, something like a book with laws, and the secret of fire, and that drug..."

"The six secrets are Law, the secret of civilized living; Fire, the secret of warmth; Ceremony, the secret of uniting and dividing; Erotica, the secret of right love; Architecture, the art of building towers for shelter;

and the Magansa root, which gives visions of how to interpret and use the rules of the other secrets. Obviously, I had the Mayan mushroom ceremonies in mind, or the Native American peyote rites, in which they were granted visions that gave them the patterns of living or the patterns of woven rugs. The thing is, when I wrote that, I didn't know what you were doing. When someone said you were making towers from mescaline visions, it totally blew my mind because it is exactly what I saw the Bandi as doing."

He looked at me as he sipped some coffee. To my dismay, he didn't seem nearly as excited about the whole thing as I was. In fact, he seemed rather upset by my interest in his method.

"So what did you have in mind, then?" he asked.

My dreams of finding a kindred spirit began to vanish before my eyes.

"We could collaborate," I said. "You could show me your method, help me to see the visions..."

"My method is a secret," he said, almost hostile. "I can't show anyone."

Immediately, I felt like a total asshole. No wonder he was unreceptive. If he went around showing everyone how to make the sculptures, his work wouldn't be unique anymore. It would ruin his business.

"No, I mean, I don't want to know how to make them. I'm terrible with my hands. But I believe you're really tapped into some kind of a magic power line there, maybe the same one as the builders on Babylon. If I could see what you can, then I could write on the same wavelength. I guess that sounds weird, but I thought you'd understand."

He shook his head.

"No, I understand," he said, setting down the pipe tube. "But you overestimate me. I'm just an artist. I don't really believe in all that tribal magic you guys do out in the wild Councils. I don't think I could help much. Sorry."

"Hey, well that doesn't really matter much," I said, wanting to keep him around longer. "Say, maybe instead I could just write something about what you do in the *Dollar Rag*. Just a little interview or something. I know MG would publish it and it would be good business for you."

"Yeah, that would be cool, I guess."

"So what do you really think the tower builders are?" I said.

"Did the interview start already? I think I'm getting a little too stoned to want to say anything that'll be in print."

"That's okay," I said. The hash was really hitting me, too. "I can't find my pencil."

We both started laughing, and coffee came painfully out of my nose, only making us laugh harder.

"Why don't we just do the interviewing tomorrow," I said. "Anything now is off the record."

"Well, listen then," he said, suddenly getting serious, "because anything I tell you about the tower builders tomorrow is just going to be the kind of bullshit that makes Councilpeople happy, anyway. The thing is, the towers are the product of a very scientifically advanced race. There's no psychedelic ritual or any visions or any creative process at all. Actually, there's only one tower."

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying to grasp the weird thread he was on. "There's thousands of them."

Everyone saw those pictures."

"No, man. There's thousands in physical space. But in the ideal, there's only one tower."

"Oh," I nodded contentedly, because I like to get philosophical when I'm high. "You're talking Aristotle. There is an ideal form of everything, and everything we see is just a version of its form. So there's an ideal form of a tower?"

"I've never read Aristotle. I'm a physics major. I mean all the towers are based on the same picture in phase space. I know what it looks like, too, or at least kind of." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a piece of paper folded four ways. It had been printed by an old-fashioned laser printer, and it contained a square filled with a myriad of looping lines and dark areas lightened by Swiss cheese-like holes. To some degree, it was reminiscent of a picture made with the old child's toy, Spirograph. I looked at it in confusion for a moment.

"This doesn't look like a tower to me," I said, finally.

"It's a cross section," he said, as if trying to explain a difficult concept to a child. "See, that square contains all the shapes in the towers. But you have to magnify it in some places. See, it's a 2.45 dimensional fractal shape."

"Yes," I said, "that definitely clears everything up."

"Sorry. It's hard to explain, especially when I'm high. What matters is that I don't make anything. It gets made." Suddenly he shook his head. "Let's not talk about that for a while."

At first I thought he had maybe done too many drugs and lost it, but I've known some guys like that and he didn't act that way. But then I remembered something I was taught by a grizzled veteran exposé journalist at an underground paper. "Sometimes," the old vet had said, "someone has something that they can't tell anyone, but they just have to tell someone. They'll tell you enough that you just have to wonder, then back off." For some reason, I knew Bishop had what he thought was a huge secret he wanted to tell me.

"Okay, let's not talk about that," I said, putting the cryptic piece of paper down. I remembered the vet's advice about getting the secret out: first, don't push them. They will tell you eventually, but not if they're scared. Instead, be friends.

"Do you remember," I asked, hoping I wasn't pushing, "when they first found the towers, where you were?" It was a cocktail-party question, the same question earlier generations must have asked about the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Kennedy assassination.

"Sure," he said. "I was in high school, junior year, Biology II. Right away I wanted to be a scientist. From that day, all I thought about was studying another planet. I studied physics in college—graduated in three and a half years from a good school. I got accepted to UC Berkeley as a grad student. Everything went to shit from there, of course.

"I had to leave California in '28 because of the secession riots. By then, though, the depression was going strong, so I couldn't get a job anywhere, and scholarship money had all dried up. I went from place to place, college town to college town, but it was the same everywhere. No scholarship money, no research grants, no incoming undergraduates to teach because of the fucki—because of the RHF, no work-study jobs, no jobs anyway. I lived in my car from March to June of '31. Lots of other times I was on the couch tour.

"Then I got a position with the physics department at UNM, and it looked okay for a little while, but it's the same old thing. The department's practically shut down. What's a department without students or research grants? So here I am, stuck in the middle of fucking nowhere, selling toy souvenirs on a card table."

It was a sad story, but who didn't have one like it in the last few years? Since the global economy drowned in the greed of the multinationals and nation-states at Kiev, everyone's life story was a sequence of lost jobs, lost homes, broken or delayed plans, and general poverty. *Time's* Man of the Year in 2033 was a panhandler, reviving the century-old refrain of "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" It was that very hopelessness that had driven so many of my generation, me included, to renounce jobs and school and everything and run off into the mountains with the Return to Humans Front to tend organic carrot and potato and hemp farms. Up there, everyone had food and work, if hard work, and a place to sleep. I didn't always agree with the politics, but it was an alternative, at least.

"Remember how it was supposed to be?" said Bishop. "We had found aliens, and they said we would go off into space and make friends with these aliens, and they'd teach us to go to all the other planets, and they'd be all smart and wise and we wouldn't have any more poverty or wars or stupid nationalist bullshit and the universe would be all perfect and beautiful. I really believed that shit, you know? I really thought I'd be the one to make the starships that would go to Alpha Centauri and meet the aliens and go to other worlds and everything. I think everyone believed it once. Just ... I was a sucker longer than most people. Now it's almost fifteen years later and what do we have? Three days worth of optical fucking photographs taken by Peltier that are sitting around libraries and research departments gathering dust. Shit-ass nothing on a stupid little shit hole planet that we're all going to die on is what we have."

"But you still believe in the Builders," I said. "They'll still be there. That's why you still make the towers."

He laughed bitterly.

"The great and mighty and wise Builders, yes. The Builders will save us from ourselves. Do you believe in them?"

I didn't answer right away, while I dredged up a truth I had hidden from myself.

"Yeah, I believe in them. I believe they can't possibly be as fucked up as we are. I really think that anyone who can build structures so beautiful must be more in tune with the universe than we are. They must be seeing something we aren't. Maybe if we could talk to them, or, well, something. I don't know."

"Maybe you should see what they look like first. You might have a different opinion."

"Who knows what they look like?"

"I do," said Bishop. "Come on."

We paid our tab and walked down to Central. He led me over to the west end of campus, where the physical sciences and engineering had been taught. In contrast to the bricks of the mall and earth-toned stucco of the liberal arts buildings, the 1950's-era west half was square, concrete and modernist-looking. The sign in front of the door he led me to said "Reggener Hall, Physics & Astronomy." There was no structure behind it, but that was because it led underground. The door was held closed by a chain locked with a padlock, and Bishop brought out a key and unlocked it.

"It's dark," he said, and it was. I had to feel my way down the stairs with the handrail, even though it was only early evening outside.

"Can't get them to put new fluorescent bulbs up there," he explained. "I'm lucky I can keep my own lab lit. To the left in here."

I could tell the room had once been used for freshman lab classes from the rows of cracked tables and the chalkboard. Two of the light strips in the back of the room came on, revealing what I assumed was Bishop's workspace. The ziggurat sculptures were there, but nothing that looked like carving tools. In fact, none of the sculptures gave any appearance of being carved. Instead, they sat in glass tanks of various sizes, like vertical ships-in-a-bottle, on top of some kind of white sand. Some of the towers were much shorter than anything he was selling, as little as a few inches tall.

On another table sat a computer, which was drawing images on its screen like the one on the paper Bishop had showed me earlier. To its side were various kinds of electrical equipment whose purpose I couldn't understand and what I thought might have been an oscilloscope.

"Is this where you work?" I asked.

"Not anymore," he said, lighting a gas lamp. "I no longer need to."

He opened a deep desk drawer and began pulling out its contents, which were impressive. It contained ziggurat photographs that most people would recognize from the newsfeeds, but there were also others that they wouldn't. It had been consistently rumored that the Peltier probe had taken much closer and more detailed pictures than those that were released to the public and that these had been classified. Having studied almost all of the publicly available pictures, I could tell immediately that I was looking at classified ones.

"Bet you always wanted to see those," he said. "Look at this one. Taken from only ten kilometers up, sent back just seconds before the probe died. Ten to one resolution. So tell me, what's wrong with this picture?"

The photograph was of the view down between two very close ziggurats. It was like the view a person would get if they had fallen off of a tower and looked down while falling. In this view it was clear that the towers were laid out in blocked patterns, almost like skyscrapers in a city, with flat ground at the bottom between the two. Up close, the detail of the tower windows was even more incredible; they covered the sides in asymmetrical filigree, and each window had smaller supports inside like a cathedral window. There was no obvious logic or pattern to the layout of the windows, except that it seemed so natural and beautiful.

But that was not what was shocking about the images. I set the picture down.

"It's like there's nobody there," I said uneasily. "If you saw New York from this height, you would see glass in the panes, cars on the street, people through the windows. You can see through this window and there is nothing in there except blank stone or whatever it is. It's like someone built a whole city and never moved in. Or moved away. Are they extinct? Is that why the pictures were classified?"

"That's what they thought at first," said Bishop, opening another drawer. "But that's not right, because even then you would see artifacts, machines, evidence of wars or damage to the cities, but there isn't any of that. It's even more obvious in some of the other pictures. Actually, you were closer to right the first time. The cities were built, but never moved into. At least not yet."

"But what..." I sputtered. I didn't even know what to start asking. "What do you mean not yet? Is someone there or not? I thought you said you had seen the Builders."

"No, no," he said, pulling out another picture. "Our resolution isn't good enough to see them. I said I

knew what they looked like. Here you go."

The picture he put down was black and white and fuzzy. It contained four featureless buglike things with maybe four or five legs or arms, each on an all black background.

"Electron microscope plate," he explained. "The bugs are very small."

"Bugs? The city was built by microscopic bugs? How do you know this? How did you get these pictures?"

"Not real bugs," he answered. "Machines. Microscopic machines, about twenty angstroms across. Those aren't them, they're my copies. I'm almost sure I got it right, though, because the towers they build come out exactly the same, scalable of course. Given more materials and air they'd make bigger ones, but they stop when they run out of calcium, which is what they build with. They need a little iron, too; just a few atoms each, but the more iron there is, the faster they build. There's a lot of calcium and iron on Babylon. That's how the towers are so big."

"I have a hard time believing this," I said. "How does a microscopic machine know how to build a whole skyscraper? Where's the program running them? How do they work together?"

"Do you know what the most massive piece of construction on earth is?" he asked.

"The Yamaguchi building, I guess. Or, well, maybe the Great Wall of China is more massive. I'm not sure."

"None of those. It's off the coast of Australia, and it's bigger than the Great Wall and all of Tokyo put together. It's made of this stuff."

"Oh, yeah," I said, looking at the piece of coral he was showing me.

"It was made by trillions of microorganisms. Look at the intricate design of that coral, and tell me which one of the microorganisms had the plan to make it. Or where their controller was. Central planning is just a myth of ours; in fact, most of life doesn't work that way at all. The bugs that made the ziggurats work in a very similar way to the microorganisms that made that coral. They take an atom here, an atom there, and put together a copy of themselves. They make maybe ten of these before they poop out. Then each copy repeats the process. Each copy is attached to its creator. Because the number of bugs increases exponentially, their growth can be explosive if there is enough material.

"The bugs are mostly made of calcium. When they die, their bodies are all stuck together, and they form a substance not unlike cement. When the ziggurat starts to grow, the bugs further up take apart the bodies of bugs below and more bugs below make replacements. It's fairly complicated, but that's how they can sort of 'hand up' material on the ground to the top of a six-hundred-foot ziggurat."

"Okay," I said. "Assuming that's true, how does that come out as a big tower? You said that the design is not planned centrally, but you knew what you wanted a tower to look like at first."

"That was a result of some clever math on my part. It is a continuation of chaos math research from the 1980s, which allowed someone to take a picture of, say, a fern leaf, and create the formula that would plot points that would make that picture. In this case, the cross section of a ziggurat I showed you earlier was the picture I was working from. A simple nonlinear equation draws that picture, and the same formula governs how the bugs stick together."

"But if the ziggurats were built by tiny machines," I said, "then who built the machines? You said there was nobody living there."

"Say you were going to colonize a planet, and it will take you a long time to get there. When you do, you aren't only going to need supplies like food; you're going to need air to breathe and places to live in. You can't just get the planet ready when you get there; you would run out of supplies and die first. Wouldn't it be easier if the planet were all ready for you when you got there?"

"Some NASA researchers around the turn of the century were thinking the same thing. Nanotech was just catching on, then. A Dr. Nguyen at Stennis Space Center visualized some types of nanos that could be dropped on a planet long before we got there. They would build structures on the planet that we could use and, by working through chemical reactions, change the atmospheric composition to one we could breathe."

"Come on," I interrupted. "How could some small thing like that change the atmosphere of a whole planet?"

"Already has. In fact, the composition of the ocean has been completely altered by life-forms that take the calcium out of it and die, depositing it on the ocean floor. And the earth's atmosphere has enough oxygen for us to breathe only because of vegetable life, a lot of which is microscopic. Since the industrial revolution, we've been making a few changes of our own. Why else are you guys at RHF trying to shut down all the CO₂-emitting factories? Remember 'Don't make Earth into Venus?' You of all people should believe in that possibility.

"Anyway, the project lost funding even before the RHF could freak out about it, because even the best machines we could make would take tens of thousands of years to do any good, and NASA just wasn't that farsighted. But when we were trying to explain what we were seeing on Babylon, someone dragged out Dr. Nguyen's research, and we knew right away what was going on. Since we had the technology, duplicating the machines just seemed like the logical next step. So I did it.

"Ten years ago I could've gotten a Nobel Prize. Right now, I can't tell anyone because—"

"Because people would shut you down," I interrupted. "And not just because of the mood right now. Have you thought about how dangerous what you're doing is? What if your 'bugs' got loose and started building ziggurats on the mall, or on the Sandia limestone? Cement, plaster, drywall, almost everything in the city is made out of calcium, and there's plenty of iron in the steel bars and girders. The bugs would reproduce like crazy. They would be uncontrollable, and eventually would completely change the planet worse than all the coal factories and incinerators all over the world put together."

I expected for him to argue with me, but instead he just sat down and shook his head.

"Those sculptures sure are popular. I've sold them to galleries in New York and L.A. and five or six other cities. They're all over the place."

"Holy shit," I said. "Holy shit, they already did get out. You not only let them out, but you distributed them to the biggest cities in the country. You fucking did it *on purpose!*"

Weakly, he said, "I didn't think about..."

"Yes you did. You made earth into the next Babylon, and I know why, too, because you want them to come here too, don't you? You want them to come here and fix everything all perfect like aliens can. The fucking human race wasn't good enough for you, so you gave the damn planet to another species."

"By the time it happens," he said, "We'll have fucked up the planet so we couldn't live on it anyway. To tell you the truth, it really didn't occur to me at first what I was doing. But I must have wanted to do this, subconsciously, because even when I did see the implications, I didn't stop, I just kept on selling them.

Then I started trying to sell them all over the country. There's just something so pure about it. The ziggurats really obey a universal law. Math works the same everywhere, all the time, and there's nothing anyone can do to fuck with it, you understand? This form, the form the ziggurats take, existed when Christ was born, it existed when Australopithecus came out of the trees, it existed when the universe was nothing but quarks and radiation. It's more like I'm just revealing it."

"How long will it take?" I asked, slumping hopelessly into a chair.

"Thousands of years, for the process to complete. Of course, people will start noticing problems a lot sooner. Like you said, most of the construction in our cities is made of iron and calcium. The bugs will start reorganizing that right away. Buildings and bridges might start collapsing as soon as a decade from now, or it might take a century, I don't really know."

"So then why did you tell me? I can tell everyone now and people will figure out a way to stop it."

"You could certainly do that," he said, "if you want to try. It sounds like something a lunatic would say, to me. Of course, eventually everyone will realize you were right, but you might be dead by then. And anyway, people will figure out what's happening probably within a century or so. There might be a way to stop them, too, for all I know. I can't think of any way, but that doesn't mean there isn't one. Certainly there are ways to slow them down.

"Of course, I could also be a lunatic who carves stone pretty well that just made this whole thing up. Then you'd look like a real dumb shit, wouldn't you? I mean, what reason do you really have to think I was telling the truth?"

"Are you?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Good night, I'm really tired and I have to go to bed."

* * * *

I haven't left Albuquerque yet, but I just don't know what to do. I've been walking around breaking off little pieces of cement, but I don't really know what I'm looking for. I don't know if I'm going to try to publish this account of what I saw yet, or keep it around to explain things if what Bishop said starts happening, so you may be reading this next month, or in a hundred years.

I don't know if whoever reads this has yet seen evidence of what Bishop was talking about. If so, then now you know why. If not, then maybe someone with scientific background could tell me if it could be true, because I'm having a hard time looking at the city.

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PostFlesh

by Paul Jessup

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Paul Jessup has been published in many magazines, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *Farrago's Wainscoat*, *Post Scripts*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Pseudopod*, and more. In 2009, PS Publishing will publish his collection of short stories titled *Glass Coffin Girls* as part of the PS Showcase series.

* * * *

1. Captain Found Us a Ghost World.

Shadrim. It was a grave of space, a planet of bones. It was the endless all and everything. Shadrim. When we discovered it, we found it full of ruins and corpses. Shadrim. When it discovered us, it was thinking. Shadrim. It had sepulchral thoughts. Thoughts that only the dead could or would want to think. Filtering through the entire planet.

When we found it we were lost. It sent out beacons, psychic signals across the radio waves. Old Gray Mack thought it was perverse. We all laughed at his thoughts. Mack could fly the darkness like no one else. But he didn't know anything about the human mind—the world between the waves.

When we landed we saw the big bronze skull city-states; we saw the machines that they had left behind. Large spider beasts. Evolved, transfigured. Machines with alien skin stuck to the grindbones, scuttling through those ruins and making the corpses dance. First time we saw that sight we wanted to leave. Big alien bones with zombie skin still stuck on them, prancing around in nightmare waltzes. We ran like hell away from them. They didn't follow. They stayed behind, dancing and staring with ghost eyes.

When we got back to the ship it was dead. Buried in the ground with a grave on top. All that was left was ash and skeleton. A breathing thing that had sustained us now gone and deceased. Like manhome itself.

Carit wept, and Sunday Jay said a prayer in Pascal. It was the way Sunday Jay talked to the onboard systems. Sure, it was an old language, but we are an old people, wandering the restless void of space and searching for ourselves in the reflection of the cosmos.

The next day we found that dog that did our ship in. Giant machine thing that kept piecing itself together out of the ruins of the world around us. He was a sea of corpses and machinery. He looked at us with alien eyes, and Good Day just smiled at him and offered him a smoke.

Carit cursed it. Claimed it killed the ship and kept us trapped here. We couldn't look at that alien thing, covered in ship blood and the strings of organic machinery. It kept trying to talk to us, talk to us over the radio sounds of the dead. It was so lonely.

But we couldn't. Not now. Even though it promised us so much. Faster than light travel. Becoming transhuman. Existing beyond the realm of mortality. We couldn't let it know how we felt. How it hurt us and stranded us in the depth of space. The captain even went out and got the zox box and shocked it around. This machine seemed to love it. It squealed with delight and then asked us if we had eaten anything yet for dinner.

Good Day stepped forward and told it we were all starving. The creature had a few nanokin whip us up some good stuff. It tasted all right for alien metal food. And we thought, *this giant postflesh spacecat couldn't be all that bad*. Sure he killed our ship, but that space trawler was dying anyway, maybe it was

a mercy killing.

Later that night we slept under the frozen purple light of fourteen distant suns. They were moon-sized in the distance, spread across the sky and shouting out the light of the stars. The pull of this world was dizzying and complex; it weaved through the orbits of so many planets and suns. It was like a drunk fractal nightmare of astronomical physics.

When we dreamed, we dreamed in ghost voices. We dreamed of ghost algebra in a ghost planet. This world, it spoke in our sleep and screamed in our waking hours through the radio towers broadcasting around us. The bones are restless, dancing. When the last hour of sleep washed away, we were greeted with the beating of techno drums and the dancing of the alien corpses.

And this time, they sang.

* * * *

2. We Discuss Ghost Dreams

Spillgal was the first to do it. She just sat up like a white cat with black eyes, stretched out her tail and started talking. Her voice meandered at first, wandering over our heads. But then we realized what she was talking about, and we leaned in and listened.

Even that big A.I., that giant shipkiller corpse monster, it bent the massive head down, dripping with columns and garbage and rotting alien flesh, and listened. We had to filter out the screams of the dead in order to hear her properly.

Her voice was like static, noise in the broadcast of Shadrim. "I dreamt of endless space, and vacuum tubes. I dreamt of a doll without eyes and a lady without teeth. I dreamt that I licked the feet of secrets, and they gave me bones to pay for a ship. I think I dreamed memories, but I can't be sure. So many voices, lost in my head. Even as I am awake now, I am almost certain I am still dreaming."

We talked about her dream for a bit, discussing its contents but coming to no conclusion. Whisper Kid went next, talking about smoke and a guy named Kagaratz. Each of us went in turn, and each dream was discussed but without any answers. Finally, at the end, the captain sat up and proclaimed that he would build us a new space ship, one to take us home.

The dead aliens scuttled away screaming. Our dreams were a gift. They felt insulted that the captain would not stay and experience more of them. The giant machine that was our host ticked his head to the side and sighed, getting the nanokin to make us a meal of tin and scrapskin. It tasted worse than it looked, but we ate it.

After that, we were less welcome on the planet of the dead. Our host kept ignoring us, and the broadcast screams of the lost world got so loud we became just static and noise in the background. It was hard to think like that, but we had to. It was a learning process, a way of filtering ourselves out from the void that tried to swallow us.

* * * *

3. Skullchic Finds Material

We scavenged the world for parts and pieces, but of course we couldn't go too far. There were a lot of alien machines, but we couldn't make sense out of any of it. And our host wasn't talking to us anymore. He kept towering over us, watching and recording us with thousands of nanocams. We could seem them scuttle about his massive body like living dust.

And the corpses—they were mad. They hung out on the edge of our vision, running through the ruined city and howling in a dead tongue, their voices projected just barely above that loud broadcast of ghost voices and ghost memories.

And we starved. Hunger laced through our veins, spilling over into our thoughts. All we dwelled on was the memory of food. Of great things like pancakes and waffles and syrup and strawberries and tomatoes. No vegetation was on this planet, nor any living meat we could kill and fry up.

In the hour of our greatest hunger, Skullgirl found some parts. At first we weren't sure what she had—it looked like some skeleton from an alien body with a glowing orange heart. But metallic and carved with cold foreign pictographs.

The captain knew what it was, knew what to do with it.

He kissed her in joy and we all screamed. The voices got louder, and that A.I. started to crumble into smaller pieces around us. We fitted each part in and assembled it right and proper. The captain got Old Grey Mack to study the controls, and then to figure out a way for us to interface with it.

Old Grey Mack was great at that sort of thing. He was a xenoarcheologist, a regular alien retrofitter. He could sew these things into the right pieces of his mind, find out exactly how their propulsion system differed from our ion drives. He was used to this sort of thing—rearranging his mind into alien shapes and geometry.

Soon we had a working model up and running. Time for a test drive and then off to freedom.

* * * *

4. We Gasp, We Sigh, We Say Goodbye

It was a rough-looking space vessel, made from the alien boneparts we found and some old stuff from our ship, strapped on so that Old Grey Mack could pilot it without a problem. More like a shambling half-dead animal than a cruiser, it spun around the atmosphere and screamed as it flew in chaotic messy lines. Our host watched, his body slinking into sludge parts, the air filtered with his nanodust. He tried to get the alien corpses to dance a goodbye dance, but he could not get them to come near us.

On the moment of the test departure, those dancing corpses came out again, screaming and running toward us. Mack was flying low in the sky, looking down. The machine worked, leaving trails of blue light behind it in whirling vapors. Mack smiled and gave us the thumbs up to say that everything was okay. He flew a little lower, getting ready to find some open ground to land on.

Our host collapsed into thousands of tiny bodies, trying to restrain the living dead's nanosystems. They surged and came forward, crying out and scurrying across the floors of the world with many thin and angular limbs. Like undead spiders with big bulging eyes and tiny puckered lips.

The planet shook; the radio systems picked up. It was all one voice now: the voice of Shadrim, that zombie planet that wanted us to stay and be assimilated into its nightmarish ecosystem. The voice of the planet spoke in strange tongues, and the nanomachines obeyed. We tried to get Mack to land, to drop down something we could cling onto and escape. He only hovered low, a look of shock and horror on his face.

The dust of the world poured into us. Living things, tiny A.I., pieces of that host that had kept us here for so long. Mack just circled about and watched as we were disassembled, our parts and pieces connected to the ruins now. They strung up our bodies like art, our intestines and bones collected with bacterial computers and nanomachines that somehow preserved us and made us do what the world told us to do.

In our mind we could hear it all the time. The thought running through our veins like the whispers of space. Commanding us. Telling us what to do. Our we had gotten bigger, engulfed us. We had one mind now, the mind of the world. The mind of the ghost planet. It sung in our skin, set our nerves on fire.

And now we danced. We danced, and our voices broadcast from those old radio waves. This was the radio song, the voice of planet Shadrim. This was us and who we were. Mack sped off, and we would have, too. But now we were dancing, our corpseskin cold. Soon we would transcend. Transcend and be like our host, postflesh.

