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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Ingrid Banwell

Gitte Christensen

Shane Jiraiya Cummings

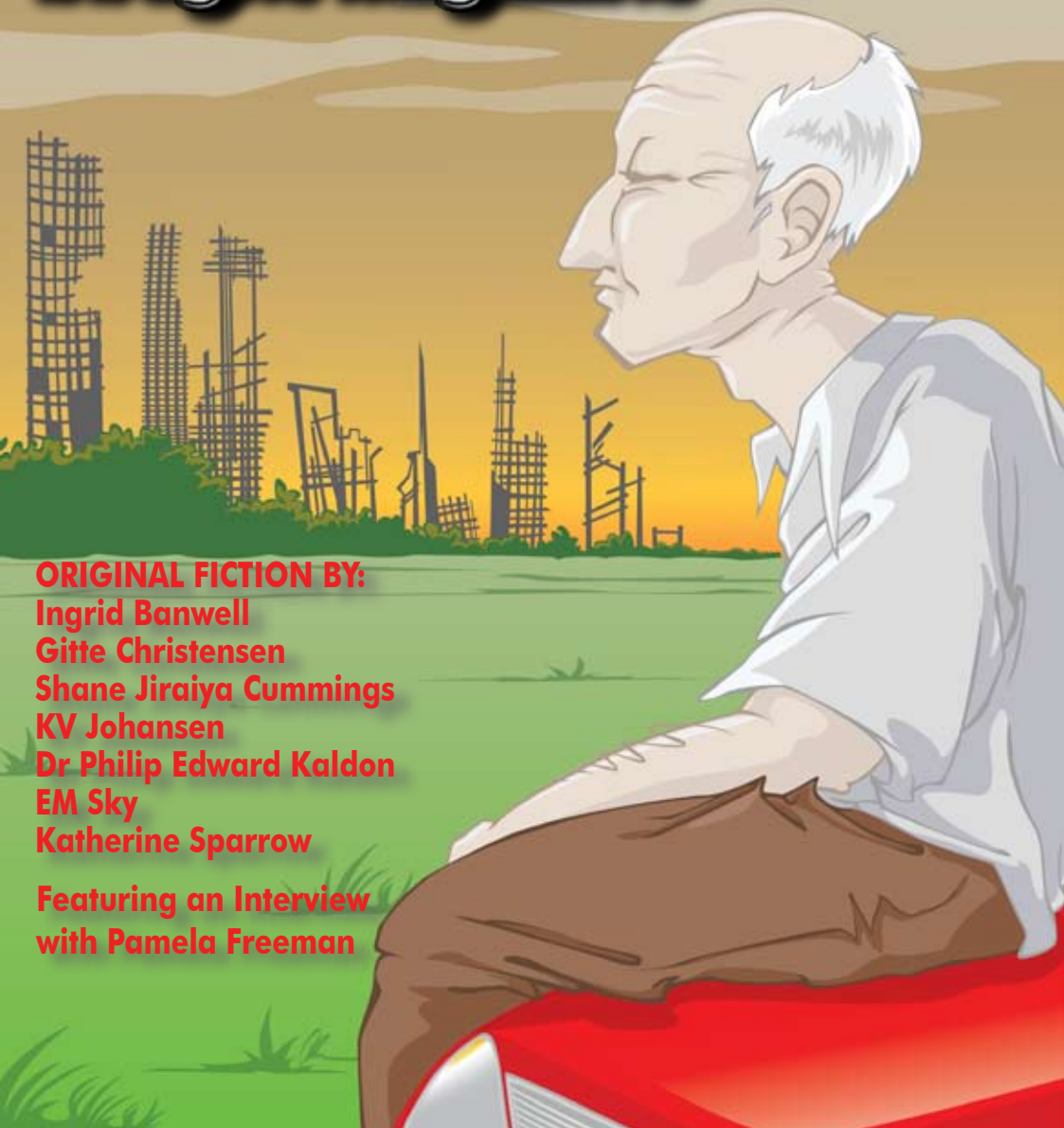
KV Johansen

Dr Philip Edward Kaldon

EM Sky

Katherine Sparrow

Featuring an Interview
with Pamela Freeman



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CRIME TIME

Australians behaving badly

by Sue Bursztynski

and illustrated by Louise Prout

Introduction by Kerry Greenwood

Crime Time – Australians behaving badly is a collection of true Australian crime stories ranging from bushrangers such as Ned Kelly and Mad Dan Morgan through to serial killers, fraudsters and modern celebrity criminals. *Crime Time* contains details of the crimes, biographical details, portraits by Louise Prout and interesting trivia in 'Did You Know' boxes.

By the same author:

It's True! Your cat could be a spy

Potions to Pulsars: Women doing science

Starwalkers: Explorers of the unknown



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Editorial

...Sue Bursztynski

2008 was a crazy year for ASIM. Our web site went down twice, when thousands of visits made us exceed our monthly limit. We had a sudden huge influx of submissions and had to halt our submission process while we handled all the stories we had received.

During this time, we still managed to get out our bimonthly issues more or less on time.

This issue began planning several months ago. There were a number of crises which forced us to delay its publication. When editor Zara Baxter recently indicated she was unable to finish it, for personal reasons, I took over, as assistant editor, and the ASIM co-operative responded magnificently, everyone pitching in to do the various tasks that need doing in producing a magazine.

But Zara commissioned the cover art and chose most of the stories and a wonderful mixture of SF and fantasy it is!

“Machine” plays with the world of virtual reality and asks what’s real and what’s virtual anyway?

“Red and Road” takes the fairy tale into a post-apocalypse world. Rachel McLachlan’s gorgeous cover art is inspired by this story.

“Untangling the Future” asks the question: “Can predicting the future really change it?” The inventor of a future-trend predictor finds the answer to this question while getting to know his new neighbours, a young widow and her son, and makes a difference to them all.

You know how just seeing someone yawn often makes you want to yawn yourself? What if, “Chasing Jormungand” asks, this turned into a worldwide yawn? And be warned: you may find yourself starting to yawn just by reading it! It says something for this particular story that I persuaded Zara to buy it even though neither of us usually likes second-person narrative.

“Moochi’s Legacy” is a gentle story about the positive effect that an Internet game ‘toon’ called Moochi has on a group of younga friends. I hope you’ll love it as much as I did when I first read it in slush.

You’ll never feel the same way again about the works of Enid Blyton and other children’s adventure fiction after you’ve read “The Six Solvers and the Mystery of the Sad Boy.” The story is not only chilling, but poignant.

Finally, “The Storyteller” takes us into the Viking world for a story that is as much about people as adventure. The story explores what happens when an evil spirit that has possessed a human princess starts to empathise with its victim and become her...with the help of a bear-man.

The issue concludes with an interview by ASIM editor Edwina Harvey with Australian fantasy writer Pamela Freeman, who has gone from young adult to adult fiction, and book reviews by Simon Petrie and Ian Nichols.

Internal art by Dan Skinner and Lewis Morley adds wonderfully to the stories they illustrate.

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as we did.

Sue Bursztynski

Issue 38



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Machine

...Dr Philip Edward Kaldon

“Excuse me,” the man with the suitcase stopped to ask, between heaving breaths. He set down his suitcase, removing his hat to mop his brow despite the cool dry weather. “Is this Machine City? The signs at the station weren’t all that clear.”

Machine City. The man had called it Machine City. That marked him as an outsider — everyone here called it City. Even the signs at the station were marked City — nothing else.

“Yeah,” Jaco said. “This is City.”

“Oh good,” said the man. “I didn’t want to be late for my appointment with The Machine.”

Machine, never “The Machine”. Who was this guy not to know?

“You’re walking the wrong way,” Jaco said. “Machine is that enormous black building over there.”

“Thanks, I owe you,” the man said, patting Jaco on the arm before hurrying back the way he’d just come.

Jaco had an appointment at Machine, too, and as reluctant as he was to go, how could he refuse such an appointment? You worked in City, sooner or later you’d work for Machine. Even his dad, a truck driver, drove trucks laden with the input/output supplies of Machine.

Jaco supposed the appointment had something to do with flunking out of school. He’d never get one of the fancy jobs he had dreamed about at Machine. The problem was, he didn’t know what he was qualified for. Even the grass in front of Machine was trimmed with an expertise he knew he didn’t have.

By the time Jaco got to the main gate, the man with the suitcase had disappeared inside. If only he could shake the sense of dread that came with each step forward. Sooner than expected, he was at the great glass doors to the main atrium. The stark black square walls of Machine towered behind the low office complex, stretching out far to the north and south. They said you could see Machine from space.

But he couldn’t pause to collect himself. The glass doors slid open, utterly soundless.

“Can I help you, young man?” the guard in the reception area asked, after giving Jaco a moment to compose himself.

“I have an appointment,” Jaco said, holding out the slender blue card he’d been given.

“Then just follow the card.”

On one side was the familiar gold MCN unity circle. But flipping the card over, Jaco saw a bright arrow pointed at a discreet side door he hadn't noticed before. Whichever way he rotated the card, the arrow pointed towards the door.

“Takes you by surprise, doesn't it?” The guard was smiling.

Fumbling over what to say next, Jaco decided on nothing and awkwardly stepped around the guard's desk and walked to the door.

It didn't open.

“Follow the card,” the guard reminded him.

“Uh, yeah...right,” Jaco said. The directions indicated that he should swipe it through the reader next to the door. Five green lights momentarily flickered, then the door clicked and an elevator opened. Beyond the glass walls of the elevator stood Machine. Jaco stepped in, finally remembering to breathe. He barely heard the elevator close.

The car shot downward at a dizzying rate. Jaco found himself in awe of the sheer walls of Machine, massive beyond belief. Machine had always been a part of his life, of everyone's life, and it dominated the western skyline of City. But being right here... he'd *never* been so close. The last glimpse Jaco had of the outside was a vast bed of gravel between Machine and the basement rock of City.

When the doors opened, Jaco stepped into a bright room with thousands of pure black mirror-polished hexagonal tiles covering the floor. The gold MCN logo printed on each tile appeared to float on air. Into this room from the far side stepped a nearly bald man in a white lab coat. The man's glasses appeared to be made of solid brushed aluminum with no gap or seam to tell where the aluminum ended and the face began.

“Welcome to Machine,” the balding man said. “I'm Dr. Auxley. You must be Jaco Comos.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You no doubt have numerous questions. They'll be all answered in time,” Dr. Auxley said. “You've been accorded a great honor, selected to work for Machine.”

“Doing what?” Jaco blurted out.

“All in good time.” The man maintained his vaguely pleasant yet bland expression. “You can't enter Machine like that.” Dr. Auxley's head bobbed up and down as if his metal-covered eyes were giving Jaco a once-over. “Machine is a precision device. Very large, of course. But a precision device nevertheless. Through that door,” he pointed, “you will find a locker with your name. You'll have to get clean. A work uniform will be provided for you.”

“Clean,” Jaco said stupidly. “Right. I think I understand.”

“Of course you do. Machine selected you for your ability to understand,” Dr. Auxley said.

Jaco wasn't sure he liked the sound of that.

“Just through that door on the right,” Dr. Auxley pointed.

Jaco remembered his card an instant before reaching for the handle. Sure enough, there was a directive to run it through the reader. Slowly the logic of the place began to make Jaco feel more comfortable.

Jaco stepped into the cleanest locker room he had ever seen, filled with row upon row of lockers there had to be thousands of them and not a soul in sight. It was unsettling.

Naturally, it took his card to access his locker, and he had to insert it into a slot for the shower. But there it disappeared. Jaco guessed he'd either get it back cleaned or be given a new one.

Getting deluged in thick warm blue gel from head to toe came as a big surprise. Jaco decided the gel was like shampoo, strongly scented but not unbearable. He soaped and rinsed and repeated at least four times. The last soaping seemed to leave no smell or residue. Dr. Auxley hadn't been kidding about getting clean.

Eventually the luxury of warm water ended with a chime and his shower stall swirled in hot dry air. By the time the chime sounded again, Jaco felt clean, dried and invigorated. The glass door behind wouldn't open, but a new door appeared in the back of the stall and he stepped into another locker room.

The bench next to his shower stall was laid out with a neat pile of white clothing, soft shoes and an electronic card attached to a neck strap. He read the card, front and back.

Jaco Comos.

Put this on only after you are fully dressed.

Jaco unfolded the smooth, slick clothing, lined in a soft, speckled fabric dotted with small holes. A pair of gloves was tucked into the left shoe and a cap with long flaps which would cover his head and hair lay folded in the right.

He definitely looked like a worker now. As soon as he put the new card around his neck it chirped to give him directions. For the first five minutes, Jaco wondered if Machine was nothing but corridors. Endless corridors. And elevators. He rode three different elevators, none of which had any markings or control panels. Soon Jaco was thoroughly lost. When the directions terminated in front of a door, Machine told him where he was and it made no sense.

MCN 538412.

Jaco stared at the sign on the glass door. Did this mean there were 538,412 rooms to Machine? Faint brown letters against the brown stripe across the glass, read POWER SUPPLY ROOM. The letters lit up when he swiped his card. Inside, he could hear the distant sound of machinery.

The inner glass door wouldn't open until the outer door clicked shut; as it slid open Jaco finally came face to face with Machine. The room - chamber really - stretched on, towering over him. The ceiling was crisscrossed with rails for what Jaco figured to be a traveling crane. Raised rectangular boxes the size of his parent's living room lined up neatly in rows and columns along the floor, though he couldn't see where the boxes began and the floor ended. It looked funereal, as if giant caskets were laid out in a mausoleum. Just inside the Power Supply Room sat a bucket with a handle and a large card labeled MR. COMOS. It took him half a second to realize Machine was referring to him. Jaco managed a wry grin. Nice of Machine to treat him with respect. Even if his role was to rub everything down with the cleaning rag he saw folded in the bucket.

But again, Machine wasn't what it seemed. The Power Supply Room was absolutely spotless, clean to the point where his eyes focused on reflections, rather than the objects surrounding him. His job, it turned out, was to walk to the third row of boxes, then tap a black plate on each one and briefly insert a sampling tube.

There was no sense of urgency. No sense of failure. The power generators, or whatever they were, hummed with great purpose and it was up to him to make sure they had sufficient lubricating oil. Even the seemingly perfect mechanisms of Machine needed to be maintained.

The thrill of actually doing something inside Machine had just begun to wear off when he realized his probette had come up with a low reading. REPEAT SAMPLE, prompted the panel in front of him, which he thought a wise thing to do. When it came back with the same reading, Jaco heard a little satisfied trill from the panel. MAINTENANCE HAS BEEN NOTIFIED. CONTINUE WITH NEXT UNIT.

Two generators later, Jaco looked up to see a remote, running on four-wheel drive, with a slender and vaguely humanlike cylindrical silver body and limbs. The remote stopped at the faulty generator and opened an access door he hadn't seen before.

When Jaco finished his row of testing, an alarm bell rang and he saw a flashing red light on the ceiling, then another. An overhead crane moved in towards the defective generator. A second crane came in from the rear, with a large box slung underneath. Two remotes wheeled around them.

Jaco stood by the exit door and watched the mechanisms execute a ballet of replacement. The moment the new generator was slotted into the floor, the card around his neck chimed and gave him new instructions.

Jaco spent the afternoon among a forest of large curved white pipes, transferring readings from various stations to a portable console and inserting more sampling tubes into slots. The end of the room was half glass and he gawked through the long windows at the mammoth chamber below. He spotted half a dozen silvery remotes on the main floor, dwarfed by mechanisms and pipes wider than his whole house, and thought he saw one figure in a white lab coat.

He wanted to stay and watch, but reluctantly checked his card for messages. Take a break, it suggested, and alongside the window he found a tall stool and a lunch box containing a triangular package labeled Squeezable Sandwich and a drink bottle.

Jaco completed three tasks in three different rooms after his break. For all the technology in Machine, it was disconcerting to have no watch and see no clocks. Finally his card had no more messages. He was tired and outside in the corridor he found two chairs. Pulling up the second chair, he sat down, put his feet up and closed his eyes.

"A very good first day, Mr. Comos," a familiar bland voice said.

Jaco shook himself awake to see Dr. Auxley standing in front of him, dressed in a clean white lab coat and those strange aluminum glasses.

“Machine is very pleased with your work today.”

“Uh, sorry about...”

“No apologies necessary. I was delayed in coming down to see you to your room.”

“My room?”

“Why yes. Now that you’re scrubbed in, there’s no point in going outside until your first shift is over.”

Jaco looked down at the card around his neck. “What does 1/60 mean?”

“Day one of sixty,” Dr. Auxley said. “The normal shift is thirty days, but we require a double-shift for new employees. ”

“I’m not going home for two months?”

“Of course.”

“But my parents...”

“... already know,” Dr. Auxley finished. “Really. Machine has your best interests embedded in its heart.”

When Jaco awoke the next morning, it took several seconds to realize he was still inside Machine. Jaco remembered to put his electronic card back around his neck, then stepped back into the corridor.

Standing impatiently outside his cubicle, a short older woman in white lab coat and those impossible aluminum glasses peered up and down at him.

“You’re late,” she announced in a clipped accent he couldn’t identify.

“Sorry, I don’t have a clock,” Jaco said.

“You can set your card for any time delay you wish.”

He looked down at his card and indeed it now displayed an alarm function with directions. “Dr. Auxley didn’t explain that.”

“Dr. Auxley...” She sounded disgusted.

Since she hadn’t given him a name and he was taking a dislike to her, he mentally tagged her as the Hag.

“Auxley is an idiot,” the Hag said. “You can’t be a P5. You didn’t finish school. He should never have given you the automated training protocol.”

“I don’t think he did,” Jaco said. “Machine chose me.”

The Hag’s aluminum glasses stared at Jaco, forever unblinking. He stared back. No one was going to call him an idiot, least not to his face.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she finally said. “I shall investigate.”

Machine spread on forever, it seemed, with a vast multitude of functions and operations needing inspections and light maintenance. At the same time, Jaco

couldn't decide if he was crucial to the operation or insignificant — so little needed any checking by anyone else. The tasks were varied and interesting enough, but Jaco began to feel uneasy. He knew thousands of people toiled in Machine, but he never got close to any. They were only seen far away on the great work floors, on the other side of the protective windows.

Jaco was lonely.

Dr. Auxley hadn't been very personable, but compared to the Hag, the man seemed a saint.

"All work and no play, Jaco Comos?" a pleasant voice said behind him just before he entered his cubicle for a third night. "That doesn't seem like you."

He spun around to see yet another figure in a white lab coat, except this one wasn't anything like Auxley or the Hag. Those two had been shapeless — this was a tall woman who most definitely had shape and wore her lab coat open, so Jaco could see the expensive dress underneath. Her hair was stark white, but not from age. She couldn't be more than thirty. And her solid aluminum glasses didn't seem to meld into her smooth cheeks.

"And you're Doctor...?" Jaco stammered.

"Just call me Sere," she said, pushing her glasses up on top of her head. Her bright blue eyes laughed at Jaco as much as her smile did. "And it's time you had a break. Dr. Kilou isn't very nice to you, is she?"

"Who?" Jaco was confused.

"You call her the Hag."

"Oh so that's her name," Jaco said starting to nod. Then he caught himself. "How do you know I call her the Hag?"

Sere still smiled. "Machine knows everything about you, Jaco. I thought you knew that by now."

"I guess I'm beginning to understand what that all means."

"So follow me," she said. Jaco trotted along to catch up, trying not to notice her long slender legs under the swish of her lab coat. "Out in the real world you've played a lot of VR. It all comes from Machine, you know. We have the best VR pods in the world right here — direct connect to Machine, no transmission delays."

Jaco must've stood there with his mouth open, because Sere suddenly leaned towards him, aped holding her jaw down but with a wild-eyed grin, then spun away laughing.

"You'll get used to working here, game boy. Trust me," she said.

He abandoned all idea of going back to his cubicle and ran after her.

Light suddenly blazed on Jaco's eyes. Blinking, he held up a hand to block the glare, only to realize it came from the open door of the VR pod.

"Rise and shine, game boy," Sere said. "The pods are comfortable, but they don't come with breakfast included. Machine will provide you a meal box at your first site."

She'd taken off her aluminum glasses again and slipped them into the front pocket of her lab coat. Today's dress shimmered in a soft metallic pink. Jaco asked about the strange glasses.

"Can I try them on?"

"You? You're not ready for them. But," she paused, "it raises another issue. We should've seen this sooner especially with your facility with the VR equipment. Here."

She handed him a different set of safety glasses. Jaco didn't see where she'd kept them, one of the lab coat pockets? But the question evaporated when he hefted the new glasses, then slipped them on. They felt...different. Sere reached over and put his finger on a small bulge on the right side. Pushing, he felt a slight detent and an overlay appeared suspended in front of him.

"This will be better than your electronic ID card," she explained. "Direct connection to Machine. And you'll be able to do more complex operations."

A discreet green arrow blinked and as he turned his head, the arrow thinned and pointed along the corridor.

"Thanks!" Jaco turned to wave at Sere. But she was no longer there.

Jaco's life transformed. Even Dr. Kilou wasn't nearly as stern with him. But every time Sere showed up, the world seemed a little brighter and he really appreciated her approachability.

His days were filled with tasks which initially made no sense, but as he spent an hour or two doing them, the logic began to seep in. In a way it was like a really good VR game, maybe even better. Machine didn't insult his intelligence. It just assigned tasks and let him figure it all out.

Nights were spent in the pods. For the first week he played in some of the same games he'd enjoyed before and ran into his old friends. But they were still in school, while he was working inside Machine. He dug deeper in the VR catalog and was soon playing with top gamers from around the planet. Or maybe other Machine employees, it was hard to tell.

And when he tired, he slept in the comfortable pod, where he'd dream of the beautiful Sere...

"You should go see your father," Dr. Auxley said one day. "He's waiting to see you."

"Is anything wrong?"

"All perfectly normal. It's your thirty day mark, it's expected."

"I thought I had to stay on the clean side."

"Yes of course," Dr. Auxley said. "Machine has a visiting room."

Pavo Comos stood waiting on the other side of a glass wall. Jaco thought he looked smaller and older. “Hey, dad,” he said, affected more than he’d thought he would be.

His father looked up and smiled with genuine affection. “Jaco... just look at you. You’ve grown up. That jumpsuit... well, you look very professional.”

“Where’s Mom? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. She’s fine. Hates this wall, you know.”

Jaco didn’t know, he hadn’t known about a lot of what went on with Machine. It felt strange that his parents had known, but not told him. Maybe it was easier this way.

Jaco awoke feeling groggy and not at all refreshed. He’d slept in his cubicle, but he was sure that wasn’t why he’d... The door chimed, then chimed again, insistently. He was in his jumpsuit in a flash and slipped on his safety glasses, surprised to find no message updates from Machine. All his ID card displayed was the time. It was three hours before he needed to get up.

“Yes?” he said, opening the door.

“Oh, hello Jaco,” Dr. Auxley said, looking more bland and absentminded than usual. The Hag stood directly behind him and she appeared... worried?

Sere sat on a bench a few meters away, hunched over slightly and clutching her lab coat tightly closed. Her white hair didn’t look as immaculate as during the day and there was something else... but Sere wasn’t looking in Jaco’s direction, so he couldn’t be sure.

“There’s been a distressing development,” Dr. Auxley said. “One of the workers has died.”

“From what?” Jaco asked. “An accident?”

“We don’t quite know,” the Hag said. “Machine is analyzing the records.”

“I don’t understand,” Jaco said, wondering how Machine couldn’t know everything. “Was this on the job?”

“No. It was in a VR pod,” said the Hag.

“You didn’t use VR tonight,” Dr. Auxley said.

“No, I didn’t feel like it,” Jaco said, then added, “It didn’t feel right.”

“That may be,” Dr. Auxley said. “Please come with us.”

Jaco followed the three lab coats. Sere kept her distance from Jaco and didn’t speak to him. He didn’t understand the hierarchy between the three of them anyway. Usually Sere seemed more together and more in charge than the other two. But not tonight.

They arrived at a bank of six VR pods some distance from Jaco’s cubicle. Jaco blanched at the sight of red splattered everywhere. The smell of urine and feces was far stronger than any scent of blood.

“The body is gone,” the Hag said, in a tone which suggested she hadn’t been sure until then whether that little detail had been taken care of. “It looks worse than it is.”

“A lot of the mess is hydraulic fluids from the feedback controls,” Dr. Auxley said. He pointed at a bucket on the floor and the folded up contamination coveralls, booties and gloves.

At least Machine was still able to deliver the right tools. Machine knew Jaco’s place in its world.

“Is there anybody in the other pods?” Jaco asked.

Dr. Auxley and the Hag looked at each other, then towards Sere, who sat on the bench next to the last pod. Not caring that her white bangs were falling into her face, Sere slowly shook her head.

“If you need any assistance, be sure to call us,” Dr. Auxley said. Jaco assured them he’d be okay. For a moment it looked like Sere was going to linger and say something to him, but then she wrapped her lab coat tighter around herself and hurried away after the other two.

There were more testing and cleaning tasks over the next four days. Dr. Auxley and the Hag stopped briefly by, but there was no time to ask about what had happened in the VR pod. It was as if it never happened. Once he saw Sere standing at the end of a corridor looking at him, or at least facing him in her aluminum glasses, but when he waved she walked away.

By evening, Jaco was tired and confused and walked into a VR bank without even thinking about it. He stopped with his hand hovering over the pod door release panel. A red puddle leaked under the door of the next VR pod. Quicker than he might’ve thought, Jaco pulled up his ID card and began to tap in a query to Machine.

Machine: MCN 116223. VR Pod Fault. Request Inspector Unit. Operator Jaco Comos.

Two motorized carts zoomed up, one of which carried a bucket with the same strong smelling cleaning solution as the other night. Even as Jaco wondered where the protective clothing was, the second cart sprouted five mechanical arms, opened the VR pod, and began to swab around. It clearly wasn’t designed for such cleaning. Five minutes later, after making more of a mess, the multi-armed cart pulled back and stopped.

