

Editorial

...Tansy Rayner Roberts

There have been some interesting questions floating around the Australian speculative fiction community in the last year.

Are there too many markets for short fiction, and does this mean a lower standard of fiction is being published?

Is Australian speculative fiction good enough?

What is “good” speculative fiction anyway?

I should point out that these questions are coming from writers and editors — but mostly writers. Readers have much simpler criteria for “good” fiction — Do I like it? Did I enjoy reading it? Would I read it again? And, most importantly — Where can I find more like it?

The question of whether too much speculative fiction is finding publication in Australia surprised me. The writer in me says, “More, more markets! More magazines, more anthologies! Maybe they’ll publish meeeee!” The editor in me thinks, “Hmm. More competition. But still, that means a wider audience coming to Australian speculative fiction, right? And that means more subscribers for ASIM!” The reader in me says, “Bring it on! The more the merrier. Maybe I won’t read all of them, but at least I’ll have a choice.”

I think “choice” is the operative word here. Readers of Australian speculative fiction have never had so much choice before. Between *Voyager*, Allen and Unwin, ASIM, Agog! Press, *Aurealis*, *Ticonderoga Online*, *Shadowed Realms*, Chimaera Press, Mirrordanse, Prime Books, Orbit, and a host of other publications/publishers here and overseas, you can now choose between epic fantasy, urban fantasy, literary fantasy, YA fantasy, space opera, hard SF, soft SF, funny SF, dark horror, medium horror, light horror and a host of other possibilities.

If you only like one of those kinds of speculative fiction, then something by an Australian author that you will enjoy was published last year. If you

like many different kinds of speculative fiction, then roll on up. It's your lucky year. Let's hope you have more of them.

In his most recent *Year's Best Science Fiction* (in which ASIM scored 6 recommended reading mentions!) Gardner Dozois lamented that ASIM's content wasn't a little more serious, while at the same time wishing that Canadian magazine *On Spec* would "lighten up a little". While I respect and enjoy Mr Dozois' editorial taste, that sounds a lot like wishing all icecream was chocolate. I'm a big fan of chocolate icecream, but sometimes I want vanilla. And sometimes, I want pineapple.

So here's to ASIM, the pineapple icecream of the spaceways, offering something different: entertaining, well-written speculative fiction that allows (and even encourages!) its authors to have fun with the genre — to just relax and tell stories, without worrying about how literary they are, or whether they fit into current marketing trends.

There's a mixture in this issue of the light-hearted and action-packed, the dark, the very dark, the outright silly and even a touch of elegance here and there. I really enjoyed this mix of stories from up-and-coming and established writers, and I hope you will too.

But whether you enjoy the stories or not — either way, we'd love to get some feedback from you. Write us a letter or an email — review the issue on your website or blog, and send us the link. Sometimes the writers and editors and publishers are talking so loudly about what matters to them that they forget to listen to the readers. And we'd really like to hear what you have to say.

Tansy RR

Editor, Issue 22

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/cassiphone/>

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The Sun King

...Adam Browne

On the occasion of his twenty-fifth birthday, Louis XIV, Le Grand Monarque de France, was promoted to the position of God, that office having been vacated by its previous tenant for reasons of death.

As this was an inevitable advancement in the monarch's career, the announcement of his ascension caught exactly no-one by surprise. Even Louis, who normally enjoyed a bit of pomp, felt the deification ceremony was something to be got through as swiftly as possible. No sooner had he been coronated, anointed with sacramental oil and handed a parchment affording him authority over the Deep and Secret Machineries of the Universe, than he was hurrying out the great doors of the Notre-Dames de Rheimes Cathedral and into the sunshine for which he was now responsible.

Nor did he pause when he reached the square outside the cathedral. He strode across the flagstones, outpacing the ragged crowd of his attendants (his fatly panting Valet de Chambre; his Nanny with her immense whaleboned gown creaking like the rigging of a tall ship; his First Physician and First Surgeon, both weighed down by hairpieces of a size more often associated with civil engineering than wig-making), until he came to the northern corner of the courtyard where the reason for his impatience stood demurely awaiting him.

Her name was Mademoiselle Françoise-Athénaïs de Rochechouart.

As a deity, Louis was now officially a divine being of pure spirit, perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness; but he fancied the pretty ladies as much as ever. And the Mademoiselle was most uncommon pretty. She was his petit divertissement, his little dimpled plumping, the one upon whom the royal eye, but not yet the royal lips, had alighted.

"May I offer my congratulations on your ascension, Sire," she said — rather stiffly, he thought.

"You may indeed," he replied. "And as my first official act, I shall present you with a token of my esteem."

He gestured as is sometimes seen in ecclesiastical art; an elegant, holy figuration of his fingertips; and from nowhere (or, more accurately, from the pregnant fizzing

Nothing that underlies all Creation) there appeared a gigantic bunch of roses, their scent miraculously identical to the *Eau de Admirable* of the Florentine perfumier Giovanni Paolo Feminis. Louis nodded to acknowledge the scattered applause from his assembled courtiers, but really, privately, he didn't know what all the fuss was about. Miracles were a doddle once you had the trick of them.

He bowed to the Mademoiselle, his robes (a gold-scintillated explosion of ostrich feathers) rustling about him as he proffered his gift. The Mademoiselle accepted the flowers, but Louis could not help but think there was something of sufferance to her manner. "*Eau de Admirable*," she sighed, "it was all the fashion, was it not, a few months ago?" She gave him a perfunctory curtsy, then tossed the flowers to her maid.

Louis smiled indulgently. True, she was spoiled, but whom in Louis's court was not? Having grown up in the infinitely brattish context of Versailles, where even the boy who wiped your arse of a morning conducted himself with the hauteur of a peer of the realm, what else could she be but a brat?

And indeed, apart from her beauty, her opulent thighs, sumptuous upper arms and succulent bosom, it was her very resistance to his charms that had attracted him at the first. In a society where the battle to win his heart had reached such a pitch that ladies were known to consult sorcerers for love spells and philtres, the Mademoiselle's disinclination piqued his interest, as did the hint of shyness he seemed to detect behind her prickly manner.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I am about to conduct a survey of my new kingdom, being the Universe-at-large." He indicated a nearby sedan-chair (his gesture accidentally causing a small miracle in a nearby farm, where a goat surprised itself by giving birth to a toad). "I hope you would not think it too forward if I invited you to join me?"

In reply, she indicated with the slightest but most expressive arch of an eyebrow that she did think it a *little* forward, but that as he was now her Lord in both senses of the word, she would do as she was bid within, of course, limits dictated by propriety.

In his turn, Louis quirked his own eyebrows (being quite as eloquent in the idiom as she) to assure her that his motivations were entirely honourable; but that if she *were* ever to stumble outside the bounds of propriety, he would stoutly follow, if only to keep her company.

So she took his arm and they repaired to the sedan-chair where, by royal decree, he repealed the law of gravity (which was the invention of an Englishman after all). The little vessel swifited upwards, beyond the clouds, splashing out of the atmosphere on a fountain of air, a rarefied chandelier that flash-froze then dissipated into a thousand lights to mark the beginning of their voyage.

They swung away from the Earth. The sedan-chair moved smoothly through space, an excellently beautiful vessel in which to ride, adorned all over with rich architectural exuberations, its gold-chased surfaces everywhere inlaid with silver and living mother-of-pearl. Nevertheless, the ambiance within was not an easy one. The

Mademoiselle sat with a rigid back and responded to Louis's conversational gambits with little more than an occasional stiff nod.

She was the coyest of mistresses; but unlike Marvell, Louis did have 'worlds enough, and time'. He was patient, or at least not *entirely* impatient. Even as a mortal, a mere lieutenant of God, he had been 'prudent, and fully possessed of the self-restraint one might expect of a divinity', as his minister the Duc de Saint-Simon had phrased it. An appraisal now doubly true; *and more's the pity*, thought Louis as with divine forbearance he forced a smile and continued their rather one-sided chat, proving that light conversation can be heavy going indeed.

Still, he was pleased to show off his newly acquired knowledge of the heavens (having felt obliged in recent weeks to learn a little of the universe over which he had been about to take control). With proprietorial pride, he explained to the Mademoiselle the wonders of the cosmos passing by outside. "Here, milady, you see the Moon," he said. "Note the seas of ivory dust. Note too its rilles, like veins running dark through the features called *maria*; impact basins created four billion years ago."

"It is dreary," was her observation. "Like a skull."

"In truth it is, Mademoiselle," he replied without hesitation, and caused the craters to flow with flowers, the plains to run and chuckle with merry freshets, and the lunar atmosphere to blow with spring breezes scented with jonquils.

"Is that more to your liking, my dear?" he whispered, contriving to brush his lips against her ear.

"Certainly it is...improved," she said, shrugging him off with a brusqueness bordering on lèse majesté. *Or is it sacrilege?* he thought crossly.

On they flew, bucketing upward, his Highness now higher than ever.

They flew past Mars ("an atrocious, utilitarian world," as the Mademoiselle later recalled to her sister, "its colour a déclassé shade of cerise..."), and onward into the Asteroid Belt. Louis pointed out its various features: "Observe, my dear, the pretty planetesimals and meteoroids atumble in their multitudinous orbits." He rested a hopeful hand upon her knee. She shifted the leg out of reach. "If you will but look closely," he continued, hiding his disappointment, "you may mark faint maculations indicating the presence of strange fossils, suggesting that once the asteroids were fragments of a world where living things roamed and roared."

But it was clear to Louis that, in the eyes of Mademoiselle Françoise (used to the gilded orangeries, the Parterre des Fleurs, the terraced symmetries of the Versailles gardens), the asteroids were ugly and frightening. She pulled down her blind with a snap, refusing to open it again until Louis had bettered the view.

Which he did without demur, miracling the Belt into a ring of sapphires where flew orbital nightingales and iridescent butterflies with looking-glass wings. She accepted all this without a smile (it must be said in her defence that smiles were unfashionable among the ladies of Louis's court, as their makeup, a paste of white lead, duck eggs

and puppy's urine, made for a hard shiny finish that cracked when stressed by facial expressions).

Their journey continued. They came to Jupiter, and not even that splendid planet with its numerous luminous moons, its god-tossed lightnings flashing athwart its storm-swirled sky, sufficed to soften the Mademoiselle's heart ("a gross old man of a world," as she put it later, "its red spot staring at me like a lecher's eye, its radiation frizzing my hair..."). Louis began to suspect his cause was lost. In desperation, he tried to improve the view with the addition of several immense kittens (all ladies love kittens, do they not?): colossal things, their fur a furlong long; an entire litter of them playing in Jupiter's upper airs.

"Aren't they darling?" said Louis, although he privately feared that *grotesque* or *monstrous* might more aptly serve to describe the creatures. "See how they make sport with the moons. Oh, ha ha!, that one shall knock Callisto out of orbit if he's not careful!"

But when he turned he saw she was not even looking.

He sighed. The game was over, and he had scored not a point. "Ah well," he said glumly. "Perhaps we should return home." Beneath his makeup (thick layerings of cochineal, maquillage, lotions, powders and unguents) his cheeks were pale with sorrow.

