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INTERZONE
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

ISSUE 221

FEB 2009

Cover Art

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ISSN 0264-3596] Published bimonthly by TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK (t: 01353 777931) **Copyright**] © 2009 Interzone and its contributors **Distribution**] UK] Warners (t: 01778 392417)] Central Books (t: 020 8986 4854)] WWMD (t: 0121 7883112)] **Australia**] Gordon & Gotch (t: 02 9972 8800)] If any shop doesn't stock Interzone please ask them to order it for you, or buy it from one of several online mail order distributors such as BBR, Fantastic Literature ... **or better yet subscribe direct with us!**

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EDITORIAL—Radical Postures and a Real Challenge

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There's more to great stories than entertainment and aesthetics: they foster greater understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit, and they challenge the way we think.

I discovered anarchism at the same time I dipped my toes in the turbid waters of sf&f. I encountered Christie and Meltzer's *The Floodgates of Anarchy* while I was reading Spinrad's novel of media manipulation *Bug Jack Barron*, Sladek's satire of corporate servitude 'Masterson and the Clerks' and Moorcock's ironic and anti-authoritarian Jerry Cornelius books.

It was an epiphany. The fiction clarified the anarchists' assault on the deadening repression of our society. And the anarchist polemic reinforced an enjoyment of sf&f—a literature that took me beyond the life I led, the places I inhabited and the assumptions that limited my own possibilities.

I hope others are making a similarly serendipitous, frightening and enjoyable voyage of discovery—wherever it takes them—but believe it's less likely to happen today. This isn't nostalgia for a 'golden age' of radical sf&f, but an appalled realisation that artistic dissent has been absorbed and commodified by the cultural mainstream: genuinely mutinous work is increasingly rare.

The clamour of sanitised and bogus outlaws—pre-packaged by the music business—and the hypocritical campaigns of tax-minimising, self-indulgent rock icons drown out the voices of original and passionate musicians.

The *soi-disant* 'Young British Artists' claim they explore the morality of art and money, but grab top dollar for their lucrative mock provocations. Their anaemic repetitions of the Dadaist experiments of 1916 aren't merely banal and senseless in a contemporary context—they make it harder for genuinely challenging work to find an audience.

It's the same in film, TV, theatre and literature: the cultural landscape has never looked shallower or more derivative. But if, as Jung asserted, the psyche creates reality every day, the genuinely resonant and original stories we receive at *Interzone* constitute a shield against this barrage of mass media crap. Independent publishing *must* survive the current crisis: any hope our culture can escape its corrupting obsessions with money and celebrity lies in writers like ours, and readers like ours.

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ANSIBLE LINK—David Langford's News & Gossip

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Encyclopedia cabal: Ron Tiner, Pam Scoville, John Clute, John Grant, Judith Clute and some guy with a camera

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As Others See Us. ‘*Doctor Who* ... has ... made sci-fi—once the domain of pizza-faced speccy boys and middle-aged men named Timothy who iron their socks and still live with their mum—acceptable, if not downright glamorous.’ (*Daily Mail*)

Stephen King assessed fellow-writers in a *USA Weekend* interview. Harry Potter vs. Twilight: ‘The real difference is that Jo Rowling is a terrific writer and Stephenie Meyer can't write worth a darn ... She's not very good.’ Also, Dean Koontz is ‘sometimes ... just awful.’

Awards. *Crawford* (best first fantasy): Daryl Gregory, *Pandemonium*. * *Newbery Medal* (children's lit): Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*.

Sector General Lives! Public safety news from the writer of a UK patient information leaflet for hospital oxygen cylinders: the regulator insisted on the words ‘Do not use if you are allergic to oxygen.’

J.K. Rowling was made a knight of the French Legion of Honour by President Nicolas Sarkozy, and profusely thanked France ‘for not having held a grudge against me for having given a French name to my evil character’, Voldemort.

As Others See Their President. ‘Get ready for the geek-in-chief. / President-elect Barack Obama used to collect comic books, can't part with his BlackBerry, and once flashed Leonard “Mr. Spock” Nimoy the Vulcan “Live Long and Prosper” sign. / That and other evidence has convinced some of Obama's nerdier fans that he'll be the first American president to show distinct signs of geekiness. And that's got them as excited as a Tribble around a Klingon.’ (*Boston Globe*)

Magazine Scene. *The Magazine of Fantasy and SF* went bimonthly from March/April 2009. * *Fantastic Stories*, which folded with the collapse of Warren Lapine's DNA Publications a couple of years ago, is relaunching as a quarterly edited by Lapine—first issue due September, dated January 2010. * *Mad* is switching to a quarterly Schedule. * *Realms of Fantasy* ceased with its April issue. * *Starburst* has suspended publication ‘for the foreseeable future’.

John Barrowman, of *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* fame, provoked vast outrage at the *Daily Mail* by exposing his naughty parts on Radio 1. How does that work, exactly? Pictures were ‘relayed to online listeners via a webcam’. Or not: ‘while Barrowman's genitalia were not actually shown, the crude comments which accompanied the incident made it clear what had happened.’ Now I feel I've been depraved and corrupted just by reading about it.

Sir Terry Pratchett, made a Knight Bachelor in the New Year honours, could only say: ‘There are times when phrases such as “totally astonished” just don't do the job. I am of course delighted and honoured and, needless to say, flabbergasted.’

As Others Synopsise Us. The *Telegraph* ‘100 Novels Everyone Should Read’ list (17 January) begins in 100th and lowest place with ‘Tolkein’ and his ‘tale of fantastic creatures looking for lost jewellery’.

Edgar Allan Poe's 200th birthday was on 19 January; he appeared on a US postage stamp released

that month.

World SF Convention 2011. This will be in Reno, Nevada, since the rival Seattle bid had to withdraw—too much competition for facilities.

Thog's Masterclass. *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'I tasted the heady loam of the spongy earth beneath my feet ... Nothing seemed amiss.' (Andre Norton & Jean Rabe, *A Taste of Magic*, 2006) * *Dept of Doublethink.* 'I slammed my chain against the pig, drawing the hooked end across its throat to kill it. I respected all life.' (*Ibid*) * *Dept of Extraterrestrial Studies.* 'It's coming through the opening now! The most awful thing I've ever seen. Vast! Yellow as a slug and far more horrible' ... 'the tentacles are coming for me now. It's not nice. There's a horn on its nose and the longest teeth imaginable. And blue hair! But the tentacles scare me most of all. They seem to come from every part of its body!' ... 'The gun doesn't have the slightest effect on it. You might as well shoot an elephant with a catapult. Oh my God, its tentacles! They can touch me now. It stretched them out like rubber, and they end in sharp points.' ... 'There are sort of pimples all over it, and slime oozing from its skin. I just can't describe it properly!' (Ray Barry, *Gamma Product*, 1952) * *Synaesthesia Dept.* 'They seemed to hear Esmer as much with their nostrils as their ears.' (Stephen R. Donaldson, *Fatal Revenant*, 2007) * *Dept of Method Acting.* 'A smile toyed with Cormac's lips; failed to manifest itself.' (Andrew J. Offutt, *Sign of the Moonbow*, 1977) 'Anticipation lit his cerulean eyes with bloody portents for the guards of Dithorba.' (*Ibid*)

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R.I.P.

Lino Aldani (1926-2009), leading Italian sf author since the 1960s, died on 31 January; he was 82.

Hortense Calisher (1911-2009) US mainstream writer whose work includes horror, alternate history (*Journal from Ellipsia*, 1965) and even spacegoing sf (*Mysteries of Motion*, 1983), died on 13 January; she was 97. [JC]

Edd Cartier (1914-2008), US illustrator whose career began in late-1930s pulp magazines—notably *The Shadow*—and whose 'combination of whimsy and menace' (*Encyclopedia of SF*) made him highly popular in John W. Campbell's *Unknown* and *Astounding*, died on 25 December aged 94.

Hugh Cook (1956-2008), UK-born author of the fantasy series 'Chronicles of an Age of Darkness'—10 volumes published, opening with *The Wizards and the Warriors* (1986)—died on 8 November aged 52.

Leo Frankowski (1943-2008), US author of over a dozen sf novels beginning with *The Cross-Time Engineer* (1986), died on 25 December; he was 65.

Stuart Gordon (Richard A.S. Gordon, 1947-2009), Scots-born writer whose 1965 sf debut was in *New Worlds* and whose novels included *Time Story* (1972) and the Eyes trilogy beginning with *One-Eye* (1973), died on 7 February. He was 61.

Patrick McGoohan (1928-2009), co-creator and star of the unforgettable cult TV series *The Prisoner* (1967-1968), died on 13 January. He was 80.

Adrian Mitchell (1932-2008), UK poet whose sf novel was the near-future dystopia *The Bodyguard* (1970), died on 20 December aged 76.

Angela Morley (1924-2009), UK-born transsexual composer whose genre work included *E.T.* and the first two *Star Wars* films, and who as Wally Stott was musical director and band conductor of *The Goon Show*, died on 14 January; she was 84.

John Mortimer (1923-2009), UK author, playwright, barrister and much-loved public figure best known for creating Rumpole of the Bailey, died on 16 January aged 85. Genre link: his script work on *The Innocents* (1961), a film adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*.

Oliver Postgate (1925-2008), UK creator (usually with Peter Firmin, as 'Smallfilms') of many beloved animated TV series for children, died on 8 December aged 83. These much-repeated programmes include *Ivor the Engine*, *Noggin the Nog*, *Pogle's Wood*, *The Clangers*, and *Bagpuss*. The memories, for whole generations, are indelible.

Harry Turner (1920-2009), long-time UK fan and artist whose trademark impossible-object drawings appeared both as fanzine covers and in book form—*Triad Optical Illusions and How to Design Them* (Dover 1978)—died on 11 January. He was 88.

John Updike (1932-2009), highly respected, Pulitzer-winning US novelist, critic and poet whose first novel *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) was sf and whose best-known fantasy is *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984, filmed 1987), died on 27 January aged 76.

Donald E. Westlake (1933-2008), prolific, witty and popular US crime writer who won three Edgar awards and the Mystery Writers of America Grand Mastership, died on 31 December; he was 75. His sf/fantasy includes over 30 stories 1954-1984, and three novels.

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A CLOWN ESCAPES FROM CIRCUS TOWN—Will McIntosh

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Illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

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This is Will's sixth appearance in *Interzone*. His stories have also appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Black Static*, *Science Fiction: Best of the Year 2008* and *2009*, and others. He is at work on a novel based on his *Interzone* story 'Soft Apocalypse'.

* * * *

Beaners tied the pillowcase to the end of a fiberglass rod he'd cut from his cot, then slid the rod down the neck of his crepe-collared shirt and into the waistband of his patched, baggy pants, careful not to scrape his ass with the splintered end. The pillowcase held a change of clothes and some clown chow.

Glancing around to make sure no one from Management had wandered into the tent, he gripped a sharpened butter knife between his teeth, wrapped his arms around the massive tent post, and shimmied upward, toward the billowing folds of the tent roof, striped red and white when sunlight filtered through the silky fabric, but only grey and dark grey now. His grunts of exertion drowned the thunderous snores of his brother clowns.

From fifty feet up, the vast grid of tiny rectangles was almost beautiful. The pattern was imperfect, however, because the cots closest to the shithouse were not splashed with the bright red and blue and yellow of sleeping clowns. They were empty. They'd been full of clowns last night, but a hundred or so had disappeared around chow time, and, if the past was any gauge, they would never be heard from again.

Beaners sorely wanted to know where they went—that was why he was climbing a tent pole. Clowns shouldn't just disappear.

If Beaners had been more introspective, he might have admitted that he also wanted to breathe fresh air, to gaze at landscapes unclotted by clowns. He was so sick of their giant eggplant feet, their chorus of rolling snores and whistled exhales, the cotton-candy stink of their unwashed armpits and sex-starved pillow ejaculations.

Clutching the post with one white-gloved hand, Beaners pulled the knife from his mouth and stabbed the tent fabric, opening an incision. The material drooped on either side, exposing a crescent of black sky and moonlight. He sighed with relief that the breach-detector, as he'd guessed, didn't extend to the tent ceiling. He tossed the fiberglass pole up and out, then gripped the edge of the rent fabric with one hand, and swung his balloon-sized foot up through the hole, and rolled onto his back, panting.

The ride down the outside of the tent was harrowing. His rubbery face flapped in the wind as the ground hurtled toward him. He landed hard, then staggered to his feet, weaving like a punch-drunk strongman. When he had regained his wits, he vaulted over the motion detectors and ran for his life.

Beaners skidded around the corner of the Snake Charmer's shack, and paused, panting, pressed up against the wall like a knife thrower's assistant. All was quiet. He cut through an animal tent to stay out of sight. Lions and tigers, giraffes and elephants lay sleeping in an indiscriminate tangle. From what Beaners had heard, all of them were somehow grown from pigs, all ate the same chow and had no interest in eating each other.

The whites of his face red with strain, Beaners shoved a trampoline out of the acrobatics tent and into the moonlight. He scaled a support pole on the tent, surveyed Circus

Town from on high for a moment, then launched himself at the trampoline. He soared up and over the wall and its defenses, hit the ground at a bad angle. His open mouth cracked shut and he rolled backward, down a brambly ravine and over a bank, landing with a splash in a shallow stream.

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A town came into view, mounds of debris piled against its wall, evidently tossed from inside. Even from a distance Beaners recognized what the piles were. The smell gave it away, if nothing else. And even from a distance, it was not the least bit beautiful, despite the way the steel helmets and chain mail glistened in the late afternoon sun. Beaners knew which town was behind this wall: Medieval Village.

He shifted course, planning to skirt around the pile of bodies, and maybe the entire village, but then he noticed a lone figure, sitting up against a tree near the carnage. It was not a knight. In fact—Beaners squinted—it appeared to be a superhero. Judging from the bright green skin-tight outfit, a Green Arrow.

Occasionally, Marks who visited Circus Town from Superhero Cove were Green Arrows. More were Batmans, but he'd separated a few Green Arrows from their money. All the Marks from Superhero Cove were thick with muscles and acted like they were hot stuff. Beaners figured that a lone person was more likely to talk to him (and less likely to kill him) than a group of people, so he decided to approach the Green Arrow.

As he got closer he saw that the Green Arrow was eating a lunch spread around him. "Lovely afternoon, isn't it?" Beaners asked as he approached under the Green Arrow's gaze, hoping to strike a cordial note.

"A clown?" the Green Arrow said in a gravelly baritone. He had a blond mustache and goatee. A quiver of arrows and a bow lay on the grass within his reach. His green outfit was identical to the other Green Arrows Beaners had seen, except this one was blood stained—a white, blood-soaked rag was tied around his thigh.

"Yes. Your eyes do not deceive you."

"What are you doing here? I thought clowns were indentured."

"I ... escaped from Circus Town," Beaners said, unable to think of a lie that was better than the truth.

Green Arrow threw his head back and laughed. "You *escaped*? I didn't know clowns were bright enough to brush their teeth, let alone escape!"

"Here we go," Beaners said, examining a scraped elbow he'd received when he went over the Circus Town wall, "let's get it all out. Clowns are morons. Clowns are made from pigs, just like the other animals at the circus."

"Aren't they?" Green Arrow asked, frowning.

"Sure. Whatever you say," Beaners said. He pulled a little flap of skin off his elbow, blotted a drop of oozing blood, stared at the bloodstained fingertip of his white glove.

"So what will you do, now that you've escaped?" The Green Arrow retrieved a loaf of dark brown bread, spread butter on it.

"I don't know. Maybe find work?"

Green Arrow waved dismissively. "Who's going to hire a clown? What can you do, fall down for a living? Deliver cupcakes on a tiny bicycle?"

"I can work." Beaners thought of all the shithouses he'd cleaned in his miserable life.

Green Arrow only shook his head, considered Beaners from the shade of the scrub pine, his injured leg stretched out, his good one bent. He took a bite of the bread, his brow knotted in obvious pain.

Beaners settled near him in a strip of shade.

"What happened to your leg?" Beaners asked. He poured some clown chow into his palm. If this guy was going to eat, he might as well join him.

Green Arrow looked at Beaners' chow-filled palm, frowning. "What is that? It looks like duck droppings."

"Hey, that bread don't look all that tantalizing either," Beaners shot back.

Green Arrow grinned, held up a finger. He pulled a hunk of chocolate from his satchel and held it up. "How about this, clown? Does this look tantalizing?" He sunk his pearly whites into the chocolate and chewed with gusto.

Beaners chewed the clown chow more slowly, studying Green Arrow. The truth was, Beaners didn't know if he should be tantalized or not. Clowns caught eating Mark food were ground up and fed to the seals.

Green Arrow glanced up, meeting Beaners' gaze. He sighed theatrically. "It's a heavy burden, to be a hero." He broke off a square of chocolate and tossed it into Beaners' lap. Beaners sniffed the chocolate, took a tentative bite.

His vision went black. The stars were in his mouth, the whole universe. He started to cry.

Green Arrow roared with laughter.

"Don't laugh at me!" Beaners said. He scrabbled behind the pine with the rest of the chocolate, suckling it, the mother's milk he'd never known.

"You know, you're not very funny," Green Arrow called to him.

"I'm not trying to be funny. When I want to be funny, I'm hilarious."

"Well, any time you want to start being funny, I'd welcome the change," Green Arrow said.

Beaners studied the rest of the chocolate in his palm, looked at it closely, deeply, astonished that a brown, slightly melted lump could hold so much pleasure. He'd never known what a magical place the world was.

"Are you really smart enough to work?" Green Arrow asked.

"Why?" Beaners asked.

"I may have a job for you."

Beaners stood, brushed the back of his baggy pants. "Name it."

"Go out into this—" he gestured toward the piles of dead knights "—mess, and search for men who aren't quite dead yet. Call me when you find one."

Beaners studied Green Arrow's face, trying to tell if it was a joke. It didn't seem to be. It wasn't what Beaners had expected, but Green Arrow appeared to have more chocolate in his sack. He ventured in among the dead, treading carefully so as not to trip (which clowns often did).

"The smell is terrible!" Beaners called, his voice muffled because he was covering his mouth with a white-gloved hand.

"You'll get used to it."

He didn't get used to it. The bodies were fresh, bloody with mortal battle wounds, their pants stained with piss and shit. There were thousands of them, the grass soaked red around them. Dozens of bodies had rolled off the pile and were scattered among trees. Flies buzzed around his head as he searched their faces for signs of life, occasionally tugging a body off a pile to show Green Arrow that he was doing a thorough job.

Soon enough he found a man with a horrible belly wound whose chest was rising and falling, and whose eyes followed Beaners as he walked.

"Found one," Beaners called, waving his arms.

Green Arrow eased himself to his feet. "Good man. Go on, keep looking." Beaners moved on.

Shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun, Beaners watched Green Arrow limp among the carnage with an arrow notched to his bow, his handsome blond face crunched to a sour expression. When he reached the dying man, Green Arrow had a brief conversation with him, then he shot an arrow into him. Beaners started in surprise, but went on searching when Green Arrow looked up.

He waved a hand in front of his face in a futile attempt to shoo the flies that were buzzing all around him. This wasn't exactly where he imagined he'd be when he vaulted the wall of Circus Town. Beaners wished Green Arrow was a woman. He'd like to see a woman.

"Clown!" Green Arrow shouted urgently. "Come here, quickly."

From the opposite direction, Beaners spied the source of Green Arrow's agitation: a dozen knights on horseback, brandishing weapons, thumped down a switchback on a ridge, heading toward them. Beaners hurried to Green Arrow's side.

"Don't say anything. I'll do the talking," Green Arrow said.

A rising rattle and clank of steel lit the air as the knights approached. They stopped a dozen feet away, their horses pacing side to side, pawing the grass and making wet horse sounds.

"What are ye doing?" the biggest knight, who had a bushy black beard, said, waving at the bodies.

"We've merely stopped for lunch," Green Arrow said. He pointed in the direction of his pack, but none of the knights looked. Each of them had a broadsword slung across his back, and many carried spears and nasty-looking flails—spiked balls on the ends of chains. All of them also had guns tucked into thick leather belts.

"Ye were merely having lunch," the knight said skeptically. "Yet your arrows were not merely having lunch, were they? Not a moment ago one entered the still-beating heart of my brother-in-arms in a most

definite not-merely-having-lunch fashion."

"I was putting him out of his misery."

"Is that what you call it? Out of his misery?" the knight barked, drawing his gun. His companions followed suit. "Well allow me to put you out of *your* misery."

In the blink of an eye there was a fresh arrow notched to Green Arrow's bow, but there were nine of them, and they had guns.

"Hold on!" Beaners cried. He rifled through the detritus at his feet, chose a massive flail, pulled a gigantic helmet over his head. He could see very little. He cast his long thin field of vision left and right, getting nothing but foliage before finally spotting the knight. He stepped forward. "Come on!" he howled, closing the distance, dragging the flail behind him. "I'll fight the lot of you. I'm the new sheriff in town! Avast ye varlets!" He gripped the flail in both hands and, with great effort, got it rolling in the grass, and then swinging in a wobbly arc that sent him spinning like a top. "Whoah!" he shouted as the world melted in a horizontal smear. He released the flail; it sailed over the heads of the knights. Beaners landed hard on his big rump with an "Oof." The knights pointed and laughed, laughed and pointed.

Beaners struggled to his feet, took a few dizzy steps and fell again. "Who's first?" he said. He regained his feet with exaggerated effort, retrieved a sword from the bloody grass. "Come on, you maidens!" He tripped over a corpse and fell a third time. The knights laughed harder.

Few things become funnier with repetition. Self-inflicted pain is one of those few. When Beaners performed the hammering-a-nail routine, the audience laughed harder with each missed strike that found his thumb. In all likelihood there was a point at which the comic value of injury finally began to decline, but Beaners had never found it.

His yellow teeth flashing in laughter, the big knight stepped up and swung his sword, whacking Beaners on the side of the helmet. A deafening clang raked Beaners' eardrums. He struck Beaners on the other side of his head, sending him wheeling. Then, with the flat of his sword, he hit the target crying out to be hit: one of Beaners' enormous feet.

Beaners yelped in pain, hopped around clutching his throbbing foot. The knights roared with laughter. The dark-haired knight booted him in the ass, knocking him to the turf. He stayed down. His job was done.

"Ye're a long way from Circus Town, aren't ye, little clown?" the knight said, sniffing back tear-induced nasal mucous.

"I left to seek worthy opponents," Beaners said, setting off another round of laughter. He tossed the helmet.

"Ye're fortunate then, that the folding has brought ye face to face with Sir Clarke of the Tytus clan."

"The folding?" Beaners said.

"Aye."

"What's the folding?"

"You don't know about the folding?" Sir Clarke asked, frowning.

"No," Beaners admitted.

Sir Clarke fixed Beaners with an incredulous look. "How can ye not know about the folding?" He waited, as if Beaners could explain how he didn't know something.

"How did ye think things got the way they are, if not the folding?" Sir Clarke asked, spreading his arms.

"What do you mean? How else would things be?" Beaners asked.

"A town of knights and damsels? Another full of fetching whores and wenches and harlots, but no portly matrons? Jesters and fire-eaters in a third, with not a superhero among them? That never struck thee as odd?" the knight said.

Beaners had never heard such nonsense. Why wouldn't Circus Town be populated with circus people, and Medieval Village with knights and damsels? Should Santas live in sextown, and naked ladies make toys in Santas' workshops?

"It's because of the folding!" Sir Clarke insisted. Beaners just shook his head, eliciting a huff from the knight. "Ten score years ago, things folded. Places were pulled from all over time and dimension and folded into one place. This place."

"That's why we no longer have super powers. They don't work in this dimension," Green Arrow said.

"Super powers?" Beaners said.

"Yes, super powers. Extraordinary abilities," Green Arrow said. "In our home dimension superheroes have powers. Nothing can pierce a Superman's skin. A Spiderman can climb walls without rope."

Beaners watched Green Arrow closely, searching for a telltale smirk. He suspected they were trying to pull one over on the clown. "What were things like here before the folding?"

"People were mixed. Towns were mixed. Most of the people were just plain," the knight said.

Beaners didn't know what to say. And his foot was throbbing.

Sir Clarke sniffed, looked off toward the horizon. "Well, we'd best be returning to the castle." He motioned to his men.

"Good knight," Green Arrow said, approaching Sir Clarke and putting a hand across his shoulder. "May I have a word with you first?"

The two walked a few paces, Green Arrow speaking low, and the knight answering in kind. Just minutes after nearly fighting to the death, they now resembled long time friends. Such is the transformative power of a good laugh.

Beaners couldn't hear what they were saying. Sir Clarke pointed once, shaking his head. After a moment, Green Arrow bade farewell to the knight and turned to gather up his meager belongings.

"Where you headed?" Beaners asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Sextown, probably." He fixed his blue eyes on Beaners. "You knew what you were doing back there, didn't you?"

"I told you, I can be funny when I need to be."

"Indeed." Green Arrow checked the sun, probably deciding whether he could make Sextown by nightfall.

"So you're heading to Sextown?"

Green Arrow nodded.

"Mind if I join you?" Beaners wanted to go to Sextown. It would be easier for Beaners to travel with a guy carrying a quiver full of arrows.

Green Arrow glared. "Why would I want a clown with me?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm resourceful. There are plenty of things I can do."

Green Arrow puffed his cheeks, allowed the air to slowly seep out between his lips. "Can you carry things?"

"Well, that's not what I was referring to, but yeah."

Without a word, Green Arrow tossed his satchel at Beaners' feet, turned on his heel and headed down the road. "Good. Then you can join me."

Beaners fell into step two paces behind Green Arrow.

He struggled to keep pace.

"So, do you have a girlfriend back in Circus Town? Is there a Mrs Beaners?" Green Arrow asked.

Beaners stared at him. "A Mrs Beaners?"

"Yes." He shrugged. "What?"

"You ever seen a female clown?"

"Come to think of it, no. Are there no female clowns?"

"No, no female clowns." Beaners kicked a stone down the road.

"Really?" Green Arrow said. "Well, then what do you do when you're not performing?"

"Very little," Beaners said. "I share a tent—shared a tent—with two thousand other clowns. When I'm not working or eating, I'm in the tent. You get crazy in there. The boredom. The stink. Once in a while someone can't take it any more and runs off, ends up where they aren't supposed to be, maybe the acrobats' tent, or the penny arcade. Anywhere but the clown tent. Sometimes the clown who wandered off makes it back before Management catches him, and sometimes he gets caught, and they bring him back. In pieces. They string him up in the tent. If you're unlucky enough to be under a piece, the blood drip-drip-drips on you all night. But you're afraid to move, because Management's already in a bad mood."

Green Arrow stared at Beaners, open-mouthed.

"But enough about me," Beaners said.

They walked in silence for a while.

"What were you talking to the knight about?" Beaners asked.

"Nothing," Green Arrow muttered.

"You know, I think I deserve the truth," Beaners said.

"*Deserve?* I don't owe an accounting of my private life to a grubby clown."

Beaners shrugged. "Fine, don't tell me."

Green Arrow looked off into the canopy of trees overhead. Beaners whistled a calliope tune. They walked.

"All right," Green Arrow said. "Anything to pass the time." He plucked a leaf from a branch overhead, chewed it for a moment, then tossed it fluttering to the ground. "Eight days ago my wife and I were in Medieval Village, on our way to an archery tournament. We came upon a battle in a glen beside the road. We raced to the fray, eager to help the heroes defeat the villains, but we couldn't figure out who were the heroes and who the villains."

Green Arrow stopped, eased himself onto a big rock to rest. Beaners took a seat on a fallen tree nearby.

"A small group noticed us and broke off from the fight. They taunted us, made unseemly comments about my wife. Then two of them grabbed her and..." Green Arrow grimaced.

"I killed one of them before they shot me and took her away. The knight I just spoke to said she was probably sold. Most likely in Sextown if she's fetching, which she is."

"I'm sorry. Now I see why you're heading for Sextown. I figured you were just feeling randy."

Beaners' foot was killing him. He pulled off his shoe. The top of his foot was an angry red, and already badly swollen. He pressed on it; pain lanced through it like a bee sting.

Green Arrow had gone silent. Beaners looked up. He was staring at Beaners' foot. The ivory-white parts of Beaners' face—that is, the parts besides the wide blue stripe around his lips, the red stars on his cheeks, and the swooping red semi-circle eyebrows—reddened. Green Arrow wasn't looking at his foot out of concern, but in sick fascination. Beaners eased his shoe back on.

They made slow progress, both of them limping, but eventually came to a wide, open road. Green Arrow led them West, toward the setting sun.

"Have you ever seen big groups of clowns outside Circus Town?"

"No," Green Arrow said. "Why do you ask?"

"Clowns are disappearing from Circus Town. Big bunches of them, every three, four months."

Green Arrow threw back his head and howled with laughter.

"What? You think it's funny that clowns are vanishing into thin air?"

"How can you be so wily, yet so ignorant?"

Beaners put his hands on his hips. "Well, I haven't been getting out much. What am I ignorant about this time?"

Green Arrow threw up his hands. "People disappear all the time."

Beaners stopped walking. The road ahead reeled and bulged, like an image in a funhouse mirror. He dropped to one knee.

