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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine



ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

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James Targett

Linda Steele

Dr Philip Edward Kaldon

Editorial

...Andrew Finch

A lady loses her husband, a snake charms a girl, a colonel goes native, terraformers become transformed, a murderer taunts the law and emergency assistance is rendered by dragon. Interested? Then skip this and read on because these stories are worth reading.

This will be my third and last foray as an editor of ASIM. For the most part I have enjoyed working with the crew in producing these issues and now I am finding it hard to tear myself away from the whole process and finish the editorial.

I first met ASIM while in Rome in 2001 accompanying my partner, Tansy, who was madly corresponding with a bunch of interesting sounding folk via the internet cafés. What are you doing? I asked. We're starting a new speculative fiction magazine, she replied. That sounded interesting, so I asked if I could play too and as we returned to Australia I was drawn into the family of ASIM and small press publishing.

Eight years later, I have a small (and growing) family of my own with a four year old daughter who has just discovered the wonders of Astroboy. I remember watching as a child myself when I made robots out of plastic blocks and had endless fun tearing them to pieces and rebuilding them. Now she wants to build a robot herself so maybe its time to dig out the Lego and let her have a go.

Who knows what the next generation might accomplish given the right inspiration and tools.

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Luxembourg

...Robert Shearman

It's not that they thought it wasn't worth reporting, it was just a matter of deciding where to schedule it. It wasn't a human interest story, after all, and it wasn't an issue of national concern, how could this possibly affect the average British voter? And global importance, well, no, clearly not. It was something quirky, something a little whimsical, a story that would amuse rather than educate, distract rather than inform. And that's why the disappearance of Luxembourg didn't headline the news, but was announced instead somewhere just between the sports round-up and the weather.

It wasn't even as if anyone could ascertain for how long it had been missing. It's not like Luxembourg was a country people were in the habit of looking at. A housewife in Belgium said that on Wednesday she'd thought to pop across the border, go to this grocery store she knew, the milk was always cheaper there. When she found out there was no longer a Luxembourg to pop across to, nothing but water stretching off as far as the eye could see, she'd turned right round and bought her goods from the supermarket in Antwerp. She said she might end up paying a bit more, but at least they were *reliable*. And no, she hadn't bothered to report the missing nation for a couple of days. When asked why, she said she was always mislaying things, there was no point in making a fuss, they usually showed up again sooner or later.

Juliet had never been to Luxembourg. Colin had. Sometimes she'd ask him what it was like there. "Oh, you know," he'd say vaguely, and shrug. And she'd smile, and nod, and change the subject, but she didn't know, that was the whole point, why else would she be asking? Sometimes he'd be a bit more forthcoming. "It's got nice architecture," he'd say. "Yeah, some of the architecture is quite nice. Quite European." Juliet didn't know Europe very well. She'd been on a day trip to Dieppe when she'd been at school, and there'd been that summer holiday near that beach in Tenerife. Both times it had rained. She'd asked whether one day she might go to Luxembourg with him. She still had her passport, look. And showed him the photo of her inside,

with that bemused expression on her face as the flash caught her by surprise. And he'd laughed, and said, no-one *chooses* to go to Luxembourg. He'd find them somewhere better than Luxembourg, just wait and see! Maybe on their anniversary. But the anniversaries had come, and then gone, several of them now, and that photo of her in the passport was looking terribly young now, she wasn't sure the customs people would let her through.

When Juliet saw the news story, she felt the urge to call out for Colin, she thought he'd find it interesting. But then she remembered. He was on one of those business trips of his, in Luxembourg, he did a lot of business in Luxembourg these days. Even at that very moment she thought he'd be enjoying himself, sampling the drizzly weather and the architecture. She settled down to watch the whole programme, stupidly she half wondered whether Colin would get a mention. But they didn't talk about Luxembourg for long, soon it was time for Eastenders. So she watched Eastenders instead. She supposed there was nothing to worry about. She supposed if there was something she ought to be doing, someone would soon tell her to do it.

The next morning Juliet got up early, watched the news before going to work. She was a bit sleepy, so may not have been concentrating hard enough, but she was pretty sure Luxembourg wasn't mentioned at all. She asked the other girls at the supermarket about it, but none of them knew what she was talking about. Mrs Wilson, who was deputy manager, but also did turns on the patisserie counter, so wasn't a big a deal as she thought she was, said she'd heard *something* about a country disappearing, but was certain it was Liechtenstein. And that gave Juliet some hope, she didn't think even Colin had visited Liechtenstein, she might still have a husband after all — but that night she watched the evening news, and there was an item about it, just a very short item, and it *had* been Luxembourg all the time. "Country still missing," said the report. "Experts baffled." They had a financial boffin in, to work out how much the nation's absence would affect share prices and the FTSE — and he concluded it wouldn't make the slightest difference. And there was an editorial about it in The Sun, in an article entitled "Luxem-gone!", neither the title nor the contents of which made any sense whatsoever.

All that could be said with any certainty was that a nation of some half a million souls had been yanked out of existence. Fifty miles long by thirty-five miles wide, it was as if one of the jagged jigsaw pieces that had made up Europe had simply been taken from the puzzle by its cosmic player. Not that many alluded to this being the handiwork of God — it was all very well some tub-thumpers claiming it was a divine retribution for the evils that Luxembourg stood for, but since no-one could work out what Luxembourg's stance had been on *anything*, it wasn't very convincing. A few theories did the rounds. Some said

it was because of continental drift. It was unusual, admittedly, for a landlocked country to be drifting, but just because it had never happened before didn't mean it hadn't happened now. Others blamed it on global warming. They suggested that perhaps Luxembourg had been using a higher than average number of aerosol deodorants or CFC-bearing fridges per capita, and if someone could only conduct a few surveys on the ecological habits of the Luxembourg populace, they could prove it. It was hardly their fault, they said a trifle defensively, if there was no Luxembourg populace left to survey.

But the sad truth is that there weren't *that* many theories, because there wasn't that much interest. It had only been Luxembourg, after all. For a few days the nations of the world waited to see if anyone else would vanish — and when no-one did, they heaved a sigh of relief. And, it must be said, looked at their neighbours sideways on, and felt a twinge of disappointment too.

The only remaining flicker of interest was not in Luxembourg itself, but what had been created in its absence. Small as a country it may have been, but the gaping puddle it left behind was considered to be rather on the large side. France called it 'La Manchette'. Belgium called it 'La Mer Belgique'. The Germans went one better, gave it the name 'Fehlenderangrenzenderlandsee' — if anyone referred to it as something else, they put their fingers in their collective ears and pretended not to understand. There were quite heated discussions between the three countries, and even hints that all or any of them might be prepared to go to war to claim this fresh territory. And then the USA stepped in, and said they were all being very silly — if they were going to behave like children, none of them could have it, so there. So it was named The American Channel. Everyone seemed satisfied with that. And with this last matter solved, Luxembourg dropped off the world's radar again, and every nation on the planet could get back to what it had been doing in the first place.

Juliet didn't find that so easy. Colin may have been away on his business trips rather a lot, but her life still had revolved around him — if not his direct presence, then at least anticipation of his weekend returns. The weekend had always been about Colin, he ran through it like lettering through a stick of rock. On Saturday they would go out and do the shopping, and that night they'd curl up on the sofa and watch a DVD. If the movie wasn't too long, or if Colin wasn't interested in the special features, afterwards they might make love. That first Saturday she'd still half expected him to turn up; the night before she had, as always, vacuumed the house from top to bottom. Not that he ever commented, but she knew he'd notice if she didn't bother, she wanted the house to be just perfect for the time he was there. She adapted quite well, considering — she just pretended it was a Thursday instead, a Thursday without work, a long Thursday evening maybe, and carried on as normal, she was quite used to being on her

own. But come the second weekend she found it all quite frustrating. She didn't know how much food she should buy on the shopping run, and the DVDs weren't nearly so much fun without Colin talking through the whole thing — she looked at the house, all newly cleaned, and wondered why she'd bothered. She began to fixate on his absence. It became a solid thing, somehow, she didn't know that absence could take up space, but it did — Colin wasn't there when she got up in the morning, Colin wasn't there when she went to bed, and he insisted on not being there at any time intervening — in a strange way, his very absence filled the house more completely than his presence ever had. She supposed she mentioned Luxembourg quite a lot at work, rather too much even. Mrs Wilson took her to one side and told her to stop going on about it, she was boring everyone to bloody death, and since Mrs Wilson was speaking to her at that moment in her capacity as deputy manager and wasn't even in spitting distance of the patisserie department, Juliet supposed she'd have to listen. And that seemed fair enough, she was beginning to bore herself too. And on the third Saturday in a row, as she lay there in bed, on her own, indisputably on her own, and there was no love making to be had, not even a sniff of it, Juliet told herself it was high time she did something about it all.

She supposed there must be many people out there who'd lost family when Luxembourg vanished — but since the overwhelming majority of them had been in Luxembourg too, there was no-one she could compare notes with. She decided that Colin was dead. Once she put it like that, without fanfare, without qualification, everything seemed so much simpler. And seeing that he was dead, she decided too that she really ought to be grieving, that's what was called for at times like these. She stood in the bathroom, looked at herself in the mirror, practised expressions of sorrow and loss. It was hard work. In truth, she *did* feel sad, but, thinking about it, she felt sad pretty much most of the time, she wasn't sure Colin's death had very much to do with it. She had hoped that being sad already would be a help, that it wouldn't take much of a leap to get from her normal state of faded ennui into an appropriate display of grief. But just when she thought she'd got a handle on that grief, that it was finally taking shape, she'd lose her concentration and slip back into her usual sadness again. And wonder afterwards whether she'd been kidding herself, what she'd begun to feel wasn't anything even like grief, not even in the same ballpark, it was just hunger or tiredness or boredom. Juliet had no experience of mourning, didn't know what it was she was reaching for. She'd never lost anyone; her siblings, her aunts and uncles, they were all still about, all still kicking. Her parents had stayed stubbornly alive — they were getting on a bit, and Juliet couldn't see what they actually *did* with all that life, but they were there anyway, if not exactly energetic, still nowhere yet near death's door. She'd have to try to mourn a bit harder, really

put her back into it, she stared at herself in that mirror of hers, she practically *gurned* with the effort. She tried to visualise Colin as a corpse. But it was no good, he always just looked asleep, it made her drowsy just to think of him, it made her want to get into bed beside him and cuddle. And if she tried to imagine him with his eyes open, the facial contortions she put him through to make him look sufficiently deceased just gave her the giggles.

Colin's family felt sorry for Juliet, of course. They'd never much liked her, this shy girl that Colin had married so suddenly, pretty but not quite pretty enough, always hanging in the background at social occasions, never speaking unless she was spoken to and not speaking anything of interest even then, always too eager to pass the phone straight to Colin without saying more than the quickest of hellos. But they didn't dislike her either; there was nothing to dislike. They could quite appreciate the awkwardness that Colin's disappearance must be putting her through, and even if their sympathies had not yet been conveyed via greeting card or phone call — they wouldn't want to interfere — they were genuine enough. But when she invited them to Colin's funeral, they were somewhat irked. "He's not been in Luxembourg a month!" his mother told her. "Some people go on *holiday* longer than that!" She went on to tell her, in no uncertain terms, that there was no body, so he couldn't legally be pronounced dead, and even if there *were* a body, it would barely have cooled yet, what was her bloody rush? And Juliet told her quietly that she needed to move on. It was time. She had to move on. And although Colin's mother might have thought that Juliet was a brazen slut, that she obviously had some new man already lined up to take Colin's place, that she'd probably *wanted* Colin dead, yes, actually *wanted* it, so she could cop off with the nearest feller, that really wasn't it at all. Juliet just didn't feel she could accept Colin had left her until there was something official to tell her so. She asked the vicar if there could be a service at the church — no, there was no body, not yet, but she thought Colin'd have preferred cremation if that was any use — and was told that, sorry as he was for her loss, it wasn't quite a loss big enough for him to help her with. So the funeral became a wake, held at her house that Sunday, and all Colin's family and friends could come and pay their respects if they wanted to. Not many did. She'd been out on the shopping run the day before, had massively overcompensated on the sausage rolls and the scotch eggs, she'd be picking her way through them for months.

As she was washing up in the kitchen, Dave came in and asked if he could help. Dave said that she was the widow, she shouldn't be doing all the work. And Juliet said he could do the drying if he liked, there was a towel hanging by the saucepans. Juliet liked the sound of 'widow', it gave her a buzz, and all day long she'd been waiting to feel something. Dave was three years younger than Colin, and would look a bit like him too, if only his hair were greyer and he were

a bit fatter and he wore glasses. He'd come up from Leatherhead with his wife Sharon and their four year old son Tom, who'd been running around the house all afternoon pretending to be a dinosaur and who was clearly not making any better a stab at this grieving thing than Juliet was. "Do you miss your brother?" she asked Dave, as she handed him a cake knife.

"Oh yes," he said. "Well, sort of. I mean, I only see him at Christmas." He dried a couple of cups, and some saucers, and a fork. "I'll probably miss him at Christmas," he said.

They carried on washing up for a while. And then something got very confused, because he was supposed to be drying, but now his hands were in the sink as well, he was washing away at the cutlery with the spare sponge. It wasn't the largest of sinks, so their hands kept on bumping into each other.

"Do you miss him?" asked Dave.

"Oh yes," said Juliet.

"Do you miss kissing him?" asked Dave.

Juliet thought about this. "I suppose I do," she said. "Yes."

"I miss kisses too."

Juliet said, "But Sharon hasn't been in Luxembourg," and Dave said, "I know." And then his face was all over hers, cheek and neck, and finally he found his way to her lips, and she thought, oh yes, I was right, I *had* been missing this. They dripped soap suds on to the floor. He pulled away. "Sorry," he said. "Sorry. I've wanted to do that for such a long time. Forgive me. I shan't do it again." And he left the kitchen.

That night he phoned her. "Oh, hello," she said. "Did you make it home okay?"

"I've got to see you again," he whispered at her. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She supposed that would be all right. He said he'd make it over to her on Saturday, he'd find a reason to be out for the day, just leave it with him. And even though it was now arranged, and this was only Sunday night, he managed to find a reason to call her every night that week to confirm all was still well.

She broke her shopping habit, went out on Friday evening. The supermarket wasn't as crowded, she wondered why she'd never done it on Fridays before. And she made Dave a nice lunch for when he arrived. He didn't want her potato salad, though. The first thing he did was to wrap her in his arms and kiss her all over, even before he'd taken his shoes off, even before his coat. Realistically Juliet had known they probably wouldn't draw the line at kissing, and there might be a bit of sex involved. She just wasn't prepared for how much. "Oh God, I've missed this!" he shouted out, somewhere during the fifth bout. And Juliet said she'd missed it too, and she meant it, but she thought to herself she hadn't missed it quite enough to *shout* about. Dave looked just like Colin, but they felt

so very different; Juliet had imagined that in the dark she could have pretended they were one and the same, fair exchange, no robbery — but his hands were all over her, she wasn't sure where he'd want to touch next, and it wasn't in the dark, was it, even with the curtains drawn the sunlight was streaming in, she could see *everything*. And that was a bit disconcerting at first, and not necessarily all that pleasant, but it lent a definite thrill to the proceedings. Around half past five he said he'd have to head home now, it was a long drive ahead, and Saturday traffic was probably rubbish. And she surprised herself by actually minding. "Don't go," she said, "not just yet," and, uselessly, "I've got potato salad in the kitchen." "Can we do this again?" he asked her. "We've got to do this again." "Oh yes," she said. "I bloody love you," he said, and kissed her, and drove away, and although she decided it'd be better to ignore that last bit, it replayed in her head a lot over the following week.

The next Saturday she didn't bother with the potato salad. She'd had a good think about what she should be feeling during the sex, about how much pleasure there ought to be — and she was able to get that right, she was very proud of herself, she'd caught the expression exactly. And then it occurred to her — my God! - she really *was* enjoying it, without having to consciously try. That made her panic a bit, she was lying there next to Dave when she realised that Colin was fading away, he'd been there in her head but now he was disappearing, how could he just disappear like that? This was grief, she thought, finally it was here, and she wasn't sure when she cried out whether it was out of the relief or the sudden loss knotted in her stomach. And Dave hadn't known why she'd cried out either, but he held her tight, he held her until she felt better and he told her that he loved her. He was using the 'love' word quite a lot. She told him once in a while not to be silly, and he said it wasn't silly, the last thing in the world it was was silly, it was *love*, didn't she deserve to be loved? And she asked him if he didn't love Sharon. It wasn't meant to be accusatory, but he went very quiet. He told her he had loved Sharon, of course he had, but that love had just gone. He didn't know where. It didn't make sense. How could something as important as love just fade away, what could it be worth if it could vanish so easily and without cause? So Juliet said that maybe he'd feel the same about her one day, and he denied that, he said this was a different kind of love, this one was solid. They had sex again after that. And then he got a bit tired, and asked whether she had anything to eat. He was bloody starving! And she wished she'd made the potato salad after all.

"I've told Sharon all about us," he said one Saturday. "We're getting a divorce." Juliet wasn't entirely sure that she wanted him leaving his wife for her sake — she'd only just got used to the idea of feeling grief and feeling pleasure without now having to feel guilt as well. Dave assured her it was all right. Sharon was

pretty angry, and his mother was absolutely furious, for some reason, Juliet might want to avoid answering the phone for a bit. But this was good, they'd no longer be living a lie, and better still, he could now spend all weekend with her. Friday evening to Sunday! He'd stay all week, of course, but his office was in Leatherhead, he could drop his marriage but not his job, that'd be silly. And it worked fine for a while. He wouldn't want sex the minute he got through the front door any longer, there was no need, they had all the time in the world now. He'd help her with the shopping on Saturdays, in the evening they might watch a movie. Then they'd make love, and it was fairly good, but Juliet couldn't help but notice it was getting that bit more perfunctory, the hands weren't quite so keen to explore, they stayed pretty much north of the equator. Colin hadn't been a passionate man, but he'd had his moments, it had taken two years of marriage before the sex had got stale. With Dave it had taken a little under three months. Juliet supposed it was her fault, she must just suck the spirit out of people. And she didn't *want* Dave to be like Colin, she didn't want to think of Colin at all. But it was like prodding a sore tooth, she couldn't help it, she knew Dave was so close to being his brother — she watched for the grey hairs, she put extra mayonnaise in the potato salad to fatten him up. And already as she lay beside him in bed, as they shopped, watched DVDs, she thought, he may not be Colin, but Colin Mark II could be seen peeping through. "I love you," he'd tell her, so bloody often, and she'd believe him, but she'd choose half the time not to hear. "Let's have a baby," he said to her, "a baby of our very own." "But you've got Tom," she said. "Fuck Tom," he said. "I want a son with you." And he worked hard at that, Colin had never wanted a child, that made Dave different, didn't it? Didn't it? After they'd put the work in, he'd fall asleep and she'd lie in his arms. How long would he stay with her? How long could he love her? She'd started dreaming of turning on the news one weekday morning, and finding that Leatherhead was in the headlines, that Leatherhead had vanished from the face of the earth. And that's what she wanted, too; she wanted Leatherhead to fade away, and take Dave with it, just so she'd know, just so she'd finally *know* it was over and done with. She was practising already in front of the bathroom mirror, she was practising her grief, this time she knew just how she was going to do all those reactions. And although he hadn't vanished yet, he hadn't done a Luxembourg on her, as she cuddled next to his sleeping body she began to mourn. "I love you," she said. "Oh God, I love you." And she began to cry. This is grief, she thought, I'm getting so good at this! It hurt so much. If only he'd disappear.

But Leatherhead didn't disappear. And Luxembourg came back.

Mrs Wilson said she'd seen something on the news about it last night, hadn't Juliet heard? She was surprised, she'd always thought Juliet considered herself quite the Luxembourg expert. Juliet didn't believe her, but one of the girls at the

checkout till confirmed it. Juliet asked if she could take her lunch break early, just go and check, and Mrs Wilson said she didn't think anyone could be seen to be taking lunch at half past ten, it'd set an unfortunate precedent. And Juliet thought, sod it, and it made her feel good to think that, and she went out to her car anyway, without permission, and drove home. She turned on her mobile, and Dave was there, he'd left four messages, "Phone me," he said, and, "We have to talk." So she called him from the car. "You've heard the news?" he said. "I'm coming over. I've left the office, I'm coming over right now. We need to talk about this."

Luxembourg had been misplaced in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Juliet hadn't known much about the Pacific Ocean, but she now found out it was *vast*; you could drop a country in it easily, no sweat, say, twice the size of Luxembourg, and never expect to find it. The people of Luxembourg hadn't even noticed they'd been transplanted for a day or so; they were a bit puzzled by the warmer weather, but they weren't going to complain. And then it dawned on them they were aboard an enormous raft, a thousand square miles floating untethered, out of the reach of civilisation. They peered over the edge. They found out that as wide as this raft was, it wasn't very thick — it was just a sliver of a nation, really, no more than three feet deep. And so the authorities had set up a rota, and the population had taken it in turns to lean over the side, and paddle their way to the nearest country. They had thousands of miles to cross, but they really put their backs into it, it had taken them a little less than a year before they were close enough to Samoa to get a mobile phone signal and call for help.

And the best news was, as far as anyone could determine, pretty much everyone in Luxembourg had survived the incident. There'd been a few deaths, of course — old age, illness, suicide — but it looked as if they were the sort who'd have died anyway, all the dead looked fairly old or sick or fundamentally depressed. And there'd been some instances of cannibalism, where some of the populace had panicked and thought they might be about to starve: but these cases were few and far between, and no-one had been quite sure why they'd resorted to such desperate means in the first place. After all, the cattle and the vegetation had been unaffected by the vanishing act, and besides, all the grocery stores had stayed open and kept normal hours.