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Covenant

by Lavie Tidhar

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Lavie Tidhar writes weird fiction. He grew up on a kibbutz in Israel and can say “the dictatorship of the proletariat” without blinking. He also has lived in South Africa, the UK, and the remote islands of Vanuatu. His short stories have appeared in *Sci Fiction*, *Salon Fatastique*, *The Del Rey Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Best New Fantasy 2*, *Horror: The Best of the Year 2007*, and many others. Lave's website is www.lavietidhar.co.uk.

* * * *

"And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Giants, which come of the Nephilim: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight."

In the Desert, 13:33

Ya'el had been gone for the length of nearly fifteen cigarettes and Miriam was getting worried. No—it was fifteen cigarettes now, exactly. Her breathing had been getting short for the past few hours, and she felt the familiar feeling of helplessness that always combined with that strange feeling of calm when blood flowed slower. With shaking hands—she had really left it too long again—she adjusted the yarmulke on her bald head, feeling the little beast resist as it moved. The tingling sensation in her scalp was not a good thing; it meant the yarmulke was getting hungry, was beginning to sink feelers deeper into her head.

As always when she had been gone too long without smoking, hallucinations started to occlude her vision; impossibly tall creatures with countenances of pure light seemed to walk around her, through her, passing with an inhuman grace through shining streets that had never existed, through broad avenues and past gigantic buildings that never were.

She abandoned the struggle with the yarmulke and with careful, slow movements unwrapped the small wooden box and took out a cigarette. With a feeling of distaste she had never been able to be rid of, she put the grey, organic tube in her mouth and lit it, throwing the match on the sand as soon as the flame touched the fungal material.

Where was Ya'el?

The smoke poured into her body; in an instant, the alien feeling at the top of her head disappeared and her breath returned. She sucked on the cigarette, the way she had been taught since childhood at the cheder, trying to get as much of the smoke in as possible with each breath. The visions slowly receded.

It was her sixteenth now since Ya'el had gone. Almost a week of planetary rotation, and really she should have been smoking more. She had to stop fighting it.

She finished the cigarette down to the stub. Only after making sure there was nothing left in it, nothing at all, did she throw it on the sand, where it joined the burnt match in a single testament to human life. The desert air calmed her, and she scanned the horizon with hooded eyes, unable to stop the feeling of exhilaration that momentarily overcame her, as it did after each hit of the fungus.

As long as she kept smoking, she would live.

She looked back to where the city of New Jerusalem squatted uncomfortably in the oasis, and then forward again at the never-ending expanse of the desert. Migdal lay over seven cigarettes in that

direction, if you walked. But Ya'el had a vehicle, and knew the terrain, and had done that journey before. She should have been back by now.

Miriam wished they didn't have that fight before Ya'el left. It made her absence all the more painful, and in her dreams, Miriam was forced to re-enact that fight again and again, with the smoke-induced vividness she had found offensive since childhood.

It was only a silly argument; they had been through it enough times before, but this time Ya'el was particularly upset, and when she called Miriam an atheist bitch and slammed the door as she rushed outside, Miriam was left unable to speak, unsure how this particular argument could have gone so wrong.

They were sitting together at Miriam's apartment in the Old Quarter, built, as tradition demanded it, of stone; built when the Tikvah first arrived on the planet and when the machines still worked. When cutting stones from the remote quarries of newly-named Har Even—Mountain of Stone—was still possible. That, at least—as Ya'el was fond of arguing—was the prevailing theory. No one really knew when the city was built; no one really knew why the machines had died.

They had just finished making love; Ya'el was smoking a cigarette (her own body time had always been much faster than Miriam's) and they watched the people below as they made their way through the streets. The sun was setting behind the temple, and the movement of people had a purpose in it, a singular direction. They looked the same, from above, men and women and children all wearing the grey, shapeless yarmulkes.

"I don't see how you can say that," Ya'el said. Smoke covered her face like a grey mask. "I just don't understand how you can come up with those things sometimes."

Miriam shrugged, tracing a finger on Ya'el's smooth inner leg. "I don't understand why you're so positive they had any form of religion. I mean, I don't, and I have to conclude that, therefore, religion is not a natural state of being. I don't see it being any different for an alien species." She withdrew her hand as Ya'el's muscles tightened. "In fact, since the only species we have studied is the human race, it's quite likely we're alone in having developed religion."

Ya'el almost threw her cigarette down. Miriam saw, not for the first time, the anger in her eyes, and felt bitterness rise in her. Lovemaking was definitely over.

"You utter, utter..." Ya'el struggled for words. "Atheist bitch." The yarmulke on her head pulsed, as if feeding on the turmoil in Ya'el. Miriam didn't need to look at a mirror to know her own beast was doing the same. She knew where this was heading even before Ya'el silently got up, put out her unfinished cigarette, and began to dress. The words left her mouth all the same, knowing she would regret saying them later, yet saying them anyway. "You have no proof. None. And you want to know what I think? I think the Nephilim were fucking sensible. They didn't have any superstitions. Like you."

Then, as Miriam had known would happen, Ya'el called her that thing again and put away the half-smoked cigarette in her metallic case, and left, slamming the door to the flat behind her.

"You want proof?" Ya'el had shouted at her when she reached the street. "come with me to Migdal and you'll have proof. Or better still, wait right here in your cushy little apartment, writing your angsty little poems, until I come back."

People's heads were turning. Miriam realised suddenly that she was leaning over the balcony completely naked and that this confrontation would most likely be in the gossip columns the next day. **NAKED POET FIGHTS LEADING ARCHAEOLOGIST**. She opened her mouth to shout to Ya'el, to call her back, but there was a new look on Ya'el's face, a victorious look fused with the angry one, and Miriam,

not knowing what to say anymore, didn't say anything.

Come with me to Migdal and you'll have proof, Ya'el had said. But Miriam hadn't gone, and now Ya'el was missing, and no one seemed to care.

She had tried. When Ya'el hadn't come back, Miriam went to the Archaeology Department, but in that imposing building where the ruins of the Nephilim lay on display like an incomprehensible alphabet, no one was willing to help.

"You're the..." Professor Yagil said curiously, then checked himself. "The poet, right? I read some of your stuff." His tone was cautious, neither complimentary nor negative. Despite the recent return of democratic life, many people—especially those employed by the civil, rather than Rabbinic, authorities—still stepped cautiously. And Miriam's work made them uncomfortable. "Look," he said when she asked him directly about Ya'el, "don't worry about her. She knows the desert like the back of her hand, and she's been to Migdal dozens of times. To tell you the truth, I have no idea why she went there this time. We've been through the place with a comb. If there was anything there, we would have found it by now."

"Maybe it's not something obvious," Miriam had argued, desperate to break the man's unconcerned mask. "Maybe it's something she just realised, something you've overlooked."

"Don't worry." Yagil smiled at her, his grey teeth, like Ya'el's, showing he was a heavy smoker, something that characterised the archaeologists and the rare traders, the people who spent most of their time outside, away from the cities. "She'll be back before you know it."

His expression made it clear he thought Ya'el was just wasting time, probably thinking she had wanted to get away from Miriam for a while. She had no doubt that Yagil read the articles that inevitably appeared after their fights.

The police were not much help either. "If she doesn't show up in a month, let us know and we'll send someone over there," the inspector had said. "But I don't see what could have gone wrong. It's not as if the Nephilim got her, eh?" He laughed as he walked off.

If it had been up to her, Miriam would have blamed the Nephilim. Their artefacts were scattered haphazardly across the planet like broken toys left by unruly children. Large unruly children. While no skeleton was ever found of that vanished race, their buildings towered over humans. Their few dwellings had become places of industry, the commerce centres of the planet's small population. Not for the artefacts, though a trade in those curiosities did go on, but for the fungus. That grey, moist substance grew wherever the Nephilim once lived. It grew like moss, like weeds, on the sides of buildings and inside them and in the avenues of abandoned towns.

And the fungus provided the planet's new occupants with life.

* * * *

Miriam felt the rush of euphoria ease; the cigarette's initial overwhelming effect had passed. She looked again toward New Jerusalem, and again at the desert's horizon. Seven cigarettes to go.

She hoisted her small pack onto her back and began to walk toward Migdal.

* * * *

The road to Migdal was cut through the desert in the early years of settlement. That, at least, was what the legends said. The crew that first arrived on the planet was many generations removed from the ones who first left the Israeli colony on Mars on their uncertain way to the stars. Current debate ranged over

whether the crew still had technological capabilities on crash landing. Those in favour cited the roads, ruler-straight and cut through the desert the way a scalpel cuts through skin. Those against only had to point at contemporary life.

Miriam thought of the debates with a feeling of bitterness. Ya'el was so involved in them, her cheeks flushing when she got excited, her voice growing louder, more confident.

"Does it matter?" Miriam had pleaded with her one night. "What difference does it make if they had technology or not?"

Ya'el was looking at her, impatience simmering behind her eyes. "The question," she said, "is not whether they still retained control of the technology they brought with them. The question is what happened."

"What happened..." Miriam prompted her.

"To bring us to our current level of technology," Ya'el completed the sentence for her. "You may have noticed, it's not exactly of a star-faring level."

"Don't you dare use sarcasm on me," Miriam said, making Ya'el smile.

No records were left, and that had frustrated Ya'el, Miriam knew, more than she was willing to admit. There was no record left of the first years of settlement, nothing to indicate what had happened, not even who the people who first reached the planet were. The words "Israel" and "Mars" had gained an almost mythical resonance amongst the settlers; of their physical presence remained only intangible names.

* * * *

Miriam's pace was measured. She walked the way she wrote the rebellious poems that had made her name, with care and not a little wariness. The sun was level on the horizon, a red globe blinking like a sore eye. She opened her senses to the silence around her, mentally cataloguing every detail.

The silence, first and always. The utter, invasive quiet of the desert where nothing lived, where nothing moved. So different from the city, where the press of people always provided noise, conversation, a reassuring background hum to her life. Ya'el loved the desert and the quiet, but Miriam found it almost offensive, as if the world was mocking her with its total lack of life. At least New Jerusalem has birds, she thought, cats, even, amazingly, those strange animals called horses that somehow came with the Tikvah and which only the very rich ever kept.

But nothing lived on the planet that wasn't brought. It was as if, Miriam had written in one of her early poems, they were trespassers on holy ground, squatters in a morgue. The visions she always saw when not smoking enough seemed to reinforce that in her, as if what she was seeing was not exactly a hallucination but an alien memory of the planet as it was before the Nephilim disappeared.

But few enough people saw them. Most simply became weak and sluggish, dull-witted until they smoked again and were revived.

She abandoned this train of thought with difficulty and returned to cataloguing. She might have a poem of this trip yet, she thought with sudden, icy guilt. Don't think about it, she warned herself, don't think about Ya'el until you get to Migdal. Don't fall apart now.

She took a deep breath. A clean, warm air, like liquid oxygen. Almost clinical in its purity. She hated that, the lack of life in that scent. Nothing alive, no plants, no animals—only the smell of stone and sand and silence.

"It's not natural," Ya'el had insisted in one of their many, tempestuous arguments.

They had been sitting on the balcony of the Temple, the stone cool against their backs, whispering. Below, the Rabbis performed the evening prayers of Ma'ariv, their yarmulkes seeming to absorb the fading light into their grey bodies. A woman sitting above them shushed loudly.

Ya'el ignored her. "There should be life on this planet, love," she said. "Plants, animals, forests. Something to produce enough oxygen for us to be able to breathe. The whole ecosystem of this place is missing, and yet we are able to live here quite comfortably."

"I don't know about comfortably," Miriam said as the woman behind shushed again. "Though it's a living, I'll grant you that. Still," she added, "for all you know there are whole continents filled with forests and trees and flowers and, and—" her imagination abandoned her for a moment, "and shrubs and stuff."

They both smiled, and for a moment, Miriam felt they were united again, spiritually entwined in shared laughter. Below, the Rabbis finished the song and were parading the effigy of a life-sized Nephilim around the altar. Its body was covered in the grey lichen of the smoke.

The Rabbis then dispersed to the four corners of the enclosure below and cast more of the grey fungus onto burning braziers; the pungent aroma of the burning weed circled lazily upward, engulfing the crowd of worshippers.

Ya'el took a deep, shuddering breath as the smoke reached them. All around them, the crowd sighed, inhaling smoke. The woman who shushed them before lay back with eyes closed, a lazy smile playing on her podgy face.

Miriam remembered that smile. Complacent, she deemed it then, and so it still seemed to her, especially here in the aloneness of the desert. She and Ya'el had never been complacent; that, probably, was part of the problem.

She walked throughout the day, stopping only occasionally, in those rare moments her body rebelled and she had to eat or to relive herself, which she did with a sort of angry impatience.

She stopped when the sun was low on the horizon and settled down to camp beside the road in a makeshift crater of sand. She had heard stories that the word desert, originally, had signified strange shifts in temperature; they were places burning hot during the day, freezing cold at night. She wondered briefly what it was like, to experience such climatic shifts and whether there was a poem in that, then abandoned the thought.

She felt lethargic, weakened by the walk, then realised she had not smoked since the morning, outside of New Jerusalem. She knew she should light up, knew she should reach for the box, but the lethargy took her, and she lay back and stared at the world as it shifted around her.

Once more, she saw the beings of light walking about her, sometimes going through her as if she were not there. There were buildings, now, great yet delicate things that resembled nothing she knew; and everywhere the light, pouring out of everything around her.

With shaking hands, Miriam reached for the box and opened it. She ran her tongue along her dry lips and with an effort put a cigarette in her mouth. She tried to ignore the vision around her, just as she tried to ignore the pain in her head as the yarmulke hungrily moved.

She fumbled for the matches, lit one on the second try, and quickly inhaled. She hated the ritual, and yet her body could not deny its need. She felt her head clear, the power coming back into her limbs.

The hallucinations receded.

Miriam prepared herself a light meal, washing the bread and cheese down with a few mouthfuls of water. She thought again of Ya'el and of their plans together, the dream of moving one day to one of the small farms around Har Even to grow sheep and make cheese and make love every night. She wondered if they were ever to do that again—dream together, make love—then berated herself for her pessimism.

She fell asleep still thinking of Ya'el.

* * * *

Morning, Miriam felt, had sprung on her unfairly.

She woke up and for a moment was unable to move. Slowly, with cautious, careful movements, she began stretching her arms, then her legs, until she was able to stand up. Her whole body ached; she felt as if an army of tiny people had worked on her during the night, hitting her again and again with small metal hammers.

She swallowed a mouthful of water again, then lit up a cigarette and waited as the pain ebbed from her body.

The second day's walk was harder. She stopped frequently, smoking a new cigarette during each break. In the evening she sank, exhausted, against the sand, smoked a last cigarette and was immediately asleep.

On the eve of the third day, Miriam reached Migdal. The huge, sand-coloured buildings towered over the horizon like gigantic statues. She walked in their shadow for a long while before reaching the outskirts of the city.

Miriam's heart pounded as she neared the first buildings. Even from afar, they looked somehow broken, lifeless. Up close, she could see the chinks in the walls, the broken masonry that had fallen off and was lying haphazardly on the ground. She passed between two buildings, her mouth dry at the thought of Ya'el lying somewhere, dead or dying. She followed the wide avenue inward, into Migdal. The town remained unused, devoid somehow of the fungus and of the shapeless animals they called yarmulkes that lived on the fungus until they were harvested and used. It was but another mystery.

She began calling out, shouting Ya'el's name, her voice arid and small in the emptiness of the place. But there was no answer, and the sun had completely disappeared over the horizon. There was an inky, total darkness. Overhead, the stars glistened with a cold light that illuminated nothing.

Miriam found the thought of going into one of the buildings unnerving; as dark as it was outside, it was not as dark as inside one of the windowless buildings, and she found the idea of being enclosed in one of them too much like being inside a cave.

No, she decided. She would remain in open space.

She camped by the wall of one of the buildings, finding the way by touch, feeling the panic she had tried to stomach all evening rise. Where was Ya'el?

She pictured her lover lying nearby, unable to speak or move, and nearly got up again to look for her. But it was no use. She would have to remain where she was until daylight returned, and hope.

And pray, she decided, knowing as she did that it was her last measure, a desperate childhood instinct she had been able to suppress until now. Prayer, she once wrote, was hope's unsightly cousin. One she now desperately held onto.

She lit two small candles from her pack; their illumination seemed to reflect her mood, desperate and fragile in the great abandoned space. She knelt on the ground, her knees sinking into soft sand, and

carefully made a small crater in front of her, which she filled up with the grey fungus of a cigarette.

She lit a match, edged it close to the weed until it began to catch fire, then leaned close, inhaling the smoke. She closed her eyes.

Why she prayed with her eyes closed she didn't know. The words, when at last they came, were a jumble of broken sentences, of flickering images, dull and ragged, nothing like the poetry for which she was known. She prayed—to whom, also, she didn't quite know—asking only for Ya'el to be alive, to be well, to be back with her.

But prayer brought her no relief, and as the last vestiges of smoke faded away she remained empty, crouching in the darkness, eyes still closed against the world.

She fell asleep at last, curled against an ancient wall the Nephilim built. She didn't dream.

Morning rose about her like a temple. She woke at first light and sat with her back to the wall as the sun came up, lighting the buildings around her at a measured pace, from the foundations up to the skies. They towered over her, those monuments of a vanished race, and her heart caught with the twined beauty and futility of it, and the sudden conviction, like a rush of blood to the head, that they were responsible for the vanishing of her beloved.

She stood up abruptly, pain flaring in her legs, numb from her uncomfortable slumber. Not waiting for the blood to circulate, not waiting to light a cigarette from her diminishing box, not waiting for anything but driven by an urgency she now sensed in everything about her, Miriam began to walk away.

She shouted Ya'el's name over and over as she walked, her eyes moving across the alien landscape as if starved of anything but that which she was looking for. The silence oppressed her. The shadows gradually shortened until it was midday, the sun high in the sky. Still there was no sign of Ya'el.

Miriam became dizzy with hunger and the pangs of not smoking. On her head, the yarmulke moved restlessly, sending shocks of pain through her scalp.

Still, she wouldn't stop.

She began to see the visions again: the movement of light coalesced into living beings; they occluded her vision, their movements like the drifting of leaves, their buildings strangely real, unchanged.

The buildings were the same, she realised. Unlike in the desert, where the phantoms of habitation rose around her. Here, the buildings were the same, sand-coloured and broken. Why did she not hallucinate buildings? she wondered, then a bark of laughter escaped her, sudden and unwelcome. What did it matter?

She had to find Ya'el.

She searched all throughout the day, getting lost in the identical-seeming avenues of Migdal, seeking her beloved. At last, when the shadows again lengthened and the brilliance of the day subsided, Miriam reached—by accident or design, she couldn't later say—the seeming heart of Migdal. The tall tower that gave the place its name rose above her, disappearing into the darkness above.

"Ya'el!"

She was huddled against two boulders, looking like a rag doll thrown aside in a fit of pique. Blood was coming out of her head, her nose, her mouth, and for a moment Miriam was unable to identify the source of the wrongness about Ya'el's shape, a wrongness she felt immediately was there.

She knelt besides her lover, running shaking hands over her inert body. "Ya'el?"

Then realization hit her and unseated deep-buried fear. Ya'el's yarmulke was gone, and in its place was an eroded, bleeding crater.

"Can you hear me? Are you okay?" She was shouting, her voice echoing weakly against the tower.

Ya'el's head turned, and her open eyes—and only now did Miriam realise that Ya'el's eyes had been open throughout—stared at Miriam. There was something terrifying about her features, a look of terrible victory etched in her face, yet also, Miriam thought, one of a desperate longing.

"What happened to you?" Miriam said, tears burning her face with salt. The air was still, the sun growing lower on the horizon. "Oh, shit." She frantically searched for her box of cigarettes, trying to extract one, light it, and shove it into Ya'el's mouth all at once.

"Don't." Ya'el's voice was a distant murmur.

"You don't know what you're saying," Miriam said, trying to hold the cigarette in Ya'el's unresponsive mouth and strike a match at the same time. She changed tack, put the cigarette in her own mouth and lit it, then pressed it into Ya'el's mouth and held her nose closed, forcing her to smoke.

"I know exactly what I'm saying."

Some of the smoke must have gone through, Miriam thought, as Ya'el's voice rang with sudden anger in the still air. Her eyes lost their intensity, and Miriam felt that for the first time they were really looking at her and were seeing her there.

"What happened?"

"Can't you see them?" Ya'el's face set in a grimace as she attempted to smile. "But of course you can." She coughed, and blood splattered Miriam's front. "You always could."

"See what?" Miriam asked. There was a sudden sensation of falling inside her head, as of an inevitable but unwanted outcome finally materialising.

"Them." Ya'el pointed in the air, before energy abandoned her and her hand dropped back to her side.

Miriam reluctantly looked around her. The space around the tower was thronging with beings of light; they shimmered and flickered in and out of her field of vision, gliding past them and through them, moving between the gigantic buildings like ghosts.

"You're hallucinating."

Ya'el laughed, and before Miriam could stop her, she buried the cigarette in the sand, extinguishing it.

"Not anymore."

A silence fell between them. Miriam felt her anger flare. To have come all this way, and to be helpless—that, she couldn't stomach. She held Ya'el's hand in hers and tried not to think of the meaning behind Ya'el's words.

"What happened to you?" She didn't know how she meant it, but the words came out choked and coated in bitterness, like wrongly-inhaled smoke.

"I wanted to know the truth," Ya'el said. The effect of the smoke Miriam had forced on her seemed to

have dissipated. She looked bright and feverish, her pupils moons swimming in a milky sky.

"What truth?" Miriam demanded. She felt a sudden, irrational urge take her, to slap Ya'el and bring her to her senses. Ya'el's words hovered at the back of her head; she refused to understand them.

"For a poet," Ya'el said, "you have a remarkable ability to ignore what your eyes tell you." Her eyes tracked the moving beings of light and her face relaxed into a childish mask of pure fascination. "Their truth," she said at last.

Miriam didn't answer.

Darkness fell. The ghostly figures of the Nephilim shimmered in the blackness, illuminating Ya'el's fragile, dying body. At last Miriam spoke, and when she did, bitterness again threatened to overwhelm her, making her voice quaver, disobedient to her wants. "Why Migdal?" she demanded at last. "Why come here to kill yourself?"

She remembered Professor Yagil's vague smile, his assurance there was nothing left in Migdal of any worth.

Ya'el coughed. On Miriam's head, the yarmulke squirmed, hurting her.

"Because this is where we landed."

It came out as a whisper.

"Miri..." Ya'el held her arms out, shaking as she did so. There were no words left. Miriam stooped down to her and held Ya'el in her arms, holding onto her tightly, trying to cover her, to protect her from the world. Miriam's face searched Ya'el's, inhaling her aroma, the mixture of sweat, smoke, and blood. Ya'el's lips, in a last physical act, found Miriam's and they kissed, lips dry and wordless.

Miriam felt Ya'el let go as their lips touched. She kissed her nevertheless, praying uselessly, and when she laid the body of her lover back on the sand, there was nothing of Ya'el but that. A body.

Miriam found she couldn't cry.

She sat cross-legged in the sand, holding the hand of her lover entwined in hers. As she watched, she knew her own body could not be deprived much longer, that she herself would soon die if she did not feed the yarmulke, if she did not let smoke enter her body. And still she resisted.

Her mind, unable to stop working, was composing a poem, and as she sat in the darkness of Migdal she knew that, had she but written it down, it would have been her greatest work. It was a narrative poem she was writing in her head, the story of a ship arriving at a far and strange planet after crossing space itself; the story of those first people, landing here in this alien city, consumed by excitement, curiosity, and a confidence in themselves that was overwhelming.

There are some things we are not meant to see, she thought. It was a line of Talmudic scripture, written a generation after landing. It was drummed into her in the cheder every day for years. She tried to construct that first meeting, between people and those who were more than people.

It must have seemed a lush planet to the people of the Tikvah. They brought hope with them, and hope was what they saw. And that hope, she thought as her hands—independently, it seemed, of her conscious mind—began searching for the cigarette box, that hope was not a futile one.

She put a cigarette in her mouth and, with shaking hands, struck a match.

They were allowed to live, after all. They settled and raised children and worked and prayed. They wondered at the curious artefacts that littered the small space of their habitation, asked themselves why the machines stopped working, why no records remained, and they formed scholastic societies and played with archaeology and raised furious debates.

She lit the cigarette and inhaled, and inhaled again, until her eyes filled with tears.

The burning figures of the Nephilim receded, as if they never were.

Her head cleared. The world around her was once again the world she knew, silent and peaceful and empty. She knew grief would come, later, and that she might be ready for it then, and she wondered again at the contracts one makes, the bonds between lovers and the pacts between a woman and a God she no longer believed in. And she wondered, also, at the covenant that must have been struck all those years ago, on landing, and at the way that which is commonplace might live with that which is truly alien.

She sat holding Ya'el's hand in hers and waited for the sun to rise and end the long night.

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Little Red Riding Hood—Life off the Path

by Angela Slatter

It's been an interesting journey for Little Red Riding Hood. She started life in a tribal tale about a girl who outsmarts a wolf—all on her own, no outside help. A few centuries later, she gets a red cap, loses about twenty IQ points and gets eaten by a transvestite wolf. Add another hundred or so years, the cap becomes a hood, she loses a few more brain credits, gets molested, and then eaten by the same cross-dressing wolf but is rescued by a big, strong man and learns never to disobey the rules again. Adding insult to injury, in the forties Tex Avery turned her into a stripper. Bruno Bettelheim looked at Gustave Doré's 1867 *Little Red Riding Hood* illustrations and saw dirty pictures—Little Red in bed with the wolf, giving him the eye. A red leather-jacketed Reese Witherspoon (oh, puhleezz!) played her in a nineties film version, *Freeway*, in which a friendly neighbourhood serial killer fulfils the role of the wolf. Just when you thought it was all over, Angela Carter came along, reclaimed her and set her free.

So, Li'l Red—what happened?

