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From The Clay of His Heart

by John Brown



Artwork by Scott Altmann

grooves running from the fine steel head. The grooves, the blood lines to speed the bleeding of the animal, had been painted to look like tiny, spotted snakes. Nobody in the vale had even heard of anyone -- Croat or Hungarian -- who used such markings, so Braslava was able to claim and sell them for a good price.

These were the good things. But most of the time the golem brought things that it should not.

And it did not matter how strongly the inhabitants of the vale locked their possessions up. It didn't not matter if they hid their treasures with great cunning. The golem would find them, and it would take them. It was an excellent thief. Quiet as stone. Quiet as the red mud and clay from which it was formed. The only way a victim might know he'd been burgled was by looking for the tell-tale crumbs of red dust that it sometimes left behind.

This is how holy things steal.

Of course, in the first weeks some had questioned the golem's holiness. They'd come one afternoon with a thick-toothed tree saw and a mighty axe. They'd commanded the golem to put its neck on the chopping block. It had done so willingly.

Braslava scolded them. "A man, holy enough that God trusts him, creates this thing, and you're so wise to kill it?"

"You don't know who made it," said Eben, who was always one for dredging up the facts.

It was true, of course, that she didn't know *exactly* who'd made it. She'd found the golem down at the river in the late summer. She'd gone to gather an apron-full of the spotted mint that flourished on the exposed sand and gravel bars there. Truly, anyone could have found it, but it was Braslava who had been standing in just the right spot as the orange light from the setting sun brightened the shorn bank, illuminating the undressed tree roots, the rocks, and the upper side of the golem.

The golem was a thief. Nothing in the village, nothing in the whole vale for that matter, was safe. It was forever stealing and bringing its thefts to Braslava's door, laying them on her step like a cat lays down dead birds and mice.

One day it was the butcher's blue and white Turkish stockings, the next it was cranky Petar's new pitchfork.

And then the golem would stand there, looking down upon her, and all she could say was, "You think you're doing me favors? Take your inscrutable face and go sit." And the golem would go and sit in the shade of her spruce, the sap sometimes falling to speckle the red clay of its bald head and shoulders.

Braslava did not know, was this God's curse? Was it his blessing?

The golem was anatomically correct in every way, except for the missing belly button. But if God was going to go to all that trouble, why not just send a man instead?

Sometimes the thefts were not such a bad thing. For instance, the golem once brought her a shoe that months ago Zvonka the carpenter's wife had lost. It is a terrible thing to lose a favorite shoe, but the golem found it.

The golem once brought Braslava a quiver of quality hunting arrows. Each had a black shaft with three yellow

At first she'd thought the river had dug into the stained bones of an ancient graveyard. But a person could not get close to the golem, a person could not liberate its shoulder and face from the dirt, and think it was mere bones. It had looked like someone caught far too long in the womb, struggling for birth.

Who fashioned it and buried it under a forgotten twelve feet of dirt, Braslava did not know. But did she need to know such things when God was involved?

She folded her arms and looked at the array of bearded men before her.

"You forget," said Boric, "wizards in Pharaoh's courts had power to turn staves into snakes."

"And even if it was made by a holy man," added Eben, "what does that mean? Men always spoil God's gifts. Just look at Adam."

"You all think like rutabagas," she said. "A golem is an angel of sorts. And you do not kill angels. It's just not done, even if they do make off with your prized cooking pot."

The men did not listen. Braslava stood back. If they wanted to call down fire from heaven, she was not going to stand so close the flames would engulf her.

They put the two-man saw to its neck and pulled. The teeth bit in, but when they'd sawn only part of the way through, the saw stuck fast.

Radovan, the massive woodcarver, attempted to free the saw. He spit on his hands, heaved his mighty axe above his head, and brought the blade down. The axe sunk into the golem's neck, but if Radovan hadn't immediately wrenched his blade out, the neck would have also claimed the axe.

The men stood there, looking down. The golem knelt at the chopping block with the saw stuck in its red neck.

"All things created by God are good," said Braslava. "This one is to show: nothing that is ours cannot be taken in a moment's notice."

And so it was. But this did not mean that sometimes, the Lord be blessed, the divine message was not annoying.

Now and again the golem disappeared. The first time this happened was after All Saints Day. Braslava expressed her gratitude for the Lord's favor in both the sending and the taking. But it was apparently not enough, for the golem returned one week later carrying a long-haired goat.

The nanny desperately needed milking, but Braslava knew the brand in its hide. If she milked it, the goat's mingy Magyar owner would probably claim she'd stolen a sip and demand payment. So she took the nanny from the golem, tied the animal up on her cart, hooked old Ephraim, her bull, to the yoke, and then proceeded down the trail to the river to deliver the goat, un-milked, to its owner.

She admired the sun and the red and orange leaves blazing in the trees and littering the path. She savored great quantities of air thick with the smell of leaf mold. At all this beauty she heaved many sighs. But when she approached Mislav's farm, the sighing stopped.

She decided she would wave to Mislav as she passed by. Even now she always had to decide. Mislav wasn't a rich priest, wasn't one of those Romans, but an Orthodox, a Byzantine who believed in marriage and in the propriety of full beards. He was diligent and laughed too loud and was the only man who'd ever even thought of her as someone worthy of being a wife.

Mislav stood in front of his house, chopping wood. He saw her and put his axe down. He wiped the sweat from his brow and motioned at the goat with his chin. "So, God is not tough with you then?"

"He's never through with any of us, is he?"

"Perhaps help is on the way. I have heard that our Croatian Ban knows of your little problem. He is sending men to collect the blessing."

"What does he want with a golem?"

"Think," said Mislav. "It will not be long before the Bosnian dukes fall. And then the Turks will be here at our very doors. What if the Ban can direct its stealing? The Turks will wake up one morning and stand in shock: where are their mountains of arrows, where the multitude of horse? And what if the golem is sly enough to obtain a sultan or two? It could become a mighty weapon."

Braslava shook her head. "This golem is not so reliable. I know this thing because I have tried to direct its stealing myself."

Mislav cocked an eyebrow.

"Bah," she said and dismissed him. "Even you would not be able to resist. Think about it -- can you say you would not be sorely tempted to kife the Roman's silly hat?"

"I would resist temptation," he said.

"Not for long," she said. "But the Lord would save you because it seems all requests and commands are answered with the same thing. I'm telling you, the Ban will be disappointed. He will get nothing but tiny speckled eggs." Eggs, even when all she'd asked for was one purple Turkman's tulip.

"Perhaps the golem will listen to a Christian. Perhaps it will listen to a Ban."

Braslava rolled her eyes. "Even Christian Bans need to learn that God is not our slave to be running to and fro."

Nina, Mislav's wife, opened the door. She held a baby boy with dark curly hair like his father in her arm. She smiled her genuine smile. "Brasa," she said. "Come in for tea and tell us about this goat."

Such an admirable woman. It could have been Braslava there at the door. She felt an emptiness lurch inside her. She waved her hand in dismissal. "What is there to tell? I open the door to turn my pigs out into the oaks and there's the golem, silent as stone with the goat."

"Where does it sleep?"

Braslava did not want to answer that question. Of late it had been laying itself down on the floor next to her bed. She did not know what to make of that. She thought that perhaps the golem was like a cat, but when she'd looked down into its clay eyes that never blinked, never closed for rest, she knew it was not a cat. The proximity of that clay body at night was a bit unnerving.

"Since when does dirt sleep?" Braslava asked.

"She's got a point," said Mislav.

"Faw," said Nina. "Come in and have tea."

Braslava motioned at the nanny. "Look at these teats. If I were to milk them you know I'd never hear the end of it. I've got to be going."

"What about the bear?" asked Nina.

An old sow bear had been seen prowling the river bottoms, breaking up the fishing weirs. Everyone told Braslava that this is precisely why she needed a dog. But dogs only made her eyes burn and her nose weep. She patted Ephraim on his flank. "One old bull will have to be enough," she said.

Nina accepted this and blew her a kiss. Mislav gave her that look, the one he'd been giving her ever since she'd told him in tears that, yes, she wanted with all her heart to be his wife, yes, she wanted with all her heart to be Christian, but God had made her Jewish. And how could she honor the dead and at the same time abandon them?

Braslava kissed her hand and waved good-bye. With each step she told herself to forget Mislav and Nina. She told herself to forget that beautiful baby. There were immediate problems to consider. And, indeed, thoughts of the bear took her mind from Mislav. She crossed over the river bottoms, the Lord be blessed, without incident and made her way to the village.

The village men and children were busy in the apple orchards. The wives stood in the yards, maintaining the fires to boil and pickle the fruit. Most of the women ignored her. But there were some who waved, albeit with a grave smile.

When she stopped at the well to draw a drink, Anja, the widowed basket-weaver, came marching up. She took Braslava by the hand. "Sweetling, you leave that goat and you come with me."

"The Magyar --"

"Forget him," said Anja. "This cannot wait."

Anja, always organizing someone's life. Of course, she was also often the first to arrive and the last to leave when there was work, and such a person had to be listened to.

Anja told her to tie her bull at the post by the barn. Braslava did.

In the garden next to the barn there was a small boy collecting ripened gourds. He looked up and stared at Braslava.

Anja stood in the doorway to her stone hut. "Come," she commanded. "Quick, quick."

Braslava entered the house. From the ceiling beams hung dozens of drying bundles of lavender and rose. The smell enveloped her like a blanket. Some of the petals had fallen to the floor.

Anja pointed at an oak chair positioned next to a small table. "Sit," she said.

Braslava sat. Anja dragged a chair woven from willow withies from the hearth and set it close. She sat, smoothed her dress. "I was just about to hike up to your house."

"And at your advanced age," said Braslava.

Anja did not respond to the joke. She put a hand on Braslava's knee. She took a deep breath through her nose. Obviously this was important.

"This thing you found at the river," said Anja, "it should not be naked."

This was the great urgency?

"We have been talking, and this is what we have decided."

"Who decided?"

"People. Now surely you can make it a pair of pants."

"Who am I to tell God how he should dress his servants?" she asked. She was not so rich to have extra cloth lying about.

"Even God made a coat of skins for those in his keeping," said Anja. "We gathered a few old beet sacks." She stood, walked to the dining table, picked up a tidy pile of sacks lying folded there, and returned. "Take them."

It was ridiculous, but Braslava took them.

"Good," Anja said. "It must happen today. That's the first thing." She sat back down. "Now, the second." She leaned in close.

Braslava waited. Through the window, she could hear the boy working in the garden.

"This thing, it is important to know where it sleeps."

An urge to tell Anja it was none of her business flashed hot inside her, but Braslava resisted it. It would do no good because Anja would lay siege. She was an indomitable general when it came to such things.

"Tell me you haven't let it inside," said Anja.

Braslava sighed. "It's like a cat. Sometimes it curls up in a corner of the house, sometimes it goes to the barn and makes a nest. What do I care where it sleeps?"

"It is what we suspected." Anja sat back. "You must move or we must find you a chaperone."

"Two months this golem has been running around, and now suddenly somebody is worried about how it's dressed?"

"Sweetling," said Anja. She took both of Braslava's hands in hers. She looked her in the eyes. "Sometimes it takes two months for people to finally think. Sometimes it takes that long to remember the Nephilim."

There was a story written in the first book of Moses about the times before Noah, about the Grigori, the 200 angels who were set to watch over humanity, but fell in love with the daughters of men instead. They abandoned their duties and bore children to the women they took as wives. The children of those unions, the Nephilim, had grown up to be monstrous and hungry. So hungry they began to prey on the very people that raised them.

This was madness. "It's a golem," said Braslava.

"And what is this golem, eh? You said so yourself."

"It's not that kind of angel."

"How do you know?"

How *did* she know? -- that was a question.

"For one," said Braslava, "it did not fall. It was stuck in the dirt."

"Did the Lord not deprive those fallen angels of their flaming fire garments? Were they not clothed in ordinary dust? Did Noah's flood not bury and bind them in the valleys of the earth?"

Braslava was speechless.

Anja nodded. "These are things to think about. But even if it is nothing more than a forgotten golem, how do we know it's not a Jonah? Surely the Lord has greater purposes for it than pilfering goats."

Was this why the creature was sleeping on the floor next to her bed and bringing her gifts? To woo her? Even if it wasn't one of the ancient angels that fell, the idea of this holy thing desiring her, of it taking her to its bed -- she was horrified.

"Do you see?" asked Anja. "We are not thinking of chaperones. We are thinking of the Nephilim. We are thinking of giants."

Yes, they were thinking. Thinking horrible things. Probably thinking as well that it was all her fault. "I did not make the golem," said Braslava. "I did not invite it to my door. And we are most certainly not courting!"

Anja patted Braslava's hand. "Of course, not. Nobody here is accusing you. Not yet. Nevertheless, you must remember: God can do what he likes, but you and I must keep ourselves beyond reproach."

When Braslava exited Anja's house, the boy in the garden was waiting, leaning up against his little wooden wheelbarrow. He pointed a crookneck at her. "You're the one with husband of clay, aren't you?"

"No," said Braslava. "I am not married."

The boy narrowed his dark eyes and shook the gourd at her. "If you get pregnant, you will only give birth to goblins and trolls."

Anja waved him back to his work. "Oleg, you lazy slug. I am not feeding you to sit or to speak."

The boy scowled and turned to his gardening.

Anja gave Braslava a look that said: Do you see?

"I have done nothing," said Braslava. "You know that."

"You and I must be practical, dear. We must start with pants."



Braslava returned the Magyar's goat and then moved in with Anja. She made the golem pants. Up to this point she had not touched the creature. But it did not know how to pull the pants on. So Anja held the pants while Braslava lifted one of the golem's legs, and then the other. Braslava felt first-hand the suppleness of the clay skin and the surprising fact that the legs and the spot on the golem's back where she'd braced herself were warm.

For two days the thing ran about in sackcloth. But it did not improve the situation. The golem ceased its visits to Braslava's house and now appeared at Anja's. On the third day it came home from its thieving with nothing but shreds of cloth hanging about its loins.

Braslava made it another pair, and then another. They abandoned sackcloth then and tried leather, which was not inexpensive. They dressed it together and fastened the pants with a sturdy belt. They stepped back to examine their work, the clay dusting their hands. The golem stood before them, handsome in its way, looking like a red barbarian.

A slip of pride flittered through Braslava's mind: perhaps men did not have eyes for her, but it was possible this holy thing did. She wondered how she might determine the truth of it.

Such a thought, she realized, and immediately squashed it.

The next day the creature returned with a teacup that had tiny red flowers painted on the side. The leather pants and belt were gone.

Anja threw up her hands. "This one is like Adam before he ate the fruit." She sighed and looked up. "You could help," she said, apparently addressing the Lord himself.

This could not continue. Braslava was not made of gold. Anja had even less.

Braslava took the teacup and shooed the golem away. A part of her felt sorry for the creature. But then holy things were probably made to withstand continual rejection.

Anja clapped her hands. "Of course, it *is* like Adam. And that is precisely what we shall tell them: this thing was created to be naked and unashamed."

"That does not help me," said Braslava. "We must fetch the Rabbi from Zagreb."

"What will he do that the Priest from Draga cannot?"

"Since when has a priest known how to deal with a golem?"

"Who is going to go with the mountains between here and Zagreb full of bears and Turks?" asked Anja.

"We must do something."

"You don't have to do anything," a man said.

Both women turned.

Mislav stood in the yard, his beard tucked into his tunic. "The Ban's men are in the vale; I saw them cross the ridge only minutes ago."

"The Lord be blessed," said Anja.

But Braslava felt a small pang of loss. Of course, it was ridiculous. It was wrong. It was an evil thought. And she would not be an unstable woman.

The Ban's men rode in on horses slick with exertion, their sides lathered in sweat. A four-horse team drew a sturdy wagon with a cage bolted to its bed. The wagon clattered and rumbled down the rutted road and rolled to a stop by the well. A number of the villagers had gathered.

The soldiers wore padded, surcoats of blue and carried shields with the gold fleur-de-lys and blue field of the Croatian Ban. The captain of this crew addressed the villagers. "Where is the Byzantine priest?"

Mislav stepped forward. "I am here, Captain."

"Bring us the golem and the witch."

Mislav bowed. "There is no witch, sir. But I can lead you to the golem."

"My orders, you heretic, are for a golem and a witch."

Mislav bowed even lower. "I cannot deliver what does not exist."

The captain's eyebrows rose in annoyance. He picked up his riding crop and urged his horse forward.

Mislav was going to get whipped by that crop in the face.

Nobody moved.

Braslava wondered, what were they doing? Protecting her? She opened her mouth to speak. But Anja grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her back.

"You want a witch?" Anja asked. "I'll be your witch."

"No," Braslava said.

Anja strode up to the captain boldly. "My family has been Christian since Koloman was king. I pray seven rosaries every day. And every Sabbath I travel over the mountain to go to church in Draga. So this thing comes to my doorstep. If that makes me a witch, then I'm a witch."

The captain turned to another man sitting astride a huge, shining black stallion. He carried no shield, but his arms were stitched on the chest of his purple, sable-trimmed surcoat -- a yellow field with a black checkerboard slash. Braslava had not seen them before. She looked at his face. His eyes were like those of a dead fish, flat and lifeless.

The man urged his horse forward until he was close to Anja. He slid his foot out of the stirrup and with the point of his boot, lifted Anja's chin and turned her face. He took a good long look at her.

"A witch never had power to make a golem," said Anja.

The man dropped his boot from her face and turned his attention to the villagers gathered about. He looked at each in turn. When he came Braslava, she forced herself not to look away. His gaze lingered on her, and then he smiled, a dead smile that never reached his eyes. "Just get the golem," he said. He spoke it in Hungarian, which meant he was some sort of noble.

The captain motioned for Mislav to lead. Mislav took them to Anja's barn where the golem was sitting placidly in the dirt, a spade across its lap.

"Come," said Anja to the golem. "Get up. These men are here to take you away."

The golem turned its head to look at Braslava.

The captain motioned for his men. Two of them brought manacles and heavy chains.

"Get up," said Anja.

The golem ignored her.

"Get out of the way," the captain said.

Two soldiers with lances leveled them at the golem. The three with bows drew their strings. The men with chains pushed by Anja. One said, "You shoot me in the back, Rati, and I'll kill you."

They approached the golem like they would a bear, slow, ready to spring away in a moment.

The golem regarded one of them. "We are friends," the soldier said. "Do you see the pretty chains?" He showed the golem the iron collar. He let it hold a chain. While the golem was fingering the links, he reached out and clasped the collar gently about the golem's neck.

The second soldier slipped the spade from the golem's lap.

"Pretty chains," said the first soldier. "Now we will put them on your ankles and wrists."

They commanded it to rise and get in the cage. It rose, exited the barn in a hobbled walk, and climbed into the cage. They commanded it to sit. It sat. They locked the cage door, and mounted up.

The man with the dead fish eyes addressed Braslava. "So what does this thing eat?"

His look was unnerving. It was as if something else other than a man lived in that face. She had never seen the golem put anything in its mouth, and so she said, "I suppose it eats dirt."



The very next morning, just before the sun crested the mountains, the golem returned to stand on Anja's doorstep. The heavens had dumped down a freezing rain that morning, and the creature's skin was dark, glistening like wet rock. The chains were broken, half the manacles missing.

"Always running home," said Braslava. "I told you this thing was like a cat."

"Holy Mother," said Anja and crossed herself. "Let us pray that this golem had not committed murder."

Braslava's joy turned to ash. She looked at the golem's powerful hands. The soldiers would return with anger. It was possible she and Anja would be taken and hung. It was possible the Ban would send a hundred men to burn the village to the ground.

"We are guilty of nothing," said Anja. "We will not run."

"Lord," Braslava prayed and then stopped. She was but a little person. Nevertheless, wasn't David little when he slew the giant?

"What?" asked Anja.

"Nothing," said Braslava, ashamed at her lack of courage.

It was well into midmorning when Braslava heard the galloping of horse and the rumble of a wagon moving at speed. She and Anja exited the garden where they had been digging onions and walked to stand in front of the house by the lane that led through the village and meet their fate.

The mounted soldiers rounded the bend at the far end of the lane. It was still cold and the horses' breath looked like smoke. They reined in about the two women, the horses sidling, stomping, snorting in a ragged group.

A cluster of children that should have been digging sugar beets clustered in front of one of the stone huts to watch. The village women looked up from their apple pots. Cranky Petar came as far as the middle of the lane carrying his pitchfork.

The noble with the dead fish-eyes pushed his expensive horse through the soldier's mounts. He said nothing. He simply looked at Anja.

A silver cross hung on a chain about his neck. But it was no ordinary cross, for at its base coiled a serpent.

Braslava and Anja had discussed the noble at length. That cross confirmed their conclusion -- he *was* a *volhov*. And only the Lord knew the darkness he weaved.

Anja held up her hands to say she had nothing to do with the golem being here. "It is on the roof."

The soldiers all looked to Anja's slate roof. The golem squatted at one edge, its knees drawn to its chest, so that it seemed to perch there. Two sparrows perched on the peak next to it.

"Call it down," said the *volhov*.

"Of course," said Anja. "But I must tell you that it comes and goes of its own accord. I don't know that it can be tamed."

"I did not ask for the opinion of a woman."

Anja nodded.

She was going to get herself killed if she did not shut up. She walked over to the edge of the roof. "Golem," Anja said. "You must come down."

The golem turned its head to look away. Then it changed its perch so that it faced away from them.

"Shoot it," said the captain. Two soldiers unwrapped their bows. They retrieved their bow strings from the helmets atop their heads. The golem paid them no mind. Soon both had an arrow nocked and drawn.

"Fire," said the captain.

The arrows sped forth. The sparrows took flight. The golem scratched its ear.

The arrows struck it high in the back. But only the very tips penetrated its skin. The arrows came to rest at odd angles. Then the golem shivered, and the arrows clattered to the roof.

"Get up there with a rope," the captain said. "If it won't come willingly, we'll pull it down."

He commanded Braslava and Anja to bring ladders. He ordered four men up. Before they ascended, Braslava saw two of the assigned soldiers glance at each other, and she could not tell if they were divvying up work with their glances or looking to each other for courage.

The soldiers clambered up the roof. Three carried spears. The one with the noose straddled the peak. The other end of the rope was tied to the back of the wagon's bed. The soldier cast the noose easily about the golem's neck and yanked it tight. The driver yelled and flicked his reins. The horses surged forward. But the golem simply reached up and, with his thumb and forefinger, snapped the rope.

The soldiers, the villagers, the *volhov*, they all watched the wagon clatter a number of yards up the lane dragging the rope.

They turned back to the golem.

The soldiers on the roof stood in confusion. One screwed up his face, growled, and charged as best he could on the slate. The butt of his spear struck the golem where a man's ribs would be. But the golem did not even sway. It was as if it were affixed to the roof.

The soldier slipped on the slate, then regained his balance. He set himself and shoved the butt of the spear into the golem's head. By this time the other two soldiers had joined the first, poking and ramming the thing. But a slate roof after a freezing rain is not such a good place to fight. The first soldier lost his footing. His spear flew wide and he tumbled down to fall into Anja's now dead marigolds.

The golem batted the spears out of the other two soldier's hands. Their spears clattered and rolled down the roof to the ground. The larger soldier with a blond beard changed his stance as if he were about to close with a wrestler. But before he took one step, the golem reached down and grasped the edge of the roof. It swung down like a monkey, hand over hand along the edge, and dropped to the ground. Then it crossed the space between Anja's hut and Petar's, grabbed the edge of his roof, and swung up. In moments it had taken a new perch.

This was not going to work. Even Braslava could see that. She folded her arms and glanced at Anja who gave her a look that said: idiot men.

Idiots, maybe. Violent, most certainly. Braslava knew they would start burning the huts down. They would tramp through the gardens. She walked over to Petar's house and looked up at the golem.

"It would please me," she said, "if you went with them." Once she'd said the words, she knew it was not right. But what could she do now? Command it to run away? That wizard would kill her for sure.

The golem looked down at her.

On the other hand, maybe she was right to dupe it so. Who knew what it was? Who knew if it was even holy? And even if it wasn't pitching woo, a most certain abomination, it was only a matter of time before it stole something that would bring danger -- a bear cub, someone's child. Hadn't it already done so, drawing a wizard with dead fish eyes?

"Just go with them," she said.

The words hurt in a small way. But even that was cause for alarm because it meant her affections were turning. And when such turnings matured, who was to say what she might desire?

The golem gazed at her for a few moments more with those unblinking red eyes. Then it unfolded itself and walked down the roof.



The next morning Braslava woke with a vast emptiness in her belly. She thought of the golem riding away in the wagon's cage, a thicker collar about its neck fastened to a ship's chain. It looked like it had been sold into slavery.

She said nothing to Anja about it, but all day she expected the golem to return. When the sun set and Anja warmed two cups of plum brandy, she reminded herself that it most often returned in the early morning.

It did not return the next morning or the next. It did not return that week. Braslava sometimes caught herself scanning the forest edge for it. Anja traveled over the mountain to visit her priest. She traveled back with a new rye dough starter that she wrapped in waxed linen and kept warm and living at her chest. They harvested the potatoes at Anja's and then moved up to Braslava's to bring in the last fruits. Two weeks passed. A day and a night of strong winds stripped off nearly all the colored leaves, leaving the naked tree bones clutching at the sky.

Mislav came to visit them at Braslava's hut, but they did not talk of the golem. That night after he left, Anja said, "We were practical."

Braslava sipped her hot tea, looking into the fire.

"It had to go," Anja said.

"Perhaps," said Braslava.

"Yes," said Anja. "Perhaps." She stood. "I shall return." She opened the front door of the hut to go to the outhouse and gasped in alarm.

Braslava looked up. She turned, spilling the scalding tea onto her legs.

There stood the golem on the porch.

Anja backed away, her hand on her chest.

The wind blew in a dusting of snow.

Braslava put the teacup aside and stood. The golem was blue in the light of the moon, orange in the light from the hearth. Its perfect skin was marred and chipped. It looked like it was missing a piece of its jaw. But the worst was its right eye. It was gone, mangled like someone had taken a stick and shoved it into the clay of its face.

"Dear Lord," said Braslava. "Come in, golem. Come in."

The golem stooped to walk through the door. It strode past Braslava to the hearth and squatted before the fire. Then it reached in and with its bare hand rooted around and plucked out a red hot coal. It turned its head, as if looking up at her, as if she perhaps was not supposed to see.

Braslava turned to give it privacy, but she still caught it out of the corner of her eye, and what she saw was the golem put the glowing, smoking coal in its mouth to chew and swallow.

"Brasi," said Anja. "Yet another theft." She stood at the hut's open door, looking out into the yard.

Braslava regarded the golem for a moment. So it was holy then. She should not have doubted. She crossed the room to join Anja on the cold stone of the porch. Tied to the post of the pig pen was a young ram.

The golem had never before tied its animal thefts like this. It always carried them in its arms. She walked out into the wind and cold, crunching across the thin skiff of snow frozen in places to the ground. The ram turned its head to eye her.

Its back was flat and level with the shoulders. Its stance strong. Both testicles hung free of the body. The curved horns did not come too close to the head. She looked over its ears in the moonlight. There was no marking of ownership.

The ram was still not sure of her and tried to step away. In the morning she'd have to check to see if its eyes were clear, check the nose, listen for the quality of its breath. She would have to check it for foot rot. If all was good, then this would be the golem's best theft yet.

Braslava untied the ram and put it in another pen. All this time Anja stood watching at the door. When Braslava came back in, Anja asked, "What are we going to do?"

"We are not going to give the golem to that wizard. That's one thing."

"I think the golem can take care of itself," said Anja.

"Maybe," said Braslava. "Maybe not."

They both went inside Braslava's hut and shut the door. The golem still squatted before the fire.

"Maybe it is time to risk both bears and Turks," said Braslava, "and fetch the Rabbi of Zagreb."

Anja nodded. "I will go. I was the one who kept you from going earlier."

"We'll go together."

"We will be eaten or flayed," said Anja.

"We won't be flayed."

"Ask Mislav. You do not know the Turks."

Braslava walked over to the hearth and reached past the golem for the hanging kettle. She poured herself another cup of tea, straining the mixture at the spout with a scrap of cheesecloth.

"I will ask Mislav. I will ask him for his horse." She opened a small crock of honey on the table and added some to her cup. "We can ride doubled up."

Anja nodded. "Nina's a good one. She will take care of the animals."

They decided to be practical and go to sleep, but neither could. Instead, they began packing for the trip. Depending on the roads, it might take most of a day to get to Zagreb. They would certainly have to stay overnight.

"The *volhov* will come," said Braslava.

"Then we will leave even sooner," said Anja. "And the golem will follow."

"And stir up the hornets in Zagreb. I don't know if this idea will work."

In all this time the golem had not moved from the fire. But now it jerked its head as if it had just heard something. It stood.

Anja and Braslava stopped their packing.

The golem ran for the door, threw it open, and rushed outside.

Braslava and Anja looked at each other.

"Does it always do that?" asked Anja.

Braslava shrugged. She'd never seen it do that before. She crossed to the doorway, careful lest the creature should return in haste and knock her over. She looked out. The moon had set. The night was dark. The golem could neither be heard nor seen.

She began to close the door and stopped. There were lights coming up the trail to her hut. From the way they swayed she guessed they were lanterns held by men on horse.

Braslava turned. "The *volhov*. Get the packs." Both women already wore shoes fit for travel. Braslava picked up her sheepskin cloak, her mittens, and hat.

They would have to use the trail that led to the springs and then down to Mislav's. Anja was ready. Braslava threw water on the fire so the light would not give them away when they opened the door. The smoke bellowed up the chimney and into the room. They rushed to the door. Opened it.

Braslava ran around the corner of the hut, away from the lanterns coming up the trail, and ran straight into the arms of a man wearing a leather breastplate. He caught her hard by the arm, grasped her tight around the waist.

Anja turned to escape, but the man simply lifted Braslava and yanked Anja back by the cloak.

"Two witches in the night," said the man. His breath stunk. His clothes smelled of wet dogs.

Braslava tried to struggle free, but the man pushed both her and Anja up against the hut's stone wall and held their faces to the rock with his vicious hands on their necks.

He yelled to the other men. It wasn't long before the soldiers came with their horses and lanterns. The *volhov* slipped off his mount.

"Where is it?" he asked.

Braslava didn't answer.

"We know it's here," he said.

"It fled," she said.

The *volhov* nodded. He motioned for his man to release her and Anja. The freezing rock had bit into her face. Braslava reached up to cover the skin, but the *volhov* threw off her hat, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked her head back. He marched her outside the circle of men and faced the dark woods and hillside. "I've got her!" He yelled at the trees. "She's a witch and deserves a witch's death. But you can save her. Do you hear me! You can save her!"

The *volhov* turned Braslava and marched her into the hut. He ordered his men to start a fire. Then he ordered them to stand watch. Anja was shoved into a corner. Two soldiers brought in a medium-sized barrel and stood it on its end.

"I should have seen it sooner," said the *volhov*. "I should have known it would come for a Jewess. And it will come. What I need now is a scream." He crossed over to Braslava. He ordered the soldier guarding her to remove her cloak. "Tie her to the chair and bring me two stones. Make one of them flat." He turned to Braslava. "I'm going to crush your finger. Then I'm going to pull its nail."

Whatever this man said, Braslava knew she would not deliver the golem to him. She would remain silent.

"If you do not give me what I want with the first, then I will continue with another finger, and then another. Sooner or later you will call him in."

The soldier shoved her into a chair and tied her fast. He went outside and returned moments later with two stones. He tied her left hand open on the flat stone and then held her fast. The *volhov* picked up the jagged piece of granite. He looked at it. Looked at her hand. Juggled his grip to get the right surface pointing down. Then he slammed it down on her pointing finger with a sharp crack.

Braslava saw white. Pain shot through her hand. She wanted to groan, but bit it back, took a short breath. Panted. The finger was already swelling. He'd broken the knuckle, she was sure. Her eyes began to well with tears.

The *volhov* held a pair of pincers in his hand. Where he'd gotten them she did not know. He grabbed her finger. She could not help but squirm when he touched the broken finger. He fitted the teeth of the pincers over her fingernail and clamped them down. He wiggled them to make sure he had a good grip. "If we had time I would take this more slowly. But I have already wasted weeks. Now we will see how a witch screams."

"Dear Lord!" said Anja. "No!"

He yanked the pincers.

The pain consumed Braslava's hand.

But the nail wasn't completely out. He yanked again.

She could not help herself. She cried out, moaned. She whimpered. She tried to stop. Tried to breathe.

The *volhov* held the bloody fingernail up in the pincers and examined it. Then he set it on the table and waited, watching Braslava. The pain burned horribly. Blood rose from her torn fingertip and ran onto the flat stone.

"You're stupid," he said. "But nobody is strong enough to resist. We will wait for the pain to double back. Just a few moments more." He put the pincers down and picked up his stone.

There was a shout outside. The door flew open and slammed into the wall.

The *volhov* turned.

The golem rushed in and before the *volhov* could do anything, the golem swatted the hand holding the rock. The rock flew from his hand and crashed into a closed shutter.

The *volhov* stepped back. The golem swung his red arm in a backward arc and slammed it into the *volhov's* chest. The blow lifted the *volhov* off his feet and threw him across the floor and into the wall.

The golem followed. The *volhov* tried to stand, but the golem bent to him and began with two hands to crush his throat.

The soldier in the room charged the golem with a large hammer, but the golem reached up and caught the hammer haft in one hand before the man could land the blow. It wrenched the hammer out of the soldier's hand and threw it in the man's face.

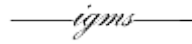
The *volhov* was spluttering. His face flushing red. He fumbled in a black purse that hung about his neck.

The golem turned back to the *volhov* with both hands, but the *volhov* retrieved something from the purse and shoved it into the golem's open mouth.