"Whoa, steady clown." Green Arrow grasped his arm, steadying him.

"It's not just clowns?" Beaners asked.

"Of course it's not just clowns. Superheroes disappear. Knights disappear. Whores disappear."

"Where do they go?"

Green Arrow sighed. "That's the age old question. That knight probably believes they're pulled back to their old dimension, by aftershocks of the folding, but I'm not convinced the folding has anything to do with it. Religious folks say that God takes them. Others say it's just how the world works—some people die in front of your eyes, others simply vanish. It's a mystery."

"Well I want to know the answer to the mystery," Beaners said, although, in the light of this new revelation, that seemed far less likely.

Green Arrow chuckled, clapped Beaners on the shoulder, knocking him off-balance. "Answer it and you'll be the most famous clown who ever lived." He canted his handsome blond head. "Of course you'll also be the only famous clown who ever lived.

"But be aware," Green Arrow continued, "many have gone on that quest. Most of them disappeared themselves."

They crested a rise. Just beyond, a woman sat by the side of the road, next to a massive vehicle the likes of which Beaners had never seen before. It was very tall, with a pendulous hose-like appendage, like an elephant's trunk.

The woman was Asian, but Beaners didn't know that. To him she was slim and almond-eyed, with black hair, and clothed in a shiny yellow full-body protective hazard suit.

"Hello," Beaners said as they approached. The woman didn't answer. She was sitting glumly, with her chin propped on her fist.

"Are you from Sextown?" Beaners persisted. He said it as if it were a perfectly normal thing, for a clown to strike up a conversation with a Mark. It was a trick of sorts. He found that if you acted as if something were perfectly normal, others usually went along.

The woman glanced up at him. "No," she said without lifting her chin off of her fist.

Green Arrow put a hand on Beaners' neck and squeezed.

"So what town are you from?" Beaners asked, ignoring the hint.

"I'm not from any town. I was born outside," the woman replied in a clipped, impatient tone that Beaners was well accustomed to.

"Oh."

Green Arrow grabbed Beaners' collar and pulled him down the road. "Don't bother people, you idiot."

It had never occurred to Beaners that there were people who were born, lived, and died outside the towns. He'd thought the in-between spaces were mostly crossings to get from one town to another, and where you dumped your trash.

"Who is she?" Beaners asked.

"She's obviously Management of some sort."

Beaners snapped his head to look at Green Arrow. "I thought only Circus Town had Management."

Green Arrow shook his head. "Every town has Management of some sort. Not the sort of Management you described, but people in charge."

The walls of Sextown appeared wavering in the distance.

"Can I have some pay for carrying your bags?" Beaners asked.

Green Arrow gawked at Beaners as if he'd asked for his pants.

"Then, can I borrow some?"

Green Arrow smirked at Beaners. He pulled a cash card from his pocket, punched in some code, and handed it to Beaners. "That ought to be enough."

"I'll meet you right here, in one hour." Green Arrow pointed at the ground between his green boots. "If I'm not here, *wait*." Beaners nodded understanding. Green Arrow hurried off.

Sextown was dirty. It was run down and sleazy, the sort of town where you didn't want to rest your hand on a light post or brush your pants against a brick wall, lest it come away covered with something sticky. Lights flashed everywhere; sirens wailed. Smiling women in short skirts with perfect thighs and raccoon eyes walked nowhere in particular, competing with peep-show barkers for the attention of men with their hands stuffed in their pockets. Men looking to pay for sex try to look casual, but a tightness in their jaws gives them away.

Beaners was simply trying to look like the men, but he had no pockets. He had striped socks, a ruffled crepe collar, a purple polka-dotted bow tie, but no pockets. Clowns have no need for pockets.

He watched the men carefully, and the women more carefully, trying to learn the game, catch the patter that would open the gates. It seemed straightforward enough—nothing like the intricate machinations that accompanied clown-clown liaisons.

To call Beaners undersexed would be a vast understatement, unless you counted the occasional soul-numbing dalliance with a brother clown. The few times Beaners had dared put a hand of encouragement on a female Mark's shoulder as she readied to throw a dart at a balloon, or fire a watergun into a mechanical clown's rotating mouth, the woman had recoiled like he'd dropped a snake down the back of her dress.

He approached a delicious woman with jet-black hair down to her waist and heels so high her calves were perpetually tensed.

"Hi there," he said. He flashed his cash. "I'm interested in your services."

The woman burst out laughing as if Beaners had said something profoundly hilarious. Beaners had never been so serious. He walked away, feeling dozens of onlooker stares, her waves of laughter like a wind at his back.

He tried again and again, adjusting his approach after each rebuff until he settled on "Please. I'll give you all the money I have."

Outside a shingled honky-tonk on a particularly filthy street, Beaners approached a woman with red hair,

freckles, and a vaguely piggy face. Like many women with this look, she appeared to be overweight, but was not.

"Please. I'll give you all the money I have," he said.

She squinted at Beaners, raising his hopes that her eyesight was poor.

"You're a *clown*," she said.

"Yes, I'd noticed. But thank you."

"How much do you have?"

His heart thudded hard in his narrow chest. "Forty."

She sighed, looked him over. "Okay then. It will have to be behind the bar; they're not going to let you into a room."

"That's fine," Beaners said, not quite believing what he was hearing.

She said her name was Roxy and led him down an alley, into a long, narrow space littered with rusted pots and rotting banana peels, and a steel shelf, empty save for a ragged stack of ancient-looking porn. The clatter of cooking drifted through a crack in one of the bar's frosted back windows.

"Go easy on me, I'm sore as hell," Roxy said as she hiked her skirt and half-leaned, half-sat on an upended steel drum. She wasn't wearing any underwear. Beaners scrabbled to unclasp the buckle on his belt; his fingers were tingly, almost numb. He licked his suddenly dry lips.

"We have similar jobs—after a day clowning, I'm usually sore as hell too. All the falling, the bonks on the head, the tricycle collisions—I hurt all over by evening."

"I'm usually sore in just one place, but boy am I sore," Roxy said. With the hand that wasn't holding up her skirt, she swept her strawberry hair back out of the way. In the starlight, she was beautiful to Beaners. The freckles on her legs were flecks of gold. "I wouldn't mind spreading out the soreness to other places. It'd be a change, anyway."

Beaners finally got his pants down around his ankles. He waddled over to her, shaking badly. Roxy angled herself and guided him inside her. Beaners moaned, began to move very gently. Roxy inhaled sharply; he froze.

"Is that hurting you? We can stop," he said.

"No, it's okay," she said. She grasped Beaners' waist and shifted him over a bit. "There, that's better. You're fine, sweetie."

He continued, even more gently now.

It was a thousand times better than the chocolate. He fought back tears of joy and gratitude welling in his eyes.

"I bet you're glad that old adage about the size of a man's feet isn't true," he said.

Roxy burst out laughing. Her rhythmic contractions squeezed him, tugged him, massaged him into a shattering orgasm. Beaners laughed out, the loosest, easiest, most genuine laugh of his life. He laughed as only a clown can laugh—a pinwheel kaleidoscope pennywhistle whoop, until the edges of his vision went

grey and the alley spun like a funhouse tunnel.

He collapsed against her, chuckling, coming—a primordial hitch that bobbed him up and down like a cork on water. Roxy wrapped her arms around Beaners' shoulders and chuckled along with him for a moment. Beaners wished there could be a folding—a folding that would fold time into a loop and keep him there forever.

"That was my first time," Beaners said.

"Really?"

"Mm hm."

"Well, I'm happy to be your first. You're..." She reached for the right word. "Nice. You're a nice guy."

"Thank you," Beaners said.

Her feathered bangs rippled in a light breeze. Beaners wanted to touch them, feel how soft they were, but he didn't want to risk rushing her off.

She sighed, wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Do you know about the folding?" he asked.

"The folding? Silly old knight's tale."

"That's what I thought."

"My mama told me how this world really got started. I'll tell you, if you want to hear. Do you want to?"

"I do," Beaners said. "I do want to hear." He almost didn't recognize his own voice, because it was soft, almost sweet. He leaned his head against Roxy's shoulder, and she let him.

"Okay then," she said. She closed her eyes, and took a breath. "Once upon a time, all the towns were mixed. The townfolk did all sorts of different jobs. But in a lot of the towns, all the jobs were going to Texico."

"What's Texico?" Beaners asked.

"I don't know. Don't interrupt."

"There was one small town, though, that had a very big heart. The townfolk hired a gunslinger to help them save their town, and the gunslinger came up with an ingenious plan: make their town into a place for people to go on vacation. But the town wasn't near a pretty lake, or a beach, and no one famous had ever died there, so how could they get people to travel all the way to their small town for a vacation? The gunslinger had the perfect plan: turn their town into a superhero town. Superheroes were only in books then, they weren't real people.

"So the townfolk dressed as their favorite superheroes, and people started to come to their town for vacation with their children."

"*Their* children? They owned children?"

"Don't interrupt. The townfolk took their roles very seriously, playing their parts even when the vacationers weren't around, until they were living their parts all the time.

"Now, other nearby towns saw what was happening, so they hired the gunslinger to help them save *their* towns, too, and he turned them all into vacation towns: Santa Land, Circus Town, Wild West Range, Bible Village, Hobbitown. It spread on and on, first because it was a way for the townfolk to survive, then a way for them to get rich, and finally, it became a way of life—it became a badge of pride for a town to have a theme. And that's how things got to be the way they are."

Beaners' head hurt, trying to get the gist of the explanation. He thought he understood. Towns used to be mixed, mostly filled with plain people, just as the knight had said. But there was no folding—that was just something people had made up because they'd forgotten what really happened.

It was difficult for Beaners to imagine a mixed town. What were they, if they had no themes? How did the people who lived there think about the place where they lived? And what did they do there? It was like a person with no face. Yet this story rang true in a way the knight's did not. Beaners was skeptical when explanations involved spells or trolls or folding time.

He left the alley three inches taller, looked up and down the street, spotted Green Arrow, legs spread, fists on hips, casting about impatiently. Beaners stuck two fingers between his lips and whistled.

"Let's go, move your big ass!" Green Arrow said. He headed toward the gate at a brisk clip.

Beaners hustled and fell into step behind him. He imagined that if he had a wife and knew she was at this very moment being banged in a whorehouse, he'd be testy too.

"What did you find out?" Beaners asked, trying to keep up.

"Diana wasn't very cooperative. One of her prospective clients may never walk again." Green Arrow flashed a 'that's my girl' sort of grin. "So they sold her."

"Where to?"

"Circus Town." Green Arrow paused to let it sink in. "What would Circus Town want with Diana?"

Beaners didn't want to answer. No one wants to hear bad news from a clown. "No one works in Circus Town who wasn't born in Circus Town. It's an incestuous place."

"Well, evidently some people do."

He swallowed. "People have seen women being taken underground."

Green Arrow stopped walking. Underground, where Management operates. Where no one who isn't Management, not even a superhero with a quiver of arrows, could ever reach.

"What would she be doing there?" Green Arrow said.

Beaners shrugged. Entertaining Management was his guess, but he didn't volunteer that. "That's where clowns come from," he finally said.

"That's where everyone comes from. What does that have to do with Diana?"

"Nothing. I was just saying." He hadn't known that superheroes came from underground, too. No one at Circus Town ever told him anything, except other clowns, and they didn't know anything.

A working girl approached them. She started to say something to Green Arrow. He cut her off with a slashing hand gesture and a curse. She hurried away.

"In any case, Diana is underground, that I'm sure of," Beaners said.

"Then that's where we're going."

"You know we can't do that," Beaners said. "We'd need an army to get in there."

"Damn it!" Green Arrow said, pounding his fist into his palm.

Beaners barely noticed this; most of his attention was turned inward, where the wheels were turning. He had an idea—the sort of insane idea people sometimes get and then quickly discard, because as soon as they consider it at any length, a dozen flaws quickly become evident, exposing the idea as an absurd impossibility. But this idea, as staggering and insane as it was, still held together after Beaners picked at it for a while, during which time Green Arrow had resumed walking.

"Wait. I may have an idea," Beaners said.

Green Arrow went on walking.

"Hey!" Beaners said, clutching at the end of his jerkin. "I have an idea."

Green Arrow glanced at Beaners, but didn't slow. "I'm listening."

"We go to the King of Mediaeval Village, and convince him to invade Circus Town."

"*Invalidate* it?" He stopped, spun on Beaners with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Invalidate it," Beaners said. "We tell the King that the clowns are ready to rise up, that we can take out the security measures for the walls and open the gates from the inside. In exchange, he agrees that your wife and any other women underground go free. And so do the clowns."

"The clowns are ready to rise up?" Green Arrow asked.

"Let me worry about that," Beaners said.

Green Arrow stared hard at Beaners. "Can you really do this, clown? Are you serious?"

"Do I look serious?"

Green Arrow searched Beaners' face. He nodded.

* * * *

Beaners was sure that if he looked down at his chest, he would see his heart thudding underneath the purple suit jacket he was wearing. He approached the entry turnstiles to Circus Town on wobbly legs. "This can't possibly work," he said.

"This is the *only* part of the plan that I have confidence in," Green Arrow said. He looked Beaners up and down. "You're the spitting image of The Joker."

Beaners had seen a few Jokers in Circus Town, and they did resemble clowns. There were not nearly as many Jokers as there were Batmans and Spidermans, so he and Green Arrow were banking on no one in Circus Town noticing that Beaners was awfully short, and had awfully big feet, for a Joker. He touched his forehead and looked at his finger, reassuring himself once again that the white grease paint covering the red and blue parts of his face was not sweating off. The green hair dye would take weeks to grow out, but the greasepaint left him one smudge from disaster.

"Oh, by the way, I never asked how your own quest in Sextown went," Green Arrow said as they moved along in line.

Beaners said nothing, but his eyes spoke volumes. They were the eyes of a clown who has glimpsed the infinite.

"I'm sure she took a hot shower immediately afterward. And scrubbed her skin with lye."

Beaners chuckled but didn't laugh. His laugh would give him away. "She said I was the best clown she'd ever had."

Green Arrow swiped his cash card at the turnstile, and they cruised into Circus Town, just two superheroes on a jaunt.

As planned, they separated at the Ferris wheel. Green Arrow doubled back to set up in a sheltered spot near the gates. If all went well, he would open them as soon as Security was distracted putting down the insurrection. He'd serve as a sniper once the siege began.

Beaners headed to the clowns' tent.

"Slinky, it's me," Beaners said, grabbing a friend's shoulders. "Beaners," he added when Slinky continued to stare blankly.

"Beaners?" Slinky said. "Beaners!" He rubbed the tufts of green hair on the sides of Beaners' head.

"Beaners?" another clown named Gonzo said, turning. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Outside," Beaners said. "Outside the town." Others gathered round, many of them clowns he'd known all his life. He could hear his words being passed through the tent, muttered from one cluster of clowns to the next. Beaners had been out of the town.

"Here, help me with this," Beaners said, grabbing one end of a cot. Slinky grabbed the other, and they stacked one cot on top of another, and then a third on top of that. Beaners climbed atop the wobbly dais. He looked into the sea of colorful faces, trying to think of what to say.

"I've seen things," he finally shouted to the quieting, colorfully dressed crowd. "You would not believe the things I've seen." Beaners paused, giving them time to imagine.

"I talked to all sorts of people." A buzz went through the crowd.

"I ate Mark food." The buzz got louder, peppered with exclamations of alarm.

"I bought sex from a woman!"

The crowd roared with shock, then howls and cheers and whistles broke out.

"And I want to do it again! All of it! And I want you all to join me!"

Some cheered, others exchanged dubious glances. "Sure, we'll all sneak out together," someone shouted.

"No," Beaners said, pointing at the shouter, "we'll storm out together! Ten thousand knights are waiting, hidden in the trees outside the gates, with guns and swords and giant spiked balls on the ends of chains. If we have the *guts* to rise up, to cause a commotion and divert Security's attention, then freedom, and jobs, and sex with women will be ours!" Beaners pulled two dozen of the King's finest chocolate bars out of his purple suit pants and tossed them into the crowd. "Taste it! Take a piece and pass it on. Just taste

what we've been missing!"

It is a perilous thing, to allow the downtrodden even a sliver of hope, a ghost of a chance. When your life is misery, you'll risk it even when the odds are stacked a thousand to one against you. Beaners showed them how to cut the fiberglass support poles from underneath the cots, and how to sharpen them.

They burst out of the tent sporting wide painted smiles, and set upon two Security guys lounging just outside the tent, stabbing them from all sides.

If he could have, Beaners may have called the whole thing off after he watched the men die. It was awful and brutal, the way they screamed. Their pain was real; he hadn't realized how real it would be. It was like sex, or chocolate, only bad.

The clowns tore through tents and upended pretzel stands, laughing their whooping, hiccupy laughs. Elephants howled and seals bleated. Lion tamers and stilt-walkers stepped aside and watched, wide eyed. Marks ran screaming in all directions. The clowns didn't harm the Marks—they had no quarrel with the Marks. But the few members of Management who happened to be out were torn to pieces.

Security arrived—a horizontal line of blue men with guns and shoulder-fired lasers and cluster grenades that sliced off a clown's legs so cleanly that it took a moment for the clown to realize they were off.

The clowns kept moving, kept laughing, and began to die in mounting numbers. The plan was to spread out so Security couldn't use their heavy weapons without risking injury to Marks, and to cause as much commotion as possible. They executed this plan well, because clowns are smart. They have to be smart—it's not possible to be funny and stupid. It's possible to be funny and look stupid. People often confuse the two.

"Come on, come on," Beaners said, scanning the far end of Main Street through the chaos. A Security man spotted him, raised his gun ... and then jerked backward, an arrow jutting from his chest.

A hearty wet whinny rose above the commotion. Dozens of knights cantered into view, led by Sir Clarke. The clowns cheered. Beaners felt the strangest, most wonderful feeling glide down his back as he watched those knights race into view—knights who were, for the moment, their allies. Green Arrow, riding beside Sir Clarke, lowered his bow and gave Beaners a salute.

The clowns shifted tactics, joining the knights in attacking Security rather than attempting to evade them. Soon the outnumbered security forces lay dead or dying. Knights and clowns fanned out, seeking more, until nothing moved except knights and clowns, jugglers and fat ladies, lions, trapeze artists, and Marks.

Beaners turned at the sound of an approaching horse. "Where would she be kept?" Green Arrow asked from astride the braying horse. Beaners led him to the entrance of the underground. The heavy steel door was sealed. Eight knights with a tungsten battering ram turned it into so much twisted foil.

Beaners watched as Sir Clarke led a phalanx of knights, and Green Arrow, inside. As each stepped in, they were whisked silently down an incline. Almost immediately, there were shouts, flashes and screams. More knights raced into the entrance, guns raised.

Beaners waited until there was no more commotion, and many of the knights had returned back up (a few of them dead, carried by comrades), before venturing inside.

For some reason Beaners had always pictured the underground as a nest of narrow concrete tunnels and cramped rooms, but it was nothing of the sort. A huge, opulent expanse met him at the bottom. There were vast moving pictures on polished marble walls, sparkling blue-green streams pouring into gushing

fountains, big glass balls tumbling through the air. All was silent. Beaners wandered from one cavernous room to the next, looking for Green Arrow. Occasionally he came upon the mangled corpse of someone from Management. He crossed a giant hall filled with glass balls. It had no floor save for a narrow, railed walkway. Below, glass balls disappeared into bright violet light.

On the other side of the hall, Beaners encountered six beautiful, astonished-looking women in a big round pool of whirling water. He was too far away to see if they were naked, but close enough to see that they weren't Management. A couple were superheroes (a Scarlet Witch and a Supergirl), and the others looked like they could be from Sextown.

"Have you seen Green Arrow?" he asked. Supergirl pointed toward an archway. Beaners tipped his little hat and forged on.

Beaners found them sitting on a bed of floating marshmallows, in a courtyard. Green Arrow was comforting Diana, who was crying. Diana was a Wonder Woman—she had long black hair and a red, white, and blue costume, with hot pants that showed off long legs. Beaners got a lump in his throat watching them. He imagined comforting Roxy like that.

"Did they ... harm you?" Green Arrow asked Diana.

She shook her head. "No. But I was forced to undergo a ... medical procedure. Otherwise they left us alone."

"Do you have any idea what they wanted?"

Diana shrugged. "They barely talked to us."

"It doesn't matter," Green Arrow said. "You're safe, that's all that matters. Let's go home." They headed back, with Beaners leading the way, Diana and Green Arrow lagging and talking, their arms wrapped around each others' waists.

A scrum of knights were lounging in a long hallway, smoking. A short, chubby knight pointed at a staircase. "Take a look down yon. Ye're not going to believe it." A deep humming emanated from below.

The stairs led to a room of polished steel. Giant bronze pigs, each a dozen feet high, lined the room like golden idols. The humming vibrated deep in Beaners' belly. He eyed the pigs uneasily.

"What in blazes is this?" Green Arrow said.

"Look at this!" Diana called from behind one of the pigs down the long row. As Beaners and Green Arrow joined her she pointed at its posterior.

The pig's tail was rising. Its hind end bulged—something gummy expanded, as if the pig was blowing a bubble out its back end. The bubble grew, swirling with colors, the walls of the bubble stretching and thinning, becoming opaque, until it was apparent that the colors and movement were inside...

Without warning, the bubble burst. Three small, naked clowns tumbled out, landing in a heap at Beaners' feet. "Whoa!" one of them cried in a diminutive voice.

They were slick with goo, their eyes half-closed and fluttering, straining against the bright light. There was a long, awkward moment when no one spoke.

"Evidently," Beaners said, "clowns are born of pigs after all."

"I'm sorry," Green Arrow said, staring down at the clowns as if his head were bowed in prayer.

"I don't understand any of this," Beaners moaned. He lurched, dragging his gaze away from the little clowns, who were falling over each other, pinwheeling their little arms. He continued down the length of the room, to the wide double-doorway at the other end. It led to a long, sloping tunnel. A far-off vibration echoed out of the tunnel, and a breeze wafted out, tickling the tufts of Beaners' hair.

Beaners turned, found Green Arrow and Diana behind him, standing arm-in-arm. Without a word, Beaners headed into the tunnel.

The breeze varied as they descended—rising to a whistle, then falling away to nothing, then rising again after a few moments.

"It must be the machinery that runs this place," Green Arrow ventured as the breeze rose again. Beaners couldn't imagine what was down there, but he was going to find out.

Ahead, the tunnel opened to their left and right. Beaners hurried, rushed to reach the big entryway just as the breeze was at its peak.

A hundred Spidermen hurtled past, seated in rows of identical plastic seats. They were all sleeping, their heads lolled back or resting on the shoulder of the Spiderman beside them. They disappeared, streaks of red and blue, out through the end of the cavernous room and into darkness.

Beaners, Green Arrow, and Diana ventured to a wide yellow line painted on the floor. Beyond it, the ground hummed with energy, waiting to carry more seats along. The wind rose; all three peered to their left expectantly.

A sea of scarlet flesh rose out of the darkness. Beaners backpedaled, gawking at the monstrous thing that lay unmoving on a platform. He glimpsed long, sharp teeth inside its open mouth. Neither Beaners nor his companions had ever seen a dinosaur, so they had no name for the beast that coasted past them and disappeared back into darkness.

The next transport to arrive was empty. It stopped. They looked at each other, perplexed.

"Has it stopped to pick up lions, or clowns, but there's no one here to bring them down?" Diana wondered.

"That seems like a good guess," Green Arrow said. "But where is it going?"

"There's only one way to find out." Beaners crossed the yellow line, stepped onto the platform and took a seat. Diana and Green Arrow followed reluctantly.

"You found what you came for," Beaners said to Green Arrow. He waved at them with the back of his hand. "You two go home. This is my quest, not yours."

Green Arrow shook his head. "Some of my best friends are Spidermen. One of them may have been on that transport. This affects all of us."

Beaners didn't argue. It was true, and besides, he didn't want to go into that dark tunnel alone. "If we see anyone, we should pretend we're sleeping," he suggested. The platform began to move. Green Arrow pulled an arrow from his quiver, clenched it against his bow. It grew dark, with no sound except for the high-pitched whistling of wind. Beaners wondered if the clowns in Circus Town had fled yet. He should have told them to go, to split up and spread out. Two thousand clowns marching around would quickly draw attention, although Beaners wasn't sure whose attention they would draw at this point. If Circus

Town's Management was dead, was there anyone left who cared where clowns went? Maybe. The Spidermen passing under Circus Town suggested Management in each town was not independent.

The platform slowed; Beaners laid his head against the back of the seat and mostly closed his eyes. Through slits he watched as they passed through a station that looked just like the one under Circus Town, only the floor was lined with sleeping knights in full armor. Four people, Management types, were working around them, one running a thick machine carrying a pile of knights in a scoop. There were strange black marks on the wall.

It grew dark again. They passed through another station. Vampires in black capes lay alongside werewolves and green-skinned Frankensteins. They were below Monster World. The stations kept coming, and Beaners kept watching, and thinking.

"Clown," Green Arrow whispered in the darkness between two stations. "If we come upon a station with only one or two persons, we're going to leap off and take them captive, and find out what in blazes is going on." It seemed a reasonable plan. They had no idea where they were going—this trail could lead to a furnace. Best to get informed.

They hit a stretch that was longer than usual. The next station was unoccupied; the floors were stacked with crates, rather than sleeping people. There were some of those funny marks on the sides of the crates.

The next station was the same, and the next as well; nothing changed except the size and shape of the crates.

Finally they passed through a station where a lone graying man was bent over an open crate, his back to them. Green Arrow leapt off, shoulder-rolled agilely and landed in a crouch, with Diana right behind.

Beaners leapt off the transport, landed on his nose, skidded, then flipped onto his back with a thud. By the time he got his wits about him, Diana had the man's arm pinned up near his shoulder blade, and Green Arrow had an arrow pointed at his chest.

"What the hell is this?" the old man whimpered. "Who unlocked you?"

"Who unlocked us?" Green Arrow spat. "We unlocked ourselves."

The man lunged forward. Diana yanked his arm; he winced extravagantly.

"What town is this?" Green Arrow asked. The man looked away; Green Arrow tensed his bow a notch.

"Belt Buckleborough," the man said.

Beaners squinted. "What's its theme?"

The man looked at Beaners as if he were mentally challenged. "Belt buckles."

"Oh," Beaners said, frowning.

"What's the matter?" Green Arrow asked. "Belt buckles must come from somewhere."

"But it doesn't fit with *either* story we've heard about how things began! Do shoes come from some other time or dimension? No. Would people take vacations in a town that made belt buckles? No."

"Well, maybe a town decided to make belt buckles to sell to the vacation towns," Green Arrow suggested.

"Why not ask our friend?" Diana suggested, nodding toward their captive.

"What is all this?" Green Arrow demanded. "Where is all of this going?"

The man looked at his shoes. It appeared that he was not going to tell them, that he would rather take an arrow to the chest.

Green Arrow jabbed the man in the thigh with his arrow; not deep, but deep enough to break the skin.

The man squealed in pain.

"Where is it going?"

"Out, to the world."

"Out to the world? Aren't we in the world?" Diana asked. When the man didn't respond, Green Arrow brandished the arrow.

"All right!" The old man held up his free hand to ward off the arrow. He took a deep breath, exhaled through his nose. "Shit. Shit, shit," he hissed. "This is a factory."

"Well, obviously," Beaners said, gesturing toward the boxes. "Tell us where those people are going. Those Spidermen we saw. All the clowns."

The man shook his head, his expression a mixture of pity and disgust. "Some of the factories produce belt buckles, some circus performers, some living exhibits for the historic recreation attractions. Historic recreation is very big in the United States. They can't get enough of it. Clowns sell best in France and the Soviet Confederation."

Beaners slapped the man's face. His white glove (now more brown, after days of wandering and warring) did not result in a crisp slapping sound; it was more of a thump. "You're purposely explaining this so we don't understand! Tell us! What are those giant metal pigs under Circus Town?"

"I'm trying," the man said. "It's complicated." He collected himself for a moment. "The mechanical pigs allow Texicorp—the corporation that owns all this—to get around the letter of international law. You're technically not human if you're birthed by an animal. Of course, the metal pigs aren't animals; it has to do with how the law was originally written, and everyone looks the other way and accepts the loophole, because they want their clowns and superheroes and whores."

"Superheroes come from pigs as well?" Diana asked. She looked badly shaken.

"Yes, anything bought and sold has to come from pigs."

"So, when clowns disappear from Circus Town..." Beaners struggled to understand. It felt like two giant fingers were pinching his temples.

"They're sold to circuses, out in the world," the man said, nodding as if Beaners was catching on. But he wasn't, really.

"When you say 'out in the world,' which way is the world from here?" Beaners asked.

"It's all around, in every direction, once you get past the factories."

"And we're all the same as belt buckles out there?"

"Now you're getting it," the man said.

To the extent that Beaners understood this new explanation, it sounded truer than either of the previous ones. There were no supernatural events involved, and it was nasty.

"Why is all this kept from us?" Beaners asked.

The man shrugged. "It's cheaper. You manage yourselves, police yourselves, train yourselves. And there's the authenticity factor—a superhero wouldn't be much of an attraction if he didn't believe he was a genuine superhero."