Traditional versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* were oral tales about a young girl's initiation into womanhood. The Italian version, which contains the crack-a-lackin' lines: "Why is your chest so hairy, Grandmother?" "From wearing too many necklaces around my neck," and replaces the wolf with an ogress, pitches Little Red as a girl on the cusp of growing up. In the French oral tales (often known as *The Path of Needles or Pins*) the heroine must choose one of two paths when she meets the wolf (or *bzou*) in the woods. There is no exact explanation of the difference between the Path of Needles and the Path of Pins; however, Yvonne Verdier, who studied manifold variations of the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale, believed the paths were symbolic of two periods of growth in a young girl's life. When a girl was sent off to be apprenticed to a seamstress, this was the path of pins (learning a trade as part of growing up) and is regarded by Verdier as the path of maidenhood, the path of change from child to young woman. The path of needles was the next stage and implied sexual maturityⁱⁱ, the needle being emblematic of sexual penetration. Terri Windling suggests that girls who choose the path of needles before the path of pins are trying to "grow up too soon."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jack Zipes refers to the original tales as having a "narrative perspective ... sympathetic to a young peasant girl ... who learns to cope with the world around her."^{iv} The girl meets the wolf on the way to Granny's house and discloses where she's going (but makes no wager). The wolf kills and eats Granny, takes her place in bed, and induces the girl to eat and drink Granny's flesh and blood before climbing into bed with him. Recognising her danger, and with no one else to turn to, the girl uses her wits to save herself. Before she can be devoured, she claims she needs to relieve herself, the wolf (after first suggesting that she do it in the bed), ties a rope to her leg and lets her out. When outside, she ties the rope to a plum tree and runs home safely.

The heroine in the oral tale eats her grandmother's flesh and drinks her blood. Gruesome though it is, this can also be seen as a metaphor for the revolution of the life-cycle. The young replace the old, the girl is coming into the fullness of her womanhood, she is all "power in potentia;"^v the grandmother is at the end of the cycle, she is no longer fertile, no longer desired, no longer agile and active. Although the young girl has a traumatic experience (an education in the dangers of life), she has been independent and saved herself with no help from either a prince or woodsman, nor any other male figure.

However, under the pens of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, the tale became one of a girl's rape and murder, for which she herself is blamed.^{vi}

Operating in the salons of France in the mid to late seventeenth century, Charles Perrault was one of the

leading proponents of literary fairy tales. Although by no means the only “recorder” of tales—female authors vastly outnumbered the males working in the genre at the time^{vii}—it is his versions of fairy tales that have survived and dominated the Western fairy tale tradition. Perrault, who also claimed to be supportive of women's rights (at least for women of his own class), nevertheless managed to infuse his tales with patriarchal notions of how girls *should* behave.

Although Perrault claimed to be “a mere conduit of past wisdom,”^{viii} not creating stories but simply taking the tales from a “pristine source,”^{ix} (nurses, gouvernantes, grandmothers, random old female gossips) he did not leave the tales intact. He changed them, transformed them to suit his own purposes. Marina Warner notes that he “set aside aspects which struck him as crude,”^x and Zipes, in relation to Perrault's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, points out that the author's “[own] fear of women and his own sexual drives are incorporated into his *new* literary version, which also reflects general male attitudes about women portrayed as eager to be seduced or raped.”^{xi}

Perrault's tales became moralising stories, warning women and children that if they did not conform there would be consequences. Perrault introduces into the literary tale the red cap/hood and the element of a wager between the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood. He also implies that she is somehow careless in taking her time to get to Granny's house—that she is complicit in Granny's death because she wants to lose the bet^{xii}, and thus invites the wolf's sexual advances.^{xiii} When she arrives at Granny's house she is raped and eaten. Perrault lays the blame very squarely on her shoulders (just in case anyone should miss the point):

From this story one learns that children,

Especially young lasses,

Pretty, courteous and well-bred,

Do very wrong to listen to strangers,

And it is not an unheard thing

If the Wolf is thereby provided with his dinner.^{xiv}

Sharon Johnson has noted that Perrault's version of the tale reflects not only his assumption about gendered behaviour but also that of the society in which he lived—even in terms of how rape was regarded by French jurisprudence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Johnson argues that “Men are represented as naturally aggressive, and their ravishing of women is often eroticized.”^{xv} In a society where sexual violence was viewed as ‘desire, women were often blamed for inciting male sexual aggression by *being* objects of desire.^{xvi} Perrault's central message is that she was “asking for it” and got what she deserved: “She was wearing red, Your Honour, and you know what that means!”

Warner also notes Perrault's fusing of Granny with the wolf—the “crucial collapse of roles”^{xvii}—may show that he was associating Granny, as a solitary old woman of the forest (the traditional place for witches, those with occult knowledge and therefore suspect) with the wolf, also a creature of the forest, natural, uncontrollable and an object of fear.^{xviii} Perrault implies, consciously or otherwise, that those who associate with nature and the uncivilised get what they deserve.

A century or so later, the Brothers Grimm gave the story a happy ending and removed the sexual bawdiness and overt violence. Little Red is shown as a silly little girl who gets herself and her Granny into trouble by disobeying her mother, dawdling, and talking to hairy strangers. The wolf once again wins the race to Granny's house, where he eats the old woman and then her foolish granddaughter. Luckily, there is a woodsman, a big strong man, to get them out of trouble. In this version, Little Red's warning from her

mother is more explicit than in Perrault, and although she still ignores it, she and Granny are rescued nonetheless.^{xix} Zipes interprets the message as “Only a strong male figure can rescue a girl from herself and her lustful desires.”^{xx}

Little Red, who in the oral tradition was a brave, resourceful little girl, is no longer able to get herself out of trouble; the only virtues allowed her are passivity and dependency, and the hope that a male will always be around to rescue her. She was pulled back onto the path, made to be safe, turned into an object *requiring* rescue.

When fairy tales began to be written down and published, they gradually became static after being subjected to an editing process to take out anything that wasn't sanctioned. When their form became “satisfactory,” they became “Good Girls’ Guides on How to Behave.” In Germany, at the time of the Grimms, Jeanine Blackwell observes that the phenomenon of young mothers reading to their children from the new books of sanctioned Grimms’ tales replaced the oral tradition of tale telling in the evening. Old women—nurses, grandmothers, servants—were suspect as tellers of tales; they were the kind of old wives who would change the tales, who would improvise, and who would not conform.^{xxi} The mutability of old women's tales was due at least in part to the fact that many of them were illiterate, so the oral tradition was the only one open to them. The power of the literary tale for the patriarchy lay in its static nature—the pattern did not change, the end did not change, girls stayed girls and boys, boys. If female tellers changed the stories, they were behaving independently and subverting the patriarchy.^{xxii}

Blackwell summarises Ruth Bottigheimer's quantitative survey on the speech patterns of women in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.^{xxiii} The tales collected by the brothers came directly from the oral tradition, from a variety of women whom they met on their travels (indeed, Wilhelm married one of his sources: Dortchen Wild). The Grimms’ fairy tale collections went through many editions between the early 1800s and 1856, and across these editions significant changes were made: “good” girls spoke less and less from edition to edition; silence as a task for men lasted up to three days, but for women it was often seven years; the female's voice was frequently *taken* away from her, whereas the male willingly stopped speaking to achieve a goal; girls spoke when spoken to and generally did not ask questions unless invited; and, perhaps most tellingly, those characters who spoke most were witches (bad women who did not conform) and boys (in whom activity and curiosity were lauded).^{xxiv}

The editing of female speech in fairy tales by male authors/transcribers shows in a very real way how tales have been used as a means of training women how to behave in a socially (i.e., patriarchally) acceptable fashion.

Blackwell makes the assessment that “authority is removed from the oral female voice to the male editor/author, but returned to her in a sanitized form, when she is the properly behaving dispenser of his tale.”^{xxv} The story “teller” is no longer the old wife but the nurturing figure of the mother. The voice of the mother is used to enforce ideas of sanctioned behaviour—girls are quiet, pretty, submissive and there to be rescued. The power of maternal voices enforces the edicts of the ruling order, and with the hand that rocks the cradle co-opted by the other side, mothers as models of, and conduits for, female behaviour were now complicit in the subjugation of their own daughters.^{xxvi} Women told their children through the medium of static bedtime stories: I have no value beyond beauty, passivity, silence and fertility. My daughter, you are like me. My son, you are not like me, you are special!

Fairy tales also teach girls about reward and punishment—those who conform are rewarded, those who do not are punished, ridiculed and subjugated, or worse, killed. Under the pens of male transcribers *Little Red Riding Hood* became such a tale.

The tales in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* are reclaimed from the patriarchy and stretched out of their sanctioned shape—Carter has firmly placed herself on the side of the “old wives” under whose

hands tales were mutable and malleable. Warner says that Carter “deliberately [draws the tales] out of the separate space of “children's stories” or “folk art” and into the world of change.”xxvii

Carter's work restores female agency, independence, intelligence, and allows the heroine freedom to be a sexually active desiring object—in direct contrast to the “approved” condition of literary fairy tale heroines as passive, dependent, virginal and self-sacrificing. Warner refers to *The Bloody Chamber* as Carter's “answer to Perrault's vision of better things.”xxviii

Carter's Little Red (in the *Bloody Chamber* tale “The Company of Wolves”) is described as “an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing.”xxiv This is possibly the best summary of the strengths of Carter's heroine: she is brave and independent (a closed system), she has the power of an intact virgin, she is fearless and ready to protect herself—no waiting around for the woodsman for this girl. She can and will look after herself. She is confident and when she meets the wolf/huntsman (in Carter, the huntsman and wolf suffer a similar “critical collapse of roles” to Granny and the wolf in Perrault's version) on the path to Granny's house she is in no way intimidated. In fact, she decides “she's never seen such a fine fellow before, not among the rustic clowns of her native village;”xxx she will not settle for any old village boy.

They make a wager with a kiss the prize, and she happily dawdles so he may reach Granny's house first. When she arrives, Granny is a rattling bundle of bones wrapped in a napkin under the bed, and the wolf makes no real attempt to pretend to be the grandmother. Their exchange, informed by knowledge rather than fear, breaks the traditional pattern. She undresses quite willingly, combs out her hair, and stands “up on tiptoe and unbutton[s] the collar of his shirt.”xxxi Upon hearing “All the better to eat you with” she laughs: “she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing.”xxxii There is no fear of sex, or of male desire, or even a hint of shame about her own desires. This girl is no one's victim.

The tale ends “See! Sweet and sound she sleeps in Granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.” Carter's heroine is fearless on many levels: she has sex outside the bounds of the approved space of marriage, she *chooses* it for herself (it is not imposed upon her as a marriage duty or as an act of rape), she acts without deference to anyone, and with no thought for society's sanctions. And there are no consequences for her actions, no societally enforced punishment for being a “loose” woman.

Importantly, when she does break her “unbroken membrane,” she does not become a broken or ruined “thing.” Her virginity is not an economic asset, the removal of which devalues her. Carter's heroine exchanges the power of a virgin for that of a knowing woman—her “power in potentia” has been realised. She retains the core of who she is; sex has merely added to her experience, not soiled her in any way—she has not lessened.

Sex, desire, and independent female action, hinted at in the oral tradition, primly covered and clothed by the patriarchy, are all on glorious, rapturous, almost pornographic display in Carter's works. There is no room for the “good” girl in her revisionist fairy tale.

I like to think that Carter reclaimed Little Red and gave her the chance to be more Buffy and less Little Bo Peep. She reclaimed the idea of “power in potentia,” precisely the thing that frightened men: female independence and power and freedom of choice. These were precisely the things that were stripped away over time through editing and re-writing by patriarchal transcribers. Blackwell writes: “...when the brothers wrote down the tales, they omitted some of the magic words, and they jumbled up parts of the plots. They even left the wise women out of the stories they told, or changed them to be wicked, bossy, and ugly. Still, they left some of the magic in the stories.”xxxiv There is still magic left in the tales, and Carter found it—Little Red is now back on the path less travelled, and having a better time for it.

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Bio

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Broken Strand

by Maurice Broaddus

I brought my hand up to the doorbell simply to watch it hang in mid-air then fall back to my side. My balled hand tapped my thigh before I checked my watch. 2:55 p.m. Still time to come up with an excuse to back out of the reunion; at best, the professor would get a half hour of my time. I didn't know why I'd even agreed to the meeting. Yeah I did. Her. The possibility of seeing her.

The weather report called for a high of 64o. A little on the cool side for spring, the overcast sky—bleak, impenetrable, and cold, with a slight breeze—falling under the weatherman's definition of partly sunny. Underneath my overcoat, I flexed and puffed a bit to further fill out my expensive cream-colored business suit. 3:00 p.m. Before ringing the doorbell, I adjusted my tie one last time and smoothed out a crease only I would've noticed.

"Wendal Tolliver." The professor's voice attempted to mask not just the hint of shock that I'd actually shown up, but any trace of the frantic furtiveness that pled for a meeting.

"Professor Roush." I moved to clap him on the shoulder, which I suspect he took as an opening for a hug. The awkward tango ended in a cautious handshake.

"Martin, please." The professor put his hands in his pocket, suddenly fascinated with his shoes. "Come in, come in."

Time had changed Professor Roush into something less than the teacher I remembered. Dark circles ringed each of his eyes. Although he still walked with a meandering shamble, he now had a pronounced slouch. He ran his calloused fingers through his full but disheveled mop of graying hair. The modest home smelled of astringent chemicals, dirty socks, and the kind of "air freshener sprayed over body odor" scent best left unmentioned upon in polite conversation. Wallpaper curled along the wall, as if the paper longed to peel free. The paint beneath chipped and flaked in spots under the erosion of neglect; an emptiness soaked into the walls, rotting the wood framing and baseboards in a mold of despair. A Spartan feng shui ordered the spacious living room: we huddled in the corner on the sole two chairs. A lone shelf with a picture of the professor and a young woman fought off a sense of complete loneliness about the room.

"Piece of gum?" I didn't care how obvious it appeared that the professor's rank breath bothered me. Foul was foul and I didn't want to have to put up with anymore than I absolutely had to.

"No thanks."

I kept holding out the package of gum. If I held it out long enough, some people felt compelled to take a piece, a sign that they'd crack under pressure. A handy thing to know in business.

Professor Roush took a piece.

"It's been a long time."

"Too long, too long indeed." The professor's face again took a sudden sheepish turn, as if he fumbled to start the conversation. "Do you know why I chose you to be my assistant?"

"No." I lied. I suspected it had something to do with the fact that I was the only black student in his class.

"Because you weren't like the others around there. You cared," the professor explained.

"I don't understand."

"Things, real things, mattered to you. People mattered to you. Knowing mattered to you. Not ass-kissing and your precious GPA."

I wish he had offered me a drink. A glass of anything to fidget with or sip from would help pass the awkward pauses that tended to accompany conversations with Professor Roush. The weight of his stare made me uncomfortable, so I checked my watch. 3:10 p.m. Though I was no longer the guppy-eyed, eager-to-please student, part of me still wanted the professor's approval. He meant a lot to me, having become more than a mentor, despite the rocky start to our relationship: he'd accused me of cheating. Not quite the case, though I assumed that was what the professor thought. Never the most focused of students, I never bothered to take notes during the lectures, nor particularly applied myself during study groups, yet I aced the first test. Professor Roush immediately revised how he handled test day seating arrangements and kept his eyes on me. I aced the second test. His suspicions assuaged, Professor Roush gave me a lab job.

I spied a Bible on the end table. "Have you found religion?"

"Sometimes we can't bring ourselves to part with attachments to our past." Professor Roush loomed nearer, peered at me from just above his hawkish nose, and waited for a reaction. "By one man sin entered into the world and by sin, death; and so death passed upon all men."

"I see." It had been nine years since I'd escaped my absurdly religious family. Nine years since I'd had to suffer their strict interpretation of the Bible and a church with its swaying choir and preacher-inspired emotion. I knew the fire, the frenzy, the ecstasy of faith; but disconnected from the ridiculous children's tales presented as fact. And, because their beliefs never became my own (I couldn't even parrot them in high school), I grew up alongside strangers in the same home. Shuffled to school as obligation, not parenting, I never looked back once I got to college. I couldn't even find the emotional resources to rub their noses in my success, though I doubt they'd have the emotional resources to be jealous. Or proud. Nine years with nothing to say besides the occasional strained phone call where the first two questions were "are you praying?" and "have you found a good girl to settle down with?" They were lucky I didn't also develop a resentment toward women; the professor was lucky all he got was a polite-as-I-could-muster "I see."

"I doubt you do," he said. "Anyway, as you know, the human genome project has completed. Do you know what I see? Within the myriad, disparate, convoluted genetic information is man's sin nature. A person's entire identity balled up in a few nanograms of matter."

"Assuming one's whole identity can be quantified entirely by our DNA." Sitting forward, I peered at the professor through my bridged fingers. To be fair, as far as I was concerned, there were only three tiers of intellect: genius, above average, and the rest. My theory was that true genius saw patterns where others didn't. I never once doubted the professor's genius.

"Let me put this in terms you might understand; some people are just born bad. No amount of nurture, no amount of loving parents and stimulating environment can help them. 'A bad tree bears bad fruit.'"

"Is everything all right?" a voice asked from behind us.

"Everything's fine. Wendal, you remember my daughter, Lyndsey? She's been assisting me in my work."

"Wendal."

"Lyndsey, it's been a while." I held my head a little too high, not much hiding the smug, lusting gleam in

my eye, although my throat had turned to lead. My arms opened, inviting a hug, even though she'd angled to the side, avoiding the full crush of her breasts against me. I thought I was prepared for the torrent of recognition. Extra primping time aside, I didn't want to let myself believe she'd actually be here. At best, I'd hoped the professor would report back to her how well I looked. And turned out.

"Yes, it has been. Hopefully we'll have a chance to catch up." Her voice recalled embarrassed laughter and nights spent snuggled on a couch, the quickly remembered good times. Long reddish-brown hair bled into a thatch of blonde roots and shrouded an elongated cherubic face whose amateur porn prettiness held me transfixed for hours. Her melancholy eyes, which had absorbed too many hurtful sights, contained an offness about them, as if the light didn't reflect properly. Hopefully she no longer saw the little boy flirting with manhood she'd once known, because I definitely wanted to give the voluptuous creature before me a chance to get to know me all over again. If I were honest with myself, that was what this meeting was all about—her giving me the chance to make up for past mistakes. She balled her hands within her sleeves, a nervous habit, one of those little quirks that friends noticed. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Bless you." My eyes followed the bounce of her behind down the hallway until I caught sight of a door.

"Perhaps it would help if we gave you a tour of our facility." The professor interrupted. "Phase I begins in our level one staging area. Phase II, through that door, is in the lower level. Laying all of my cards on the table, I need your help with Phase III, our final stage."

The level one staging area turned out to be their garage. A room filled with test tubes, venting hoods, and lab benches, a mix of lab surplus equipment—probably gathered from dumpster diving outside of local labs—and shrewd purchases, like their thermal cyclers. I pitied the man. The rumors had to be true: he was never the same after what happened to his wife, Susan. A wave of sadness overwhelmed me and I put my hand on the professor's shoulder. Roush turned with a beaming grin, apparently having taken the gesture as one of excitement.

"Right this way, this way," he said.

Lyndsey joined us, much to my delight, with drink in hand. Her hands lingered on mine as she passed the glass to me, causing an adolescent surge of the old affection. Whatever anxiousness threatened calmed once she shadowed us, the heat of her close presence reminded me of our brief time together. Roush had always joked that when a professor started to appear good to you, you'd spent too much time in the lab. He said nothing about professor's daughters.

I pushed back the reality that things hadn't ended as well as I'd hoped. Though I never raised my voice at her, I was the master of the calculated coldness. Silence and distance used to flay the emotional meat from her bones; little cruelties dripped on her, turning the relationship into a crude Chinese water torture.

"Humans are a product of their genetic make-up and their total environmental/cultural influences. Wild-type retroviruses can be altered and used as vectors to insert into genes. It's a simple process. Retroviral RNA is cloned into a plasmid and constructed into a vector. We collect cells from an affected individual, anyone would do. Basically changing functional genes of a human cell with the aim of correcting the genetic defect by gene transfer..."

"Genetic defect?"

"Sin, of course. An inherited proclivity to sin. We then select and grow the genetically corrected cells and infuse or transplant them back into the patient. That person becomes a universal donor. I'm trying to think of a catchy name for my vector. Something to be remembered for the ages. Anyway, that was Phase I."

I knew I shouldn't have come. Maybe there was some truth to the old saw about not going home again. I always thought if I returned home, the rooms would feel smaller, suffocating. That I wouldn't belong. I held out hope it might be different with the professor. He was the father of my second life. The father that solely knew the Wendal who had to be the smartest, had to be the best, if just from fear of people seeing me as the fraud I thought I was.

Science didn't answer the questions I asked. I wanted to kneel and pray, to believe a fraction of what my parents believed, but doubts cut into my knees like slivers of glass. Bible-thumping B.S. and a sycophant-craving God had no place in my world. I defined myself. So it was easier for me to distance myself from science and the professor than from faith and my parents. I chose to lose myself in climbing the food chain of the corporate laboratory until I was able to buy into the company, where the true money was. Not that business offered anything more by way of answers, it just didn't have the promise of journeying, of seeking answers to unanswerable questions, that science and faith proffered. Numbers never lied.

Part of me felt all the more apostate to Professor Roush. Another part resented Lyndsey for never leaving her father to become her own person. But I chided myself for sounding like one of those people who escaped something—drinking, smoking, the projects—and they thought were better than the folks who hadn't—that anyone who failed to do so was weak and stupid.

"Have you had any success?"

"Much. Enough to move on to Phase II."

"Phase II?" My hand pressed against my clammy forehead, my face suddenly flush with heat. I steadied myself against the wall, not wanting to betray any loss of cool.

"Human trials." The professor revealed an unctuous grin.

"Hu ... Professor, you can't be serious."

"But I am. At any rate, the last step would be final deployment."

"Deployment?"

"Put it in our water."

I locked onto Roush's eyes. He was shit-slurping crazy. The glass of water felt suddenly heavy in my hands.

"Dear me, are you all right." Professor Roush's voice took on a sinister aspect in its feigned concern. "You look positively ... piqued."

The world canted to and fro. The muscles in my legs gave out from under me, the dead weight of my body slid along the bracing wall. Lyndsey relieved me of the glass before it tumbled along with me and crashed to the ground. *I'd hate to leave a mess*, I thought as I put one hand on my queasy stomach, my eyelids heavy and my brain filled with wet cotton. My other hand searched for purchase along the wall. Lyndsey knelt over me, studying my face as I slipped into darkness, with the sage fascination of a child ready to step on an anthill. She grew impatient at my slow descent into unconsciousness, punched me in my face and...

* * * *

...I drifted into the darkness, lost in a dream of another person's memories. Professor Roush left the world of academia for the more lucrative corporate world. Private labs spent more on research in a day

than his entire yearly budget at the university; although the job came at a cost—one he was more than ready to pay: he arrived before any of the others and was the last to leave at night. Some people speculated that he kept a cot in his office so he could catch naps during the night rather than go home. Before too long, he ran the entire department, “It’s all about the real estate” he was quick to say, as an entire building’s wing full of scientists danced to the song of his research, all working on the human genome project. He saw Lyndsey and Susan when he could; after all, they were the reason he sacrificed his time, wanting to make the world a better place for them. Inevitable tragedies followed men of devotion. No sacrifice asked of them was too great since they expected a last-second reprieve, a surely-not-them moment of Abraham’s knife spared from Isaac—too bad for the ram caught in the thickets offered up in his place—so the stillness of the house, after the professor returned from another long day at the labs shouldn’t have alerted him to something being wrong ... but it did. Nothing specific, nothing he could put his finger on right away; however, he called out “Susan?” Roush set his briefcase down, a frown ensconced on his face, no dread, no sense of welling fear, only a mild displeasure as he crept up the stairs, ignoring the fact that some part of his brain, some baser survival instinct, told him to not turn on the lights but to cling to the walls as he made his way. The door to his bedroom opened with a slight creak, the tenor of its slow whine stilling the burgeoning desire to call for his wife again; her name died in the back of his throat while a tear burned down the side of his face—even before he switched on the light—since the air was heavy with the smell of sex, sex mixed with something else. Her silk night gown sprawled on the floor, despite his repeated chiding of her to put away her previous night’s clothes. Her body peeked from the mound of sheets on the bed, his mind registered that she was positioned too akimbo in the bed, but was unable to reconcile it with how her eyes peered at him from the closet. Opening the closet door more, he saw her head resting on its side, staring at him with dull, unfocused eyes. He backed out of the room, tripping on her nightgown on the way out, never quite the same again. He quit his job and fell off the grid to pursue his own independent research; what remained of his life was spent oscillating between his work and his daughter who...

* * * *

...stood on the opposite end of the basement beside her father, cultured around a freezer and examined a series of vials. Borne on waves of nausea, I drifted back to consciousness studying their painfully obvious body language: Rousch’s nervousness at her approach, the furtive glances, the way the professor fumbled with the vials then calmed at her touch—Roush feared her.

My hands were manacled to the water line over my head, pain spasmed along my arms from being suspended too long in the same position. The ragged strips of my torn suit jacket, though the material was smooth against my wrists, held me at an odd angle and prevented me from getting enough leverage to sufficiently pull at my bonds. Wood sheeting guarded the windows against unwanted eyes. Turning, I noticed the body sitting next to me.

Also handcuffed to the thick pipe, the slumped figure stank from a layer of grime coupled with the smell of rotting flesh. A pool of dried blood glued his tattered pants to the floor. Scars, some healed but most not, scored his hairless chest and thick arms. A delighted artist had etched his flesh; his tortured eyes remained open, his face a rictus of frozen terror.

"I see you met ... what was his name again?" Lyndsey asked her father.

"Marcus."

"Yes, Marcus. He was delicious." The word “delicious” rattled like wind-scattered bones in my ear. “A homeless gentleman I met through some of my work with the shelter. We go through the motions of charitable acts to prove that we are more than motes of dust with delusions of grandeur."

"Do you know your Bible?" Roush asked.

"The Bible?" I remembered my Sunday School lessons well.

Professor Roush crouched down to eye level with me—close, but not too close—his fetid breath pouring on me like stink rising from steaming shit. "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" We bit into the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and it bit back. Sin came into the world and it was passed down through him. Passed down could mean genes. What if the original bodies were perfect, that's why people lived 600, 800 years; but sin, once in place, slowly set in and corrupted the bodies?"

"Professor ... Martin, you've been under a lot of strain..."

"Eradicating sin nature, our ability to sin—by removing the option to sin, we can do what God couldn't. Wouldn't. He was afraid. Afraid and wanting people to come begging to him as worship."

"What's life without the ability to make stupid choices?"

"We can still choose, but we would only have good options. What we are doing here will eliminate the need for atonement. We could truly vanquish evil."

"Like smallpox." I stalled, hoping for an opportunity to present itself for me to escape. The conversation distracted me from the throbbing ache in my wrists.