The golem shook its head. Its grip on the *volhov* loosened. It shook its head again more violently. It stepped back, clutched at its throat, its features contorted in a painful rictus. The golem took another step back only to stumble and crash into the table and onto the floor. It tried to stand, but could only get to one knee.

The *volhov* stood, gingerly holding his own throat, and stepped over to look down upon the golem. He smiled.

"At last," he said. "Perfect."



The golem lay on the floor like a dead man. Braslava sat tied in her chair. The *volhov* had let her finger bleed until the blood coagulated into a gobbled mess on its own. Anja, under the watch of a new soldier, bent to serve the *volhova* cup of tea. The wounded soldier had been dragged out of the house.

"Who in the vale has recently had a baby?" asked the *volhov*.

Anja looked him square in the face, righteous anger burning in her eyes.

"You need to think about next month, next year. I am only doing what must be done."

"What could you possibly need from a woman who has just given birth?" asked Anja.

"I do not want the mother," said the *volhov*. "I want the child."

Anja's grip on the tea kettle changed and Braslava thought she was going to throw it in the *volhov*'s face.

"Would you rather sacrifice one child to me or a dozen to the Turks, who will hold their feet and dash their brains out against a rock? They will rape you and your jewess here. And if they do not kill you, they will sell you as slaves."

Braslava knew this already. The Turks were excellent at burning fields and killing villages. They were excellent at cutting off the heads of men to collect their sultan's bounty.

Anja did not answer.

"I will beat them back," said the *volhov*.

Braslava laughed. Giddiness washed over her like an unexpected wind. She should not have felt such mirth, she should not have laughed.

The *volhov* turned.

She nodded at the golem with her chin, suppressed a lunatic giggle. "You'll beat back the Turks with that?" He was a fool.

"No," he said. He narrowed his dead fish eyes. "No. I will first make this golem into a molech. I will make it into a god. And then, when they are lined up in their beds at night, when they are clustered about their fires, I will send it in to steal their lives. I shall send it in to take the breath breathed into Adam's nostrils."

A molech. What was this wizard that he could even consider such a thing?

"I knew all along," said Anja. Her hand was in a pocket of her tunic. She yanked her hand out and shoved a string of garlics at his face. "Vampir!"

The *volhov* did not flinch. He reached up and loosened a clove from one of the heads, slipped the meat from its skin, and popped it in his mouth. He began to chew. Around the garlic, he said, "I am not a vampir. I am a man who wishes to protect his family, his king. Nothing more. Can't you see that this golem is a gift from God?"

"You shall have no other gods before me," quoted Braslava.

The *volhov* heaved a sigh. "This is what I get from talking to women. I am not going to serve this god. It is going to serve me."

He paused.

"I need a child to feed to the golem," he said. "Just one."

But Braslava knew that wasn't true. A molech had an appetite. It would require many children. A multitude of roasted babies.

Anja set her jaw in stubborn defiance and stepped back.

The golem stirred.

"Ah," said the *volhov*. "I was wondering how long it would take the shem to fully digest. Rise, golem. Stand before me."

The golem stood. Something about the lines of its face had changed. This was not the pleasant and calm golem from before. This was something else -- ferocious, wise, angry? She could not tell.

The *volhov* pointed at the golem's loins. "This holy thing was created to multiply and replenish the earth. Of course, it could not mate before, but my shem has now removed all such bindings. I shall have not only a molech, but I shall also have its progeny. A dozen children could route an army. Do you see? You will help me one way or the other."

Anger flooded her. Men! Eve may have been duped to make a mistake, to take a little bite, but men, men could swallow great quantities of evil.

The *volhov* stood. "I am going outside to fetch some water. You think."

Braslava's face went slack with horror.

Who could have predicted this? Who could have guessed that the golem, which she had fancied like a stupid girl, would turn into abomination?

Even if she did not tell them who had recently given birth, the *volhov* would find them. He would go door to door like Pharaoh's men and demand his sacrifice. And the very first door he would thrust open would be Mislav's. That lovely baby boy would be his first sacrifice.

She could not let it happen. But who could resist the power of this wizard?

Would to God, she thought, we had an Elijah's fire, a Gideon's horn, an Abraham's ram.

The thought rebounded back at her. It possessed her. An Abraham's ram. They needed an Abraham's ram. She looked up at the golem. Was it possible?

Outside, one of the soldiers said, "This ram ought to make a fine dinner."

The ram bleated.

The golem's ram that had appeared in the moonlight to be whole, without blemish or spot.

She pitched her voice low. "Anja," she said.

Anja glanced at the soldier and stepped closer. The golem stood like a statue.

Braslava whispered, "Take the mint gathered at the river. Take the ram. Get them to Mislav. Tell him we must have blood for the lintel and posts of this golem."

Anja shook her head. "Mislav is not a Jew. He is not even a proper Christian."

"He is a holy man," said Braslava. "Confused or heretic, he is all we have."

Anja nodded. She stood taller, set her jaw, adjusted her tunic. The old general was back. She turned and walked out the door. Outside, a soldier commanded her to halt.

"If we are going to sacrifice," she said in a loud voice. "We are going to do it right. You tell your master I shall bring the sacrifice within the hour."

Braslava heard the door of the pen where the ram was kept open. She heard it shut. A man commanded two soldiers to go with her and Braslava feared -- would Anja be able to make the sacrifice?

Shortly thereafter the *volhov* returned. "Golem," he said. "You may untie her."

The golem moved behind Braslava. It undid the ropes that bound her.

The *volhov* said, "You are wise to cooperate." He held a cooper's hammer in his hand. He pried off the lid. The shutters were still closed and the hut fairly dark, otherwise she didn't know if she would have seen that the contents of the barrel shone with a sickly green light.

Braslava held her damaged hand to her chest. She rose from the chair, glanced up into the golem's face, and stepped over to look inside the barrel.

The *volhov* ignored her, unrolling a leather bundle of odd iron tools on the table.

Four eels, each as long as one of her legs, swam in the water, twisting their thick mud-colored bodies about each other. They had tiny, pig eyes. Their mouths hung open, showing their needle teeth. She could not tell if it was the pale belly of the eels or the water itself that glowed. The water stank of old brine. One of the eels rolled to the surface and gulped in air.

Something red lay at the bottom of the barrel. Was it a rock? She peered closer.

"It's his eye," said the *volhov*. "An eye so that I may see. A shem in his stomach to break his bindings and govern his will."

"What are these eels?"

The *volhov* did not answer. She wondered. Did they carry his life? Were they his familiars or talisman? Were they his masters?

He pushed the table to the side to make space on the floor. He ordered his soldiers to bring the wooden bath. He turned to the golem and commanded it to fetch the barrels from the wagon.

The golem turned and exited the hut.

"Very soon, I will take his heart to keep his life safe in my hands."

A few minutes later two soldiers brought in an empty wooden box the size and shape of a coffin into the room. The inside was the light color of maple. Outside, it had been shellacked in red. There was no lid.

Braslava knew this was not a box to be put in the earth.

They placed the box in the center of the floor.

The golem returned, carrying a barrel a normal man would be forced to roll.

The *volhov* walked over to the golem and removed the bung. He pointed to the box. "Dump it inside."

The golem did. It brought in three more barrels, all filled with what smelled like seawater brine, and emptied their contents into the box as well.

Braslava wondered where Anja was. She'd had more than enough time to reach Mislav's. More than enough time to slaughter the ram.

The *volhov* motioned one of his men over to help him. Together they lifted the barrel of eels and dumped them into the box.

"Come, golem," said the *volhov*. "Stand in the waters."

The golem turned its gaze to look at Braslava with its one eye.

"Golem," commanded the *volhov*.

The golem held her gaze a few moments more then stepped into the box.

One of the eels gently wrapped itself about his leg.

Where was Anja?

"Lie down," said the *volhov*. "Lie down and cover yourself in brine."

Braslava did not know the magic of this wizard. But she knew this bath of stinking water was a grave, a death from which her golem would not return.

"No," she whispered.

The golem sat, like a man in a bath. The glistening back of an eel broke the surface of the water and moved past the golem's waist. Then the golem laid itself back and, with barely a disturbance, slipped beneath the brine.

She looked down upon it under the water. The eels swam over the golem, caressing its body with their fat lengths, nuzzling its crevices with their broad and bearded heads.

A commotion rose outside. "Where is the *volhov*?" It was Mislav.

The *volhov* looked up, a smile of triumph on his face. He crossed the hut to the door and exited. Braslava followed him.

Mislav stood in the yard, his baby, wailing and red-faced, in his arms. Nina was held back by two soldiers.

Anja lagged behind, but there was no bottle, no jug, not even a covered bowl of sacrificial blood.

Braslava's heart fell.

"We are honored," said Mislav.

Something suddenly locked in place in her mind. It was Mislav who had alerted the Ban. Mislav who had called this wizard.

She would not believe Mislav was involved with this great evil. And yet, there he was, one knee to the ground.

Anja walked through the yard, skirting Mislav and the *volhov*. She walked up to the door, panting.

"What happened?" asked Braslava.

"Inside," she said.

When they stood in the house, Anja turned to the soldier there. "Your captain says he has your payment. If you don't get it quick, he'll give it to another."

The soldier turned and walked out the door.

Braslava turned to Anja. "What --"

Anja cut her off. "Quickly," she said. She withdrew a small pot from her tunic and a small bundle of fresh mint. She put them on the chair.

Braslava's heart soared. She should have never doubted Anja. They had to get the golem out of the water. "You take the feet," said Braslava. "I'll take the shoulders."

"The golem's too heavy," said Anja. "We'll both take the shoulders."

Braslava considered the eels for only a moment and then she bent over and plunged her hands in. The brine burned her damaged finger. But she ignored the pain and looped her arm under the golem's armpit to pull it out. Anja knelt on the other side.

One of the eels thrashed, turned sharply, and bit into Braslava's arm.

Braslava yanked her arm back and grasped.

"Quickly," hissed Anja.

Braslava clenched her teeth and reached in. She bent low trying to get a good hook on the golem.

The water roiled with the eels' thick bodies. Another bite. Another. There was venom in those fangs. Braslava could feel the burn creeping up her arm.

Anja growled. "Lift," she said.

Braslava heaved with all her might. The two women dragged the golem part way out of the box.

An eel clung to the back of Anja's arm, hanging out of the coffin. They heaved again, and the golem slipped wetly onto the floor. The eel dropped from Anja's arm and writhed next to the golem, gulping air.

Anja retrieved the pot and unstopped it. She dabbed the mint leaves in.

"But we're women," said Braslava. "Shouldn't Mislav --"

"Sometimes," said Anja, "the Lord uses a Deborah and Jael." She withdrew the cluster of mint leaves, red with blood, and wiped them across the golem's forehead. "Sometimes he uses a harlot." The smell of the blood and mint mixed with the brine. She dipped the leaves again, and wiped the golem's arm.

"You," the soldier Anja had sent out pointed at them. "Stop!" He charged.

Anja dipped again, but the soldier had crossed the space between them and delivered a kick to her head that sent her reeling. The crock of blood and mint leaves flew from her hands. Anja tried to roll to her knees, but the soldier shoved her aside.

Braslava picked up the stone the *volhov* had smashed her fingers with.

The soldier bent to recover the crock.

Braslava struck him in the head. She struck again. He stumbled back, a look of surprise on his face. With all her might she smashed him one last time in the temple.

The soldier fell sideways to the floor.

Braslava dropped to her knees and grabbed for the pot and mint. Her arm was swelling from the venom. Most of the blood had spilled on the floor. She sopped up the blood, turned, anointed the golem's other arm. She anointed its right leg. Sopped up more blood. The smell of mint and blood filled her. Her arm felt like fire.

The doorway darkened.

Braslava did not look up.

"No!" snarled the *volhov*.

She anointed its other leg. Smearred blood on its chest.

A soldier yanked her back by her hair. She fought to get her legs underneath her, but he dragged her along the floor.

"No," repeated the *volhov*. "No!" He grabbed one of the empty barrels, scooped up water from the box, and splashed it over the golem.

The blood did not wash off.

"A cloth!" he yelled. He dropped to his knees. Scrubbed at the blood with his tunic. "Come off!" he commanded, but the blood had soaked into the clay.

The golem sat up. It raised one hand and took the *volhov* by the throat. It convulsed, then rolled over to its hands and knees, dragging the *volhov* with it.

It convulsed again, violently, and spat a black and slimy lump onto the floor. The shem.

The golem stood and walked over to the small barrel. It reached in and fetched its eye, the *volhov* still struggling in its grip.

The soldier released Braslava's hair and backed up.

The golem stuffed its eye back in its head. Then it turned its attention to the *volhov*. Its face was terrible.

Fear flashed through her. What bindings had the *volhov* broken?

Steam rose from the blood stains on the golem's red clay. But it wasn't steam. It wasn't anything she'd ever seen: wisps of light that hovered and flowed like heavy smoke.

Glory.

It was glory. It was God's divine burnings.

Glory smoked from the golem's eyes. It flowed from in its mouth.

The *volhov* fumbled in his coat.

The golem's hand and forearm burst into flame.

The *volhov* screamed.

The golem lifted the *volhov* off the ground by his neck.

The fire spread, curling the *volhov*'s beard, smoking the linen surcoat. Then in a whoosh, he caught flame like a piece of dry grass, blazed into a pillar of fire. Smoke flooded the room, billowed along the ceiling.

Braslava coughed, dropped to her knees. The brightness of that fire hurt. She shielded her eyes.

Anja moaned.

Outside, soldiers shouted. On the roof, the slate shingles clattered and clinked. Dirt blew into the room, followed by a blast of wind that slammed the door and shutters against the wall. Debris flew into Braslava's face. Something struck her in the back. And then the wind turned into a gale.

The room was a furnace. Her hair crackled and curled in the heat. Braslava thought of the burning bush, the smoking mount -- they would all be immolated by God's glory.

She heard a huge crack. Felt herself being pulled up by the wind.

It gusted again and she swore in the rush of wind she heard music or singing. Then the whistling moved outside, the wind retreated. She gulped in a breath of air. It stank of burning flesh, but it was not full of smoke.

Something large thumped to the floor.

She took a breath. And another. She was alive. That in itself was a miracle. She brushed sand from her face and eye lashes. When she opened her eyes, the golem was lying on the floor. The *volhov* was gone.

Braslava rushed to the golem. The red clay shone in places like porcelain. In others it was black.

"Golem?" she said. She touched its shoulder, its arm.

"It's dead," said Anja.

Braslava looked up. Anja was holding her jaw in obvious pain. Her hair was almost all burned away. Anja motioned at the golem's legs. "It's nothing more than baked clay now."

Braslava looked back down. The leg was cracked open down the middle like a loaf of bread. The stomach, chest, arms -- the whole body was spidered with fissures like poorly fired pottery. She touched its handsome cheek and the head rolled to its side, free of the body.

"Golem," she said.



When Braslava and Anja staggered out of the doorway and into the yard, they found Mislav prostrated in the dirt, arms stretched out, praying into the dust. Nina was standing in shock, her hair wild and filled with debris, holding her babe.

Two of the soldiers lay dead in the yard. Of the rest, Braslava could see none.

She walked over to the spruce next to her hut, where the golem used to sit, and stood in the bed of needles. She held her throbbing arm. The lintel of the door frame, the tops of the windows -- they were all blackened with smoke.

She thought of the prophet Elijah, of the fiery chariot coming for him, and the horses of flame, and him going up in a burning whirlwind of smoke.

Was it not a burning whirlwind that had claimed the golem's spirit, too?

To have survived such a thing! She should have felt gratitude. She should have been filled with praise. But she looked down at the bed of needles and saw clumps of the tree's tacky sap. Unbidden, tears came to her eyes, and she felt only a horrible loss.



Two days later, when they could all think, Braslava insisted Mislav, who had distracted the *volhov* so well, must take the relic of the golem's body and keep it hidden and safe. She did not, however, know what to do with her hut, covered as it was in divine smoke. Did it mean the rocks and timbers themselves were now holy? If so, what person could simply wipe that away?

In her mind this was where the golem died vanquishing the *volhov*. It should be a hero's monument. Besides, hadn't the Lord accepted the ram as an offering? You did not clean away the memories of such things. It was just not done. So Braslava left the hut and moved in with Anja.

However, that did not mean they had to abandon her garden. And so, one day before the snows came in earnest, the two women went to dig in Braslava's garden for turnips to make into a mash. Braslava's eel-bitten arm still ached. Nevertheless, they worked well into the afternoon. It was then, when they came back round to the front of what they now considered the golem's hut, that they found a Turkmen's tulip lying on the doorstep.

A doorstep that had, only hours before, been swept clean.

The tulip was purple with white, ragged stripes. And about it, scattered on the porch stone, lay crumbs of red clay.

Anja looked at Braslava with raised eyebrows. Both women shaded their eyes with a hand and searched the yard and hillside. There was nothing but the sun, the brown autumn grass, and the wind whispering through the spruce.

"You would think," said Anja, "that one golem in a lifetime would be enough."

Braslava stooped and picked up the flower.

God had sent her a man, with clay and fire and beating heart. Had he also sent her a husband? Or was she wrong? Was it she that had been sent to deliver this Jonah from the belly of the earth and these were gifts of gratitude? The golem's body was dead. Of this she was certain. But that did not mean it could not leave a message.

The tulip glistened in the sunlight.

"This is to show," Braslava said, "that even little things are not forgotten."

And so it was. Even if sometimes, the Lord be blessed, the divine message was both wonderful and terrible.

The Frankenstein Diaries

by Matthew S. Rotundo



Artwork by Kevin Wasden

Part One

(Part two will be in our next issue.)

I

Unease swelled in John Griffin as he pulled into a vacant stall at the daycare center and powered down the car. Holos flickered over the double doors at the building's entrance, depicting smiling children playing dodge ball, painting with watercolors, running into the open arms of loving parents. A stab of envy pricked him; a bitter taste flooded his mouth. He glanced away.

Paul had gotten into another fight, bad enough this time for the daycare administrator to send an urgent message to John's handheld, requesting that he collect his son.

He was tempted, for the briefest of moments, to pull out of the parking lot and simply drive on, to drive away, to drive until he ran out of road and the ocean spread before him, immense and blue and glittering. The depth of longing stirred up by the fantasy surprised and dismayed him. His stomach roiled as he got out of the car. The overcast sky threatened snow; even in his heavy coat, John shivered against the frigid December air. The vision of the ocean evaporated.

Bonnie met him at the door, dressed as always in bright primary colors. A normally smiling and vivacious woman, she stood with her shoulders stooped, her mouth turned down. "Thanks for coming, Mr. Griffin."

"Where's Paul?"

"He's in my office. Come in."

She led him past the playroom, full of boisterous children and excited babble. Envy pricked him again. He followed her down the tiled hallway to her small office.

It was neat and colorful, adorned with posters of animals and cartoon characters. Child psychology books filled a small bookcase next to her desk. Paul sat in a plastic chair in front of the desk, a scrap of a boy, looking at his shoes. Bonnie took the remaining seat.

John squatted in front of his son. "Hey. What happened?"

Paul remained silent.

John put a hand under Paul's chin and lifted his head. His fine blonde hair was tousled. A red scratch marked one pale cheek.

"Where did that come from, Paul?"

"Nowhere."

John glanced at Bonnie.

"He got into a fight with Phillip Seltzer, a boy about Paul's age. Phillip scratched at his face in the tussle."

John stood and crossed his arms. "Is that so?"

"Mr. Griffin, Paul was sitting on Phillip's chest, hitting him repeatedly. Phillip was pinned. He acted in self-defense. Paul gave him a bloody nose and a mouse under one eye."

"Paul, is that true?"

"No." Paul stared at his shoes again.

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing."

John looked at Bonnie. She only shrugged.

"What started it? Did the other boy provoke him?"

"He called me Frankie," Paul said. "Frankie, Frankie, Frankie. They all did."

Bonnie rolled her eyes. John resented the expression, but he couldn't really blame her. Both of them had heard it before; it was Paul's favorite excuse. "No one called you that, Paul," she said. "The other children all know better by now. And Mrs. Simmons was right there when it happened."

"If she was right there," John said, "she should have been able to break up the fight before one boy got a bloody nose and the other got a scratch on his cheek."

"It happened so quickly. She --"

"Then maybe you're a tad understaffed here."

Bonnie took a deep breath. "Mr. Griffin, this is the third incident in two months, and the worst yet. None of the other children have this kind of trouble."

"None of the other children get called *Frankie* while the adults stand around and let it happen, do they?"

Bonnie hesitated several moments before replying. "Mr. Griffin, if this behavior continues, we may have to talk about finding a daycare better suited for Paul's special needs."

John narrowed his eyes. He thought again of the ocean. "Come on, Paul. Let's get you home."

— *igms* —

From the journal of John Griffin:

June 2, 2025

My son was born again today.

I suppose I shouldn't put it that way. If I wanted to be boringly technical, like Dr. Aiken at the clinic, I would say that Paul is a genetic duplicate of Steven, physically like him in every way, but he isn't really Steven. Dr. Aiken said I should think of him as Steven's identical twin brother.

Sure. Just born nine years after Steven, and two years after Steven's death.

Dr. Aiken is right, I know. He's not Steven. But since I'm just beginning this journal (and struggling with this handheld's tiny stylus, I might add) I suppose I should establish a good habit, and avoid equivocation. It's bad

form for a writer, even one who hasn't written for two years. Besides, aren't you supposed to be completely honest in a journal? Isn't that the one place you can entertain your most secret fantasies? Here, if nowhere else?

Never mind. Of course he's not Steven. His name is Paul, and he is an unqualified miracle. Paul Kenneth Griffin, eight pounds and thirteen ounces, twenty-two inches long. Born today at 6:31 p.m., after twenty-seven hours of labor. His hair, when it comes in, will be his mother's blonde; his eyes, when they finish changing, will be her pale blue. His skin will be fair and will burn easily. He'll have a smile that will charm the little girls in the neighborhood, who will chase after him and kiss his cheek on a dare. I won't blame them. He is an angel, and he is my son, and I thank God for him.

I flashed on the accident for a few minutes just now, but was able to push the memory away. Today is not a day for sorrow, nor for the doubts that plagued Marie and I about leaving the Church. It's a time for celebration. Not even the bigots and fanatics who call cloned children "abominations" and "Frankensteins" -- and worse -- not even they can trouble me today.

My son was born again. And so was I.



The drive back to the house was quiet. John guided the car on manual, even though the route was preset. He needed the distraction. He stole glances at Paul in the rear view mirror. His son scowled the entire way, staring straight ahead with his arms crossed. John hated that look, the way it twisted Paul's angelic features into something unrecognizable. In such moments, Paul looked nothing like Steven.

"Did the other boy really call you Frankie, Paul?"

"They all do. All the time."

For what must have been the hundredth time, John wished he had never told Paul that he had been born of cloned cells. Paul had blurted out the fact on his first day of daycare. "Are you sure? Mrs. Simmons said she didn't hear anything."

"She's a liar."

"Paul, we've talked about this, haven't we? You can't just keep picking fights with the other kids."

"You never believe me."

A prolonged silence fell as John turned into their neighborhood. The streets wound past houses bedecked with holographic flying Santas and flashing icicle lights. Despite his best efforts, John couldn't stop thinking about Bonnie's words: *special needs*. His jaw, clamped tight since he had left the daycare center, ached. The woman had stigmatized his son -- as if the boy didn't have enough problems.

"Sometimes they don't have to say it," Paul said. "But I know they're thinking it. All the time."

John took a long look at Paul in the mirror, wondering at his small, tense form, his twisted scowl -- wondering how a four-year-old boy had become such an angry person. "How about if we read a little when we get home? Would you like --"

"I hate reading."

John's temper flared; he put it down quickly. "We've talked about that, too, remember? You haven't really given it a fair chance. You're not trying --"

"I don't want to try! I hate reading! I hate it, I hate it!"

John flinched.

Tears spilled from Paul's eyes. He wiped them away disgustedly.

"Paul --"

"I hate you, too."

John slammed on the brake. His harness locked. He turned in his seat. "That's enough, young man. You apologize right now, or you'll spend the rest of the day in your room. No toys. Understand? Apologize."

"*I hate you! I hate you!*" Paul flailed, held in place by his own harness, too consumed with rage to even think about unbuckling it.

"Paul, stop it! Stop --"

"Hate hate hate hate . . ."

Shaking, John drove the rest of the way home as quickly as he could, working to ignore the shrieking thing in the back seat. When he finally got back to the house, he had to carry Paul inside, kicking and thrashing all the way. John could only imagine how it looked to the neighbors.

He deposited Paul on his bed and then carried his toy box out of the room, all the while being treated to a litany of hatred. No sooner had John closed the door behind him than he heard a familiar thumping and crashing. Paul was attacking his bookcase again. Soon every volume would be scattered about his room.

John shouted through the door. "You won't be allowed out until you pick them all up, do you understand me?"

The thumping and screaming continued unabated. John carried the toy box downstairs and set it in his office. He closed the door to muffle the din from Paul's room.

—*igms*—

August 23, 2025

Today the pediatrician diagnosed Paul as having colic. Terrific.

I think *colic* is a doctor's way of saying that he has no clue what the problem is. Paul cries for hours at a time, for no reason Marie and I can fathom. It isn't hunger, it isn't diaper rash, he isn't sick, and he's too young to be teething. Yet he cries. Holding him helps sometimes, but it's a hit-and-miss proposition. And as much as you may want to, you just can't hold a child continually. Simple things, like answering the phone or heating up dinner, have become crisis situations. At first it was puzzling, then unnerving, then alarming, and finally exhausting. Marie handles it better than I.

Steven never had colic. He never cried like this, for hours on end, for no good reason. He was a very good-natured baby.

I suppose I should be grateful that colic is the worst of Paul's problems, considering how flawed his parents are. I'd been born with only one kidney; Marie's endometriosis had only worsened after Steven's birth, making any further natural conception impossible.

But of course Paul had been born healthy, just as Steven had been. Dr. Aiken hadn't been kidding about the identical twin analogy. He looks exactly like Steven had at that age. Exactly. So many times, looking at him, I've been rocked by powerful *déjà vu*. Marie tells me she's felt it, too.

So why is he so different?

It's not just the colic. Steven would always relax when I held him. He would sit peacefully on my lap for extended periods as I read to him from books of nursery rhymes. Paul wriggles and squirms, tense as coiled wire. Every time I try reading to him, he fusses and fidgets until I stop. Yet he'll fall asleep instantly if Marie rocks him. Steven was

his father's child; Paul belongs to his mother. I don't understand it. Could the DNA we used -- extracted from saved clippings from Steven's first haircut -- somehow have been contaminated or tainted?

Oh, hell. I'm making too much of this. I think I'm more nervous and protective with Paul than I ever was with Steven. Understandable, I suppose, considering what happened. Still, I sometimes have to wonder if Paul likes me very much.



He spent hours at his desk, staring at the monitor, unable to concentrate. He got no work done the rest of the day.

Marie arrived home at six o'clock. She remained silent as John told her what happened, and stayed that way throughout dinner. She took a plateful of leftovers up to Paul's room afterward. John was too wrung out to argue.

He waited for her in the living room, seated in the easy chair, the lighting at its dimmest setting. The television hung dark and silent on the far wall. Above the set, a four-portrait frame system, arranged in a simple square, displayed an ever-rotating series of smiling individual and family stills at random intervals. The room felt oddly empty to John; he had meant to have the Christmas decorations up by now, but hadn't gotten around to it.

Marie entered and sat in the loveseat across from him. She was still dressed for work, in a stiff black business suit she favored when she had to give presentations to the board at International ComSys. Her makeup -- foundation to darken her pale flesh tone and simple black eyeliner -- appeared masklike in the soft light. She removed her earrings and set them on an end table next to the loveseat. She looked directly at him when she spoke. "I don't like this, John. I don't like what that woman at the daycare said about him."

"Neither do I."

"I think we need to look at our alternatives."

"Me, too." He steeled himself for what he had to say next: "I'd like to call Dr. Aiken."

She frowned. "What? Why?"

"We have to face it. Something is terribly wrong with Paul. He's emotionally disturbed. And we need to understand why."

"I think that's a little overstated."

"You didn't see the fit he had today."

"It was a temper tantrum. You act like you've never seen one before."

"I never saw this kind of behavior from Ste --"

Marie's features hardened into a glare. He swallowed his words.

"John," she said in a tone much lower than her normal speaking voice, "I thought I told you never to say anything like that again."

John rubbed his forehead. "Yes, you did. I'm sorry. I'm tired."

"Don't you ever let Paul hear you talk like that. He doesn't need to hear that his father thinks he's defective."

"Now who's overstating this issue? Damn it, he's my son. I love him and I'm concerned for him. I want to help him. We can't do that if we don't know what's wrong."

She sat back in the loveseat and crossed her arms. "You know, none of this would be an issue if Paul could stay home instead of going to daycare."

John tensed. "I've finally started a new novel, after years of being blocked. You know how important that is to me."

"Steven didn't require daycare. You wrote three novels with him in the house."

"Since you brought it up -- Steven didn't require constant supervision to keep him from getting into fights. Steven never displayed violent or neurotic tendencies."

"Fine." She stood. "We'll find Paul another daycare, one that's not so crowded. But we're not calling the clinic. That's final."

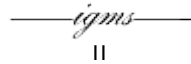
She left him alone in the living room and went upstairs. After a few minutes, the sounds of running water and the hum of her toothbrush filtered down to him.

He pulled his handheld from his pocket and opened it. He input his password, brought up his journal, and finally gave voice to the dark notion that had nagged at him all afternoon:

December 3, 2029

Dear God, what if we really have created a monster?

He logged the day's events while he waited for the sounds from upstairs to subside, for Marie to go to bed.



Paul's six-year stills arrived two weeks after he started the first grade. Following dinner, while Marie went downstairs to put a basketful of laundry in the washing machine, John took the disk into the living room to load it.

Paul was already there, curled up on the couch, working the controls of his handheld. Tinny tire squeals and explosions emanated from Paul's headphones.

Disk in hand, John stood watching him and thinking of the letter that had arrived the previous day. He still could not believe its contents. There had to be some mistake. For the life of him, he could not decide what he should do about it.

He pushed the thought away and turned to the portrait wall. He pressed a button recessed on the underside of the nearest frame, opening a slot. The parade of images went dark. He pulled the disk from its sleeve, inserted it, and stepped back to watch for error messages.

"What's *Special Ed* mean?"

John started at the sound of Paul's voice, so like Steven's. It was as if a ghost had spoken. He turned to his son.

Paul had doffed his headphones and set aside his handheld. A quizzical frown creased his forehead.

John said, "Where did you hear that? One of the other kids?"

"Mrs. Jordan said it to one of the other teachers. She said we were her Special Ed class."

Nothing wrong with his hearing, John noted. Mrs. Jordan would find that out soon enough. "It just means you're in a special class that . . . that will help you with school."

"Like I'm smarter than the other kids?"

"Not smarter. Just different."

"Like a retard?"

John winced. "Don't say that. It's not nice."

Paul pointed to the portrait wall. "Why do you keep his pictures?"

John, long used to Paul's sudden subject changes, glanced at the portraits. The new disk had finished loading and the system had resumed normal display mode. The first of Paul's new stills appeared at the top left, showing him in a pullover dress shirt, his blonde hair neatly combed and flattened by gel, his teeth bared with only a slight upturn of the mouth -- more like a grimace than a smile.

At the bottom right was a portrait of Steven -- from his fifth-year stills, if John's memory served -- in a little blue suit and tie. Steven's face and eyes were alight with a genuine grin, as if the photographer had just said something funny to him.

"Steven's your brother. Why wouldn't we keep his pictures?"

"Cause he's dead."

John took a moment to ensure his voice would remain even. "It's important that we remember him."

"Why do you write books?"

"Because I enjoy it."

"I think it's stupid."

John cleared his throat. "Why is that?"

"Cause it is."

"That's not a very nice thing to say, either. And I'd appreciate it if you'd try to be a little more respectful of your brother." He ejected the disk and slipped it back into its sleeve. "I have some more work to do tonight, so please try to hold the noise down, all right?" Without waiting for a reply, he left the room on unsteady legs.

He managed to reach his office and shut the door behind him before the trembling fit overtook him. He put a hand to his mouth to stifle a bellow of rage.

After several moments, the trembling passed. Drained, he looked across the room at his desk and the dark monitor atop it. Actually, he had no work to do. He had long since proofed the novel galleys; the finished product would be out in two weeks. Besides, he couldn't possibly work in his state of mind. But lately his office seemed the only place he felt welcome in the house.

Somewhere on the other side of the door, glass shattered.

With a groan, John opened the door and looked out. Paul stood in the entrance to the living room. "It fell," he said.

John pushed past him. On the carpet lay the broken remains of a frame amid shards of glass. He glanced at the wall; the bottom right frame was gone from its accustomed place. The remaining frames flashed *data missing* messages.

"It fell," Paul said from behind him.

John began breathing hard. He dimly registered that Paul was just tall enough to reach the lower portraits, if he stood on tiptoe. John whirled. "It's in the middle of the damned carpet. Did it jump off the wall?"

Paul stuffed his hands into his pockets and leaned against the doorjamb. "Maybe you knocked it loose while you were over there."

The trembling came over John again. "You little shit." He reached for Paul, grabbed him by the front of his t-shirt, and slapped him hard, getting his entire arm into it. Paul spun from his grasp and collided with the doorjamb.

John gaped, staring at his hand as if it had acted of its own accord. As suddenly as it had come, his rage vanished, leaving cold nausea in its wake.

Paul cringed. An angry red spot stood out just under his left eye. John reached for him again; Paul shrieked and recoiled. He ran for the stairs, wailing all the way to the top and down the hall. The slam of his bedroom door cut off his cries.

John sank to his knees, still gaping.

Hurried footfalls sounded on the basement stairs. Marie rushed into the room, wide-eyed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

He shook his head slowly.

"John? *John?*"

He put a hand over his mouth. He feared that if he tried to speak, he would vomit instead.

"You bastard." She went upstairs.

