

Sample Chapters of Pyr Books

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Fast Forward 2: "Catherine Drewe" by Paul Cornell

Fast Forward 2 is an anthology of all original, unthemed science fiction works, edited by Lou Anders, published by [Pyr](#), and featuring stories from such names as Paolo Bacigalupi, Benjamin Rosenbaum & Cory Doctorow, Ian McDonald, Mike Resnick & Pat Cadigan, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and Karl Schroeder & Tobias S. Buckell.

As a sample of the contents in *Fast Forward 2*, we are pleased to present, in its entirety, a story from the twice-Hugo nominated Paul Cornell, of *Doctor Who* and Marvel comics fame. The adventure that follows launches Paul into exciting new territory while remaining quintessential Cornell in its mad, exuberant brilliance.

"Catherine Drewe" Paul Cornell

Hamilton could hear, from the noises outside the window, that the hunters had caught up with their prey. There was a particular noise that Derbyshire Man Hounds made seconds before impact. A catch in their cries that told of their excitement, the shift in breathing as they prepared to leap at the neck of the quarry the riders had run in for them. He appreciated that sound.

He looked back to where Turpin was sitting in a wing chair, the volume of Buttriss he'd taken from Sanderton's library in the early stages of the hunt still open on his lap. The skin on Turpin's face was a patchwork of different shades, from fair new freckles that would have put an Irishman to shame to the richer tones of a mulatto. This was common in the higher ranks of the military, a sign that parts of Turpin's body had been regrown and grafted back on many different occasions. Hamilton saw it as an affectation, though he would never have said so. He had asked for his own new right arm to match the rest of his body completely. He'd expected Turpin, or one of the other ranking officers who occasionally requested his services, to ask about it, but they never had.

The noise from outside reached a crescendo of cries and horns and the sudden high howl of one dog claiming the prey and then being denied more than a rip at it. Turpin opened his eyes. "Damn," he said. He managed a slight smile. "Still, five hours. They got their exercise."

Hamilton reflected the smile back at him, shifting his posture so that he mirrored Turpin's nonchalant air more exactly. "Yes, sir."

Turpin closed the book. "I thought they had me an hour ago, which is why I sent for you. How's your weekend been? Has Sanderton been keeping you in the style to which you're accustomed?" Turpin had arrived unannounced and unexpected, as he often did, late last night, sitting down at the end of the dinner table as the gentlemen were about to adjourn and talking only about the forthcoming day's hunting, including asking his host for Hamilton to be excepted from it.

“It’s been a most enjoyable house party, sir. Dinner was excellent.”

“I heard you bagged your share of poultry.”

Hamilton inclined his head. He was waiting for Turpin to get to the point, but it wouldn’t be for a while yet. Indeed, Turpin spent the next twenty minutes and thirty-three seconds asking after Hamilton’s family, and going into some of the details of his genealogy. This happened a lot, Hamilton found. Every now and then it occurred to him that it was because he was Irish. The thought registered again now, but did not trouble him. He had considerable love for the man who had ordered him to return home from Constantinople when it became clear the only good he could do there was to remind the Kaiser that every disturbance to the peace of Europe had consequences, that every action was paid for in blood. Hamilton would have done it, obviously, but it was one fewer weight to drag up the hill when he woke each morning.

“So.” Turpin got up and replaced the book on the library shelf. “We’ve seen you’re fit, and attended to your conversation, which rang like a bell with the white pudding crowd. We have a job for you, Major. Out of uniform.”

Hamilton took that to be the royal we. He found that a healthy smile had split his lips. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Turpin touched his finger to the surface of the table, where the imprint glowed with bacterial phosphorescence. Hamilton leaned over and made the same gesture, connecting the receptors in his skin with the package.

“Nobody else knows about this,” said Turpin.

The information rolled into Hamilton. It exhilarated him. He felt his nostrils flare at the smells and pictures of a land he’d never been to. New territory. Low white newly grown wood buildings, less than a day old by the look of them, with the banners of imperial Russia fluttering gallant. That is, fluttering not entirely through the progression of an atmosphere past them. Near darkness. Was it dawn? Not unpleasant.