"Exactly like smallpox. Plagues come in many forms and we are dealing with the worst plague we've ever known. We've sat back too long without doing anything about it because we've lacked the technology. My synthetic T-cell invades genetic code and activates latent introns, the dormant sequences of DNA. This sets off a cascade of reactions, part of a gene super-family, behavioral and physical characteristics from perhaps millions of years ago. However..."

"There have been some unanticipated complications." I tugged at my restraints again. My struggles ceased once I caught the professor's faraway gaze. I followed it until I, too, landed on Lyndsey.

"Genes have many different roles to play in the proper functioning of an organism. A defect in a gene expressed in one tissue might have a deleterious effect on other tissues. Lyndsey's DNA is in a state of ribostatic flux. Her genetic codes are being resequenced and her cells are mutating as a result. At a fundamental level, she is no longer human."

Bereft of my compulsory need to flirt, I saw Lyndsey with a greater clarity. With her sleek and sullen face, she wore the mask of a funeral-goer. A haunting apathy filled her eyes, a hollowness unable to quite catch light because they had stared into the dark for far too long. Hers was a corruption in the code; almost as if the therapy drove out her soul.

With the demeanor of an alcoholic sauntering into a bar, she walked over and straddled me. She brought a scalpel to bear and placed the cool flat of it against my face. I frantically pulled at my chains, attempting to shake either her off or myself free, but she pressed a thin and cruel finger to my lips. She caressed my cheek, her freezing fingertips producing an ache where they lingered too long. The gesture-meant to be tender, perhaps even seductive-had the calculation of someone approximating emotions with the skill of a child's first introduction to a piano. Suddenly, she seemed so young, a girl searching for the words to describe concepts she had little experience with. Her free hand trailed down my chest and reached into my lap, unbuckling my belt and unzipping my pants. She fished my manhood from my briefs, her eyes not breaking their gaze.

"No." Rage boiled inside me, my struggles chafing the skin from my wrists. I wondered how much a man

could endure before he broke from who he was.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," Roush offered.

"Professor ... Martin, we make bad decisions every day of our lives. Please, you're making one now."

"You think you're better than you are," Lyndsey said.

"The sin of pride," Roush lowered his head as if weighed down by his thoughts.

"Such a pretty face. It makes me want to keep it forever."

The blade bit into my tender flesh, warm blood pooling then dribbling down the side of my face. She hesitated in her implied threat to peel the flesh from my skull, though she may have wanted to savor the moment, hypnotized by the tenor of my scream. Or vicariously experiencing the feelings she could no longer tap into. I swelled to rigidity despite myself, the word "no" forming and dying on my lips once more. Lyndsey's hips undulated until I slipped into her cold, velveteen embrace.

Her father watched.

"What was that about alchemists believing that watching the transformation of lead to gold purified the soul?" Roush's voice sounded so far away. "That's it, the alchemy of the soul. Metal transmutation as a means to an end; the act of witnessing the transformation purifies the soul. Change caused by witnessing atomic phenomena, rather similar to the idea of photons behaving like waves or particles depending on the intentions of the experimenters."

Lyndsey thrust herself down upon me as I spasmed within her; another wan smile lit her face. I sat there as she pulled herself from me, angry tears welling in—but not escaping—my eyes.

"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men."

"We have what we need." Lyndsey patted her belly like a woman pushing away from a buffet.

"What of him?" Roush glanced at my slumping figure.

"He no longer matters. None of this does. We're done."

"Are you sure?"

"A mother always knows."

* * * *

We all make bad decisions.

Overcast and pregnant with rain, the evening clouds were a snapshot of grief. Fatigue wormed its way into my bones with the tenacity of rage. Black chunks of silence haunted me as I stared out my windows. I had retreated to the routine of my life to process being alive, if not whole, but it was far short of living. Waiting in my empty house was too much. I relived the memories of that night for months. One day it struck me. *Sometimes we can't bring ourselves to part with attachments to our past.* Roush had kept his old home, the ghost of Susan still running about; perhaps hoping to redeem it, give it a second chance. My rage focused itself again and I stepped out, wanting some measure of control back. Maybe if I had told someone ... no, it was my burden, my shame to carry. In the end, we all carried our sins alone.

A sickening wave of nausea hit me when I saw them. I could still feel the bite of metal cutting into my

wrists. The helplessness. The powerlessness. I grew as still as an owl that had spied a field mouse—mice—caught in their own routine. They were reading of all things, nary a worry in the world: Roush a Bible and Lyndsey the day's newspaper. A baby monitor squawked beside her. Three generations of madness under one roof, all of them there of their own free will. All except the boy. I knew it was a boy without even seeing him. The boy never asked to be born, never asked to be caught up in their madness. Strains of classical music emanated from the monitor and from the stairwell.

I wondered if she could know grief or if she would have to torture it out of someone else.

Sidling up the stairs, I stretched my joints that had grown stiff from hiding and waiting. The bedroom door opened without a creak. A homemade mobile—with the letters A, C, T, and G dangling down—danced just out of reach. I didn't know what I believed anymore. Sometimes I wanted to—I needed to—believe someone was paying attention. During the many lonely nights, I'd been tempted to call out in the hope of catching His or Her ear; to remind them of the mess they left behind. I wanted to pretend someone was listening and that they cared. We all made bad decisions, we all wanted forgiveness, to cling to our ritual comforts and console ourselves. I stood over the crib, and the baby glanced at me with mild disinterest. A vague luminescence flickered in the boy's eyes. I knew I stared into a monstrous abyss. This baby born with an empty soul, or rather, a soul not infused by the hand of its Creator. Not capable of choice. Irrational. Instinctual. Spiritually, they had already killed it.

So I clutched a pillow in my hand.

* * * *

One of R. Neube's favorite activities is sitting on the southern bank of the Ohio River waiting for story ideas to come his way. Alas, five-legged rats are so overdone. A fulltime, self-unemployed writer, he credits his wife's hatred of housework for giving him the opportunity of staying at home and spinning his yarns.

His next published story will appear in the July, 2008 issue of *Asimov's*.

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Feverish Solutions

by Ryck Neube

"Will she feel anything?" Delta Nolana asked at the end of the negotiation.

"What do you think we are? Monsters?" snapped the nameless buyer.

"Aren't we all?"

"She'll be given an overdose of curare. After she's dead, we will replace her blood with a brine and pepper solution. After the evisceration, we'll stuff her with my grandmother's cornbread stuffing. Six hours later, she'll emerge from the oven and bring more joy into the world than she ever did alive."

Delta dried her brow on the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

Buyer shielded his mouth with a wrinkled hand lest hidden cameras read his lips. "Of course, our doctor must test her first. There are so many diseases out there."

Delta Nolana straightened herself to her full height of two meters, dwarfing the old man. Her gray eyes swept the dock for hidden CIB agents.

"Testing goes without saying, but your politicians aren't allowing us off the dock," she said. "You'll have to bring your doctor here. Say, same time tomorrow."

"Fine. Does she know about our ... arrangement?" Buyer's flaccid jowls suddenly tightened as if his face were being stretched.

"Miriam knows. She tried to suicide last month. This time we'll make certain she succeeds."

"Everybody wins." He patted her waist.

Delta cringed, but forced her body to stay remain still. "Sure, we're all winners."

Buyer's liver-spotted hand caressed Delta's fingers. "I envy you modern Gypsies, always traveling. It's so boring to have the same view all the time, the same people at every business meeting."

"All I know about Gypsies comes from TV. I got the impression they *wanted* to be nomads. We're the homeless, flying the circuit from polis to polis to collect our charity while waiting for some miracle to give us a home."

The old man nodded his head. "You're too young to remember the crowding, the epidemics. Right after World War III, we crammed twenty-five thousand Earther refugees into one hall here, barely a square meter per person. That was cruel. You're lucky to have your spacious grainships and the protection of the Trade Commission."

"Sure, lucky." So lucky a young woman volunteered to be eaten by high society perverts rather than spend another year on our grainship, Delta didn't say.

She dropped her hand on his stooped shoulder when he turned to leave. "Forgotten the handsel? I'll have to grease a lot of palms to bring this off."

He smiled, showing his perfect teeth. Manicured fingers reached inside the starched jumpsuit Buyer wore over his Doulle suit in a vain attempt at camouflage. Five folded, bright blue banknotes slipped into

Delta's scarred and calloused hand.

"See you mañana," she said, to prevent her mouth from cursing him.

Delta watched the old man limp to the airlock. The cops guarding the hatch snapped to attention. At first she thought he was merely shaking hands with them like an oily politician, then she saw a flash of blue and realized hush money was changing hands.

It surprised her that it surprised her.

"Everything's a racket," she mumbled to herself as she entered the converted grainship.

Long legs carried Delta Nolana down a corridor bereft of humanity. Smells lingered like angry ghosts. An echo shook the ventilators. Her imagination perceived it as a tortured soul's final scream. *When had home become hell?* she wondered. It was the fever, she hoped, wiping her fiery brow.

She turned into Chicago Hold and walked by the eighteen lanes separating the tidy rows of coffin homes stacked three high. At Number Nine, she entered her code and then she pressed her thumb against the sensor.

On her knees, she eased through the door, securing it with her foot once she was inside. Two and a half meters deep, one meter square, coffins were deceptively spacious to those who had grown up in one. An extra coffin had been wed to her original home in order to store gray market goodies from meat to lingerie. The merchandise spilled into her domicile no matter how carefully she stacked it.

The clutter doubled the amount of contortion necessary for a night's sleep. It took forever to get the lumps out of her futon. By then, sleep eluded her. A blast from an inhaler failed to relieve the aches in her chest.

Rolling onto her back, Delta keyed her monitor. A long click through the television channels offered by the polis failed to engage her interest. Bored, Delta set her keyboard on her stomach and tapped into the ship's Bulletin Board. Most of the new entries were complaints about the lockdown. Idiots. She'd been among the minority who voted to flee Earth orbit after the *Grainship 980* had been stormed by an angry mob from Kerrigan Polis three months ago. Over seven thousand grainers had been murdered before order was restored. Even now, the Kerrigans were refusing to indict the mob leaders. However, safety was a secondary issue to the masses—charity was better around L-5 than elsewhere.

"The more their politicians use grainers as pawns, the more their people hate us," Delta muttered to herself.

She shelled into the dock computer, the only access city officials allowed the grainers. A sociologist had posted two long questionnaires. On Taylor Polis, the ten-buck payment was nominal to the point of risible. On a grainship, a hard currency tenner was well worth the effort of answering seven hundred and fourteen questions. She keyed her ID and completed both.

Her lies were smooth and well-practiced. Nobody wanted to hear how she'd turned her first trick at the age of nine for a box of fried chicken. That her parents were religious fanatics who had refused to be evacuated from Earth when the Dyb' ship landed in her neck of Appalachia; how they preferred death over accepting help from godless aliens. At every opportunity, Delta raved about her brother Alpha who had raised her aboard the grainship after rescuing her from the cultists. She did not mention how he'd been murdered while trying to stop a drunken brawl.

Overall, Delta sought to paint an image of noble poverty. She feared the truth would only increase the bigotry grainers faced.

She finally fell asleep and dreamed of rawboned Alpha. Her brother had been terrified the first time he went on the Mayor's Channel to argue against naming the 474, yet he'd eloquently defended his position. Naming the ship denoted acceptance of the converted grain-hauler as their home. As long as the ship's name remained numbers, so remained the hope of resettlement elsewhere.

Gentle Alpha could have been a great mayor. He could have changed the face of grainer life. Could have...

After Delta woke, she walked to the cafeteria by way of the Corridor of the Dead, stopping at Alpha's plaque to dust it. Like the majority of memorials, his name was ineptly scratched into the lid of an aluminum ration box. She remembered spending weeks with a sharpened screwdriver engraving it.

The dust caused a coughing fit, forcing her to dose herself with the inhaler. The poison left her lightheaded.

The noise of the cafeteria greeted her long before its smells. Today's offering was vegetable stew, fried *kinal* cakes, a vitamin bar, and a cup of coffee. Real coffee. She couldn't recall the last time the cafeteria had served coffee. Little wonder her fellow idiots preferred to risk their lives docking at Taylor.

Miriam Carr was present. Delta sat beside the grisette. The youngster reeked of moonshine, looking as bad as Delta felt. Miriam's head bounced as if it were mounted on a spring. A considerable amount of her meal decorated her jumpsuit and chin. Oversized blue eyes were bloodshot and unfocused.

Girl she was, thought Delta. When *Delta* had been sixteen, she was already running a successful black market operation. She'd killed once in self-defense and once for revenge. Delta learned from the past, utilized her present, and hoped for her future.

Miriam Carr had no past, courtesy of brain damage caused by long-term consumption of moonshine mixed with chem cocktails. Her present revolved around a full-time search for the next buzz. And her future was a formal dinner.

"This is lucky. I don't have to hunt you down. The customer wants to see you on the dock tonight, so you're spending the day with me."

"Huh? Oh. Good," squeaked Miriam's unfortunate voice.

"We need to get you cleaned up." The grisette's stench caused Delta's eyes to water.

"I'm filthy. We're all—"

"I don't want to hear your whining. You can still back out. Nobody will make you do this."

"You're the nicest pimp I've ever had."

Delta stuffed an entire *kinal* cake into her mouth to keep from cursing the loser. She nodded as Mayor Bobby Ferrell walked by with his tray. His knowing wink spoiled the taste of the alien vegetable.

"Am I doing the right thing?" asked Miriam.

"No, you spoiled brat. If you were my daughter, I'd thump a wart upside your head. That is, if you didn't like that sort of thing so much."

Carr giggled. "This would kill them, wouldn't it?"

Delta nodded, knowing the grisette referred to her late parents. As the ship's previous mayor, Doreen

Carr had set an uncommon value on her façade of normality.

Death by rumor was a cruel and unusual punishment. Delta doubted if Samuel Carr had been sacrificed for his wife's career, however often she heard it whispered. Certainly, his death from radiation poisoning after heroically patching a hole in the ship's hull had clinched the election for Doreen.

That rumor had been the start of Mayor Carr's ordeal, as Bobby Ferrell's supporters had blanketed the ship with half-truths. So what if Doreen had a vinyl fetish? So what if there was money missing from the ship's treasury? The mayor didn't have access to that particular account. So what if she had Miriam's arrests erased from the record? What mother wouldn't? So what if Miriam would 'confess' to anything, if the reporter poured enough booze into her?

To this day Delta wondered whether Mayor Carr had actually airlocked herself. Suicide seemed an anomaly for a fighter like Carr. Delta's eye strayed to the current mayor as he held court surrounded by his thugs. Had Bobby Ferrell arranged the putative suicide? Another of Ferrell's *deals*?

I had a crush on Sam, Delta thought. I admired Doreen. Now I'm killing their only child.

The food choked Delta. It didn't pay to question the past on a grainship.

After inhaling her meal and dumping the trays, she towed Miriam out of the cafeteria, no small accomplishment given the loser's rubbery legs.

It was a long trek to the Clean Center. Delta swapped three packets of oatmeal cookies to score fresh jumpsuits for the two of them. It cost another packet to have someone guard her poke and clean clothes. Ms. Loser spouted attitude as they entered the steam room. Delta instructed Miriam on the use of a full nelson until the grisette reconciled herself to twenty minutes of sweating silence. A long shower capped the experience.

The cleansing made Miriam appear a decade younger, a child. It also accentuated the myriad scars decorating her body. Miriam's psych report mentioned a penchant for self-mutilation, but nothing had prepared Delta for how thorough she had been.

She towed her ward back to Gold Lane. Inside Number Nine coffin, Delta opened her safe and offered the girl a heroin derm. The loser slapped it on her neck and eyed Delta.

"What the hell kinda name is Nolana? Sounds made-up to me."

"It is. My parents' cult dropped out of society. Nolana comes from NO LAst NAME. In the wrong hands, God can make you as stupid as drugs."

"Can I have another derm?"

"No. Watch TV and behave yourself."

"Let's have sex."

"No. Watch TV and shut up."

"Beat me."

"Watch TV."

Miriam chuckled as the narcotic suffused her brain. She rolled beneath the screen. Delta placed the remote on her belly.

"I'm so sick of being," mumbled the grisette, before she had to concentrate on operating the remote.

Delta handcuffed Miriam to the lockbox at the head of the coffin after she had shifted the consumables out of her guest's reach. She crawled out of her coffin and double-locked the hatch.

Her stomach churned. Mayor Doreen Carr had been one of Delta's heroes. Sam Carr had been a hero to the whole ship. Unlike Alpha Nolana, they had survived long enough to make a difference. And here she was murdering their only child. Where her money belt pressed against Delta's flesh, the skin crawled.

Delta deflated as she sighed. A shadow fell across her size nines. Missy Ferrell, the mayor's wife, brushed her fashionably-plaid hair. The silver paint she wore in lieu of clothing glittered beneath the lights. She squatted and played with the ribbons atop her satin slippers.

"Who sold you the paint, Missy?"

Delta's mind raced. Body paint hadn't been on any of the manifests logged with the ship's Purchase Bureau, ergo someone had smuggled it aboard the grainship. A career in the gray market required Delta to know *everyone* bringing in goodies.

"A friend bought it on the dock. I love the way it sparkles. Cheap, too."

Delta's interest waned; cheap meant barrels of the stuff had come aboard. Volume traffic was not her style.

"It's stunning. Of course, you have the body for it. I swear, you grow younger every year. How are the kids?" Why are you here? Delta forced herself not to ask.

Missy covered her mouth with a silver hand in case someone was filming the encounter. "Bobby wanted to make certain there was no problem with the lunatic."

Delta covered her own mouth and whispered, "Her name is Miriam."

"Did the customer give *us* the upfront money? Bobby has a lot of expenses."

Is Mayor Ferrell hiring more thugs? Delta did not ask.

Delta's free hand slipped into the pocket of her jumpsuit and cupped four one thousand dollar Taylor bills. Even folded, the large blue bills were hard to keep palmed as Delta slid the currency into the slipper Missy had untied. The silver woman cleared her throat until Delta tied the bow. The woman walked away.

Delta strolled, trying to stay a step ahead of the depression that cloaked her. Bad enough that grainers sold themselves as indentured servants to the fortunates who had homes in habitats and poleis. Bad enough that her peers embraced whatever poison made them forget their life in the coffin lane.

"Bad enough turns worse. Now we're feeding cannibals."

She could almost understand necrophilia. Goodness knows, she'd endured her share of lovers who were no improvement on corpses. But to eat someone?

"Reckon it has to be the rush of the forbidden."

"Talking to yourself again, Nolana?"

Delta spun, reaching for the sharpened screwdriver holstered in her burlap poke's strap.

Captain Lucy Fulton threw up her hands and stepped back, miming terror. She tossed her thick mane of violet hair, posing like a model. "What's got you spooked, Nolana?"

"Some days grate my nerves. How's our good captain doing?" Delta breathed through her mouth to avoid the woman's noxious perfume.

"The Pilot's Guild bitched at the Trade Commission, so now the local authorities must allow captains off the dock. I'm allowed one guest. Want to come with? We'll prowl 'til we get lucky."

"No can do. I've got a deal hatching. Could you do a fav for me? I need to wire some money to my bank account on Deimos."

"You sly fox."

"It won't take you five minutes." Delta reached into a pouch of her money belt and produced a bulging envelope. She opened it, showing the captain the bank card nested among scores of different currencies. "I've programmed the card. All the teller has to do is run it. Here." She rummaged in another pouch of the belt and withdrew a hundred-dollar Reagan coin. "Have a couple of drinks on me."

Captain Fulton winked before stuffing the envelope into her pocket. "I won't forget." Laughing, she headed toward the dock.

Delta doubted if more than four people on the grainship possessed bank accounts. If she saved enough, there was always the possibility she could buy herself a citizenship somewhere. The possibility of escape. Hope was all society had left grainers.

Delta continued her walk, not realizing she had a destination until she'd reached it. Climbing a ladder, she shouldered aside the hatch and stepped into the ship's navigation dome.

Doctor Fields nodded at her, then resumed staring at Earth in the center of the transparent dome. He reminded her of a soldier standing at ease, coiled muscles awaiting the call to duty. The reflection of the planet blanketed them in blue light, although she knew that was an illusion of the Jensen field protecting the grainship from solar radiation.

"How is our deal going?" asked Fields.

"I have Miriam caged and cleaned. Their medico will meet us on the dock tonight to check her out."

"When I was working as a paramedic on Mobil Habitat, I was called to a cannibal bust. They arrested eighteen people. According to the newspapers, their combined net worth was nine billion. Each had everything—wealth, fame, five or six trophy spouses. What could motivate them to do something so unnatural? Humans are..." His sigh was as big as space itself.

"In the German language there is a word: *opfer*. It can mean either victim or sacrifice. Fitting, isn't it?"

"I didn't know you spoke German, Nolana."

"Just because my parents jerked me out of fourth grade doesn't mean I'm stupid, Doc. Has anyone else found out about our ship's plague?"

"Nope, I told my patients it was flu."

"If we are declared a plague ship, it's all over but the dying."

"Don't blow it out of proportion, Nolana. We'll be quarantined off New Dearborn Polis for a year. Who

knows, the Trade Commission *might* be able to afford treatment for us."

"I'm not concerned about the disease. It's the reaction of the rest of the charity circuit that scares me. The slaughter of the *219* was no accident," said Delta.

"There's no proof a crime took place. Tugs accidentally ram ships all the time. The lanes are crowded."

"Ask Cap Fulton to run her computer simulation for you. It's impossible for an unmanned tug to rip open every hold on a grainship. Two, four, even six holds could be punctured, but the impact should have caused the tug to recoil, not open up the *219* from stem to stern. The grainship was gutted deliberately. They were doomed the instant they announced the plague aboard their ship. You mention Zebra Fever, and people stop thinking logically. Nobody wants a plague ship docking near their home."

Doctor Fields shook his head and whispered, "How much of the serum culture can we afford?"

"My source will sell us a liter of culture for the money the cannibals give us. As long as it's fed well, the engineered *E. coli* will double the amount of serum they produce every week."

"I, I'm not confident about distilling the serum."

"What the hell? It's too late to be having doubts. You said you could do this," Delta snapped.

"Don't strut that attitude with me, Nolana. Purity control is always a problem, but none of the contaminants *should* harm our patients."

"But you can do it."

"Yes, I can, but once the fever starts speckling and striping skin, people are going to know about the fever. And once their flesh starts peeling—"

"I want a list of the other victims."

"Why?" The doctor lifted Nolana's eyelid, tsking as he studied her pupil. "How high is your fever?"

"If your patients turn into zebras, I have ways of keeping them quiet." She laughed at his grimace. "I'm *not* a killer. The mayor is buying a crate of summer sausages. We'll distribute them to the victims in exchange for them hiding and keeping their mouths shut."

"Sausage bribery? May I have one?" He checked her pulse. "Not bad, only two hundred."

"Why not? It's Mayor Bobby's dime."

"This cover-up won't work. I had my first case fifteen days ago, my second eight days ago, my third and fourth six days ago, the fifth through ninth three days ago, and eight today. Do the math. They've probably infected a dozen people each. By the end of the month, we're talking hundreds of patients. We can't hide this epidemic."

"We've only got four more days here at Taylor. Then our ship will swing out to Mars. That'll give us six weeks of travel to stop this epidemic," said Delta.

"The serum works slowly. We can't keep the outbreak secret."

"As long as we're gone from L-5 when the news leaks. There's no other option."

"The Trade Commission—"

Delta growled. "Lookit, we have to try. The good citizens in their tidy homes already hate us. Do we need to give them a reason that singles out the 474? Do you want a tug *accidentally* ramming us?" She bit her tongue to stop the diatribe.

"Paranoia is a symptom of Zebra Fever."

"I was paranoid before I got sick. I need more spray."

"No. The mercury compounds you've been inhaling only slow the replication of the virus. You're already showing signs of liver failure. Mercury is more toxic than the fever at this point. Killing yourself helps no one." He pulled open her jumpsuit, shifting a breast to stare at the darkening of the skin on her rib cage. "You're already beginning to stripe. Bet that's going to need a skin graft. In another week, you're going to be too sick to walk."

"I only need a few more days. But I can't spread the disease, right?"

"Would I allow you to walk around infectious? That's one good thing about poisoning you with mercury. It cleansed your lungs of the virus. As long as you refrain from sex, don't bleed on anyone, and are careful about your toilet habits, your infection will be contained within this splendid body. And for heaven's sake, don't serve yourself for dinner."

"I'll be okay. We'll have the serum in a few days."

He shook his head slowly, sadly. His eyes returned to the planet overhead. "So blue. So dead."

Delta refused to look at Earth. As if it were a lover who had betrayed her, she never wanted to see the planet again.

Down she climbed from the chamber, more depressed than ever. Her cyanotic fingertips made her wonder how much longer mercury poisoning would protect her from the fever's relentless advance.

She wanted to return home and sleep for days. However, thoughts of home brought to mind her handcuffed guest, further depressing her.

A vaguely familiar woman grabbed her forearm. "Hey, you in the ozone or something?"

"Just thinking," replied Delta. Did all monsters feel this dizzy, this weak? she wondered.

"That's a bad habit. Too much thinking and the airlock starts looking good." She was as tall as Delta, having lived her life under the .7 standard gravity of the ship. A handful of brown tufts dangled from her tattooed scalp.

"What do you need?" Delta could almost feel the mode shift. Nolana the Gray Marketeer assumed the helm. The fever and the depression retreated. Her hand slipped around the strap of her poke, pulling the bag around her body.

"I was wondering about this." The woman produced a ring. "My mother died last week. I inherited her coffin and this."

Delta removed her multimeter from its holster. A quick scan showed the two carat emerald was poorly cut, but only slightly flawed. The gold weighed eleven grams at eighty-two percent purity. Antique or esthetic value, there was none.

She shared the data. "Hang onto the ring until we reach the Mars Circuit. They're more into jewelry than

the Earther Circuit. If you're really desperate, you might try the dock. Never can tell when you'll run into someone with more money than sense. Don't take less than five grand."

"I-I don't want to leave the ship. You can't tell what will happen out there. How much will you give me?"

"I don't have that kind of cash. What do you need the money for?"

Her brown eyes glowed and then her gaze darted toward the deck. "I want to double my coffin, but the neighbors won't cooperate."

Delta nodded. "I can find a couple that is splitting and wants two separate coffins in exchange for their double. If I were you, I'd keep that ring. You never know when an asset like that will buy you the medicine that will save you from the epidemic *du jour*."

The customer looked dubious. On a ship of cons it behooved her to be skeptical.

Delta pulled out her chip-plate and banged into her deal directory. "What's your name and address?" She logged it. "I'll see what's on the market and talk to you tomorrow." She checked her schedule. "Make that the day after tomorrow. You can wait a few days, can't you?"