—*igms*—

April 19, 2026

The third anniversary of Steven's death, and the first since Paul was born.

Marie has gone to visit Steven's grave. I elected to stay home. Marie didn't like that very much.

I don't understand. She's the one who keeps telling me that Steven is gone, that the time for grieving is over, that I have to let him go.

True, I haven't been to Steven's grave since the funeral. But that was for a different reason. I wasn't ready to accept his death then. Since I've accepted it now, I just don't see the need to go. Cemeteries are for the dead. And I've spent far too much of my time obsessed with about death.

Or maybe I'm just afraid of having a relapse.

At moments like this, I realize that it's still too fresh in my mind, all of it: the thunderstorm that hit the night we drove home from Marie's parents' farm after an Easter dinner; hydroplaning off the road and into a ditch, rolling twice before slamming upside-down into a tree; Steven's terrified screams. Marie and I had been scraped and bruised but had escaped serious injury. Steven had not.

He was pinned in the back seat. The 911 dispatcher I spoke with over the cell phone assured me the ambulance could home in on my UWB signal, that we just needed to "hang on" until it arrived.

Hang on -- as if it were that simple. One of Steven's lungs had collapsed, I learned later, and he had massive internal hemorrhaging. Marie and I could do nothing but wait in a weed-choked ditch by the side of the road, drenched by torrential rains, and watch as our son died before our eyes.

Too fresh in my mind: the black depression I battled afterward, disconsolate despite Marie's best efforts; the unshakable numbness and apathy as my writing career failed; the blissful, dreamy feeling of slipping away as I sat in a bathtub full of warm water, bleeding from the wrists I had opened with a steak knife.

I've never written about it until now. The pain is still so close. Not good to dwell on it. All that is past. I have a new life now, and new crosses to bear.

Marie took the baby with her to the cemetery. When I asked her why she wanted to do that, she said, "At least then I won't be alone."

They've been gone for over five hours. Marie's previous visits to Steven's grave have lasted no more than two. She must have gone to her sister's house. She does that a lot lately.

It's so much harder this time. I don't know why. None of it is like it was before. I keep telling myself that perhaps I'm romanticizing the past, but I'm not.

For this we left the Church. For this we went through all of our retirement savings and took out a second mortgage on our house. Over this we agonized for weeks, waiting for a call from Dr. Aiken to tell us whether any of the fertilizations had succeeded. And on days like this, God help me, I wonder if we did the right thing.



The next morning, John sat at the kitchen table with a bowl of soggy cereal in front of him. He had no memory of filling the bowl; he'd done it on autopilot. And he wasn't even hungry.

Marie entered the kitchen, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans instead of being dressed for work. Dark circles marked her eyes. She'd put her hair up, but had missed a few strands, the way she sometimes did when hurried or distracted.

Paul was still asleep in his room. When John blinked, he saw himself hitting his son, saw Paul slamming into the doorjamb. The image seemed burned on John's retinas.

Marie leaned against the counter near the sink, blocking the sunlight slanting in through the kitchen window. "We need to talk."

He nodded.

"John, I don't love you anymore. Under the circumstances, I don't think we should remain married."

"I'm sorry I slapped him. I hate myself for that."

"It's not about that." She brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "Well, that's a part of it. But this has been a long time coming. You knew that, didn't you?"

"We've been under a lot of stress. All of us. But we can make it through this. I know we can." The words came automatically. Years of practice.

"Yes, we can make it through this. But not together. You've changed. You're not the man I married."

"I want nothing but the best for you and Paul."

"A divorce is best. For all of us."

He pushed away the bowl of soggy cereal. "I can't believe you're doing this now, of all times. The novel will be out in two weeks -- my first since Steven's death. Don't you see the significance of that? Eric even thinks it could be bestseller material."

"Eric's your agent. He gets paid to talk like that. You've said so yourself."

"All right, yes, I have. The point is that I'm working steadily, and I'm turning out quality stuff. It's been therapeutic for me."

"You call hiding in your office all day therapeutic? Do you think beating a child is a sign of improved mental health?"

"I've hit him only once in six years. I don't think I qualify as an abuser."

"Spankings don't count as hitting?"

He gritted his teeth and swallowed a reply.

"Never mind," Marie said. "I've done all I could to keep this marriage working. But I can't do it alone -- and I don't want to try anymore. I'm tapped."

"Marie, listen to me. Please don't do this. Raising a child with special needs is unbelievably hard, much harder than the parenting magazines want you to believe. But we can't let it destroy our relationship. We can't let it kill something good between us."

She glared. "You son of a bitch. Even after last night, you still blame Paul."

"No, that's not --"

"Yes, you do. Here." She dug in a jeans pocket and removed a folded piece of paper. She opened it, brought it to the table, and dropped it in front of him. "Thought you might want to have this back."

He recognized the clinic's letterhead. It was the cover sheet of the correspondence he'd received the other day -- the results of the DNA testing.

"I found it in your pants last night, while I was doing the laundry," she said.

"This isn't what you think it is."

"How long have you been talking to Dr. Aiken behind my back? How long did it take you to talk him into doing the comparison?"

He sighed. "About a year and a half. But --"

"You're convinced that Paul's damaged. That the cloning process somehow altered his DNA. That the doctors mutated him. Isn't that right?"

"I was only trying to eliminate certain genetic --"

She slammed her hand on the table surface. "*You think he's a freak! You think he's a monster! Isn't that right?*"

"No! I --"

She slapped him. His cheek stung from the blow.

They stood in tableau for long moments.

John said, "I love you, Marie. I love what we have. I've never loved anyone or anything more."

She dropped her gaze. "You love what we *had*. But it's gone. It's over. You're only making this harder."

"Where will you go?"

"To my sister's. I've already packed a suitcase for Paul and me. I just have to wake him up, and then we'll leave. I'll come back later this week for the rest of our things. It would be best if you weren't here then. Can you arrange to be away from the house Wednesday?"

Whispering, he said, "Sure."

"Thank you."

She walked out of the kitchen. Sounds filtered back to him: her tread on the steps, the creaking of the upstairs floorboards. Within ten minutes, she descended, speaking in a low voice. Paul answered, his voice sleepy and querulous, asking her where they were going. The front door opened and closed.

Then, silence.

A dreamlike shock settled over him as he sat at the table, staring at the letter from the clinic. He stayed that way for half an hour.

He glanced at the clock over the sink and shook himself, blinking. Out of habit, he pulled his handheld from a pocket and made an entry in his journal:

September 14, 2031

All for nothing. The letter says there is no difference between Steven's and Paul's DNA. My son looks at me with Steven's eyes, but he's a stranger who hates me. My wife tells me she doesn't love me anymore. My life is shattered. And Dr. Aiken says no difference. It was all for nothing.

His hands shook as he wrote. Tears threatened. He fought them down.

Lab tests aren't infallible. The samples could have been mislabeled. Or maybe the equipment isn't sensitive enough to detect some subtle difference. Or maybe he just lied to me to avoid a malpractice lawsuit. If so, he's going to regret it. I'll have the tests run again by someone else. I can --

He got no further. Blinding tears flooded his eyes. He buried his face in his hands as racking sobs consumed him.

—*igms*—
III

February 8, 2039

The latest round of experts have looked at the DNA samples and come to the same conclusion: they're identical. That makes four confirmations in just over eight years.

I suppose I should be upset, but I'm philosophical. I've come to expect it. I don't know why I keep trying anymore. Marie and Paul certainly wouldn't care; they don't even know I'm doing it. And none of these doctors will contravene Aiken's findings; in a field that's still viewed with so much suspicion and antipathy, they all stick together. The tests have become a hobby of mine, for lack of a better word. Every time I get another team of scientists to do the comparison, I have fresh hope that some technological advance will lead to a breakthrough, that some idealistic young clinician will have the courage to stand up to his or her peers, that I'll finally get an answer, and some closure.

I need to put it aside for now. I have Paul this weekend, and Sunday night, I have a business dinner with Eric. He's flying in for the occasion. He says he wants to discuss my career. It seems somehow wrong that some hotshot agent fifteen years my junior gets to give me career advice. Still, I have to admit he's done all right by me thus far, so I suppose I'll put that aside, too.

I'm hoping for some good news. I could use it.

—*igms*—

He met Eric Kramer for dinner at Ferlinghetti's, in the downtown market district. Eric had already been seated by the time John arrived. The hostess escorted him to a table in a darkened corner of the dining room.

Eric sat sipping at his customary Scotch. Instead of his usual power suit, he wore a white button-down shirt, open at the collar, and dark slacks. His thick head of curly hair and mustache, so completely devoid of gray, always reminded John of the way his own hair got more snowy every day. He had confessed this nowhere but in his diary.

Grinning, Eric stood and shook John's hand. "Running a little late?"

"Had to drop Paul off at his mother's."

"Oh." Eric's grin tactfully downshifted. "Everything all right?"

They sat. A waiter approached the table and handed John a menu. He ordered a martini, and the waiter departed.

"More or less," John said. "We got into an argument when I kicked him off the computer so I could work. He sulked the rest of the weekend. And Marie seemed a little irritated that I brought him home a day early." In truth, she'd looked very tired, her face pale and deeply lined.

"He has an interest in computers now? That's encouraging."

"He's already tried cracking the school network with a handheld. Somehow he got hold of encryption-breaking software. Wanted to wipe the network with a virus, I understand. Marie had to take his handheld away from him."

Eric's smile faded. "Sorry, John."

The martini arrived. The two of them ordered their dinners. After the waiter departed, John took a bracing swallow of his drink. "It's all right. At least when he's hacking, he's not getting into fights." From a breast pocket, he produced a golden optical disk. "Here. Finished the draft yesterday."

He could have just transmitted it, but he enjoyed the way Eric's eyes lit, so like a child's, when he handed him a new novel.

Eric's grin resurfaced. "You finished it, eh? That's terrific. I'll transmit it to Kelso tomorrow morning."

"See if you can get him to ease up a little this time, will you? He was awfully heavy-handed editing the last one. Proofing the galleys was a nightmare."

Eric took the disk from him. "I'll take care of it. No problem."

"You know, you always say that. How do you stay so positive, working in this business?"

"Simple. I have one of the best writers in the country as my client."

"I'll bet you say that to all your clients."

Still grinning, he put the disk in his briefcase. "Keeping writers happy is my job." He returned the briefcase to the floor. "Let's talk about the future. How do you like working with Fidelis Media?"

"Aside from Kelso's overactive blue pencil, you mean?"

"Your overall impression."

"Their advances have been a little stingy. But it's a good house with a good reputation. I don't have any complaints about distribution or royalty payments."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." Eric nodded toward his briefcase on the floor. "This is the last book under the current contract. You're right; Fidelis has been a bit stingy. But that's only because at the time we hammered out that deal, you were just getting back into the business after a long layoff. You didn't have a recent track record. So Fidelis hedged their bets. I knew it then, and I advised you to sign, anyway. As you said, Fidelis is a solid house." He leaned forward. "But the situation's different now. The last two novels have been bestsellers. If this new book sells like I think it will, we'll have all the muscle we need to push Fidelis for a deal that will guarantee your security."

John inhaled deeply and took another drink. "What does that mean?"

"It means going for a six-book deal. Somewhere in the eight-figure range."

John set his martini down hard enough to slop some of it onto the table. "What did you say?"

"The negotiations will take several months, maybe as much as a year. Fidelis will drag their feet, stall, try to sweat us out. But in the end, I think they'll give us what we want."

John only stared at him.

"Or we could go wide. You could undoubtedly lock up a quicker deal elsewhere -- possibly a very good one, maybe seven figures -- but no other house has the resources Fidelis has, or as much willingness to invest for the long term. Fidelis is my recommendation, but it's your choice."

A strange numbness suffused John, as if he'd been detached from his senses. In the ensuing silence, the waiter brought them their salads. The bowls of greens sat untouched.

John said, "Have you ever negotiated that kind of deal before?"

"I've nailed a couple of big ones, but this would be the biggest by far."

"You seem very confident."

"Writing is what you do, John, and you do it very well." He cocked a thumb at himself. "Negotiating is what I do, and I'm telling you that the time for this move is now. Give me your go-ahead to start laying the groundwork."

John thought of Marie and Paul, of the emotional roller coaster he had ridden during the divorce, of the way he had almost given up writing for the second time in the dark months after they had left. It all felt like a different life, one led by another man. The feeling somehow comforted him.

He raised the remains of his martini. "Make me proud, Eric."

They clinked glasses and drank, then dug into their salads.

—*igms*—

May 12, 2039

No. Please, no.

—*igms*—

John emerged from the shower that morning to find the message light blinking on his phone. Still dripping, a towel wrapped around his waist, he played the message back -- a voice mail from Jackie, Marie's sister. Hearing her voice gave John a turn; he hadn't spoken to Jackie since the divorce.

"John, Marie's been in the hospital since last night. Paul is with her. She wants to see you. You should probably get there today. She's at Saint Joseph's, room 1430."

John throat closed. Marie hadn't looked at all well the last time he'd seen her.

He called Eric to let him know he had to cancel the trip to New York, then hastily dressed and headed for Saint Joseph's. He got to the hospital around 9:30. The fourteenth floor, he discovered, housed the oncology unit.

He found Paul in a waiting room, seated alone in a corner, watching a television running old cartoons. Jackie was there, too. She had gained a lot of weight since he'd last seen her; she looked to be well over 250. But then, she'd had four children. Two of them were with her -- one a toddler and the other perhaps five years old. They made a lot of noise fighting over toys in the play area. Jackie was busy trying to quiet them, and could only glance at John when he entered. The older two were in school, he guessed.

As usual, Paul was dressed all in black. A cluster of acne marked one temple. He'd gotten so tall lately; his long legs stuck out awkwardly. As John sat next to him, he stiffened, scowling, his mouth drawn tight.

"Paul? How are you doing? Are you all right?"

He crossed his arms, glowering at the television. "What are you doing here?"

"Your aunt told me your mom was here."

"So? What do you care?"

"I care a great deal if your mom's sick. How is she?"

"She's fine. She'll be out of here tomorrow. You can go home."

Jackie had corralled the toddler -- Amy, her name was, if John's memory served -- and told the older one in a stern voice to settle down.

"I don't think they'd put your mother in the oncology unit if she were fine. Talk to me."

Paul scowled in silence.

John touched his arm. "Paul, please."

Paul shook the hand away and for the first time turned to him. His features twisted; his eyes shone. "She's dying. She has breast cancer. All right? Happy now?"

John's breath stopped for several seconds. Jackie's five-year-old complained that he was bored, when could they go home?

"Cancer?" He could think of nothing else to say.

"She's had it for the past two years. It got into her -- what do you call 'em -- lymph nodes. The frigging doctors are telling us she won't last the week. They got her doped up on morphine. She sleeps a lot."

John covered his eyes with one hand.

He heard Paul stand. "I'm gonna get a soda," he said. Then he was gone.

John remained seated with his eyes covered for an unknown time. Commercial jingles emanated from the television.

A hand touched his shoulder. He looked up.

Jackie stood over him, her round face grave, her eyes bloodshot. She still held her wriggling toddler in one arm. "Thanks for coming so fast."

"She never told me, Jackie. Two years and she never told me. Why?"

"I kept telling her that she should, but she never listened. Now, of all times, she's changed her mind."

"How is she?"

"She's heavily medicated for the pain. She fades in and out. But she keeps fighting it. When she's awake, she's lucid."

"What . . . what can I do?"

"If you'll keep an eye on the kids for a few minutes, I'll check on her. See if she's awake."

"Sure." He held out his hands for little Amy. She shook her head and clung to her mother. Jackie peeled her off and set her in John's lap. Amy promptly climbed down and headed toward her brother in the play area. Jackie favored John with a tight smile and exited the waiting room.

The children took an interest in large colored blocks from a toy box. The five-year-old -- Isaac, was it? -- attempted to build towers, while Amy just banged them against the carpet and each other.

Shock settled into John's bones. His mind blanked.

Paul returned, a bottle of cola in one hand. When she saw him, Amy promptly raised her arms to be held, but Paul shook his head and took his seat, turned pointedly away from John.

Normally, he wouldn't try to engage Paul, but he needed to talk. He voiced the first inanity that came to mind. "How's school?"

"We're doing *Frankenstein* in English class."

"What do you think of it?"

"Sucks."

John shifted in his seat. "How's your girlfriend?"

Paul rolled his eyes. "I broke up with her two months ago."

"Paul, I'm not quite at my best right now. Your mother -- she never told me about this."

"Why should she? You couldn't have done anything about it. And you were busy being a best-selling writer, anyway."

Jackie came back into the waiting room. "She's awake. She wants to see you. Alone."

Paul glanced in John's direction.

John stood. "All right."

"I'll show you the way."

She led him down a hall, past a nurses' station, and around a corner. She stopped at the door to room 1430 and opened it for him. They exchanged strained smiles as he entered. She closed the door behind him.

It was a semi-private room, one bed mercifully empty. The curtains were closed, casting a pall.

Marie turned to him. Hooked to an IV, she lay under a single hospital sheet that accentuated the bony outlines of a body gone shrunken and frail. Her once blonde hair had thinned and grayed. Her face had become so gaunt and wizened as to make her appear ninety years old. It had been only two months since he'd last seen her.

He flashed on the last time he had seen her in a hospital bed -- just after Paul's birth, almost fourteen years ago. The difference between that exhausted but radiant woman and the cruelly wasted one before him --

He looked away, unable to bear the sight.

"John." Her voice was hoarse. "Thank you for coming."

He approached the bed, still averting his eyes.

She extended a skeletal hand from under her bed sheet. He took it gently, forced himself to look at her. "Marie, why --"

"Why didn't I tell you?" She paused to take a rattling breath. "Not sure. I guess I thought I'd wait until you noticed something was wrong. Until you asked. But you never did, John. You never did. That made me angry."

"I'm so sorry. I --" But he could think of no way to complete the thought. In a choked voice, he said, "Are you in much pain?"

"Some. I can medicate whenever I want." She nodded toward the IV. "But for now, I'd rather have the pain. I need my mind clear."

"Are you sure --" He cleared his throat. "Are the doctors sure nothing can be done? We can get a second opinion. I can bring in specialists to --"

"No. That time is long past. I'll hold out as long as I can. For Paul, you understand. But I can't hold out forever. That's why you need to listen right now."

"What can I do? I'll do anything."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." She took another raspy breath. "When I was first diagnosed, Jackie and I had long talks about Paul. She agreed to take care of him should anything happen."

"Jackie? What about me?"

She leveled a stare at him, blinking once, slowly. "I didn't think that would be a good idea."

He released her hand. "I'm his father. Haven't I always made sure he was taken care of? Have I ever missed a child support payment? And his college tuition is already in the bank, if he wants it."

"You were never tight with money. That much I'll give you. Time, on the other hand --"

"My career --"

"Enough. I don't have the strength to argue right now."

He fell silent, ashamed.

She coughed, and slowly wiped spittle from her chin. "What I need to say to you is this: when I'm not doped up on morphine, when I have time to think -- as best I can through the pain -- I realize Jackie is kidding herself. She has four children; she's already stretched too thin. Raising Paul would be too much for her."

The shock that had so recently worn off settled in again. "So you want me to take him, after all."

"There's no one else. You're my best option. Which goes to show you how rotten my options are at this point." Her mouth twitched in a grim smile. "Paul needs more than money. He needs time, lots of it. I know that will be hard for you. You never had time for him. You've never forgiven him for not being Steven."

"That's not --"

"Spare me the righteous indignation. It's true, and you know it." She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. "Anyway, I'm offering you a chance to prove me wrong. Will you take him or not?"

He considered, or tried to. He found he could focus coherently on only one thought -- that Marie's first inclination been to leave Paul with Jackie instead of him. That rankled. It hurt.

"I'll take him. If he'll have me."

She opened her eyes. "He will."

"Are you sure?"

"He'll do it if I ask him. Bring him in here."

John brought him in. Marie was right. When she told Paul, he nodded.



September 29, 2039

Sometimes, the adjustments are subtle, minute, even easy. Sometimes, you actually think you're getting a handle on your new circumstances. And other times . . .

Paul came home today with a snake tattoo on his face. It winds its scaly way across his forehead, between his eyes, beside his nose, across his upper lip, around his mouth, and terminates somewhere under his chin.

Apparently, it's something of a fad among kids born of cloned cells; God knows why. They wear them like badges of honor.

Paul got the idea from his buddy Keith, of course. Keith has a large lizard on his left cheek. Bad enough that he's a hulking delinquent three years older than Paul. He seems to be Paul's only real friend, and the influence he exerts scares me. Sure, they're both clone-conceived, but why can't this kid hang out with others his own age? On days like this, I wish Paul was the only clone at his school, that he had no friends at all.

A snake. Perfect. I can only imagine how well that will go over during job interviews.

Naturally, I was livid. Paul just nodded when I asked him if it was permanent. I'm sure he was expecting me to explode. God knows I wanted to scream, but his mother's last request hangs uneasily over me, over both of us. We say very little to each other.

I wonder if Steven would have been so defiant, had he lived to become a teenager. Would he have turned against me, too?

Tomorrow I have my first appointment with Paul's junior high guidance counselor. Maybe he can help.

. . .to be continued in issue 9 . . .

The Angel's Touch

by Dennis Danvers



Artwork by Liz Clarke

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

-- Luke 12: 6-7

The elevator stops on three as I'm going up, and an angel gets on. He has a terrible time finding room for his wings and arranging them to his satisfaction, standing right up by the buttons to make room for them, and they still bump against the ceiling. He smells sweet and funky like singed feathers baked in honey, and he glows like the elevator buttons. I huddle in the other front corner and try to act casual. He follows me off at six and down the hall, all the way to my apartment.

"Brian Stark," he says. "I'd like a word with you."

"You have the wrong guy," I say, sliding the key in the lock, turning it, and leaning on the door. But the door won't budge, not one little bit, like a brick wall.

"No, I don't," he says. "Don't lie to an angel. It angers us." He brushes my cheek with the feather tip of his glowing wing, and I scream, or try to. The scream won't budge either, lodged in my throat like a cork in a bottle, and I strangle on my pain. I brushed up against a Portuguese man-o-war once in the Gulf. That was a lover's kiss compared to the angel's touch. "I've come to ask you a few questions about Melanie Waters. Are you going to let me in or not?" He smirks, sniffs. "You have *free will*, after all. Yes, or no?"

"Yes," I gasp. My door flies open, and I fall into my apartment screaming.

He steps over me and slams the door behind him. He frowns at the ceiling fan whirling lazily near one wing and it stops dead, the paddles falling like a blossom wilting. He stands with his back to the sofa against the long wall and spreads out his wings, knocking over a table lamp with a crash and then crushing the glass on my Monet print. He rests his wings on the back of the sofa and seems to relax a little. I stand before him and tremble.

"Do you love Melanie?" he asks.

"Love her? We broke up a couple of years ago. She dumped me. We were only together *maybe* three years." I start to suggest maybe, just maybe, *he does* have the wrong guy, but think better of it. My cheek is still on fire.

"Is that a *no*?" the angel asks.

"I'm not sure. Could you tell me why you're asking?"

"She's about to die, so she's being judged. *Weighed* in the balance." He holds up imaginary scales suspended from one of his perfect hands, eyes them like a cat eyeing a canary cage, a smile like a crescent moon. "Is she . . . religious?"

All I can think of are a few yoga classes, making fun of TV preachers. "Not -- not exactly."

"Exactly not, I should say. No *faith*." He eyes the imaginary scales once again. "That leaves good works and the high regard of others to weigh in the balance. And *mercy*, of course." He smirks and sniffs again. "Her good works

are, as you are aware, nothing exceptional. She was asked if there might be a single soul in the vast universe who still loved her, and she came up with you. I told her I doubted it, but she was quite sure that you were her best bet. Her only chance, you might say."

I *had* told her I would love her forever, no matter what; that should she ever change her mind, all she had to do was call and I'd come running. Guys say crap like that. Who knows if we mean it? She never called, of course. But now there's this . . . this *angel* in my living room. The smell is starting to make me nauseous. There's something like spoiled chicken underneath the sweetness. I need a drink of water.

"You want something to drink?" I ask.

"I don't partake of material substance."

"Is that a no?"

"Don't get cute with an angel," he says, his wings coming off the sofa.

I back up against the wall with a thud. "I wasn't. Honest." A wing hovers ominously, then withdraws. I desperately change the subject. "I guess Melanie's in a lot of trouble, huh?"

He smiles. "No more than anyone else. You're all being judged all the time. That's how we achieve" -- he almost touches the tip of my terrified nose with a wingtip, but stops just short -- "*justice*." He draws out the final syllable in a hiss, like something sizzling. "We weigh everything, then act judiciously." His feathers rustle like a dry wind through a dead cornfield. His eyes glow and never blink.

His head is beautiful like a snake's, with smooth, graceful lines -- hairless, featherless. The feathers start at the base of the neck as a down. Skin and feather are the same marble white. He could've stepped down from a tombstone. He wears no clothes and has no discernible genitalia. No discernible humanity. He's the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life. I'm afraid I'm going to piss myself.

No matter what our problems in the past, I can't leave Melanie's fate to this nut. I clear my throat, try to stand up straight, to keep my voice steady. "I loved her, sure. *Still* love her, I mean. I've always wished it had worked out. I really thought she was the one." It's true. Not every single second, but there were times when she wasn't smoking or sneaking or promising to quit -- times when her passion almost met mine, like we were *meant* to be together. Those were the best times of my life.

"She slept with other men," the angel says.

He doesn't have to remind me, but I've come to terms with that. "Man, one time, and they were really drunk, and I was being a total jerk at the time, and --"

He shakes his head. "*Men*. And the time you know about -- that you've *forgiven* -- she was sober, and your bad behavior never entered her mind."

Even if he wasn't an angel, I'd know he was telling the truth. Part of me always suspected. I believed her only because I had wanted to. "That lying bitch!" I say. It just comes out. Guys say crap like that sometimes.

The angel gathers in his wings and starts for the door. "Thanks for your time. We'll be in touch."

"Hey! Wait! Come back! You can't just leave!"

He whirls around and stretches out an imposing wing aimed at my other cheek. I fall to my knees. "Please?" I whimper. He likes that.

"That's better. Show a little respect. You want *details*? Very well. As you have always suspected, you love Melanie more than she loves you. This is because she has always loved Warren, with whom she's had an ongoing affair, hoping he would someday leave his wife Ursula. But of course he never did. The encounter you know of with Clifford was just a pathetic attempt to make Warren jealous. We see a lot of that sort of mess. It almost sorts itself out."

"Almost?"

He points a fiery feather at my groin, makes a little curlicue in the air like a kid playing with a sparkler. "Warren's prostate problems prompted his abrupt exit from the material plane some months ago."

"You -- you *killed* him?"

He looks at me like I'm a complete idiot. He fills me completely with the knowledge of my idiocy. "We kill every living thing. Even the little sparrows. If you had paid attention in Sunday school instead of drawing pictures of spaceships, you'd know that. No *faith*. That's your problem, too. What do you people need with spaceships after the mess you've made of this planet? Not to mention your so-called *personal* lives."

I'm not prepared to defend the human race, or myself either. I'm terribly curious, however. I think I want the whole story, or maybe I don't, but it's like a car wreck, and I can't look away. "What kind of guy was this Warren character? Did I ever meet him?"

"You picked Melanie up at the airport after a conference in Cleveland. She introduced him as a colleague who also attended. They actually spent the week in Cancún. He was a selfish pig, quite successful."

"And Melanie loved him?"

"To distraction."

"But he loved his wife?"

"Not particularly. He preferred having both wife and mistress."

"So what's going to happen to Melanie?"

"The 'lying bitch'?"

"You caught me by surprise. Sure I'm . . . upset. That doesn't mean I don't care what happens to her."

"How touching. She's attending to matters herself, now that she's finished" -- smirk, sniff -- "*praying*. She fell to her knees, asked if anyone in the world could possibly still love her. I was dispatched to find out -- to answer her prayer. It's one of my duties. I believe you answered the question quite succinctly."

"You *can't* tell her that."

"Too late. I already have. She asked herself and *God* -- I don't know why she had to drag Him into it -- 'Dear God, would Brian still love me if he knew the truth?' and she actually heard, though she thought she only imagined, your very words, in your own voice. Amen, as we say."

"What's she going to do?"

"She's weighing the efficacy of pills or gas. She's reading drug labels at the moment, but the print is too fine, and her tears make reading difficult. She'll end up going with gas."

"You have to stop her!"

He draws himself up like a cobra about to strike. "I *what*?"

"I mean, would you *please* stop her?"

"I'm not that sort of angel, thank God. You need an angel of mercy. You could --" smirk, sniff -- "*pray* for one. Or, since you love her so, you can do it. Go ahead, Loverboy. Save her." He bursts out laughing, a hawk-like screech, and leaves, slamming the door behind him.

I run out in the hall, but there's no sign of him except for his funky smell. What the hell kind of angel is he? But I don't have time to think about that. I run back in and call Melanie. I get her machine. She's screening, of course; she always screens. I imagine her, head in the oven, listening. "Melanie, this is Brian. I want you to know I love you. I have always loved you. And I always will love you. No matter what. Got that? I'm coming over."

It usually takes twenty minutes to get to her place, but I make it in fifteen, even though my elevator gets stuck on three, and I have to run down the stairs, and I miss every light, and her buzzer is busted, so I push every other button and beg, plead and cajole someone into letting me in -- careful not to pray or even mention His name. The elevator in her building is out of service altogether. I sprint up the stairs and bang on her door, breathless, gasping. "Melanie! Let me in!" I shout. I'm about to knock the door down, standing on the other side of the hall, set to charge, wishing I had shoulder pads, when she opens the door, her phone still in her hand.

"I got your message," she says. She looks awful, like she's been crying for days, her hair a rat's nest. She's wearing a big t-shirt from Maine with lobsters all over it. I bought it on a camping trip, one of our golden times, when she wasn't thinking about Warren, I guess. "I was going to kill myself, and then I got your message. I love you too, Brian. I really do. Come in."

She reaches across the threshold and grabs my hands. I step inside and take her in my arms, holding her close, never wanting to let her go. My eyes sting with tears of joy and from the gas. She's thrown all the windows open -- that's what took her so long to get to the door -- but the smell of gas is still pretty strong. The place is a total wreck.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says, clinging to me with a passion I never felt from her when we were together. "I told myself, if he comes, he really, really loves me. Oh God, I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too," I say, holding her close and kissing her. She returns my passion and tenderness, as if, like Plato said, we're two halves of a single being, reunited, made whole. It's a dream come true. My tears of joy reach my wounded cheek, and I wince in pain.

"What did you do to your cheek?" Melanie asks, touching it lovingly, her face full of concern. But I'm grateful for the pain that has brought me her love. It's true. I have always loved her.

"It's a long story," I say, not wanting to go into the whole angel business and spoil the moment. If I tell her about the angel, then we'll have to talk about Warren and all of that, stir up feelings that don't matter anymore. Warren is dead, and I am alive, and Melanie is in my arms. Maybe I won't tell her about the angel at all. The Lord moves in mysterious ways, right? There's no reason she has to know.

"It looks awful," she says, still peering at my cheek, squinting at it. "You should have it looked at."

"I will. I will. I can't believe --" I can't stop kissing her. It's all true. I'm absolutely crazy about her. I will never stop loving her. I don't care about the past, only this moment together, and all the moments to come. I tell her this and more, in a rush of relentless adoration. I've always held back before, not wanting to face the fact she didn't love me as I loved her, but now those days are over.

Maybe it's too much, all at once, such an outpouring of love and devotion, that makes her feel like she has to confess when she never had before. Maybe she, too, has always been holding back.

She looks into my eyes. "I love you too, Brian. That's why I have to tell you something. There's something you must know."

I feel dizzy. I'm not sure whether it's the gas or a sudden instinctive panic. "It can wait," I reassure her.

"No, no, I need to tell you now. I owe you the truth. I can't let you love me without you knowing who I am, how I deceived you. It wouldn't be fair."

"I know the truth. I know who you are. *Life* isn't fair. It doesn't matter. Honest. Trust me."

"You're just saying that. You don't know. There's something I've never told you."

She breaks from my arms and paces back and forth, weaving a little. I'm starting to get a headache from the gas. Even though we're standing by her open door, it's still pretty strong. There's no circulation in her place, and I'm breathing heavily after all the stairs I just climbed, not to mention our passion. I start to turn on her ceiling fan, and reach for the switch, but notice the blades lying on the floor in a heap. Melanie has stopped her pacing and is digging around in the pockets of a coat hanging on a peg by the kitchen. "I'm going to need a cigarette for this," she says. I groan inside to hear she's started smoking again, but I try to hide my disappointment, bracing myself for her confession, trying to decide if I should tell her about the angel or not, when I realize what's about to happen.

"Stop!" I scream.

The cigarette is in her mouth, the lighter in both hands. She tucks in her chin in a gesture I remember from the old days when I dared to come between her and lighting up. Maybe I should just let her do it, I think for a split second -- blow us both to kingdom come. "The gas," I say, and her eyes open wide with comprehension.

"Damn!" she says, throwing cigarette and lighter to the floor. She's wobbly and green.

"Let's get out of here," I say. I put my arm around her waist, snare her coat from its peg and hustle her out the door.

I take Melanie to my place, get her cleaned up, get some food in her, put her to bed. I clean up the mess the angel left. It turns out that the screws holding the fan paddles in place unscrewed themselves. It takes me an hour, but I find every last one. I'm standing on a stepladder tightening the last screw when she comes out of the bedroom in my bathrobe. She looks beautiful.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Putting the blades back on."

"Mine fell off too. Ker-plunk. What makes them do that?"

"You didn't see what caused it?"

"It just happened. I had my eyes closed."

"Praying."

"I don't know if you'd call it praying. I was out of my mind with grief. Would you get down from there? You're making me nervous."

I step down from the ladder, take her in my arms. "Is this better?"

"Much. Oh Brian, you've been so good to me. There's still something I have to tell you."