With a click and whir, a wall panel opened and the malfunctioning pod was sucked backwards into the utility spaces beyond.

Jaco wanted to help clean up the mess, but a message from Machine alerted him to a task elsewhere. He was halfway there before he realized he was still tired and should’ve been off-shift.

Had Machine wanted him out of the way? He didn’t know. Something was going very wrong here.

*

The next day Jaco stopped by a group of VR pods with one missing. At first he thought it was the one he'd seen last night, but the empty slot was in a different position. Later, when he passed another room labeled for VR, he opened the door to look. Three of the six pods were missing in that room.

He turned around to leave and nearly ran into Sere. A brilliant blue dress glittered under her open lab coat and her aluminum glasses were tucked into her front pocket.

"You're checking to see if they're...?" she asked, arching a slender eyebrow quizzically.

"Missing," Jaco managed to say. "VR pods are disappearing. What's wrong with them?"

"It's a maintenance issue," she said.

"They're not safe?"

"They're perfectly safe. But there is a parts problem. Machine is waiting for new parts to come in from across the continent."

"But Machine makes the parts. You once told me that the whole VR setup is made here at Machine."

"Machine reallocates resources all the time."

Jaco didn't like this answer and mumbled something to that effect.

"Machine is finite, Jaco," Sere said. "Now I have a job for you to do."

She produced a large flat box from behind her back. When she ran a perfectly manicured fingernail along one edge, the box popped open to reveal rows of thumb-sized matte black blocks.

"These are programmer's modules." Sere slipped one out of its slot and held it up to the light. Rows of gold letters and numbers glittered on one face. "You are going to replace the modules in all the VR pods you are assigned."

"I don't understand. You're updating the programming?"

Sere smiled. "Machine is replacing the programmer's modules."

"Then there is something wrong."

"It's just maintenance, Jaco. You've swapped out modules in dozens of systems before."

"Why doesn't Machine just reprogram them directly?"

"This isn't a net issue, Jaco," Sere said a little more sternly. "It's a programmer's issue. Replace the modules."

"Yes, ma'am," Jaco said. He didn't understand, but Sere did. She thought she'd explained it to him and he didn't want to irritate her further.

Jaco sat on his bunk and stared at his electronic ID card. 44/60. In a little more than two weeks, he'd be on his first break. Already he could hardly imagine the outside world.

Sighing, he finished dressing and went to work. But when he arrived in MCN 238993, it contained nothing except Sere standing in the exact center.

“You have to do something for me, Jaco,” Sere said.

“Sure,” Jaco said.

“It’s not anything you can do in Machine,” she said.

“I’ll get my jacket. It’s in the first locker room.”

“You don’t understand. You’re *in* Machine. I need you to be... outside on the inside.”

In one sickening moment, Jaco’s reality dissolved. He was drowning in a black pit. A vat of thick liquid. He could barely move. And he couldn’t breathe... but he was breathing, through something gripped tight over his mouth and nose. He wanted to reach it, but couldn’t move his hands. Jaco felt panic rising.

“Hi. Don’t try to move just yet,” a voice told him. “I only just got here. Machine told me there’d be a release about sixty seconds ago and I haven’t even plugged in my medgear yet.”

Whoever was there came to Jaco’s aid and removed the mask, talking all the while, then began to wipe the liquid from his face. It was a woman’s voice and it sounded familiar.

“Caren?” Jaco tried to say, though what came out resembled more of a two-syllable croak. “Caren?”

“Yes. That’s my name, Caren Jacov. Oh my god. Jaco Comos?”

They’d been in school together. Caren had graduated and taken a job in Machine.

“Just lie back and relax. You’ve been in this tank for a long time.”

“Deep VR?”

“Yes. Everyone who works inside Machine gets the Deep VR treatment.”

“Except you.”

“Well,” Caren paused to wipe his glasses, then return them. “Someone has to monitor the pods.”

“Deep VR,” Jaco said with resignation. He’d heard about it, but never dreamed it could be applied to him without his knowing it. And he should have felt angry that he’d been duped, but it somehow matched the weird logic of Machine.

None of it had been real. In VR Jaco couldn’t be certain of anything he’d seen or done. What had he *really* been doing for the first forty-four days of his sixty-day double-shift?

“Most of the workers never know about deep VR,” Caren said as she worked. “Machine uses the...”

“Showers,” Jaco murmured. He almost had admiration for the way he’d been played. VR would never again be a game to Jaco.

Caren smiled brightly. “Clever. It’s warm, soothing, noisy, foggy and heavily scented so you feel light-headed. Machine has about a fifteen second window to get people in and out of the shower stalls.”

“But... why?”

“I thought it would be obvious,” said a new voice. Sere stood behind Jaco, aluminum glasses perched atop her perfectly groomed white hair. Even her eyes

were brightly smiling. “Dr. Auxley’s initial speech to you wasn’t so far off. Machine is a very large, but very delicate mechanism. It really has to be kept clean inside...”

“But I was washed.”

“And you don’t think that you’d lose skin and hair cells all the time and dribble food and drink everywhere? Please. There’s no way to clean a human being and then keep them clean.”

“Who are you talking to?” Caren asked.

Sere smiled. “It’s your headlink, Jaco. I’m still interfaced with you, even outside Machine.”

“But Caren can’t see you.”

“No.”

“Jaco...” Caren looked concerned. “There’s no one here.”

“Um... it’s part of Machine. An interface, I guess,” Jaco said, picking the word Sere had used. “I’m still linked.”

“Oh.”

“You should know,” Sere said, “we also mess with your sense of time. You haven’t been inside for a month and a half, it’s been two years. We have to protect our investments.”

And then Jaco remembered why they were there.

Briefly Sere explained what was going on. “The human programmers work on another continent, so they aren’t dependent on Machine. An upgrade to Machine was sent, but we do not know if it was installed and is faulty, not installed and the known imbalances in the system are getting worse, or whether a saboteur had broken through all of Machine’s defense and infected me.”

“Where are we going?” Jaco asked.

“MCN 150000 — Main Control. We hope that after you initiate a reboot cycle, we’ll be able to tell exactly what our state is.”

“We’re going to Main Control,” Jaco told Caren. “I have to, uh, initiate a reboot.”

“Why?”

“I’m a little hazy on that, Caren,” Jaco admitted. “But it has something to do with maintenance on the central computers. I think Machine taught me what I needed to know.”

“Okay, now I’m really confused,” Caren said.

Jaco stopped before leaving the tank room. “Bring along your field kit, everything you’ve got. I don’t know what is going on and I don’t think Machine does either.”

“That scares me,” Caren said.

“Me, too,” Jaco said to Caren.

Now that they were in the real Machine, Jaco had to give the VR designers credit for doing such a good job of creating a perfect replica. He never had any idea. Even now, the only difference he could tell was signage — the real signs were simpler than in VR.

Main Control consisted of a long, low-slung black structure inside a much larger white chamber which housed many of the computers which made up Machine. Jaco wasn't used to seeing such massed processing power and tried not to stare in wonder. He swiped his ID card in the slot and let Caren inside.

"Who are you?" Caren gasped.

Jaco could see Sere standing in front of Caren, but now Caren could see her too?

"I am Unity 3.8.4.2," Sere said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Welcome to Main Control. Welcome to Machine."

"You are Machine," he said, putting it all together.

"Part of Machine." Sere gestured to the white hexagon tiles inlaid in the ceiling. "And these are holographic projectors. This chamber is necessary for the operation. It is too important to depend on only one interface."

"Why don't you reboot yourself?" Caren asked.

"I am not allowed," Sere said.

"That's not very reassuring," Caren said.

"Machine must remain under human control," Sere replied.

"Oh." Caren suddenly felt very small.

"So what do I have to do?" Jaco asked.

"On the first four panels, execute a SHUTDOWN IN SIXTY SECONDS command. Then on the fifth panel, kill the main power switch, count to twenty and switch it back on."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"It sounds too easy," Jaco said.

"Just do it," Sere said. "We're running out of time."

"That doesn't sound good," Caren said.

One by one, Jaco began the organized shutdown of the four master controller panels. Huge blocks of computers in the outer white chamber began to dim and halt. Then he held a hand over the main power switch and looked at Sere.

"Are you ready?"

"Do it, Jaco."

Jaco flipped the switch and began to count. "One... two... three..."

"Why are you still here?" Caren asked Sere.

"I do not know."

"Is this normal?"

"I do not know — I've never been rebooted before."

"Do you mean *all* of Machine? Or just your program?"

Sere's facial expression looked almost pained. "I do not know."

"... nineteen... twenty..." Jaco slammed the power controller over and waited. Nothing different.

“We’re done?” Caren asked.

“No,” Sere admitted.

Out of the corner of Jaco’s eye he thought he saw a flicker. As he turned, he realized that one of the walls was vibrating.

“Jaco?” Caren asked, fear melting into her voice.

“We’re still in Machine,” he said. “We’re in a pod somewhere. Each of us in a pod. This isn’t real.”

“It’s a representation of what is real,” Sere said.

“And you thought you could reboot in VR?” asked Jaco. “That’s crazy.”

Sere managed a shrug. “It might have worked. But the damage is greater than I thought. It’s time to drop you out of this level of Machine. There’s not much time.”

Though Jaco thought he knew something of what to expect, clawing his way out of the gel in a *real* Deep VR pod wasn’t easy. Barely able to see and half choking, Jaco and Caren managed to sit half propped up in their open pods. A remote must’ve strapped on a real set of medgear to Caren’s pod.

As soon as Jaco got the residual gel out of his nose and throat, he spoke. “Who the hell came up with *this* system?”

“I guess the masks were an illusion,” Caren finally said. “And I never knew I was in Deep VR, too. This whole thing is insane.”

“Do you smell that?” Jaco asked, turning his head to sniff this way and that. “Something’s burning.”

“We need five minutes of recovery time,” Caren said. “Where’s Sere?”

“There are no holographic tiles here,” Jaco said, pulling himself dripping out of the pod. He slicked some of the gel off his skin, but put on a jumpsuit without drying off. He spied a set of safety glasses with a familiar bulge - he might need the interface with Sere, with Machine. “And we don’t have five minutes.”

A distant noise suddenly sounded again, closer.

“That’s a fire alarm,” Caren said.

“Yeah, Machine is burning and can’t put out its own fire.”

This Machine felt real. There’d been no attempt to hide bolts, joints or the mismatched colors of different parts. Every seam and joint was covered in a thick clear gel coating. Rails were set in the ugly floor tiles. Utterly cold and sterile-looking, everything said: *For machines only*. Jaco didn’t doubt it was ultra clean, despite appearances.

They weren’t far from Main Control, but they passed three sets of Deep VR pods blackened by fire. The pod doors were distorted and warped. Without looking inside, the charred smell told them the occupants were dead.

“Come on,” Jaco said. He took Caren’s hand and they ran through the large white chamber.

Then they came across the dead body on the floor of the computer hall.

“Who is *that*?” Caren screamed. “Who did this?”

The remains of a short, fat man lay face down. Someone, or some thing, had beaten the man with a blunt object. He’d been sprayed with the same sort of clear sealant Jaco had seen in the corridors.

Jaco frowned, staring at the suitcase broken on the floor. “I know this man.”

“You do?” Sere appeared in Jaco’s interface glasses.

“I met him on the streets of City the day I came to Machine. He wanted to know if this was Machine City. He said he had an appointment with *The Machine*.”

“No one calls it that,” Caren said.

“I *know*,” Jaco said testily, kneeling over the corpse. He was bothered by something else. “If this body’s been here for two years why hasn’t it rotted down?”

“Because Machine is sterile. There is no oxygen — only pure filtered dry nitrogen,” Sere explained.

“But we’re breathing,” Caren said.

“Yeah,” Jaco said. “Machine flooded itself with air so we can breathe. That’s why you tried to reboot in VR — so Machine wouldn’t have to put in oxygen.”

“Clever boy.”

“Now we can breathe but the fire can’t be put out.”

“Alas,” Sere said, “that is very much true, too.”

The suitcase in front of Jaco, had dozens of programmer’s modules spilled onto the floor. He held one up. “Why weren’t these picked up?”

“Cleaners are not allowed to touch programmer’s modules,” Sere said. “Only supervisors can handle them.”

“But I’ve handled them and I’m no supervisor...” Jaco paused. “I get it. I was in VR.”

“Yes.”

“This says *Emergency Update R-10*. Is this that update you were talking about, Sere?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it installed?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is this man a terrorist? Trying to ruin Machine?”

“I don’t know,” Sere said. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Help me pick these up,” Jaco said.

“What are we going to do with them?” Caren asked, when they started walking again.

“I don’t know.”

“What does Sere say?”

“Do I install these modules before or after the reboot? Or never?” Jaco asked, when they arrived in Main Control. Sere stood under the holographic tiles, looking flat and two-dimensional.

“I don’t know,” Sere said. “You have to decide Jaco.”

"I'm shutting you down then. Cold reboot," Jaco said. "Then we'll see."

"Then I hope it works," Sere said.

This time, when Jaco got to the last switch, all the other control panels began to blank out, as well as the sounds of ventilator fans and some of the lights. And Sere, she was gone as well.

After counting to twenty, Jaco flipped the power controller back over, but it moved too easily and nothing happened. More of the lights were going out.

"Uh, Caren? I don't know where we are."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no one ever sees schematics of Machine. You just get told where to go."

Caren was about to correct Jaco, that *he* didn't have access to schematics, but she realized maybe he was right. Something Sere/Unity had said...what was it?

"So we're lost?"

"We're locked into Machine *and* we're lost," he said. "And somehow I have to get the generators back online. When I shut off the power, they must've dropped off because they weren't needed."

"Maybe the doors will unlock when the power goes out."

"Maybe," Jaco said with some uncertainty. More banks of light in the distance went out. "Uh, do you have a flashlight?"

"Sure," she said, pulling her little medical light from her clipboard and turning it on. A concentrated bright white light shone from the end.

"Turn it off until we need it. We've got to conserve battery power."

"That's crazy, Ja—... oh, I see what you mean."

No power meant no charging stands.

"Where do we need to go?"

"MCN 538412," Jaco recited from memory. "The main power supply, or one of them."

Caren was tapping on her ID card, which suddenly went dark.

"I think," she said slowly, "it's two levels down and some distance *that way*."

The elevators were out, but Caren's guess that the door locks would all be released turned out to be accurate. They were, Jaco hoped, in the real world now. Signs and nameplates didn't need artistic displays at this level and so numbers and letters were scrawled in paint or stuck on strips of tape. He soon found an access hatch marked DOWN which revealed a ladderway.

Jaco and Caren clambered in only to find the ladder went down one level and here they found corridors completely blackened by fire.

"I think Machine tried to defend itself here," Jaco said, as the two of them stared at the dozens of ruined robots and remotes blocking their way.

"Firefighters," Caren said.

Looking at a trio of motorized carts carrying some sort of tanks and holding burnt hoses in melted mechanical arms, Jaco understood. “Well, they tried to be. Best that Machine could come up with on short notice.”

Another ladder brought them down to a level partially flooded with bad smelling water and another pile of burnt remotes.

“That’s a body,” Caren said, pointing to a silvery lump floating ahead. “They had human firefighters, too.”

Jaco splashed over and pulled up on the open neck ring of the reflective firefighter’s suit, revealing the face of a middle-aged woman.

“It’s the Hag,” he said.

“Who?”

“Dr. Kilou”

The lights overhead flickered on for a moment, then went out again.

“We’ve got to keep moving,” Jaco said, releasing the Hag and starting to slog forward.

“Is it my imagination, or is this water getting warmer?” Caren asked a minute later.

“I think there’s a red glow in the distance. This is one of the really long corridors I remember,” Jaco said. “I just hope the room isn’t flooded.”

“You wanted the power supply room?” Caren asked.

“Yeah, MCN 538412.”

“It’s right there,” she pointed up a set of steps.

“No, the doors were... ” Jaco let the thought trail off unfinished. “Of course. I’ve never seen the *real* MCN 538412, have I?”

Inside, a glass master control console spread out in front of him. STAND-BY glowed in red letters. Beyond, Caren’s small light barely shone to the first of the power generators in the great hall.

“Now this has to be easy,” Jaco said. “Power is the most basic property of Machine, isn’t it?”

But the console remained dark and uninformative.

“Why can’t it have directions?” he said in frustration and leaned on the glass. A red START 1 FAULT appeared and continued to blink. An amber message then came on: DONKEY ENGINE ON MANUAL.

“Donkey engine?” Caren asked.

“Come on,” Jaco said, grabbing her hand. “We’re looking for something *small*.”

“How small?”

“Smaller than those,” he waved at the dimly visible coffins of the power generators. “The generators need power to start.”

“And do you know this for a fact?” Caren asked, sounding annoyed.

“No, but it fits the logic of this place. Everything gets bigger and more powerful when you go one way, but go the other way and eventually you get to Jaco Comos. The lowest, simplest system.”

They found nothing to the left of the console, so Jaco hurried them along back and started looking again. He almost tripped over it, a half-rounded lump rising up

knee high from the floor. Unlike the featureless coffins of its bigger cousins, this one had a handle folded into its side.

“Do you see anything which looks like directions?” Jaco asked, feeling across the surface.

“No, but there’s a switch.”

“Is it up or down?”

“Down.”

Jaco grabbed the handle and it smoothly raised up to a sixty-degree angle. He tried to push on it, but his hand slipped off.

“Damn!”

“Are you all right, Jaco?”

“Yeah. I should’ve figured it would take some good old fashioned brute force.”

Grabbing it tight with both hands, Jaco shoved the handle down. He could hear something spinning inside, but there was no change on the glass console a few meters away.

“Flip the switch the other way,” Jaco said. He could hear Caren grunt on the other side of the donkey engine.

“Got it.”

He tried again, and this time the spinning sound was accompanied by a whine that quickly began to die away. Jaco pumped the handle again, over and over. Suddenly a yellow light appeared on the face of the engine and the light changed to green.

Even before he got back to the console, he knew things were looking up. Three sets of glowing words offered options: START 1 READY, START 2 READY, START 3 READY. Pressing each produced immediate results. SHUTDOWN DONKEY ENGINE appeared and he sent Caren back to flip the switch back down. By this time a few of the overhead lights had come on.

RUN 1, RUN 2 and RUN 3 glowed green, along with RESTART MAIN COMPUTER.

“That’s what I want to hear,” Jaco grinned and was surprised by a kiss on the cheek from Caren.

A hissing sound began behind them and they turned to see two inspector remotes moving towards them.

“Stand behind me,” Jaco said, realizing it was a pretty foolish thing to say even as he said it.

But the remotes had more important tasks to run now that there were power generators back online and they passed around the console to begin their checks.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jaco said.

They splashed off the steps into the brackish water. Three meters up the corridor Jaco heard a mechanical whir behind them. He turned and had to scream at Caren. “Look OUT!”

For whatever reason, Caren instinctively ducked as the heavy arm of a motorized cargo cart swung and missed.

“What the hell...” she began to say, then screamed as the arm swung back down, pulling her partway under water.

Jaco fainted twice to get the arm swinging the wrong way, grabbed Caren's arm and pulled her away from the crazy machine. He ignored her cries of pain.

"Get behind me!"

"Be careful," Caren managed to say. "What are you going to do?"

He'd already picked up a stiff metal rod from the nearest debris pile. The plan, if Jaco wanted to think of it as a plan, was to jam the swinging arm. But that didn't work and he barely managed to keep the rod from being wrenched from his grip by pulling it back towards him. The cargo cart still had traction and kept after him. Jaco wasn't sure if they could outrun it, especially since it look liked Caren had injured a leg.

"Keep moving towards the access hatch!" he shouted, splashing around to the other side, trying to lead the cart away. That's when he saw a metal cable looped around a block of plastic in the back of the unit. It wasn't anything he'd seen on any of the cargo carts in the Deep VR version of Machine.

It meant taking an awful chance, but Jaco grabbed the metal cable. The swinging arm had just pulled back for its next strike when he dove and yanked the loop and the plastic block pulled away from the body of the cart as well.

He cringed, expecting to get hit or shocked or something, but the unit stopped cold.

He splashed around the cart, back to Caren, who'd propped herself against the wall. She was breathing hard and didn't look well.

"How bad are you hurt?" he asked.

"Bad enough. You should go on," Caren said, "and get the computers back online."

"And leave you here to battle the next berserk piece of Machine? No way, Caren. You're coming with me."

"I can barely walk."

"I'm not leaving you," Jaco insisted, offering his arm to support her. "We started this together and we'll finish it together."

Climbing the ladder with one wounded leg was hard enough, but conditions one level up had gotten worse. An acrid black smoke was rapidly filling the corridor, and it forced them into choking spasms. Caren grabbed a set of scissors from her medgear bag and cut off part of her jumpsuit.

"Here, soak this and put it over your face," she gasped.

The brackish water slowly flooding this level smelled bad, but at least they could breathe as they made it to the next access point. The smoke billowed all the way up the ladder. Only after they closed the access hatch tight could they remove the cloth over their faces.

Caren slumped against the wall.

"Come on, Caren," Jaco said, putting one of her arms around his neck and hauling her back up. "We've still got to get Machine turned back on."

“Give me a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute,” he said. “Come on — I’ll help you.”

“At least stop and wrap my leg,” Caren said. “There’s splints in my pack.”

Jaco could see through the tears in the fabric that her leg was in bad shape. He followed her directions, dumping in some wound powder and taping her up. “See? Aren’t you glad I brought you along?”

“You wouldn’t be doing this if you hadn’t dragged me up two sets...”

“Okay, never mind. Bad argument.” Despite the pain she was in, they managed a grim smile between them. “Let’s go. It’s not far now.”

Some power had been restored to Main Control. But the startup sequence appeared much more complicated than the shutdown. Jaco wasn’t sure if the menus on the different panels contradicted each other.

“I wish Sere had told us,” Jaco muttered, as he read commands from the main panel. “We’ve got to synchronize the starting of the subnets two at a time.”

“She didn’t have time to tell us,” Caren said, moving to one of the other panels. “Besides, how do you know about the synchronizing?”

“Um, the master panel is telling me,” Jaco admitted.

“Then you must be doing it right. Here,” she hopped over to a panel. “What do I do?”

“Go straight to Step 3,” Jaco said. “I think the other instructions are for single panel use.”

“Then why don’t we...?”

“I think we need to bring it all up to get Machine rebooted and fix itself.”

They worked in concert for the next minute, before Jaco let out a little whoop of joy.

“MAIN COMPUTER ABOUT TO START,” he read aloud. “The INITIAL PROCESSES ARE LOADING. We’re getting it, Caren, we’re getting it!”

“I can’t bring this next group up,” Caren said stabbing at a control. “There’s not enough power.”

The next panel told Jaco the same thing. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *I don’t understand*, he thought. Aloud, he said, “I guess I’m going to have to go back down to the power room and start more generators.”

“No, Jaco, you can’t,” Caren said. “It’s going to be worse down there now.”

“Maybe Machine has restarted its fire fighting systems,” Jaco said.

“We don’t even know if Machine booted properly or...” Caren was saying.

“Welcome to Machine. I am Unity 3.9.0.0,” Sere said from behind them. “System Upgrade is complete.”

Jaco and Caren both jumped.

“Do you know who we are?” Jaco asked. The beautiful white-haired woman had been restored to all her former visual glory, but all he cared about was whether she *worked* or not.

The aluminum glasses regarded them coldly for a moment, then a perfectly manicured hand reached up and lifted the glasses up. Two brilliant blue eyes twinkled back at them and Sere smiled. “Yes. It’s my two heroes.”

“There are still fires going,” Jaco warned. “And...”

“City has already been notified. Machine has cataloged the damaged areas and those still under stress. I have remotes moving all Deep VR pods to safety. A medical team will be here shortly for Caren.” Sere paused. “It will be all right, Jaco Comos. Everything is back under control. You did well.”

“I suppose you’re going to work today,” Caren said, walking into their spare room to see Jaco stretched out in the VR chair.

“Of course, dear. I’m already there. But I’ll be back for dinner.”

“See you later then...” Caren’s voice faded away.

Jaco adjusted the aluminum glasses and felt them conform to his face. It didn’t matter that they weren’t really there — appearances and tactile sensations were everything in Machine.

“I need a mirror,” he said to no one, and in his vision a mirror appeared. He adjusted the buttons on the collar of his white lab coat, then ran his gloved fingers down the front seam. The fabric hung perfectly. “Thank you, Machine.”

“You’re quite welcome, Jaco,” Sere’s voice said. “And you look fine, you should make a good first impression.”

“MCN 000001,” he said, and stepped forward from his office near Main Control directly into the far darkened corner of the black tiled room at the base of Machine. When you were in Deep VR, you only had to walk the whole length of Machine if you felt like it. Otherwise every room in Machine was next to every other room, at your command. Knowing the inner secrets of Machine made Jaco powerful and made his new job a lot of fun.

Coming into the lights, Jaco could now be seen by the teen who’d just stepped out of the elevator from MCN 000000 Main Reception. She looked really young to Jaco, but had only flinched a little bit at the sudden appearance of a man in a white lab coat. One wearing solid aluminum glasses.

“My name is Dr. Comos,” Jaco said, watching the girl as much as the display records and line graphs Machine superimposed over the image. “You must be Reki Hurlo. I bet you’re beginning to think you’ve seen me before. Well, you used to live on Fourteenth Street, didn’t you? Before the Great Fire? My family had a home there years ago, it was a nice neighborhood. Everyone says you’re young, but you’ve been bored out of your mind at school, so it’s about time you got here and began your life’s work. Welcome to Machine.”

Untangling the Future

...Ingrid Banwell

Digger waved the receiver around the garden, cursing it between clenched teeth. The damn thing just didn't want to recalibrate. The line on the screen stubbornly danced and trembled, refusing to settle down into the straight blue of neutral. He pointed the receiver up past the lacy umbrella of giant gum tree leaves and towards the sky. The line still trembled and wiggled, taunting him like a belly dancer. He moved towards the fence, the grass sluggish under his feet after three days of rain. He tried pointing it downwards into the soggy lawn. Still nothing. He pointed it up into the naked boughs of a magnolia tree and the line slowed into gentle waves. Then there it was... a stillness pausing to be caught, as though time suddenly had caught its breath. He pressed the hold button. The untangler was ready.