So there was no reason to believe that Colin wasn't alive, and well, and would soon be coming home. "How do you feel about this?" asked Dave. He was sitting with her in the kitchen, looking very stern. And she didn't know how she felt, actually, did she need to *know* just yet, why did there always have to be a reaction to everything? She said she was excited. "No, how do you feel about us? What's going to happen to us?" And she hadn't even *started* to consider that. "Do you care at all?" he asked. And he said that he loved her, that he'd told her many times, but she'd never been straight with him, she'd never given him that

love back. And she wanted to say that of course she loved him, she let him share her bed and her potato salad, what was love if not that? And she *did* tell him she loved him, she did it at least once a day, she counted; she just made sure he wasn't there at the time, or made sure he wasn't conscious, or made sure he was just out of earshot — and even now she didn't say this to him, it didn't seem fair to offer up love when she'd never been sure she was free, and, besides, it'd be embarrassing somehow. And he called her a bitch, said that he'd ruined his life for her, abandoned his wife, his kid, it was all her fault. It wasn't her fault, she began to say, it was *Luxembourg*, Luxembourg had done this to them, it disappeared for no reason, now it had popped back, how could a small European country be her responsibility? But he was having none of it. He left the house, if she wanted Colin rather than him that was up to her. He'd see whether Sharon would take him back, maybe if he said sorry, if he apologised for the rest of his bloody life. And, as it turned out, Sharon *did* take him back, but only under very stringent conditions. Apologising for the rest of his life was just the start of it.

Metal hoops were hammered into the ground, studding the whole coastline. Ropes were threaded through. And, on a count of three, a whole flotilla of helicopters winched Luxembourg into the air, flew over to Europe, and lowered the errant country back into position. It wasn't a perfect fit, it was hard to get it into the hole exactly. Some of the extremities had to be chopped off, they lost the whole of Schengen and all the bits of Hinkel that were worth a damn. But they did the best they could, they stamped and kicked the towns that were bulging out into place, and Luxembourg was once more part of Europe. Only three feet thick, it bobbed on the water, and everyone was warned not to walk too heavily in case they sprung a leak.

And Colin came home. "Hello," he said to Juliet. "Hello," she said back. And neither were sure what to do, they both felt a bit shy. She had wondered whether seeing him on the doorstep once more would fill her with a romantic passion, that they'd sweep each other up in their arms, and never stop kissing again, never stop making love. It wasn't quite like that, but it was affectionate, they gave each other a hug. "Would you like some lunch?" she said, and he said he would. She asked him what the ordeal in Luxembourg had been like. "Oh, you know," he replied, and shrugged. He noticed she was pregnant. That's right, she said. He said he didn't blame her, she'd have thought he was dead, he'd have done the same thing had she been the one who'd disappeared. "What was he like?" he asked. "Was he better than me?" "Oh," she said, "you know." He nodded, ate his potato salad, said he'd never ask her again. To his credit he never did. She just hoped that the baby growing inside her looked nothing like her husband, it'd be hard to explain. But a few months later out it came, and it didn't, it looked like every other baby, a bald bad-tempered old man.

For a while for the marriage improved. They had conversations when they did the shopping, he picked movies to watch on DVD she might actually like. And the lovemaking was never exciting, not exactly, but it wasn't a ritual any more, it felt at least like making love. "I didn't know what I was missing," he said. "I've been such an idiot." And yes, in time, it all sank back into routine again, but they'd shown each other it didn't always *have* to be like that, they could make it all work so easily if they could just get round to bothering, and maybe that was enough. And Colin was an excellent father, he knew just what to do; Juliet rather envied him that, it took her a lot of thought to decide how a mother should behave. "We're happy," he said one night to her, quite unexpectedly. "We're actually happy, aren't we?" And she agreed. They were.

One day, about twenty years later, he told her he had cancer. It was eating away at him, it had been for ages apparently. The doctor had told him that morning, that's why he had to speak to her like this, that's why he had to sound so serious, oh God, don't be upset, oh God. Because it wasn't too late, the doctor had promised him, there were treatments, they mustn't give up hope. But the doctor was wrong, it was much too late. And all the treatments in the world could do nothing but make Colin's death terribly slow. Juliet was always there for him. She drove him to the hospital. She fed him soup, even when he wasn't hungry, she told him he had to keep his strength up. And she mopped it when he threw it all up, she never commented, never made him feel bad. As she watched he got older and weaker, his hair whitened then went altogether, his paunch disappeared into thin air. And she wished he'd vanish with the paunch. She wished she could wake up one morning and know he'd just evaporated whilst she'd slept, so painless, so simple. She now knew how to react, she could do the grieving thing now, she'd been right, it *was* easier when there was a body. And this time everyone came to the funeral, all the family were there to see him off. Not Dave, of course. Dave had died from a stroke two years previously. Juliet hadn't mourned; she'd decided then and there to save it all up for Colin.

A few weeks before he died, Colin told her he had something to confess. He didn't want to hurt her, but this was something he had to do. She waited patiently as he tried to find the words. "I was never in Luxembourg," he said.

She asked him what he meant.

"I was having an affair," he told her. And he explained how he'd lied the whole time, invented business trips just to get away from her. He'd seen this woman on and off for years, he wouldn't say her name, it didn't matter any more — and Juliet agreed, it didn't. When Luxembourg had vanished it had seemed like a godsend. His life had changed overnight, he was free, and there'd be no need for a divorce, no need to make Juliet feel bad, because it had never been her fault, it had been him, all him. A break, clean and simple. He'd moved in with his lover.

They had barely lasted a month. Some relationships are better at arm's length, he said, sometimes the reality of living together just gets in the way. He knew he couldn't go back to Juliet. How could he explain where he'd been? And then one day Luxembourg had returned. It had given him a second chance. He began to cry.

"It's okay," she said. "It doesn't matter now."

And she could barely make out his voice through the tears. "That's not it," he said. "I miss her. I'm sorry. I miss her. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." And she held him in her arms, and she kissed him. And she cried too, because she knew what he meant, it was wrong, but sometimes she felt exactly the same thing.

One day she decided to take a holiday. Her husband was dead, her son was at college. What was to stop her? She renewed her passport, had a new photo taken for it. The old one looked so young now, so gauche; the picture that looked out now at the customs officials was confident, and hard, and expressive, that was a face that had *felt* things.

There wasn't much tourist interest in Luxembourg. Even after twenty years of good behaviour, it still had its reputation. And people said they felt seasick there, especially near the edge — you could see the whole country rise and fall on the water. Juliet liked Luxembourg. She liked the architecture. She knew it wasn't the *real* architecture, of course; the surface of Luxembourg was so thin all the heavy buildings had been torn down and replaced with balsa wood replicas. But that was okay, Juliet knew that Luxembourg had to have changed, that there'd have to be a Luxembourg Mark II. She was wise enough to know that's what happened to things which come back, things you'd thought had been lost forever.

She bought herself a *caffè latte*, and sat beneath the light flat board spires of the Notre Dame Cathedral. She wondered whether she was tempting fate by coming here. She wondered if it would all disappear, and take her with it, and this time there'd be no going back, no reprieve discovery in the Pacific, no last minute returns, they'd all vanish forever and never be heard of again. Well, she thought to herself, we'll see. And she decided that if she vanished, she'd just accept it. And if she didn't, she'd go home, and get on with the rest of her life. Either way, she wouldn't complain. She'd give herself, and Luxembourg, and their twin destinies, until she reached the end of her coffee. She sipped at it, without rush, and admired the architecture, and smiled, and enjoyed the day.



Snake-Eater

...Linda Steele

“He comes.” The words rumbled from Puma’s throat.

Bracing her hand on the adobe wall, Elena leaned to look out over the fields. An upright black shadow wove across the sheep pasture, coming from the direction of El Encanto. The shadow looked large enough to be a man, but men didn’t come from the jungle at night.

Viborero, she thought. A shiver ran down her spine.

Guitar music and laughter rose from the patio, enclosed by the thick adobe wall upon which she sat. On one side of the wall waited firelight and family; on the other, moonlight sketched the mountains in shadow. Behind stone enclosures on the edge of the yard, sheep milled nervously. Puma uncurled at her side, his long tail lashing. His round, feral eyes, silvered by the moon, shone with excitement.

He flicked his wide tongue across gleaming white teeth. “Perhaps I shall eat him this time.”

Elena didn’t think he was serious, but she couldn’t be sure. Though she had already fed him the liver of the sheep her father had slaughtered that day, mountain spirits were capricious. “No. If you do, Jose will see you. Then Papa will come with his gun.”

Puma pricked his ears and turned his square head. “Good hunting tomorrow. While they talk to the man about his madness, their cows will wander into the trees.” He sprang from the wall, a long sleek shadow disappearing into the night.

Rising to her feet, she tried to see where he went, but he moved like darkness itself. Thief, she thought, considering her family’s cows. Sheep bleated in the pens, jostling loudly. The shadow man had reached the compound. He lurched to the gate, banging bony fists against the planks.

Inside the walls, the music stopped. Men shouted and ran from the patio. They unbarred the gate to let the man in.

Elena climbed down from the wall and, with braids swinging, ran to join the others.

The man had forgotten his name. The farmers called him *viborero*. Snake-eater, because of what he surely ate during his years in the jungle. Every year he came to Vila Vila to beg or trade for supplies. Often he brought fruit, monkey skulls, or jungle plants her mother coveted for powders and potions. Once, and only once, he had brought gold.

Her father let him sleep on the patio near the remains of the fire, far from the house because he smelled worse than the sheep.

The next morning he sat without complaint as Elena's mother, Rosa, cleaned his infected eye. After kneading a poultice from her collection of powders, she applied it to the eye to soak free the lid, then swabbed pus from beneath folds of skin. Elena followed her mother's instructions dutifully because doing so provided her with opportunity to observe the stranger. He was scrawny and thin, little more than bones bound by toughened skin over ropes of muscle. Every part of him was red-brown as the dirt of their land. Even with his good eye he never looked at her, or appeared to notice the birds that gathered on her mother's windowsill. He thanked Rosa with a mumble, then shuffled to the patio, where he settled in a corner behind a bench to drink café con leche from a tin cup she'd pressed into his hand.

The gift of an old shirt and trousers from her father, Don Emilio, hung upon the outcast as if on a frame of sticks. The *viborero's* other garments had rotted from the jungle's fetid heat and now burned in the fire pit. Her brother Manuel lofted the burning trousers on the end of a stick and ran with them, embers trailing in his wake.

Elena followed her mother out to the patio. They tossed the used poultice with its burden of crusts into the fire. Together they went to sit in the shade of the porch, where the day's potatoes waited to be picked over and boiled. A crimson-throated manakin joined them, watching with bright tangerine eyes from the edge of the bricks.

"Does he have any gold this time?" Elena asked.

"No. He brought tortoise shells and puka chari."

Although rare and a boon to midwives, puka chari stank when boiled. Disappointed, Elena returned to picking leaves, dirt and other debris from her basket of dried potatoes, flicking bits out into the yard where flecked tapaculos gathered and pecked. She would much rather have heard about the treasure.

Like all Vila Vila's children, she had heard the story many times, told around the fire by men who remembered, of how the *viborero* had first appeared at the farm as a youth, filthy from the jungle and clutching a golden sun figure in his dirt-crusted hand. A piece of Inca gold, he claimed, part of a vast treasure he'd found glittering beneath the water of a lake.

He'd promised to take the farmers to the treasure. Her grandfather had rounded up several strong men and they had gone down the mountain, into El Encanto, but the *viborero* had not been able to locate the lake or the treasure again. True to its name, the jungle itself had thwarted them. No matter what direction they set out in, the searchers always ended up at the same dried-up lake bed they had known about for years, surrounded by the same trees they had marked with their machetes only hours before. El Encanto mocked them with its secrets. The farmers had all elected to go home, but the *viborero* had stayed, vanishing back into the trees. Year after year, he searched to find the lake and its treasure again. Year after year, he staggered out of El Encanto seeking medicine and help for the many ways the jungle had tortured him.

The farmers said he could not find the treasure because it did not exist.

"He found the treasure," Puma said. "It changed him, and he forgot how to be human." He licked one of his plate-sized paws, tongue smoothing the inky pelt.

Most cats of the mountain were the silver color of tree bark. Only Puma was black as night. He had frightened Elena the first time he had leaped onto the wall to join her, until he spoke to her about the difficulties of catching monkeys to eat. After a while, she realized no other humans could see him, unless he wanted them to.

She told no one about her visitor, because Rosa said that kukus, the nature spirits of the mountains, spoke only to people who could be trusted with their secrets. Puma told her many secrets, not all of which she believed. Rosa had also warned her that kukus did not always tell the truth. Kukus tormented humans, according to their nature.

"People don't forget how to be human."

"Little girls maybe do not, but men often do. Watch him. He barely walks upright anymore. He feels his way along the ground."

"His one eye is clouded. He doesn't see well through the other."

Puma's clear golden gaze closed against the sun that shone through distant trees. "Some men become beasts because they do not see; others become beasts and so they do not see. The thing he sought blinded this one."

“The treasure?” She leaned forward eagerly, hugged her skirt to her knees. “Did he find it again?”

“Once was enough.”

A high voice rose from the patio, lifting her name above the bird song of the jungle and the nearer bleating of sheep. Her mother, calling for more wood for the kitchen stove. Puma swiveled his ears back as Elena hugged him. His pelt slid like velvet beneath her fingers, smelling of the jungle, musk and earth.

She dropped from the wall and ran to the woodpile, stacked opposite the house. In the shadow of the lean-to in which her father stored his plow and barrow rested the *viborero*, a collection of thin dusty limbs and dirty black feet, a fresh green poultice covering his diseased eye. His good eye, brown and not yet milky, opened to fix on her. She squatted down beside the wood, gathering the oldest, driest cuts into her arms.

He moved faster than anyone seeing him would guess. Like a spider, he scuttled to her and grabbed her skirt, his hand clutching the fabric like a claw.

“You. You speak to them. Help me.” He lisped the words through missing teeth, past cracked lips. The poultice had fallen from his bad eye, upon which the pupil floated like a spot on a sea of fog. “Help me find the gold. I’ll give you half.”

“My mother needs wood,” she said, tugging her skirt.

“Wood!” The word rattled free of his throat. “Men with gold have no need of wood!”

Though she jerked as hard as she could, he clung to her skirt and would not release it. Then she heard footsteps, quick and hard, and saw a blur of brown and red. The *viborero* screamed as Manuel’s foot, wearing a leather work shoe, smashed into his wrist.

“Let go my sister!”

“Senor!” the *viborero* pleaded. “Don’t hurt me!” He curled into a ball.

Manuel landed another kick, this one to the old man’s back.

Elena dropped the wood. She flung herself at her brother, wrapping her arms around his tense body, all muscle and anger. “He wasn’t hurting me! Stop it!”

“He stinks from the jungle. He’s rotting inside, just like the jungle.” Manuel’s face, browned from work in the sun, twisted with fury.

“He’s hungry and scared. He didn’t hurt me. Help me carry the wood back to the house.” Already Mama stood on the porch, looking to see why she delayed. Like a beetle, the *viborero* scooted back on all fours to the shelter of the lean-to. The poultice of coca leaves and wetted powders lay on the dirt like a squashed green bug.

When she stood up from gathering the scattered wood, Elena glimpsed Puma crouched in the shadow of the house upon the wall. His wild golden eyes held her gaze for a moment, then he unfurled his long body and vanished over the other side.

In the morning, the *viborero* returned to the jungle. A pouch dangling from his rope belt held coca leaves from which to make more poultices, though he might choose to chew them instead, to dull the pain from his eye and two rotten teeth. On his back, he wore her father's gift of clothes, and over his shoulder he carried a bag of rice and a bag of beans, along with a wrapper of dried beef in his sack and a canteen filled with beer. He left silently, simply walked across the courtyard, opened the gate and hobbled off into the mists that cloaked the mountainside.

That night Elena learned from her father and mother that Manuel was being sent away to the city, to the school of the Jesuit Fathers of San Calixto.

Puma came again after three days of rain. He ate her gift of chicken entrails and hearts and told her about the *viborero*, whom he said lay dreaming in the jungle against the trunk of a chuchu tree, unmindful of the beetles laying eggs on his skin.

"He does not notice. They have infested him for years. Their sickness uncoils in his blood."

Elena shuddered, remembering her parent's stories of people bitten by the red-bellied beetles that lived in the low, warm land near the river.

"The monkeys piss on him; he doesn't care. A human would care."

"Perhaps when he finds his treasure again, it will cure him."

"No. Treasures cure nothing."

She wanted to ask him about the Inca treasure, where it had come from, but knew that he might not wish to answer questions. Kucus of the cloud forest came in many forms, some helpful and some wicked, and she was not yet completely sure which kind Puma might be.

"Manuel is gone to the city," she told him, her family being a safe topic. "He went to study with the priests." She tried to keep the longing from her voice, her envy that her brother had left hard work behind for the life of a student.

"Men do better close to home. When they go off to strange places, they learn strange ways."

"I would go to school every day, if I could."

Puma's tail twitched, like the mark at the end of a question. "Useless," he said.

"I don't think school is useless. I would like to know numbers. I can write, but only a little." Three times a year, a missionary came to the farm and conducted classes in the small church at the bottom of the hill, teaching the farm's children writing and numbers. Elena kept a composition book in which she practiced making elegant, cursive letters with a precious, much-sharpened pencil.

"One day you will learn many more man-things, and you will know less, not more, than you do now," Puma said. He lowered his head to the top of the wall, his shoulder blades thrust above his spine like shadowy peaks. "You will forget the mountain, and become like the *viborero*."

"He's different. He found a treasure and lost it."

Something screamed far away, in the trees. Puma lifted his head, his ears tilting forward. "A monkey," he said. "Something found it. A jaguar, I think." He turned to her again, eyes narrowed, mere slivers of reflected light. "The monkey should have stayed where it was."

Stayed in the trees, stayed in its nest, stayed where predators did not roam and could not find it. Elena shivered because her people had left safety long ago, had searched for adventure and fortune and found it. Don Emilio relished telling how the blood of Castilians and Moors ran in his veins, the hot blood of the conquistador Francisco de Orellana and the hidalgos who had followed in his footsteps. Elena had their large dark eyes, their full lips. Her mother, though, was not Spanish. Rosa's people were Aymara and Quechua, descendants of Tiawanaku and Cuzco. Her father did not boast of that.

That night she cornered her father on the patio and told him she, too, wished to attend school in the city. He laughed and patted the bench until she sat beside him.

"Why do you need to go to school? The aged sisters would just take my money and give you the priests' clothes to wash. All you will learn is how to argue, then no man will want to steal you for a wife."

Don Emilio was like a mountain spirit sometimes, the way he teased her. She snuggled under his arm. He pressed his lips beside her ear. "Did your mother ever tell you that when I first met her, she spoke like a bird?"

She shook her head. Her mother spoke seldom, and in no way different from other women.

"The first time I saw her, birds perched upon her arms and shoulders. She wore a veil of flowers and sang to the birds in a language I did not know, that no men knew. The priest from San Bartelmo feared for her soul and sent her to the city to

study with the sisters. When she came back, she knew her prayers but could not sing.” He looked toward the kitchen and his expression turned wistful.

Elena touched his face, the stubble of his beard roughly scratching her fingertips. “Did she tell you what the birds said?”

“No. I didn’t think to ask her at the time, and now she says she cannot remember.”

But the birds still came to Vila Vila. Ignored and half-remembered, they gathered in the corners of the patio, quietly chirping songs no one understood. Rosa washed clothes in the stream while finches flew around her and she pounded maize under the gaze of nightjars spreading long lyre-tails upon the wall. Now Elena understood how her mother knew about kukus.

The next day Elena joined the other children of the hacienda in searching for two cows that had wandered into the jungle to drop their calves. Cows never went far into the jungle, just far enough to believe themselves hidden, and they would stay there while their calves were young unless someone went in and drove them out. Finding calves was important work. It amazed her how elusive so large a thing as a cow could be, to hide itself and a calf so well. The animals lay in the undergrowth and seemed to blend with trees and earth. If they did not move, she might not see them. Carrying a length of rope wound three times about her waist, Elena pushed through broad leaves and around vines, hoping for a glimpse of a leg or hoof.

Thinking she perhaps had found one, she followed a trail of broken leaves and thorny vines down a drop, only to have the trail vanish in a space of small, close trees. Overhead in the canopy, so densely laced as to form a green roof, squirrels scolded her presence. Hot and slick with sweat, Elena gave up on searching for cows and sat on a high, broad root. She lifted one leg to examine scratches on her ankles. One long, thin line looked especially angry and red, and she bent to pluck a thorn from her skin. A drop of blood from the puncture trickled along a red thread before falling like a brilliant bead to the soft forest floor.

“You should not tempt wild things like that. I’m a meat eater.”

Before she had even turned, Puma’s black body landed in a crouch, inches from her. His rich scent greeted her, more powerful here than on the wall.

Elena would have been terrified, had he not spoken. From her pocket she pulled a kerchief she sometimes used in the fields. She tied it over the wound. “You’re a kuku. Kukus don’t eat people to whom they speak.”

“We do, once we stop speaking to them.”

“I cannot find the cow and her baby,” she said. “Help me find her and I will have more time to talk with you.”

“Last night I killed the calf and ate its best parts. The mother will not leave it. She moves only far enough to stand and watch while others eat the rest.” He licked his muzzle.

Anger filled her. The two cows were the farm’s best, the calves sired by Don Emilio’s new bull. Her father had promised both to Manuel.

“You’re nothing but a thief!”

With one paw, Puma batted at the blood spot on the forest floor. “Shall I tell you where to find the carcass? There’s still good meat to be had on it.”