"I guess."

They parted company. Coffin configurations removed Delta's neural traffic jams. Housing swaps had been her bread and butter during that long business lull marking the last Martian/L-5 Cold War. That had been a pain, stuck halfway to Earth orbit in a herd of grainships shepherded by a pair of trigger-happy customs' cutters for months.

Delta was in Chicago Hold before she knew it. As her exhausted calves turned down Gold Lane, she felt like the old Nolana: gray marketeer extraordinaire. She slowly went to her knees and punched her code into the lock, then thumbed the sensorpad. The hatch clicked open.

"Wait a min, didn't I double-lock?"

Her coffin was empty.

A shadow loomed over her; a satin slipper stomped her hand. A steely hand grabbed her ankle and jerked. She slammed into the deck an instant before a stunstick cast a lightning bolt into her skull.

Gagging, Delta jerked to life. Her reeling senses told her this wasn't the grainship. The air was too fresh, too warm. A pair of hands tore the burlap poke off her shoulder; its strap nearly ripped off her ear. Her sharpened screwdriver flew across the room. Delta feared her retching would never stop.

"Nothing in here but junk."

Delta's bag banged against her head. She seized it, curling around its cargo of barter goodies. It gave her something to focus upon other than her misery.

"We'll take it nice and easy, grainer. We're Confed Internal Bureau—CIB. You know what that means?" The woman wore an aqua suit. Short and stout, the way she moved hinted at muscle, not fat. Her head was shaved except for two long blonde strips.

Delta grabbed an oxygen mask when the woman offered it. Cool, crisp air cleansed her lungs, easing the stomach cramps. She answered as soon as her throat cleared. "Of course, CIB hunts spies and revolutionaries."

Aqua Suit said, "And assorted scum. You are far away from the garbage scow you call home."

"Why?" Delta barely had the courage to ask. Who had betrayed her? Who had allowed CIB agents aboard her ship?

"Can you see this?" The woman squatted, showing Delta a lump of clay the size of a pea. She smashed it on the table and touched it with a stunstick. Current zapped. The explosion blew a hole through the table.

Oxygen mask in one hand, the poke in the other, Delta wheezed and nodded. CIB agents were one of the most divisive issues among the Lunar/L-5 Confederacy. Any institution beyond the law was a problem, however well it protected the government.

Delta recoiled as the woman squashed another lump into one of her nostrils.

"A gram of explosives probably won't kill you when it blows your face off. Do you have a cosmetic surgeon aboard your flying compost heap?"

"You win," Delta blurted. Sweat streamed from every pore. "I'll cooperate fully with the Bureau." Delta's voice sounded distorted, courtesy of the explosives.

"The topic is cannibalism."

"I only dealt with one person—an old man with liver spots on his hands and a saggy face. He stood one-point-seven meters tall, maybe ninety kilos. He wore a huge silver ring in the shape of an eagle with its wings wrapped around his finger. He was balding with a dirty gray fringe. I'd be happy to point him out in a line-up."

"Where is the victim?"

"I left her handcuffed inside my coffin. She was gone when I was captured."

"Who is she?"

"Miriam Carr. She tried to suicide and failed. She volunteered."

"The penalty for cannibalism, voluntary or nay, is airlocking. However, I'm in a merciful mood so I'll give you a choice—airlocking, or I detonate the charge. Well? I haven't got all day."

Delta looked up, wanting one moment of eye contact with her torturer. Instead, she saw a camera in the corner pointed at her. The torturer punched a remote and a TV emerged from the wall. A talking news head explained the technique of the inquisitor while the Delta on the screen bounced her head from the camera to the screen. Delta's voice came from the TV, describing Buyer as a tall, blond grainer from another ship. Delta gaped. The computer-generated mockery sounded more real than her own voice.

"Is it sweeps week?"

"You're a lesson to other grainers. We're tired of you parasites." The slap rocked Delta.

"We're tired of having your mobile crime waves docked with our homes." The second slap hurt more since Delta had anticipated it.

"My God, you people are debased enough to sell your teenagers to cannibals. Now the entire solar system will know what scum *you people* are." The third slap struck numb flesh. "I can think of no punishment worse than sending you back to your ship. Excrement deserves its sewer."

A hand seized her hair, another grabbed her ankles. In a trice she was dragged from the chamber. Delta sneezed the explosive from her nostril. A door hissed open. Noise rolled over her, an avalanche of sound.

"We thought you'd like to spend some quality time with your fans," yelled the uniformed thug who surrendered a handful of Delta's hair in order to latch onto her arms. They swung her twice before tossing her into the crowd.

Delta bowled over three people. The mob redoubled their decibels and surged toward her as she rolled, scrambled, and slammed into the closed door. With the clarity of impending death, Delta calmly ignored the kicks and spits and curses. Hopeless as a grainer.

She regained consciousness at the bottom of a garbage chute. Delta swallowed her outrage at being alive and scrambled to her feet. Instinctively, she shouldered her burlap poke. That way she could use both of her hands to clutch her oft-kicked belly and kidneys as she fled.

She'd never been inside Taylor Polis, even back in the days when grainers roamed free. However, a polis was a polis—a series of doughnut-shaped halls stacked in a tube, varying only in the arrangement of the residential and business halls. She found a sign pointing to the train station connecting the doughnuts. Once there, she lurched into a bathroom and hid in a stall.

Her jumpsuit betrayed her as a grainer. Ripping the Velcro clasps apart, Delta discovered a broken knife blade embedded in her money belt. Fist-sized bruises dotted her flesh for a leopard look. It was hard to discern the bruises from the disease's stripes.

As shredded and bloodstained as her jumpsuit was, she might be mistaken for one of those trendy-wendys she'd seen on CNN. Withdrawing the broken knife blade, she hacked off sleeves and legs, which she used to wrap her head in a ragged version of a turban. She then sliced the back out of the jumpsuit. The mirror over the sink showed a battered wendy looking for a trendy to finish beating the crap out of her.

Miriam would love this, she thought.

She slipped from the bathroom. The station was empty. The sounds of distant sirens wafted down the ramp. Carefully studying the ceiling, Delta figured where the surveillance cameras were hidden. It wasn't difficult to avoid them as she read the map and purchased a ticket to Panikow Hall—the last stop before the dock—from the automatic vendor. She would sneak the rest of the way via maintenance tunnels.

The clock showed she had a thirteen-minute wait for the next train. Swigging the hot tea she'd bought from a machine calmed her cramping stomach. The fresh bloodstain spreading slowly down her thigh hinted at internal injuries. The benches were in the path of the cameras, so she leaned against a wall and prayed she wouldn't collapse.

The big board suddenly flashed: SCHEDULED TRAINS WILL BE DELAYED DUE TO TERRORIST ACTIVITY IN GOVERNMENT HALL. CHARTERS WILL NOT BE AFFECTED.

Delta slid to the cool deck. There would be no escape. Why hadn't she died back there? It would have been so much easier.

A prim-looking man stepped onto the platform. He stared at Delta with gold-dyed eyes. His austere suit could be a uniform. He kicked Delta's ankle once, softly, then a second time with power.

"How much do you charge?" Suit glanced with slit eyes, communicating how embarrassed he'd be should

anyone see them together.

"I'm new at this," Delta sputtered.

He grabbed an ear and pulled Delta to her feet. "Somebody did you good."

"It was my first. It went too far. Give me a place to stay tonight, and I'm free. Anything you desire."

"I'll be gentler than your first beast," he promised, pupils dilating. "But you have to take money. That's part of the fun."

Suit walked over to the vending machine and inserted a bank card. Punching the buttons, he cocked his head toward Delta. "I've ordered a charter."

Twin doors opened. Delta stumbled into a cramped car. Suit squeezed in beside her, one hand exploring her body while the other punched the confirmation. The doors closed, then the car hissed down its tube.

"I always had this fantasy, but I didn't dare," Delta cozened. "My friend and I came here on vacation. We met a couple and—I can't go back to the hotel like this."

The trendy's hand snaked around Delta's neck. A finger pressed against the base of her windpipe, cutting off her breath. "I don't want to know your life's story." He shoved currency into her mouth. "If you're a good little wendy, I'll send you back to your hotel in a nice, new outfit. A little paint will hide your bruises." His hand vanished inside her tattered jumpsuit to stuff currency elsewhere.

Delta feigned a passionate moan and rubbed against the pervert. I'm as bad as Miriam, she thought. Withal, a night out of circulation would improve her chance of sneaking back aboard the 474.

"Please teach me how to be a good wendy," she begged.

"I'll teach you *everything*," he promised, biting Delta's broad shoulder. "You are so wicked."

"I will be," Delta promised.

She culled her memory for dialogue from the movie *WENDY* that had swept the Oscars a few years back. She cursed herself for falling asleep during the tale of a librarian's journey through the S&M subculture. Still, how hard could it be?

Suit's home was the size of Chicago Hold. He guided Delta into a bathroom with a tub larger than her coffin. A long, scalding bath eased her aches. Suit sported a full-torso tattoo of ivy. They split the contents of a crystal decanter of red wine made bitter with narcotics. That stilled the rest of her physical woes.

Staggering into the bedroom, they collapsed onto an orgy-sized bed. Suit had a quick cry and a longer mewl about his pressure-filled life in the CEO lane. Delta cuddled and commiserated, hiding her contempt for such wimpy miseries.

Suit ordered Delta to lick the tears from his face. He lurched off and returned with another decanter, commanding Delta to chug it. Golden-dyed eyes stayed on her the whole time, providing her with no opportunity to pour the swill anywhere but down her throat. Suit slapped derms on his neck, and became increasingly energetic as the chems dissolved his self-pity.

By the time the handcuffs appeared, Delta was too loaded to move. It puzzled her that Suit would numb her out before the whips emerged. Wasn't pain as much a part of the game as submission?

Consciousness slipped away.

Delta woke beside Miriam. For a moment her foggy mind insisted they were in her coffin, and her lousy day had merely been a nightmare. However, the paralysis was too total to be a mere hangover. The huge room was stainless steel. Sterile. Surgical.

A liver-spotted hand caressed her bruised breast. Delta tried to move her head, but it was too heavy. Instead, a hand gripped her chin and moved it for her. Buyer smiled. His fingers pulled the corners of her mouth into a parody of a grin.

"You caused us considerable anxiety, Citizen Nolana. But we aren't monsters. Isn't it precisely how I promised? No pain. Soon, we'll give you an overdose, and our party will commence."

He turned Delta's head to look at Miriam. The grisette's blue eyes fluttered open without focusing. Her slow-motion giggle was barely audible. A wheeze later, Miriam returned to her stupor.

"Here, taste." He shoved a morsel into Delta's mouth, moved her jaw. "This cornbread stuffing recipe has been passed down in my family for eight generations. The secret is lots of sage. It makes all the difference. Otherwise, you grainers taste so gamey."

"What an odd dappling effect across her ribs. What kind of whip did you use?" asked a woman with large diamonds embedded in the skin above her thin eyebrows. She licked Delta's chest to see if the stripe would come off.

Delta wanted to laugh, but the paralysis refused to ease its steely grip. How would the perverts explain catching Zebra Fever in their disease-free paradise? This was sweet justice.

Suit's voice drifted into her ear. "I told you I could find her before she talked to the press. You simply have to think like a loser."

"Your mayor was very cooperative. We couldn't have done this without him," said Buyer.

"Double the pleasure, double the profit," quipped Missy Ferrell, slapping Delta's nose with a stack of currency. "Who's going to escort me back to the ship?"

Buyer eased behind Missy, wrinkled hands exploring her silver paint job. He whispered into her ear. Missy laughed, then replied, "Could my husband film us?"

Suit's tongue entered Delta's ear. "Now, Wendy, your first lesson will be good taste. Isn't that the ultimate kink for a grainer?"

Fighting the paralysis, Delta smiled. The fever made her strong.

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Clementine

by Joy Marchand

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Thurs. 10, MAR 20—

Another mark on C. today—cigar burn under r. breast, & so realistic, could almost see ashes on sheets during sponge bath. The docs don't know how C. does it. Letters & scars appear here & there. Bracelets of misfortune sometimes. Burns & whip-welts on shoulders. Sad life before C. ended up in produce section of JPI. Day nurse says C. drove last doc nuts while over at County & ordered R. to keep her buckled, though catatonic. D's a pussy—2 a.m. meebie-jeebies would turn D's hair white.

C. had r. eye closed during bath time & l. eye open. Looks like cheerleader with blonde hair & “C” charm necklace. Day says necklace dangerous (but re: D. See above). After bath time C. took 60 ml. banana smoothie—YUM. Throat works ok, zero large motor. Noted burn for Dr. P—wonder what he'll think. Won't tell me. *Jones*, that's myself, just bedpan washer & ass wiper. Speaking of ass, C. has nice one, heart-shaped, although muscle tone suffering. Trying not to look.

C. = vegetable. Not for sight-seeing.

* * * *

Fri. 11 MAR 20—

Saw burns and cuts myself, but never believed about skin—letters. Rumors fly, but most psych-workers almost as crazy as patients, & many even worse, just smarter. Hard to believe what you hear from doctors & Dr. P the worst of all. Takes more meds than produce-aisle patient, but rules JPI like tyrant, & RNs too scared to report to Board. Dr. P took case notes on C. for 3 months about letters, then stopped. Says just mass hysteria & any RNs caught spreading rumors about C. & letters, *to be fired*. Letters hard to imagine anyway, so wasn't worried until today.

During exercises (me pushing & sweating, C. staring w/both eyes open) saw letter appear on r. shin. At first just looked like squiggly burn, standard show, but resolved into letter “S” on white skin. Knew what Dr. P said, but hard to keep quiet as other letters—S-H-A-V-E—appeared. SHAVE. C's legs fuzzy from neglect & though gaze still vacant, tears dripped down cheeks as I pushed & flexed ankles. Dr. P says C. has neural activity of peaceful, sleeping person, no pain, no boredom—just z's. But tears seemed hyper-real. Embarrassment, not just auto-response or irritation of eyes. SHAVE. No awareness in gaze, mouth open a little, but IN THERE. IN THERE & IN PAIN.

Against rules, brought in portable TV & left it playing all night for C. Can't stop thinking about it. Trying hard. Can't imagine lying in that bed, restraints, forever, awake.

* * * *

Sat. 12 MAR, 20—

C. has name. Snuck peek in records & found it: Clementine McNab. Googled name & saw story in newspaper, like afterthought stuck between blurbs about gay preacher & celeb with too many wives. Some small town society page w/local dirt. C. was high-school girl found trapped in coffin after busy-body called to complain about neighbor's bull mastiff starving to death in back yard. C. starving, too & catatonic, 'boyfriend' dead of aneurism in bathroom full of mouse traps, dead roaches, thumb cuffs. Docs estimate C. trapped in coffin for 3 days after death of boyfriend, & unknown amount of time before. Cigar butts suggest months.

Kidnapped? Volunteer? Everyone has different theory.

Other information locked in Dr. P's private case file on C. At change of shift told D. about tears, & D. said C's eyes both closed, all day, every day. D. looked suspicious, so I changed subject to 3 other patients. Didn't want D. thinking, "Jones obsessed w/C. Should inform Dr. P." Don't want to lose job, even w/low pay & crappy admin power-politics. Need to stay more than ever now, to keep an eye on C. What if yours truly = only person at JPI who knows she's awake?

Had all this stuff running through brain while doing rounds in produce E-wing. Long concrete hallway of doors w/peepholes. Never noticed before, but looks like bomb shelter. Cold, damp, not therapeutic. But patients all sleepers, right? Flowers & dayroom not necessary, just food, meds & sanitation.

C. had eyes open, blonde hair greasy, cotton gown crooked & showing knees. Eyes like blue glass under dirty hair. Couldn't stand any of it—dungeon atmosphere, C. strapped down & memories of coffin making C. look like little girl. Not on schedule, but decided to wash hair. Feeling like idiot, told her *shaving legs not possible. Nothing sharp allowed in wings D through F. Risk too great.* Voice sounded weird in room, like standing in closet talking to coats. Hard to touch C. after yesterday. Before was more like changing diapers on baby. But tonight, C. more human, Real Live Woman.

Put hands on C.'s damp-cotton hair, hands weirdly dark even though yours truly only a semi-tan white guy. Couldn't help but glance down v-neck of gown, while resting C.'s head on edge of clean bedpan, good shape for washing bed-bound person's hair. Breasts just anatomy before, like fingers, elbows, anus. Meat. Now, beautiful breasts like ripe tangerines. Clementines. C.'s nipples stiff when warm water touched scalp & hard to keep hands steady, soap bar sliding through hair. Heart in throat, rinsed soap away & grabbed stethoscope, slipped cool metal under C.'s shirt to l. breast. C.'s heart racing, eyes vacant, mouth just blank line of nothing. Said: *Clementine*, & heart beat faster.

Like ribs might crack, blood crashing like waterfall.

Said: *Name's Jones, Clementine. Can you hear me?*

Across l. collarbone in tiny letters like bird footprints, *JONES*. Heart going dubbadubbadubba. Then, *HELP*. Letters like lines of cocaine on a mirror. Stethoscope hit floor with crash and clatter, metal on cement.

Thought about drying C.'s hair & bugging out. Too intense. Dr. P will kill yours truly. Dismember, dance on bones. Things going to shit—hands tied. Should call docs & give full report on C. but can't. EEG says C. just dreamer. Maybe new EEG will show breakthrough & C. ready to emerge from catatonic, schizoid state? Nope, C. still frozen like department store dress dummy w/Dr. P's threat in room like stink of rotten meat. Ole Jonesy going nutbar, too?

Letters on C.'s collarbone faded, just smooth white skin.

Then, very small, like needle scratches: *touch*. Tears all down face, sliding into ears.

Couldn't shave legs. Too obvious. D. would see & report. But just touch? C. so lonesome & *alone*.

Hand shaking bad, reached, put finger on word, bumpy like Braille. From hump of H, line arose, like worm sliding beneath skin, stopped until finger followed. Across collarbone to base of throat, then under neckline of gown to l. breast. Rested hand shivering on tangerine breast, felt nipple against palm. Cherry stone. Sudden pain in groin, hard as marble in shorts. Pulled hand away and left C. with wet hair, water sloshing from bedpan onto floor, slammed door.

Yours truly standing in hallway, w/bedpan in hand, heart in throat. Bar of soap in pocket, tears on face.

Monster? Monstrous.

* * * *

Sun. 13 MAR, 20—

Tried to stay away from C. today. Put TV in room & stayed at station after rounds. Sundays, Dr. P makes 100% rounds, A-F wings. At 11 pm, I took TV back to station & popped in baseball tape. Pretended to care about Sox vs. Yanks while Dr. P in C.'s room. To self, promised never to touch C. again, prayed Dr. P wouldn't see letters on C. saying "JONES = PERVERT." Sick & sad about touching C., though still wish some way to help. Thinking about telling Dr. P about letters anyway, but scared to death.

Dr. P stayed w/C. the longest, 30 min. when everyone else got 5. Before leaving, asked all sorts of probing questions re: C. *Seen any marks lately? Eyes, open? Closed? Change of body position? What times*, etc. etc. Told him about the cigar-burn, but kept quiet on words. Thought maybe Dr. P was laying trap or testing loyalty. Wanted to tell doc about words: *C. awake & so lonely. Need to give C. walks, rec time, permanent TV set*. But Dr. P's eyes like snake's, cold, unblinking. Used to think C's gaze empty, but now know the truth about empty.

Didn't say another word, except: *Yes, doc & No, doc*.

Dr. P gave hard smile and said: *Good boy, Jonesy. Was good idea to give you night shift; can tell you're happier. Doing an excellent job down here*.

Said: *Thanks, doc*. Kept poker face.

Couldn't help it, when Dr. P left, went into C.'s room to bring back TV & check her status. Felt mouth go dry. C.'s face scrunched up like experiencing BAD smell. Tears & snot all over face, gown a mess, ties all undone. First thing, thought she'd been raped, *sick fucker Dr. P would feel my hands around throat*. But was adjusting gown & words (like child writing with crayons) appeared on C.'s r. forearm: *P-I-C-T-U-R-E-S*.

& idiot night nurse said: *You can make pictures now?*

+ *BELLY*.

+

Untied r. gown laces and looked at C.'s abdomen. Tried not to look lower, but saw dk. blonde curls anyway. Screaming words on C.'s belly, fading, but still readable: *AWAKE! PLEASE HELP!!* The word "help" slanting downward toward navel.

With heart thumping, said: *Dr. P took pictures & you asked for help? Told him AWAKE, but doc took pictures & left?*

No answer, just tears. So many tears & eyes like blue ice. Heart-shaped face, beautiful child-woman, crying in streams & a pain in my heart so sharp, almost forgot to breathe. With hands shaking bad, wiped tears away, washed face w/cool water & said: *I want to help, don't know how. Took night job because bad with people. Scared of Dr. P. Can't do anything. Shit!*

On the curve of C.'s cheekbone, a word so tiny and precise.

Kiss.

Brain almost exploded, yours truly holding onto edge of bed like drowning man. So many things wrong with request for kiss, couldn't form coherent argument. But heart made decision that head couldn't. Leaned & pressed lips against word. One kiss on cheek, innocent, right? Could taste C.'s tears & felt brain tip into overload—kissed eyelids, felt lashes quiver against lips. Thought: *damned anyway*, so kissed mouth too, felt C.'s lips part and tasted breath, cool & sweet w/wintergreen toothpaste.

A universe in a kiss, all things compressed in empty space between lips. Pulled away & C. was looking, eyes open. Hard to think of eyes as empty, so close, sharing breath. Necklace slid & “C” dangled in hollow of throat. Just below, raised words in loopy script: *Sweet Jones.*—3

* * * *

Mon. 14 MAR, 20—

Day off today & can only think of C. My life not so very different after all. Apartment not much bigger than room on E-wing, just bed, TV and sink. Shared toilet down the hall & all neighbors gone all day. I lie in bed & look up at ceiling w/one eye open & one closed. Does not alleviate boredom. TV helps a little, but mostly same 3 commercials, over & over, so gets old fast. Not much of cook & too pudgy anyway, so don't spend much time eating. Would go out & have beer, but seems weird to drink beer in afternoon; sad sack losers chain smoking & making eyes at tired cocktail waitress = sadder than yours truly.

Can't help but think must be more to life than this, & for C. too, shackled to bed, not even same 3 commercials to help pass days. Both of us could be in coffin, side by side—would make no difference to world. Only solace = I know about C., can help make her life a little better, maybe.

Keep thinking about last words: *Sweet Jones*, & little heart shape. Nobody ever loved yours truly, maybe Momma, but nobody else. Probably not Momma either, actually.

* * * *

Tues. 15 MAR, 20—

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Can't believe how idiotic people can be, especially yours truly. Never thought especially bright but not stupid either, until today.

Day off seemed so long, couldn't wait to see C. Had tunnel vision, all the way to E-wing. Ignored D. on the way in. Waved but didn't stop to trade stories. D. must have brushed out C.'s hair, though doesn't like to touch catatonics, because hair was shining, like pulled taffy—vanilla & lemon in waves. Probably wishful thinking, but C.'s eyes seemed to focus when door closed & I said: *Clementine*. Not imagination when cheeks turned pink & pulse jumped (this verified with stethoscope, warmed in palm).

Took plastic sandwich bag out of pocket, showed gift: ice. Cube against her lips, me smiling away while ice melted & water ran like tears down cheeks to wet pillow. Gown all tied up, & blanket tucked to chin, so C. made words on cheek down path of melted water: *Jones came back.*

1st stupid thing. Not to tell C. re: day off. JPI shift-schedule = punishing. 10 hr. days, 1 day off every 2 wks. Must have thought, "Jones not coming back at all," or "Maybe Jones dead on side of road."

Said: *Sorry didn't tell you, C. Had a day off, but thought of you & couldn't sleep. Couldn't eat. Beautiful—*

& C.'s words, loopy cursive on cheek, chin, forehead, neck. *Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. Love.* Last one in hollow of throat, letters so small, almost invisible under thin gold necklace.

Heart like happy seagull, floating in warm breeze, soaring & diving in chest. No more thoughts of Jones = pervert, because C. IN THERE & asking for love. Kissed her cheek, chin, forehead & neck, following words rippling across soft, pale skin. Untied gown & followed "kisses" across collarbone, down curve of breast to nipple. Tears from my cheeks on C.'s skin, making all taste salty—tears for wounds revealed, a map of pain written on long, soft body. During day off, C. busy w/marks. 2 burns on breast, bracelets on skinny wrists, whip welts on belly, long parallel razor cuts on inner thighs. Kissed all. Parted thighs, kissed deepest part of C. & heard rush of breath.

Love makes people stupid & impatient & blind. So busy w/C. & her rippling flesh-words, fingers inside her, tasting her salt & happy as lottery winner when C.'s muscles contract & give gift of wetness on fingers & chin. Happy, happy me to have a banquet before me, colors across C.'s flesh like fireworks as she comes alive a little, sighs & closes eyes, happy woman. So busy, that sound of door opening drowned out w/sound of own moans. Finally heard door shut & pulled gown over C. but too late. 2nd stupid thing, carried away by love & caught in act.

Dr. P standing there w/ugly smile on face. Said: *D. wasn't wrong. Surprise! We find Jones face first in Ms. McNab.*

Saw whole life flash before eyes. Jones not just fired, imprisoned for rape & made example of before Board. Show Dr. P as vigilant administrator, deserves raise, yes? Yes! & dirty, vile Jones put away for life, turned into sad, pudgy sex toy for hardened inmates. Weeping, said: *C. asked me to. Followed her words where C. wanted me to go. C.'s IN THERE, Dr. P, & lonesome all the time. Can't bust me, Dr. P. C. needs Jonesy.*

Dr. P showed envelope w/pictures & terrible sinking feeling he would show pictures of C. w/out words. Jones = pervert after all. Almost passed out from panic.

Dr. P didn't show photographs, said: *Firing D., not Jones. Good to have someone who understands secrets. If administrators knew C. aware, would transfer C. to large university laboratory for study. Not good for Dr. P's career, oh no, & not great for Jonesy's disturbing love life either. & Dr. P took scalpel from coat pocket, hitched up C.'s gown & touched point to l. nipple. Said: Dr. P comes down to E-wing to see C. whenever necessary & Jonesy makes no notes in log. When Dr. P leaves, C. belongs to Jones. Clear?*

Wanted to snatch scalpel & ram into Dr. P's ear. Wanted to sit on Dr. P's chest & urinate in face. Bad, nasty, monstrous Dr. P. But couldn't move, all attention on C. & getting Dr. P out, soon as possible. Said: *Ok, Dr. P. Jonesy's your man.*

Dr. P took out camera, said: *Jonesy won't mind giving C. a little kiss?*

Felt heart sink into stomach like battleship. No escaping. If refuse: Dr. P gets D. to testify against Jones & C. = victim of Dr. P forever. If accept: Jonesy's picture held hostage for good behavior & C. = victim of Dr. P forever. Lose/lose. All lost. All hopeless. Only thing is stay w/C. no matter what.