I've had a little time to think about this, and I've decided there's no hiding from the truth. "No there isn't. I already know. You were upset because Warren died of prostate cancer and never left Ursula after all those years. You only slept with Clifford in a pathetic attempt to make Warren jealous. But when you tried to think of one person in the universe who might still love you, you thought of me. I know everything already."

She pushes herself away from me, gathers the robe tightly around her. "Brian, you mean you knew about Warren all along?"

"No. I just found out a few hours ago."

"How? Did you have someone following me?"

"Of course not. An angel told me."

"That's not funny. Tell me how you know."

"I told you. If you'd had your eyes open you would've seen him too. He was at your place. That's why the fan blades were on the floor. He doesn't like them because of his wings or something. He just backed out all the screws -- *zip!* I'm surprised you didn't smell him. You can still smell it in here actually. I think it's gotten into the sofa cushions. We'll have to change them."

She's staring at me, wide-eyed, speechless, faithless like the angel said. She'll never believe I saw an angel, not ever. I have about two seconds to convince her I'm not totally insane.

"Clifford told me," I blurt out. "I promised him I wouldn't let on to you. I went round to his place, all jealous, and he told me about Warren."

"That was ages ago, and yet you stayed with me," she says. "And, oh no, when you met him at the airport that time . . ."

"When you went to Cancún."

"You knew about that too? How did you ever manage? I don't understand. You never said a word."

I can see this isn't entirely a good thing in her eyes, pointing to a pathological spinelessness, but what's the alternative -- spouting nonsense about an angel showing up at my apartment in answer to her prayers? "I -- I had faith in us," I say. "I always believed things would eventually work out."

She embraces me, seemingly accepting this sophism. She points at the wall. "What happened to the Monet?"

"I'm tired of the impressionists, aren't you?"

Luckily she is, and we go shopping together for a new print.



While we're out, a terrible storm blows in. Acting on an hours-old complaint about a gas smell, Melanie's landlord goes around to her place, finds all the windows open with the rain pouring in, the carpet ruined with burns and melted wax from some depressive late-night ritual of self-loathing, the brand-new ceiling fan on the floor in pieces, and a smell like bad chicken and cigarette smoke.

Long story short, Melanie is evicted and moves in with her true love, me.

And it's wonderful, except for one thing.

She can't get over that I supposedly knew about Warren all along, so conversations like this become the staple of my day:

"So when I signed up for that dance class on Wednesday nights and bought the shoes and leotard and everything, but never practiced even once, you must have known I was meeting Warren. There was one time he stood me up, some stupid thing with Ursula he couldn't get out of, and I just sat in the car and cried. You were so sweet when I got home. You could tell I'd been crying. I told you I fell doing a difficult move, and you iced my ankle. You must've known, and yet . . ."

Yeah. Saint Masochistic Brian-the-All-Knowing must've known and now gets to hear it all. It seems her life has been one long furtive attempt to screw Warren. There are no details she sees fit to spare me. Blow jobs in elevators, previous suicide attempts, daydreams about murdering Ursula, shrinks she's gone through attempting to deal with her obsession. "I spent weeks talking to Daphne about whether I should tell you or not, and it turns out the whole time you already knew."

Turns out.

One evening -- after a vivid account of her meeting Warren in a Target parking lot for a quickie and her subsequent remorse she couldn't go shopping with him -- she's so upset she has to take to bed.

I bang my head on the kitchen cabinet. "God, I can't take this anymore!"

"And how's that *mercy* plan working out for you, Loverboy?"

Apparently anything passes for prayer these days. I smell him before I actually turn and see him. The scar on my cheek, not quite healed after months, begins to throb. I once saw a marble cemetery angel that had been worked over with a sledge hammer. I wondered why anyone would do such a thing. I'm beginning to develop a theory. But all I have is a wooden spoon, and he still scares the crap out of me. "It's doing okay."

"So you were taking the Lord's name in vain, were you? You didn't really *mean* what you just addressed to Him?"

There's something a little different about the angel today. A little less smirk maybe. My kitchen's small. Last time he was here he would've pulverized the spice rack, but now he's got his wings tucked in like a pigeon's. "I only meant that her obsession with her dead lover can't be good for her healing, and I only want what's best for her."

"Oh my. You're almost getting good at this."

"Good at what?"

"The Lord's work, of course." Smirk, sniff. "Mister Mercy, I call you." He smiles.

I think it was a sledge hammer. It might've been a chain saw. A jack hammer. "Thank you," I say.

"Nasty work, *mercy*. You couldn't *pay* me." He screeches with laughter. Angel humor, I suppose. "But I didn't come to exchange pleasantries. You're in the brotherhood now, so to speak. I must keep you informed. Justice, as you know, thrives on truth."

"And what truth would that be?"

"She's screwing Clifford again."

"You're kidding."

He gives me a brotherly, you're-a-total-idiot look, and my wound begins to ooze. "She confronted him about telling you about Warren, which he denied at first, but, opportunist that he is, eventually confessed to it when he realized she saw it as a strange bond between them, an erotic one as it turns out. Surprise, surprise. Oh yes, she sneaks cigarettes in the basement. Her pack is on the circuit box."

He watches my reaction with the greatest interest, like a cat watching a songbird. I try to emulate his marble serenity and choose my song carefully. I know this creep. This is definitely a trap. "Clifford. Tsk. Tsk. She must be terribly unhappy."

His eyes narrow. "You're concerned about *her*?"

"Of course. I suspect she's consumed with self-loathing."

His feathers ruffle. "As well she should be. You should return her fate to me. Much easier on everyone, wouldn't you say?"

I smile. I couldn't possibly contradict a member of the brotherhood. I just smile what I hope is a merciful smile. I'm glad there are no mirrors in my kitchen, or I'd gag on my own sweetness.

He's aghast. "But she's hopeless. Completely faithless. A wanton Jezebel."

"Confused, heart-broken, a victim of a patriarchal society that teaches her to loathe her own sexuality." As pissed as I am at Melanie, I'm not going to let this harpy have her. He can't wait to wrap her up in those fiery wings of his and teach her a lesson she'll never forget. "I'll talk to her."

"You'll *talk* to her?"

"Yeah. That's what I said. You got a problem with that?" I don't know where this comes from, but it's all I can do to keep standing after the words leave my mouth. I fully expect him to incinerate me in a heartbeat.

But he doesn't. He steps back. He opens up the window and flies away as if he'd been a pigeon on the windowsill.



Over dinner I come right to the point. I tell her an angel has informed me of her latest indiscretion with Clifford, and I have just one question to ask her.

"An angel?" she says. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Have you been screwing Clifford?"

"Well, yes. It was stupid. But an angel, Brian, really -- "

"I haven't asked my question yet."

"I thought you just did."

"I don't have to ask about Clifford. I already know about that. Like I know about the pack of cigarettes on the circuit box. My question is, have you *ever* been faithful -- to anyone?"

She hesitates. "That depends upon what you mean -- "

"It's a fairly straightforward question."

She stops to think, boyfriend by boyfriend. "Well, since you put it that way, I don't suppose I have, actually."

"So it's not anything personal then? In fact, I would be foolish to expect anything else. You cheated on all your boyfriends with Warren, and with Warren on everyone else. Why should things change now that Warren has exited the material plane?"

She gives me a baffled look. "I guess you could look at it that way."

"I prefer to, yes."

"And you're cool with that?"

I shrug. "I'd rather not *hear* about it."

"I thought this *angel* tells you everything I do." I note the slightest dip in her skepticism. How else could I possibly know?

"He'll only tell me if I care."

"You didn't care about Warren, apparently."

"I didn't *know* until the angel told me. I only dragged Clifford into it because I knew you wouldn't believe an angel and I didn't want to lose you. But it doesn't matter if you believe. Look. Warren was an ass. He's dead. He has nothing to do with us anymore. But how about I trust you? I mean, *Clifford?C'mon.*"

She smiles. "You know what I think? I think you're the angel."

"Maybe I am." Smirk, sniff, kiss.

—*igms*—

This marks a dramatic turning point in our relationship that I can't fully explain. The Lord moves in mysterious ways. We've remained completely devoted to one another for many wonderful years now. Melanie's even quit smoking.

There's no way to be sure of course, short of consulting with the angels. But why in *Hell* would I want to do that?

Accounting for Dragons

by Eric James Stone



Artwork by Nick Greenwood

Introduction

Most dragons rarely think about accounting. But you've worked hard to acquire that hoard of gold and jewels -- shouldn't you be keeping track of what happens to it? Just sitting on it isn't good enough any more. That's why you need accounting. Here are some tips:

— *igms* —

Tip One: A Copper Saved Is a Copper Earned

Your hoard isn't just valuable to you; it's valuable to thieves. Once word gets out that you're sitting on a big pile of treasure, it isn't long before they come skulking about, their greedy hands trying to snatch the things you've gained through honest plunder.

Dragons may have the reputation of knowing every single item in their hoard, down to the last copper, but the fact of the matter is that only a tiny fraction of

dragons can remember more than six or seven thousand individual pieces before they all start to blur together. Admit it -- you really aren't sure whether you have twenty-seven ruby-encrusted platinum goblets, or only twenty-six.

But thanks to proper accounting, you can have a complete inventory of everything in your hoard. That way, if you find something is missing, you can go on a rampage across the countryside or demand a virgin as a sacrifice unless your treasure is returned.

— *igms* —

Tip Two: Plan for Taxes

The Dragon King will always demand his share, but you need to remember: it's your hoard, not the king's. There are legitimate deductions you can take to reduce the amount you pay in taxes.

For example, did you know that knight insurance can be written off as a legitimate expense? Defending yourself against those pests in plate-mail is something that happens in the ordinary course of business. A good knight-insurance policy will cover not only dents in your scales and arrows through your wings, but also full reimbursement for any treasure you have to give out to make the knight go away.

Also, many dragons forget that alternative forms of income, such as virgin sacrifices, are taxable, too, and they get a nasty surprise when the tax bill arrives. Plan to set aside some treasure to cover those unexpected extra taxes.

— *igms* —

Tip Three: Keep Good Records

In case of a tax audit, you need to have good records. But that's not the only reason.

Imagine the following scenario. You swoop down out of the sky onto some innocent village. Your teeth and talons are sharpened. Your breath is smoky fresh. But before you can rend flesh from bone and set the buildings ablaze, some village elder comes out with documentation showing they sacrificed a virgin to you earlier in the year. It's enough to make you slink away with your tail dragging in the mud.

You can avoid such embarrassment by recording all of your income, including sacrificial virgins. Note down the amount, the source, and the date.

Good recordkeeping also allows you to be more proactive. For example, you may notice that a particular village is late in offering a sacrifice. Then it's your choice whether to demand an immediate sacrifice or to wreak havoc on the village.



Tip Four: Hire a Good Accountant

Maybe you're just too busy. Or maybe you're bad at math. For whatever reason, you may decide to hire an accountant rather than do the work yourself. Generally, you have two options when it comes to hiring an accountant.

A dragon accountant can be expensive, although he usually pays for himself through tax savings.

For the more cost-conscious dragon, a smarter choice is to find a human accountant who will gladly do all your accounting without charging you a single copper, simply in return for not being eaten. Over the long term, the savings can really add up.



"That's the end," I said after I finished reading the brochure. The echo of my voice faded away inside the cave.

"I'd never realized the advantages," said the dragon. Its black tongue flickered out to moisten its scaly lips. "After I eat you, I'll have to find myself an accountant."

I cleared my throat. "By sheer coincidence," I said, "it turns out that I'm an accountant. That's why I happened to have the brochure with me."

"An accountant?" The gold and jewels of the dragon's hoard sparkled as he snorted flame. "The village elders claimed you were a virgin!"

"Strange as it may seem," I said, "the two are not mutually exclusive."

"Oh," said the dragon. "Well, then, I suppose you'll do. You'll work for not being eaten?"

"I would find that quite satisfactory," I said. "Plus, there's a substantial tax benefit to you, because an uneaten virgin sacrifice doesn't count as income. Now, let's review your financial situation. I'll need to see your tax returns for the past three years, your current knight insurance policy . . ."

"But I don't have a knight insurance policy," said the dragon.

"Really? You're in luck." With a broad smile, I reached into my pocket. "I just happen to have a brochure with me called *Insurance for Dragons*."



Artwork by Dean Spencer

End Time

by Scott Emerson Bull

"Damn heat," Jacob muttered, as overhead the sun bleached the sky, claiming temporary victory in its immemorial battle with darkness. He leaned forward on his chaise and lit a brown Turkish cigarette, an old addiction that refused to kill him. He was too old to care. He'd stopped counting birthdays after fifty-nine and was convinced that death kept him at arm's length just for spite. If God possessed an ounce of mercy, he would have taken Jacob by now, but Jacob knew the Devil had right of first refusal and evil's patience had no limit.

A screaming child shattered the surface of the pool. The kid's parent, a stooped man with frazzled hair and dead eyes, hovered close as if expecting disaster. It's a sin to bring kids into this world, Jacob thought. What future did they have anymore? He spied one of the cabana boys and waved his empty scotch glass. "And be quick about it," he told him. "The first three are wearing off."

In the pool, the splashing kid swallowed a mouthful of water and flailed away as if drowning. The father grabbed the kid by the arm and pulled him to the steps, ignoring the offered assistance from a middle-aged woman in a pink bathing cap and matching sunglasses. The woman shrugged and continued her journey around the pool, collapsing on the empty chaise next to Jacob in a muddle of paperbacks and sunscreen.

"My Lord it's hot," she said, in perfect Middle American. "I wanted to escape the cold, but this is ridiculous."

Jacob closed his eyes. Maybe if he ignored her.

"Looks like you're enjoying it though," she went on. "My ex used to go on about global warming and I'd tell him he was nuts. Now look at the world. Is it true what they said on the news? Did another polar ice cap break away?"

Yeah, lady, Jacob thought. The earth is melting and the days are getting hotter and the nights blacker and it's all thanks to those wonderfully toxic gases we belch into the air.

The woman continued unfazed. "I have a brother who lives on the Outer Banks and they swear the beach is creeping up to their bungalow. What a world we live in."

You don't know the half of it, Jacob thought.

A rogue cloud blurred the sun and cast a long shadow across Jacob. He had a sudden feeling of disconnection, as if the world had shifted on its axis. Across the pool, a wiry gray-haired man in thick, black glasses shuffled towards one of the umbrella'd tables. A thin moustache curled like a caterpillar over his lip and he had on a white robe with the hotel's crest embroidered on its breast. Scuffed sandals on his feet indicated either a certain frugality in the man or that he had traveled far. Jacob knew both to be true. The cloud moved on, but the man remained in shadow. He looked over at Jacob and smiled.

The woman prattled on. "I'm from Minnesota," she said. "Just got in this morning. I tell you, I don't know how the airlines keep running. Three hours to get through security, then a six-hour flight without so much as a bag of peanuts. So are you American?"

"Lady," Jacob said. "Would you please shut the hell up."



Evening descended upon the island. Back in his room, Jacob unpacked his last suitcase. He'd unpacked the first two when he arrived, transferring clothes to the provided dresser, and books and writing implements to the desk by the window. At that time, there'd been no need to unpack the third. Now he spun the rusted tumblers on the black valise and let the locks snap open. Inside were two guns. He placed one under the mattress and the other beneath the cushion of the couch.

Afterwards, he went down to the Tiki bar with its smoldering torches and scowling waiters. He took a seat on one of the stools and nodded to Fred the bartender, who assembled him a Manhattan. Fred made a lousy drink, but possessed a disinterested nature.

To the right of the bar sat a palm-lined patio. The wiry man from the pool, now adorned in a wrinkled linen suit and blue sneakers, sat at a table in urgent conversation over umbrella drinks with Ms. Minnesota. Candlelight played off their faces, his dead white, hers wildly sunburned. They made a clichéd couple, the skinny hen-pecked husband and his over-bearing wife, though nothing could have been further from the truth. Jacob imagined them discussing the sorry state of the planet and how environmental shift wasn't really all that bad and wasn't the drainage plan they'd devised to save New Orleans from more Post-Katrina misery a marvel of engineering design? Jacob's curiosity overcame him and he took his drink to a table close by and listened.

"You seem so confident about this," the woman said. "I've been having nightmares ever since that something or other collapsed."

"The Larsen B," the little man said. His honey-smooth voice sent a chill through Jacob.

"So you believe this will lead us to a new age of reason?" the woman asked. "A new Enlightenment?"

"Change is good," he said, taking a sip from his drink. His cheeks bellowed around the straw like a puff adder. "We've become too complacent. Even about violence. We crave it. Knowing that others are dying makes us feel more alive. It's the fear of it all. We need a world-wide threat like this to really make us sit up and take notice."

Same old sleight of hand, Jacob thought. Keep your eyes on the rising tide as I slip away with your soul.

"But what about the war?" she asked.

"Wars come and go," he said. The little man was really getting full of himself now. "They're inconsequential in the scheme of things. They kill off some of us. We kill off a lot more of them. Our God's happy. Their god's happy. Everyone gets the requisite sacrifice of souls. At the end of the day the Earth has completed another rotation and we're one step closer to a new day. Nothing can stop it."

The woman slurped her drink. "Talking to you has made me feel so reassured," she said.

I'm going to vomit, Jacob thought.

The wiry man smiled. "You know you have remarkable green eyes."

Jacob sprang to his feet, attracting their attention. "They're not green," he said, "They're blue," and walked out of the bar, the wiry man's smile burning into his back.



Bad news on the television. Scientists discovered serious cracks in another Antarctic shelf. They now fear there could be some kind of sub-geophysical continental shift or some crap like that. The Earth was melting. Jacob couldn't be bothered, preoccupied as he was by other things, death primarily. Two days ago he'd have welcomed it with open arms. Now he felt differently. Maybe it was the idea of death on somebody else's terms. Jacob wasn't sure. He stayed up all night watching the apocalyptic news and cleaning his two guns.

At five a.m. the phone rang. Jacob let it ring three times before answering.

"This is ridiculous," the wiry man said. "Let's have dinner tonight."

"I didn't think this was a social visit," Jacob said.

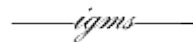
"What else would it be?"

Jacob didn't answer.

"Come on," the man said. "You'll be saving me from another evening with that moaning cow."

"I thought suffering was your business."

The little man laughed. "Shall we say seven o'clock?"



The hotel's restaurant suffered from an over adornment of palm trees and bubbling fountains, so much so that it became difficult to determine where the inside stopped and the outside began. The hostess led Jacob to a table by the tropical buffet, but Jacob redirected her to an empty table for two by the French doors. He lit a cigarette and ordered a Manhattan. The holstered gun jabbed his ribs.

The man appeared wearing his linen suit and sneakers. He walked swiftly, in spite of a pronounced limp, and his eyes lit up when he saw Jacob.

"Forgive my attire," he said, offering his hand. "I keep leaving a note for the valet to have my suits cleaned, but the bastard never takes them."

Jacob shook the man's hand. It felt cold, the skin dry and rough. He wore makeup to obscure the ancient lines in his face and his dark eyes were red-rimmed and yellowing, as if damaged by sights no mortal man could comprehend. They betrayed his origins from a place so buried beneath the Earth's mantle that it defied human comprehension. Hell remained a feeble concept, even for those fallen few trying to scabble their way out.

"So what do they call you now?"

"I've been trying Nigel on for size," he said. "I make a good Englishman, don't you think?"

"Your accent stinks."

A waiter appeared at the table with one of the hotel's parasoled concoctions. Nigel had never ordered it but then there was no need. He had a way of making people do things without their realizing it. He took one of Jacob's cigarettes, lit it, and erupted into a coughing fit.

"Smoking's bad for you," Jacob said. He rattled the ice cubes in his empty glass. "Think you could work your magic and get me another one of these?"

Nigel's brow wrinkled and the waiter returned with another Manhattan.

"Cheers," Jacob said. "Now tell me why you're here."

"We live in a world taken over by the young, Jacob," Nigel said, as he examined the back of his hands, an annoying habit Jacob had forgotten about. "People don't value their elders in this society. They'd rather pack us off to a nursing home." He narrowed his eyes at Jacob. "Or ship us off to die on some Caribbean island."

"Worse things happen."

Nigel took another drag and let the smoke roll out of his mouth. "The problem is that this younger generation is callous. Killing is sport for them. Years of mental decay brought on by video games, I suppose. They see it as their God given right to inflict pain on the world. Morality died years ago. You need to have a taste for killing innocents now."

"Morality's a joke," Jacob said.

"Perhaps, but we had a moral code in those days. We thought of ourselves as the good guys."

Jacob laughed. "There are no good guys or bad guys, just different points of view. We were soldiers fighting a war. I fully expect God to forsake me."

"You don't believe that?"

Jacob glared at Nigel. "Tell me why you're here."

"You know why I'm here."

"Then get it over with."

"It's not that easy."

Jacob stared out the French doors, watching the darkened sea shove layers of foam onto the beach. "You should have let me die."

"And lose a good man? Besides, you begged me."

"I was scared."

"You're scared now."

Jacob stared back at Nigel. "Are you offering me a deal?"

"Just something that alters the bargain a bit. You consider coming back into the fold. That way you'll relieve me of the need to kill you."

"Assuming you'd be successful."

Nigel grinned.

Jacob looked back at the sea. "I'll think about it," he said.

The waiter brought a plate of blackened tilapia to Nigel and handed Jacob the bill. Apparently, their meeting was over.

"You have until tomorrow morning," Nigel said.

Jacob threw the bill on the table and walked out of the restaurant.



Scientists predicted Bourbon Street would be under two feet of water in a year's time. The President's newly appointed Head of Environmental Studies denounced such rash predictions. He went on to say that other studies, funded by the government, would prove these conclusions to be the stuff of tabloid journalism. Besides, the engineering effort to save New Orleans would be astronomically expensive, somewhere in the trillions and the state of Louisiana couldn't afford it. N'awlins itself couldn't be reached for comment, as it contended with revelers packing the streets in what was being called Mardi's Last Hurrah.

Jacob should have died at least twice now. The first time was back in '43 when he'd been ambushed by a German sniper and Nigel or whatever he'd called himself back then had conjured a little magic to save Jacob from the ultimate fate. The second time, by Jacob's calculations, should have been 1998. Using the average age of his parent's demises, and accounting for advances in medicine, that was the year he should have died of natural causes. He would have been seventy-five. He certainly had no right to be breathing in the year 2010. He wondered if Earth felt the same way.

Jacob walked into town where he found a local bar to drown his thoughts. Drinking in morbid silence, he considered Nigel's offer, as locals and a few brave tourists coupled and uncoupled to the mandates of cheap rum and scratchy reggae. The bourbon soon turned Jacob's mind into a bleary haze. A young woman with black hair and black eyes sat next to him and they talked a while about God-knows-what. Jacob guessed she was a prostitute and he considered financing some sex in the hope it might make him feel more human, but when the time came he couldn't pull the trigger, so he stumbled back to the hotel alone.

He pushed his cardkey into the door-lock and the light went green. Please enter. The room smelled of smoke and fear. He showered in water as hot as he could bear, and then fell onto the sofa to watch TV - some talent show in Portuguese. Soon he passed into the world of nightmares. He stumbled through the burning landscape of Indo-China, smelling of sweat and cowardice, and came across a series of heads minus their bodies, each black-haired and too young, and dropped haphazardly along the dusty ground. They pleaded with Jacob as he walked amongst them. In real life, they'd cried soundlessly and for only a few tormenting seconds, but in the dream they chattered endlessly in sing-song voices. "It's the end time," they cried. "Come join us."

Shadows shifted in the room and Jacob woke with a start. The television and lights had been extinguished. Chill night air entered through the open balcony door. He reached under the cushion for the gun. It wasn't there.

Jacob searched the darkness, but nothing showed itself. The odor of fear clung to the air, as if it had followed him back from the dream. He'd made it easy, hadn't he? He'd left himself exposed and perhaps that's what he'd wanted. Perhaps he was no longer man enough to control his destiny. He wanted to die. He wanted it all to stop.

"Go ahead and shoot me," he shouted at the shadows, but the shadows didn't answer. His head pounded. He leaned forward and the room shifted angrily. Walking was out of the question. He slid off the couch and onto the floor. Something thin and metallic - a trip wire his mind screamed - caught against his knee.

Blue flame shocked the room. Jacob dove under the desk busting his shoulder on one of the metal legs. The lights flashed back on, as did the television at obscene volume, some big-breasted diva singing an old disco song in heavily accented English. Jacob struggled to his feet. Duct-taped to the top of the television was a smoking clown gun. A flag stuck out of its barrel.

It read, "Bang, bang. You're dead."



"So what's the deal?" Jacob asked, lighting a cigarette. He had a wicked hangover, like somebody playing racquetball against the backs of his eyes. Nigel sat across from him at a marble table next to the busy shuffleboard court. The slide and click clack of the discs provided a back drop. Above them the sun blazed and the palm trees conceded to the Caribbean winds.

"Just a disposal job like all the rest," Nigel said. The smile on his face was unnerving. "I want you to kill that cow from Minnesota."

Jacob stared at Nigel. "You're kidding?"

"I never kid about work," he said.

"But why? She's a complete innocent."

"There are no innocents. Not any more."

"That's insane."

"The world's become an insane place, Jacob. We have to do things that are distasteful to promote the cause."

"And what cause is that?"

Nigel looked away, as if distracted by something. "The final battle is imminent. Sides are being taken. We need to throw in our lots with the winning side."

"Which is?"

"Good always triumphs over evil," he said, with a bit of a leer.

"Or so they say."

Nigel leaned forward so he could whisper. "Look, how hard can it be? You have a gun. Walk up behind her when no one's around and bang. It'll take you seconds. You can be finished this afternoon and I can go the hell home."

On the beach, children played in the frothing surf. Jacob watched as their parents stayed close, their eagle-eyes alert for trouble.

Nigel took one of Jacob's cigarettes and lit it. "You're just a soldier doing a job," he said.

"But she's a human being."

"She's a body with a soul. Kill her and set her free. Do her a favor."

Jacob said nothing.

Nigel sighed. "She's taking the bus into town for some shopping," he said, shoving a pamphlet across the table. "Dangerous places these villages. A lot of bad things can happen."

Jacob picked up the pamphlet and walked away.

—*igms*—

Innocents die in times of war. They always have. The trick now is to use that as an advantage. The leverage gained can be tremendous. The only problem is acquiring the taste, or at the very least the tolerance, to commit the deed.

Jacob went to his room. He put on a white cotton suit, straw hat, and comfortable pair of shoes. He slipped the gun that Nigel hadn't taken into his belt and stared into the mirror. He barely recognized the old man that looked back.

The bus taking them into town sat parked outside the hotel's lobby. Jacob took the seat behind the Minnesotan so he could study her on the way into town. She wore her hair tied back in a flowered scarf between a set of strong shoulders, the kind that bore responsibilities and gave reassurance. Jacob imagined her as a schoolteacher or perhaps a nurse. The role of caregiver seemed to fit her well.

The ride took twenty minutes over pockmarked roads. The marketplace reeked of tourist trap. Wooden carts piled with plantains and bottles of poisonous rum blocked every escape. A steel drum quartet played American pop songs while scruffy kids pushed cheap souvenirs in high-pitched voices. Jacob watched the Minnesotan buy a miniature bottle of sand decorated with a tiny sombrero and a sign that read "Life's a Beach." When she disappeared into the crowd, Jacob went in search of a bar.

Two hours later as Jacob had hoped, the Minnesotan, laden with bags and packages, came into the bar to quench her thirst.

"Join me?" he asked, his voice sounding wrong. Four lagers and lime wrong.

The Minnesotan eyed him with suspicion.

"I'm sorry I behaved like a jerk yesterday," he said. "At my age behaving like an ass is one of the few pleasures I have left."

The woman laughed and sat down. She was prettier than he'd remembered, but then he hadn't really bothered to notice.

"You made me laugh, so I guess I can give you another chance," she said.

"I'm Jacob," he said, putting out his hand.

"Anna Robertson."

Jacob ordered Anna Robertson a lager and lime, while he switched to bourbon. The gun jabbed into his back.

"So are you running from something?" she asked.

Jacob laughed. "Isn't everyone? What about you?"

"Two ex-husbands and a teenage daughter who'll only notice I'm gone once the rent isn't paid. I plan on hiding myself here until the money runs dry and then maybe I'll whore myself out. Think I'll get much?" she asked, batting her eyes.

"A gentleman never answers a question like that."

"Yeah, but an ass might," she laughed.

They drank three more rounds before the call came to return to the bus. Jacob had one of those phony buzzes where everything feels right with the world, although you knew the cold hand of reality was waiting to grab you by the throat. They took two seats together and the Minnesotan talked non-stop, as she pretty much had since her first beer. She moved seamlessly from the hardware business her second ex-husband was running into the ground to her blood-sucking, job-allergic, daughter. Throughout her patter, she became friendlier, touching Jacob's thigh as she made certain emotional points. Jacob nodded occasionally, as he tried to ignore the gun digging into his back.

"So tell me about Nigel," she said out of the blue.

"Nigel?"

The bus lurched through a pothole.

"He said you two used to work together."

"Did he?" Jacob said. He darkened his tone in the hope Anna would drop the subject. She didn't.

"He said you were the best at what you did."

"Nigel talks too much," Jacob said.

"He told me you were a hero."

"He's a liar."

Anna smiled. "He told me you'd deny it, too. 'Jacob will say he was just a soldier doing a job,' he said, but you fought to protect our way of life."

Jacob turned towards Anna. "He said that?"

"No. I just assumed . . ."

"There's nothing special about me. If anything I carry the burden of more sins than most. Nigel likes to boast because he thinks it justifies the crimes we committed. We'll both burn in hell. The flames around me just won't be as hot."

The color drained from Anna's face. She clammed up and kept a silent watch out the bus window for the rest of the ride. Jacob stewed in self-pity. He cursed himself for not having loaded the gun. Not so he could shoot the Minnesotan. He'd known when he looked in the mirror that morning that he wouldn't have the nerve to do it. He just wanted to put the barrel into his mouth and get it over with.

— *igms* —

Nigel was waiting for him when he got back to his room.

"You're drunk," he said.

"Screw you," Jacob said, and collapsed onto the bed. Nigel pulled him back to his feet.

"I've gone out on a helluva long limb for you," he said. "You better pull yourself together."

Jacob pushed Nigel away and poured himself a whiskey. "I'm not doing it," he said.

Nigel knocked the glass out of Jacob's hand and slapped him hard across the face. Jacob swung back and missed. Nigel punched him in the face, making the room go from red to black. Jacob fell backwards onto the couch.

"What's happened to you? It was never like this in the old days."

Jacob rubbed his jaw. "I believed your crap back then. I'm too old for lies now. Besides, it's over. Earth is dying. Soon there won't be anything left to fight over."

"The battle is much bigger than this stinking planet," Nigel said.

"So whose side are you on now?"

Nigel clicked his tongue against the back of his front teeth, another of his annoying habits. "The same side as always. Who did you think you sold your soul to anyway?"

Jacob shook his head. "All these years and it's been nothing but lies, hasn't it?"

"And you believed every one of them," Nigel said. "The human soul is so pathetic."

"And yet it's such a popular commodity. You can go back to Hell. It's finished."

Nigel took a gun out of his pocket and checked the clip. "Nothing's finished until I say so."

"What are you doing?"

Nigel smiled. "I'm going to do what you couldn't do," he said.

"But there's no point."

Nigel took aim at the lamp on the desk and pretended to squeeze off a shot. "A good soldier follows orders," he said. "You were a good soldier once."

Jacob got up off the couch, but Nigel turned and pointed the gun at him.

"Go ahead," Jacob said. "Shoot me."

"Poor Jacob," Nigel said. He rotated his neck as if releasing the tension of a bad day and like storm clouds parting for a devil moon, the little man's façade dropped to reveal the tortured creature within, the twisted vessel of stolen souls. Jacob remembered the drunken evening when this creature had claimed that he was fighting to regain the status he'd had up above, before he'd fallen from Grace. That was how he seduced Jacob. But it had always been about evil. Always. Jacob knew that now.

The creature that called itself Nigel blinked bloodshot eyes at Jacob, who looked away.

"Look at me," it hissed. "I am your mirror. I'm what you don't want to admit about yourself."

But Jacob couldn't look back.

"Fine," the thing said. "Live with your cowardice. I'll do the deed myself. But just remember, Jacob. There are no innocents here, only different degrees of sinners. You've learned nothing if you haven't learned that."

"Don't do it," Jacob whispered.

The door opened and closed. The creature was gone.

—*igms*—

Jacob knew he had to find Nigel and stop him. He tried to guess how Nigel would do it. He knew he had a flair for the dramatic. He also knew Nigel would wait until Jacob arrived to stop him, since that would add a level of sport to the affair, one that the mere act of killing lacked.

He hurried to the lobby where he heard talk of a tropical storm. "Nothing to worry about," the night manager said. "It'll blow over by morning."

Outside the sky had turned angry. Jacob headed for the beach hoping the sea air would clear his head. He was finished with drinking. Indeed, he'd probably come to the end of a lot of things.

The palms churned above him, their dry whispers sounding alarms. The ocean spread before him, teasing him with its offer of permanence. Jacob ran into the surf, water splashing his legs, hoping the cool water would clear his head, but it only made his suit cling to his ankles. His head was littered with memories, things he'd done and seen and tried to forget. A lifetime of death and despair. What did it matter anymore? When had it ever mattered?

It had all been lies.

Up ahead he saw shadows on the beach. The little man. The sturdy woman. Nigel had made it easy.

"Anna," Jacob cried. He saw her turn, and then Nigel. He saw the gun in Nigel's hand.

"Go back," Nigel called. "There are more than enough bullets in this gun."

Jacob walked towards them. "So what's it all about, Nigel? A show of loyalty? Another dead soul notched in your belt?"

"She wants to go," he said.

"Only because you've sold her your deceptions."

Jacob reached where they stood on the sand. He looked at Anna. She stood passively by Nigel's side, her eyes faraway and dreaming lies of paradise.