A pause. And then the Mademoiselle surprised him by laying her hand on his. He looked up, and saw (miracle of miracles!) *compassion* in her eyes. For, at heart, and despite all the callousness trained into her at Versailles, she was by nature a sweet girl who could not stand to see suffering for long.

He shaped one of his eyebrows into a query.

She arched her own in reply, indicating with the merest virtuoso twitch, executed just so, that she was sorry to have saddened him, but that he had annoyed her with his blithe certainty that he could have her so easily — and, furthermore, though she was too coy to have ever said so aloud, that she really thought him rather dashing.

Her eyebrows went on to suggest they should let bygones be bygones and continue the journey on happier terms.

Louis's eyebrows, for their part, were in complete agreement.

"After all," he said aloud, "we have not yet seen Saturn. My astronomers assure me it is a planet of such beauty that it would melt the gold in one's teeth to see it."

Their little vehicle flung itself outward, into the deep end of the Solar System.

But the journey to Saturn was a long one, and bleak, and when they got there even Louis had to admit the planet was disappointing, the great Rings a mere rubble, the atmosphere a foul congregation of stinks. The king found the atmosphere within the sedan-chair no less disagreeable, a strange unease having descended over him. He could not account for it. Now, with intimacy between them a real possibility, he felt oddly glum, while the Mademoiselle had become bubbly and talkative.

“What is that one called, Sire?”

“I believe it is Iapetus, Mademoiselle,” he murmured.

“A funny name. I seem to see forests on it.”

“They are crystal formations,” he replied, brusquely, “not alive, but mineral.”

“They are very pretty. And who is to say that minerals cannot be alive?”

So it went on. Louis shook his head. It was as if their roles had reversed, as if she had taken control of the situation. But how? It had happened so quickly, almost without transition. It baffled him. She was a woman, he thought, a mere girl, while *he*...he was emperor!, he was *king*; he was *god*, for goodness sake!

They were drifting out near the moon Titan when she said, “Is that a comet I spy, Sire?”

“I think not, Mademoiselle,” he said without looking. “They are rare in these regions.”

“It is getting closer!” she said. “Please look, Sire!”

“If you insist.”

He turned — and gasped. It loomed towards them, its gaseous envelope swelling and billowing outside the windows. He saw the sizzle of it, the otter and slink of it; and now the core, a glacial, mountainous thing sloping through thickly slurring mists; and now the tail, immense and terrible, a miasmatic gush, dark and wretched like the smoke from a burning orphanage.

He had time to say, “Mademoiselle, you were right. I stand corrected...” — and a moment later he was no longer standing at all, for the sedan-chair had been struck a blow. Cometary vapour and ice battered the hull. There was a scream, perhaps a woman’s. All was confusion; the little vessel pitching wildly; everything a-tumble; flashes of light and dark; furnishings toppling; glasses smashing...

The floor tipped again, and of a sudden the Mademoiselle fell on top of Louis (but *did* she fall?, Louis wondered later — in retrospect it seemed more a leap than anything else.)

Then she kissed him.

In the moments that followed (a period whose deliciousness was only enhanced by the danger) there was a part of Louis’s mind that remained sufficiently detached to ruminate on his first lesson as a god-king. Or perhaps there were two lessons: the first, that even absolute power is not absolute when it comes to women; and the second, that a man will never win a lady’s love through force or burdensome shows of largesse. A fellow must trust the woman he loves to find her own way to him, he thought, or else lose her for good...and then even that part of his mind was lost to the general pleasurable tumult as they were tossed about by the storms within and without; finding themselves now on the floor, now on a couch, now tumbling up against a wall...

And later, in the account of Louis’s career that came to be called *The Brand-New Testament*, the Duc de Saint-Simon wrote: “Plato stated that all things are produced by

the gods or by human skill; the greatest and most lovely by the former; the lesser and most imperfect by the latter. The love that Louis and Mlle Rochechouart made that day was plainly of the former variety. It was a tireless firework visible all the way down to Versailles, flickering with the rhythms of vigorous fornication, its colours outshining the Sun and persisting throughout the afternoon and well into night. After which it faded for a time...and then began again and continued ever after, a steady love-light by which mariners may faithfully steer forevermore.”

Passenger Dossier

Name: Adam Browne

History and Writing Credits: Adam Browne lives in Melbourne with his wife Julie Turner, also a writer, and their 16-month foetus tentatively named Harriet. This story comes from one of Adam's dreams, in which God revealed Himself to be the Dauphin — and also proved to be an excellent chef, incidentally, putting on a fine spread for his guests (though even a dream cannot compete with the insanely lavish 240-course dinners the real Louis used to preside over).

Blake the God

...Lee Battersby

“Somebody’s been stealing!”

Blake’s indignation is palpable. I wipe soap suds from my arms and turn towards him, happy for any excuse to stop regretting the sale of the dishwasher.

“Stealing what?”

“Come and see.” He stands in the doorway, almost vibrating. Of course, with my stepson, that’s normal. “Half of them are gone!”

I dry my hands on my t-shirt and follow him into the courtyard that serves as back yard until I get a job and a bigger place. I’m not even out the door before the object of Blake’s ire becomes apparent.

“What the hell?”

We only have half a patio. Last time I looked, bricks spread out in patterns from the house to the garden beds ringing the fence. Now it’s all yellow sand and topsoil. Only a thin walkway remains, the bricks pressed up against the wall as if terrified of whatever consumed their brothers.

“Someone’s been stealing!” Blake repeats in a tone of high righteousness.

“So I see.” I walk to the corner, peering around to discover the extent of the thievery. I blink, and blink again.

“No,” I say, blinking a third time just to make sure my eyes are free of soap and I’m really seeing what I’m seeing. “Not stealing. Re-arranging.”

“What? Hey, cool.” Blake says from under my elbow. “Looks just like me.”

Indeed it does. An eight foot tall relief of my stepson’s face has been erected against the rear fence. Someone has broken a lot of bricks to get the planes and ridges of his face correct. I hope the insurance covers stolen brick art breakage. Blake’s visage stares back at me with an altogether too noble gaze. It’s an expression alien to his hyperactive features, as if someone had created an idealised version of Blake for the National Gallery.

“What the hell is going on here?”

I run my hands over the statue, looking for a clue as to its origin.

“It’s cool.”

“It’s the work of a seriously deranged stalker.” I circle the backyard, peering at every stray peg and weed as if they might provide a vital scrap of evidence I can use to nab the vandal. At least I’m pretty sure it’s a crime. I mean, it has to be. I picture myself confronting some previously unregarded local, uttering Poirot-esque bon mots and instructing an bobby to take the poor fool away. Then I remember that my last contact with the police was a failed attempt to evade a speeding fine, and that I had to shave the last time I tried to wax my moustache. The image shatters, leaving me gaping before Blake’s bemused stare. I peer at the caps atop our fences, noting their complete lack of fingerprints, and shrug.

“How about we call the real police?” Blake suggests. I retain my dignity by not answering. I still ring them. The cop who comes is as far from my image of a local bobby as he could get. My Mum used to tell me that the first sign of age is when authority figures start to look younger than you. This guy makes me feel like Tutankhamen, or worse, Monty Burns. He’s full of the arrogance of youth. Too full. He strides around like the Blue-Shirt Avenger, tutting and tch-ing at our explanations, calling Blake ‘Matey’ every time he tries to point something out. He stares long and hard at our unwelcome sculpture, then at its model, before leading us back to our front door.

“Just put the bricks back, I reckon.”

“Do I glue them back together first, or just be content with crazy paving?”

He flicks his notebook shut with a twist of his wrist and snaps it back into his chest pocket.

“We’re a very busy station, Mister Bellington. I don’t think your culprit is a stranger.” He favours Blake with another long glare.

We’ve brought Blake up to be polite, so I resist the temptation to poke out my tongue. Even so, I stifle a giggle when he tells our zealous crime fighter to say hi to Constable Care. The policeman looks as if he wants to charge me with something, *anything*. My poker face persuades him to fight the forces of evil elsewhere. He departs, and I turn back to my stepson and his personal shrine. Blake is back outside, kneeling before the brick face.

“Jim,” he says as I approach, “Does it look different to you?”

It does, and it takes me a moment to realise why. Blake has brushed his hair since we rang the police. Now the statue reflects his rare neat-headed state. I stare around us in sudden alarm.

“Go inside, Blake. Make sure all the doors and windows are locked.”

Blake looks as if he wants to argue, but obeys. Once he’s out of earshot I call out to the surrounding fences and whoever may be crouching on the other side, waiting for us to turn our backs.

"I'm dismantling this sick little message. And I'll be watching. You do *not* want me to catch you. You understand, pal?"

I grab the uppermost brick fragment of Blake's neatly brushed fringe. It is no more than five or six inches removed when a tiny creature crawls from between the bust's eyebrows and raises something in my direction. A beam of light shoots out and strikes me on the wrist.

"Aagh!" Raw heat envelopes my hand. I drop the chip. It clatters to the ground. I suck at my wrist. More beings swarm out of the statue's mouth. The brick is lifted up and transported back to its resting place, sliding up Blake's face like a tear in reverse before nestling back into place with a satisfied 'chink'. My minuscule attackers melt back inside the structure, leaving me alone with the pain in my hand and the faint aroma of burnt ozone.

"I'm guessing they're not insects, then," says a voice behind me. I turn to see Blake, two glasses of cordial in his hands. His eyes are fixed upon his effigy, and are as wide as I've ever seen them. I reach out and take a glass.

"No," I say. "Not insects."

We repair to the dining room to drink in silence. I can sense the face watching us, countless figures waiting for Blake to reappear so they can recreate his every expression. Like worshippers waiting for a God. The nine year old deity dunks a biscuit into his cordial, face creased with the effort of his internal thoughts. He drains the last of his glass and asks the question I had been hoping to avoid.

"What do we tell Mum?"

Blake's mother is an important woman, very busy, very logical, with only one crack in her efficient and businesslike facade: she loves me and trusts me with the care of her only child. She will not be impressed by talk of burning light, and worshipful creatures with a jones for the fruit of her career-minded loins. Blake and I share a sombre stare. Both of us can do without the lecture, not to mention that we're both far more frightened of his Mum than any alien bearing a death ray. I place my glass on the table with resolve.

"We need to finish this," I say, glancing at the clock. "Really, really quickly."

Blake follows my gaze and leaps to his feet. "I'll get dinner organised. You..." he flails a hand at the backyard, "do something."

"Oh, thanks." I'd object, but Blake's a much better cook than I am. Tonight is roast chicken, his specialty. I leave him to it and go outside to contemplate the creatures. The face has changed again. The mouth is open, and as I watch a small mound of dirt creeps across the ground and disappears inside. The mouth closes.

"Blake?" I call out, watching the statue chew and swallow.

"Yeah?"

“Stop eating the stuffing.”

“How did you...hey!” The penny drops, and I can’t help but smile. Obeisance takes many forms, and not all of them are helpful. A thought strikes me. If imitation is the key to worship...

“Hey, Blakey!”

“Yeah?”

“Poke your tongue out.”