Bent, gave C. a kiss on lips & flinched at sound of digital camera, *click-whirr*.

Dr. P put camera back in coat pocket & said: *See you after meds. Good boy, Jonesy. Keep up good work.* & left.

Smarter person would have known what to do, but clearly, no stupider person than yours truly. Held C. tightly & wished for way out. Dotted lines appeared (wrist to elbow) w/word: *C-U-T*.

Real? Imagination? Doesn't matter. Lost.

* * * *

Wed. 16 MAR, 20—

Kill self = no big deal. Die for C. no problem. But kill C. = impossible. Hands won't hold blade steady, won't hold the pillow over face, even with words rippling over C.'s body like raindrops: *do it, do it, do it, do it*. Dr. P coming to C. again tonight to see how much pain C. can take before screaming. Doc wants to drill tiny-tiny hole in C.'s skull, measure brain waves while C. begging for mercy w/words on her skin:

PLEASE STOP IT HURTS.

Feels like end of world. Have to get C. out. Have to save C. from evil Dr. P. Have to do something, have to—gotta get

* * * *

Wed. 16 MAR, 20—

World upside down. Snatched. Heart ready to burst & only thought in my mind = memory of wind in C.'s hair, w/top folded down in junkyard Cadillac. In motel rm. now, but headed south to Tijuana. Heard people live down there for next to nothing. Laid C. on hard Q. size bed like new bride & went to wash hands—washed hands at every rest stop since fleeing JPI, still hands feel dirty, but rewards promise greatness.

Writing this while sitting on toilet, having real hard time w/new information about C. C—waiting on the bed, for yours truly. Want everything to be perfect, but shaking all over.

Waited until D.'s shift before breaking into Dr. P's office for photos. Found thick folder full, naked shots of C. covered with pain & begging & foul names she called Dr. P while he stuck C. with pins & pinched her until white skin covered with bruises all blue & green & purple. Took pictures & put them in envelope addressed to Board, some to big newspapers & TV stations. With note from C. She wrote on belly, I wrote on paper, forged C.'s loopy cursive, pretty good I think:

AWAKE & ALIVE & TORTURED BY DR. S. PRICE. DECIDED TO CHECK SELF OUT OF JPI & SEND YOU THESE AS GOODBYE GIFT.

& signed: *CLEMENTINE J. MCNAB.*

At C.'s urging, enclosed "C" charm & lock of blonde hair to D. w/message. *SPEAK OF C. & JONES AT OWN RISK.* & picture of C. w/hands outstretched, ready to strangle. Could hardly stand to look at it, but knew it was only way to keep D. quiet. As said already, D. = pussy. Easily influenced, or so we hope.

Didn't see Dr. P on the way out of JPI. While D busy in bathroom, took C. through E-wing & down through F-wing, past solitaries in closed, padded cells. Out the loading dock & away in barely-running

junkyard Caddy bought from old guy with handful of cash from savings. Suddenly no life = good thing. Lots of money for trip. Never had any reason to spend before.

Once on road, bags packed, keys to apartment under mat w/a last payment & note to landlord—(strapped C. to passenger seat & put neck into brace so C. can see road through big sunglasses, lip balm and sunscreen making face radiant in light). Almost ran off road when spotted ghost of smile & when Caddy straightened out, smile was gone. C's stare = vacant, like expression just half-forgotten dream.

—3 *LOVE* written across backs of both hands.

Don't know what it means, & stomach all in knots. Just a dream, that smile? C. coming awake from wind on face? Or both of us trapped in coffin now, insane, side by side w/out hope?

Head says: *run, Jonesy, run*. Heart says: *love is love*.

Darling Clementine.

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Solomon's Bad Luck

By Brandy Schwan

There are only particular colors it sees, and only particular numbers

Solomon saw it as he sat on his couch, feeling oh so sorry for himself

Candles lit, liquor consumed, sad music soon ran out—Brood and brood!

He went on, hung his drunken head, thought thoughts of ending dread

What images of people feeling regret while crying over his corpse?

Too many pathetic images brought a thing to rap, rap at his door.

He opened the door to that thing, it waited on his stoop, swaying, grinning

The thing looked darn right happy ... in a morbid sort of way.

"Solomon, invite me in. Let us get on with it." It moved through the door.

What strolled through his house sat down gracefully in a chair across from his couch

It filled his glass full of clear liquor, began his sad music again, and with a flick of the wrist extinguished candles were lit. Question not the mood of a reaper.

"Do not allow me to interrupt, dear" It hissed through pretty lips

Solomon replied "You are not here to stop me?"

The thing sat forward, met him eye to eye and answered

"Now, why ... would I do a thing like that?"

"Won't you show me the future, won't you show me the past, and tell me what beauty is to live for?"

"For goodness sake, Solomon what do you think I am? The ghost of Christmas past?"

The thing snickered under it's breath "Honestly, darling, you humans and your goodwill.

It does not exist where I come from, and certainly not where you are going."

"Dare I inquire I might request someone else to keep me company tonight?"

He asked the thing.

"I do apologize, Solomon. I am afraid all of the Saints grew tired of you, and left you to me."

It sarcastically spat the words at him. "Have you thought over how you might go about this?"

I do have a few suggestions." It glared and smiled.

Uncomfortable silence lingered between the two, until the thing began to tap it's foot most impatiently, sigh and pretend to admire it's own long red nails.

'Oh, cruel coy of the beast!' Solomon thought to himself.

Wouldn't you know, in that very moment the thing spun a ghostly noose around Solomon's head,
watched him hang until he was dead!

"So, I cheat on occasion" The thing said out-loud, as it left a brooding man with nothing more to dread...

There are only particular colors it sees, and only particular numbers

Solomon saw it as he sat on his couch, feeling oh so sorry for himself

Candles lit, liquor consumed, sad music soon ran out—Brood and brood!

He went on, hung his drunken head, thought thoughts of ending dread

What images of people feeling regret while crying over his corpse?

Too many pathetic images brought a thing to rap, rap at his door

The thing, that sometimes cheats.

BIO:

Brandy Leah Schwan's first book was *Grim Trixter*—horror, fantasy, and erotic poetry published by Apex Books. Her second book, *Catacombs and Photographs*, will be released in November, 2008. Brandy's work can be found in the *Dark Distortions* anthology (www.scotopiapress.com) and in Apex Digest issue #7 and issue #9. Her official website is www.grimtrixter.com.

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Cain XP11 (Part 4): The Wicked King

by Geoffrey Girard

* * * *

Geoffrey Girard first appeared in *Writers of the Future* (a 2003 winner) and has since penned and sold more than sixty short stories of dark fantasy and horror. His latest book, *Tales of the Eastern Indians*, thirteen original tales blending history and Native American myths, was published last Fall. Find out more at www.GeoffreyGirard.com.

* * * *

This is the concluding installment of a four-part novella. The first part is available online at www.apexdigest.com.

Zahir liked to watch men die.

He specifically treasured the end, the exact moment when the doomed reached that unique awareness, helplessness, of having nothing more to give. Nothing. And then, suddenly, in that very personal and ultimate defeat, there was almost always a brief, final, and futile clench of life. A sudden gasp, an optimistic lunge, a defiant shout of fury or hope. And, whatever that gesture might become, the eyes almost always showed all of it. It was glorious. No man was ever as truly alive as during his very last breath. And, looking into their eyes, it was the only time Zahir could truly see God.

Now, he ran his fingers along the soldier's face. It felt slick with sweat and blood, and the man moved his head into the touch. *Well trained*, Zahir thought, and smiled. *They're all so well trained*. Where most would pull away from one who'd already brought so much pain, this one wanted the heft of reality against his cheek. He wanted something "real" to focus on. Zahir patted the man's cheek. "Soon," he whispered, promised. "Very soon."

Zahir moved toward his bench of tools.

A rusted kerosene lantern cast fluid shadows along the cramped cave wall behind him, his own shadow noticeably grotesque as he hunched unnaturally under the low ceiling. The air was warm and sticky. He could hear some of the other men talking in the adjacent tunnels and holes. Someone's laughter carried over the hum of several generators and the single exhaust fan. This particular mountain den, a dozen dark hollows that stretched a mile into the earth, supported forty men easily. The whole place smelled of piss and sweat. And blood. He barely noticed it anymore.

The first time he'd seen a man die, he'd been only eight. In Cairo. The car bomb had shattered half of the small outdoor market and, as he'd cowered on the ground with the others, a dark shape had stumbled toward him out of the smoky wreckage. Zahir was still not sure if it was a man or a woman he'd seen that day. There was too much blood and part of the head was missing. It lurched toward him as if every step might bring the final collapse, and the boy had wiped the burn of the smoke from his eyes to watch it all. He saw half a face, the right side only shards of bone and flesh and the skull behind almost completely lost. A lone left eye glared at him, *yes, directly at me*, with both amazement and resolve. Zahir knew then that the bloody thing actually wanted to kill him. That, even with half its face and brains splattered over the street behind, it had determined not to accept death alone. The man-woman lifted an arm at him, an accusing bloody stump that ended at the elbow ... then it had collapsed at his feet. Something wet and hot had splashed Zahir's face. Beside him then, the shattered jaw and what was left of its teeth gnawed slowly on a lolling tongue. Blood gurgled from the half mouth, the body's limbs twitching against Zahir's legs. Still, Zahir kept focused on the eager and knowing eye that watched him. The eye shone just like a

star. The eye of God.

He'd found the same look again six months later when he killed the old man with a brick. Then, again, when he strangled Ahmed's baby sister. And all the others. When he joined the Fatah al-Islam Jihad, it quickly became his sacred duty to hurt, to kill. One of the group, a wealthy girl who went to Alexandria University, had suggested his violent nature was surely caused by the trauma of that first car bomb, or perhaps the frequent beatings his father had given him. Zahir did not think so, and, as he raped and killed her, he told her as much. He simply enjoyed it, he told her. That was all. He'd enjoyed torturing the family in Herát, or the boy soldiers they'd kidnapped in Qal'at Dizah. More recently, he'd enjoyed killing the people in Towraghondi. So many, and all the time he needed to work.

His team had captured the three Army Rangers outside of Towraghondi a week before and slipped them back across the border. No way the Americans would come into Iran for them. John Penn and George Clooney would never allow it. Zahir chuckled. It had been a good week.

After much pain, and much blood, he'd already seen God twice. And he would enjoy this man's death, too. He'd already hurt him. Peeled flesh some, cut down to the bone here and there. The American soldiers were all so damn big, he'd wanted to see all that muscle up close. Truth told, he'd never been particularly interested in the politics, in the spiritual matters of his efforts. These were only secondary to his true passions. In that regard, he was probably no different from these soldiers that God had sent to him.

He glanced over the two emptied chairs. Dark stains of torture remained pooled below each, the broken bodies of the two men dragged away the night before. Only their heads remained. Each one was propped on the small wood table. Watching.

Zahir chose his favorite scalpel. The two-inch carbon steel BD Bard-Parker he'd lifted from the Red Cross tent. Nice cutting control and strength. Perfect to make some more shallow incisions along the chest and genitals.

When he turned, the soldier started making garbled sounds with his mouth. They were not words anymore. Hadn't been for almost a day now. A pity. Zahir wanted to learn more about this man first. But, again, these were not normal people. These "Rangers" never once begged for mercy like the others, they only cursed at him and grew more angry. He had never even learned their real names, and there was no identification on men like these.

This last man now glared angrily from his one good eye. The other was swollen over and crusted in dried blood from when Zahir had cut into his scalp. In the shadowed cavern, the eye looked almost like one he'd seen long before.

No, the eye said clearly. Don't do this.

So. It was not yet the true eye of God.

Zahir stepped closer and pressed his thumb against the man's mouth to push back his upper lip. The man writhed in his chair, the blood-speckled ropes holding tight. The man screamed as Zahir raised the blade. He slowly brought the scalpel once more to the gums.

Then he moved to his body again.

He'd worked quietly for some time before gunfire erupted in one of the tunnels. The sound echoed into Zahir's tiny space like thunder.

He stepped back from the American and dropped the dripping scalpel onto the table beside the two heads. Someone shouted somewhere. It was the sound of a man dying, and Zahir reached calmly for his rifle.

One of the others, Hasib, burst into the cave, shouted something, and Zahir almost shot him. He grinned at the thought. "What is it?" he asked.

In reply, Hasib lifted a bit into the air and then, like a ghost, he rose another full meter off the ground.

Zahir stepped back in confusion.

Blood splashed across the cave's grey-brown rock. Something shiny appeared out of Hasib's chest, then the man dropped again to the floor. Zahir squinted to focus his eyes. Something else now moved in the shadows. A thin, dark shape that drifted like smoke directly toward him.

Zahir fired his rifle.

He felt strong hands at his throat. And then something very cold sank deep into his stomach. He felt it move inside him.

The shadow man stood before him suddenly, and Zahir gazed into the pitch black eyes. They shimmered like oil, like a demonic jewel. But in their dark reflection he saw his own eyes, too. Wide and shining.

He recognized the sensation of his body splitting apart. He screamed, an almost joyful sound, and then, finally, in the reflection of dark man's eyes, his own eyes shone like stars. The eyes of God.

Then, nothing.

The dark thing turned next toward the man in the chair.

* * * *

The cave was gone. And the Arab man's screams.

The black thing was gone.

The pain lingered, however, and Becker absently touched his mouth, and then moved down to his chest where his fingers easily found the thick scar tissue. Both familiar and alien.

He sat up once more at a small desk over a closed laptop and his notes. A gooseneck lamp cast the only light in the motel room, and it glowed hotly, like a rusted kerosene lantern.

Becker leaned forward and put the heels of his palms against his eyes to rub away the sleep, the memory. His fingers wrapped around the sides of his head. From afar, Becker often thought, it probably looked as if he were literally holding himself together. *Maybe I am.* He felt the cool air of the room move across his back and shoulders.

He pulled his hands away and sat back. Checked his watch. 02:36. He couldn't quite remember when he'd dozed off. He remembered noting 01:00 clearly and reading more of Jacobson's damned notes. He picked up the open notebook from the table and read.

From the letters of Jack the Ripper: *You an me know the truth dont we. ha ha I love my work an I shant stop until I get buckled and even then watch out for your old pal Jacky. Ps Sorry about the blood still messy from the last one. What a pretty necklace I gave her.*

'Your old pal, Jacky.'

Becker turned the page and reread the words of Ted Bundy: *We serial killers are your sons, we are your husbands, we are everywhere. And there will be more of your children dead tomorrow.*

He ran the words through his head again. The boys truly had a whole country in which to hide. They had transportation, money. No ties to real people beyond the historic files of the killers they'd been cloned from.

We are everywhere.

The proverbial needle in the haystack would prove easier. And as to the last...

Becker's mouth went tight. How long did the boy really have?

And were there really any answers he could find in the notes of this madman? Any clues as to where Jacobson's creations might have gone? Or was this only more of the same lunacy? The same that had driven the eminent geneticist to such horrors in the first place.

Becker could hardly think anymore. He checked his watch again. Time had become a damning factor. It had been less than forty hours since he'd walked out of the Winter Quarter mine. Jacobson was dead, murdered by the thing from Becker's dreams, the same "dark man" he'd seen in the cave just two years before. A stress-induced delusion he'd been convinced was only in his mind until he'd shot it dead moments after it killed Jacobson.

And the boy ... Jeffrey.

He closed the notebook. Stared only at the dark wall over the desk. He felt he should get up and drive somewhere to do something. But where? And what? He was too alone now. As wanted by the Defense Department, perhaps, as the psycho killers he'd been tasked with bringing in months ago. And even with the full support of Command, there just wasn't time.

Becker pushed back from the table and rose for the first time in hours. He moved slowly toward the mirror in the dim light. Then, he looked up.

The pale scars almost completely covered his stomach and chest. The marks criss-crossed the defined muscles in continuous disfigurement and design, wrapped over his shoulders and arms. Many letters were Arabic, naturally. Others were something else, symbols no one had ever determined. The man had cut snakes and trees into him. And eyes. Staring eyes. Etched in flesh.

The Illustrated Man, Becker thought again, *My specialty: to hunt and kill Death-Watch Beetles.*

He studied himself awhile. Curiously, almost, as he often had over the last two years. As if he were looking at someone else. He stared back into those other eyes. First, the ones that had been cut into him. Then, the pair in the mirror.

Himself.

And behind it, the shadows of the room assumed their own shapes. Almost human.

'Your old pal, Jacky.'

Becker turned away from his reflection and reached for his phone. His call was answered on the first ring.

"Becker."

"Durbin."

"I'm glad you called, kiddo," the Major General said. "We're in a new place here."

"Very true."

"And it's not a good one."

"Also true."

"You need to come in, Captain, and you need to come in now. This one's over. That's an order."

"Not yet."

"Shawn, if you continue—"

"Not yet."

"What do you want?"

Becker flipped open his laptop. "I want you to release more of those things."

"I don't know what—"

"Sure you do," Becker stopped him. "Like the one that recently murdered Jacobson for you. Was it the same you sent into Iran two years ago?"

"When I saved your fucking ass?"

"Do this," Becker said. "Or I go to the press with everything."

"Would you really?"

Becker honestly didn't know. "I would."

"But would they believe you?"

"Considering the current popular opinion of our bosses, I have a feeling they might. Release them."

"To what end?" Durbin asked.

"What end do you think? So they can find the last boys. Just like the other one did. How'd they track them down before? Are they made from the same stuff, some kind of connection or ... you tell me."

"You killed it, Shawn. There are no others."

"Sure there are, *Brad*. You're the guys who love to make copies, right? Death's very own Kinko's."

Durbin grunted a half laugh. "I don't know if we can do that now."

"Sure you do," Becker moved back to his laptop. "And I need to know when it finds them. I want to be there."

"To end this yourself."

Becker ignored him, tapped at his keyboard. "I'm sending you a private ICR to contact the moment you know something. Do that, and you won't have to worry about me ever again."

"It's my job to worry. And what about Jeffrey? Do I need to worry about him?"

"Who?"

"Dahmer. Jacobson. Whatever name he's going by. Jeff #22. His DNA's all over Jacobson's house. At the park in Missouri. In your hotel room in Florence. It was only a matter of time before we realized there was another one roaming about. How long have you—"

"I'm sure he's already dead," Becker said. He almost hoped as much. "He's not an issue. Never was."

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Only that this needs to be done immediately."

"What's the hurry?"

Becker suppressed his first response. "Immediately."

"I understand you request, but Shawn..."

"Yes."

"If we do this. If we do this your way ... I can't help you when this is all over. You'll be on your own after this. You understand?"

"I do," he said and ended the call.

'And there will be more of your children dead tomorrow.'

But how many, Becker wondered aloud, and his body trembled in the empty room. *How many?*

As he flipped off the light to let the darkness cover him completely, he could only think of one.

* * * *

Jeffrey Dahmer sat in a chair before a rusted metal table, a small pile of bones spread before his hands.

Jeffrey Dahmer stood closely behind the chair, watching him.

The first, the one Jacobson had raised, had been stripped naked and looked as if he'd been crying. There were abrasions on his wrists and legs from the duct tape. The other one, the one Ted knew from school, was a couple years older and heavier, too. But, fuck yeah, these two were cut-and-paste jobs for sure.

It was certainly something to see.

And Ted could hardly take his eyes off it. Any of it.

When they'd first snatched the kid in Scofield, it had been a pretty random act. Thought they were pulling one over on that asshole Jacobson. But when they saw, when they really understood who this kid fucking was ... *amazing*.

Another version of Jeff. 2.0 or 3.0 or 40.1, they hadn't a clue. He was a couple years younger, for sure. But the real kicker, this pussy had lived with Jacobson most of his life. Al thought he recognized him. Another lab rat who'd apparently only been snuck into DSTI a couple times for counseling and testing over the years. One of the lab rats who'd gotten off easy.

The bones were only animal bones. Small stuff, too. Mice and birds, mostly. A squirrel Jeff had found in

Mt. Sterling. And a cat, the Alsip's cat. A fun little pile of tiny vertebrae, ribs, tibia, and skulls that Jeff had pulled together over the last few weeks. He usually kept 'em in an emptied box of Frosted Flakes, a box he'd recently had to reinforce with silver duct tape. Now they were dumped out onto the table again so the other kid, the other Jeff, could play with them.

Would play with them. Had to. Or be punished.

Just like they'd forced the first Jeff to do when he was younger. One of the many tests, *treatments*, they'd been secretly subjected to over the years by the fine men of DSTI. When Jeff'd been only five, they'd made sure he found the bones behind the facility one morning with the hope that he'd find them amusing and play with them. And they hoped this because that's exactly what another Jeffrey Dahmer, the "real" one, had done when he was a kid. They must have been quite pleased with the results. But this other kid, this other Jeff, hadn't gotten any of that. He'd been in another test group all together. Until now.

"It's the sound," the older Jeff said. "When they rub together. Or when the pile collapses and they roll off each other. That click, click, click." He leaned in close behind the second Jeff as he spoke. "I don't think they ever understood that, the ones who were watching me all these years. Click, click, click. They'd call it something else, no doubt. Some psycho babble about a God complex, I suppose. Playing God. A power trip. But it was never that." He picked up some of the pile and let the tiny bones trickle back off his fingers onto the table.

Click, click, click.

Ted listened too, but couldn't understand what the big deal was. Just sounded like dice rolling on a table. But he could see the look on Jeff's face. And he could recognize it well.

"Do you hear it?" Jeff asked the kid. "Do you?" He picked up and dropped another handful.

Click, click, click.

The kid didn't answer.

"Are you fuckin' playin'?" Jeff's face sharpened like a knife blade. "Maybe you need another beer first." There was a half-emptied case of Budweiser on the table, and he angrily reached for a can. "Go for it, faggot." He pushed the kid's head back and poured.

The younger boy spurted and choked as the beer ran over his throat and chin and piss-colored streaks traced down his bare chest. The boy thrashed against the weight of Jeff's hand, but throughout, Jeff held him in place.

Ted reached to scratch his arm again.

It stung and he reluctantly pushed back the shirt sleeve to get a better look.

The blotch looked even worse than before.

A rounded stain that ran from the lower half of his bicep past the crook of his arm and grew toward his wrist. *Growing*. It had bubbled up in the center with what looked like several giant zits. Big whiteheads, but yellowy and the size of quarters. The skin was darker than brown now, almost black. A nigger's arm. Two weeks before, it had only been a small smudge. He'd thought it was a bruise.

But there were others now. A small one on his chest. And another growing slowly up his calf. By the day, by the hour. He didn't know. But only thinking about it made him want to scratch it again. Made him want to cut it out.

Ted turned his attention back to the Jeffs.

"No?" the older was shouting. "Then we better give it some time, I guess." He tossed the empty can across the room. "You'll get used to it. Even start to like it, I bet."

The boy coughed, gagged as some of the beer spewed from his mouth.

"Fuck," Jeff laughed. "They had me drinking by ten. Wanted a genuine alcoholic. Just like the original." He'd moved behind the boy again, but kept his hand on his face.

There, his fingers moved slowly over the chin, forced their way into the boy's mouth, where he slipped them, long and wet, in again and again.

"Do you love me?" he asked the boy. Jeff's voice had taken on a different emotion. And it was another that Ted was familiar with.

Jeff's other hand now moved slowly down the boy's chest. "I love you," he said. It came out like a whisper as his hand slipped lower. "But, you know what?" He pulled his hand away from the kid's mouth and leaned closer so their two faces were pressed together. It looked like one of them had mashed up against a mirror. "I hate you, too." Jeff's lips now brushed across the boy's cheek, and Ted wondered if the kid was even listening anymore. If he was even there. He also wondered if it really mattered.

Ted smiled and stepped slowly from the room.

It was clear that Jeff needed some more time alone with himself.

* * * *

Major General Durbin was an *asshole*.

And even more so, Robert decided, than the other stock Nazi Big Brother republican dogs-of-war who sporadically appeared at the lab. This guy was another breed altogether. Seven letters for Durbin? *Asshole. Gestapo. Certain. Unmoved. Monster.*

Ten letters for the current situation?

Precarious. Iniquitous. Inevitable. Fuckedcity.

A little word game he'd quickly invented to take his mind off the real task at hand. Not quite the same as his customary morning ownage of the NY Times puzzle, but it was getting the job done. His hands weren't shaking hardly at all anymore.

Robert looked across the lab to where Durbin and some other defense department clown stood with Dr. Erdman. Watching him from the relative safety of the control room. Dr. Molenbrok was at the other console beside his, reading out the latest vitals.

The thing in the tank shifted again.

It moved with new life. A single dark hand suddenly slammed against the side of the Plexiglas, and Robert instinctively stepped back. Snot-colored bubbles rolled between the long, skeletal fingers as it dragged its hand slowly across the inside surface.

Robert would not look up. He knew that if he did, it would be looking straight at him. They always did that. And he knew it would be smiling. He refocused.

Nine for the thing in the tanks?

Procedure. Evolution. Destroyer. Paycheck.

They'd used these things before in Afghanistan and Yemen. Lots of tests in central America. Short shelf life on these fellas, they—

No, he realized suddenly. *'Paycheck' is only eight letters*. And then he moved to the tank itself and typed in the last codes. Listened to the whirr and spurt of the remaining dark fluids. *I should be home playing my guitar*, he thought. *I should be rolling a nice fatty 'bout now and crankin' those new speakers*. Robert patted the release check, and the sealed hinges of the front panel hissed back at him like something else alive. *Maybe hit the library on the way home, the one in Camden where there's never a wait for the new stuff because none of those poor bastards can read*. He could almost hear the other men talking behind him. Durbin and Dr. Erdman. Muffled, unrecognized words about killing more children, no doubt. Word was that DSTI had eliminated all the other waiting embryos. Also that some of the developed specimens had been destroyed or chemically lobotomized. A million rumors after Jacobson had up and vanished. Some kind of accident in the "Cain" tests.