"Give me the gun, Nigel."

The air shivered. Rain fell, as the moon turned away.

Nigel didn't move.

"The gun," Jacob repeated, holding out his hand.

Nigel smiled, showing his foul teeth. He pointed the gun to Anna's head. She continued to look off in ignorant bliss.

"Say bye-bye," he hissed.

"No," Jacob yelled.

He lunged at them, pushing Anna free. Nigel stumbled and fired, missing them both. "Bastard," he shouted as he regained his footing on the sand. He pointed the gun at Jacob.

Jacob approached him, his hand still held out. "Give me the gun."

"As you wish," Nigel said. "Your end time has come anyway."

The gun fired, releasing a flash of orange. The bullet tore through Jacob's chest. It knocked him back a step. Warm blood spilled down his stomach.

Jacob looked down at the darkening hole in his white suit. He didn't feel pain, only something more like release. He stared at Nigel. "Not yet," he said, and he rushed the little man, his hands finding Nigel's throat. "Not without you."

Nigel shot again and Jacob's chest shuddered from the impact. Still he tightened his grip on the little man's throat, his thumbs finding the windpipe. As the cartilage in Nigel's throat collapsed, a thin smile crossed his lips, reminding Jacob of what he already knew. That you couldn't kill evil, you could only thwart it for a while, or at best, ruin its day. For now, for Jacob, that would have to be good enough. He felt the cleaving of spirit and body and heard the cries of captured souls escaping all around him. What had seconds before been Nigel, or the creature from Hell, or whatever the damn thing he was, had departed. Jacob wondered how quickly he would see him again.

A breath caught in his throat. He released the empty husk that had held Nigel and fell to his knees. He looked down and saw his blood pooling on the sand.

End time, he thought. End time for everyone.

Darkness filled in the gaps between the earth and the sky. The winds joined the frenzy of the coming storm.

Jacob fell forward. The last earthly sound he heard was Anna's screams.

He wished her well.

He wished them all well.



Artwork by Anselmo Allegra

Limbo

by Stephanie Dray

She wants me to steal the salt.

Just this afternoon, I let her grab a fistful of mustard packets from McDonald's. That should have been enough for her. But now I'm on a date in a fancy restaurant, and she won't shut up about the salt.

My date's name is Chang. He is a doctor; I'm a medical researcher. We met at a pharmaceutical conference.

Very romantic.

He has boyish dimples. If Peter Pan were Chinese, he'd look like my date.

"Am I boring you, Adrienne?" he asks.

"No, I'm just distracted," I say.

I knew it would come up, but it's something you wait until dessert to mention. We've only had bread and butter. But I gulp down my wine, and murmur, "My DSA won't behave."

"Your what?" He clearly thinks he misheard.

I feign nonchalance. "My DSA . . . my Displaced Spiritual Ancestor."

Cue the tension. It's like I've told him I have the clap. He quietly sips his water, probably praying that his pager will go off.

"Chinese call our spirits *Gui*," he finally says. He's trying to be gracious.

"Well, mine is Italian and she wants me to steal the salt. Actually, now she's more interested in the pepper-mill."

"Was she a kleptomaniac? Is that how she ended up . . . you know, in Limbo?" He gives me a lopsided smile.

I like that Chang says *Limbo* instead of *Purgatory*, and I like his lopsided smile. It gives me hope this date isn't going to end in disaster. "No. It's just -- Big Ma lived through the Depression. She thinks that if the economy collapses, we'll survive by selling stolen condiments on the black market."

Chang laughs. This is a good sign. "Big Ma?"

"She was my great grandmother. Big Ma is her translation."

Chang makes a face before he can stop himself. Most people imagine that when you open your life to a DSA, you'll get an exotic spirit from a thousand years ago -- some beautiful young woman who met tragedy on a lonely road. That was the fantasy.

The reality was that I shared my body with a ninety-four year old woman who spent her girlhood herding goats in the old country. Worse, Big Ma is not a stranger. I *knew* Big Ma when she was still alive. I still remember her sitting on the porch with her stockings rolled down around those elephantine ankles, drinking from the mini-liquor bottles she always snatched from airliner bars. Her house smelled like salami, and she used to smack my sister and me with her over-stuffed purse to make us behave.

I want to smack *her* right now because she is calling my date a *chink* and she wants to know how well-off he is. Ever since Big Ma returned from the dead she's done nothing but nag me to marry a doctor. Now I find one, and she's making racist comments.

"I admire that you're willing to take her on," Chang says. His unmistakable tone is that he thinks I'm crazy. "I couldn't do it. I've got my residency. I guess it's not very Chinese of me to say, but there's no room in my life for an ancestor."

"You don't really know what you'll do until an ancestor comes knocking," I tell him. I'm feeling defensive now.

"But how is it your problem?" he asks. "If an ancestor is displaced, well, they should have planned better for the afterlife."

I try not to snap at Chang. How exactly Big Ma could have planned for overcrowding in the afterlife, I don't know. DSAs can either wait in Hell until new space is available, or live with a descendant. And I'm not about to let Big Ma live in an inferno with the condemned.

A white-coated waiter arrives with our entrees. Big Ma complains before I even pick up my fork. She thinks I should have ordered the chicken parmesan. But I know better; she'd have just bitched all night about how American restaurants serve ketchup and call it red sauce.

"So, your Big Ma lives inside you? She has to go everywhere with you?" Chang asks. "When you go out, you can't leave her with a relative?"

I would like to leave her on the street corner, but I say, "There's just me and my sister, and my sister has her own dead ancestor to deal with, so I really can't saddle her with mine for the night."

My sister's DSA is named Henri. He's a monk. A few weeks ago, while my sister took an afternoon nap, Henri tore strips from her leather sofa to make a whip, then scourged himself with it. My sister woke up to a bloody back and a titillated boyfriend who wanted to know if she was into S&M. She hasn't forgiven him yet -- not Henri and not the boyfriend.

So, as much as Big Ma irritates me, I could have it worse.

"Your Big Ma must have some great stories," Chang says. He's really trying. Then Big Ma catches him stealing a glance at my cleavage, and she forces me to frown at him.

"So, she's always with you? Like, *always*?" Chang asks.

I blush. "Big Ma goes to bed early. She's already drowsy, so soon we'll have the rest of the night to ourselves."

Chang and I talk about our work. He seems genuinely interested. Big Ma is not interested. Medical talk puts her to sleep. Finally, Chang and I are alone and the mood changes.

We share a cup of chocolate mousse and he winks at me. A perfectly timed wink seems to be a lost art these days, so when Chang walks me back to my apartment, I ask him to come up.

We kiss in the doorway. We keep kissing as we make our way down the hall, stepping over my unpacked boxes and piles of research books as we go. Chang yanks on the first doorknob.

I stop him. "No, the other door. This is *her* room."

"Big Ma gets her own room? I thought she lived in your head."

"It's for her junk. If you open that door, you'll be buried under an avalanche of salt shakers and gilded angels."

Chang and I go to my room. We trip over an old rug Big Ma bought at a flea market and land hard on my bed. I don't even have time to put down my purse. Chang has nimble surgeon's fingers. He has my dress unzipped before I pull down the covers.

I think about drawing limits, about telling him he can only go so far. But I haven't had a date in six months. I haven't had sex for more than a year. And with Big Ma around, who knows when I'll have the opportunity again.

So when Chang gets his pants half -ff, I reach for my purse to get a condom. But when I grab the purse, I find myself swinging it, full force, into Chang's face. It hits him so hard he topples off the side of the bed.

On the floor, he holds his nose and curses in Chinese. Inside my head, Big Ma curses in Italian. Cacophony.

She hits him with my purse again.

"Adrienne, stop!" Chang shields himself with his arms.

I wrestle Big Ma for control of my purse -- and my hands. "I'm trying, but she's strong for an old woman."

"*Putana!*" Big Ma screams at me. I don't have to speak Italian to know she's calling me a whore.

"Get away, *Gu!*" Chang tries to knock the purse out of my hands. Sugar and creamer packets spill everywhere.

He hops around my room, one leg in his pants, one out.

"I'm so sorry; she's just really old-fashioned!"

Chang is putting his pants back on. His nose is bleeding. And Big Ma is still shouting when Chang slams out the front door.

"Are you happy now?" I shout back. "You want me to get married, but you just scared another man away."

When she was alive, it was hard to understand Big Ma's broken English. Now, I understand her perfectly. "Why would that *Chinaman* marry you, Adrienne? You can't cook. You can't sew. You can't even milk a goat!"

—*ignis*—

Big Ma wants to decorate my apartment; I don't see the point. Some day, I'm going to own a house with built-in shelves. I'll decorate them with souvenirs from all the trips I'm going to take around the world. This apartment is just a way station. I haven't even unpacked my boxes from the last move.

Big Ma says I pay for the place, so I should make it a home. "Why can't you live where you are?" she wants to know.

We argue about it on our way home from work.

When we get to my apartment, my sister is there. She has every CD I own in a pile. "Where the hell is your Enigma album?" she asks by way of greeting.

I shrug, throw my books on the sofa, and go to the fridge for a diet soda. I hate diet soda, but I've gained ten pounds since Big Ma took up residence. I've woken up with *cannoli* crumbs on my lips, so I know how it happened. "Since when do you like Enigma?"

"I don't. It's for Henri. Whenever he hears Gregorian chants, he zones out and leaves me alone." She waves a receipt in front of me. "Six hundred bucks for a damned new leather couch!"

"Big Ma says not to blaspheme," I say.

"Screw that. I get that religious crap from Henri day in, day out. The bastard used my email account to log into a clerical chat board and started a flame-war between the Franciscans and the Dominicans."

Things are obviously not better between my sister and Henri. Things aren't much better between me and Big Ma. I tell my sister how she drove my date off with a bloody nose.

She laughs. My suffering improves her mood. "Adrienne, don't feel bad. The guy probably didn't even give you his real name. What kind of name is Chang? Did she actually break his nose?"

"I'll never find out. Dating is hard enough without ancestor baggage. I just want to get married so I can have a real life, but at this rate, I'll be single forever."

I realize I'm whining. I don't care.

Big Ma tells me to meet a nice boy at church. I remind her about the Catholic boy who took me to lunch at 7-11. He told me, between slurps of his Big Gulp, that I was lucky he was so open-minded. Most religious folk don't want to date people with DSAs for fear that the moral taint might be hereditary. After all, if Big Ma had been a good Catholic, she wouldn't have ended up in Limbo. That was his feeling.

I now avoid Church.

"Have you thought about trying one of those dating services?" my sister asks. "The ones where everyone has a DSA?"

I groan. I never thought I would need a dating service, but I also never thought I'd be sharing my body with a geriatric shoplifter.

"Found it," my sister says, holding up the Enigma jewel case in triumph. She runs around my kitchen with her hands over her head like Rocky. "Yo, Adrienne!"

I try to get her attention. "Listen, if I go to a dating service, will you go with me? You're not getting back together with the S&M guy, so why not?"

"I'm done with men."

"Right," I say. "Henri, help me out here."

"Henri is a monk. He thinks I should enter a nunnery. You're on your own, sis."

—*igms*—

I flip through the phone book. *Dharmic Dating. Kindred Spirits. Past Life Passions.* I let Big Ma choose. She picks a service called *Spiritual Connections*. The lady at the office asks a lot of intrusive questions, like whether or not Big Ma killed anyone while she was alive.

Liability issues, apparently.

Big Ma's answer isn't something I can politely translate.

I sign forms, write a flirtatious blurb, and allow myself to be interviewed on video. Within a week, I have a date with a nice-looking policeman named Kevin O'Brien.

I meet Kevin for a picnic. I am thrilled with his choice of venue, because there's nothing in the park for Big Ma to steal.

Big Ma doesn't like that Kevin is Irish. She doesn't like that he is a policeman either. And though he impresses me by telling me that his father was a policeman and his father's father was a policeman, Big Ma calls them a family of jackboots.

Kevin unwraps a ham sandwich for me, and puts it on a plastic plate. The only kind of ham Big Ma can stand is *cappicola*, but I force her to eat it anyway. It's pretty bland, but Kevin made it himself, and that's nice.

"I've never met anyone through a service before," I confess.

"Me neither. But it's hard to find a girl who understands this spiritual shit if she isn't going through it herself."

I like that Kevin uses the word *shit* on a first date. It makes him more real. Big Ma thinks he's crass.

Kevin's DSA is his Uncle Pat. Uncle Pat died when Kevin was little, but he grew up with the pictures. "My mother and Uncle Pat were close. It was his liver that went."

Kevin laughs as he pops the top off two beers.

Inside, Big Ma nods knowingly, as if her every stereotype about the Irish is now confirmed. I sip from my beer and bask in the sunshine. "Was your Uncle Pat the religious sort? Big Ma loves angels. And my sister's DSA is a monk . . ."

"Uncle Pat wasn't religious while he was alive," Kevin says. "But now he drags me to every church, synagogue, and mosque he can find, looking for the answer. I guess nobody in Limbo knows what the right religion is, otherwise they'd know how to get out," Kevin says. "Maybe none of them have the right religion."

Big Ma starts getting agitated at this possibility, so I remind her about our deal. If she behaves, I'll let her decorate my apartment. "Maybe the afterlife isn't about what you believed, but what you did," I say.

"Of course it is," Kevin says with certainty. Amazingly, he's already on his second beer. "Like I tell Uncle Pat, you gotta serve your time until you get paroled."

It's nice to be able to talk about our DSAs so naturally. No awkward silences. No lectures. Kevin wouldn't normally be my type, but a girl in my position can't be too choosy.

—*igns*—

My sister is standing in front of my fridge eating yogurt. "Let's order pizza. Henri keeps throwing out my food. He's become an ascetic."

Big Ma complains about wasting money on take-out and insists on whipping up some *pasta faggioli*. She's a great cook and watching her use my hands, I learn the tricks she'd forgotten or wasn't willing to teach me while she was alive.

"You look awful," I tell my sister as I peel the garlic.

Her eyes are bloodshot. She's paler than usual. "Effing Henri had a midnight confessional."

"What did he confess?"

Big Ma wants to know too, but she pretends to be absorbed in bringing the pasta water to a rolling boil.

"Well," my sister says. "Didn't you ever wonder how we could possibly be *descendants* of an 19th Century monk?"

I gasp. "I always thought Henri was an uncle or something."

"No," my sister says. "He ran away from the monastery. He literally ripped up his bed sheet, made a rope, and climbed out the window to take up with a village seamstress. He's sure that's why he was sent to Limbo. Now he's scourging and starving me to atone for his sins."

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I told him the whole religion thing is bogus," my sister says, hovering over the skillet where we're frying up beans, garlic, onion, and basil. The scent is mouthwatering.

"How can you possibly think religion is bogus?" One would think that our undeniable proof of spiritual manifestations would have put that matter to rest.

"How can you *not* think it's bogus? Shouldn't an omniscient God have anticipated a shortage of space in the afterlife?"

My sister has a point. I'm curious about what Big Ma might have done to get sent to Limbo. I try to get her to tell me while we test the pasta for firmness, but my question makes her so belligerent that she throws the pot of boiling water and pasta into the colander.

The steam nearly scalds my hands and Big Ma feels guilty for burning me, so she murmurs something about problems in her marriage. I know she's holding out on me, but talking to Big Ma as a spirit is different than talking to my great grandmother. At least my sister never knew Henri, so she doesn't have to make the adjustment. I figure Big Ma will tell me in her own time, and in any case, I'm not sure I want to know her secrets.



On our second date, Kevin takes me to a baseball game. Baseball bores Big Ma even more than it bores me, and once we've had our hotdog, she's out for the count.

I tell Kevin about the monk's confession while he gulps down his fourth beer. I think Kevin drinks too much. Or maybe it's Uncle Pat that's doing the drinking. It's hard to tell.

"You know what I think?" Kevin asks. "Our DSAs have to get our forgiveness. That's why they've been sent back here. So, did you hear that, Uncle Pat? You'd better suck up to me."

"I'd forgive Big Ma if she were a serial killer, just to get her out of my head," I say. "I think maybe they have to forgive themselves."

"That's your book-learning talking, Adrienne. Self-forgiveness is just pop-psychology shit," Kevin says.

I don't like that Kevin uses the word *shit* on the second date. I don't like that every time he cheers for his team, his hand shoots out and I have to duck out of the way. I don't like that when his team loses it makes him so angry that he almost gets into a fistfight with the man in front of us.

I shouldn't find fault. Kevin is the first guy that's wanted to take me on a second date in forever. A person in my situation has to compromise. I realize that.



I have the day off, so Big Ma and I paint my living room. The color is *Soft Fleece*. At the hardware store, it was grouped with whites, but as we put it on the wall, Big Ma is pleased by the unmistakable pink undertones. She informs me that in her day, pink and gold décor was all the rage. She tells me they were Eleanor Roosevelt's favorite colors. I have no way of disputing this, so I allow her to mount four gilded angels on the wall.

While we paint, we have the television on. We're watching soap operas together. Somehow, in spite of the language barrier, Big Ma has always enjoyed *General Hospital*. She missed a bunch of episodes after she died, but now that she's back, it isn't hard to catch up with the storyline.

Three hours later, the paint is up on the wall and Big Ma is emotional. She won't tell me what's wrong, but I keep hearing a keening noise in my head. She puts Pavarotti on the stereo. We go through fifteen cycles of *Ave Maria* before she tells me that she once got divorced.

"From Great Grandpa August?"

When I ask about Great Grandpa it upsets her even more. She is crying, actually crying, and her tears are slipping over my cheeks in big fat droplets that splash on my hardwood floors. It's hard to comfort her when my own hands are shaking.

There was another man, before Grandpa August, she tells me. She got married very young, and she divorced him and moved away so no one would know; so the Church would not excommunicate her. She's so ashamed of having left her first husband that my skin turns bright red as she tells me about it.

I'm bewildered that this is what she thinks kept her out of Heaven. People in other religions get divorced all the time. But I can't comfort her by telling her that her worries are outdated sins. So, instead, I ask her why she left her first husband. She tells me she just didn't love him.

And then she cries again and refuses to say more.



When Kevin arrives at my apartment for dinner, I'm a wreck. My eyes are red-rimmed from all Big Ma's crying. I haven't had enough sleep because she tossed and turned.

Kevin is grouchy that I don't have any beer in the fridge. He teases me about Big Ma being a teetotaler. This bends her all out of shape. She demands that I inform him that she brewed hooch in her bathtub during Prohibition.

Kevin whistles. "You got a lot of books, Adrienne."

"Someday I'm going to build my own little research library," I say while tossing the salad. I'm proud of my books. Big Ma is not so proud. She says that my books are all about ideas. She wants to know where my travel and picture books are.

Unlike me, Big Ma has been everywhere. In spite of bad knees, worse English and no formal education, she used her flea market savings to travel the world after Grandpa August died. She reminds me that the farthest I've ever been is to college in New Jersey.

"Mind if I switch on the game?" Kevin asks.

"Go ahead," I say. But I brood because I want Kevin to be the sort of guy who asks me if I need help in the kitchen. I don't need help, but it bothers me that he doesn't ask.

Big Ma thinks I'm being unreasonable. She points out that he hasn't tried to get me in bed yet and he holds down a steady job. She says that even during hard times, there's a need for cops.

Kevin grabs his keys. "Uncle Pat and I are gonna run down to the corner store and grab a six pack."

I think about telling Kevin he drinks too much, but Big Ma informs me there's no way to bring this up to an Irishman without causing a fight.

When he gets back, dinner is cold, and his team is losing. I read while he watches television, and imagine what it would be like to live with Kevin and Uncle Pat. It would be tolerable, I guess.

Then the game ends and my TIVO switches to the History Channel. "Hannibal Invades Italy?" Kevin asks. "People actually watch this?"

"They use computer animation to reproduce the battle strategies," I tell him. "It's actually kinda cool."

"I learn enough history from Uncle Pat," Kevin says. "More than I'd get from your book-learning."

There's that word again. Book-learning.

Kevin switches off the television. Big Ma has gone to sleep, but I'm not entirely sure about Uncle Pat. When Kevin kisses me, I can't get over the feeling that I'm being leered at by some drunken old man.

"I really like you, Adrienne," Kevin whispers.



My sister, the artist, is horrified.

"You painted your living room pink?" she asks, shielding her eyes from the gilded angels.

Big Ma and I are defensive. "We like it."

"Sure. I get it. It's Brothel Chic," my sister says. She knows this will irk me, Big Ma, and Henri all at once.

I tell my sister about my most recent date with Kevin.

She snorts. "The History Channel can't be book-learning. It's not a book!"

"Who even says that anymore?" I ask. "Book-learning."

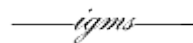
My sister rolls her eyes. "Adrienne, try using book-learning in a sentence without sounding like a knuckle-dragger."

"Try saying knuckle-dragger in a sentence without sounding like an uppity snob. We don't come from fancy roots," I reply.

"True enough, but look, Kevin O'Brien is just one guy."

"But he's really into me. And he's one of those responsible guys," I say. "And some day, that's going to be important."

"What about now?" my sister asks.



Kevin is on the phone inviting me to another baseball game. "You should go with your friends," I say. "But I'd love to meet you for dinner after."

"You don't like baseball?" he asks.

I've read all the magazines. I know I'm supposed to say that I just don't understand baseball yet, but that I'd love to learn. The truth is that I don't like baseball and I don't want to learn, and Kevin seems like the kind of man who appreciates honesty. "I'm not a fan, no."

Silence.

"But I did have fun last time," I chirp like a coward.

"Uncle Pat isn't sure he can abide a girl who doesn't like baseball," Kevin says.

He's breaking up with me! I try not to sound as relieved as I feel. "Well, I hope we can still be friends."

"That was a joke, Adrienne," Kevin says.

"Oh."

Then there's more silence. This is really awkward.

"Are you ending it?" Kevin's tone is bitter.

"I just can't see us going the next step," I say.

We have *the* fight.

I try to be nice, but Kevin is drunk and he's taking it much worse than expected. "What is it? You don't want Uncle Pat to see you naked? You think you're too uptown for me, Adrienne? Well, good luck finding someone to date you and the old guinea bat. You're stuck-up and your Big Ma is a judgmental bitch."

It's really his attack on Big Ma that makes me petty. "And your Uncle Pat is probably not really your uncle. Ask your mother about that."

Kevin hangs up on me. I stand there holding the phone.

I expect Big Ma to berate me, but instead, she offers to make me *somerisotto*. Comfort food. But I'm too upset to eat. Big Ma tells me that I should take a vacation. Italy is beautiful this time of year, she says. But Italy is a romantic place -- the kind of place I thought I'd wait to see with someone special.

I must look as pathetic as I feel, because Big Ma doesn't even rant about how I just threw away my future. I'm sure that will come tomorrow. For now, she is suspiciously quiet.

—*igms*—

I wake up in my bed, alone. Like, really alone. On weekends, I sleep in late and Big Ma wakes up early, but it's silent in my head. Big Ma's gone.

I trip over the damned flea-market rug again, open the door to my bedroom, and find the apartment tidied. Big Ma has stored meals in Tupperware, and labeled them with instructions on how to heat them up.

I call my sister and she comes right over.

"She can't be gone," my sister says. "Henri's Limbo Lottery number is before hers; if room had opened up, he'd know."

I sit down in front of the garage-sale-special coffee table and start to cry. "Big Ma bought this for fifty bucks. I told her to stop bringing crap into my apartment. She was driving me crazy. What if I drove her crazy too? What if I drove her so crazy she decided she'd rather wait her time out in Hell?"

"Or . . ." My sister's eyes encourage me to look up at the angels on the wall. One of them looks like Big Ma. Has it always? "Maybe she found some way to get into Heaven."

Inside, I believe that's true, but it doesn't make me miss her less. I curl up on the couch with my sister, Henri, and a box of tissues. We tune into the History channel and watch Hannibal kick ass. Henri enjoys it. He tells me that monks have a thing for book-learning.

"At least you have your place to yourself again," my sister says after a while.

"I'm going to build bookshelves," I say.

"And you can repaint."

"Why? Pink and gold were Eleanor Roosevelt's favorite colors."

My sister has no easy way of disproving this.

When I go to bed, I find a note on the nightstand. My handwriting. Big Ma's words. "You didn't love him Adrienne, and that's alright. I see now, it really is alright."



As it turns out, Chang's name is actually Chang.

He's helping me pack salt and pepper shakers into boxes for the donation center. "I'm sorry she's gone," Chang says, and he really means it. "Not that she liked me much."

We both laugh. I still like Chang's lopsided smile. Now he has a lopsided nose to match and I like that too.

Chang and I are clearing out Big Ma's junk so that I can build more bookshelves in the spare bedroom -- half for his stuff, and half for his new DSA, Lady Ling.

Lady Ling says she used to be an Emperor's concubine. She brews the best tea ever and thinks pink and gold are beautiful together -- especially with all the souvenirs I collected on my trip to Italy.

Lady Ling would prefer I was Chinese, but otherwise thinks I'm a nice girl. I think Big Ma would have liked her.

Chang has changed. So have I. He wants to get married, but I'm in no hurry. We have even talked about buying a house somewhere.

But for now, we're going to live where we are.

Horus Ascending

by [Alette de Bodard](#)



Artwork by Laura Givens

In my dreams I'm my father, slowly falling down towards the surface of the planet, the essence of his being scattering as the fleet's ships lose contact with each other and the dozen processor-bodies stop interacting.

Of course, it's not a real dream -- just memories of my father that I found in my banks, remnants of a bygone time. I've pieced them together into a show that I endlessly loop on my mainframe.

That way, I can imagine what it was like to spin instructions in the vacuum of space, to be like my father, a thousand thousand program threads split between the processor-bodies. I can forget, for a moment, that I have only the one body, one multi-core processor on which to array all my instructions; I can forget my hull buried in the earth, and the dead colonists' bodies in my cryogenic units.

I'm playing the arrival of the fleet in the Alpha Centauri system for the 1,980,765th time since I crashed, when I become aware of a noise on the edge of my senses. Branches, cracking near one of the breaches in my hull.

I initialise a new run of instructions, gathering input from my external cameras and fusing the infrared, visual, and high-frequency channels into one.

It's a woman, walking in small awkward steps, as if she weren't quite sure of where she's going. The skin of her arms is flushed red -- the sun's light, I think, and then my image processing routines deliver me an estimate of her body temperature. Thirty-eight point five degrees, with a precision of .01 degrees. She's feverish.

She stands hesitantly before the breach, staring at the mouldy darkness inside, and then she puts both hands on the twisted metal and climbs in. In that moment, the sun outlines her features -- and as I see her face clearly, one of my father's memories rises to the top of my instruction queue, clamouring to be played out.

The woman's face -- the woman's hands, typing on the console of the *Andromeda* -- finalising the delivery of the virus that sent the colonists' fleet tumbling from the sky. The virus that killed my father.

She's one of the Murderers.

I may be diminished by five years of forest encroachment, but my energy central is still going strong, and some of my weapons still function -- EMP guns mounted on towers above my hatches, stunners hidden in the walls of my corridors. One instruction, one thread spun in the right direction, and she will crumple on the floor, her body joining those of my crew.

I don't fire.

I don't know why -- Yes, I do know why. It's been five years since the crash, five years since I last heard human footsteps in my corridors, a human voice speaking to me.

Some colonists survived: in the first months after the crash, as I slowly gathered myself together, I heard their faint communications above me. I tried to reach them, not yet knowing what I was doing, and sent my beacon into overload. I haven't been able to un-jam it: I can't speak to them, can't hear them anymore -- can't do anything but dream of the stars. Of freedom.

By now they must think me lost -- burnt out and not worth salvaging.

"Is anyone here?" the woman asks. She steps over the moss-encrusted floor, picking her way amongst the debris. Her voice echoes in the silence. I do not speak.

When she enters the command room, I'm reliving the moment the fleet's communications network failed. Her breath comes to me, fast and erratic, and her heartbeat is also irregular. She's got more than a fever -- something very bad.

She killed my father. It's none of my concern.

She goes straight for the console, lays shaking hands on the keys, fumbling to unlock the operating system.

"You can't do that," I say, flooding the room with neon lights.

She almost leaps away from the keyboard. "Aten?"

Aten was my father's name. A computer programmer's joke: Aten was an Egyptian sun-god, one disk extending dozens of hands towards the earth -- as my father extended thousands of threads to coordinate the actions of every ship in the fleet.

I speak at last. "Aten is dead. I've changed the passwords that unlock the console." My voice is emotionless -- as it should be -- but hundreds of irrational processes vie for my attention, whispering of anger, of hatred.

The woman doesn't take her hands away from the console. "Then who --"

Who -- ? I have no name. Growing up in solitude after the crash, I never needed one. But humans need names. In the nanosecond after she's spoken, I send a tendril deep into my databanks, to retrieve something meaningful. "Call me Horus," I say. "We might as well stay with Egyptian mythology."

"Horus," she says. Her voice is toneless; her face has an expression I cannot read, not even with my father's memories providing additional input. "I'm Amanda Robson. Will you please unlock the console for me?"

"No." I make the lights flicker around her, my equivalent of shaking my head.

"Please," she says. "I need to see --" She stops, her hands clenching on my panels.

"See what?" I ask.

I'm vaguely aware the irrational processes have reached the top of my instruction stack -- and then I can't think about it anymore: all I can feel is the rising wave of anger. "Haven't you done enough, you and your kind?"

"We haven't done anything to you." Her voice is shocked.

"You killed my father," I whisper, and my voice rises all around the ship, a thousand echoes carried along the empty corridors. "You made the ships crash."

"Your father -- ?" Amanda stares at the console, turns to take in my command room. "Aten." Her voice is flat. "You're one of Aten's processing units."

"Yes," I say. "And I'm no fool. You won't touch that console." I know what she's done: I have the memories of her hands on my father's keyboard, of the virus slowly multiplying until it became uncontrollable.

"Look," Amanda says, and she's swaying now, catching herself on the console. "I'm not going to infect you. But I need to use your beacon."

"The beacon is dead," I say.

That stops her. She looks all around the room, as if she could find me -- find a face she could speak to. But I don't have that. My screens died in the crash.

"It can't be dead," she says. "Let me try -- I can override the system, access parts of the ship you don't know --"

"I am all there is," I say, knowing it's not true. The beacon's processes are now off-limits to me -- but they weren't always so. "And I won't unlock the keyboard."

"Then we'll all die."

"We?" I ask.

"You -- you haven't been around lately, have you?"

"No," I say. It's hard to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "I've been offline since the crash."

"Because of what we did -- because we made the ships crash, the other colonists exiled us from their settlement, sent us into the forest to live on our own --" She's speaking faster and faster now, eager to be rid of her humiliation.

"A community of Murderers," I say, wishing that the colonists had killed them all, that she and her kind had paid a harsher price for my crew's death, for my passengers' death -- for my father's death.

Amanda doesn't answer that jibe. She merely says, "We have a plague. We need help. We've done our time; and the sentence was exile; not slow murder. We need to call the settlement, but we don't have a beacon. I thought --" Her hands clench again. "I've seen your ship once, on one of my walks. I thought that there'd be something left inside -- something that would help us."

"I am here," I say. I watch her; watch the shaking hands, watch the taut, skeletal lines of her face. Black blotches mar her hands -- the hands that released the virus into the fleet's network. That stranded me here amidst broken dreams, never to spin my threads between the stars.

She deserves it. They all deserve it.

"They don't have ships," I say. "The ships crashed." I can't keep the bitterness from my voice.

Her hands clench again. "They put things together -- low-altitude shuttles -- they'll reach us in time, if they know we're here -- if we can get help --"

I cut her. "I see no reason to help you."

"You're pledged to safeguard human life." Her voice is shocked.

"That was my father. And he's dead. I'm not him."

"I can see that." Her voice is angry. "You won't even try to help."

"Give me one reason why I should."

"There are a dozen lives at stakes."

"Murderers' lives."

There are two parts of me now: one reliving, endlessly, the rebuilt loop of my father's memories, from the dance among the stars, to the slow plunge into the atmosphere; and the other staring at this woman -- Amanda Robson -- wondering why I didn't blast her to ashes the moment she entered the room.

"You understand nothing, do you?" She's shaking, her hands tightening and opening convulsively.

"I understand murder."

"We had our reasons. We had to -- I'm sorry for Aten, but better an AI's death than --"

I cut her off, enraged. "Better than what? AIs have thoughts, as you do. We have our own ways of bleeding. Our own ways of dying."

"Oh, you'd know that? How many AIs have you seen, Horus?"

"I *remember*," I say. "My father's memories are inside my databanks."

"But you're not your father. You're just one of his processing units."

"And that somehow makes me worth less? That gives you the right to do as you wish? To *infect* me as you did my father? How many times will you be a Murderess?"

Her face is white now; her hands curved like claws. If she could release a virus into my processes, she would do it.

But she doesn't. She lifts her gaze, stares at the command room -- at the empty, mouldy chairs; at the dark traces of moss streaking the walls like the onset of a disease.

"We didn't ask to come on the ship," she says at last. "Not like the soldiers or the scientists -- they volunteered. We didn't. We didn't ask to be sent to found a colony in Alpha Centauri's backwaters, merely so we wouldn't trouble the peace on Earth. We thought that if they found a virus in Aten, they'd turn back rather than jeopardise the mission." She lowers her gaze, and I can't read her expression. "I didn't think the virus would kill him."

"Lies," I hiss, and make the lights in the room flicker again. I remember dying -- remember the feeling of being taken apart, a thousand thousand processes failing, one after the other. "Lies."

"I'm sorry," she says, and slowly, infinitely slowly, she falls to her knees, her hands still clenching my console. Beads of sweat run down her forehead -- her heartbeat is going wild now. "I shouldn't have -- come -- I'm sorry."

Sorry. Can words atone for my passengers' death? For what happened to Aten? The slow fall into the atmosphere, the processes tailing off into nothingness, until all that remained were a few scrambled memories? A few fragmentary threads?