“What? Oh, okay.”

In front of me, a brick tongue appears and waggles back and forth, before retreating.

“Do that thing with your eyelids that makes your Mum feel sick.”

“The statue’s lower lids fold up and in, tucking themselves underneath the blank stare. I suppress a shudder.

“Stop it, stop it. That’ll do.”

The face resumes a normal appearance, and grins. Its mouth moves ever so slightly behind the voice in the kitchen, like a badly dubbed Hong Kong movie.

“What now?”

I look at the statue for long seconds, measuring my stepson’s face in a way I rarely do in the flesh. I note the alignment of his eyes and nose; the way his ears poke out at right angles, making them look so much bigger than they really are; the drop of his fringe just above his eyebrows, hair falling in lines down the side of his elfin features. Somewhere inside this head, weird and scary things lurk. The statue is no different. If I want to get them out, I have to get inside. I don’t think his Mum would appreciate me lopping off the top of Blake’s head. But maybe I don’t need to, at least, not the whole skull. I swallow, and offer a little prayer to my own gods. If they’re listening, what I’m about to do might actually work.

“Blakey boy?” I call out. “You know where your Mum keeps the hair clippers?”

I explain what I want him to do. When I’m finished there is a long silence from the house. The effigy’s expression tells me exactly what Blake thinks of the idea.

“Are you sure?”

“Sort of.”

“Oh, wow,” he replies, voice thick with sarcasm. “That fills me with confidence.”

I glance down at my watch. “Mum will be home in just under an hour.”

“On my way.”

I hear him thunder into the bathroom, and the clatter of toiletries being pushed aside as he pulls the clippers from the cabinet. Buzzing flows through the window. Lumps fall away from the statue to lie in folds at its base. Slowly, the top is shorn of hair. A dome appears, glinting silver in the afternoon sun. Lights pulse across its

surface in bursts. I see rows of windows, each one centred by a miniscule head. I sit transfixed, any idea of what to do next vacant in the revelation of what I'm seeing. A queue of creatures emerges from the brickwork to line the creases and crevices of Blake's face. Hundreds of tiny tubes point up at me. My wrist begins to throb. The final lock of hair falls away. The buzzing ceases.

"Jim?"

"Yeah?"

"What do I do now?"

"Just stay there, mate. Um," I tear my eyes away from the little army, dropping my gaze to the shavings at the statue's base. "You might want to clean up."

"Oh." A pause. "Okay."

I raise a hand. The array of tubes follows it. I show them my open palm. Feeling like a fool I place my index and third fingers together, then my ring finger and pinkie.

"Um. Live long and prosper?"

I'm not sure what I expect, but utter indifference seems to be the result. My Vulcan greeting hangs in the air between us. The creatures point their weapons at me. I'm fresh out of ideas. It's pathetic, really. I thought I'd have more.

"Jim?"

Blake stands behind me, gazing at the alien ship. He looks utterly unlike the boy his mother left behind this morning. I realise that no matter the result of this confrontation he and I are going to be in an awful lot of trouble. Blake doesn't seem to understand this. He sports a huge grin.

"Aliens!" he cries. "That is so cool!" He looks at me as if I've caused them to appear all by myself. In the face of his adoration I don't have the heart to correct the impression. The effect of Blake's arrival upon his subjects, however, is impressive. As one the tubes vanish. The creatures fall to their knees, bowing what must be their faces to the ground. They begin to squeak, voices like Tibetan monks on helium. I'm stunned. I didn't think people that small would need knees. Blake, raised on a diet of bad SF films, takes it all in his stride.

"This is so cool," he repeats. "Can I show them my room?"

"Your...?" I manage, and then pause. The aliens raise their heads and gaze at me like so many miniature, begging children. I can almost hear the cry of "Pleeeaaasse?"

Suddenly it occurs: why not? When was the last time I'd heard of worshippers harming their God? Okay, I'm an atheist, but I'm sure I'd have heard *something* about it. And what had they done, anyway? Nothing more than show love for him. Hell, they probably had toilets on that ship, which made them preferable to the puppy Blake wants. I shrug, not quite believing what I'm about to say.

"Okay."

Blake and his new friends cheer in unison. Blake gives me a hug. I'm a sucker for hugs. Even so, I manage to peel myself from his embrace and favour him with my best approximation of a frown.

"But." I raise a take-me-seriously finger, "No mucking about, no weird alien warp stuff or whatever, and they hide if your Mum comes in, got it?"

"Got it. Love you, Jim."

"Love you too, mate. Go play."

"Come on, you guys." He takes off. The aliens surge forward. I'm caught off guard by the movement, and yelp as they swarm over me. I fully expect to be eaten, or at least covered in goo. It takes me half a second to realise they are also giving me a hug of thanks.

"Um, well, all right then," I say. "Just...be good. Don't lay an egg in his chest or anything, okay?"

They slide off me like a departing wave, then slip up the face of their effigy and into their spaceship in a silent, happy rush. It lifts from its mount, and turns in mid-air. Before I can change my mind it dips its front end to acknowledge me, and glides off in pursuit of their God. I'm left behind, kneeling in the empty yard. I exhale once.

"Well," I say to nobody in particular.

Then the key rattles in the front door. Blake cries "Mum!" as he roars down the hallway for his customary embrace. I hear Lyn shriek. Helen Keller could hear Lyn shriek.

"Your hair!" she cries, then moments later, "My patio!"

The love of my life appears at the corner of the house, five-foot-nothing of business suit-clad fury. She takes one look at the brick idol, then turns her eyes upon me.

"Just what the hell is going on here?"

Alien hordes have nothing on this woman. I smile my most innocent smile.

"Hi, honey," I say, as if I might just survive the rest of the evening. "How was *your* day?"

Passenger Dossier

Name: Lee Battersby

History: Born in 1970, died in 1984, 1987, 1993, and 2000. Could do better.

Writing Credits: Over 40 sales in Australia, the US, and Europe, including issues 6, 10, 16, and 22 of this magazine. His first collection *The Divergence Tree*, due to appear any moment now from Prime Books. Will be a tutor for Clarion South 2007, which he takes as proof that you can fool some of the people some of the time. Has an unhealthy attraction to Daleks. The truth is revealed regularly at <http://battersblog.blogspot.com>

Marco's Tooth

...Trent Jamieson

"Surely you're not frightened of death, Padre," Galley shouted down at me, pitching his voice to cut through the white noise clouding every transmission. He gestured mockingly with one hand and leant into the terrible pull of the planet.

I ignored him, gritted my teeth and kept climbing. Afraid, no. Terrified. Death drove me on, and it had led me here.

I scrambled for the next handhold and, reassured by my grip, stared down into Styron's storm-wracked atmosphere.

Big mistake.

Vertigo welled within me. Bank upon bank of grey clouds scudded beneath my feet. Lightning flashed about a hundred kilometres below; everything lit up stark and awful. For a moment I felt terribly and utterly alone. Then Galley kicked me in the head; my helmet clanged like a bell.

"Look up, idiot!" Galley grinned down at me, completely trusting the magpads that melded him to the tooth. My fingers — even sheathed in the suit, its micro-motors whining — burned with the strain. My back ached, too: a constant reminder of its secret cargo.

Any issues Galley had with death had obviously passed. "Long way up," I said. "And a long, long way down."

"Deal with it. You're the priest, trust in your God."

"How much further?"

Galley's smile broadened. "Another thirty metres. Not far."

We had been climbing for what felt like hours, and this was the most we had spoken.

Our ship was docked about a kilometre below: a silver fish jutting from the bottom of the Tooth, as close as it could get to the entrance without the Tooth's K-P field doing major damage.

We could have used gliders, but from what Galley told me, they were far more dangerous than the climb. Styron's Winds delighted in tearing to pieces anything more fragile than a starcruiser. Combine that with the odd effects of the Tooth's

K-P field — gravitational flex, spatial distortion — and climbing was the only remotely safe way of reaching the entrance.

“So why am I here?” I asked again, curious and anxious for any distraction from the mind-numbing scale of the planet around me.

“Like I told you, Marco wants to see a priest.”

“Doesn’t seem to me Marco would have much need for one.”

Galley laughed. We had spent a week together on the flight here. The man was taciturn, but he liked to laugh.

He reminded me of me as a young man, before things went wrong.

“Shows what you know,” Galley said. “Marco is in a bad way and he doesn’t want a *comeback*. Resurrection tech isn’t allowed on the Tooth. He just wants a priest. And Marco gets what he wants. Now shut up and climb or I might kick you off and get me a less loquacious holy man.”

“From the sound of things there’s not enough time.”

“Don’t you talk to me about time,” he said. “I know all about that.”

I didn’t feel cocky enough to continue the banter. I was too close and too scared.



Galley pulled me onto the ledge. “You can take off your helmet now.” He pressed a stud on a nearby wall.

A rail sprang up behind us. I stared over it, into the clouds. In the distance hovered a tooth, identical to this one, and beyond it another both corposant in the storm. I couldn’t help but think of Sophie. Styron’s teeth had been an obsession of hers. There were more than seventy thousand of them, almost identical, running above Styron’s equator. They floated, nacreous and enigmatic, shrieking at the heavens, a vast wall of radio waves.

Even here I could not escape memories of home: Vargis and the grand cathedral Amon. I had spent the last twenty years of my life, trying to drive away the memory of my sister as I rose in the ranks of the priesthood. I went from tending the funereal lilies as a young acolyte to whispering away sins. All the while fighting the sin brewing in my own blood, the desire for revenge.

Galley had come to me, and my Prefect recommended me for the job.

I had tried so hard not to end up in this place and yet everything had conspired to pull me here.

A door opened in the side of the tooth. Galley dipped his head. “After you.”

I walked inside and left the storms behind. I never expected to see home again.



The door shut behind us. My ears popped as the air pressure equalised.

“Where’s Marco?”

“I’ll take you to him soon, don’t you worry. Thought I’d show you to your rooms first.”

We left the vestibule and walked into another hallway. The floor was carpeted, the walls the stony material of the artefact, covered in places by tapestries and murals depicting old scenes of the colonisation of the Vargis Sector.

I had asked where Marco was, but in truth he was everywhere here. His face was woven into every scene, just as his presence was woven in history.

Marco from two hundred years earlier, leading the raids on the Nagatelle Trade Initiative. He stood, a giant of a man, sword in one hand (actually a very specialised Electromagnetic Pulse generator), rifle in the other.

Marco at the head of the Iowa Congress, negotiating the peace treaty, just before he staged the Barnatile Coup. I noted the absence of any celebration of Marco’s drug wars, or of the millions of executions served out in his name. Fields of dead, each corpse with a single bullet in the brain.

Finally, a great fresco of Marco’s last flight. The one which ended here and allowed him to fade away from history. As much as a man like Marco can.

All these images stirred so many emotions in me that the vertigo returned in a wave. I’d given my life to the church to escape this meeting. And yet I was here, regardless of all that I done to avoid it.

Marco got what he wanted. And he wanted a priest.



I stared out the window of my room, slowly sipping my whisky. The aches in my fingers and my back were fading. So much pain to get here. But it was worth it; it had to be.