Green Arrow looked at Beaners, his eyes round. "Can he possibly be telling the truth?"

"Of course I'm telling the truth!" the man interjected. A seam of blood had welled up where Green Arrow poked him.

"I don't know," Beaners said. "I've heard so many stories about how the world began that I don't know what to believe any more." In his gut, though, Beaners knew it was the truth. The Management woman they had passed on the road to Sextown had said she was from outside. She hadn't meant outside the towns, she'd meant outside.

The wind through the tunnel kicked up. Moments later, a transport breezed into view, filled with sleeping clowns. Hundreds of them, stacked two and three to a seat. Beaners watched them pass, dumbfounded.

"How can that be?" Green Arrow asked. "We sacked Circus Town! The clowns are all free."

"You *sacked* Circus Town?" the man said. "You mean a bunch of superheroes stormed the town and took control of it?"

"No," Green Arrow said, "a bunch of knights and clowns took control of it. And the underground."

Now the old man looked dumbfounded. "That's how you got down here unlocked." He shook his head slowly, absorbing everything, muttering under his breath. "That's why there are so many of them. Management got wind of it, went in and cleaned house. They'll have to offer deep discounts to move so much circus stuff at once."

"They cleaned house? You mean they got everyone in Circus Town? That fast?" Beaners said, his lips numb.

"It wouldn't take long. They'd bubble it over, lock everyone down, send in a crew. Lots of overtime pay, though, on such short notice. They'll start Circus Town over."

Green Arrow set the arrow with the bloody tip back in his quiver. He sighed, shook his head.

"What now," Diana whispered, fighting back tears.

Another transport went by, piled with sleeping elephants.

"I always knew that any day, any moment, you could be gone," Green Arrow said, his voice shaking, "but I didn't understand what that meant."

Beaners finally had his answers, although he didn't like them much. He watched Green Arrow and Diana commune in silence, the old man between them with his head hanging. At least they had each other. For the hundredth time Beaners thought of Roxy. Was there any way she would have him, not as a customer, but as a companion? Beaners didn't even care if there was sex involved (well, not much, anyway); he just

wished he could have more conversations with her. Green Arrow had said that if Beaners answered the age-old question of where people went when they disappeared, he'd be the most famous clown in history. Would that impress Roxy? Maybe. In any case, Beaners realized, he knew what came next.

"Take this guy's clothes," Beaners said to Green Arrow, gesturing at the man. "Then find clothes for Diana, and get outside. Who'll know you're superheroes?"

The old man grunted amusement.

"What's so funny?" Green Arrow asked.

"Who'll know you're superheroes? Only every scanner you walk through. Your best chance to survive is to give yourself up to Management."

It was Beaners' turn to laugh. "Oh, sure. Maybe they'll give us jobs. Us and the belt buckles." No one laughed. If the circumstances were different, Beaners was sure that crack would have gotten laughs. "I say we go into the preaching business. Let's go back and tell everyone. Let's shout it from the rooftops."

"Who'll believe us? What proof do we have?" Green Arrow asked.

Beaners considered. He pointed to a box of belt buckles. "We'll take one of those, with the funny markings on it, and," Beaners pointed at the old man, "we'll take him."

Green Arrow and Diana looked at each other. Diana nodded.

"You're making a mistake. There's no telling how Management will react if you do this," the man said.

"I guess we'll find out," Beaners said.

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FISHERMEN—Al Robertson

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Illustrated by Geoffrey Grisso

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Al Robertson lives and works in London. He's published fiction in *The Third Alternative*, *Midnight Street* and *Postscripts*, has a story—'Changeling'—in the current issue of our sister magazine *Black Static*, and more upcoming on the Science Museum website. He's also a performance poet, and vocalist with ambient doomsters Graan (graan.org.uk). He's recently completed his first novel, and the second is already under way. Find out more at his blog, allumination.co.uk.

* * * *

They came at dawn. The sun had flared on the horizon and made the still sea beaten gold. I was drawing Christ on the Maria's foredeck, mindful of the Lord as I looked out on the water.

"Sagenae! Sagenae!"

Panic sharpens voices.

"Fucking corsairs!"

I stepped back from the rail. Someone ran past me.

"Below decks! Maestro, below!"

Hard, murderous ships carving in towards us, black outlines on the white glare of sea. Behind me, iron clashing—

"Take one, this one..."

"Fuck me, I thought we had more swords..."

"Libera nos, quaesumus, Domine, ab omnibus malis, da propitius pacem in diebus nostris..."

"Starboard! Starboard!"

The sweetest of hard morning breezes.

Then they were on us like the entry of a demon.

Our trabaccolo shaken, first once, then twice—swearing, a scream—and men, it seemed, climbing out of the very sea, up from the burning waves and into our boat, black shapes barely there they moved so fast.

"Fucking Lazarus! Fucking Lazarus! The Fenicians fucking warned us!"

The fight was over instantly, the corsairs a storm the crew could not stand up to. The cargo bell at the Fenice Exchange would toll for us.

A bird called, and I remembered Azantium, Theo's Harbour there; the salt, charred taste of mackerel on soft, fresh bread. Death is a great sea that waits for us all.

"You, boy—there—with the others."

Rough hands and the reek of sweat. I was pulled back to the stern, stumbling over something soft and wet. I thought of the crimes of the Firentine artists. The mainsail had broken free and cracked back and forth above me. I hid my Christ.

"What's that?"

They had already stripped out half the cargo. A chain of men across the deck, tossing sacks to each other. The crew were pushed up against the deckhouse. The cook had wet himself. Others were crying.

"What's that?"

He had a beard, I remember, and the hardest hands I'd ever felt. His breath stank of fish, of the open sea.

"Fuck me, that's beautiful."

The Christ gazed up at him. There is no judgement in art. My feet were wet. Red footprints on the deck.

"You did that? Oy, Lazlo—an artist!"

There is a chapel in St Mark's Fenice that I will never paint, now. I will not add to the glory of that golden city.

The sun blazed into day and they took me.

"We won't harm you."

My master Gianni Giambono had talked of the Corsairs of Omis, while we were painting the Last Judgement in St Mary Blachernae. "Think of that horror, Michael, think of being taken by them—knowing they'll whip you, cut you, break you, saw away at your neck with a blunt saw and mount your head on the prow of one of their sagenae! Terrorists ... imagine the damned knowing such torments await, and paint that fear in them—the flames are coming for them and they know it!"

Now I was one of the damned. I would not stay and be tortured. They had not tied me up. The deck of their ship was low on the water. I ran, and dived.

The cold shocked me and I thought of St Peter. Before I had entered Gianni's service I used to race my friends across Theo's Harbour.

There was shouting and another splash. I pushed through the little waves, salt water breaking against my mouth—and then he was on me—

"You'll drown, you fucking clown."

I pushed back against him and we sank together. Silence beneath the water and I struggled. I remember soft blue light and his arms wrapped around me. I could not escape him. He held me close. All thought left me.

I came round to the wide and empty sky, a sail taut with wind, the concerned faces of dangerous men. I was lying on soft stolen sacks of wheat.

"Captain, he's come back to us."

He was a tall man, with a dark, slightly shaggy beard, thick black hair, even blacker eyes. His nose hooked out of a taut face—skin stretched like canvas across strong bones. He had opened my portfolio.

His clothes were soaked.

"Good morning, artist. I am Lazlo Subic. You know of me?"

"You're a sodomite and murderer, a destroyer of virtù."

He smiled. A gold tooth flashed.

"So they say. And you draw with most excellent precision and have led—I am sure—an entirely blameless life."

"Why did you save me?"

"Every man has the right to live. Besides, I have a use for you."

* * * *

Omis runs down the hill to the sea, a huddle of a town pouring off the cliffs. Sandbanks run before the port, blocking the harbour off to all except those who grew up here; walk up the Sestina River and soon a steep, hard ravine closes around you. There is a wall across it, spiked with a guard tower like a broken tooth in a crone's mouth. The hills beyond the town are guarded by the Polijican Highlanders. A pirate's eyrie; impenetrable.

"Normally we kill strangers who see this town," Subic said. I was tending a small fire in a little metal grate. "We don't give them a house."

I watched the face of Christ burn. Fire licked at him like dancing gold, a blasphemy. Paper browned, sparks lifted up and away. Every image carries some small relic of the perfection it describes. I had never seen him look so alive. The little blaze burnt out. I reached for another sketch—an Annunciation.

I had copied these figures from the finest Azantine models to shine before the guildsmen of Fenice. I had imagined that I would work with my master's brother and dazzle them.

"All this we saved for you. Rescued!" Subic sighed. "You are an artist. You will make more."

I reached for the flints.

"You will paint our church for us."

I struck the stones together. Sparks leapt from my hands. Fire snatched at parchment. "No."

Subic laughed. I imagined his face; shadows dancing across it in the firelight. It would look devilish, burning angels revealing the truth of the man.

"You will stay with us for a year and a day. If then you will paint, we have bare walls for you, and such pictures to fill them with. If you would leave, you will leave with our blessing."

Gianni Giambino had taught me so carefully. I had traced the lines of the cartoons he'd sketched onto rough plaster, mixed up his pigments, spread the day's painting area with soft, wet plaster. I'd watched as he picked up his brushes and made heaven appear, then hell, then given life to saints, angels, to the Madonna, the divine Trinity. I had been the first to witness his greatest work, and the last.

Afterwards, I had listened to tales of his glory days in Fenice, of the great masterpieces that his brother was still making there. By then, he had found peace, of sorts, in the bottle.

I had carried that sodden, exiled man home so many times.

I paid for his burial in the Pauper's Cemetery.

"If you are not going to paint for us, perhaps you should also burn your books."

Subic was holding the Alberti out towards me. His touch was in itself a desecration.

Earlier, he had leafed through my sketches, commending this one, questioning that—my meal cooling before me. I would not drink his wine, or eat at his table. He had talked of his plans for the small village church.

"You understand me, artist? You know now what it is to care for these people. This town is my father, these people my children."

Alberti, Manetti, Filarete—the Firentine teachers my master had bequeathed me. His brother would not wait for me in Fenice, and another would paint the Mascoli Chapel.

I took the book from him, but I could not burn it.

"I will see that you are fed, artist."

* * * *

Weeks passed. The wall that blocked the ravine was well guarded. Two, three times they caught me there, and returned me to Omis. I thought of ending my life. The Christ always pulled me back. I have seen so many painted Christs, but at that time I could only imagine him drowning in flames.

One cold dawn I tried to steal a boat, a child's sailing dinghy. I had to be rescued when a strong breeze trapped me against the harbour wall, half capsized.

I kept apart from the people of Omis, and sketched in my house by day, walking at night when I could be sure that all slept. Pacing through the silent village I imagined the horrors that the terrorists in each house had committed.

Learning from Alberti, I made myself an intersecting veil. One day, I was amusing myself by using it to draw a jug. I had opened my small window, to make sure that I had light to work by. And then the jug fell into shadow, and a voice said—

"What's that?"

A small child's face. I had heard them play—but somehow I had not connected them with this community, or imagined that the town of Omis could harbour such beaming innocents.

I had vowed not to talk with these people.

"My mother leaves you food, you know."

I kept sketching, ignoring him.

"And you eat it. All of it."

It was difficult to pretend that he was not there. The jug was in shadow, so I could hardly see it through the veil.

"I can teach you to sail."

"What?"

"You can't sail. We saw. I can teach you."

"They won't let you."

He laughed, sunlight catching at him and making him gold.

"It will be a secret. And you will draw me. For my mother. To say thank you. And every night I will teach you how to use boats."

* * * *

I had never had a subject like that child. It is not the Azantine way to draw from life. The intersecting lines I had drawn on the veil defined his face for me as I looked through them, at him. I had laid out the same pattern of lines on parchment, and copied the pattern of his features from the one to the other.

Once, in his cups, Gianni Giambino had whispered to me of blasphemies committed by Firentine artists—of the dead dissected, of bodies cut into to show the material foundations of life. I had hushed him, fearful that he would be overheard, that it would be believed that we endorsed such crimes against God. Now—sketching that boy—I began to understand the Firentine passion for such accuracy.

Life blew across his face like a tiny breeze, expression flaring and shifting beneath it. I found it so hard to catch his likeness. I had painted a dozen Christs, a hundred disciples, a thousand angels—each one reproduced from a model in a fresco, an altarpiece, a copybook—but I had never tried to capture such breathing vividness before.

* * * *

A month later the pox came and it seemed that the whole town lay sick. Ladislav wept one day as I drew him. All my drawings were failures, but they pleased him. I was not yet sailor enough to be free. His mother was ill. His father, one of Subic's chief lieutenants, was away. Food supplies were running short. Subic had taken the few able bodied men that remained to him, and sailed in two sagnae to pillage for vittles.

I found myself cooking for Ladislav and his mother, Elena. Their cottage was small and sparsely furnished. I had imagined corsair orgies in these little houses, but there was no place for them here. Elena would watch me at work, sweating palely in the doorway. Subic had allocated her extra rations to care for me, but still there was little to eat.

"Don't use too much rice! That's for the month, that jar" or "Save some of those, for pickling." After a few minutes she would start to cough. Once she trusted me to carefully ration each ingredient she stopped watching me. At first, I left her food on her bedside table. When I realised how ill she was, I began to feed her by hand.

The walls of her room were rough plaster, whitewashed. A crucifix faced the bed, the Christ carved by hand from driftwood. "He made that," she said, "Ladislav's father." There were words painted beneath it: every man has the right to live. The pirate's Christ had a slightly shaggy beard, thick black hair, a nose hooking out of a tiny gaunt face. I did not recognise him, then. "You mustn't judge them," she would say. "We must eat."

I remember sitting up in her room, as much to comfort Ladislav as to care for her. He would not sleep if she was alone. As she slept I drew her—the light planes of her face, the darkness round her eyes, her pale lips. I tried to catch the softness of her breathing in the quiet hatchings of my pencil. The candle flickered and I thought of her husband, far out at sea; the care and love he would return to.

* * * *

She was sitting in the kitchen, watching me cook, when Subic kicked open the door. "The Fenicians have taken him. They have his sagena, his crew."

Elena was weeping. Ladislav clutched at her, wrapping himself in her nightgown.

"You! His boy has taught you to sail, to row, my best men are captured or sick. Come, painter, I will show you these Fenicians of yours. Come, we will save them."

His voice rasped and wheezed out of him. He was swaying a little. His shirt and tunic had been torn open, and there were thin red lines across his chest. One eye was black. The bruise had swollen his eyelids shut and pulled his face out of true. He took a step into the room and fell. He would not wake for a week.

His fever spared him the sight of the Fenicians' message. At dawn two days later they beached the captured sagena on the outer shoals of the bay. I volunteered as rescue crew. I remembered Ladislav's father from our first meeting and would know him again. I wondered at the mercy of the Fenicians, returning boat, perhaps captives, to us.

The sun nudged at the edge of the sea, staining the sky the lightest pink-red. We moved slowly through the sandbanks that protected the port. I had not been in the company of so many men for a long time. All looked to the floor as they dragged their oars through the still salt water.

Cold shadows ran through the boat. A lone bird's call sliced at the sky. The dawn was behind the black boat ahead. We never seemed to face it directly.

They had butchered the crew. The deck was clotted and soft. The tiller had been tied off, a man lashed to it. His throat had been cut, his nose pulled away. Thick boneless fingers, whole hands, floated loose in the bilges. Gulls lifted off as we boarded—they had been silent, too busy for noise.

Most of the dead had no faces. There was birdshit everywhere, white and yellow on open pink flesh. I had set light to the anatomical sketches my master had left me—sealed in an envelope, for my eyes only—but I cannot burn out my memories of that day. Walking among these battered corpses, I understood how gracefully and with how much respect and love the Firentines had carved out their knowledge.

We towed the ship back to shore and beached it. There was a great pyre on the beach. It blazed all night. The priest stood with us, periodically shouting in Latin. The wives were a little clump of loss in the dark. Every so often the flames would illuminate an empty face—and then it would be hidden again in the darkness. Jagged sobs enshrouded us all. I stayed until the embers glowed in the dawn. The pork reek of burnt flesh clung to my clothes—the dead so reluctant to leave us—and later I had to burn them too.

Fire took my master's heart. Staring into the pyre I was an apprentice again, gazing into St Mary Blachernae as it burnt. He was weeping beside me. The face of the Christ receding into flame; angels winged with fire reaching up to him, the damned and the saved beneath him, the blaze dancing through and around them like the Holy Spirit itself. All so golden, so elusive; so lost. I learned then how easily a man may be broken. The soul flares like parchment at the touch of God. Certainly Gianni guttered out, wheeling and swearing through the bars of Azantium.

The town was quiet after that. The pox lifted and left us, almost as if it were ashamed. I found that I was sharing Elena's bed. Every night she would sob herself to sleep, shaking, clutching at me. Sometimes she would call Ladislav to her. Sometimes he would stand in the doorway and stare. I sat up with him too. He spoke very little. I had not known the rhythms of the town before. Now there was only a broken absence.

* * * *

Subic came and invited me to dine with him. I ate and let him talk. The Fenicians had decided to crush the Corsairs of Omis. There was a sea blockade. They had hired an English Condotierro to ravage the Polijicans. There were reports of burnt villages, ravaged crops. His gold tooth flashed in the candlelight.

"Thirty years ago we were at peace—then the taxes, and we run goods without paying—and the Fenicians fine us, and try to take our young for their galleys. We do not let them ... and then..."

He would rail at the butchers of Fenice, then at their guildsman masters. "They are lied to, artist, lied to, and as you did they think we are monsters." Then he would cry. "Aren't they men too?"

* * * *

Elena asked me to sketch her husband for her. After I completed the portrait she kept it close to her. Other wives came to me and made the same request. I protested that I could not draw men I had not seen. Their sad, earnest sense of loss overpowered me. I sat with them one by one. Each described her man to me, and I followed their caring, precise guidance until I had made a picture that satisfied them.

Subic found me one day. He carried some of these drawings.

"You burnt your Christ and Apostles and I let you, because you copied them for the men of Fenice. Now you have found your new models for them."

"I cannot..."

He laid the images down on the table in front of me. He pointed. "He was strong and will be Peter. He was kind and will be Andrew. I will tell you the others."

"Captain, truly, I cannot. To be holy the apostles must be painted from the models..."

His rage was luminous. "And what better models than these, who died out of care for those they loved? And what could be better for those they loved, than to see them set on the walls of a church, unchanging and always caring for them?"

I thought of the figures that my master had copied. It had taken fire to make them live.

"I will paint your church."

* * * *

The walls were parchment white. The nave was rectangular, with two small side chapels set into the north and south walls. A small altar—little more than a table with a crucifix mounted on it—sat in an equally modest apse. There was no choir, no space to separate the priest from his people. Windows ran down either side of the nave. The wooden roofing above looked like an upturned ship.

Ladislav had accompanied me. "We used to sing here every Sunday." There were dried flowers. A woman, swaddled in a black shawl, prayed out a stream of soft, indistinguishable words. Ladislav's hand was safe in mine. "These are the saints."

The men of Omis had carved rough faces and bodies from driftwood. "This is Saint Anthony of Padova. He protects against shipwrecks." We walked to the other side of the church. "This is the Madonna Stella Maris."

We stood before the altar. "This is our Christ." Sailors' knots tied him off against the cross. A crude red line of paint had clotted against the rough, hacked at wood that was his skin.

I taught Ladislav how to burn wood to make charcoal crayons, and then we began.

I started by sketching historiae. I would show Christ calming the storm, then walking on water. I went to the harbour to watch the men of Omis at work in their boats.

Spring became summer. Sagenae went out, returned; piracy so small a part of their activities. They smuggled Polijican refugees through the Fenician blockade, used night to run supplies past Fenician and Azantine tax inspectors. Occasionally they attacked a ship, but only—Subic said—for food. I am sure that there was brutality; but there was nothing to match the cruelty of the Fenicians. Our ships outran theirs.

One evening, I was sketching by the dock. The sun had spent itself against the horizon and the light was falling away. The last blaze of the day had turned the sky to fire, the sea beneath it to gold. I turned and looked up at Omis. The glory of the moment seared itself against the white walls of the town. Everything was made flame.

The Fenicians tightened their grip on us and I lost myself in my masterpiece. I use the word in its old sense. As I planned and drew, I realised that I was no longer an apprentice. My master, his brother, could have taught me nothing more. Thought became art and vision blazed in me.

I showed the crowd dispersing from the feeding of the five thousand. I showed the disciples among them, all men I had known—men lost to me, to their families. I drew joyful faces, made them rich with amazement at the so easy satisfaction of such basic, perpetual needs. Seek, and you will find; ask, and you shall be given.

I showed the Christ commanding his men to take ship. I painted the sea as I had seen it, that morning on the Maria—a serene, blazing void. I showed the disciples—fishermen all—at home in their craft, the rituals of preparation, of navigation. I thought of Ladislav, teaching me to sail. I showed them as they left the safe land behind.

I showed the Christ praying. I made them tiny on the sea beyond him. I showed him grieving for their weakness, for his terrible inability to do anything else but send them into danger.

I showed the storm that blew up. I scraped lines in the wall, jagged and terrible, creating a violence that could not be withstood. I showed the fishermen afraid in their little boat, men who knew the sea too well to pretend that they could be saved.

I showed the Christ walking out to them, the great storm become nothing more than a vehicle for his presence. I showed their awe, their relief, their joy. I showed Peter, stepping from the boat, laughing as he found himself safe within the tearing of things.

I sat in that room for so long, looking at an empty space.

Ladislav mixed up new inks, made me fresh crayons. I did not use them. I listened to reports of the burning of Polijican towns, of sagenae lost to Fenician pirates. I heard of the death of men I had known, and I consoled their wives with drawings. I helped Subic drink against his grief. I talked with the refugees. I heard tales of English mercenaries; of murder, rape and pillage.

I would not let my apostles sink. I would not let the Christ fail them, and so I showed Peter walking, and I had the rest step into the storm and join him, and I made them all secure against the burning rages of life. I drew the women too, and made a great scene of the dead and the living, alive to each other despite all the world. I made them strong together, blazing with love for and faith in each other.

But I could not complete my work. I could never find a face for my Christ. The figure that watched over them all was always crowned with a silent, empty oval. I could never see how to fill that space.

And we had no pigments and no gesso; and no possibility of either, as mercenaries besieged our little town walls, and the Fenician ships grew more and more daring. And so my work was never more than lines carved in black, on brilliant white walls.

* * * *

On our last night in Omis—before the flight along the secret cliff paths; before the pretence of occupation, the final resistance that Subic and his volunteers would make, buying the hours needed to free us—we gathered in that little chapel.

I had not thought that it could contain us, but it seemed to grow and embrace us all, a Misericordia made stone. I thought again of the loaves, and of the salt taste of fish, of the heresies of consolation that I had created. We sang, and prayed, and I looked at the pictures on the wall and the faces of the congregation. The candle light was soft, blurring the two together. In my memory, the dead stand amongst the living and comfort them with their presence.

And then there was silence, and I was alone. I let the last of the candles burn out as I gathered and packed my tools. I had been working until the very last, dropping in small details here and there. I had sent Ladislav on ahead, with his mother. I was hidden in a corner, packing sketches into albums and styli into cases. In the soft light the empty chapel felt like a great silent cave.

There were footsteps in the church, and I saw a tall man. He was simply dressed in a white smock. He had a dark, slightly shaggy beard, thick dark hair, ash black eyes. His nose hooked out of a taut face—skin stretched like canvas across strong bones. He did not see me. I did not reveal myself.

He went to every face and looked at it, murmuring words to each one. Sometimes he would laugh. Sometimes I saw him cry. Then there would be a farewell touch, a kiss, and he would move on to the next one.

I had made so many different people there, but he knew them all. The church was his little kingdom and—as the light from small flames danced around and in him—he moved through it and possessed it, at once a proud king and the humblest of servants.

Once he had visited them all, he knelt before the altar and prayed. I listened to the soft murmur of his words. Then, there was silence.

He had left the doors open.

I waited to the last, and watched from the cliff path as the bluff ended and Subic fired the town. The church went quickly, blazing more fiercely than the other buildings. I had packed the pews and altars with kindling. My work was for the people of Omis alone.

I imagined the completed face of the Christ, shining out within flames—blazing out from void and loss to console us all, amidst the crackling, burning shocks of life.

* * * *

I have not been back to Omis. There is nothing to return to. Now, I am an artist. I travel through the small towns, the fishing ports and the shepherd villages, the little hamlets of this world, and I give what I can and move on.

I take their faces, their small lives, and set them onto the empty walls. I cast them into the great tale of

that caring, forgiving, angry man, remaking the stories where I need to, and show them the life that sustains them against life. Every man has the right to live.

The faces of the apostles always change. Here a sailor, here an innkeeper, here a shepherd, here a cook. Sometimes, I find myself painting a dead fisherman. For a moment he flares in my mind; then, I finish my work, and he will live beyond memory, for as long as his image glows on that wall.

There are always children. I tell them the stories of these remembered men, and make sure they know not to forget them. Ladislav laughs at me for this, but then he is young. His mother understands. He will find his own faces to treasure, and he will make them live again, in his turn. I see the mastery in him now; sleeping lightly, awaiting the soft touch of loss to kindle it to life.

The face of the Christ never changes. He is a man with sharp eyes and a dark, shaggy beard. I paint him burning with life on the cross, looking out at his people. He is their master; he is their servant. I no longer see a distinction. I have seen him die for them, and so now he is immortal.

I tell his story too, and the children spread it. And so the blazing face of the pirate Christ looks out on all those he gave himself for; and because the guildsmen of Fenice slandered him, and then came to destroy him, he rises again, time after time, the living, golden, human flame of every work I make.

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SAVING DIEGO—Matthew Kressel

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Illustrated by David Gentry

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Matthew Kressel's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as *Naked City: New Tales of Urban Fantasy* (edited by Ellen Datlow), *Electric Velocipede*, *Apex Science Fiction & Horror Digest*, *Abyss & Apex*, and elsewhere. He is also the publisher of *Sybil's Garage* magazine. In April of 2008 he took over from Gavin Grant as the co-host of the KGB Fantastic Fiction reading series in New York City. Matthew is a member of the Altered Fluid writing group where, he says, he is continually humbled by his talented peers ... His website is matthewkressel.net.

* * * *

I had traveled twelve thousand, seven hundred and sixty light-years to see my friend, but the hardest part of the trip was the last seventy one flights of stairs. Goddamn the Nefanesh and their ass-backwards ways! I struggled to catch my breath as I moved down a dim hallway covered with dust. Oil lamps flickered from high places, and the doors sported knobs and hinges, like some virt park for kiddies, a rehash of a dead era. But, no, the Nefanesh preferred their realtime antique, the fucks. Why Diego had come all the way out here, to this world at the edge of the galaxy where the planet-munching numens roam, I could only guess. I hadn't seen my friend in six years.

At the end of the hallway a door leaned open, and I pushed it aside. An emaciated man sat cross-legged in the corner with his back against the wall, smiling like the Buddha. He wore nothing but a pair of ripped shorts, and the room was as bare as him, a single lamp burning at his feet.

"Mikal!" he said in a voice weary and slow, so different from the one I remembered. "I've been waiting forever for you."

Diego had always been thin, scruffy, two days past a shower. But now his ribs jutted from his chest, and his face was as thin as the dead. A mop of greasy gray hair hung to his shoulders, and his beard was long and shaggy. Diego, I knew, was thirty one years old, by Earthcal. Whatever had happened to him in the last six years, it hadn't been kind. "Diego?" I said, skeptically. Was this really the same man I had known?

"It seems so long since we've seen each other, Mikal," he said. "But also like yesterday." He stared at me with the starry, probing look of a mystic. But he looked so disgusting, so different than the man I remembered, I had to look away.

"You must be exhausted, Mikal. Don't worry, I have a meal prepared."

He struggled to his feet, grabbed the metal lamp, and crept like an old man into an adjoining room. I resisted the urge to help him; I didn't want to touch his pasty skin. When he wasn't looking, I shivered.

The next room was bare too, except for a small table that rose a few inches above the floor. It had been set with fine glasses, plates and silverware, and looked very out of place in this empty apartment. A pot steamed beside it, smelling delicious; I hadn't eaten since I left the highliner many hours before.

"Sit, Mikal! Eat!"

I threw my bag down and devoured chunks of a meaty stew while Diego watched. Behind him, the windows of Hasriyu flickered like stars. In a universe filled with flits and slipstreams, these people had

chosen candles over electric light.

Diego poured me some tea. "I knew you'd come," he said.

"Anything for a friend," I said.

"Mikal, you look great."

"I suppose," I said, though I couldn't say the same for him. I studied my friend, the empty apartment. It took me a while to build up the courage and ask him, "Are you sick, Diego?"

"It's all relative," he said. "My body doesn't look healthy, I know, but my mind is sharper than ever."

I looked down at the food, a table prepared for two. I didn't see a kitchen, and I doubted Diego had cooked this meal himself. Maybe a bot? "Are you here alone?" I said.

"Most of the time."

"Diego, why am I here?"

Diego pulled out a long, curving pipe from his pocket, and lit it. He puffed it slowly, making little arabesques of smoke that twirled up to the ceiling. It reeked like a dead rat caught in a furnace.