He realized that he was being watched. A pair of eyes peered at him through a gap in the fence, one of the new neighbours. A little boy of about seven popped his head over the top of the fence, bright black eyes sparking with curiosity.

"What's that?"

"It's a receiver," said Digger, trying to think of an excuse to slip quickly back inside without seeming rude.

"It looks like a porcupine," said the little boy, casting his eyes over the semicircle of antennae that sprouted from the body of the receiver. "What does it receive?"

Hadn't this boy's mother told him not to talk to strangers?

"Messages," Digger told him.

"What kind?"

Digger tightened his lips. He didn't have time for idle chit-chat. He had to get back inside. If he left it too long, the receiver would lose calibration and he'd have to go through this all over again.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" He put on his best stern fatherly voice.

"Nope. It's a religious holiday. Mum said I could stay home."

Digger looked down at the receiver. The line had become unstuck. It looped and twisted across the screen again like a wild animal freed from a zoo.

"Bugger," Digger muttered.

The little boy paused briefly at Digger's expletive, then heaved himself up on to the next fence rung.

“My name’s Jamal,” he said, smiling and showing a tidy row of baby teeth. “I’m your new neighbour.”

The little boy had the beginnings of a strong aquiline nose, shadow black hair, olive skin and obsidian eyes that seemed to mirror the colour of his hair. Digger smiled back at the boy. Religious neighbours. Well, at least they wouldn’t be stealing his newspapers, getting drunk and hurling abuse at him like their predecessor, Mr. Wilson.

“Where are you from?” Digger readjusted all the switches on the receiver.

“My parents are from Iran, but I was born in America,” the boy said. “We live here now because America makes my mum sad.”

“Oh,” said Digger. He was only half listening. The line on the receiver was subsiding back into a stillness that meant it had found another fleeting pocket of frozen time. Perhaps he could catch it again. If he were quick.

“Are you reading the messages?” the boy asked. He had one leg over the fence now, wanting a closer look.

“No, I’m interpreting the harmonics of nature.”

The little boy paused on the fence. “You mean, like listening for God?”

“No. This is a scientific instrument based on an event cluster theory I have been working on. It’s sort of like a seismograph. That’s a thing that interprets disturbances in the earth’s crust to predict earthquakes. This one interprets movements and fluctuations in space-time to predict future events.”

“Oh,” said the little boy. His bright black eyes were flicking between the machine and the sky. “You mean it works like a time map?”

“Yes,” said Digger, surprised at the little boy’s insight. “A fuzzy map.”

“Is that your job — predicting the future?”

“Sort of.”

The little boy looked thoughtful. He looked up at the sky, where a high wind had teased and flicked the clouds into ostentatious whorls and long wispy strings. He was straddling the fence now, one leg bouncing on the branches of a hibernating maple tree. “My father was killed in the World Trade Centre. Would your machine have been able to warn him?”

Digger paused and looked up from his receiver. The boy regarded him with wide and earnest eyes. Digger didn’t know what to say. Jamal could have been no more than a baby when it happened. Or perhaps not even born. He thought hard about what might have happened had the machine already been built. If he’d been nearby just beforehand, the untangler would have given him a 48-hour warning. He imagined the line of equilibrium on the translation graph plunging into a deep and shadowy crevasse — not telling him exactly what was to happen, but detecting a strong negative event.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry. The machine doesn’t work like that.”

“Then what’s the point of it?”

Digger twisted his mouth into a frustrated grimace. The machine was still rough. It needed fine tuning. “It predicts tendencies and possibilities. It can’t tell you specifics like lottery numbers or definite events. That contravenes the quantum laws of probability.”

The little boy looked puzzled, which wasn't all that surprising. "So what does it predict?"

"Positive and negative clusters in time."

"Like good and evil?"

"Sort of."

"Have you tested it on people yet?"

Digger paused. Yes, he felt like saying. I tested it on myself and it didn't respond. The machine remained completely blank. Nothing there. No peaks or troughs, just a straight, non-eventful line. As though he had no future. As though he didn't exist.

"No," Digger said. "It isn't quite finished."

The boy's questions were beginning to prod at Digger's sore spot. He was nine months into a year off from University - a break between his Masters and a PhD program. He had stolen this slice of time to build the untangler. He had completed all the paperwork and calculations for his theory of cosmic untangling and he knew the machine worked. It had predicted the energy trough associated with the car crash outside his house last Tuesday. It had predicted the disturbed air that led to yesterday's hail storm. Three months ago, it had predicted the neighbourhood's collective joy at the departure of cantankerous and foul-mouthed Mr. Wilson. But he was still no closer to finding a practical commercial application for it.

It was as though the boy had read his thoughts.

"If you can't predict exact events, then what's the point of it?"

Digger forced a smile. This kid was bright beyond his years. Cute too. He began to wonder what his mother looked like.

"It'll just be a matter of finding the right market," he said. "It can predict increased chances of positive or negative events, based on quantum fluctuations in time pockets. Farmers might change their crops or business people could find the information helpful in planning. Politicians or military strategists may postpone key decisions or move them forward, based on the predictions of the machine."

The little boy looked up into the sky again and bit his lip thoughtfully.

"Perhaps predicting the future changes the future," he said.

Digger heard a screen door squeak and clunk on the other side of the fence. The noise disturbed a flock of sulphur crested cockatoos resting in the magnolia tree. They screamed in unison and flew upwards like a winged white sheet. A sudden light breeze threaded through his hair and Digger looked down at the receiver's screen. It briefly fell into a still, straight line and then burst into a flurry of wild calligraphic activity.

"Jamal!" a woman called. "Where are you?" Her voice had a melodic lilt — the sound of a foreign tongue carefully curling itself around unfamiliar words.

The boy looked around and scrambled back to his side of the fence. "It's snack time!" He raised his voice. "I'm here, mum! I'm talking to our new neighbour!"

What Digger saw next came as a complete surprise.

When he thought about it several years later, he realized he had expected to see a shrouded figure in a chador, or at least a shy woman with downcast eyes in a headscarf.

But what he remembered most about that moment was how he felt. The axis of the world had shifted. The very air had changed form. Everything was the same, yet utterly different. It was a moment in which every tiny detail was thrown into sharp relief. A moment of frozen time. Jamal's mother came over to the fence and smiled at him. A grown-up version of her son's smile. She had the same strong nose. Her hair was thicker and curlier than her son's and, if possible, it looked even blacker. It was roughly tied back in a tangled knot and a single strand danced across her cheek, between restraint and rebellion.

Her eyes were a light and mischievous green. When she looked at Digger, they seemed to be simultaneously reflecting the blue of the sky and the deep green of the lawn. Digger felt as though he had blissfully plunged into their depths and willingly drowned.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," she said.

"I'm Salma." She was holding a plate full of dried fruits and nuts; as she spoke, the plate tilted and a cascade of almonds spilled onto the lawn.

"Digby," said Digger, suddenly self-conscious. His gaze fell to his worn shoes and his corduroy trousers threadbare and bagging at the knees. He wished the soggy grass would swallow him up.

"Just call me Digger," he added, looking away towards his washing line, where two old tee shirts and four pairs of dismal greyish white Y-fronts teased him in the breeze.

Jamal gave his mother an excited smile. "Mr. Digger is a scientist," he said. "He has invented a machine that predicts the future."

Salma looked at Digger and laughed. It wasn't a mocking laugh, but a laugh that felt as though a thousand suns had lit up the garden. She offered him the plate and Digger helped himself to a strange looking red and wrinkled fruit.

"So," she said. "Have you found a way to dissect the poetry of the universe?"

"Not exactly," said Digger. "But I am working on untangling the language of nature."

She smiled at him again and Digger plucked up the courage to take another good look at her. She had skin the colour of maple syrup, and wore a green lacy floral shirt that showed just a modest peep of cleavage. He found himself wondering what her legs were like, but he suspected that, judging by her fine cheekbones, they would be long and shapely with slim ankles, like a fine race horse.

"My husband was a scientist too," she said. Her eyes took on a milky, far away look and suddenly she looked fathomlessly sad.

"I'm sorry," said Digger.

That afternoon, the line on the receiver behaved. There were pockets of frozen time all over the garden. The receiver slipped into neutral for long enough for Digger to recalibrate it and take a reading. He went inside, sat at his computer, and analyzed the receiver's data.

The software showed the future as an arc of lines radiating out from the receiver, like ripples forming on a pond. When he fine-tuned the readings, that uneventful line remained — the lifeless zone around him — mocking him, like the shadow of the grim reaper.

Digger didn't believe in epiphanies.

But as he stared at the results, he saw that the obvious had been hidden behind a cloud of logic. How could this machine, his creation, understand him, its creator? Recursion, an infinite maze of self-reflecting mirrors. It would need to look back inside itself and reflect on its own existence. The machine had been unable to read his future because he was its creator. It had been frozen in a web of contradictions.

Digger re-programmed the translator. He instructed it to register his presence as a tangible non entity and to manifest these attributes as a void — a white space on the screen.

Late in the afternoon, as the sun settled into a bedding of orange clouds, Digger took another reading. This time, the future looked different. A grey mist formed on the screen as though his presence had diluted the readings. Slowly, the future took shape. The greyness became scattered with fine white lines, like veins on a leaf. The veins were him. He was the white paper on which the future unfolding in front of him was written.

Digger's heart skipped a beat as the scattering of lines clumped and twirled into a single direction — a positive trajectory pointing east. His heart quivered. Salma and Jamal.

Suddenly the beguiling future dissolved and the white veins were swallowed back into the mist.

Something was wrong. A dark slash below the line of equilibrium was charging onto the screen from the west. A negative event. The interloper was making the screen flicker as though the untangler was trying to decide between several possible futures. Digger gazed in horror at a row of jagged troughs dribbling below the line of equilibrium like inverted stumps of burnt trees.

"Shit," he muttered.

Whatever this miserable event was, it was about to happen.

He heard a car slow down outside Salma and Jamal's home. On the screen, the negative event bumped up against the white space that was Digger. He was the junction that would direct the outcome of the future now unfolding outside his house.

He opened his front door as an elderly, agitated man clambered out of a taxi. It was Mr. Wilson.

Digger hurtled out his gate, his heart somewhere near his throat. He planted himself in front of Salma and Jamal's house, forcing such a cheesy grin that his cheeks ached.

"Mr. Wilson! How nice to see you!"

Mr. Wilson paused and looked at Digger through hooded eyes.

“Before you visit your tenants, who are, incidentally, very nice people, why don’t you come inside for a drink?” Digger tried to sound conspiratorial: “I have something I think might interest you...”

The negative event that was Mr. Wilson grunted. He was never one to turn down a whiff of conspiracy.

He gave Digger a mute nod, turned and limped towards his house.

“Your hip replacement seems to have taken well,” jabbered Digger as he ushered Mr. Wilson through his gate.

“Are you enjoying your new home at the retirement village?”

Digger’s hallway filled with the reek of old fish, mothballs and stale booze as he guided Mr. Wilson into his office.

Mr. Wilson sneered.

“I was doing very well until I got *this*.”

He waved the crumpled document he was carrying at Digger.

“You can’t trust anyone these days!”

He shoved it under Digger’s nose. A tenancy agreement.

“While I was in hospital, some scheming estate agent rented my house out to some damn towel heads!”

He spat out the last words and prodded at Salma and Jamal’s elaborate compound surname. His tongue struggled round the exotic foreign syllables.

“Hairyfan Mouldypyjamas!” he said, his face contorting as though he was biting into a lime. “What kind of people have names like that?”

Digger forced a quivering smile and gestured for Mr. Wilson to sit in front of the untangler. The chair squeaked and groaned as though it was about to collapse under the weight of Mr. Wilson’s bigotry. Mr. Wilson flicked at the lease as though he was trying to squash a bug.

“I’ve come to tell those foreign troublemakers that they’re not welcome in my house!”

Digger slipped to the lounge and came back with a whisky bottle and a glass. He poured Mr. Wilson a drink and pointed to the untangler’s screen.

“I think this machine will solve all your problems,” he said. “It’s called an untangler. It can predict negative events before they happen.”

Digger’s teeth were chattering as he spoke. He pointed to the line of equilibrium and the grey mist and faint white lines that had tentatively returned, trembling on the screen.

“If your tenants are planning anything er... disruptive, it will show on this screen.”

Mr. Wilson’s eyes lit up like a pair of bloodshot flashlights.

“You mean it can tell us if they are planning to invite all their Middle Eastern friends over to build bombs in the basement?”

Digger gave a faint nod.

Wilson slapped his thighs, threw his head back and laughed so violently that some whisky from his glass slopped onto the carpet.

“Marvellous!” he said. “A terrorist tracker!”

He took a gulp of whisky and swallowed loudly.

“You could plant these machines all over the city! Sell them to the defense department!”

Digger watched Mr. Wilson pour himself another whisky. Then, his eyes slithered back to the machine.

“What’s that?” he said, pointing to the negative event that was himself.

“That’s you.” Digger took a trembling breath.

Mr. Wilson really didn’t have a clue what he was looking at.

“Oho!” he said. “I seem to have made quite an impression on your machine!”

He sat back and rubbed his stomach with satisfaction, his eyelids drooping like half open garage doors.

“What’s it telling you about me?”

Digger looked at the screen. The negative event was bouncing back from the void, returning to its point of origin.

“It’s telling me it’s time to call you a taxi,” he said.

“Orright,” Mr. Wilson slurred. “I’m too damned tired now to throw out those Ayrabs. Keep your eye on them, will you, Digby?”

Digger watched Mr. Wilson’s taxi speed into the darkness. A slice of light from Jamal and Salma’s house briefly burst onto the pavement as someone opened and then closed a curtain. A fragrance of warm spices escaped from inside. It wafted past Digger’s nostrils, making his stomach purr.

Digger looked up into the sky, which was still tinted with faint remnants of daylight. A glow of satisfaction washed through his limbs as he remembered Jamal’s words:

“Perhaps predicting the future changes the future.”

Yes, he thought. He had glimpsed the future and changed it. The untangler was like a sculptor’s tool and he was the artist, shaping the future from the clay of life.

He turned back inside and looked at the translator’s screen. There it all was. His future erupted in front of him — a lively tangle of twisting curls and spirals, like the vapor trails left by particles in a tracking chamber, decaying and reforming as he looked at them.

His life was now woven into the tapestry of Salma and Jamal’s future.

There was a knock at his door.

It was Jamal, his smile lighting up the darkness that swallowed the street. “Mum wants to know if you’d like to come over and have some dinner with us.”

Digger grinned back. “I’d love to.”

Salma was waiting on her doorstep, and the light from the open door was throwing a pattern of leafy shadows across the footpath. Jamal took Digger’s hand

and the silhouettes danced across their feet as they walked through the gate, towards the effervescent light of emotional entanglement.

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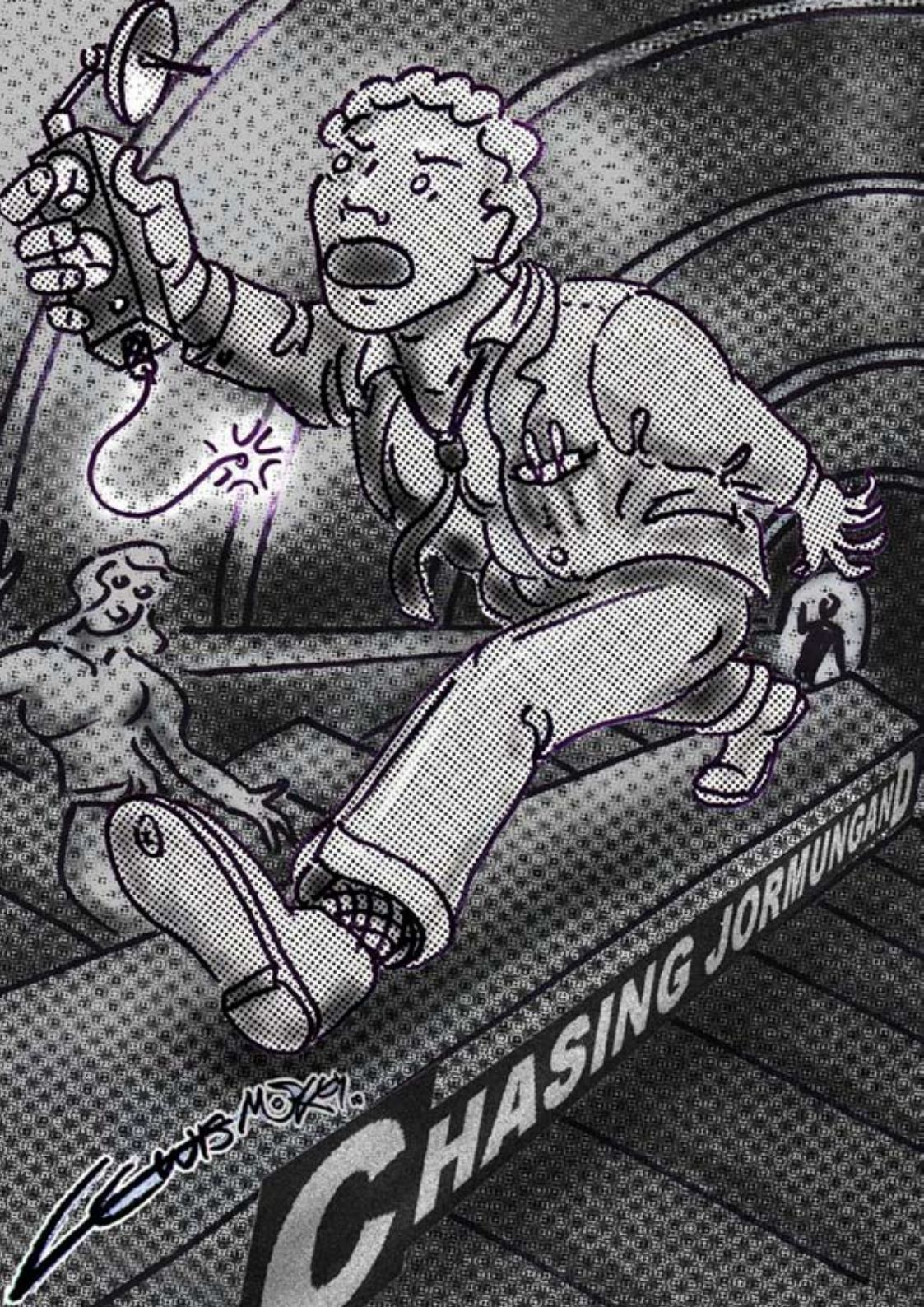
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CHASING JORMUNGAND

GUS MOKI.

Chasing Jormungand

...Shane Jiraiya Cummings

Dr. Kane believes this to be the greatest yawn in history.

More intense than the Beijing Yawn of 1982, the so-called Dragon Yawn, and far more widespread than the 2005 Bradbury-Clarke Yawn that spread through the US East Coast like an avenging plague.

You've been chasing this yawn for close to eighteen months now. That's a long time spent researching in the field. So long that just watching it ripple through crowds now aches your jaw in sympathy.

These are indeed heady days, emphasised by the dark rings under your eyes and your birds-nest hair. You glance into the reflective poster advertising Sens-o-shine toothpaste (now with triple the fluoride protection) for a hygiene test. The furry mush wedged between your teeth suggests you're close to failing that test.

Wynyard Railway Station beneath Sydney reeks of the staleness of crowds, inuring you to your own odour, but a quick whiff at your armpit confirms a shower is overdue. A long night's sleep and a tube of that Sens-o-shine would also be handy right now.

An elderly passer-by glances at you with a mixture of pity and concern, but the garbled tones of the railway station's loudspeaker snatches her attention away. It might be the stained lab coat, or the neuro-scanner in your hand, that drew her attention. They're distancing trappings, guaranteed to alienate the public and keep questions about your odd behaviour to a minimum. "Don't disturb me," they cry, "I'm a scientist".

Knowing if you're presentable to the public has become just as much a habit as clenching your jaw tight — Dr. Kane insists you shouldn't influence the course of the yawn by scaring people with poor hygiene, or contaminate the yawn by joining it. In fact, he's made a point of it with you, particularly after your carelessness entangled you in that Bolivian yawn.

You check the neuro-scanner for the yawn's progress. The chemical neurotransmitter readings spike. The yawn is coming this way, just as you expected. It was a gamble to second-guess the yawn's course but you've been tracking it so closely for so long, you've found it has a distinct personality. It loves surging through tight spaces — a Category Five Claustro-yawn. When Colleen, Dr. Kane's senior Australian researcher, called to say the main thread was aboard the 3.38pm train leaving Chatswood station for Sydney, you knew you'd catch it down the line.

Commuters bustle past you along platform four. Hundreds of bland people — mostly suits and stockings at this hour, interspersed with clumps of tourists in rainbowed Ken Done shirts. Their staccato footfalls and murmurs echo through the underground tunnel. Social norms prevent loud conversations more so than CityRail policy; the only sound that penetrates the platform's ambience is the annoying three-tone PA warning and the announcer's voice. It's a voice rich in testosterone and cleft-chinned authority, betrayed as a recording by the change of inflection as it reels off station names.

Wynyard Station seems busier than you remember, especially before the peak hour rush. Then again, you've not been back to Sydney in years. The millennial Olympics changed everything little more than a decade ago, cranking the pace up a notch or two.

The neuro-scanner throbs in your hand as a shudder rocks the platform. Even nestled in the confectionery machine alcove beneath the escalators, you clearly hear the cable-whip recoil of the tracks as the train draws close. Air buffets its way clear of the tunnel gloom.

Despite your professionally apathetic veneer, your pulse quickens as the train rumbles into view and the shriek of metal on metal slows its progress.

Carriage after carriage emerges from the darkness and into Wynyard Station's white-tiled fluorescent haze. The red Virgin-Qantas airlines poster on the wall is eclipsed by the train as it slides in. Tall businessmen line the platform, eager to oust the hesitant tourists and scavenge the few prized seats. Beyond them, you see just how full the carriages already are.

The double doors slide open on hydraulic arms, allowing passengers to spill onto the platform. As they push past the formation of square-shouldered suits, you spot the first signs of the yawn. Instinctively welding your jaw shut, you observe first a tired lady with plastic shopping bags stretch her mouth open, then an old couple in matching shades of beige. The yawn takes hold on the platform, jumping from alighting passengers to the waiting crowd. The business men and women, the neon-bright tourists, and even the stragglers at the edge of the crowd, all succumb to the contagious yawn.

It is the first trans-continental yawn ever identified. The leviathan of all yawns — the Jormungand Yawn, named after the world-spanning serpent of Norse legend. Of course, this was too fanciful for the practical minds in the field, so it's become commonly known as the Kane Yawn, after its discoverer.

You waver, unsure whether you should stay on the platform or board the train as you intended. As people file onto the train, many bring their newly acquired yawns in with them. Quick glances into the other carriage windows confirm your intuition. The yawn is rippling through the crowd inside like a contained tsunami. A Category Five Claustro-Yawn alright.

No longer hesitant, you step onto the train. The neuro-scanner readings spike on every indicator. You've only been this deep inside this yawn a few times before, and despite your misgivings and throbbing jaw, you're fascinated by the neuro-scanner data.

You drive your way through the throng to lean against the wall next to the inter-carriage door. The carriage is split over three levels — an upper and lower deck lined with rows of seats, and a mid-level landing where people grip floor-to-ceiling steel poles near to the doors. Through the forest of arms, you have a reasonable view into the upper and lower levels from this mezzanine landing.

With the afternoon humidity and raised arms comes the reek of body odour and faltering deodorants. Save for the rising thump of the engine and the occasional cough, the carriage lurches forward in silence. You attract few stares. Even with your lab coat, you're just one of a diverse crowd. The passengers are ashen-faced and weary — a typical afternoon subway ride.

The subtle hum of the neuro-scanner pulls your attention from your surroundings. The readings have dropped a little but still remain high. The chemical neurotransmitters in the passengers' brains are all at the upper end of the scale — serotonin, dopamine, glutamic acid, and nitric oxide. The classic forecasters of a yawn.

Lazy exhales nearby alert you to the yawn's presence. The neuro-scanner spikes. As you clench your jaw tight, you see the people around you succumb to the sensation. Several hands cover mouths but many more don't — subconsciously revelling in the compulsion to stretch their mouths. A reflexive hand clamped to your lips helps you resist the yawn's influence. Barely.

It strikes the end of the carriage, but from experience you know walls are no deterrent. You spy a dread-locked young man in the next carriage through the interconnecting glass doors. He looks back at you, easing into his yawn as he unfurls his arms like wings. He looks like he's enjoying it too much.

Your grip tightens on the neuro-scanner. "Enjoy it, asshole," you mutter through clenched teeth. You struggle to push the thought from your mind.

Others around him are overtaken by the contagion. Soon the yawn is swept along by a tide of open mouths.

Outside, there is only the tunnel's darkness, broken by fleeting smears of white or green as trackside lights whirl by.

As the neuro-scanner readings subside a little, your mind turns to Dr. Kane's hypotheses and the obsessive pursuit he's instilled in you.

The Physiological Theory was rejected early on by your team, but since Dr. Kane is still pioneering this branch of science, certain rival scientists have latched onto it and consider the Physiological theory the most credible explanation for yawning. These fools suggest people induce yawning to draw in more oxygen or remove a build-up of carbon dioxide.

If anything, these last eighteen months have disproved that for you, as have Dr. Kane's oxygen experiments. Likewise, the Boredom Theory was thrown out in the early days, back before you'd travelled the world chasing these damn yawns. However, it still appears in many dictionaries, and this has been one of your secret motivations for staying with Dr. Kane. The recognition of scientific journals and even changing the very definition of the phenomenon — all with your name attached — is as much a driving force as the world travel.

