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# Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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# Ten Years of Silver Age Books

## SW Theaker

Looking back through the news archives on our website last month, and sprucing them up a bit, I realised that I had let the tenth anniversary of Silver Age Books pass without comment last issue, so let's put that right!

Back in 1997, after years of writing nothing and feeling pretty bad about it, I spent a couple of weeks writing *Professor Challenger in Space*, a short and silly novel. It had been fun to write but obviously no one would be interested in publishing it (if it was even legal to do so).

In 1998 I went into a copy shop (Alphagraphics, who much, much later would print the first dozen or so issues of TQF) and found that it wouldn't be terribly expensive to photocopy a few sets of the book for my friends. I was a bit stuck on how to bind them, so I bought some A5 folders and a hole punch, and thus was born the folderback edition. I tried to make it look like a real book (despite putting it together without access to a computer), so it needed a publisher. The name Silver Age Books was inspired by my love of comics. I wanted to publish books with a similar ethos to the wonderful, wild and silly comics of the Silver Age (roughly the late 1950s to the late 1960s): Superman and Kandor, the Fantastic Four and the Negative Zone, and so on.

The slogan of this new company was "Publishing novels retrofitted for the new millenium". Readers were advised to look out for two forthcoming

releases: *Mad Rolnikov and the Space Warriors* (due spring/summer 1998) and *Don Coyote's Spacesuit* (due autumn/winter 1998). Sadly neither of these were published.

In 2000 I was working for a publisher, and noted with interest the invoices for book printing passing over my desk – the prices weren't as expensive as I had expected. Before long I was quite an experienced typesetter, and a few lunchtimes was all it took to prepare *Professor Challenger in Space* for paperback publication. I gave many of the copies away as Christmas presents, sent some others to libraries, and even sold a few.

Round about August of the same year I bought myself a Rocket eBook, something that seemed rather cool and futuristic at the time. The best thing about it was that you could download software for creating your own ebooks, and there was a website, the Rocket Library, to which you could upload them. So I uploaded a version of *Professor Challenger in Space*, and was heartened by the healthy download numbers. In December I made plans to write a book a month for the Rocket Library for the next year...

Well, I finished one of them, at least. That was *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!* and if I remember correctly it was online within an hour or so of being written, on 22 January 2001.

It must have been around this time

that the ever-magnificent Silver Age Books website first appeared.

Disaster struck only two months later: in March 2001 the Rocket Library was shut down. It was a real shame, because it was a pretty cool place.

In December of that year, Silver Age Books published *Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!* as a paperback (with a black and white cover to make the printing as cheap as possible). 2002 was then the high point to date of our book publishing, as further books followed: *Elephant* by Harsh Grewal (May 2002), *Elsewhere* by Steven Gilligan (round about June 2002), and, finally, and printed secretly as a surprise present for the author, *There Are Now a Billion Flowers*, by John Greenwood (June 2002).

We got a bit carried away at this point, because many further titles were quickly announced, none of which ever saw publication: *Aardvark Attack* (volumes one to three!), by Alec Abernathy, *Rolnikov, Mad Knight of Uttar Pradesh*, by me, and *Alpha.one*, by Steven Gilligan, not to mention multiple unwritten titles by Howard Phillips that never got beyond the point of having a proposal and a page on the website.

Stung by our abject failure, nothing much happened with Silver Age Books for a while then. The cost of printing (this was pre-Lulu) was prohibitively high anyway, even if we

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had actually written any new books. There was very little chance of making money, and every likelihood of losing quite a lot! So 2003 and the beginning of 2004 were very quiet, very sad times for us.

Then at the end of 2004 we wrote some new novels, launched *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* to put them in, and three and a bit years later here we are, on top of the world!

But why be so proud of a history of such mediocrity and failure? Well, I'm not proud so much as happy to have had the fun of doing it. Also, the purpose of Silver Age Books has always been to indulge myself – and everyone will agree that in that regard it's been a great success!

## Contributors

*Mike Schultheiss* contributes "Darwin's Corridor" to this issue, bringing adventure, ecology, colonialism, evolution and religion together in one steaming teapot of a tale. Though we have published many, many wonderful contributions over the last year of TQF, this kind of intelligent adventure is so exactly what we're after that we are tempted to post it in full on our submission guidelines page. And it comes with a scientific note. How wicked is that?

Notably, the story contains the word *erectus* 91 times. If you laugh, it's only because you're immature. (Like me.)

It is also notable for being one of two stories from American friends this issue with curious connections to our home city of Birmingham: Buffalo Bill, mentioned in the story, once brought his travelling show here.

Mike lives in Davis, California, and attends the university of the same name. He is currently awaiting his graduation from this same university in June of this year with great anticipation. He plans to pursue a career as a high school teacher of Social Studies and English through the UC Davis credentialing program in the fall. Having grown up in the foothills of

California's Sierra Nevadas, Mike is a long-time nature and animal enthusiast and is particularly fond of reptiles. He is currently at work on a novel-length version of "Darwin's Corridor" as well as a vampire novel, *Blood Moon Queen*. You can befriend (or just secretly spy on) him at [www.myspace.com/mikeschultheiss](http://www.myspace.com/mikeschultheiss).

*Richard K Lyon* is a semi-retired research scientist/inventor whose hobbies include collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. He has also published numerous short stories and novelettes. A collection of the latter, *Tales From The Lyonheart*, is available from Barnes and Noble, etc. In collaboration with *Andrew J Offut*, famed author of *My Lord Barbarian*, he wrote the Tiana trilogy (*Demon in the Mirror*, *The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*), *Rails Across the Galaxy* for *Analog*, and "The Iron Mercenary", a tale of Tiana which appeared in TQF#19. To this issue they have contributed "Arachnis", an adventure of Tiana's youth.

*Sam Leng* lives in Yorkshire, England. She has had fiction published in various print and online magazines, including *Skive*, *Delivered* and *Steelcaves*. A previous story by Sam – "When the Sun and the Moon Did Not Shine" – appeared in TQF#19. This issue's tale, "A Matter of Taste", is short, sweet and impossible to discuss without spoiling it entirely. She produces her own webzine: see [www.neonbeam.org](http://www.neonbeam.org).

*Robert Laughlin* lives in Chico, California, in a Craftsman bungalow destined for restoration by some well-heeled future owner. Mr. Laughlin's short stories have appeared in several American magazines since mid-2006; "The Spirits of '26", is his first publication in a British magazine. It's in our science fiction section, but to explain why that isn't really an accurate categorisation would spoil some of its surprises.

He offers a note to put this issue's story in context: "I conceived this story in its present form approximately five years before the events of September 11, 2001. I decided against writing it at that time out of the belief

no one would consider it the least bit germane."

As well as sharing the interest of "Darwin's Corridor" in the issues surrounding colonialism, this is the second of our American stories with a Birmingham connection. Avoiding spoilers, I'll just say that the story mentions Birmingham bricks at one point, which made the acquisition of an illustration no more difficult than stepping outside to photograph our crumbling garden wall.

Mr Laughlin's story, "In the Evening Made", was voted a Notable Story of 2006 by the judging panel of the storySouth Million Writers Award.

*John Greenwood* has made contributions to most issues of TQF following his return from a round-the-world trip, and was eventually made co-editor in recognition of his efforts. To his camera we owe the photography that accompanies "Darwin's Corridor" in this issue. To his pen we owe the ongoing genius of Newton Bradwell's inconclusive researches into the unknown. This issue sees no improvement in Newton's situation. I would feel sorry for him if his travails weren't so entertaining.

*Steven Gilligan* was a mercurial, interesting and funny person to be around. Unfortunately he produced just twelve episodes of *Helen and Her Magic Cat*, the last of which appears on the back cover of this issue. Most of his unpublished work was destroyed before his death, an action which left some tantalising hints in the recent files list on his laptop, but a few fragments survived. We'll do something with them at some point, so it's not quite the end of his contribution to the magazine. Still, it's a bummer to have reached the last Helen. What can or should we read into its strange conclusion? Did Steven just lose interest in producing the comic?

*Stephen Theaker* is the eponymous editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, and the cack-handed publisher behind Silver Age Books. He recently became the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society, a publication launched in 1971.

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# Darwin's Corridor

## Mike Schultheiss

### Chapter One

The plane settled gently to a stop on the tarmac, its jets still hissing from their vertically-rotated position on its powerful, sweeping wings. The hatch slid open with a whirr, and the small party stepped into the blazing hot sun. A nearby control tower jutted boldly into the sky, and across the expanses of cerasphalt lay hangars, warehouses, and a handful of aircraft. Directly ahead stood a low-roofed structure of adobe. Further beyond they could see the raised spire of a church and other structures.

"Guess this is it." Officer Maria Cardenas checked her gun in its holster. Her dark eyes creased warily, her brow furrowing over well-worn lines in her sun-worn skin. Her dark hair was braided loosely down past her shoulders. Maria was as tough as the frontier she patrolled, on a world that demanded no less.

"Where else? I think I can still see a faint plume of smoke coming from that farthest building." Lennik Ostrand pointed with obvious displeasure to the building in question, which even from a distance appeared to be the most shoddily constructed. Parts of it had clearly been damaged by fire and sure enough, a faint trace of smoke was still wafting lazily into the hot skies. "I can't wait to hear what bullshit explanation for all this they've concocted for us. For once the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests will eat them alive!" Lennik's intense gaze was one of disgust. A tall, slender man, he wore a broad-brimmed hat against the sun, his dirty-blond

hair falling dishevelled down his back.

"I expect there'll be much to tell my superiors when I meet with the bishops at Hearth, one way or another," Father Nigel Obsanjo observed calmly, his dark-complected face composed, his eyes betraying a searching intelligence. His short-cropped, tightly curled hair was beginning to show signs of grey but his build retained a remarkable quiet power and poise. He fingered his rosary beads idly.

"I don't care what it takes, I'm getting this place shut down." Lennik tried, without much success, to calm his voice. "I don't care how many environmental analysts and petty bureaucrats from the Department of Outland Management tell me we're mining safely and I don't care how many 'specialists' from the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests tell me we're 'managing mutually beneficial partnerships', we're exploiting them! This is exactly what happened with those illegal settlers a few years back who took Renna from her people."

Renna, the fourth member of the party, scratched herself and vocalised, her voice a curious warble. She was naked, her bare skin and small, pendulous breasts covered with a layer of fine body hair. Like most of her kind, wearing clothes was something she'd never cared to learn from her *sapiens* cousins. Her wide, intelligent eyes were set under graceful brow ridges and a receding forehead. The hair on her head was darkish brown and hung past her ears. She pointed to the building with one slender finger and tugged questioningly on Lennik's sleeve. She was never too far from him.

Lennik smiled. "Yes, Renna, that's where we're going. I only hope we can do some good."

The adobe lodge was a study in frontier practicality mixed with business efficiency and the odd whiff of decadence. The walls of the central lobby that greeted them were covered by rough-hewn planks of the moss-cork tree, creating an aesthetic that was once rustic and appealing. Intricately woven rugs hung from the walls, evocative of a medley of designs: Mexican, Navajo, Iranian, and others. And in the far corner stood something that made them all jump, and Renna let out a yelp of surprise: the stuffed hide of a creature that stood erect on powerful hind legs, easily twelve feet tall, with curving, scimitar claws, a hide made of interlocking, grainy, scale-like plates, and six tentacles splayed menacingly around an open, beakish mouth. A dracokraken, the largest and most powerful land predator on Pleistonia.

"Don't ever get near one of those when it's a gravid male, or one with a cub." A large, bullish man with a crew cut and neatly trimmed moustache swaggered casually into the room and nodded at the dracokraken. "Kill you on sight. Not that they're threatened by you, you understand, they're just territorial and in need of protein." He shrugged nonchalantly and chuckled, as if murderous dracokrakens were an unremarkable experience. "They call me Captain Husler around here, but you can call me Roy." He extended a powerful hand.

"Roy, Deputy Cardenas, Range Sheriff's office."

"Father Obsanjo, but Nigel will do."

"Lennik Ostrand, PhD, Depart-

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ment of Anthropology, University of Hearth and liaison-consultant for the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests, but only when I agree." He said this last by way of wry humour, ice glinting in his eyes. He didn't accept the hand. He mistrusted this man on principle. "This is Renna."

By way of greeting Renna vocalised, her voice a singsong of tantalisingly complex sounds, and bared her teeth. Scientists had only begun to understand these vocalisations and their possible ramifications for the evolution of language in Renna's close evolutionary cousins, *Homo sapiens*.

Hussler chuckled indulgently. "Sure does make you wonder what they're trying to say. At least they follow orders plenty well with a little training. Speaking of which, I suppose you'll be wanting to discuss the incident. Should we repair to my quarters?"

Maria nodded. "Certainly. Lennik and I will need an official statement from you, and Nigel should probably be present as well – I'm sure the Pleistonian See will want to hear from you and" – she perused her handheld – "Father Joseph Landa?"

"At the chapel. He's probably instructing the orphans, we got a new batch recently."

"New batch?" Lennik's eyebrows furrowed suspiciously.

"Tribal wars, predators." Hussler shook his head. "It's a rough, savage planet out there. One time I was out with a scouting party in the scrublands to the north of here where all those weird plants grow. Heard some shrieks, calls, sounded like a whole mess of *erectus* in trouble. Crested a small rise, guns at the ready, and what do you think we found?" he paused for effect. "We found a whole pack of great crested lupokrakens bearing down on a group of *erectus* in *broad daylight!* The *erectus* were beside themselves, of course – waving firebrands and sharpened sticks and even those funny handaxes –"

"Acheulean bifaces," Lennik supplied.

Roy nodded his assent and continued. "Acheulean bifaces, but nothing was stopping those bastards! They'd already killed a young one, maybe

'bout four five years old, then they killed a mother and her infant before we could shoot them off!"

"They will do that, on occasion," Lennik agreed. "I myself have nearly been eaten by great crested lupokrakens no less than three or four times."

"All that to say, a lot of times we find young *erectus* half-starved, parents killed or separated from the tribe maybe, and we take them in, give them a good upbringing here," Hussler finished with a smile of pride. He clearly loved his stories of adventure on the wild frontier.

"And teach them to work in the mines?" Lennik needed. Maria shot him a reproving glance.

Hussler looked slightly affronted. "Only if that's what they show an inclination for. But why don't we take this into my office?" He gestured towards a hallway.

The same rustic aesthetic guided the design of the rest of the central lodge. The hallway was plated with the same grainy-textured boards, giving the building a kind of organic character it otherwise would have lacked. Potted plants stood sentinel at intervals. Some were clearly Earth-derived, but others were strange and alien marvels. Rows of doors led to various offices, Hussler explained, for the various technicians, operators, administrators, overseers and countless others needed to keep Twin Mounds Mission Partnership Station running effectively. Finally they stopped before a larger door that bore the legend CAPTAIN ROY HUSSLER, GREENPARK BRIGADE. Hussler held the door to one side and beckoned.

"Welcome to my humble quarters." His smile was sardonic, for the spacious office was anything but humble. A colonial British administrator from Kenya might have felt at home here: spectacular trophies from a multitude of successful hunting expeditions lined the walls, spreading horns and sprawling tentacles and fearsome claws, a taxidermist's menagerie. Interspersed with the silent victims were the powerful instruments that had brought their destruction, and by the numbers and varieties of these it was instantly apparent that Roy Hussler was no casual gun aficionado. The furniture was an

almost decadent ensemble of ottomans and divans that did nothing to detract from the feeling of a Victorian British colonial officer's quarters that had somehow been magically transported to the Star Age.

Hussler seated himself at a desk of ebony-looking wood that had been polished until it glowed lustroously and motioned to the party to be seated. "Emmy, guests!" he called, tinkling a small bell. A young female *erectus* stepped through a side door and waited attentively. "Now then, care for a drink? In exchange for stationing me in this wilderness the company has seen to it that I receive some of the comforts of civilised life. I've quite the fine selection from the vineries at Starfall, and I've recently managed to lay my hands on a case of Zinfandel from that new one in Pleistonia. Or for the beer drinkers," he made a theatrical grimace, "we've the finest suds from the breweries at Hearth, and I've even got a case that's not half bad from Encounter Point of all places."

"Let's just get straight to business." Maria spoke for the group, activating the recorder on her handheld and putting it on the desk between the two of them. Lennik and Nigel followed suit. "First, I need to know the number of casualties, *sapiens* and *erectus*."

Hussler's visage grew dark. "They killed ten of us, deputy, just turned on us like wild animals. It was that Marcus who led them, the one who was always stealing food and starting fights. He bit a mine supervisor in the neck, tore open the jugular like a bloody fucking savage." His voice shook with anger. "Two of my brigade tried to restrain him but he turned on them with a pickaxe. He split Aubuisson's skull in two before they could get off a shot, and then one of his cohorts knocked Gramsci out with a rock. Next thing you know entire shaft's swarming with the murderous bastards. Thank God some of my staff got away to tell the rest of us what happened. Next thing you know, they storm the *erectus* quarters, kill a priest and a few more of the brigade, set the place on fire! They almost set the church on fire but by that time we'd raised the alarm and gunned

them down. We killed twelve of those animals, and I only wish it'd been more: Marcus and the rest of his pack ran off into the wilds with all the weapons they could lay hands on."

Lennik was trying mightily to contain himself from an outburst of harsh, cynical laughter. Nigel looked remarkably unshaken. Fortunately Maria spoke up. "In your opinion, why did Marcus do this, and what would make his companions join in like that?"

Hussler took a gulp from a bottle of Starfall's finest and shook his head. "I really can't say. He was always an odd one, Marcus. Picked him up with a few others, all that was left from a tribal attack, few years back when this place was starting up. That'd be..." he frowned, trying to think "About seven years ago, I guess. I was with this place right from the beginning. Anyway, found them in a village all desolate like, few bodies all torn up by the scavengers and no food. Half-starved they were too. Brought them back just like we've taken to doing. But he was always odd – more aggressive, kept to himself with a few friends. Priests said he was a quick study but at some point he became impossible to control."

"I've been studying *Homo erectus pleistoniensis* in the field for more than ten years, and I've yet to see them living in tribes, much less having tribal wars." Lennik's challenge was matter-of-fact. "They live in small family groups, usually just a handful of families, and I've never seen them engage in anything like a war. Occasionally they get into spats over territory, a carcass, maybe even a watering-hole, but they almost never kill each other. I've seen it happen but not many times. And I've *never* seen or heard of them attacking another encampment and killing everybody but leaving the children miraculously unscathed and abandoned – and the large predators usually *only* go for the children, they're easier to catch."

"Well, the Greenpark Brigade isn't here to study them, that's the Bureau's job," Hussler acknowledged. "I can't tell you how they live, I just know they live out there without proper houses and with nothing more

than those hand-axes and sharpened sticks against some god-awful nasty predators. Frankly I'm surprised they've managed to last this long out here, however long that's been."

"About 1.4 million years, according to the best available dates from fossil material." Lennik supplied smoothly. "But the planet's changed a lot since then. Returning to the question, you have no real idea where these orphans come from and you don't know why this Marcus turned on your crew, and then was aided by the entire shaft crew?"

Hussler sighed and shook his head. "No, I really can't say as I do. We always knew he was troubled, tried to look out for him, but it just wasn't enough apparently."

"Apparently." Maria shrugged. "Can you tell us, again, just why exactly the Greenpark Brigade, a mercenary corps –"

"Security firm," Hussler interjected.

"Security firm, then" – Maria raised an eyebrow crossly – "is running a mining operation?"

"That's an excellent question." Hussler leaned back, lacing his fingers together behind his head. "Refiner's Agent, Inc, the mining firm that owns this place, actually helped to create the Greenpark Brigade a few years before the entire Mission Partnership Station program was launched. The problem at the time was actually that bandits in the interior of Hearthland island were living off the land and robbing assets, mostly through covert raids, off of company property. When this program was gearing up the company knew it needed trustworthy men with expertise in advanced weaponry to not only protect its assets from banditry but to keep its personnel safe from wild animals. Believe me, for all our Star Age technology I don't think any of us has quite gotten over the dracokrakens, tigrekakens, leopokrakens and lupokrakens that bedevil this continent! And of course, whenever a herd of ornery giant savannah buffalo or great savannah octephants comes, we deal with them too."

"What about the local *erectus*?" Nigel at last spoke up.

"Honestly, you'd do best to talk to

Father Joseph about that, Father," Hussler replied. "He wasn't here at the time, but he's got all the files from his predecessor who was. The Pleistonian See was contracted with to bring the local tribes or groups or whatever into the fold, so to speak. They had some sort of translator, negotiated with them for a while and then we moved in, set up shop. No, we're great pals with the locals, they live longer and better because of our foods, medicines, shelter, all that. I figure anytime you go from scraping carrion with a hand-axe and living in a brush shelter to eating three solid meals a day with a roof over your head is a good thing." Hussler smiled confidently.

"But obviously Marcus didn't see it that way. And he wasn't alone, apparently." Nigel's tone was inquiring but not confrontational.

Hussler sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Look, I know you all have a job to do. You're trying to get to the bottom of the first meltdown between humans and erects on this crazy planet. And here's me, a sorry sonofabitch, smack dab in the worst public relations crisis in – well, in a lot longer time than we've been on this planet, okay? I was in charge of an outfit that saw first blood between two species. Do you know how much I regret that? I don't know what went wrong, but I promise you I'm trying my hardest to be helpful so the appropriate authorities can figure out what's going on here."

"Your helpfulness is not being impugned, Captain," Nigel reassured him. "We are, as you have said, trying to get to the bottom of this. Therefore I'm trying to be as thorough as possible. After all, the Pleistonian See is waiting on my report, among other things, to deliberate the wisdom of its current policy regarding the Mission Partnership Stations."

Lennik interjected: "Speaking of which, the Bureau specifically requested me to question you regarding the relationship between the Greenpark Brigade and the Catholic church, in particular the relationship of both these parties to the local *erectus*. Do you think the outbreak of hostilities was directed against you or them or both?"

Hussler nodded. "Well, as to that last I can't rightly say for sure. Refiner's Agent won the contract for this and a few other MPSs – excuse me, Mission Partnership Stations – in part thanks to a faith-based lobby in the General Congress. Basically Refiner's Agent promised to invite the Catholic church to found missions at all of its MPSs, hence the "mission" part, in order to fulfil the requirements of an MPS charter – namely, that a non-profit organisation must be employed to negotiate with the *erectus* for their benefit. So with the lobby behind them, they got a hold of those contracts and brought in the church. We don't tell the mission what to do, generally speaking, other than general planning and administration, and Father Joseph handles the rest. No, we get along just great with the church, I can tell you that."

"Thank you, Captain," Lennik acknowledged. "If you could provide us with copies of all of your and the mission's records to take back we'd be most appreciative."

"Certainly." Hussler gestured expansively towards his desktop computer.

"If you have nothing further to say on the incident, Captain, then I would like to speak with the surviving witnesses of the shaft incident, and then the soldiers who fired on the mob, and anybody else you can suggest." Maria was all business, her tone steady and professional.

"I'd best come with you," Lennik said, still unmoved and unconvinced by Hussler's protestations of helpfulness and bewilderment.

"I, meanwhile, should really speak with this Father Landa," Nigel said.

Maria paused. "How could I not think of that? We should all talk to him, Nigel. It sounds like he's as much a part of what goes on here as anyone."

"I'll show you the way," Hussler offered, rising from his chair with a cordial smile on his face and a bottle of wine in hand. Emmy, the young female *erectus*, followed him meekly.

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Father Joseph Landa was a thin, careworn man. His face was browned and etched with lines by time and sun, his

hair closely cropped to reveal a receding hairline. Accompanied by several of his fellow priests and a few *erectus* in simple mission garb, he was teaching a group of young *erectus* to perform simple chores related to the upkeep of the mission, such as tending gardens. The young *erectus* seemed greatly cowed in his presence and uncomfortable in their mission shirts, trousers and smocks made of roughly woven cloth. His gaze was penetrating and his gestures firm, but his voice was remarkably patient and even laconic.

"Hello, Father!" Hussler saluted him with raised bottle of wine. "I see you're teaching our latest batch the upkeep of your fine work."

"Indeed." The man's voice was stiff, sombre, and yet somehow intense, as intense as his penetrating needle-sharp falcon eyes. "And I see you have brought the official delegation."

Lennik shivered. The priest made him uneasy already.

Hussler nodded, then raised the bottle of wine to his lips, tossed his head back and chugged. Father Landa's subtle gaze of disapproval for such decadence was almost psychically charged. Introductions were swiftly made and this time it was Nigel who opened and led the questioning.

"Personally I am unsurprised at the recent turn of events." Father Landa's statement was as matter-of-fact as if he were discussing the weather. Hussler froze mid-swig, small beads of wine dribbling down his chin. A predictable register of shock and surprise greeted the priest's matter-of-fact statement.

"Would you care to be more specific?" rejoined Nigel when after several moments it appeared Father Landa was waiting for encouragement.

Landa shrugged. "As Hussler has no doubt told you, Marcus was a troublemaker. It didn't escape the Captain's notice and he didn't even interact with our young zealot on a consistent basis, the way that I and my brothers of the cloth did. But it didn't start that way, because Marcus was one of the most intelligent young *erectus* I've seen in the several years I've been out here, and I confess

freely that I initially had very high hopes for him. I hoped that here at last would be the breakthrough the church had been waiting for, the miracle that would legitimate the involvement of the Pleistonian See in taking the word of Our Lord to these wild men: the first catechised and confirmed Pleistonian *erectus*. Marcus mastered his Interactional English and International Sign Language classes like no other, so I assigned him to work with the others, as a teacher and a delegate of tasks. He was without a doubt our best intermediary between the staff and the *erectus*. He was also very clever with machines – I remember Father Rodriguez, who ran our machine shop, saying Marcus lent new meaning to the term grease monkey.

"But he was troubled. I think the savage within him ran too deep, or maybe he was simply restless by nature. He began engaging in fights, stealing things – mostly just food, small tools, things like that – and gradually the staff found they couldn't work with him anymore. Certainly I didn't see this coming, but after the fact it completely makes sense. The warning signs were all there: unfortunately, I simply didn't know what they were pointing to."

"How does this fit in with the *erectus* who joined him?" Lennik asked suspiciously. "Why would they suddenly take up arms and rush men under the command of our friend Roy here? What can you tell us about the daily regimen of their care?"

Landa folded his hands contemplatively. "Perhaps it would be better if I were to show you so that you may see for yourselves."

"Yes, thank you," Nigel spoke up. "In particular I am interested in the catechising of your charges here."

"We'll stop at the chapel first, then," Landa nodded in agreement.

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The chapel, though humble, was elegant in its design. Fitting with the rough-hewn "frontier" aesthetic of the station it was built of the same adobe as the central lodge, with a vaulted ceiling rising upward into a steeple adorned with a crucifix. Inside the church votive candles

burned, and statues of the Madonna and Christ on the cross were also present. Rows of hard, varnished wooden pews lined the floor. Stained glass windows of various religious scenes glowed in the bright sun.

"I couldn't allow you to pay a visit to our mission without coming here." Landa's voice was touched with a certain quiet pride. "This is our light in the wilderness, where we instruct the savages in the Word of God."

Lennik tried to hide the disgust on his face. Fortunately Nigel spoke: "And you are confident of their ensoulment and their redemptive eligibility?"