"That shit smells awful," I said. "What is it?"

"It's called the sweet jisthmus. The Nefanesh use it to reach transcendent states of consciousness."

"And you?"

"I've found it to be the most introspective of all the herbs. It helps me think."

"*Why am I here*, Diego?"

He pulled his pipe from his lips. "Because, Mikal, I need you to help me stop smoking it."

I looked at his withered body and understood. He had become addicted, and it was killing him.

"I need to start over," he said. "A new life. But I need help."

"Are you selling?" I didn't want to get caught up in that scene again.

"No," he said.

"How did you get the money for my ticket out here?"

"I do favors for someone. In return, she provides for me."

I didn't want to imagine what kind of favors he meant. "Why didn't you ask her?"

"Well, she's pretty particular about what she does for me."

"And no one else here could help you? There's no rehab for junkies?"

"To these people, jisthmus is a godsend. They don't understand my need to stop smoking it. But you and I, we've shared so many trips together. You *get* me, Mikal. You know when to push and when to let go. And you're the only one I trust. I thought we might—when I get clean—start a little business. We used to

work so well together, Mikal."

"You want to sell again?"

"Nothing illegal. We could sell custom virts, or blandybanes, or lumps of dirt. It doesn't matter. I know anything we do together will succeed."

"I have a job now," I said. "A real job." I didn't mention that I had quit so I could heed Diego's call, nostalgia for my former life pulling me across the galaxy.

"But does it make you happy?"

I looked away from his probing eyes.

"C'mon, Mikal. Let's live again! Remember what we had together? That was bliss, man. So you got clean. Now it's my turn. I just need a little help."

I'd spent years trying to get sober. I could navigate that slipstream blindfolded. And Diego was right. The past few years had been the dullest of my life, nothing but the same monotonous routine day after day after day. The thought of hanging out with Diego again filled me with an excitement I hadn't felt in years. "Yeah, I'll help you, you old bag of shit," I said.

"I knew you would, Mikal. I just knew it!"

* * * *

Six years ago, Diego and I were squatting in an abandoned Seoul co-op, dropping tabs of virginize and fucking virts in VR. We had a good connection down in Andong, a vestie with a cock and breasts who brought us shit once per week, and we'd sell tabs to junkies with a huge markup. We dropped almost as much as we sold, so even though we were making gobs of cash, money was always scarce. But Diego and I, we made it work somehow. And, man, those were some of the best times I've ever had. The stories I could tell.

So one day our Andong hookup gives us this new shit, said it was going to blow our minds, make us rich, that we could buy an air condo with the cash it would bring. Diego and I wanted to drop it together, but then he said to me, "What if we OD? Or what if we're so fucked up we want to jump out a window? Maybe I'd better do it alone, and you watch me."

He was always the brave one, the guy who walked fearlessly into shady alleys to make deals with nervous junkies, who dropped heroic hits of xeno, so I agreed. He put on his lucky necklace, a gaudy thing made of cobalt and hematite that he adored. Then, after we downed half a bottle of whiskey, Diego dropped a single tab. For the first thirty minutes, he felt nothing, and we thought we'd been jacked. But then, Diego suddenly said, "Oh. My. God!"

"Are you all right?"

"Mikal. Mikal, my friend. We haven't lived! We haven't lived a single moment in our pathetic lives!"

"So you feel it?"

"The question is, Mikal, do *you* feel it?"

"I didn't drop, Diego."

"Life, Mikal! Life, it's all around us! I can see it now. It's in everything. It's in you and me and everyone."

"It's good then?" I said. "We're going to be rich?"

Diego smiled, off in his own trance of bliss.

I heard dogs barking and several loud bangs. I glanced out the window and saw six police officers storm the building. Three flyers circled overhead, beaming spotlights into the windows. I ran out into the hall. On the floors below, cops pried open a door, wipes in their hands. They burst into the apartment and exploded out again with drooling squatters in tow. They moved to the next door and the next. I remembered we had a thousand hits of gheebong stashed under the bed. A single tab could land you five years in realtime.

"Diego! Diego, get the fuck up!" I shouted. "The cops are here! We got to bail!"

"Oh, Mikal, you don't see."

"Diego, shut the fuck up! Get your ass up!" I tried to lift him, but he was too heavy.

"You're my friend, Mikal," he said. "You always have been. I love you."

I heard the whine of an ascending discus; the cops would be on this floor in seconds. I couldn't go to prison, couldn't get fullwiped and refocused. I had too much life left to live.

"I'm sorry, Diego," I said.

I climbed out the rear window onto the fire escape; the flyer turned its spotlight in my direction as I leaped across the gap to the next building. I jumped over a couple fucking, hopped a discus to the basement, and snuck out through an old tunnel. I fled Korea Xin a few days later inside the cargo hold of a scramsloop, nearly dying from oxdep.

Yeah, I wanted to look up my friend, to see if he was safe, but I knew that any nets grep would finger me if he'd been busted, so I tried to forget about Diego and move on with my life. I got clean—*eventually*—and got a job tending newsents on the freeweb, making sure those nascent AIs didn't eat through decades worth of connections. It wasn't my dream job—the pay was shit—but I made enough to be comfortable, to fall into a kind of sleep, I guess.

Then one morning, three months ago, I received a flit inviting me out to Gilder Nefan, an ass-backwards planet at the edge of the galaxy, along with a thousand terrans, a shit-ton of money, and a plea for help. Diego, it seemed, had found me.

* * * *

I woke up to singing. Outside, in a parapet high above the city, a muezzin chanted prayers as a giant red sun rose behind him. Through the stone walls and hallways I heard echoes of more chanting, as if the entire city sang with him. The food from the night before had been cleared while I slept. For years I'd squatted in apartments where people came in and out like flies to shit and I didn't bat an eye. But now, knowing that someone was here while I slept creeped me the fuck out.

I found Diego in the next room, sitting by the window, smoking his ass-reeking herb. He nodded to me, but his eyes were far away. I sat down and told him of my plan, how I would wean him off of his habit, and he quietly agreed. It was the same plan I had used to get myself clean.

For my first task, I had to buy more jisthmus. Diego couldn't quit cold turkey, and his supply was running low. With two hundred terrans of Diego's cash in my pocket, I descended the seventy one flights of stairs, already dreading the return trip, and wandered deep into the city's crooked streets.

There were no plasmasents to guide my way, no kiosks or netports to plug into. My clothes were different too—the Nefanesh were obsessed with mud browns and greens—it made me feel exposed as I walked. The sun didn't reach this far down between the stone buildings, so the people hung thousands of lamps along the sloping walls and bridges. The lights had been arranged to form stars and birds and trees and hundreds of other shapes, while the air stank of burning oil, jisthmus and dust.

The women here were beautiful, in a rugged way. No plastica or juve supplements for them. Freegenes, I guessed. And the men, with their dark beards, looked identical as they walked past me. A few spoke Anglai well enough to guide me to Usha Square, a park in the center of the city.

I found a jisthmus merchant near the park's edge, under a spindly tree and a rusting statue. His pavilion was filled with wooden dishes, pipes, and bizarre tapestries hanging from the flapping walls.

"How much for a decagram of jisthmus?" I said.

The merchant looked me over with deep brown eyes. "You from Earth?" he said in awful Anglai.

"Yes."

"Come here to get high?"

"No. I'm here for a friend."

"Gilder Nefan no place for junkies."

"How much?" I barked.

"Nine hundred shekels."

"Do you take terrans?"

He scoffed, then said, "One eighty terrans."

"That's fucking ridiculous," I said, and started to walk away.

"No!" he said. "Jisthmus cheaper no place else. Bazaar is two months away. Hard to buy until then. I have best price. You see."

My stomach rumbled, and I was already exhausted, so I paid the outrageous sum and crept back into the shadowed streets. I ate some foul meat from a vendor, and on the way home passed a squat merchant woman selling cheap jewelry. I bought a cobalt necklace from her, much like the one Diego used to wear. A little gift, I thought, to remind him of the old days. When I reached his building, the people bowed and sang in another fit of prayer. They knelt in the lobby, bobbing their heads like pigeons pecking at crumbs. They leered as I walked past them, and some flicked their fingers oddly at me, I think in some kind of curse.

An hour later, completely exhausted from the seventy-one-flight climb, I entered Diego's apartment to find him naked on the floor, shivering. A puddle of vomit glimmered in the lamplight next to his head.

"Diego!" I screamed.

"No more, Saa!" he whimpered. "Leave me alone! Go away, Saa!"

He stank like puke and shit. I picked him up and carried him into the washroom, then placed him on a small stool and used my shirt as a sponge to clean his face; there were no towels anywhere. He had shit

himself, and for a moment I regretted my new job. But I thought of our future together, roaming the galaxy on one adventure after another. This was only a passing moment. So I took off his pants, cleaned him up, and set him to rest in the main room on a thin mat. Tomorrow, I told myself, I'd buy him some new clothes and some towels.

Later, as the sun was going down, as the muezzin bellowed for the third time that day, Diego awoke. "Mikal? Mikal!"

I came to him. He was shivering violently.

"My pipe!" he said. "Hurry."

I stuffed his pipe with a small bit of jisthmus. "Just a little," I said.

I watched him smoke, smelled the reek of that ass-stinking herb, until a small amount of color filled his cheeks. His shivering subsided as night slowly crept into the room.

I lit the lamp and said, "What happened before?"

He shrugged.

"Who is Saa? Is she the one that cooks your meals?"

His head snapped in my direction. "I was hallucinating," he said.

"You didn't hallucinate the puke."

He frowned. "Now you see one more reason why I need help." His voice had become slow and thick.

I sat and wrapped my hands around my knees. "So this is what you do?" I said. "Just smoke and puke and waste away?"

He stared out the window. "No. I *think*."

"About what?"

He paused. "Mostly, I think about the numens."

"The planet-smashers? The gods?"

"They're not gods, Mikal. Are you a god to a cockroach?"

"In a way," I said. "I can crush it whenever I want."

Diego shivered. "The numens are intelligent creatures, like you and me—"

"Yeah, that eat planets. What was it? Ecruga, Oxwei, Charlotte's World. All obliterated by numens. And they weren't too far from here either."

"That was more than twenty years ago. And the numens didn't understand what they were doing. When you see a cockroach scuttling by, you crush it because you were told that they're diseased and swim in shit. But what if you knew that each one had a soul, a conscience? Would you kill it then?"

"Yeah. They're disgusting little buggers."

He frowned. "It's all about points of view. People convinced the numens that certain planets were being

infested by vermin—humans—and so the numens destroyed them."

"People?" I said. "How did people convince the numens of anything?"

"Did you ever own a pet?"

"I once had a cat."

"Okay, so you fed your cat, right? Changed its litter box?"

"I let it shit outside."

"But you were doing things *for* your pet, giving it things it wants, like food. And in return, it gives you what you want: affection, a companion. A soft thing to rub when you're lonely and cold."

"What are you saying? That a human was a pet to one of these numens?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Once these humans were adopted, it was just a matter of simple coercion to convince their numen masters that, in order to be happy, the numen had to destroy a planet."

"That's fucked up."

"It's the truth."

"How do you know this?"

He took another hit. "I told you, I've had a lot of time to think. The jisthmus helps me reach subtle states of consciousness where the numens roam. You might say I plucked the answers out of the ether."

"I think you've plucked enough ether for one night," I said, taking the pipe from his hands. "I'm rationing your jisthmus from now on."

He nodded solemnly.

"Oh, I almost forgot," I said. "I have something for you." I pulled out the cobalt necklace I had bought earlier. "I remembered your lucky necklace. This looked a lot like it."

He took it and smiled. "I remember. I lost it when I went to prison."

We fell silent for a time. Eventually I said, "Why did you come all the way out to this planet, Diego?"

"Do you remember that drug I took our last night together?"

I nodded.

"Our Andong hookup was right; it was like touching the face of God. Then I came down."

"Did you go to prison?"

He nodded. "They refocused me. I avoided fullwiping by pretending to have schizophrenia. They thought it might make me worse. But refocusing is just as fucked up."

"God," I said. "What was that like?"

"Like every day is the first day of school. Everything is new and utterly terrifying. I felt like a whole new person, new behaviors, new feelings. The prisons are crowded, you know, so eventually they just let me

go. Three years later I was serving drinks at a dinky bar in the Ukraine when some flicky pops me in the head with a bottle 'cause his meds had run out or something. When I awoke in a puddle of my own blood, I felt like my old self again."

"What did you do?" I said.

"I quit my job and just sat in my apartment for weeks. I remembered that night in Seoul, how I'd touched the face of God. I started obsessing about that feeling. I wanted to touch heaven again. But I couldn't go back to Korea Xin, and no one in the Ukraine had ever heard of that drug. But I'd heard stories of a planet, way out on the galactic edge, with people that devoted their lives to godliness, where they smoked an herb which supposedly opened their minds to higher realms. I thought, what better place to seek nirvana again? I had saved enough money for a highliner, found a job as a woodworker, and began, through jisthmus, to search for that feeling I had lost."

"And did you find it?"

"Yes. And no."

"Which is it?"

He sighed. "The old saying is, 'The first high is always the best'."

"That's the truth."

"Not really. With Jisthmus, there's no first high. The past and future are one continuum. In some ways, I'm still experiencing that night in Seoul. Part of me is still in prison. And another part of me, is in a mental prison."

"From the refocusing?"

"No. I touched something out here, Mikal. Something I'm having trouble getting free from." His face twisted as if he was about to say something, but then he sighed and stared down at his bony fingers.

My stomach rumbled loudly. "I don't suppose you have any food?"

"The meal's been ready for over an hour." He pointed into the next room.

I turned around and saw a small table set with plates and food. I hopped to my feet to investigate. The apartment was empty, except for us.

"This is freaking me out," I said. "Who's preparing the food?"

"She doesn't like to be seen." Diego leaned against the window, all skin and bones.

I shook off my nerves and helped him to the table. "Come," I said. "You need to eat."

"Mikal," he said as he took a sip of soup, "about Seoul, six years ago..."

"Yeah," I said, "I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Why, Mikal? Why did you leave me?"

I had to look away from his probing eyes. "I told you we had to bail, but you wouldn't listen. The cops were coming. And you were so heavy..."

"But you were my lookout. You were supposed to protect me."

"I didn't know what to do. I panicked, Diego."

"How come you never visited me in prison, or found me after?"

I lost my appetite and put down the fork. "I thought that if I found you, the cops would find me too. I got clean, and I guess I just wanted to start over. Diego, I know this doesn't mean much to you now. But I really am sorry. I don't know what else to say..."

He stared at me for a long time before sighing deeply. "I've imagined this moment a thousand times, and each time I was unable to forgive you. But I keep thinking that you've traveled all the way out here. For *me*. I didn't want to forgive you, Mikal, but when I look at your face, my heart says that I do."

"Eat your soup," I said. But inside, I smiled.

* * * *

I thought I'd be bored without the distraction of virt and vid, of nets and polysents, but I found myself relaxing for the first time in years. The days melded pleasantly together as I got used to the short days of Gilder Nefan. We formed a simple routine: I'd ration out portions of jisthmus for Diego, weaning him off of the drug until he felt the first severe symptoms of withdrawal. Then I'd allow him to smoke a very small amount. While high, he'd entertain me with stories of his intellectual wanderings, and I started to look forward to my daily dose of Cosmic philosophy. I had never truly known how smart my friend was, the strange places his mind was willing to go.

Our mysterious cook placed meals in the apartment every day. Often, I'd sit in the next room, just out of view, waiting for her. But a watched table never gets set; she never came while I hid. Then, I'd get up to piss or to look out the window, and when I returned, the food was there. Freaky.

Diego smoked that decagram faster than I'd expected, so before the end of the first week I returned to the vendor in Usha Square to buy more jisthmus.

"If you smoke the sweet jisthmus without grounding in faith, it will eat your mind," the vendor said.

"It's not for me," I said.

"You Terrans, you come here and think sweet jisthmus is fun, a game to get high and touch the *Ein Sof*. Do you know the story of Musa?"

"Moses?"

"When Musa went up the mountain of Ilah, he commanded his people to look away. It is—how you say in Anglai?—a metaphor. Musa was pure and could glimpse the endless above the crown. But his people were dirty. If they look on the infinite, it shatter them. You are like the impure who disobey and look upon *El Shaddai*. Jisthmus will break you unless you purify your soul."

I thought of Diego and how the drug had destroyed his body. He had no faith that I knew of. "Are you going to sell me the jisthmus or not?"

He frowned and handed me a cloth bundle wrapped with leather twine. I paid him and turned to leave. "Wait," he said. "This is for you." He fetched a small book from under the table: a real hardbound, paper pages and all. "It has Anglai translation."

"I don't do religion," I said.

"This is not religion," he said. "It save you from the abyss."

I took the book out of curiosity for its paper pages and its interesting script rather than any words inside of it, and headed back to Diego's apartment. I began to feel a chill, even though the air was desert hot. Perhaps I was getting a fever. And that would be piss on shit if it was true, because I knew these Nefanesh didn't believe in nanomed, that their doctors would probably shove a wooden pole up my ass and call me cured.

Back in the apartment, Diego sat by the window, wearing the cobalt necklace and some of the new clothes I had bought for him. In the reflected light, his face resembled the one I remembered, with round ears and soft cheekbones. He was beautiful. And I thought, though the change was small, that he had gained a little weight.

I offered him the bundle of jisthmus.

He shook his head. "No. I'm going to wait."

"Really?" I said. "You sure you don't want some?"

"No."

"I think you need a little bit to—"

"No!" he snapped. "Isn't that your goddamned job?"

"Yeah..." I said. "Yeah. Sorry."

"You're shivering, Mikal," he said.

"I think I'm getting a cold."

"Well, you'd better get some rest. I'm going to sleep early tonight too. I want to see if I can go without jisthmus until morning."

I nodded and slipped into the next room. I tried to sleep, but my nerves wouldn't let me rest. What if I'd caught the cur-flu on the highliner out here? What if I developed a fever and didn't have the energy to descend the stairs? Diego was still not in any condition to fend for himself, let alone for another. I sat on the floor and rocked back and forth, while I flipped through the holy book the vendor had given me. The words blurred together, and I couldn't read more than a sentence before I felt a wave of nausea and fear.

There had been something profoundly grounding while sitting next to Diego as he smoked his jisthmus and spoke of his philosophy, and I thought that right now that was the one thing I needed. But my job was to help him quit, and we'd never get off this planet if I kept him hooked.

I opened the bundle of jisthmus and looked at it closely for the first time. It resembled buds of ganj, but was much darker, almost black. Not burning, it smelled pretty tolerable, like black tea and sage. I thought that if I put a little bit into Diego's pipe and lit it, not to smoke, of course, but just to smell it in the air, like an incense, it might settle my nerves.

I put a small amount into the bowl and held a match to it, pointing the stem away from my lips. The herb was moist, however, and didn't catch. So, with the same lit match, I puffed on the pipe. I never planned to inhale, but years of smoking all of sorts of things made the action involuntary. I inhaled a small bit before I realized what I'd done and threw the pipe away.

The world shifted.

My nausea, shakes, and fear stopped instantly. The walls, bare and brown before, took on new life. I saw, in each and every crevice and bump, an entire universe of history. I thought of the people who had built these giant towers without modern machines, how each stone was laid by hand, of the mason who placed the bricks of this wall, how my presence here, in this room, was impossible without his meticulous work. I suddenly wanted to meet him and thank him.

And—my god!—outside, the stars—when had the sun set?—the stars glimmered with light a million years old and yet born anew every second. Below them a city of such simple beauty. And on the floor by my feet was a book. I picked it up and read the cover: *Ohr Ha'Olam, The Light of the Universe*. And it was lit too. The book glowed brighter than the stars outside, brighter than the lamp beside me. I opened to page one and read, ‘The universe is nothing but Light, and the light of the One pervades all.’ Yes, I thought. Yes.

And I understood, and read, and knew the Cosmos as a friend.

* * * *

A voice called to me from sweet and heavy dreams, pulling me awake. It was Diego, screaming.

"Mikal! Mikal!"

I ran to him, groggily. For the first time, I had slept through the muezzin's morning song.

"My pipe, Mikal! Get my pipe!"

I ran back into the other room, and when I saw the packed pipe, the open bundle of jisthmus, and *The Light of the Universe* open to page two hundred and seventy three, I remembered: I had smoked jisthmus last night. I cursed myself as I emptied the contents of the pipe outside the window to hide my guilt from Diego, then rewrapped the bundle to make it look as if it hadn't been opened. How could I let this happen?

I returned to Diego, reopened the bundle, and packed his pipe. As he smoked his herb, I relaxed again into the thick smell that filled the air. With the scent, memories of the evening returned to me as he spoke. “What took you so long?” he said.

"I'm tired." *Despair is the respite of fools, for none enter the Lord's house without joy.* The words flashed in my mind.

"Are you feeling better?"

The Light of one's house is dim or bright according to his need. “Yes,” I said after a time. In truth, I felt rather sick. I took a deep breath, trying to inhale some of the second-hand smoke. I wanted to reach out and take the pipe from him. But I steeled myself. I could not let myself become addicted to this drug.

"I had a strange dream last night,” he said. “I need to tell it to you. Maybe you can interpret it.”

"Okay,” I said groggily.

"I dreamed I was a cat that wanted to be human. I watched my master, how she did her human things, and when she was gone I imitated her. She'd come home and stroke me, and it would feel wonderful, but each time she petted me I felt more like a cat and less like a person. So one day she came home and I hid from her. She called and called, but I didn't come. I hid from her for days, until I was weak and hungry. She finally found me, an emaciated thing hiding inside the lamp in the ceiling. To punish me, she

cut off my legs and tore off my eyelids. She returned to her human things, while I could do nothing but watch her. But the worst part of all was that *she still petted me.*"

"That sounds horrible," I said.

"It is," he said, staring at me. "What do you think it means?"

His dream made me feel even worse. "Look, I need to get some air. Is it okay if I go for a while?"

He frowned. "Hide the jisthmus first," he said.

I quickly hid the bundle then left him. Alone, I wandered the city streets, drinking buckets of water, seeking the wide open spaces to clear my lungs. I had to remove that poison from my body. But jisthmus was all I could think about.

I sat on a bench, shaking my legs, willing myself to think of something else, when a Nefanese girl sat down next to me. Her eyes were swirls of green and brown, with pupils like tiny black stars.

"You from offworld?" she said in accented Anglai.

I nodded.

"Earth?"

"Yeah."

"I've never been to Earth," she said.

"There's a lot more to do there."

"I like your face," she said. "No beard. Can I touch it?"

Before I could answer she ran her finger down my jaw.

"There are some empty pavilions in Usha Square," she said. "Where two people could be alone."

"You wouldn't, by any chance, have some jisthmus?" I said.

"I do. But it's not yet *Zizuhr.*"

"Zi-what?"

"Noon prayer."

"Do you have to wait until then to smoke it?"

She looked at me strangely, then frowned. "Of course we do."

"Can we smoke a little now?"

"No," she said sternly.

"Why not?"

"Because it's forbidden."

"C'mon, let's just smoke a little."

"Have you no reverence for *Elohim*?"

"Elo-who? Why can't you smoke whenever you want?"

She abruptly stood, spat in my face, and slapped me. She made the finger gesture I had seen the others do, then shouted foreign words in Nefanesh. I slowly walked away, and when I turned the corner, she was still shouting.

Angry, confused, I wandered the streets. I'd come down here to be free of the jisthmus, and instead I found myself seeking more. Back in the apartment, I knew Diego would want to smoke again soon. I felt trapped. To keep my mind occupied, I ate from every vendor I passed, until my stomach hurt and I was heavy with food. For a time, I didn't want the drug anymore, only sleep.

I trudged up the many flights to Diego's apartment. At first I thought I was on the wrong floor. The many walls had changed, rearranged into a new pattern. I checked the floor and apartment number, but both were correct, and when I re-entered Diego's room, I saw him rocking back and forth. His hair was wild and his face was twisted in pain.

"Where the fuck were you?" he said.

"What did you do to the apartment?"

"What do you mean?"

"The walls, they're all different," I said.

"Different?"

"Is this the same apartment?"

"Are you feeling okay?"

"No," I said, sitting down. "I'm tired."

"*You're* tired?" Diego said. "I've just spent the entire afternoon looking for my jisthmus. Fuck, Mikal, if I found where you hid it, I'd have smoked the whole bundle! All my progress would be for shit."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Go!" he said. "Get my pipe!"

I ran into the next room—a different next room from the one I remembered—and found the pipe and bundle behind a loose brick in the window sill. That part, at least, hadn't changed. I packed the pipe, lit it, and took a puff. With it, all my anxiety left me. I took a second puff and a third. Then I remembered Diego.

I stepped into the next room.

"It's already lit," he said.

"I got it going for you."

He puffed on his pipe and his face relaxed.

"The walls," I said, "the walls are different."

"The walls are always different," he said, and I understood what he meant. Everything around me was moving, alive, bursting with life. In every instant, the walls were born anew. The light of the setting sun moved across Diego's face as he fell asleep, and with his eyes closed I took another puff and another. I thought of reading more of *The Light of the Universe*, but I was too lazy to move.

I fell asleep, and dreamed of a monstrous hand reaching across light-years of space to stroke me. Its touch was the most pleasurable and the most vile thing I have ever felt. Pleasurable, like a thousand orgasms. And vile, because each stroke said to me I was nothing but a speck of flotsam in an infinite sea.

* * * *

Things grew hazy after that. I continued weaning Diego off of his habit and watched him get stronger each day, while I snuck more and more jisthmus when he wasn't looking. I stopped bathing, let my beard grow, and would only eat every other day. Diego, on the other hand, grew strong enough to descend the many flights of stairs. I offered to go with him, but he refused, said he needed to prove to himself that he was a man again. I didn't argue. I was all too happy to be alone to smoke more.

By the end of the third week, we ran out of lamp oil. I promised to get more, but kept forgetting. So we spent the nights in the dark, until one night I broke a glass. Without light, we kept cutting our feet on the shards, so I used the only source of kindling I had: a page from *The Light of the Universe*. The pages had a natural oil to them, and I found that if I twirled them into little tubes, they made excellent, if short-lived, candles.

"The Bazaar's coming in two weeks," Diego said to me one night.

"What's that?" I said, my mind wandering into ethereal dimensions.

"The Hinini traders come with goods from offworld. All those empty tents in Usha Square fill with vendors. It's the best time to buy jisthmus."

"Good to know," I said dreamily.

"But I'm not going to buy any more."

"What?" I said, sitting up.

"I'm choosing that day to quit. I've saved enough for two highliner tickets. Enough for you and me to go anywhere. Some place far away from jisthmus."

"That's great," I heard myself say, "I'm proud of you. You've come so far." But inside, I was filled with dread. I wasn't ready to leave jisthmus behind.

"*We* have come far, Mikal. *We* have."

* * * *

I knew the Bazaar's arrival by its sound. The skies buzzed with trader ships, huge highliners floated in orbit, and thousands of jumpers crisscrossed the sky. Today, Diego would quit, and we'd leave this planet together. But I wasn't ready to leave.

I didn't sleep at all that night; I was up before the sun. Ships in silhouette descended from the sky as I puffed jisthmus, thinking of all the ways I might smuggle a bundle onto a highliner. I felt the now familiar bending of my mind, the opening of all things into infinity, the transience of all. Diego walked into the room while I had the pipe to my lips. I coughed and exhaled the blue smoke.

"Diego!" I screamed.

He sat down across from me. He had cut his hair, shaved, and bathed. Besides a few extra wrinkles and a mop of gray hair, he looked much like the man I had known back in Seoul. "You don't have to hide it anymore, Mikal. I should have guessed, but I was too preoccupied. The bundles disappeared too fast."

"I'm sorry. It's just ... I mean, I was..."

"Don't try to explain. It's pointless now."

"I'll quit. Just like you did. Let me pack my things. We'll take that highliner to Datsu, or Woll Ye. It'll be like old times again!"

"You can't quit cold turkey, Mikal. It'll kill you."

"I'll bring some with me. You can wean me off of it, just like I did for you."

"You'll never get it past customs. And even if you did, I don't want it around me anymore. I've worked too hard to get free."

"Diego, just give me a week or two. I'll quit, and we can take the next highliner out of here."

"The highliners only come with the Bazaar, every three months. I don't want to wait that long."

"Why not? I helped you! Won't you do it for me?"

"It's more complicated than that, Mikal. It's not just the jisthmus I'm running from. I came here to find heaven again, but I found something else instead, something beyond matter. I found a world of thought and emotion, an entire realm beyond the physical."

"I've felt it too," I said. "With the jisthmus."

"That's where the numens roam," Diego said. "I was exploring it, when I came to the attention of one of them. She calls herself Saa."

"You called her name that day I found you naked on the floor," I said.

He nodded. "Saa liked how I stayed put, how my thoughts returned to her day after day. We shared ... conversations, really just exchanges of raw emotion. To her, I was like a stray cat that visits every day. She thought I needed a home. One day, she reached out and petted my soul. It was bliss, and it was hell. Nothing so cemented my human condition as that stroke of affection. I was, I saw, little more than an atom in a billion light-year void. She sensed my loneliness and adopted me.