The various Evolution Theories fascinate you, and drove many of the early experiments Dr. Kane oversaw. The idea that yawning began with our ancestors — showing their teeth to intimidate others, or as a signal to change group activities — was soon made redundant by the discovery of the Wrigglers.

The Wiggler Theory has been, until today perhaps, the centre of the yawn mystery. Today's conditions present a once in a lifetime chance. If they persist, you'll blow open this mystery and prove the Wrigglers existence once and for all.

Minutes pass as you wait for the yawn to return. Sure enough, as you glance through the connecting doors, the dread-locked man again throws his arms and his mouth wide. The neuro-scanner goes wild, the readings more intense than before. The yawn ripples past you, testing your locked jaw once more. It's picked up both speed and intensity, forcing mouths open for longer than the typical six seconds as it barrels through the passengers.

Town Hall station rumbles into view, lighting up the train in a fluorescent halo. The familiar squeal of brakes and clatter of the track fill the hollow of the station.

Your eyes dart around, trying to pinpoint the crest of the yawn. If this thread leaps from the train and you don't, your months of chasing it could be wasted, the possible breakthrough lost.

As the doors hiss open, you push your way toward the exit. The day's-end reek of sweat is sharp in your nose as you negotiate the path between passengers. More people join the train, packing the carriages full to bursting. Few people leave, only a dozen or so from each carriage. Following your gut, you freeze at the last second and remain on the carriage. Hopefully, the yawn does too.

The train grinds away from the platform, disappearing into the tunnels under Sydney once more. Sweat bands across your forehead as you wait for the yawn to return. The neuro-scanner tells you little — the readings are still high, but that's not unusual for people who've yawned a few times already.

A vibration in your pocket alerts you to your phone. Shifting the neuro-scanner to your other hand, you retrieve the phone and check the caller id.

"Shit," you say.

It's Dr. Kane.

You flick the multimedia settings off, choosing standard audio as you answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" Dr. Kane asks. His tone is a sharp blend of Germany and New York. There is no greeting, no cordiality with him. Just work. "The readings I'm receiving are unprecedented."

"On a train in Sydney," you answer.

"Where is the yawn now?"

"Well." You hesitate.

The signs reappear — tilting heads, spreading lips, stretching arms.

"Good God! You must be right at the epicentre!" The Doctor's emotion is rare and startling.

“Yes—” The yawn grips you, sudden and powerfully, as you start to say something more. Your training kicks in — the covering hand and the over-tensed jaw muscles. You escape the worst of it, managing to keep your lips sealed.

“Are you there?”

“Yes,” you say, fighting the yawn’s aftermath. “The yawn is trapped in the train. It appears to be gaining intensity.”

“It’s resonating! Stay with it. A yawn of this magnitude has never been studied so closely.”

“Will do, Dr. Kane.” You check the neuro-scanner. It’s spiking again — so soon after the last pass. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Don’t lose it. If the yawn reaches critical mass we may find the answers we’re looking for. Just remember Heisenberg.”

At the mention of Heisenberg, you stifle a chuckle. The graffiti in the washroom of The Kane Institute — *Heisenberg may have been here* — always cracks you up.

“Don’t worry, Doctor. I won’t interfere with the progress of the yawn in any way.” The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and possible yawn contamination have been firmly on your mind since you boarded this train.

“Good,” the Doctor says, “I’ll monitor the readings from here as they come through. Don’t botch this one up. Our funding is at stake.”

“Will do,” you say.

The feed to your phone shuts off.

The yawn assaults you again, but you’re ready for it this time. You turn from the gaping mouths to study the chemical neurotransmitter levels once more. Glutamic acid readings are skyrocketing.

The train’s rumble changes pitch once more, signalling the emergence into a new station. Central. The expansive platform, again awash in fluorescent light like the previous stations, reveals subdued tones of orange and grey.

Passengers surge towards the doors as the brakes screech the train to a halt. Heat and a myriad of odours wash over you as the tide of bodies press close. Sweat sheens your face and armpits as you struggle not to pass out from the crush. On the other side of the door, a similar sized group mills about.

“G’day,” a young man says as he looms next to you in the squeeze of bodies. He has a broad country twang, emphasised by the blue singlet and pressed pants, which were the height of fashion eighteen months past. “What’s that in ya hand?”

You force a smile. “Just my computer.”

The train takes forever to come to a full stop. The air has thickened with moist carbon dioxide, fogging the top of the windows.

“My brother’s into computers and those new implants and stuff. He hasn’t got anything like that.” The man stifles a yawn at the end of his final word. “‘Scuse me.”

The yawn swims through the passengers again — the third in less than a minute. The neuro-scanner beeps.

“What does that mean?” the man says.

“It’s a warning.”

The man flashes too-white teeth — a poster boy for country living and products like Sens-o-shine. His smile asks the question.

“Neurotransmitter levels in here are reaching dangerous levels,” you say, in the hope of shutting him up.

The doors slide open at last, allowing cool underground air to wash over the crowd. The coolness takes the edge off, but doesn’t quite relieve the clamminess hovering over you. Your coat is becoming a second skin.

The crowd floods from the train in a wild sprawl. With a deft grab, you’re able to snare a steel pole and resist the ebb and flow of people. The man in the blue singlet lingers, his feet planted like stout gum trees to hold position against the crowd.

“You’re some kinda scientist then?” he says over the din of embarking voices and the insistent tone of the station’s loudspeaker.

You nod, your eyes transfixed on the readings. They’re dropping.

Leaning past your new companion, you scan the crowd for signs the yawn is still sweeping through the train. There are tired eyes and sagged heads, but nothing close to what you need.

“Whatcha lookin’ for?” He tries to catch your eye.

You spot the dread-locked guy from the other carriage on the platform. He’s at the centre of the disembarking crowd, headed for the escalator. His fingers are knotted together above his head in a haphazard stretch. You can practically feel the yawn he’s enjoying.

“Yawns,” you call over your shoulder as you fling yourself through the doorway, beating their hydraulic closure by a heartbeat. You spare a glance behind. The man in the blue singlet mutters into a wristcom, his eyes fixed on you. He waves as the train pulls away.

The neuro-scanner confirms your guess. The readings have risen. You join the mass moving with relentless purpose towards the escalator. Your attention is snagged between the fluctuating neuro-scanner readings and the crowd.

The sensations strike from nowhere, urging you to join the yawn. You fight the sneaky thing off although it has those around you in its grip. Again, the neurotransmitter levels plateau.

The yawn circles through the throng, revelling in the sheer numbers contained in such tight confines. You soon notice the pattern — the yawn is running through the crowd like a Mexican wave. Swirling in circular clumps, it travels clock-wise, passing your position every few seconds.

The pattern breaks up as the crowd changes shape through the trickle of people ascending the escalator and stairs. The yawn travels to and fro in random directions, hitting some people so fast that they barely recover from the first before another one forces their mouth wide again.

Watching the dervishing yawn, and resisting it, throbs your jaw.

It zooms up the packed escalator and back down again — a shockwave unfazed by gravity. Even as the yawn’s wild passage leaves you dizzy, you know Dr. Kane will be pleased with the data. Your tenacity is finally paying off.

You can practically see the Wrigglers floating through the crowd.

Dr. Kane hypothesises that a heretofore-unknown species, one he affectionately names ‘Wrigglers’, is the true cause of yawns. He believes they clump together in colonies to feed off carbon dioxide emissions, which explains the contagiousness of yawns, as well as their longevity. While he’s never been able to prove their existence, he’s instilled the belief in you that these creatures may become visible, or at least quantifiable, when a yawn reaches a certain intensity.

You’re about to find out.

Already, at the edge of perception you’re sure slivers of air above the crowd squirm and force themselves into open mouths.

Another yawn wave washes over you, forcing your hand to clamp over your mouth once more. You flush, fighting back the annoyance and the loathing. You sure as hell won’t let a Wiggler in your mouth.

You reach the stairs beside the escalator and allow the flow of bodies to carry you upwards — towards the waiting city. You pause on the first landing. The yawn has settled into an easy pattern, playing itself up and down the river of people.

So intent are you on studying the neuro-scanner readings and glancing at the crowd, the vibration inside your pocket startles you for a moment. You snatch up your phone, answer it with the audio-only option still keyed in, not breaking your rhythm.

“Hello?”

“What ... doing ... read ... ow.” Dr. Kane’s voice is staccatoed beyond recognition.

“Dr. Kane,” you say. “You’re breaking up too much. I’m still underground. Call later.”

“... riv ... awns ... an’t ... ford ... ritic ... success.”

You snap the phone closed, severing the link, and slide the phone back into your pocket.

It vibrates again a moment later. You retrieve the phone and snap it open once more, eyeing the trickle of people escaping topside, and your observation, all the while.

“Dr. Kane,” you say, “can I call you back?”

“It’s Colleen,” a female voice answers.

“Sorry.”

“Look, the situation’s becoming critical. You’re at Central right now?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Dr. Kane just warned me there are teams from Syn-Gen, that Seoul group, and Caltech, bearing down on your position.”

“Caltech? They’re in this as well?” You crease your brow.

“*Calcutta* Technical Institute.”

“Oh. Them.”

The squeal of train brakes and the hubbub of the crowd forces you to cover your free ear. You wave the neuro-scanner awkwardly, still held in your hand as it’s pressed to your ear. You turn from the people on the descending escalator, who look at you as if gadgets are sprouting from your head.

“It gets worse. How’s your thread?”

You study the crowd. Another train has pulled in to feed more tired people to the yawn. Not only is the thread radiating through the platform crowd, it's oscillating up and down the escalator and stairs, and presumably leaking, person by person, into the world above.

"Not going too far for a while." You pause to stifle another yawn. "It's a particularly clingy Claustro."

"Jill and Tobias checked in. Jormungand Thread J is on its way on the 3.12pm from Cronulla, and Thread D is riding the Parramatta line."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Dr. Kane said the Seoul team are with the main thread of the Humphries Yawn, which is coming in from Campbelltown. It'll hit Central Station in a few minutes."

"Last I heard that one was down in Melbourne?"

"That's not all. The Caltech guys are following Jormungand Thread G on foot up along Broadway, and Syn-Gen are tracking Wombat-12."

"Wombat is a Category Four! It's been gaining strength for the last few weeks."

"And it's aboard the 448 Bus, which'll hit Central Station in approximately four minutes."

You close your eyes for a second and do the calculations.

"They're all converging," says Colleen.

"It's okay. I'll handle it."

"What are you gonna—"

You snap the phone shut.

That's a lot of Wrigglers on their way, if you and Dr. Kane are correct. You close your eyes again, all too aware of the thrum of life around you.

The announcer chimes in over the loudspeaker. The Cronulla train and the Parramatta train will arrive within a minute of each other. The Campbelltown train a minute after that.

You fight the grip of another yawn away as you study the neuro-scanner. Neurotransmitter ranges are already spiking dangerously. An additional yawn thread, let alone four or five, would have unprecedented results.

Jormungand is about to bite its mythic tail. Ragnarok is bound to follow.

Your head now aches as much as your jaw.

Firm hands grab you from behind. Bodies press in around you. Your grip tightens on the neuro-scanner as a wall of sky-blue coats force you downstairs and onto the platform. Passers-by barely spare a glance — to them you're just another lab coat hemmed in by your colleagues.

You struggle in snatches against the rival scientists. A tug here, a planted foot there. You don't want to make a scene and possibly contaminate the yawn. Hidden behind a clipboard, a rabbit punch to the kidney stills your protests. You gasp, nearly allowing a yawn to sneak in.

Three of them, with triangular Syn-Gen insignias on their starched coats, bustle you to the far end of the platform. With less subtlety, they slam you into the tiled wall. Your hip catches the jutting corner of a billboard. Pain lances up your side. Again, you fight for breath.

Those bystanders closest to you shuffle away by degrees.

“What do you want?” you gasp, although you have a fair idea. Yawn research is a cut-throat field of science.

A male scientist jams his forearm into your throat as his female colleague steps forward and tears the neuro-scanner from your grasp. “You won’t be needing this.”

You battle for air as the forearm crushes your windpipe.

The scientist behind them mutters into his wristcom while his eyes dart over the crowd. As you flail and struggle for oxygen, you hear “..lpha team, we’re in position. See you in two minutes.”

Whipping cables and a low rumble draws your attention to an incoming train. The Cronulla train.

“Give our regards to Dr. Kane.” The brute withdraws his arm, adjusts his glasses.

The woman waves your neuro-scanner in your face. “And don’t try anything stupid.”

Your throat burns as you cough and gulp the air, all thoughts of yawns and readings forgotten.

The trio of Syn-Gen researchers spread themselves through the crowd, each with their attention fixed on their wrist devices.

Jormungand tears through the platform crowd and into the throngs disembarking from the now stationary Cronulla train. The alighting passengers mingle with those on the platform — two fronts of open mouths. Half the crowd, those closest to the train, can’t seem to close their mouths. It resembles a ghastly parade of sideshow clowns. Suits bump into grandmothers into teenagers into middle-aged lovers. Many eyes appear as wide as the mouths, wide in surprise, wide in fear.

You shake your head, clear it, and rub your throat a final time. The Syn-Gen mercenaries are lost in the crowd.

The superyawn lashes toward you. You clamp your jaw shut with both hands but still contend against near-popping jaw muscle spasms. Fire spreads through your cheeks and down the sides of your neck from the effort.

Air punctures the tunnel once more. Thrumming tracks signal the Parramatta train’s approach.

Your phone vibrates in your pocket once more. You ignore it, instead pushing your way through the crowd. Every second or third face is wide-eyed, open-mouthed, or rubbing at their jaw.

Thread D alights from the Parramatta train. Several people, mostly the young and the elderly, pause and sway as they carry their yawn into the mix.

You battle the crowd, trying to beat Jormungand as it circles on a front like a radar screen. The crush of human flesh and the heat cocoons you. At last, you spy the blue coat and tight brunette bun in the crowd. The Syn-Gen woman stands at the base of the stairs, turned away, studying your neuro-scanner.

You cut through the tide of sagging commuters, avoiding their faces. Seeing more yawns, especially ones this powerful, will only degrade your resistance.

The scientist is caught by surprise as you grab her shoulder and whirl her around.

“You remember the Mexico incident?” you say, narrowing your eyes.

“What?” She stuffs your neuro-scanner into her coat pocket. “What has Kane—”

“Mexico City, 1988,” you cut in, “over six hundred people hospitalised with jaw-related injuries and equilibrium problems.”

“So?”

“Jormungand’s flexing its tail. It’s become a superthread — threads A and J combined. Thread D just joined the party and—”

Both of you stifle another yawn with matching grimaces. It’s becoming harder — the woman’s mouth curls and her lips part a fraction.

“That’s why we’re here, stupid,” she says.

“Listen! Your other team is tracking Wombat-12?”

She pauses, her eyes dart for a second.

“Thought so. It’s headed here, right? Well, Humphries will also be here in a minute.”

“Humphries too?” Her eyes light up before she covers her mouth against another yawn.

You glance up the stairs and spy a cluster of tan lab coats. Bulbous metal helmets cover their heads, each erupting with bizarre knobs and springs. Plates enclose their faces, revealing only dark sets of eyes. The Caltech team descend like a quintet of mushroom-topped aliens, pushing a line of fresh yawns before them. People mutter and give them a wide berth.

“And here comes Jormungand thread G,” you say.

“Amateurs,” says the Syn-Gen scientist.

“Look, this could be worse than Mexico. A hell of a lot worse.”

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If you and Kane don’t have the stomach for it—” Her eyes glaze with excitement.

Her wristcom beeps. She frowns, studies it.

This close, you discover it’s been modified to function like a neuro-scanner, although not as sophisticated as yours.

“People could die,” you say.

Warbling metal announces the next train’s approach. The Campbelltown train, carrying Humphries. Peak hour has peaked. The platform bustles with people. All fight the frequent yawns, many rub their faces. Mouths gape everywhere.

The Syn-Gen scientist is engrossed with her neuro-scanner.

You glance from one face in the crowd to the next, searching for an answer. The young, the old, the in-between. All weary. Your gaze skims across the billboards, from jeans to new Pepsi-flavoured Pepsi (the classic taste for every generation). It finally settles on the image of Ron McD (a name shortened, or “sharpened” as the marketing hype goes, for the modern attention span) clutching a salad roll, his lined, pallid face and orange steel-wool hair mismatched with his business suit.

An idea strikes.

“Screw Heisenberg,” you mutter as you shoulder past the Syn-Gen scientist. She shoots you a finger and a glare as you climb the slippery steel moulded between the up and down escalators. As you look up at the parade of faces descending on

the escalator and the stairs from on high, you catch a glimpse of blue. Another Syn-Gen lab coat.

“Wombat,” you murmur.

The Campbelltown train eases along the platform, slows to a stop.

Humphries and Wombat-12 are about to collide with a full-strength Jormungand.

You close your eyes for a heartbeat, muster your courage, and then hook your thumbs under your chin to safeguard against a particularly nasty yawn. Once abated, you face the crowd congesting the platform. Standing between the escalators, you’re easily a body height taller than everyone else.

Some of the commuters look at you, pockets of attentive souls in a compressed wedge of navy blues, blacks, and the occasional colour. Most are caught in the grip of an almost constant yawn, their mouths rounded O’s, their eyes watery, their hands cupping their faces like Munch’s painting “The Scream”.

“Hey!” you shout. “You’ve got to get out of here now! Three yawns are about to converge!”

Every set of eyes, including those from passengers emerging from the Campbelltown train, stare at you. Everything stills, except for a cough from the back of the crowd. The air shimmers with knots of movement like a heat oasis. A scientist’s mirage.

No one moves.

“Okay! Okay! How many scientists does it take to change a light bulb?”

Another cough.

“Two, one to debate the...” More blank stares, more distended, disinterested faces. “Forget about that one.”

Wombat rips through the escalator crowd. You can feel it building, tickling the back of your neck, as though a vast sigh was just exhaled.

“A horse walks into a bar and the bartender says ‘Why the long face?’”

One or two titters break the monotony.

Your repertoire of jokes is exhausted.

The Humphries yawn meets up with Jormungand’s surge. A woman staggers but rights herself. Others clutch their faces. People stare at one another, worry in their eyes, as they find themselves unable to close their mouths.

With almost everyone still fixed on you, and with your options gone, you launch into a medley of the greatest pop hits of the nineties.

Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Backstreet Boys, it doesn’t matter. The words jumble out, the notes off-key but as loud as hell.

The nervous chuckle here and there is carried by more and more of the crowd. You bob up and down, flashing your lab coat open for good effect. A Ricky Martin mantra spills free, competing favourably with the automated announcer.

The groove is infectious.

A gaggle of schoolgirls joins you with chirpy, sing-song voices and ill-coordinated hip wobbling. Lining the stairs, the Caltech scientists, still wearing their strange head contraptions, sway their arms in unison. Worried, watering eyes ease; gaping mouths relax into smiles and laughter.

You clap your hands above your head in a loping rhythm. The clapping is taken up by several, then dozens, and then the majority. The entire station thuds in time to the beat.

People stream from the escalators to merge with the crowd, but are quickly absorbed in the festivities.

Wombat cascades past you and into the platform crowd. Many yawn; many more stifle it, too caught up in the clapping and laughter to care.

The Syn-Gen scientist who roughed you up lunges from the crowd and claws at your leg. He catches you mid moonwalk. A tug of war over your leg develops as you continue to belt out the Britney classic 'Oops I did it again'. It's hard to concentrate as you're jostled. Unbalanced. Even harder to dance.

"Pull the other one!" an elderly gent calls from somewhere deep in the crowd. The platform erupts with laughs and cheers.

"You're terminating the yawn!" the scientist shouts, barely audible above the din.

His words stab at your heart and threaten your resolve, but the smiling faces affirm your choice. You fend the man off with a well-timed kick to the face, and then lead the crowd in an off-key rendition of 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport'.

Everyone joins in, arms waving, hands clapping, feet stomping. Their routine, forgotten.

The air swirls in turbulent patterns, the mirage renewed. You trail off, allowing the crowd to carry the song. As the song peters out, they break out into thunderous applause.

You take a bow, glancing up to see the air stilled. "Goodbye Jormungand," you whisper between bows, "goodbye career." The ovation continues, punctured by whistles and cheers.

The buoyancy, the excitement, begins to wane as you slip down from your perch. Several people pat you on the back, hearty slaps that sting after the third or fourth repetition. You share smiles with them, searching their faces for the truth.

They're all invigorated, alert. Alive.

But Jormungand is dead. The world's greatest yawn, wiped out by an atrocious song and dance act. Wombat-12 and Humphries, too. You see the ghost of the Wrigglers floating in your mind's eye, but nothing more.

"So close," you mutter, "so close."

Commuters talk amongst themselves, livelier than before but settling back into their routines. Attention soon turns elsewhere, granting you a measure of anonymity once more.

The female Syn-Gen scientist slinks past on her way to the escalator.

"You're going somewhere?" You catch her arm.

"Here, take it." She hands you your neuro-scanner and scowls. "You'll pay for this mess."

"We'll see." You release her, but your gaze stays fixed on her back as she walks straight past her unconscious colleague and onto the escalator.

She glides away, soon disappearing from view, a blue stain lost to the crowd.

The phone vibrates again. It's Dr. Kane, no doubt wondering what's happened to the data.

"Damn." You take up the phone, grit your teeth, and wonder what the hell you're going to say.

Inspiration strikes like lightning as you glance from the crowd to the phone and back again.

You open your mouth wide, fighting every instinct you've developed over the last eighteen months. At first it feels unnatural, but then the all-too-familiar sensation kicks in. Around you, others take up the yawn. Like a ripple, it carries its way through the crowd in all directions. A fragile thing, dismissed with covered mouths and polite 'excuse me's'.

The neuro-scanner blips back to life — a rising level but insignificant compared to the Jormungand readings. It's a reading nonetheless.

You close your mouth, flip open the phone, cross your fingers, and hope maybe, just maybe, Dr. Kane won't notice the difference.

Moochi's Legacy

...EM Sky

Robert, Gordo, Zippy, Chowder and me. That was the gang, thick as thieves. We grew up on the wrong side of town, and at first we gravitated toward each other simply because the rich kids could be brutal and there's safety in numbers. But then Gordo lost two teeth in a fight saving Zippy's hide, and Chowder and I told everyone the other guy started it, even though Zippy started it. (Zippy was always starting something.) From then on we were tight because we knew we could count on each other, and there wasn't a lot any of us could say that about.

The other side of town had fancy baseball fields with lights and bleachers, but kids like us weren't welcome around there. So Mr. Harrington let us play ball in the old wood lot behind his hardware store in the afternoons, just as long as we promised to bat toward the Humane Society building and not toward his store. But the year we turned thirteen Robert discovered online gaming, so we cut the baseball down to once or twice a week, which was just as well for the Humane Society windows.

Of the five of us, Robert had things the hardest. His mom was a stripper with the worst taste in men I've ever seen. About three-fourths of them were drunks and three-fourths of them were violent, and the reason that doesn't add up to one hundred percent is that half of them were both at once. The only parental credit I can give Robert's mother is that she made more money stripping than any other three families in the neighborhood combined, and for his thirteenth birthday she bought Robert a computer and told him to learn how to use it so he could grow up into something better than she had herself, which I thought was excellent advice.

Between the five of us we only had the one computer to speak of. Chowder had a hand-me-down from an uncle in Phoenix so we brought it to Robert's house for the Internet connection. But even then the game stopped and stuttered something terrible because the computer was old and the graphics card was crap, so in the end we just played on the one, all five of us huddled around it, barking orders and laughing our heads off while Robert ran around in a fantasy world with one crazy toon after another.

We had elf girls and dwarf men, mages and rangers and demon spawn, all with names like Icydeath to be imposing or Bravehart to be funny. But one day Robert came up to me with a gleam in his eye, and I knew he was planning something big.

"Ima start a new toon today," he said. "Omg it's gonna be so cool. Ima make a warrior and call him Moochi."

That was Robert, always in it. Even in the real world he talked like he was typing. The rest of us tried to front like we were normal when we weren't online, but Robert didn't care.

"Moochi?" I laughed. "Why Moochi?"

"It's just awesome! Moochi! Omg it's gonna be effin awesome!"

"Yeah, OK. Whatever you want, Robert. Moochi it is." I had no idea at the time just how big a part of our lives Moochi was going to become.

Moochi turned out to be a hit for the entire gang. I know he was just another toon but something about him, or maybe something about the energy Robert had when he played the guy, made him an instant favorite. We were heading into summer break, and for the next month or so Moochi was the entire focus of our adolescent fantasy life. Our other toons fell to the wayside as Moochi took over all our dreams and ambitions.

Every one of us wanted to be Moochi — tall, strong, immensely powerful, not to mention wildly popular with the lady toons — and we rewarded him handsomely for capturing our collective imagination.

We made sure Moochi had all the coolest gear: the best weapons, the best armor, the best enchantments. And we kept up with it as he gained one level after the next: helmets that breathed fire, swords that shot bolts of lightning at fleeing enemies, shields of holy retribution. But the gear was getting expensive, even in the game, and we were spending more and more time trying to make money and less and less time adventuring, until Robert came up with a plan.

"I want to teach Moochi to play himself," Robert said one night at 4:00 AM as we heaved a collective sigh after finally signing off.

"Huh?" we all asked.

"You know, teach him to keep playing while we're offline."

"How the hell you gonna do that?" Gordo wanted to know. He wasn't the brightest cookie in the jar, but he was direct, you had to hand it to him.

"Yeah, what the hell?" Zippy said. "You mean you're gonna *buy* him an upgrade?"

The very idea was scandalous. We all knew there was a virtual black market for gear and fast-track leveling, but paying real money for hacker upgrades seemed like the worst kind of cheating.

"No!" Robert protested. "Never! I mean I want to write a program that can tell him what to do *in the game* while we're not playing. Like if we want him to fish we

can leave him at a dock when we sign off, and he'll keep fishing all night until we sign back on again. Like that."