"Their what?" Maria asked. Lennik shook his head, having an inkling of what was coming. Renna, ignoring the metaphysical speculations concerning the place of her species in *Homo sapiens* mythology, was admiring the glowing stained glass windows.

"Their possession of an immortal, divinely-inspired soul, capable of being redeemed by Christ's sacrifice on the cross at Calvary," Nigel explained. "It's something the Pleistonian See – not to mention the Vatican – is in much debate about right now. Essentially it determines whether we should regard them as beast or human in nature."

"I see." Maria nodded, obviously thoroughly unconvinced and more than a bit perplexed.

Lennik chuckled. "No you don't. My paternal grandparents were from Sweden and they were both Lutheran. My father used to say that if you weren't born Lutheran, you'd never catch up. And the Lutherans are just as perplexed by all of this as are the Catholics – well, the few of them that are left, anyway." He winked at the two priests. "No affront intended to present company, of course."

"None taken," Landa assured him. "Now, Father Obsanjo –"

"Nigel, please."

"Very well. In answer to your question, yes, we are reasonably confident of their ensoulment and redemptive eligibility. As I am sure you are all aware, the Church has accepted Darwinian evolution for centuries. While we can not establish absolute

certainty about this until we gain a successful convert, we are of the belief that they represent an early phase in humanity's ensoulment, and had their ancestors not been separated from ours they would simply be a part of humanity. Now, Nigel, you mentioned wanting to know about our catechism? We teach a very simple, basic version of the Church's teachings, which is administered in the sign language that we've taught the *erectus*. We've found that they're drawn to fire, it seems to be the closest thing to God that they have a concept of – and the sun by extension."

Lennik nodded. "Fire is their friend, and it's the most powerful weapon in their arsenal against all the things this planet's got to throw at them. I've noticed Renna here" – she looked up at the sound of her name – "greeting the sunrise by vocalising and making gestures I can only assume are, at some level, ritualistic or symbolic. She does similar things sometimes around the fire, especially when I'm lighting it. I wouldn't call it their god, but it's the closest thing to some form of supernaturalism or fetishism that they seem to have."

"Right you are," Landa nodded, "and this has made our task the more difficult. Past mission fields to various heathen tribes and nations had at least this advantage, and it was a major one: namely that no matter how debased his condition, the savage at least had a language and a religion. Pleistonian *erectus*, it would seem, have neither and, thus, the greater our task."

Lennik couldn't believe what he was hearing. This man flat out *admitted* that his mission subjects were unable to comprehend the arcane nature of his message and yet he insisted on his horrendously myopic mission! *If he says "savage" or "heathen" one more time, I'm going to deck him.*

They moved on to the quarters for the mission *erectus* acolytes, which were considerably more humble: squat bunks, walls bare save for images of the crucified Christ, and, unsurprisingly, sexual segregation.

"We find it keeps them less distracted and more receptive to our teachings," Landa explained. "These, I should clarify, are for orphans and

young, single adults. The rest of the adults have their own dormitories with their partners."

"Have you managed to teach them holy matrimony?" Nigel's question was nonchalant but Lennik had to repress a flash of annoyance, anger and amusement. The idea of *Homo erectus* sexual practices being bound by a *Homo sapiens* institution struck him as singularly odd.

"We're still working on that." Landa's response was clearly intended to be delicately vague.

Hours passed as the three collectively grilled both Hussler and Landa on every aspect of their policies regarding their charges, then turned their attention to members of the staff. Finally, worn out from the lengthy process of collecting testimonials and data they took their leave.

\* \* \*

The sun was beginning to descend steadily and the shadows to lengthen by the time they set out. The plane leapt responsively into the air under Maria's touch, the ground falling away below them. They flew in silence for some time.

"So, what do we think?" Maria's voice was laced with sarcasm. "Innocent, courteous mercenaries and their sanctimonious priests have absolutely *no idea* why a troublemaker would lead a revolt against them?"

Lennik sighed. "It's as bad as I'd feared, maybe worse. This entire operation isn't just exploitative, it's horrendously myopic. There's so much we don't know about *Homo erectus pleistoniensis*, and people like these are oblivious even to what we do know."

"His catechism struck me as particularly odd," Nigel ruminated. "I've been around them, and more to the point around you, Lennik, long enough to doubt whether they have the capacity to appreciate a concept as abstract as *redemption*. Not, I hasten to add, to speak poorly of present company," he smiled at Renna, who was preoccupying herself with some dried pemmican Lennik had given her, "but I think likening it to a 'sacred trade fire' isn't exactly what Jesus meant it as, to make the theological understatement of – well, proba-



bly the entire history of Christendom. We may be looking at the first allegations of major heresy in the history of the Pleistonian See – that, or Landa will be canonised in a century or so.” He chuckled at his own wry humour.

Maria frowned. “There’s something up ahead – looks like an *erectus* camp but something’s wrong.”

Lennik sprang alert, reaching for his binoculars. “Where? Wait – yes, looks like there’s been a fire and – *Maria, land the plane!*”

“What?! Why?” Maria stared at him, taken aback by the urgency in his voice.

“Just do it, Maria, this is bad, trust me!”

“You better know what you’re doing, then,” she muttered as she began the descent.

\* \* \*

It was a dismal sight that greeted them. As the plane came to a stop they could see that here had recently been a thriving *erectus* camp. Now, however, tools and half-eaten food lay scattered haphazardly, brush shelters torn down as if by some savage beast or burned, central fire still smouldering dimly. And – the sight that made the bile rise in their throats – there were bodies. The corpses of several adult *erectus* lay scattered throughout the camp in the frozen throes of death, some with broken wooden lances jutting out of their backs.

Lennik froze, the horror of it taking hold to chill his very marrow. Renna whimpered, murmuring mournfully to herself. Nigel shook his head sorrowfully and turned aside to pray, reaching for his rosary. Maria, hardened deputy of the Range Sheriff’s office, just stared silently.

Lennik turned to Maria. “It all fits, doesn’t it? So much for Hussler’s ‘tribal wars’ and the source of his orphans.”

Maria pulled out a pair of gloves and reached for her handheld. “I thought as much too. In that case this is a crime scene. If you want to help, Lennik, put on a pair of gloves and help me take pictures.”

Lennik nodded, doing as she instructed.

The first corpse was that of an

adult male. Judging by his physique Lennik guessed him to be around his mid-twenties. Old enough to have fathered a number of children, especially given the fact that *erectus* were hardly devout monogamists. Robust enough to be an important leader in the small group. He was sprawled on his back, with the broken end of a wooden lance sticking from his chest. It was clearly a crude ruse designed to implicate other *erectus* in his killing: Lennik noticed several blast-discharge wounds scorched into his flesh. His head lolled to one side, sightless eyes staring blindly into forever. Lennik shook his head sorrowfully as he shot several photos of the tragedy.

Boot prints throughout the camp, especially around the shelters that had been destroyed. Spent canisters of tear gas and spent blast cartridges dropped in the bushes. Blast marks on the corpses. A level of sheer violence that Lennik had never seen or heard of among *erectus*.

“If they fought like this they would’ve gone extinct on this planet over a million years ago, probably,” he told Maria grimly. “Nothing from the anthropological literature indicates that we learned to fight this way until much, much later in our evolution. I think it’s pretty obvious who did this – and what they were after.”

“So much for Hussler’s ‘orphans,’” Maria agreed, “But why the bodies? That’s what I’m not getting. They could have stunned an encampment this size with probably a single payload of a powerful stunning gas.”

Lennik shook his head. “For the hell of it. Because it was more fun this way, maybe. I’m sure it gets pretty boring out here and there aren’t that many ways to relieve the tension – no prostitutes and only limited shipments of alcohol. Some of those men are probably used to chasing bandits and smugglers but this isn’t the Hearthland frontier or even New California or New Javaland – there’s not that much excitement. This way they get a little target practice and a way to keep the *erectus* population beaten down.”

“Well, we are going to put a stop to this.” Maria cracked her knuckles with resolve. “I think I’ve got enough

pictures for now, the rest can wait for the official inspection. Right now let’s concentrate on getting this bird back aloft and getting out of here. You all right, Nigel?”

Despite his initial repulsion Nigel had forced himself to aid his comrades in their mournful task. He nodded and attempted a smile. “I’m... fine, thank you Maria. At times I ask myself how God can allow the evils of men such as these. And, while I don’t profess to know the answer, it will bring me the slightest ounce of comfort if I am able to witness them being brought to justice.”

“We’ll just have to make sure that happens,” Maria frowned as she finished her preliminary report. “Let’s get back to the station. We’ve still got a little ways to go, but thank goodness it’s not too much farther.”

The plane lifted off and the tragic scene below was swallowed up by distance and lengthening shadows. Maria looked at the display panel, then at her handheld, and frowned. “Do you have a signal on your handhelds, either of you two?”

“No, actually, I do not,” Nigel noted. “Which is rather odd. What seems to be the problem?”

“Me either, why?” Lennik asked concernedly.

“It looks like the plane’s main frequency is being jammed.” She fiddled worriedly with knobs and dials but to no avail.

“Can you get a bead on where the jamming signal is coming from?” Lennik asked.

“I’ll try but I –” She froze as she called up a display screen. “We’re being followed.”

The plane’s viewfinders were registering the approach of two aircraft, flying in orderly formation directly towards them, coming from the direction of...

The mission. *Should have seen this coming*, Maria chastised herself. Heaving a sigh she steadied her grip on the plane’s controls. “Hang on, everyone. Looks like our friends aren’t letting us out of here so easily. This is going to be a bit of a ride.”

## Chapter Two

From the cockpit of his aircraft Captain Hussler watched the smaller Range Sheriff's plane with grim satisfaction. *Couldn't just leave well enough alone, could you?* He thought. *Good thing I had your plane bugged. You're not getting out of this one.* In his years of service on the Greenpark Brigade Hussler had made himself a reputation as a ruthless and formidable opponent who kept his head in a fight and let nothing come between him and victory. Bandits, smugglers, wild beasts, *erectus*... at some point they all became the same to him, obstacles to his interests and purposes, challenges to be met and surmounted. Confident in his superiority as a man and a soldier, he harboured them no particular ill-will: it was simply do or die. These god-damned delegates were different in a way, though: they just *had* to stick their noses into what he was doing, trying to fuck it all up with their bleeding-heart niceties concocted by talking heads and bean counting bureaucrats in Hearth! He fought back a surge of anger and hatred. They weren't dangerous the way a rampaging beast, rioting *erectus* or gun-slinging bandito was: they didn't fight with weapons but with decrees and mandates and ordinances, pretty little bureaucratic weapons that had the almost god-like power to bring a man like him up or level him down good.

*Pity they don't put birds on these things,* he thought, thinking how nice it would be to blast that plane out of the sky with one well-placed missile. Instead they had to jam its frequencies until they could force it out of the sky with the jerry-rigged door-guns he'd installed on the planes a while back to deal with *erectus* and large, dangerous wild animals.

"How we looking, Nielsen?" He addressed the pilot, who was plotting a course that would take them within range of the gun's devastating fire.

"Pretty good, boss," Nielsen, a burly, thin-lipped man with a coarse beard and heavily tattooed arms,

replied. "Should be in range in just a while here."

Murdock, the gunner, nodded and tightened his grip on the gun, preparing to open the door and deploy it to firing position.

\* \* \*

"They're gaining on us." Maria's voice was tense but she tried to keep it calm. "They obviously don't have missiles on those things – the company would never have given them any to use in the first place and if they had them they'd have used them by now. Probably those planes have door-guns mounted in their sides, which means they're going to try to rake us on our left-hand side and force us to land."

"Why the left?" asked Nigel.

"Because the guns will be on their right-hand side, facing out of the cockpit. I, however, intend to make this as difficult as possible for them."

Under Maria's firm hand the plane leaped like a trout breaching to snap a fly, then corkscrewed languorously, trying to make targeting difficult.

Renna yelped in panic. Lennik gritted his teeth, digging his fingers into the armrests. Nigel gripped his seat and tried to keep his hands from shaking.

The first salvos missed them entirely thanks to the skill and daring of Maria's piloting. Their pursuers encircled them like hungry sharks but were unable to close the gap. Finally a sporadic burst of fire pounded the plane, the shots slamming into it with shattering force.

"No – you – don't!" Maria's words came through clenched teeth, knuckles white as she barrel-rolled the plane into a steep dive, levelling out to zigzag like a bolting gazelle.

\* \* \*

"Stay on them!" Hussler barked at Nielsen, then, eyeing Murdock: "Hit them as hard as you can – go for the engines. If you can get them there we can bring them down."

The pilot bared his teeth in determination, spurring his larger plane after the smaller, fleeing craft. The other pilot did the same. They couldn't communicate by radio without risk-

ing allowing their quarry to transmit. The most they could hope to accomplish was to anticipate each other's moves and those of their quarry, and try to act accordingly.

The other craft pulled upward, directing a withering stream of fire at the fleeing craft. Suddenly it clicked in Hussler's mind. "Pull us downwards and to the left, quickly!" he barked at Nielsen. Then, to Murdock: "Get ready! Don't lose them now!"

Nielsen and Murdock knew better than to question their commanding officer's orders. The craft yawed almost lazily downwards, cutting through the air like a cruising shark.

"Get ready! Don't lose them!" Hussler repeated, his voice tense, commanding. They *couldn't* afford to lose the delegation; far too much was riding on this. "*Now!*"

Murdock, meticulously tracking, depressed the trigger and let loose a powerful salvo.

"Don't let up! Aim for the engine!" Hussler commanded.

\* \* \*

The plane had been hit badly. Smoke trailed from the left-hand wing. Maria knew there would be no making it back to the Range Sheriff's outpost. *I've got to land this bird.* But where? And how in hell were they supposed to simply land a damaged plane and walk away with murderous airborne pursuers?

The trailing smoke gave her the faint glimmering of an idea. Under any other circumstances she never would have considered it, but now it was do or die. With a deathly grip she clenched the levers that controlled the plane.

The craft lurched forward, turning on its right-hand side like a wounded whale thrashing in shallow waters, dragging a trail of smoke behind it. Like sharks the hungry pursuers followed. Suddenly Maria rolled the plane, violently and perilously considering its damaged state.

Renna was disconsolate but Lennik and Nigel had the good sense to keep their mouths shut and hang on. Lennik tried to comfort Renna and the young *erectus* clung to him like a drowning swimmer, whimpering.

Seeing an expanse of thick, wooded growth Maria sensed her chance. The plane would never make it to the Range Sheriff's office. This was the only way, she told herself, praying she was right.

"Okay folks, this is it," she told them, "we're going to have to land."

Lennik and Nigel nodded, sensing better than to try to argue with her. They were much too far away from their destination to keep going – Hussler's men would shoot them out of the sky sooner or later. Best to give them the slip while they still could.

As she pulled the plane in for the landing Maria pushed a button to trigger the emergency flares. *Try to give us a little cover, at least.* The craft blundered through the wood like a drunk in an alleyway, its damaged left-hand side trying to manoeuvre into place for the landing. It came to rest in a dense tangle of trees with a thud. Maria was already moving again, sorting through an assortment of items in the rear of the plane, grabbing supplies and a long, powerful rifle.

Lennik forced the hatch open and they tumbled to the ground. Not a moment too soon – from a distance Hussler's craft were already angling an approach for their descent. The small party ran, dense brush whipping at their clothing – or hide – mercilessly, their only imperative to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their pursuers.

Renna sprinted like a champion. She was scared, and fear powered her lithe, agile form, sustaining her seemingly indefatigable burst of speed. The other three were in fairly good physical condition as well, but found themselves trailing Renna raggedly. Her keener senses led them into the now murky twilight.

Finally they could run no further. The three sapiens collapsed, panting raggedly and nursing their stitching sides and exhausted legs. Renna still seemed able to run but she indulged her evolutionary cousins, making use of the rest to glance anxiously about.

Night had fallen, bringing with it greater danger than ever. If they weren't careful they'd blunder into a predator with just as much potential interest in killing them as Hussler

presumably did. *At least we'll be armed, whatever happens.* Lennik eyed the long rifle, wondering how effective it would be against a large predator or in a confrontation with Hussler's party. He hadn't bothered to mention that he himself was armed, and now he drew his sidearm to clean it and check that it was sufficiently well loaded.

Maria looked at him, trying to steady her breath as she spoke. "Didn't – know – you – were – armed."

"Didn't care – to – advertise it." Lennik tried to keep his hands from shaking and calm his heart rate as he examined the piece and wiped it down. It was small, smaller even than Maria's gun, but it packed a fair amount of power for its size. Lennik knew – while he'd never shot a man before, his years on the Pleistonian frontier had provided him with plenty of target practice against game and predators. "How about you, Nigel?"

Nigel shook his head, trying a rueful smile. "A man of my profession does not carry such instruments of violence."

"Well, in a pinch you can use one of mine." Maria hefted the rifle, testing its weight and balance. Fortunately she'd grabbed enough ammo for it to fell an army. "Now, let's take stock of our situation: we're out in the middle of nowhere after dark, we're being pursued, we're lost and we've got minimal supplies."

"But we're armed." Lennik smiled. "Don't forget the silver lining."

"About how far are we from the Range Sheriff's office?" Nigel asked.

Maria shook her head. "No way to be sure. It's to the northeast of the mission, but we were forced a good way off course to the east trying to get away from those bastards. I say our best bet is to find somewhere to go to ground for the night, then figure it out in the morning."

"What about Hussler?" Lennik asked. "He's not going to give it up for the night."

Maria nodded. "No, but he'll have trouble locating us in all this. The fact that he's not on us right now tells me we've given him the slip, albeit temporarily. If we push on now we might just get more lost – or even if we

don't we'll just tire ourselves out and they might find us before we get to the station. But if we hole up for the night we can face this problem refreshed – well, relatively speaking – in the morning. We'll stand watch to make sure no one finds us and lives to tell of it." She hefted the rifle meaningfully. "Meanwhile, those yahoos will be out combing this area and wear themselves out. Then in the morning, assuming all goes as planned, we'll be able to give them the slip again and make our way to the station."

*Assuming all goes as planned.* Lennik tried to suppress his feelings of scepticism. That was an awful lot to assume. Aloud he said: "Well, it's tricky, Maria, but I don't see that we have much of a choice. How about you, Nigel?"

Nigel shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't see we have much of a choice either."

"Then it's settled." Maria hefted the rifle then, surprisingly, drew her sidearm and gave it to Nigel. The priest tried to protest but Maria cut him off. "Listen, Father, I know this is hard for you. You've obviously never had to wield a gun in the line of duty before but these aren't ordinary circumstances. Those men will shoot us down if they find us, and there are a lot of wild beasts out here that have us on the menu. You're not a disgrace to your vows or your ordination if you choose to fight in self-preservation, to keep yourself alive."

Nigel bowed his head and reluctantly accepted the weapon. "Thank you, Maria, I know you are right. I've fired guns at targets on the range before but never at a living thing. It will be difficult but I will manage."

"You're doing great, Nigel," Lennik encouraged him.

"Now then, let's find that hide-out." Maria's tone was firm and determined. Nothing, it seemed, could slow an officer of the Range Sheriff's office down for long.

\* \* \*

Hussler was enraged. *How could this happen?! How the bloody blue-blazing hell could this happen?* A priest, a Range Sheriff's deputy, and an anthropologist and his *erectus* sidekick

had somehow managed to give his entire party the slip.

"Get those birds back aloft," he snapped at the two pilots. "Take your gunners and five others each. It's unlikely you'll find them unless they're stupid enough to light a fire but try anyway. The rest of you, you're with me. We'll look for them on the ground. Fan out, stay light – we don't want them to know we're coming. If you find them don't engage, notify me and wait until the rest of us catch up. We'll be able to communicate just fine – now that they're out of the skies we won't be jamming this area. Move out!"

At his bark of command the soldiers rushed to carry out orders. *We'll find them yet.* Hussler sustained himself with this deep conviction. *There's too much riding on what we're trying to do here for a few animal-rights activists to fuck it all up now.*

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The tigrekraken watched with interest at the two-legged creatures moving across her field of vision. They walked with a strange poise, as though they were trying to be alert or were looking for something... and yet they seemed strangely oblivious to their surroundings. The tigrekraken fixed them within her large, powerful field of vision and extended six waving tentacles positioned around her mouth in their direction. Her eyes could see an incredible register of colours, well into the infrared spectrum. The two men stood apart from their surroundings purely by the infrared rays they reflected and the heat of their bodies. Her tentacles, sensitive to even faint whiffs of scent, told her the rest of what she needed to know.

The tigrekraken was intelligent. She knew that she had never encountered beings quite like these before. And yet her large, complex brain told her that she had encountered – and successfully hunted and devoured – a very similar kind of being before.

Not quite *erectus*, but still good to eat. She began her careful pursuit, gliding almost noiselessly through the tall grasses and shrubs on her four long, powerful legs.

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"God-damn this place bites." Arthur St.-Avery pushed aside an overhanging branch moodily. "What the fuck we doing out here anyway?"

Suleiman Ahmet gritted his teeth, trying to keep his patience with his companion. "Out here? Besides chasing these people?"

"No, no I mean out *here*, out in this God-forsaken neck of the woods." Arthur waved his hand expansively. "We come out here to oversee a *mine* for Christ sakes, as if the Greenpark Brigade really trained with military equipment just so we could look out for mines, then we get a bunch of us killed by these wildmen and *now* we got to keep these bleeding-hearts from spilling the story! So we're out here after them instead of back at the base with a bottle of whisky and a deck of cards and maybe even an obliging young *erectus* female.

"And that's another thing! Back in Hearthland I wouldn'ta touched them creatures for a luxury ride back to Earth! Even when we did duty together near Encounter Point and in New Javaland there was women! But out here we're so far away the management don't like to keep our needs met! After a while a man goes crazy, starts looking at them cave women a little different like, starts to think even, hey, it ain't so unnatural, the anatomy's mostly the same, so what they're a little hairy and they've got those God-ugly faces, it still works – down there, you know?"

"Yes." Suleiman was trying mightily hard now to keep his patience. The two men had been friends for a long time but Arthur's whining was taxing his already-strained nerves. "I do know what you mean, Arthur. But we really need to keep our voices down and try to keep our eyes out for the people we're supposed to be finding. I'm sure the Captain would look very favourably upon any two men who brought him the people who have the potential to derail his plans."

"Oh right." Arthur nodded earnestly. "That's a good point." A broad grin suddenly split his rugged, coarse face. "Hey, maybe we could even get back to some semblance of civilisa-

tion sooner if we find them for him, eh?"

Suleiman tried to ignore his companion as Arthur began to fantasise about the drinks and the women he'd have if they were given leave back to Encounter Point, or better still, the capital city of Hearth.

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The tigrekraken couldn't believe her good fortune. Her quarry were totally unaware of her and she was closing the distance between them steadily. Soon she would be within range to chance an ambush. She was an experienced, mature hunter and she had successfully taken the similar species, *erectus*, a number of times before. But those were almost all youngsters, too inexperienced to know of the dangers that lurked in the tall grasses and the undergrowth. Even one of these creatures would be a filling meal that could keep her going for many days. And both – a rare feast indeed.

Her hearing was unexceptional, her species relying mostly on sight and smell, but she was close enough now to ascertain that the one in the lead was the noisiest. *Perfect.* The one behind would fall quickly, and if she was lucky she'd be able to ambush the second one before he had time to react. With the precision and grace of a dancer she tensed, focused on her quarry and leapt.

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Suleiman rolled his eyes. Arthur was regaling him yet again with stories of his licentious escapades in Encounter Point, a frontier town and MPS far to the northeast. *Try to ignore it.* He thought. He suddenly thought he noticed something. Had the sounds of the night creatures just grown quieter?

Intuition is a tricky thing. Suleiman's hit him just as he half-heard, half-felt a displacement of air behind him. But by then, of course, it was much, much too late. He started to turn, and the last thing his startled brain struggled to comprehend was a monster from the worst depths of his nightmares leaping for him, powerful

forelimbs pushing through the air with wicked, scimitar-like claws.

The tigrekraken dispatched her prey in the efficient manner used so often by her kind, opening Suleiman's jugular vein and throat with one powerful swipe. The man never had a chance to get off a shot – his gun was slung over one shoulder. Leaving him to choke to death in his own blood, she leaped again for her second victim.

Arthur turned, hearing Suleiman's horrible gurgling. "Sulei, what's the –" he screamed, reflexively reaching for his gun as the tigrekraken bore down on him with the speed of a car. But she was much too quick for him. Raking his throat with her powerful claws, she sank her questing tentacles into his warm, steaming flesh. In addition to providing her with her sense of taste, the tentacles were lined with rings of teeth bound by contracting discs of muscle and helped to detach portions of flesh for consumption in her powerful, beakish mouth. She gorged, satiating the pangs of her hunger before dragging her kills to a cache for safe storage.

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Hussler surveyed the bloodstained, damaged gun with disgust.

"It's St.-Avery's, Captain." The soldier who'd given it to him scowled. "Him and Suleiman were taken by something. Looked like a tigrekraken. Schultz and I heard a scream so we went to investigate. Took us a while to find where it'd come from but the place was all torn up, blood everywhere. Tracks, too, real big tracks. Looked like a tigrekraken had snuck up on them and taken them down before they could get off a shot, because we didn't hear any. Some drag marks where it looked like it'd taken them away but we figured we'd rather not follow it without talking to you first."

"You did well." Hussler traced a wickedly curving scratch in the side of the gun. "You see this, soldier? Poor fool probably tried to draw just as it took him. If those claws can do this to metal without even trying to, imagine what they can do to your flesh when they're hunting you." He sighed. *Goddamn it, this can't be*

*easy, can it?* But Pleistonia was a brutal planet. It had been named for the Pleistocene epoch, when *Homo erectus* walked on earth, and like the Pleistocene, Pleistonia featured a rich fauna of very large and very dangerous creatures. Captain Hussler knew this and he knew Pleistonia. Knew it surprisingly well. Despite his earlier protestations of ignorance to Lennik, he knew a great deal about *Homo erectus pleistoniensis* and many of the other lifeforms on the planet. He knew, for example, that tigrekrakens were territorial and solitary. Therefore they would be unlikely to experience any more attacks, although it wouldn't hurt to take precautions just in case.

"Get the lines tighter," he snapped. "Now that it's made a kill – let alone two – we shouldn't see it again but better safe than sorry." He made a mental note to return to this area after they'd killed the delegation in order to hunt the tigrekraken. He didn't let go of a score like the loss of two men very easily.

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After an hour of hard searching the weary party had at last found a place to camp. The three sapiens readily credited Renna with the discovery: the young *erectus* female's uncanny intuition seemed to tell her it would be a good place to hide. The area was covered with raised mounds forming strange shapes on the landscape. Brush grew heavily on many of the mounds, with variegated clearings in between. The multiform terrain was the perfect place to hide – or the perfect place for an ambush. If they were followed to the area they could probably pick off a fair number of Hussler's men from the shelter of the contorted landscape and thick brush.

"Well, whatever this place is, it's home for tonight." Lennik yawned, tramping wearily to join a cautiously eager Renna in the shelter of an overhang shielded by brush.

Maria and Nigel were too tired to do anything more than nod in agreement. Underneath the overhang was a kind of declivity in the side of the mound, perhaps formed by erosion. The ground was even enough for sleeping on.