And there was the woman. She stood on a bluff, looking down into a dark grey canyon, looking at a prize. He couldn’t see what she was looking at; the emotion came with the package, and Hamilton reacted to it, making himself hate her and her prize for a moment, so if anything like this moment came in the world, he would be in charge of it.

She wore her hair green, but bundled in the knots that suggested she rarely had to unfurl it and take the benefit. Her neck was bare in the manner that said she was ready for the guillotine, the black collar of her dress emphasising her defiance. Hamilton let himself admire that bravery, as he did the martial qualities of all those he met in his work. Her gown was something that had been put together in the narrow hell of the foundry streets of Kiev, tiny blue veins of enforcement and supply across Imperial white, with the most intricate parchment wrinkles. It looked like she was wearing a map.

Her hands were clasped before her, and she was breathing hard, controlling her posture through an immense effort of will. She wanted to exult, to raise herself in triumph.

Hamilton found himself wishing she would turn around.

But the information froze there, and the rare data tumbled into his mind. He sent most of it into various compartments, for later examination, keeping only the index in the front of his attention.

“Catherine Drewe,” said Turpin. “Ever meet her?”

Just because they were both Irish? Hamilton killed the thought. “No.”

“Good. We got that emotional broadcast image by accident. From some-one standing behind her—a bodyguard, we think. One of our satellites happened to be passing over the Valles Marineris at the right moment, three days ago.”

Hamilton had already realised. “The Russians are on Mars.”

Turpin nodded. “Terrifying, isn’t it?”

“Is her army—?”

“Down there with her, because if so, we’re acting with a criminal disregard for the safety of our allies in the Savoy court?”

Hamilton acknowledged Turpin’s smile. “Thought you might be ahead of me, sir.”

“We hope not. And we don’t see how. So we’re not getting Chiamberi involved as yet. She’s probably down there on her own, either negotiating a rate to take the Russian side in whatever their long-term plans against the House of Savoy might be, or already part of those plans, possibly as a consultant. Now, the mercenary armies alarm us all, but the good thing about them is that we’ve sometimes been able to use them as passive aggregators of intelligence, allowing them to serve a side to the point where they’re trusted, and then buying them off, netting all they know in the process.”

“Is that the mission, sir?”

“No. We’ve created and are ready to plant chaotic information of an unbreakable nature strongly suggesting that this has already happened, that we have paid Miss Drewe in advance for her dalliance with the bear. Your front cover will be as a serf, your inside cover as a deniable asset of the Okhranka. Your mission is to kill her and any associates in one move.”

Hamilton felt himself take another deep breath. “So the world will think the Russians discovered her treachery and covertly executed her.”

“And botched the cover, which the world will enjoy working out for itself. Miss Drewe’s mercenaries are tremendously loyal to her. Many of them declare themselves to be in love with her. Doubtless, several of them are actually her lovers. They will not proceed with any contract should she die in this way. Moreover, they may feel obliged to expose the Russian presence on Mars—”

“Without us having been involved in exposing it.”

“So the czar’s state visit at Christmas and the superconductor trade talks won’t have any awkwardness hanging over them. Savoy won’t ask and won’t tell. They’ll be able to bring pressure to bear before the Russians are anywhere near ready to tussle. There will be no

shooting war, the balance will be preserved, and even better—”

“Miss Drewe’s disaffected mercenaries may actually give us the information on Russian arms and intentions that we’re alleging she did.”

“And other such groups, irked at Russian gall, will be less disposed to aid them. It is rather beautiful, isn’t it?” Turpin held out his hand, the ring finger crooked, and Hamilton touched fingertip to fingertip, officially taking on the orders and accepting them. “Very good. You leave in three days. Come in tomorrow for the covers and prep.”

There was a knock on the door. Turpin called enter, and in marched a hearty group of hunters, led by Sanderton, the mud still on their boots. At the front of the pack came a small girl, Sanderton’s daughter. She’d been blooded across the cheeks, and in her right hand she held, clutched by the hair, Turpin’s deceased head. “Do you want to eat it, Uncle?” she asked.

Turpin went to her, ruffled her hair, and inspected the features of his clone. “Yes, I’ll take my prion transmitters back, Augusta. Can’t be spendthrift with them at my age.”