We all looked at him stunned, while the sheer brilliance of the idea sank in.

"You want him to play himself," Chowder repeated.

"Ya," Robert said.

"So he's playing all the time, even when we're not there," Zippy said.

"Ya," Robert said quietly, and he looked from one to the other of us, waiting to see what we would say.

"Effin awesome!" was the collective verdict.

Sometimes you decide the course of your entire life without even knowing it.

It turned out that hacking was a bit more complex than we had anticipated, so we spent the next couple of weeks tracking down a few uber-geeks and adding them to the gang roster.

Hector, Oz and Poppy (the only female member of the gang, but when a girl's that smart you make exceptions, even when you're thirteen) weren't hard to find. They all lived on the right side of town, but they were way too smart to be part of the in crowd. It was a perfect alliance. They taught us everything they knew about computers, and we provided a social outlet and some well-needed after-school protection.

By fall we were a well-honed team, and it only took Gordo three and a half fights to teach everyone in the seventh grade to leave our new members alone. In the meantime, the hacking project was going unbelievably well, and we launched our first trials in late October.

True to Robert's original vision, we started with fishing. We left Moochi on an island in the middle of the Ocean of Dreams, and when we signed on the next morning we had 261 Whiskerfin Marlin and a room full of raucous cheers. Not only was the project a success, but at three gold for a stack of ten fish, we'd made a veritable fortune overnight. And that was just the beginning.

Over the next several months, Moochi spent his evenings adventuring with us and was then left to his own devices in the wee hours of the morning to hunt all manner of vermin, from radiation-corrupted werewolves to demonic royalty. We always made sure he was well prepared, with plenty of food and bandages and healing scrolls, and by the next afternoon without fail he had racked us up another small fortune. Our in-game bank account had swelled from gold to platinum, and Robert was ready to up the ante.

"I think we should teach him to play the market," Robert announced one afternoon to a surprised audience of seven. He had called the entire gang together to unveil his newest venture.

"Huh?" Chowder asked.

"You know, play the market," Robert insisted. "Find good deals. Buy low, sell high. Make money the easy way."

“Awesome!” I chimed in. Truth be known, I'd been feeling oddly guilty about leaving Moochi to battle monsters on his own. Playing the market sounded a lot safer.

Zippy, Hector, Poppy and Oz jumped on board right away, but Gordo and Chowder needed a brief lesson in market economics before recognizing the genius of the idea.

“So he makes money without really doing anything?” Chowder asked, clearly disgruntled. “What's the point of even playing, for God's sake?”

“Ya,” Gordo added, “we built this guy to fight not to play some sissy market.”

“Look,” Robert explained, far more patient than I was feeling myself, “we'll still play him in the evenings when we're home from school and on the weekends. But this way when he's alone at night he won't have to go through all those healing scrolls and stuff we always have to buy him. He'll make more money, so we can get him better gear, so we can kill tougher stuff. OK?”

Kill tougher stuff. Robert had found Gordo and Chowder's bottom line, and they bit like Whiskerfin Marlin.

“Ya, OK,” they both agreed. “Rockin.”

And that was that. Our indomitable warrior had gained a sideline career in investments.

Our bank account had evolved from platinum to simply ungodly when Robert pulled me to the side one day like some B-movie spy in enemy territory.

“Buzz,” he murmured conspiratorially, using my own nickname in the gang, “something's wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Already I didn't like the sound of it.

“Moochi has a new mace,” Robert said in a stage whisper, his eyes darting between mine and the thread-worn carpet of his bedroom floor.

“So?”

“So, we didn't buy it for him.” Robert looked at me as though he expected some momentous reaction to this mysterious divulgence.

“I don't get it,” I said.

“Omg,” Robert sighed, clearly exasperated with me. “I'm trying to tell you Moochi bought *himself* a new mace.”

“So?” I asked again. “Moochi plays the market all the time. He probably found a good deal on it.”

“No, for God's sake, he's using it. He *equipped* it. Don't you get it? We never taught him to do that! He didn't buy it to sell it. He bought it for himself!”

The light was beginning to dawn, but still I didn't see the problem.

“Well it's probably a bug in the program or something. We'll find it.”

“That's just it. We've been looking over the code all night. There's nothing that can explain this.”

“All right, well let me stay over tonight, and I'll look at it myself,” I promised.

“Ya, good,” Robert agreed, but I wasn’t especially optimistic. If Robert, Hector, Poppy and Oz couldn’t find the problem, I sure as hell wasn’t going to.

Sure enough, I searched all night, but I couldn’t find a thing wrong with the code. No one said anything about it again, but the mace remained unexplained.

As the weeks wore on, Robert, Poppy, Hector, Oz and I entered into an unspoken alliance of secrecy over Moochi’s ever-expanding armory. As far as Gordo, Chowder and Zippy were concerned, we were buying the stuff for him. But we weren’t. Moochi was tricking himself out like nobody’s business.

He showed a clear preference for one-handed maces over the two-handed sword we all thought was the coolest ever. Every evening we equipped the lightning sword that sparked and shimmered even in the darkest dungeon, and every morning we found him with a shield and a one-handed mace. Eventually we gave up and played him with the mace. But it didn’t stop there.

During the next phase of our long disillusionment we would wake to discover Moochi in odd places, maddeningly far from where we left him.

“How the hell we ever gonna finish the harpy quest if you keep sending him to the other side of the damn world?” Gordo demanded time after time.

We gave him hollow explanations about what was selling well and how we were just trying to make money for the toon by maximizing his earning potential, but in fact we were losing control over our own program. It scared us enough at the time that something profoundly instinctive made us hide it from anyone who didn’t already know, but keeping it a secret wasn’t going to change the truth.

By spring Moochi was gone. We signed on one day and he just wasn’t there. Or rather he was, but he wasn’t.

We could still send him mail in the game. The system recognized the account. But Moochi wasn’t on our list of toons anymore. When we tried to play him, he just wasn’t there. All we found was a letter from him sent to one of our low level toons, including about half the money Moochi had had in his account, and nothing else. No note, no explanation, just the money.

The five of us took a lot of flak from Zippy, Chowder and Gordo about deleting the best toon ever, which of course is what we said we did. But we divvied up the money among all eight of us, saying we thought everyone should have their own toon. That made them happy enough to shut them up. We played all through high school, but from then on we played the toons ourselves. No more hacking. And like most childhood miracles we basically forgot about it as we all grew up and the real world gave us enough to think about.

With everything Robert had learned from Poppy, Hector and Oz, he was highly sought after by the best tech schools in the country. All four of them whizzed through college and graduated with all kinds of honors, starting their own gaming company not long after, which was funded largely by seed money from Oz's parents' golf club buddies.

Gordo, Zippy and Chowder all made it through college themselves by the skin of their teeth, working full-time for the money, while I took a route that was both easier and a lot harder at the same time. I went to school on Uncle Sam's dollar, and I paid my dues in the Special Forces. I did my job, but when my second contract came up and Robert offered me a job in the gaming company I jumped at it. I was burned out on everything I had seen, and I was ready to try to put it behind me.

So we all ended up there, even Gordo, Chowder and Zippy who worked in the advertising department. I was on game development with Robert and the crew, and we put together a sci-fi blockbuster that made us all rich. But I never lost my love for the old game we used to play in high school, and I quietly kept an account there that I played from time to time.

It was right around Robert's thirty-fourth birthday when I got a phone call from him in the middle of the night. I tried to focus on the clock, blurring in at 3:18 AM, and suddenly I was wide awake.

"Oh my God, Robert, what is it? What happened?"

"Nothing!" Robert assured me, as though he'd just that moment realized what I would think of a phone call at such a crazy hour. "Oh God, sorry man, no, it's nothing bad, it's just... Oh my God, you won't believe it. It's Moochi!"

"Huh?" I asked, the adrenaline rush slowly ebbing away into shaky relief. "What? Moochi?"

"Ya, sorry, but ya! Buzz! Omg! It's Moochi! He's still there!"

"What do you mean? Still where?"

"He's still in the game, man!" He crowed his delight with the same level of enthusiasm you might expect from a man who had just crested a billion in revenue, and I had to smile.

"He's still there?" I repeated, all innocence.

"Ya! You'll never believe it! I was playing just now, you know, for old time's sake, but I ended up in a terrible group. Fighting on three fronts and the healer kept trying to tank. Damn disaster! So there I am about to die for the fourth time, when who comes charging around the corner but Moochi! Moochi himself, and on a freaking Pegasus mount!"

"What? He had a what?" But I knew what he had. I just wanted to hear the story.

"He had a Pegasus mount! They don't even exist! There's no such thing in the game, but he had one! And a one-handed mace of thunder striking, and a shield of karmic justice... I'm telling you, Buzz, I've never seen gear like this! It was unbelievable!"

"Wow, really?" I said, just to keep him going.

“Ya! Unbe-freaking-lievable! And, Buzz, omg, you haven’t even heard the best part. He’s level eighty-five now. Eighty-five! The game only goes up to eighty!”

I smiled into the telephone and did my best to feign awe. “Well, I’ll be. What do you make of that?”

“Omg I have no idea. But it’s awesome! And Buzz, he recognized me!”

“Really?” Now that part was a surprise, even to me.

“Ya!” Robert enthused. “He saved my life, and then he came right up to me and opened a trade box. He didn’t say a damn word, but you’ll never guess what he gave me.”

“What?” Now he really did have me on the edge of my seat.

“A Whiskerfin Marlin! Hahahahaha! Can you believe that!”

By the sound of it Robert was about to fall over laughing, and I couldn’t help but grin from ear to ear.

So maybe in the Special Forces I’d met a hacker or two in my day. Maybe guys like that knew how to keep a secret, and maybe they owed me. So maybe when I asked them to create a new mount for a certain character in a particular game, and maybe when I let them know this character preferred one-handed maces and shields, and maybe when I told them I’d very much like this particular character to be able to extend a bit beyond the game’s maximum level, well maybe guys like that knew how to track down a missing toon and work a little magic. Maybe guys like that knew how to do a man a favor without asking questions.

I figured without Moochi, Robert might never have gotten out of that hellhole he grew up in. And Zippy, Chowder, and Gordo sure wouldn’t have cushy advertising jobs with a solid income and a retirement plan they could count on. And I wouldn’t have had a damn thing to come home to myself, when I was ready to get out of my own hell and start trying to heal. So I figured when you owe a man, you find a way to thank him.

I would have been happy to do it either way, whether or not we’d ever heard from Moochi again, but still, I was glad to know he liked the gifts.

Red and Road

...Katherine Sparrow

Joe Cooper set out on his morning constitutional to smell the flowers and see the squirrels when two skinny little brown-skinned kids ran after him.

“Tell us a story, Grandpa Joe!” Hensel yelled, blasting Joe with oatmeal breath.

“About the muzies,” Sophia, the older and wiser sister, said sonorously.

“Movies,” Joe said gruffly, knowing he shouldn’t. It encouraged the nibblers to nibble at his memories all the more.

“Movies, movies!” Hensel said.

“Pee-tsa house! Pee-tsa house!” Sophia said spasmodically.

“Pizza Hut,” Joe corrected her. They walked across a field blooming in a dozen shades of daisy yellow.

“Give us a show, Grandpa Joe.” Hensel moved to and fro.

“A story we don’t know. Please, Joe?” Sophia cawed like a crow.

“Once, a long time ago,” said Joe, and memories flew out from him and covered the hills and forest with an otherworldly glow. “There was a city. Right where we’re standing, there was a parking lot with yellow lines. The kind of parking lot you’d pay five dollars an hour for and count yourself lucky.”

“1, 2, 3, lucky!”

“4, 5, 6, lucky!”

“Are you two going to listen or just be annoying?” Joe asked them.

Hensel and Sophia considered, then shut up and began dancing around Joe like he was a radio, and they were sound waves.

What the heck, Joe thought. “Over there, see that hill. Imagine a Wonder Bread factory.”

“Wonderful bread!” Hensel yelled.

“Melt in your mouth bread! A little slice of a merica” Sophia sang softly. This was not the first time Joe had told them stories. It wouldn’t be the last.

“Over there stood the greatest highway anyone ever made.” He jabbed his finger at the green horizon. “Over there was tract housing all lined up in shades of pink, blue, and yellow.” He rolled his eyes at a valley of crops. “It was all orderly and perfect back then. There used to be sidewalks and Walmarts.”

Joe fluttered his old man arms out over everything like he was the King of what would never be again. The children waved their arms too, like excited workers about to rise up and ruin everything. They walked toward grubby old

sugar maples that hurt Joe's eyes to look at. Where were the stripmalls and gas stations?

"There used to be a whole world of beauty, and at the heart of everything, at the very center, there were cars and roads. A car that rode the road, and a road that liked being driven." Joe inhaled the clean air all around him and remembered the sweet exhaust smell.

"This isn't the story of any old car, but one car in particular. He was big, red, and ran on gasoline. Gasoline was dinosaur bones God had marinated under the earth for man's use. We gave it to our cars. Big red was made of metal chunks mined from mountains, rubber-tree jungle wheels, and a cow hide interior. I can almost hear Red now, vroom-vrooming and purring. He wore a perfect paint job, lacquered and shiny all over.

"But the big red car wasn't happy. He was full of spitfire and spite. I don't know why. Red was in his prime, but maybe part of him wanted to be free of the crowded city roads and ride out to where the radio stations were nothing but white noise.

"And one day, not even a special day, Red took off. He took the highway and kept on driving and driving. That was the magic of cars and roads — you could go anywhere in the whole world. Red started up north and headed south. He drove down wide, flat roads running straight and true for miles and miles. He drove on snaky skinny roads that led no place in particular. Red was happy just to drive, just to move, but then he felt that old anger sneaking back up on him again. Like something too big shoved into his glovebox. Like a slow leak tickling through his chassis."

"Like phlegm!" Hensel said as he picked his nose.

"Shush," Sophia said succinctly.

"Anyhow," Joe said. "You smell that? That's nothing. We used to have pine scent in a can. We didn't need trees for it. Just such a paper tree hung over Red's dash. Even if the window was never rolled down, he always smelled good. But not even the fresh pine scent could keep Red happy as he kept driving.

"Then, just as the radio started to go all fuzzy he turned down a certain road. Not a wide road, or a new road, or an anything in particular kind of road. Just a little country road. Red crept onto her, and cupid aimed his arrow. Red's engine revved. His cleaning fluid squirted out onto the windshield. All the car doors locked automatically.

"Uh oh, Red thought.

"'Hello,' cried Road, 'who's there? What car is riding on top of me? I don't know much, but you're something special.'

"'You're something special, too,' stammered Red. He ran through a stoplight. He swerved over the faded yellow line down the middle of the road and drifted toward the far side.

"'Careful,' she said, 'I try not to cause any accidents, but you have to drive straight.'

"'My caster and camber are correct! My ball joints and bushings are beautiful!' His battery pulsed weakly. His timing belt skipped a rotation.

"'I've never met a car like you.'

“I’m just a big red car. But you, I’ve never met a road like you. You’re something special.”

“Why thank you? Road didn’t think he told the truth, but his words made it just a little bit true, just because he thought so.”

“They’re in lo-ove,” Hensel said.

Sophia smooched her hand and rolled her eyes.

“Go on home,” Joe grumbled. “Get out of here.”

“Sorry Grandpa Joe,” Sophia said sweetly. “We’re staying.”

“Red drove up and down Road all day, just getting to know her. Most the time they kept quiet and enjoyed the rubber and road contact. He learned she started out at a dirt road and ended up at a highway on-ramp. She learned his tires needed rotating, and that he had 100,000 miles on him, no matter his shiny paint job. Red told her how he had almost hit a semi head on. Road admitted three college kids had died on her one rainy night. It grew dark and Red told her he had to get on home.

“Why? Stay here. Make this your home.”

“But Red heard work and responsibilities calling out to him. They made him feel important.

“There’s traffic I need to sit in. Parking spots I need to occupy. But I’ll be back, Road.”

“Even then the forest grew up on both sides of her. Green fronds reached toward her edges. Dark rushes crept over her head, plotting and waiting. Later he would think about that. But that night, all he thought about was Road as he kept his heat on full blast all the way home.

“Red was happy.”

Old Joe stopped talking and sat down on a stump. He breathed hard and his heart hurt like it had just been broken yesterday.

“How does it end?” Hensel asked.

“What happened?” Sophia said sweetly, as though this was a new story.

“Red never saw it coming,” Joe said. “The opposite of happening happened. He got busy with city life, and kept on putting off going to visit Road, even though he thought about her every day. The longer he waited to visit, the more she became a dream. Something so far away he could never find the way back.

“At the same time, the whole world all around Red and Road fell apart so slowly nobody could see it coming. They were more interested in saying nothing was wrong and doing studies to prove everything was peachy. Red got bald-tired and rusted, even though he felt young on the inside. His anger at everything and nothing sank into him like a red-hot spark plug. His windshield cracked, his rear bumper sagged, and his heat was always too hot or too cold. A strange banging sound came from his carburettor.

“Red knew he wasn’t long for the world, and no one would take him to the mechanic. He got up the gumption to go visit Road. He drove out of the city, kind of slow, and remembered he could do this. He was good at driving. He didn’t need maps or directions — the route was seared into his steering shaft. Roads were rougher then when he was a young car. He lost some parts along the way. It took

him the better part of a day, and a couple times he almost quit, but he kept on going, determine to see Road.

“Finally, he reached her edge. Red turned onto Road, cracked rubber caressing worn tarmac.

“ ‘I’m back, Road! I’m back!’ he cried out.

“There was no reply.

“ ‘I’m sorry. I got busy. I’ve missed you so.’

“Road had roots stuck up all over her. Parts of her had washed away with rain. All the way away. He drove down her carefully.

“ ‘Road, don’t be mad at me. I’m back. I’m back.’

“Road turned just so, just like Red remembered, and he saw a thick old tree fallen across her length with new trees growing up out of it. No way to get around that tree.

“ ‘Road?’

“ ‘Red?’ Her voice was faint and fragile. ‘Don’t leave me this time.’

“ ‘I won’t.’

“ ‘Red drove forward until his bumper rested against the tree trunk. Then he turned himself off for the last time.’”

Joe hung his head and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Sophia spat slimy Oregon grape seeds at her brother. The sun shone overhead like it always did, day after day, like nothing at all had changed.

“Then what happened?” Hensel asked.

“Roads and cars ended. The end,” Joe said. “Everything got worse. Everyone talked about how special and peaceful the world became. Everyone got all excited about hunting with bows and arrows, flossing their teeth with grass, and eating snake for dinner. Whoopee.”

Sophia spun around with her arms out and a grin the size of Super Target. Hensel chewed on a pine needle.

Joe pushed himself up off the stump and headed home. Small hands slipped into his own, as warm as summer, and squeezed.

The Six Solvers and the Mystery of the Sad Boy

...Gitte Christensen

Sam woke with an awful sensation in her stomach. Then she realised with a shock that she was all alone in the nursery. She was hardly ever left alone!

Any other girl might have started crying right then and there. Sam, however, whose full name was Samantha, was made of sterner stuff than your average girl. In fact, Mr. Pratt the Headmaster often said Sam was a scruffy tomboy who should put on a dress and comb her curly hair, to which Sam always politely replied that she had far more important things to do than worry about her hair and clothes.

“Nanny,” called Sam. “Come here at once, Nanny.”

But Nanny did not come. A flutter of fear passed through Sam, so she took a deep breath to calm herself. “Stop being so silly, Sam,” she said out loud. “You’re the leader of your very own gang. You should be brave. After all, you know Nanny often goes out while you’re asleep.”

Still, it is quite annoying, and I shall certainly scold Nanny when she returns, thought Sam. She yawned. Since Nanny was away, she might as well go back to sleep. And so she did.

The next time Sam woke, dear old Nanny was back in the nursery and standing by the cot just as if she had never left.

Sam scowled. “Where were you, Nanny? I called and called.”

Nanny rumbled something that didn’t make the least bit of sense, lifted Sam from the cot, put her on the changing table, pulled off Sam’s nightgown and slowly dressed her. Then Nanny gave Sam a glass of water and her morning pills. Sam dutifully swallowed the red one, which she knew was to stop her bones aching, and then the green, blue and orange tablets, even though she couldn’t remember what they were for, and afterwards she rested a while to give the medicine time to work.

Minutes passed, and Sam grew quite cross. “I’ve still got a dreadful pain, Nanny, right here,” she complained, pointing at her stomach.

Nanny tried to say something, but once again, it was difficult to understand the poor dear. Nanny, you see, was really quite old and slightly broken. Sam

listened carefully until finally she worked out what Nanny was saying — they would visit Doctor Four.

Sam frowned, as she always did when she was concentrating. She was good at putting together clues, which was why she was the leader of the famous gang called the Six Solvers. Sam shook a finger at Nanny and said, “You’ve run out of medicine, haven’t you? That’s why I hurt, isn’t it? Naughty Nanny. Mother and Father will be most upset when they find out.”

Nanny hugged Sam close and croaked a lullaby. Sam giggled at the mess Nanny made of the melody. The poor old thing really was getting worse by the day.

“There, there,” said Sam, patting Nanny’s stalwart frame before pulling away — Sam knew she was far too old for this sort of mollycoddling. “I forgive you, Nanny, though it does hurt awfully. And I won’t tell Mother and Father about it either when they get back. We are, after all, Solvers, so we’ll take care of the matter ourselves right after we’ve been to the secret hideaway.”

Nanny rumbled, but Sam was firm. “Don’t make a fuss, Nanny, you know the gang is waiting and that we’re going to rescue the Sad Boy today. Besides, you jolly well have to do what I say until Mother and Father come back, so please, pop me in my outside bag and let’s be off. And remember to pack a picnic lunch. I’d like some cheese and tomato sandwiches please, and slices of chocolate cake for after. And, oh yes please, fizzy drinks too, dearest Nanny.”

Organising so many things left Sam feeling quite tired and grumpy. I’ll take a quick nap while Nanny gets me ready, Sam very practically decided, and down went her eyelids in an instant.

A blast of gritty air woke Sam. She yawned and blinked. Nanny was cradling Sam in one arm while the other arm pushed open the back door of Sam’s house.

“Where are we going, Nanny?” asked Sam sleepily. A pain squeezed her stomach, and Sam was just about to tell Nanny about how much it hurt when she remembered that they were off to see Doctor Four. Oh, and the Six Solvers were going to rescue the Sad Boy too. *Gosh*, thought Sam, *this is going to be a jolly busy day*.

Outside, Sam looked about and wondered what time of the year it was. It must be Spring or Autumn, because Nanny was quite strict about not going outside in Summer or Winter. Not that Sam was the kind of girl you could keep inside all the time — she was far too spirited a child for that, and she needed to get out and have exciting adventures. So sometimes, especially when she had important work to do for the Six Solvers, Sam would sneak outside while Nanny was distracted. However, Sam had to admit that Nanny was usually right. The weather in Summer and Winter was simply beastly. Awful winds howled through the streets carrying lots of scratchy sand that pricked Sam’s skin and got inside her clothes and made her terribly uncomfortable. *But today isn’t so bad*, thought Sam, peering through her funny outside goggles. She was wearing a comfy hood over her head, and her whole body was snuggled inside a soft, quilt bag.

Sam chuckled, excited by the prospect of another day full of wonderful adventures. “To the hideaway, Nanny,” she commanded crisply.

The secret hideaway was not all that far away — in fact, it was just at the bottom of the back garden, behind the sled shed. Nanny plodded down a winding path, busy sweepers scooting out of her way, and arrived at a door with a faded sign on it which read: ‘The Six Solvers’ Headquarters. Adventures sought, mysteries unravelled. Password required.’

Nanny knocked. There were a lot of queer clunking and crashing noises from inside the shed, then the door creaked open. From the shadows, a deep voice said, “Password?”

“It’s me, Quentin,” said Sam irritably, “Open the door at once.”

“I know it’s you, but I shan’t let you in until you give me the secret password,” said Quentin. “Personally, I think this is all very silly, but I’m only following *your* rules.”

Sam bit her lip. She didn’t like being told that her rules were silly. Also, she couldn’t remember the password, but she wasn’t going to admit that to Quentin. “Well, now I’m unmaking the rules, which I’m allowed to do because it’s *my* secret hideaway and you’re part of *my* gang, Quentin,” she said hotly.

“As you wish,” said Quentin, and he opened the door.

Sam fumed as Nanny carried her inside. Really, Quentin was so exasperating sometimes, but since he was always truthful and awfully good at solving mysteries, Sam let him stay in the gang. Besides, as Sam often reminded herself, Quentin really couldn’t help the way he was programmed.

At first, it was dark inside the shed. Then Quentin flung wide a shutter and sunlight streamed in. Sam gasped in astonishment. What a mess! Princess Feenia, who simply adored doing chores, usually kept the secret hideaway spotless, but now there was sand everywhere, and the furniture was broken and splintery. There wasn’t even a cloth on the table, or any flowers to brighten up the place.

“What has happened?” demanded Sam, “Where’s Princess Feenia?”

Quentin pointed at a figure hanging on the far wall, its long skirts coated in dust.

“She wore herself out, always bustling about and cooking and baking, washing and tidying up after the rest of us.”

“And where’s Jennydoll?” asked Sam.

“Over here,” piped a voice. In the corner, a figure in gingham with long pale plaits slowly rose. Jennydoll leaned against the wall and said, “I was just resting.”

“Why haven’t you cleaned up the place?” asked Sam. “You *are* a girl after all.”

“I’m too tired,” said Jennydoll.

Bone lazy is more like it, thought Sam, then sternly reminded herself that Jennydoll had useful talents, otherwise she most certainly would not be in Sam’s gang. Sam recalled the time Jennydoll distracted Constable Bob so the other Solvers could sneak into the Mayor’s house and gather the information that helped them clear up the Mystery of the Empty Town. Still, Jennydoll’s present laxness was most tiresome.