"Fortunately the Range Sheriff's office keeps its planes stocked with emergency supplies." Maria passed out portions of smoked meat and dried vegetables and fruit. It was a mark of how hungry and tired they were that everyone was soon done eating and ready to sleep. But there was still the matter of the watch.

"Who wants first watch?" Maria asked.

"I don't care." Lennik rolled on his back, looking up at the tangle of roots that formed their shelter. "Nigel?"

"I am entirely without preference." The priest tried to stifle a yawn.

"Middle watch's the hardest, your sleep's cut in two," Maria told them. "So I'll be taking that." The two men made weak protests. "No, shut up you two. I've done this plenty of times before, trust me, I know what I'm doing. So, since neither of you care who goes first, how about Lennik, then me, and then Nigel?"

The two agreed and Lennik leaned forward to accept the rifle from Maria, positioning himself at the forefront of their shelter, his view screened by brush. She made sure he knew how to use it.

"If you see any of Hussler's party, don't shoot unless it looks like they're going to find us. Then wake us up first, if at all possible. Trust me, there's nothing worse than being awakened by a gunshot. But if it comes down to it, Lennik, and the situation's dire, shoot! Do you think you can do that?"

Lennik paused. In the time that they'd been running from these men he hadn't had time to ask himself that question. He'd never shot a human being before. In the eleven years he'd spent studying *erectus* in the field he'd never had to shoot one of those, either, and there had been several perilously close calls where his life had been in danger. But each of those times, he'd managed to defuse the situation without violence. Could he shoot a member of his own species like a predator in ambush?

Maria raised an eyebrow. "Lennik, trust me, I know it's hard. I remember the first time I shot a man. I could hardly touch a gun for a week after that. But you have to be able to,

Lennik! Your life, all of our lives, may depend on it.”

*These are the men who massacred that encampment.* The thought hit Lennik with the force of a lightning bolt. *They'll kill us – all of us – without a moment's hesitation.* “Of course I can do it,” he told her, bringing a small but steady note of conviction to his voice. It wasn't much, but Maria's ghost of a smile told him that it was all she needed to hear.

\* \* \*

Morning, and Nigel gently roused his companions to wakefulness.

“How goes it, Father?” Lennik asked groggily, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“Well, we are still here, thanks be to God, so I suppose on balance it goes rather well.” Nigel managed a smile.

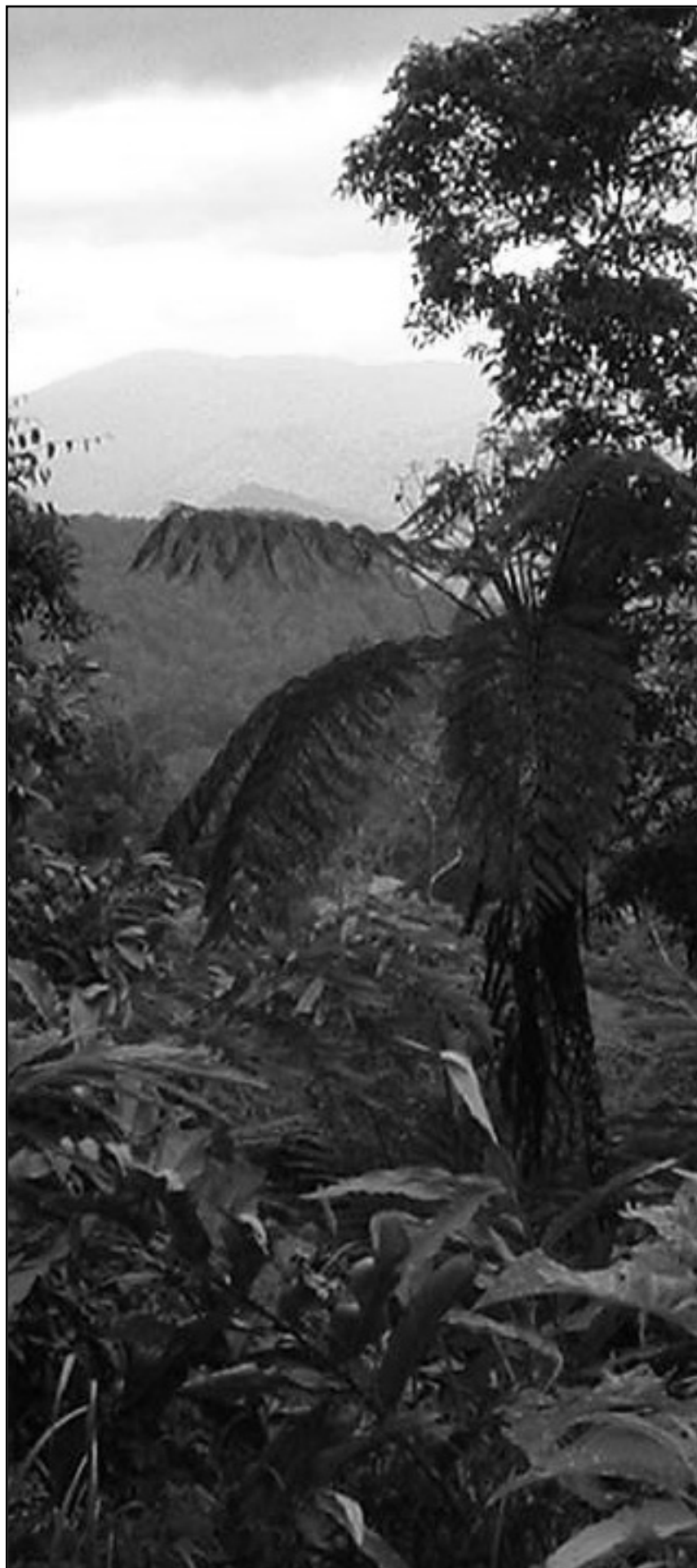
“Time to take stock of our surroundings.” Maria was surprisingly alert, considering the fact that her sleep had been interrupted by her watch. “Maybe we can find some provisions on the way.”

They stepped out to confront the early-morning light. A profusion of greenery greeted them in every direction, and in the light the strange contours of the land were even more visible – and at last, recognisable. The strangely-shaped mounds were hardly random in their order: instead, they followed a pattern still discernable as having been designed, despite the fact that the mounds had been abandoned for 1.4 million years.

“*I thought so!*” Lennik snapped his fingers. “I knew there was something odd about this place last night! It's a Visitor ruin!”

Maria frowned, squinting at the strange and yet surprisingly symmetrical lines. “Of course. We just didn't see it last night because it was dark and we were tired and on the run.”

Everyone knew that the Visitors, a mysterious alien race, had once lived on Pleistonia and brought both *Homo erectus* and other lifeforms from earth as well as lifeforms from their own world, such as the ancestors of the tigrekraken and the dracokraken and many other creatures. Not much was known about them, but it was clear that they weren't native to Pleistonia



and that they hadn't stayed long – no more than a thousand years or so at the most. Thus, Pleistonia's wildlife was made up of lifeforms native to the planet itself, to the Visitors' planet, and to Earth. It still wasn't clear exactly why they left, but they seemed to have brought *Homo erectus* as cheap labour for the mines they operated, which were probably the major reason why they came to Pleistonia in the first place.

"In that case there'll probably be an abandoned mine shaft near here," Lennik concluded. "Have to watch out for that. Probably why Hussler and co are so keen on following in the Visitors' footsteps here: plenty of ore."

Maria accessed the compass on her handheld and made some quick calculations. "Well, it's not all bad, team," she informed them. "This place is a landmark on the topographical maps the Range Sheriff's office keeps, and a historic landmark on the regular maps. We're quite a ways off course to the east, near the New Zambezi River, so we'll have to tack a little to the northwest, which means we'll risk running into Hussler's party but that can't be helped much. I figure if we go the most direct route it'd take us maybe a little less than a day. Since we probably don't want to go *the* most direct route to minimise the chances of an encounter, it'll take us more like a day to a day and a half."

"Well in that case, what are we waiting for?" Nigel's smile carried a hint of mischief.

"Let's do this." Lennik checked his gun to make sure it was in place in its holster: tight enough to stay in place, loose enough to come out in a hurry.

They picked their way through the ruin with care, careful to not expose themselves to any potential dangers lurking nearby. Renna recognised a kind of shrub with edible seed pods and they took the opportunity for fresh produce readily. The pods were oily and had a mild tang to them that reminded Lennik of ginger, not an unpleasant taste.

"What do you suppose they were like?" Nigel asked as they crested a small rise that had once been a struc-

ture built by mysterious alien hands – or other appendages.

"The Visitors?" Lennik shrugged. "There've only been a handful of physical remains discovered, none of them soft tissues, more's the pity. Apparently something like the large predators here, there seems to have been an evolutionary relationship that wasn't too distant. Probably plated hide, tentacles, all that. Intelligent, no doubt about that, if they got here and even went to Earth. They had a written language – see here." He pointed to an expanse of bare earth where rains had swept aside layers of detritus. Faint, undulating lines and interconnected bars were visible, etched into a metallic surface. "That's their script. Can't decipher it of course, we have no idea what – or even how – they spoke. Some analysts think their language was mostly based on gestures made with their tentacles, but there's no way to be sure."

They walked in silence for a time, maintaining a brisk but even pace. Maria explained it would be best not to go too fast, lest they run the risks of exposing their position by making noise and expending too much of their strength.

The sound of running water drew their attention. Ahead, the brush was thinning. Renna perked attentively, sensing a change in ecology often to her species' benefit – as well as the dangers it held.

"Well, we're losing our cover," Maria sighed. "That'll be the New Zambezi. Good news is we can follow its course towards the station. Everybody stay on the alert, though."

Lennik didn't have to be told twice. He knew that not all of the dangers on the open Great Savannahs ate meat.

They crested a small rise and the jaws of everyone except for Renna dropped. For Lennik the spectacle was not a new one, but that didn't make it any less jaw-dropping. It was the time of the migration of the giant savannah buffalo, one of a number of Pleistonia's bovines. Vast herds were congregating ahead of them, crossing the river to tack south and east to new grazing grounds. The savannahs were a sea of tossing tails, horns and hooves.

"Be extremely careful," Lennik warned them. "The males can get more than six feet high at the shoulder and weigh more than a ton. The females aren't that much smaller, and both know how to use those horns. These things are powerful and numerous enough that they don't get that much predation."

Picking their way to the savannah floor, the small party gave the moody grassland giants a respectful berth. Getting closer, they could see other, smaller species forming herds behind the buffalo. Stilt-legged, flighty swiftcattle bounded antelope-like away from them while herds of horse-sized taurochs, another cattle derivative, backed away cautiously.

Suddenly a tauroch bellowed and the animals jumped as if they had been struck, heads alert. The alarm had been sounded.

"Look out, everyone!" Lennik yelled as more and more of the animals bellowed in fear and began to run, hooves pounding the ground with a rumble. To their right the buffalo took notice, turning to confront the source of the alarm with lowered horns. Menacing snorts and bellowed challenges were issued – no predator braved their circle of death and lived to tell of it. The smaller taurochs and swiftcattle had no such defence, however – they bolted for all they were worth.

Some of the animals suddenly changed course erratically, leaping in their direction. The three sapiens' faces visibly paled. Renna whimpered.

"DON'T run!" Lennik bellowed over the noise. "They'll only trample you! Get ready to use the guns!" His own fingers were white and shaking as he said this.

Just as suddenly as the taurochs stampeded for them they swerved again, abruptly changing direction. *Wait a minute, why would...* Lennik turned, praying he was wrong. Only one predator on Pleistonia possessed the techniques, the formidability, the intelligence and the numbers to hunt a herd of taurochs like this.

The creatures were lithe and powerful, about the size of an African lion. Like their cousins the tigrekraken and the dracokraken they had the



characteristic six tentacles and beaklike mouths. Unlike their cousins they hunted in packs. They were lupokrakens, and by their size and the distinctive display crests on their ridged shoulders and powerful necks Lennik recognised them as great crested lupokrakens. Smaller than the other large predators, they made up for it in speed and coordination in numbers. Highly intelligent, they had ambushed the herd from both sides.

And to their horror, their small party was right in the middle.

\* \* \*

Hussler was not having a good day. His men were exhausted from a night combing the brush and the savannahs for their adversaries, both on foot and in ATVs, and they were disheartened by the loss of their comrades. The outpost was not a large one: everyone had known Arthur and Suleiman and most had played their share of hands of poker and downed whisky with the two deceased men.

Hussler lit a cigar and puffed bad-temperedly, trying to let the thick smoke of the New Havana Tobacco company wash away a night of sleeplessness, the memories of St.-Avery's scratched and bloodied gun (and, worse, other effects of the two men in variously mangled and bloodied states found by another team), and the large knot of worry in his stomach over the missing delegates.

*A man could go crazy out here.* He thought, closing his eyes and trying to let the cigar and the warm morning sunshine transport him to another realm. *Why, it's not so bad, really – who's so eager for civilisation, with all its little rushing, busy people, safe and secure behind the four walls of their lives? Our species was born on a planet like this one. Look at me – out here so long I know this wilderness better than the streets of Hearth or Starfall or Pleistoniana. And Earth – just a memory of a memory. My grandparents didn't even remember too much about it, mostly just things their parents told them. This planet's got food, it's got lots of excitement, it's even got women – after a fashion.* He thought of Emmy, docile, pliant, subservient – the perfect maid and concubine in one. *Never have to wor-*

*ry about her talking back to me, that's for sure.* He chuckled to himself. *Or, God forbid, getting pregnant.* He shivered. That was one thing the early researchers had answered very quickly, with DNA analysis: this was a form of *Homo erectus*, closely related to but not fertile with *Homo sapiens*.

He shook himself from his reverie. *What the fuck am I thinking?* He thought in disgust. He had to catch those delegates. The company was counting on him, had entrusted him with making sure that the delegation was neutralised. Nothing could allow their operations in *erectus* territory to be sabotaged, not with what they had at stake. If the delegation escaped the Pleistonian government at Hearth could send National Guard troops to disband every single MPS. The handful of settlements that existed at Encounter Point, in New Javaland and New California could be abandoned. No frontier meant no real estate, and when the Second Fleet from Earth arrived that would be very bad for business indeed. *I'll show them.* He brooded. *I'll show the government, all those big-shot bureaucrats at Hearth, that the Pleistonian erectus is a bloody savage beast.*

"Captain –" a man approached, threw him a salute.

"Any word?" he barked.

"Not on the delegates, no sir, but –"

"Make sure the pilots are fresh and tell them to get the lead out! It's broad daylight now and I don't know how the bloody hell we're supposed to find them on the ground without air surveillance!"

"Yes sir." The soldier tried to continue. "Captain –"

"What?" Hussler's voice cracked like a whip.

"Father Joseph Landa is coming, sir." He saluted and withdrew.

Hussler looked up: a two-seater plane was visible, angling itself for descent. The hatch opened and Father Landa descended. The thin priest was clad in a pair of rugged hiking boots and simple outdoor clothing.

"Father," he greeted Landa. "Glad you could make it, although I regret the circumstances."

"As do I, the more so because of a

conversation that I had with one of my superiors at Hearth," the priest informed him gravely. "It would seem that the outside world is beginning to worry and take note about the absence of our champion delegates. Apparently they were supposed to have made it to the Range Sheriff's office up the New Zambezi last night. When they failed to make their return the office tried calling the plane, and when that failed, the mission and finally the delegates' respective contacts. I expect we'll have competition in our search before too much longer."

Hussler swore. "We've been out searching all night and no sign."

Landa's gaze turned to ice. "Redouble your efforts, Captain. Do you need to remember what's at stake if this goes sour?"

Hussler moved with the speed of a striking snake, grabbing the much lighter priest by the collar and pulling him close. "What the fuck do you think is on my mind?! Why do you think I've been pushing my crew and myself all night, even though we lost two men to a bloody tigrekraken? *DON'T* you lecture me, priest, I've been running this place since before you got here, and I've helped you out with your program plenty good so you can retire someday with a good name and plenty of money! Just remember: if this thing goes sour you fall too!"

The priest's smile could have frozen fire as he extricated himself from the Captain's grip with evident disdain. "Believe me, *Captain*, had you any idea how truly expendable – and vulnerable – you are you would understand the meaning of the word *scapegoat*. A proverbial sacrificial lamb, I should think, really." His voice was silky enough to make a cat shudder. "You can not *begin* to comprehend how well I have, to borrow the vernacular, 'covered my ass'. I'm connected – and that means *protected*, protected in this case by Cardinal Agustino Cruz, director of the Pleistonian See's Native Missions Arm which works directly with Refiner's Agent – your employer, remember, the company who runs the Greenpark Brigade? I happen to know that if



these delegates are successful, you will fall hardest, and first.

"It's too easy, Roy, too easy to blame all the misdeeds and abuses of the poor, poor *erectus* on swaggering, gun-toting, villainous-mustachio-twirling Greenpark Brigade mercenary Captain Hussler. That leaves the church free and clear to dissociate itself from the abuses of *one* Brigadesman and the company free to make a lot of apologetic noise and write a few checks to the appropriate places. Then all the company has to do is say, see, we cleaned up the mess! And the church can override the leftists and naysayers and say, see, we can treat the *erectus* compassionately and integrate them into our society! And guess what, Roy, when the Second Fleet gets here from Earth, Refiner's Agent can take up the real estate market in this area and there'll be lots of new homes being built here, and the church's Native Missions Arm will be over its eyeballs in funds, and whether you get any of that wealth or end up in prison depends on whether or not you can *clean up this mess!*"

"Did you come here to do nothing more than insult me and impugn my talents, or was there a useful function as well?" snarled Hussler, trying not to show how chastened – and sobered – he felt.

Landa sighed exaggeratedly and rolled his eyes. "No, Roy, I came to help oversee things. As you'll notice my pilot's already taken off without me: I ordered him to join the search with the plane the church gave us for mission purposes. You're in enough of a pickle as it is. I don't see how the situation can get any worse if I lend a hand – or a mind. And with any luck I may be able to save us all yet."

## Chapter Three

The lupokrakens bore down on the small party with tentacles flared and crests quivering in the air as they raced. "Run!" Lennik barked. "Try to

delay them just long enough for the main body to make a kill!" he knew that this was a smaller group that served as the second part of most pincer-style ambushes. Usually the larger group of a pack chased quarry towards a hidden ambush, and then a few animals leaped out to snap at the frontrunners in the herd. Panic-stricken, the quarry would try to change directions, causing confusion and collision and allowing the main body of the pack to make a kill – sometimes two. In a pinch Lennik knew they could use their weapons, but they might be unable to stop all of the lupokrakens in time. Besides, it was better not to risk it if possible – their pursuers might be close enough to hear the noise.

They ran, the lupokrakens giving chase as the taurochs began to thunder off.

Renna kept her head remarkably well. Despite the fact that the great crested lupokraken was one of her kind's most feared enemies, she ran ahead of the rest of the party, bounding with remarkable ease on the hot savannahs. Her keen eyes quested for something in the grass – there! She bent to pick up the rounded stone mid-stride, turning with astounding precision to face their pursuers.

Her aim was impeccable. The lupokraken in the lead was hit square-on between the eyes. It stopped, hooted plaintively through its beaklike mouth, flaring its tentacles in pain. The other lupokrakens slowed their stride, perplexed by their leader's strange behaviour.

The party kept running. Renna had given them a small lead and they were not about to waste it. Suddenly a melodic, bugling hooting cut across the plain. The lupokrakens turned and bounded towards the remainder of the pack, one of them still shaking its head as the pain cleared.

"Guess they got lucky," Lennik panted. "And thanks to Renna here, so did we." He hugged her. "Some aim you've got there, little girl. Just promise you'll never turn it on me."

"Glad we didn't have to use this thing." Maria surveyed her rifle doubtfully. "I wonder if it would have been enough."

Lennik shook his head. "To stop

those things? Doubt it. These handguns sure wouldn't have. Renna's stone was fortunate but it only would've slowed them down. You okay there, Nigel?"

The winded priest was still trying to catch his breath. "Yes – thank you, I'm fine. My grandparents were from Nigeria and they used to tell me such stories about African animals, but now I've got a story that tops them all!"

Renna was staring at something intently, keen, dark eyes focused beyond where the great crested lupokrakens were gorging themselves. Dark, aerial forms were swooping, flapping and soaring around a collection of figures. Lennik recognised the flying creatures as pterostars, Pleistonia's native equivalent of birds or pterosaurs. *Probably hoping to scavenge carrion. But what's down there?* With binoculars he zoomed in to see more clearly.

"Check this out." He motioned to Maria and Nigel. "There's a group of *erectus* down there!"

"Is it safe to approach?" asked Maria. "We really should keep moving."

"No reason it shouldn't be, unless we want some of their carrion." Lennik smiled.

The great crested lupokrakens were so engrossed in their kill that the party didn't have to bother giving them any more than a modest berth. The scattered taurochs and swiftcattle had regrouped and were making their crossing with the last of the buffalo.

The *erectus* group seemed to be mostly young adults, Lennik noted as they drew closer, although there were some adolescents as well. They were engaged in butchering and consuming the carcass of a half-grown buffalo, probably killed by a pack of great crested lupokrakens or a dracokraken within the last day or so. *Erectus* never took large game, they lacked the hunting skills and weapons to do so.

*Erectus* were usually mildly curious at the approach of sapiens but this group seemed different. Renna's greeting vocalisation produced alarm, warning calls and threatening displays. Several of the males picked up strange implements – the sapiens stared. Instead of the usual Acheulean

bifaces, picks, cleavers and fire-hardened wooden spears these *erectus* carried pickaxes, crowbars and other implements from the mine.

"Looks like we found young Marcus and his gang," Nigel observed calmly.

One of the young males stepped forward, hefting a pickaxe menacingly. The implement was covered in blood, some fresh and some caked and dried. The *erectus* was tall, standing perhaps six foot three. The pickaxe looked like a toy in his powerfully-built, sinew-corded arms. It was easy to see how he could have split a sapiens' skull in half with a single blow. Behind him the others gripped their weapons and took up positions.

"I'll wager that's Marcus." Lennik's tone was nervous. He'd never used a gun on an *erectus* and he wasn't going to start now if it could be helped.

"I'll wager he means business." Maria's hand twitched reflexively on the rifle.

The young male's keen, intelligent eyes fixated on the rifle and he vocalised, a series of sharp barks and screams clearly intended to warn off intruders.

"Maria, drop the gun." Lennik's command was urgent but he kept the tone of his voice low.

She looked at him as though he had lost his mind. "Drop the gun? Are you insane?"

Lennik earnestly shook his head, fervently hoping he was right about this. "Maria, he's had bad experiences with *Homo sapiens* wielding guns. Trust me. Drop the gun, now!"

Maria surrendered her weapon with due professional grace, carefully extending it away from herself and lowering it to the ground, then standing up slowly with open hands. Lennik raised his open hands too and Nigel followed suit. Renna went them one better, vocalising happily. The *erectus* lowered their weapons and visibly calmed.

"Well, now that that's cleared up." Nigel smiled good-humouredly. "Wonder if these fellows – and ladies – would be willing to share dinner with us?"

"Not unless you enjoy sun-ripened carrion," Lennik responded. "But we

shouldn't be hanging around them anyway. We'll make them uncomfortable, and more to the point we don't want our pursuers to catch up with them."

"What about the rifle?" Maria eyed the weapon lying on the ground. "We can't leave it behind."

Lennik frowned in thought for a moment, then smiled. "Ah, leave that to me." He turned, drawing his knife as he walked toward a large stand of brush. Cutting several large stems close to the ground, he returned with an armful and dropped it over the gun. Then, reaching underneath to tuck the gun into the brush, he picked it up again and the foursome walked off. Maria looked at him quizzically. "They only see the gun as a threat. I've just worked off their concept of object permanence. Bundled in brush they can't see it and it doesn't worry them because they have no experience of gun-in-brush equalling danger."

"Clever." Maria shook her head, gratefully accepting the rifle back from him.

"That was some smooth diplomacy back there, Lennik," Nigel commended him. "You'd have made a fine priest." He smiled mischievously.

Lennik stopped mid-stride. "Coming from you, Nigel, I'll take that as a compliment."

"Renna seemed quite taken with those young *erectus*, especially that male," Maria noted. "Has she ever –"

Lennik shook his head sadly. "Been back with her kind? Taken a mate? No. Pleistonian *erectus*, like humans, need to be socialised into their appropriate sociality, including sexuality. Renna here and others like her – including a lot of that lot back there, I'm guessing – were taken too young to have learned it all. Oh, there've been matings in captivity – when we took her and the rest of the captured *erectus* from that illegal settlement several years back we established an 'experimental farm' on Hearthland to try to rehabilitate them. Some of them mated successfully and produced children, and some of these we were able to re-release into the wild as family units. Others though, like Renna, never seemed to get it.

The real tragedy is that some of the young females had been sexually abused by their captors, and I'm not aware of a single one of those successfully joining a reconstituted *erectus* society, let alone mating with one of her kind. I don't know if that happened to Renna; in her case I guess it was more unclear."

"What about that group?" Nigel asked. "Can we do nothing more than leave them on their own?"

"Nothing." Lennik shook his head. "And even if they'd accept our company, let alone any kind of help, I think it's for the best. They've got a shot at making their way on their own – with a little bit of luck they might pull it off. I think we owe them that chance."

They walked in silence for a while, stopping only to dig some woolly yams. A plant evidently brought by the Visitors, it produced tuber-like growths covered with an almost furry outer layer. The skin was inedible but the tubers were easily peeled with a knife and when consumed yielded a surprisingly robust, nutty flavour.

"These things are great baked, just like a potato, or better yet, roasted over an open fire like a shish kebab," Lennik rhapsodised. "They cook in their own husks, the hairy stuff just burns off, and when the husk splits open along the seam you've got this nice, tender meat just ready for some salt and – ow!" Maria had jabbed him in the seat of the pants with the rifle butt.

"Enough with the food fantasies already," she told him playfully. "Or I'll feed you to the next terrible predator we come across."

The sun rose high in the sky over the banks of the New Zambezi as it wound its powerful course south and east from the northern scrublands to the Great Savannahs. It was the time of the summer rains, a fact reflected by the migration of the herds towards the south and east. The giant savannah buffalo in particular were dependent upon greenery and high amounts of precipitation: drought killed more buffalo than did predators.

Ahead the four found their view screened by another low rise. Suddenly the ground began to shake with

the sound of countless hooves. They could hear the panicked yelling of men's voices and the sharp reports of several gunshots, followed by the bellow of wounded animals and more stampeding. Curiosity won out, and they quickly drew to a small stand of brush atop the rise to ascertain the source of the commotion.

On the plains below no fewer than six of their pursuers were futilely attempting to stand down or to evade a charging herd of buffalo. Lennik knew the great animals usually preferred threat displays to actual charges: the men must have especially drawn their ire. Their rapid-fire salvos felled a few of the animals but only angered the onrushing tide. Two of the men managed to escape to the sanctuary of a thinly-wooded grove, where the power of the buffalo onslaught would be dispersed somewhat. Four of them met their painful and sickening ends on the tossing horns and beneath the powerful hooves of the cavalcade. The mightiest of predators quailed before a charge of giant savannah buffalo: the men had been fools even to try to stand against it.

Nigel turned away, trying to block the awful screams of the dying men out of his mind, to keep them from becoming memories. *No time for this now, Nigel*, he told himself. *You hate bloodshed but there's nothing else for it, just maintain your composure.*

"Well, guess we know how *not* to try out for 'Buffalo Bill' status," Lennik quipped with an air of morbid levity.