Here, everything was writ large. Storms the size of continents played out beneath me. Great bands of cloud, alternating grey and white, streaked from East to West. Below, winds hurtled around the planet at over 500 metres a second. To the south a vast tempest had raged for centuries. Radiation crowded the sky. It was beautiful.

Styron was like nothing I had ever experienced. Carvel and Vargis with their eighty-three diamond towers apiece, and Covar where smoke and fire reigned; those muddy, rocky worlds were insipid in comparison. From a distance, as we approached her, Styron possessed the majesty given only to Gas Giants, seething and quiet all at

once. Up close, she still inspired awe. Lightning crackled and lit the sky, burst after magnificent burst.

Marco had chosen a planet of fury and mystery. Styron was not the only Gas Giant to possess Teeth. Maupin and Atwood were also braceleted with them, but they were situated at the other end of the galaxy.

I wondered what Marco might have discovered about this place. He had been living here as a recluse for a quarter of a century.

All that the rest of the galaxy understood was that the Teeth produced a very powerful electro-magnetic field, their flotation created by the generation of a Koczor-Podkletnov stabilisation — antigravity of a type we had never perfected.

The Teeth were alien artefacts almost as enigmatic as the day they were first encountered, and one of only thirty or so such artefacts discovered in the known galaxy in this time. Of course, discoveries were happening every day. The galaxy was in a constant state of catch up. There was so much going on; so much being catalogued that even artefacts like the Teeth were given the barest scrutiny.

I did a swift self-diagnostic. The weapon was quiescent — coiling in my spine, beating softly in time with my heart — but I could arm it with a word.

There was a knock on my door.

“Hope you’re decent, Father,” Galley said.

“I’m fine,” I said and he entered.

“It’s Marco. He wants to see you.”



His room was sparsely furnished, just a bed and a single huge window perfectly framing the next tooth along.

The temperature was set a little high for comfort and the air smelt of lavender. I was reminded of Sophie. She’d fill her rooms with that fragrance. The smell and heat were smothering. I clenched my fists and took a deep breath, driving thoughts of Sophie back down.

Marco measured me in a single gaze as I walked through the door. He smiled, mistaking my rage for something else. “Don’t look so shocked, Father. You knew I was dying.”

“I would prefer it if you called me Simon.”

“Simon, eh? Simon, even the great Marco dies.”

“Do you fear it?”

“What do you think?”

I almost said, "I think you should. I think you will burn in hell." But I held that inside. "I think you look tired."

Indeed, as the anger passed, Marco's appearance shocked me. He had withered; gone was the near giant of the murals and the histories. He lay in a nest of life support. Sentient med-units crawled over his skin. Tubes drained and fed him. Despite all this, his voice remained strong and his eyes bright and hard.

"More tired than you will ever know," he said. "Live long enough and you can no longer endure the cancer treatments and analeptics, nor the ceaseless little agonies of life. Comfort lies in the past and I move away from it at the speed of sixty seconds in a minute." He gazed out the window then and took a deep breath. "I've been the architect of so many awful things. Terrible things. I've even enjoyed some of them."

"Do you want me to absolve you of all your sins?"

Marco laughed until he coughed, bringing up blood-speckled spit. One of the machines attached to his body chirruped for a second. Respirators whined and renal engines engaged.

"Not at all. I am in no way a religious man. Do not be offended, but an afterlife does not interest me. Indeed, I would be disappointed to find that such a thing exists. But I was raised to the church. An orphan taught by priests, who became a tyrant — what does that say of God, eh?"

His eyes locked with mine. I did not look away. At last his gaze softened, and he gave a wry smile. "I think the orphan boy in me wants a piece of my childhood here. A piece I know will listen." He wiped the blood from his lips. Cracks ran deep and red over their surface. "Your church had a lot of support from me during the War. I helped fill its ranks, you could say."

I knew that. I also knew that we'd done a lot of work to wear away the guilt of that Faustian bargain. The Church had been instrumental in several battles, virtually handing victory over to Marco. There was blood on our hands; Marco did not need to remind me of it. And there would be blood once more.

But what of it, I thought. The Church has known blood since the days of St Paul. The Church was born in blood.

"You know, I once toyed with becoming a priest."

"What happened?" I asked him.

Marco's sharp face darkened. "Things changed. I gave into temptation." He coughed again and paled, more tubes and infusers came alive around his bed. "We'll talk in a little while, Father. There is plenty of time left. This death is a controlled one. I may not want a *comeback*, but I do not wish to die just yet. Now I need sleep. This time, this first time, all I wanted was to meet you."



Galley waited at the door to escort me to my quarters. I was shaking as we left the room, my back burning. I could have killed Marco then, released the triggers and sent us all to hell. But I wanted him to *know*. Otherwise I was just doing the old man a service. It had to happen at the right moment. God how I hated him, hated the life he had made of mine. I would not destroy him until he knew.



The next week passed swiftly, my mornings spent with Marco. His past was related to me in non-linear fragments. He boasted of his achievements: the seeding of the outer system with harbour habitats, the construction of The Parliament of Liberation, the government he tore down when it turned against him, and a dozen other tales I already knew from the history files. He explained how he escaped from the Oligarchy's prison, mud and blood. It was all mud and blood.

There were murders and executions. These he would often boast about, before growing defensive — eyes narrowing — and sending me from his room, whispering, “You didn't know. You couldn't know what *I've* been through.”

His heart rate rose as he cried out his innocence, machines all around him moving into action, soothing him.

“I'm not here to judge you,” I said, after a tale of one particularly grizzly execution. “That is no priest's job.”

Marco smiled, his eyes softening as the drugs came into effect. “Leave it to your boss, eh?”

“That's right,” I said.

But the truth was, I had judged him. Two decades ago. I judged him worthy of death and, against all the odds, I had the opportunity to mete out punishment.

Yet the right moment never presented itself. Truth thickened my tongue and, every day, terror grew inside me. The guilt of not doing it. The guilt of wanting to.

And the tooth was always around me. The constant hum of its machinery and beneath it, some deeper sensation: a movement or a sound that was intermittent but potent. It seeped into me and I found myself waiting for it, cursing its irregularity. Just when I thought I had its rhythms understood it would change.

After one particular session with Marco, Galley was waiting for me.

“I've got something to show you,” he said. “A word of warning though, the K-P field's a little weaker there.” He laughed. “I spent so long there as a child, Marco says it stunted my growth. I'm half the man I should have been.”

“We are all our own men,” I said. “No matter the shape of the pitcher, it is filled with all that we need to live fully.”

Galley looked at me. “Do you really believe that?”

“If I didn’t believe that I wouldn’t be here.”

Galley led me to a north-facing balcony. Not another tooth in sight, just the turbulent curvature of the horizon and so much of it! Styron had grown somehow larger. I felt its vastness, its deep pull in my bones, and was again overwhelmed.

I held the balcony rail and squeezed until my hands ached.

I had to do it soon. But killing did not come naturally to me even if my victims were a monster and his lackey.

“This is my favourite place. I do most of my thinking, staring out into the storms.” Galley smiled. “You can’t see the stars from here. Styron’s auroras are just a little too bright. There are twenty-eight moons up there, but beyond the great shadows of their passage, all you get are these clouds of ammonia-ice and the secrets that lightning exposes.”

Here, not clinging for grim life, I could appreciate the beauty of each lightning burst, the bruised and subtle colours they revealed in the racing air.

“Marco isn’t the bad man you thought he was,” Galley said, and I took a step back.

“What do you mean?”

“Most people think Marco is evil. Well, he’s looked after me. Raised me. I would not exist if it weren’t for him. None of us would.”

I smiled, grimly. “A lot of people *don’t* exist because of him.”

Galley laughed. “Marco’s a much better man than he was. People change, otherwise he wouldn’t have sent for you.” He hesitated, then frowned. I have spent hundreds of hours in the confessionals of Vargis’ Cathedral Complex: I know such pauses, and waited for the revelation to come. But the moment passed and Galley shook his head. “Enough of this, time to cook dinner,” he said.

Galley opened the door behind us and we walked back into the tooth.



I had been but two weeks in the priesthood. One of those damn ecclesiastical types as Sophie liked to call me.

A bored cop, smelling so thickly of cigarettes that I felt sick, met me at the morgue.

“You ready,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, as though I could ever be ready.

“Sorry for your loss,” he muttered as an afterthought.

There wasn't much left of her — the Biter weaponry was brutally efficient. Bullet-borne nano-chewers had torn through her nervous system, turning it to goo, then started on the outer limbs. No *comebacks* with the damage she had sustained, even if we could have afforded the technology.

Her eyes snapped open, and I saw the ruined empty orbits where her eyes should be. *Kill him.* Her voice was at once pained and petulant. *Why isn't he dead?*

Soon.

The morgue shuddered and groaned, masonry smashing at our feet.

"Earthquake," the cop said, and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke in my face. I coughed and woke up.

The tooth jolted again, almost throwing me from the mattress. The shuddering increased and machinery roared. The bed flexed, extruding limbs and holding me tight until the shaking stopped. After a few moments it released its grip.

I rolled out of bed. My inner ear had had enough changes in pressure and gravity over the past few weeks. I staggered to the bathroom and threw up.

It was all too much. For all I knew the Tooth was about to drop us into the crushing weight of the atmosphere beneath the storms. At least the ending would be quick.

The shaking stopped with my third round of vomiting.

A hand gripped my shoulder and I looked up, wiping spit and bile from my lips, at a wan-faced Galley.

"Storm flared up. Strong one, just as the tooth was dipping. It happens." He patted my back. "Just came to see if you were all right."

"Yes, for the most part."

"My cooking doesn't agree with you?"

"Being shaken to within an inch of my life doesn't agree with me. I was never good at fairground rides — anything more vigorous than a Ferris wheel made me sick."

"Well, you've bought tickets on the wrong ride now, haven't you, Father?"



By morning, with Styron's weak sun a dim stain on the huge storm-gripped horizon, I felt better: doubts discarded. The tooth across from us appeared to have dipped a little in the night.

"Nothing unusual there. If one moves, they all move," Galley explained, pouring me a coffee. He laughed. "When I was a kid I called them toothquakes. Sometimes they'll all drop a kilometre or so. Marco knows the pattern far better than I do, but they even catch him out sometimes."

"I'm heading down to the ship, checking for damage. Can't imagine there will be much, we've experienced a lot worse."

"How long have you been working for Marco?"

Galley grinned. "A long time, Father." He paused as his earlet beeped, and listened. His grin widened. "Marco wants to see you."



"I trust last night's tremors didn't disturb you too much," Marco said. He was out of bed, sitting in a wicker chair by the window. When he turned his head towards me his skin lost its opacity, making his face nothing more than bone and vein and penetrating eyes.

"My stomach didn't appreciate it. But I'm okay."

"Styron doesn't like these teeth. She struggles in their grip, I think. But we all have our cross to bear, father, even planets. Styron sends her petulant storms. The shaking almost always makes me feel better." Marco smiled. "It is one thing over which I have no control. I choose the moment of my death — the cancers in me are held in perfect stasis — and this entire tooth is fitted out to serve my every whim. But when Styron rages, there is nothing I can do."