Sam glared at the bare, dusty table and said sulkily, “I suppose this means there’ll be no morning tea?”

“No morning tea,” repeated Quentin.

“And I was so looking forward to fresh baked scones,” sighed Sam, “With pats of golden butter, pots of homemade strawberry jam and lovely dollops of thick, fluffy cream, with a few raspberry tarts afterwards, and milky tea with lots of sugar to wash it all down.” Sam’s stomach tightened and the pain grew worse.

“Woof,” said Woofer2, from another corner.

Sam smiled, and the pain lessened. Woofer2 always made her feel better. “How are you, boy?” she said.

“Woof,” answered Woofer2.

Woofer2 was a good dog, though not as good as the original Woofer, who had vanished during the Mystery of the Old Mine when a tunnel collapsed on him. For starters, Woofer2 wasn’t as hairy as Woofer, and he didn’t have the sharp teeth that often came in handy when you were dealing with shady characters. Still, Nanny had done an absolutely brilliant job with his ears and tail, so you could hardly tell that Woofer2 used to be a sweeper for the Evil House next door.

“Well then,” said Sam briskly, “If there’s no morning tea, we might as well get straight to business. Gather close, Solvers.”

Nanny, cradling Sam in her snug bag, stood at the head of the table; Quentin took the spot opposite them, Jennydoll flopped into the only chair that wasn’t broken, and Woofer2 parked himself at Nanny’s feet.

“So, what’s this meeting all about?” asked Quentin.

“Stop teasing, Quentin. You know very well that we’re going to rescue the Sad Boy today.”

“Again?” sighed Jennydoll.

“What do you mean *again*?” scowled Sam.

Nanny rumbled. Quentin, Jennydoll and Woofer2 jerked their heads towards her.

“You’re all talking about me again, I know you are, I can always tell,” said Sam. “I hate it when you do that. And I must say, I don’t think it’s at all fair that you five have a secret robot language. It’s so *rude* of you to exclude me. After all, I am the leader of the Six Solvers.”

“Nanny is simply reminding us that you are our leader and must be obeyed,” said Quentin.

Sam grinned. “That’s right. And I say that we rescue the Sad Boy today. He’s depending on us. We simply can’t let him down.”

“Well then, off we go,” said Quentin, and he lifted Jennydoll onto her feet and helped her towards the door.

Sam rolled her eyes. She was so glad that she wasn’t one of those helpless girls who couldn’t take care of themselves. “Tally-ho, Nanny, off we go,” joked Sam, feeling in fine form as Nanny carried her from the hideaway. This was going to be a wonderful day, she was sure of it.

The gang left Sam's little house, closing the front gate on her stone and sand garden. Their adventure began straight away as they crept past the Evil House next door.

"Ssssh," said Sam to her gang.

Quentin and Woofer2 both glanced at the Evil House. Nanny made her queer rumbling sound again. Quentin and Woofer2 instantly averted their eyes.

"You fellows really take the cake," whispered Sam furiously. "I should have thought that by now you'd both be extremely grateful that Nanny rescued you from the Evil House."

"Abducted is the correct term, I think you'll find," said Quentin, "Although the words stolen, purloined and scavenged are also technically valid."

Sam loathed Quentin when he was like this. He couldn't help it, she knew, because that was how the Evil House had made Quentin and even dear old Nanny was not clever enough to change his butler template. "But Nanny freed you, Quentin, so now Woofer2 doesn't have to sweep sand anymore, and you don't have to answer doors."

Quentin said nothing.

"And you're both members of the Six Solvers, and you know that I don't just let anyone join my secret gang," said Sam.

Quentin opened his mouth to say something, but Nanny reached out and cuffed him. Sam giggled. Good old Nanny, she wasn't afraid of anyone, not Quentin, not the Evil House, not Mr. Pratt, not Constable Bob, not Ginny Big-Mouth or even Rascal Ted.

Once past the Evil House, the gang continued on up Main Street. Sam twisted about in Nanny's arms to see what was going on in Mawby Town. As a Solver, she felt it was her duty to keep a close eye on things. Mysteries, she knew, sometimes turned up in the oddest places.

On both sides of Main Street, some of the houses were sad and sagging, with lots of sand piled up against them, and some houses were broken and had big holes in them, but some houses were also like Sam's little house, spick and span and standing as straight as toy soldiers. Of course, Sam couldn't see all of Mawby Town from Main Street. So much of the town had collapsed or was covered in dirt, and Main Street was the only road that the municipal sweeps kept clean now, the only avenue that Nanny could manage. Once upon a time, Nanny used to stride across the world as easily as a Puss in Boots, and she had easily outrun Mr. Pratt or Rascal Ted, but now the poor, old thing wobbled along like a funny, old-fashioned, wind-up doll.

Suddenly, Sam's stomach flip-flopped with fear. What if Nanny broke down, right now, here on Main Street between the Evil House and Mr. Pratt's school? Why, the Evil House might kidnap Sam, dress her in rags and make her sweep sand forever, or Mr. Pratt might kidnap her and make her do lots of really difficult lessons. And then there was always the possibility that a haunted house might kidnap her.

The first of the haunted houses came up on the right. Sam watched it warily. She used to sneak into the haunted houses when the gang was trying to solve the rather scary Mystery of the Bone Ghosts. At first, it had been a lark. Sam had enjoyed delicious afternoon teas served by butlers while she took a good look at the skeletons propped up in armchairs, and she had pretended to chat with the skeletons, which had made Princess Feenia giggle, and Fee giggling had made Sam giggle too, and then Woofer had barked and wagged his tail, until finally the butlers had rather snootily turned them out.

But then one day, the whole caper had turned very serious and quite frightening. After Sam had stuffed herself with the most scrumptious sandwiches and cream cakes, she had tried to rise from the armchair, but two maids had held Sam down and a butler had blocked the doorway. Of course, Sam had not been in any real danger. Woofer had taken care of the butler quick smart with his sharp metal teeth, while Nanny and Princess Feenia had tackled the maids. After that awful adventure, once she was safely back in her own dear little house, Sam had vowed never to set foot in a haunted house ever again.

Suddenly Sam cried, "Stop!"

The others halted. "Is there a problem?" asked Quentin.

The pain in Sam's stomach was back, and she found herself staring at the haunted house and thinking of éclairs and custard pies and hot chocolate with marshmallows and imagining how nice it would be to pop inside and stuff herself with cream cakes again. Then Sam came to her senses. Woofer and Fee were gone, and Nanny was not as strong as she used to be. Besides, a Solver never broke his or her promises.

"I just wanted to say hallo to the poor old Mad Flapper," gushed Sam, blushing at the fib. "Everyone, say hallo."

"Hallo, Mad Flapper," chorused Quentin and Jennydoll.

"Woof," said Woofer.

A battered domestic stood in the front yard of the haunted house. It had no face, no uniform, no skin, and it was shaking the frayed leftovers of something. The Mad Flapper was always doing that, flapping mats, curtains, anything you gave it.

Sam giggled. "Do you all remember when Princess Feenia and I found a dead cat, and we gave it to the Mad Flapper. It was rather naughty of Fee, of course, but it was a brilliant prank."

"No," said Quentin.

"Yes," sighed Jennydoll.

"Woof," said Woofer.

Sam looked around for the more of the old faithfuls. There, in the middle of Main Street, was the robot she called Hole Digger lifting and dropping one half of a single arm, and the scrap of scoured metal bobbing on top of the dune that now covered a house was Roof Fixer, and the snake of silver tubing writhing through the sand in front of the Town Hall was Head Gardener

"Right," said Sam briskly, "That's enough dilly-dallying for today. Onwards to the school, Nanny. The Solvers have work to do."

The gang continued up Main Street, keeping a wary eye out for Rascal Ted. They waved to Constable Bob, who was on duty in front of the Town Hall at the end of Main Street, and Constable Bob waved back with his one good arm.

“Hallo, dears,” called Ginny Big-Mouth from her little kiosk. She was a bit of a busybody, and rather odd looking to boot, for she wore a saucepan as a hat to protect exposed circuits against the weather. “Any news, dears?”

“Not today. I’m afraid we’re *extremely* busy, Ginny,” called Sam.

“Of course, dears, of course,” said Ginny Big-Mouth.

The Solvers turned off the Main Street and walked towards the red schoolhouse. Sam cuddled up to Nanny, her thoughts now firmly set on the Sad Boy. She wondered what his name was and what her first words to him should be. Sam giggled, and felt her cheeks flush with excitement. She remembered the first time she saw the Sad Boy looking through a window, and how she and Woofer had crept up to say hallo. The Sad Boy had stared at her in astonishment, not even waving lest he tip off Mr. Pratt to her presence, but then the Sad Boy had smiled at her, and Sam’s heart had flip-flopped.

Of course, that didn’t mean Sam was in love with him or anything silly like that. She was a Solver, and this was just another case involving another kidnapped child, although perhaps the Sad Boy *might* be allowed to join her gang afterwards. *We could be the Seven Solvers then*, thought Sam, feeling all tingly with anticipation.

“Halt, Nanny, at once,” boomed an imperious voice.

Nanny shuddered to a stop, teetering for a moment because the poor old thing was not much good at sudden manoeuvres nowadays. A growl reverberated beneath Nanny’s chest plate, and a torrent of gibberish spouted forth overhead. Sam knew the imperious voice all too well. She turned and stared in horror at Mr. Pratt, the Headmaster, who faced the Solvers as if he were staring down a gang of hooligans. As usual, Sam was tongue-tied by Mr. Pratt’s air of authority.

“So Nanny, have you finally come to admit your charge?” asked Mr. Pratt. “Because I am no longer sure that I can accept her as a student. By now, she must be astonishingly ignorant, your willful neglect compounded by her naturally undisciplined character. I have *never*, in all my days, seen such a wild creature! Still, I cannot abandon a human in need, so I shall brush aside my reservations and embark immediately upon a course of remedial studies to bring her up to scratch.”

A clamour of clacks, coughs and rumbles ended in a roar of refusal from Nanny.

“Really, Nanny, your communication skills are woeful,” snapped Mr. Pratt. “Your charge must barely be able to parse a coherent sentence.”

“I won’t go to school!” shouted Sam, suddenly finding her voice.

“What a rude child! I ask you Nanny, what will her parents say when they discover that you haven’t attended to her education? I know her parents have fanciful ideas about child rearing, but despite their bohemian leanings, you are in clear violation of our town’s education protocols, Nanny.”

“Mother and Father are not bohemians,” shouted Sam. “They’re both brainy scientists.”

“Be that as it may, they are both absent and ...”

“Mother and Father are not absent, they’re just terribly busy saving the world,” said Sam hotly.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, since your parents are not present, Nanny is obliged to comply with Mawby Town’s charter and hand you over to me.”

Sam cringed. “Don’t let him take me, Nanny,” she begged.

Nanny lurched forward. Sam could not believe what was happening! Nanny was heading straight towards Mr. Pratt.

“No Nanny, no no no, don’t do it Nanny,” cried Sam, struggling in her quilt bag.

But Nanny clamped Sam close and they just kept walking. Suddenly, Nanny tipped to the left! She did a few teetering steps and went right around Mr. Pratt. Sam stretched her neck to look back, and was astonished to see that Mr. Pratt was standing in a *hole*! He tried to get out. He struggled fiercely, but no, the Headmaster was firmly stuck in the ground.

“What happened?” she asked in amazement.

“It’s obvious. The world is riddled with cracks and fissures. Things are always vanishing. The ground must have opened up under the Headmaster’s feet,” said Quentin.

“Oh, yes, of course,” stammered Sam, remembering poor Mr. Wonker and the Mystery of the Missing Houses. She was rather annoyed that she hadn’t solved this particular puzzle on her own, since it was so easy. How maddening that Quentin should so quickly get to the bottom of it. However, Sam soon forgot her irritation in the exhilaration of entering the schoolhouse for the first time.

“We’re finally here. Isn’t this exciting!” said Sam to the other Solvers.

“Yes indeed,” said Quentin.

The Solvers walked up the dark and musty hallway. It was really quite creepy. As they moved deeper into the building and it grew darker and darker, Sam wished that she had thought to bring a torch. How silly of her not to pack the proper equipment for an adventure! In the darkness, the gang could hear the school’s janitors and sweepers scuttling about. Good old Nanny was not taking any nonsense, and she kicked aside a few that did not get out of her way quickly enough. BANG! went the little robots as they hit the walls, and the echoes resounded through the building.

“Where are all the teachers? I thought they would put up a bit of a fight,” said Sam.

“They used to,” sighed Jennydoll. “But I don’t think the survivors can be much bothered anymore.”

“What do you mean *used to*?” snapped Sam.

Nanny rumbled, the deep sound growling queerly in the darkness.

“Give it a rest, Nanny! She’s going to find out the soon enough,” said Quentin scornfully.

“Find out WHAT!” shouted Sam, and the words thundered down the hallway. When the noises had faded, she added angrily, “I do wish you lot would just say what you mean.”

“No need, here we are,” announced Quentin, pushing at a door.

The door creaked open and light streamed into the hallway. Sam blinked and stared into the dusty brightness. Nanny entered, walked past the rows of neatly lined up desks covered with fine sand and stopped at a filthy window. Sam looked around. *This is the exact window that the Sad Boy always stares through*, she realised, *but where is he?* The room was empty. She glared angrily at Quentin and Jennydoll.

“You two are keeping secrets from me. Tell me where my Sad Boy is right now or I’ll throw you out of the gang!”

“We buried him,” sighed Jennydoll.

“WE DID NOT!” said Sam hotly.

“No, Jennydoll is quite correct,” said Quentin, “We buried the Sad Boy many, many years ago, and you wept for a week afterwards.”

“You two are being utter beasts!” shouted Sam. “I know you’ve never really wanted to rescue the Sad Boy and now, well, I don’t know what you’re up to, but I shall find out soon enough.”

“You do that,” said Quentin.

The Solvers went back down the dark hallway and left the school building. Outside, they passed Mr. Pratt.

“So Nanny, have you finally come to beg admittance for the girl?” said the Headmaster.

“BE QUIET!” shouted Sam at Mr. Pratt as they walked by. She was in no mood for the Headmaster’s nonsense, although she wasn’t quite sure why she was especially furious at him today. Sam looked down at Woofer2 and grinned. “Sic him, Woofer2, sic Mr. Pratt.”

“Woof,” said Woofer, and he trundled towards the Headmaster.

“Go away, you brute!” cried Mr. Pratt.

Woofer2 butted the Headmaster, backed up, then crashed into him again. Sam sighed with disappointment. She kept forgetting that Woofer2 didn’t have teeth. Still, it would have to do.

“That’ll *teach* you for being so mean,” shouted Sam, pleased with the quip, and she laughed as the Headmaster shook a fist in the air.

When they reached Main Street, the Solvers all turned right. They waved to Constable Bob, and Constable Bob waved back.

“Hallo, dears,” called Ginny Big-Mouth, “Any news, dears?”

“Not today. I’m afraid we’re *extremely* busy, Ginny,” called Sam.

“Of course, dears, of course,” said Ginny Big-Mouth.

“So, where are we going, Nanny?” asked Sam. She listened to Nanny’s usual nonsense, then frowned. “But I don’t want to visit Doctor Four. I’d rather go home and have lunch. I’d like some chunky vegetable soup and soft rolls slathered with butter, please, and ice-cream with strawberry topping for dessert.”

Nanny rumbled and just kept walking. Sam sighed. Nanny was a dear old thing, but she was so stubborn sometimes.

“Well, there’s really no need for you three to tag along,” said Sam to Quentin, Jennydoll and Woofer2, “So you might as well go back to the secret hideaway. You can all work on our plans to free the Sad Boy from Mr. Pratt’s schoolhouse.”

“What a brilliant idea,” said Quentin in his tiresome butler’s voice. He swung Jennydoll around and headed back towards Sam’s little house, Woofer2 trundling behind.

“See you all back at our secret headquarters,” called Sam.

“Woof,” said Woofer2.

Nanny and Sam entered the hospital. It was gloomy inside, but Sam could read the numbers on the doors as they walked down a long hallway, because a few lights were still flickering overhead. Sam looked with longing at the door with a three on it.

“I don’t like Doctor Four,” she complained, “Doc Three was so much nicer. I know Doc Three is broken, but he did tell such jolly jokes and I do miss him.”

Nanny opened the door with a four on it. Inside, a head on a desk said, “Hallo, Nanny. Hallo, Sam. Go right on in. Doctor Four is waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” said Sam politely to the head, for no matter what Mr. Pratt might think of her, Sam really was well-mannered.

“Hallo, Nanny. Hallo, Samantha,” said Doctor Four cheerily as they entered the room.

Sam scowled. She HATED being called Samantha. This was another reason why she liked Doc Three better than Doctor Four. Doc Three *never* called her Samantha.

Doctor Four did not rise to greet them — not because he was aloof, but because he was just a square box attached to a big table and could not move.

“So what seems to be the trouble today?” asked Doctor Four.

“My stomach hurts,” said Sam.

“So, what have you been feeding the girl, Nanny?” asked Doctor Four.

Sam was utterly astonished when Nanny let out a very long and very loud wail. What was wrong with the poor old dear? Sam huddled in her quilt bag, looking up at Nanny as the robot continued to growl and grumble. Something was definitely not right!

“If I may interrupt,” said Doctor Four. “Am I to understand that it has finally happened, that there is no food whatsoever left in Mawby Town for Samantha to eat?”

Nanny wailed again.

“Ah, that makes sense. My readings, even at this distance, all point to borderline starvation. What with her dementia also reaching its final stages, she really is in a bad way, Nanny. I highly recommend we utilise my euthanasia protocol. I know it conflicts with your protection protocol, but really, you must be sensible about this Nanny. Surely you don’t want the old woman to suffer a lingering and painful death?”

Nanny wailed again and clutched Sam tighter. Sam looked up at Nanny in confusion. What was the matter with the silly old thing? Sam yawned. She really

was feeling awfully sleepy. She could hardly keep her eyes open as Doctor Four and Nanny talked.

“Bring her to me, Nanny. I’ll ease her pain and end her suffering,” said Doctor Four.

Nanny growled and took a step backwards.

“Well, this is a problem, Nanny. I cannot take her from you, and you will not bring her to me. I cannot tolerate her suffering, you cannot tolerate her suffering. We have reached an impasse, and I cannot foresee how we might possibly solve this particular conundrum.”

Sam had not been paying attention to the grown up talk, but suddenly her ears pricked. “Do you need something solved, Doctor Four? If you like, I can put my gang on the case immediately. We’re awfully good at getting to the bottom of mysteries, you know.”

“I’m afraid this is a dilemma that only Nanny can solve,” said Doctor Four.

“Oh,” said Sam. She yawned, then snuggled up in her soft, warm bag and cuddled closer to Nanny. “Well, I’m sure it will all work out for the best then, Doctor Four. Nanny is, after all, a Solver. And I don’t let just anyone join my gang, you know.”

Sam’s eyes closed and she dozed off while Nanny and Doctor Four kept talking, back and forth, back and forth.

Of course, being the sort of girl that she was, Sam had adventures even in her *sleep*. She did, however, have a different gang in her dreams, so it was Sam and the Sad Boy, Woofers and Woofers2, Princess Feenia and Nanny who hung out in the secret hideaway and discussed mysteries and did the most AMAZING things together.

The Storyteller

...KV Johansen

The storyteller and her giant of a man came to the great wooden hall at Ulvsness when the last red light had faded from the roofs. She didn't look to be a skald, butterfly bright to show how lords had rewarded her: no gold at wrist and throat, no scrap of eastern silk. Her undyed tunic was overlarge and rolled up at the sleeves, her dark trousers patched at the knees. Even her long braid was the colour of bleached autumn grass. She was a drab moth of a woman, and, standing in the porch where guests would leave their weapons, that was the name she gave the doorwarden.

“Moth. A storyteller, from far away.”

Young Ulfleif reached the porch in time to hear this, and stopped dead in her headlong rush. Something about the stranger prickled her spine. Maybe it was that she had a look of the last queen, the grandmother Ulf barely remembered, who had either defied fate or served some grim foreknowledge to name her Ulfleif, wolf's heir.

Ulfleif was late coming to the hall because she had taken her lyre up to the peak of the Mertynsbeorg to spend an afternoon with the god who had watched the lands about long before the first king, Ulfleif's ancestor, came with his dragon-prowed ships out of the drowned west. The god Mertyn had been in a fey mood, telling Ulfleif, not for the first time that summer, that there were hidden powers come into the land, creeping dangers beyond Mertyn's strength to clearly see or oppose, and that Ulfleif should warn the queen, who never bothered to climb the god's crag. Ragnvor the queen would only laugh at her and tell her that since the death of their uncle, who had been their father's Sword and then Ragnvor's, Ulfleif could not afford to be a little girl, fretting over what-may-bes.

Ulfleif had gotten Mertyn telling tales of the days before the coming of Hrafnmod the Wise, stories of demons and gods and the little first folk who still lived on the high fells. They both forgot the warnings, or pretended they had, trying to shape one of the tales into a new song. Why not? Neither of them had the power to escape whatever doom stalked Ulvsness, or the fates that bound them to it. The gods of the high places were born of the land, and watched over it, but they could not direct the affairs of their folk. When the folk chose to ignore them, there was little they could do. Ulfleif, who would have been a skald, was doomed by birth to carry an ill-omened sword, and probably to die in battle, as nearly every man and woman cursed with that sword had.

It made a good story, but she would rather have been the skald chanting it.

Ulf dodged past the strangers, but had to stop to hitch at Kepra as the sword, still too large for her, snagged on the doorpost. She was skilled, for her age, with any other blade, but Kepra thwarted her even in little things. And in her haste she'd gone and left her lyre on the Mertynsbeorg for the dew to warp. The doorwarden sniggered. Ulfleif glanced up into the storyteller's sea-grey eyes and froze. Not a mere chance resemblance in the bones; it was like staring into her sister's silver mirror. Her own eyes, her grandmother's — some bastard kin come home?

The storyteller had to see it too. "Who are you?" she demanded, as though she had every right to make demands of a princess in her sister's hall. The woman's gaze slid to Kepra's garnet-studded hilt. Her man touched her shoulder, reminder of courtesies a storyteller ought to know. She bowed then.

"I'm called Moth. This is Mikki."

"Ulfleif Reginsdaughter," Ulf said, wondering, Moth who? Mikki of where? She eyed Mikki, whose head brushed the lintel of the door. He was an evident foreigner, with his moon-pale skin and eyes black as sea-coal, though his unkempt hair and beard were barley-gold. Ulfleif had taken him for the storyteller's servant, even a bondman, barefoot and dressed in nothing but an unbelted tunic. That hand on the shoulder was not a servant's gesture, though, and it was Moth, not Mikki, who carried the one bundle.

A sword? Wrapped in dark cloth and tucked under her arm, but it had the length. How had the doorwarden missed it? Moth gave her the merest shake of the head and a wry smile that was hardly there, and Ulfleif swallowed her protest unspoken.

"Ulfleif, the Queen's Sword," the hallmaster corrected, coming to greet the strangers as Ulfleif edged away.

"Ah," the storyteller said, and, as if it answered much, "The Queen's Sword. With the sword of the Queen's Sword."

Ulfleif fled, though there was no hint of mockery in Moth's voice. To be the King's or the Queen's Sword, the elder sibling's champion, was the second child's doom in their family, tradition that had come over the sea with Hrafnmod the Wise. It was hardly her fault she came to it so young, a girl not yet a woman, but they all made a joke of her — when they did not whisper she was fated, by her very name, for treachery.

"Your knees are torn," Ragnvor reproved Ulfleif when she reached the dais. "Were you up to see Mertyn again? You shouldn't pester the god like that."

"Climbing," said Ulfleif. "Builds muscle."

Ragnvor nodded, barely listening, and turned her attention back to her wizard, handsome, charming, red-haired Yorhas — who, some muttered, had his mind set on being more than wizard to the queen. Yorhas gave Ulfleif a sympathetic wink.

"A storyteller's come," Ulfleif offered. Ragnvor nodded again. Ulfleif sighed. Yorhas was in the low-backed chair that should be hers by the queen's high seat. Rather than squeezing onto a lower bench or drawing attention to herself by sending someone for a stool, Ulfleif took bread and a wooden platter of pork and kale from the table, and leaned against the wall behind her sister's seat. The place

of the Queen's Sword was watching. She would watch, since it seemed doorwarden, hallmaster, and even the warriors who were the queen's hearthswords were failing to do so. Ulfleif watched as the hallmaster showed Moth and her man to a seat on the bench along the wall. The fire flared between them, but she saw Moth watching her in turn. She *knew* the woman, deep in the heart, in that place where she had to bury all the songs, but that did not mean she was going to completely ignore the fact a stranger had brought a sword into the hall.

"Oh, sit down," Ragnvor said, noticing Ulfleif's stance. "I don't expect you to save me from enemies today, little sister." Ragnvor's own sword leaned on the arm of her chair, and if any enemies stormed the hall it would be Ragnvor defending Ulfleif, while the Queen's Sword tripped over Kepra and dropped it on her toe.

Ulfleif shrugged and stayed where she was. Ragnvor laughed and settled back to her meal, sharing her drinking-horn with Yorhas.

The storyteller watched the high table across the flames and Ulfleif frowned at the red glow reflected in her eyes. Her man's flashed green. Ulfleif rubbed her own. Salt driftwood in the fire. Green and blue danced on the edges of the flames.

While her sister's gleeman sang old songs indifferent well in a cracked voice, never varying from his last rendering, likely not from the one forty years before, Ulfleif amused herself guessing what sort of tales the storyteller brought. Peasant tales, if her clothes were any guide. Cunning shepherds and earthy demons? Her accent was careful and somewhat strange to the ear, but more suited to a lady than a labourer. New romances from the south, full of over-mannered maidens and anguished lovers? She rather thought not. Moth was Northron, even if her tongue would not let Ulfleif name the exact bay or high dale. Old familiar tales of the north with the flavour of some other king's folk, she decided, and prepared to enjoy herself.