Rumors, he told himself. Nothing more than that. He wondered again why he hadn't been sent home with the others. Most of DSTI was temporarily shut down, the employees shipped off to university study or interim assignments in other development branches within DSTI. Instead, he remained part of the skeleton crew. For cleanup. *I haven't had a good night's sleep in almost nine years*, he realized. His shrink felt that his anxiety attacks were induced by stress from work. *Ya think?*

The thing stepped freely from the tank. Its legs wobbled like a newborn deer or someone who'd just cum for a third time, and it grabbed the sides of the hatchway to steady itself. Robert thought again of a book he'd recently read, something called *Planet Dora*, about the Nazi's work on V-1 and V-2 rockets at the Dora concentration camp. The mountain hideaway in Thuringia with its endless secret tunnels and 20,000 slave laborers. The torture and hangings in the name of science. The 15,000 corpses.

How many corpses would this one make? Robert wondered. *And every time that vulture ripped into the warm belly anew, did Prometheus ever regret the whole fire thing?*

Robert half closed his eyes to the thought and stepped aside to let the thing pass by.

But it didn't. It stopped.

And now stood beside him. Its head turned to watch Robert, and he could hear the fluids dripping off its charcoal skin onto the floor. He could smell the synthetic stench of something between cheap fruity wine and formaldehyde.

A twelve letter word for—

The thing opened its mouth and the fetid breath blew rank and hot over Robert's face. No words came to mind. Robert gagged and a deep gargle burred down the thing's throat. He assumed it was laughing. Something gently touched Robert's arm, tugging him closer, and he turned slightly.

A single eye caught his own, and he stood frozen before it again. His body trembled, yet he was too terrified to move a single step away. In that one glance, Robert would have sworn he saw all that was behind the stare. In the novels he loved to read, the killers always had uncaring, vacant eyes. Shark eyes, glossy doll eyes. But in this gaze was something else. This eye was the collective refined chromosomes of men named Bundy, Desalvo, Dahmer, Gacy, Rodrigez, and a dozen others. This eye was the authentic "all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world" and empowered by that same truth. This eye wasn't vacant at all. It was totally aware. It was all-knowing. This eye was the eye of God.

And God wanted Robert dead.

Its mouth opened and moved toward Robert's throat.

"No," someone said behind them. It was Durbin.

The jaws cracked, widening. Something sticky dripped down Robert's neck.

*Would there be a space age without the extraordinary work accomplished at Dora? Would—
Robert knew then he would die.*

"No," Durbin said again. "At least not today," he added and laughed, patting Robert on the back. "Move aside, doctor," he suggested, and Robert quickly did as he was told.

Major General Durbin stood directly in front of the dark creature. "We need you to find someone," he told it, handing over a blanket. "Your brothers."

The thing literally growled in understanding.

"You will find them and kill them," Durbin explained.

"Becker, too," Erdman added.

Durbin turned and fixed the geneticist with an icy stare of endless contempt, then looked slowly back. "Anyone," Durbin agreed. "Who gets in your way."

The deformed pinhead had broken into a hellish grin. It tilted back in anticipated pleasures.

"First," Durbin said. "You'll need some clothes and intel. There's a chopper leaving in thirty minutes. Better follow me."

Six letters for The Damned?

Durbin. Erdman. Some guy named Becker.

The Lot.

Robert.

"Dr. Fietsam?"

Robert looked up to where Durbin had his hand on the back of the swathed creature, leading it from the room.

"Yes, sir?"

"We'll also need the other two," Durbin said.

* * * *

Kristin was beautiful. She almost shined.

Two years couldn't change that, Becker thought, Not even a hundred.

"Shawn."

"Thanks for coming," he said and sat quickly in the opposite booth while his eyes scanned the rest of the small café. "I know I ... It, ah, it means a lot."

"You knew I'd be here."

"I thought, I *hoped* you would."

"Shawn, I'm sorry about Durbin and—"

"Forget it. You were doing your job."

"That makes it worse."

"And you thought you were helping me."

"I did. You must hate me."

"There's nothing you could ever do for that."

"Stop. I can't." She looked away, collected herself. "You look terrible," she said, turning back.

Becker laughed. "Thanks, babe."

"I'm sorry." She found a genuine smile. "You know what I meant."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure I do. Just water for now, thanks," he told the waitress, who scurried back to the kitchen. "Well, though I apparently look like shit, you ... You look great, Kristin."

"Shawn."

"This thing is almost over I think."

"Then let me help you finish it." She grabbed his hands together. He let her, and she squeezed them tightly in her own, the touch proving so very familiar. "We can figure this thing out together. You and me. Whatever it is. Please."

"It's..."

"Can't you simply walk away?" she asked. "Just this once?"

"I don't think so. Thanks." He took the water the waitress set down, and then waited for her to leave again. "It's gotten too thorny. It's gone too far."

"In this hole lives the Wicked King."

"What's that?"

"A quote."

"Timberlake or Gandhi?"

"Neither, smart ass. Berkowitz. The Son of Sam."

"Ah. So close."

"He wrote it all over his apartment wall when he was killing people."

"It's very Hallmark. Your point?"

"That it sounds like you've climbed down into some dark places the past few months. Like before. The kind of pits that are sometimes tough to get out of alone."

"And you can only walk in Mordor so long before that dust gets in your boots. Is that it?"

"I don't know where you're at anymore. No one does."

"Oh, your pal Durbin been—"

"Fuck Durbin, this isn't about Durbin. This isn't about the goddamn job. Yours, or mine. It's gone beyond that now and you know it too."

"I do."

"Then why this? Why so personal this time? And don't tell me it isn't."

"I don't know why."

"Bullshit."

Becker took a long drink of water. Set the glass down again. "There's this kid."

"Try again. There's always some 'kid'." Kristin shook her head. "Every village in the world, there's some kid. That never made a difference before. There's something else."

"Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

"You brought me down to quote Blake?"

"Fair's fair, you started the quote bullshit. How 'bout some Genesis?"

"Gabriel or Collins?"

"Funny girl," he said. "Bible stuff. The mark of Cain."

He felt her hands relax. Release. "What about it?"

"Do you know why God marked him?"

Her face tightened, deciding whether or not to follow him down whatever path he'd chosen. "Because he was a killer," she said.

"Yes. But why?"

"Jesus, Becker, it's a made-up story. What's the—" she sighed with exasperation. "So others would forever know his sin."

"Nope," Becker smiled, and her face showed him it wasn't a pleasant look. "Read it again," he said. "God marked Cain so that the others would never punish him. Not kill him. It was a warning to the others to let Cain live. He wanted Cain to live."

"Right. And?"

"All of us," he said, wrapping his fingers around the water glass again. "We're *all* Cain. Always have

been."

"We're all Abel too, Shawn."

"Listen to me," he leaned forward, his words a hiss. "An American genetics company is cloning humans from the DNA of various serial killers."

Kristin eyed him steadily. "I'd guessed as much."

"When I was rescued in Iran, it was one of those science projects that saved me. One of their 'distilled' killers. Durbin's been using these things for years. And this company's committed everything from murder to torturing children. All in the name of science. In the name of national defense. In the name of cash."

"And?"

"And?" He sat back, smiling at her candor. Amazed he could smile at anything.

She leaned forward. Puzzled and challenging. "And when has that ever bothered you before? You, of all people, understand that *this*," she indicated the diner and everyone, everything, in it, "has a price. It's always been a double-edged sword, Shawn. When did you latch onto the clichéd and puerile liberal absolutes that the military is *always* dangerous, government is *always* corrupt, capitalism is *always* merciless."

"Not always. But some times. *This* time."

"Just walk away."

"I can't."

"Shawn."

He looked up and she smiled at him, her blue eyes filled with such sadness. "This time," he said, "this kid, this boy. Jeffrey." His voice cracked a pitch at the end and he looked away in shame. He felt his hands squeezed again.

"God, I love you," she said.

"They *made* this kid," he continued. "They did, we did, I did. In a way, he's an actual byproduct of everything I've devoted my life to protecting."

"Shawn, you can't think—"

"But I do. And if I'm willing to die for those ideals on some Pakistani hilltop, I'm sure as hell going to take full responsibility for them here, too." He glared at her, not seeing her eyes anymore but those of another, blinking. Scared. "I *made* this kid, Kristin. Like God made Cain. And I—"

"I would have gone with you," she said suddenly, pulling him back from the dark place that was becoming too familiar. "I'd have left him."

"I know."

"I would still."

His hands now moved over hers. "I know," he said. "It's why you're the only one I could call."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

* * * *

Ted saw it coming. All that death.

Or, rather, he *felt* it.

He'd experienced the exact same sensation from the house in Orchard City. Like there was something crawling inside. Something alive with many legs, something with teeny claws. Growing more and longer legs each day, each hour.

The 'Dark Man.'

Getting closer. The same who'd carved up Johnny and a bunch of other kids without missing a step. It was the feeling he brought that struck Ted the most. Part dread and part relief. Part home.

He's here now.

The feeling that everyone in the house was soon going to die had hung on him for a couple days, and he'd slowly gotten used to it. He'd started to enjoy it. And it had only gotten better as the night landed on them all. Ted had to smile at that. *Even monsters were a little more afraid in the dark.*

They'd been staying in the house, another one of the many rentals they'd broken into over the past weeks, for almost four days. Too long, he thought. Probably best to go. To dump the kid and get moving again. But Jeff wasn't done with the kid yet. Not by a long shot, from the sounds of things. Hell, Ted shook his head. Those two had been going at it all day. And Al was out of it. That fucking guy was done, fried. Didn't make no sense anymore. Perhaps he'd been feeling the dark man's approach for days, too. Perhaps he also knew what was coming.

He's upstairs with Al even now. I can about picture him cutting, cutting. Hacking around the spine now and pulling out all that muscle. Almost as if it were me doing the tasty knife work...

Ted began to cling to the new feeling. It almost replaced the other that racked his whole body. The ever-growing sensation that he was stuffed, full. Like he needed to drop the world's greatest deuce but couldn't. Hell, even his fucking fingers were swollen like little fat-kid sausages. And all the itchy black shit on his skin...

The black.

Ted was in the basement again, watching the two Jeffs when the door above pushed open and Al came down the steps.

Only it wasn't really Al.

This kid was all limp and floppy like a skinny cock. Folded up on himself, sort of collapsed in the middle in a couple of odd places. And he didn't walk down the stairs as much as he seemed to simply float over them. All the while leaving a dark trail of vivid red blood on the Berber carpet beneath his feet.

Even Jeff had turned and stopped to watch. He was wearing some kind of blue wizard's hat with giant mouse ears on the sides. Other than that hat, he and the kid were both naked again.

Al moved down the last few steps and into the light, and then all Ted's recent foretellings came to pass.

The dark man stood right behind the kid.

Holding him up with one arm. The other arm carried a long blade. The man slid down the last few steps easily, like another shadow moving into the one-bulbed room. Ted could barely make out the skeletal body, the misshapen head.

As the two moved closer, Ted could see now where one of the man's dark arms was jammed up into Al's back. Behind the shoulder blades and up into the back of the kid's head. Like some kinda puppet. Ted expected the fucking kid to start speaking, the man's fingers moving the dripping jaws from the inside.

At the bottom step, Al's body, or the half-gutted shell of Al's body, pitched forward as if he were trying to fly. Blood dotted the wall as the kid arched and crashed on its face onto the floor with a wet and heavy sound. The upper back lay open, emptied, the peg from the top of his spinal column and some tendons lodged in the bloody cavity. The same that the dark man had worked his new meat puppet. Bulbous, pearl-colored lumps glistened in the top of the shoulders and the lower back.

Al's puppet master stepped over the corpse and moved toward Ted.

Ted was ready and lifted up his shirt. "Look, man," he almost laughed. "Look at this shit. Yeah? You see that?" Closer still, Ted decided it was not something human. Not enough human. And he supposed that made more sense. "Look, mother fucker! I'm just like you. You should see the shit I've fucking done these past few—"

The blade slashed out. Ted fell back, fire burning in his chest and neck. He collapsed to the floor and the thing leaned closer. Its bulging rat eyes stared down into Ted's, the mouth opening to release what Ted could only think of as a hiss. The breath was hot, with the stink of fresh decay.

The dark thing chuckled softly and stepped away. Moved across the room toward the Jeffs.

Ted fumbled on the floor, brought his hands to the drenched gouge in his shoulder. So sticky and warm. Already running over his fingers.

Jeff had grabbed his knife from the table. The one he'd used with the kid. Ted watched dreamily as Jeff moved toward the dark thing.

Then the stupid wizard's hat and mouse ears were falling to the floor. And Jeff's head was still inside. The naked body remained standing for one beautiful moment, gushing from its neck like a blood-filled fountain. Then it, too, fell to the floor beside the head.

After another moment, the thing moved for the boy in the chair.

Ted propped himself up to watch as best he could and wondered some if the damned kid had seen it all coming too.

* * * *

Jeffrey Jacobson felt the thing standing behind him now.

He could feel its hot breath against his scrunched shoulder blades. The heat of its body. Several sharp nails moving slowly under his chin.

And, he could almost hear its thoughts.

He'd imagined it upstairs for some time now. He'd pictured it chopping into the boy called Al, ripping away all that muscle and weird fatty stuff. Almost as if he were doing it himself. A dark place he'd gone over the last two days while that boy...

While *Jeff*...

He was still tied to the chair, but knew there was nowhere to go even if he weren't. It all seemed sort of silly now. All of it.

He'd been wrong.

Warm water splashed all over his back and soaked the back of his head.

The table turned red suddenly. Like a magic trick. Like a sorcerer's spell. The red on the table was blood, he realized, and his instant silhouette—his own head and shoulders—now appeared on the table between the spatter. All sound vanished. Something like thunder pierced his ears.

This is death, he thought.

He felt great weight fall against his body and then slide away again.

He heard more thunder.

Gun shots.

Something touched his face, lifted his head. The light above burned his eyes, and he crept back into the darkness again. The burn from the ropes slackened suddenly.

Then nothing.

He felt himself being lifted from the chair.

Like flying.

He forced one eye open.

"Becker," he said.

"I got you, pal."

* * * *

Becker lowered his head. He'd only expected Durbin and Erdman, maybe another doctor. Instead, he counted nine in the room.

Durbin, of course; Doctors Erdman and Mohlenbrock and three other DSTI guys he didn't know. One of them was an older woman. Then there was Kapellas and Neff, two guys from Delta he'd met once before.

And then one of freaks.

Dark man. Shadow. Son of Cain.

Man? Thing? Nightmare?

Did it even matter?

How many more of them were there? Becker wondered. How difficult to make thousands?

"Welcome home, soldier," the Major General greeted, holding Erdman with a sideways glance. "See you got my message. Mission accomplished, I assume."

The whole room had grown comically still when he entered. Becker had also noticed the look Durbin had given the two Rangers. The one to lower their rifles.

"Yes," Becker replied, eyeing the others again and the emptied tanks. "We really gonna do this here?"

Durbin smiled. "No secrets here, Captain. We're all on the same team, remember. Only want to fix things up again. Are we good?"

"Your man led me to the house as you promised. They're all dead. You're good."

"All of them?" Durbin got up from his chair.

"Yup. All of them. Ted #12, Jeff #44, Al #20." He watched Neff fan out slowly to his right. "And another Dahmer clone. Jacobson's Jeff."

Durbin nodded and Becker could tell the General didn't believe the last. "Our other man do the job?"

"Most. I killed Ted." Becker looked directly at Erdman, "Of course, looked like he was gonna die from some kind of cancer soon anyway."

"That so?" Durbin pressed.

"Gone bad, that one. Rotting like old fruit. Blackened skin. Fat fresh goiters running up his chest and neck. Your man cut him open enough to show the rot inside. I thought it best to end things."

"That's fine, Becker. Our soldier hasn't returned yet. Do you—"

"*Soldier?* Mr. Cain? I killed him too, sir. But let me tell you more about Bundy's clone first, because you probably need to know. He burst open like I don't know what. A piece of fruit again, I guess. One shot to the chest, and the fucker basically exploded with the stuff all over the floor. I probably could have just kicked him."

"It is not yet an exact science," Durbin smiled. "Certain test groups have..."

"Right, right. Dolly had a short run too, I recall. I see you guys have managed to clean your rooms up. Put away almost all your toys," Becker eyed the dark-skinned freak when he spoke the last. The thing, dressed in black fatigues and mask, hunched low at Becker's attention and he could feel its hate, tangible and hot, from across the room.

"We've closed shop," said Durbin. "The whole project. Obviously too risky. Just not there yet, it seems. And taking out these guys was the last piece, kiddo. This can all be over." He added, "Once DNA testing confirms what you've told us."

"House got torched, boss."

"Is that right?"

"Burned to the ground."

"Not a problem," Durbin smiled, stepping closer. "I'm sure we'll be able to determine what happened there. Whether or not young Jeffrey Jacobsen is among the bodies. And if we don't find him there, then—"

Becker fired.

The first shot hit Kapellas in the vested chest, the next in the Ranger's chin as the man pitched backward off his feet in a splash of bone and blood that showered the monitors behind.

Neff moved like a big guy, too slow.

And Becker killed him too.

Durbin had not yet gotten his gun free.

"Don't," Becker said.

"You damn fool," Durbin raged. "You god damned fool."

Becker eyed the dark man, the only other real threat in the room. The others, the scientists, were already crouched behind tables and chairs.

The thing, however, had not yet moved from its spot. And it seemed to be smiling. Childishly curious, Becker decided. Waiting to see how things might go. Becker could literally *feel* this thought. Its thought. Then the next. Filling with unimaginable blood lust. Waiting to strike. To kill. And no decision quite yet as to whom to kill.

"Toss the gun over," Becker told Durbin.

"You gonna kill me, kiddo?"

"Probably," Becker said. He knew the deformed science project wouldn't wait much longer. He'd watched its eyes linger over the one doctor a second longer than all the others.

"You've lost your fucking mind." Durbin tossed his holstered pistol across the room, and Becker freed the pistol slowly to stuff into his own belt.

"No," Becker said. He moved deeper into the room and grabbed one of the DSTI guys by the back of his green lab coat. "I'm quite sane, actually. That's the funny part. All the money and all that death to isolate what? *This*? The urge to kill?" He pulled the man to his feet. "To kill. Is it deliberate or arbitrary? Yes. Anger or apathy? Yes. It's not under some fucking microscope. What's your name, doc?"

"BBBbbb," the man stammered.

Becker pulled him closer and read the name on his ID badge. "Fietsam. How long you worked for DSTI, doc? Hmm? Long enough for that thing to know you, looks to me. See how he watches you, Robert?"

"I ... I don't. Please. I didn't..."

Becker wrenched the man around and brought the 9mm against his head.

He fired.

Dr. Fietsam's ear vanished in an explosion of crimson spray and hair. The mutilated hole scorched black. Blood streamed down his neck as a large flap of skin fluttered against the side of his cheek. The geneticist's screams now filled the room.

Becker shoved him forward toward the dark man.

The thing sprang onto Fietsam and the two collapsed to the floor as one while nails dug into the

geneticist's shoulders and neck and the DSTI doctor thrashed and roared in agony. The black stunted head dipped into the spouting wound. Started feeding. Tearing away the left side of Fietsam's face.

"Pppppain," the doctor roared, his words now garbled and wet in his own blood. "Hellllllp. Dddddead."

Becker stepped over them and fired. Emptied his gun into the back of thing's head. Bullets pierced both the dark head and the scientist beneath as both vanished in grisly growing splotches.

"Is it self destruction?" Becker asked the suddenly noiseless room while Fietsam's body shuddered in death at his feet. "Yes. And see, a lot of time saved. No need to isolate anything at all. No need to breed and destroy children."

He thought of the boy.

Jeffrey.

And Kristin.

He knew she would care for him as she'd promised.

That she would "fix" as much as she could. That she would raise him as her own. He knew she would do that. And he knew she and the boy would be safe now.

Erdman ran for the door. Becker turned, drew Durbin's gun and fired three times. Erdman fell.

Becker looked the other way and shot another doctor. The woman. Fat doctor Mohlenbrock was now crying, clinging to the legs of the closest table.

Becker pointed the gun at Durbin. "And," he asked, "is it maybe just a little fun?"

The only three men left in the room already knew his own answer again.

"You gonna kill everyone, Shawn?" Durbin asked.

"Yes."

Becker emptied the second gun.

He then moved slowly across the lab. Retrieved the rifles and ammo from the two Rangers while listening to Molhenbrock drag himself across the floor behind him.

We can never cure or destroy it...

"Because we are all Cain," he whispered.

And pulled the trigger again.

Moving through DSTI, he found a dozen more staff in the other rooms.

When the bullets finally ran out, he used his knife.

Then his hands.

And we are all Abel.

It was hours before the police finally arrived and ended things.

* * * *

Jack moved slowly across his big green lawn. The thick grass tickled his bare toes, and he let each step sink in fully before moving to the next. In one hand he carried a small plastic cup that mommy had filled with goldfish crackers. The cheezy pizza kind he liked the most. In the other hand was a grape juice bag. The driveway was hot under his feet, and he walked quicker to his destination. The shade of the big tree where his dinosaurs were waiting. The big T-rex that was his favorite and the new stegosaurus his dad had brought home. He sat down carefully on the natural mound under the great big tree and carefully set his cup of goldfish on the ground. He looked around for any ants.

Across the street, Alec was playing with his mommy. Alec got mad if you called him Alex. Maybe they would play later.

He wondered again if it would be funny to kill Alec. To drown him in the pool. Or hit his head with something until he stopped moving.

Alec and his mommy both waved from across the street.

Jack did not understand why he thought these things. Later, no one else understood, either. There was no history of psychopathic behavior or violence in his family. There had been no physical or mental trauma. His serotonin levels and glucose metabolism were quite ordinary. He was not adopted. His blood and thoughts were entirely his own.

He was just a normal boy. He was every boy.

Jack waved back.

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An Interview With Laura Anne Gilman by Jason Sizemore

Laura Anne Gilman is the author of the popular Retrievers series from Luna Books, which includes *Staying Dead*, *Curse the Dark*, *Bring It On*, *Burning Bridges*, and the forthcoming *Free Fall*. She is also the author of more than thirty short stories published in a variety of magazines and anthologies.

Apex Digest: In 2004, the first of your “Retrievers” novels was published—*Staying Dead*. How do you pitch the Retriever series to potential fans?

Laura Anne Gilman: “It’s a caper novel, like *Oceans’ 11*, featuring a thief and her business partner. Only with magic, set in modern-day Manhattan. With an appropriate amount of sex.” I actually pitched it to my editor as “*Remington Steele*, with magic” but she and I are of the same age ... I’m not sure how many people remember *Remington Steele* any more, except as where Pierce Brosnan got his start. No, Sergei is not based on Brosnan. He’s based on Mitch Pileggi (“Skinner” on *The X Files*). Wren’s based on an old high school friend of mine, in case anyone was wondering. If she knew, she’d kill me.

AD: Did you have any idea after *Staying Dead* came out that there would be four more books (at least!)?

LAG: Well, when I wrote *SD*, I had in mind to do a series, so I had hoped that there would be more. The first contract was for three books, so yeah, by the time *SD* came out I knew. I didn’t know there would be six (6!) before I was done, or that they would have a connected story arc ... that surprised me. I thought I was writing stand-alones, but the story kept evolving and growing ... working on Book Six (BLOOD FROM STONE) right now is interesting, because the first story arc is over, and the characters are moving on, and it’s bittersweet, like sending your kids off to college. They’re not gone, they’re just becoming different people, and you get to re-meet them all over again.

I’m still in shock that we’re at six (number four, BURNING BRIDGES, was released this year, FREE FALL will be out in Spring 2008). It’s a gift, being able to write these books. A joyous gift.

AD: You wrote the introduction to Lavie Tidhar’s *HebrewPunk* from Apex Publications. What is it about Lavie’s writing that speaks to you?

LAG: He’s got a very pared down yet evocative style that I like. I’m not a fan of overly-verbose text; if you can say it with ten words, use three. But what makes him stand out for me is that his direct short fiction ancestor isn’t Asimov or Lieber or Dick, but Isaac Bashevis Singer, who also mined the incredibly rich Jewish mythology for stories that both embrace and transcend both religion and culture to talk directly about humanity.

AD: You’ve got quite an extensive short story bibliography. What’s your favorite of these stories? What’s the single “sale” that you’re most proud of making?

LAG: That’s a trick question, isn’t it? I don’t have a single favorite story—there are stories that I loved writing, there are stories that I love re-reading, there are stories that make me laugh and a few that make me cry, even now. My favorite stories are the ones that taught me something about myself, after I wrote them. But they’re all beloved.

Mostly the stories—and books—that I love the most are the ones that I haven’t written yet. They’re still idealized, they still have the chance to be perfect. Once I actually start to write them, no matter how good they are or how well they are received, I get frustrated, and it takes a while—sometimes a year or more—for me to be able to see them for what they are, rather than what I had *wanted* for them

AD: Tell us a bit about the famous Laura Anne Gilman.

LAG: She hates to talk about herself, for one thing. Um ... okay. Forty years old, gypsy wanderlust in my soles and practicality in my soul, which is an interesting combination. I manage to be both athletic and clumsy, love the outdoors most of all when I'm looking at it from the indoors, and adore the ocean but dislike swimming. I will mess with your expectations just because it amuses me. Rumors that I was a cat in another life have yet to be disproven.

I knew I was a writer when I was seven, but also knew that I didn't have anything interesting to say until I was in my mid-20s. Wrote my first pro-quality story a year after that, sold it to *Amazing Stories*, still don't quite believe it's all real. Writing is my heart, my pulse. I tell stories to figure out what's going on, why it's going on, and where it's taking us and what we'll find out when we get there.

I knew I was going to be an editor when I was sixteen, spent the next two decades working with other writers to help them reach the top of their game. I was a damn good editor. Not so good at playing the corporate political games, unfortunately, but I was a damn good editor. Still am. Getting other people to the top of their game is something I do very, very well.

I love cooking and talking about cooking as much as I love writing, will talk about wines until people beg me to stop, and have an almost unholy glee in showing off pictures of my cats, Boomerang and Pandora. Consider yourself warned. I photograph badly, mainly because I'm constantly in motion.

Everything else really needs to be learned in person.

AD: You list on your website a couple of *Buffy* tie-in novels. What was it like writing a tie-in for one of the most revered television series in recent history?

LAG: Oh, writing the *Buffy* characters was a joy—their voices were just so much fun. I still have an inner cheerleader—who knew Cordelia would be so difficult to evict? But overall it was ... frustrating, mostly. The joke—"Why did I write two *Buffy* books?" "Because I couldn't bear to write three." My brain is all full of "what if" and "where do we go from there?" and tie-ins by their nature demand a reset button, so you don't stray too far from canon. Being able to tell a satisfying story while still adhering to that rule ... it's a skill not everyone has, and not one I wanted to cultivate. I'd have to really love a franchise to do it again. *House*. I'd do it for *House*, and *Pushing Daisies* and ... that's about it, right now.