He spoke then of his childhood in Vargis: the beatings, the blistering sun whose bite was almost as cruel as the Oligarchy's Guard. And then his own rise through the Guard, becoming what he had most hated.

"If it hadn't been me it would have been someone else. It was a powder keg and the Oligarchy was too blind to see that they might be under threat. They'd stopped thinking about their citizenry as anything but commodities.

"When one of the overseers killed my sister it just drove me to seek revenge. Fools, they thought it would drive me into submission."

I blinked.

They killed his sister. Like Marco's soldiers had killed mine.

I clenched and unclenched my fists a moment until I realised Marco had stopped speaking, and was staring at me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said, keeping my voice slow and calm. "I lost my sister too. But it didn't mean I went out and — I didn't know you had a sister."

"I had the information suppressed," Marco said. "It still hurts, but not as much as th—"

The tooth shook, once, twice.

Hard.

I fell to the ground. Marco crashed from his chair, broken med-tubes jugged from his skin, writhing shrill and stupid in the absence of signals.

I lay there, the wind knocked from me.

Now. *Now.*

Marco stared at me a moment, his gaze almost expectant, and then he started crawling back to the bed. I told myself that he wanted to die, he wanted me to kill him. He coughed, and this time blood flowed from his mouth. A dozen machines screamed out, their tendrils swinging in his direction but unable to reach.

I got to my feet, and stepped towards him.

"Is everyone all right?" Galley asked, his face pale. He looked from me, to Marco and back again, his green eyes flaring.

"Quick," I said. "Help me get him to his machines."

We carried Marco back onto the bed and there his life support sought him out, syringes and tubes sliding back into his body.

"He'll be out for a while," Galley said. The last quake was bad. I nearly fell." He shivered, his face lit with a sickly pallor. "The air just gets thicker, and here at the equator the winds are strongest. I'd be long gone and long dead. Either burnt up in the fall — because there's a lot of mass here and you pick up a huge amount of speed going down — or crushed. It would have been quick."

"And a *comeback?*"

"Like I said, we don't do them here, no brain scans, no rebuilders. Marco doesn't want the temptation. One slip and you're dead."



The next day Marco called me early. I could not tell if his fall had injured him. He looked the same to me, in his nest of machinery.

"Do you know what all this is?" Marco asked, without preamble. "The Teeth, why they're here?"

"Nobody knows," I said, pouring a little tea for Marco. Gramil tea, strong and bitter — from the Harmian system eight light years away. The revolutions that rocked Gramil may have already destroyed it. Despite death and tyrants, they still produced some of the finest tea in the sector. In part their wars were about that very thing. Maybe they don't make tea in Gramil any more.

Still it was good. We drank in silence for a while — Marco leaving tiny red stains on his fine china cup.

"I know," Marco said. "It's a clock. Its engineers were ostentatious, no doubt, but it is ostentation laden with melancholy. Styron's teeth are linked with Attwood and

Maupin. It's little more than a very accurate timepiece. Each tooth is in constant communication with the others." He chuckled. "Its signals are sent at light speed. A very long wind up for a clock, don't you think?"

"I am sure this civilisation had faster than light tech — even we possess FTL drives! So why build a clock that would not have started working until after its engineers were long gone? I have my own theories and they boil down to this: these teeth are a testament that time passes for all things.

"No matter how many *comebacks* you have, how great your empire. It all ends. These teeth dance, following commands almost a million years old, and respond with signals that will, in turn, not be answered for twice that." He patted his bed. "All of this will be less than the memory of dust, by then. Only the teeth will remain, until even they wear down. It's a great feat of engineering, and a greater lesson. It humbled me, in time." He chuckled and took another sip of his tea.

Sophie was eighteen when agents of Marco killed her. She'd walked in the way of a bullet and it ate her life out. Marco's empire was on the wane then. Tyrants fall eventually, and his decline had been dramatic.

Marco smiled. "But that is not the true mystery here, is it? I suppose you're ready to kill me now?"

"What? Of course not!" I spluttered and reddened and Marco ignored me.

"I hope you're not relying on those explosives in your spine. They were disarmed before you had them implanted. I've been watching you, Simon, like all the others. I owned the surgeon who did the work." Marco sighed. "All my clones come here to kill me, each with inbuilt reasons for hating me. My reasons for hating someone else. Sophie's real name is Kyreen. She was my sister."

I roared and threw myself towards him.

"Cadmus," Marco said. I froze, unable to even lift a finger. "A simple voice trigger, like the voice trigger for your suicide bomb. We think alike, wouldn't you say? Kyreen loved these teeth, she was utterly fascinated by them."

Sophie had loved them, too. I wanted to beat his face into a pulp. I wanted to kill him, slowly and terribly.

Marco saw my hatred unveiled in my eyes, and he responded with such a look of compassion. This monster whom I had longed to destroy.

"I am sorry to have filled you with such hatred. I really am, but I needed something to keep you all focused. Hatred is so much easier than love, and less obvious to spies."

He shuffled towards me, his machinery trailing behind him, and brushed my face with a brittle old hand. "Are you familiar with the concept of Spartoi? I've locked you there but you can speak."

I said nothing.

"Very well, then," Marco said. "They were warrior clones, the Dragon's Teeth of legend.

"Ancient Greece. A little pagan for your tastes, no doubt. The warrior Cadmus slayed a dragon and then, on advice from a god — never the best thing — he planted its teeth and from them sprung the Spartoi. Sown men. A band of warriors.

"After my fall, I trusted no-one. Of course, I'd never really trusted anyone. I surrounded myself with machines. And I created an army of clones — sleepers, of course — all modified so they didn't bear any resemblance to their maker, and fed false memories that had them obsessed with me? Truth is you're nothing but a cipher."

"You're lying."

Marco smiled. "When I was a young man, not much older than you, I used to dream of my sister: the morgue they took her to, the police officer and his damn cigarettes. And her eyes, the hate in her eyes. It took me a long time to realise that hate was mine."

"Why did you do this?"

"After my empire collapsed I wanted to rule again, and this time do it right." Marco sighed. "It was a fool's dream. A sickness. As the years passed and I watched you all grow into twisted ruined things, I realised it would never work. That it couldn't work. I am a monster, yes. But I am also a man and I feared the horrible thing I'd done.

"So I called you all back, one by one, hundreds of you, waiting to be activated without realising it. Waiting for my return. They are dead. All I could do was end their suffering. All of them, all of my dragon's teeth came but for you."

"And now you'll kill me," I said.

"No. I've had enough of killing, Simon. You do not deserve it. You've struggled with this and it hasn't consumed you. I've murdered too many people.

"If you must hate me, hate me for the lie I made of your life. But there is more to you than hatred." He walked back to his bed and lay down. "I'll be dead soon, and with my death you'll find you can move. Leave me here, it's all I ask. My bones will fall to dust just as this Tooth will one day fall, and all that I have done will be forgotten."

He tapped a code into the master med-unit and the machines fell from his flesh. "It is so good to be free of these shackles." Marco turned his head away from me and stared out at the window, laughter on his lips, his voice the barest whisper. "It's funny, you know. Cadmus's Spartoi wanted to kill him, too." He looked at me once again. "Please look after Galley for me — another clone, a brother to us both though I did not drive him mad with false memories. You are a better man than me. There is no death in your life, for all that you may have wished otherwise. You have never killed and I respect you for it."

In a little while his breathing stilled, and I found that I was no longer frozen. I walked to his bed and did not know whether to weep or rage. I did neither. I just stood there, staring down at the old man's corpse.

"So it is done," Galley said behind me. I turned. His eyes were wet with tears. Today we had both lost so much, and gained as well...

"There are no *comebacks* for him," I said. "Where do we go now?"

"Back to the ship. Marco's ghosts haunt this place. I don't ever want to see these teeth again."



Styron shrank behind us, banded with storms, wild flaring dots and ovals. I stared down at her. Marco was dead and there would be no more killing there. Just the teeth, responding and replying to signals eight hundred thousand years old. An ancient clock with a message that all things pass. Even hatred.

My head spun. Who was I? What was real and what was not? My rage-filled life had been a lie. I couldn't return to Vargis now. I didn't want to. Galley patted my back, startling me.

"Going to engage the FTL now," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." I paused. "Galley?"

He looked at me.

"Who am I?"

"You're Simon. You're a priest, and you are my brother."

"Where are we going?"

"Far away," Galley said. "We're going to find a place where Marco's name is not even a whisper of a memory."

"And what will we do there?"

Galley smiled. "We will live our lives, brother."

Passenger Dossier

Name: Trent Jamieson

History: Trent lives in Brisbane with his wife Diana.

Writing Credits: Trent has had fiction published in *Aurealis*, *Eidolon* and *Nemonymous*. His collection *Reserved for Travelling Shows* is available through Prime books.

The Last Cyberpunk

...Will McIntosh

Somebody had flooded Bit-Town. The Milkman — all seven-foot five of him, dapper in crisp white uniform and dark aviation glasses — bodysurfed down Broad Street in the floodwater rather than take the time to find the source and close the spigot. This sort of thing happened all the time, ever since everyone shifted from digital to organic and the big corporations shut down their security.

The Milkman spotted a couple of live jack-ins in black jumpsuits; they were behind him on water scooters. He didn't recognize them — must be retro-freaks having a look around. They sped up to overtake him, probably planning to boot him out for a laugh. They were in for a surprise: no newbie retro-freaks were going to boot The Milkman.

A steep drop loomed in the street ahead. The Milkman hooked a street lamp and hung a sharp right, picking up a current running through the front doors of Skinny's cyber-brothel. The retro-freaks followed. Unwise. The floodwater ripped him through the building's main hallway like a bug flushed down a toilet, and he ate it up. He rode the roaring torrent around a corner, into an open stairwell and down the spiraling rapids.

The retro-freaks burst into the stairwell above, engines howling. The clown in the lead didn't cut sharp enough to make the first turn. His scooter plowed into the concrete wall and he followed, face-first. He disappeared. The scooter, now a piece of detritus twisting in the current, tripped the second rider, who tumbled head over ass down the stairs and slammed into the wall at the bottom. She also disappeared. As easy as that, the retro-freaks were gone.

The Milkman exited on the ground floor, rode the swell down the narrow street till he spotted an entrance to the sky track, then hopped a sky car. The sleek steel bullet whisked up the track which wound above and through Bit-Town like a reckless rollercoaster. The Milkman relished the ride. He stared up at the Bit-Town skyline, admiring the skyscrapers that reached impossibly high in the cloudless vermilion sky, sometimes merging, twisting together like electrical wires, then shooting off again in different directions. Amazing what you could do with

architecture when gravity was nothing more than an agreed-upon abstraction. The Milkman climbed—



“Grandpa? Hey, live person here!” Bruce felt a gentle squeeze on his shoulder. He jacked out, removed his goggles and earphones, and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

“Who’s that?” he said. Long sessions left him disoriented lately, like he was just waking up. He shook his head vigorously. “Hey Jess.” His granddaughter stood over him.