She wanted to say “no.” Her father, however, would still want her to retrieve the cow. “Show me, and I won’t tell Papa you killed it. Then he won’t come after you with his gun.”

His eyes glowed against the jungle shadow before he turned and glided between two upaya trees. Fearful of losing him, Elena darted after, squeezing between the trees with their branches of leaves like open hands. He led her to the edge of the jungle, a tangle of growth overlooking the pasture, above which could just be seen the roof edges of the hacienda. He vanished then, saying, “She’ll hide if I am with you.”

Elena found the carcass under the trees, the mother cow standing ghostlike in the undergrowth. Talking to her softly, Elena walked up slowly, and once there, looped her rope over the cow’s nose and head.

“He’s wicked, I know, but he can’t help it,” she said to the mother cow, laying her hand on its neck, hoping to coax it to follow. “This time the kuku took your calf, but you will have another and I will help you protect it!” She would ask her father to give the next one to her. Puma would not eat it then.

Halfway to the forest edge, still among tall trees, the cow raised her head and jerked the rope out of Elena’s hands. Monkeys screamed and branches rustled sharply behind her. A hand snatched at her braids and yanked her backward. She glimpsed an arm and a sack, then the stink of putrid flesh and urine enveloped her just before a blinding pain exploded at the back of her head.

When Elena opened her eyes again, she was being dragged beneath trees as tall as the sky. Lianas of downy white flowers hung from tree to tree like constellations against a glowing green firmament. She stared up into the canopy, pulling together fragments: her body bumping over dense jungle debris and growth, along runnels carved by roots and water. Her head hurt so much she

wanted to cry, but fear held her to silence while monkeys chattered and hidden birds trilled. Overhead, giant spiders' webs displayed collections of dark, dried husks.

"Awake, are you?" The hands pulling her let go. Someone knelt by her shoulder. The *viborero*.

The clothing her father had given him hung upon his emaciated frame in tatters, revealing how thin he'd become. She saw his milky eye and fear of him turned her mouth to dust.

She yelped when he grabbed her by the shoulders but all he did was pull her up. He kept one hand wrapped around her upper arm. "Walk!" he ordered.

"Why?" Elena pleaded. But she stumbled after him, tripping over the jungle's soft, uneven floor. She stayed out of fear, not only of him but also because if she became lost, she might never be found. Monkeys and red ants would pick her bones clean and scatter them beneath the trees. Thoughts of death propelled her feet forward.

Ahead, the jungle looked unfamiliar, the trees closer and shorter, with a canopy broken by sky and mist. Soon the ground beneath her feet turned wet and sinking, the stink in her nostrils that of water-logged vegetation and rot.

The *viborero* stopped where the jungle opened wide and the edge of a dark, green lake lapped at his feet. Thick tree roots plunged down a gentle bank and sank into the mud. Other things stood in the water: crumbling walls of massive, square-cut gray stone, and hulking statues the shapes of which had long since worn away, covered over by vines and layers of moss. A few rotting tree trunks rose among the ruins.

For years he had talked of a treasure buried in a lake.

She wrenched free and tried to run, but her foot landed between half-buried stones and she stumbled. Her knees and elbows met the ground and she twisted, freeing her foot. Black mud covered her hands and streaked her legs and skirt. The *viborero* clambered toward her on hands and feet, shouting.

"I claim it! Do you hear? The gold is mine! The gold belongs to men! The Spanish father said so. It's mine—"

She saw only water and rock, no gold, no priests — only a man crazed from too many years in the jungle where he'd been mocked by monkeys and bitten by insects.

"She'll talk to you," he railed, lurching toward her. "You can tell her. Tell her that the gold cannot be hidden. That men will find it, that men should find it—" He grabbed at her ankle. She kicked at him and her foot connected with his ribs, sending him sprawling.

She sprang to her feet and saw the black cat lounging on a branch nearby. “Puma!” she shouted.

He eyed her, unperturbed. “Why are you afraid? You can outrun him.”

The *viborero* lurched toward her. One of the fallen trees in the lake shifted, unfolding with blinding speed to reveal a long sinuous body with a massive, diamond-shaped head. Casting off bark and leaves, the apparition coiled around the man’s torso, pulling him off his feet. The *viborero*’s head snapped back and he screamed. The snake’s head by itself was half his size, its brown scales shading into green around red eyes the size of eggs. The snake’s body remained attached to the thick base of the tree, perhaps part of it. Another snake head and body emerged while the first swayed above the water with its captive. The *viborero* screamed again.

“Sach’a mama! Look! I brought you another. A young one. A virgin. Talk to her—” His voice sounded like a broken flute, leaking air.

Terrified, Elena dared not move. She did not know what to say to a two-headed snake, or even if she wanted to save the man in its coils. The cracks she heard were of bones breaking. The second snake head moved purposefully above the water, heading toward her. Puma pounced and landed in front of her, body alert and tail twitching.

“The girl is mine,” Puma growled.

The head wove nearer, green-brown scales glinting. Red eyes narrowed and the mouth opened, releasing a forked black tongue and sibilant hissing. The *viborero* had ceased to scream. There was only a splash as he was pulled under the water. Only the snake-goddess’s rolling coils showed on the water now. Elena wanted to scream and run, but Puma brushed against her legs.

“Don’t be afraid.” His golden eyes burned into hers. “Sach’a mama is the spirit of this lake. Her power extends to all the waters. Your ancestors knew her well, before the Spaniards came.”

“But I do not hear her.”

“Open your mouth.”

The old women of the farm whispered that kukus were not to be trusted, but she trusted Puma. He could take her back to her farm and her parents. Going to school in the city no longer seemed important. She wanted only to see the patio again, and sit with her mother among the birds. Standing straight, arms and hands at her side, she parted her lips.

The snake head in front of her swooped nearer. Black lids slid sideways over fire-hued eyes. The snake’s thick body curled around hers, and Elena gasped at the sensation of silken scales sliding over her skin. The slitted nose pushed to within inches of Elena’s face, the black tongue finding and flicking over her

face, lightly touching and tracing her lips. Sach'a mama tasted of water, sharp and sweet and clear. Everything, suddenly, was clear. From everywhere — the earth and trees and sky — voices assailed her. Monkeys mocked her clothes and toucans debated her chances of escape.

“The girl is afraid,” the snake observed.

“They get that way,” Puma said in Elena’s defense. “You just killed a human and are ingesting him as we speak.”

“He stopped talking to me...and I to him. He listened only to gold.” Eyeing her, Sach'a mama unwound from Elena and reared up from the waters of the lake, her serpentine body towering over all but the trees. Black and brown scales shone dark and wet. “When the man came to me, he was a boy. I tasted his royalty. The Spaniards did not slay all the blood of the sun.”

Elena surprised herself by finding her voice. “You spoke to him?”

“When he was young. I do not travel as Puma does. The boy played beside my lake. I gave him the power to speak to serpents, to learn the secrets of the earth.”

“He found the gold?”

Sach'a mama dipped near to the shore again and regarded her with lidded eyes. “Would you like to see it?”

Puma growled a warning, and the snake goddess, giving him an evil look, retreated.

Elena gazed upon the surface of the lake, glassy and smooth again now that the coils bearing the *viborero* had sunk beneath it. She thought of what the treasure might mean to her and her family. With gold, she might go to the city, attend school, become more than a farmer’s wife and helpmate. Her family could buy a big house, become powerful. Gold made men’s dreams come true.

Except that the gold of El Encanto was not meant for men.

Inca gold, the gift of the sun, could only safely be used in worshiping the gods. Any other use brought men to ruin. Because of it, the Spaniards had murdered and destroyed empires, and because of it other men would do worse.

I must be wise, as a snake is wise.

“Your gold is very beautiful, I’m sure,” Elena told the snake-goddess staring at her so intently. “I don’t want to see it, though. It burned the *viborero*’s eyes and poisoned his thoughts, and I would not like to become like him.” Her powerful long body of scales shimmering, Sach'a mama dove down into the water. A rumble shook the lake and one of the stone walls rattled, blocks falling into the water with great splashes. Then she surfaced again, swimming forward until the great diamond head rested on the mud at the water’s edge. The lipless mouth

below the nostrils parted and the blue-black tongue slithered forth, something beckoning from its ridged surface.

Puma paced forward. “I think you should take it,” he said. “It is perilous for humans to refuse the gift of the waters. She could order a drought — or a flood.”

Daughter of farmers, Elena feared both. Though wary of the snake’s slitted eyes, she squatted before Sach’a mama. Reaching out, she placed her hand within that fanged and shadowy maw. Though she tried not to, her fingers touched the cold black tongue as she took the golden sun figure from it. Once she’d stepped back again, she looked at the shining object that weighed so heavily in her hand. Nearly the size of her palm, the sun disk bore the face of a woman, with a condor beneath her and flanked by a puma and a snake.

Puma stretched to gaze upon it. “Impressive.”

Elena met the snake-goddess’s red stare, remembering what had happened to the gold figure the *viborero* had shown to the men of Vila Vila. Her grandfather had taken it to the city, to a learned man at the university, who had asked him questions and given him money. The *viborero* was always welcome at the farm, her father said, because he had already paid for whatever he took with him. Somehow, she knew, he had been a fool.

“I do not want the *viborero*’s gold,” she said again.

A hiss escaped the thin high nostrils, and dismissal narrowed the great snake’s red eyes. “Explain to her,” Sach’a mama said. Unblinking, she slid back into the depths of the lake. Only waterlogged walls remained, lapped by tiny waves of dark water.

Elena released a sigh of relief. Her body ached and one of her braids had come undone, so the hair on that side swung loose. Puma brushed against her, his body sleek and hot, urging her to place her hand on him. He led her up a path of stone steps covered with moss and leaves, until they reached an open place above the lake. Another wall was there, low and solid, flowers growing in the joints between stones men had shaped from the mountain’s bones. Still clutching the sun figure, she sat on steps of Inca stone and stared at the lake below.

Something golden gleamed in the water’s heart. Gold — and more. Another shape, long and shadowy, undulated around that murky light.

Puma cocked his head and looked from the water to her face. “The gold is cursed. The sun priest knew this when they hid it. The man knew after he sold it.”

She swallowed, remembering the wild eyes of the *viborero*. Did she now own his curse? Uncurling her fingers, she studied the beautiful, golden face.

Puma crept near and laid his head upon her lap. His golden eyes reflected the thing in her hands. “The gold in the lake belongs to the Sun, created from the

Sun God's tears. It once resided in the Temple of the Sun in Cuzco, where it was used to anoint rulers and adorn virgins. Before the Spaniards took Cuzco, the high priest placed a curse upon the gold, that it should drive mad any man who laid claim to it. The priest and the Sun Virgins carried the gold to this place to keep it from the Spaniards. But the Sun's tears were given to men, so a human must know where to find them."

"And the *viborero*?"

"He was young when he saw the gold and forgot all else."

She ran her thumb over the sturdy rays of the sun disk's dazzling corona. It was the first gold object she had seen and the most beautiful. "Is that what I'm to do? Remember where the treasure is?"

Puma's lids dropped over his eyes. "There is always a human to remember. When one human dies, we choose another."

"You're a very bad kuku, getting me in such trouble."

He yawned, showing her his teeth, white against the pink of his mouth and midnight of his fur. "I didn't eat you, did I? You should thank me — that treasure may prove useful some day."

She frowned. "I don't see how. I'll be cursed if I try to take it or give it away, and I can't tell anyone about it or Sach'a mama will eat me."

"Not if you learn the difference between a curse and a treasure."

Elena's heart pounded. From a nearby branch a frog whistled. Rain is coming, it said, wait for rain...parrots nattered of avocados hanging heavy by the river... emerging from broken stones at her feet, a tiny black snake whispered of green jewels under the mountain...

The lake itself sighed, and trees lifted chants to the wind.

What if only the gold itself was cursed, not the knowledge of it or the gifts Sacha' mama bestowed? The *viborero* had not always wandered the jungle as an outcast. Only when Sach'a mama had stopped speaking to him had the *viborero*'s world gone silent, El Encanto's secret forgotten. Once he had awakened the curse, and been consumed by it, only his madness had remained. And now she possessed El Encanto's secret.

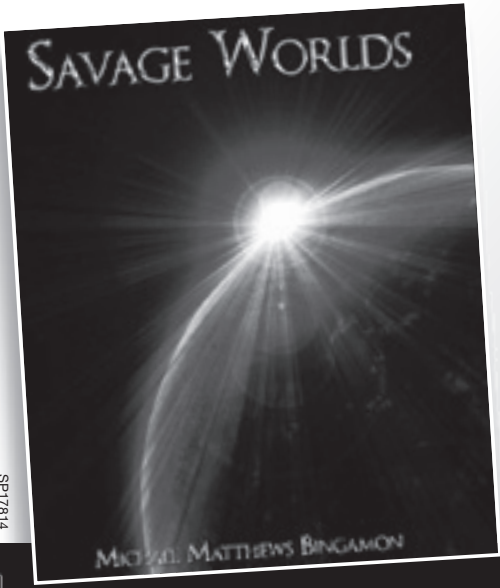
She was the *viborera* now, but not like the old man had been. If she kept the secret, she would keep the power.

Pushing Puma's big head off her lap, she removed the kerchief from around her ankle and used it to wrap the gold figure, which she then tucked into her skirt pocket. She would hide it in a better place as soon as she reached home. Rising to her feet, she dusted off her soiled skirt as best she could. Overhead, an excitable tanager swooped and sang that she had better hurry home. *Vila Vila!* it cried. *Vila vila vila!*

Puma stretched, then turned his hindquarters to her. "Take hold of my tail and I will guide you by the quickest route."

Elena grasped his tail with both hands. It moved under her hand like a black velvet rope. The jungle opened before them. Though the trees spoke to her in ways they never had before, Elena closed her ears and thought of human things, of clothes washed in the stream and drying on rock, of bread fresh from the oven and guitars serenading the night. She would listen to the jungle another day and learn its secrets, greater than any the city might hold. Today she clung to Puma's tail and ran like the wind until she was free of El Encanto's whispers

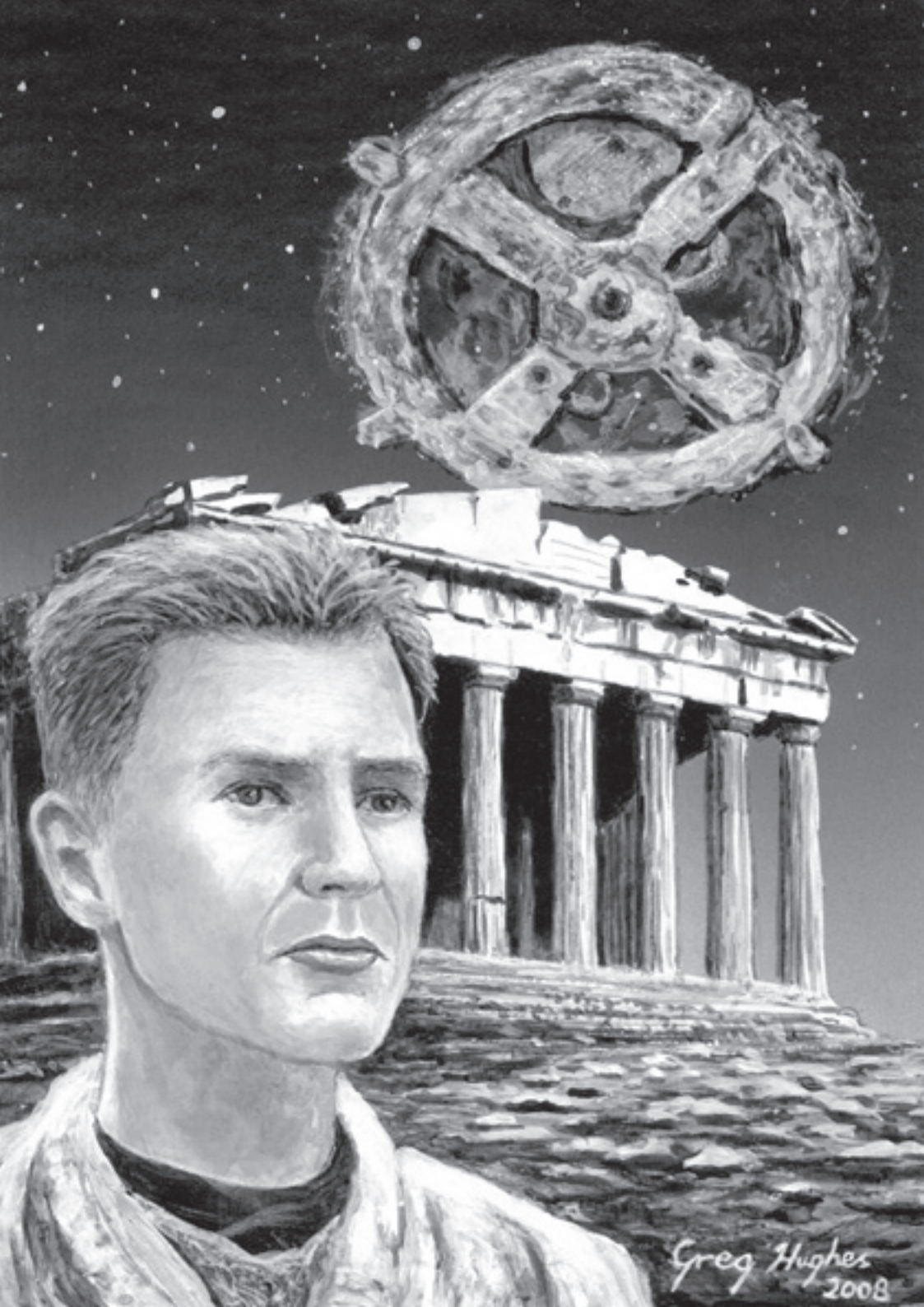
Home awaited and she raced along with the birds toward the sound of her mother's voice singing her name.



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Greg Hughes
2008

The Colonel's Character Flaw

...Paul Kennebeck

Although the crisis evolved over a period of several days, the Colonel could pinpoint exactly when it got out of control.

The Colonel was part of a Tour in Athens, walking in the Mediterranean sun near the Plaka on a narrow side street crowded with outdoor *tavernas* and sidewalks filled with parked cars.

The Tour Guide, a professor from a university in Ohio with an expertise in sustainable annoyances, was happily pointing out the many inefficiencies of Greece: the shops closed for the siesta, the cars parked on the sidewalks and in doorways, this very walk in the Plaka itself a supreme example of inefficiency, the result of a necessity to keep the Tourists entertained when their tour bus to Sounio failed to appear because it was the bus driver's name day.

A woman standing next to the Colonel complained, "Can't abide Greece. Can't. Ferries changing schedules without warning. Taxis charging a different rate every time you ride one. Waiters who won't wait on you."

The Colonel, proficient at nodding noncommittally, suspected the woman knew he was monitoring the Tour. Monitoring had long been an accepted part of Tours for a number of reasons, one of which was that New Government provided Monitors on the Tours who were discreet and affable, men and women who could pretend to enjoy being with Tourists.

"Superstitions abound," the Guide was explaining. "The simplicity and primitiveness of a civilization is demonstrated by its folkloric beliefs." The Tourists smiled. In New Government-controlled territory superstitions were prohibited.

"Ancient Greeks," the Guide explained, "believed the sun was pulled across the sky each day by a chariot. Each night, to get ready for the next day, the chariot pulled the sun back across the sky--west to east--but no one could see it because it was dark."

The Tourists laughed. These Guides — trained by New Government--never made it clear whether the Greeks still believed such things. Ambiguity was good for New Government.

“Why is Greece allowed to have superstitions?” a Tourist asked.

The Guide avoided answering that.

The Colonel himself had never had it adequately explained to him: Maybe Greece was never intended to be this way. Knowing what the Colonel now knew about New Government, he guessed it was probably a result of hasty decisions made on the run. Someone, some committee maybe, articulated the best course was to let the Greeks remain as they are. Don't waste money, lives, energy, resources on the Greeks. Are they really that important?

Whatever the reason, New Government developed its Theory of Exclusions: New Government would isolate certain areas of the earth and more or less allow these areas to fend for themselves. The theory was based on the premise that Excluded Areas would eventually conform in order to gain entry into the New Government Area. The Excluded Areas would see the advantage of being a part of the power. The theory was not bad for a theory and was more or less true, except, principally, for Greece.

The Guide stopped walking.

The Guide shouted.

The Colonel turned. It happened fast and not every one of the Tourists saw it. The Colonel saw it. Others saw parts of it. The Guide saw the entire thing.

“See?” The Guide said. “Look. *Superstitions!*”

The Tourists peered across the narrow street to where the Guide was pointing. On the opposite sidewalk, between parked cars, a *yia-yia* in black dress was holding what must have been a grandchild. A young man stood next to the *yia-yia*, smiling, obviously talking about the baby, messing the baby's thick black hair, saying all the right things about the baby's skin, hair, eyes. Then the old *yia-yia* turned her head away from the baby and the man and spat on the sidewalk.

“See? See?” The Guide was ecstatic, a bird watcher catching a glimpse of some bird long rumored to be extinct. “She spits. The *Mati*. She's warding off the Evil Eye. A custom thousands of years old.”

“Ridiculous,” a Tourist said.

“Gross.”

The Tourists murmured various forms of gratitude that they were citizens of New Government, far from the grasp of ancient beliefs.

Thus commenced the Colonel's crisis.

After the siesta, Takis arrived at the National Archeological museum where the Colonel waited for him. Takis guessed the Colonel was a twenty-something

powerhouse who would make Brigadier General by the time he was thirty: A man who had never taken a siesta in his life.

Takis, of course, had taken a lifetime of siestas.