Maria frowned in puzzlement. "Buffalo Bill?"

Lennik shook his head. "Nothing. Just an American historical figure from a few hundred years ago."

\* \* \*

"Captain – Father." The two bloodied, bedraggled men practically collapsed before their two superiors as they addressed them.

Hussler frowned, both at the dreadful state of the men and the fact that they'd addressed Landa in addition to him. Who the hell did they think was running the show here?

"Goodness, whatever happened to

you?" Landa's ordinarily cool tone carried a sincere note of concern.

"Buffalo – attack, back that way." One of them thumbed over his shoulder from the direction in which they came, panting and out of breath. "Started threatening us, so Mathers shot in the air over their heads to frighten them off. 'Stead, they charged us."

"Imbecile!" Hussler raged. "You *never* shoot at buffalo, they'll trample you to death if they don't gore you first! Where are Mathers and the others?"

The other man looked at his commanding officer with a look of pure hatred that would have cut granite. "Gored and trampled to death like the imbeciles they were, *sir*."

Landa cut in, his brow wrinkled with concern. Pushing Hussler aside, he pulled out a clean cloth and a bottle of antiseptic and began to dab at the blood on their faces. "I'm sorry to hear of the losses, men. I've called the medics and they're coming over to take a look at you two now. Were you seriously hurt in any way?"

The men looked at him, somewhat taken aback by his ministrations. The second man spoke. "No, thank you, Father, we just got scratched by the bushes as we ran away."

Hussler turned aside, rubbing his eyes wearily. That meddlesome priest just *had* to exploit his outburst, which was only because he'd had no sleep last night and been out looking for the blasted delegates because *he* would take the fall! Goddamn it all, did the priest *have* to be so ingratiating with *his* men? He reached for his hip flask and took a gulp of whisky, felt its liquid fire sorcery kindle in his stomach and spread to his muscles. He lit another cigar.

His handheld beeped. He answered it. "What?" he growled.

It was the voice of Joachim da Cunha, one of his most trusted and competent lieutenants. "Captain, we've set up positions around the Range Sheriff's station and midway between the station and where you are, as you've ordered. They still haven't arrived, but we'll catch them."

Hussler closed his eyes. That might have been the first piece of

good news he'd heard since he'd failed to catch the delegation in his trap, he realised. He'd lost two good men in the night to a tigrekraken and four more to a buffalo stampede, been upbraided in front of his men and his authority undermined by a *priest* for Chrissakes, but it still wasn't too late! "Great, Joachim, you've done well." He commended him. "When we get out of all this there's a whole bottle of single-malt whisky with your name on it in my liquor cabinet."

"Thanks Captain, we'll keep you posted." Joachim signed off.

*Stupid delegates.* Hussler thought. They'd been fools to ever tangle with him, and now they had nowhere to run. *You may not know it yet but the game's all over.*

\* \* \*

Lennik had decided that Pleistonia was ruled by a particularly capricious god with a delightfully wicked sense of justice. He tried not to look at the mangled remains of the four men as the party picked its way forward. *Let's see, in one day we've had a run-in with great crested lupokrakens and seen four men trampled and gored to death.*

Renna stiffened in alarm, as usual her keen eyes and watchfulness alerting her to the possibility of danger before her cousins. She froze.

Drawn by the migrating herds, the sounds of violence and especially by the smell of fresh blood, a dracokraken was lumbering towards them.

"Not another dangerous beast that wants to eat us." Maria groaned. "Now I *am* going to have to use this thing." She tightened her grip on the rifle.

"No you won't." Lennik insisted. "It's just after the carrion. As long as we don't make any sudden moves or indicate that *we* want it we're fine."

They gave the immense predator a respectful berth. As it drew closer they could see two cubs trailing in its wake. Males with cubs were always the most dangerous. The adult's tentacles writhed in anticipation, scenting the air. The men had managed to kill three full-grown buffalo. The dracokraken family had probably never seen such a feast. The father sunk his tentacles into the full underbelly of a

buffalo and tore out its innards with gusto, helping the two eager cubs partake in the meal. Overhead the scavenging pterostars were circling, drawn by the promise of an ample share in the feast.

"Dis-gusting." Maria shook her head.

Renna seemed drawn by the carrion. Although she knew better than to approach a male dracokraken with cubs, her species' natural affinity for scavenging was an instinct not easily repressed.

"Sorry, babe, we don't have the time to scavenge." Lennik gently led her away. "Although the fresh meat would be nice."

"I'm not sure I could stomach one of those things." Nigel pointed to the buffalo carcasses.

Lennik shook his head. "Non-sense, Father, you never had bison?" American bison had been brought on the First Fleet in addition to cattle and other domestic hoofstock. "Just like a better beef."

Nigel closed his eyes. "Please, Lennik, for the love of God don't mention *beef* right now."

The grasslands rolled on, and they encountered still more rolling herds of buffalo, taurochs, and bounding swiftcattle. Thankfully there were no more close calls with predators. They passed a young tigrekraken enthusiastically devouring a half-grown tauroch, so engrossed in its dinner it barely gave them a glance. They witnessed an impressive high-speed chase between the great crested lupokraken's smaller cousin, a pack of common lupokrakens, and their primary prey, a herd of swiftcattle. In panic one of the swiftcattle veered in their direction, and before any of them could do a thing it had leaped clear over their heads.

"Sure is one hell of a place," Maria said, shaking her head. "Sometimes even working the Range Sheriff's office you forget that."

"Speaking of which," Nigel frowned, "it seems that we should have heard from them, at least, by now. After all, we are well behind schedule, I would have expected them to deploy an effective search party by now."

"I'm sure they have." Maria nod-

ded. "But this is one hell of a big place to be searching in. We can only hope that they'll think to sweep the course of the New Zambezi – it certainly wasn't on our travel agenda originally. And of course, they'll think that Hussler's on their side."

Lennik checked his handheld. "If my maps of the New Zambezi are not mistaken, we are about at the halfway point between where we started out and the station."

Maria checked her handheld and brightened. "Hey, you're right, good going Lennik!"

A sudden rustling in the brush and they all froze. Maria had the rifle ready to fire in a half-blink of an eye. Lennik drew with practiced ease and was surprised to see Nigel do the same.

"I'd watch where I put those, if I were you," a man's voice drawled. The party jumped. From behind a dense stand of brush the speaker rose to his feet, revealing a lean, rawboned frame, an unruly thatch of auburn hair and a stubbled chin. "Allen MacReady at your service." He saluted them mockingly with one hand, cradling a powerful assault rifle almost casually in the other. "Crew!" he commanded. Five more men emerged from their positions, forming a rough semicircle around their leader.

As one the three sapiens groaned. They had walked straight into the trap.

"Captain," MacReady drawled into his handheld. "This is Allen MacReady. I've got some news you've been waiting to hear."

\*\*\*

Hussler's patience was about to snap. He and his men had been going almost non-stop since yesterday. He'd had teams spell each other, trading places on the search so they could get some shuteye, but that could only go so far. They'd covered miles of the same goddamned bush and grasslands, lost two men to a tigrekraken and four – *four!* – men to a bloody *buffalo stampede*, and still nothing!

A Range Sheriff search party had finally caught up with them. Landa was speaking with them now – at least the meddlesome priest was mak-

ing himself useful. When he had the opportunity after all this Hussler was planning to sort him out plenty good! Teach him to be all high and mighty!

His handheld beeped. "What?" he barked. "MacReady? You – *what?!* Fantastic, MacReady, dispose of them and hold the area until I can get over there!" A broad grin cracked his rugged face. *Knew this would happen.* MacReady signed off and Hussler stalked over to his driver, who was lounging against the wheel of an ATV but snapped to attention as soon as he saw Hussler. Hussler barked orders and a handful of his most competent soldiers joined him in the ATV – no sense alerting the Range Sheriffs to what was going on. Hussler glanced in the direction of the deputies and was pleased to see Landa was still keeping them busy. *That's it, priest, just keep them busy.*

\*\*\*

"Come on, drop your weapons or we start shooting – and that pretty little cave bitch gets it first!" MacReady threatened, gesturing with his powerful assault rifle towards Renna.

Maria's mouth twitched. Lennik tried to look at her from the corner of his eye, but his attention was focused on their captors. His mind was racing. *They're going to kill us. They have to kill us or we'll expose them.* Did Maria know that? Did Nigel? Surely they did. The real question was: would they do what had to be done?

Lennik tried to take in his companions. Both of the sapiens seemed just as frozen as he was. Renna bared her teeth and let out a low stream of chatter. Again Maria made as if to speak, this time letting out a slight hiss of air. Lennik looked. So did Nigel. She gave them a hard look. *She knows.*

"Come on, drop 'em!" MacReady barked.

"If we do that you'll shoot us down." Maria's tone was accusatory, bold.

*Good work, Maria.* Lennik thought admiringly. *Stall them. Anything to buy us time.*

MacReady chuckled coarsely. "Sister, we'll shoot you down in your tracks if you *don't* drop your guns! Now lay 'em down and we can negotiate!"

*Why does he want us to do that if he's just going to kill us?* Almost as soon as he asked himself the question Lennik realised he already knew the answer. *He's afraid we'll get off a lucky shot or two – or six.*

“Do you swear before God you will not harm my friends?” Nigel asked, his face earnest and sincere. He held the weapon from himself with distaste, in one hand as if to surrender it.

MacReady looked over at Nigel, and rolled his eyes. “You’re in a mighty poor position to be making deals, Father. What in blazes you even doing with that thing?”

It was all the opening Maria needed. Her fingers were corded livewire as she dropped the rifle to firing position and unleashed a punishing salvo. No sooner had she gotten off a shot than Nigel turned with astonishing speed and alacrity, dropping two men with impeccable accuracy. Lennik leaped as soon as he heard the loud report of the first shot, protecting Renna with his body and dropping the last man from a crouch. MacReady and his men, taken wholly off-guard, fell to a man, their few shots flying ineffectually off course.

“Everyone all right?” Maria asked.

Nigel managed to steady his trembling hands. “Yes, thanks be to God.” He said, surprised to find his voice remarkably firm. “And thanks to my target practice in my youth, as well. I’m surprised I still have it in me.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.” Maria told him. “You two okay, Lennik?”

Renna pulled Lennik close for an embrace, nuzzling his neck affectionately, then nipped his ear. “Hey, cut it out, you little flirt!” Lennik laughed, squeezing her back. “We’re fine, thanks.” He got up, helped her up and dusted himself off. Renna warbled softly.

“We need to get out of here fast.” Maria observed. “Hussler and party are already on their way.”

Hurriedly they grabbed more weapons and provisions from the dead men. Despite the fact that the guns were extra weight to carry, Maria made Lennik and Nigel grab one assault rifle each. She shouldered a second rifle, grabbed a handgun to replace the one Nigel was borrowing

from her as well as a grenade bandolier. Then they set off, running as fast and as far as their legs would take them.

\*\*\*

Hussler swore, howling until he thought his lungs would burst, raging until his throat burned and his vision swam. Impossible no longer held any meaning for him. He refused to believe in the impossible because it kept becoming possible. Not only had a rag-tag group of delegates evaded his grasp by fleeing, they had killed six – six – of his men in a direct confrontation. Together with the four trampled by buffalo and the two slain by a tigrekraken, that brought the death toll to a staggering *twelve* men lost trying to stop them! His men were murmuring mutinously behind his back and Landa was taking more control than ever. Fortunately for him, it was only his small party at the scene of the gunfight – the better to keep it under the wraps for now.

He forced himself to calm down, taking deep breaths. It wasn’t over. He had contacts, powerful contacts with the Greenpark Brigade who could pull him out of this mess if it became intractable. Whatever Landa thought, he wasn’t the only one who’d covered his ass. And the fugitives were still out there somewhere, and whatever the cost it’d be well worth it when they finally closed the gap.

“Keep moving,” he growled to the driver. “They can’t be far. We’ll find them.”

\*\*\*

It was Nigel’s idea to tack to the west, away from the New Zambezi, in order to avoid further ambushes. Crossing the river would take precious time and was dangerous; best to get back under cover.

They stopped by a small creek, sheltered by surrounding brush and slightly hilly terrain from view. Exhausted, the entire party sprawled by the bank of the creek to eat and take a breather. It was a swelteringly hot and humid evening: it was summer on the northern savannahs, the time of the hottest temperatures and the warmest rains.

Maria fanned herself furiously as small, four-winged flying invertebrates known as helistars buzzed excitedly about them, drawn by the smell of their sweat. “If you’ll pardon me, everyone, I’m going to go behind those bushes down by the creek and take a bath.”

“I’ll be watching,” Nigel told her, hefting his rifle and winking at her over his double entendre. Maria gave him a dirty look and the priest smiled.

“In that case I, being hot and sweaty but much too beat to do anything about it, am going to take a nap.” Lennik unbuttoned his shirt and laid back on the ground, placing his hat over his eyes. Renna cuddled up next to him. “Watch out for helldragons, Maria, they sometimes come up creeks like this.”

“I’m taking my weapons, thanks, Lennik,” she acknowledged and turned to leave.

“A woman who takes her guns to the bath,” Lennik mused aloud from underneath his hat.

Nigel chuckled. “Who would have guessed?”

\*\*\*

Lennik awoke and thought he would die. Never before, he thought, had he felt so *unclean*. The dust and grime of more than a day’s worth of solid travel was coated to his skin, now drenched in yet another layer of fresh sweat. Maria was back, digging determinedly at a tenacious woolly yam plant with her knife. Nigel was asleep on his back. Renna was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s down by the creek.” Maria answered his unspoken question. “You should go join her, you look – and smell – dreadful.” She smiled wickedly.

“Thanks,” Lennik groaned, rubbing his eyes wearily.

Renna was thoroughly enjoying herself: she lolled in the shallows, sinking her hands and feet in the soft mud.

“Come on, you, let’s find some privacy,” Lennik chuckled. Renna looked up at his approach, her face brightening. They walked behind a screen of bushes and around a bend, shielding them from view. Lennik looked around, worriedly scanning

the area for any signs of predators or their pursuers. By great good fortune they were still undisturbed. He plunged into the water fully-clothed, then emerged to lay his clothes to dry on the bank. He sank back in with a sigh of bliss, Renna following closely.

For a time he closed his eyes, lying back in the water and feeling the sun caress his closed eyelids and the water gently enfold his body as it washed away the grime.

Renna touched him.

His eyes jerked open. There was something so indelibly and indescribably *powerful* in that touch. She closed her hand over his shoulder and then let it fall away, making soft sounds. He turned to look at her.

Her face was very close to his. Her eyes were filled with something so powerful it crossed even the evolutionary gap that divided them. *Desire*. At long last Renna was discovering her sexuality.

"Renna, no, you can't—" he started to protest. There were *laws* against this sort of thing. He'd helped to put men in jail for this!

She touched him again, more excitedly. In that moment Lennik realised that there was nothing she wanted more than this. And that was the difference: unlike a human child or an animal of another species, a sexually mature *Homo erectus* could engage in consensual sex with a *Homo sapiens*. With that realisation came another: in that moment he felt he'd never met a woman from his own species so beautiful.

In the light of the afternoon sun, the two unlikely lovers intertwined in life's great embrace.

\* \* \*

Ringling the Range Sheriff's station, concealed behind scattered stands of brush and boulders Joachim da Cunha and his men lay patiently in wait. Below they had watched the coming and going of Range Sheriff planes for hours. Their own plane was concealed with camouflage nets a short distance off.

Joachim wiped the sweat from his brow and raised his binoculars to his eyes for the millionth time that day to look at the New Zambezi Range

Sheriff's Station. It wasn't much to look at, just a simple wooden structure with a few outbuildings and a crude landing strip for planes.

Unlike his superior, Captain Husler, Joachim was a quiet, reserved kind of man. People often thought of him as brooding and moody but the truth was simply that he didn't take to company. The frontier life appealed to him because of his personal philosophy of strength and self-reliance. He saw himself as an individual who strove for what the ancient Greeks had called *autarky* or self-sufficiency. The Captain liked and trusted him because he was competent and dependable but Joachim felt no loyalty to him. He simply followed orders because that was how to get ahead. Few men had ever crossed him: he bore a white scar on his right cheek, souvenir of a knife fight with a pair of frontier toughs at Encounter Point who'd thought to get the better of him after losing at cards. He touched the silver chain that hung at his neck at the thought: he still carried the dried, severed ears of the two men as a memento.

His handheld vibrated. Joachim answered it. "Lieutenant Joachim da Cunha."

"Lieutenant, this is Major Abdul Kandiyoti, Fort Greenpark. We are speaking on a secure line."

Joachim nodded. Fort Greenpark was the command centre and training facility for the Greenpark Brigade. "I'm listening, sir."

"Lieutenant, command has been made aware of your situation and has reached a decision. What is your position now?"

"We are posted around the New Zambezi station, sir, to intercept the delegation."

"Our intelligence has informed us of the deaths of twelve men in the attempt to intercept this delegation, half at their hands and half by wild beasts."

*Twelve?! They took out MacReady's party?!* Joachim was shocked. "I was unaware of the former six, sir, although I am sorry to hear of it as I stationed those men myself."

"Lieutenant, this situation is deteriorating: there are Range Sheriff

planes throughout the area and if the situation continues to deteriorate they'll bring in the National Guard to shut us down. A lot is at stake here, and it has become apparent what needs to be done. Do you understand your orders?"

"Yes, sir, I do." Joachim's voice was calm, measured.

"Then you know what you must do." The line went dead.

Joachim turned to his expectant men. "Move out." He told them. "MacReady and his party are dead. We're getting back aloft." He placed another call. "Father Landa? That was Fort Greenpark. They've reached a decision. I'm on my way back now. I've got some business to attend to."

\* \* \*

They returned to camp flushed and invigorated. Maria stared suspiciously. "That took a while. Everything all right?"

Lennik nodded and Renna warbled excitedly. "Yes, thank you, everything's fine."

"Well, we'd best get a move on; looks like Nigel's finally stirring."

The priest, hearing his name, sat up with a groan. "Thank you, yes, I'm up. Thank you all for indulging me but I needed that."

"I think we all did, Father." Maria told him, handing him his guns. The priest accepted them soberly and they set off, evening shadows beginning to lengthen.

"We'll do it in a straight march, more or less," Maria told them. "I've kept track of our progress and we're not that far from the New Zambezi, so we'll keep going and we should be at the Range Sheriff's station not long after dark, maybe a couple of hours. And I think we've already run into our quota of dangerous predators so with any luck we won't be running across any more."

"Let's hope not," Lennik groaned. "But if we do, Renna here can always try that stone trick again, right?" he grabbed her playfully and Renna vocalised happily.

Maria shot them a suspicious look but held her tongue.

They made good progress as the afternoon wore on to evening. The wilds of Pleistonia seemed to have fi-

nally exhausted their repertoire of unpleasant surprises in the form of large and powerful beasts, and well-rested they actually felt their spirits begin to rise as they neared their goal.

"They'll really be out for us in force by now," Maria confidently expressed. "Frankly, I'm a bit surprised we haven't seen a Range Sheriff's plane by now. Probably happen soon, though."

Nigel smiled. "I'm sure they'll find us soon. How much more can this planet throw at us?"

"Plenty," Lennik told him with a half-chuckle. "But don't worry, something tells me we're clear for now. The big predators all have to have big ranges to hunt in, and we've encountered the ones in this area already by my reckoning."

"I'm just amazed we didn't have to use any of our weapons against them." Maria shook her head, hefting her rifle on her shoulder. "Not that those soldiers were so fortunate, of course."

"Overall, we've been remarkably blessed with safety," Nigel observed.

"Now we just need to be blessed with a rescue plane," Maria replied.

Nigel nodded knowingly. "He's working on it," he assured them.

The shadows were longer now and the landscape was opening again to rolling savannah when at last they saw it. Lights moving through the sky: a plane, cutting a course from the north, the direction of the station, coming towards them at a tangent.

"There you go, Nigel," Lennik said. "Good guesswork."

Nigel looked toward the approaching aircraft gratefully.

Maria reached for her handheld but Lennik stopped her. "Wait, Maria, how do we know it's from the station? What if it's one of Hussler's?"

"I don't think so, I'm pretty sure that's the model the Range Sheriff's office uses," she assured him.

"All the same, be careful."

She sent a call signal from her handheld to the plane, hoping her handheld would have the power to reach that far. The handheld beeped. Maria acknowledged the call.

"This is Deputy Kim Joon, Range Sheriff, come in."

"This is Deputy Maria Cardenas,

Range Sheriff, and companions!" She couldn't restrain the excitement in her voice. "You don't know how glad I am to hear a friendly voice, Deputy, but there's not much time. Quickly, while you're coming in for a landing, standby for transmission of file."

"Acknowledged, standing by."

Maria quickly found the file containing the photos and her report on the massacre and sent it.

The noise of another approaching craft caused them to turn. Fear rolled over them like an icy wave.

"Not again," Nigel grimaced.

Maria thought fast. "Deputy, we're being pursued by Captain Hussler and his men! I'm sorry, there's not time to explain, you're just going to have to trust me!"

The Range Sheriff plane was angling its approach. The other plane, which had clearly caught Maria's hail, was turning too.

"The file contains the report of a massacre on an *erectus* village near here! The mutiny at the mission was against oppressive conditions. The Brigade's trying to eliminate us to keep us from telling the truth! Look out, they've got a door gun!"

"A door gun?! What the —" Deputy Kim broke off. "Hang on, they're hailing me."

The small party waited with bated breath, seeking shelter low to the ground, trying to screen themselves from view with the scant brush in the area, but to little avail. There would be no escape this time if the plane opened fire.

\* \* \*

Hussler's handheld beeped. It was Nielsen. "Captain, come quick, we got 'em! Hurry, this Range Sheriff's coming to get 'em!"

"Shoot him down." Hussler growled. "We'll be right there. You're not far from me and I'm on an ATV, we'll catch up in a few."

Hussler's driver was already driving like a bat out of hell by the time he'd hung up.

The Range Sheriff plane surged forward, barrelling at the larger plane from the MPS. Taken off guard, the larger plane tried to swerve to outmanoeuvre its smaller opponent in order to climb. Skilfully, Deputy Kim hov-

ered over it, blasting the window of the cockpit with his plane's jets. The pilot of the larger plane evidently panicked, sending his craft streaking downwards and away from Kim's designated landing site.

It was all the opening Kim needed. He angled for a descent, the Range Sheriff plane swooped down like a bird of prey. No sooner had it hit the ground than the four ran towards the raising hatch and the promise of freedom, through choking clouds of dust.

Deputy Kim was a lanky, handsome Korean who affected a dark leather bomber's jacket with style. "Swing low, sweet chariot!" He gave them a smile. No sooner had they scrambled inside than he dropped the hatch and took off with a roar. Behind them the larger plane was regaining its footing in the skies like a malevolent giant lurching to its feet. "Well, I must say, you four look a sight." He offered them tubes of a condensed high-protein shake and they gratefully accepted.

As the Deputy flew, dodging devastating salvos with astonishing ease, he listened to their story and recorded it on the plane's computer. Maria's file had already been relayed from the plane's satellite connection to the station, and to the Range Sheriff's central command in Hearth. Soon the whole of Pleistonia would know.

"Sounds like one heck of a ride. You're lucky you didn't die — several times over." Clenching his teeth in concentration, he focused on the pursuing craft. "But if you're to stay lucky we still — need — to — get — back though." The larger craft was becoming desperate, emitting great gouts of fire that raked their smaller plane. The plane shuddered but stayed aloft. "That other pilot was terribly offensive, he wanted to take all the credit for rescuing you for himself! When I wouldn't back down he threatened to drop me from the sky!"

"I think he wanted to rescue us plus a few holes in our vital organs, and take the credit from Captain Hussler," Lennik said dryly.

The plane shuddered again, violently.

"We're only a couple of miles from the station!" Maria's voice was urgent. "We can make it!"

"We'll make it." Nigel's voice carried measured confidence mixed with worry.

Kim swore. "There's another plane coming. Looks like one of theirs. Damn but you're popular."

"Not another one!" Lennik groaned.

As the plane drew closer it became apparent that it was the other mission plane. Suddenly the computer on the Range Sheriff plane squawked.

"Incoming missiles!" Kim shouted.

The party looked up in shock.

"But they don't *have* missiles!" Maria protested. "They didn't use them before!"

\* \* \*

Joachim had never bothered to tell Hussler that he'd had concealed missile bays installed on his plane. One of a number of secrets the Captain didn't need to know about his trusted lieutenant. Some weapons were meant to be deployed in extreme situations as a last resort, with the element of surprise making them the more devastating in their effect. Now the missiles streaked through the air with an awful note of grim finality toward their intended target.

The second mission plane exploded, torn from inside out into a thousand fiery shards.

Joachim noted a hail signal and answered.

"Come in, Nielsen, what's the word?"

"This is Joachim, Captain, and the problem's been taken care of."

"Taken care of – what? Joachim, what's going on? Why aren't you at the station?"

"Just stay where you are, Captain, I'll pick you up and explain."

\* \* \*

"What on earth just happened there?!" Deputy Kim wanted to know. "First the Greenpark Brigade's after you, now they're killing their own?"

"I get it." Maria gave a low whistle. "I get it. They're covering their tracks. They know they can't pull a complete win so now it's damage control – they had to take out that

plane because it attacked us, in order to give whoever's in charge – I'm guessing he's got to be on the other plane – any credibility in court!"

"So we've won." Lennik breathed. "Hey, we've won! We're going to change things!"

"We can only hope." Nigel gave a deep sigh of relief. "And I can see that I will have even more to tell the See than I had expected."

\* \* \*

"What's going on here? Why've you stopped?" Landa demanded to know. Together with the main party he had caught up to Hussler.

"Don't give me that, priest!" Hussler snarled. He was a gnat's whisker from snapping that goddamned priest's neck. He took a deep pull from his hip flask. "Joachim said it's been taken care of, coming back to pick me up is all."

Landa stopped and folded his hands beatifically. "I'll believe that when I see the bodies, Roy, because frankly those four have given you more trouble than I would have imagined possible. Twelve men dead, Captain, *twelve men*. I just hope this forces you to re-evaluate your overall competence."

Further animosities were forestalled by the arrival of Joachim's plane.

"Captain, Father." He greeted each in turn with deference. "If you'll kindly come with me I'll take you to it, and then back."

"Yes, let us." Landa's smile was thin. "I want to see the bodies of the people who cost this outfit three times their number."

Hussler shot him a venomous glare but for once had nothing he cared to say.

\* \* \*

Joachim winged the plane not north and east but to the east and slightly south.

Hussler frowned. "Hey, what's going on here? Thought you said you was going to take us to them."

Joachim reassured him. "We're going where we need to go." Landa nodded approvingly.

They flew for a time in silence and

then Joachim spoke up. "Well, this is it. Cuff him, men."

The soldiers on board the plane rushed as one upon a startled and outraged Captain Hussler, relieving him of his weapons and handcuffing him thoroughly.

"What's all this about?" Hussler yelled. "What the fuck's going on?"

"It seems I was only a little mistaken," Landa told him. There was no mercy in those cold eyes. "When I said that you were a sacrificial lamb, a scapegoat as it were, I should have remembered that you know too much – you're a liability, Hussler, a blunt instrument that's outlived its usefulness."