AD: If someone were to describe you in the year 2025, what would they say?

LAG: "Man, did you read her most recent book? Kicked ass. Hell of a career, man. Hell of a career."

AD: Do you still write any short fiction?

LAG: All the time. I tend to use my short fiction to work out things that are bothering me, issues that are still cloudy in my mind, and need to be poked and prodded a bit before I understand where I stand, so it's tough to predict when something will trigger a story. I'm working right now on a series called the Dragon Virus right now, stories about the nature of friends, family, loyalty and what it means to be true. About half of the stories have been published, but I see them as a complete, interconnected narrative, evolving as humanity evolves. It's fun, but it also requires a lot of research, so the writing comes slow.

AD: Tell us about your other series, *Grail Quest*.

LAG: *Grail Quest* was a middle grade trilogy I wrote for HarperCollins, trying to find a new angle on the Arthurian mythology, keeping the traditional feel of the period while still making it interesting to

ten-year-olds. I was pretty subversive, actually—good is boring, adventure's only fun when it's dangerous, and evil all depends on who's doing the defining. It wasn't political when I wrote it, but in retrospect...

The main thing was to get kids reading, and keep them reading. I keep hearing from kids who have written book reports on the trilogy, so I guess I did good. Emotionally there's part of me that's still a wide-eyed ten-year-old turning pages ... if you lose that, you can't write for kids. Hell, if you lose that you can't tell stories, period. It's all about being wide-eyed and turning pages.

AD: What do you consider to be essential reading?

LAG: Nothing. Everything. Whatever speaks to you and wakes you up and makes you think and wonder and try again and try harder. 's no one thing I can recommend to everyone because everyone has different triggers. The secret is to find what it is that speaks to you, and never let it go. Anything else, any other mass advice, is pretty much useless. Read, listen, learn, grow.

For more information visit www.sff.net/people/LauraAnne.Gilman

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Curve Balls in the Rift

by Durand Welsh

* * * *

Durand Welsh lives in Sydney, Australia, with his wife and one-year-old son. He has a degree in Economics, but has been writing since he was ten-years-old. This is his first published story.

"Curve Balls From the Rift" was the winner of the 2007 *Apex Science Fiction and Horror Digest* short fiction competition. The theme was "post-apocalypse."

* * * *

My grandfather farmed this land once, tilled it with a horse-drawn plough and dug the irrigation ditches with nothing but a spade. He sowed fields of wheat from a sack of seed slung across his shoulder, hammered in his own fence posts with a mallet, and hand-rigged baling wire from post to post along all the acres to his name.

My father followed in his footsteps, adding cattle driving and sheep pasturing to the family business, although by then the Murray River Basin was running dry and the politicians' talk was all of drought and half-cocked schemes to reroute the great rivers of the North. I remember how I used to stand beside my father on the front veranda in the late evening light, the smell of mum's cooking wafting through the open kitchen windows and the stock dogs panting under the eaves, and my father and I would look out across the plodding cattle towards the flat horizon and the clear edge of the sky. He used to speak of storms and clouds and rain, and it had seemed so exciting to hear him speak of those things, as if I were a party to some great secret, the inner workings of the universe. I don't know if he kept the doubt and fear from his voice, or if I was simply too young to hear it, but it had seemed a magical, cherished time. It was only looking back that the tableau held a darker shade, a portent, perhaps, of the future.

Like my father and my grandfather, I still earn my daily bread with the sweat of my brow and the strength in my hands. But the farm is decades gone; the dusty dirt beneath my feet is hard to think of as anyone's, let alone mine. Farming's no longer the family trade.

In my father's time, summer was the meanest season. It's still that way. Only the seasons are all summers now: High summer, Low summer, Half-Summer—there's a different frame of reference these days. But if only that were the worst of it. If only...

* * * *

I grab my kit bag from the Ford utility's tray, then stretch the tarp back over and secure the latches on its trailing edge. The gales can detonate in a split second out here. When they do, they sweep the plain like God's own wrath, exploding through the sandstone hollows of the dried river canyons, stripping the crumbled earth down to bedrock. I use my eyes to retrace the utility's tyre tracks across the doomed landscape, over sunburnt hillocks and between dead trees the colour of grey ash. When I reach the limit of my sight, I close my eyes and count to three. I say goodbye to the normal world before turning my back on everything, re-opening my eyes and setting out for the fence.

I'm cresting a dune of stone-flecked sand when I suddenly realise I'm stepping through bones: shards of white curve from the shifting ground—a skull, some ribs, curved horns. They're cattle bones, a herd that ran against the steep rise and didn't find the strength to continue over. I'm glad they're not human. I pick my way through them, bridge the rise, and troop down the other side until I reach the fence.

The fence is slightly taller than head height. It arrows to the left and right, following the laws of perspective down to a tiny point in either direction. It appears to be made of a translucent metallic mesh,

but I know that it's nothing so simple. And as for what the fence is holding back...

The joints in my hands burn as I approach, and I go with what the pain tells me—be it hotter or colder—as I stalk up and down the fence trying to find the breach. I finally reach a particular stretch where the pain flares close to agony, nerves frying all the way to my elbows. The hands know, they always do.

When I find the hole, I see it is small, less than half a metre wide. It bleeds a sick bluish light across the sand; on the opposite side of the fence the Southern Chimera Rift ebbs and flows like a diver's viewpoint of the shifting sea. The dreamscape twirls, shimmers, bends, refracts, contracts. However, I long ago gave up chasing the many patterns and shapes with my eye. Down that path lies insanity. Besides, I have a job to do, and my job is simple: I repair the breaches.

Before, when I was still driving cattle and watching the world begin to die, I thought I knew what the worst would be. I figured famine, war, disease. I was wrong.

In the beginning, the chimera rifts appeared in sporadic patches: the windblown Nevada desert, a stretch of the London Underground, a corner of the Amazon Basin. It was as if the basic laws of physics had packed up and left, and what remained behind was something altogether alien, altogether anathema to our reality. The rifts ate up the old world, spreading like clots of mould in a Petri dish. That's when the grinding, straining machinery of civilization truly broke.

The cultists used to believe the chimera rifts were gateways to the Earth's death dream as her spirit died. The cultists are all gone now, mostly having marched in ordered lines into the chimera dreamscape. There're only enclaves of mean, scared folks like me left, awaiting the truth behind the rifts. And the truth will come; every day I live in quiet fear of that.

I pull the stiff length of wire from the bag, and begin to bend and shape it with my hands. Smarter folk than me figured out that bits of the chimera dreamscape could be undreamed enough to form a different substance altogether, something halfway between the other reality and ours. It's enough to hold the rifts back, for now.

My hands glow a delicate blue as I twist the wire just so, and begin to patch the breach. The rift licks at my fingers. It feels cool, like the frosty breath of a low powered freezer. I can sense the breaches easily, now. In the same way my mother's bones used to ache when a storm was coming, my hands will throb with pain as I near a breach. A man can't tangle regularly with a chimera rift and not get a measure of it embedded in him. These days, my hands are more of the dream world than the old world, but I can still touch and sense the old world things. I'm hesitant to touch people, though. There's always the possibility the dream world will steal through my hands and into their thoughts. Most folks steer clear, anyhow. For the most part I like it that way; although there're times when, like any man, I yearn for something more. There's a crazy woman in the camp, her brain so far gone that my dreamer's touch seems to actually calm the storm inside her fractured mind, and there are nights when I sit beneath the bright stars and simply cradle her head in my arms and stroke my shimmering fingers across her brow as she rolls to the edge of sleep and beyond. It's nothing much, but it reminds me how to feel alive.

The hole is quickly patched. I slip the last piece of wire into place and make ready to leave.

And then I see my son, Richard Zachary Price. He's a mere metre away on the opposite side of the fence, just standing there in the blue chaos.

My son was in the Blue Mountains with Amy, my ex-wife, when the Southern Rift tore open and a million souls vanished in the night. Now and again, on these long patrols of mine, I see him through the fence. Or something which mimics him with uncanny acuity. Usually, I'll only get a glimpse, a flicker in my vision, a

teasing instant that fuses the present to a thousand memories of a past that should have led to a different, better place. I always have the sensation during those moments, that the rift, or something nestled in its depths, is testing me—is gauging me, the enemy.

I've heard awestruck men speak as if the rift is a magnificent force of nature—a tsunami, a volcano, a tornado. But I've done more hard time out in the sticks with this seething beauty than any man yet living. In my time, I've travelled a million kilometres of fence with nothing but the Southern Chimera Rift for company. I know it as much as a sane man can know the face of madness. For me, mindless catastrophe is furthest from my thoughts at times like this. No, when I'm out here, I think of it as a great predator—a lion, or a shark—stalking its prey. It is a canny foe we have out there; no wild pig to be cornered by the dogs and laid low with a shot from my old Remington. Out there is something more, and it has my son, and it won't let me forget.

Richard is standing quietly. He looks only eight years old, although by now he should be almost twenty. If he'd had a chance to live his life, that is. But what does a chimera rift care for time frames? What does a chimera rift care that my son never got to live his life?

* * * *

I stand there before the fence and stare back at Richard. He is dressed in three-quarter-length urban-camo shorts and a baggy t-shirt with a sports motif across the chest. His hair is close cropped, the way he used to prefer it. He had hated having a fringe or anything which might dangle in his eyes; he was always frightened he wouldn't see what was coming. I blame myself for that: he learned more from me about fear and cynicism than he did about how to fish or throw a curve ball.

Richard grew up in a time when childhood was essentially a fiction. His two best friends died when he was seven, and after that he just stopped trying to make more. He never got to play a game of baseball, nor visit Disneyland, nor even see the ocean. Time moved too fast for all those things. He saw his first dead body at an age when I'd been crying over not getting the latest movie tie-in figurine.

It bothers me somewhat that the Richard in the chimera rift has colours that seem wrong. He looks kind of stonewash faded, almost bleached, and then there's the insane bluish glow encapsulating him. But he's my son, and I can't seem to make those other things matter.

What matters is the hurt. Confronting him like this hurts so badly. I shake a little, and place both my hands against the fence's mesh, lean up close and try and steady myself. The fence bows out a bit, but the slack quickly goes out of the mesh and I feel it draw tight against the steel posts sunk into the bedrock. They don't give an inch.

"Richard?" I say.

Richard doesn't answer. He grins slightly, though, and that melts me, because I never saw Richard smile enough in life. It also occurs to me that I never actually saw Richard die, and that no one living, absolutely no one, can definitely say what happened to those people who vanished in the rifts. A seditious voice whispers in the back of my head that now I'm sounding like a cultist. But I'm not in a mood to give the voice much attention. After all, Richard is still smiling at me. He's got some charm, that kid.

"We never played baseball, you know," I say. I feel stupid saying that. My mouth is dry—and it's not just the stinking heat.

Richard keeps on smiling, and I see that there's something in his hand. I zero in on it and recognise a baseball. Richard tosses it lightly up and down in his palm as if testing its weight. I step back from the fence, moving to the base of the sand dune that I had earlier descended. I pop my right fist into my left palm as if I'm wearing a catcher's mitt, and signal him to throw. Crazy, yes, but the whole world's gone

crazy, anyhow.

Richard draws his hand back and lets fly. It's not the kind of throw a kid should be able to make. It's much too fast. But I don't think too closely about that; after all, I'm more intent on catching it, and it's got such a velocity that the exercise takes a fair bit of concentration. The ball slams into the blue sky and, as it does, I lose it for a moment and part of me thinks, hell, you know why—it's because that ball is blue like the chimera rift—but then the thought is severed as the ball comes careening down from heaven and I reach out my transformed hands and catch it squarely. In that moment I know it's dream stuff; I can feel it. Already the ball is turning a heavier, grey colour, isolated as it is from the reservoir of the rift. But I feel good regardless, this moment nourishing something desperate inside me. I laugh, wholeheartedly, sight Richard on the other side of the fence wearing his kid's grin, and I shoot the ball back towards him. The throw is bad, way off target, but somehow Richard's right there under it when it nears the ground, and I think, that's not right, I should be remembering the shark, the lion in the grass. What am I doing?

But then Richard jiggles his feet in excitement and laughs, and it's my kid's laugh, which the world has robbed me of for so long; and I've been so lonely, all those long, hard days on the road out here, nothing but a crazy woman to hold in my arms back at that despairing place I call home. Richard draws his hand back and pitches hard. The ball has got some serious speed this time. It skips over the top of the fence and, as it grazes the top of the undreamt material, it uncoils a wisp of bluish gas. That's not right! a voice in my head screams.

I try to get my hands up to catch it, but I know I'm too late. I know I've miss-timed it. The ball is a blue comet, angling straight towards my chest and behind it, through the fence mesh, I can see my son smiling.

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Making Dynamite

by Alethea Kontis

* * * *

Alethea Kontis's first publication was her essay in *Apex Digest* issue #3. She is now the author of *AlphaOops: The Day Z Went First* and the official Sherrilyn Kenyon *Dark-Hunter Companion*, as well as co-editor (with Steven Savile) of the SF all-star anthology *Elemental*. Find out more about Alethea's plans for world domination on her website: www.aletheakontis.com.

* * * *

I'm one of those organized people who always likes to start her story at the beginning ... but where's the beginning *really*?

If you want to get technical, the beginning of everything is the Big Bang of the Universe (or the Big Bang of God, if that's your poison). For the purpose of telling a story, though, the teller has to know where to begin. It needs to be close enough to the action to keep the listener/reader engaged, but far enough back so that person has all the information they need to understand what's going on. The beginning is always the hardest part, because inevitably you have to leave something out.

It's a toss up to say whether or not this little tale starts with the essays, or the events that caused the essays ... or my parents giving birth to a child who decided that writing down everything she saw and did was a good idea ... see where this could go?

How about we start with the announcement: yesterday, Apex Publications formally announced that they will be releasing a book of my essays this fall, to be entitled *Beauty and Dynamite*. Cool, huh?

Yes. Very cool ... and very unsettling.

I've kept journals all my life. (Harriet the Spy was one of my childhood heroes.) I've got a box of them up in the attic: spiral-bound notebooks, artsy-fartsy blank books, chunky little Diaries with locks on them that anyone with a straight pin can open, hardcover lined books, sketchbooks, loose paper ... even a Beezus & Ramona fill-in-the-blanks journal. Postcards, flyers, envelopes, receipts—nothing with a blank space on it has ever been sacred in my house. And yes, I have even been known to write on walls occasionally ... but a very rare occasion.

I never thought it odd (and still don't) that I carry on a constant running dialogue with myself. To be honest, I find myself fairly clever, amusing, even supportive at times, and I am never bored.

The odd part was when I discovered that other people apparently found this dialogue ridiculously entertaining.

Until the ripe-old age of twenty-six, most of my thoughts and poems and essays were private, and none of them published. In 2003 I started writing a book review column every two weeks for a local free press—you know, one of those papers you pick up outside the Kroger when you're looking for a yard sale or used workout equipment. High-quality stuff, I assure you.

Sometime around the third article I thought, "No one is reading this crap, so screw it. I'm going to have fun with it."

(I maintain that everyone in their life needs to have a "Screw It" moment—this was my first. What an epiphany!)

I wasn't being paid, so it's not like losing the job would have been a big deal. The next book review I submitted was less of a review and more about what was going on in my life when I read the book in question. A sort-of blog entry, if you will. I think the editors were just so happy to have someone who produced to deadline, they printed it. And the next one. The entries got more and more personal, but they just kept printing them ... and kept on for the next two years.

Every once in a while, one of my co-workers would come up to me and tell me they had read one of my reviews ... and I'd thank them and hoped they were happy with their new-used lawnmower or sofa. I was honored when one of my co-workers' daughters took one of my reviews to school and read it out loud to her class ... but I didn't think much of it. I went to Orson Scott Card's Boot Camp, I sold *AlphaOps* to Candlewick, and eventually—like most folks in this day and age—I graduated to blogging.

I was okay with saying “Screw It” and putting my life out there on the internet, mostly because I was sure that 1.) no one would be reading this either, and 2.) those friends and family who did were people I would have told anyway, and whose comments and wisdom I always welcomed. It was good to be able to get things out—writing has always been my therapy—and I was up to the challenges of a.) making it obscure enough to mask real people and events and z.) making it sensible enough that accidental passers-by didn't write me off as a raving lunatic. And as my life became more and more insane and incredible, I was able to share the magic and misery of my world with others. No matter what I went through, I wasn't alone.

It was nice.

And then along came Jason.

After Hypericon's inaugural convention in 2005, Jason asked me to write an essay for Apex, based on my experiences in the science-fiction and horror genres. He said he had read some of my blog posts, and was impressed with my writing style. I said sure, no problem. He gave me a deadline.

And then he wouldn't tell me what it was he wanted me to write about.

He said some editorial mumbo-jumbo about giving his contributing writers free reign (bet he's regretting that now) and how what they came up with on their own was usually better than anything he could make up.

This shouldn't have been a problem. I had had free reign in my universe for years: I was the Red Queen, and all the ways around here belonged to me. The only problem was, I couldn't exactly say “Screw It, No One Reads This Crap” because they DID. He had subscribers to prove it, and distribution in bookstores all around the country.

Aw, hell.

At that point, however, it was far too late to save me from being ME, so I said “Screw It” and wrote the essay. I even turned it in early, so that Jason would have ample time to mull over how to politely turn it down and a nice window in which he could find advertisers to fill the four-page gap in his fall issue.

The essay was called “Keeping Your Friends Close and Your Fears Closer.” It was about my inevitable, damning relationship to the horror genre and how I reluctantly embraced it, fell in love with it, dated it, helped make a movie or two in it, and finally ended up writing in it. Sure, it had the word “horror” in the title, but it wasn't about horror. It was about me.

He told me he loved it (I didn't believe him), and he printed it anyway. And the next one. The entries got

more and more personal, but Jason just kept printing them ... and has continued for the last two years.

In that time a few people have asked if I was ever going to put together a collection of these essays and make it available, á la Brian Keene and his *Best of Hail Saten* series. I was flattered by the suggestion, but—much like my co-workers' previous comments—I didn't think much of it. Until someone posed that same question at the Apex table at Hypericon 3, in front of both Jason and Geoffrey Girard.

That started *that* ball rolling.

But, while incredibly honored, there were a few problems I could see inherent in my assembling a book of ... well, of myself. Did I have enough material? One long, curious evening at the computer proved that the answer was an emphatic yes. But what about the other issues? What about the people who hadn't been living with me in my head for four years? Won't they feel left out? There are some basic things they need to know! Like for instance:

* * * *

Who's Lee?

In my travels on this planet, I have been known by many names: Allie, Harry, Alf, Lee Lee, Leafy, The Incredible Whirlwind of Beauty and Dynamite (thus the book's title)—those of you who have one of these names for me, you know exactly who you are, exactly what that is, and exactly how you've come by it (proving there really is a story behind everything).

Lee, however, is the most common of these, derived by yours truly in the sixth grade when I decided at the ripe old age of ten that I needed a nickname. After a long, creative, and arduous selection process, I settled upon “Lee” (because the correct American pronunciation of my full name is “a-LEE-thee-a”, for those of you who might not know). It's what my family calls me, what my close friends call me, and what I call myself when I'm having one of those myriad inner dialogues. You're welcome to call me Lee too. It's just easier to say.

* * * *

Who's Max?

Due to the very bizarre nature of our slightly backwards relationship (I am also known as “Backwards Girl” by more than a few), Steven Savile and I obscured the details of our movie-plot romance by me referring to him as “Max” when I began writing the blog. Our close friends knew his identity, but to everyone else it remained a mystery.

Over the months, I enjoyed mentioning Max, fell in love with him a little bit, and Steve would even post comments on the blog under Max's name. I didn't want to let go of Max—he was the free spirit I fell in love with, the arrogant bastard who said what he thought and partied till dawn. All of us have a little Max inside us, I think ... and I didn't want to let that go. Even after we officially became an item, I still referred to him as such when I wasn't discussing him as a fellow author. For the purpose of continuity, I decided to leave “Max” in the details. My readers are smart enough to figure it out.

As to the origin of the name “Max”, those of you fortunate enough to have one of those rare editions of Steve's *Angel Road* (still possibly my favorite work of his), the answer is at the bottom of page 5.

* * * *

The Black Hole

Almost every author has one of these stories, and unfortunately I'm one of them. The majority of my blog essays from when I started it in the summer of 2004 to roughly August 2005 got lost on a friend's server

and were sacrificed to the Black Hole of the Internet. I still mourn the loss of those stories and so many of them have stayed with me—the story behind my grandmother's diamond, finding the true meaning of Cinderella, finding faith in a couple of rainbows the morning after the longest night, and the soul-searching scariness I went through before (and just after) flying 4000 miles to meet Max for the first time.

Yes, I've learned my lesson, and now I write (and save) my essays in a Word document before pasting them into the blog. What few I had the foresight to save during that time, I've included. To the memory of the rest I raise my glass in remembrance.

* * * *

Who gives a crap?

You and I know the answer to this: no one. Nobody gives a crap about me and my silly life and my silly stories, and what crazy kind of egomaniacal person am I to think that I can just throw my soul out to the general populace? Nevermind that a lot of these have been posted and printed before, nevermind that I have no secrets and tell everybody pretty much everything, nevermind that I am friends with the world ... who on earth gives a crap? I can't do this! To which Brian Keene, Masterblogger Saten himself responded: *Yes, you can. You're a great writer. Just shut up and do it.* Actually, it might have been more along the lines of: *Those really are great boots. Are you sure I can't get you anything stronger than water?* Which brings me to:

* * * *

No one is going to believe any of this.

Life imitates art, and vice-versa. I do lead a bit of a strange life. And the more I write about it, the stranger it gets. Truth is definitely stranger than fiction. (I don't suppose my mama was considering that when she named her daughter "Truth", but as far as curses go it's worked out pretty well.) So to prove I wasn't making this all up, I asked some of my friends and family to contribute essays corroborating certain events. They all emphatically said yes and sent me their two, five, and sometimes ten cents.

Now that I have them, I'm not exactly sure they're going to convince anyone. But I'm including them anyway, because they're a lot of fun.

Screw it.

But it made me realize, as I have suspected for a while now, that I *do* live in a fantasy world. I always have. I made it up when I was young, named myself the heroine, and let it go along its merry way, growing wild and thriving in the fertile ground of my imagination.

Only ... by surrounding myself with storytellers and immersing myself in a world of books, the lines between fiction and fact, truth and tale, story and memory, have become fantastically blurred. It's not that I *can't* tell reality from fantasy, it's just that I don't *want* to.

Come on, with a life like mine ... would *you*?

Best of all, I brought my friends with me.

And how am I supposed to explain all these things? I asked. Nobody's going to know all this! *So write an introduction*, said Geoffrey, *and explain it.*

Okay ... here you go.

I am Alice, and *Beauty and Dynamite* is a doorway to my Wonderland.

Welcome.

Brush off the Looking Glass. Sit back. Have a spot of tea. Move down one and make room for the Doormouse. Ignore the smiling cat. If you buy the book, enjoy it. If you don't, spend the day indulging in something else that's just for you. You deserve it.

Be happy.

Be Max.

Have fun.

Say "Screw It."

After all, no one's going to read this anyway ... right?

* * * *

You have just read the introduction to *Beauty & Dynamite*, a book of essays and madness from Alethea Kontis.

Contributors include Brian Keene,

Tom Piccirilli, and John Ringo.

Look for it this summer at

www.ApexBookCompany.com

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Artist Bios

Cover Art—I Can't Look at the City—Osvaldo González

Osvaldo González is a self-taught digital artist, born in Argentina. Working in a melancholic vein, he creates complex and emotional scenarios of the human condition and strange dreamlike figurations. Using layering to create depth, tonal qualities, and aged effects, he produces otherworld narrative moments with a delicate and detailed sense of atmosphere and transparency.

He currently resides in Miami, Florida, with his Mariana and his iguana. View more from Osvaldo at www.pixelium-art.com.

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Apex parting shot

Dear Diary

by Sara Genge

Dear Diary,

The ministers returned today. It was like last year, trumpets and screaming, but this time they haven't killed anyone yet. Mom didn't let me watch when they burnt Aunt Helen at the stake, but the square stank like forever of burnt fat and old cheese.

Today, Mom called me into the house and told me to be quiet. Then she went into my room and took away my little god collection and smashed all the jars and took out the dead gods and burnt them in the fireplace. I screamed and kicked but she wouldn't stop. She said if the ministers found them we'd go up in smoke like Aunt Helen and that I should be a big girl and learn which things are important.

"You take after that good-for-nothing father of yours," she said. I knew she was mightily pissed because she never talked about Dad.

She also wanted to burn you, dear Diary, but I hid you away. Mom gave me candy in exchange for my dead god collection, but I'm not going to forget, oh no.

Then she said she needed my help and sent me to the basement to hunt the little gods that live there and I said "Yeah, I'll do it, but I still hate you," and she said, "Fine, whatever," and laughed.

So I went to the basement and killed lots of gods because gods are mean and if the ministers come, the gods will tell them that Mom and I hunt and eat them. But there was a god who crawled into a crack and I couldn't get him. I tried and tried, but in the end I had to stuff a pillow into the crack so he wouldn't get out. After the ministers go away, I'm gonna drag him out with a stick and he'll be the first god of my new collection.

Now I've come to get you and I'm sitting in the basement writing all of this down.

The doorbell is ringing.

Dear Diary, wait a second. The basement window is too high for me, but if I get up on that chair I think I can see who's calling.

It's a minister! He's wearing those horrible black clothes. Mom opens the door. They talk. Now the minister puts his hand up Mom's skirt and she lets him, which is totally unfair since she hit me once when she caught me showing Tommy my knickers.

The minister kisses her (ew!). Good, he's going away.

Oh no! The little god has run out of the house. I turn around. There's a hole in the pillow. He must have gnawed through. Dratted beasties! The minister lifts him up to his ear. The little god is rattling, I know. They walk up to Mom. I think the minister is going to hit her! No, he doesn't hit her. They're kissing some more. Yuck! Now he puts his hand on her tit, throws down the god and stomps on it.

I don't understand. I thought ministers and gods liked each other.

Mom waves at the minister and he leaves. She's coming inside. I'm going to hide you again in case she

wants to hug me or something. She always wants to cuddle when the ministers come to town.

I hope she doesn't want to kiss me, though. I don't ever want to kiss her. She has minister cooties.

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Sara Genge is a doctor in Madrid, Spain. She writes speculative fiction aided and abetted by a coven of friends and female relatives. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Helix SF*, *Cosmos Magazine*, and others, including translations in Greek and Czech. She has stories forthcoming in *Asimov's* and *Weird Tales*.

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