“Where is it?” the Colonel asked.

“Have you had the pleasure of visiting us previously?” Takis asked. They stood among marble statues produced by the best sculptors the earth had known. The intricate golden jewelry from the Minoans was visible in the next room. Works attributed to Praxiteles next to that.

“Why would I?” the Colonel asked.

Takis nodded in understanding. Staring at a statue would not be time well spent for a Colonel. That was the problem with museums. You just looked at stuff.

“Where is it?” The Colonel repeated. Takis saw that the Colonel was unethnic, as most New Government military personnel were. He was tall and stood straight and did not wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

Takis apologized. “The heat in Athens causes the air conditioning to malfunction.”

“Malfunction is the byword for Greece.”

Takis led the Colonel among the cabinets of swords and knives and among the life-size statues of warriors as well-constructed as the Colonel himself. Occasionally the Colonel stopped and took his measure of these warriors. Takis assumed the Colonel knew military history. Even the Colonel must know of Alexander the Great, of Marathon, of Salamis. He must have recognized some of the statues of Alexander.

The Colonel reached out to touch the marble bicep of an unnamed warrior. Military personnel of officer rank had access to role enhancement and the medical procedures that could cause a military man to look as he should: lean, strong jaw bone, bold cheek bones. The Colonel seemed to be examining these replicas of real warriors to compare the resemblance. Surely, Takis thought, the Colonel wasn't thinking he should look more Greek.

They walked among the statues and friezes and bas-reliefs and at a small table upon which was placed a glass enclosure, the two men stopped. The Colonel leaned forward, examining the artifact within. The object was old, of course, but it always saddened Takis to see how the waters in which it was discovered had corroded it, diminished it. In Takis's mind, the artifact should have been as bright and shining as the Minoan gold in the next room. To Takis, it was as bright and shining as anything in the museum.

The metal instrument in the glass case was thousands of years old, green and brown with corrosion.

“Looks like my great grandfather's pocket watch,” the Colonel said.

Takis had never viewed it that way, probably because he knew its history. Plus no one in his family had ever owned a pocket watch.

“Why is it called the Antikythera Mechanism?” the Colonel asked.

“It was found in the waters off the island of Antikythera at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.”

“Open the case,” the Colonel said.

“I can’t,” Takis said.

“It is an order.”

Takis gave a shrug.

“Three thousand years of that useless shrug.” The Colonel mimicked a Greek shrug. “One of the reasons Greece is not a part of New Government is that shrug. Order. Open it.”

“I don’t have the authority to—”

“I’m a Colonel from New Government. I’m giving you the Authority.”

“Only Dr. Spakos can open it.”

“Where is he?”

“It’s August. He’s on the beaches of Crete, Rhodes, Thira with every other sensible Greek.”

“Have him return tomorrow.”

“No one comes to Athens in August.”

“Tomorrow,” the Colonel said.

Takis could not allow the matter continue this way.

“We should talk,” Takis said quietly. He moved closer to the Colonel. “You are a Colonel. Someone in my position would enjoy your insights. You can convince me why I should leave Greece for New Government territory.”

The Colonel said nothing.

“Let me buy you *mezedas*.”

The Colonel was hungry. “We can disagree,” the Colonel said. “But we can still eat together.”

“Like man and wife.”

“Is that a Greek proverb?”

Takis saw something in the Colonel, a look of unaccustomed acquiescence, a hint of a strain of humanity, and thought it was a good idea to say yes. Three thousand years of creating Greek proverbs shouldn’t stop now.

Takis’s dealings with New Government representatives caused heartburn. Alcohol burned his intestines. He took the anti-acid drugs that had become

prevalent in the Twentieth Century, but he had a Twenty-First Century esophagus. A hundred thousand years man has been on earth and the stomach still burns. Takis, a student of logic, concluded: Maybe man wasn't meant to be on earth.

Takis sat at a small outdoor table with the Colonel at a *taverna* located in an area of junk and debris and, thus, was devoid of tourists. It was featured in no guidebook that Takis knew of. In the background the Parthenon was illuminated and shone in the night sky. Takis thought it was lovely, an edifice of art that had been part of mankind for three thousand years. New Government, of course, followed its standard policy in regard to native attractions. It did not destroy the Parthenon as an affront to its authority. Rather, New Government constructed hundreds of replicas of the Parthenon around the world, the two most famous being in Des Moines and Liverpool. When a Tourist arrived in Athens, the striking presence of the night-lit Parthenon was familiar stuff, not striking at all.

Takis, exasperated by the Colonel's perfect command of posture, invited the Colonel to relax. Then Takis and the Colonel each tore off a piece of the warm bread in the basket on the table and dipped a knife in the olive spread and placed the olive spread on the bread.

"*Kala*," the Colonel said.

Yes, Takis thought, the Colonel's wonderful Greek word for wonderful Greek food.

The olive spread was a combination of smoothness and tartness, spicy and clean. The Colonel ate the bread and drank the cold Mythos from the bottle. And he took a sip of his ouzo. He looked into the night sky and said to Takis, "The Parthenon in Athens is more refined, lighter-seeming, hovering on the hill, superior to the one in Des Moines."

The Colonel took a knife and placed a dab of olive spread on the warm bread. "We don't have olive spread in Iowa." He chewed. He stared at the Acropolis lit against the dark sky and admitted to Takis, "It's the ouzo talking, my friend. But that Parthenon has proportion and scale that the one in Des Moines doesn't possess."

Takis poured another ouzo and asked the waitress for more olive spread, more warm bread.

The Colonel stretched out his legs, Takis felt his stomach stop burning. Bread was good for the burn. With the arrival of night, the heat had dissipated. An evening in Athens can soothe one's nerves. The Colonel was relaxing, becoming inquisitive. What was Greece really like? Why did people live here? Why didn't people revolt? Why did Takis work at a museum?

Takis poured another ouzo. "Why do I work at the museum?" Takis asked. He sat back and almost smiled. "I don't know how much longer I'll be employed

at the National Archeological Museum. There is little need for me. No one visits museums anymore.”

The Colonel nodded. “Sorry,” he said. He paused. “I’m on the opposite track.” He drank the Mythos. He sat forward. “I’m beginning to think matters are going too well for me.”

Takis did not doubt that no one possessed more ambition than a young Colonel serving in New Government’s military.

“I’ve been lucky,” the Colonel said. “A few more successes and my career will be made.” He paused. “The Antikythera Mechanism is my highest assignment.”

He placed the olive spread on the fresh bread that the waiter brought and took a bite. Takis guessed the Colonel had a W factor inserted in his wrist so that he would gain no weight.

“You will be promoted?” Takis inquired.

The Colonel waved him off. “Probably shouldn’t talk about it.”

“Not talk about it?”

“Something might go wrong.”

Takis frowned. “Go wrong?”

“You know. People talk about good health and the next day they have a heart attack. You brag about work and the next day you’re fired.”

“The *Mati*,” Takis said.

The Colonel put down his glass. “Sorry?”

“You believe in the Evil Eye.” Takis pointed to the bracelet he wore, a string of white eyes with black pupils. “Ancient Greek wisdom.”

“Wisdom?”

A shrug. “Superstition. You’re a believer.”

The Colonel felt unwell and knew it was not the result of the ouzo.

The purpose of a Tour to Greece was to underscore to the Tourists the value of the efficiencies and modernity of New Government controlled territory. It was never assumed one would *admire* Greece. The Colonel’s own analysis was that he clearly did not admire Greece. There was no question in the Colonel’s mind that he was not going to develop a character flaw. The Colonel knew that a man who had obtained the rank he had obtained was not permitted to have character flaws. The term “character flaw” was, of course, sufficiently ambiguous to afford New Government the opportunity to define a character flaw when it was expedient for New Government to do so.

For decades the medpharm experts in New Government's military operations had been capable of neutralizing any character flaw. Although since no member of the military could admit to having a character flaw, no member of the military had access to the medpharm cures. The Colonel knew alcoholics and gamblers who had remained captains forever.

The Colonel was certain his sudden love of ouzo was not a character flaw. It was simply that one could not find quality ouzo in Iowa. Nor did he think his sudden love of olive spread was an admission that he admired Greece. He had, as did all military personnel, studied the Stockholm Syndrome. A liking for ouzo and olive spread was not an indication one was rebelling against his master; it was simply indicative of a mature and refined palate. No one, of course, would ever know he believed in the Evil Eye.

Such, anyway, were the defenses the Colonel mentally postulated as he listened to Takis Polus at the outdoor *taverna*.

Dr. Spakos inserted some keys and flipped several latches and the Colonel and Takis watched as two workmen attempted to lift the glass off of the small table that held the Antikythera Mechanism. Takis knew the Colonel was going to remove it from the museum.

"There's too much history," the Colonel said, looking around the room at the statues and weapons.

Takis, along with most of the other historians, curators, and archeologists with ties to the museum, had been interviewed and lectured: New Government had concluded much of history no longer happened. Each week heralded an advance in technology, science, biology, genetics that changed the way life had been lived for the past ten thousand years. History was too old to effect the present.

"But why remove the Antikythera Mechanism?" Takis asked.

The Colonel smiled. "New Government senses heresy."

"Do you know what the Mechanism is?"

"Of course," the Colonel replied. "And that is why New Government must neutralize it." The Colonel gave a somewhat disjointed explanation of the Antikythera Mechanism, a device constructed in the First Century BCE that was composed of gears and ratchets, complicated to such a degree that its full import was not recognized until Twenty-First Century MRI devices were employed to determine its intricacies. There will always be doubters. But the most agreed-upon conclusion was that the device was capable of projecting planetary movements

to such an exact degree that it was designed to recognize lunar cycles and solar cycles and synchronize the two. Sailors used it to navigate among the islands.

Takis nodded. "You have learned well." And then Takis's passion suddenly burst forth. "But you left out the most important part! No other such devices were ever found. The knowledge contained in the device was lost to mankind for millennia. The Mechanism was more than a mere astrolabe. It predicted the sequences of the planets, the cycles of the sun and the moon and made calculations about all these cycles. It was not until the Twelfth or Thirteenth Centuries that mankind constructed such devices. How did the Greeks do it in the First Century BCE? How did the knowledge come to be lost for a thousand years?"

"It's going to make my career," the Colonel said.

"But why must you take it?"

"New Government is efficient, modern, successful, powerful. Greece is inefficient, backwards, superstitious, laughable. Yet Greece thrives. New Government allows Greece to exist as an example of what life was like before New Government brought the world to its highest point. People visit Greece and see the mess, the confusion and they return to New Government territory thankful to New Government."

Takis knew all this. Everybody knew all this. "But why take –"

"Greece is the source of superstition, of useless beliefs, of magic, of ancient oracles and Elysian fields. Tourists come and see for themselves and are grateful for the rationality New Government has injected into daily life."

"But why –"

"Because the damned Antikythera Mechanism demonstrates that Greeks knew science, mathematics, astrology to a degree unknown thousands of years before any other civilization. That puts a bit of a dent in New Government's picture of Greece as a land of inefficiency and superstition." The Colonel stared off into space. "I must neutralize it, emasculate it." The Colonel nodded at the table. "Lift the glass."

Takis and Dr. Spakos and the workmen tried to lift the glass. It wouldn't move.

"Break the glass," the Colonel said.

"No, no," Takis said. "Tomorrow. We will saw it off."

The Colonel made no expression.

"Greek inefficiency," Takis explained with a shrug. "Glass can't be removed in one day."

That evening at the *taverna*, the Colonel sipped his ouzo. “What is the Evil Eye?”

Takis raised his wrist and displayed the bracelet with the blue eyes and black pupils. “This wards off the Evil Eye.” He laughed. “Maybe it doesn’t. My wife makes me wear it.”

“What does it ward off?”

“It wards off exactly what you think it wards off. You were afraid to talk about your promotion because something might go wrong. You mentioned the man who brags about his health and has a heart attack the next day. Everybody, every culture, has this sense that if you talk about something good, if you brag, then something bad will happen. Who knows? It might be part of our DNA.”

“That’s why the *yia-yia* spit when her grandchild was complemented?”

Takin nodded.

The Colonel sipped ouzo.

“Maybe Greeks are not so crazy,” Takis said. “But please don’t tell anyone.”

The next afternoon after the siesta the workmen sawed a ridge through the bottom of the glass and lifted off the cover. Dr. Spakos lifted the Mechanism and placed it on a white cloth on a small table standing next to the display case. The Colonel leaned forward to look at it closely and all he could think of was the Stockholm Syndrome. All he could think of was that he believed in the Evil Eye. And that he mixed water with his ouzo like a Greek. And that he ate olive spread at every meal. And if he could just leave Greece immediately he would be a Brigadier General and never worry about Stockholm Syndrome again.

He stared at the Mechanism. He wondered if he had praised the olive spread too loudly. Or the Parthenon. He should have kept his thoughts to himself. There were Monitors better than he, Monitors who monitored Monitors. What if it was discovered he believed in the Evil Eye?

Takis saw that the Colonel was distracted, paying little attention to the Mechanism. “Colonel, do you like it?”

“Is that camera a monitor?” The Colonel was pointing at a set of two small telescopic devices in the museum’s ceiling.

“They’re Greek,” Takis said. “They don’t work.”

“New Government has cameras everywhere,” Dr. Spakos said.

The Colonel studied the ceiling.

“Are you an Agoraist?” Takis asked the Colonel.

“What is an Agoraist?”

“Agora. The Greek word for market place. A word that hasn’t changed in three thousand years.” Takis smiled. “An Agoraist is one more Greek superstition,” Takis said. “Like the Evil Eye.”

“Meaning?”

“Ancient folklore. You Tourists laugh at the Greeks for it. You will have to forgive our ancient, backward culture.”

“What does it mean?”

“An Agoraist is one who believes people are watching his every move.”

“But New Government does watch our every move.”

“Pity.” Takis reached out and touched the Colonel, a gesture he realized was probably an affront. “Colonel, my friend. You’re an Agoraist, a believer in the Evil Eye, a connoisseur of ouzo and olive spread and one who recognizes the difference between the Parthenon built three thousand years ago and the one in Des Moines.”

“And,” the Colonel said, controlling the steadiness of his voice, “I am one who is *not* going to have his career destroyed.”

The Colonel turned and strode down the aisles between the display cases, leaving Takis and Dr. Spakos staring at his back.

Dr. Spakos drank with Takis and they studied the lit Parthenon.

“Why did the Colonel not take the Antikythera Mechanism?”

“I suspect it was necessary for him to leave the country quickly,” Takis said.

“Quickly.”

“His career was in jeopardy. He recognized the Parthenon for the beauty it was. He had an innate sense that was different from other Tourists. Plus he got involved in the *Mati*. He realized he believed in it. And he realized he believed in that ancient Greek lore of Agoraism.”

“Takis. I’m an expert in Greek primordial beliefs. I have never heard of Agoraism.”

Takis studied the old doctor. “What is important is that Agoraism was the final straw. The Colonel’s career was at stake.”

“Thank God.” Dr. Spakos sipped scotch. He disliked ouzo. “But I’ve never heard of Agoraism.”

“The Colonel was fearful he was failing New Government. A belief in one more ancient folk belief was enough to sway him,” Takis said.

“But where did the folk belief come from?”

Huge smile from Takis. “It’s a piece of ancient Greek folklore I invented this morning.”

Much of the information that New Government placed on the world-wide e-kiosks was often true and even if it wasn’t true a lot of it could have been true if events had turned out differently. While reading the e-kiosk several months after the Colonel had walked out of the museum, Takis saw that the Colonel’s ambition had been fulfilled. New Government produced wonderful biographies of its military leaders and the one devoted to the Colonel was of the highest order. Although e-kiosk biographies were occasionally fictional, they read well and the basic tenets of the biography were based on reality as reality was currently understood.

Takis learned that the Colonel had previously distinguished himself in many of New Government’s wars. Takis replayed the biography several times and, although the Colonel had said his career depended upon the emasculation of the Antikythera Mechanism, there was no mention of it in the biography. Takis guessed the Colonel must have finessed the issue somehow. Takis suspected the Antikythera Mechanism was in the process of achieving the status of a non-issue.

But the device was still in the museum, still in its case, and on quiet afternoons after the siesta Takis found pleasure in looking at it and imagining the mind of man that produced such a device in a time before Caesar conquered Gaul. Takis wondered how the Colonel was able to achieve promotion even though he failed utterly in his quest to emasculate the Antikythera Mechanism.

Months passed before Takis received his answer. The number of Tourists to the National Archeological Museum had increased slightly. Takis did not know why. And the number of Tourists examining the Antikythera Mechanism also increased. This was all a puzzle to Takis.

It was not until the day Takis heard the Tour Guide from the university in Ohio with an expertise in sustainable annoyances that Takis felt a bitter stab to his stomach. And at the same time understood that the Antikythera Mechanism was forever safe in the National Archeological Museum.

Takis listened as the Guide addressed a group of Tourists who had gathered around the display case of the Antikythera Mechanism. Of course, Takis had no

way of knowing that it was the same Guide who had pointed out to the Colonel the *yia-yia* spitting on the sidewalk, thus beginning the Colonel's struggle with his own soul.

The Guide, a hearty-type, avoiding any appearance of the professorial, was happily describing the purpose of the Antikythera Mechanism. "Ancient Greeks," the Guide explained, "believed the sun was pulled across the sky each day by a chariot. Each night, to get ready for the next day, the chariot pulled the sun back across the sky — west to east — but no one could see it because it was dark." He pointed to the display case. "This old pile of rotted gears was the way ancient Greeks demonstrated how the sun was pulled across the sky at night."

(Authors Note: The Antikythera Mechanism reposes in the National Archeological Museum in Athens. Its description and purpose is pretty much as originally described in the story.)

The Dissolution of Blue

...James Targett

Blue had seen pictures, drawn by the Virtualists of the early 21st C, of humans first dissolving, or reforming (it was hard to tell from the pictures), into thousands of brass and steel coloured squares and then into nothingness. She had never thought that she would see it happening right in front of her.

The last of the metallic squares spiralled through the vortex of air. It shimmered as it connected with its mates, completing the jigsaw puzzle. The metallic colours faded, slowly took on fleshy tones. The figure opened steely-pink eyelids, revealing a pair of all-too-human, blue eyes. It blinked, focused, and *he* was there again. Re-appearing the same way he had vanished an instant before.

“Ta da,” Alexander said, like a magician. “What do you think?”

“What have you done?”

Alexander grinned lopsidedly.

“Pushed the technology to its limits. A little bit of a software tweak - alright, a bit of a hack around the protocols — and some holistic meditation.”

He shrugged with false modesty.

“I’ve done it, something else that nobody on Earth could’ve done. A dispersed cloud of nanites that can ride the wind and then reform back into a person.”

“And you tried it out on yourself first, didn’t you?”

The anger seethed inside her. His casual disregard for cause and effect: it made her blood boil.

His smile wavered.

“We’ve talked about this. We need you. Altar needs you. What if this had gone wrong? What if it does go wrong? What if there are side effects?”

“I thought you’d be pleased...impressed.”

“Well, now you know,” Blue replied. “Just don’t do anything else stupid!”

She strode off, heading down the hillside with stalks of wildgrass brushing against her neo-pirate style leather boots. Fury powered her long strides. Blue knew she needed to cool down, before she discussed it any further with her lover.

Below her the temporary structures of the campsite sprawled up against the foundations and skeletal framework of Altar's first settlement. Men and women moved throughout the encampment. It was people — industrious, enthusiastic, talented people — who would fill the gaps in the Master Plan, who would make it all work, would make ends meet. People were the magic ingredient.

He came after dark, as Blue knew he would. She had been lying awake in the shell of a recently completed dome, just listening. She had been trying to decide how much anger still burned within her.

And then he was there, moving quietly, as he always did, so that she was unaware of his presence until he gently shook one of the glowlamps. The liquids inside the lamp merged, filling the dome with a soft phosphorescent glow.

“Hi,” Alexander said, easing himself into a kneeling position so that his head was level with hers.

Blue pushed herself up in the camp bed, supported her head on a brace of hand and elbow.

“Hi yourself.”

“Look,” he said. “I’m sorry about earlier. You’re right; it was stupid. We can’t afford any silly mistakes — well, any mistakes really — at this stage of the project.”

“So...?”

“No more experiments. Promise.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

She raised her head to meet his descending lips.

He was gone when she was awoken by the daylight sluicing in through the grid of the skylight. Blue dressed slowly, happy and stiff, wishing for the luxuries of a hot shower and clean clothes; luxuries that were on the agenda, but not part of the mission priorities.

She ate in the mess. Alone at first, but then Geneva, a thin, redheaded girl, took the bench opposite hers. They shuffled trays, clearing space on the table that was starting to develop an early patina of dirt and scratches.

They ate between bursts of conversation about their work and project updates.

“You see Alex last night?” asked Geneva.

Blue smiled.

“Yes. He stopped by. Have you seen him this morning?”

“Maybe.”

Blue paused in lifting her fork.

“Maybe?” she asked, with a raised eyebrow. She enjoyed gossiping with Geneva, but Blue was naturally cautious when the gossip involved her lover.

“It was odd.”

“Do tell?”

“I was up early, checking on the new lambs in the South Pasture. I was riding back and I could’ve sworn that I saw Alex walking out on the plain. I rode out towards him, but by the time I’d crested the rise he was gone.”

“Where on the plain?”

“About five miles to the east. I know that some people have started camping out, taking some kit and going exploring; but it can’t have been Alex. Not if you saw him last night.”

“I did see him. He stayed in my bed until ...”

“Until—?”

Blue eyed her coldly. Discussing her intimate moments was not a line she wanted to cross. The rest of the colony practically knew when her shadow drew breath. She valued the little privacy she did have.