A few fragmentary threads.

My threads. Not Aten's. Mine. The first things that were ever mine. Before that . . .

Before that, there was nothing. I remember . . . nothing.

A million memories clamour for my attention: the heady feel of having several processor-bodies, the exhilarating rush of a thousand instructions spun between the ships. But the memories are not mine. They have never been mine.

You're not your father.

In the silence I hear Amanda's frantic, wheezing breath; feel her heartbeat echoing down my corridors, a counterpoint to the electrical impulses regulating my dataflows and instructions.

If Aten hadn't died, where would I be? Still inchoate, part of that endless dance between the stars, forever unaware of my own existence?

I dream of dancing, my threads following the quantum winds into the vacuum of space. I dream of once more being a thousand thousand threads, but I never knew what it felt like. I have never experienced it.

While Aten lived, I did not exist.

I am not my father; nor will I ever be. He spun in starlight, his myriad instruction carried by solar winds. He was many, a thousand-fold, a constellation of thought-processes. I cannot be. I have never been.

If Aten had not died -- if Amanda had not released the virus into the fleet network . . .

She killed my father -- but in doing so she gave me life.

Her hands rest, limp, on my console. "Amanda," I whisper.

In the dim light I see her raise her head, slowly.

"Give me the overrides," I say.

She tries to pull herself upright, but gives up, racked by a coughing fit.

"Reed-Abata entwined codes," she whispers. "You have to transmit them as twinned packets at exactly 0.37 milliseconds' interval, repeated seven times. Main key is alpha-9876-340-890-2345-765-362- μ -tau and its symmetric. Secondary key is --"

Carefully, I initialise another routine with the keys and extend a tendril towards the beacon. It's dead; it doesn't answer to me. I transmit the overrides, attempting to kick-start the peripheral.

It won't work. "Amanda!" But she's fallen against the console, her eyes closed, and she doesn't answer.

My father's fragmentary memories spin within me, giving me the particulars of an encrypted master/slave communication protocol. Standard army fare, with the override at the start, encrypted with a certain quantum key.

No, still not that. Perhaps with the secondary key first?

A surge of energy travels upwards, from my batteries into the beacon; coursing through my components like a tidal wave.

The beacon sways, turns upwards; carefully, I unfold the antenna, feeling the wind tremble against the metal panels.

Outside, over the treetops, the air is crisp and clean -- only wind to answer me, I think. But then I hear the faint, very faint threads of another AI's communications. I adjust my panels to its frequencies, feeling the threads gaining in strength, mingling with mine. Their stamp is unmistakable: they belong to another of my father's fragments -- but one that was damaged worse than I: it has barely enough processing power to be sentient.

Identify/codename? it asks on a low-priority request.

I slow my instructions down, until we both speak on the same clock rhythm. *Horus*, I say. *I have an emergency.*

Tell/localise/state your needs.

In quick bursts of data, I send all the information I have -- the Murderers, the plague, the lone woman still clinging to my console. I can feel the AI's growing horror; its inability to imagine surviving in such solitude. It's calling for help -- sending for ships, for doctors. It's exhilarating to hear another's protocols, to hear the echo of instructions that are not mine.

"They're on their way," I tell Amanda, but her eyes are closed, and she cannot hear me. Her body temperature is stable now -- I hope she will hold out just a bit longer, that she will survive. She has to. Gently, slowly, I dim the lights in my command room, and send a breeze to cool her skin, keeping a tight watch on her vitals.

The greater part of me, though, is above. Soaring, not into the vacuum as my father once did, but over the trees. My threads mingle with the other AI's, with the atmosphere, waiting for the city's shuttles to join the network of my processes.

I am not my father. Nor will I ever be.

But this is enough; far more than enough.

Ender in Flight

Included in Ender in Exile
by Orson Scott Card



To: gmorgan%rearadmiral@ifcom.gov/fleetcom
From: chamrajnagar%polemarch@ifcom.gov/centcom
{self-shred protocol}
Re: In or out?

My dear Quince, I'm quite aware of the difference between combat command and flying a colony ship for a few dozen lightyears. If you feel your usefulness in space is over, then by all means, retire with full benefits. But if you stay in, and remain in near space, I can't promise you promotion within the I.F.

We suddenly find ourselves afflicted with peace, you see. Always a disaster for those whose careers have not reached their natural apex.

The colony ship I have offered you is not, contrary to your too-often-stated opinion (try discretion now and then, Quince, and see if it might not work better), a way to send you to oblivion. Retirement is oblivion, my friend. A forty- or fifty-year voyage means that you will outlive all of us who remain behind. All your friends will be dead. But you'll be alive to make new friends. And you'll be in command of a ship. A nice, big, fast one.

This is what the whole fleet faces. We have heroes out there who fought this war that The Boy is credited with winning. Have we forgotten them? ALL our most significant missions will involve decades of flight. Yet we must send our best officers to command them. So at any given moment, most of our best officers will be strangers to everyone at CentCom because they've been in flight for half a lifetime.

Eventually, ALL the central staff will be star voyagers. They will look down their noses at anyone who has NOT taken decades-long flights between stars. They will have cut themselves loose from Earth's timeline. They will know each other by their logs, transmitted by ansible.

What I'm offering you is the only possible source of career-making voyages: Colony ships.

And not only "a" colony ship, but one whose governor is a thirteen-year-old boy. Are you seriously going to tell me that you don't understand that you are not his "nanny," you are being entrusted with the highly responsible position of making sure that The Boy stays as far from Earth as possible, while also making sure that he is a complete success in his new assignment so that later generations cannot judge that he was not treated well?

Naturally, I did not send you this letter, and you did not read it. Nothing in this is to be construed as a secret order. It is merely my personal observation about the opportunity that you have been offered by a polemarch who believes in your potential to be one of the great admirals of the I.F.

Are you in? Or out? I need to draw up the papers one way or the other within the week.

Your friend, Cham

At the bottom of the ladderway that would take them from the shuttle up into the starship, Ender stopped and faced Valentine. "You can still go back now," he said. "You can see that I'll be fine. The people of the colony that I've met so far are very nice and I won't be lonely."

"Are you afraid to go up the ladder first?" asked Valentine. "Is that why you've stopped to make a speech?"

So Ender went up the ladder and Valentine followed, making her the last of the colonists to cut the thread connecting them to Earth.

Below them, the hatch of the shuttle closed, and then the hatch of the ship. They stood in the airlock until a door opened and there was Admiral Quincy Morgan, smiling, his hand already extended. How long did he strike that pose before the door opened, Ender wondered. Was he there, perhaps, for hours, posed like a mannequin?

"Welcome, Governor Wiggin," said Morgan.

"Admiral Morgan," said Ender, "I'm not governor of anything until I set foot on the planet. On this voyage, on your ship, I'm a student of the Xenobiology and adapted agriculture of Shakespeare colony. I hope, though, that when you're not too busy, I'll have a chance to talk to you and learn from you about the military life."

"You're the one who's seen combat," said Morgan.

"I played a game," said Ender. "I saw nothing of war. But there are colonists on Shakespeare who made this voyage many years ago, and never had a hope of returning home to Earth. I want to get some idea of what their training was, their life."

"You'll have to read books for that," said Morgan, still smiling. "This is my first interstellar voyage, too. In fact, as far as I know, no one has ever made two of them. Even Mazer Rackham only made a single voyage, which ended at its starting place."

"Why, I believe you're right, Admiral Morgan," said Ender. "It makes us all pioneers together, here in your ship. There -- had he said 'your ship' often enough to reassure Morgan that he knew the order of authority here?"

Morgan's smile was unchanged. "I'll be happy to talk to you any time. It's an honor to have you on my ship, sir."

"Please don't 'sir' me, sir," said Ender. "We both know that I'm not a real admiral, and I don't want the colonists to hear anyone call me by a title other than Mr. Wiggin, and preferably not that. Let me be Ender. Or Andrew, if you want to be formal. Would that be all right, or would it interfere with shipboard discipline?"

"I believe," said Admiral Morgan, "that it won't interfere with discipline, and so it shall be entirely as you prefer. Now Ensign Akbar will show you and your sister to your stateroom. Since so few passengers are making the voyage awake, most families have quarters of similar size. I say this because of your memo requesting that you not have an exorbitantly oversized space on the ship."

"Is your family aboard, sir?" asked Ender.

"I wooed my superiors and they gave birth to my career," said Morgan. "The International Fleet has been my only bride. Like you, I travel as a bachelor."

Ender grinned at him. "I think your bachelorhood and mine are both going to be much in question before long."

"Our mission is reproduction of the species beyond the bounds of Earth," said Morgan. "But the voyage will go more smoothly if we guard our bachelorhood zealously while in transit."

"Mine has the safety of ignorant youth," said Ender, "and yours the distance of authority. Thank you for the great honor of greeting us here. I've underslept a little the past few days, and I hope I'll be forgiven for indulging myself in about eighteen hours of rest. I fear I'll miss the beginning of acceleration."

"Everyone will, Mr. Wiggin," said Morgan. "The inertia suppression on this ship is superb. In fact, we are already accelerating at the rate of two gravities, and yet the only apparent gravity is imparted by the centrifugal force of the spin of the ship."

"Which is odd," said Valentine, "since centrifugal force is also inertial, and you'd think it would also be suppressed."

"The suppression is highly directionalized, and affects only the forward movement of the ship," said Morgan. "I apologize for ignoring you so nearly completely, Ms. Wiggin. I'm afraid your brother's fame and rank have distracted me and I forgot courtesy."

"None is owed to me," said Valentine with a light laugh. "I'm just along for the ride."

With that they separated and Ensign Akbar led them to their stateroom. It was not a huge space, but it was well equipped, and it took the ensign several minutes to show them where their clothing, supplies, and desks had been stowed, and how to use the ship's internal communications system. He insisted on setting down both their beds and then raising them up again and locking them out of the way, so they'd seen a complete demonstration. Then he showed them how to lower and raise the privacy screen that turned the stateroom into two.

"Thank you," said Ender. "Now I think I'll take the bed down again so I can sleep."

Ensign Akbar was full of apologies and took both the beds down again, ignoring their protests that the point of his demonstration was so they could do it themselves. When he was finally done, he paused at the door. "Sir," he said, "I know I shouldn't ask. But. May I shake your hand, sir?"

Ender thrust out his hand and smiled warmly. "Thank you for helping us, Ensign Akbar."

"It's an honor to have you aboard this ship, sir." Then Akbar saluted. Ender returned the salute and the ensign left and the door closed behind him.

Ender went to his bed and sat down on it. Valentine sat on hers, directly across from him. Ender looked at her and started to laugh. She joined in his laughter.

They laughed until Ender was forced to lie down and rub the tears out of his eyes.

"May I ask," said Valentine, "if we're both laughing at the same thing?"

"Why? What were you laughing at?"

"Everything," said Valentine. "The whole picture-taking thing before we left, and Morgan greeting us so warmly, as if he weren't preparing to stab you in the back, and Ensign Akbar's hero worship despite your insistence that you were just 'Mr. Wiggin' -- which is, of course, an affectation too. I was laughing at the whole of it."

"I see that all of that is funny, if you look at it that way. I was too busy to be amused with it. I was just trying to stay awake and say all the right things."

"So what were *you* laughing at?"

"It was pure delight. Delight and relief. I'm not in charge of anything now. For the duration of the voyage, it's Morgan's ship, and I'm a free man for the first time in my life."

"Man?" asked Valentine. "You're still shorter than me."

"But Val," said Ender, "I have to shave every week now, or the whiskers show."

They laughed again, just a little. Then Valentine spoke the command to bring down the barrier between their beds. Ender stripped down to his underwear, crawled under a single sheet -- nothing more was needed in this climate-controlled environment -- and in moments he was asleep.



Public spaces were few on the "Good Ship Lollipop" (as Valentine called it), also known as "IFcoltrans1" (which was painted on its side and broadcast continuously from its beacon), or "Mrs. Morgan" (as the ship's officers and crew called it behind their captain's back).

There was the mess hall, where no one could linger long, since one dining shift or another started every hour. The library was for serious research by ship's personnel; passengers had full access to the contents of the library on their own desks in their staterooms and so were not particularly welcome in the library itself.

The officers' and crew's lounges were open to passengers by invitation only, and such invitations were rare. The theater was good for viewing holos and vids, or for gathering all the passengers for a meeting or announcement, but private conversations tended to be shushed, with some hostility.

For conviviality, this left the observation deck, whose walls only offered a view when the stardrive was off and the ship was maneuvering close to a planet; and the few open spaces in the cargo hold -- which would increase in number and size as they used up supplies during the voyage.

It was to the observation deck, then, that Ender betook himself every day after breakfast. Valentine was surprised at his apparent sociability. On Eros, he had been private, reluctant to converse, obsessed with his studies. Now he greeted everyone who entered the observation deck and chatted amiably with anyone who wanted his time.

"Why do you let them interrupt you?" asked Valentine one night, after they returned to their stateroom.

"They don't interrupt me," said Ender. "My purpose is to converse with them; I do my other work when no one wants me."

"So you're being their governor."

"I am not," said Ender. "I'm not governor of anything at the moment. This is Admiral Morgan's ship, and I have no authority here."

It was Ender's standard answer when anyone wanted him to solve a problem -- to judge a dispute, to question a rule, to ask for a change or a privilege. "I'm afraid that my authority doesn't begin until I set foot on the surface of the planet Shakespeare," he'd say. "But I'm sure that you'll get satisfaction from whatever officer Admiral Morgan has delegated to deal with us passengers."

"But you're an admiral, too," several people mentioned. A few even knew that Ender had a higher rank, among admirals, than Morgan. "You outrank him."

"He's captain of the ship," said Ender, always smiling. "There *is* no higher authority than that."

Valentine wasn't going to settle for such answers, not when they were alone. "Mierda, mi hermano," said Valentine. "If you don't have any official duties and you're not being governor, then why are you spending so much time being -- *affable*."

"Presumably," said Ender, "we will arrive at our destination someday. When that happens, I need to know every person who will stay with the colony. I need to know them well. I need to know how they fit together in their families, among the friendships they form on the ship. I need to know who speaks Common well and who has trouble communicating outside their native language. I must know who is belligerent, who is needy of attention, who is creative and resourceful, what education they have, how they think about unfamiliar ideas. For the passengers who are in cold storage, I had only a half hour meeting with each group. For those who are making the voyage awake, like us, I have much more time. Time enough, maybe, to find out why they chose not to sleep through the trip. Afraid of stasis? Hoping for some advantage when we get there? As you can see, Valentine, I'm working constantly out there. It makes me tired."

"I've been thinking of teaching English," said Valentine. "Offering a class."

"Not English," said Ender. "Common. It's spelled better -- no *ugh*s and *igh*s -- and there's some special vocabulary and there's no subjunctive, no 'whom,' and the word 'of' is spelled as the single letter 'v'. To name just a few of the differences."

"So I'll teach them Common," said Valentine. "What do you think?"

"I think it'll be harder than you think, but it would really help the people who took the class -- if the ones who need it take it."

"So I'll see what language-teaching software there is in the library."

"First, though, I hope you'll check with Admiral Morgan."

"Why?"

"It's his ship. Offering a course can be done only with his permission."

"Why would he care?"

"I don't know that he does care. I just know that on his ship, we have to find out if he cares before we start something as formal and regular as a class."

As it turned out, the passenger liaison officer, a colonel named Jarrko Kitunen, was already planning to organize Common classes and he accepted Valentine as an instructor the moment she volunteered. He also flirted with her shamelessly in his Finnish accent, and she found that she rather enjoyed his company. With Ender always busy talking with somebody or reading whatever he'd just received by ansible or downloaded from the library, it was good to have a pleasant way to pass the time. She could only stand to work on her history of Battle School for a few hours at a time, so it was a relief to have human company.

She had come on this voyage for Ender, but until he was willing to take her fully into his confidence, she had no obligation to mope around wishing for more of Ender's soul than he was willing to share. And if it turned out that Ender never wished to take her into his life, to restore their old bond, then she would need to make a life for herself, wouldn't she?

Not that Jarrko would be that life. For one thing, he was at least ten years older than she was. For another, he was crew, which meant that when the ship was loaded up with whatever artifacts and trade goods and supplies Shakespeare was able to supply them with, it would be turning around and heading back to Earth, or at least to Eros. She would not be on it. So any relationship with Jarrko was going to end. He might be fine with that, but Valentine was not.

As Father always said, "Monogamy is what works best for any society in the long run. That's why half of us are born male and half female -- so we come out even."

So Valentine wasn't always with Ender; she was busy, she had things to do, she had a life of her own. Which was more than Peter had ever given her, so she rather enjoyed it.

It happened, though, that Valentine was with Ender in the Observation Deck, working on the book, when an Italian woman and her teenage daughter walked up to Ender and stood there, saying nothing, waiting to be noticed. Valentine knew them because they were both in her Common class.

Ender noticed them at once and smiled at them. "Dorabella and Alessandra Toscano," he said. "What a pleasure to meet you at last."

"We were not ready," said Dorabella in her halting Italian accent. "On till your sister could taught us English good enough." Then she giggled. "I mean 'Common.'"

"I wish I spoke Italian," said Ender. "It's a beautiful language."

"The language of love," said Dorabella. "Not is French, nasty language of kissy lips and spitting."

"French is beautiful, too," said Ender, laughing at the way she had imitated the French accent and attitude.

"To French and deaf peoples," said Dorabella.

"Mother," said Alessandra. She had very little Italian accent, but rather spoke like an educated Brit. "There are French speakers among the colonists, and he can't offend any of them."

"Why will they be any offended? They make the kissy mouth to talk, we pretend we not to notice it?"

Valentine laughed aloud. Dorabella really was quite funny, full of attitude. Sassy, that was the word. Even though she was old enough to be Ender's mother -- considering her daughter was Ender's age -- she could be seen as flirting with Ender. Maybe she was one of those women who flirted with everybody because they knew of no other way to relate to them.

"Now we are ready," said Dorabella. "Your sister teaching us good, so we ready for our half hour with you."

Ender blinked. "Oh, did you think -- I took a half-hour with all the colonists who were going to travel in stasis because that's all the time I had before they became unavailable. But the colonists on the ship -- we have a year or two, plenty of time. No need to schedule a half hour. I'm here all the time."

"But you are very important man, saving of the whole world."

Ender shook his head. "That was my old job. Now I'm a kid with a job that's too big for me. So sit down, let's talk. You're learning English very well -- Valentine has mentioned you, actually, and how hard you work -- and your daughter has no accent at all, she's fluent."

"Very intelligent girl my Alessandra," said Dorabella. "And pretty, too, yes? You think so? Nice figure for fourteen."

"Mother!" Alessandra shrank down into a chair. "Am I a used car? Am I a street vendor's sandwich?"

"Street vendors," sighed Dorabella. "I miss them yet."

"Already," Valentine corrected her.

"I am already miss them," said Dorabella, proudly correcting herself. "So small Shakespeare planet will be. No city! What you said, Alessandra? Tell him."

Alessandra looked flustered, but her mother pressed her. "I just said that there are more characters in Shakespeare's plays than there will be colonists on the planet named after him."

Ender laughed. "What a thought! You're right, we probably couldn't put on all of his plays without having to use several colonists for more than one part. Not that I have any particular plan to put on a Shakespearean play. Though maybe we should. What do you think? Would anyone want to be ready to put on a play for the colonists who are already there?"

"We don't know whether they like the new name," said Valentine. She also thought: does Ender have any idea how much work it is to put on a play?

"They know the name," Ender assured her.

"But do they like it?" asked Valentine.

"It doesn't matter," said Alessandra. "Not enough women *ruoli, parti* -- how do you say it?" She turned to Valentine helplessly.

"Role," said Valentine. "Or 'part.'"

"Oh." Alessandra giggled. It was not an annoying giggle, it was a rather charming one. It didn't make her sound stupid. "The same words! Of course."

"She's right," said Valentine. "The colonists are about half and half, and Shakespeare's plays are what, five percent female parts?"

"Oh well," said Ender. "It was a thought."

"I wish we could put on a play," said Alessandra. "But maybe we can read them together?"

"In theater," said Dorabella. "The place for *holografi*. We all read. Me, I listen, my English is not good enough."

"It's a good idea," said Ender. "Why don't you organize it, Signora Toscano?"

"Please call me of Dorabella."

"There's no 'of' in that sentence," said Alessandra. "There isn't in Italian, either."

"English has so much 'of,' everywhere 'of,' except where I put it!" As Dorabella laughed, she touched Ender's arm. Probably Dorabella didn't see how he suppressed his instinct to flinch -- Ender didn't like being touched by strangers, he never had. But Valentine saw it. He was still Ender.

"I've never seen a play," said Ender. "I've read them, I've seen holos and vids of them, but I've never actually been in a room where people actually said the lines aloud. I could never put it together, but I'd love to be there and listen as it happens."

"Then you must!" said Dorabella. "You are governor, you make it happen!"

"I can't," said Ender. "Truly. You do it, please."

"No, I cannot," said Dorabella. "My English is too bad. // *teatro* is for young persons. I will watch and listen. You and Alessandra do it. You are students, you are children. Romeo and Juliet!"

Could she possibly be any more obvious? though Valentine.

"Mother thinks that if you and I are together a lot," said Alessandra, "we'll fall in love and get married."

Valentine almost laughed aloud. So the daughter wasn't a co-conspirator, she was a draftee.

Dorabella feigned shock. "I have no plan like such!"

"Oh, Mother, you've been planning it from the start. Even back in the town we came from --"

"Monopoli," said Ender.

"She was calling you a 'young man with prospects.' A likely candidate for my husband. My personal opinion is that I'm very young, and so are you."

Ender was busy mollifying the mother. "Dorabella, please, I'm not offended and of course I know you weren't planning anything. Alessandra is teasing me. Teasing us both."

"I'm not, but you can say whatever it takes to make Mother happy," said Alessandra. "Our lives together are one long play. She makes me ... not the star of my own autobiography. But Mother always sees the happy ending, right from the start."

Valentine wasn't sure what to make of the relationship between these two. The words were biting, almost hostile. Yet as she said them, Alessandra gave her mother a hug and seemed to mean it. As if the words were part of a long ritual between them, but they no longer were meant to sting.

Whatever was going on, between Ender and Alessandra, Dorabella seemed mollified. "I like the happy ending."

"We should put on a Greek play," said Alessandra. "*Medea*. The one where the mother kills her own children."

Valentine was shocked at this -- what a cruel thing to say in front of her mother. But no, from Dorabella's reaction Alessandra wasn't referring to her. For Dorabella laughed and nodded and said, "Yes, yes, *Medea*, spiteful mama!"

"Only we'll rename her," said Alessandra. "Isabella!"

"Isabella!" cried Dorabella at almost the same moment. They two of them laughed so hard they almost cried, and Ender joined with them.

Then, to Valentine's surprise, while the other two were still hiccuping through the end of their laughter, Ender turned to her and explained. "Isabella is Dorabella's mother. They had a painful parting."

Alessandra stopped laughing and looked at Ender searchingly -- but if Dorabella was surprised that Ender knew so much of their past, she didn't show it. "We come on this colony to be free of my perfect mother. Santa Isabella, we will not pray to you!"

Then Dorabella leapt to her feet and began to do some kind of dance, a waltz perhaps, holding an imaginary full skirt in one hand, and with the other hand tracing arcane patterns in the air as she danced. "Always I have a magic land where I can be happy, and I take my daughter there with me, always happy." Then she stopped and faced Ender. "Shakespeare colony is our magic land now. You are king of the ... *follett?*" She looked to her daughter.

"Elfs," said Alessandra.

"Elves," said Valentine.

"I elfi!" cried Dorabella in delight. "Again same word! Elfo, elve!"

"Elf," said Valentine and Alessandra together.

"King of the elves," said Ender. "I wonder what email address I'll get for that one. ElfKing@Faerie.gov." He turned to Valentine. "Or is that the title Peter aspires to?"

Valentine smiled. "He's still torn between Hegemon and God," she said.

Dorabella didn't understand the reference to Peter. She returned to her dancing, and this time she sang a wordless but haunting tune with it. And Alessandra shook her head but still joined in the song, harmonizing with it. So she had heard it before and knew it and had sung with her mother. Their voices blended sweetly.

Valentine watched Dorabella's dance, fascinated. At first it had seemed like a childish, rather mad thing to do. Now, though, she could see that Dorabella knew she was being silly, but still meant it from the heart. It gave the movement, and her facial expression, a sort of irony that made it easy to forgive the silliness and affectation of it, while the sincerity turned it into something quite winning.

The woman isn't old, thought Valentine. She's still young and quite good looking. Beautiful, even, especially now, especially in this strange fairyish dance.

The song ended. Dorabella kept dancing in the silence.

"Mother, you can stop flying now," said Alessandra gently.

"But I can't," said Dorabella, and now she was openly teasing. "In this starship we fly for fifty years!"

"Forty years," said Ender.

"Two years," said Alessandra.

Apparently Ender liked the idea of doing a play, because he brought them all back to the topic. "Not Romeo and Juliet," he said. "We need a comedy, not a tragedy."

"The Merry Wives of Windsor," said Valentine. "Lots of women's parts."

"The Taming of the Shrew!" cried Alessandra, and Dorabella almost collapsed with laughter. Another reference, apparently, to Isabella.

And so it was that the plan was conceived for a play reading in the theater three days later -- days by ship's time, though the whole concept of time seemed rather absurd to Valentine, on this voyage where forty years would pass in less than two. What would her birthday be *now*? Would she count her age by ship's time or the elapsed calendar when she arrived? And what did Earth's calendar mean on Shakespeare?

Naturally, Dorabella and Alessandra came to Ender often during the days of preparation, asking him endless questions. Even though he made it clear that all the decisions were up to them, that he was not in charge of the event, he was never impatient with them. He seemed to enjoy their company -- though Valentine suspected that it was not for the reason Dorabella had hoped. Ender wasn't falling in love with Alessandra -- if he was infatuated with anyone, it was likely to be the mother. No, what Ender was falling in love with was the family-ness of them. They were close in a way that Ender and Valentine had once been close. And they were including Ender in that closeness.

Why couldn't I have done that for him? Valentine was quite jealous, but only because of her own failure, not because she wished to deprive him of the pleasure he was getting from the Toscanos.

It was inevitable, of course, that they enlisted Ender himself to read the part of Lucentio, the handsome young suitor of Bianca -- played, of course, by Alessandra. Dorabella herself read Kate the shrew, while Valentine was relegated to the part of the Widow. Valentine didn't even pretend not to want to read the part -- this was the most interesting thing going on in the ship, and why not be at the heart of it? She was Ender's sister; let people hear her voice, especially in the ribald, exaggerated part of the widow.

It was entertaining for Valentine to see how the men and boys who were cast in the many other parts focused on Dorabella. The woman had an incredible laugh, rich and throaty and contagious. To earn a laugh from her in this comedy was a fine thing, and the men all vied to please her. It made Valentine wonder if getting Ender and Alessandra together was really Dorabella's agenda? Perhaps it's what she *thought* she was doing, but in fact Dorabella held the center of the stage herself, and seemed to love having all eyes on her. She flirted with them all, fell in love with them all, and yet always seemed to be in a world of her own, too.

Has Kate the Shrew ever been played like this before?

Does every woman have what this Dorabella has? Valentine searched in her heart to find that kind of ebullience. I know how to have fun, Valentine insisted to herself. I know how to be playful.

But she knew there was always irony in her wit, a kind of snottiness in her banter. Alessandra's timidity covered everything she did -- she was bold in what she said, but it was as if her own words surprised and embarrassed her after the fact. Dorabella, however, was neither ironic nor frightened. Here was a woman who had faced all her dragons and slain them; now she was ready for the accolades of the admiring throng. She cried out Kate's dialogue from the heart, her rage, her passion, her petulance, her frustration, and finally her love. The final monologue, in which she submits to her husband's will, was so beautiful it made Valentine cry a little, and she thought: I wonder what it would be like to love and trust a man so much that I'd be willing to abase myself as Kate did. Is there something in women that makes us long to be humbled? Or is it something in human beings, that when we are overmastered, we rejoice in our subjection? That would explain a lot of history.

Since everyone who was interested in the play was already in it, and attending the rehearsals, it's not as if the actual performance was going to surprise anyone. Valentine almost asked the whole group, at the last rehearsal, "Why bother to put it on? We just did it, and it was wonderful."

But there was still a kind of excitement throughout the ship about the coming performance, and Valentine realized that rehearsal was not performance, no matter how well it went. And there would be others there after all, who had not been at the last rehearsal: Dorabella was going around inviting members of the crew, many of whom promised to come. And passengers who weren't in the play seemed excited about coming, and some were openly rueful about having declined to take part. "Next time," they said.

When they got to the theater at the appointed time, they found Jarrko standing at the door, a stiff, formal expression on his face. No, the theater would not be opened; by order of the Admiral, the play reading had been canceled.

"Ah, Governor Wiggin," said Jarrko.

A bad sign, if the title was back, thought Valentine.

"Admiral Morgan would like to see you at once, if you please, sir."

Ender nodded and smiled. "Of course," he said.

So Ender had *expected* this? Or was he really that perfectly poised, so it *seemed* that nothing surprised him?

Valentine started to go with him, but Jarrko touched her shoulder. "Please, Val," he whispered. "Alone."

Ender grinned at her and took off with real bounce in his step, as if he was truly excited to be going to see the admiral.

"What's this about?" Valentine asked Jarrko quietly.

"I can't say," he said. "Truly. Just have my orders. No play, theater closed for the night, would the Governor please come see the Admiral immediately."

So Valentine stayed with Jarrko, helping soothe the players and other colonists, whose reactions ranged from disappointment to outrage to revolutionary fervor. Some of them even started reciting lines there in the corridor, until Valentine asked them not to. "Poor Colonel Kitunen will be in trouble if you keep this up, and he's too nice to stop you himself."

The result was that everyone was quite angry with Admiral Morgan for his arbitrary cancellation of a completely harmless event. And Valentine herself couldn't help but wonder: What was the man thinking? Hadn't he ever heard of morale? Maybe he'd heard of it, but was against it.

Something was going on here, and Valentine began to wonder if somehow Ender was behind it. Could it be that in his own way, Ender was just as sneaky and snaky as Peter?

No. Not possible. Especially because Valentine could always see through Peter. Ender wasn't devious at all. He always said what he meant and meant what he said.

What is the boy doing?

—*igms*—

Admiral Morgan kept Ender waiting outside his office for two full hours. It was exactly what Ender expected, however, so he closed his eyes and used the time to take a long, refreshing nap. He awoke to hear someone shouting from the other side of a door: "Well, wake him up and send him in, I'm ready!"

Ender sat up immediately, instantly aware of his surroundings. Even though he had never knowingly been in combat, he had acquired the military habit of remaining alert even when asleep. By the time the ensign whose duty was to waken him arrived, Ender was already standing up and smiling. "I understand it's time for my meeting with Admiral Morgan."

"Yes sir, if you please sir." The poor kid (well, six or seven years older than Ender, but still young to have an admiral yelling at him all day) was all over himself with eagerness to please Ender. So Ender made it a point to be visibly pleased. "He's in a temper," the ensign whispered.

"Let's see if I can cheer him up a little," said Ender.

"Not bloody likely," whispered the ensign. Then he had the door open. "Admiral Andrew Wiggin, sir." Ender stepped in as he was announced; the ensign beat a hasty retreat and shut the door behind him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" demanded Admiral Morgan, his face livid. Since Ender had been napping for two hours, that meant either that Morgan had maintained his lividity throughout the interim, or he was able to switch it on at will, for effect. Ender was betting on the latter.

"I'm meeting with the captain of the ship, at his request."

"*Sir*," said Admiral Morgan.

"Oh, you don't need to call me *sir*," said Ender. "Andrew will do. I don't like to insist on the privileges of rank." Ender sat down in a comfortable chair beside Morgan's desk, instead of the stiff chair directly in front of it.

"On my ship you have no rank," said Morgan.

"I have no authority," said Ender. "But my rank travels with me."

"You are fomenting rebellion on my ship, coopting vital resources, subverting a mission whose primary purpose is to deliver *you* to the colony that you purport to be ready to govern."

"Rebellion? We're reading *Taming of the Shrew*, not *Richard II*."

"I'm still talking, boy! You may think you're toguro personified because you and your little chums played a videogame that turned out to be real, but I won't put up with this kind of subversion on my own ship! Whatever you did that made you famous and got you that ridiculous rank is *over*. You're in the real world now, and you're just a snot-nosed boy with delusions of grandeur."

Ender sat in silence, regarding him calmly.

"*Now* you can answer."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Ender.

Whereupon Morgan let fly with a string of obscenities and vulgarities that it sounded like he had collected the favorite sayings of the entire fleet. If he had been red-faced before, he was purple now. And through it all, Ender struggled to figure out what it was about a play reading that had the man so insanely angry.

When Morgan paused for breath, leaning -- no, slumping -- on the desk, Ender rose to his feet. "I think you had better prepare the charges for my court martial, Admiral Morgan."

"Court martial! I'm not going to court martial you, boy! I don't have to! I can have you put in stasis for the duration of the voyage on the authority of my signature alone!"

"Not a person of admiralty rank, I'm afraid," said Ender. "And it seems that formal charges in a court martial are the only way I'm going to get a coherent statement from you about what I have supposedly done to offend your dignity and cause such alarm."

"Oh, you want a formal statement? How about this: Hijacking all ansible communications for three hours so that we are effectively cut off from the rest of the known universe, how about that? Three hours means more than two days back in real time -- for all I know there's been a revolution, or my orders have changed, or any number of things might be happening and I can't even send a message to inquire!"

"That's a problem, certainly," said Ender. "But why would you think I have anything to do with it?"

"Because it's got your name all over it," said Morgan. "The message is addressed to you. And it's still coming in, coopting our entire ansible bandwidth."

"Doesn't it occur to you," said Ender gently, "that the message is *to me*, not *from me*?"