Sanderton advised him that his chef was used to the situation, and would prepare the brain as a soup.

Hamilton caught the eye of the girl as she hefted the head onto a plate provided by a servant. She was laughing at the blood that was falling onto the carpet, trying to save it with her hand.

Hamilton found that he was sharing her smile.

Hamilton made his apologies to his host, and that night drove to Oxford in his motor carriage, a Morgan Sixty-Six. The purr of the electrical motor made him happy. Precision workings. Small mechanisms making the big ones tick over.

It was a clear run up St. Giles, but glancing at his watch, Hamilton knew he wasn’t going to make it in time for the start of the service. He tore down the Banbury Road, and slowed down at the last moment to make the turn into Parks, enjoying the spectacle of the Pitt Rivers, lit up with moving displays for some special exhibition. The Porters, in all their multitudes, ran out of their lodge as he cut the engine and sailed into the quad, but the sight of the Fourth Dragoons badge had them doffing their caps and applauding. After a few words of greeting had been exchanged, Loftus, the head porter, came out and swore at Hamilton in her usual friendly fashion, and had her people boost the carriage onto the gravel just beyond the lodge.

Hamilton walked across the quad in the cold darkness, noticing with brief pleasure that new blades had appeared in neon scrawl on the wall of his old staircase. The smells of cooking and the noise of broadcast theatric systems in students’ rooms were both emphasised by the frost. The food and music belonged to Musselmen and Hindus and the registered Brethren of the North American protectorates. Keble continued its cosmopolitan tradition.

He headed for the chapel. As he passed the main doors, the bells that had been sounding from inside fell silent. He put his hand to the wood, then hesitated, and went to sit in the hallway outside the side door. He listened to the start of the service, and found his heart lifted by the words, and by the voice that was saying them. “Your world turns as the solar system turns as the universe turns, every power in balance, for every action an opposite, a rotation and equalisation that stands against war and defeats death, and the mystery of what may happen in any moment or in any space will continue. .? .? .?”

He waited an hour, until the service was over, enjoying the cold, listening to that voice through the wood of the door, intimate and distant.

As the congregation came out, Hamilton stepped through the mass of them, unnoticed, and past churchwardens putting out candles and gathering hymn books. There she was. She had her back to him. Annie. In the gleaming vault of the chapel interior, dominated by the giant depiction of God with a sword for a tongue, reaching across time and space with his Word.

She turned at the sound of his footsteps. She was as lovely as he remembered. “Jonathan,” she whispered, “why are you here?”

He took her hand and put it to his face and asked for a blessing.

The blessing only gave him an edge of 0.2 percent. Annie checked again, in his head behind his eyes, and for a moment he thought how splendid it would be to show her all his old covers, to share. But no. He could not. Not until this part of his life was over.

“It’s a very slight effect,” she said. “Your prayers have hardly provoked the field. Are you contemplating murder?”

Hamilton laughed in a way that said of course not. But really his laugh was about the irony. It wasn’t the first time the balance had stood against he who sought only to maintain it.

They went into the side chapel where *The Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt was kept, the one on display to the empire’s gawkers in St. Paul’s being a copy.

Places like this, to Hamilton, were where the sons of empire returned to after they had done terrible things, the clockwork pivots about which their dangerous world turned, where better people could keep the civilisation that they did those things for. Annie, his old tutors like Hartridge and Parrish, the architecture and custom, the very ground were why he went to work. On his way from here, he would look in on the Lamb and Flag and drink a half of a beer with the hope that he would return to drink the other half. As had many before him, for all the centuries.

After the churchwardens had left, Annie did him a certain service behind the altar, and Hamilton returned the favour.

And then he left holy ground, and went out into the world that wasn’t England, equipped only with a tiny and ironic blessing.

At the square, anonymous offices off Horse Guards Parade, they armed him and briefed him. He looked out from the secret part of his mind and saw that he was now Miquel Du Pasonade, a bonded serf of three generations. He let Miquel walk to the door and bid farewell, only leaning forward to take over during weapons familiarisation.

He let his cover take the overnight to Woomera, switching off completely, waking only as he was paying in Californian rubles for a one-way ticket up the needle.

