

## **The Bookseller of Bastet**

by John G. Henry

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Some heroes are not what people usually imagine, but face no less danger.

The bookshop of Aaron D'abu filled to overflowing a ground level store space in the oldest building in Fraternity, the oldest city on the continent of Libertus on the world of Bastet. The bookshop had been there as long as the building and the city, its narrow street frontage only hinting at the deep space within, lined on both sides with shelves packed with every kind of book and magazine. E-readers and e-books in a hundred formats ranging from obsolete to not-quite-new cluttered one side, stacks of printed books filled the other, and in the very back against a wall covered with handbills announcing author readings and book signings rested an ancient Print On Demand console.

"When they founded this city," Aaron D'abu told me, "my grandfather, may his spirit be ever at peace, was told that the new land here needed hands to build and farm, not shops that sold words. He told them they were wrong, that it was words that had built all which humanity knew, and words which had brought us to this world far from the Earth our ancestors called home."

He waved toward the back of the store. "Look. Inside these walls we have the thoughts formed on Earth two or three thousand years ago and the latest imaginings of the newest generation here on Bastet. They rest side by side, for all books are companions to each other. So said my mother, may she also be at peace."

I'd come to Bastet on a diplomatic mission. Earth's children occupy many worlds now, but the mother feels responsibility for her offspring. There are still things the old mother can offer her children, perhaps the latest technology or new techniques for farming or even grants of devices that new worlds find prohibitively expensive to manufacture. It's all only a drop in the bucket, for even Earth can't do much measured against the needs of other worlds, but it grants the home world a bit of influence it might otherwise lack. Too little influence, it often seems, as we watch the new worlds make the same mistakes the old world once did.

How was business? I wondered, noticing that only a few locals were browsing among the many offerings in the bookstore.

“Not what it should be. Enough, but no more. Too many say they don’t need these books,” Aaron told me. “I tell them everything they want to know, someone else has thought or dreamed of, and it’s all here for them to see. Would it kill them to learn of such thoughts? But, no, they claim to honor the past but don’t care to learn from it because they say the future will be different.” He waved a hand again, this time to encompass all around us. “Does this city look different? See here, the thoughts of the old religions, may all honor be to them. Next to them, the new beliefs. Here the words of those who claim no god, and here the words of those whose gods are philosophy or money or power.”

I asked him if he had any texts for the Anubans, who had declared themselves the only true children of the religion all Bastet had once shared. “Of course. You see? There with the others. Many say that the words of the Anubans as well as their people should be suppressed, but truth does not fear argument!”

In the cities to the north, I pointed out, bombs were going off as some Anubans fought for an independent state. “I live near Anubans! A nice family who believe themselves chosen, but do not demand that everyone else submit to the same belief. I respect them.” Aaron D’abu rummaged among his shelves. “See here. History. Wars and hatred, and for what? We’re building a nice world here, for our children.”

Did he have children?

“Alas, no. A nephew. He works here sometimes.” Aaron sighed and offered me a seat at one of the beat-up tables lined down the middle of the bookstore. “My wife, blessed be her memory, died of the plague in ‘29. You heard of it? An awful time. My nephew will have this store when I join her. People will always need books.”

He chuckled and picked up a small battered disc from the floor. “Look at this! Cast aside and yet it holds someone’s story. Some writer’s hopes. Look! A romance, I think.” He studied the disc doubtfully. “I don’t know if I have a reader that fits this anymore. It came from Earth with the first settlers. Do you think the one who wrote this ever dreamed it would travel to the stars and still be read so many years later?” Aaron smiled and carefully placed the possibly unusable disc on a shelf piled high with a variety of other e-books and data holders.

He wasn’t worried by the violence? One of the reasons our delegation was here was to try to broker a cease-fire, I explained. A few gestures of tolerance would deny the violent extremes of the Anubans most of their support.

“Blessings on your task,” Aaron replied. “Worried? What can I do? I live with wisdom—” He waved at the books again. “—and am surrounded by human foolishness. Why would they hurt me? Who fears words?”

I didn’t see Aaron D’abu again for a couple of months, being engaged in fruitless negotiations with the government and those who claimed to represent the Anuban sect. Eventually I returned to Fraternity and stopped by the bookseller again. He greeted me as if we’d just parted yesterday and this time offered refreshment. “It did not go well?”

No, I confessed, neither side wanted to be seen as giving in.

“If my mother were here, she would speak with them. In my mother’s time,” Aaron confided over a glass of hot, sweet tea, “the mayor of Fraternity was not a humble man. He thought himself wise above all, and criticism angered him. One day, his police came to this very shop and pointed to a new book, which mocked the mayor. Take it down, they said, or this shop will be closed.”