“Hey Pop.” She frowned. “You need a haircut. Jesus, you look like Albert Einstein!” She brushed at his hair until he swatted her hand away. “Okay, okay, I’ll stop. But get it cut.”

Bruce mumbled noncommittally, struggled to his feet and stretched.

“You ready to go?” Jess asked.

Bruce sighed, slumped his shoulders. “All my friends are dying on me.”

Jess nodded sympathetically.

“Thanks for coming with. Let me just put something on,” he said.

Navigating through piles of old hardware, he led Jessica out of his store and into the adjoining apartment, trying to ignore an ache in his left knee. “So how are you?”

Jessica caught her foot on an ancient holovid game player. It skittered across the floor. “Jeeze Grandpa, why don’t you get someone to haul away all this crap and make this your living room?” He didn’t answer — it was an old argument. “I’m great. Busy at work, but great.”

Bruce dug through clothes piled on the kitchen table. Jessica looked intently at her hands, turning them over and back, then scanning her legs and feet, front and back.

“I can confirm you’ve still got all your limbs if you like. Shall we count them together?” Bruce said.

Jessica smiled. “I’ve got to perform a ‘visual surveillance of extremities’ every half hour. I’ve got my pain receptors turned completely off. I have to make sure I haven’t injured myself without knowing it.”

Bruce furrowed his wiry brows in concern. “Why did you have to turn them off?”

Jessica grasped the bottom of her white t-shirt, smiled sheepishly. “I’ll show you. Get ready.” She pulled the shirt up to reveal her belly. A sensuous, full-lipped mouth smiled at him from where her navel should have been.

“AAHH! Shit!” he cried, jerking. He shielded his eyes with his hand for a second, then dropped the hand and gaped.

“You like it?” Jessica asked. The lips parted, displaying perfect white teeth. Then it stuck out a pink tongue. “Isn’t it great?”

“Jesus Christ, Jessica. Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the hell did you get a mod for? You’re thirty-five years old, not nineteen!”

“Thirty-seven. You trying to tell me I’m old? Now ninety-three, that’s old.” Mercifully she let the t-shirt drop.

He eyed her midsection suspiciously “I just don’t get it. I will never understand why anyone would want to *distort* themselves like that.”

Jessica came over and tugged up the right sleeve of Bruce’s t-shirt, revealing a faded tattoo: a skeleton with an old USB connector running from its head to a PC. Underneath, it read “permanently jacked.” Once colorful, the tattoo was now shades of grey and green. To drive her point home she playfully flicked one of his four gold stud earrings.

“It’s not the same thing,” he protested. “That’s an extra *mouth*. Do you have to feed it, like your car and your house and your computer?”

“No Grandpa, I don’t have to feed it. It doesn’t lead anywhere. It’s only ornamental. Why are you so stuck in the past?” She spread her hands to indicate the room’s decor — just about everything in it was pre-2050. “Everyone else your age adjusted to the new technology just fine.”

“Everyone else my age is dead.”

She stopped smiling and looked at him seriously. “Grandpa, I worry about you. You haven’t had a customer in your store in years. You spend all your time jacked into that antique system. I’m not asking you to move. Just install some organics in this place. A physio monitor that can alert the hospital if anything happens to you. A net hookup so you can talk to live people...”

“I can talk to people on the hard net.”

“There *are* no people on the hard net.”

“Sure there are. How would you know anyway? Hard tech is making a comeback. Retro-freaks are popping up all over. Just now when I was jacked in there were two retros I had to give an ass-whooping.”

“I’m sure you did, Milkman. At least consider getting an organic hookup for emergencies, even if you don’t use it, okay?”

Bruce nodded. Sure, he’d consider it. Then he’d decide against it.

“You ready to go?” she asked.

At the top of the stoop she put one hand under his arm and helped him down the steps. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t complain. He took them one at a time.



There were eight people at Neal's funeral. Just eight people to honor one of the greatest cyber-architects who ever lived. Bruce eyed the freshly turned soil that was about to be piled on top of Neal. He was wearing his full hard-tech outfit in Neal's honor — sleeveless skunker T, fiber-cable finger wrap, soft-soled boots. People shot glances his way, amused by the old-fashioned garb, but he was used to that.

Bruce felt a clap on his back, and turned. He smiled broadly when he saw who it was. Make that nine people. "I thought I was gonna be the only person here who had any appreciation of who was being buried," he said. Bruce had only met Bill a handful of times in the flesh, but they'd had a lot of adventures together in Bit-Town, many of them with Neal.

"That's a great man lying in that box," Bill said. He looked good for ninety or so — his back relatively straight, his eyes alert. His long white hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he was wearing a black t-shirt that swam with constantly shifting 0's and 1's. "You see the obituary in the *Times*?"

"No," Bruce said. "Any good?"

"It didn't even *mention* that he was one of the architects of Bit-Town," Bill said in disgust. "All this shit about the loved ones he left behind, like his primary contribution to mankind was his ability to breed."

Bruce hissed in disgust. They stared at the coffin. A wren hopped in the dirt nearby, pecking idly.

"Haven't seen you in Bit-Town in quite a while," Bruce said.

"Too depressing," Bill said. "All those empty streets." He frowned, shook his head. "It's too much like this graveyard. I want to remember it like it was in the past. I try to live in the present as best I can."

"Please, don't tell me you've bought into this organic crap!"

"Well, I haven't 'bought in' — I'm not happy about it. Give me a fucking Hydro-Cycle over one of these squirt things any day," Bill said, waving his hand. "But I use it. You've got to admit, organic has its pluses. No pollution, no repairs..." Bruce just stared at him. Bill talked faster. "I mean, you've gotta use it for the medical whether you like it or not. The cholesterol cleansing, anti-clotting... I'd be dead of colon cancer if it wasn't for organics."

"Well, maybe *you've* gotta use it for medical," Bruce spat, "I don't let those fucking tubes anywhere near me."

Bill shrugged. "Well, like I said, I'm not happy about it."



When Bruce got home, he propped his feet on the coffee table and turned on the flat-TV. There were only three stations left, run by holdouts and retro-freaks. They only showed reruns of old pre-2050 shows, and that was fine with him. The crap that passed for entertainment these days was intolerable.

He watched old commercials for a while, but they didn't hold his interest, and he nodded off. When he woke, he wasn't sure where he was. He stared blankly at the TV, then around his living room, slowly getting his bearings.

The walls were decorated with weathered posters and pictures — Skunk-rock legends, skyboarders, Hackers, Cyber-architects. Most people today wouldn't even recognize them. Propped on a shelf by the TV, among video games and CD software, was a photo of his wife Andrea. It had been taken when she was in her thirties, dressed to kill in a cyber-chic cerulean blue outfit. The anguish he used to feel when he looked at her picture had long ago morphed into a warm, nostalgic longing. Just like the feeling he got when he jacked in and skated the deserted streets of Bit-Town.

Bruce struggled to get to his feet. On the third try he got his feet under him, and nearly tumbled forward into the table. Cursing, he headed back to the store. Staring down at his black Nikes as they shuffled along, he tried to remember when he had stopped walking normally, started taking little-old-man steps. He eased himself into his tattered recliner, and jacked in.



In the hours since he'd jacked out, someone had hacked into Bit-Town's core programming and fucked the place up good. A few entire blocks had been erased — ink blankness spotted the landscape. Worse, some of the remaining buildings were sprouting hair. He could not even see the bricks of the Three Penny Pub — it was covered with long blonde hair. A red crew-cut bristled out of the Bit-Town Security Building. Many windows were now fat, rectangular eyes, bulging obscenely from the slick surfaces, blinking occasionally.

The Milkman trembled with rage. Fucking vandals. Someone was going to pay for this. In the distance he heard the snarl of engines. He hopped in his milk truck and sped off.

He found them at the pinball park, power-skating up and down the curved steel sides of the park, blatantly violating virtual gravity etiquette. Both sported flat, featureless faces and wore black jumpsuits, same as last time.

He left his truck and snuck into the park, staying in the shadow of bumpers and ramps. He squatted behind a flipper and waited. The woman jetted down the backflash, kicked off a drop target and shot across the glossy horizontal playing surface. The Milkman sprang forward as she sped by, and knocked the power-board out from under her with his foot. She took the hit on her shoulder and rolled, avoiding being jacked out. Good. He wanted a word before booting her ass out of Bit-Town. The other newbie was coming right at him. The Milkman pivoted, dropped to one knee and whipped his arm around, planning to cut the newbie at the knees.

The arm did not extend, and the skater flew by untouched. The Milkman's arm was numb. One side of his face curled in an involuntary rictus snarl. What the hell was happening? He dropped to the ground and lay there, unable to move. This wasn't possible. Nobody alive could hack The Milkman's system, certainly not a couple of newbie retro-freaks.

"What's the matter dick-wad ice-cream man?" The faceless man stood over him, hands on hips. Lifting one of his pointed black boots, he stomped The Milkman in the ribs, once, twice. Then he took a step back, cocked his foot like a punter and kicked The Milkman's face.



"Pop?" Jessica's voice came through a thick haze. He didn't want to find it, wanted to sink back into blackness. "Pop? You need to wake up." Her voice was snuffly, as if she'd been crying. Bruce struggled to shake off the thick stupor. One eye popped open. Jessica stood over him, blurry. "Oh God, he's awake." She started to cry.

"Pop? It's Evan. Your son." Evan? Evan lived in Vancouver. What was he doing here? And why did he find it necessary to specify their genealogy? Bruce knew his own damned son's voice. Jessica's husband Joel was there as well, standing in the background. "Pop, listen to me," said Evan. "You've had a pretty bad stroke."

Bruce tried to sit up. He managed to lift his head off the pillow, but that was all. The right side of his body felt like it was submerged in wet cement.

Jessica cupped the back of his head and gently pushed his forehead till he sank back into the pillow. "Lie back, Pop, don't try to move yet." Tears were pouring down her cheeks. She brushed hair off his face. He sank back into unconsciousness.



Andrea was with him. They were both jacked in like old times: laughing, cursing, cranking skunker music too loud, visiting the old haunts in Bit-Town. It felt very real, and when he woke he was horribly disappointed to find himself lying in a hospital bed. As his senses cleared he noticed the thing pressed against his left ear. A pink intestine was *connected* to his ear, probably sticking something fleshy right into his ear canal, something that sprouted smaller tendrils that had crawled into his nasal cavity, down his throat into his lungs, up into his brain. He swallowed. He could feel the soft tendrils lying in the back of his throat. He tried to scream. A weak, warbling, dry croak came out.

“Pop?” Jessica ran into the room from the hall. “You awake?” She touched his forehead with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, I was getting something to drink. Dad and Joel are at dinner. How do you feel?”

“Get this thing *out of me*,” he said, his speech a mumbled slur. “Jesus, this is miserable, get it the hell out of me.”

“Try to relax. I know how you feel about organic technology, but if it wasn’t for this you’d be brain-damaged, or dead.”

“I’d rather be dead,” he moaned.

“Shhh, you don’t mean that. I’ll get the nurse to program the medi-probe to stimulate an endorphin release for you—”

“I don’t want fucking endorphins! Get it out of me and give me a damned shot of morphine!”