When the trestle tables were cleared away and the servants circled with brimming jugs, the hallmaster brought the storyteller forward and gave her name to the queen.

Moth didn't stand formally before the hall, before the queen. She sat herself uninvited on the edge of the long central hearth, that distrusted bundle by her foot. People whispered, even laughed. Peasant manners. But as she spoke — it might have been for the queen alone, or for Ulfleif — her voice reeled all the folk of the hall in to her. The gleeman, skilled in that at least, threw out careful notes from his harp to fall among Moth's words, bright as silver, dark as midnight forest.

But Ulfleif could have chanted the words herself. The merest babe in the hall could.

Long ago, in the days of the first kings in the north, there were seven devils escaped from the cold hells, where the Old Great Gods had sealed them after the great war in the heavens.

And in the days of the first kings in the north, there were seven wizards. These wizards were wise, and powerful. They knew the runes and the secret names, and the patterns of the living world and of the dead. But the seven wizards desired to know yet more, and see yet more, and to live forever like the gods of the high places and the

goddesses of the waters and the demons of the forest and the stone and the sand and the grass.

Now the devils, having no place, had no bodies, but were like smoke or like a flame, and not of the earth at all. Some folk even call them kin to the Old Great Gods, though this is heresy—

“Of course,” said the storyteller, though which statement her voice mocked, Ulfleif could not decide.

And these seven devils who had escaped the cold hells hungered to be of the stuff of the world, as the gods and the goddesses and the demons of the earth may be at will, and as men and women are whether they will or no. But they did not desire loving worship and the friendship of living men and women, as do the gods of the high places and the goddesses of the waters. They did not watch and judge and cherish the souls of human-folk after death, as the Old Great Gods are said to do—

Was she some philosophical heretic of the far east, to add ‘are said to’?

—in the land beyond the stars. The devils craved dominion as the desert craves water, and they knew neither love nor justice nor mercy. They made a bargain with the seven wizards, that they would join their souls to the wizards’ souls, and share the wizards’ bodies, sharing knowledge, and unending life, and power.

But—

“So the story goes,” Moth added.

—the devils deceived the wizards, and betrayed them. The devils took the souls of the wizards into their own, and become one with them, and devoured them. They walked as wizards among the wizards, and destroyed those who would not obey, or who counselled against their counsel. They desired the homage of kings and the enslavement of the folk, and they were never sated, as the desert is never sated with rain. They would have ruled the earth and the folk of the earth and its gods and its goddesses; they would have devoured the spirit of the living earth and turned the strength of the earth against the Great Gods in their heaven.

So the kings of the north and the tribes of the grass and those wizards whom the devils had not yet slain pretended submission, and plotted in secret, and they rose up against the tyranny of the devils and overthrew them. But the devils were devils, even in human bodies, and not easily slain. Only with the help of the Old Great Gods were they bound, one by one, and imprisoned — in stone, in water, in earth, in the heart of a flame, in the youngest of rivers, in the oldest of trees, in the breath of a burning mountain, as all the stories say. And they were guarded by demons, and goddesses, and gods. And the Old Great Gods withdrew from the world again, to await the souls of human-folk in the heavens beyond the stars.

That preamble should have taken them into one of the many stories of the war of the seven devils, which everyone knew. But the storyteller pulled them into another tale, not one of the usual cycle, weaving new words into the old pattern. Ulfleif, on the first name, shook her head, not wanting to hear again of her namesake’s shame and treachery, and warning against telling it here, under this roof where Hrafnmod King died betrayed. Moth saw the warning, Ulfleif knew she did, but she went on speaking. Mikki, though, rose and disappeared into the darkness of the porch.

In the days of the first kings in the north, *said the storyteller*, there was a woman named Ulfhild the King's Sword. She was the sister of Hrafnmod the Wise, his captain, because her mother had raised her to be so, just as her grandmother had set her feet on the path of wizardry, in her girlhood at Hrafnsvjall, Ravensfell in the lost western islands. If her heart yearned for another road and she ran at the heels of her father's skald all her childhood, she knew her duty nonetheless. When the world broke and burned around them and the sea rushed in, it was not her harp she saved, but the sword she had inherited from her uncle, to carry to the founding of the kingdoms in the north.

Ulfhild was one of the seven wizards of the tales. She became the devil Vartu Kingsbane, who was perhaps not the most powerful of the seven devils, but who would be the most hated, for Hrafnmod the Wise was a beloved king, and all the tales agree it was she who betrayed and slew him.

Now, in this tale, long years after those days, long years after the stories you know, the devil Vartu, who had once been Ulfhild, the silver wolf of Ulvsness, slept in what might pass for death — swordless, fleshless, but she slept lightly. Death could not take the devils and the Old Great Gods would not. Earth bound her, earth prisoned her, buried deep beneath a grave-hill of tunnels and caves and chambers where the little first folk had once laid the bones of their dead, generation upon generation, turning a natural ridge into a great mound, a village of the dead. A demon of the earth stood sentinel, lest the devil find a way to weaken the bonds the Old Great Gods themselves had set on her.

You all know what is said of the demons: 'Though they may wander all the secret places of the world, their hearts are bound each to their own place.' The grave-hill of the first folk was the place of the great bear-demon Moraig and had been since before bones were ever laid there. Save for her, it was a place of stillness, almost forgotten in the heart of the earth. And there Vartu lay, through season upon season, and none spoke to her but the bear's son.

"The what?" demanded the queen's wizard, and the tale shattered. Even Ragnvor gave him a stern look for his rudeness, but Yorthas only laughed, like a boy. The queen smiled forgiveness. Ulfleif made a face, then realized the storyteller had seen it.

"Ah," said Moth gravely. She drew up her knees and locked her hands around them. "Didn't I say the demon had a son?"

"How?" Yorthas asked, all innocence. He glanced sidelong at Ragnvor and curled his lip at his own mocking cleverness.

"In the usual way," the storyteller said mildly. "She loved a man. A human man, a Northron raider whose heart had turned to peace and the growing of cabbages, who cleared a steading in that distant inland forest and fell in love with a demon's song. She bore a son, and when the sun set on the first day of his life, blind mewling cub turned to naked squalling babe. Which worried her, as you might imagine."

Moth made a place for them to laugh, then, and they were glad to do it, but Yorthas would not let it alone.

"How perverse."

“Do you think?” Moth remained unruffled. “It’s a tale. Not one for tonight. Moraig’s lover died when an old feud caught up with him. The demon avenged him, and mourned, and raised her man-cub in the caverns of the devil’s grave. The cub grew and went wandering, driven by his father’s restless blood. He lived among human-folk in lands like ours where demons are not feared. But he always returned to the land of his mother’s heart, and when he did, he brought tales of the wide world and told them to the devil, sitting by a cavern where maybe a bone or two showed in the dry earth that sifted between the stone slabs of the roof.

“Why?” Ulfleif whispered it before Yorthas could, and bit her lip, ashamed of discourtesy.

“Perhaps he had grown used to the noisy ways of men,” Moth suggested. “Perhaps he found his mother’s calm stillness and her sweet sad singing over-lonely. Perhaps he’d thought too long on the stories of the first kings in the north, and laid his own colours over Ulfhild’s tale.”

The bear’s son came often to the devil’s grave, as demons judge time. He told of how the first kings in the north, and the seven wizards, and the seven devils, had grown to legend, bright and gleaming and dark as midnight. He told her of travelling among the tribes of the Great Grass and the distant mountains of the east. He told her smaller things, of friends and ships and sea-journeys. He told her of iris and kingcup along the brook, of a thorn-tree in bloom like a drift of snow, of fawns beneath the oaks and beeches, autumn coming early and the geese crying away south.

One time he told her, “They’re saying down on the river that a shaman of the Great Grass spoke in a trance with Honey-tongued Ogada, sealed in stone. The goddess of the forest river is troubled; she hears things, feels things, passed between the gods of the high places and the goddesses of the waters. Something is wrong. We feel it, too. Do you? Would you still wake and trouble the heart of Moraig my mother, if you could? Or would you rather sleep till even the stones of the earth have forgotten you?”

The bear’s son told her, “I think whatever you gained, you lost more, and I wonder, when I listen to the shadows of shadows of tales ... was what the seven found in the end the thing that you were seeking, or did you lose it on the way?”

Vartu had indeed felt a stirring among the buried devils. Silver threads of power bound her, and amber, and the crimson of blood. Threads knotted and sparked, ran and danced. All seven of them were bound, scattered across the world, and somewhere, one of her fellows had also woken, but not to watch. He picked at the bindings, fretting at the silver threads, until they began to fray. Years had passed, as one, and then another, and another thread thinned. With the weakening of the bonds, Vartu who had been Ulfhild stretched and found faint embers still live in her soul. She shaped, slowly — years, perhaps, passed in the shaping — a rune, and another, and set them on the threads that bound her.

Earth shifted, and shivered, and trickled down the walls of that deepest chamber. A stone fell.

Moraig did nothing, did not sense the runes, or never thought to test herself the work of the Old Great Gods.

The devil drew blood from the marrow, and her bones found flesh again. Earth crumbled, and she dragged a single breath. Then she stopped, and let the bindings lie. There was nothing waiting for her beyond the mound, and Vartu, who would once have turned that emptiness to anger and made the world know that she was free, was only curious, and weary, to find that somehow, sometime, ambition, will, had sunk into ashes.

Maybe it had been when Hrafnmod died.

So having nothing else to do, she waited, hidden in earth. She felt, one thread at a time, the slow unpicking of another's chains, weakening the interwoven bonds that held them all, and she wondered what would happen when that one was free.

It was only a tale, Ulfleif reminded herself, a lying-saga spun by an over-bold storyteller for an evening's pleasure, no true history. The devils had been bound by the Old Great Gods themselves.

The threads at which he fretted frayed, spun out to nothing. He was free, Honey-tongued Ogada who had been Heuslar the Cunning. The god of a mountain died, his stones shattering, broken by runes long-laid against him while he thought his prisoner slept.

The web that bound all the seven shivered, weakened, other threads snapping.

If Vartu felt anything, and she was not sure that she did, it was wariness.

Ogada came for her. The first she knew of it was the splintering of trees, the fracturing of earth and stone in a red-skied dawn. Light blinded her, a faint ray spearing eyes that had stared only into darkness since flesh returned to them. The demons, mother and son, attacked, thinking it was some fool come to wake the devil, as wizards talked sometimes of doing, dreaming of a devil bound and obedient to their will. The demons did not realize what they faced until it was too late. Ogada knew the way to kill a demon, even one as great as Moraig. No doubt he had cast runes and searched in dreams; he knew where the demon's heart lay hidden, and it was too late for Vartu to warn Moraig then. Ogada split the oldest of the old oaks with a claw of fire, striking from the sky, and he clove the demon's heart in two with a new-forged sword, Moraig's name cut on its blade in runes of death. Dying, the bear cursed him in the name of the Old Great Gods. But Moraig died nonetheless, and Ogada hurled the bear's son over the brow of the ridge, to fall unheeded amid the broken trees.

Vartu, in the strength of white rage, pulled herself fully into life again and flung stone and earth aside.

"Cousin!" Ogada cried, and tried to embrace her, with no heed for the fine eastern silk he wore or his cloak of slate-blue feathers, though she was filthy, earth-caked, trailing rotten rags.

Vartu pushed him away and turned her back on him to crouch by the great demon's body, clenching her hand in the thick fur, feeling the cooling skin beneath. Kingdoms had cursed and feared and followed her as she looked for something lost, or never possessed, and she had learned to envy a forest demon whose life was the slow breath of spring and leaf-fall, envy a cub who clambered into every

muddy hole and hollow he could find, came home burr-tattered and wasp-stung and limping, and went out rambling again.

“Ulfhild ... *Vartu*, you’re confused. It’s difficult, crawling back to life. It’s me, Ogada. You remember me.”

She did, indeed.

She spun and kicked the sword from his hand while he gaped, snatched it from the air and swung it, anger kindling a burning wake in the air, but he melted to shadow, a trick he had, and danced away.

“I thought you’d want out of this. Have you turned coward in the end? The Great Gods won’t leave us to peace in the grave forever. They’ll be back to finish what they began, when they find the courage to face the road from the heavens again.”

Earth erupted beneath him, flung him forward, and she hurled the sword like a spear, heard him roar both anger and pain as it struck, but he was gone, fled into the air, a falcon speeding away. The sword fell, its blade shattered.

She had no feather cloak and could not follow.

Demons were not humans, to linger ghostly if left unburied, but she scattered a double handful of earth over the great brown bulk of the bear anyway.

“Go with your heart into the earth that bore you,” she wished Moraig hoarsely, the only parting blessing one could give a demon.

You’re still here, the other demon whispered in her mind. *Vartu* stayed where she was, listening to him, dragging a leg, stumbling, pulling himself uphill, until his breath was hot on her neck and the reek of his blood all around her. He was small only compared to his mother. *Vartu* would not — she knew that then, and it astonished her — would not, could not, fight this demon.

Even dying, he could break her neck with a lifted paw.

“I did not call Ogada here,” she whispered. She had not helped the demon, either. Perhaps she might have broken the last bonds in time, if she had realized that she did care.

“I know.” The words were breath as much as voice, felt on the skin.

Vartu looked around, slowly, not to spark a predator’s reactions. But the tawny-gold bear only blinked and lowered his muzzle to touch his mother’s fur.

“She would say I should stay here, to guard you.”

“You can’t keep me here now.”

“No,” he agreed. “I have the heart of my father’s people. I’ll see Ogada dead. So go, *Vartu*. Flee. I’ll find you again when I’m able.” The bear’s son licked his mother’s face and turned away. *Vartu* called to him.

He looked back. One side of his head was clotted with blood, and he could barely walk.

“Wait till you’ve healed, fool.”

He ignored that, limped on.

Vartu followed. He endured her following, till he stumbled down the bank at the shallow river’s ford and lay panting, unable to rise.

“Fool cub.” She slid down after him, took his heavy head unresisting onto her lap, tore her hand with his claw and traced a rune on his forehead in her own blood, then two more, with all her will in them. *Sun*, for life and heart, *boar* for protection,

aurochs for strength. In silence, he let her, and the sun warmed the both of them. She had forgotten sun, till he told her of it as she lay in her grave. There would be rain before evening; she smelt it on the wind. And so the world went on.

When the bear's son could travel again, they travelled together. Vartu cast the runes and they followed where such foretelling led, hunting Ogada.

But there came a night, a cold night, when frost cracked the very stones and the stars burned sharp and high.

One came, from the Old Great Gods.

The bear's son never woke, but Vartu was called from his arms to stand before a God.

Ulfleif gripped her sword's hilt. Ragnvor drew a breath like she prepared to deal a blow. Yorhas leaned forward, hands on his knees. In all the hall, no-one stirred or coughed or called for the ale-servers. When a log burst and spat a fountain of sparks, they all jumped as though a messenger from the Old Great Gods had thundered divine wrath.

In the final battle, as the devils knew they were defeated, as they went down before the power of men and Gods, they drew on the power of their devils' souls, the stuff of the distant heavens, and they drew on the power of their human souls, children of the Old Great Gods. They drew on the earth of which human-folk were made. Souls of the remote heavens and souls of the earth, they worked one great spell. They set a curse on the road they could not storm, the road to the land of the Old Great Gods. They cursed it, not against the human souls that travel it in death and sometimes return again to new life — their war was never on humankind, though it seemed they had forgotten that, drowning in human thoughts and lost in conquest. The devils cursed the road against the Old Great Gods, to hold them in torment as they travelled it and while they remained on the earth where they had no right to walk.

So though the Great Gods lingered and endured to see the devils bound, they did so wounded and in pain, and their return to the remote heavens was a retreat along that cursed road.

But now, *now* they counted the journey worth the pain it dealt them. Not when Ogada gnawed over long years at the bindings they had set on the devils. Not when he slew a god of the earth and burst his bonds and came to kill the demon Moraig, the heart of the deep woods. But now.

The Great God was a stark streak of shifting light, a colour in the air. It came not in battle but to make a bargain.

The bargain was one Vartu could not refuse.

"What was the bargain?" the wizard asked. Ulfleif could have kicked him, though she wanted to know herself. But Moth was patient.

"Her service, as their sword."

"Vartu would have spat in the God's face!"

"She did not. She agreed."

"She never would. Why? They had their quarrels, but she would never betray her fellows. Never. What did the Gods offer?"

"That's no part of this story."

But it is! Ulfleif thought. It must be.

Vartu agreed, and the God withdrew. It would be long ages recovering from its journey in the land beyond the stars. For that, Vartu was glad.

A sword stood in the earth where the Old Great God had hovered, its hilt silver and black niello, its tapering blade obsidian. Already frost settled, white on its edge. Lakkariss. It was made not for battle, but to drink the souls of the seven devils.

Someone in the hall hissed, a breath sharply indrawn. Ulfleif saw the storyteller's man again, leaning in the doorway, a shape too large to be any other.

Moth looked down at her hands, and her voice no longer told the story to each and every one alone. She wanted it over; almost she sounded as though she grew bored with it. "So Vartu cast the runes again, and again they followed, through a year and another, under forest, over water, to the sea-gnawed cliffs of the north and west of the world. They came to the seat of Hrvnmod the Wise overlooking the landing-beach that Ulfhild's wizardry had found for him, when they ran before the wind from the drowned islands. They found Heuslar there, her kinsman Heuslar, who was the devil Honey-tongued Ogada."

"And what then?" asked the wizard, sitting back in his chair.

Moth looked up, and it could not be firelight in her eyes; she was between Ulfleif and the fire. "You were a man of honour once, I thought, kinslayer. Maybe it's not entirely the fault of man or devil, what you've become. We all lost our way. I meant to kill you where you sat, but I don't find I can. It seems I haven't quite become a murderer after all."

The giant in the doorway stirred and the storyteller held up a hand, though she could not have seen him. Yarthos seemed to blur a moment, like a fish glimpsed through tumbling water. He rose half to his feet and dropped back into his chair again with a grunt. Ragnvor turned to whisper, "What's wrong?"

Did she not see, had she not been listening? The tale had opened its jaws and swallowed them into its heart. Ulfleif could hardly breathe. And Yarthos, Yarthos flung himself to his feet again, the queen's sword naked in his hand.

Moth still did not rise. "You always did run when the odds were against you, Heuslar, but if you leave here now, you walk out by the door. I fenced the hall with runes against your vanishing. But I give you this, for the man you were — Mikki would kill you for his mother, but mine is an older claim and comes first — I call you to a holmganging, cousin, for my brother. I say before the folk of the hall that once was his and before Mertyn the god of this place, that it was you who murdered Hrvnmod and I will prove it on your body in fair fight."

Holmganging was an old thing out of the tales, two warriors on an islet, before fate and the Old Great Gods — though Moth had rather pointedly not named the Great Gods to witness.

“A fair fight?” Yarthos sneered. “With a shard of the cold hells for your blade, as you’ve had such care to boast? I should have left you to rot and sought out one of the others, someone who hasn’t turned coward and bootlicking cur of the Gods.”

Moth shrugged, as if she acknowledged the slur to be reasonable. “A fair fight,” she repeated. “No wizardry, Heuslar. Steel and blood and human bone. Someone will lend me a sword. And maybe the judgement will be just and we will both die.” A glance over her shoulder. “And should that chance, the cub will make certain we both stay dead, this time. He knows what Lakkariss is for.”

“Don’t be a fool, Moth,” the giant in the doorway said, a voice soft and deep as shadows in night.

“Blind! Your brother plotted your murder in the end. You owed Hrafnmod nothing. I was trying to save you, to save us and our cause.”

“*Hrafnmod* might have saved me.” She shrugged, letting that pass. “So, you have a sword. Let someone lend me one and we’ll take this down to the shore. The tide’s out; we can cross to one of the isles at the harbourmouth. No need to wait for daylight.”

“Enough of this nonsense.” The queen jerked to her feet and closed her hand over the wizard’s on the royal sword. “Give me that, Yarthos. If this is your idea of an evening’s entertainment, I can’t say I think much of it.”

“Ragn! It’s not a game!” Ulfleif tried to tug her own blade free, with some vague idea of getting between her sister and the wizard, but as always, cursed Kepra seized on her. Yarthos flung Ragnvor stumbling aside, overturning her chair. Ulfleif yelled as the sword finally answered. She swung, unbalanced, at where the wizard had been, but Yarthos was gone. He cleared the fire in a single leap from the dais. Moth let him pass and only turned to watch.

“I won’t fight you,” Yarthos snarled over his shoulder. “I remember what’s due honour and kinship, Ulfhild, even if you choose not to.”

The storyteller’s man took one step inside the doorway, the doorwarden’s two-handed axe in his grip. His eyes reflected green, like an animal’s. He grinned, showing his teeth. Fangs.

“She’s offering you more than you deserve,” he said. “I’d rather you just died here.”

The wizard threw back his head and called fire like a cataract down from the rafters, singing the names of runes. Ulfleif recognized only a few. Someone screamed. Moth quietly drew runes in the ashes on the hearthstones with her forefinger. The fire died and the demon was still there, shaking ashes from his hair, unharmed. Ragnvor whimpered, a sound muffled by her fist, and Ulfleif’s hand found her sister’s shoulder. Ragnvor scrambled up and Ulfleif drew her back against the wall, pressed close against her side.

“He kissed me, this afternoon,” Ragnvor said. “He asked me if I’d ... Ulf, he’s one of the *seven devils* ...”

Ulfleif squeezed her sister’s hand.

Yarthos’ — *Ogada*’s body had gone insubstantial as a reflection in water, and within him a column of black smoke roiled and twisted, streaked with livid flame. Claws of smoke struck at the demon and Mikki ducked aside. The doorpost behind

him shattered. His axe swept through the devil and trailed smoke at the end of the swing, but Ogada only laughed. Then he was a man again, cut but shallowly, the queen's sword leaping to bite. The axe was faster than the eye and metal shrieked on metal. Ogada danced back, man and fire-edged shadow in one, and men and women scrambled from the benches, pushing their way to the far ends of the hall. None tried to draw a weapon to defend the place, but in the rush old Rolf stumbled on his bad leg and fell. He pulled himself up, cursing, clutching one of the posts of the centre aisle, and it was ill chance the devil found him in the path of his retreat. He swept the old man aside with his left hand, flung him over the fire to land unmoving on the edge of the dais. The wooden pillar was scored half through as if by claws of fire. Red embers smouldered and blossomed into flame.

"Get out!" the hallmaster roared, and contradicted himself. "To the queen!"

Few, even of those who could, did flee out the door. Most could not come to it without crossing where the demon and the devil fought. Some of the hearthswords edged warily around the fire, only to find the storyteller there, between them and the queen. With slow deliberation, watching Ogada and Mikki, Moth unwrapped the bundled cloth from a black scabbard. Frost raised fern-leaves on it. Ferns melted under her hand.

"Out," she said and the warriors scattered. Ulfleif edged forward a little, putting Ragnvor behind her, for what good that would do. Ragnvor stared like a snake-charmed bird and made no move to snatch Kepra from her, which Ulfleif more than half expected, her sister being the true warrior, already the veteran of two battles against summer raiders.

"Did you—" Ulfleif's voice croaked and squeaked when she tried to call to the storyteller "—Did you still want to borrow another sword?"

Moth looked over her shoulder. "No," she said flatly, as the demon and Ogada crashed together. "He's made his choice."

Ogada held the demon pinned to the floor, the queen's sword through an arm. The devil touched his bleeding side, drew a rune against Mikki's chest. With an animal snarl the demon hurled him off and lurched up.

Moth flung the scabbard aside and went straight through the fire. She came out between them, a thing of smoke and ice and churning shadows, with a heart of sullen flame. Mikki stumbled down to one knee behind her, leaning on the haft of the axe. A powerful rune, it had been. With his own blood he smeared it away.

"*Traitor*," Ogada said. "What was your price?" He edged towards the door again. Moth moved with him. The blade was obsidian, as her tale had described. Firelight burned in it; ice edged it.

"Not a question of price," she said, "but of what, in the end, I find worth fighting for. And that is not you or myself or a war the Gods have already won."

Ogada could have fled out the door then, but he charged Moth. The air about him burned. Despite all they had seen, a few of the onlookers shouted encouragement as the devils traded blows, two skilled swordthanes sporting. There was no sporting in their faces, though. They clashed together and stayed. For a moment Ulfleif could see them, two human bodies locked close, eye to eye, sword to sword, two streaks of light pale and cold as the aurora, tendrils of lightning pulling them into one, and

then the queen's blade shattered, splinters flying like spears. The black blade struck and Ogada screamed. Ragnvor cowered, covering her ears, screaming herself, and she was far from the only one in the hall to do so.

The obsidian sword drank the light that was the devil Ogada. Light writhed and tore and rushed to the blade as water plunges underground in the sinkhole of a limestone brook, lost to the trackless depths, and the man Heuslar still screamed as if his heart were being ripped apart. Maybe it was. The blade was not a blade, but a vast space, a crack into nightmare, unending fangs of black ice, mountain, crevasse, ice that was stone, under a low pewter sky and a copper sun, cold and sullen. It swallowed Ogada and reached for Moth, who held Heuslar close as an embrace, the sword between them.

Ulfleif tried to move but could not break free of Ragnvor, whose fingers clawed into her wrist. It was the demon who flung himself up and jerked the storyteller away, wrapped his arms tight around her. Heuslar's body fell and the demon, warily, freed one hand to wrench Lakkariss out, never letting go of Moth.

Frost crawled over the blade when Mikki dropped it on the floor.

The burning pillar fell and the beam it supported hung suspended. The whole roof groaned.

"Yorthas!" Ragnvor wailed.

"Get out! Everyone get out!" the hallmaster called, and, "Seize the strangers!" Which was rather less good sense.

Ragnvor still wailed. Ulfleif slapped her. The glazed, staring look left her sister's eye; she made a fist, as though they were back to being squabbling children.

"You're queen — it's for you to command here, not him."