"The Company can't afford to take that risk," Joachim told him. "I regret this, Captain, but in the end – it's just business."

"Now see here – you can't – I demand –" Hussler spluttered.

"To what? Talk to Fort Greenpark?" Joachim asked. "Because that's where I'm getting these orders. They've had me on the back burner for jobs like this one for years. I'm what you might call a special-ops sort of man. Too bad I had to shoot Nielsen down, but that couldn't be helped. Here looks good."

The plane pulled in as if to land but Joachim didn't take it all the way down.

"I truly regret this Captain," Joachim told him. "But some things can't be helped. Take those cuffs off him and toss him out."

The men did as ordered. Hussler yelled as he fell seven feet to the ground, landing hard on his back.

"Say hello to our old friends for me," Landa called after him as the hatch was shut.

*Old friends? What the hell does he mean by –* Hussler froze. Despite the waves of pain coursing through his body he could hear the tramp of stealthy feet in the tall grass as the plane departed.

A low, menacing vocalisation. *No, it can't be...* strong hands seized him roughly, pulled him to his feet by the neck. Hussler choked, gasping for air as he was forced to look into an all-too-familiar face.

A pickaxe rose menacingly in the darkness and the night was rent with



Hussler's scream, cut mercifully short by a sickening thud as Marcus's swing found its mark.

\* \* \*

The next day, and the station was abuzz with reporters, National Guard, Range Sheriffs and Federal Investigative Agents. An army of the press, politicians, bureaucrats and law-enforcement officials had descended upon the small outpost. A scandal was breaking and a class action lawsuit was already being filed against Refiner's Agent and the Greenpark Brigade on behalf of the *erectus*, in addition to the damages that were all but certain to be awarded to Maria, Nigel, Lennik and Kim the pilot. Joachim had been arrested but the case against him was poor and the Brigade's slick legal team had already got him out on bail. Landa was under suspicion but no definitive case yet existed.

"This is all too overwhelming," Maria remarked to Lennik, having stolen a quick moment outside away from the crowds for a quick cigarette break. Lennik was smoking a cigar and downing a pint of ale.

"You're telling me." Lennik was smiling. "Didn't think I'd have to get chased by those bastards to make my case, but I can't argue with results! There's talk about closing down the entire Mission Partnership Station system. I spoke with the commander of the National Guard and they're putting all the Stations under a provisional occupation, kicking the Greenpark Brigade out and everything!"

"And Cardinal Agustino Cruz currently can not be reached for comment." Nigel smiled. "I've caught wind of rumours that the Native Missions Arm may be in for some hard times, though."

Renna vocalised excitedly and pried Lennik's ale mug from his fingers and took a sip. She had weathered the tumultuous adventure rather well, Lennik thought with pride.

Maria looked at the two of them sceptically. Nigel raised an eyebrow.

Lennik noted her look. "Let's just say I think I now know why Renna's never taken a mate or bonded with her own kind before."

Maria shook her head. "Lennik, I'm not one to judge – I've done more

crazy shit then anyone I know – but I can't help worrying that this is a little too far."

Lennik nodded. "I know. And I don't blame you for thinking that because it's how I thought myself. What it comes down to, Maria, is we're all trying to figure out how to treat them: are they human or beast or something else? And you know what I'm finally coming to understand? They blur the categories between 'human' and 'something else'. They *are* a human species, they're just not us! And that's what's so hard for everyone to get, because we're all seeing them as 'cavemen' or 'apemen' and we get lost along the way."

"I think that's why the See has been so knotted up about whether or not they have souls," Nigel chuckled. "I figure God can sort that out. I'm just going to live my life the best way I know how. I've never been one for imposing my faith on others – that certainly wasn't Christ's way."

Maria smiled and shook her head. "I still can't get my head around it, Lennik. But after what we've been through I consider you three some of the best friends I've got. And who knows, maybe in a hundred years' time you'll be hailed as a revolutionary."

"I'll settle for saving Darwin's Corridor," Lennik mused.

"Darwin's what?" Maria asked.

"This place." Lennik gestured expansively. "This strange, beautiful, deadly planet that's kept *Homo erectus* alive and well for tens of thousands of years after it went extinct on Earth. Did you know the last ones died out on Earth well after modern *sapiens* arose?"

Maria and Nigel shook their heads.

Lennik nodded. "It's true, in Java and other parts of Southeast Asia connected to Java at the time. And on the island of Flores to the east, a dwarfed species descended from *Homo erectus*, *Homo floresiensis*, lived even more recently. So that's why I call this Darwin's Corridor – it's preserved an entire species, with very few changes, that once gave rise to our own species. Last time we encountered *Homo erectus* it led to their extinction. But now we've got a sec-

ond shot – I'm going to make sure that it doesn't happen again."

Renna warbled happily as she drank the last of his ale.

## Homo *erectus* and the Nature of Evolution: an Author's Note

Writing about evolution in the sphere of popular fiction is a fascinating and invigorating challenge. But the potential pitfalls are many, and I fear that I may incite confusion and misconceptions about the nature of evolution in general and *Homo erectus* and human evolution in particular. Accordingly, I thought it fitting to write a small addendum to explain my own positions and something of the status of what is known about *Homo erectus*.

First and foremost, let me be very clear that I in no way intend the portrait of *Homo erectus* that I have painted here to be an "authoritative" one. Expert views concerning such particulars as the evolution of fire, language, and the speciation that gave rise to *Homo erectus* and then to *Homo sapiens* do vary. It is clear that *Homo erectus* possessed fire, although some would say that 1.4 million years is a date too early for them to have done so. For the purposes of the story this matters not: I assume that had they not possessed it at the time of their arrival on Pleistonia, 1.4 million years is more than enough time to have mastered its use.

So why 1.4 million years? First and foremost, I selected this date because by this time *Homo erectus* had emerged in the "classic" form most commonly associated with the species, including the mastery of the

Acheulean stone tool industry which in Africa (but not Eurasia) was dominated by the first stone tools to be carved on both sides (hence the term “bifaces” or “handaxes”) as well as other tools known as “picks” and “cleavers” mentioned in passing in the story. The Acheulean lasted for over a million years in one form or another. By this time *erectus* had also assumed the morphology (form) of a tall, bipedal species with characteristic facial features that distinguished it from the earlier *erectus* populations.

And this brings us to the second reason that I chose 1.4 million years: to sidestep a knotty and intricate debate between competent experts concerning the classification of the early *erectus* remains (approximately 1.9/1.8–1.4 million years ago). One camp maintains that the designation *Homo erectus* is valid, while the other camp, based on certain morphological differences of the cranium, classes these remains as *Homo ergaster*. I personally have no desire to go on record as a proponent of either interpretation, as it is at the time of this writing (to my knowledge) still primarily a specialists’ debate.

As to why I did not select a more recent date for the arrival of *erectus*, I wished to give the various non-native organisms of the planet time to evolve in novel directions. And of course, had I chosen my date too late, *erectus* would have been at a different stage of its evolution. It should be noted that organisms are always evolving, attempting to stay in tune with the changing demands of their environments, both climatic and those related to the quest for food and, where applicable, efforts to evade predation. But when circumstances change more dramatically organisms may evolve correspondingly and comparatively quite rapidly – hence the profusion of different kinds of cattle not known to earth, the result of the radiation of a single ancestral population to fill a variety of herbivorous niches on Pleistonia.

But is it conceivable that *Homo erectus* could have remained so essentially unchanged for so long? Here, perhaps, is the author’s greatest licence, but one for which I invoke a justification near the end of the story.

Asian *Homo erectus*, particularly those in Java, survived until shockingly recent times: less than 50,000 years ago, possibly as recently as 25,000 years ago (after the last Neanderthals died out, c.28,000 years ago in Spain and Croatia). While they had changed from their African ancestors, of course, they were still recognisably *Homo erectus*. And the *Homo erectus* of the story are not intended to be *entirely* unchanged: hence the designation *Homo erectus pleistoniensis*, or *Homo erectus* of Pleistonia.

The reader may well be asking her or himself, What is the relationship between *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* evolutionarily? The short answer is that, according to the most credible interpretations, *Homo erectus* in Africa became *Homo sapiens*, with a divergence approximately 400–500,000 years ago between European/Middle Eastern and African populations that led respectively to the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) and to us, ultimately – although both outcomes took a few hundred thousand more years to develop. Neanderthals appear in the fossil record by about 120/125,000 years ago, and *anatomically* modern humans by *about* 100,000 years ago, but not until approximately 50,000 years ago did sapiens become *behaviourally* modern, with a creative explosion of art and new tool types. This creative florescence, known as the Great Leap Forward, was the beginning of the end for both the Neanderthals and the Asian *erectus*. Over the course of the next 20,000 years or so *Homo sapiens sapiens* spread from Australia to Portugal and the British Isles, driving our evolutionary cousins extinct. The diminutive “hobbits” of the Indonesian island of Flores (who stood about 1 meter tall), were probably driven extinct by a volcanic eruption 12,000 years ago that wiped out much of Flores’ unique fauna (including rats the size of rabbits and dwarfed elephants the size of water buffalo): fossils from the Liang Bua basin date as recently as thirteen thousand years ago, staggering in light of the fact that *sapiens* had already occupied the region and beyond to Australia for tens of thou-

sands of years! Local legends still refer to a creature startlingly like the Floresian “hobbit.”

How does evolution work? Can a species continue to exist after giving rise to another species? Yes, because there are a number of means for speciation. A single species can become another over time by adapting continually to the environment and incorporating beneficial changes – this is the most commonly-perceived and understood means of evolution and by far the simplest – but other ways exist. For example, the species may be diffuse, spread out over a large area, and in one or more areas a new species or more than one new species may be given rise to while some proportion (possibly the main body) of the old species persists. Forget the iconic but grossly outdated and incorrect “march of progress” showing the journey from ape to man (never, you’ll notice, woman!), evolution is a branching shrub or tree of family relations, not a simple and straightforward line.

So is it really all that implausible? Taking for granted the factor of star-hopping aliens with no scruples about enslaving (or domesticating?) our ancestors, could *Homo erectus* have survived on a suitable planet thusly? More important is Lennik’s point: how would modern humans classify living *erectus*, and treat them? Our track record with other groups of our own species is dismal: one thinks of the Islamic conquests, the Crusades, the Mongol expansion, the sheer savagery and sanctimonious hubris of the European destruction of the Americas beginning in 1492, and within the author’s own lifetime Rwanda and, currently, Darfur. Would we, could we, be expected to do any better, even at a future date, for our evolutionary cousins? Despite the dire and abysmal nature of things I see some grounds for hope: it is getting more difficult (but not, I add, impossible) for states to openly carry out genocide, slavery has been officially abolished and the cause of minority, gay and women’s rights advanced in my country and others. More than anything I hope to leave it as an open, and profound, question for the reader to answer.

# Arachnis: a Tale of Tiana

Richard K Lyon &  
Andrew J Offutt

Tiana fastened the handsomely decorated pin to her blouse, above the swell on its left side. Again she hugged the huge man.

"I do love you, father, and I thank you again! It's beautiful! I've never seen such workmanship – it looks so real!"

"Nothing's too good for my daughter on her birthday," he said smiling.

There was no grey in his tightly curling black hair, nor had he yet retired as captain of his ship, still called *Black Fox*, and Tiana's confrontations with Derramal and Pyre and Ekron were years ahead. The only demon in the mirror she knew at this time in her life was her own vanity – to which she admitted no more than to fear.

"But where did you find such a bauble, father?"

"Ah, ask me no questions," he said, smiling in display of those oddly short front teeth, and he wagged a finger at her.

Tiana smiled too, and her emerald eyes sparkled no less brightly than the topazes on her chest; her present was a spider carven of gold, and set with two yellow stones that were its eyes.

After a while, though, she asked again: "Father... you have long said you are raising me to take over the

business. I trained well, in Reme, with Bandini the Cat."

"Aye, and you did well. To be both female, and white, you do very well, Tiana my daughter."

"Hmp," she said darkly, distracted from her original purpose by a possible slur. "I've told you before that I'll be happy to dye this pink skin and red hair to be as black and beautiful as yours, father... but try to make me other than female and I'll fight you! It is very... convenient. You saw how handily I slipped steel through that merchant captain whose ship we took but three days ago. It was because he was staring at my breasts! From now on, I wear nothing but tight shirts and short leggings... but I'll keep a cloak on till we board other ships!"

He shook his head. "Ah, Tiana, Tiana. You'll be far from the first woman to use her femininity against us poor ogling men!"

"You call me a woman, then?"

"Well... almost."

"I am sixteen today!"

"Aye, and next year I don't misdoubt me you'll be ready to be captain's first mate, on our *Black Fox*."

She smiled. "Which someday will be changed to *Red Vixen*... father." She caressed her gift. "Tell me where you got my present. I know you, and I know you did not *buy* it."

He looked at the foundling he'd

long ago adopted, and he smiled fondly on her. "And why should I not buy my beloved daughter's sixteenth birthday gift? I have wherewithal aplenty – as of three days ago!"

"Because you are a pirate," she said chuckling, "and you'd not buy anything you could steal; 'twould be sinful! Come, tell me. Tell me. I should know, as part of my education."

He gazed long at her. Then, "Aye, I will tell you. You were with me on yester day, when we paused to peer into that old temple to Naroka's spider god. Today, while you were in the marketplace with Bunin, I returned to the temple. There I... found the bauble."

"Father!" Tiana's eyes were large. "You stole from a *temple*. Will not the god of the Narokans be angered? And the priests?"

"Tiana: among my people we worshiped Susha, who has two faces each of surpassing beauty, black of course, and a bosom like this. The neighbouring tribe called her Sushi, and showed her with a whole cluster of breasts, like grapes. Throughout most of the world, people revere the Cow whose Cud formed the World and the Turtle whose Back bears the World. Yet here in Naroka men say that the abhorred spider is the only true god. There is no priest in the temple I... visited, to-

day. Naroka's god has moved to the great newer temple over on Sacred Way. If he left behind a son to dwell lonely and alone in a deserted temple, perhaps, the son would be but a godling, small and hardly powerful."

Tiana had not meant to bring on a fatherly lecture on religion. Still... "But father, if the god of Naroka is as they claim big as a horse, even a small son would be a formidable spider indeed!"

"What care I of the gods of these poison-makers? Tomorrow we sell them the last of the spoils off that Bemarese ship, and set sail for Reme – home. Tonight... I am weary. Good thefting is hard work! As for Naroka's god: as you know, daughter, I myself am without fear. Be thou the same."

And in that inn of Naroka's Port Thark, Caranga went to bed, and to sleep. Soon so did his daughter, and when noises awoke her she discovered that violence had taken place in Caranga's chamber, and he was gone without his sword – clear indication that he had been taken. Further, some fool had spilled some sticky stuff on the floor – and her blouse bore an ugly ragged rent, where someone had torn from it her brand new birthday present.

It was then that Tiana, at sixteen, girded herself for the first time to rescue him she called father. She went alone, taking sword and dagger and the other tools of her trade, which was theft. She fared alone through the dark streets of Port Thark, and she strode purposefully, for she knew precisely where she was going.

Her boldness and sense of purpose were as nothing against the temple door, which was secured not by a

lock that might be picked, but by a bar, on the inside. Tiana fared around the side. There she found no door, and thence she went into the alley behind the temple. Here was another door – secured just as was the main one. Tiana had already learned to curse, and she proved it.

Then, in darkness, she saw the window high above. A black square against the fulvous stone of the old, old temple.

*Oh well, then. Child's play!* And with her padded grapnel and silken rope, it was. The hook caught the high sill on her second throw, the padding stilling the sound of steel against stone. She went up the wall light as a cat.

Natural with time and most appropriate, cobwebs laced the window. She could hardly see within. Besides, it was dark. She could cut through these webs and lower herself... Cobwebs? Tiana horripilated. Ever had Caranga been at her to see things not as they were expected to be, but as they truly were. For that reason, he'd survived many trials. This, she realised, was no ordinary web that nigh filled the window space. Each strand was thick, too thick, and the interstices were too wide.

*Whatever spun this web, she thought, planned to catch something a lot bigger than flies!*

Watchful waiting was forgotten. This was a challenge and a problem to be solved, by the highly skilled thief Tiana felt herself to be. Hmm... the slightest touch to this web should bring on a very large spider indeed.

If she was to rescue Caranga, it must be fought.

Fighting her foe on its own territory was absurd. She frowned, pushing

her lower lip in and out while she pondered. In this web, a human would be as a fly in a normal one. She considered. As an alarm, the web was only half clever. Regardless of size, a spider was a silent and solitary hunter. *Why, they're almost as patient as I am!*

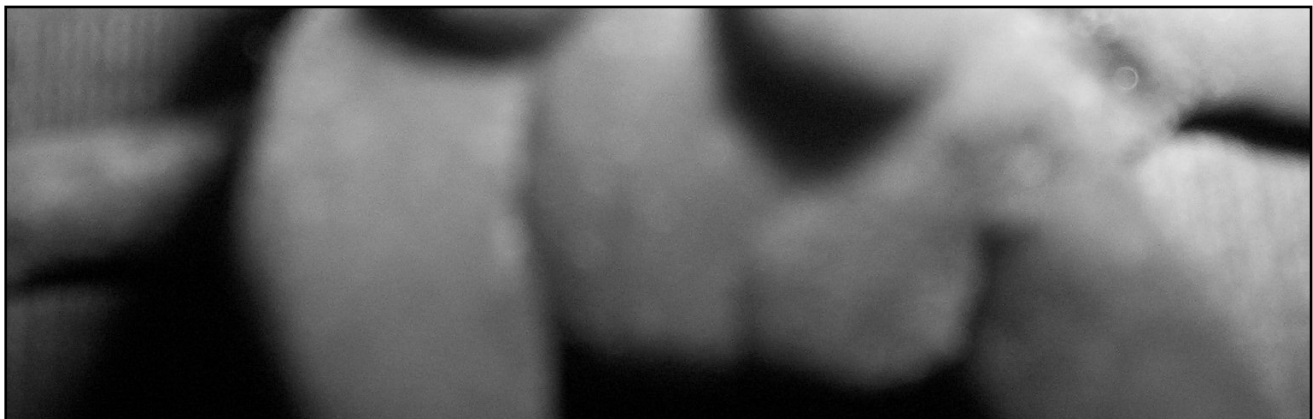
An attack by it would bring no other spiders or human guards, surely; it would move silently, without warning to assault, immobilise, and devour.

She was debating whether to summon the thing and slay it or attempt to slip in, when beneath her, within the darkened building, she noted faint movement. She saw nothing... stared... and slowly, the shifting shadow resolved into a definite shape: a spider, presumably black, and large as a hunting hound. Its compound eyes seemed impossibly large topazes – cracked. They did not focus, so as to give her possible hint of the thoughts this dark thing had. If it thought.

Of course it didn't think. Not thoughts: intentions. Intentions required no thought, any more than the web-spinning of a creature directed by instinct.

Yet – Tiana considered. There was a big difference between planning to slay an overgrown bug, and facing this eight-legged monster! She watched it climb until it was a few feet below her. It stopped. Instinct warned it not to leave its web, she assumed, however tantalising the prey just beyond web's edge. Girl and spider stared at each other in a long, long moment of fragile truce.

She saw that its huge jaws were equipped with big fangs, which drooled a yellow-green slime. *The*



*monster must deliver enough venom to kill an elephant*, Tiana mused cheerlessly.

Too, it did not walk on eight legs like its smaller cousins; this outsized arachnid's two forelegs, thicker and more powerful, were permanently raised for combat. Anything caught by those "arms" would never escape the envenomed jaws. It was armoured, too; it wore its skeleton outside the squishy body within, like plate mail.

*Surely a good thrust from a blade as slim as mine will pierce that carapace* Tiana mused, but... *where to strike a mortal blow?* Where were its heart and lungs – did it have such organs? Behind those staring eyes... was there a brain she might pierce and destroy? She remembered once having completely beheaded a wasp, which she picked up to carry triumphantly to Caranga. It had stung her painfully, just as if it were alive. And when she tried to fling it away, the legs and feet *clung*.

Tiana was as vain of her courage as of her beauty. She did not admit fear even to herself, and never remembered terror once she'd whelmed its source. Now – now *it* moved, and her arm quivered with gooseflesh. That settled that.

Since this ugly huge thing frightened her, she must kill it.

A glance at her grapnel showed it firmly in place. Her rope of silk was coiled about her left hand. Using a fold of her cloak as glove, she could quickly slide to the ground without getting rope burns. That was swift retreat, after...

She shifted position slightly and her rapier flicked out and down. Its needle point slashed across the spider's antennae. The thing lunged up at her, and she braced and thrust: straight and true. Her rapier plunged in between the great cracked-yolk eyes. The armour snapped. The rapier went in. Tiana held her arm steady; the beast continued coming; a foot and then two feet and then nigh the rest of her rapier vanished into the creature's body. Because of the angle of spider and its stabber, the blade's tip emerged, dripping, from its lower body – and for Tiana it was let go the hilt or lose her arm.

Tiana let go and swung back, squatting with most of her body outside the window so that anyone below would have had a most fascinating view. She stared at the spider, which had stopped. Good, then. Surely such a transpiercing wound would swiftly prove fatal.

It did not. With great speed the spider lunged, and Tiana dropped, barely evading the grasp of its hairy forelegs. She slid swiftly down her rope, back into the alley, while the spider gained the windowsill. A thread of pallid white dropped from its body and Tiana felt a cold, sticky touch on her right arm. A few feet from the ground, her downward slide was arrested with an abrupt jerk. It hurt. And that was not all.

Her right arm was twisted above her head – and she was being pulled steadily upward. The spider had ejected webbing, snared her, and was... reeling in, or something like. Did spiders do that? Tiana didn't know. And she didn't care; this one did, and was!

Now that her weight was on the spider's line, her own rope had gone slack. Desperately giving it a flip, she tugged hard. The grapnel hopped free of the sill and tried to fall on her. A great spider-leg was in the way. The beast was toppled forward to plunge past Tiana. She groaned, trying to hang onto, her own rope and being pulled by webbing and–

She hit the ground hard, and rolled. The web that had snared her had been scraped loose; her arm, abraded on the hard-packed earth of the alley, oozed blood. She threw herself up, whipping out her dagger, and – where was the accursed beastie?

It should have fallen near her. Yet it was nowhere in sight. She glanced around again, her heart pounding, and then came the slight sound and she hurled herself flat. The black monster shot through the air above her. Apparently a hastily-extruded strand of webbing had prevented its falling all the way, and now it was swinging back and forth in the alley, a pendulum of death. She had no place to go; the narrow alley ended a few feet behind her, and the old temple's rear door was barred from within. The spider whooshed past again.

Fighting down panic, Tiana tried to think her way out of the trap. If she moved to the end of the alley, she would be trapped, and the enemy had only to drop on her. Just now, it was at the top of its arc; now it was failing toward her... She ran toward it, and at the last moment dived to the ground. More pain, but she hardly noticed, hearing those venom-drooling jaws snap within a hand's breadth of her body. She was clear, already up and running. Her abraded leg tried to buckle, and held. The thump behind her was shocking, as the creature landed on the ground, six-legged, and pursued her. She heard the point of her rapier scrape the ground, still thrusting from the monster's lower body. The thing was gaining on her!

*Why did the fates decide that I, with only two legs, must race a fiend that runs on six? What disadvantage does the Droop-sent thing suffer to pay for its four extra legs?*

She stumbled, and had her answer: balance.

It was too late to worry whether her flash of idea was good or no. In another instant the dog-sized spider would run her down. She swerved leftward, stopped, and sprang to the right even as she whirled around. The spider's headlong rush carried it past her; it too had swerved to its left. As it scuttled by, Tiana slashed, but her dagger glanced harmlessly off an armoured leg.

Stopping almost instantly a few feet beyond her, the spider started to turn.

In an act that would have looked insane to any observer, she pounced – at the beast. Before it could come around to face her, she struck again, and this time with force and accuracy. Tiana was accustomed to thrusting; she was swift and could never be so strong as many male warriors. Therefore she had long ago chosen the swift, light rapier – and now, with her dagger, she made a rapier-like thrust.

Just as a mailed knight might be stabbed in the joints of his armour, so the spider's armoured leg possessed vulnerable joints. Into one of these spots her steel bit deeply. Feeling triumphant but trying to back-pedal too rapidly, Tiana sprawled, and the spider was now facing her. Big multi-

faceted eyes gleamed. The monster lunged – and toppled over in midst ride. Before it could regain its footing and compensate for its one useless leg, she swivelled on her backside and stabbed another leg joint. Then she rolled, with all her might.

A filthy pirate stared at her wounded enemy.

Though the spider struggled, it could no longer stand up. Tiana grinned. Rising, she moved about it; calmly and carefully, she destroyed the use of another leg, and then one “arm”, and then, though barbs brought blood from her own arm, she daggered its other arm like leg.

The spider was helpless. Not without some difficulty, Tiana regained her rapier. Arachnid blood gushed.

Her own legs made it emphatically clear that they wanted a rest. Rather suddenly, Tiana sat. The hard earth felt fine. Her heart was pounding furiously and her lungs burned. Little shudders came and went. She considered.

In retrospect, she was surprised that she had not sooner perceived the solution. The spider walked with a gait like that of a horse's trot: the right front and rear legs moved forward along with the left centre leg, while the other three remained down, and then the left front and rear legs and middle right, and so on. Since the creature was ever propped on three legs even when rushing, it never had need for a sense of balance. Losing the use of a single leg proved a fatal disadvantage for a creature without balance.

Rested and armed again, Tiana rose. Well, she thought, at least I was never scared; had I been I might have died!

This time her grapnel caught only on the third throw, and once again she went up the temple's outer wall. She passed the dangling cord of arachnid webbing without touching it. On the sill, she loosed her grappling hook, turned it and anchored it again and, after a brief rest, descended into the dark, musty temple. She was grateful for the bit of moonlight that leaked in through the window now high above. A few flips of the cord loosened the grapnel and brought it hurtling down. After coiling the silken line many

times around her left arm, she held the hook, just back of its head. With her rapier in her other fist, she advanced through the temple, wishing she had a light.

*Spiders*, she thought, *like the dark*. And horrification came over her like the feet of a hundred spiders. She heard nothing; saw nothing; felt nothing in this vast chamber save herself.

At last, after too much time spent in silent searching that discovered nothing, she yelled Caranga's name, waited an instant, and yelled “Father!” on a second breath.

His muffled reply came at once. A few more shouts from each of them soon had her at the small door back of the altar. She opened it, and squinted at the light. The single candle seemed bright as dawn, after almost total darkness. Careful not to let the door close behind her, she squatted beside her foster father, who lay on the floor. He was bound and said he'd not been harmed since his arrival here. There had been one man. Tiana cut him free.

“Well, daughter,” he said, with a big hand on each of her upper arms. “It seems that my birthday present was ill-chosen. I've received a nasty bump, but a great gift: my own daughter has come to free me!”

“Yes,” she said with Tianan modesty. “I believe I am worthy of being called Caranga's daughter and first mate of his ship.”

“Umm – you'll not tell anyone you had to come fetch me out of a closet, trussed like a lamb for market, will you?”

“Probably not,” she said, waiting while he picked up the candle. “No – let's leave by the rear door. I want to show you something.”

“My captor?”

“Uh – yes. Father... tell me what happened?”