"Once I was hers, she wouldn't let me go. My body could roam the physical world, but my mind was caged. It felt like falling, for ever and ever, into nothingness. I told her I wanted to be free, but she said that the Cosmos was dangerous, that I was safe with her as her pet, her prisoner.

"She gave me material things to keep me happy. Food, money, physical pleasure beyond anything I have ever known. But still, I was in her mental cage, falling, falling. But then I realized it was the jisthmus that was keeping me bound to her. If I could stop smoking it, I'd be free."

"Why didn't you tell me this before, Diego?"

"She wouldn't let me. I tried to tell you in roundabout ways, through dreams and stories and metaphors, hoping you'd catch on. But now that I'm free of jisthmus, her hold over me has weakened. I have to leave Mikal. *Today*. I can't be here anymore. I can't go back in her cage again."

"Diego!" I said. "You're leaving me?"

"You've left me no choice, Mikal. If I don't leave now, I'll miss the highliner. I'm sorry, Mikal, but I have to go. I guess things come full circle."

His eyes watered as he unfastened his cobalt necklace, and placed it on the floor before me. Then he left me on the floor. I tried to stand, but my legs were so weak I couldn't even get to my knees. "Diego!" I called. "Don't leave me!"

But he was gone.

To try and comfort myself, I reached for the holy book the vendor had given me, but I'd torn out all the pages. I shivered as the sun rose and the muezzin sang his morning song. I smoked a dozen pipes of jisthmus until I was numb, when the walls suddenly shimmered and moved. They exploded outward into the air, though the individual bricks remained solid and unbroken. I found myself floating in mid-air, cross-legged, motionless. I felt like I was falling, but my body remained still. Then the bricks collected again into a new apartment, with new dimensions, new walls. A brilliant light shone onto my back, and slowly, slowly, I turned to face it as something the size of a universe gently reached out to caress my shoulder.

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FAR & DEEP—Alaya Dawn Johnson

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Illustrated by Lisa Konrad

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Alaya Dawn Johnson's stories have appeared in *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Year's Best Fantasy 6* and *Year's Best SF 11*. Her first novel, *Racing the Dark*, appeared in 2007 and the sequel, *The Burning City*, will be out later this year. 'Far & Deep' takes place in the same fantastical universe as those works. Alaya is a member of the Altered Fluid writing group. Visit her website at alayadawnjohnson.com.

* * * *

Her mother had never cried, but always closed her eyes when she laughed. Only in death did Pineki seem to weep, her cheeks wet from the ocean. Her eyes joyously closed.

The killer had left Pineki belly-down in the sand. A mottled crab scuttled from the cavity in the back of her head, imperfectly obscured by clumps of dark, bloody hair. Its tiny claw held a goblet of red flesh.

Just a normal sunrise. Just the normal tides. Just the normal crabs. Leilani's mother was dead. As a pure, rational fact, it was easy enough for her to accept. Pineki's infuriating, unheeding, raw, wild spirit—she swam too far not to be caught in someone's net. Everyone would tell her they'd seen it coming.

Imagining these conversations, Leilani pinched her eyebrows together. She wagged her tongue in the wet, salty early-morning air. She would have to be understanding; she would have to see their sympathy in the context of her mother's life. They would feel bad for Leilani, but they would not keep the smugness from their voices, their unassailable conviction that whoever had smashed in her mother's skull and left her for the crabs and the tides and the beach had righted an imbalance in their world.

Pineki's lips were a lurid purple-red and so full it seemed she had plumped them with straw. They grazed the sand like she was teasing it, like it was the luckiest sand in the world: kissed by a woman still alluring even in death.

* * * *

"Lei ... I'm so sorry."

Okilani was not apologizing for her mother's death.

"Not even a diver's burial?" Leilani had not anticipated this.

"We can't. She hadn't dove in years."

"She did it every day!"

The wind blew back Okilani's graying hair, rattled her mandagah-jewel necklace. "Not with the others, Lei."

Leilani bit her bottom lip, but stopped before she drew blood. She would not throw one of her mother's fits. She would not. "Is that all that matters?" she asked, her tone combative, her posture submissive.

Okilani gestured with her head to the group of elders still seated ceremoniously in the great kukui grove. The five stared straight ahead, but Leilani knew where their attention was riveted.

Okilani did too. "To them," she said. Loudly.

Leilani looked past the one she still loved, to the others she now despised. Leva'ula, the head elder, met her gaze with the same gentle smile she always wore. Leilani had always thought her expression an indication of deep piety, of a mind focused on other, higher matters. Leva'ula gripped her knobbed kukui-wood walking stick like a scepter, she wore her red mandagah jewel like a proclamation. She had been an elder for as long as Leilani had been alive and Leilani couldn't help but feel a little awe in her presence.

Six elders. Pineki had been the seventh, before the council declared her unworthy, a vow-breaker. Pineki had laughed at the idea of chastity, and now they refused to even burn her body in the grove.

"Whoever did it," Leilani said, "they took her jewel." A shimmering, mesmerizing drop of palest orange, given to Pineki unexpectedly three years ago by a dying mandagah fish. The elders had reluctantly taken this wayward child, older than anyone marked in recent memory, into their collective bosom. And then, one year later, they spat her out again. Pineki had never been to everyone's taste.

Uku, the only male elder and the youngest of the six, stood. "Your mother lost her right to the sacred gift. Hopefully the new owner will make better use of it."

He seemed furious. Leilani stared at him, confused. He had a body like a kukui tree—dark and lean and chiseled as only years of the tides and fishermen's nets could make you. The younger divers would joke about how it was a shame that such a specimen had as much interest in them as the great grove itself. And Pineki would always laugh—blind and so delighted it hurt to watch.

Uku seemed infuriated by Leilani's silence. He took a step toward them. Okilani threw him a sharp look and he paused. "Lei," she said, a little desperately. "We don't want—"

"Enough." Leilani left the grove.

* * * *

The body began to stink, and so she rubbed her mother with salt while she waited for the sunset. She did not touch the head, where strange red and pink bruises had begun to tinge the tip of her mother's nose and right cheek. Her skin had turned a sickening almost-gray beneath the deep nut brown that had always been Pineki's joy. Even without the gaping hole in the back of her head, smashed like the egg of a moa, she looked to Leilani like a carcass, a dead body as far from life as a grouper on a stick.

Pineki's leibo were dry now, but they had been wet this morning. At least her murderer had allowed that one concession, a final dive. Leilani looked in the deep pockets of the bone-white diving pants and found three jewels. All were beautiful specimens; Pineki had a knack for only seeking out the healthiest mandagah for their jewels.

The flies came when the sun had just passed its zenith and even the salt could not retard the smell. Leilani peeled off her shirt and swatted at them viciously until her arms burned and she nearly fainted from exertion.

She could hear her mother's laugh. "So much effort. So little result."

Leilani stared at the corpse. "This would never have happened if you had just done as they said!"

But her mother's sweet, mildly mocking delight still echoed in her head and she sat still. The flies began to feast on the brain. They stayed away from her mother's eyes.

Leilani did not know why she awoke so early this morning, why she had known something was wrong.

They lived together, despite everything. Pineki even occasionally spent her nights at home. Yesterday Pineki had given her a pineapple the size of her torso, a fruit so massive that she had been forced to roll it up the stairs like a giant log.

"What is this?" Leilani had asked, when her mother presented it with an air of most uncharacteristic solemnity.

"You used to love them when you were a baby. You would chew my fingers to get at the juice."

"Oh, Piki," she said, using the nickname that could so clearly express simultaneous affection and annoyance, "we left that a long time ago."

Her mother had smiled at her, but so sadly that Leilani nearly burst into tears. Her mother never cried. Her joy seemed to guard against that kind of abject expression, or perhaps even made it redundant. Leilani *almost* never cried, and sometimes the effort to resist was so great it felt like every tearless moment was one bargained for in blood.

Pineki left without another word. Leilani, busy in contemplation of the monstrous fruit, did not even watch her go.

* * * *

Kapa found her, shaking and dry-eyed. "I heard," he said, standing back diffidently. Pineki had always intimidated him. Death, as Leilani was discovering, changed little.

Or everything. "It must be all over the island by now." Her voice was very calm. "You're the only one who came."

Kapa looked at the rotting body, the cloud of flies. "We heard the elders refused ... I think the others are just worried. They'll come."

"Of course." Less than a day ago, Pineki had rolled a giant pineapple up the stairs. Less than a day, and it would stretch until the end of her life.

"Leilani," he said, a little helplessly. He still hadn't touched her. He hadn't even moved close enough for her to smell the fishy scent that always seeped into his clothes after a day's labor. Kapa's parents had died years before, drowned on a boat in a storm. He had survived by clinging to a plank of wood. He was a terrible fisherman, but he knew his way around a lute. They had met right after his parents died. Pineki introduced them ("Make this poor child feel better!" she had said, and so commanded, Leilani tried her best).

Kapa began to cry. "Who would do this to her?" Leilani envied him the ease of his release even as she despised him for it.

"Who wouldn't?" She began to take a deep breath and then thought better of it when the stench from her mother's corpse nearly overwhelmed her. "Who was she sleeping with?"

Kapa looked shocked. "I ... How would I know?" Recent years had stripped most of the child-like fleshiness from his face. Leilani noted, in dispassionate surprise, that her childhood friend was almost handsome. Not such a paragon of beauty as Uku, but well enough. She wondered, for the first time, if other girls had noticed.

Kapa's question had given her a goal, a question for which an answer could be sought. Someone had murdered her mother. Their identity had not seemed so very important this morning, but it was a reason to not sit beside her mother's rotting corpse in a stupor.

"What will you do with..." Kapa gestured awkwardly to the body.

"Burn her at sunset."

He looked shocked again. Leilani almost laughed. His sensibilities, as Pineki would say, were delicately guarded. "But the elders refused a funeral!"

"I'm burning her at sunset."

* * * *

Kapa followed her to the hills in the center of the island, where the slopes and valleys were covered with small plots of land that produced almost all of their food. She rarely ventured here. The divers were a class above the common farmers, and the women of her family had been divers for centuries. She was proud of her legacy, though of course Pineki had viewed this attitude with amused tolerance. She was more inclined to think of the unbroken line of mothers and daughters as the product of "luck, and a knack for holding our breath."

Leilani only saw gentle slopes covered in rich black soil and the flowers of taro plants, but Kapa led her unhesitatingly through the fields and into the valley beyond. It occurred to her that his mother must have farmed, before she died. Perhaps he had spent his childhood in the fruit groves. The farmers—men and women with sunbaked skin and bare torsos glistening with sweat—stopped and stared as she walked past. They did not whisper. That made it worse.

She rested underneath some orange trees, out of their immediate sight, and just a few feet away from the disappointingly normal pineapple plants. Where had her mother found the monster? Had she conjured it up from a bit of twine and spit, like in the tales? Had the spirits then taken their revenge for her presumption?

A man on the other side of the pineapple plants waved and began walking towards her. He was too far away to recognize.

"Lei," Kapa said, startling her. She had forgotten he was there.

In the distance, a pair of moas chortled their deep love song. The trees were heavy with ripe orange-green fruit—she could practically feel its sharp fragrance on her skin. Like the initial shiver of jumping into the morning ocean.

"I've been meaning to ask ... I mean, I know how hard this must be ... and now with the elders, and I just wanted you to know that I've always..." He paused and cleared his throat. Leilani glanced at him, but kept her gaze focused on the approaching figure. He looked more familiar as he came closer, even through the heat shimmer of late afternoon in the harvest season.

"I make a good income from the fish," he said quietly. "Maybe together—"

"Ukele!" Leilani exclaimed, when the man was close enough to see clearly. Uku's almost-as-handsome farmer brother was crying as he approached them.

"I just heard," he said, embracing her freely. Strange, she thought, and Kapa had yet to touch her. "My sorrow is too great for words."

She looked at him thoughtfully, remembering his brother's obvious hatred earlier this morning. The two were bound by blood, not temperament. And she, after all, should know something of that.

"Did she sleep with you?" she asked.

Kapa grimaced, but Ukele merely laughed and wiped his eyes. "Ah, there's some Pineki in you, then? Yes, I had that pleasure. Only twice, but yes."

Lucky Piki, Leilani surprised herself by thinking. But great Kai, those were two beautiful brothers. His hair was curly and cropped close to his head. His skin was darker than Uku's, which made the sand-brown of his irises stand out like mandagah jewels.

"Leilani, I swear, if I find out who did this..."

She shook her head, and wondered if Ukele and Kapa were the only two people on the island who truly regretted her mother's murder. Pineki had lived to offend, to transgress, to break taboos and laugh at the pleasure. And now she had died for it.

"Ukele, this sounds strange, but yesterday she gave me a giant pineapple. Do you know—"

He put a hand over her lips to stop her question and looked around. Then he motioned silently for them to follow.

They left the shade of the oranges and walked into the full glare of the sun. She could feel the sweat dripping down the back of her neck and under her arms. The salt-smell of the ocean was faint here, overpowered by manure and soil. Already, her breath came out in shallow little bursts. All around her, anonymous figures hacked into the earth to harvest her food. In the distance, a woman raised her voice in an eerie, ululating chant.

If diving was a legacy, what was this?

* * * *

At first glance, it looked like paradise. A land of the giants, where every seed planted grew vast and plentiful fruit. Deep within the still-unripe coconut groves and hidden by a few steep hills, grew pineapples the size of her body, oranges larger than a coconut, plantains fit to feed a family of pygmy elephants and a taro with a sprout so large she thought it would take five men to pluck the tuber from the earth. An earthworm poked its head out of the ground nearby. Its body was thick as her handspan, and decorated with red and white bands as sharply defined as a layered rock.

"Great Kai," Kapa said, reverently.

Leilani's heartbeat sounded like a drum in her ears. This was all so beautiful. And so unnatural. "Did Pineki..."

Ukele was crying again. "This was her gift," he said. "To our families."

Last year's harvest had been nearly destroyed by an early rainy season, she recalled. The farmers had, ironically, been the ones least able to afford the remaining food. Pineki had hardly eaten until the rains stopped, much to Leilani's annoyance. Recalling how she had snapped at her mother for what she saw as put-upon martyrdom, Leilani felt almost physically ill.

"Lei..."

There was a note in Kapa's voice that made her turn to him immediately. He was pointing to one of the massive coconut trees in the corner of the hidden patch. These, unlike the normal crops surrounding it, were fully ripe. Several of its fruits had been knocked from the branches and something heavy had smashed through both the outer and inner shells. In some cases, the coconuts looked as though they had shattered under the force of multiple blows.

There was nothing overtly disturbing about the scene, and yet the three of them were mute in momentary horror. There were visible dents in the base of the tree trunk where something almost unimaginably strong had struck it. A splatter of juice had dried to a shiny film on the fronds scattered among the fruit. Gobbets of white flesh hung by fibrous tendrils from the inner casing. This was rage and this was satisfaction.

At least no crabs stole the flesh, but she knew the flies would come for it soon. She had, she realized, past experience.

Leilani knelt quietly among the carnage. She vomited.

* * * *

"I'm burning her at sundown."

Quietly, steadily, she said this to everyone she passed. Kapa followed her like a lost moa chick, but she barely noticed his presence. She had two facts now. Two pieces of knowledge that she knew would lead her to an answer. She would force them to.

Fact number one: Someone had murdered her mother. Straightforward and unassailable. Just like when she had come upon the body, alone, this morning. There had been no moment of denial. No frantic calling of her mother's name and pleading for her to be alive. She had seen and she had known.

Fact number two: Her mother had been playing with the spirits, and someone didn't like it.

How else to explain the fruit grove? Nothing could grow so large naturally. Pineki had been an elder, one of the select few who learn the mysteries of geas bindings and the wild earth spirit. And though they had stripped her of her rank after only a year, she was clever enough to learn what she could while she had the chance. The elders thought they had kicked her out, but perhaps Pineki had merely decided to leave.

"Where are you going?" Kapa asked, when they had left the farms.

"What else can a girl do before she burns her mother?"

Kapa just stared at her like he could speak from his pores.

She shook her head. "I'm going diving."

"Before sundown? What about the day-eels?"

"You can tell Okilani."

* * * *

She took off first her sweaty, dusty shirt and then her leibo. Naked, the sun fell on her back like a bonfire. The freshwater eddied around her feet. Kapa had gone, of course, terrified enough of the day-eels to take her advice.

She looked out at the water breaking over the shore, at the innocuously clear ocean surface and felt a shiver of something she had never properly experienced: the delight of anticipating terror. Is this what her mother had loved? Is this why she always sought to offend and to shock—for that frisson of pleasure in the very act of defiance? Leilani had always found her pleasure in tradition, in reason, in fulfilling expectations. When her mother had become an elder, it had never occurred to Leilani that she might not want it. That the strictures against marriage and sex would be as laughable to Pineki as ones against diving or breathing. She hadn't been a bad mother, precisely, but she certainly hadn't embraced the virtues of responsibility either. She would leave Leilani with friends for days at a time while she vanished on some adventure. She first took Leilani diving at age three—dangerously young, according to the

elders. The respectable had condemned her for it, but those dives were Leilani's first memories. Their magic still made her breath catch.

Leilani had spent most of her life hating her mother. She had interpreted Pineki's carelessness as not caring, her multiple lovers as not loving.

She had thought a woman who didn't cry never wanted to.

She had not anticipated enigmatic gifts of massive pineapples. She had not anticipated violent death.

Leilani noted the position of the sun—four hours after noon. The day-eels would be out in force. She took a deep, practiced breath and dove under the surface.

The water slid around her body like the finest cloth from the inner islands—cool and supple. The water was not very deep here, and the sunlight penetrated straight to the coral floor. The mandagah were nowhere to be found at this time of day, but for sheer physical beauty nothing could match their island's natural coral. It rose like a castle from the deep, built by some mad designer with a fetish for bright colors and retractable parts. A massive purple fan waved lazily beneath her until covered by her shadow. It vanished faster than she could blink, leaving nothing but an unremarkable piece of porous gray stone behind. She shook her head in delight, but did not stay to watch its slow re-emergence. *Pineki always swims too far*, the divers would complain to Leilani when their entreaties did not seem to penetrate her mother's laugh. *She dives too deep*. It was unspeakably rude to leave your partner alone on a dive. Even worse, it was dangerous, and Pineki always left anyone behind who couldn't keep up.

"Why can't you just stay with the others!" Leilani screamed once, after another incident. "Even you aren't totally fearless!"

Pineki hadn't laughed, though Leilani could tell she wanted to. "Oh, keika. I'm not fearless at all. Nothing's any fun if you're fearless."

That was before Pineki had refused altogether to dive with the group.

Leilani had made it a point of pride to always dive judiciously and accommodate her partner. Her etiquette had been impeccable, as though she had thought it would make up for her mother's wildness. Pineki had taken a perverse pride in Leilani's conformity. She had once boasted to another diver that her daughter had "never once dipped below thirty feet."

Abruptly, Leilani swam to the surface. Three steadying breaths and she was ready to try again. How strange, to come so close to crying when your eyes are already submerged in water.

* * * *

The eels were massive, almost worthy of the fruit in Pineki's secret garden. Their heads alone dwarfed her torso. Their unhinged mouths could swallow her in one tiny gulp. Their swiveling bodies looked as long as five of her in a row. She was forty feet under now, with plenty of air in her ears to ease the pressure. She rested very still in the water, and the three eels nearby did not deign to pay her much attention. Their natural prey was the large ahi fish. Fishermen also laid their nets in these waters, and the tales told by the survivors of those on boats unfortunate enough to catch a day-eel had given them a fearsome reputation. As far as she knew, no one but Pineki had ever tested the legend of their taste for human flesh. Their iridescent blue skin that flashed green when they were about to strike, their massive size, and the baleful cast of eyes as big as oranges all conspired to make the worst stories eminently credible. Everyone was terrified of them. Maybe even Pineki. But her mother had stayed in the water and watched the eels for hours. Pineki had realized that so long as she didn't threaten them, they cared about as much for her as the crab scuttling along the sandy floor. She had stayed until sundown, when she saw

a lone mandagah fish among the seaweed. Thinking to get at least one jewel out of her day among the eels, she had gone to it and received the shock of her life. It deposited two jewels in her hand. One was white and the other that rare color of the sun that always marked an elder.

Pineki said she cursed, and then shrugged. She was willing to try everything at least once.

Leilani decided she was running out of air and slowly swam to the surface, letting the pressure ease gently. Halfway there, one of the eels came racing up from below her, its skin crackling green. She stared at it, frozen in a combination of awe and terror. It missed her by a mere two inches before falling on an ahi fish like a living, hungry waterfall. Her skin tingled from its passage and she shook from the shock.

She shot to the surface like a cork. No, she would never match her mother.

* * * *

Okilani was waiting back at the shore. Leilani tried to smile at her like she imagined Pineki would have, but it felt so brittle and terrified instead of calm and daring that she just gave up.

"I hope you enjoyed that," Okilani said. Her voice was harsh but her eyes were gentle. Okilani was everything she had always imagined a mother should be.

Leilani took her leibo from the sand and pulled them over her clammy legs. "It was ... amazing," she said, truthfully. "I'll never do it again."

Okilani looked into her eyes and then away abruptly. "Your mother gave you just enough of herself, didn't she? Too much, and..." Okilani's voice had gotten very tight.

"How much did Piki know? How much power did she have when you tossed her out?"

Okilani looked surprised. "We ... weren't sure. We didn't teach her anything very explicit, but..."

"She's Pineki."

"Oh. I almost forgot. Leva'ula wants to see you."

* * * *

Her muscles, weak from her dive, burned like alcohol on an open wound after the climb to Leva'ula's tree house. The head elder's home was built into the largest and most ancient of the kukui trees in the sacred grove. Across from it was the tree traditionally reserved for diver and elder funerals of the kind they had refused Pineki.

Leilani was not inclined to be charitable when she knocked on the door, but Leva'ula seemed so much like the same warm but absentminded mystic she had known all her life that it was impossible to maintain her anger. She even smelled familiar, like honeysuckle and coconuts.

"I hear you are going to contravene the council's wishes," she said, when Leilani seated herself on the floor. Leva'ula had taken a chair, forcing Leilani to gaze up at her.

"I'm going to burn my mother at sunset." It was harder, somehow, to say the words in this woman's presence. They seemed so belligerent, and she seemed so benign.

"Well, you know, keika, we forbade her a funeral. She was your mother. I know you must have loved her and seen parts of her hidden from the rest of us, but by her actions she forfeited the right to a consummation, by geas or by fire. You must understand that."

She said 'must' as though it were the most natural and reasonable thing in the world. She looked sorrowful at what she had to do, but firm. She spoke like a parent, one who made decisions based on pragmatic rules and bedrock principles.

Leilani found herself nodding. "Yes," she said, "I understand that."

Leva'ula smiled. One side of her mouth curved up a little more than the other, like she had forgotten to smile properly or something had just made her particularly happy.

"So I trust you'll reconsider your decision? I know I cannot force you ... but you might not like the consequences if you don't. Perhaps a burial would suffice. The farmers always appreciate the fertilizer."

She could hear Pineki's laugh so clearly she nearly covered her ears to block out the sound.

"I'll consider it," she said, her voice wobbling. Why couldn't she just say no? How had her mother defied this woman? How could Leilani? Leva'ula somehow made the entire act of defiance seem childish and just a little disappointing.

"Good," Leva'ula said, rapping the floor with the tip of her walking stick in self-satisfied emphasis. "You can show yourself out, dear. I'm getting a bit old to walk to and from the door like I used to."

I'm going to burn my mother at sunset. But she only thought the words.

* * * *

Kapa was holding Uku face down in the sand, his knee on the small of his back, with only a dead woman as witness. Leilani stared at the tableau for a long, uncomprehending moment.

"Kapa, what—"

"I was just paying my final respects to your sweet mother," Uku said, the venom in his voice obvious despite the muffling sand. And to think that Ukele, his brother, had wept.

"He spat on her body, Lei. He says Pineki cursed him." Kapa's voice was quiet, steady.

"Let him go."

After a moment, Kapa nodded and stood up. Uku scrambled to his feet and looked as though he would take a parting shot at Kapa, but Leilani stood in his way.

"She's dead, Uku. You've dishonored her enough already, don't you think?"

"I could feed her to the worms in my garden and urinate on her every morning and it wouldn't be dishonor enough."

"What did she do to you?" Facts. She needed more. The ones she had now weren't enough.

He laughed. "She was sleeping with my brother. I told her to leave him alone, and she cursed me with the holy powers *we* taught her!"

Life with Pineki had trained her to spot all brands of sexual infatuation. Especially jealousy. "She slept with you."

"She's a whore!"

'Whore'. That ugly, inner-island word. It was a concept she knew only from books and hearsay.

"We have no whores on this island," she said.

Hate twisted his face into a hideous mask. Had she ever found him attractive?

"You're right," he said. "She just died."

* * * *

They started to come an hour before sunset, defying the council's ban in twos and threes, until sheer numbers protected them. Leilani was surprised—she had been prepared to do this alone. She had laid the body out on a pile of dry palm and kukui fronds. She removed her mother's leibo and covered her naked body with three fresh leaves. On each of them she put one of the mandagah jewels from her mother's dive this morning. If the elders refused to give her mother the honor she deserved, then Leilani would do as much as she could herself. It had been a remarkably easy decision, after Uku had left. How could she give into that hate? How could she not honor the spirit of her mother's laughter? She was coming to realize how much pain that carefree sound had always held. How much defiance.

"They could bar you from diving," Kapa said, as the sun began to dip and the silent people approached the body. "I think ... this is right. But you should know what they'll do."

This time Leilani laughed. "Do you think anyone ever warned Pineki like that? Don't sleep with this man, Piki, he's filled with hate and may bash your skull in with his fist?" *And when he does, no one will punish him, because he's an elder and they think you deserved it?*

Kapa stood very close to her. She almost thought he might take her hand. "Do you think you should have?"

"I think she knew every consequence she risked. I think she liked it that way."

Kapa must have heard something in her voice she wasn't even aware of herself, because he suddenly gripped her shoulders like he could prevent her from falling. *There*. She liked his touch. It was cool and his fingers were strong. "Lei," he said, "you can't be your mother. There are other legitimate ways to live."

He was exactly her height. She smiled. "Legitimate ... but worthwhile?"

* * * *

Sunset. She let Kapa light the torch. The crowd behind her was huge—a sea of people and she didn't even recognize half. How was that possible? Their island was tiny; she had lived here her whole life. She felt like she had cloistered herself while her mother lived enough for ten people. And still ... the fading light took the harsh edge off of her mother's stiff, bruised face. She looked young again and beautiful.

"I see you didn't heed my advice." Leva'ula.

Leilani took a deep breath and turned to face the head elder. "I didn't think it was worth heeding." Her voice, but Pineki's words. She felt a rush, like her first taste of palm wine or her first dive. Pineki wasn't fearless, but she knew how to use fear.

Leva'ula's smile was almost aggressively forgiving. Leilani wondered if something else lay beneath—vindictiveness rung with tradition and guarded by the authority of her red mandagah jewel.

"I'm afraid I can't vouch for your future as a diver if you go through with this, dear," Leva'ula said. "It would be a shame to see such a good daughter destroyed by such a bad mother."

Okilani had moved silently behind the head elder, and she winced. In the deepening dark, by the light of

Kapa's torch, Leilani met Leva'ula's eyes. Even they smiled. Even now. "She was not a bad mother."

"You loved her." Leva'ula said it as though the emotion were a lisp, an unfortunate affliction of the kind some must bear.

"Did you know Uku killed her?"

The elder's lips turned down gracefully and she sighed. "Yes, I suspected as much. Your mother's wiles were enough to seduce even our proud kukui tree. He had provocation."

Leilani laughed. Great Kai, it felt so good and free that she had to close her eyes to just encompass the absurdity and perverse beauty of it all.

She opened her eyes to see Leva'ula staring like she had seen a ghost.

"I thought you were different from her, Leilani."

Leilani took the torch from Kapa. "Of course I am. But she taught me more than I knew."

Leva'ula drew herself up very straight. "This is my last warning." She gave no hint of kindness anymore. Perhaps this was the true power of Pineki's laughter: it revealed what lay underneath.

She was about to turn from the elder when the light from the torch made something gleam on the top of Leva'ula's walking stick. Slowly, as though she had no inkling of the implied discourtesy, Leilani leaned over and sniffed.

Coconut milk. A few hairs from the outer shell remained stuck in the film.

Leilani looked up. "You washed off the blood, but forgot the coconut."

Leva'ula tried to laugh, but the sound was unconvincing. "You silly girl. I'm much too feeble to go running around bashing grown women's heads in. Even if their favorite pastime is breaking vows and misusing power."

Behind the head elder, Okilani had an expression on her face Leilani couldn't even hope to read. "True," Okilani said, surprising them both. "But you're capable of using a geas to make yourself temporarily stronger."

Leilani understood. "Strong enough to smash a giant coconut with just a stick."

"Giant coconuts? You *have* lost your mind. I trust a fondness for coconut juice is no crime."

"No. Too bad none of the regular trees have ripened yet. The only fruits ripe enough for juice are in my mother's special garden."