Hamilton always preferred to watch the continents drop below him as he ascended. He mentally picked out the shapes of the great European Empires, their smaller allies, colonies, and protectorates. The greater solar system reflected those nations like a fairground mirror, adding phantom weight to some of the smaller states through their possessions out there in the dark, shaming others with how little they'd reached beyond the world.

Hamilton waited at Orbital for two days, letting his cover hang around the right inns, one of the starving peasantry. He let himself be drunk one night, and that was when they burst in, the unbreachable doors flapping behind them, solid men who looked like they should be in uniform, but were conspicuously not.

His cover leapt up.

Hamilton allowed himself a moment of hidden pride as they grabbed his hair and put their fingers onto his face. And then that was that.

Hamilton woke up pressed into service, his fellows all around him celebrating their fate with their first good meal in weeks. They sat inside a hull of blue and white.

His cover didn't know where they were heading.

But Hamilton knew.

Normally on arriving at Mars, Hamilton would have booked into the Red Savoy Raffles, a tantalising distance from Mons, as the gauche advertising put it, and spent the evening arguing the toss of the wine list with Signor Harakita. Serfdom to the Bear offered a different prospect. The hull the serfs were kept in smelt of unaltered body. During the passage, they did the tasks that would have needed continual expensive replacements had mechanisms been assigned to them: maintaining the rocket motors, repairing the ship's life-support infrastructure. There were two fatalities in the three weeks Hamilton was on board.

They didn't take the serfs on face value. All of them were run through an EM scan. Hamilton watched it register the first level of his cover. It accepted it. The deeper cover would only be noticed once that print was sent, hopefully long after the fact when

inquiries and excuses were the order of the day, to the cracking centres in the hives of St. Petersburg. It had also, to more deadly effect, been registered in public with the authorities at Orbital, and would thus also be cracked by every empire's mind men in every capital.

But that was not all that the EM scanner did. It suddenly went deeper. But not searching, Hamilton realised—

Cutting!

Hamilton winced at the distant sight of some of the higher functions of his cover's mind dissolving.

From that point on, it was like sitting on the shoulders of a drunkard, and Hamilton had to intervene a couple of times to stop his body getting into danger. That was all right. The serfs also smoked tobacco, and he declined that as well. A cover couldn't look too perfect.

The serfs were strapped in as the Russian space carriage aerobraked around Mars's thin atmosphere, then started its angled descent towards the surface. This was the first surprise. The carriage was taking a completely conventional course: it would be visible from every lighthouse. This must, realised Hamilton, wishing for a window, be a scheduled flight. And by now they must be very close to whatever their destination was, the resorts of Tharsis, perhaps—

Then there came a roar, a sudden crash, and the giddy sensation of falling. Hamilton's stomach welcomed it. He knew himself to be more at home in freefall than the majority of those he encountered. It was the sea welcoming the shark.

He could feel the different momentum: they must have been jettisoned from the main carriage, at a very narrow angle, under the sensor shadow of some mountain range—

The realisation came to him like the moment when Isaac Newton had seen that tiny worm and started thinking about the very small.

Hamilton started to curl into the crash position—

Then with an effort of will he forced himself not to. Too perfect!

His seat broke from its fastenings, and he flew at the ceiling.

The quality of the air felt strange. Not enough! It felt like hell. And the smell. For a moment Hamilton thought he was in a battle. So where were the noises?

They pulled the darkness from around him. They were rough. There were bright lights, and a curt examination, his body being turned right and left. Hamilton had a sudden moment of fear for his body, not belonging to him now, carelessly damaged by the puppet he'd leant it to! He wanted to fight! To let his fists bite into their faces!

He held it in. Tried to breathe.

He struggled out of their grasp for a moment, only to look round.

A serf barracks, turned into a makeshift hospital. Bunks growing out of packed-down mud, providing their own sawdust. Bright Russian guard uniforms, blue and white with epaulettes gleaming, polished, ceremonial helmets off indoors. All wearing masks and oxygen supplies. All ceramics, no metal. Afraid of detectors. A Russian military medic, in his face again, flashing a torch into his eye. Masked too.