“Oh well.” Geneva shrugged. “I guess it was somebody else. Or maybe Alex was up for an early morning run.”

“Maybe he was. I’m not his keeper.”

Of course she was suspicious, and annoyed. However Blue didn’t want to make anything of it with Geneva. It wasn’t the redhead’s fault; it was between her and Alexander.

Relationships were all supposed to be about trust. Her suspicions and her temper had caused Blue trouble in the past. More than one lover had left her life with a trail of accusations and broken crockery behind him.

Sometimes those accusations had been false. Her ex-lovers, not unreasonably, had not wanted anything to do with Blue when she had tried to kiss and make-up.

Here on Altar, there weren't a lot of prospective partners to choose from. The colony was too small. Its relationships already too incestuous. As Alexander had said, they couldn't afford any stupid mistakes.

Blue was high up on the scaffolding surrounding the new comms needle when she saw Geneva talking to Alexander. Blue looked at Yulsa, one of her co-workers, and then rocked a half-open hand back and forth in front of her mouth: the universal mime for a tea break.

By the time she reached the ground, Alexander was out of sight. Geneva was strolling towards her parked quad bike — stacked with fence-posts and spools of self-extruding wire.

“Hi, where'd Alex go in such a hurry?”

“Nowhere. I haven't seen him all day.”

Blue paused, the snarl of outrage stalled by Geneva's blatant lie. She had thought — now knew — that Alexander had broken his promises, but why was Geneva covering for him?

“But I saw the two of you from up on the needle—?”

“Sorry Blue, you must be mistaken. I was having a quick word with Jamal. I've not seen Alex.”

Geneva shrugged.

“I gotta go. The crew is waiting down at the Creek Pasture for this kit.”

Blue watched Geneva mount her quad. Then the redheaded girl was gone in a cloud of dust and ethanol by-product, leaving Blue with her bottled-up anger.

She waited. She continued to watch, her temper slowly simmering towards boiling point. Jamal said that he'd been with the Creek Pasture crew all day and hadn't seen Geneva until she turned up with the fencing equipment; he'd not been anywhere near the needle. Alexander told her that night that he'd been helping map out the East End of the settlement.

Blue turned her cheek when Alexander tried to kiss her. Pushed him away, attempted to go to bed alone. He asked her what was wrong. She called him a liar and a traitor. He said that he didn't know what she was talking about. Blue told him that he was having an affair with Geneva.

She didn't know if it was true, entirely; but it was the only explanation that made sense. She had been twisting it back and forth in her head all day, trying to

see it from every angle. Why else would the two of them be lying to her? Geneva was pretty enough, thin, and most importantly younger than Blue.

Alexander laughed then, in surprise and amusement. No, he said, he wasn't having an affair. Blue ran away.

She didn't know which hurt more. The fact that she was wrong about the affair (but Alexander and Geneva were lying about something), or that Alexander had laughed when she'd been open and vulnerable and hurting, right in front of him.

By the time Blue feel asleep her pillow was damp with tears.

The wind gusted down from the foothills and scoured across the plain. Blue let it whip around her as she watched one of the descent craft finish its landing run. Once it was grounded on the edges of the settlement there was silence. Nobody moved, they had to wait for the super-heated hull to cool before cracking the craft and unloading it.

She picked up her rucksack and started on the path down the hillside. As Blue made her way halfway down a turn in the path revealed another view of the surrounding plain, and also a view of Alexander and Geneva. They were sitting cross-legged, facing each other, eyes shut in meditation.

Blue paused, feeling like an intruder. Then she felt angry. She wasn't doing anything wrong. Alexander and Geneva were supposed to be her friends, and they weren't doing anything obviously wrong like kissing or fucking in the tall grass.

Her feet kept on, one after another, as they followed the path that was slowly being beaten around the hillside.

"Morning," she said. "Don't let me interrupt."

Two pairs of eyes opened in surprise.

"Blue!"

"It's not what you think."

"You don't seem to care what I think. Or what promises you make."

"It's not like that."

"Stay out of it Geneva, I'm talking to him."

"Bl—"

"I thought you were my friend."

Tears welled in her eyes. She didn't want to be seen crying; she'd rather be thought of as righteous and angry. Blue quickened her stride, until she was almost running, aiming for the settlement and her dome.

She made it halfway there. Then the air swam with metallic colours, streaks of red that wove themselves into hair, bronze plates that co-joined and became fleshy.

Geneva stood in front of her, hand outstretched.

“Blue—”

Blue slapped the hand away.

“I’m your friend Blue. I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

“Why don’t you go talk to the last person who promised me anything.”

That was that. The fury was there and Blue was righteous. She threw all of Alexander’s things out of her dome. She didn’t quite go as far as slashing the tyres on Geneva’s quad or scrawling “You Treacherous Bastard” across the side of Alexander’s yurt.

She did refuse to talk to them or eat with them in the mess. She did let everyone else on Altar know what a pair of lying little shits they were.

The needle was almost finished. Yulsa was helping Blue connect the last of the network and configure the gateway settings. Blue had decided that she liked working up high, the gusts of wind seemed to cleanse her of all the hurt she felt lately.

“How’s that?” squawked her earpiece.

“Hang on. Just checking,” Blue replied into her throat-mike.

She flicked open the display console’s protective cover. The wind gusted again, making the scaffolding rock gently.

“Can I help?”

Blue tensed. She was deciding that she hated it when people re-formed behind her without any warning. It was damn rude.

“Piss off Geneva.”

“I only want to help.”

“Why don’t you tell it to the dozen or so other people who’ve joined *his* cult. None of you do any work anymore.”

“There’s more than a dozen—”

Her earpiece crackled.

“Blue?”

“Sorry Yulsa, Geneva has just turned up wanting to help.”

“I didn’t see Gen — oh. Well, if you’ve got the gateway checks under control, tell her to go get me a mug of tea.”

“You hear that Geneva?”

Geneva nodded.

“I can’t do it I’m afraid. I can only form and reform myself. You’ll have to apologise to Yul — wait...”

The air shimmered, became cloudy where Geneva had been standing, and then the next breath of wind cleared it. Blue waited a moment, anticipating something, and then heard the sound of Geneva and Yulsa’s voices from the bottom of the needle.

Blue returned her attention to the control panel. She started to key in the commands for the test sequence. She stopped as the wind carried up the sound of laughter from below.

She’d been up for hours, herding the sheep in the Upper Pasture towards the lambing shed. Her head felt light with hunger and her buttocks ached from the jolts and bounces the quad bike had delivered.

All she wanted was a coffee and a large breakfast.

Blue strolled into the mess. All the chairs and tables had been pushed up against the sides of the room. In the centre of the clear space, thirty men and women sat, cross-legged, meditating in time to the thin hum being exuded from Alexander’s lips.

The mess lacked the familiar smell of fresh coffee or food of any sort.

“Oi,” she said. “What do I have to do around here to get some food? And when are you lot going to do any work!”

They exploded like frightened birds. She inhaled sharply, hoped that she didn’t breathe in any one of the whirling multi-coloured platelets. The colours shimmered, like the sun reflecting of metal, and then vanished.

She was alone.

Jamal walked in behind her.

“Mind telling me what happened?” he asked.

“I scared them,” she said. “And they were gone.”

“Do we know if they are coming back?”

“Does it matter if they do?”

Night fell almost unnoticed. The driving rain had obscured the autumn daylight long before the sun rolled out of the sky. Blue was in the loading bay of the last craft to land, manhandling supplies onto the back of the trailer.

“What are we doing, Blue?” asked Jamal.

“Ensuring our survival,” she replied. “And that of our sheep and chickens.”

Jamal manoeuvred himself around the bay until he stood at the top of the ramp, the hull protecting him from the storm. Blue let him have a moment of introspection, he had been working as hard as she had and she knew that she was exhausted, desperate for any moment of peace that she could grasp.

“These storms are going to get worse,” he said.

“What?”

“I checked the monitors when I was up on the ship. Unless someone does an EVA and adjusts the weather platforms then the wind and rain is going to blow and blow.”

“I thought—?”

“—that Altar’s terraforming was complete? It is. But there is still some fine-tuning that needs doing if we want an Earth-type climate at this latitude.”

“How many people do we need?”

“A pilot and co-pilot, someone to monitor the EVA. Maybe two people to work with the ’bot and platform systems. Two to three trips per platform. Maybe eighteen trips all told.”

He paused.

“Ideally we’d use three to four craft, several crews on rotation. Some working from the ship.”

“But we don’t have that many people.”

Jamal shook his head.

“Which is why you asked ‘What are we doing?’”

“We could go back up to the ship. Go back into cryo.”

“Might as well kill ourselves”, Blue replied. “We’d orbit this world, sleeping, until it was a cold cinder or until they remembered us.”

He continued to study the heavy rainfall.

“And I don’t believe in suicide,” she added.

Not knowing what else to say, Blue carried on lifting boxes and crates onto the trailer. Inside the confines of her own head she cursed and swore, furious that the dream for Altar was falling apart, like cardboard in the rain.

It was raining again, the sky darkened by cloud rather than Altar’s own rotation, when Jamal left. At least he was one of the ones who had the decency to say goodbye.

Blue pulled out the yellow fabric of her waterproof’s hood; the wind was driving the rain hard from the east, and she needed the extra shield. Despite that, her cheeks and hair were drenched.

She stood next to the collapsed shape of Alexander's yurt as she watched Jamal walk through the wildgrass. He stripped as he walked, letting his clothes fall away behind.

Lightning flashed in the west. For an instant Blue saw wet, dark skin. She ached for him, wished that she had taken him to her bed. There would be no opportunity now, for companionship or for friendship or anything else. Then the shape of another man in the distance made her start. It had been weeks since she seen one of the others. It took a moment to realise that it was Yulsa.

She raised her hand in greeting, but Yulsa and Jamal were already gone. Lost in the wind and the rain. She was alone. The storm's fury redoubled.

She wrapped her blanket around her like a cloak, briefly considered the progress she'd made with the loom and prodded the ashes of the fire with the poker — probably once a tent-pole, but now given a specific task.

Her dome was crowded with the boxes and equipment that she had hoarded, too precious to keep in the mess hall or the storehouses, not even with the dogs.

Blue wasn't even aware of *his* presence until Alexander made a coughing sound. She jumped slightly, but then stilled her reaction as quickly as it had surprised her.

"That's what I liked about you," *he* said. "Always in control. It's your greatest strength"

She licked her lips, wondered how long it had been since she had spoken to anyone. For a time, after Jamal finally joined them, she had talked to herself, sung to the sky. She didn't know why she had stopped. Maybe she had been afraid that there had been nobody listening. Either that, or she had been afraid that the sky had been full of an audience, mocking her tenacity.

"And your weakness. You don't know when to let go. When to be free."

Blue fumbled with her tongue, tried to remember how to make sounds. Her vocal chords felt as though they had shrivelled up.

"Alexander?"

"Yes."

He sat up on her bed, moving into the light cast by the beeswax candle.

"Fuck you."

Alexander made a sound. It took Blue a few seconds to realise that he was trying to laugh. She wondered how long it had been before he had made any sound with his vocal chords.

The croaking wheeze stopped. He wiped his eyes with the back of a hand.

“You should join us.”

“No.”

“You can’t stay here alone. Half the camp is a mess — the tents have collapsed. There is moss and wildgrass growing on the roof the mess hall and on the hull of the descent craft.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Blue—”

“If you had stayed—”

She had to stop and swallow hard. Blue’s throat felt sore and lumpy.

“If you had stayed, we could have made this place work. We were so close.”

“We are making this place work. Not as the Designers intended, but there is a colony of people here. Come and join us.”

“You still consider yourselves people?”

“Blue, it breaks my heart — it breaks all our hearts, mine, Geneva’s, Yulsa’s — to see you like this. Please, I’m begging you, come and join us.”

“You have a heart?” she spat. “Funny that. You must have grown one. Because you certainly didn’t have one before.”

“Blue—”

“Get out. Get the hell out of my house.”

She reached for the nearest thing, the poker, and threw it at him. He was gone before the tip arced through the air where his face had been. The smoke from the fire rippled, its updraft disturbed, as Alexander left by the chimney.

The comms needle failed on the fifth year. The storms, far fiercer than envisaged, ripped apart the shielding and the struts; despite the best of Blue’s repair work. She knew it was gone when she lost the uplink to the ship and the weather platforms. Seconds later, above the gale, she heard the banshee squeal of metal rupturing.

Blue sat in front of a blank screen, imagining the cladding being lifted up into the sky like a giant sail. She thought about the mutilated pile of wreckage she would have to inspect on the morrow. Would she be able to cannibalise any of it? Or should she just leave it to rust and be torn apart further by the next storm.

In one angry sweep she hurled the terminal from her desk. The screen cracked as it struck the concrete floor. It sparked and died.

Maybe, she thought, she ought to let the storm take her as well.

It seemed an even better idea after she had consumed half-a-bottle of vodka. She’d found the spirits in the personal effects of one of Alexander’s followers.

The wind and the rain whipped at her hair — grown long and tangled, soon it would be time to hack at it with scissors again — and her face. She dropped the glass she had been drinking from as she leant into the wind, clutching at the doorway of her shelter for support.

She screamed obscenities into the sky, until her words lost all sense and she was just a scream. She drank straight from the bottle, strode out into the storm. Booted the quad bike that was in her way — its empty fuel tank turning it into a lawn ornament. She picked up an object, uncaring what it was, and hurled it into the night.

She spat and swore and cried. Drank more vodka, until the bottle was empty. That too was flung into the wind's embrace. It landed with the splintering sound of breaking glass.

Her stomach had enough at that point. Blue collapsed on the wet grass, retching and puking up the alcohol that threatened to poison her.

Hands helped her back to her shelter, several pairs of hands. Blue could never remember the faces that went with them. She recalled the rain and the smell of wet wild grass and vodka and fresh puke.

Only one pair of hands undressed her. They felt so good after the empty years. *He* smiled at her, his features softened by the candlelight. She was the one who kissed him. Her loneliness, overcoming her anger and her hurt, added perhaps by the vodka and her need.

He was gone in the morning, when her head hurt, and her soul ached, and she too full of self-pity to feel angry about anything.

After that she didn't drink again.

She was thankful, three weeks later, when it was clear that she wasn't pregnant. She hadn't known what she would have done if she'd been bearing Alexander's child.

"Hi," he said.

Blue was mending the roof of the barn — formerly one of the other domes — that sheltered the sheep from the worst of the storms. The wind was gentle,

blowing across the plain and gently rustling her hair, a comfort rather than a threat.

“You walked?”

“Only from the other side of the landing field.”

She glanced at the hulls of the three descent craft. All three looked like mossy hillocks now. It was barely possible to tell that the craft had once been able to break the tug of gravity.

“What do you want?”

“To see how you are.”

“You aren’t going to ask me to join you.”

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

“I don’t.”

She stood up, feeling the muscles in her lower back twinge with relief. Blue felt old. She knew she had grey hairs. She’d seen them in the mirror the last time she had shaved her hair back down to her scalp.

Alexander stood there, patiently. He didn’t do anything rude like disappear and reform beside her.

“I’ll be down in a moment.”

Blue collected up her tools, the spare nails, and the cladding that she was reusing as roofing material.

He was still there when she stepped off the ladder, her feet sinking into the grass and the mud.

“So?”

“How are you?”

“Okay,” she nodded. “Considering.”

“Considering what?”

“That I’m turning into a batty old lady who is alone, except for some chickens and dogs and sheep.”

“It might be better if you had some cats. At least you have eggs and milk.”

“Goat’s milk, pluuu-eease.”

She pulled a face. Alexander smiled, and she smiled back.

“But I do have wool. And grain to make flour, which means I have bread.”

“And the goat’s milk means you have cheese.”

“And I have meat.”

Blue grinned.

“I’m doing okay.”

“No more getting drunk and throwing bottles at the stars?”

“None of that.”

Alexander stopped in his tracks — they had been walking towards her dome (though Blue had stopped thinking of it as a dome anymore, it had become a

shelter, her cave) and the stores. Blue took a few more steps, then realised he had stopped. She turned to face him.

He stared at her, but refrained from voicing the question reflected in his eyes.

Instead, he asked: “how is this all going to end?”

“For you? Or for me?”

He shrugged.

“For us.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, or the rest of them. For me—”

“For you?”

Blue glared at his interruption.

“For me? Well, I plan on living a long life — alone, as that seems the only choice granted to me — and then dying. You were the one who asked how I thought it was all going to end.”

“So there is no hope?”

“None.”

She noticed his forlorn expression.

“Though you and the others are always welcome to visit. But you have to come, as you have, in solid shape. And you must go before nightfall.”

“Why before nightfall?”

“I am not letting *you* stay the night.”

“Truce?”

“Truce.”

She’d cleaned most of the craft’s hull before she saw one of them again. It had been the summer season, the air still and calm, filled with the sound of fat bees and little else. They only seemed to come when the wind was blowing. Blue had been expecting them for the last few days; they’d been rain and clouds gathering in the east, signally the start of the autumnal storm season.

“Hiya Blue.”

It was Geneva, still looking as young as she had twenty years before.

“Hi. I thought we’d agreed that you wouldn’t just appear like that.”

The girl was sat, cross-legged, on the upper curve of hull. She hadn’t been there two seconds before and Blue was damn sure that she would have heard someone else setting up a pair of ladders of the other side of the craft.

“Sorry. I forgot. It’s been awhile.”

“Indeed it has.”

Blue blinked. A shadow passed across her vision despite the fact that sky was, for the moment, clear of cloud. Not now, damn it, Blue thought.

“What you doing?”

Her lungs burnt and ached, as they had done so for the last three months. Her throat tickled.

“What does it look like?”

“That you’re scraping moss of the hull.”

Geneva took a look around.

“And you’ve been busy. Jesus Blue, how long has this taken you?”

“Long enough.”

The tickle became a cough. Blue turned her face away from Geneva, coughed up small flecks of fire and blood into her fist. She wiped her hand hastily on her trousers, clutched at her chest, just beneath her left breast, as the flames in her lungs settled back down to glowing embers.

Blue opened her eyes and saw that Geneva was looking at her.

“Blue?”

“It’s been twenty years. What? You expect me to live forever.”

Geneva sat there, whetted her lips.

“You could you know.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Nor is that. Whatever that is.”

“It looks like antibiotic resistant TB. Fuck knows where from. Maybe we brought it with us. Or some bastard laced our genes with it, in the wars before our parents were born. Or maybe it’s just something that evolved on Altar. Whatever. All I know is that it means I’m dying and there is bugger all that I can do about it.”

“Blue—”

“Enough!”

Blue studied the tanned flesh of her gnarled hands. She could feel another coughing fit building.

“Enough, okay?”

She looked back up, but Geneva was already gone.

They’d built well, the original engineers. It had taken time, and she had to consult the manual, but the craft had booted up eventually. The last of the amber telltales shimmered into green as the final connections were made and the self-diagnostics agreed that the ship was well enough to fly.

Blue hoped that none of the sheep would get in the way. She had freed the livestock four days before; most of the animals were still milling around the barns and her cave. They looked lost, not used to the idea of free will.

She locked the ship down, pressurised the internal atmosphere. She didn't turn around as felt a whisper of a breeze behind her.

"Too late," she said, reaching for the control stick. "Do you really intend to die with me?"

"I was hoping—"

"To talk me out of it? No chance. I'm a stubborn old bitch. I've done things my way all my life. I don't intend my death to be any difference."

"Geneva told me."

"I'm sure she did."

Blue fed power through to the craft's projectors. She said a little prayer under her breath. Being shaken apart before she left the ground wasn't quite what she had in mind. Nothing happened. There was the feel of great strain. Blue eased more power to the projectors. There was a lurch, and then a sensation of freedom as they were divorced from the ground.

"You're not going back to the ship, are you? Jamal didn't think that you would be going there to place yourself in cryo."

"Well at least you still talk to each other."

"We talk," Alexander said. "But not the way you mean it."

"So, what else is new?"

The craft was rising now. Blue was concentrating in the readouts. She was glad that she was piloting the only thing that was airborne; well the only thing of any significant size that was airborne. There was no air-traffic control and her reflexes were beyond rusty; they were so far corroded that in another time and place they would have taken her pilot's license away.

There was movement beside her. Alexander stepped into the cockpit proper and sat down in the navigator's seat.

Blue grinned, then cursed as her lungs convulsed again. She coughed for what seemed like a never-ending five minutes. Inside her chest, she could feel bits of muscle and bone being flayed from her lungs, pulled upwards into her throat with each cough. It burnt.

She stopped eventually; saw the blood and spittle she had sprayed across the console. She hawked up the rest of the mucus and bloody fluid clogging up her throat. She was beyond caring, so just turned her head and spat out the horrible mess onto the deck plate.

The fire continued to burn inside her chest. She sat back into the pilot's seat, willing the black dots kaleidoscoping across her vision to stay away for half-an-hour more.

Gravity squeezed her chest tight. Each breath was a battle. She sucked desperately for air. As she pulled the air in, the flames licked higher. Rising and falling as they burnt out all the available oxygen and clamoured for more.

“Blue. Let me—”

Feebly, she waved Alexander’s hand away.

He reached for the control stick again.

“No!”

A clump of blood, and a part of her lung, landed on his hand. He flinched and then it was gone, absorbed into him.

“No,” she said. “You aren’t fucking human anymore.”

“Humanity is over-rated.”

“Well. I don’t expect you to understand then.”

They rode in silence.

“Isn’t that beautiful,” she said. “I wanted to see it one last time.”

The stars were as sharp and as clear as diamonds. Altar, below them, was a fat hemisphere. Blue and green and brown mostly obscured by thick bands of white cloud. The pole was hidden from sight. Spirals, curvaceous systems of heavy cloud, were spinning down towards the temperate regions and the equator.