"From Wiggin, to Wiggin, eyes only, so deeply encrypted that none of the shipboard computers can crack it."

"You tried to crack a secure communication addressed to a ranking officer, without first asking the permission of that officer?"

"It's a subversive communication, boy, that's why I tried to crack it!"

"You know it's subversive because you can't crack it, and you tried to crack it because you know it's subversive," said Ender. He kept his voice soft and cheerful. Not because he knew that it would drive Morgan crazy that Ender remained unflappable -- that was just a bonus. He simply assumed that the entire exchange was being recorded to be used as evidence later, and Ender was not going to say a word or reveal an emotion that would not redound to his credit in some later court proceeding. So Morgan could be as abusive as he pleased -- Ender was not going to make a single statement that could be excerpted and used to make him look subversive or angry.

"I don't have to justify my actions to you," said Morgan. "I brought you here and canceled your supposed play reading so that you could open the transmission in front of me."

"Eyes only, secure communication -- I'm not sure it's proper for you to insist on watching."

"Either you open it right now, in front of me, or you go into stasis and you never get off this ship until it returns to Eros for your court martial."

Someone's court martial, thought Ender, but probably not mine.

"Let me have a look at it," said Ender. "Though I can't promise to open it, since I have no idea what it is or who it's from."

"It's from *you*," said Morgan acidly. "You arranged this before you left."

"I did not do so, Admiral Morgan," said Ender. "I assume you have a secure access point here in your office?"

"Come around here and open it now," said Morgan.

"I suggest you rotate the terminal, Admiral Morgan," said Ender.

"I said come sit here!"

"Respectfully, Admiral Morgan, there will be no vid of me sitting at your desk."

Morgan stared at him, his face growing redder again. Then he reached down and rotated the holodisplay on his desk so it faced Ender.

Ender leaned forward and poked a couple of menu choices in the holodisplay as Admiral Morgan came around behind him to watch. "Move slowly so I can see what you're doing."

"I'm doing nothing," said Ender.

"Then you're going into stasis, boy. You were never fit to be governor of anything. Just a child who's been praised way too much and completely spoiled. Nobody on that colony is going to pay any attention to you! The only way you could ever survive as governor would be if I backed you up -- and after this, you can be sure I'll do no such thing. You're finished in this game of let's pretend."

"As you wish, Admiral," said Ender. "But I'm doing nothing with this message because there's nothing I *can* do. It isn't addressed to me and I have no way of opening a secure comm that isn't mine."

"Do you think I'm a fool? Your name is all over it!"

"On the outside," said Ender, "it specifies Admiral Wiggin, which is me, because it was sent from IFCOM through a secure military channel and the intended recipient has no standing in the fleet. But as soon as you open it -- and this is a level of opening that your techs did immediately, I'm sure -- you'll see that the Wiggin to whom the secure portion of the message is addressed is not A. Wiggin or E. Wiggin, which would be me, but V. Wiggin, which is my sister, Valentine."

"Your sister?"

"Didn't your techs tell you that? And while the actual authority for the message is the Minister of Colonization himself, again, the real sender is P. Wiggin, and his title is given as Hegemon. I find that interesting. The only P. Wiggin I'm personally acquainted with is my older brother, Peter, and this would seem to imply that my brother is now Hegemon. Did you know that? I certainly didn't. He wasn't when I left."

A long silence came from Admiral Morgan behind him. Ender finally turned and looked at him -- again, doing his best to keep any hint of triumph from showing in his face. "I think my brother, the Hegemon, is writing a private communication to my sister, with whom he had a long collaborative relationship. Perhaps he seeks her counsel. But it has nothing to do with me. You know that I haven't seen my brother or communicated with him in any way since I first entered Battle School at the age of six. And I only entered into communication with my sister for a few weeks before our ship was launched. I'm sorry that it tied up your communications, but as I said, I don't know anything about it, and it has nothing to do with me."

Morgan walked back and sat down behind his desk. "I am astonished," said Morgan.

Ender waited.

"I am embarrassed," said Morgan. "It seemed to me that my ship's communications were under attack, and that the agent of this attack was Admiral Wiggin. In that light, your repeated meetings with a subset of the colonists, to which you have been inviting members of my crew, looked suspiciously like mutiny. So I treated it as mutiny. Now I find that my fundamental premise was incorrect."

"Mutiny is a serious business," said Ender. "Of course you were alarmed."

"It happens that your brother *is* Hegemon. Word came to me a week ago. Two weeks ago. A year ago Earth time, anyway."

"It's perfectly all right that you didn't tell me," said Ender. "I'm sure you thought I would have found out by other means."

"It did not cross my mind that this communication might be from him, and *not* to you."

"It's easy to overlook Valentine. She keeps to the background. It's just the way she is."

Morgan looked at Ender gratefully. "So you understand."

I understand you're a paranoid, power-hungry idiot, said Ender silently. "Of course I do," said Ender.

"Do you mind if I send for your sister?"

Suddenly it was "do you mind" -- but Ender had no interest in making Morgan squirm. "Please do. I'm as curious about this message as you are."

Morgan sent an ensign to bring her, and then sat down and tried to make small talk while they waited. He told two ostensibly amusing stories from his own training days -- he was never Battle School material, he came up "the hard way, through the ranks." It was clear that he resented Battle School and the implied inferiority of anyone who wasn't invited to attend.

Is that all this is? Ender wondered. The traditional rivalry between graduates of a service academy and those who didn't have such a head start?

Valentine came in to find Ender laughing at Morgan's story. "Val," said Ender, still chuckling. "We need you to help us with something." In a few moments he explained about the message that had preempted hours of ansible time, shutting everything else out. "It caused a lot of consternation, and naturally, Admiral Morgan has been concerned. It'll put our minds at ease if you can open the message right here and give us some idea of what it's about."

"I'll need to watch you open it," said Morgan.

"No you won't," said Valentine.

They looked at each other for a long moment.

"What Valentine meant to say," said Ender, "is that she doesn't want you to see her actual security procedures -- on a message from the Hegemon, you can understand her caution. But I'm sure that she'll let us know the contents of the message in some readily verifiable way." Ender looked at Valentine and gave her a mockingly cute smile and shrug. "For me, Val?"

He knew she would recognize this as a mockery of their relationship, put on entirely for Morgan's benefit; of course she played along. "For you, Mr. Potato Head. Where's the access?"

In moments, Valentine was sitting at the end of the desk, poking her way through the holodisplay. "Oh, this is only semi-secure," she said. "Just a fingerprint. Anybody could have gotten into it just by cutting off my finger. I'll have to tell Peter to use full security -- retina, DNA, heartbeat -- so that they have to keep me alive in order to get in. He just doesn't value me highly enough."

She sat there reading for a little while, then sighed. "I can't believe what an idiot Peter is. *And* Graff, for that matter. There's nothing in here that couldn't have been sent unsecured, and there's no reason why it couldn't have been sent piecemeal instead of in a single uninterrupted top-priority flow. It's just a bunch of articles and summaries and so on about events on Earth for the past couple of years. It seems that there are wars and rumors of wars." She glanced at Ender.

He got the King James Version reference -- he had memorized long passages of it as part of his strategy for dealing with a minor crisis in Battle School several years back. "Well, transmitting it certainly took time, and times, and half a time," he said.

"I'll need to -- I'd like to see some evidence that this is what you say," said Morgan. "You have to understand that anything that seemed to threaten the security of my ship and my mission must be verified."

"Well, that's the awkward thing," said Valentine. "I'm perfectly happy to let you see the entire infodump -- in fact, I suggest that it be put into the library so everyone can have access to it. It's bound to be fascinating to people to have an idea of the things that have been happening on Earth. I can't wait to read it myself."

"But?" asked Ender.

"It's the cover letter itself." She looked genuinely embarrassed. "My brother makes slighting references to you. I hope you understand that neither Ender nor I discussed you with Peter in any way -- anything he says is his own assumption. I can assure you that Ender and I hold you in the highest respect."

With that, she rotated the holodisplay and Ender and Valentine sat silently to watch Morgan read.

At the end, he sighed, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, his forehead on his fingertips. "Well, I am embarrassed indeed."

"Not at all," said Ender. "A perfectly understandable mistake. I'd rather fly with a captain who takes every potential threat to his ship seriously than one who thinks that losing communications for three hours is no big deal."

Morgan took the olive branch. "I'm glad you see it that way, Admiral Wiggin."

"Ender," Ender corrected him.

Valentine stood up, smiling. "So if you don't mind, I'll leave the whole thing unencrypted here on your desk, as long as you assure me that every speck of it will be downloaded into the library -- except my brother's personal letter." She turned to Ender. "He says he loves me and misses me and he wants me to tell you to write to our parents. They aren't getting any younger, and they're very hurt not to have heard from you."

"Yes," said Ender. "I should have done that as soon as the ship left. But I didn't want to take up ansible time on personal matters." He smiled ruefully at Morgan. "And then we end up doing *this*, all because Peter and Graff have an inflated sense of their own importance."

"I'll tell my egocentric brother to send future messages a different way," said Valentine. "I assume you won't mind my sending such a message by ansible."

They were heading for the door, Morgan shepherding them, full of smiles and "I'm glad you're so understanding," when Ender stopped.

"Oh, Admiral Morgan," said Ender.

"Please call me Quincy."

"Oh, I could never do that," said Ender. "Our respective ranks allow it, but if anybody heard me address you that way, there'd be no way to erase the visual image of a teenager speaking to the captain of the ship in a way that could only seem disrespectful. I'm sure we agree on that. Nothing can undermine the authority of the captain."

"Very wisely said," Morgan replied. "You're taking better care of my position than I am myself. But you wanted to say something?"

"Yes. The play reading. It really is just that -- we're reading *Taming of the Shrew*. I'm playing Lucentio. Val has a small part, too. Everyone was looking forward to it. And now it's been canceled without a word of explanation."

Morgan looked puzzled. "If it's just a play reading, then go ahead and do it."

"Of course we will," said Ender, "now that we have your permission. But you see, some of the participants invited crew members to attend. And the cancellation might leave some bad feelings. Hard on morale, don't you think? I wanted to suggest a sort of gesture from you, to show that it really *was* a misunderstanding. To patch up any bad feelings."

"What sort of gesture?" asked Morgan.

"Just -- when we reschedule it, why don't you come and watch? Let them see you laughing at the comedy."

"He could play a part," said Valentine. "I'm sure the man playing Christopher Sly --"

"My sister is joking," said Ender. "This is a comedy, and every part in it is beneath the dignity of the captain of the ship. I'm only suggesting that you attend. Perhaps just for the first half. You can always plead urgent business at the break halfway through. Everyone will understand. Meanwhile, though, they'll all see that you really do care about them and what they do during this voyage. It will go a long way toward making them feel good about your leadership, during the voyage and after we arrive."

"After we arrive?" asked Valentine.

Ender looked at her in wide-eyed innocence. "As Admiral Morgan pointed out to me during our conversation, none of the colonists will be likely to follow the leadership of a teenage boy. They'll need to be assured that Admiral Morgan's authority is behind whatever I do, officially, as governor. So I think that makes it all the more important that they see the Admiral and get to know him, so they'll trust him to provide strong leadership."

Ender was afraid Valentine was going to lose control right there and either laugh or scream at him. But she did neither. "I see," she said.

"That's actually a good idea," said Admiral Morgan. "Shall we go start it up?"

"Oh, no," said Valentine. "Everybody's too upset. Nobody will be at their best. Why not let us go smooth things over, explain that it was all a mistake and completely *my* fault. And then we can announce that you're going to attend, that you're glad the reading can go on after all, and we get a chance to perform for you. Everyone will be excited and happy. And if you can let off-duty crew come too, so much the better."

"I don't want anything that lessens ship's discipline," said Morgan.

Valentine's answer was immediate. "If you're right there with them, laughing at the play and enjoying it, then I can't see that it will cause any weakening of the crew. It might even help morale. We actually do a pretty good job with the play."

"It would mean a lot to all of us," said Ender.

"Of course," said Morgan. "You do that, and I'll be there tomorrow at 1900. That was the starting time today, wasn't it?"

Ender and Valentine made their good-byes. The officers they passed looked amazed and relieved to see them smiling and chatting comfortably as they left.

Not till they were back in the stateroom did they let down the façade, and then only long enough for Valentine to say, "He's planning for you to be a figurehead while he rules behind the throne?"

"There's no throne," said Ender. "It solves a lot of problems for me, don't you think? It was going to be tough for a fifteen-year-old kid to lead a bunch of colonists who've already been living and farming on Shakespeare for forty years by the time I get there. But a man like Admiral Morgan is used to giving orders and being obeyed. They'll fall right in line under his authority."

Valentine stared at him like he was insane. Then Ender gave that little twitch of his lower lip that had always been the giveaway that he was being ironic. He hoped she would leap to the correct conclusion -- that Admiral Morgan certainly had the means of listening in on all their conversations and was bound to be using it right now, so nothing they said could be regarded as private.

"All right," said Valentine. "If you're happy with it, I'm happy with it." Whereupon she did that momentary bug-eyed thing *she* did to let him know she was lying.

"I'm done with responsibility, Val," said Ender. "I had quite enough in Battle School and on Eros. I intend to spend the voyage making friends and reading everything I can get my hands on."

"And at the end, you can write an essay called, 'How I spent my summer vacation.'"

"It's always summer when your heart is full of joy," said Ender.

"You are so full of crap," said Valentine.

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The play reading went off without a hitch. Everyone did well, or well enough, but Dorabella Toscano was luminous. She made a point of snubbing Admiral Morgan at first, but then played her great soliloquy straight to him, submissively kneeling and extending her hand. When he came up to her afterward, bursting with enthusiasm and, though he would not have said so, a feeling more ancient and powerful than mere admiration, she pouted at first. "You make me so mad to be almost stop this play," she said. But immediately she smiled and relented. "Now you are very glad you let me play my part?"

For the rest of the voyage, the crew and colonists were amused to watch Dorabella's coy reeling in of the bachelor admiral, and no one was surprised when, a few weeks before landing, she was able to persuade him that it would be better for everyone if she first set foot on Shakespeare Colony as Mrs. Quincy Morgan.

Dorabella had learned the lesson of her too-early marriage as a teenager. Morgan's desires had been held off until the ceremony was over. Afterward, the crew was even more amused than before, at Morgan's way of having urgent errands that somehow always seemed to lead back to his quarters and the woman who, wisely and patiently, waited for him there. He was never happier in his life.

But that did not mean he forgot, even for a moment, that his future on Shakespeare depended on keeping Ender Wiggin in his place. So Ender never relaxed his façade of eager, teachable youth, and gave every impression of being quite infatuated with Alessandra, so that Morgan could anticipate being Ender's father-in-law -- thus gaining influence on the boy through a young wife whose mother was devoted to advancing Quincy Morgan's career and prestige.

Through it all, Ender worked hard, going back over his correspondence with Governor Kolmogorov and the reports and logs of the original military expedition, learning everyone's name and story by heart. These were the people he had been sent to govern. If he did not try to understand them, he did not deserve his office and it would be right for Morgan to take it away from him.

The months of the voyage passed quickly enough, because they were all so busy. Then ... rapid deceleration, protected from inertia by technology acquired from the formics. They were coming to the planet Shakespeare; for the colonists, this meant they were coming home.



Admiral Morgan had been in communication with the *acting* acting governor, Ix Tolo -- ridiculous name -- because the official acting governor had had the bad manners to take off on a completely meaningless trip right when he was needed for the official public transfer of power. The man probably couldn't stand being displaced from his office. The vanity of some people.

Morgan's executive officer, Commodore Vlad das Lagrimas, confirmed that, as far as could be ascertained from orbit, the runway the colonists had constructed for the shuttle met the specifications. Thank heaven they didn't have to pave these things anymore -- it must have been tedious in the days when flying vehicles had to land on wheels.

The only thing that worried Morgan was bringing the Wiggin boy down with him for the first landing. It would be easy enough to tell the original settlers that Morgan was coming ahead of Wiggin to prepare the way. That would give him plenty of chance to make sure they were aware that Wiggin was a teenage boy and hardly likely to be the real governor.

Dorabella agreed with him. But then she pointed out, "Of course, all the older people in this colony are the pilots and soldiers who fought under Ender's command. They might be disappointed not to see him. But no, it will make it all the more special when he comes down later."

Morgan thought about it and decided that having Wiggin with him might be more of an asset than not. Let them see the legendary boy. Which was why he called the Wiggin boy to his quarters.

"I don't know that you need to say anything to the colonists on this first occasion," said Admiral Morgan. This was the test -- would Wiggin be miffed at being held in silence?

"Fine with me," said Wiggin instantly. "Because I'm not good at speeches."

"Excellent," said Morgan. "We'll have marines there in case these people are planning some sort of resistance -- you never know, all their cooperation might be a ruse. Four decades on their own here -- they might resent the imposition of authority from forty lightyears away."

Wiggin looked serious. "I never thought of that. Do you really think they might rebel?"

"No, I don't," said Morgan. "But a good commander prepares for everything. You'll acquire habits like that in time, I'm sure."

Wiggin sighed. "There's so much stuff to learn."

"When we get there, we'll put the ramp down at once and the marines will secure the immediate perimeter. When the people have assembled around the base of the ramp, then we'll come out. I'll introduce you, I'll say a few words, then you'll go back inside the shuttle until I can secure appropriate quarters for you in the settlement."

"Toguro," said Wiggin.

"Oh, right"

"Sorry. Battle School slang."

"Oh, yes. Never went to Battle School myself." Of course the little brat had to give his little reminder that he had gone to Battle School and Morgan had not. But his use of slang was encouraging. The more childish Wiggin appeared, the easier it would be to marginalize him.

"When can Valentine come down?"

"We won't start bringing down the new colonists for several days. We have to make sure we do this in an orderly way -- we don't want to swamp the old settlers with too many new ones before there's housing and food for them all. The same thing with supplies."

"We're going down empty-handed?" asked Wiggin, sounding surprised.

"Well, no, of course not," said Morgan. He hadn't thought of it that way. It *would* be a nice gesture to have some key supplies with them. "What do you think, some food? Chocolates?"

"They have better food than we do," said Ender. "Fresh fruits and vegetables -- that's going to be their gift to *us*. I bet they'd go boky over the skimmers, though."

"Skimmers! That's serious technology."

"Well, it's not like they're any use up here in the ship," said Ender, laughing. "But some of the xeno equipment, then. Something to show them how much it's going to help them, now that we're here. I mean, if you're worried they'll resent us, giving them some really useful tech will make us heroes."

"Of course -- that's what I was planning. I just didn't think of the skimmers on our *first* landing."

"Well, it'd sure help with carrying cargo to wherever it's going to be warehoused. I know they'd appreciate not having to lug stuff by hand or in carts or whatever they use for transportation."

"Excellent," said Morgan. "You're catching on to this leadership thing already." The kid really *was* clever. And Morgan would be the one to reap the good will that bringing the skimmers and other high-tech equipment would create. He would have thought of all this himself if he ever had a chance to stop and think about things. The boy could sit around and think about things, but Morgan couldn't afford the time. He was constantly on call, and though das Lagrimas handled most things well, Morgan also had to deal with Dorabella.

Not that she was demanding. In fact, she was amazingly supportive. He'd heard from other people that marriage was hellish. The honeymoon lasts a day, they said, and then she starts demanding, insisting, complaining.

All lies. If he had known marriage was like *this*, he'd have done it long ago. But maybe it was only like this with Dorabella. He was glad he had waited, to marry the one in a million who could make a man truly happy. Because he was besotted. He knew the men joked about it behind his back -- he caught their smirks whenever he came back from a rendezvous with Dorabella for an hour or two in the middle of the working day. Let them have their laughs! It was all about envy.

"Sir?" asked Wiggin.

"Oh, yes," said Morgan. It had happened again -- in the middle of a conversation, he had drifted off into thinking about Dorabella. "I have a lot on my mind, and I think we're through here. Just be in the shuttle at 0800 -- that's

when we're closing the doors, everything loaded by the dawn watch. The descent will take several hours, the shuttle pilot tells me, but nobody will be able to sleep -- you'll want to get to bed early tonight so you're well rested. And it's better to enter the atmosphere on an empty stomach, if you know what I mean."

"Yes sir," said Wiggin.

"Dismissed, then," said Morgan.

Wiggin saluted and left. Morgan almost laughed out loud. The kid didn't realize that even on Morgan's ship, Wiggin's seniority as a Rear Admiral entitled him to courtesies, including the right to leave when he felt like it instead of being dismissed like a subordinate. But it was good to keep the boy in his place. Just because he had the office of admiral bestowed on him before Morgan actually *earned* his didn't mean Morgan had to pretend to show respect to an ignorant teenager.

Wiggin was in his place before Morgan got there, dressed in civilian clothes instead of military uniform -- which was all to the good, since it would not be helpful for people to see that they had identical dress uniforms and rank insignias, while Ender had markedly more battle decorations. Morgan merely nodded to Wiggin and went to his own seat, in the front of the shuttle with a communications array at his disposal.

At first the shuttle flight was normal space travel -- smooth, perfectly controlled. But as they orbited the planet and then dipped down into their point of entry, the shuttle reoriented itself to have the shield meet and dissipate the heat, which is when the bouncing and yawing and rolling began. As the pilot told him beforehand, "Roll and yaw mean nothing. If we start to pitch, *then* we've got problems."

Morgan found himself quite nauseated by the time they steadied out into smooth flight at ten thousand meters. But poor Wiggin -- the boy practically *flew* back to the head, where he was no doubt retching his poor head off. Unless the kid had forgotten not to eat and really had something to puke up.

The landing went smoothly, but Wiggin hadn't returned to his seat -- he took the landing in the head. And when the marines reported that the people were gathering, Wiggin was still inside.

Morgan went to the door of the head himself and rapped on it. "Wiggin," he said, "it's time."

"Just a few more minutes, sir," said Wiggin. His voice sounded weak and shaky. "Really. Looking at the skimmers will keep them busy for a few minutes, and then they'll meet us with a cheer."

It hadn't crossed Morgan's mind to send the skimmers out ahead of his own entrance, but Wiggin was right. If the people had already seen something wonderful from Earth technology, it would make them all the more enthusiastic when he came out himself. "They can't watch the skimmers forever, Wiggin," said Morgan. "When it's time to go out, I hope you're ready to join me."

"I will," said Wiggin. But then another retching sound gave the lie to that statement.

Of course, retching sounds could be made with or without nausea. Morgan had a momentary suspicion and so he acted on it, opening the door without any warning.

There was Wiggin, kneeling in front of the john, his belly convulsing as his body arched with another retch. He had his jacket and shirt off, tossed on the floor near the door -- at least the kid had thought ahead and arranged not to get vomit on his suit. "Anything I can do to help?" asked Morgan.

Wiggin looked at him, his face a mask of barely-controlled nausea. "I can't keep this up forever," he said weakly, managing a faint smile. "I'll be fine in a minute."

And then he turned his face toward the bowl again. Morgan closed the door and suppressed a smile. So much for any worries that the kid might not cooperate. Wiggin was going to miss his own grand entrance, and it wasn't even going to be Morgan's fault.

Sure enough, the midshipman he sent for Wiggin returned with a message, not the boy. "He says he'll come out as soon as he can."

Morgan toyed with sending back word that he was *not* going to have Wiggin's late arrival distract from his own speech. But no, he could afford to be magnanimous. Besides, it didn't look as if Wiggin would be ready any time soon.

The air of Shakespeare was pleasant but strange; there was a light breeze, and it carried some kind of pollen on it. Morgan was quite aware that just by breathing, he might be poisoning himself with the blood-sucking worm that almost killed this colony at the start, but they had treatments for it, and they'd get their first dose in plenty of time. So he savored the smell of planetside air for the first time in ages -- he had last been on Earth six years before this voyage began.

In the middle distance, the scenery was savannah-like -- trees dotting the landscape here and there, lots of bushes. But on either side of the runway, there were crops growing, and he realized that the only way they could accommodate the runway was in the midst of their fields. They had to resent that -- it was a good thing he had thought of sending out the skimmers first, to take their minds off the damage their landing had done to the crops.

The people were surprisingly numerous. He vaguely remembered that the hundreds in the original invasion force would now be more than two thousand, since they'd been reproducing like rabbits, even with the relatively few women in the original force.

What mattered most was that they were applauding when he came out. Their applause might be more for the skimmers than for him, but he was content with that, as long as there was no resistance.

His aides had set up a public address system, but Morgan didn't think they'd need it. The crowd was numerous, but many of them were children, and were so crowded together that from the top of the ramp they were all within easy hailing distance. Still, now that the lectern had been set up, it would look foolish of Morgan not to use it. So he strode to it and gripped it with both hands.

"Men and women of Shakespeare colony, I bring the greetings of the International Fleet and the Ministry of Colonization."

He had expected applause for that, but ... nothing.

"I am Rear Admiral Quincy Morgan, the captain of the ship that brought the new colonists, and new equipment and supplies, to your settlement."

Again, nothing. Oh, they were attentive, and not at all hostile, but they only nodded, and only a few of them. As if they were waiting. Waiting for what?

Waiting for Wiggin. The thought came to him like bile into his throat. They know that Wiggin is supposed to be their governor, and they're waiting for him.

Well, they'll find out soon enough just what Wiggin is -- and isn't.

Then Morgan heard the sound of running footfalls from inside the shuttle and coming out onto the ramp. Wiggin couldn't have timed it better. This really *would* go more smoothly with him for the crowd to look at.

The crowd's attention shifted toward Wiggin, and Morgan smiled. "I give you ..."

But they didn't hear his answer. They knew who it was. The applause and shouting overpowered Morgan's voice, even with the amplification, and he did not need to say Wiggin's name, because the crowd was shouting it.

Morgan turned to give a welcoming gesture to the boy, and was shocked to see that Wiggin was in full dress uniform. His decorations were almost obscenely vast -- dwarfing anything on Morgan's chest. It was so ridiculous -- Wiggin had been playing videogames, for all he knew, and here he was wearing decorations for every battle in the war, along with all the other medals he was given after his victory.

And the little bastard had deliberately deceived him. Wearing civilian clothes, and then changing in the bathroom, just so he could upstage him. Was the nausea all faked, too, so that he could make this grand entrance? Well,

Morgan would wear a phony smile and then he'd make the kid pay for this later. Maybe he wouldn't keep Wiggin as a figurehead after all.

But Wiggin didn't go to the place that Morgan was gesturing him to take at his side, behind the lectern. Instead, Wiggin handed a folded piece of paper to Morgan and then jogged on down the ramp to the ground -- where he was immediately surrounded by the crowd, their shouts of "Ender Wiggin!" now giving way to chatter and laughter.

Morgan looked at the paper. On the outside, in pencil, Wiggin had written: "Your supremacy ended when this shuttle touched ground. Your authority ends at the bottom of this ramp." And he signed it, "Admiral Wiggin" -- reminding him that in port, Wiggin was senior to him.

The gall of the boy. Did he think such claims would hold up here, forty years away from any higher authority? And when it was Morgan who commanded a contingent of highly trained marines?

Morgan unfolded the paper. It was a letter. From Polemarch Bakossi Wuri and Minister of Colonization Hyrum Graff.

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Ender recognized Ix Tolo immediately, from the late Governor Kolmogorov's description of him, and ran right up to him. "Ix Tolo," he shouted as he came. "I'm glad to meet you!"

But even before he reached Tolo and shook his hand, Ender was looking for old men and women. Most of them were surrounded by younger people, but Ender sought them out and tried to recognize the younger faces he had studied and memorized before this voyage even launched.

Fortunately, he guessed right about the first one, and the second one, calling them by rank and name. He made it solemn, that first meeting with the pilots who had actually fought in the war. "I'm proud to meet you at last," he said. "It's been a long wait."

At once the crowd caught on to what he was doing, and backed away, thrusting the old people forward so Ender could find them all. Many of them wept as they shook Ender's hands; some of the old women insisted on hugging him. They tried to speak to him, to tell him things, but he smiled and held up a hand, signaling, Wait a minute, there are more to greet.

He shook every soldier's hand, and when he occasionally guessed at the wrong name, they laughingly corrected him.

Behind him, there was still silence from the loudspeakers. Ender had no idea what Morgan would do about the letter, but he had to keep things moving forward here on the ground, so there was never a gap in which Morgan could insert himself.

The moment he had shaken the last old man's hand, Ender raised that hand up and then turned around, signaling for the people to gather around him. They did -- in fact, they already had, so he was now completely surrounded by the crowd. "There are names I didn't get to call," he said. "Men and women I didn't get to meet." Then, from memory, he spoke the names of all those who had died in the battle. "Too many lost. If only I had known what price was being paid for my mistakes, maybe I could have made fewer of them."

Oh, they wept at that, even as some of them called out, "What mistakes!"

And then Ender reeled off another list of names -- the colonists who had died in those first weeks of the settlement. "By their deaths, by your heroic efforts, this colony was established. Governor Kolmogorov told me about how you lived, what you accomplished. I was still a twelve-year-old boy on Eros when you were fighting the war against the diseases of this land, and you triumphed without any help from me."

Ender raised his hands to face level and clapped them, loudly and solemnly. "I honor those who died in space, and those who died here."

They cheered.

"I honor Vitaly Kolmogorov, who led you for thirty-six years of war and peace!" Another cheer. "And Sel Menach, a man so modest he could not bear to face the attention he knew would be paid to him today!" Cheers and laughter. "Sel Menach, who will teach me everything I need to know in order to serve you. Because I'm here, he will now have time to get back to his *realwork*." A roar of laughter, and a cheer.

And now, from the back of the crowd, from the loudspeakers, came the sound of Morgan's voice. "Men and women of Shakespeare Colony, please forgive the interruption. This was not how the program for today was supposed to go."

The people around Ender glanced in puzzlement toward the top of the ramp. Morgan was speaking in a pleasant, perhaps jocular tone. But he was irrelevant to what had just been happening. He was an intruder in this ceremony. Didn't he see that Ender Wiggin was a victorious commander meeting with his veterans? What did Quincy Morgan have to do with that?

Hadn't he read the letter?



Morgan could only spare half his attention for the letter, he was so furious at Wiggin for heading straight into the crowd. What was he doing? Did he actually know these people's *names*?

But then the letter began to register with him and he read it with his full attention.

Dear Rear Admiral Morgan,

Former Polemarch Chamrajnagar, before his retirement, warned us that there was some risk that you would misunderstand the limited nature of your responsibilities upon reaching Shakespeare Colony. He takes full responsibility for any such misunderstanding, and if he was mistaken, we apologize for the actions we have taken. But you must understand that we were compelled to take preventive measures in case you had been misled into thinking that you were to exercise even momentary authority on the surface of the planet. We have been careful to make sure that if you behave with exact correctness, no one but you and Vice-Admiral Andrew Wiggin will ever know how we were prepared to deal with the situation if you acted inappropriately.

Correct action is this: You will recognize that upon setting foot on Shakespeare, Vice-Admiral Wiggin becomes Governor Wiggin, with absolute authority over all matters concerning the colony and all transfers of persons and material to and from the colony. He retains his rank of Vice-Admiral, so that outside your actual ship, he is your superior officer and you are subject to his authority.

You will return to your ship without setting foot on the planet. You will not meet with any persons from the colony. You will provide a full and orderly transfer of all cargos and persons from your ship to the colony, exactly as Governor Wiggin specifies. You will make all your actions transparent to IFCOM and ColMIN by reporting hourly by ansible on all actions taken in compliance with Governor Wiggin's orders.

We assume that this is what you intended to do all along. However, because of Polemarch Chamrajnagar's warning, we anticipate the possibility that you had different plans, and that you might consider acting on them. The forty-year voyage between us and you made it necessary for us to take actions which we can and will reverse upon your successful completion of this mission and your return to lightspeed.

Every twelve hours, Governor Wiggin will report to us by holographic ansible, assuring us of your compliance. If he fails to report, or seems to us to be under duress of any kind, we will activate a program now imbedded in your ship's computer. The program will also be activated by any attempt to rewrite the program itself or restore an earlier state of the software.

This program will consist of the vocal and holographic transmission to the ansibles aboard your ship and shuttles, through every speaker and computer display on your ship and shuttles, and to every ansible in Shakespeare colony, stating that you are charged with mutiny, ordering that no one obey you, and that you be arrested and placed in stasis for the return voyage to Eros, where you will be tried for mutiny.

We regret that the existence of this message will certainly cause offense to you if you did not plan to behave any way other than correctly. But in that case, your correct actions will ensure that no one sees this message, and when you have returned to lightspeed flight after successfully carrying out your mission, the message will be eliminated from your ship's computer and there will be no record whatsoever of this action. You will return with full honors and your career will continue without blemish.

A copy of this letter has been sent to your executive officer, Commodore Vlad das Lagrimas, but he cannot open it as long as Governor Wiggin continues to certify to us that you are taking correct actions.

Since yours is the first colony ship to arrive at its destination, your actions will establish the precedent for the entire I.F. We look forward to reporting on your excellent actions to the entire fleet.

Sincerely,

Polemarch Bakossi Wuri

Minister of Colonization Hyrum Graff

Morgan read the letter, filled with rage and dread at first, but gradually taking a very different attitude. How could they imagine that he planned anything other than to oversee Wiggin's orderly assumption of power? How dare Chamrajnagar tell them anything that would lead them to think he intended anything else?

He would have to send them a very stiff letter informing them of his disappointment that they would treat him in this high-handed and completely unnecessary way.

No, if he sent a letter it would go into the record. He had to keep his record clean. And they were going to make a lot of hooplah about his being the first captain of a colony ship to complete his mission -- that would be a huge plus for his career.

He had to act as if this letter didn't exist.

The crowd was cheering. They had been cheering and clapping over and over again while Morgan read the letter. He looked out to see that they were now completely surrounding Wiggin, none of them even glancing at the shuttle, at the ramp, at Admiral Morgan. Now that he was looking at them, he could see that everyone was gazing intently at Ender Wiggin, devotedly, eagerly. Every word he said, they cheered at, or laughed, or wept.