Deliberately, hoping her very brazenness would prevent Leva'ula from acting, Leilani put her hand deep in the right-hand pocket of the elder's leibo. They both stared at her discovery for a quiet moment: an iridescent, pale orange jewel, strung on a broken chain.

"Leva'ula." Okilani put a firm hand on her shoulder. "Let the girl send off her mother."

Leilani thought of spitting, or slapping her or demanding justice from the council. But her mother was still dead. She found she didn't yet have the energy to punish anyone.

Leilani turned away from them, her mother's murderer and her mother's friend. She walked to the pyre.

"Thank you," she said, "for the pineapple."

She tossed the torch on the tinder.

* * * *

"Kapa," she said, many hours later when the flames had all but vanished, leaving a pile of bone and ashes for the next tide. "Why don't we get married?"

He nearly stumbled to his knees. "Lei!" His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "Are you serious?"

She laughed at him, but just a little, and not so he would hate her for it later. "Of course."

He closed his eyes and she kissed him.

* * * *

Home. She hadn't been back here since ... this morning. She could almost imagine that Pineki would be coming back later that night, her cheeks flushed with wine and love and good conversation. The pineapple was still there, taking up half of their tiny kitchen area.

"Give me your fishing knife."

Kapa obliged and she used it to hack through the tough, prickly skin to get to the white-gold flesh beneath. She was sweating by the time she succeeded in tearing off a slice, but Kapa prudently didn't ask her if she needed any help. She cut off two bits of flesh as big as her hand and gave one to her husband-to-be.

"Can I eat it?" he asked. His voice wavered just a little. He loved Pineki, too.

"Of course. That's what she made it for. Eating."

She bit into the stringy flesh and held it on her tongue. The juice coated the inside of her mouth, so tart and sweet she had to pucker her lips. She was aware of a perverse desire to imprison this moment forever, to refuse to chew or swallow, to merely exist in this pineapple-induced gustatory orgasm. But habit overcame her. The flesh slid down her throat, passed from joy into memory, and she knew Pineki would understand.

Something occurred to her. "Kapa," she said, "do you know what curse Pineki put on Uku?"

Kapa looked blank for a moment and then began to laugh. "Well..." He reached for her hand. "I heard that for about a month, every time he was attracted to a woman, his penis shrunk to the size of a kukui nut."

Leilani began to giggle. "Leva'ula called him a kukui tree. So Piki turned the kukui tree into a kukui nut!"

She threw back her head. She closed her eyes. She laughed until she couldn't breathe, until she had to stop, until the pineapple between her lips was both salty and sweet, with no real difference between them.

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HOME AGAIN—Paul M. Berger

* * * *

Paul Berger has been a Japanese bureaucrat, a Harvard graduate student, an M.I.T. program administrator, an internet entrepreneur, a butterfly wrangler and a Wall Street recruiter, which, in the aggregate, may have prepared him for nothing except the creation of speculative fiction. His work has appeared in/on *Polyphony 6*, *Twenty Epics*, *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories*, *Ideomancer* and *Escape Pod*, and he wrote the first true-life memoir published in *Weird Tales*. Paul is a founding member of the Altered Fluid writing group and a 2008 graduate of the Clarion Writer's Workshop.

* * * *

Julia was the first one to realize Father's ship had jumped home. She had been reaching to help herself to a piece of fruit just as it happened—one moment she was extending her arm to snatch a nice heavy pear from the basket in the kitchen, and the next her hand closed around a bunch of plum-grapes. Without that little schism between intent and sensation, she wouldn't have noticed at all, no more than anyone else. The basket was a silver latticework made to look as if it had been woven of living rushes. Father had brought it back from the other end of his trade route, which was a world called Arkilla where they had three moons and the people were marvelously clever with their hands. He loved that basket. He also loved plum-grapes. There were no pears in it now.

She ran to tell Mother, and sure enough, ten minutes later the phone rang, and it was Father linked in from orbit to say he had arrived. The next afternoon, her little sister Elleen called out when she saw his car start up the long, tree-lined driveway, and the three of them dropped everything to greet him.

Father came through the door, and Mother, Elleen and Julia flew to his arms and they were all glad, because he had been away for weeks. He held them tight and touched their hair and smelled their necks.

"I swear," he said, "you three ladies get a bit more beautiful each time I see you." Then he gave Elleen and Julia their gifts, little jewels filled with light, which would run like water when you told them to, and could be draped around a wrist or neck or ankle like a tiny coiling river. Elleen's was red, and Julia's was purple, which were their favorite colors.

"Take good care of these," he told them. "They're about to become the hottest fashion accessory in human space, and you're the first to own one."

He said he would save his gift for Mother for later, when they were alone, and she put her hand on his chest and grinned at him with a heavy-lidded gaze. Julia hoped she would grow up to look like Mother, because everyone thought she was the prettiest woman they had ever seen.

After that they gave Father the quiet time he needed, and he inspected every detail of the house, squinting at the colors of paint on the walls, running his fingertips over the weave in the cloth backs of chairs, working the doors until they made just the squeak he recalled, and tilting his head to watch the shadows that his birch trees cast through the broad windows across the kitchen floor. It was a very nice house, and Father loved it.

Julia came up silently behind him. When he noticed her, he smiled and asked, "How'd I do, kiddo?" He always asked that when he returned.

"Pretty good, I guess," which was what she always said. "Except for the pears."

"What pears?" His smile was gone.

"I was taking a pear from your basket, but then all it had were plum grapes. It's how I knew."

"Well," he said. "Let's hope that was the only thing."

"I'm sure it was." She believed in Father, and it was important he knew it.

He lifted her onto his lap and said, "Tell me everything you did while I was gone."

This was also part of their ritual, so she recounted everything she could remember, to help him envision what she had thought and felt during his absence: the picnic she and Elleen had made (what they laughed about and what they ate, and the crumbs they had thrown the ants as an offering so that they'd leave them in peace); and the warm praise her math teacher had given her in front of the class; and which of her friends were not always as kind as they pretended to be to her face. Finally, she told Father about the science fair, and how her partner had gotten the flu at the last minute so she stayed up all night and did the whole project herself, and won first place.

When she finished, he said, "No secrets?"

"No secrets," she promised, and she smiled, even though the pit of her stomach roiled a bit. If she held anything back, it was because she wasn't such a little girl any more, and she knew some things were meant to be all her own.

"I'm so proud of you," he said, and squeezed her. "You're achieving so much, and you're at the best age now, and I'd keep you just like this forever if I could. You'll start high school soon, and high school girls think about silly things like boys and clothes. Keep your mind on math and science, the way I did, and there'll be nothing you can't do."

Elleen heard their voices and came running to them. She held her wrist against Julia's, and their bracelets twined together, looping both their arms in a shimmering figure-eight. The loop stretched but made no resistance when Julia pulled on it, and then without transition was two separate bands again. Julia laughed, and then Elleen did too, because Elleen's jewel was around Julia's wrist, and Julia's was around Elleen's.

"Mine's the red!" Elleen insisted. So they touched and pulled apart again, and now the red was on Elleen, and the purple was back on Julia.

"I bet you can sell these anywhere," Julia told Father.

"Even Earth!" said Elleen.

"No, you silly," Julia said. "Of course not Earth. Father tells us all the time that he can't go to Earth."

"That's true, honey," Father said more gently. "Thought-ships aren't allowed there."

No one even knew how far away Earth was. The only way to reach it was with a thought-ship, but they were outlawed in the core systems. A thought-ship could take you anywhere, in no time at all. They worked by stepping outside reality into a place that was nowhere, surrounded by nothing. Then they jumped back into the real world—or perhaps summoned the world back into being. Only a skilled pilot like Father, his mind linked tightly to all the systems of his vessel, could guide his ship and the universe to meet at the right point. Good pilots were rare and very valuable, and they could have the best of everything.

"The people in the core systems are afraid, aren't they?" Julia said.

"Well, those places are very crowded and rich, so they don't think it's worth the risk," Father explained. "They didn't like thinking that a ship could jump into the wrong place ... or maybe make changes as it

came in."

Elleen listened without comprehending, but Julia asked, "How come *you* always come back just right?"

Father hugged them both and said, "Because of you!"

"Us?"

"Because I love you so much. You two, and your mother. When my ship jumps out of the world, and I'm alone and adrift in all that blankness, I have to build my destination in my mind, and when I put enough details in, just like that, we're back. No one really understands it. Like when you stand at the edge of the pool, and you tip over a little bit, a little bit more, and the next thing you know you've fallen over into the water? That's how it feels when I come home."

"Only you're not swimming, you're flying," said Elleen.

He nodded. "Every pilot needs to have people and things waiting for him at the other side. It's a regulation. You are the touchstones I use to establish my reality. Once I get those parts right, the rest of it falls into perfect order."

"Mostly perfect order," teased Julia, remembering the pears.

"Mostly perfect," Father conceded gravely. "But the colonies don't mind so much, because we need the resources and the trade the thought-ships bring. And as long as I can come back to the people I love, I don't mind either."

"So when your ship returns—" Julia strove to fit words to the concept "—is it like when you dive into the pool and make ripples? Or does it re-create the world around you?"

Father beamed at her with real pride. "That doesn't matter, as long as you're just how I remember you."

Julia wore Father's gift until after dinner. Then she ran into her bedroom, and from the back of the closet slid out her box of treasures, where she hid the things she needed to protect from Elleen or which were too special to share with anyone. She wrapped the jewel carefully in tissue paper and tucked it inside. Just before she replaced the lid she noticed a flash of color at the bottom and tugged it out—it was a fancy purple dress like someone would wear to a high school dance.

Julia was nonplussed; the dress was too frilly for her, and obviously cut for an older girl. She wondered if maybe Father had gotten confused and this was a gift he had intended for his other family waiting for him on Arkilla. Then she noticed that the ruffle at the hem had been pulled away, as if by the misstep of a clumsy dance partner. Perhaps it *was* hers, and for some reason she had neglected to tell him about it. But she couldn't imagine why she would leave out a thing like that.

Then she thought about how much she loved him and how important it was that they all be happy, and she ran out to the living room where everyone was sitting together.

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BLACK SWAN—Bruce Sterling

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Illustrated by Paul Drummond

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An interview with Bruce Sterling follows the story in our Book Zone feature

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The ethical journalist protects a confidential source. So I protected 'Massimo Montaldo', although I knew that wasn't his name.

* * * *

Massimo shambled through the tall glass doors, dropped his valise with a thump, and sat across the table. We were meeting where we always met: inside the Caffè Elena, a dark and cozy spot that fronts on the biggest plaza in Europe.

The Elena has two rooms as narrow and dignified as mahogany coffins, with lofty red ceilings. The little place has seen its share of stricken wanderers. Massimo never confided his personal troubles to me, but they were obvious, as if he'd smuggled monkeys into the cafe and hidden them under his clothes.

Like every other hacker in the world, Massimo Montaldo was bright. Being Italian, he struggled to look suave. Massimo wore stain-proof, wrinkle-proof travel gear: a black merino wool jacket, an American black denim shirt, and black cargo pants. Massimo also sported black athletic trainers, not any brand I could recognize, with eerie bubble-filled soles.

These skeletal shoes of his were half-ruined. They were strapped together with rawhide boot-laces.

To judge by his Swiss-Italian accent, Massimo had spent a lot of time in Geneva. Four times he'd leaked chip secrets to me—crisp engineering graphics, apparently snipped right out of Swiss patent applications. However, the various bureaus in Geneva had no records of these patents. They had no records of any 'Massimo Montaldo', either.

Each time I'd made use of Massimo's indiscretions, the traffic to my weblog had doubled.

I knew that Massimo's commercial sponsor, or more likely his spymaster, was using me to manipulate the industry I covered. Big bets were going down in the markets somewhere. Somebody was cashing in like a bandit.

That profiteer wasn't me, and I had to doubt that it was him. I never financially speculate in the companies I cover as a journalist, because that is the road to hell. As for young Massimo, his road to hell was already well-trampled.

Massimo twirled the frail stem of his glass of Barolo. His shoes were wrecked, his hair was unwashed, and he looked like he'd shaved in an airplane toilet. He handled the best wine in Europe like a scorpion poised to sting his liver. Then he gulped it down.

Unasked, the waiter poured him another. They know me at the Elena.

Massimo and I had a certain understanding. As we chatted about Italian tech companies—he knew them from Alessi to Zanotti—I discreetly passed him useful favors. A cellphone chip—bought in another man's name. A plastic hotel pass key for a local hotel room, rented by a third party. Massimo could use these

without ever showing a passport or any identification.

There were eight 'Massimo Montaldos' on Google and none of them were him. Massimo flew in from places unknown, he laid his eggs of golden information, then he paddled off into dark waters. I was protecting him by giving him those favors. Surely there were other people very curious about him, besides myself.

The second glass of Barolo eased that ugly crease in his brow. He rubbed his beak of a nose, and smoothed his unruly black hair, and leaned onto the thick stone table with both of his black woolen elbows.

"Luca, I brought something special for you this time. Are you ready for that? Something you can't even imagine."

"I suppose," I said.

Massimo reached into his battered leather valise and brought out a no-name PC laptop. This much-worn machine, its corners bumped with use and its keyboard dingy, had one of those thick super-batteries clamped onto its base. All that extra power must have tripled the computer's weight. Small wonder that Massimo never carried spare shoes.

He busied himself with his grimy screen, fixated by his private world there.

The Elena is not a celebrity bar, which is why celebrities like it. A blonde television presenter swayed into the place. Massimo, who was now deep into his third glass, whipped his intense gaze from his laptop screen. He closely studied her curves, which were upholstered in Gucci.

An Italian television presenter bears the relationship to news that American fast food bears to food. So I couldn't feel sorry for her—yet I didn't like the way he sized her up. Genius gears were turning visibly in Massimo's brilliant geek head. That woman had all the raw, compelling appeal to him of some difficult math problem.

Left alone with her, he would chew on that problem until something clicked loose and fell into his hands, and, to do her credit, she could feel that. She opened her dainty crocodile purse and slipped on a big pair of sunglasses.

"Signor Montaldo," I said.

He was rapt.

"Massimo?"

This woke him from his lustful reverie. He twisted the computer and exhibited his screen to me.

I don't design chips, but I've seen the programs used for that purpose. Back in the 1980s, there were thirty different chip-design programs. Nowadays there are only three survivors. None of them are nativized in the Italian language, because every chip geek in the world speaks English.

This program was in Italian. It looked elegant. It looked like a very stylish way to design computer chips. Computer chip engineers are not stylish people. Not in this world, anyway.

Massimo tapped at his weird screen with a gnawed fingernail. "This is just a cheap, 24-k embed. But do you see these?"

"Yes I do. What are they?"

"These are memristors."

In heartfelt alarm, I stared around the cafe, but nobody in the Elena knew or cared in the least about Massimo's stunning revelation. He could have thrown memristors onto their tables in heaps. They'd never realize that he was tossing them the keys to riches.

I could explain now, in gruelling detail, exactly what memristors are, and how different they are from any standard electronic component. Suffice to understand that, in electronic engineering, memristors did not exist. Not at all. They were technically possible—we'd known that for thirty years, since the 1980s—but nobody had ever manufactured one.

A chip with memristors was like a racetrack where the jockeys rode unicorns.

I sipped the Barolo so I could find my voice again. "You brought me schematics for memristors? What happened, did your UFO crash?"

"That's very witty, Luca."

"You can't hand me something like that! What on Earth do you expect me to do with that?"

"I am not giving these memristor plans to you. I have decided to give them to Olivetti. I will tell you what to do: you make one confidential call to your good friend, the Olivetti Chief Technical Officer. You tell him to look hard in his junk folder where he keeps the spam with no return address. Interesting things will happen, then. He'll be grateful to you."

"Olivetti is a fine company," I said. "But they're not the outfit to handle a monster like that. A memristor is strictly for the big boys—Intel, Samsung, Fujitsu."

Massimo laced his hands together on the table—he might have been at prayer—and stared at me with weary sarcasm. "Luca," he said, "don't you ever get tired of seeing Italian genius repressed?"

The Italian chip business is rather modest. It can't always make its ends meet. I spent fifteen years covering chip tech in Route 128 in Boston. When the almighty dollar ruled the tech world, I was glad that I'd made those connections.

But times do change. Nations change, industries change. Industries change the times.

Massimo had just shown me something that changes industries. A disruptive innovation. A breaker of the rules.

"This matter is serious," I said. "Yes, Olivetti's people do read my weblog—they even comment there. But that doesn't mean that I can leak some breakthrough that deserves a Nobel Prize. Olivetti would want to know, they would *have* to know, the source of that."

He shook his head. "They don't want to know, and neither do you."

"Oh yes, I most definitely do want to know."

"No, you don't. Trust me."

"Massimo, I'm a journalist. That means that I always want to know, and I never trust anybody."

He slapped the table. "Maybe you were a 'journalist' when they still printed paper 'journals'. But your

dot-com journals are all dead. Nowadays you're a blogger. You're an influence peddler and you spread rumors for a living." Massimo shrugged, because he didn't think he was insulting me. "So: shut up! Just do what you always do! That's all I'm asking."

That might be all that he was asking, but my whole business was in asking. "Who created that chip?" I asked him. "I know it wasn't you. You know a lot about tech investment, but you're not Leonardo da Vinci."

"No, I'm not Leonardo." He emptied his glass.

"Look, I know that you're not even 'Massimo Montaldo'—whoever that is. I'll do a lot to get news out on my blog. But I'm not going to act as your cut-out in a scheme like this! That's totally unethical! Where did you steal that chip? Who made it? What are they, Chinese super-engineers in some bunker under Beijing?"

Massimo was struggling not to laugh at me. "I can't reveal that. Could we have another round? Maybe a sandwich? I need a nice toasty pancetta."

I got the waiter's attention. I noted that the TV star's boyfriend had shown up. Her boyfriend was not her husband. Unfortunately, I was not in the celebrity tabloid business. It wasn't the first time I'd missed a good bet by consorting with computer geeks.

"So you're an industrial spy," I told him. "And you must be Italian to boot, because you're always such a patriot about it. Okay: so you stole those plans somewhere. I won't ask you how or why. But let me give you some good advice: no sane man would leak that to Olivetti. Olivetti's a consumer outfit. They make pretty toys for cute secretaries. A memristor chip is dynamite."

Massimo was staring raptly at the TV blonde as he awaited his sandwich.

"Massimo, pay attention. If you leak something that advanced, that radical ... a chip like that could change the world's military balance of power. Never mind Olivetti. Big American spy agencies with three letters in their names will come calling."

Massimo scratched his dirty scalp and rolled his eyes in derision. "Are you so terrorized by the CIA? They don't read your sorry little one-man tech blog."

This crass remark irritated me keenly. "Listen to me, boy genius: do you know what the CIA does here in Italy? We're their 'rendition' playground. People vanish off the streets."

"Anybody can 'vanish off the streets'. I do that all the time."

I took out my Moleskin notebook and my shiny Rotring technical pen. I placed them both on the Elena's neat little marble table. Then I slipped them both back inside my jacket. "Massimo, I'm trying hard to be sensible about this. Your snotty attitude is not helping your case with me."

With an effort, my source composed himself. "It's all very simple," he lied. "I've been here a while, and now I'm tired of this place. So I'm leaving. I want to hand the future of electronics to an Italian company. With no questions asked and no strings attached. You won't help me do that simple thing?"

"No, of course I won't! Not under conditions like these. I don't know where you got that data, what, how, when, whom, or why ... I don't even know who you are! Do I look like that kind of idiot? Unless you tell me your story, I can't trust you."

He made that evil gesture: I had no balls. Twenty years ago—well, twenty-five—and we would have

stepped outside the bar. Of course I was angry with him—but I also knew he was about to crack. My source was drunk and he was clearly in trouble. He didn't need a fist-fight with a journalist. He needed confession.

Massimo put a bold sneer on his face, watching himself in one of the Elena's tall spotted mirrors. "If this tiny gadget is too big for your closed mind, then I've got to find another blogger! A blogger with some guts!"

"Great. Sure. Go do that. You might try Beppe Grillo."

Massimo tore his gaze from his own reflection. "That washed-up TV comedian? What does he know about technology?"

"Try Berlusconi, then. He owns all the television stations and half the Italian Internet. Prime Minister Berlusconi is just the kind of hustler you need. He'll free you from all your troubles. He'll make you Minister of something."

Massimo lost all patience. "I don't need that! I've been to a lot of versions of Italy. Yours is a complete disgrace! I don't know how you people get along with yourselves!"

Now the story was tearing loose. I offered an encouraging nod. "How many 'versions of Italy' do you need, Massimo?"

"I have sixty-four versions of Italy." He patted his thick laptop. "Got them all right here."

I humored him. "Only sixty-four?"

His tipsy face turned red. "I had to borrow CERN's supercomputers to calculate all those coordinates! Thirty-two Italies were too few! A hundred twenty-eight ... I'd never have the time to visit all those! And as for *your* Italy ... well ... I wouldn't be here at all, if it wasn't for that Turinese girl."

"Cherchez la femme," I told him. "That's the oldest trouble-story in the world."

"I did her some favors," he admitted, mournfully twisting his wineglass. "Like with you. But much more so."

I felt lost, but I knew that his story was coming. Once I'd coaxed it out of him, I could put it into better order later.

"So, tell me: what did she do to you?"

"She dumped me," he said. He was telling me the truth, but with a lost, forlorn, bewildered air, like he couldn't believe it himself. "She dumped me and she married the President of France." Massimo glanced up, his eyelashes wet with grief. "I don't blame her. I know why she did that. I'm a very handy guy for a woman like her, but Mother of God, I'm not the President of France!"

"No, no, you're not the President of France," I agreed. The President of France was a hyperactive Hungarian Jewish guy who liked to sing karaoke songs. President Nicolas Sarkozy was an exceedingly unlikely character, but he was odd in a very different way from Massimo Montaldo.

Massimo's voice was cracking with passion. "She says that he'll make her the First Lady of Europe! All I've got to offer her is insider-trading hints and a few extra millions for her millions."

The waiter brought Massimo a toasted sandwich.

Despite his broken heart, Massimo was starving. He tore into his food like a chained dog, then glanced up from his mayonnaise dip. "Do I sound jealous? I'm not jealous."

Massimo was bitterly jealous, but I shook my head so as to encourage him.

"I can't be jealous of a woman like her!" Massimo lied. "Eric Clapton can be jealous, Mick Jagger can be jealous! She's a rock star's groupie who's become the Premiere Dame of France! She married Sarkozy! Your world is full of journalists—spies, cops, creeps, whatever—and not for one minute did they ever stop and consider: 'Oh! This must be the work of a computer geek from another world!'"

"No," I agreed.

"Nobody ever imagines that!"

I called the waiter back and ordered myself a double espresso. The waiter seemed quite pleased at the way things were going for me. They were a kindly bunch at the Elena. Friedrich Nietzsche had been one of their favorite patrons. Their dark old mahogany walls had absorbed all kinds of lunacy.

Massimo jabbed his sandwich in the dip and licked his fingers. "So, if I leak a memristor chip to you, nobody will ever stop and say: 'some unknown geek eating a sandwich in Torino is the most important man in world technology.' Because that truth is inconceivable."

Massimo stabbed a roaming olive with a toothpick. His hands were shaking: with rage, romantic heartbreak, and frustrated fury. He was also drunk.

He glared at me. "You're not following what I tell you. Are you really that stupid?"

"I do understand," I assured him. "Of course I understand. I'm a computer geek myself."

"You know who designed that memristor chip, Luca? You did it. You. But not here, not in this version of Italy. Here, you're just some small-time tech journalist. You created that device in *my* Italy. In my Italy, you are the guru of computational aesthetics. You're a famous author, you're a culture critic, you're a multi-talented genius. Here, you've got no guts and no imagination. You're so entirely useless here that you can't even change your own world."

It was hard to say why I believed him, but I did. I believed him instantly.

Massimo devoured his food to the last scrap. He thrust his bare plate aside and pulled a huge nylon wallet from his cargo pants. This overstuffed wallet had color-coded plastic pop-up tags, like the monster files of some Orwellian bureaucracy. Twenty different kinds of paper currency jammed in there. A huge riffling file of varicolored plastic ID cards.

He selected a large bill and tossed it contemptuously onto the Elena's cold marble table. It looked very much like money—it looked much more like money than the money that I handled every day. It had a splendid portrait of Galileo and it was denominated in 'Euro-Lira'.

Then he rose and stumbled out of the cafe. I hastily slipped the weird bill in my pocket. I threw some euros onto the table. Then I pursued him.

With his head down, muttering and sour, Massimo was weaving across the millions of square stone cobbles of the huge Piazza Vittorio Veneto. As if through long experience, he found the emptiest spot in the plaza, a stony desert between a handsome line of ornate lamp-posts and the sleek steel railings of an underground parking garage.

He dug into a trouser pocket and plucked out tethered foam earplugs, the kind you get from Alitalia for long overseas flights. Then he flipped his laptop open.

I caught up with him. "What are you doing over here? Looking for wifi signals?"

"I'm leaving." He tucked the foam plugs in his ears.

"Mind if I come along?"

"When I count to three," he told me, too loudly, "you have to jump high into the air. Also, stay within range of my laptop."

"All right. Sure."

"Oh, and put your hands over your ears."

I objected. "How can I hear you count to three if I have my hands over my ears?"

"Uno." He pressed the f1 function key, and his laptop screen blazed with sudden light. "Due." The f2 emitted a humming, cracking buzz. "Tre." He hopped in the air.

Thunder blasted. My lungs were crushed in a violent billow of wind. My feet stung as if they'd been burned.

Massimo staggered for a moment, then turned by instinct back toward the Elena. "Let's go!" he shouted. He plucked one yellow earplug from his head. Then he tripped.

I caught his computer as he stumbled. Its monster battery was sizzling hot.

Massimo grabbed his overheated machine. He stuffed it awkwardly into his valise.

Massimo had tripped on a loose cobblestone. We were standing in a steaming pile of loose cobblestones. Somehow, these cobblestones had been plucked from the pavement beneath our shoes and scattered around us like dice.

Of course we were not alone. Some witnesses sat in the vast plaza, the everyday Italians of Turin, sipping their drinks at little tables under distant, elegant umbrellas. They were sensibly minding their own business. A few were gazing puzzled at the rich blue evening sky, as if they suspected some passing sonic boom. Certainly none of them cared about us.

We limped back toward the cafe. My shoes squeaked like the shoes of a bad TV comedian. The cobbles under our feet had broken and tumbled, and the seams of my shoes had gone loose. My shining patent-leather shoes were foul and grimy.

We stepped through the arched double-doors of the Elena, and, somehow, despite all sense and reason, I found some immediate comfort. Because the Elena was the Elena: it had those round marble tables with their curvilinear legs, those maroon leather chairs with their shiny brass studs, those colossal time-stained mirrors ... and a smell I hadn't noticed there in years.

Cigarettes. Everyone in the cafe was smoking. The air in the bar was cooler—it felt chilly, even. People wore sweaters.

Massimo had friends there. A woman and her man. This woman beckoned us over, and the man, although he knew Massimo, was clearly unhappy to see him.

This man was Swiss, but he wasn't the jolly kind of Swiss I was used to seeing in Turin, some harmless Swiss banker on holiday who pops over the Alps to pick up some ham and cheese. This Swiss guy was young, yet as tough as old nails, with aviator shades and a long narrow scar in his hairline. He wore black nylon gloves and a raw canvas jacket with holster room in its armpits.

The woman had tucked her impressive bust into a hand-knitted peasant sweater. Her sweater was gaudy, complex and aggressively gorgeous, and so was she. She had smoldering eyes thick with mascara, and talon-like red painted nails, and a thick gold watch that could have doubled as brass knuckles.

"So Massimo is back," said the woman. She had a cordial yet guarded tone, like a woman who has escaped a man's bed and needs compelling reasons to return.

"I brought a friend for you tonight," said Massimo, helping himself to a chair.

"So I see. And what does your friend have in mind for us? Does he play backgammon?"

The pair had a backgammon set on their table. The Swiss mercenary rattled dice in a cup. "We're very good at backgammon," he told me mildly. He had the extremely menacing tone of a practiced killer who can't even bother to be scary.

"My friend here is from the American CIA," said Massimo. "We're here to do some serious drinking."

"How nice! I can speak American to you, Mr CIA," the woman volunteered. She aimed a dazzling smile at me. "What is your favorite American baseball team?"

"I root for the Boston Red Sox."

"I love the Seattle Green Sox," she told us, just to be coy.

The waiter brought us a bottle of Croatian fruit brandy. The peoples of the Balkans take their drinking seriously, so their bottles tend toward a rather florid design. This bottle was frankly fantastic: it was squat, acid-etched, curvilinear, and flute-necked, and with a triple portrait of Tito, Nasser and Nehru, all toasting one another. There were thick flakes of gold floating in its paralyzing murk.

Massimo yanked the gilded cork, stole the woman's cigarettes, and tucked an unfiltered cig in the corner of his mouth. With his slopping shot-glass in his fingers he was a different man.

"Zhivali!" the woman pronounced, and we all tossed back a hearty shot of venom.

The temptress chose to call herself 'Svetlana', while her Swiss bodyguard was calling himself 'Simon'.