Blue coughed, less painfully this time. She knew she was wheezing with every breath, briefly considered what damage take-off had done to her already tortured lungs. Thirty minutes. Another thirty minutes, that’s all she wanted. It’s all she needed, to do it her way.

“What now?”

She keyed in the descent path.

“But that’ll — “ said Alexander. “Oh.”

“It’s a techno-pagan/Viking thing,” Blue replied. “I’m going to burn up on re-entry, leave a smear across the sky.”

“No beautiful corpse.”

“Nothing beautiful about me. Even less when the disease has taken it’s toll.”

“What about me?”

“What about you? I didn’t ask for you to be here.”

He thought for a minute.

She punched the Execute button. The descent craft shuddered as the directional rockets fired. Alexander and Blue felt the thrust of the craft, as they were pushed back into their seats. Altar was before them, the vast storm systems dominating their view of the planet.

She came apart in wind and flame. There was heat, lots of heat. There was a deafening roar as the outer hull caved in and the craft's atmosphere leaked out like steam from a boiling kettle.

There was the sound of metal snapping, of ceramic tile peeling away.

'Goodbye Blue, I love you,'

It was the last thing she heard before there was only heat and darkness, sound and fury.

Pain.

And then nothing else.

Blue became ash, smeared across the sky.

Geneva watched the false comet burn its way across the sky. She was still looking at the sky when Alexander shimmered into shape beside her. It broke her concentration. As she turned to him, she was aware of the air tugging at her. She wanted to leap, to shift and be gone on that wind, to taste its currents.

Alexander touched her.

<She's gone>

<Yes>

He tasted of the upper atmospheres, of impending rain, of ash.

<She did it then>

<Yes>

<But whenever we are in the air. She will be with us. The wind will carry her particles>

<A child of air and flame>

<As much as we are>

<Yes>

The wind gusted, and they were gone.

In the Blink of an Eye

...Dr Philip Edward Kaldon

He had the two hundred or so people in the auditorium right on the edge, waiting for the payoff. Time to deliver.

“The key to solving the case rests with the scuff marks in the dirt just under the west wall and the lack of any scratches on the door’s lock. That deadbolt latch was never turned and the pin never once ground against the striker plate. And so it turns out the room was assembled *after* the murder.” A loud undercurrent of murmuring swept through the crowd, which satisfied Stanislaw Cooper. “Thus this was never a locked room mystery.”

He had to raise a hand to stem the applause. “Unfortunately, rational forensic science is one thing. The law is something different. While I am convinced Seth Caputo killed Maura Kennerly, there was sufficient doubt to allow him to walk away in a court of law. And I can’t even say that the judge was wrong to rule as he did. The fact is, this could be the fifth case in three years in which Seth Caputo may have gotten away with murder. In the 27th century, this is rather remarkable.

“My good friend Miriam Jackson, the lieutenant governor of New York, says I’m not motivated enough to outsmart Seth Caputo. But I’m not so sure about that — after five cases involving the man, I really want to clear one and get a conviction. Maybe it will be Seth Caputo judged guilty, maybe not. Serial killer or innocent bystander? Using our technology against us or merely guilt by association and proximity? You be the judge. I thank you.”

This time there was no stopping the applause or the third of the audience who decided to give Cooper a standing ovation. It was usually this way at his performances as he walked off the stage. Fifty-two last December, with a few more pounds than he liked, Cooper still looked enough like his publicity photo to please him, to say nothing of his fans. A dozen or more people clustered around the podium. At least it got him out of the office and away from the grim reality of his work. Cooper pulled out his trusty Waterman stylus, twisting it to reveal a real pen to sign autographs.

Cooper was not surprised to see two plainclothes detectives standing to the side, their police badge cameras worn prominently clipped to their suit jackets. The police were often more keenly interested in his talk than the general lay public — sometimes they hoped to engage in his consulting genius, without paying of course, by asking him questions afterward or offering to show him something “interesting.”

Finally the last autograph seekers and well-wishers were done and one of the two detectives moved in, clearing his throat. “Dr. Cooper? Could you come with us, please?”

Cooper smiled. “I’ve committed no crime, Detective. You really can’t hold me.”

“No, sir. But we have a murder case we’d like you to consult on.”

“Contact my assistant in the morning,” Cooper said, dismissing it without another thought.

“This is a police matter of an immediate nature, sir.”

“Then contact my supervisor — he’s the Chief of Police in New York City.”

“There’s been no time for that yet...”

“Detective...Brakowski, is it?” Cooper was very good at reading badges and professional name plates at a glance and then make it look like he was guessing. Or somehow *knew*. “Look — I’m flattered you guys thought of me. But frankly, I get called to come in and take a look at *thousands* of cases a year and...”

“Sir — this request comes from the Chief of Detectives. And it really is going to be something up your alley.”

“Oh very well,” Cooper said, going to his Plan B stalling tactic. “If you insist. Give me a moment to gather my...”

“Officer Ruiz will take care of your things.”

Before Cooper could protest, he felt a slight vibration in his ear. His assistant, Jake Gilchrist, was calling from Manhattan One. “Cooper — this is New York. Dallas has a case and you’ve been volunteered to render assistance. Looks like it might be another chapter, if not a book.” A click told Cooper that Gilchrist wasn’t going to waste time by listening to his boss argue. Still, the junior man appreciated Cooper’s work a great deal and if he thought there was seriously mileage in this Dallas case...

“I guess I’m coming to see what you have,” Cooper smiled good-naturedly at the two detectives. They’d paused when it became apparent Cooper was taking a call on his comm link. Now that he was willingly on board, they escorted him from the auditorium.

“So where’s the body?” Cooper asked as they got into the armored police cruiser. “I’d like to see it before you give me any case details.”

“We can’t show you.”

“You don’t have the body?”

“No, sir. We have the body. We just can’t show you yet.”

“Detective — you’re starting to annoy me.”

“Sorry, sir...”

“And stop this *sir* crap. That’s equally annoying.”

“Sorry, Dr. Cooper.”

The other detective, Bates, finally spoke. “It’ll be much clearer at HQ than the crime scene, Dr. Cooper.”

“Just Cooper will do. We all work for the same side,” Cooper said. “Now why can’t you show me the dead man?”

“Because he’s not dead yet.”

Cooper nearly got angry. “Then how do you know with such certainty he’s going to be murdered?”

“Because he’s sealed in a stasis tube — along with the speeding bullet which is aimed directly towards his brain.”

Stan Cooper blinked twice without speaking.

“And the murderer is your old pal, Seth Caputo.”

Now Cooper was interested.

The police station looked like any police station. Desks and cubicles piled up with printouts and datapads, wall screens tiled with photos, notes and diagrammed flow charts. Cooper could spot four different coffee pots holding places of glory at various spots around the office. But they didn’t stop at any of the desks or cubicles. Instead they went directly into the Custody Control Block.

“Dr. Cooper is with us,” Bates said to the duty sergeant who logged them in. “And he has no weapons.”

He followed the two detectives, Bates and Brakowski, into the cool of a Dallas Police Department interrogation room. Seth Caputo sat at the table, relaxed and looking smug as usual. He was thin and wiry in marked contrast to the heavier set and paunch of the others. His short beard and shaved head made him look like a criminal, except he wore no tattoos and had no scars from combat implants.

“Why Stanley Cooper,” Seth broke into an insincere smile. “How good to see you again. Very unexpected that your visit is so soon after the last case. My lawyer should have a field day filing papers on a harassment charge against you.”

“It’s Stanislaw, if you really cared, Seth,” Cooper said, taking a seat directly across from the man. “But you know that. And for your information, I wasn’t planning on seeing you again for a long time. I was invited to this party.”

“Not by me, surely.”

“No, of course not. Though your actions today triggered my invitation, as it were.”

“Me?” Seth feigned innocence. “I haven’t done anything.”

“Only murder.”

“I’ve committed no murder,” Seth grinned. “By legal definition, Jackie Bastard is still alive and unharmed.”

Typical Seth Caputo. So convinced he was untouchable, Seth always managed to taunt Cooper with the crime, right from the start. They weren’t sure exactly who the victim was yet, since he was sealed in a stasis tube — along with a bullet. He could’ve been labeled a John Doe, but since Seth was calling him Jackie Bastard, they would, too. For the moment.

“It’s a Heisenberg Cat problem,” Caputo said.

“I don’t think so,” Cooper said.

“Sure. Jackie Bastard exists in an undetermined quantum state. Half-dead? Or half-alive? That doesn’t work. You want him alive — keep him in stasis. If *you* want to kill him, *Doctor* Cooper, then it’s on your head.”

“I didn’t pull the trigger.”

“And I’m not going to open that stasis tube.” Seth seemed very pleased with himself.

“It was Schrödinger’s Cat, not Heisenberg’s. And the vial with the poison was to be broken by the decay of an unstable particle. Until you opened the box, you wouldn’t know if the cat lived or the cat had been killed. That’s the indeterminate quantum state,” Cooper explained, hoping to take Seth down a peg by pointing out his mistake. “Your little physics experiment is designed as pre-meditated murder. There’s no change in the state as long as the box stays closed. The murder is merely completed by the opening of the box.”

“Very good, *Herr Professor*,” Seth said. “However I didn’t misspeak. You’re already thinking about how you can stop a speeding bullet. But you’re not sure where it is, how fast it’s going — the time you have to react is uncertain. So it’s more like Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle than Schrödinger’s quantum theory, hence it’s a Heisenberg’s Cat problem.

“And any attempt you make to see what’s going on... *ffff!* Now Jackie Bastard is dead and *you* killed him. Not me.”

This time Seth smiled broadly as he leaned back in his chair.

“What do you think, Gilchrist?” Cooper asked over his comm link to New York, after filling in the details.

“I think it sounds too easy. Seth Caputo isn’t so obvious.”

“So we’re missing something.” Cooper was more talking aloud to think, than to get Gilchrist’s opinion.

“Yes.”

“I thought so. Thanks.”

“Any time, boss.”

“What’s the time angle?” Cooper asked, turning back to Bates and Brakowski.

“So this is more than just a man, a tube and a bullet,” Bates said.

“Yes. I understand time stops inside a stasis tube, so the victim is safe for the moment, but what are our constraints in holding Seth?”

“We have twenty-four hours if nothing else comes in — forty-eight if we can actually develop a case before we have to charge or release him.”

“Or,” Brakowski said, holding up his datapad, “only six hours if his lawyer files an expedited writ.”

“How the hell did he get *that*?” Bates demanded.

“Probably my fault,” Cooper said. “And the five failed cases before this one.”

“He’s gaming the system.”

“Oh yeah,” Cooper agreed. “This bastard is wonderful at playing us against ourselves.”

“But you’re one of the greatest forensic analysis...”

“That’s my publisher talking,” Cooper admitted, embarrassed at having to interrupt the praise. “They insist on that quote every time I release a book or go on a tour. The truth is... well, the truth is I’m damn lucky and I’m pretty damned good nearly all the time. Except when it comes to Seth Caputo.”

Cooper studied the video which was charitably left at the crime scene — the rest of the place had been cleaned up except for the stasis cylinder. Jackie Bastard, or whoever he was, appeared to be sweating and struggling against the restraints while sitting in the still open stasis tube. Seth took his time attaching a starter’s firing sensor to the end of the pistol barrel, loading the first bullet into

the chamber on the gun on the tripod and then carefully positioning himself so his back blocked about a third of the frame. *What is he hiding?*

“He had it all figured out,” Bates said. “Time-speed-distance. That makes it pre-meditated.”

“What’s he saying at the end? I can’t make it out.”

“There’s a lot of background noise, but the boys and girls downstairs say the victim is crying out *No! Don’t! Get me out of here!*”

Cooper nodded. “Pretty reasonable request under the circumstances.”

“Yeah,” Bates said. “But we’re fresh out of ideas as to how we can grant it.”

Cooper grunted as he thought. “You guys have a good stasis tech on call here?”

“Sure. We use stasis tubes for processing some of the crims. Haven’t yet found anyone who can break out of stasis or have anything smuggled in while no one is looking.”

“Rikers Island is the same back home,” Cooper nodded. “Set me up some face time with your tech.”

“You got it.”

“Any I.D. on the victim?”

“No,” Bates said. “But we don’t have any kind of accurate list of known associates of Seth Caputo.”

“And I don’t either,” Cooper admitted, before he realized Bates was referring to Cooper’s research. “Anyway, he’s never been in contact with anyone in Dallas that I know.”

They had to pass through a massive blast door, one perfectly balanced on its hinges that closed shut with a resounding *thud*. The tube sat near the doors left on its transport pallet, yellow CRIME SCENE tape wrapped around the nondescript grayish cylinder with more tape across the small control panel. It stood taller than a man and a little wider to accommodate the stasis mechanisms. *And they use these to cut down on supplies on long star voyages*, Cooper thought, before Bates coughed lightly.

“This is Avri Xemes, Dr. Cooper. She’s our top stasis tech.”

Xemes had to put down the enormous sandwich she was eating, before extending a white lab coat clad arm. “Dr. Cooper — I’m sure you’re tired of hearing this, but I’m a big fan.”

“Never tires when it comes from people on the job,” Cooper said. “And call me Cooper.”

“How can I help you, Cooper?”

“Can you see inside an activated stasis canister?” He nodded at the yellow tape wrapped cylinder by the door.

“Sure, Cooper. We do it all the time. On-off-on in less than the blink of an eye. I can shoot a millisecond scan and image the entire interior of the canister. With a hundredth of a second, I can do internal organs, the works.”

“There’s a bullet,” Cooper said.

“No problem. We’ll find it.” The tech picked up the sandwich and took another bite. “Fleet Medical does this on starships. Put the injured in stasis, or at least what’s left of them, take a scan at the hospital and then with the patient back in stasis, take days or weeks to prepare the perfect treatment protocol. Replace or re-grow body parts in a Bateson tank — whatever’s needed. Doctors love having the time to make decisions instead of their patient bleeding out while they dither, especially when there isn’t a whole body. But this is easy — we’ll be able to do a deep scan and find the bullet.”

“I don’t want to find it. I need to stop it. You see, the bullet’s still in flight.”

Xemes put down her sandwich and tried not to choke on her last mouthful, before she could talk. “You’re not shittin’ me, are you?”

“No.”

The stasis tech scratched the top of her head. “This is bad. I don’t think we have that kind of time.”

“What do you mean?”

“What kind of projectile are we talking about?”

Seth Caputo had cheerfully given the police the specifications, but not the gun. “.19 caliber AS-Super, explosive tip.”

“That thing’s moving at least Mach 2, Cooper. Call it eight hundred meters a second. I do a ten millisecond scan and it’s game over. Bullet can move eight meters in a hundredth of a second. That’s from here to the far wall of the *next* room over. I do a millisecond scan and the damned thing still can travel eighty centimeters. Hell, the stasis canister itself isn’t even a meter in diameter.”

“I was afraid of something like that.”

“It’s basic physics, Cooper,” the stasis tech said in a tone which bemoaned having to state something so obvious. “By the time we know where the bullet is, it’ll have penetrated and detonated and your boy inside will be dead.”

“What about a microsecond scan?”

“Sure. In a millionth of a second your bullet will only travel eight millimeters. Except... we have no technology to turn a stasis cylinder off and back on again in that short a time. The millisecond scan is already a freak of nature.”

“So what do we do now?” Bates asked.

“We go see Seth again and find out what his next trick card is,” Cooper said.

“You think he’s going to tell us anything?”

“Maybe not directly. But it’s always entertaining to talk to Seth and Seth likes to talk,” Cooper said. “You never know what he might say.”

“I’ve advised my client not to see you.”

“Yes, but we’re looking at how to see inside your handiwork,” Cooper said to Seth, not the lawyer. “Thought you should know.”

“You shouldn’t meddle in things you don’t understand.”

“We’ll understand after doing a brief scan.”

“There’s no time for it,” Seth said.

“We’ll make time.”

“Are you sure you have the right stasis cylinder?” Seth asked. “Because as I recall... there were *three* cylinders in the warehouse.”

Ah. “You did this to three people?”

“Two of the tubes are empty — but you won’t be able to tell,” Seth smiled. “Get put in stasis and you’re placed outside of the universe. It’s the same procedure as jump engines on a starship.”

Cooper and Bates exchanged looks. “I see,” Seth said, very pleased now. “You didn’t *know* that. Obviously stasis tubes and jump engines aren’t your specialty. Well I’ll tell you another little tidbit for free — time doesn’t exactly stop in stasis either. You don’t have forever.”

“Thanks,” Cooper said, not believing most of what Seth just told them.

“Oh and Dr. Cooper,” Seth paused for effect. “I wouldn’t open *any* of those three tubes if I were you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Your Mr. Caputo is both right — and very wrong,” Xemes said. “I think he’s just messing with you.”

“It’s his specialty,” Cooper told her. “As he said, I’m not an expert in stasis tubes or jump engines. But then again, neither is he. So what’s the real deal?”

“Stasis technology is related to both jump engines and artificial gravity used on starships. But you’re not inserted into hyperspace. Stasis works by stopping the motion of the atoms and molecules. It’s not that time really stops, just that

physical processes and chemical reactions can't occur. No motion, no way to tell time is passing."

"So that's what his crack about time not really stopping means."

"Well... maybe. On the other hand, if you were to use a standard stasis tube for long duration stasis, there'd be some very, very slow motion accumulating over decades."

"I don't think we have to worry about that."

"Only insofar as I don't know how to find that bullet and stop it."

"Why do I feel that the schools should teach more about all the colonies and the technology of star travel?"

"Which schools?" Avri said with a crooked grin. "I went to school on Titian Colony. That's about four hundred light years from here."

"They've found all three stasis tubes," Brakowski said, coming into their work area. "The other two were behind the wall in the next room. Xemes will be weighing them within the hour."

"So they're all activated?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Because if the others were off, you wouldn't have to weigh them."

"You'd just look inside... right."

"Number 1 does have the right mass to contain a normal male body," Xemes said, as the they gathered in the lab. "The other two are lower and each about the same mass."

"So what's in the other two?" Bates asked.

Cooper smiled. "Good call. Just because Seth says they're empty, doesn't mean they are. He might even not know."

"Huh?"

"Avri, have you tracked the serial numbers of these tubes?"

She shook her head. "They're Frankensteins, Cooper. Just like you thought they'd be."

"Made from spare parts or multiple reassembled tubes," Cooper explained. "Untraceable."

"So what *is* in the other two?" Bates asked again.

"Let's see," Xemes said, starting to walk over to the second cylinder.

“Stop!” Cooper said, before she could reach for the panel. “Seth is trying to work multiple angles here. He insists we leave them alone, therefore he knows we’re going to open them anyway. These need to be opened in isolation.”

Bates took a cautionary step backward.

“If there’s something bad in there,” Xemes said, “it can’t hurt you yet. It’s in stasis.”

“What can you set up here in your lab?” Cooper asked. “Seth likes to play with bombs.”

“Oh, we’ve got a couple of blast shields to stand behind,” Xemes said. She began to wheel over a three-meter high panel and placed it between the “opening” of the Number 2 stasis cylinder and its small control panel.

Five minutes later they were ready.

“Let’s do it,” Cooper said.

“So tell me again why we’re bothering to look in these two tubes if you’re sure that Seth booby-trapped them?” Brakowski asked.

“There might be clues,” Cooper said. “And if we don’t open them, Seth’s lawyer will be all over us about it.”

“Opening access to the field,” Xemes said. “And penetrating the event horizon membrane now.”

The tube shot to clear all around, accompanied by a massive blast which shattered the curved plex walls of the cylinder and ejected a myriad of flaming plasma balls at varying heights above the floor from the tube’s front opening. One plasma blast glanced off the shield in front of Xemes — only the shallow angle of reflection kept it from shattering. Cooper instinctively ducked behind his own clear barrier only to stare straight into the spider web of cracked plex where a knee-level shot had been aimed.

The sounds of various small things breaking as the blasts and ricochets subsided were drowned out by a wail and the sound of Brakowski falling to the floor.

“Man down!” Bates shouted to his comm link and broke cover to sprint to his partner’s location. “Med crew to the Stasis Lab!”

Oh shit, Cooper thought as he saw Detective Brakowski go down. *You sonofabitch*.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Cooper berated himself after the ambulance team left. “Just because cylinders 2 and 3 had the same weight, it didn’t mean they

were empty. I just didn't think the bomb would be that big. Seth had it timed to the millisecond — the bomb was firing even as the stasis tube was activated."

"The tech crew is done," Xemes said. "There wasn't anything else besides the bomb."

"Do we open the third?" Bates asked.

"Of course. The clue will be left in there. But we do it in a much more remote location — and use a robot," Cooper said, then stood there fuming.

"Have you ever been in stasis?" Bates asked, after an awkward silence.

"No. You?"

"Once. As part of a stakeout, I was one of six cops put in stasis in this warehouse during a smuggling crackdown. Interesting experience," Bates mused. He seemed extremely calm after all that'd happened. "First you're here, then you're in the future. Can't say it actually hurt, but it's a shock to the system all right."

"No pain, no gain."

"I suppose. Look, Jackie Bastard isn't feeling a thing right now. Not a thing," Bates said, trying to reassure Cooper. "We still have time to beat Seth at his game."

"Yeah," Cooper said grimly. "But it's not the fall off the building that kills — it's that sudden stop at the end."

"I'm surprised to see you again so soon, Dr. Cooper," Seth said. He seemed both pleased and yet possibly surprised that Cooper was still alive. Word had spread around the police station about the blast in the Stasis Lab.

"Your bomb in one cylinder has put Detective Brakowski in the hospital."

"I don't think so," Seth said. "I *told* you not to open any of them. Not that I knew what was in them — I bought them cheap from a shady character that I've met one or twice, you know. I just didn't need them after all."