“‘Why should I remove this book?’ my mother asked.”

“‘It is not truthful,’ they told her.”

“‘Should I take down the book next to it, then?’ my mother asked, which was a book saying good things about the mayor.”

“‘No,’ they said, ‘for that book is truthful.’”

“‘But I must,’ my mother declared, ‘for the second book says the mayor is a fair and wise man, and such a man would not fear the words of those who disagree with him. If the mayor says I must hide such words, then the second book cannot be truthful, either.’”

Aaron D’abu grinned at me. “The mayor’s police argued, then called their supervisor, who called her supervisor, and so on. The next day the mayor himself came and sat here, at this very table, and drank tea with my mother. She told him of all this store held and he listened, and then he told his police to leave her alone, because he who does not fear the truth does not fear lies. That was my mother.”

He sighed and looked toward the back of the store. “She died there, seven years ago, among the words she treasured, taking inventory. It was as she wanted it. Her body was taken to the Garden of Memory, but her spirit remains here.”

Three months after that, occasional bombs were going off in Fraternity. Tensions kept rising, and both sides in the dispute were accusing us from Earth of favoring the other side instead of serving as honest brokers. A family had been massacred in a small town far to the north. Then two families in another town. Fighting began in Tvor City, radical Anubans striking and drawing retaliation against all Anubans, the radicals building support for themselves at the price of their own people's blood and the government hard-liners playing right into their hands.

Wisdom seemed in short supply when I next visited Fraternity and sought out Aaron D'abu. There were fewer people on the street than I remembered, and Aaron seemed saddened. "Some people leave, others hide. They say the war is coming. I once told you of neighbors I had, good people. But they received threats. Death to Anubans. And they left, for their children's sake. I could not blame them."

Had his business suffered?

Aaron sighed heavily. "Business is not even as good as it was. Not like in the old days. People now say they are too busy for books. Too busy to read, while the world gallops toward the abyss! Perhaps the words of others would give them pause, make them think, give them new eyes to see all around them. Or maybe they fear all that and so avoid it."

A sound of thunder rolled by and the shelves filled with books rattled slightly as if in momentary fright. The bookseller gazed out into the street, where a not-too-distant column of smoke could be seen rising over the buildings. "We came to this world, to this continent, to this city, to build things. And now too many just want to destroy what our mothers and fathers built. This will pass. I know it will. My books tell me it will. Another day will come." Aaron grimaced. "My nephew has been drafted. He will fight. When he comes home, he has promised to come work here."

Another few months and even the most optimistic among our delegation had to admit that we'd failed. Bombs were going off daily in cities and the death toll kept rising while both sides refused to compromise. Earth had no power to compel peace or reason, but was now being blamed in part for the ongoing violence, as if we could have somehow stopped what the people of this world seemed determined upon. We would leave and try to see what we could accomplish elsewhere.

The decision was reached during a final meeting in Fraternity, so I resolved

to say good-bye to Aaron D'abu before our delegation took its flight back to Bastet's spaceport the next morning. I'd finally buy some books from him, to help occupy the long trip to the next world on our schedule. As I walked toward the street on which his shop lay, I heard and felt and saw the explosion that rattled buildings all around me. Once I recovered, I started running, joining a crowd hastening to provide assistance.

The oldest building in Fraternity was no more. Only rubble remained of the structure. From the size and shape of the crater before it, a vehicle loaded with explosives had been detonated in front of the building.

I stumbled to a halt and stared at the devastation. Why?

I must have said the question out loud, because a woman beside me shook her head. "The building belonged to a man who now commands an anti-Anuban militia." She was crying, tears cutting paths through the bomb-birthing dust that had powdered her face. "Not ten minutes ago I came past here and greeted my friend Aaron. Have you ever noticed his bookstore?" I nodded. "All gone," the woman mourned. "Aaron and all he treasured. And for what? Aaron had been threatened by some Anubans. I knew of it. They didn't like some of the books he sold, but Aaron wouldn't take anything off the shelves. But look where they put the bomb! They didn't even care the bookstore was there. They just wanted to destroy the building."

And I truly didn't know at that moment which was worse: that people might deliberately destroy the bookshop of Aaron D'abu because they hated the ideas inside, or that they might heedlessly destroy it because they didn't care about the ideas it held.

"It's a task of great honor, to sell books," Aaron had once told me. "All of life, hope, death, and love is within my walls. It's a great responsibility, you know. We booksellers, we come and go. But the books, the ideas, those remain with us always for those who seek them."

I left Bastet, wishing more people on that world had read the books that Aaron D'abu had once sold.