I had naturally thought that it was insane for Massimo to announce me as a CIA spy, yet this gambit was clearly helping the situation. As an American spy, I wasn't required to say much. No one expected me to know anything useful, or to do anything worthwhile.

However, I was hungry, so I ordered the snack plate. The attentive waiter was not my favorite Elena waiter. He might have been a cousin. He brought us raw onions, pickles, black bread, a hefty link of sausage, and a wooden tub of creamed butter. We also got a notched pig-iron knife and a battered chopping board.

Simon put the backgammon set away.

All these crude and ugly things on the table—the knife, the chopping board, even the bad sausage—had

all been made in Italy. I could see little Italian maker's marks hand-etched into all of them.

"So you're hunting here in Torino, like us?" probed Svetlana.

I smiled back at her. "Yes, certainly!"

"So, what do you plan to do with him when you catch him? Will you put him on trial?"

"A fair trial is the American way!" I told them. Simon thought this remark was quite funny. Simon was not an evil man by nature. Simon probably suffered long nights of existential regret whenever he cut a man's throat.

"So," Simon offered, caressing the rim of his dirty shot glass with one nylon-gloved finger, "So even the Americans expect 'the Rat' to show his whiskers in here!"

"The Elena does pull a crowd," I agreed. "So it all makes good sense. Don't you think?"

Everyone loves to be told that their thinking makes good sense. They were happy to hear me allege this. Maybe I didn't look or talk much like an American agent, but when you're a spy, and guzzling fruit brandy, and gnawing sausage, these minor inconsistencies don't upset anybody.

We were all being sensible.

Leaning his black elbows on our little table, Massimo weighed in. "The Rat is clever. He plans to sneak over the Alps again. He'll go back to Nice and Marseilles. He'll rally his militias."

Simon stopped with a knife-stabbed chunk of blood sausage on the way to his gullet. "You really believe that?"

"Of course I do! What did Napoleon say? 'The death of a million men means nothing to a man like me!' It's impossible to corner Nicolas the Rat. The Rat has a star of destiny."

The woman watched Massimo's eyes. Massimo was one of her informants. Being a woman, she had heard his lies before and was used to them. She also knew that no informant lies all the time.

"Then he's here in Torino tonight," she concluded.

Massimo offered her nothing.

She immediately looked to me. I silently stroked my chin in a sagely fashion.

"Listen, American spy," she told me politely, "you Americans are a simple, honest people, so good at tapping phone calls ... It won't hurt your feelings any if Nicolas Sarkozy is found floating face-down in the River Po. Instead of teasing me here, as Massimo is so fond of doing, why don't you just tell me where Sarkozy is? I do want to know."

I knew very well where President Nicolas Sarkozy was supposed to be. He was supposed to be in the Elysee Palace carrying out extensive economic reforms.

Simon was more urgent. "You do want us to know where the Rat is, don't you?" He showed me a set of teeth edged in Swiss gold. "Let us know! That would save the International Courts of Justice a lot of trouble."

I didn't know Nicolas Sarkozy. I had met him twice when he was French Minister of Communication, when he proved that he knew a lot about the Internet. Still, if Nicolas Sarkozy was not the President of

France, and if he was not in the Elysee Palace, then, being a journalist, I had a pretty good guess of his whereabouts.

"Cherchez la femme," I said.

Simon and Svetlana exchanged thoughtful glances. Knowing one another well, and knowing their situation, they didn't have to debate their next course of action. Simon signalled the waiter. Svetlana threw a gleaming coin onto the table. They bundled their backgammon set and kicked their leather chairs back. They left the cafe without another word.

Massimo rose. He sat in Svetlana's abandoned chair, so that he could keep a wary eye on the cafe's double-door to the street. Then he helped himself to her abandoned pack of Turkish cigarettes.

I examined Svetlana's abandoned coin. It was large, round, and minted from pure silver, with a gaudy engraving of the Taj Mahal. 'Fifty Dinars', it read, in Latin script, Hindi, Arabic, and Cyrillic.

"The booze around here really gets on top of me," Massimo complained. Unsteadily, he stuffed the ornate cork back into the brandy bottle. He set a slashed pickle on a buttered slice of black bread.

"Is he coming here?"

"Who?"

"Nicolas Sarkozy. 'Nicolas the Rat'."

"Oh, him," said Massimo, chewing his bread. "In this version of Italy, I think Sarkozy's already dead. God knows there's enough people trying to kill him. The Arabs, Chinese, Africans ... he turned the south of France upside down! There's a bounty on him big enough to buy Olivetti—not that there's much left of Olivetti."

I had my summer jacket on, and I was freezing. "Why is it so damn cold in here?"

"That's climate change," said Massimo. "Not in *this* Italy—in *your* Italy. In your Italy, you've got a messed-up climate. In this Italy, it's the *human race* that's messed-up. Here, as soon as Chernobyl collapsed, a big French reactor blew up on the German border ... and they all went for each other's throats! Here NATO and the European Union are even deader than the Warsaw Pact."

Massimo was proud to be telling me this. I drummed my fingers on the chilly tabletop. "It took you a while to find that out, did it?"

"The big transition always hinges in the 1980s," said Massimo, "because that's when we made the big breakthroughs."

"In your Italy, you mean."

"That's right. Before the 1980s, nobody understood the physics of parallel worlds ... but after that transition, we could pack a zero-point energy generator into a laptop. Just boil the whole problem down into one single micro-electronic mechanical system."

"So you've got zero-point energy MEMS chips," I said.

He chewed more bread and pickle. Then he nodded.

"You've got MEMS chips and you were offering me some fucking lousy memristor? You must think I'm a real chump!"

"You're not a chump." Massimo sawed a fresh slice of bad bread. "But you're from the wrong Italy. It was your own stupid world that made you this stupid, Luca. In my Italy, you were one of the few men who could talk sense to my Dad. My Dad used to confide in you. He trusted you, he thought you were a great writer. You wrote his biography."

"Massimo Montaldo, Senior'," I said.

Massimo was startled. "Yeah. That's him." He narrowed his eyes. "You're not supposed to know that."

I had guessed it. A lot of news is made from good guesses.

"Tell me how you feel about that," I said, because this is always a useful question for an interviewer who has lost his way.

"I feel desperate," he told me, grinning. "Desperate! But I feel much *less* desperate here than I was when I was the spoilt-brat dope-addict son of the world's most famous scientist. Before you met me—Massimo Montaldo—had you ever heard of any 'Massimo Montaldo'?"

"No. I never did."

"That's right. I'm never in any of the other Italies. There's never any other Massimo Montaldo. I never meet another version of myself—and I never meet another version of my father, either. That's got to mean something crucial. I know it means something important."

"Yes," I told him, "that surely does mean something."

"I think," he said, "that I know what it means. It means that space and time are not just about physics and computation. It means that human beings really matter in the course of world events. It means that human beings can truly change the world. It means that our actions have consequence."

"The human angle," I said, "always makes a good story."

"It's true. But try telling that story," he said, and he looked on the point of tears. "Tell that story to any human being. Go on, do it! Tell anybody in here! Help yourself."

I looked around the Elena. There were some people in there, the local customers, normal people, decent people, maybe a dozen of them. Not remarkable people, not freakish, not weird or strange, but normal. Being normal people, they were quite at ease with their lot and accepting their daily existences.

Once upon a time, the Elena used to carry daily newspapers. Newspapers were supplied for customers on those special long wooden bars.

In my world, the Elena didn't do that any more. Too few newspapers, and too much Internet.

Here the Elena still had those newspapers on those handy wooden bars. I rose from my chair and I had a good look at them. There were stylish imported newspapers, written in Hindi, Arabic and Serbo-Croatian. I had to look hard to find a local paper in Italian. There were two, both printed on a foul gray paper full of flecks of badly-pulped wood.

I took the larger Italian paper to the cafe table. I flicked through the headlines and I read all the lede paragraphs. I knew immediately I was reading lies.

It wasn't that the news was so terrible, or so deceitful. But it was clear that the people reading this newspaper were not expected to make any practical use of news. The Italians were a modest, colonial

people. The news that they were offered was a set of feeble fantasies. All the serious news was going on elsewhere.

There was something very strong and lively in the world called the 'Non-Aligned Movement'. It stretched from the Baltics all the way to the Balkans, throughout the Arab world, and all the way through India. Japan and China were places that the giant Non-Aligned superpower treated with guarded respect. America was some kind of humbled farm where the Yankees spent their time in church.

Those other places, the places that used to matter—France, Germany, Britain, 'Brussels'—these were obscure and poor and miserable places. Their names and locales were badly spelled.

Cheap black ink was coming off on my fingers. I no longer had questions for Massimo, except for one. "When do we get out of here?"

Massimo buttered his tattered slice of black bread. "I was never searching for the best of all possible worlds," he told me. "I was looking for the best of all possible me's. In an Italy like this Italy, I really matter. Your version of Italy is pretty backward—but *this* world had a nuclear exchange. Europe had a civil war, and most cities in the Soviet Union are big puddles of black glass."

I took my Moleskin notebook from my jacket pocket. How pretty and sleek that fancy notebook looked, next to that gray pulp newspaper. "You don't mind if I jot this down, I hope?"

"I know that this sounds bad to you—but trust me, that's not how history works. History doesn't have any 'badness' or 'goodness'. This world has a future. The food's cheap, the climate is stable, the women are gorgeous ... and since there's only three billion people left alive on Earth, there's a lot of room."

Massimo pointed his crude sausage-knife at the cafe's glass double door. "Nobody here ever asks for ID, nobody cares about passports ... They never even heard of electronic banking! A smart guy like you, you could walk out of here and start a hundred tech companies."

"If I didn't get my throat cut."

"Oh, people always overstate that little problem! The big problem is—you know—who wants to *work* that hard? I got to know this place, because I knew that I could be a hero here. Bigger than my father. I'd be smarter than him, richer than him, more famous, more powerful. I would be better! But that is a *burden*. 'Improving the world,' that doesn't make me happy at all. That's a *curse*, it's like slavery."

"What *does* make you happy, Massimo?"

Clearly Massimo had given this matter some thought. "Waking up in a fine hotel with a gorgeous stranger in my bed. That's the truth! And that would be true of every man in every world, if he was honest."

Massimo tapped the neck of the garish brandy bottle with the back of the carving knife. "My girlfriend Svetlana, she understands all that pretty well, but—there's one other thing. I drink here. I like to drink, I admit that—but they *really* drink around here. This version of Italy is in the almighty Yugoslav sphere of influence."

I had been doing fine so far, given my circumstances. Suddenly the nightmare sprang upon me, unfiltered, total, and wholesale. Chills of terror climbed my spine like icy scorpions. I felt a strong, irrational, animal urge to abandon my comfortable chair and run for my life.

I could run out of the handsome cafe and into the twilight streets of Turin. I knew Turin, and I knew that Massimo would never find me there. Likely he wouldn't bother to look.

I also knew that I would run straight into the world so badly described by that grimy newspaper. That terrifying world would be where, henceforth, I existed. That world would not be strange to me, or strange to anybody. Because that world was reality. It was not a strange world, it was a normal world. It was I, me, who was strange here. I was desperately strange here, and that was normal.

This conclusion made me reach for my shot glass. I drank. It was not what I would call a 'good' brandy. It did have strong character. It was powerful and it was ruthless. It was a brandy beyond good and evil.

My feet ached and itched in my ruined shoes. Blisters were rising and stinging. Maybe I should consider myself lucky that my aching alien feet were still attached to my body. My feet were not simply slashed off and abandoned in some black limbo between the worlds.

I put my shot-glass down. "Can we leave now? Is that possible?"

"Absolutely," said Massimo, sinking deeper into his cozy red leather chair. "Let's sober up first with a coffee, eh? It's always Arabic coffee here at the Elena. They boil it in big brass pots."

I showed him the silver coin. "No, she settled our bill for us, eh? So let's just leave."

Massimo stared at the coin, flipped it from head to tails, then slipped it in a pants pocket. "Fine. I'll describe our options. We can call this place the 'Yugoslav Italy,' and, like I said, this place has a lot of potential. But there are other versions." He started ticking off his fingers.

"There's an Italy where the 'No Nukes' movement won big in the 1980s. You remember them? Gorbachev and Reagan made world peace. Everybody disarmed and was happy. There were no more wars, the economy boomed everywhere ... Peace and justice and prosperity, everywhere on Earth. So the climate exploded. The last Italian survivors are living high in the Alps."

I stared at him. "No."

"Oh yes. Yes, and those are very nice people. They really treasure and support each other. There are hardly any of them left alive. They're very sweet and civilized. They're wonderful people. You'd be amazed what nice Italians they are."

"Can't we just go straight back to my own version of Italy?"

"Not directly, no. But there's a version of Italy quite close to yours. After John Paul the First died, they quickly elected another Pope. He was not that Polish anticommunist—instead, that Pope was a pedophile. There was a colossal scandal and the Church collapsed. In that version of Italy, even the Moslems are secular. The churches are brothels and discotheques. They never use the words 'faith' or 'morality'."

Massimo sighed, then rubbed his nose. "You might think the death of religion would make a lot of difference to people. Well, it doesn't. Because they think it's normal. They don't miss believing in God any more than you miss believing in Marx."

"So first we can go to that Italy, and then nearby into my own Italy—is that the idea?"

"That Italy is boring! The girls there are boring! They're so matter-of-fact about sex there that they're like girls from Holland." Massimo shook his head ruefully. "Now I'm going to tell you about a version of Italy that's truly different and interesting."

I was staring at a round of the sausage. The bright piece of gristle in it seemed to be the severed foot of some small animal. "All right, Massimo, tell me."

"Whenever I move from world to world, I always materialize in the Piazza Vittorio Veneto," he said, "because that plaza is so huge and usually pretty empty, and I don't want to hurt anyone with the explosion. Plus, I know Torino—I know all the tech companies here, so I can make my way around. But once I saw a Torino with no electronics."

I wiped clammy sweat from my hands with the cafe's rough cloth napkin. "Tell me, Massimo, how did you feel about that?"

"It's incredible. There's no electricity there. There's no wires for the electrical trolleys. There are plenty of people there, very well-dressed, and bright colored lights, and some things are flying in the sky ... big aircraft, big as ocean-liners. So they've got some kind of power there—but it's not electricity. They stopped using electricity, somehow. Since the 1980s."

"A Turin with no electricity," I repeated, to convince him that I was listening.

"Yeah, that's fascinating, isn't it? How could Italy abandon electricity and replace it with another power source? I think that they use cold fusion! Because cold fusion was another world-changing event from the 1980s. I can't explore that Torino—because where would I plug in my laptop? But you could find out how they do all that! Because you're just a journalist, right? All you need is a pencil!"

"I'm not a big expert on physics," I said.

"My God, I keep forgetting I'm talking to somebody from the hopeless George Bush World," he said. "Listen, stupid: physics isn't complicated. Physics is very simple and elegant, because it's *structured*. I knew that from the age of three."

"I'm just a writer, I'm not a scientist."

"Well, surely you've heard of 'consilience'."

"No. Never."

"Yes you have! Even people in your stupid world know about 'consilience'. Consilience means that all forms of human knowledge have an underlying unity!"

The gleam in his eyes was tiring me. "Why does that matter?"

"It makes all the difference between your world and my world! In your world there was a great physicist once ... Dr Italo Calvino."

"Famous literary writer," I said, "he died in the 1980s."

"Calvino didn't die in my Italy," he said. "because in my Italy, Italo Calvino completed his 'Six Core Principles'."

"Calvino wrote 'Six Memos'," I said. "He wrote 'Six Memos for the Next Millennium'. And he only finished five of those before he had a stroke and died."

"In my world Calvino did not have a stroke. He had a stroke of genius, instead. When Calvino completed his work, those six lectures weren't just 'memos'. He delivered six major public addresses at Princeton. When Calvino gave that sixth, great, final speech, on 'Consistency,' the halls were crammed with physicists. Mathematicians, too. My father was there."

I took refuge in my notebook. 'Six Core Principles', I scribbled hastily, 'Calvino, Princeton, consilience'.

"Calvino's parents were both scientists," Massimo insisted. "Calvino's brother was also a scientist. His Oulipo literary group was obsessed with mathematics. When Calvino delivered lectures worthy of a genius, nobody was surprised."

"I knew Calvino was a genius," I said. I'd been young, but you can't write in Italian and not know Calvino. I'd seen him trudging the porticoes in Turin, hunch-shouldered, slapping his feet, always looking sly and preoccupied. You only had to see the man to know that he had an agenda like no other writer in the world.

"When Calvino finished his six lectures," mused Massimo, "they carried him off to CERN in Geneva and they made him work on the 'Semantic Web'. The Semantic Web works beautifully, by the way. It's not like your foul little Internet—so full of spam and crime." He wiped the sausage knife on an oil-stained napkin. "I should qualify that remark. The Semantic Web works beautifully—in *the Italian language*. Because the Semantic Web was built by Italians. They had a little bit of help from a few French Oulipo writers."

"Can we leave this place now? And visit this Italy you boast so much about? And then drop by my Italy?"

"That situation is complicated," Massimo hedged, and stood up. "Watch my bag, will you?"

He then departed to the toilet, leaving me to wonder about all the ways in which our situation could be complicated.

Now I was sitting alone, staring at that corked brandy bottle. My brain was boiling. The strangeness of my situation had broken some important throttle inside my head.

I considered myself bright—because I could write in three languages, and I understood technical matters. I could speak to engineers, designers, programmers, venture capitalists and government officials on serious, adult issues that we all agreed were important. So, yes, surely I was bright.

But I'd spent my whole life being far more stupid than I was at this moment.

In this terrible extremity, here in the cigarette-choked Elena, where the half-ragged denizens pored over their grimy newspapers, I knew I possessed a true potential for genius. I was Italian, and, being Italian, I had the knack to shake the world to its roots. My genius had never embraced me, because genius had never been required of me. I had been stupid because I dwelled in a stupefied world.

I now lived in no world at all. I had no world. So my thoughts were rocketing through empty space.

Ideas changed the world. Thoughts changed the world—and thoughts could be written down. I had forgotten that writing could have such urgency, that writing could matter to history, that literature might have consequence. Strangely, tragically, I'd forgotten that such things were even possible.

Calvino had died of a stroke: I knew that. Some artery broke inside the man's skull as he gamely struggled with his manifesto to transform the next millennium. Surely that was a great loss, but how could anybody guess the extent of that loss? A stroke of genius is a black swan, beyond prediction, beyond expectation. If a black swan never arrives, how on Earth could its absence be guessed?

The chasm between Massimo's version of Italy and my Italy was invisible—yet all encompassing. It was exactly like the stark difference between the man I was now, and the man I'd been one short hour ago.

A black swan can never be predicted, expected, or categorized. A black swan, when it arrives, cannot even be recognized as a black swan. When the black swan assaults us, with the wingbeats of some rapist

Jupiter, then we must re-write history.

Maybe a newsman writes a news story, which is history's first draft.

Yet the news never shouts that history has black swans. The news never tells us that our universe is contingent, that our fate hinges on changes too huge for us to comprehend, or too small for us to see. We can never accept the black swan's arbitrary carelessness. So our news is never about how the news can make no sense to human beings. Our news is always about how well we understand.

Whenever our wits are shattered by the impossible, we swiftly knit the world back together again, so that our wits can return to us. We pretend that we've lost nothing, not one single illusion. Especially, certainly, we never lose our minds. No matter how strange the news is, we're always sane and sensible. That is what we tell each other.

Massimo returned to our table. He was very drunk, and he looked greenish. "You ever been in a squat-down Turkish toilet?" he said, pinching his nose. "Trust me: don't go in there."

"I think we should go to your Italy now," I said.

"I could do that," he allowed idly, "although I've made some trouble for myself there ... my real problem is you."

"Why am I trouble?"

"There's another Luca in my Italy. He's not like you: because he's a great author, and a very dignified and very wealthy man. He wouldn't find you funny."

I considered this. He was inviting me to be bitterly jealous of myself. I couldn't manage that, yet I was angry anyway. "Am I funny, Massimo?"

He'd stopped drinking, but that killer brandy was still percolating through his gut.

"Yes, you're funny, Luca. You're weird. You're a terrible joke. Especially in this version of Italy. And especially now that you're finally catching on. You've got a look on your face now like a drowned fish." He belched into his fist. "Now, at last, you think that you understand, but no, you don't. Not yet. Listen: in order to arrive here—I *created* this world. When I press the Function-Three key, and the field transports me here—without me as the observer, this universe doesn't even exist."

I glanced around the thing that Massimo called a universe. It was an Italian cafe. The marble table in front of me was every bit as solid as a rock. Everything around me was very solid, normal, realistic, acceptable and predictable.

"Of course," I told him. "And you also created my universe, too. Because you're not just a black swan. You're God."

"'Black swan', is that what you call me?" He smirked, and preened in the mirror. "You journalists need a tag-line for everything."

"You always wear black," I said. "Does that keep our dirt from showing?"

Massimo buttoned his black woolen jacket. "It gets worse," he told me. "When I press that Function-Two key, before the field settles in ... I generate millions of potential histories. Billions of histories. All with their souls, ethics, thoughts, histories, destinies—whatever. Worlds blink into existence for a few nanoseconds while the chip runs through the program—and then they all blink out. As if they

never were."

"That's how you move? From world to world?"

"That's right, my friend. This ugly duckling can fly."

The Elena's waiter arrived to tidy up our table. "A little rice pudding?" he asked.

Massimo was cordial. "No, thank you, sir."

"Got some very nice chocolate in this week! All the way from South America."

"My, that's the very best kind of chocolate." Massimo jabbed his hand into a cargo pocket. "I believe I need some chocolate. What will you give me for this?"

The waiter examined it carefully. "This is a woman's engagement ring."

"Yes, it is."

"It can't be a real diamond, though. This stone's much too big to be a real diamond."

"You're an idiot," said Massimo, "but I don't care much. I've got a big appetite for sweets. Why don't you bring me an entire chocolate pie?"

The waiter shrugged and left us.

"So," Massimo resumed, "I wouldn't call myself a 'God'—because I'm much better described as several million billion Gods. Except, you know, that the zero-point transport field always settles down. Then, here I am. I'm standing outside some cafe, in a cloud of dirt, with my feet aching. With nothing to my name, except what I've got in my brain and my pockets. It's always like that."

The door of the Elena banged open, with the harsh jangle of brass Indian bells. A gang of five men stomped in. I might have taken them for cops, because they had jackets, belts, hats, batons and pistols, but Turinese cops do not arrive on duty drunk. Nor do they wear scarlet armbands with crossed lightning bolts.

The cafe fell silent as the new guests muscled up to the dented bar. Bellowing threats, they proceeded to shake-down the staff.

Massimo turned up his collar and gazed serenely at his knotted hands. Massimo was studiously minding his own business. He was in his corner, silent, black, inexplicable. He might have been at prayer.

I didn't turn to stare at the intruders. It wasn't a pleasant scene, but even for a stranger, it wasn't hard to understand.

The door of the men's room opened. A short man in a trenchcoat emerged. He had a dead cigar clenched in his teeth, and a snappy Alain Delon fedora.

He was surprisingly handsome. People always underestimated the good looks, the male charm of Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy sometimes seemed a little odd when sunbathing half-naked in newsstand tabloids, but in person, his charisma was overwhelming. He was a man that any world had to reckon with.

Sarkozy glanced about the cafe, for a matter of seconds. Then he sidled, silent and decisive, along the dark mahogany wall. He bent one elbow. There was a thunderclap. Massimo pitched face-forward onto the small marble table.

Sarkozy glanced with mild chagrin at the smoking hole blown through the pocket of his stylish trenchcoat. Then he stared at me.

"You're that journalist," he said.

"You've got a good memory for faces, Monsieur Sarkozy."

"That's right, asshole, I do." His Italian was bad, but it was better than my French. "Are you still eager to 'protect' your dead source here?" Sarkozy gave Massimo's heavy chair one quick, vindictive kick, and the dead man, and his chair, and his table, and his ruined, gushing head all fell to the hard cafe floor with one complicated clatter.

"There's your big scoop of a story, my friend," Sarkozy told me. "I just gave that to you. You should use that in your lying commie magazine."

Then he barked orders at the uniformed thugs. They grouped themselves around him in a helpful cluster, their faces pale with respect.

"You can come out now, baby," crowed Sarkozy, and she emerged from the men's room. She was wearing a cute little gangster-moll hat, and a tailored camouflage jacket. She lugged a big black guitar case. She also had a primitive radio-telephone bigger than a brick.

How he'd enticed that woman to lurk for half an hour in the reeking cafe toilet, I'll never know. But it was her. It was definitely her, and she couldn't have been any more demure and serene if she were meeting the Queen of England.

They all left together in one heavily armed body.

The thunderclap inside the Elena had left a mess. I rescued Massimo's leather valise from the encroaching pool of blood.

My fellow patrons were bemused. They were deeply bemused, even confounded. Their options for action seemed to lack constructive possibilities.

So, one by one, they rose and left the bar. They left that fine old place, silently and without haste, and without meeting each other's eyes. They stepped out the jangling door and into Europe's biggest plaza.

Then they vanished, each hastening toward his own private world.

I strolled into the piazza, under a pleasant spring sky. It was cold, that spring night, but that infinite dark blue sky was so lucid and clear.

The laptop's screen flickered brightly as I touched the f1 key. Then I pressed 2, and then 3.

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THE CARYATIDS

Bruce Sterling

Reviewed by Ian Sales

In 1930, Hugo Gernsback wrote: 'Not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous import, but it is to be an important factor in making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life which, even today, are not appreciated by the man on the street.' And yet in the decades since then, the genre has ceased to be either didactic or predictive. A science fiction may have something to say—and most certainly do—but any such conversation will most likely be about the present.

Bruce Sterling, however, is not just a science fiction writer. He has also been a 'Visionary in Residence' at both the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam. He has eleven science fiction novels to his name, and five collections of short stories. He has also written non-fiction, such as *Tomorrow Now* and *Shaping Things*. His last three novels could be described as conversations with the future: in *Zeitgeist*, it was the commodification of entertainment product and the feral capitalism of the ex-Soviet client states; in *The Zenith Angle*, it was the War on Terror and ubiquitous surveillance; and now, in *The Caryatids*, it is the collapse of the earth's climate, of the global economy, and of nation-states.

The Caryatids of the book's title are the four surviving clone sisters of a group of seven created by a female Croatian warlord (what *is* the female equivalent of warlord? warlady? bellatrix?). Vera is a member of a recovery team on the Adriatic island of Mljet (known to the Ancient Greeks as Melita), which has suffered toxic pollution. Radmila has married into a powerful Hollywood family and is now a media star. Sonja is a medic, living and working for the Chinese in a space city in the Gobi Desert. And then there's Biserka, who is insane.

I suspect it's no accident there are seven clone sisters—that's one for each continent. It's equally telling that only four have survived. Vera is Europe—technological, non-authoritarian, looking for new ways to live. Radmila is the US—technology-backed spectacle, a self-imposed role as the guardian of the planet, and wielding capitalism as a weapon with the clinical precision of a scalpel. Sonja is Asia—undefeatable, strong, and finding a way to live that neither Europe nor the US would ever contemplate. And poor Biserka is Africa—the dark continent, forever at war with itself.

There is also an eighth clone, a man. His name is Djordje—George—and he is a Viennese businessman. He has a nice Viennese hausfrau wife and darling children. He is successful, and makes more than enough money to keep his family safe and secure. He's not above bending laws, or ethics, when making deals. He has just started using the latest business tools and he thinks they're wonderful. George is perhaps the world as it used to be.

And the 'mother'? She is the climate disaster which created the world of *The Caryatids*. Once she's done her bit, she's hustled off to a space station in orbit, out of the way of story and history.

Each clone has her story—and *The Caryatids* is a story. And shown to be a story about a story in the afterword ‘interview’ with Radmila’s daughter, Mary Montalban. There are three sections to the novel: Vera, Radmila and Sonja. An epilogue sees all four meet for the funeral of their mother. They are burying the world’s past as much as they burying their own.

The world as it is in *The Caryatids* is not the world we know. The climate has crashed, billions have died, and most nation-states have failed. The world is now dominated by two supra-national societies—the Dispensation and the Acquis. The Dispensation is Californian and supremely capitalist. Its members talk like the flakiest of Hollywood ‘business’ people. The Acquis are European.

As a writer or a visionary, Sterling has never been short of ideas, and there are plenty in *The Caryatids*. Most of them seem extrapolated from his arguments in *Tomorrow Now* and *Shaping Things*—ubiquitous computing, and complex devices created from simple components using unsophisticated techniques. This is a ‘spime’-dominated future.

Conversations can change minds. They can alter opinions. When conversing about the future, wiggle-room for such changes is built-in. *The Caryatids* is not going to be “educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life,” but it may well prove a catalyst for conversations which will do that. Gernsback might not recognise the 21st century version of his ‘scientifiction’, but for those of us living in the 21st century and gazing into the abyss of the future, *The Caryatids* provides a thought-provoking, entertaining, and perhaps important, roadmap for the decades ahead.

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Bruce Sterling interviewed by Ian Sales

Do you see *The Caryatids* as an optimistic novel?

Obviously it’s about a future world severely beset with disasters. Still, the people in that book don’t waste much time hand-wringing about their situation. They’ve internalized their world, so that they think reality is inherently disastrous. The prospects that worry them are all super-disasters.