There was a rectangle of light shining in through the doorway. They were pushed from their beds, one by one, and sent stumbling towards it. Still couldn't breathe. That was where the smell of battle was coming from—

No, not battle. A mixture. Bodies from in here. From out there—

Gunpowder.

Soil with a high mineral content.

He moved into the light and put a hand up.

He felt his skin burning and yelled. He threw himself forward into a welcome sliver of dark, shielding his eyes from a glare that could have blinded him.

He lay in shadow on the gunpowder-grey ground, with laughter from behind him, the sun refracting off angled rock, through a blurred sky, like a cold furnace.

He was in the Mariner Valley, the deepest gorge in the solar system, with the sun flaring low in the west, rebounding off the white buildings. There was hard UV in the sky. His lungs were hoiking on tiny breaths. Frost was already burning his fingers. And he wasn't wearing any kind of protective equipment.

They made the serfs march along the shaded side of the valley. At least they gave them gloves.

An enormous wind would suddenly blast across the column of men, like a blow to the ground, sloughing them with rock dust, and then it would be gone again. It was a shock that breathing was even possible. Hamilton stole glances from the shade as he struggled to adjust, looking upwards to the nearest escarpment. In the valley proper, you wouldn't necessarily assume you were in a gorge; the vast depression stretched from horizon to horizon. So this must be one of the minor valleys that lay inside the great rift. They could be six miles deep here. Given the progress of terraforming on the rest of the Martian globe, the air pressure might just be enough.

He realised, at a shout from the overseer in the Russian uniform, that he had slowed down, letting his fellow serfs march past him. But his cover was pushing his body to move as fast as it could.

He realised: he was different to the others.

He was finding physical action more difficult than they were. Why?

He looked at the man next to him, and was met with a disinterested misty expression.

The mental examination! They hadn't ripped out the higher functions of the serfs purely in order to make them docile; they'd shut down brain processes that required oxygen!

Hamilton added his own mental weight to that of his cover, and made the body step up its march. He could feel his lungs burning. The serfs had perhaps a couple of months of life before this exposure caught up with them. It felt like he had a week.

He considered, for a moment, the exit strategy. The personal launcher waiting in a gulley—he checked his internal map—sixteen miles away.

That was closer than it might have been. But it was still out of the question without the oxygen supply that previously had been standard for serfs working in such conditions. If he was going to get out of this, he would need to steal such equipment, the quicker the better, before his body weakened.

On the other hand, if he stayed and died, after having made his kills, the mission would be successfully completed. The cover would still be planted.

He decided. He would not leave quickly while there was still a chance of success.

He took care to think of Annie and the quad and the noise of the Morgan's engine. Then he did not think of those things again.

In the days that followed Hamilton was put to work alongside the other serfs. He mentally rehearsed that Raffles wine list. He remembered the mouth feels and tastes. He considered a league table of his favourites. Although the details changed, it was headed every day by the 2003 Leoville Las Cases.

Meanwhile, his body was collapsing: blisters forming on his exposed, sunburnt, and windburnt skin; deep aches and cramps nagging at his every muscle; headaches that brought blood from his nose. And the worst of it was he hadn't seen Catherine Drewe.

His work crew were using limited ceramic and wooden tools to install growing pit props into what was obviously a mine shaft. Other serfs were digging, fed off nutrient bath growths that had been thrown up the walls of the valley. There was a sense of urgency. The digging was being directed precisely, according to charts.

These were not fortifications that were being dug. Turpin's conclusions had been rational, but wrong. This was not a military offensive. The Russians gave the impression of sneak thieves, planning to smash and grab and run.

So what was this? Hamilton had only seen one mercenary uniform, bearing the coat of arms of Drewe's Army. The badge displayed the typically amateur and self-aggrandising heraldry of the mercenary bands. It claimed spurious (and now nonexistent) Irish aristocracy, but had nods to all the major courts of Europe, nothing that would inflame the temper of even the most easily offended monarch. The badge irked Hamilton. It was a

bastard thing that revealed nothing and too much.