“I cannot believe it! I, who sleep so lightly, awoke to discover that my ankles were roped and my captor was just finishing tying my wrists, with some sticky stuff. An incredibly quiet man! When I awoke and tried to struggle anyhow, he hit me with something. I awoke here – the fellow was strong, too! He said that I would be sacrificed tomorrow, and then he

heard something and left me. He heard you, eh!”

“What did he look like?” Tiana asked, as they let themselves out into the alley.

“Tallish fellow, wiry, weird yellow eyes. He wore a long black – oh. You need not have asked. I see what you wanted me to see.” Caranga's nod directed attention to a spot a few feet away, and Tiana looked.

Then she stared.

No spider lay in the alley. There was only a man, a man who had been tallish and wiry and lay now in a hideous jumble of twisted limbs. Blood covered him, face and body. On the breast of his long black robe gleamed a small spider wrought in gold, with topaz eyes; Tiana's birthday present. The robe was twisted high to reveal the better portion of one arm and both legs. All had bled from the main joint, where each had been broken.

Tiana swallowed, and swallowed again, and did a bit of deep-breathing. “Let's... let's let him keep the... ornament, father. I don't mean to be ungrateful for my birthday present, but I really don't like spiders.”

Caranga chuckled and draped a big arm across her shoulders. Its weight felt good, as did the squeeze he gave her, against him. “Nice work, daughter. Threw him out the window, did you?”

She shuddered and, reminded of the window, glanced up. No, she hadn't broken his legs and arms by throwing him down, and she hadn't dreamed it, either. A long strand of silvery grey, sticky-looking, hung to sway gently in the little breeze finding its way in from the docks.

“Father... I'm sixteen now.” Though her legs were a little tremulous, she pretended otherwise as she and Caranga walked out of the alley. “Don't you think I'm old enough to drink wine, rather than just ale?”

“Well... surely you've earned it on this night. You've heard me talk about various types of wine, my fearless daughter... what kind do you think you'd like?”

“Whatever we have the most of,” Tiana said.

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# A Matter of Taste

Sam Leng

It was late morning, Sunday, in Yorkshire, and raining heavily again. Dylan Fitzgerald was hardly surprised. Despite a summer of floods, Monday-to-Friday had been pleasant, with bright skies and high temperatures. Sitting in a stuffy office during this weather was depressing, but at least there had been the weekend to look forward to. Dylan had intended to unearth his gear and head off to Wykeham Lakes for a spot of fishing; a hobby he'd been unable to pursue so far this year, due to the bad conditions. Initial predictions had been positive, promising sunny spells, moderate heat, and, most importantly, no rain. *Ha!* Did these forecasters ever get it right?

Switching on the kettle, the middle-aged bachelor glanced out of the window. Yes, the rain was truly torrential. Diagonal lashes, blown by a strong wind, beat down onto his Begonias. The Koi pond was beginning to overflow, and the borders of the lawn, of which Dylan was very proud, were starting to swamp. Luckily, the centre of the turf was sheltered by an alien spaceship which had, for some reason, landed in the garden.

Dylan blinked. He was unsure, exactly, of what to do about the spaceship. Probably MI5 would want to know about it. He poured himself a cup of tea and dunked a chocolate digestive into the liquid. He was the kind of man who appreciated his own privacy, and didn't much relish the prospect of being hounded by journalists, blinded by photographers, or questioned by Men In Black-style agents. Why couldn't the spaceship have landed next-door, for Heaven's sake? The Sampson family were no-

toriously conceited, and would have adored the attention.

Sighing heavily, Dylan reached for the packet of biscuits, slumping his shoulders as he realised he'd just eaten the last one. Because of the rain, he had postponed his Saturday supermarket spree in favour of slouching in front of the television, watching reruns of *Fawlty Towers*. He regretted this now. His food cupboard was practically bare and he was feeling hungry.

A knock on the window caused Dylan to snap out of his misery. Two grey, large-eyed faces peered through the glass. Each had a head of blue hair, which was covered, in part, by pink hairnets. Dylan rushed to the door, unlocked it quickly, and threw it open.

"Can I help you?" he asked the aliens, who he could now see held clipboards and wore lab-like white coats.

"I'm Dr Lute," said one of the figures, "and this is Dr Gonda. May we come in?"

Dylan stepped aside to make way for the two extraterrestrials. They appeared friendly enough, and besides, he could hardly allow his visitors to stand out in the rain.

Stepping into the kitchen of the one-bedroomed terrace, Gonda extended the introduction.

"Lute and I are from the planet Cui-Sine, in the galaxy of Acceptable Standards. We work for a food inspection agency, and we have come to assess planet Earth."

"And what does that entail?" Dylan enquired. "Would you like a towel, or a hairdryer, by the way? I'm sorry about the weather. Global warming, and all. Though to be hon-

est, England was never the sunniest country."

The aliens shook their heads simultaneously to decline the offer of a towel or a hairdryer. Lute proceeded to answer Dylan's first question.

"We would like to sample Earthly cuisine. We have ultra-sensitive taste buds, which makes us connoisseurs of food. It is our job to travel the Universe, experiencing the edible products of each planet."

"We have checklists to complete," Gonda added, shaking the clipboard.

Dylan empathised with this. He was often given checklists to complete at the office. He was responsible for quality checking new software programs, and while he couldn't profess to having ultra-sensitive taste buds, he was, most definitely, a computer whiz. His line of work suited him well. Nevertheless, so many tick-sheets did become utterly tiresome.

"I'm afraid there could be a slight problem with that request," Dylan told the aliens. "You see, because of the rain I didn't go shopping yesterday, so I hardly have anything in. I'm hungry myself. Perhaps we could get a takeaway? There's a good pizza place I know that offers free delivery if you buy garlic bread with your order."

"No takeaway," Lute instructed. "We have selected you at random to provide a meal for us. You must prepare it yourself, with whatever provisions you have. The point of our job is to evaluate what Earthlings *normally* eat. Preferential treatment on our behalf is not required."

Dylan grunted, swung open the food cupboard door and began hunting through it. He wished he'd just gone fishing, rain or not. He was no

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chef at the best of times, and lived on beans-on-toast and tomato soup whenever possible. He didn't enjoy cooking, and had never once held a dinner party for friends. Expecting him to prepare food without warning, and with the reputation of an entire planet at stake, was quite unfair, as far as he was concerned.

Removing three slightly stale slices of crusty white from the bread-bin, and a half-empty jar of Marmite from behind his dwindling supply of teabags, Dylan decided to make one of his favourite dishes. Absentmindedly, he began smearing the sticky brown paste onto the bread, untroubled by the meal's appearance. If normal Earthling cuisine was what the alien food inspectors wanted, then that's exactly what they'd get.

"A Marmite sandwich," he informed Lute and Gonda, plonking a folded serving on three small plates. He handed one to each alien, and kept one for himself.

The unearthly guests glanced at

each other, then down at their respective helpings.

"Marmite sandwich," Gonda acknowledged.

"Marmite sandwich," Lute affirmed.

The aliens bit into the bread, chewed manically for a few seconds, then spat their mouthfuls out across the kitchen.

"That's disgusting!" Lute roared.

"He's trying to poison us!" Gonda accused.

Dylan was unsurprised by their dislike. "It's true then," he mused, staring at the masticated sludge which stuck like glue to his kitchen wall. "You either love it or you hate it. I love it."

"We hate it!" The aliens growled as one. They spun on their heels and stormed out of the kitchen, into the rain outside.

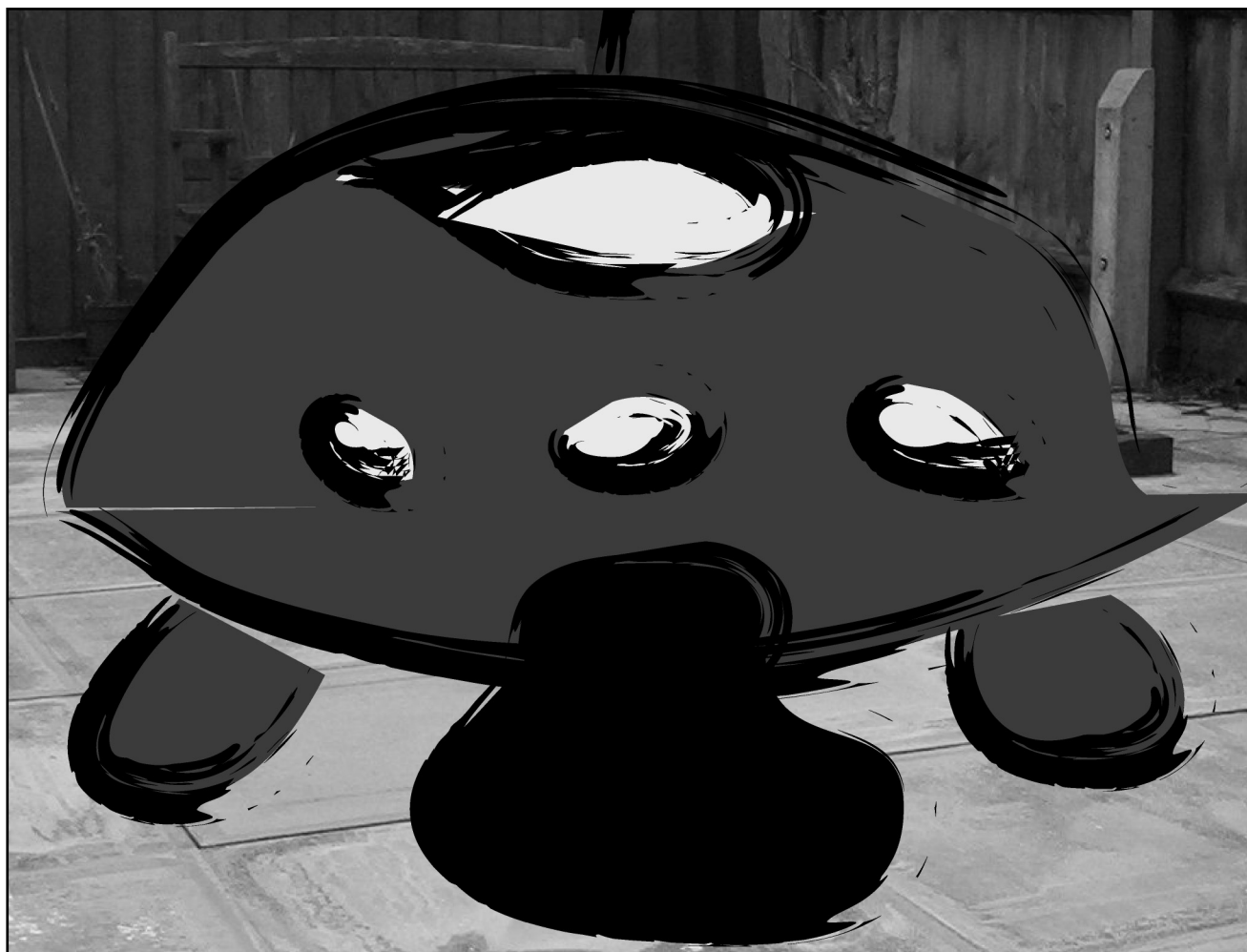
"How rude!" Dylan thought. A few months ago, his uncle, who lived in Italy, had paid a visit to England, and had insisted on cooking calamari. If there *was* a God, He had surely never

intended for humans to eat squid. Dylan had almost gagged. However, out of politeness he had forced himself to consume the meal. He would expect the same courtesy from any guest of his, but evidentially, inhabitants of the planet Cui-Sine were short on manners. He shrugged and watched as the spaceship hurtled into the sky. There was nothing to protect his beloved lawn from flooding now.

At a hundred thousand feet above ground, Lute and Gonda began preparing their lasers, aiming the deadly rays directly towards the Earth's surface. The aliens would destroy this puny planet for subjecting their taste buds to such an atrocity. They had never sampled anything so foul in their lives.

Inside, and oblivious, Dylan Fitzgerald plodded into his lounge and turned on the radio. "It's the End of the World as We Know It" by REM was playing; one of his favourite songs. Turning up the volume, he took a bite of his Marmite sandwich.

"And I feel fine," he sang.





# The Spirits of '26

Robert Laughlin

Mayor Van Laan and his company drove no further up Delancey than the Roosevelt Parkway. As expected, uncleared rubble and abandoned vehicles forced the motorcade to halt a few blocks from the Williamsburg off ramp. From there it was a difficult trip on foot, eighteen men and women in hard-armour radsuits picking their way through the obstacles on Delancey and then south on Lafayette. The most direct route to their goal was out of the question because Brooklyn Bridge was unusable, the Manhattan off ramp a gloppy, flash-melted candle stub.

The mayor was in front and thought nothing of personally pushing aside a twisted mass of fused angle irons that blocked the narrowing path. Only the four law enforcement officers present had insignias emblazoned on their radsuits, but even without any visible badge of rank, Augie Van Laan was the obvious leader. He towered above the journalists and officials accompanying him like Charlemagne above stunted Gallic peasants. His eyes, the only parts of his face visible through the leaded glass slit in the white radsuit helmet, were large and unblinking, silver-blue with yawning black pupils, the eyes of a stage hypnotist who holds an entire audience under his spell. And he had a palpable sense of purpose, a determination to achieve through his own efforts or the coordinated assistance of others, even if the desired achievement was apprehended dimly by everyone but him.

As they drew near the end of their hike, the eighteen people saw familiar landmarks, now in ruins: the Criminal Courts Building, and farther

on, the New York County Court House and the Federal Office Building. Steel frameworks that weren't flattened this close to the blast were visibly bowed from concussion, and it surprised no one that few pigeons or other birds were seen trying to roost in the surrounding piles of scorched rubble. With every footstep, nine digital cameras clicked – digital, because everyone had been told what radiation did to film stock. No pictures of the stricken area had been taken since the evacuation, except aerial photographs from a safe altitude. Van Laan was letting the press corps back on the island again, and they were recording the very images he wanted the world to see, of a Manhattan beyond any hope of rehabilitation.

Still short of their goal, Van Laan could see that the people behind him were stringing out from fatigue.

“Let's stop for a minute and rest.”

No one complained; most sat down on the nearest charred tree stump or chunk of fallen masonry. The radsuits weighed seventy pounds on average, and had no servo-assist motors. These were considered and ruled out as an undue expense, since the mass-produced suits were intended mainly for sedentary operators of bulldozers, cranes and dump trucks. Van Laan sat down near a city official appointed as yard boss to a one-of-a-kind reconstruction project.

“So, Stan, have you seen anything to change your estimate of the time frame?”

“No, not really. Clearing the streets still looks like a one-month job, barring heavy snow. For the rest, so many blocks high-rise, so many low-rise, we'll see how well the

timetable conforms to reality. I wouldn't venture a firm opinion about the big step, not just yet.” The man's voice penetrated the helmet grille less effectively than Van Laan's booming voice.

Van Laan and the other representatives of officialdom clustered together during the rest period and said little among themselves without Van Laan's prompting. The journalists, clustered further back, were more talkative.

“Did you think it would be this bad?”

“Worse. We haven't seen a single dead body. I thought we would by now; it's not like there are scavengers to gobble them up.”

“So? The evacuation was well done, nobody left behind. Anyway, there *are* corpses here, trust me. More dead people in Manhattan than living, long before Black Inauguration.” The reporter picked up a fallen slab of sea-green slate. “Nobody alive today uses *this* to clad a roof.”

“Yeah,” from a third voice. “About everything in this borough was put up by guys... how many cemeteries are there in New York, how many just in Manhattan? Does anybody know?”

After five minutes, Van Laan got up and said, “Let's get going, people. It's not safe to dawdle.” Seventeen other cadmium white stick puppets stood and moved their segmented arms and legs, directed not by an unseen string-puller above, but by the lead puppet.

Soon Van Laan and the others reached a point where nothing remained standing above ground. A few yards past the caved-in pudding of the Foley Square fountain, the pavement started shading into something

not at all like the chemically pure green glass desert cover at White Sands. Van Laan stopped well short of City Hall Plaza and let everyone in the rear catch up, to survey the scene. Charred organic matter, plant and animal, and inorganic substances of every kind found in the earth's crust or manufactured from it had melded into a rigid tarpaulin hundreds of feet across, featureless except for a few humps representing the former Tweed Court House and a broad concavity just to the south. Seen from a distance, the ground cover was a flat Crayola grey. To someone standing on it, it was almost like mother-of-pearl, waves of iridescent colour rippling over the hard, dull surface.

"Only the journalists have to come the rest of the way," Van Laan said, and twenty waffle-soled boots rang against the glossy ground at a marathon walker's pace – no one doubted the importance of completing this photo-op in the shortest possible time.

Van Laan thought it was much like the groundbreaking ceremonies he had attended in his previous life, as an architect in the city's pay. A preening bureaucrat would clip through the ribbon after one or two sentences praising the latest Van Laan project to have transitioned from schema to solid. This time Van Laan was the focus of primary attention, and he showed his instinct for political theatre by outpacing the press corps to a spot between the court house foundation and the concavity, and then turning on his heel to face them. They all stopped short; most of them took a moment to fit their cameras with wide-angle lenses. Knowing he would be quoted in headlines and newscasts around the world, Van Laan said: "This is where City Hall stood."

Some of the journalists were satisfied with their scale shots of Mayor Van Laan, some scurried up for good-measure shots of the blast crater. One sweep of a second hand was enough to finish the archival photography; the mayor and his armour-clad entourage hurried away from Ground Zero to where the others were waiting.

"She's nuts!"

The speaker was a police sergeant who had hung a bit farther back than anyone else. He was facing northeast, seemingly frozen in place until the mayor put an armoured hand on his shoulder.

"What is it, sergeant? Did you see something?"

"Sir, I... I'm sure I saw a woman in the ruins. She wasn't wearing a radsuit."

Van Laan waited for quiet while half the people present strenuously shushed the other half. "Take us to where she was."

The sergeant led the way back to the County Court House ruins. "This is where she was, sir. I saw her standing on this mound, with her back to me. She was wearing a blue dress and some kind of hat. It was just for a couple of seconds, then she went down the other side and I couldn't see her at all." The court house facade had collapsed inward and pulled up part of its foundation. This happened after the heat flash had subsided, and the turned-up earth was unglazed, mingled with broken concrete slabs in a tall hillock. Van Laan and the sergeant looked for a footprint. The only indentation in the earth was the right length and width for a woman's foot, but the object that made it was straight-sided and flat on the bottom.

"Was this woman carrying something?"

"I honestly couldn't tell," the sergeant said. "She had her right hand in front of her body. It could be she set something down and picked it up again before I spotted her."

Van Laan realised he had outsmarted himself. He picked people with sterling service records to go on the first foray into the hot zone, all the better for in-depth news profiles. The sergeant was a fourteen-year veteran decorated for gunning down two bank robbers to end a hostage situation – not the sort of person one accuses of hallucinating or playing a prank. Van Laan turned to his yard boss.

"Stan, your work party is now a search party; there are too few of us here to do the job properly. Get every man with a radsuit into Lower Manhattan. We have to find that woman before she fries. We can puzzle out

her motives later." Van Laan tried hard to crinkle his jet-and-zircon eyes into something disarming. "I guess that's all, ladies and gentlemen. We hike straight out of here and let the search proceed."

Van Laan kept ahead of the group, avoiding any journalists who would have asked his permission to stay and report on the search effort. He wouldn't allow that for fear the boxy object carried by the woman might be a Geiger counter.

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The terrorists chose Manhattan over Washington, and their one bomb furnished Augie Van Laan with his long-desired, never-expected *tabula rasa*.

Augie Van Laan: a name almost comically apropos for the suddenly made boss of New York City. Van Laan, his surname, smacked of potbellied, bewigged aldermen in three-cornered hats, straight from the Diedrich Knickerbocker era of the city's history. August, the Christian name always used in the diminutive, suggested a Mulberry Street grafter who treated with gangsters, ward heelers and union officials over a plate of antipasto. Van Laan was a Manhattan native and so were his people, going back as far as he cared to learn. The last of the local schools he attended was Columbia, where he took a certificate in architecture. He spent less than two months in private practice before the New York City Department of City Planning signed him on and put him to work at assorted projects of increasing importance. Performance reviewers were impressed by his talent and capacity for hard work. Though not explicitly cited in his reviews, they were equally impressed by his height and mesmerizing eyes, and he figured in the wet dreams of two female reviewers. Van Laan made it all the way to deputy planning commissioner in only nineteen years, a near-miraculous feat in the gerontocracy of New York City's civil service.

None of the people Van Laan had worked with suspected how he really felt about the city that produced him. His orthopaedist father and fashion mogul mother pooled their genes to get a well-tended filial accessory of

their busy Midtown lifestyle. Short of any great effort, Augie was well-liked by his prep school classmates. He was an excellent student without being showy, and always contributed his fair share in class projects. He never had an ill word for anyone, teacher or student. Usually the tallest boy in his class, he had dual responsibilities to participate in sports and mediate disputes between other boys, and acquitted them both without complaint. Above all, Augie Van Laan didn't seek to lead and apparently lacked the urge to rivalry common among his classmates, the power-lunchers of the future.

Augie had no confidants – no brothers or sisters, no really close friends – and felt he couldn't tell his career-absorbed parents that he was utterly disenchanted with school and with life generally. It started in second grade, when he went to class the first day and saw that an open lot between his school and the bus stop had been added to the school property and paved over that summer. There had been a worn diagonal path through the lot and Augie remembered the fun of cracking frozen puddles in the path and watching small, bright flowers bloom atop the tall weeds. Augie couldn't empathise with the other children who were glad for the paving because it was easier for their bikes to cross, and that was when he began to suspect he was fundamentally different. He was bored by boys' talk concerning cars, boats, planes and other material extensions of man, but he pretended to be interested for the sake of getting along. It was the same with his parents, who straddled the line between the middle and upper classes and wanted to be decisively on the better side; their talk was always of things, possessions, acquisition. Augie Van Laan was growing up in a physical environment shaped almost entirely by human design, aware that his father reconstructed people with artificial parts and his mother covered people's bodies with artificial fabrics and both were handsomely paid for their efforts. Augie yearned for an alternative, something he needed and couldn't identify.

The transforming event in Augie's

life occurred at age ten: his mother and father took him to the Adirondacks for a summer vacation. It was actually the first time he'd been outside the limits of New York City, because summer camp and membership in the Cub Scouts entailed more contact with other children than he liked, and it took his parents ten years to accumulate enough guilt to interrupt their appointment book-driven lives. For two weeks the Van Laans were shown to every relatively unfrequented brook and glade known to their guide. Augie had seen the small, crowded parks of New York and they were hardly more than an extension of the city streets to him. But this – the total absence of flat, hard, homogeneous surfaces, either vertical or horizontal, anywhere within eyeshot; the novel experience of complete silence, except when the adults present were talking among themselves; the aroma of wild vegetation, without the slightest taint of anything that came from an internal combustion engine. Beauty totally unformed by man, no part of it created for his consumption or convenience, which Augie could almost pretend was known and appreciated by no one but himself...

Augie Van Laan returned from the pines a week before classes resumed. And when, on his first day in the fifth grade, his history teacher told the familiar story of Manhattan's purchase from the Algonquin Indians, young Augie felt he understood everything. Over the next few weeks he checked out cartloads of books and maps from the school library. Marshalling his limited knowledge of papier mâché technique, he built a serviceable tabletop model of Manhattan as it looked before that fateful day in 1626, when Dutch traders bought off the Indians with a sack of five-and-dime goods.

Van Laan grew into a lanky teenager whose sepia hair barely cleared door lintels without getting mussed. Strikingly handsome, with penetrating eyes in a broad, earnest face, he could have been class president if that had been his ambition. As before, Van Laan didn't involve himself in student life beyond minimal expectations. He went out for track and field, which demanded less of his

time than the alternative choice of basketball, and did his best with numerous undersized partners at the better-attended school dances. His studies were the real focus of his existence and he was deliriously happy when Columbia accepted him.

Augie Van Laan wasn't able to arrange many more trips outside New York City until the day his parents gave him a new car, but long before that he had decided the forest-garden dichotomy in favour of the forest. He categorically preferred given, timeless nature to the ephemeral fabrications of man, and he fixed his inimical thoughts on New York especially. It was the devil he knew. Every building, shop sign and paint smear of graffiti was a variably short-lived monument to some worthless ego; every ton of concrete and asphalt was a further reduction of biomass except for potted flowers, processed plant and animal remains in refrigerators and kitchen cupboards, and one self-centred species that no longer remembered or cared for its natural heritage. The irony of Van Laan's situation was that he intended to become an architect. He would fight the good fight, a secret rearguard action on behalf of the Manhattan of his imagination, the one lost to the five-and-dime traders back in 1626.

Van Laan kept his aims a secret, and when the city hired him, he waged the fight in small ways calculated to arouse no militant opposition. His early years in the department were devoted mainly to renewal projects, designing structures and facilities in blighted areas. Van Laan's superiors frequently complained that his designs gave too little bang for the buck. If Van Laan was asked to design a slab-sided building on a fill lot, he rebated it in front and back to allow for generous lawn strips. If he was told to border an enclosure with poured concrete, his design called for unfinished dimensional lumber or labour-intensive rough stone. Too much undeveloped space, too much use of disadvantageous natural materials – Van Laan politely stood his ground and was lucky enough to prevail most of the time, despite repeated threats to divert his projects to a low bidder in the private sector.

In time, Van Laan's seeming integrity was noticed and praised by outsiders, a fact that helped his subsequent promotions. Architecture critics claimed Van Laan as a visionary with an aesthetic of site integration, New York's only city planner to follow the organic design principles of Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto. Wright and Aalto were Van Laan's culture heroes in college until he realised how their mannerisms – asymmetric and curvilinear forms, lack of distinction between interior and exterior finishes – were conscious efforts to beautify their buildings. For Augie Van Laan, there could be no such thing as a truly beautiful structure. He considered his boyhood bedroom and present-day bachelor apartment beautiful only for what they had on their walls and shelves: brightly coloured rocks and minerals, discarded antlers and snake skins, houseplants brought up from forest cuttings, photos of upstate landscapes that suggested the early Manhattan of Van Laan's fancy. Otherwise, anyplace he lived or worked had no function but function, tolerated for keeping the unity of the flesh and the nature-loving spirit.

Never once was Van Laan late to finish any kind of commission. During a brief stint in the Queens office, he was told to take over for an architect, already behind schedule, who was flat on his back with pneumonia. Ironically, the unfinished work was a hospital annex; Van Laan had never designed a medical building before, but he beat the twelve-day deadline, logging nearly two hundred hours of work. Van Laan even put in a characteristic added feature, an unspecified garden court that he knew would reduce the number of beds in a convalescent unit. It was a feat much discussed in break rooms around the city – did Augie Van Laan eat or sleep? As he had in school, Van Laan socialised just enough to soften his image and forestall any possibility of becoming a pariah. When his promotion to deputy commissioner came through, he invited several other architects and their spouses to dinner, cautiously excluding anyone who had angled for that promotion themselves.

"I used to be a colleague, now I'm a flunky."

"You never know, Jeff, I just might wash out. Then they'll demote me and you'll be a colleague again."

"Yeah... three cheers for the Peter Principle!"

Van Laan regretted his decision not to host the celebration dinner at his apartment. The restaurant staff had set a rectangular banquet table with four places on each side and one place at the end; Van Laan had to take the end setting and look at the happy couples sitting across from each other. Even seated he was half a head taller than his guests, and a recently grown moustache added further to his air of command, but he felt conspicuous and ill at ease.