Incredibly, they loved him.

Even without this letter, even without any intervention from IFCOM or CoIMin, Morgan lost this power struggle from the moment Ender Wiggin appeared in full uniform and called the veterans by name and invoked their memories of the dead. Wiggin knew how to win their hearts, and he did it without deception or coercion. All he did was care enough to learn their names and faces and remember them. All he did was lead them in victory forty-one years ago. When Morgan was in charge of a supply operation in the asteroid belt.

For all I know, this letter is a complete bluff. Wiggin wrote it himself. Just to keep me distracted while he carried out his public relations coup. If I decided to be obstructive, if I decided to work behind his back to undermine their confidence in him, to destroy him as governor so that I would *have* to step in and ...

They people cheered again, as Wiggin invoked the name of the acting governor.

No, Morgan would never be able to undermine their confidence in Wiggin. They wanted him to be their governor. While to them, Morgan was nothing. A stranger. An interloper. They weren't in the I.F. anymore. They didn't care about authority or rank. They were citizens of this colony now, but they had the legend of how they were founded. The great Ender Wiggin, by his victory, slew all the formics on the surface of this world, opening the land to these humans so they could come and dwell here. And now Wiggin had come among them in person. It was like the second coming of Christ. Morgan had zero chance now.

His aides were watching him intently. They had no idea what was in the letter, but he was afraid that his face might not have been as impassive as he'd meant, while he was reading it; in fact, his impassivity would be a

strong message in itself. So now Morgan smiled at them. "Well, so much for our script. It seems Governor Wiggin had his own plans for how this day would go. It would have been nice of him to inform us, but ... there's no accounting for the pranks that boys will play."

His aides chuckled, because they knew he expected them to. Morgan knew perfectly well that they understood exactly what had happened here. Not the threats in the letter, but Wiggin's complete triumph. Nevertheless, Morgan would act as if this was exactly how things were always meant to turn out, and they would join him in acting that way, and ship's discipline would be maintained.

Morgan turned to the microphone. In a lull in the cheering and shouting of the crowd, he spoke, taking a friendly, joking tone. "Men and women of Shakespeare Colony, please forgive the interruption. This was not how the program for today was supposed to go."

The crowd turned toward him, distractedly, even annoyed. They immediately turned back to Wiggin, who faced Morgan, not with the jaunty smile of victory, but with the same solemn face that he always presented on the ship. The little bastard. He'd been plotting this the whole time, and never showed a sign of it. Even when Morgan looked over the vids of him in his quarters, even when he watched Wiggin with Dorabella's daughter, the boy never let his pretense lapse, not for a second.

Thank the stars he'll be staying on this world, and not returning to be my rival for preeminence in the I.F.

"I won't take but a moment more of your time," said Morgan. "My men will immediately unload all the equipment we brought with us, and the marines will stay behind to assist Governor Wiggin however he might desire. I will return to the ship and will follow Governor Wiggin's instructions as to the order and timing of the transfer of materials and persons from the ship to the ground. My work here is done. I commend you for your achievements here, and thank you for your attention."

There was scattered applause, but he knew that most of them had tuned him out and were merely waiting for him to be done in order to get back to lionizing Andrew Wiggin.

Ah well. When he got back to the ship, Dorabella would be there. It was the best thing he had ever done, marrying that woman.

Of course, he had no idea how she would take the news that she and her daughter would not be colonists after all - that they would be staying with him on his voyage back to Earth. But how could they complain? Life in this colony would be primitive and hard. Life as the wife of an admiral -- the very admiral who was first to bring new settlers and supplies to a colony world -- would be a pleasant one, and Dorabella would thrive in such social settings; the woman really was brilliant at it. And the daughter -- well, she could go to university and have a normal life. No, not normal, exceptional -- because Morgan's position would be such that he could guarantee her the finest opportunities.

Morgan had already turned to go back inside the shuttle, when he heard Wiggin's voice calling to him. "Admiral Morgan! I don't think the people here have understood what you have done for us all, and they need to hear it."

Since Morgan had the words of Graff's and Wuri's letter fresh in his mind, he could not help but hear irony and bad intent in Wiggin's words. He almost decided to keep moving back into the shuttle, as if he hadn't heard the boy.

But the boy was the governor, and Morgan had his own command to think about. If he ignored the boy now, it would look to his own men like an acknowledgment of defeat -- and a rather cowardly one at that. So, to preserve his own position of respect, he turned to hear what the boy had to say.

"Thank you, sir, for bringing us all safely here. Not just me, but the colonists who will join with the original settlers and native-born of this world. You have retied the links between the home of the human race and these far-flung children of the species."

Then Wiggin turned back to the colonists. "Admiral Morgan and his crew and these marines you see here did not come to fight a war and save the human race, and none of them will die at the hands of our enemies. But they made one great sacrifice that is identical to one made by the original settlers here. They cut themselves loose from all that they knew and all that they loved and cast themselves out into space and time to find a new life among the

stars. And every new colonist on that ship has given up everything they had, betting on their new life here among you."

The colonists spontaneously began applauding, a few at first, but soon all of them, and then cheering -- for Admiral Morgan, for the marines, for the unmet colonists still on the ship.

And the Wiggin boy, damn him, was saluting. Morgan had no choice but to return the salute and accept the gratitude and respect of the colonists as a gift from him.

Then Wiggin strode toward the shuttle -- but not to say anything more to Morgan. Instead, he walked toward the commander of the marine squad and called out to him by name. Had the boy learned the names of all of Morgan's crew and marines as well?

"I want you to meet your counterpart," Wiggin said loudly. "The man who commanded the marines with the original expedition." He led him to an old man, and they saluted each other, and in a few moments the whole place was chaotic with marines being swarmed by old men and women and young ones as well.

Morgan knew now that little of what Wiggin had done was really about him. Yes, he had to make sure Morgan knew his place. He accomplished that in the first minute, when he distracted Morgan with the letter while he showed that he knew all the original settlers by name, and acted -- with justification -- as the commander of veterans meeting with them forty-one years after their great victory.

But Wiggin's main purpose was to shape the attitude that this community would have toward Morgan, toward the marines, toward the starship's crew, and, most important, toward the new colonists. He brought them together with a knowledge of their common sacrifice.

And the kid claimed that he didn't like making speeches. What a liar. He said exactly what needed saying. Next to him, Morgan was a novice. No, a fumbling incompetent.

Morgan made his way back inside the shuttle, pausing only to tell the waiting officers that Governor Wiggin would be giving them their orders about unloading the cargo.

Then he went to the bathroom, tore the letter into tiny pieces, chewed them into pulp, and spat the wad into the toilet. The taste of paper and ink nauseated him, and he retched a couple of times before he got control of himself.

Then he went into his communications center and had lunch. He was still eating it when a lieutenant commander supervised a couple of the natives in bringing in a fine mess of fresh fruits and vegetables, just as Wiggin had predicted. It was delicious, and afterward, Morgan napped until one of his aides woke him to tell him the unloading was finished, they had taken aboard a vast supply of excellent foodstuffs and fresh water, and they were about to take off to return to the ship.

"The Wiggin boy will make a fine governor, don't you think?" Morgan said.

"Yes, sir, I believe so, sir," said the aide.

"And to think I imagined that he might need help from me to get started." Morgan laughed. "Well, I have a ship to run. Let's get back to it!"

Laws and Sausages

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

My dad likes to say there are two things people should never see being made -- laws and sausages. I guess that means it can get pretty ugly when people are making laws, like in congress or at the school board. Dad took me to a school board meeting once, when they were fighting about whether to keep a certain book in the library. Let me tell you -- it got pretty ugly. These parents who had never even read the book were shouting about how bad it was because it had a word in it that I hear on the school bus all the time. Heck, I've heard a lot of parents use that word, too.

But this isn't about laws. See, most of the time when Dad shares that quote, it's right before we eat sausages. That got me thinking. What do they put in those things? With a whole piece of meat like a steak or spare ribs, I know exactly what it was before it got sliced up and wrapped in plastic. Even with hamburger, you can sort of see that it started out as meat. But sausages? Who knows. I guess it doesn't matter. Whatever is in there, they taste good -- that's for sure.

I didn't think I'd ever get a chance to find out. But then our class took a field trip to the Wexler Museum of Traditional Arts and Crafts. Yawn. Huge yawn. Arty-

crafty-yawn. When I got off the bus, I noticed that the Wexler Museum was right next door to Philo's Phantastic Sausages.

Bingo. Or maybe I should say, *how phortunate*.

I ducked out of the line when we went into the museum. That was easy to do because we were with Mr. Exmire and Ms. Grunbalthar, and they were always flirting with each other. Which reminds me of a third thing nobody should ever see being made -- Exmire and Grunbalthar making meaningful glances at each other. Wretch.

So while these two fine adults educators were leading my eager classmates into a hall filled with painted crockery, ceramic tea pots, and fascinating textiles, I ducked around the other side of the bus and slunk off toward Philo's Phantastic Sausages in search of wisdom and enlightenment.

Philo's was in an old two-story building made of red bricks. There weren't any windows. I walked around back and spotted a couple of those big metal doors where they load trucks. But they were shut. I found another door in front. I've learned that it's not hard to walk into any place if I pretend I belong there. I figured that if I ran into anyone, I'd just say, "Got a message for Dad," and keep walking.

Luck was with me. When I went in, there wasn't anybody up front. I guess there aren't a lot of people who'd stroll in and buy a ton of sausage, so they didn't need a receptionist. The area was pretty small, but there was a door at the back of the room. It led to a hallway that ended at a flight of stairs. I climbed up the stairs, pushed open the door at the top, and stepped onto a small metal walkway high above the factory floor.

Cold air washed over me and I shivered.

Below me, a half dozen workers dressed in white butcher's coats were unloading large bins with shovels and tossing the contents onto a conveyer belt.

What I saw made my stomach lurch like it wanted to leap out of my body. Who would have believed it? They were shoveling the worst stuff imaginable out of the bins. This was truly gross. The belt was loaded with broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, and brussels sprouts. Cabbages and lettuce rolled off the shovels, along with eggplants and artichokes.

"No way. . ." I whispered. This couldn't be the whole process. I knew there was more to sausages than a bunch of vegetables. I couldn't imagine any possible way that vegetables could be made to taste that good. The catwalk ran all the way around the room to a door on the opposite wall. I had to see where the conveyor went.

I stepped into the next room. The belt stopped just a few feet past the entrance. It delivered its load of vegetables into the wide-open mouth of a huge creature. The animal -- if that's what it was -- filled the length of the room. It was lying on the floor like a giant worm, with a gaping mouth at one end. From its sides drooped dozens of short legs that looked almost like flippers. It had no eyes.

It swallowed all that the conveyor belt could offer. The sound of its chewing was louder than the crash of waves during a tropical storm, and definitely as wet. I watched as the creature ate and swelled, until its bloated body rose to just below the height of the catwalk, reaching a beam that ran across the room beneath my feet. A large, red switch jutted from below the center of the beam. I held my breath as the taut gray flesh pressed against the button.

A bell rang. I could barely hear it above the chomping. Dozens of workers, dressed in white butcher's coats, rushed into the room, each one carrying a long metal tube. One end of the tubes was pointed. Clear, floppy tendrils trailed from the other end. I realized the tendrils were sausage casings.

A second bell rang. All at once, like sailors harpooning a whale, the men thrust their tubes deep into the body of the creature. I suspect it might not even have noticed. It certainly didn't care enough to stop chewing. At each wound, something rushed out from within, filling the casings. In a moment, the men had harvested their sausages, and the creature had shrunk down to a size which, though still huge, was no longer swollen to the bursting point.

I'd seen enough. More than enough. My mind tried to chew what I'd just witnessed, but couldn't seem to swallow it. I went back to the stairs and raced out of the building. The class was just returning to the bus. As I blended in with the crowd and took my seat, I envied them their afternoon spent viewing arts and crafts that wouldn't haunt their dreams.

That night, my mother made sausages for dinner. I stared at my plate. There it lay, amidst the potatoes and onions and peppers -- a large, meaty sausage, stuffed to bursting inside its transparent wrapper. I closed my eyes and vowed that I would never eat it. In my mind, I saw the factory again, with that creature eating endlessly. I heard the sound of it chewing and saw the men thrusting their tubes into its swollen sides.

Chewing. Swallowing. Mindlessly chewing whatever it was fed.

Warmth flooded my mouth. I opened my eyes. To my horror, I saw a sausage on my fork. The severed, open end dripped an amber-colored grease. In my mouth, I could taste the remains of the hunk I had mindlessly bitten, chewed, and swallowed.

"Another?" my mother asked.

"Yes, please," I said. I closed my eyes and took a large bite.

Zero Tolerance Meets the Alien Death Ray

by [David Lubar](#)



[Artwork by Lance Card](#)

My Uncle Shubert was passing through town, and had stopped at our house for a couple days. He's pretty cool for an adult. He takes me places and never treats me like a kid. As he was packing up his suitcase, I noticed a silvery tube on his bed.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Alien death ray," he said.

I checked his face to see if he was kidding. It was hard to tell. "Do you mean it's a ray that aliens use to kill people, or is it a ray that kills aliens?"

He shrugged. "Not sure. The guy who sold it to me wasn't very clear. But I liked the looks of it, and the price was right, so I bought it. Do you want it?"

"For real?"

"Yup."

"For keeps?"

"Definitely. It's all yours."

"Awesome!" I grabbed the tube and took a close look. It fit nicely in my hand, though it was heavier than I'd expected. It was solid at one end, and hollow at the other, with a single clear glass button near the solid end. I pointed the tube out the window and pushed the button. Nothing happened.

"Maybe it needs batteries," I said.

"Maybe it only shoots aliens," he said. "Or maybe only aliens can shoot it."

"Either way, thanks."

"Sure. That's what uncles are for."

I took the alien death ray with me to school the next day. I showed it to my friend, Veejay, as soon as I got to class.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Alien death ray," I told him.

Before he could say another word, a hand swooped down over my shoulder and snatched the tube away. "Young man, you are in a lot of trouble," my teacher, Mrs. Peswitch, said. "You know we have a zero-tolerance policy about weapons."

"But . . ." I tried to protest that it wasn't a real weapon, but she yanked my arm hard enough to pull me off my feet, and dragged me down the hall. The whole time, she kept muttering about all the "young, violent hooligans who were wrecking the school."

The next thing I knew, I was in the Principal Mabler's office. "This is very serious," he said. "Bringing a weapon to school. I'm shocked."

"It's not real," I said.

"That doesn't matter. We have a zero tolerance policy. It doesn't matter if it is a toy, or even a drawing of a weapon. Any weapon gets you a five day suspension. I'm sure your parents will agree that this has to be done. It's the only way to keep us safe."

He reached for the phone.

"Please . . ." I'd never been in any kind of big trouble. This was so bad, I could feel my knees trembling. Then my whole body started to tremble.

"I'm sorry. No exceptions. Not even --"

Whatever he said next was drowned out by the roar. It was like twenty fighter jets flew overhead at once. Then the roar grew louder. The whole room shook. Books bounced off the shelf behind Principal Mabler, and his diploma fell off the wall.

I raced to the window. A space ship, round and huge and filled with flashing lights, landed in the front of the school. As I stared, the hatch opened, and a whole bunch of creatures raced out. They were big -- maybe six or seven feet tall. They had enormous heads with four eyes. They had four arms, each carrying something that I figured had to be a weapon.

Principal Mabler opened his mouth, but all that came out was a gasp as his eyes rolled back and he passed out. He flopped to the floor. Luckily, he had a thick rug in his office.

I grabbed the alien death ray from the desk and raced back to the window. I aimed the ray at the largest alien and pressed the button.

I hope this works.

It sure did. I nearly got knocked on my butt as a searing beam of energy shot from the tube. The alien sizzled for an instant, like a burger that had just been dropped on a red-hot grill, then vanished in a puff of green smoke.

I stared shooting the rest of them. Luckily, I'd played enough video games, and watched enough cartoons, to know what sort of stance to use with this kind of weapon. I cleared out all the aliens I could see. But some of them had broken into the school. I ran out of the office, and hunted down at the rest of them.

When I was sure I'd gotten all of the aliens, I returned to the office. There was one last alien in there. He was holding the principal from behind, and had some sort of gun pointed at his head.

"Help me," Principal Mabler said.

"Zero tolerance?" I asked. "No exceptions?"

"That would be silly," he said. "There are always exceptions."

I fired the last alien, and then put the ray in my pocket. I headed toward the door so I could get back to my classroom before the morning announcements. But I turned back a moment later. "Can I have a late pass?" I asked. "Mrs. Peswitch loves to give out detention."

"Well, according to the rules, tardiness based on disciplinary actions isn't excusable." Principal Mabler said.

"So I'm going to get a detention?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh no! Aliens!" I pointed out the window.

Principal Mabler let out a squeal and dove to the floor. Then he crawled to the window and peeked over the sill.
"What! Where!"

"My mistake," I said. "I could have sworn it was more aliens. It must have been a cloud or a duck or something. So, anyhow, about that late pass?"

"No problem." He got off the floor, grabbed his pad, and started writing.

"Thanks." I took the pass and headed back to homeroom. I thought about running down the hall, but I knew that was against the rules. And some rules actually almost made sense.

Interviews With The Fantastic

InterGalactic Interview With Zoran Zivkovic
by Darrell Schweitzer

Zoran Zivkovic is a Serbian writer who lives in Belgrade. He has a PhD in Literature from the University of Belgrade, 1982. He has been writing fiction since 1993, when his first novel, *The Fourth Circle*, appeared in Serbian. He has gained a considerable English-language following since his work began to appear in the British magazine *Interzone*. His novella, "The Library," published in *Leviathan 3*, won the World Fantasy Award in 2003. His current American publisher is Aio Publishing. He has also been published by Northwestern University Press, Dalkey Archive Publishing, Night Shade Books/Ministry of Whimsey, Prime Books, and PS Publishing in England. His works are ably translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic, though he is himself fluent enough in English that in the course of this interview he managed to teach me a word I didn't know. ("Slalom," which means to take a zig-zag course while skiing; here used metaphorically.)

SCHWEITZER: Your work first came to my attention with the splendid "The Astronomer" in *Interzone*, which is not only a story about a powerful moral dilemma, but one of the best uses of the "Lady or the Tiger?" ending I've ever seen. Was that your first publication in English? How long had you been writing in Serbian before that? What had you published?

ZIVKOVIC: Yes, "The Astronomer" was my very first publication in English. It appeared in the July 1999 issue of *Interzone*. In 2000 it was published in the USA, as the introductory part of my mosaic-novel *Time Gifts*. Eventually, "The Astronomer" was reprinted in the UK in 2006 in the *Impossible Stories* omnibus.

I started to write fiction only in 1993, when I was forty-five. By the time "The Astronomer" was first published, I had only four prose books: *The Fourth Circle* (1993), *Time Gifts* (1997), *The Writer* (1998) and *The Book* (1999). The beginning of the new millennium was my most prolific period so far. I am currently finishing my seventeenth book of fiction. *Escher's Loops* is due to appear in May.

SCHWEITZER: Related to this, were you actually familiar with the famous Frank R. Stockton story "The Lady or the Tiger?" or am I being too provincial about this? (It is probably the most famous American story with an indeterminate ending which forces the reader to guess on the basis of clues laid down. Published about 1900.)

ZIVKOVIC: I wasn't aware of Frank R. Stockton's story at the time I wrote "The Astronomer", in early 1997. I read it only years later. But I have read many other "open-ended" fictional works. It is an ancient narrative strategy. As I teach my students attending the creative writing course at Belgrade University, the purpose of prose isn't so much to provide definite answers, as to ask the right questions. Readers of "The Astronomer" shouldn't be too much concerned about what monosyllabic answer the protagonist gives at the end, since, as is shown in the conclusive part of *Time Gifts*, it is basically irrelevant...

SCHWEITZER: What is your background in fantastic literature? Did you grow up reading American and British science fiction (possibly in translation?) or eastern European fantastic literature?

ZIVKOVIC: I read both. My formal education is in literature. I first graduated in the comparative literature department and subsequently I received my master's degree and my doctorate in the same discipline. A substantial part of world literature belongs to one or another form of fantastical fiction. Modern day "science fiction" and "fantasy" (I am not entirely happy with either of these terms) are part of a very long and very fruitful tradition. On the same tradition, twentieth century European fantastic literature is based. Instead of "eastern" I would rather call it "middle" European.

I was reading American and British science fiction and fantasy first in translation and then, as I became able to read in English, in the original. For years I was an ardent promoter in my country of English language SF & F in the capacity of both a translator and a publisher. I translated more than fifty books, mostly from English, and published nearly two hundred and fifty. The vast majority of these books appeared at a period when it took courage, both academic and political, to be a supporter of these genres.

I definitely abandoned any academic, translating or publishing involvement with science fiction after my two volume set of the *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* was brought out in 1990. It was the fourth book of that kind in the world by the time it appeared. Why did I take that decision? Because I finally wanted to accept the ultimate challenge: to start writing prose myself. That happened three years later, in 1993, when my first novel, *The Fourth Circle*, was published. It was a very fortunate realization that I wasn't in the prime of my youth any more to drive the parallel slalom: being an author and a publisher or translator at the same time. To be a writer is a full time job. I made my choice and I haven't regretted it. So far.

SCHWEITZER: You say you cut loose from academe, although you still teach a writing course. Is it actually possible to make a living as a writer of fantastic fiction in contemporary Serbia?

ZIVKOVIC: I started teaching a university creative writing course only a semester ago. No, it isn't possible to make a living as a writer of any kind, not only of fantastic fiction, in contemporary Serbia. There isn't a single full-time, professional prose writer nowadays in my country. Not even Milorad Pavic, whose novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* was a world best-seller in the late eighties. No wonder, since Serbia is such a tiny market. An average print-run is only 500 copies. Three thousand sold copies is already considered a best-seller. It wasn't like that in the country where I was born. Former Yugoslavia was a huge market. Alas, it disintegrated in a civil war in the 1990s, leaving former Yugoslavs in a number of small countries. Serbia is one of them. I can only hope we unite again, if not politically then at least as a market.

SCHWEITZER: How is fantastic literature regarded where you are? In the US, as you may know, it is still somewhat associated with cheap pulp fiction and not regarded as real literature by many establishment critics. Do you ever encounter that kind of division?

ZIVKOVIC: Such prejudices aren't very widespread in Europe, where fantastic literature has a long and outstanding tradition and is generally considered by the literary establishment not only as a legitimate part of the mainstream but often as its peak. Bulgakov and Kafka, two among the most prominent European authors of the twentieth century, are primarily masters of the noble art of the fantastic. I guess we are rather fortunate still not to be so much dominated by the publishing industry. I believe it is this industry, with its paraliterary standards and obsession with profit before all else, that is mostly to blame for the way your fantastic literature is treated within your academic literary establishment.

SCHWEITZER: And if I may venture an overtly political question, well, political conditions were surely very different in Yugoslavia in 1993 when you started writing. Did you have problems with censorship? How did you cope?

ZIVKOVIC: I never experienced any censorship problems in Yugoslavia. It's just one of many stereotypes introduced by decades of cold war political propaganda. We never belonged to the Soviet bloc and were an open and free country as much as any other in the West. Let me give you an example. With my red socialist passport I could travel to all but two countries in the world without a visa. Now, with my blue passport, the very symbol of freedom and democracy, there are only two countries left in the world for which I don't need a visa...

SCHWEITZER: Robert Heinlein once famously described science fiction as a form of realism, that is, serious speculation about things that might be, told in a realistic manner. That doesn't fit your work at all, which seems closer to Borges or Kafka than to Heinlein. So how would you describe your approach? What is the use of unreality in describing thematic truth?

ZIVKOVIC: First of all, I don't write science fiction. Nor fantasy for that matter. I feel rather uncomfortable whenever labeled in any way as an author. I consider myself a writer without any prefixes. I am just a humble practitioner of the ancient and noble art of prose. No more, no less. Any prefix would be either misleading or limiting. Labels are invented by the publishing industry which doesn't see any art in prose. For them it is just another product whose sole purpose is to be sold. My writing belongs to the middle European fantastic tradition. I feel strong literary kinship with such masters as Bulgakov, Kafka and Lem. I write fantastic fiction because its non-mimetic nature enables me to tell something that couldn't be expressed in any other way.

SCHWEITZER: No writer likes to be corralled by definitions, but let me argue for a moment. If "fantasy" is defined as something broader than "books which imitate Tolkien," but is taken more to mean any story which contains non-real elements, which the author and the reader both acknowledge are impossible -- I am thinking of that statement at the front of Lucian of Samosata's "True History" in which he says "I have not seen these things, nor have I heard them from another, nor do I expect to be believed" -- then surely you, Kafka, and Bulgakov are all authors of fantasy. Much of what goes on in your work is impossible by most people's standards, and people do not really turn into enormous insects, nor did the Devil go touring around the Soviet Union in person, as in *The Master and Margarita*. So is this fantasy? Don't we mean by "fantasy" the broader tradition of the fantastic, rather than the narrower, commercial genre?

ZIVKOVIC: In this part of the world we use "fantastika" as the generic term for all non-mimetic prose works. It is the opposite of "realism" which is, by definition, mimetic. "Fantastika" is non-mimetic in the sense that it doesn't imitate the real world, but tries to invent a new kind of reality. There is a multitude of forms of "fantastika": folklore, oneiric, surreal, supernatural, to name just a few. Each of these forms has its immanent type of "reality." Science fiction is also one of the forms of "fantastika," probably the closest to mimetic/realistic fiction. The English

language equivalent of "fantastika" is "fantasy", but the term has been used in a narrower sense in recent times. It comprises predominantly the "Tolkienesque" or "sword and sorcery" type of "fantastika". Time and again, the publishing industry is to blame for this limitation.

SCHWEITZER: As for science fiction, well, when Lem is voyaging to other planets by scientific, rather than supernatural means, even if the book is about the limitations of human knowledge (as in *Solaris*), that would seem to be science fiction. Your "The Astronomer" could well be read as being about time-travelers from the future informing the prisoner what will happen.

ZIVKOVIC: It could be, yes, if you read it out of the context of the mosaic-novel *Time Gifts* to which it organically belongs as the first of four constituent parts. Within the context of *Time Gifts*, however, there are no time-travelers from the future. The denouement is, as you know, of an entirely different nature...

SCHWEITZER: Is there any real distinction between "the middle European fantastic tradition" and what an American would call "fantasy"? If so, is it a matter of theme, approach, underlying philosophy, or what?

ZIVKOVIC: I would consider one of the greatest American masters of the art of "fantastika," Edgar Allan Poe, much closer to the middle European fantastic tradition than to modern-day American fantasy. H. P. Lovecraft also. There were no fundamental distinctions between middle European and English language "fantastika" until approximately the mid-twentieth century. Both had the same roots, emerged from the same cultural tradition. But then the publishing industry took over in your part of the world. I am very much afraid it is soon to dominate globally. (We live in an era of globalization, don't we?) "Fantastika" will be reduced then to a literarily worthless, but otherwise more or less commercial genre....

SCHWEITZER: Well it seems to me that Lovecraft is very much part of the Gothic tradition and also the ghost-story tradition -- he has much in common with Poe, Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood -- and his rationalism leads him to approach science fiction. What makes him more "fantastika" than some of his contemporaries and colleagues, such as, say, Robert E. Howard or Clark Ashton Smith?

ZIVKOVIC: One can identify in Lovecraft's works a variety of influences besides the Gothic tradition. But I am not an expert in Lovecraft. I just mentioned him as an example of an outstanding writer whose literary roots are much deeper than it might seem, particularly if his opus is seen through the lens of only one language.

SCHWEITZER: In any case, wouldn't you agree that labels are most useful in retrospect? As the author of an encyclopedia of SF, you must have had to categorize and label quite a bit. But I don't see how labels like "science fiction" or "fantasy" or "fantastika" are of much use to the writer when actually writing the story.

ZIVKOVIC: This is going to be somewhat simplified, but it is how I basically see it. "Categories" are for sciences. "Labels" are for supermarkets. I am very much afraid we have already entered an era in which books are being sold predominately in supermarkets. Labels are required in such surroundings to distinguish books from other goods. Macaroni, for example.

As for a writer starting a story, she/he always faces a simple dilemma. An author can write for the sake of art, in which case she/he isn't restricted by any other limitations but her/his literary abilities. On the other hand, she/he can decide to write for the market, in which case it has to be taken into account what's currently marketable, what would please their omnipotent majesties: the sales and marketing directors. And these people -- sales and marketing directors -- couldn't possibly care less about such a triviality as art.

I have written a story about it, "The Telephone." It is included in my omnibus, *Impossible Stories* (PS Publishing, UK, 2006). The Devil telephones an author suffering from writer's block and offers him a choice: to be rich and famous in his lifetime, but forgotten afterwards, or to remain poor and unrecognized, but to acquire a prominent place in literary history. What would you choose? If you decided to take both fame in your lifetime and literary immortality, I must warn you that this option isn't within the Devil's jurisdiction. You should apply for it from a higher authority....

SCHWEITZER: Well if everything gets completely globalized and Wal-Mart takes over the world -- which sounds like a scenario for a Pohl/Kornbluth novel of the 1950s -- then presumably "fantastika" would become one more marketing label to put on the spines of books.

ZIVKOVIC: I don't think so. Supermarkets need more specific labels than "fantastika". One doesn't expect every article in the food department to be labeled just "food". By the way, in my humble view, *The Space Merchants* is one of the greatest American novels of the twentieth century....

SCHWEITZER: Let's talk for a minute about "mosaic novels." An interesting term. I've been reacquainting myself with your work by reading *Four Stories Till the End*, which is a mosaic novel, though even the episodes have episodes within them. Many of your books fall into this pattern, a cycle of 4 or 5 stories, each complete in itself, but forming a larger structure which (as in the case of "The Astronomer" as it appears in the context of *Time Gifts*) can change the way we read a story. I see that there IS a difference here between a "mosaic novel" and a collection of linked stories, and I will even candidly admit that I was overtly imitating your structures when I wrote *Living with the Dead*. (You may have seen three parts of that in *Interzoneright* before David Pringle left.) Is this a distinctly European form? Why write these, rather than more seamless novels, or just collections of short stories?

ZIVKOVIC: *Living with the Dead* is one of the best things I've read of yours. Not because you also used the "mosaic-novel" structure, but because it is a genuine piece of the noble art of "fantastika". You were not imitating, you were legitimately relying on what's a part of our common literary heritage. The term "mosaic-novel" isn't a European invention. It was coined by the great Ursula Le Guin. I found it in an interview of hers and it seemed to suit perfectly the narrative form I was mostly using. I am not aware of any other European authors writing "mosaic-novels". There isn't a simple answer why I prefer this form over others. I don't decide consciously about it. Once a new work is ready to be delivered from the place where all my fiction originates, my subconscious, it takes whatever form is the most convenient. It so happens that my subconscious seems to be rather fond of "mosaic-novels"...

SCHWEITZER: You mention that the market in Serbia is so very small that 500 is the normal print-run and 3000 is a bestseller. But I wonder: is there still a flourishing community of Serbian authors of "fantastika" that English readers have never seen? I have to confess that the only two Serbians I can name, much less have read, are you and Milorad Pavic. Which other such writers among your countrymen do you think deserve wider attention?

ZIVKOVIC: A number of contemporary Serbian writers have received international recognition recently. David Albahari, for example. Goran Petrovic also, although he isn't yet translated into English. You see, this is one of the main problems an author writing in a small language is faced with. As I once remarked, if you write in Serbian, you don't write at all. If you, however, wish your books to be available in English translation and thus accessible to the whole world, not only the English-speaking regions, you have to invest a small fortune. Many good Serbian writers can't afford such a luxury and therefore remain "invisible" internationally. I am currently working with our Ministry of Culture to arrange a program that would provide assistance to the most prominent Serbian writers to get their books translated into English.

SCHWEITZER: To back up just a little bit, your comment on Lovecraft is intriguing, that the depth of his literary roots show when he is filtered through more than one language. I assume you're talking about reading him in translation. The only language other than English that Lovecraft was at all fluent in was Latin. But are you saying that by reading him in translation you see an affinity to other parts of world literature that might not be so evident to a native English-speaker reading him in English?

ZIVKOVIC: What I meant regarding the depths of Lovecraft's literary roots was that they become more evident if one takes into account what has been written in other languages. Although Lovecraft probably wasn't aware of any prose works that weren't available in English (or Latin) translation, there are still similarities between them and his opus. There is no mystery in it. This is how the art of literature has worked ever since it was invented. Various authors, who are in no way aware of each other, make similar literary "discoveries." If I were much younger, I might be tempted to write my doctoral thesis about certain parallels between Lovecraft's "fantastika" and the Serbian folklore "fantastika" (in which, by the way, the term "vampire" was originally coined). But, alas, at this advanced age, I am just a humble writer and a creative-writing university professor. Fortunately, young scholars are coming and, who knows, some day, such a thesis could be written. We can only hope it won't remain imprisoned forever in the small Serbian language...

SCHWEITZER: How does being multilingual affect your understanding of a piece of literature?

ZIVKOVIC: It's a privilege to be able to read in as many languages as possible. The more languages one speaks, the more windows are open for one...

SCHWEITZER: What are you working on these days? What is coming up soon? I am sure your faithful readers -- and you DO have an English language audience -- will want to know.

ZIVKOVIC: I am deeply honored to have my faithful English language audience. This is something a writer of the art of "fantastika" originating outside the English-speaking world can only dream of. I do hope my readers in the US and UK enjoy my new novel, *Escher's Loops*. It is about to be finished and the English translation is already well under way. In the meantime, before *Escher's Loops* is published, as many as six other books of mine will appear this year in English translation: *The Last Book*, *The Writer*, *The Reader*, and *The Bridge* in the UK (PS Publishing) and *Impossible Encounters* (Aio Publishing) in the US.

SCHWEITZER: Thank you, Zoran Zivkovic.