The emblem had been on the sleeve of some sort of bodyguard, a man with muscle structure that had been designed to keep going having taken some small arms fire. He moved awkwardly in the lower gravity. Hamilton felt a surge of odd fellow feeling, and knew this was the man from whom the emotional broadcast had originated.

He and his mistress would doubtless appear together at some point.

After three days, Hamilton's crew swapped tasks with the other group, and were put to dig at the rock face down the tunnel. Hamilton welcomed it: the air pressure was slightly greater here.

He had started to hallucinate. In his mind, he saw great rolling clockworks against a background of all the imperial flags. Armies advanced as lines across maps, and those lines broke into sprays of particles, every advance countered to keep the great system going. He himself walked one of the lines, firing at imaginary assailants. Women spun in their own orbits, the touch of their hands, the briefest of kisses before they were swept away maintaining the energy of the whole merry-go-round.

And at the centre of it all? .? .? .? He didn't know; he couldn't see. The difference of accident, the tiny percentage effect that changed the impossible into the everyday. He bowed his head amongst the infinite cogwheels and prayed for grace.

He was broken out of his stupor by the sudden noise in front of him. There had been a fall of rocks. The whole working face in front of him had given way.

Something, maybe the pebbles beneath their feet, was making the serfs working with him sway and stumble. One beside him fell. The Russian overseer bent to check on the man's condition, then took out a gun, thought better of the expense, and instead used a ceramic knife to slit the serf's throat. The body was carried out to be bled over the nutrient baths, the overseer calling out orders as he walked with the man back towards the exit.

Hamilton put his face close to the rock wall that had been revealed. It felt different. It looked blacker. Iconic. Like a wall that was death ought to look. He thought he could hear something in there. That he was being called. Or was that the thought he wasn't allowing himself, the chapel and Annie inside?

A voice broke that terrible despair that would have led him away. "There!"

Hamilton turned and smiled in relief to see her at last. Catherine Drewe. Face-to-face. Her hair was dark with dust, her face powdered around her oxygen mask in a way that looked almost cosmetic. Her eyes were certain and terrified. The other serfs were staring at her. Behind her came the bodyguard, his bulk filling the tunnel.

Hamilton's right hand twitched.

She pushed past him and put her ear to the rock.

He decided not to kill her yet.

“You,” she said, turning to point at one of the serfs, “go and tell Sizlovski that we’ve hit a snag. The rest of you, get out of here, you’re relieved.”

The serfs, barely understanding, took a moment to down tools and start following the first towards the light.

Hamilton let his cover open his mouth in blank surprise and kept it there. He stayed put.

The bodyguard tapped her shoulder, and Drewe turned to look at him, puzzled. “I said you’re finished.”

Hamilton detected something urgent in her voice, something he’d heard in the moments before other situations had got rough. This was no setback, no sighing pause.

He crumpled his cover into the darkness of his mind.

He slammed his palm against the wall beside her head.

The bodyguard moved—

But she put up a hand and he stopped.

He let out his Irish accent. “You’ve got a problem, Miss Drewe,” he said.

She considered that for a moment.

He smelt the edge of the ceramic knife as it split molecules an inch from his eye.

He flathanded the wrist of her knife hand into the wall, his other hand catching the gun she’d pulled at his stomach, his finger squashing hers into firing it point-blank into the bodyguard. His face exploded and he fell and Hamilton ripped aside the weapon and threw it.

There was a shout from behind.

Hamilton grabbed the Webley Collapsar 2 mm handgun from the folded dimensions in his chest, spun into firing stance, and blasted a miniature black hole into the skull of a Russian officer, sending the man’s brains flying into another universe.

He spun back to catch Drewe pulling another device from her boot.

He grabbed her wrist.

He knew intuitively how to snap her neck from this posture.

In moments, the gunfire would bring many soldiers running. Killing the overseer had compromised Hamilton’s mission but slightly. It was still something that a Russian assassin might do, to give his cover credibility. He had completed half his mission now.

But why had she pulled that, instead of something to kill him with?

He looked into her eyes.

“Do what you were going to do,” said Hamilton.

He let go.

Drewe threw the device at the overseer’s body, grabbed Hamilton, and heaved him with her through the rock wall.