The others did their best to make it an enjoyable night out.

"Pour me a glass of the red, hon."

"Right – a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step."

"Didn't Andy Rooney say the cost of dinner out gets hiked fifty percent if your menu has a tassel?"

"I remember hearing that."

"Okay, then, what's the deduction for a squashed cockroach?"

"Jush what –"

"Not with your mouth full, dear."

The henpecked architect obediently finished chewing his breadstick. "Just what do you have in mind for policy changes, Augie? The guys in the trenches would like to know."

"I haven't thought about it. Deputies don't make policy."

"Long as they're deputies. What if you're the next commish?"

"We don't have to talk office talk at dinner, dear," and that was the last question from that particular quarter.

"You know, this city has had some kind of planning authority since the colonial era." This from a landscape architect, almost the only person in the department Van Laan thought of as something of a kindred spirit. "If the first commissioner, or whatever he was called, could see what's been done to New York, do you think he'd feel guilty?"

"Probably. A sense of guilt dogs anyone in high office," Van Laan said, thinking that was the appropriate thing to say. Then the salads came.

Naturally Van Laan did dream about what he would do if he eventu-

ally became commissioner. He knew he would be able to effect real change in New York City by disapproving or stalling construction in open space, encouraging demolition of blighted properties to create more open space and occasionally using his office as a soap box to decry evil developers. Shortly after becoming a deputy commissioner, Van Laan found he had little chance of ever scaling that last rung in the promotional ladder. The current commissioner wasn't so much older than Van Laan and showed no signs of wanting to retire early. He valued Van Laan's counsel and thought of his deputy as a needed voice of restraint, "the city's conscience" in his own words. Van Laan was too little of a consensus builder to win the commissioner's recommendation as an anointed successor, and there was no faction of devoted friends within the department to endorse him; Van Laan was more respected than loved. As an added demerit, Van Laan had become something of a clock-watcher after his promotion to the executive suite. He was seldom in his office until the dot of nine and refused overtime work whenever he could. People who knew the long hours he once put in were at a loss... Van Laan knew the reasons. The last couple of years, he needed more relief from the concrete canyons, the kind available at his favourite rural retreats. And when he was in New York City, every minute of his spare time went to a personal project of the strictest secrecy.

The most forbidding obstacle for Van Laan, as he well knew, was a change in civic fashion. New York's mayor-elect was a former real estate baron who campaigned on the slogan, "They're Coming, Let's Build It". Van Laan was identified with the philosophy of less construction and more elbow room, now out of vogue. The new mayor would never choose Van Laan to head the department, and a possible eternity of waiting for a mayor who might just didn't please. Van Laan mulled the options and finally decided to quit for private practice. He could make out well on catchpenny work in the suburbs and outer boroughs. Lawsuits and smear speeches against a range of familiar

enemies at home would be a much-indulged hobby.

The incoming mayor let it be known to every high-ranking civic official – borough presidents, councilmen, fire and police chiefs, commissioners and deputies from every bureaucracy – that they were expected for his swearing-in at City Hall Plaza. Like a crown prince ordering his nobles to be present at the coronation, Van Laan thought, and a personal boycott would be Van Laan's final act before turning in his resignation. That's how Augie Van Laan chanced to be the only person in mayoral succession who wasn't turned into radioactive soot.

Van Laan had breakfast at one of his favourite spots, a Suffolk County coffee shop with a rapturous view of Long Island Sound. It was located in the hometown of the mayor's vanquished opponent in the election – appealing symbolism there. Morning haze kept Van Laan or anyone else in the coffee shop from seeing the flash, but the explosion carried the fifty miles, sounding like a distant, low-registered thunderclap. Compared to most other nuclear weapons, it wasn't much, a tactical bomb with less punch than the ones dropped in Japan. Still, it vaporised City Hall, knocked down every building in a quarter-mile radius and caused a firestorm that burned out most of the area south of Houston Street. The television set in the coffee shop was tuned to the inauguration; no one guessed what had happened when a writhing *Greyed Rainbow* instantly replaced the ceremony on the screen. Then the channel was switched, and out-of-town stations had already interrupted regular programming to carry news coverage of the disaster.

Van Laan didn't join in the crying and moaning going on around him. Someone studying his rigid face closely might have concluded he was in a daze, when in fact he was struggling to hold in his natural reaction. Augie Van Laan, whose still-living mother was in Manhattan along with hundreds of other people he knew, wanted to grin ear-to-ear. Whoever the terrorists were, they had made a good beginning toward Van Laan's secret ambition. Few persons who re-

alise great change for good or evil lack the capacity to seize on opportunities, and Van Laan formed a plan of action on the spot.

Eastbound highway traffic was moving at a creep. Van Laan took the westbound lanes like an autobahn driver, arriving in Brooklyn thirty-five minutes later. He knew from the radio that rare northerly winds had pushed fallout uptown and refugees from every part of Manhattan were massing in the outer boroughs, as were the news media. Augie Van Laan strode up to the nearest television camera, identified himself as acting mayor and said he was ready to take charge of the situation. When a destructive event takes place of such magnitude that the only reaction possible to most people is shock, the way is cleared for a leader to emerge from obscurity if only he says forcefully enough that he knows exactly what to do. Hitler and FDR were both made leaders this way by the Great Depression. Augie Van Laan, the gimlet-eyed giant with an air of complete certitude, said "I am taking charge now" and became the nearest thing to a dictator that New York City had ever had. Van Laan had discovered both his cause and his latent genius for leadership.

Van Laan sealed his authority with three actions performed in the space of twenty-four hours. He persuaded the president and the governor to let him direct the activities of federal and state officials within New York City. He evacuated Manhattan to the last person, then put sentries and concrete barriers at the approach to every bridge and tunnel; no one was allowed back into Manhattan under any circumstances. And he submitted detailed plans showing how the devastated borough was to be rebuilt.

A better word might be "unbuilt". More than six thousand hours of Augie Van Laan's spare time had gone to the raddest radical retro project any city planner ever imagined for Manhattan. It was loosely inspired by Van Laan's one-time idol, Frank Lloyd Wright. Among Wright's many unrealised projects was Mile-High, a gargantuan commercial tower able to provide all of Manhattan's office space; the rest of the island could

then be converted to residential, retail and park use. Van Laan's notion was, in effect, to tip Mile-High over on its side and tuck it under the surface of the ground. Ten thousand cubic feet of space per capita is ample for the business sector of a city, and for a million permanent residents and a million more commuters and tourists, it is the space present in a right-angled volume eight miles long, two miles wide and fifty feet high. New Yorkers were accustomed to travel underground, so the step to a complete subterranean city core, brightened by skylights and reflecting light wells, wasn't necessarily such a long one. Radial tunnels would lead outward to tiers of earth-covered residential units encircling the island, their purchase price determined by their size and features and the quality of their view. In addition to removing all traces of surface development, sufficient earth would be imported to reconstruct old hills, former watercourses would be restored and historically authentic stands of forestation would be planted. Highways would detour around Manhattan and no motor vehicles would be allowed on the island's surface. A new network of freight subways would transfer cargo from the surrounding land areas – no more docks wrapping around the West Side. Finally, the presence of man would not be divulged by light and smoke, the visible evidences of man's first invention. Every skylight and window pane would be engineered to emit no light from within, every furnace and fireplace would have a built-in filter for particulates and noxious vapours. Once the new forest greenery matured, anyone standing on the adjacent shores would see Manhattan as it was before that fateful day in 1626.

Van Laan announced his plan during a television address the morning after the bombing. He had uploaded his lovingly detailed 3-D schematics to a new website and the public was welcomed to inspect every hiking trail and ventilator shaft of the rebuilt Manhattan. Augie Van Laan was gambling that the mass psychology of the moment would swing in his favour. His proposal combined three seductive levels of appeal: the pas-

toral impulse, the urge to create anew and the fresh awareness of how vulnerable America's cities really were. The Manhattan envisioned by Van Laan was resistant to attack like no other populated place on Earth; even a hydrogen bomb detonated inside could kill only a few tens of thousands before spending itself against thick partitions of earth and concrete. Within a week of his address, Augie Van Laan knew he had won. Most New Yorkers and most Americans approved of his idea. A small minority inquired into the psychology of a Nowhere Man who invested much of his life planning this project before there was any foreseeable need for it. The majority wanted Van Laan to get on with the job.

The obvious practical objection to Van Laan's scheme was its cost. It would be the priciest public works project in history and Congress had to be convinced there was no alternative. Cases of radiation sickness were known from as far north as the Theatre District. If the fissionable byproducts of the explosion were the worst possible, lingering radiation would pose an unacceptable health risk to anyone living in any part of Manhattan – better to scour off the buildings, pavement and topsoil, and finance the Manhattan of Van Laan's dreams. Van Laan was far ahead of this particular curve. Instead of letting government scientists into Manhattan to conduct tests, he rifled the personnel and medical records of colleges in New York till he found what he wanted: a radiochemist with first-class credentials and a terrible cardiac prognosis.

Dr Maxwell Sanders was still teaching on a curtailed schedule, his health being no reason to miss alimony payments to two ex-wives. Van Laan put Dr Sanders in a radsuit and let him take dust and soil samples from all over Manhattan. When the Sanders report reached Van Laan's desk, all his fears were confirmed. Only the area within a few hundred feet of Ground Zero needed deep excavation; the rest of Manhattan needed little more than a mega-scale feather dusting to remove fallout traces. Van Laan released a fraudulent report that met his needs, and Dr

Sanders wasn't about to complain, having been buried a few hours earlier. Van Laan was delighted when internet rumours attributed the death to radiation sickness, not the as-expected heart attack.

Not until October did Congress write the blank cheque and approve a reasonably close disposal site for the excavated material. By then, Van Laan was all set. He had filled every executive vacancy in the city government with people known to him, people who were competent, loyal and lacking in voter charisma. Van Laan's mayoralty was safe for two terms, and by the time he left office, his life work would be so far along that the next mayor would be obliged to finish it. His deception might be discovered someday, but that didn't bother Van Laan... he was bone-certain that people would prefer his own version of Manhattan. The only thing left now was to break ground.

\* \* \*

"No developments since last night, sir," the tinny voice said. "Our spotters haven't seen a thing: no lights on the island, no movement."

"Has anybody turned up at a hospital with symptoms that could be radiation sickness?"

"Not to our knowledge."

"Alright, thanks for the report. I may call you again for an update just before the press conference, so stay in reach."

"I will, sir."

Van Laan broke contact with the police commissioner and put his cellphone down on the breakfast table. He was alone in his Brooklyn flat overlooking the East River mouth, grateful for solitude at that moment. The search for the woman had been a complete bust. Twelve thousand people spread out all over Manhattan hadn't found a trace of her. The only consolation for Augie Van Laan was that they also hadn't found out how needless their radsuits were. Van Laan gave orders that the searchers weren't to carry dubious gear that would slow their movement, and the list included radiation detection equipment of any kind. The mayor's habit of micromanaging was too well

known for anyone in the chain of command to suspect a thing.

Van Laan wondered what he might have done to prevent this setback from happening. It was obvious from the start that enforcing the quarantine would be tough. Freelance photographers, souvenir hunters, local history buffs, people with valuables and loved ones still in the rubble – Van Laan knew what he was up against. Apart from closing all land approaches, he had banned non-commercial boat traffic on the West and East Rivers and ordered the Manhattan piers to be watched by spotters, day and night. Did the woman don a wet suit and swim to Manhattan? Whether she did or not, Augie Van Laan would tolerate no further delays. At seventy-three he was due to address the news media, and he would tell them that if the mystery woman hadn't already snuck back to the mainland, she was to be presumed dead. Manhattan's makeover would get underway as soon as the red lights went out on those TV cameras.

Van Laan got up from the remnants of his self-cooked breakfast and looked at his watch... still a good forty minutes until press time. He went to the living room window and looked out at Manhattan. Van Laan and his people had been uncomfortably warm in their radsuits yesterday, but the Indian summer ended within hours of their return. The dawn sky was solid with storm clouds and snow had settled on both sides of the East River. Van Laan couldn't see how deep it was on the Manhattan side. It occurred to him that the streets might need plowing to allow access for the debris removal crews; really deep snow would halt their work altogether. Van Laan went to the hall closet for something he had found useful in upstate hiking trips.

Men in power are not left alone for long and Van Laan didn't notice right away when his personal secretary entered the living room. She had let herself in, making no audible footfalls on the plush carpet, and saw the mayor in an unexpected place doing a very unexpected thing. Augie Van Laan's six-foot-nine frame was bent in a half crouch by the open living room window. Clad only in a pastel dress shirt

and the trousers of his Brooks Brothers suit, he paid no heed to the icy draft spilling in from outside – he was all intent, peering through a hunter’s spotting scope he had set up on the window sill. A rear quartering profile was the visible extent of Van Laan’s face, but that was enough; when his facial muscles slackened, the secretary knew Van Laan had seen something that made his jaw drop.

“Why didn’t they...” Van Laan didn’t finish vocalising the thought.

“Mr Mayor.”

Van Laan straightened and turned with convulsive quickness, like a coil spring suddenly released from compression. The secretary took half a step back.

“Excuse me, Joyce. Almost a year in office and I’m still not used to this goldfish bowl.”

“The chief of staff is downstairs, sir. He wants you to come right away.”

Van Laan shook a few water drops from the scope’s tripod legs and closed the window, shutting out cold air and street noise. “Ned won’t let his gofers hustle me off to the press conference, he has to do it himself. Tell him this: I’ll speak to the press at noon. They can’t reach me, he can’t reach me – I’ll be out of the office all morning.” Van Laan put on his best authoritative glower. “Tell Ned he’s canned if he or anybody else tries to find out why.”

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Instructions to the police, donning a radsuit, fitting a four-wheel drive SUV with tire chains – it was all done at once, and Augie Van Laan drove through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel at the time initially set for his press conference. By his own orders, nobody went with him. Van Laan had what little he needed in the way of equipment and it was understood that no one would come after him unless he failed to return in two hours. A police captain and two federal officials had advised Van Laan to stay off the island; he pulled rank on them. From his loft window Van Laan saw something that evaded other pairs of eyes, or perhaps those other people watching just weren’t willing to report what

they had seen. Van Laan had to know, had to see it again, close up.

The snow was four inches deep. Van Laan’s SUV could manage city speeds and he felt certain that vehicles with treads would never know the difference. Road obstructions were even more numerous than yesterday; a few hundred yards up the West Side Highway, Van Laan was stopped by a logjam of snow-covered vehicles. Not such a bad place to start reconnoitring, he thought. Most structures still standing in Lower Manhattan weren’t safe to use for a crow’s nest; Van Laan had been told about the narrow escapes of certain search parties that went poking through ruined buildings. The highway had fair elevation and most of the buildings that would have blocked Van Laan’s near line of sight happened not to have survived. The view to his right was completely unobstructed, of course, because the World Trade Center was already lost to men who differed from the Black Inauguration bombers only in their relative lack of means. Van Laan picked up the spotting scope he’d put on the passenger-side floor of the SUV and got out for a look around.

Almost immediately Van Laan noticed movement in the Tribeca, not far from the site of his now-demolished office. He brought his scope to bear. His helmet visor got in the way and a small iris-shot field of view was all he could see, but he finally got a close look at... well, nothing at all. Halfway up a high-rise apartment that survived the firestorm, on the side sheltered from the blast, a tattered blaze orange awning waved above a recessed balcony. It was just like the Morse code transmissions in *On the Beach*, Van Laan thought, a mockery of life signs in a lifeless world.

The destruction all around Van Laan affected him more than it had the previous day. Maybe it was the solitude this time, maybe the grey sky and unswept snow, but Augie Van Laan felt some measure of the grief and loss long familiar to everyone else. He had a new sense of a living, animistic quality within the blasted ruins. Many generations had given shape to Manhattan and the lasting evidence of intelligent design was

everywhere still, even after so much of it had been demolished. Snow-dusted remains of the buildings around Van Laan seemed somehow like the victims of a genocidal atrocity, so many blackened skeletons thinly coated with ash from their own burned bodies. Van Laan raised his scope and looked again at the deserted apartment complex. On most of the balconies he saw belongings of their former tenants: an improvised trash-can barbecue, a resin patio set, a bird feeder made of dark wood, the unfamiliar flag of some foreign nation proudly fastened inside the tenant’s glass doors. Any man-made object shows something of its owner’s character. Even in its present state, Manhattan still contained a giant accumulation of artifacts from persons living and dead, a fact Augie Van Laan was less inclined to regard with his long-held scorn.

For a few seconds, Van Laan wondered if his plan to strip away three hundred and eighty years of civic history wasn’t wrong, very wrong. Then the moment of doubt passed and the old burning purpose reasserted itself. Van Laan saw no reason to sanctify the Industrial Age trash middens of people who cared nothing for the original beauty of the island. He would have it all cleared away, every bit of it, and he was morally certain posterity would be better off as a result.

A grinding sound above Van Laan’s head startled him; chunks of sodden snow fell to the street. Van Laan’s helmet wouldn’t rotate upward, so he put his spotting scope on the hood of the SUV and squatted in the snow, leaning back with one hand behind him for support. Just as he thought – he’d seen already that girders from the burned-out World Financial Center were leaning over the highway, and his SUV was parked beneath one of them. There hadn’t been a major snowfall since Black Inauguration. Quite a few ruined buildings that could barely support their own weight were no doubt coping badly with the added weight of snow, and Van Laan decided to move on. He got back to his feet, picked up the scope, and froze with his free hand on the door handle because he’d noticed

movement to the south. There was one unobstructed visual path on West Street, a very narrow one, extending all the way back to the Battery; Van Laan saw a slow-moving speck of colour at the distant end. He was lucky enough to align the scope quickly and saw what he had seen forty-five minutes earlier, presumably what the police sergeant had seen yesterday: a shapely young woman.

She was near the lip of the dell descending into Battery Park and heading away from Van Laan, her blonde hair streaming over her back. The blue dress she had on was too short and too sheer for today's weather, but it was her other clothing that drew Augie Van Laan's attention. The sergeant described her as wearing a hat, and the hat was certainly there – a gull-wing hat of the sort worn by milkmaids and kitchen gardeners in Dutch genre paintings. The young woman was lifting her legs with difficulty in the new snow, holding her feet aloft long enough for Van Laan to see she was wearing clogs, clunky wooden clogs instead of shoes. He knew now that the strange print in the dirt wasn't made by a Geiger counter. Van Laan had seen enough; he boarded the SUV, made a Y-turn and drove as near as possible to the spot where the woman had been. From there it was a foot pursuit and Van Laan found himself unexpectedly thankful for the bad weather – it was all too easy to follow the rectangular footprints.

The trail through the bare trees of Battery Park swung east to State Street and led to one of the entrances of the South Street Seaport Museum. Van Laan recognised it as a facility he'd pledged long ago never to patronise: New York Unearthed, a collection of the city's vast store of urban artifacts. To Van Laan's surprise, the lights were on inside and there was no condensation on the plate glass windows, indicating that the furnace had been burning for hours. The woman must have a portable generator supplying power to the museum, Van Laan thought. Now that her hide-out was discovered, Van Laan knew he could go back for the police, but he decided enough time had already

been lost. He would apprehend the woman himself.

She had already done the tough work of clearing an arc in the deep snow; the front door opened to a tug. Van Laan stepped inside and shook the slush off his armoured boots. He planted himself inside the threshold, not moving a muscle until well after the spring-loaded door inched shut... he wanted a moment's rest and a look around. Rotating exhibits were scattered here and there throughout the floor space, the sorts of things Van Laan expected: antique cabinets full with old pottery and glassware, flannel-draped tables covered with yellowed newspapers and personal documents. Van Laan knew the woman could be hiding behind one of the exhibits if she hadn't already fled to the basement. He took his time perusing the floor for a trail of puddles, but there wasn't any; she must have doffed those clogs the moment she got inside. Van Laan noticed a wisp of smoke – no, steam – rising from behind a tall display case near the far wall. Instead of calling out, he walked across the floor to see what was back there. Not the young woman; behind an exhibit of old harpoons and anchors and other nautical ironware, a craggy man in his fifties sat in one of several vinyl chairs flanking the wall. A steaming chafing dish was on the floor near the man's feet, and bowls and utensils were in one of the chairs beside him. He showed no concern whatsoever at the approach of the armoured giant.

"Elke's not here. Her purpose was served... the siren has hied you to the rocks."

The man wore grey trousers, and a grey woollen sweater with glints of some brightly coloured fabric woven in. He had rumpled greying hair and shaggy eyebrows which, combined with drooping skin folds, made his faded eyes all but invisible. His hands were hard and massive, and looked like they might have moved the hills of old Manhattan, one scooped handful at a time. Even seated, he was obviously a big man – not as tall as Augie Van Laan, but nearly so and quite a lot heavier. Van Laan decided that wrestling him into submission wasn't a good option. The man's

breakfast caught Van Laan's attention: rice mixed with chopped fish and hardboiled eggs. The breathing filter in Van Laan's helmet would have blocked the aroma of curry, but Van Laan felt sure he was looking at *kedgeriee*... how long had it been since people ate that for breakfast?

"Whoever you are, you're under arrest for trespassing in a restricted area."

The man picked up a bowl and serving spoon from the nearby chair and held them both over the steaming *kedgeriee*.

"Wouldn't be right to serve myself first. Have you eaten, Mr Mayor? Please – there's no hazard taking off that helm. A radium watch dial would do you more harm."

The man's bland half-smile didn't change, but there was a slight lift in the woolly-caterpillar eyebrows; he knew which of them was in command of the situation. Seeing no reaction from Van Laan, the stranger put five heaping spoonfuls of the *kedgeriee* into the bowl and left the serving spoon in the chafing dish. He put the bowl in his lap, took a soup spoon from the nearby chair and began to eat, unhurriedly. Van Laan stood riveted to the spot, uncertain of what to do next. The man's accent was hard to place; to Van Laan, it sounded like the speech of an oysterman he'd met on a trip to Maryland's Eastern Shore.

"You know me. May I ask who you are, sir?"

The stranger finished chewing his latest mouthful of *kedgeriee* and put the bowl down in the other nearby chair, the one that was completely empty. He stood up with ceremonious stiffness: legs together, arms pressed to his sides.

"You've the pleasure of addressing Cyril Carstead, sailor in His Majesty's Navy, then brickmaker. Citizen of New York from the day of its transfer to British authority, departed this life Anno Domini sixteen hundred and ninety-one."

Van Laan laughed out loud, the relieved laughter of someone facing less formidable opposition than expected. "Is that a fact? You eat, you heat this building for comfort, you mix talk of radiation levels into that phoney archaic diction. You're a



highly unsatisfactory ghost, Mr Carstead."

"And you, less satisfactory a man, Mr Mayor. I've been buried upward of three hundred years and I'm more of a living man than ever *you* aimed to be." Carstead wasn't standing so straight now. He had settled into a slouch that better suited his words and the tenor of their delivery.

"Who are you?" Van Laan said, raising his voice. "What's your real name?"

"I told you – Cyril Carstead. Not but you'll find any Carstead in the Manhattan White Pages. I had five girls, fine lasses, and three who lived to marry, and none passed down the Carstead name. No shame on that. The people alive now, they haven't a thought it's some of my bricks under the wharves and a brick or two in old brick walls all about the city. To be square, I hadn't a thought for posterity when I set up my brick works. I just fixed to make a living, get by to the morrow, and the day after if I could. Them like me, the unremembered, the ones with little ambitions and no design to live by, we do more good than most of them who slaver to make the world after a fiction of theirs."

Van Laan stood quietly while Carstead spoke. He was entertaining, Van Laan decided, albeit quite mad. "I suppose you class me as one of the sla... is that even a word, 'slavers'? Are you here, back from the dead, to talk me out of going on with the Manhattan renewal?"

"Renewal: that's *your* made-up word. This island was home to fifteen million souls, some born here, some come here from other shores. For legacy, they can show the things they made and used when they lived, a deal of them still useful. To you they're all a blot on a draughtsman's

plan, the things and the people; you'd like to rub out that blot and forget it."

"Yes, Mr Carstead, I *would* like to see Manhattan as it was before Minuit took the first step in despoiling it." Carstead sniggered. Van Laan wondered if he had said too much.

"The redmen were glad to be shut of Manhattan, so they told me, and they didn't feel cheated. They'd spent the island; too many of them, too little game left. They'd half a notion to leave before Minuit turned up. Glass beads, copper links, other pretties never seen before – they figured it was the better half of the deal they'd got."

"Tell me, Mr Carstead, why were *you* dispatched to see me? What special qualification do you have that the other fifteen million don't?" Van Laan hoped this silly tête-à-tête would soon wind down; he was getting tired from the weight of the armour.

"You might say there's a connection between us. One harking back to my own time."

Carstead turned and walked to a wall-mounted display case. Van Laan followed quietly, or as quietly as possible for a man armoured like the knights of old. The materials in the case all related to the forced English takeover of New Amsterdam in 1664; it was history that Van Laan already knew. There were models of 17th-century warships, an antique city map with hand-drawn English words and fanciful myth figures, portraits of outgoing Director-General Stuyvesant and incoming Governor Nicholls, and a placard with a two-paragraph narrative.

"A bloodless annexation," said Carstead, quoting the title at the top of the placard. "The man who penned that knows less than the full story. I was one of them who came to Man-

hattan on a Ship of the Line. No love for the sea and the sailor's life, mind you. I'd been a kiln worker in the West Midlands and saw no way to buy my own works. My master had his sons and they'd get the business when he was too old, no share for the prentices and hired men. Sharon wouldn't marry me, said she wouldn't raise our young in a Birmingham flat with the air thick of foundry smells. In America there was good clay to be had and nary a brick works in the lower colonies. Bricks had to be shipped out of Boston or over the Atlantic... no need to say what *that* cost. The Roundheads were out and the king needed more men in the navy. Four years as a swab, then get off in the colonies with His Majesty's leave and all my wages saved, every penny. I'd bring Sharon over and have money enough to start my works: that was my plan.

"Be sailor or marine, they offered me, so I was a sailor. Neighbour shops in Birmingham made cannon for the king's service; I only wanted to cast bricks. Didn't fancy shooting a musket at another man when I could pull down a sailor's duty. Lucky we were that not a shot was fired in Manhattan. The Dutch saw the writing, all but old Wooden Leg, and the white banner went up six days later. I got off with the first boat to make dockside. Finding a room was for later. First thing, I went out for something I'd missed the last four years – I was going to get good and drunk. Those four years, every time we made port my mates would go fritter their wages while I stayed aboard ship. They came back with dainties and curios and such, spent all the next month telling me what they did and who to. That I was saving up for a future bowing to no man wasn't much



solace then. I put into three continents in four years without a memory of ought but hoisting sails and spreading pitch.

"Anyhow, I got off the boat. Marines were in the next boat; this one was just me and my shipmates, and my tour was over. Manhattan was nothing too much to look at: the Battery fort, a couple hundred shops, close-set houses near to, farms and barnyards, dirt roads linking up the whole. And this figures – offal canals leading to the sea, because there wasn't a sewer yet. I'd have a care where I built my house, lest the smell be worse than Birmingham. There were taverns aplenty. Wooden Leg was like the Roundheads, he had his own notion of making the world perfect and nobody wanted it; the taverns stayed open, late as you please. The one I went to, the taverner was your eleven times great-grandfather. That's the connection I spoke of. You'd hardly think he's the same blood: scarce five feet tall, just enough muscle to pull a bung without putting his feet on the barrel."