“They don’t have morphine any more. You’ll see, you’ll feel better. And you’ll be out of here in a day.”



Two days later Bruce stood in front of his new apartment and watched Jessica shoot down the street, hugged inside a squirt. She looked like she was floating on air inside the transparent tube that ran along the sidewalk, but it was actually fluid. It was eerie how quiet the streets were since the squirt had replaced most of the fuel-cell vehicles. She disappeared around the corner, behind one of the hundreds of colorful, identical assisted-living cubes that lined the streets.

As Bruce turned to go inside the apartment, he heard Jessica’s voice in his mind, reminding him that organic technology was not alive, had no consciousness, was only specialized tissue. But when he pressed his palm against the door of his apartment and the door sort of *stretched* to form an opening for him to walk through, her words were not reassuring. He felt like he was being watched as he walked down the hallway on

the fleshy floor. It felt like he was walking on corpses. The house sensed the weakness on his right side, and the floor lifted slightly to meet his right foot as it came down.

His furniture looked awkward here — too solid. He unpacked boxes. His hard tech stuff would have to wait until he recovered enough to drive — he hadn't wanted anyone touching it but him.

Every time he touched a wall he flinched, sickened by the warmth of it and the way it gave under his touch. The whole fucking place was alive.

The first thing he did was put up his posters. He didn't have any stick-em, only thumb tacks. Blood seeped onto the backs of his posters when he pushed the tacks into the wall. He felt a little better when the posters were up. It gave him something that was not alive to focus on, and insulated him from those walls. That gave him an idea.

He pulled two big rolls of oversized, heavy-duty printer paper out of a box, and set about covering the floor and the remaining bare spots on the walls with it. Better.

It was late afternoon when he finished putting his stuff away. He was tired, but not nearly as bad as he'd expected. Jessica had told him that the thing at the hospital had done some work on him beyond treating the stroke, but he preferred to believe he was feeling good because he was finally out of that freak-show hospital.

He sat on his couch and closed his eyes. He could not see the blood vessels in the walls, floor, fridge and heating vents, but he knew they were there. It made his skin crawl.

It had taken hours of arguing for Jessica to get him here. Like her grandmother, she didn't fight fair. Instead of making rational points she used tears. How the hell was he supposed to counter tears?

The truth was, she was right. He was too old and too sick to live on his own.

He looked around the place again, trying to muster some dribble of affection for his new home. Maybe when he had his system up, and his TV, it would be better. He sat, increasingly bored with no system to jack into, no TV or vids to watch. His right hand ached.

His gaze fell on the apartment's built-in system — a rounded mound of cobalt-blue flesh with one of those arteries snaking from it, curled neatly on a wheel affixed to the desk, like a living water hose. He knew that inside that mound of flesh was tissue a whole lot like brain tissue.

Twice in his life he'd tried jacking into an organic system. He hadn't liked it. Granted, that had been a long time ago. And it would be nice to have something to do, other people to talk to.

He sat down in front of it. For a moment he tried to find the on/off switch, then remembered that they didn't have one. They didn't run on power. You fed them.

He uncoiled the jack, trying to ignore how much it felt like holding a long, flaccid penis. A soft hiss of air whispered out of the end of the jack, as if it were waking up. He pressed it against the side of his head, felt it gently grip the outside of his ear, then felt tickling as thin coils made their way into his ear canal. He tried to relax his bunched shoulders, to breathe evenly, to go with it. He closed his eyes.

Images flashed past. Soft ocean waves, then a menu. He backhanded sweat from his brow and whispered, “search.” What did he want to try? Something familiar.

“Sulphur Dioxide, skunk-rock band?” suggested an inner voice that sounded like his, but was not. The system was pulling likely possibilities out of his mind before he thought them. A light breeze drifted through his mind, then he saw Sulphur Dioxide’s lead singer, Ewen Googan. A rush of angry energy coursed through him. Raking guitar licks pounded his ears. Foreign thoughts — technical music thoughts — filled his mind.

“No,” he said out loud. The image blanked. “Pre-2050 television shows,” he thought, “*The Uncouplers*.” He wasn’t sure if he had thought it, or the system had. An episode of *The Uncouplers* began, only it was three-dimensional and he was standing right in the middle of the action. China Beele strutted right by him. Aden Cole sat nearby, feet propped on a chipped desk.

“We have to assume something’s gone wrong,” Bruce said.

“So what do we do about it?” China Beele asked, turning to look at him. Jesus, he recognized this episode. He had just said one of Rando Coyle’s lines. Rando’s thoughts circled in Bruce’s head, mixing with his own.

“Jack out! Jack out!” he screamed.

As soon as the system beeped clear he yanked the jack from his ear, threw it aside, and lurched away from the desk, nearly falling down as his still weak right leg foundered. Stumbling to the couch, he sank into it and buried his face in his hands.



The sun was barely up, and Bruce was already sitting behind the wheel of his car. The vinyl steering wheel, its finish pitted and cracked, felt solid under his palms. Hard, cool, and dead. He started the ignition, pulled a CD out of the storage bin — The Snowmen — popped it in and cranked the volume. It took two tries to put the car in drive with his weak right hand. He steered with his left — it felt peculiar.

After the drive and the strain of loading the car, he was exhausted. If the couch had still been at his old place he would have taken a nap, but there were only piles of unsalvageable hard-tech machinery and dust bunnies. He headed back to the new apartment.

Halfway there he stopped for fuel, pulling around back where they kept the fuel cell pump, enjoying the curious glances. As he pulled the pump out of the cradle he noticed a note posted on it. It was to “our valued customers,” and said they were discontinuing the sale of hydrogen fuel due to low demand. Organic feed only from now on.

As far as Bruce knew this was the last fuel station in the area that sold hydrogen. He sat down on the concrete lip of the pump island and stared blindly at one of his bald black tires. A cold dread filled him at the thought of going back to that apartment.

The Snowmen blaring, the engine roaring, he drove. He turned left instead of right, going nowhere in particular, using up his precious hydrogen. Picking up speed, he put his right hand on the wheel at twelve o'clock, and took his left hand off. That felt more natural, though he could barely feel the wheel. It occurred to him that it would not be surprising if a ninety-three year old man who had just suffered a stroke were to lose control of his vehicle.

But eventually he pulled up in front of the slab of meat. Leaving everything in his car, he dragged himself inside and crawled into bed.

“Bruce, your hydration level is quite low,” the house said in its mellifluous voice. Bruce jolted upright. There was a tit of sorts jutting from the wall. It was close enough that he could have leaned right over and had a good suck if he was so inclined.

“Get that thing out of my face, and don't talk to me,” he snapped. The house didn't reply. The tit receded into the wall.

The next time he woke, he found three tentacles trailing up into his bed. One covered his mouth and nose, and was pumping air in and out of him — breathing him. The other two disappeared under the sheets. Feeling sick, he lifted the sheet and peered. One tube ended in three fingers pressing against the center of his chest. The other disappeared up his ass.

“Get off of me!” He howled. The tubes slithered off the bed and retracted into the wall. “Do not touch me, do not do anything to me! Leave me alone!” No response. He pulled the sheet over his head, hugged his legs to his chest and closed his eyes.



The house told him Jessica was at the door, but he pretended he was sleeping. Eventually she talked the house into letting her in.

He heard her crackling footsteps on the paper, then felt a hand lightly brush his forehead. He kept his breathing even and didn't open his eyes. Eventually she went away.

She came back the next day, and this time she sat by the bed for a long time. Finally, she said, “You’re not really sleeping, are you?”

Reluctantly Bruce opened his eyes. “Don’t take it personally.” His throat was so dry he couldn’t swallow.

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“When I get hungry I just lean over and gnaw on the wall.”

Jessica smiled sadly, and brushed his cheek. “The apartment is going to get sick if you cover all the surfaces like this.”

“That would be terrible,” he said.

Jessica started to speak, but her eyes welled up and she stopped, trying to regain her composure. “I know what you’re doing. If this is what you want, I won’t try to stop you.” A tear started to roll. “But, Pop, you’re better than this.”

He didn’t say anything, but looked at Jessica and saw so much Andrea.

Eventually she leaned over and kissed his cheek. “I’ll come by later to see how you’re doing.”

He lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling and thinking.

Eventually, he pulled himself out of bed. It wasn’t Jessica’s tears that had swayed him, at least not completely. She’d made a good point.

He drank two cans of Jolt, wondering how long until they discontinued it because of low demand, and he would be forced to drink a synthesized version out of the house’s tits. He set up his computer, and fixed it to alert him when two retro-freaks in black jumpsuits showed up in Bit-town.

He only had to wait six hours. Maybe they were looking for him.



The Milkman drove the milk truck to his loft, a glass-walled space at the top of a cylindrical building resembling a lighthouse. He stayed on back roads — he wasn’t ready to meet Jack and Jill retro-freak just yet. They had been busy. Tower Center was now a giant udder, spewing milk high into the sky. There was a giant cow in the sky, mooing plaintively. These two had no respect for their elders.

Inside the loft he jacked into his virtual system and hacked Bit-town’s programming. It took thirty seconds to identify the two outside lines. Both came from the same address — looked like his visitors were a married couple from Vancouver. He made a few adjustments to their preferences. Then he went looking for them.

They weren’t hard to find — they were sky-diving off a skyscraper into a pool of Jell-o they’d built in the middle of Broad Street. He pulled his truck to within a block of them, then walked, limping only slightly, down the middle of the street.

“Hey honey, it’s the ice-cream man again,” Jeremy Dalton of Vancouver said. “I’ll take a toasted-almond. No, make that a creamsickle. What’s that you got there, your cow’s lead?” The Milkman just kept walking, eyes locked on his prey. One hundred meters away he began spinning the bolo in his hand. It circled his head slowly at first, and built speed until it was a whistling blur. Jeremy opened his mouth to make another wisecrack, and The Milkman let fly. The bolo ripped Jeremy off his feet and hurled him ten meters. He hit the pavement with an audible thud.

Alyx Dalton tried to fly away. The Milkman got his other bolo swinging and hurled it at her. She fell out of the sky like a shattered skeet, landing hard on the pavement. The Milkman pulled his sword from his belt and limped toward her.

Her eyes opened wide when she realized she hadn’t been booted by the fall. “Okay, enough is enough!” she said. The Milkman raised the sword in both hands. Alyx closed her eyes and screamed as he brought it down, cleanly severing her head. There was no blood — the exposed wounds were flat crimson planes. Alyx’s mouth formed a big “O” as her head rolled to a stop a few feet from her body. “Jesus, what’s going on? Why haven’t I jacked out?”

The Milkman grabbed her head and headed toward her husband.

“Jeremy, what’s going on?” Alyx’s head said. Before Jeremy could answer, the Milkman hacked off his head as well. Carrying one head under each arm and whistling tunelessly, he headed for his truck.

“Why haven’t we jacked out?” Jeremy’s head said to Alyx’s head.

“I don’t know. He must have done something to our programming.”

“You prick!” Jeremy shouted. “Who the hell do you think you are? This is public space, you can’t stop us from using it!” He looked at his wife. “Come on honey, let’s jack-out manually.”