The thump of the explosion and the roar of the collapsing tunnel followed them into the chamber, but no dust or debris did. It was a vaulted cavern, sealed off, with something glowing. .? .? .

Hamilton realised, as he didn’t need to take a breath, that the air was thick in here. He started to cough, doubling up. Precious air! Thick air that he gulped down, that made his head swim.

When he straightened up, Drewe was pointing a gun at him. She looked shocked and furious. But that was contained. She was military, all right.

He let his gun arm fall to his side. “Well?” he said.

“Who are you?”

Hamilton carefully pulled out his uniform tag identification.

“British. All right. I assume you’re here for that?” She nodded towards the glow.

He looked. Something was protruding from the rock in the centre of the chamber. A silver spar that shone in an unnatural way. It seemed to be connected to something that was lodged—no, that was in some way part of the rocks all around it. There were blazing rivulets threaded in and out of the mass. It was like someone had thrown mercury onto pumice stone.

It was like something trapped. And yet it looked whole and obvious. It seemed apt that it had formed a place where they could live, and a wall they could step through. It spoke of uneasy possibilities.

“What is it?”

She cocked her head to one side, surprised he didn’t know. “A carriage.”

“Some carriage.”

“You don’t know. That wasn’t your mission.”

“I was just having a poke around. I didn’t expect a non-Russian here. You’re Catherine Drewe, aren’t you? What’s your mission?”

She considered, until he was sure she wasn’t going to tell him. But then—“I saw this thing. In my prayers. I spent a week in an isolation tank in Kyoto. You see, lately I’ve started to

think there's something wrong with the balance—”

“Everyone always thinks that.”

She swore at him. “You have no idea. Inside your empires. You know what that is?”

“No.”

“A new arrival.”

“From—?”

“Another universe.”

Hamilton looked back to the object. He was already on his way to the punchline.

“I followed it calling,” Drewe continued, “via a steady and demonstrable provocation of the field. I proved the path led to Mars. I used my rather awe-inspiring political clout to whisper all this into Czar Richard's ear. By which I mean: his ear.”

“Why choose the Russians?”

She ignored the question. “I dreamed before I set off that only two people would find it, that their motives would be different. I took Aaron into my confidence. He was motivated only by art, by beauty. But you killed him.”

“How do you feel?”

She bared her teeth in a grim smile, her gaze darting all over his face, ready for any provocation. “I'm strongly inclined to return the compliment.”

“But you won't.” He slowly replaced his gun in its dimensional fold. “Destiny says it's two people.”

She kept him waiting another moment. Then she slipped her own gun back into the folds of that dangerous gown.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then they stepped over to the glowing object together. “That glow worries me,” she said. “Have you heard of nuclear power?”

Hamilton shook his head.

“Energy produced by the radioactive decay of minerals. An alternative technology. It's poisonous like hard UV. A dead end. One of the outsider sciences something like this might bring in.”

Hamilton consulted his internal register, holding in a shudder at the damage he'd already taken. He hadn't anything designed to log radioactivity, but he changed the spectrum on his UV register, and after a moment he was satisfied. “I'm not seeing any radiation. Not even? .? .?” He stopped. He wasn't even detecting that light he could see with his own eyes. But somehow he doubted that what he was seeing would allow him to come to harm.

Drewe put a hand on the apparently shining limb, deploying sensors of her own. “There's

nobody in here, no passenger or driver. But? .? .? .? I'm getting requests for information. Pleas. Greetings. Quite? .? .? .? eccentric ones." She looked at him as if he were going to laugh at her.

In a civilian, Hamilton thought, it would have been endearing. He didn't laugh. "A mechanism intelligence? Not possible."

"By our physics. But it opened a door for us through solid rock. And let me know it had. And there's air in here."

Hamilton put his own hand on the object, realised his sensors weren't up to competing with that dress, and took it away in frustration. "All right. But this is beside the point."

"The point being—"

"This thing will tip the balance. You can't be the only one who's intuited it's here. Whoever gets it gains a decisive advantage. It'll be the end of the Great Game—"

"The start of a genuine war for the world, one not fought by proxies like you and me. All the great nations give lip service to the idea of the balance, but—"

"So how much are you going to ask? Couple of Italian dukedoms?"