"Fortunately the nerve gas agent you'd released in the other cylinder had no effect on robotic remote operators. But you've broken your normal form — there weren't any clues in either cylinder."

"Why I don't know what you mean, Herr Professor Cooper. Pity though," Seth sighed. "I *was* so looking forward to your incompetence putting another few people in the hospital... or worse."

"You're a peach, Seth," Cooper said. "A prince amongst men."

"I'll have you stop making comments about my client," Seth's lawyer said.

"A prince of darkness amongst men."

"That's *enough*."

“Oh let him be, Martin. Dr. Cooper’s just mad because with all his brain work, he *still* has nothing he can prove.” And with that, Seth opened his mouth and leaned back, laughing uproariously. Cooper had seen this act before. Still, it was so damned *hard* to not want to punch the man’s face in.

“He’s right,” Cooper said once they were outside. “We can’t prove he knew what was in those stasis cylinders. There’s not enough left — the lab boys found no DNA or other tags.”

“I’m beginning to hate this guy,” Bates said.

“Yes, and he’s betting on it,” Cooper said. “He wants you to lose your cool.”

“Now I hate him more.”

The hearing two days later was very short.

“Your honor,” the defense attorney began, “there’s been no crime committed here. I request that my client be freed immediately.”

The prosecutor, expecting this, was already up on his feet. But the judge stayed him with a simple raised hand. “Mr. Darnell, I am *very* well read up on this case. And there is *no* way that I am going to let your client out under the current circumstances. Mr. Caputo stays in the custody of the Dallas P.D. for the time being. Next!”

The gavel slammed on its sounding block, adding finality to the ruling.

“Now all we need is a miracle,” Bates said. “Because so far this is the *only* break we’ve gotten in this case.”

But Cooper was already on his comm link.

“You’ve got something? We’ll be there in five minutes.” Cooper turned to Bates. “You may’ve just had your prayer answered.”

The stasis tube with Jackie Bastard inside, not quite dead yet, stood in the lab next to a much larger tube. Avri Xemes beamed. “This is an emergency medical stasis tube which Fleet uses to freeze time on people in space suits. I had them ship one in from the DFW Spaceport. You can actually roll it over the patient and it’ll pick them up and shut them down in a matter of seconds.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a breakthrough. We don’t have the time.”

“I thought you wanted me to give you a millionth of a second peek into your guy there.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t do a microsecond.”

“I can’t,” the stasis tech grinned. “Your stasis tube can’t be turned off and on in that time scale. But it turns out I don’t have to. I just need a microsecond of crossover. See, I’m using this second stasis canister wrapped around the first — the whole thing will fit inside. Activate the outer unit, even as I’m shutting off the inner one and if I’ve got it timed out right, time will flow like normal for about a millionth of second before being stopped again.”

“Is this supposed to be brilliant?” Cooper asked, real admiration in his voice.

“It’s up there,” the stasis tech acknowledged.

“Any chance it won’t work?”

“There’s a chance. But I’ll give you good odds.”

“Save it for the judge,” Cooper said, winking at Bates. “I can just imagine that Seth Caputo’s lawyer will want an injunction against the scan on the grounds that Jackie Bastard *just* might die from this procedure.”

“Do we have to tell them?” Xemes asked. “I mean, this is part of our official examination.”

Cooper looked at Bates who shook his head. “No, I don’t think we have to tell them ahead of time. Seth would have to admit guilt and he won’t do that. You’re ready to go now?”

“Yeah. But Cooper, we’re no closer to stopping this bullet in flight.”

“One thing at a time,” Cooper said. “Now that I know we can do the scan.”

“You’re up to something.”

“I’ve a friend who might be able to help.”

Cooper never actually saw inside the smaller stasis cylinder. A millionth of a second was too short for human perception. But the machines worked and after the oversized stasis tube turned gray, Xemes had beamed, showing off the screens of data taken. While the techs began their analysis, Cooper excused himself. Once he closed the office door behind him, he called his friend in the Fleet Marines. Major Bruce DeGraaf appeared after the usual three to four second delay in communications to the Moon and back.

“Hey, Cooper. The display says you’re not in New York.”

“No. I was brought in to consult here in Dallas.”

“And how can I help you?”

“You’ve got the capability of catching a bullet in mid-flight?”

“I don’t know what you mean about catching, but yeah, we can stop a flying bullet. Either hit with another bullet or vaporize it with an energy weapon. But this is standard stuff — your own VIP protection squads can do this.”

“Vaporization will damage the victim — we’ve got to catch it in the air.”

“I’m still not following this *catching* bit.”

“Can you make this work at a large angle?”

“We can do it head on — armor will protect a soldier but intercepting incoming rounds is even better. But we can do it from nearby as well. Marine armor datalinks a squad together, so you can protect your buddies, too. Tell me what you *really* want.”

Cooper explained the problem of the bullet in flight under stasis.

“Jeez, Cooper, you *do* catch the ugliest cases. Let me think about this.”

“Technically,” Cooper said, “we have time. Realistically, we need to unravel this one quickly.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

Seth himself was furious with Cooper. “You’re meddling in things you ought not to be meddling with, you bastard!”

Interesting, Cooper thought. He didn’t expect us to come up with a procedure to free Jackie Bastard. Had Seth miscalculated for once? That was good. But something else bothered Cooper.

“Why is Seth in Dallas?” Cooper asked his assistant on his next link to Manhattan One. “This is outside his comfort zone. He’s always acted in the New York megaplex.”

“Because you’re in Dallas,” Gilchrist replied. “He probably knows your book and speaking tour better than you.”

“Yes, but why Dallas?”

“I don’t know. It’s a major city, has similar resources. Maybe he wanted to get you out of *your* comfort zone — deny you your usual crew. Perhaps he considers *me* an indispensable part of your success.”

“I doubt that,” Cooper said. “We’re still in contact and you have access to all the forensics recordings.”

“Except for smell,” Gilchrist pointed out.

“Smell?”

“There’s got to be something about this case which would give one of us an extra clue.”

“Gladys down in Tech Analysis just sent this up,” Bates said, walking in. “She’s rerun the video of the shot over and over.”

“We don’t need it,” Cooper said, getting off the comm link. “We got the trajectory from our previous scan. At least we knew where to look — knowing Jackie was seated and not standing, that is. So we’re good.”

“This is something else.”

Cooper wasn’t really listening, already on a roll with his own news. “My Ballistics expert has figured out how to shoot the bullet out of the tube without even getting any shrapnel in Jackie’s face. He’s on the express shuttle from the Moon and will be here in a few hours.”

“That’s not it,” Bates said. “We thought Jackie was saying *No... Don’t... Get me out of here.*”

“And...?” Cooper was beginning to get a bad feeling about this. Seth Caputo was a bad man, but he was also too brilliant for his own good.

“Yeah. Now we think he was shouting *No! Don’t get me out of here!*”

“Let me see that,” Cooper said, reaching for the databoard. He studied the two transcript fragments. The comm link in his ear vibrated. “Cooper here.”

“Sir — Seth Caputo wants to talk to you again.”

“And what do you want, Herr Doctor Cooper?” Seth asked, looking more composed than before. His lawyer sat with folded arms, having given up trying to talk Seth out of anything.

“You tell me,” Cooper said. “You called this meeting.”

“You’re going ahead with your *rescue* operation?”

“Yes.”

“I sure wouldn’t want to have that man’s death on your head,” Seth said, clearly enjoying himself. “But like I said — you tamper with that stasis cylinder and Jackie Bastard’s death *is* gonna be on *your* head.”

“Cooper!” a voice called out in the Stasis Lab.

“DeGraaf, you old bastard.” The two men shook hands. “What have you got for me?”

The major nodded to a long space shipping container being wheeled in. “Uses an electroinduction railgun to accelerate a very heavy projectile to *catch* your

bullet. Just like you wanted. Dallas has a specialist in house who will do the shot.”

Cooper once thought a marksman would use an energy beam weapon, but quickly became assured that boiling away a bullet so close to the face would still cause extensive damage to the victim. Conservation of linear momentum was also involved. Instead, DeGraaf modified a military grade anti-rifle weapon which shot hypervelocity “scoop” projectiles to catch the bullet in mid-air and harmlessly crash through the side of the inner stasis cylinder.

“The real secret is this tube here,” DeGraaf said proudly.

“A silencer?”

“Not in the traditional sense. It’s an electromagnetic air shield — the same we use to keep hangars pressurized when the doors are open to the vacuum of space. This hypervelocity projectile heats up the air and creates a shock wave. We’re going to block the air from crossing the couple of centimeters to your victim’s face.”

“I’m not sure what you just said, but if it protects Jackie Bastard,” Cooper said, “then I’m all for it.”

The marksman lined himself up to the side of the double stasis tube, DeGraaf monitoring the shot from a desk. Avri Xemes stood by the outer stasis tube’s control panel. And Cooper himself was prepared to go in, cut the tie-downs and free Jackie Bastard from Seth’s prison of time and death after the bullet was shot down.

It was the marksman who had to control the operation. If the anti-rifle didn’t fire precisely on target and on computer command, Jackie Bastard was dead. They had little margin for error.

Xemes counted it down. “In three... two... one... now...”

A seated Jackie Bastard appeared inside the two suddenly clear stasis cylinders, along with the tremendous report of the anti-rifle and the nearly simultaneous clap and crash of the scoop round snatching the bullet and driving it safely away. Cooper had the vague image of a wire hanging in mid-air connected to nothing in front of Jackie, then falling as it was no longer held in place by stasis.

But already feeling like a winner, Cooper smiled at the screaming man — there was no blood to be seen. A good sign. “It’s all right, Jackie. We’ve got the bullet...”

“In my gut!” Jackie Bastard screamed. “He put it in my gut! Goddamn it, Cooper!”

Frowning, Cooper looked at the man’s shirt, which wasn’t buttoned but merely draped closed over his torso. Pulling the Waterman stylus from his jacket pocket,

he ignored the torrent of abuse Jackie Bastard was yelling at him and gently plucked up the edge of the shirt and pulled it open.

Holy Mother of God, Cooper thought, staring at the neat, surgical implantation of a high powered anti-personnel grenade partway into the man's abdomen — its barely visible digital counter running rapidly towards zero.

Moving faster than he thought possible, Cooper dropped the stylus and reached for the original stasis cylinder's control panel. But the unit was damaged from the miracle take out of Seth's bullet. With Jackie Bastard still screaming for his life, Cooper pulled all the way out of the second stasis cylinder and fumbled for its controls. *Don't be damaged*, he prayed. *Oh dear God, don't be...* He depressed the last activation switch and the outer stasis cylinder instantly turned gray and featureless. Xemes was standing there dumbstruck by the nasty turn of events.

Cooper felt a boom and shuddered at the thought the grenade had gone off anyway, blowing out just as stasis was achieved. He reached down to his own belly. Yet there was no pain, no wound. Could it have gone off just as the stasis field...? No, it couldn't have gone off inside the stasis event horizon. Then his peripheral vision picked up motion to his left. The sound had been Bates returning. The large, heavy lab door had swung closed with its usual resounding *thud*. Relief got mixed up with adrenaline and horror.

"What happened?" Bates asked as soon as he saw the smooth grey cylinder. "I'd heard Terry made the shot."

"I should've known," Cooper said, still shaking. "Seth Caputo is the most self-righteous bastard in the known universe — and he always has a backup plan. Always! I should've known."

"Known what?"

"There was a second device," Xemes said, also rattled by the terrible events of the last minute. "Something planted in the stomach of the target."

"We didn't see a second device when we did the scan," Bates said, looking horrified at the thought. He visibly blanched when Xemes showed him an image just before Cooper reactivated the stasis field. The counter read less than a second.

"We weren't looking for one," she said.

"What's that?" Cooper asked, pointing at the datapad in Bate's hand.

"Oh, it's a second video. There must've been a signal from the stasis tube, because just about when you opened it up, this file got mailed to HQ." Bates called up the first video of Jackie's shooting on one of the big screens and beamed the second from his datapad. "You need to see this."

Recorded from the other side of the room from the first video, they clearly saw that Seth was not holding onto the trigger of the gun, but one of two wired

remote triggers. Then Seth dropped his to the floor, leaving the other wired remote in Jackie Bastard's own hand. Cooper remembered the wire falling in front of Jackie. While Seth counted down the display on the digital grenade using his fingers, Jackie had to finally fire the gun himself. To prevent the bomb from going off, he had to enable the stasis field by firing the gun.

It wasn't yet murder. Nor was it quite suicide. This was something sick which didn't have a name yet.

"He called you Cooper," Xemes said.

"What?"

"Jackie Bastard. He called you Cooper."

"Yeah," DeGraaf said. "He did. Do you know the vic?"

Cooper was about to say *no* when he looked at Jackie Bastard's anguished face frozen on one of the screens. "I know that man," he suddenly said aloud. "Oh shit, it's not Jackie — the name is Jackson. Mark Jackson. He's the son of Miriam Jackson, the lieutenant governor of New York. We've... met."

Pulling out his own datapad to make notes, Cooper reached for the Waterman stylus in his pocket — and it wasn't there. For a moment he patted down the other jacket pockets and glanced around the lab. Then he remembered he'd been holding it over Mark Jackson. He must've dropped it. Now his favorite stylus sat in stasis, along with the bomb.

"It wasn't a full scan," Cooper said. "The bastard *knew* we wouldn't have the time to do a full scan. We just concentrated on where the bullet was likely to be."

"Now what?"

"I don't know," Cooper said, sitting down in the first available chair. "I just don't know." How does one remove a bomb in someone's gut in less than a second? There would've been more time if he'd known about the grenade surgically implanted in the poor man...

I killed him, he thought. *Just like Seth said I would.*

Cooper's comm link buzzed. Without thinking or feeling, he answered the call.

"I was in the loop," Gilchrist said from Manhattan One. "I saw. And the news is all over. Lt. Governor Jackson is heading your way. Prepare to get your head chopped off when she gets there, Cooper."

He disconnected without waiting for a reply. But Cooper wasn't thinking about that. Instead, he began to smile.

"What I need is a guillotine," Cooper said. "A horizontal armored guillotine. Block the blast from reaching the head."

"That could work," DeGraaf said. "If you didn't need a living body."

“Ah, but I don’t think we need a whole body here.” Cooper looked around for Xemes. “Now what were you telling me about Fleet Medical throwing a body or part of a body into stasis for later treatment — if they had a head with a viable brain, they can grow Mark a new body, can’t they?”

“Yes.” The stasis technician’s face brightened at the thought. “Why *yes!* I think it can work.”

“I’m going to need some time,” DeGraaf said. “But we’ve got all the data here.”

“Mark Jackson is in stasis,” Cooper said. “We’ve got a lot of time.”

He called Gilchrist, who seemed relieved. “It’ll be a pretty traumatic event for the victim.”

“So is unconditional dying. But my God, this has a real chance of working.”

“Seth is going to be furious.”

“Seth is going to be sent to prison,” Cooper said, then laughed.

“What’s so funny, Cooper?” Gilchrist asked.

“Seth got it right — almost. He said if I broke into the stasis tube I’d be killing Mark. And he’s right — I am going to kill Mark. The thing is, as soon as I kill him we can jam him back into stasis until the doctors are ready with their machines, and then they can bring him back to life.

“Seth wins only to lose — I can live with that.”

Dragon Bones

...Joanne Anderton

The call came with a piercing screech and a crimson glare that shone out of the window to Jill's bedroom. The light washed over a bare-wood verandah and onto dry paddocks; a flock of galahs rose squawking from an ancient, cracking gum.

Jill dropped the sledgehammer, star picket only half hammered into the earth.

"Molsey!" she shouted, as she ran across a backyard of dark auburn dirt and dry wattle. A red light was urgent, a desperate call for aid.

Behind her, on the other side of the half mended fence, Molloche raised himself from his self-made bunker in the sand. Torrents of red dirt, bright in the mid-afternoon sun, streamed from the grooves and wide spines on his back. He shook himself, sending the rest scattering in a dry rain, and loosened out his thick wings.

Jill crashed into the house, pulling off her dirty plaid shirt and worn jeans as she ran. She dragged black riding pants from her wardrobe and buttoned up a crisp white shirt. A vibrant dragon was stitched onto the breast pocket, twisting around a red cross.

The siren sat on her desk, still screeching out the call and flashing scarlet. Jill smacked the crystal orb and a silver switch drilled into the top clicked beneath her palm, turning off the light and noise. The globe was empty for a moment, quiet, then a face appeared inside it.

The coordinating nurse was a severe woman, grey hair always tight beneath a white cap, the deep wrinkles stretched around her eyes. The crystal distorted her face, fattened her nose and pinched her chin. "Location is coming through." She didn't waste time. "Have a look at the call. This one's bad. Get your lizard in the sky."

Jill fished a call card out of her pocket. It had a crystal screen, the same clear stuff as the orb, pressed into a silver rectangle that fitted into her hand.

More dragons were engraved on the back, twirling around each other, tails and foreclaws linked. Slender things, those ones, with long graceful necks and elastic tails. Not Thornies like Molvey.

She pressed the crystal screen against the siren until it beeped, then bolted back out of the house. Molvey had already nudged the shed door open with his flat nose, and was dragging the patient carrier out.

“Thad’a boy.” Jill rushed to his side, unhooked a carrier strap from a spine behind his cheek and pulled it the rest of the way herself. The carrier was awkward in the sand. Jill grunted as it caught against the side of the shed door, wincing as metal squealed against plastic. An old ache twinged in her back, reminding her of the exercises she never bothered to do. Molvey watched her with his dark eyes, rumbling his concern. She stroked the soft thorns down his side to reassure him.

The call card was heavy in her pocket.

“Help me out, won’t you?” She pushed the dragon gently to get him moving. He shifted awkwardly, legs scarcely bending, tail straight and rigid. Jill rubbed his knobbed scales again. He’d be much more comfortable in the air.

Between them, they lined up the carrier beside his bulky body and Molvey sunk to the ground. Jill pulled herself onto his back, gripping his spines like they were thick branches of a tall tree. The carrier clattered up after her, strap wrapped around her arm. Sturdy plastic, crystal and wires, it was lighter than it looked. Lighter than the job it did so well. Like a capsule, it sat in a hollow between Molvey’s shoulders, leashed tight to his thorns. It could carry an adult safely, or two children, if the need ever arose.

A tug on the straps to make sure they were secure and Jill clambered over more spines to Molvey’s neck. Two great thorns like antlers rose just above his eyes, curving backwards at their tips. Darker than the rest of him they lacked his random patterns in yellows, reds and blacks.

Molvey stretched his wings. He fluttered them, tested them, made ready. A final strap hooked around the large horns above his eyes. This one was leather, suspiciously like a horse’s reins. But he was Molvey, not some animal. Jill patted his head and hunkered down onto his neck, gripping firmly with her legs.

He did not run like other dragons did to launch into the air, he simply beat his powerful wings. Red dirt sprayed below, leaving an indent in their shadow. Another beat, and he was above the house. Another, and another, and Jill’s small desert-edge property fell away.

Once in the air Jill drew out the call card. A tap on the crystal brought forth a map. She tugged gently on the strap on Molvey’s horns to direct him, and he

turned, dipping gracefully. Wind rushed over them, and Jill flattened herself on his head. She pressed the card again to view the call.

The call had come from a young woman with a mess of blonde hair tied back haphazardly. Her face was so pale the call card crystal dyed it an unhealthy blue. Afternoon sun warmed highlights in the few curls that sprung free. The call must have been placed only recently, minutes ago, not hours. Truly urgent.

“Please, it was an accident. Please, please. Hurry—” Her words stuttered out like a desert storm, rain falling on dead dirt. Panicked, all at once, but hollow.

In the background, fading as the call dimmed and the woman turned from the screen, a child screamed.

Jill’s fingers tightened around the call card as the scan came up. They made discoloring indents in the crystal.

A child’s body, prone. Trauma to the left leg, including a laceration to the femoral artery. The scan noted this had been treated on sight with a makeshift tourniquet which had slowed the bleeding, but not stopped it. Broken bone, fragmented, the result of crushing. Blood pressure unsteady. There were minor cuts to her left arm, and whatever had fallen on her leg had hit her side as well, cracking a rib and causing massive bruising. At least, as far as the scan could tell, no organs had been hurt.

The arterial laceration was the main problem, of course. And that was what had sparked a red light.

Jill leaned across Molsey’s head and tapped the scales between his two great horns, twice and crisp. Air rushed up to greet her as he sped up. Jill held on to the ‘reins’, twitching them to point him in the right direction, and ignored the stinging cold on her cheeks and the pressure that tried to push her overboard.

A child. They were the worst. Well, when they made it, when they recovered and sent her crude crayon drawings where she was green and Molsey for some reason purple, they could be the best. They could remind her why she was there, at the edge of the Great Sandy and nothing else, living call to call. But they didn’t always make it. And when she strapped their little bodies into the carrier, when she saw the fear in their eyes and the white of their cheeks, they reminded her of herself.

In her hand, the call card beeped. It sent little vibrations up her arm.

She looked down to a shearing shed’s tin roof, with the over-ripe plum tiles of a farmhouse near by. Tiny people, dark against the orange dust, waved stick-figure arms at her.

Molsey saw them and did not need direction. He cried out and the figures scattered, clearing the ground for him to land. His was not a deep roar like other dragons, those on her call card and breast pocket. His was a keening, high

and clicking, like an angry cat more than a dragon. “Ack-ack-ack” amplified to an ear-splitting degree.

Dust billowed as Molsey landed. Before it had even cleared a man ran toward them. It pasted his face, mingling with sweat into a red paste like tribal paint.