The plot thickens, thought Van Laan. He noticed that the chill was fading from his armour.

"I went in, still dressed as a swabby and lugging a rucksack, and he almost broke a blood vessel for cholera. He was a Dutchman, proud of it and not about to wait on an English pillager like me. I could've gone to the next tavern, but I didn't. I'd waited four years for a fill of rum and butter, not to be put off by some banty cock of a taverner. It wasn't so hard to take him by the collar and the back of his breeches and haul him to the nearest offal canal. A hod of bricks weigh more, given they don't flail and cuss your mother's forebears in two tongues. Some of my shipmates were right there to watch old Van Laan in his leather apron, making to scabble up the sides of the canal and get out of the turds and trash. They were too steep, no way out for him till some thoughtful body came by with a rope. My mates joined me in a long round at Van Laan's while the proprietor was away, and we left fair payment on the table so none could call us thieves afterward.

"My service was over, no master-

at-arms to stretch me over the ropes, so I figured I'd hear no more on it. Sharon waited the four years, bless her. I put up the house before bringing her over, me and a sailor turned carpenter; I set down the foundation and chimney for his and he did the sawing and hammering for mine. There was a bluff full of clay right by my dooryard. The brickmakers already there were nice as you please; Manhattan wasn't a closed shop. I was stoking coals when a customer came by and said Van Laan got the typhoid. It was that dunking in the offal that did it." Carstead's wrinkled face seemed to pucker in on itself as he said that. "He didn't die straight off but he didn't ever get well again either, and who's keen to buy a drink served by someone spotty with fever? He had a wife and one lad, your ten times great-grandfather. The wife sold his tavern and took in wash from a few souls kind enough to bring her their things, even though they were going to a pesthouse. The first profit I turned from selling bricks, I went to Van Laan's with ten sovereigns. The wife opened a shutter and threw them in the street; I couldn't buy her forgiveness. Van Laan was two years dying and no punishment for an English subject acting out of patriotism – that's my connection to you, Mr Mayor-by-Default August Van Laan. The one man better qualified, connected more direct... well, he just wouldn't come. Said I should have killed him *before* he sired your ten times great-grandfather, to keep you out of the world."

Van Laan felt foolish about letting Carstead go on raving for so long. The man happened to find out there was no radiation danger and Van Laan had stayed to hear him spin out his fictitious personal history. Carstead may or may not have believed his own story, but that no longer mattered. Van Laan was warmed up sufficiently to hike back to his SUV and the weight of his armour, especially on his shoulders, was tiring him more than ever. If Carstead tried to tell anyone Manhattan was safe, Van Laan would denounce him as a mental case, citing this conversation as proof. Without saying a word, Van Laan turned away.

This behind him, before his second step:

"Summary: Analysis of substances collected in the blast vicinity leaves no doubt that decontamination of Manhattan is feasible without extensive removal of existing development and landforms.' Remember that? The last sentence in the Sanders report, the real one that never got put out."

*Nobody knows that!* shrieked in his head – Van Laan stopped and turned back to face Carstead. Van Laan was frightened now, having heard the dead scientist's suppressed words spoken by Carstead. What to believe... did Carstead have some association with Sanders, was he really a ghost, was this all an awful dream?

"I've got your attention again," said Carstead. "Good. Ponder this, Mr Mayor. Let's say just for argument that nothing stops you, you suck the sands back up in the glass and make Manhattan an Indian hunting ground. We'll even allow that no one learns it was all a fraud, the island was spare of radiation all along. How long will the good people of this city go on like stoats in the little cement burrows you dug for them? It's not natural to live in fear, or see a thing and not change it. What if people decide to build on the surface again, make Manhattan near to what it was before? How's that fit into your scheme, Mr Van Laan?"

That was something Van Laan had never thought about. He had always considered Manhattan's renewal project as a finished work in the same way a painting is finished. Not once had he let himself imagine anyone changing it after Manhattan was declared ready for occupancy.

"They wouldn't... it was meant... oh, if they want to build up the surface, that's their prerogative. I can't very well stop it."

"Balls. It wouldn't be their prerogative if *you* had any sway. I touched a nerve, didn't I? That other people wouldn't let it alone, *your* Manhattan – you loathe the very thought. Rather than bring a generation into the world that'd change one thing about it, you'd have them build a couple million mannequins to fill up the underground shops and apartments, a few

thousand more on the hiking trails above, and then they can go get drowned. Your perfect world isn't threatened, it stays just the same.

"You're a lunatic, Van Laan. The men who gouged out City Hall, they're lunatics too, but it's plain to see. They hate and their snarling faces are uncovered. You're worse because your lunacy pretends to sanity. Never loved, never raised a wrathful hand – you've another passion, charming reasonable folk to follow into the maw of your own hate, hatred of things men make if they're to live at all. You never squared up to it till just now."

Carstead picked his way through the floor exhibits until he was standing just inside the museum's plate glass front, near the entrance door; Van Laan followed willingly, since that was the right direction. Carstead looked pensively out at the street, the hot breath of his nostrils making a little circle of condensation on the cold glass. Van Laan thought of trying an experimental right cross to see if Carstead was as solid and unspectral as he seemed to be.

"It mayn't do any good to ask," Carstead finally said, "since you're what you are. But ask I must: will you stop this whole thing? You're alive because you turned your back on this city, fled the morn of the attack. That makes you the least qualified man to hold the keys of the city and yet they're yours. Can't you see what you'd destroy? – the visible leavings of people else gone to dust. Not paragons, any of us; for sure, *I* wasn't. But we were living, brawling with life, like our kin today if they can shape what's at hand, inspired a little by their forebears' efforts. Your ideal is a well-tended mass grave with no stones allowed. I've done. How will you have it, Mr Mayor?"

The view outside wasn't the most scenic there was of the Battery, even in better weather; however, it was real. Van Laan saw none of it. An architect's knack for visualisation let him imagine what would be there when his plan was implemented: a grassy slope overlooking a gently lapped beach, the functional recessed windows hardly visible from a distance.

It was the vision he had preserved for years. Against seemingly impossible odds, he had come within one step of making it a reality.

"Do your worst, Mr Carstead. I'm leaving."

With an effort, Van Laan opened the street door and stepped out. Van Laan didn't think there could have been another snow shower during his time in the museum, but there must have been – the two sets of footprints were gone. It didn't make any difference to Van Laan, who remembered exactly where he'd parked the SUV and knew the city streets like a cab driver. Van Laan started trudging to the SUV. Fifty yards from New York Unearthed, he took a quick look back and saw that the lights were out and Carstead was no longer standing where he could be seen.

The SUV wasn't where Van Laan remembered leaving it and there weren't any tracks nearby. That was impossible; Van Laan knew he'd driven part of the way. Hoping that he was somehow mistaken, Van Laan made the long, frigid walk back to the West Side Highway. By the time Van Laan came within sight of the SUV, parked near the logjam, he was nearing exhaustion. His leg muscles were afire, his feet had no sensation and the aching in his shoulders had radiated upwards – his head felt like it was splitting open.

A few slogging steps from the respite of the SUV's bench seat, Van Laan saw it again: the flicker of bright colour, the torn awning that reminded him of life here, messy and bustling life on the island surrendered by its original Stone Age inhabitants. This time there wasn't any hesitancy at all; Van Laan was sure of his course. He reached for the scope on the roof, the only gear he needed to stow. He couldn't tell – a flitting shadow, a familiar sound – and Augie Van Laan lost the power of choice.

The choice was made for him.

\* \* \*

Still silver-blue, unblinking, the eyes of a man whose will was not to be shaken. A skilled coroner could have determined from the corneal opacity that their owner had died two hours earlier.

"We shouldn't have let him come out here by himself," said the sergeant.

"He's the mayor, Frank. Who's going to tell him no?" said the lieutenant.

Four police officers finished loading the long body into the back of the SUV, feet first. A girder projecting from the radsuit helmet would require the tailgate to be left down during the drive back to Brooklyn.

"At least it was quick. He never knew what happened." The sergeant picked the spotting scope out of the snow and put it in the SUV beside Van Laan's body. "You think he was looking for that woman?"

"We'll never know, not now."

"I'll drive the Expedition if that's okay, lieutenant. Are we ready to go?"

"One more thing, Frank."

The lieutenant wasn't so certain Van Laan had died instantly and he didn't want to chance anything about contributing causes. A former Boy Scout who still believed in the organisational motto, he had brought along an item of equipment Van Laan said nothing about this time. The other policemen were standing near the Geiger counter when the lieutenant switched it on, and for a moment, they all thought it wasn't working. Then came a click, and another, and another... easy to count, only fourteen the first ten seconds.

"Huh?"

"We're too close!"

"Normal? The radiation is normal?"

"As near to it as makes no diff," the lieutenant said.

"How—"

"I don't know how. We'll just report it and what happens next is up to the suits. Let's get back."

The SUV and the two patrol cars made cumbrous turns and soon the highway was deserted.

No wind blew; the scarred labour of fifteen generations lay beneath the winter's first snowfall.

Near the three sets of vehicle tracks, a member in one of the damaged buildings settled without dislodging, or even losing its cover of snow, barely audible, a sleeper rustling before a grey morning.

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# Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: Murder

John Greenwood

A mysterious but compulsive computer game on his spaceship's on-board computer has made Newton Braddell, intrepid space adventurer, forget all details of his mission. After crash-landing on an unknown but strangely familiar planet, the captain of the *Tanjong Pagar* encounters a multitude of astonishing and weird alien lifeforms, as he attempts to retrieve both his ship and his lost purpose.

A bleak promontory, shielded from inclement weather by the natural roof of an overhanging rock, became our modest camp that bitter night.

Despite a rigorous regime of physical training at Space Flight Academy, my months spent in idleness aboard the *Tanjong Pagar* had taken their toll, and notwithstanding his malnourished frame, I came to resent the dead weight of Marsiling's body. I knew we would be forced to stop at dusk, and unconsciously willed the alien sun to dip further and faster to-

wards the jagged horizon.

By the time the light failed, I felt my strength would soon follow suit, but I refused to complain. Eunos would not have the pleasure of besting me on that occasion. Once our burden had been lowered to the ground, Eunos gathered sufficient firewood to ward off any curious wildlife for the remainder of the night, and I sat nursing my aching arms and blistered feet while the robot busied himself around me. It had occurred to me several times during our hike that Eunos might have easi-

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ly carried our unconscious companion, unaided, and I wondered why he had not suggested this course himself. We might have made swifter progress.

Over an unsatisfying meal concocted from our meagre provisions and various roots and herbs Eunos had grubbed from the surrounding undergrowth, we discussed the situation. The android, at my request, pointed out our position on the map. Naturally the script used by the cartographer was unknown to me, but there was no mistaking the grey and white blotches which surrounded our camp for miles in all directions. We were in the highlands now, and would soon cross beyond the tree line into the peaks. By the light of our campfire, I spent the rest of the evening perusing the map and, with Eunos's begrudging assistance, pinpointing the exact location of the many Thanggam fungi whose presence had necessitated this laborious detour. I compared these marks with the notes made by Choa Chu Kang on the probable shape of Kadaloor's tectonic plates, and found my hypothesis strengthened. The Thanggam were indeed following Kang's fault-lines, almost as though they had a copy of the map themselves.

Soon I might be able to test this hypothesis: a few dozen miles north of our present position, Kang's snaking line, having zig-zagged across the island, suddenly stopped like a river run dry. Did this broken line mark the seismologist's death? I pictured him in the study I had visited so often at Woodland Heights, pen in one hand, the other clutching his failing heart. In all probability the event had not been so dramatic, but it struck me that I had never learned from Eunos the precise manner of his former master's demise. I suppose he would have considered it immaterial, but I would ask him all the same, perhaps another time. For now I congratulated myself on my successful conjecture. I hoped that our route would take us further north, and that I might be afforded a clear view over the lowlands, so as to spy out new eruptions of Thanggam, while remaining beyond the range of their dread calls.

I had brought my sketching mate-

rials along with me, in spite of Eunos's objections about excess weight in our packs, and hoped that if I rose early next morning, I might stroll about and record some of the landscape around us. On our journey so far my attention had been given entirely to the trouble of carrying Marsiling across so severe a gradient, and I had barely given a thought to the beauty of my surroundings. That I could remedy once Marsiling was awake, and could take his share of the load.

In short, weighed against the adversities we had struggled against yesterday and today, tomorrow was a cheerful prospect, and I anticipated the delicious sleep of one who has toiled hard all day. I lay staring through the flames at the figure of Eunos, who sat motionless, staring out into the blackness, perhaps seeing more with his thermal vision that I could, or might want to. Now and again a shrill, animal cry broke the silence.

I awoke, I know not after how long, to find that hours remained before daybreak. The fire had died down to a scattering of glowing cinders. There was no sign of Eunos or Marsiling, but I felt quite calm. Locating my flashlight, I made sure I was not mistaken. If my companions were nearby, they had for some reason taken their packs along with them. That I could not easily explain.

But I was not alone. A circle of beings surrounded the camp, tall, robed, grave in aspect. My flashlight sought their faces, but the darkness of their hoods seemed to swallow up the beam. They circled around me with ritual slowness, and I stood absolutely still, strangely fearless, waiting. Were these men? I could hardly assume so. The men of Kadaloor were an endangered species, of that I was convinced. But these creatures had assumed the shapes of men, and the arms of men, which reached out for me now and took hold of me from every side. I smelt a warm, bloody stink on their breath, and felt claws and fur brush against my arms and face. At the last moment, before I was lifted from the ground and hoisted aloft, the hood of the ringleader

slipped back, and a wolf's face grinned out.

The reader might be surprised to learn that this was the first occasion during our journey across the mountains that I had caught sight of the stars. Now, held fast by countless rough hands, and lying face up, the constellations of Kadaloor were my only view, fringed with the tops of trees as they rushed past. A mood of fatalism, quite untypical of me, had taken hold, and I considered my demise imminent. I was destined to become the next meal for these ravenous lupine life-forms. I thought how sad it was that I would never get the chance to learn the names of the stars above Kadaloor.

Involuntarily, I cried aloud, "Alas! Thrice captive, for shame!" I was thinking, of course, of my previous imprisonments, at the hands of the Punggol, and again by the illusory Rumbia beetles. By sheer accident of fortune, my Dover and Somerset was still strapped across my shoulders, and in the struggle had been switched on. As I berated my fate to the skies, my words were instantly interpreted into the tongue of my captors, and a series of gruff barks were emitted by the speakers.

The effect was instantaneous. The beasts, silent until now, uttered horrified shrieks, apparently untranslatable by the Dover and Somerset. Without warning I was cast down onto the cold earth. I rolled onto my back, tree roots and sharp pebbles biting into me, and saw the world rotate, and several robed figures apparently fleeing across the side of the mountain. The bolder among the mob kept their distance, eyeing me warily. It was as though the hunted stag had bellowed out in plain English, and the hunters stood in awe and mortal fear at the miracle.

"It spoke!" gasped a harsh voice. "The food spoke!"

"Idiots!" roared a second. "Cowards! Seize it before it escapes!"

I stumbled to my feet, and peered into the night. Large, billowing silhouettes surrounded me on three sides. I edged away from them. "Gentlemen!" I announced in a clear voice to the Dover and Somerset. "Allow me to introduce myself."

A wordless yelp was all that escaped from two of my foes as they scuttled for cover, cloaks flapping behind them. Only one had the temerity to stand his ground, and he advanced on me silently, growling softly.

"My name is Newton Braddell," I continued, my voice faltering slightly. "I mean you no harm, but will defend myself if necessary, and with gusto!"

I felt about my person for a suitable weapon to demonstrate my threat, and my hand fell on the flashlight. A solid rod of black plastic-like material, it would serve as well as any rock or branch. I switched on the beam, and shone it at my adversary, hoping to blind him and gain a moment's advantage. I walked backwards with great care, unsure at every step whether my feet would meet solid ground or tumble down the side of the abyss.

The wolf-creature side-stepped my torchlight and made a lunge. I felt the claws on my neck, the same raw, fetid breath in my face. Swinging my flashlight with all the strength I could muster, I belaboured the enemy's head. Blow after blow crashed down on that hooded skull, and still he held on, gripping my windpipe until I began to see shapes flashing in front of my eyes. I hammered away at the back of the monster's head. My persistence brought results: the claws slipped away, and the figure slumped against me, almost throwing me to the ground. I stepped back hastily, the flashlight still held above my head, ready to enter the next round of combat. Nothing stirred in the mound of cloth at my feet. The quarry had bested the hunter.

"What have you done?" asked a voice at my shoulder. The torch was pulled from my grasp, and shone back at me. I shielded my eyes, and when I looked again I saw shock and alarm on Eunos's face. I felt momentarily dizzy, and sat down, resting my head on my knees. Eunos pointed the flashlight down to illuminate a mournful scene: Marsiling lay motionless on the path, his hair and forehead steeped in blood.

"So they got him too?" I asked, shaking my head sadly. "Is he...?"

Eunos bent down and felt for a pulse. "He's dead," he pronounced.

I pounded a fist into my palm. "Those beasts shall pay!" A wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm me then, and I closed my eyes and felt the world rising up like a fairground ride.

Eunos looked at me long and hard. "Beasts?" he asked. "There are no beasts!"

"No!" I laughed bitterly. "They fled when I fought back, the cowards! Even the sound of my voice was enough to startle them! Poor Marsiling! If he had only been able to speak, he too might have survived!"

Eunos turned away from me for a moment, lost in his own calculations. When he faced me once more, I fancied I caught the flicker of a smile disappear from the corners of his mouth, but considering what then came out of it, I must have been mistaken.

"I must inform you," began the android stiffly, "that you yourself slew Marsiling. There were no beasts, beyond those in your own disordered mind. You have suffered yet another psychotic episode."

I uttered a sharp cry of horror that no Dover and Somerset box could ever translate. Was this some appalling joke? Could Eunos be lying to me? I knew the robot to be incapable of straightforward deception, at least to his acknowledged master, but what he had told me was indescribably abominable! I, a murderer! I, a homicidal madman! The abyss of madness yawned wide at that moment, and I felt myself teetering on the brink. It needed only the slightest breeze to send me over the edge.

I crouched at the corpse of Marsiling, and made some pathetic attempt to clean the wounds that I, in my lunacy, had inflicted. It was, needless to say, a futile gesture, but I was still not entirely in possession of my rational faculties, and Eunos's announcement had dealt them another heavy blow.

I cannot with certainty reckon how the time passed as I gazed on Marsiling's hunger-ravaged features. The sun rose, but I saw it not. Hours later, Eunos said, "Do you wish to bury the corpse? I understand that it is cus-

tomary to do so in some human cultures."

His question seemed senseless to me. "No, no!" I cried. "This is evidence! We must not disturb the crime scene in any way! I must go and hand myself over to the authorities!" I bowed my head. "It is the only decent thing to do."

Eunos seemed to sigh with impatience. "The authorities of which you speak do not exist," he replied. "There have been no such law-enforcement agencies to my knowledge since the end of the war with the Punggol. You have nothing to fear on that score."

Naturally I was not satisfied with his answer. The consciousness of my own guilt was overwhelming, and I could only contemplate my own deserved punishment. What would the penalty for murder be on Kadaloor? Death? A life sentence? Or would I be permitted, as on Earth, to defend myself on the grounds of diminished responsibility? But what relevance did these speculations have in a world without a judiciary?

Again the robot interrupted my silent cogitations. "Either we bury him," he reasoned, "or we leave his body for carrion."

Put in such stark terms, the question became urgent, and stirred me to action. We discussed the practicalities of disposing of the poet's body. Lacking the tools to dig a grave, and given the stony composition of the ground, a compromise was negotiated. Eunos told me that, in some of the ancient human societies of Kadaloor, it was customary to float the deceased downriver, in the expectation that he might become one with the spirits of the ocean. While I could not myself subscribe to such superstitions, the ritual itself suggested a certain gravity appropriate to the occasion. We placed the body of Marsiling once again on our stretcher, and tramped across the steep terrain until a series of gushing rapids blocked our route. From here Marsiling continued his journey alone, headlong into a foaming cascade that arced away from the mountainside, before disappearing into a swirling pool a hundred metres below us.

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# The Quarterly Review

## Triangulation: End of Time

Pete Butler (ed.)

PARSEC Ink, pb, 155pp

ISBN 978-0-6151-5280-6

It's often said that there are no new ideas left for science fiction writers to explore. It's a problem raised by D.K. Latta in his story "Conversation in an English Pub". The solution he offers is oddly brutal: travel back in time and murder pioneers like Wells and Shelley so that later aspiring authors can discover time travel and reanimated corpses for themselves.

Certainly the time travel concept is a well-trodden path for speculative writers, but that has not stopped the authors of the anthology *Triangulation: End of Time* from setting out along its muddied ruts in search of original conceits.

Beneath a slightly over-cooked cover (it resembles the inelegant design of a scientific textbook – from a distance you might mistake it for a exam revision guide aimed at students enrolled on a BSc in Time Travel), we find repeated attempts to wring some original speculative thrills from the well-squeezed notion of time travel.

A man conducts an affair with his wife when she was a younger, more attractive woman. There are extravagant, baffling worlds where jumping backwards and forwards in time has become as convenient as setting your iPod to shuffle, and which are in danger of collapsing under the weight of their own time-paradoxes. The con-

traditions inherent in the notion of time-travelling are dealt with lightly or exuberantly dismissed.

Not all the stories plump for time-travel. The stated theme is "End of Time", so there are millenarian stories too, with apocalypses to suit all tastes, the most memorable being "America is Coming!", in which the entire continent of North America breaks loose from its moorings and careers around the globe, destroying all in its path. Two Italian chancers attempt to hitch a ride on the errant landmass, only to discover that the US population have entered suspended animation for reasons that are never made clear.

If this is a metaphor for US Foreign Policy disasters (a blindly destructive nation populated by the somnolent), it's a weak one, but perhaps I'm reading too much into this. What really makes the story stand out is the genuine sense of drama in the protagonists' struggle to ground their boat on a moving shoreline. I'd be very surprised if author Dario Ciriello had not navigated some rough seas himself. What surprises me more is that I found the account genuinely gripping: I usually abhor tales of seafaring derring-do. For some reason the moment an author mentions jibs and yardarms, my eyelids grow heavy. Patrick O'Brian will never find a place on my bookshelf. Is that such a terrible shame?

Possibly.

Then again, nor can I ever normally bring myself to read novels by authors who are still alive, or abridged versions, or books with movie tie-in covers, or books with notes scrawled in the margins, although books with

the names of previous owners written inside the front cover are good. Once I found an invitation to a cocktail party in a second-hand copy of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*. The party had taken place in Brighton in 1965. I think that if I could go back in time, I would attend that cocktail party, and find out whose book that was, and what they thought of it. I wonder what they would say if I told them that in the future, the same Colin Wilson would pen a series of novels about giant spiders taking over the world. Perhaps that would make a good short story. – JG

## The Game

Diana Wynne Jones

HarperCollins, hb,

200pp + extras

This is quite a baffling book, at least without the assistance of the extras section at the end (or an excellent knowledge of the Greek myths and the related constellations). It's an odd length for the author, which makes me wonder if this is a truncated book, or the first in a series, or just an idea for a longer book that didn't pan out. Unless I missed something (I often do), the significance of the titular game is never made clear, other than as a kind of quiet revolt. All in all, it feels like the first third of one of DWJ's novels for older teenagers. Intriguing though the story nevertheless is, it is almost trumped in that regard by the final pages of the book, which announce a forthcoming second sequel to *Howl's Moving Castle!* – SWT

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## Spider-Girl Presents: The Buzz and Darkdevil

Tom DeFalco, Ron  
Frenz and Others  
Marvel, digest, 112pp

Essential reading for anyone who's been following *Spider-Girl*, as many of the mysteries set up in that title are cleared up in the two mini-series collected here. Unlike the other *Spider-Girl Presents* books – *Juggernaut Jr*, *Avengers Next* and *Fantastic Five* – which were M2 titles that ran in parallel to *Spider-Girl*, these are true spin-offs. The stories, to be honest, are nothing spectacular, and they lack the soap-opera elements that make *Spider-Girl* such an addictive read, but the various revelations about the origins of the Buzz and Darkdevil are quite eye-opening. – *SWT*

## Deep Secret Diana Wynne Jones Gollancz, hb, 383pp

I've had this book lying around the house for years and years (it was a freebie from the F&SF Book Club). So imagine my delight, a little while after I finally discovered the brilliance of Diana Wynne Jones, upon finding it in a pile of books. It's a source of continuing misery to me that I didn't read her books as a child, though I suspect I would have found them somewhat discomfiting and quite difficult reads at the time.

The novels of DWJ are a lot like Philip K Dick's in their rough treatment of reality, but where in his books reality tends to fracture and break, in hers it slowly frays and dissolves, almost without your noticing. You think you're standing on a nice cosy rug, but then find yourself falling through space wondering what the devil is going on. One colossal

mistake which I've made from time to time is to put one of her books down and then pick it up again a few months later – something which always guarantees near instant befuddlement. This novel is putatively aimed at an adult readership, but is no great departure in style from her fiction for older teenage readers, such as the amazing *Fire & Hemlock*. That isn't a bad thing. The story is intriguing and full of surprises, and if you don't get absolutely all the answers on a plate at the end that is part of the fun. – *SWT*

## John Constantine, Hellblazer: Reasons to Be Cheerful

Mike Carey and Others  
DC, tpb, 144pp

Classic *Hellblazer* storytelling, as gloomy as in Jamie Delano's day, as John Constantine has some of the worst times of his life. But like a lot of the current *Hellblazer* trade paperbacks, the colouring is murky and extremely unattractive. It isn't necessarily the colourist's fault – it's the paper these trade paperbacks are printed on. It's so difficult to make anything out that I'd prefer to read them in black and white.

## John Constantine, Hellblazer: The Gift

Mike Carey and Others  
DC, tpb, 224pp

This volume brings Mike Carey's back-to-basics run on *Hellblazer* to a

close. It's been a good, exciting sequence, and this set of stories in particular is very rewarding for long-term readers of the title, bringing threads together from all previous eras – in particular those of Delano, Ennis and the under-appreciated Paul Jenkins (rather unfairly, the only major *Hellblazer* writer whose work has yet to be collected in even a single trade paperback), with quite a few nods to his origins in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*. This book would have been a perfect end to the series, if the comic had to end. Happily it is still going, though, so I'm looking forward to catching up (weirdly, this was collected in trade paperback form only *after* the Denise Mina run which followed it, which meant the Denise Mina books, *Empathy Is the Enemy* and *The Red Right Hand*, have been sitting idly on my shelf these last few months). – *SWT*

### Theaker's Quarterly Fiction #22 Easter 2008

#### Editors

SW Theaker & JB Greenwood

#### Website

[www.silveragebooks.com](http://www.silveragebooks.com)

#### Email

[silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:silveragebooks@blueyonder.co.uk)

#### MySpace

[www.myspace.com/silveragebooks](http://www.myspace.com/silveragebooks)

#### Lulu Store

[www.lulu.com/silveragebooks](http://www.lulu.com/silveragebooks)

#### Post

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Birmingham, B21 9EE

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