"Not this time. You asked why I used the Russians to get me here." She reached into the gown. She produced another explosive device. A much larger one. "Because they're the empire I detest the most."

Hamilton licked his lips quickly.

"I don't think mere rocks can hold this being. I was called here because it got caught in? .? .? this mortal coil. It has to be freed. For its own sake, and for the sake of the balance."

Hamilton looked at the object again. Either of them could pull their gun and put down the other one in a moment. He wondered if he was talking to a zealot, a madwoman. He had pretty vague ideas about God and his pathway through the field, and the line that connected his holy ground to the valley of death. He'd never interrogated those ideas. And he wasn't about to start now.

But here were answers! Answers those better than him would delight in. That could protect the good people of his empire better than he could!

There was a noise from outside. They'd started digging.

Drewe met his gaze once more.

"You say it can be reasoned with? .? .?"

"Not to get itself out of here. That's not what it wants."

Hamilton looked around the chamber, once and conclusively, with every sense at his disposal. No way out.

“You have to decide.”

Hamilton reached into the hidden depths of his heart once more. He produced his own explosives. “No I don’t,” he said. “Thank God.”

Drewe had an exit strategy of her own. She had a launcher waiting, she said, lying under fractal covers in the broken territory of a landslide, two miles east of the Russian encampment.

It was again like walking through a door. As soon as they had both set the timers on their explosives to commit, in that otherwise inescapable room, an act of faith as great as any Hamilton had experienced—

The room turned inside out, and they took that simple step, and found themselves on the surface again.

Hamilton gasped as the air went. His wounds caught up with him at once. He fell.

Drewe looked down at him.

Hamilton looked back up at her. There was auburn hair under the green.

She pulled her gun while his hand was still sailing slowly towards his chest. “I think God is done with you,” she said. “We’ll make a balance.”

“Oh we must,” said Hamilton, letting his accent slip into the Irish once more. He was counting in his head, doing the mathematics. And suddenly he had a feeling that he hadn’t been the only one. “But your calculations are out.”

The amusement in his voice made her hesitate. “How so?”

“By about? .? .? .? point-two percent.”

The force of the explosion took Drewe, and she was falling sideways.

Hamilton rolled, got his feet on the ground.

A wall of dust and debris filled the canyon ahead of them—

And then was on them, racing over them, folding them into the surface until they were just two thin streaks of history, their mortal remains at the end of comet trails.

There was silence.

Hamilton burst out of his grave, and stumbled for where the launcher lay, bright in the dust, its covers burst from it.

He didn’t look back. He limped with faith and no consideration. With an explosion that size there would be nothing left of the encampment. His mission had not succeeded. But he felt his own balance was intact.

He hit a code-breaker release code on his palm onto the craft's fuselage, and struggled into the cockpit. He was aware of his own silhouette against the dying light.

He looked back now. There she was. Only now staggering to her feet.

In this second and only this second, he could draw and shoot her down and with a little adjustment of leaks and revelations his mission would be done.

He thought about the grace that had been afforded him.

He hit the emergency toggle, the cockpit sealed, and he was slammed back in his seat as the launcher sailed up into the Martian sky.

He thought of a half pint of beer. And then let himself be taken into darkness again.

"Catherine Drewe" © Paul Cornell

[Fast Forward 2](#) © Lou Anders

[Paul Cornell](#) is a novelist, television writer, and comic book scribe. In addition to various other genre and nongenre shows, he's written some of the best episodes of the new *Doctor Who*, his first season episode "Father's Day" and his third season follow-up, the two part "Human Nature/Family of Blood," having both received Hugo nominations. His work for Marvel Comics includes the miniseries *Wisdom*, a *Fantastic Four* miniseries, and the ongoing monthly title *Captain Britain and MI-13*. His SF novels are *Something More* and *British Summertime*, the latter released last year in the States by Monkeybrain Books.

For more information about *Fast Forward 2* and Pyr, visit www.pyrsf.com.

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October 1, 2008 10:27 AM

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Excellent.

You are right about this one. :)

October 2, 2008 3:47 AM

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Told you.

I love stories that make me gasp with excitement.

October 2, 2008 7:23 AM

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