Do we have much to be optimistic about in the rest of this century?

People don’t need optimistic things so as to be happy. What we need to be happy is something to be enthusiastic about. When I do science-fiction world-building, I try hard to get away from intellectual vices like pessimism and optimism. Choosing a view like that is akin to putting a patch over one eye—it flattens the world, it makes you lose depth and detail. I always liked Brian Aldiss’ idea of ‘enantiodromia’—the notion that over long periods of time, things turn into their opposites. Clouds become silver linings. Silver linings generate clouds. Our ancestors had many optimistic ideas about us, but the gifts they most wanted to give us are commonly things we ourselves don’t want. Henry Ford wanted to give people power and freedom, not car exhaust.

In the State of the World 2009 discussion on *The Well*, you wrote: “Communism, capitalism, socialism, whatever: we’ve never yet had any economic system that recognizes that we have to live on a living planet.” In *The Caryatids*, you’ve created the Acquis and the Dispensation but, as far as I can tell, both are chiefly capitalist supra-societies. What were the indicators you used as inspiration for the two societies?

I like to describe those set-ups as ‘global civil societies’. They’re not nations, they’re not multinational companies. They are native 21st century institutions. Based in networks, not national boundaries. The

way that we run the world today is just gone—it evaporated like the Soviet Union. Nobody talks about the past much. They don't fret much about the minutiae of their power-structures either—they're too busy fending off emergencies. Obviously they're not simple capitalist enterprises—for the first third of the book, nobody has any money. Their way of life is post-monetary. I know that people are painfully fascinated by economics right now, but you know, even for a science fiction writer, economics is the most dismal science in the world. The less a writer says about it, the more entertaining he gets.

How much of your *Well State of the World* discussion, your *Wired* posts, and even this electronic arts fair you're currently attending, feed into your SF?

Oh, I used to be very clever about this synergetic activity, but frankly, the silos are disintegrating. I strongly suspect now that people who read me no longer care a whit about the difference. I mean, supposedly the position of Bruce Sterling as a science-fiction author is quite different from that of Bruce Sterling the journalist, Bruce Sterling the weblogger, Bruce Sterling the futurist, Bruce Sterling the sometime academic and general-purpose cultural theorist—or whatever ... It's dawning on me that this polymathic blither is much less impressive than it sounds.

It's not that we're becoming Renaissance titans. It's that the older, comfortable divisions between genres and disciplines have been blurred, blenderized, cruelly smashed by the Internet. We just waltz through the rubble.

If I try to grab something obscure and 'feed it into my SF', it will leak back out immediately now. Most things I find of compelling SF interest explode into public awareness off my weblog long before I can find the time to fictionalize them. The cyberpunk SF game is up, that's the story. We're all hip-deep, neck-deep in cyberculture now. We made that bed and now we have to sleep in it.

Do you think there's a danger when writing novels whose plots are based on the *bête noire du jour* (if you'll pardon my French) that the stories are no longer relevant by the time they're published?

Well, yeah—clearly a trendy novel 'ripped from today's headlines' is going look a little funky when newspapers no longer exist and we have no headlines to rip. On the other hand, I think there's a kind of long-lasting universality in a fictional situation that is very clearly specific. If you can really feed and groom that *bête noire*, if you know something about the black beast that no one else does, that can be news that stays news, true literature.

In *The Caryatids*, Mary Montalban says, "Future is prediction. We all know that's impossible." Does science fiction have a part to play in conversations about the future?

Well, not the SF paperback genre necessarily, but the techniques of science fiction, yeah, you bet they have a part to play. There's so much blatant science fictional thinking going on right now that it probably ought to be renamed without its speculative-fiction hangover. Maybe renamed something like 'Speculative Culture'. SF ideation is in web development, design, couture, architecture, the military ... espionage and religion even ... man, it's all over the place. Sometimes I worry for the culture's sanity. Especially when you contemplate the blue-sky radicalism of the clowns who call themselves 'conservative'.

Charles Stross has said, "We are living in interesting times; in fact, they're so interesting that it is not currently possible to write near-future SF." Do you agree?

Obviously not, since I do rather a lot of near-future work, but I know whereof Mr Stross speaks. Much of the near-future stuff I emit lately is likelier better-described as 'design fiction' or even 'political activism' rather than as classic science fiction. It's not that the pace of events is freakish, or that we're

nearing a Singularity or anything. It's that both 'science' and 'fiction' have changed their social character. The ground shifted under them, and under science fiction, too. Science fiction writers used to cherry-pick bits of physics and then candy-coat them in drama, secure in the knowledge that their mostly teenage readers would appreciate the effort in popularization. Nowadays a teen with physics interests will just Google the keywords and download a few arXiv e-papers. Or maybe he reads edge.org. Lord knows I do, and *Edge* has far more brain-bending SF kick than bestselling SF novels do. Especially since most SF bestsellers are media tie-ins.

You've said that the "War on Terror bubble" has gone, and terrorism barely appears in *The Caryatids*. Unlike in *The Zenith Angle*. What will kill it?

Terrorism dies out when the people feeding and sheltering the terrorists weary of their noisome presence. The sense-of-terror doesn't have a lot of staying power. Unless it's comprehensive, state-imposed terror, it tends to burn out a lot like the sense-of-wonder. It would be interesting to see how far a 'War on Wonder' would get us.

Couldn't it be argued that SF itself is a long-running 'War on Wonder'? Is our tolerance for spectacle increasing with each passing year—we're demanding more eyeball-kicks for the bucks?

If that were the case, why would anybody read Verne, Wells, Orwell or Huxley? Yet they do. Obviously SF perpetrators are the 'wonderists' whose maanderings should be ruthlessly repressed. Anybody who reads David Langford's *Ansible* fanzine would see a litany of mainstream efforts to stuff science fiction back under the carpet where it belongs. In that war we're the miserable guerrillas.

Would you ever consider moving away entirely from writing science fiction and into 'SF ideation'?

I'm not sure I will even be allowed that choice. It's like asking me whether I'd be willing to move away from my manual typewriter. Because I had one once, you know. I wrote my first two novels with those machines. I used *carbon paper*. You explain that to adults now, they look at you as if you used to run on wind-up clockwork. I used to compose on paper. I still publish on paper. But I have few remaining illusions about any paper-based industry.

Although people don't directly ask me to work at 'SF ideation'—not with that term, anyway—I'm doing more and more work that fits that description. Not for the SF reading public, alas, but for clients. People from product-development teams, or tech startups, or even government agencies. The work is something like technical writing—clearly they want me to show up, listen to them, and put their vague ambitions into prose ... but it isn't technical writing, because they don't want to publish. They don't pay by the word, and printed matter is not the deliverable. I thought this was happening accidentally. Now I'm starting to wonder if this isn't some kind of emergent, post-SF profession. Star bloggers, industry-booster types, they seem to do a whole lot of this. No particular set of definable skills, just ... they're verbal-frameworking guys. Blue-sky 'conceptualists'. Pundits. Techno-courtiers.

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Journey into Space

Toby Litt

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Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

One of the key things about science fiction, one of its joys for those of us who are addicted to the stuff, is that you can change the world. Indeed, if you don't change the world there is some question as to whether it is indeed science fiction. But though your science fiction should then, directly or obliquely, be about the way the world has changed, that isn't all it should be about. Writers who come to science fiction from outside the genre often seem to have a problem with this: they produce work full of some sweeping change, but fail to think through what led into and what springs out of that change.

Toby Litt, however, has got that essential point from the word 'go'. He has, of course, revealed knowledge of and interest in the genre before now, but this is, I think, his first overtly science fiction novel. It seems, in some ways, old fashioned. We've had stories of generation starships as a stage upon which is acted out social or cultural or personal disintegration for at least 50 years now. And there are moments, when he feels the need to repeat technical points, that he reveals a hesitancy, an uncertainty about how far he can trust his audience. Yet, all in all, this is one of the most satisfying and accomplished science fiction novels you are likely to encounter from an otherwise mainstream author.

The first thing he recognises is that simply placing his characters within the confines of a generation starship is not, in itself, changing the world. A journey into space is actually a journey into oneself, and it is there that the cataclysm lies. As the novel opens the first generation has already all but died out and the ship is not yet half way to its destination. The 100 people aboard the ship (genetically far too few, of course, but dramatically just the right number to illuminate the denuding of social and cultural norms) leave behind a fractious earth, but, unknowingly, as their contact with earth becomes ever more attenuated, so their need for those ties becomes ever stronger. They live in a sort of panopticon, the ship's computer system, known as *it*, allows anyone to watch anyone else at any time. Yet their environment is failing, rooms are deserted, facilities are running down, there is no outside stimulus except each other and the ever more infrequent messages from home. At first this engenders a regimented atmosphere, an almost mystical devotion to 'the Mission', but already there are rebels.

August and Celeste, almost identical cousins, escape from the narrowness of ship society into oddly sensuous word games in which they reimagine an earth they have never seen. At first they conduct this verbal affair out of the view of their fellows, but as their game becomes ever more erotic so they start coming to the awareness of the crew, and a wild incestuous fling awakens all the puritanical repression of this closed social world. But the norms have already been overthrown. Celeste's son, Orphan, misshapen and mentally subnormal, grows into a dictatorial lord of misrule. When word finally reaches the ship that the Earth has finally blown itself up, destroying the prop upon which they all depended, they abandon social restraints, giving in to Orphan's pleasure-seeking anarchy. By now the ship has turned around, heading home out of a need no one quite understands, and Orphan's daughter, Three, embarks on a personal quest to write a letter to posterity that somehow encapsulates the experience of doomed humanity, necessarily reinventing paper and ink along the way. In her turn, Three becomes the reluctant object of worship of a fundamentalist religion led by her own nephew that takes over the ship as it finally approaches Earth.

Within the isolated hothouse of the ship, massive social movements rise and fall with the generations, all within a relatively short novel, yet Litt never loses sight of the individuality of his characters. It's a novel in which the social and the personal subtly amplify each other, and it couldn't have been written as anything other than science fiction. That is what makes it a joy.

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Escape From Hell
Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle
Escape From Hell!

Hal Duncan

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Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

Typical. You wait years for an *Escape From Hell* to turn up and two come along more or less at the same time. OK, so Duncan's version makes significant use of an exclamation mark, but its effect is annoyingly spoiled by the publisher's choice of font.

Anyway, here we have a fantasy novel and novella nominally dealing with the same subject. Both are founded on the concept that, after we die, we continue to experience some form of physical existence in a plane of reality not unconnected to the Judean-Christian view of Hell being a place of punishment for sins committed during our lives on Earth. Both books also opt for the administration of Hell to be in human, rather than satanic, hands—though while Niven/Pournelle use this to take a general swipe at the horrors of bureaucracy, for Duncan it seems a much more personal dig at US customs!

Being a sequel to their 1976 novel *Inferno*, the Niven/Pournelle Hell is already established—in fact, it was established about six centuries ago. The geography and mechanics are taken wholesale from Dante Alighieri's 14th century epic poem, 'The Divine Comedy': Hell is a series of nine concentric Circles, each representing a gradual increase in the wickedness of inhabitants invariably punished by an eternal repetition of their chief sin. Travel right down to the bottom, and you'll find Satan himself, frozen eternally at the Earth's core, the only exit from this horrendous domain being to crawl down a small gap next to his legs.

Duncan's Hell, by contrast, is *Escape From New York* meets *Jacob's Ladder*; it "looks not unlike Manhattan, but ragged and hollow like every window in the city of skyscrapers was smashed, every building shelled and shot up, every surface painted with dust and ash." It's a modern Hell of 24/7 'Vox News' on TVs you can't turn off, of Guantanamo torture rooms and an unbreakable determination to break the human spirit once and for all.

In the Niven/Pournelle Hell, some six centuries have passed since the poet Virgil guided Dante on that original journey. Keeping to the Dante template, our modern hero—former SF author Allen Carpenter—encounters an ongoing parade of real, deceased people mostly from the 20th and early 21st centuries—conveniently listed in a seven page list of 'dramatis personae' at the start and chosen by the authors to symbolise particular sins and conditions punished in Hell. Unfortunately this means the book increasingly resembles an unending parade of judgement on z-list celebrities and non-entities, which frankly becomes somewhat repetitive. Clearly, each encounter is supposed to push Carpenter and his new companion—the poet Sylvia Plath, whom he frees from the Wood of Suicides—towards a fuller understanding of the underlying mechanics of Hell, but the book's perfunctory prose echoes a lack of narrative gravity at its heart.

Duncan, by contrast, fills his Hell with vibrant fictional characters—although it's probably no coincidence that the young gay man shares his first name with the US student Matthew Shepard, whose brutal homophobic murder shocked much of America in the late 90s. However, by not having anyone's estate or relatives looking over his shoulder, Duncan enjoys far more freedom to use and develop his characters; as a result, the potentially clichéd "hitman, hooker, hobo and homo" from central casting quickly gain the reader's sympathies as they unite to make the ultimate prison break.

It helps, of course, that Duncan's narrative is powered by such emotive and beautiful writing. Niven/Pournelle may insist that *Escape From Hell* is "a fantasy novel, not a treatise on theology and salvation," but with its plain language it comes over as an adventure novel left high and dry by its literary

affectations. Every single chapter starts with a quotation from the authors' preferred Dante translation—the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's, don't you know—which frankly just ingrains the book's too-rigid shadowing of the original poem. Arguably, this helps highlight the differences between Dante and his modern successor; unlike the voyeuristically judgemental Dante, Carpenter genuinely wants to liberate those who he feels deserve a better eternal fate, and so has returned to Hell to be absolutely sure that—at the very least—"everyone can be rescued" if they wish to be, and that the universe isn't "in the hands of infinite power and infinite sadism."

In Duncan's picture of Hell, there seems little doubt that this is, indeed, the case; there's a suppressed rage powering almost every line, which is why—strange as it may seem—that exclamation mark in the title is so apt. Sure, in Niven/Pournelle Hell, nasty things can and do happen to people—up to and including being burned to charcoal, or blown to smithereens by a suicide bomber—but whatever happens the one certainty is that they'll always come back in some form. It may take time and a lot of pain, but they'll end up back in the Circle of Hell they were originally assigned to—until, it is suggested, they accept responsibility for their sins and so can move on. By contrast, in Duncan's version of Hell, not only can dead souls in hell fade from perception as the "forgotten," the grim reality is that even the dead can die. Which, if nothing else, adds an easily comprehensible tension to much of the narrative, as ultimately all of Hell's police attempt to stop the gang of four.

So. Two Escapes From Hell. Are the heroes successful in getting out? Let's just say that in one Escape it becomes clear that the heroes have no hope or intention of changing the Hell they find themselves in; in the other, they end up leading thousands—millions—of the damned on an Assault on Heaven itself. You can guess which is which.

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The Mystery of Grace

Charles de Lint

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Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

Charles de Lint is a master of the art of finding the magic in the everyday, specifically in the everyday life of urban North America. Many of his previous novels have been set in and around the city of Newford, but in *The Mystery of Grace* he begins to explore a new setting in the American south-west: a town called Santo del Vado Viejo with a rich ethnic mix that allows him to draw on European, Mexican and Indian magical and mythical traditions.

One of the reasons I always enjoy de Lint's writing is his very strong characterization and this novel is no exception. *The Mystery of Grace* is built around two main characters: Grace, a Latina motor mechanic, and John Burns, an Anglo graphic designer and would-be artist. At the beginning of the novel, Grace is slowly coming to terms with the recent death of her grandfather while, years after the event, John still feels guilty about the death of his kid brother. De Lint has the gift of being able to take us to the very heart of a character's passions—in the case of Grace, her passion for classic cars, rockabilly and tattoos. His description of the relationships between characters is also excellent; for example, he sketches a convincing portrayal of Grace's relationship with her grandfather entirely through her memories. More important for the development of the book is the way he traces the gradual development of the relationship between Grace and John, and particularly the healing it brings about in John's life. But his gift for characterization extends beyond the central characters; I think it is because he genuinely likes his characters that he enables the reader to sympathize with a character, to feel that you would want them as friends.

De Lint's world building is as strong as ever. This time, he has created a pocket universe inhabited by those who have died within a few blocks of the Alverson Arms—the apartment building where Grace lives. The rules of this world have been carefully thought through and dovetail with those of the otherworldly realms of his other novels and short stories. But unlike those, this is a closed claustrophobic realm and its inhabitants are condemned to mere existence enlivened only by the opportunity for twice-yearly visits to the world they have left behind.

And so to the plot, which sadly is very difficult to describe without spoilers. It contains two main story lines. One is a romance: John and Grace meet at a Halloween party. Unfortunately one of them died a fortnight earlier and is only allowed to return to this world twice a year. In spite of that restriction, their relationship flourishes. There is a resolution (at least implicitly) to their problem, but it is by no means as straightforward as you might expect about two-thirds of the way into the story.

The other plot strand is the mystery of the Alverson Arms world. Who created it? And why? And what can the souls trapped in this world do? Inevitably there is a villain behind it, but once again de Lint's gift for characterization comes to the fore and gives the reader some insight into what has driven her to do this. Less satisfactory is the religious dimension that creeps into the resolution of this aspect of the plot. In most of his novels, the central character finds the inner strength to overcome the problem that confronts them. However, in this case, a kind of quasi-religious faith is invoked by the inhabitants of the Alverson Arms world as they struggle against the woman who has trapped them there.

For me, his treatment of faith (and particularly veneration of Our Lady of Altigracia) is a significant flaw. But even a flawed de Lint novel is essential reading because of the way he brings his world and his characters to life and the way he imbues the ordinary with a patina of magic.

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Yellow Blue Tibia

Adam Roberts

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Reviewed by Kevin Stone

All of us have thought on the possibility of whether life exists beyond our world. We have all read the various reports of people claiming to be abducted, although a lack of evidence often qualifies abductions and sightings as being nothing more than hoaxes. Still, the question can be raised as to why those who have made such claims have had their lives so genuinely affected by these encounters, whilst the rest of us remain blissfully dismissive of the whole affair. This is where Adam Roberts' latest piece of speculative fiction steps in and tries to put forth one theory on all this.

The story begins in Stalinist Russia after the Second World War, where a group of science fiction writers are called to a top secret meeting by Stalin himself, to concoct a new greater threat to re-unite the Soviet people under the banner of Communism—one from beyond the stars. Just as suddenly, the project though gets shut down, with the writers dismissed back to their lives never to discuss their fateful meeting and their ideas with anyone for the rest of their lives. Fast forwarding 40 years later, an apparently coincidental encounter between two of the writers reveals a shocking truth—everything they planned, everything they imagined is suddenly, inexplicably coming true...

As always Roberts has come up with an intriguing and original piece of SF by taking Stalin's very real fascination in aliens and using it as a platform to discuss what he believes is a cultural contradiction concerning UFOs. It would be unfair to pinpoint this as the only reason to pick up this book though. The story moves quickly and is driven by dialogue which combines humorous banter and philosophical

discussions about UFOs and also the suggestive nature of science fiction. Towards the end, the narrative stumbles around a bit as it tries to pull all the threads together, but it gets there in time to conclude yet another stimulating read from one of Britain's foremost SF writers.

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One Second After
William R. Forstchen

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Reviewed by John Howard

John Matherson is Professor of History at Montreat College in Black Mountain, North Carolina (where the author lives and is Professor of History in the real world). On one entirely normal afternoon, as Matherson prepares to celebrate his younger daughter's birthday, all electrical devices suddenly go dead. There are no radio, TV, or mobile phone signals, and all computers fail. Even all the vehicles on the nearby Interstate highway come to a halt.

Matherson is slow to realise what has happened. A nuclear warhead has been exploded above the atmosphere, and created an electromagnetic pulse (EMP). This has rendered useless anything that depends on a computer to keep it going—which is now just about everything. With no power and almost no transport, with outsiders stranded there and townspeople unable to get back home, Black Mountain and its surrounding area starts to descend into chaos. And there's no news from the rest of the country at all. Although the EMP itself caused relatively few deaths, the complete and utter failure of all devices and infrastructure dependent on computers means that the body count soon begins to soar. It is as if the US has ceased to exist, and everybody has been thrown back into the tough and lawless world of the early explorers and pioneers.

One Second After is the latest in a long line of books in which an author addresses a particular concern through fiction. An author seeks to warn a complacent country, its people, and especially its government (and/or those who could be influential) of a looming future conflict or other political catastrophe. For example, in the decades before World War I there was a rash of stories of the invasion of Great Britain or the threat of the 'Yellow Peril'. A novel like H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* (which is hardly a novel at all) warned of the world-shattering consequences of modern warfare and its grim immediate aftermath.

Forstchen's view and that of his friends is that the danger of an EMP attack is clearly a real and present one. *One Second After* comes armed with both Foreword and Afterword. In the former, Forstchen's friend and one-time collaborator Newt Gingrich, the Republican former Speaker of the House of Representatives, invokes *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank (1959), a post-apocalyptic novel dealing with the effect on a small US town of a sudden nuclear attack. In the latter, Captain Bill Sanders USN, also invokes Frank's novel. The political and military impetus (and ancestry) behind *One Second After* could hardly be less explicit.

In practice this can mean that a story never fully takes off as a story, and the serious content is not taken as seriously as perhaps it should be, and as the author wishes it to be. Here, the characters rarely really come alive: they are there to go through the motions and fulfil their assigned roles against the larger overshadowing background of a US disabled by its own complacency as much as by an attack from outside. This is played out against the backdrop of a collapsing small town, a microcosm of what is happening throughout the collapsed nation. Nevertheless, while the characters' viewpoints switch back and forth between the over-sentimental and the brutally realistic, this means they do actually engage with

the changing situations in which they find themselves. As the story advances, Forstchen gives longer gaps in time between chapters, which gives an appropriately telescoping effect of acceleration, as friend and new foe alike die and more institutions cease to function. Whatever the politics involved, the only real strength of the novel is the mounting sense of mourning for the loss of something that was basically fine, and which can never be replaced. That remains. You can't go home again.

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Seeds of Earth
Michael Cobley

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Reviewed by Peter Loftus

Seeds of Earth (Book One of Humanity's Fire) starts with a bang. The year is 2126 and the human race has finally made first contact. Unfortunately, the species in question are tearing through the solar system like a plague of locusts, hell-bent on wiping humanity off the galactic map. Faced with inexorable foes and with little or no success in battle, Earth's leaders are forced into a desperate gamble. Three colony ships are dispatched, each to a different part of the galaxy, in the hope that humanity will survive the extinction that threatens.

Fast forward 150 years. We learn that at least one of the ships was successful in their mission, establishing a colony on the planet Darien, a world of secrets, riddled with ancient ruins hinting at hidden powers from the past. The settlers, mostly of Scottish and Scandinavian stock, have befriended the locals, a mystical race called the Uvovo.

The status quo is rocked, however, when an unknown vessel appears in local space. Humanity on Earth survived the Swarm Wars and has dispatched the cruiser *Heracles* on an ambassadorial mission to welcome the citizens of Darien back into the fold. The Terran government, now part of the Earthsphere alliance, has befriended several alien races and is eager to introduce them to the people of Darien. The situation quickly becomes complicated by events beyond the colonists' control, and we realise that Earth's new allies may not be as honourable as they seem.

Seeds of Earth is billed as a take on the classic tropes of space opera, and from the first page the author's love of the genre is evident. There are hints of *Hothouse*, *Hyperion* and the *Seven Suns Saga*. Cobley's greatest strength lies in his ability to conjure up and relate the most striking and memorable visuals. Nivyesta, Darien's forest moon, drips with lush greenery. The sacred sites of Darien itself are lit by glowing beetles beneath starmist and purple night skies. Every single setting is rendered in remarkable detail and with an artist's grasp of visual aesthetics.

Characterization is a little less consistent. One gets the sense that Cobley had more fun with some characters than with others, with the non-human characters generally winning the draw. While it would be overly harsh to state that some of the human characters feel a little by-the-numbers, the best of the non-humans far outdo them, fizzing with humour, creativity and verve. *Seeds of Earth* is told from the perspective of a number of different characters and the fact that some of these are not as successful as others influences how well each of the story arcs work, to the detriment of one or two of the threads.

One problem with *Seeds of Earth* is the amount of info-dumping that goes on in the early stages. Much of the information given serves to provide a background for the drama, highlighting the great lengths Cobley has gone to in crafting his universe. However, the sheer amount of information and frequency of interruption, along with the frequent changes of perspective result in *Seeds of Earth* being less accessible than one would wish. It is not until Kao Chih and Drazuma-Ha meet, almost a third of the way through

the book, that readers' perseverance is rewarded and the story becomes as absorbing as Cobley deserves.

As a stand alone novel, *Seeds of Earth* promises much and delivers with varying degrees of success. The better characters really are first rate, the setting is incredibly accomplished and, once you get over the initial hurdles, it does everything a good space opera should. As the start of a sequence it is an even stronger proposition. It lays the foundations for an engaging and well thought out drama set against a backdrop familiar enough to be comfortable and original enough to satisfy those craving an inventive and entertaining read.

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The Best of Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe

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Reviewed by Rick Kleffel

China confronts the future five years at a time. *UFO in Her Eyes* covers only three but offers much more than just the future, or aliens, or super-science. Guo's novel paints a hilarious and harrowing portrait of China today, in a world where the future has arrived and is not yet distributed evenly, then steps back and shows us what happens when our past arrives in China's future. Guo tells her story in an ingeniously written series of interviews, spurred by the sighting of a UFO. With Silver Hill in the crosshairs of the Chinese government, the residents of Roswell can finally grab a rest.

UFO in Her Eyes is a series of official documents, presented to the reader complete with paperclips, moonscapes and other typographic inventions that create an atmosphere of self-satisfied officiousness. The novel consists of four 'Files', each a series of short interviews with one of the 'List of Main Witnesses (Appendix 2)'. The event that kicks off the investigation is brief but significant: Kwok Yun, making her way home through a rice field, hears a loud noise then sees a silver disc overhead. Afterwards, she finds a wounded Westerner, who she helps, and who, in return, sends money to the village of Silver Hill.

In 'File 1: The 09-11-2012 UFO Case', Beijing Agent 1919 (BJ 1919) and Hunan Agent 1989 (HN 1989) question the inhabitants of Silver Hill about both their lives and the incident immediately after it takes place. The interview transcripts reveal a village not long out of the Stone Age, peopled with crabby, angry, illiterate peasants. Guo's prose is to-die-for direct, and as a result quite funny. Most of the villagers profess to know nothing of the incident and use the opportunity to complain about their lives. In 'File 2' Hunan Finance Officer 8 surveys Silver Hill a year later, as a new five-year plan begins with the intent to turn Silver Hill into a modern town and tourist destination. 'File 3' brings back HN 1989 joined by HN 1978 to investigate the death of a villager. 'File 4' follows up three years after the original sighting three years later as the future arrives in Silver Hill village, with swimming pools, cell phone factories and 'modernisation'.

Guo's storytelling style is sparse but rich. Each interview offers a perfectly pixelated view from the ground, and from just one step up, via the questions of the interrogators. Guo knows how to create a character with a few deft stokes, with language that is quite funny to read but simultaneously poignant in its implications. The interrogators tell us nearly as much as those they question in a delightfully understated manner, while the irate villagers often curse like sailors. Readers put the pieces of China's future together as the novel unfolds, and it's not a pretty picture. Still, Guo's warm sense of humour and the comparatively light touch of her complex narrative allow readers to enjoy her raw portrait as a

post-modern folk tale. It's a breezy joy to read, but Guo layers her work for a cumulative effect. *UFO in Her Eyes* is a powerful vision of China's future as our past.

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UFO in Her Eyes

Xiaolu Guo

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Reviewed by Rick Kleffel

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1942

James Conroy

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Reviewed by Jim Steel

Alternate realities we expect, but alternate genres can cause surprise. In his acknowledgements, Robert Conroy states that “alternate history is a growing and very intriguing niche in the world of historical fiction.” This is Conroy's fourth novel, which, following the convention of his previous three, is named after a year of war in American history. There is a large readership for this sort of book in the SF world, but it is fair to say that the readers that Conroy is writing for are looking for different things in a book, and this leads to *1942* becoming progressively less interesting to us as it goes on.

There are other flaws, but Conroy has his strengths as well. In his introduction he effortlessly destroys the conspiracy theory that had Roosevelt allowing the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor in order to bring the States into the Second World War. Conroy is also very good on hardware and can concisely summarise a vehicle or weapon in a couple of sentences. Given that most of his readers will already be familiar with these things, maybe this is a necessity. However, when the same technique is applied to his characters, we get people who are painted in flat, primary colours. It's not a novel of character.

The turning point is the third air raid on Pearl Harbor, which never happened in our world, but so weakened the defences here that the Japanese were able to invade Hawaii. There then follows a multi-threaded adventure with plenty of rough sex, sadism and fighting. It comes on like a paperback adventure from another era, and one almost feels it should have a lurid, painted cover of a blonde in a pointy bra being ravished by a savage-eyed soldier. It soon becomes obvious that there can only be one outcome and normal history will be more-or-less resumed by the end. It is the journey, not the destination, that is the point.

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LASER FODDER—Tony Lee's DVD/BD Reviews

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