“Please!” He wrapped a dirty hand around Jill’s arm as soon as she slipped from Molsey’s back, smudging her white sleeve, crinkling its smooth fabric and sharp seam. “My daughter, she’s in here.” He tried to pull her, but Jill held her ground.

“Sir!” She cut through his fear with an all-business snap. “If you want to help your daughter, then calm down. Please take the capsule from the dragon’s back.” It was an easy job, and a good way to keep hands busy and fearful minds occupied.

Molsey had already crouched as low as he could, well aware of what was expected of him.

The man hesitated. Then a boy, probably a teenager, came forward, grabbed the man’s hand and dragged him toward the dragon. As they began unhooking the capsule, Jill ran inside the farmhouse. Cool air brushed her face as she pushed open a green lacquered door inlaid with stained glass panels. Kookaburras of brown glass flecked with pale lines watched her, their dark eyes dull. The inside of the house was clean, somehow, in a way she had never been able to achieve. There was no orange dust haunting the peach colored skirting boards, no dirty footsteps on the green, plush carpet, apart from the ones she was leaving. These people had adjusted to the land, did not seem to have to fight it. Jill wondered, even as she entered their living room — floral patterned couches wrapped in tight plastic, a plaster venus with no arms in one corner — how long it had taken to learn to live this way. Would she ever master it, or was it a generational thing?

The girl was laid out on the living room floor, her blood soaked into the carpet to make a dirty, crusted brown. A small woman, the woman who had placed the call, hovered over her.

“Please.” The woman sounded tired. Not frantic like her husband, but already grieving.

Jill nodded and touched the call card to the girl’s pale face. The card announced she was alive, but her blood pressure had dropped, and her heart was struggling.

“Faster!” Jill shouted at the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Her own calm, commanding voice surprised her. She didn’t feel calm. The girl was too pale, and too many little red warning lights had lit up on the card as soon as she’d touched it to her forehead.

The girl's father and brother almost dropped the capsule in their rush. Jill organized them to help her lift the child, to keep the girl as steady as they could, as still.

As soon as they laid her body on the capsule's cold, hard surface, it flickered into life. Bright crystals lit beneath her, around her. They beamed light into her leg. Her head was surrounded in a tight halo of blue, and her chest lit up pink.

A beep from the capsule and Jill closed its lid. The girl was visible beneath its durable, semi-opaque plastic, as a blurred and glowing body. A small angel, seen through fog.

"What's happening to her?" The girl's mother touched the capsule lightly, with shaking fingers.

Jill pressed the call card into a small indent at the head of the capsule and heard it click. Most of the red lights flicked to green, but not all of them. The girl did not have much time, capsule or none.

Standing, Jill gestured to the father and brother to collect the capsule and hurried down the hallway. She looked over her shoulder as the mother followed, and spoke even as they ran. "The capsule will look after her until we can get her to the hospital at Newman."

The men re-secured it, as Jill watched from the corner of her eye. She faced the girl's mother, chafing at the delay, but knowing she could not leave the woman, not without the truth.

"Ma'am, your daughter is very badly hurt. I will do everything I can, believe me, and there are trauma surgeons standing by. But, no matter what we do, it will be close."

The woman nodded, and that sad, already-grieving expression returned to her sun-spotted face. "I know." She closed her eyes. "Look after her, won't you."

"Ma'am." Jill spun and climbed quickly onto Molsey's back. She checked the capsule, made sure it was secure, and clambered over to his neck.

A single pat to the head, and Molsey was in the air.

The call card's beeping was almost washed away by the wind. The flight to Newman was not short and it was not easy. Below them the Great Sandy radiated heat, and its fiery dunes wrinkled in the wind. It was like flying over a living thing, a thing changing and moving and breathing, ready to rear at you, ready to snatch you up.

Why anyone lived out here, so a dragon had to be stationed near-by in case they might need saving, had always been beyond her.

Jill leaned against Molsey's scales, glancing back at the capsule every few minutes, and watched one green light flicker to orange then deepen into red. There was still a good hour's flying before they reached Newman, more if this headwind continued. Molsey powered on, showing no strain, even though the wind that buffeted them both must have been tiring him, wrenching in his wings and tugging at the spines on his back. Another hour, at least, and the girl was already loosing the fight.

Jill squeezed her eyes shut. She had only lost one during a flight, an old man who had left half of his head on an empty, country road. Never a child.

With the wind, she almost didn't hear the call card's sudden, urgent call. But as soon as she lifted her head, she knew why it was making such a terrible noise. And felt her stomach sink into ice.

"No."

A cloud was billowing toward her, driven on the fierce wind. Not just a cloud, but a wall of sand that glowed like fire and towered kilometers into the air.

Molsey roared, his high, distressed voice mingling with the screaming call card before the wind whipped it away. Jill scrambled down his back to the capsule as he cried out again, and a shudder ran through him. He had already done so much, flown so far and fast. To ask him to fly over, if he could fly over... She couldn't do that.

Killing all three of them would help no one.

Writing flashed on the card, over another green light going to orange. The crystals were failing, their temporary magic no match for the little girl's body as it started to shut down.

Desperate, Jill punched the card's silvery buttons until the writing became a map. Desert was just desert, fluid sands not worthy of map-making, any settlements long given back to the dunes. The map gave her nothing but a line with estimated distance and time.

"Shit!" Jill craned her neck to see over Molsey's side. The sky darkened, the desert turning to a dull and foreboding red. But she saw it. A crevice of rock, where the sand fell away and sharp red stones pierced out of its velvet softness. Shelter? Even a solid wall to press their back to? To huddle around the dying girl and wish the sand storm past?

Another scramble to his neck. "Molsey!" Jill clutched the reigns and yanked sharply. "Down!"

He bellowed, his "acking" muted by the air rush. Wings snapped against his sides and he plummeted.

Sand boiled up to catch them. Jill opened her mouth to curse her luck, curse the luck of some poor girl whose name she hadn't bothered to read, but tasted sharp, hot grains instead.

Below her, Molsey shuddered. Eyes slits against the storm, Jill could only see his wings as hazy shadow. They strained to open again, fought sand and wind to control his descent.

The desert hit hard. Jill was thrown, blinded, into more sand that sucked her down into even deeper night than her squeezed eyelids. Dimly, she could hear the call card beeping, hear it squeal into the distance until the sand's steady hush blanketed her hearing and clogged her breath.

Sand in her lungs. Sharp little glass beads that scraped with every breath. Sand in her mouth. A gag of it, all wet from her saliva and who knew what else. Sand everywhere, stinging in her eyes and crushing on her chest, forcing out the air she fought so hard to draw in.

Somewhere, someone was crying. Soft little hitches of sound, of grief and terrible confusion.

The sound reminded Jill of a young girl from many years ago. The desert squeezing her lungs, clogging up her throat, it felt so familiar. Terrifying in the darkness.

She wasn't that little girl again, was she? Hiccupping what little breath she had left in pointless crying. Strapped to the back of a dragon, surrounded by cool crystal and flashing lights that breathed for her, and carried so very, very far. Just to stay alive.

No, she wasn't that little girl anymore. She wasn't the one weeping. She had Molsey now and she did the saving.

Molsey.

Jill struggled against the crushing sand, retched it from her mouth and clawed through it with racking fingers. It built up gritty beneath her nails.

And then the crying stopped, became a bellow that blew the final layers of red desert away like peeling sunburned skin. Warm, dry air wrapped around her arm as Jill broke free. It urged her out, promised lightness after the desert weight. And limb by flailing limb, Jill accepted.

Then Molsey was there. She found his soft-thorned face with her fingers, hooked an arm around a protrusion on his cheek and held on as he pulled her free. He snuffled her once she released him and fell gasping to the cloth of broken sand, nose poking her and hot breath brushing her clean. An enormous

dog. He whimpered, half-made keening at the back of his throat, until she found the strength to sit up and lean against his muzzle. It calmed him down long enough for Jill to blink away grainy tears and peer against the dim light.

He had found the cleft all right, and within it a low and shallow cave. Above them the sand storm roared, darkening the sun to a shade of deep red that made the desert seem bloody and the cave tight and small. Jill shuddered. Somewhere sand was falling, trickling down like an hour-glass filling. How long did they have before time filled this tiny crack of calm?

How long? What was she thinking? Jill gripped a wide, flat thorn on Mosey's nose and used it to lever herself to her feet. He shifted with her, "acking" softly, but she patted him with an unsteady hand.

"It's all right, Mosey. I'm all right."

But she wasn't, not really. She had been thrown from Mosey's back when he went down, she could remember landing. Something throbbed in her right shoulder when she tried to move it, and she didn't dare put any weight on her right leg. It felt large just below her knee, straining against her usually-comfortable riding pants, and a piercing pain jarred bone-deep with every movement.

She could lie to the dragon though. They were good like that.

"Where is she?"

The girl was still hooked to Mosey's back. Jill's straps had held well.

Hobbling, and trying beneath Mosey's eye not to look like she was hobbling, Jill made her way back to the capsule. Mosey lowered himself, his wide chest shuddering, Jill's sweaty hands slipping. In the gradually deepening sand — where *was* that sound coming from? — he could bury himself deeply, so Jill did not even need to climb to unhook the capsule. Good thing, too. She wasn't certain she could have.

The capsule slipped from his back, cresting over thorns to rest on the sand. Jill dragged it a foot or so away as Mosey reemerged.

The call card flashed angry and urgent. It should have been screaming at this stage, with all but two lights glaring red, but sand clogged in around it and maybe that had been enough to short-out its voice.

"Shit." Jill tugged at the card, but it wouldn't budge from its slot in the capsule. All she got for her troubles was the grinding of sand against hard plastic.

The girl was dying.

Jill poked at the card. Apart from the vitals flashing redly, telling her everything from the girl's erratic heart-rate to the failure of the clotting crystal beneath her arterial lesion, the card remained petulant and unhelpful. One of

the remaining green lights switched sporadically to orange, warning the oxygen would fail soon. Static hissed like an angry snake where crystal-brightened beams should have glanced off some spinning satellite and sent her desperate SOS to the Central-North dragonport. Even distance and time were gone from a map that flickered hazily on and off.

And the bastard only gave her part of the girl's name. Jill stared numbly at the letters, half dissolved into incomprehensible pixels, the other half mocking in their clear Arial font, '—nne.'

"Shit."

Molsey released a short, sharp "ack" of his own, and prodded Jill's painful shoulder with his muzzle. The act, affectionate though it might have been, was less than gentle.

"Molsey!" Jill hissed through clenched teeth. "Stop it."

She stroked fingers over the plastic. "Lynne." That would have to do. "I'm sorry, girl. I'm sorry." The body beneath the capsule's semi-opaque hatch didn't so much as twitch.

Molsey "acked" again, louder this time, and desperate. His great nose hovered close to her shoulder, not touching but breathing hot and heavy hitching breaths.

"What is it?" Jill looked up from the call card, strained to peer over her shoulder, and almost screamed. She hadn't seen them before, but in the light of the call card's ineffectual screen they were pale and ghost-like. Bones arched over Molsey like beams in one of those houses where you can see the ceiling's framework, a prettily stained redgum pointed out to start conversations.

Her dragon was staring at that bone framework and whining like a dog. Hand to her mouth, ignoring a woozy lurch as her knee threatened to give way, Jill stood. Gingerly, she wobbled over to Molsey. "Oh, boy." He let out another little keen until she wrapped her arms around his nose and pressed her cheek to his own. Opportunistic sook.

From Molsey's warm side, Jill peered closer at the bones. A ribcage, definitely, ribs woven with rock and hard sand to create their shelter, vertebrae running bumpy along the edge like a skirting board.

Ribs for an enormous chest. Really, there was no mistaking it.

A dragon, had to be, no wonder he was so upset. They were in a dragon. But this was no thorny-devil. Only European dragons grew to this size, and it was rare to see them this side of the world. So very rare.

It couldn't be. Jill clutched her own dragon, the one she had selected without even viewing the egg. Molsey, small and spiky and desert colored. Not enormous

and proud, not a splash of vibrant green against dry earth. As different from the dragon in her memories as she could manage.

It couldn't be, and yet, who else could it be? How many European dragons would make the trip all the way to the bottom of the world to live their life flying between one small, human crisis to the next?

She had been a very young girl when the verdant dragon and his charming rider had plucked her, breathless and panicked, from a disaster of a holiday in Karijini. They had taken her to Karratha where a machine helped her breathe and the doctors had a go at Mum for not making sure Jill had packed her puffer. Jill could remember the rider's face. She had been awake in the capsule the whole time and he had not stopped smiling once. Tufts of blonde hair peeked out beneath his Akubra, as cheeky as his smile, his straight teeth were white against suntanned skin. He had tied his red scarf about her neck when the ER opened her capsule, and before they whisked her away into the hospital's false cold and antiseptic smells. It had carried his scent, warm like the desert and pleasant with sweat. She still had it. Somewhere.

When Jill had entered the crew, fifteen years later and nothing like her six year old self, the rider and the green dragon were long gone. No one remembered them, only a photo on the wall, turning pallid and sepia-toned in the light from a window opposite attested to their existence at all. The first six months, Jill had stared at them daily, remembering. But then they had given her Moley, and she hadn't needed to remember any more.

"A desert grave," Jill whispered with a shiver. "Doesn't seem fair."

The rider wasn't there. His bones, if they remained, could be anywhere, scattered with the fickle sands.

"Probably isn't them." Who knew how long this body had remained undisturbed? Centuries, it could be. "Can't be." Jill closed her eyes and hugged Moley tightly.

The call card squealed. Like a small, stepped-on creature it squawked before easing into an unhealthy silence. Jill hobbled to the capsule.

"The oxygen failed."

Moley shuffled close behind her, slow, quiet and gentle. The capsule ground terribly as the emergency override kicked in and the lid lifted. Without oxygen, no number of crystals could keep a body alive. Sand and plastic scraped, gears crunched. How much desert had fallen in there?

Finally, the lid lifted to reveal Lynne, pale, sweat-slicked and gasping rhythmically. At least she had not woken. Fingers tingling, arms strangely heavy and numb, Jill leaned in and lifted the small girl. Blood squeezed from the bandage around her leg, the clotting agent fading with the failed crystal. Jill's

shoulder spiked a painful protest down into her back. She ignored both. Dying out here wasn't fair, no matter who you were. Dying out here alone, without even arms around you, was cruel.

"A desert grave." The girl sagged in her arms like a doll. The stitching was loose, cotton filling a mess. This doll would not last long. "I'm sorry, Lynne." What else was there to say?

The open capsule beeped irregular and mournful. Above it all, sand roared and sand fell.

Molsey moved away. Jill didn't notice it at first, focused as she was on Lynne's face, promising over and over in her head, as though if she thought it long enough and hard enough the poor thing might hear, that she would not leave her. Not now. She would watch as the girl died, this girl she had failed. But Molsey moved away and starting crunching something.

Scowling, hating herself for looking away, Jill peered over her shoulder. The call card had dimmed, and she could not see the dragon in the remaining darkness.

"What are you doing?"

The crunching continued, faster now. Jill found herself tense with it. The sound crawled beneath her skin and tightened it against her bones, it rose hairs along her arms and neck.

Eating? What in this barren, bone-walled place could he be eating—

"You're kidding me?" The girl in her arms kept Jill still. She was heavy even in her lightness. Precious. "Molsey, if you're eating what I think you're eating!" Jill didn't really have a threat to carry through. What could she do that was worse than a dying child and gradual asphyxiation by hour-glass? "You're not a dog! You don't just eat the shit you find on the ground—"

Molsey lumbered out of the darkness, awkward in the soft sand. He stopped in front of her, head lifted in a way she knew was difficult for him to do with his straight tail as a counter-balance, and looked down. Most of his small, dark eyes were hidden by bulbous lids.

Jill resisted the urge to back away. Lynne's head twitched and wet, cold skin brushed Jill's fingers. So cold. "Molsey, now is not the time—"

Molsey opened his mouth and vomited. A pale gray sludge the texture of mud splashed onto Jill's head. It soaked into her hair, warm and sticky. It slopped down her sand-speckled shirt, and slipped from her to Lynne.

"Shit!" Jill jerked the girl forward, but not fast enough. Sludge fell into her open, gasping mouth. It coated wounds and bandages.

A fierce reek wafted up from the muck. It burned the back of the throat like smoke and smelled heavy and wet. Stagnant. But mingled in with that was something strangely, faintly medicinal. Almost eucalyptus.

“What the fu—?”

Jill almost dropped the girl when she moved. Her face, obscured by Molsey’s vomit, turned toward her. Eyes opened, lids weak, struggling against the muck. Carefully, Jill knelt. She wiped Lynne’s face with shaking fingers, starting when she realized the skin beneath was warm. *Warm.*

Lynne opened her mouth. She coughed bubbles of stinking gloop, retched as she sucked some in, and managed to turn on her side to spit it out. “Mum?” she whispered between splutters.

Jill stared at the open capsule, call card flashing weak red. She stared down at the girl struggling to sit up, smoothing muck from her face and widening increasingly frightened eyes. The girl who should be dead, who almost was, a moment ago.

“Mum?” The promise of tears in Lynne’s hitching voice brought Jill’s attention.

“It’s okay.” Jill helped the girl crawl from her lap and sit up. “Your mum’s not here right now, but you’ll be okay.” She glanced at Molsey from the side of her eyes. How, exactly, she wasn’t sure.

Her dragon was doing the best imitation of a sheep she had ever seen a dragon do. Any more sheepish, in fact, and he would start sprouting wool.

“Is that a dragon?” Lynne had noticed him. To her credit, the girl didn’t seem to be afraid.

“Yes. This is Molloche.” Molsey shuffled closer again and Jill patted his nose. His mouth, she noticed, was sticky. “Don’t worry, he won’t hurt you.”

Lynne nodded, face grave. “The truck fell on me.”

There wasn’t much you could say to that. “Yes, it did.”

“You came to take me to hospital. Mum said not to worry, if anything ever happened, the hospital was only a dragon-ride away.”

“Your mum’s a smart woman, Lynne.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose. “I’m Carilynne. Cari.” She made a face, stuck out a tongue then grimaced. There was still muck around her mouth, and Jill hated to think what it must have tasted like. “No one calls me Lynne.”

“Cari then.” Jill hoped it was too dark for the girl to see her blush.

The sandstorm roared.

“But I’m not at the hospital, am I?” Was that a tinge of sarcasm in Cari’s voice? Far too much for a girl who just came back from the edge of death.

“Not quite.” Jill pointed up, to the break in bone and rock through which she could only see more sand. Airborne sand, of course. “We didn’t make it.”

“But I’m okay, right?” Worry made her tone a little more serious.

Molsey settled himself down behind Jill, snuggling below sand the way she would beneath a blanket.

“I think so, Cari. I think so.”

They dropped Cari off at Newman to astonished doctors and relieved parents. Jill leaned against Molsey’s leg as the staff drilled her. What had happened in the storm? How did they find shelter? Why is the girl alive? The doctors asked her the last one alone, when Cari and her mother, finally weeping, left to find a snack machine. The girl was starving, after all.

Jill didn’t know the doctor who leaned so close she could see dark-grey hairs like wires in his nostrils. His nametag said he was Neil.

“What happened?” His brown eyes were crunched with concern, lines in his forehead deep and pinched. “We have the data, before the storm crashed the call card, she should not be alive.”

Jill patted Molsey’s leg. “I can’t say.” He craned his tight, stubby neck as far as it could go, and snuffled in her hair. “Call card must have been faulty.” She shrugged. Her shoulder was stiff, but didn’t hurt anymore. And while she leaned against Molsey, Jill could have stood firmly on both legs.

Neil looked skeptical.

“Look, you’ve seen her.” Jill smoothed the front of her soiled white shirt, and straightened. Sand had scraped away most of the dragon bone sludge, then the air. But she could still smell it, like a memory at the back of her nose. Pungent. Putrid. Strangely medicinal. “When the capsule ran out of O2 and opened up, I thought that was it. I thought she was dead.” That, at least, was not a lie. “But she woke right up, she was strong and talkative. Call card must have got it wrong. No one could be that ill and snap out of it, all of a sudden.”

No one should be able to fall from the back of an airborne dragon, crash into the earth, and have no wounds to prove it. But then, Molsey had coated them both in the same stuff, the same stinking dragon bone soup. Jill hadn’t swallowed any, of course. Maybe that was why her shoulder was still stiff?

The doctor eyed her for a long moment before sighing. He rubbed his face, and when he brought his hand away seemed suddenly exhausted. “Of course. But if you can think of something, anything that might help us understand this, give me a call. Any time.”

Jill nodded. She patted Molsey again.

She would never make that call. She would keep Molsey's secret, and no doctor would ever know the dragons they employed, the dragons who saved lives and were awarded so much praise, might just be more use dead than alive.

Molsey was her dragon, after all. She would never let him down.

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Robert's first collection of short stories, 'Tiny Deaths', won the 2008 World Fantasy Award, and was nominated for the Edge Hill and Frank O'Connor International Short Story Prizes. This new story, 'Luxembourg', isn't nominated for a damn thing — but is out in his new collection, 'Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical', some time in 2009. He's probably best known for writing the episode that brought the Daleks back to the TV revival of 'Doctor Who' — so only finds time for penning short stories amidst answering continuity questions over email, and autographing plastic toys. He lives in London, and thinks Australia is warmer.

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Linda Steele was born in snowy Wisconsin, but grew up just about everywhere else. A mother of three, she has been a Jill of many trades, having worked as a respiratory therapist, book designer, creative writing instructor, legislative assistant, and public relations coordinator for a major airport. Her publications include a science fiction novel, several fantasy stories, numerous medical articles and lots of public service brochures on what to do if you're stuck at the airport. She currently lives in Philadelphia with her blissfully sane husband Steve and a prim, wacky standard poodle.

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