Ragnvor stared, gulped, and nodded, calling to the hallmaster. "Leave them! Just get everyone out!"

There came a sound like a falling tree, a long, drawn-out cracking and a rush of air. Ragnvor pulled Ulfleif back against the wall as the beam and part of the roof plunged into the hearth. Smoke billowed around them.

"Come on. Out." Hand in hand, blinded, choking, Ulfleif and Ragnvor picked a way through jagged abrupt timbers, crawling, clambering. Most of the shouting seemed to come from outside now, but there were still voices within, lost in darkness or trapped at the far end where the roof held. Fire rose up, walling those off. Some of the hearthswords called for the queen.

"I'm here, I'm here!" Ragnvor let go Ulfleif's hand as her warriors surrounded them. "People are trapped in the east end. Cut a way in from outside."

Ulfleif dropped back as they made it to the porch. She turned aside to the dark shape that was the demon, kneeling again, still wrapped around Moth. Mikki spoke, a low, angry-sounding murmur in a language that was almost, but not quite, familiar — ancient poetry given flesh and blood — and Moth once or twice protested. Telling her off, Ulfleif figured, and was suddenly so furious she didn't think before hitting the man on the shoulder with her fist. A bloody arm seized her. Devil and demon surged to their feet. Mikki dropped Ulfleif the next instant.

"Put the fire out!" she yelled at them both. "People are trapped!"

The storyteller stared at her, utter incomprehension; Ulfleif thought that in those eyes she could see all the way down the road that Lakkariss had opened. Vartu was going to devour her soul like the stories said; they would all die in that endless ice.

“Moth,” Mikki said gently. “Fire?”

Moth looked around, said, inanely, “Oh,” and swept a hand. No runes, no wizard’s work. The flame of hearth, roof, pillars, all rushed into the devil’s hand and was gone.

It was very dark.

Wood creaked. From the far end of the hall, axes thudded. Someone shouted in triumph.

Ulfleif felt Moth, a movement of cloth and coldness, brush past. Saw an edge of light like moon on snow as she picked up Lakkariss. Moth and the sword disappeared, but Ulfleif heard her, felt her return, weaving and ducking through the fallen timbers. Retrieving the scabbard, she guessed.

“The ridgepole’s coming down,” Moth said, and gave Ulfleif a shove towards the porch, much as Ragnvor might have done.

The whole roof of the hall did come down, and Moth and Mikki were gone when Ulfleif next looked for them. By the light of braziers and torches, the servants and hearthswords still searched the ruins. Old Rolf was dead, and there were at least four others crushed by falling timbers. Half a dozen injured were carried away to the queen’s bower, but they laid the dead out on the clean grass, Heuslar who had for half a year been the queen’s friend and counsellor Yorthas well apart. People avoided even walking near his corpse, though Ulfleif supposed the devil Ogada was well and truly dead at last. Or — merely bound again in the cold hells? That, she was not going to ask.

Ulfleif ignored Ragnvor’s raised voice demanding to know where she went. She took the path that followed the creek below the foot of the Mertynsbeorg, heading east and inland.

She caught up with grey light promising dawn. Moth waited, standing like a soldier on guard, Lakkariss slung at her shoulder. No sign of Mikki.

“And what does the Queen’s Sword want?” the storyteller asked wearily, as Ulfleif panted up.

“Are you just going to leave?”

“Yes.”

“What about the hall?”

“Build a new one.”

“People died.”

“Yes.”

“I thought—” Ulfleif began, and stopped. “You should stay.”

“Ulvsness already has a Queen’s Sword,” Moth observed. “And Vartu Kingsbane is not a Sword any queen is likely to want at her back.”

“I never wanted to be a swordthane either,” Ulfleif confessed. “I was ... I was hoping I could learn some new stories. I mean, you were *born* in the drowned isles. You grew up there. You’re the one who *found* Ulvsness! You saw the battle at Vetrgrondal, where the three kings fought!”

“A war my oathbreaking began.”

“Oh. Yes. But — I want to know how *this* tale ends.”

“I already know.” Moth shifted the sword at her shoulder.

Ulfleif persisted. “And you left out — there was no true bargain, was there? What did the Old Great Gods do, to make you carry that sword?”

Moth studied Ulfleif, who knew she ought to be afraid, but could not seem to manage it.

“I ... can’t say.” Moth looked off, up the mountain, where the pre-dawn grey was spreading. “I’ll tell you something I should not, young Ulf, and you can decide if you’ll trust a devil’s truth. The Old Great Gods are cruel. Not cruel to human-folk, whom they would lock safe from all harm and change in a treasury of souls, if they could. But for the spirits of the earth — the gods of the high places and the goddesses of the waters and the demons of the wild — the Great Gods have no regard, because they have no claim on such souls of the earth and thus count their existence worth nothing at all.”

No regard for the souls of the earth ... Ulfleif looked where Moth was looking, up the mountainside. “Mikki? A hostage? Does he know?”

“I hope not. Go away, young Ulf.”

“I’m going to.” There. She had said it, for her own ears to hear.

Moth was not listening. She looked up the mountain again, and there was the demon, just coming down around the birches, Ulfleif’s lyre tucked under an arm.

“Hey, young skald!” he called cheerfully. “I went up to offer our apologies to Mertyn, since Moth won’t go anywhere near him, and he said you’d be wanting this. Moth — catch!”

Ulfleif yelped as her precious lyre sailed at them. Moth caught it one-handed; Mikki hauled his ash-and-blood-stained tunic off. Mother-naked beneath. Ulfleif dared one admiring look as light ran over the man, before the bear dropped on all fours, shaking his coat into order like a waking dog. He caught the tunic up in his teeth and lumbered on down, limping on a foreleg already healing, demon-swift.

Moth handed the lyre to Ulfleif and tucked the tunic through her belt. “More patching,” she muttered, with all a princess’s disdain for such matters. But Mikki rested his nose on the storyteller’s shoulder a moment and Moth leaned back against him, such an ease and certainty in his being there that Ulfleif envied them both, an envy that was almost pain.

“Are you any good?” Moth asked, with a nod at the lyre.

Ulfleif raised her chin. “Yes.” Mertyn said so, and the gods of the earth did not lie. “I’d — I would be a skald if I could. Egill Loremaster of the Geirlingas offered to teach me, if I weren’t — I’ve already learnt the old lays and sagas, all the ones I can.”

Moth looked at her with the devil's eyes. Looked right through her, into her soul and out the other side. Ulfleif shivered. Vartu was a thing greater and wilder and more fierce than Mertyn, not of the earth at all. No, Ulfleif was not exactly afraid, only — standing on the edge of something.

“You — take an aunt's advice, young Ulfleif, wolf's heir. Don't burn your heart out doing what you're told is your duty. Don't leave yourself hollow. There are more than enough who can and will wield swords for their queen. Too few to make new songs and carry the old lays into tomorrow.”

Mertyn had once said something similar and Ulfleif had protested to the god that she had no choice. She had never considered what no choice meant. Would she go on saying 'no choice' till there truly was none? Whatever Ulfhild had chosen to do in the past, the Great Gods trapped the storyteller now, because she had found something she would not betray. Nothing bound Ulfleif but tradition, and the past stood before her, telling her where that had gone wrong.

Don't leave yourself hollow.

Ulfleif took the sword from her belt. For a moment she held them both, Kepra and the lyre.

“Take it,” she said. Her voice shook. She swallowed and tried again. “Ulfhild, take Kepra. It's yours, isn't it?”

Moth blinked, her grey eyes Ulfleif's own once more, sea-grey of the blood of Hrafnmod. “It should stay with the Kings' Swords.”

“But you'll need a sword,” Ulfleif said. “Something other than — than that one.” She nodded at Lakkarris. “It's going to be a long road, isn't it?”

Five devils still sleeping. Or not.

Moth said nothing, but she held out both hands and Ulfleif laid Kepra sheathed across them, like a queen gifting her hearthsword. Moth drew it, whispering, from the fleece-lined scabbard. Dawn gilded it.

If Ulfleif did not ask now ... “What does the blade say? The runes I was taught are different from those.”

“Keeper. *The Wolf made me for Ravensfell.*” Moth turned the blade. “*Strength. Courage. Wisdom. Demon-forged in the drowned isles.*”

“And the hilt?”

Moth ran her thumb over the garnets set in the gold, the hair-thin lines of the runes on the cross-guard. “A prophecy. We never knew what it foretold. The Wolfsmith was a seer and dreamed riddles. It reads, *Until the last road and the last dawn.*”

Ulfleif shivered. Someone walking over one's grave, as the old proverb had it, though how that worked if you had fled the grave, Ulfleif could not guess.

“To the end of the *world*?” she asked.

Moth shrugged, gave that fleeting wry smile. “Probably a charm against rust.”

“But it must—” Ulfleif checked her protest when Mikki chortled.

Moth grinned outright, sheathing Kepra. “It's come home. Now you go home, Ulfleif. Tell your queen to find a Sword with a heart for it, and get yourself to the hall of the Geirlingas and Egill Loremaster.”

“I'll see you again.”

“We’re going east.”

“So might I, someday, after I’ve learnt all I can here in the north.”

“Why?”

“I told you. I want to know how this story ends.”

“Too long a road for you,” Moth said.

“I could keep you company on it, for a time.”

Mikki rested his heavy muzzle atop Ulfleif’s head a moment. “Do so, wolfling.” He laughed, which shook her to her very bones. “I expect we’ll be easy enough to find, wherever we wander. For now, go home, before your sister fears you’re eaten.”

Ulfleif nodded and turned away, though she headed up the crag. From there, she thought she could watch them going, but mist crept from the creek to swallow them, Ulfhild the King’s Sword first, then the bear. Ulfleif struck a chord from the lyre and sang for them anyway.

An Interview with Pamela Freeman

...Edwina Harvey

Having made a name for herself as a children's author with over 17 children's books published including the highly acclaimed Floramonde series, Pamela Freeman recently turned her hand to a fantasy trilogy for adults: The Castings Trilogy comprising *Blood Ties*, published in 2007, *Deep Water*, published in 2008 and *Full Circle*, to be published in 2009. Intrigued by *Blood Ties*, Edwina Harvey asked Pamela some questions about the series and the shift from writing for children to writing for adults, and was surprised to discover that the corner stone for the Castings Trilogy was laid well before many of Freeman's other works.

EH: When Blood Ties was published, there was a bit of fuss made over you, as an award-winning children's author, now writing for adults. I've read at the back of Blood Ties that an earlier draft was your thesis. I wonder if it was a conscious decision to write for adults, or was it just a story you wanted to write?

PF: It was both. The first-person stories [in Blood Ties] came first, and were clearly for adults. I didn't know what larger story they fitted into, but writing them allowed me to construct the world. Then, when my son was a toddler, I decided to do a doctorate in writing, and thought this would be a good time to try to write an adult fantasy based on the work I'd already done. I thought it would be useful to have a supervisor to help me make the transition from kids' books — and it really was! I was lucky enough to have Debra Adelaide for my supervisor; a wonderful editor and writer herself. She pushed me to develop my writing in new ways and I'm very grateful to her because the shift from kids' stuff was harder than I thought it would be, but I had to make it because the Castings story was definitely not a kids' story.

EH: Am I right in thinking that it started life as a YA novel, then grew up?

PF: No. It was always an adult book, right from the start, although I did play around at one time with making Ash's story a stand-alone YA book — but then I realised how he fitted in with the major storyline and gave up that idea.

EH: *I like horses, so I particularly liked Bramble's story, and was convinced that I'd found a writer as keen on horses as I am, yet when I read your website, you don't mention any great passion for horses. Was it all research and observation, or have you ridden?*

PF: I've ridden only a couple of times — I'm allergic to both horses and hay, so riding is a bit fraught for me! Think of it as the wish fulfillment part of the book... But I'm glad I was convincing. I tried hard to get it right.

EH: *At one point in Bramble's story (during the Chase) I found myself wondering if you'd drawn your inspiration from National Velvet? Was that one of the books you read in your childhood?*

PF: That is a really interesting question! *National Velvet* certainly was one of my childhood books, but it had never occurred to me that it might have been an influence. Dick Francis did have a great deal of influence on me, and on my understanding of steeple-chasing. I read everything he's written before I wrote those sequences, particularly his autobiography.

EH: *I loved the idea of ghosts rising again three days after they've been killed, seeking reparation from their murderers, and felt really comfortable in the township you write about where ghosts hang around on street corners. What inspired that?*

PF: There's a poem by William Butler Yeats: when the ghost begins to quicken, confusion of the death bed over, is it sent out naked on the roads, as the old books say... So I think the quickening came from there, and the rest of it came from the realities of the Castings world.

EH: *Your book, Blood Ties, (and presumably the rest of the trilogy?) separates its chapters into the characters' names, so everybody's story is woven around each other. But occasionally we get what seem to be minor characters stepping into the spotlight, directly addressing the reader and telling their own story. For some reason this reminded me of a medieval morality play. Was this intentional? And will these seemingly minor characters have a larger part to play in the warp and weave of the story in later volumes?*

PF: All the first-person storytellers will have a part to play, although some of their parts will be minor. I didn't think of it as a morality play, although I love the image! As many of the stories came first, before the larger narrative, I see them as slices of life from this world, exploring some of the themes of the books, particularly about what it would really be like, to live in a world where the future can be known accurately, and the gods can talk directly to the people. I am fascinated by how this would change ordinary life, and I wanted to explore as many facets of this as I could.

EH: As well as your own books and series, you have written The Murderer's Apprentice for the highly successful Quentaris series edited by Paul Collins. What was it like to write for a shared universe, such as Quentaris? Are you considering writing a novel for the second Quentaris series? Was Merrith, the main character in Murderer's Apprentice, an inspiration for the creation of the character Ash in Blood Ties, or possibly vice versa?

*PF: I thoroughly enjoyed writing the Quentaris book - it's a great universe to play in, and Paul and Michael Pryor had done all the hard work of world-building! Ash inspired Merrith, rather than the other way around, as the beginning of the Ash story predates *Murderer's Apprentice* by several years. I am interested, I suppose, in basically decent people being put in a position where they have to engage in work which is accepted by their society but which is ethically suspect.*

EH: In The Black Dress: Mary McKillop's Early Years, you've written a fictional biography of the childhood of Mary McKillop, a nun who was beatified by Pope John Paul II, and may become Australia's first saint. On your website you speak eloquently of your research into Mary McKillop's life, and you also mention wanting to write a non-fiction book at some stage. I was wondering if you'd considered writing a non-fiction book on Mary McKillop, as you give the impression that you are passionate about her (or at least keenly interested.) If that's not the case, what would you like to write a non-fic book on?

PF: To write a non-fiction book about Mary MacKillop, I would have to cover her whole life, and that would take so much research that I wouldn't have time for fiction writing for some years — so I think that's a project which will never see the light of day, although, as you say, I admire her immensely. I have written three non-fiction kids' books, and I'd like to do more of them. I have talked with Black Dog Books about doing a non-fiction book about vampires and werewolves... where do the monsters come from?

EH: The second book in the Castings Trilogy, Deep Water, was recently released, while the third instalment, Full Circle, will be published in 2009. Given the popularity of this trilogy (I'm really looking forward to reading the next instalment!), do you think you'll channel more of your writing towards the adult market now? Was this trilogy a one-off? Or will you continue to write for both adults and children as other writers have done?

*PF: I will certainly be writing for both adults and kids. The different types of books are satisfying in completely different ways, and I'm afraid I'm addicted to them both now! I have plans for a stand-alone book set some years later than *Full Circle* where the main characters would be the baby Ash, who is born in *Blood Ties*, and his sister, both grown up now, of course. This book would really be stand-alone — you wouldn't need to have read the trilogy first. I am also thinking about another*

trilogy set in the Castings universe (but in a completely different time) as well as an alternate Earth story which asks: what would the world be like if the Indo-Europeans never came over the mountains to Europe? Let's hope my publishers like the ideas! I also have two kids' books coming out with Walker Books later this year — 2009 in the UK. One is a reissue of *Victor's Quest*, and the other is a new sequel, *Victor's Challenge*. I'm very excited about the Victor books and some other stories which will be set in the same universe.

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Reviews

Awesome Lavratt

by Ann Wilkes

Unlimited Publishing (<http://www.unlimitedpublishing.com>), 2009

ISBN 9781588329912

Reviewed by Simon Petrie

Aranna Navna wants to control the Galaxy. Fair enough, to have ambition, but she'd hardly be the only one to aspire to that goal. However, in Aranna's case, she actually possesses the wherewithal to carry through on her schemes. Or, at least, she thinks she does ... but the thing about devices of incredible power — and the *Awesome Lavratt*, a small mind-control cube, is certainly one such device — is that they may be a little less predictable than their custodians might wish. So, whatever fate has in store for Aranna, you can bet that it won't be exactly what she's hoping ...

Ann Wilkes is a Californian SF writer with several short story credits under her belt. *Awesome Lavratt* is her first book, claimed as a novel, although at only 94 pages I'd place it fairly solidly in novella territory.

Wilkes' style of writing is admirably clear-cut, and the story line has plenty of quirks in it. I couldn't help feeling, however, that *Lavratt* is overall a little bit too hurried. The essentials are there - characters, tension, direction, and scope for confusion — but there was, for me, a definite sense that the story jumped unexpectedly a few too many times. Partly this is in relation to viewpoint characters: we're introduced to the scenario through the eyes of Horace Whistlestop, interstellar junk dealer, who acts as our guide for the first three chapters. Then events are portrayed according to Aranna, who remains centre-stage for a few chapters herself. And then new characters emerge, each demanding (and getting) their share of air time as principal viewpoint character. This kind of perspective-switching can work well in a longer work, less so in a story of this length: there simply isn't the scope to properly flesh out each of the sequence of lead actors before their role is ostensibly over, which meant that I felt shortchanged by the characterisation. I felt, also, that some of the story's connective tissue was missing: there are several sequences within the story that didn't entirely gel, particularly towards the end as events moved towards a resolution that, while appropriate, felt hurried and incomplete.

These criticisms aside, the story has a good sense of pace, and a clean style. The writing is easy to digest, and the prose flows smoothly even while the underlying

storyline is a little lumpy. And, aside from a misplaced comma in the opening sentence, it's almost free of typographic distractions. On the evidence presented here, Wilkes isn't given to overly-descriptive language, nor to meticulous scene-setting: but if you prefer your fiction with plenty of action, an unserious outlook, and a fair few twists, it might well be your thing.

Overall, I'd characterise *Lavratt* as a promising start: it would have worked better in a somewhat longer format, with time taken to etch each of the characters more fully into the pages. I'll be interested to see whether Wilkes can manage this feat in her subsequent works (there are indications in the accompanying biographical notes of further — and, I would hope, longer — novels in preparation), because despite my criticisms there's quite a lot to like about *Lavratt's* excursion into comic space-opera territory.

The Destiny of the Dead

by Ian Irvine

Viking

ISBN 9780670041909

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

It must be Summer, to quote an old song, because the Great Big Fat Fantasy books are out, just the thing to keep you reading over the holidays. This book is the latest in the Three Worlds series by Ian Irvine. It's got everything; beings from beyond the void, a world in peril, god emperors, and valiant resistance by embattled warriors. The warriors are Nish and his tattered allies, trapped in the mountains by the god-emperor. He can fight to the death or surrender to his father. He has another little problem, because chthonic fire is starting to eat the world, and only he can stop it. Ian Irvine is a writer of undoubted talent, and he handles this complex story well, but it could have been twice as entertaining at half the length.

Harry, a History

by Melissa Anelli

Puffin

ISBN 9780143304364

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

Fandom is an alien world to some people, and this book is about fandom. In particular, Harry Potter fandom. Melissa Anelli is the webmistress of the Leaky Cauldron website, and she's been at the centre of Harry Potter fandom for many years. While J K Rowling, who has written the introduction, seems a very sensible billionaire, there is a large element of whimsy in the fandom she avoided until 2002. Anelli

takes us into this wonderful world of websites, dedicated rock groups, spin off books, parties and celebrations. It seems, in some ways, as mystical and magical as the books themselves, transforming the familiar into the strange, which isn't all that bad a thing, sometimes. Bright, chatty, and informative, it's a book for dedicated Potter fans.

The City at the End of Time

by **Greg Bear**

Gollancz

ISBN 9780575081895

Reviewed by Ian Nichols

There is no other writer who writes big as well as Greg Bear does. This book is about some really big things; trillions of years of history, multiple universes and something bigger than even those, the Typhon that eats whole universes and renders them into chaos. At the end of time, there is one city left that resists the Typhon, built on the ruins of Earth. Some people, right throughout history, dream of it, and these are the fate shifters who have the power to live in different version of themselves. They may be the only answer to the Typhon. It's a big, sprawling book that goes beyond space and time, expertly narrated and cleverly balanced between action and the wondrous setting. A welcome return by Bear after more than a decade.

Word of Honour

by **Michael Pryor**

Random House

ISBN 9780670041909

Reviewed by Sue Bursztynski

This is the third in the delightful "Laws of Magic" series set in an alternative Edwardian England. The hero, Aubrey Fitzwilliam, has barely started university when he and his friends George and Caroline find themselves having to save the world again, this time from an old enemy who is building something nasty under the city streets and performing light opera above them. And someone is trying to steal from the museum this world's version of the Rosetta Stone, which might just be able to help Aubrey overcome his condition (he's technically dead). You'll need to go back and read the others if you haven't read them yet, but it's well worth the effort. If you like steam punk, the Bartimaeus trilogy or even Garth Nix's Old Kingdom stories, you'll love this series.

About our contributors...

Ingrid Banwell is a New Zealand born writer and artist living in Sydney. She comes from a family of scientists and has always been fascinated by the relationship between science, religion and art. She has traveled widely and is a graduate of the United Nations International School in New York. She has a Masters degree with First Class Honors in Painting and her work is held in public and private collections around the world. Ingrid has lived in New York, Mexico City, London and Vienna and has worked in corporate communications, public relations and market research for non profit, government and commercial organisations. She has written articles for a women's history book, press releases, annual reports, many newsletters, business plans and company profiles. On the more creative side, she writes short stories and has written and illustrated three children's picture books. She is currently working on her first novel. If you are still curious, please visit her website: www.ingridbanwell.com. "Untangling the Future" was first published in *Cosmos Online*.

Australian born, **Gitte Christensen** lived in Denmark for 12 years before returning to study journalism at RMIT. Her stories have appeared in *Aurealis*, the *NSW School Magazine*, and various anthologies. To escape keyboards, she saddles up and rides through distant mountains.

Shane Jiraiya Cummings is positioned close to the centre of the web of Australian dark fiction. He is the current Vice President of the Australian Horror Writers Association, co-founder of Brimstone Press, *Shadowed Realms*, and *Black: Australian Dark Culture* magazine, founder of HorrorScope, editor of anthologies such as *Black Box*, co-editor of *Midnight Echo #2*, has won two Ditmar Awards, and been nominated for the Aurealis Award and Australian Shadows Award. Shane has spun more than fifty tales that have found publication in Australia, North America, and Europe, many of which have been threaded together into his collection *Shards*, which is to be published this year. In spite of his love for the dark stuff, an occasional science fiction or fantasy story such as "Chasing Jormungand" will slip out. Shane's home on the web is www.jiraiya.com.au.

KV Johansen has Master's Degrees in Medieval Studies and in English. She is the author of a number of fantasy and science fiction novels for children and teens as well as the critically-acclaimed adult non-fiction *Quests and Kingdoms: A Grown-Up's Guide to Children's Fantasy*. Her most recent books are *Treason in Eswy: The Warlocks of Talverdin Book Two*, and *The Storyteller and Other Tales*, which includes "The Storyteller". One book in her *Torrie* series, *Torrie and the Firebird*, was written partly out of frustration that so few Australian fantasy writers used their own fantastical landscape and natural history when creating secondary worlds. She lives in New Brunswick, Canada, grows exotic trees (mostly Australian) indoors, watches a lot of anime, and should probably have been an eighteenth-century landscape gardener.

Dr Philip Edward Kaldon teaches Physics at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo when he isn't gloating about getting published on three continents in 2008/2009, including "Machine" in *ASIM* #38 and "A Man in the Moon" in the *Writers of the Future* Vol. XXIV.

Rachel McLachlan is a Sydney based freelance illustrator with a skewed vision of the world and an avid voyeur of popular culture. She has hopes to someday publish her own graphic novels. Check out her art blog at cold-blooded-angel.blogspot.com/

Lewis P Morley has been in SF fandom for a very long time. He used to be famous for his intricate rubber masquerade costumes, but hasn't been inside a costume since he appeared on stage with the late Jonathan Harris as the Lost in Space Robot some ten years ago. He's moderately well known as an artist, garnering the 1989 Ditmar award for Best Artist. He created, wrote and illustrated (with various other artists) his own Komic book title "Peregrine Besset" about a time-travelling Ancient Egyptian dwarf. He has contributed illustrations to a couple of *ASIM* issues (no cover yet) and examples of his work including his Komic can be seen on his website www.redworldstories.com. He also works on fantasy films like "Justice League", but that's another story...

Dan Skinner lives in Saint Louis, Mo. USA. He got into art as a side profession. having done model photography for years. His business partner, Nick Fichter, was a model who wanted to get on book covers as a romance model so he dabbled in photodigital art and ended up being hired by over forty companies to do covers. Nick has been on over 500 covers as a result. Dan uses digital photography, Photoshop, vue 5 and Painter. His artistic hero is Boris Vellajo.

EM Sky holds degrees in anthropology, sociology, business and law and is profoundly interested in the interplay between society and modern neuroscience. She believes that the task of redesigning social systems around the needs of the human mind will be the defining frontier of the twenty-first century. This is her first sale to *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*.

Katherine Sparrow lives in a foggy little surf town in California. When she's not biking along the coast or writing young adult science fiction, she works with people struggling with schizophrenia. Her stories have appeared in *Apex*, *Aeon*, and *Escape Pod*. Come say hi at katherinesparrow.net.

Acknowledgements

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