“You don’t respect this space,” The Milkman growled. The heads disappeared. Fine. He didn’t think they’d be back. Bit-town got a little too scary for tourists when they discovered the rules could be changed.

He hopped into the milk truck and threw it into reverse.

“Where to now?”

The Milkman jumped. The Milk Maid was in the passenger’s seat, dressed in white leather and chrome, goggle-shades masking almond eyes. *Andrea*, he thought for a split-second. Then he caught on. “Hey Jess. How long have you been watching?” He backed up, pointed uptown and peeled out.

“I saw one bolo throw, both decapitations. I noticed you were jacked in, thought I’d join you. You don’t mind me using Grandma’s avatar, do you?”

“Nah. Thanks for slumming with the old man.”

“You are one sick bastard when you’re in here, you know that?”

He smirked. "Nobody fucks with the Milkman. Used to be everyone knew that." They hit a block that had been erased; he drove right through it.

"You ready to jack out now?"

The Milkman shook his head. "I'm gonna stick around." He pulled up in front of his loft. "Will you jack in once in a while and check out my progress?"

"Progress on what?" the Milk Maid asked.

"On this place. It's a work of art, the record of an era and a paradigm shift in science, all rolled into one. It shouldn't be abandoned and left to die."

"You're gonna rebuild it?" The Milk Maid smiled.

The Milkman nodded. "I'm going to turn it into a museum. In honor of people like Neal, so they won't be forgotten. Maybe you can help me get the word out once I'm finished."

"Promise me you'll come out to eat."

The Milkman nodded. "I promise. And I'll come out when you visit. But that's it. Deal?"

"Deal." The Milk Maid leaned over, kissed his cheek, and jacked out.

The Milkman got to work.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Will McIntosh

History and Writing Credits: Will is a 2003 Clarion graduate, and a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University, in the U.S.

Writing Credits: This is Will's second sale to ASIM. He has also sold stories to *Interzone*, *CHIZINE*, *Black Static*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *On Spec*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Futurismic*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Fictitious Force*, *Albedo One*, and others.

It's Only Rock and Roll

...Hannah Strom-Martin

I was a little nervous about coming back to Humboldt. It was here, after all: the same gateway I had slipped through only one mortal year ago. Mother would be looking for me. Mother's network would be looking for me. I wondered if any of them would be at the show.

From backstage the crowd was a formless sea, a scent like summer and smoke. Out on the beach the glow of cigarettes lit the dusk — a thousand cherry red coals blazing beneath the greater red of the setting sun. The breeze lifted off the river, and the babes and Rasta-men pulled their t-shirts back on over bikini tops and bare chests. As I sauntered onto the stage a shriek went up and I passed into a cloud of cloves and nicotine, the scent of opium and marijuana buzzing my senses.

Ah, Mortalia. In the last rays of light I was a sun-child: my hair tinted with fire, crazy spirals curling against my golden, leather-clad breasts. No one, not the young rock-eager crowd, nor my band of hearty mates, would have guessed that beneath my scintillating rock chick body lurked a moon-bathed immortal. I had hidden myself well. There wasn't a trace of Gwyllion the Watcher, bound and bored in the starry groves. Not a hint of Gwyllion the sweet-voiced or spider-limbed. I was of mortal flesh now, hot and aching with every mortal need. And I sang like a demon.

The crowd roared as we began. They rushed the stage with waving arms and offerings. Rog got a girl's thong, and Cat and Morris were pelted with roses. By the first chorus everyone was mine and I was nearly laughing too hard to wrap my tongue around the lyrics.

I was still a bit paranoid, but with the sole exception of my cousin Magda — and the legions of rock gods she swore came straight from the Greenwood — all the faey I'd ever met were squares. They wouldn't be combing *Rolling Stone* for the latest chart toppers. The gossip rags where they might read my mortal name were as alien to them as a virgin in Goblinland. My paranoia turned into pelvic thrusts and each thrust into a grind and the evening barreled on over the heads of the crowd, streaked with flashing lights and curling tendrils of smoke.

“Oh, my babies!” I screamed, opening my arms, throwing my head back in offering. They reached for me, some nearly eluding security. I laughed, finished my high note in one torturous soprano wail, ran my fingers over the sleekness of my exposed midriff and:

“Good night Humboldt County! Thank yew!”



Backstage, the champagne was pink, of course. Oysters and shrimp straight from Humboldt Bay sat on ice. The food was getting more exotic as the end of the tour drew near — there was baklava and curry, pesto and delicate white wine. The mates hurried to be with their girlfriends and boy-toys and I sat laughing on the buffet table, drinking Coca-cola.

With all apologies to goblin fruit, there has never been a substance to equal Coke. The chilled, liquid sugar pounding in my adrenalized veins made any other pleasure, mortal or faey, seem trite. I sat and guzzled, and it was then I saw Cedric Moss for the first time.

As my eyes fell on him I realized I'd been feeling his stare for some time. Green eyes had Cedric. Green and slanting and filled with light. His t-shirt hugged his slender torso with cloth the color of weak tea, and he'd clad his fingers in silver. There were more beautiful men milling around but he was the only one wearing skintight jeans with a blue star sewn on the crotch.

“Hi,” he said, approaching me.

“Hi,” I returned.

“Cedric Moss.”

His fingers were warm, his rings cold. I felt a tingle at the base of my spine as we shook, but I was too intent on that blue star to wonder at it. I liked that star. Why did it seem so familiar?

“Eradia,” I said

He smiled. “I know.” His lips were thin, like the rest of him, a paler caramel than his skin. His waist was smaller than mine and I was keen to know how it would feel with my legs around it.

“Like the show?” I asked, letting my knees fall open so he could stand between them.

“Very much,” he said. “Would you like another Coke?”

I looked at the pile of cans that had accumulated around my perch. “Sure,” I said.

Cedric retrieved another can from the ice chest, cracking it open with his back turned. Handing it over, he spilled a little, and the sweet, sticky liquid ran down between my breasts. His smile turned devilish. I drained the Coke in two gulps.

“Had a lot to drink, have we?” Cedric asked when I stopped laughing.

“I don’t get drunk,” I said. But even as I said it I realized it might not be true. Everything around me felt decadent: Cedric, the Coke, the warmth of the pot in my lungs. There was so much flesh wandering around backstage, so much noise. The distant rumble of the house music came to me, and my eyes began to roll up in my head. This all felt vaguely familiar, like Cedric’s blue star, but I’d be damned if I could bring myself to care.

“Do you have a dressing room?” Cedric asked. His hands were resting on my thighs.

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Why don’t we go there?”

“Yeah.”

I slid off the table, falling against him, all breasts and naked arms. He caught me around the waist, supporting me as we lurched through the crowd.

There was hardly enough space in my dressing room to make love but Cedric’s mouth was on mine the moment I slammed the door. Tubes of lipstick and powder brushes clattered against the mirror as he set me on the make-up table. His mouth tasted of cloves, and his fingers were warm as they pulled apart the lacings of my bodice. It was lovely, and yet...

“Wait,” I said.

He abandoned his slow nibble of my neck. “Yes?”

I put a hand to my throat. There was a curious tightness there. Beyond the slant of Cedric’s shoulder, the room was a smear of revolving yellow light.

“I feel...” I said, but the words drifted away from me. Somewhere, the jangle of the paranoia bell sounded.

Cedric ripped my shirt open.

“Hey,” I began, but his mouth found mine and the ensuing wrestling match was as much a struggle against my own desire as his wiry strength. By the time I could gather my wits enough to free myself, my hands were forcing his head to my breast of their own accord.

“Wait!” I squeaked as he tugged at my pants. Having adopted a mortal’s body, I had taken on all its inconveniences. “Condom,” I demanded. “Need. Didn’t...take... pills... Oh!”

Cedric sunk his teeth into my earlobe, his husky laughter tickling me as he breathed. Trying to concentrate, I reached for my purse. “Condom!” I said again.

Cedric batted my hand away.

“Hey...” I slurred. The ache was creeping into my jaw. Shades of gray encroached on the dressing room. My hand was on Cedric’s ass, my desire pulsing inside me like coals fanned by a breeze. I was aware of every touch, every wisp of breath. I could feel the love bites Cedric was lavishing in a steadily downhill progression upon my body. I had to take several deep breaths before I could bring myself to stop him.

“Didn’t take—” I began, pulling him up. But then his face came into view and the words died.

His eyes were far too green. His skin had graduated from alluring to ethereal and his hair was like fire. Cedric Moss. It wasn’t a mortal’s name, and his was not a mortal’s smile. “You are mine,” that smile said. And for the first time since I’d flown the Greenwood, it was true.

“Oh no,” I said. And then: “The Coke...”

My eyelids fluttered. Through a haze, Cedric brushed a strand of hair from my forehead.

“I see why you took off,” he said, his mortal voice slipping into the dulcet tones of faerie. “This mortal life is very...rock and roll.” He pressed his hips to mine. “It’d be a shame not to enjoy these bodies, don’t you think?”

I tried to fight, but the drug had me. As the world slipped away in a mess of sex and swirling faerie power, I bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. His yelp gave me satisfaction. As I succumbed to whatever web the faey spiders had woven, I found myself regretting that I wouldn’t be conscious long enough to enjoy the big finish.



When I woke I was sore and horny, bound hand and foot in the back of a Volkswagon. Redwood trees flashed past the window, giving the filtered sunlight a hint of green. It hurt my eyes, making the cottony mass in my head throb. Cedric was at the wheel, humming. The music coming from the radio was full of jolly cymbals and playful backbeat. The Monkees.

So this was hell.

As soon as I could think I whispered an incantation that would sever my bonds and whisk me back to my dressing room. The power bloomed on my lips...and fizzled against the ropes like water on a griddle. I swore and lowered my throbbing head against the seat. Whatever Cedric had dosed me with was giving me one bitch of a hangover. And the ropes were spelled.

“That wasn’t very good,” said Cedric, smiling at me in the rearview mirror. “I thought a child of The Lady would be stronger.”

I ignored him. Mother had probably given him the ropes herself. Cedric Moss. Why did that sound so familiar? The song ended and the DJ came on. “Here’s a little rock and roll news for ya. Eradia Parsons, lead singer of Beautiful Pornography, was abducted last night after performing at the Rock on the River Music Festival in our very own Humboldt county. Eradia was last seen in the company of an unknown man as they headed away from the post-show party. In a bizarre twist, a lifesize replica of the singer was found in her dressing room by guitarist Roger Farraday. Apparently it was made out of Coke cans. Pretty weird.”

If he hadn’t been talking about me I would have laughed. But when Cedric winked at me, my blood ran cold. There were plenty of faeries who liked to leave things in place of the maidens they lured or the babies they stole. But it took a special aptitude to pull a stunt this big. Mother had hired out for this job.

A changeling.

Cedric Moss. I’d been an idiot. The legend of House Moss was a faery’s faerie tale long before I was born. A notorious bunch of glamour spinners, House Moss. Mother had banished them eons ago to prevent them from spoiling her carefully cultivated state of boredom. The blue star of the Moss pennant had five points to represent the multifaceted nature of their kin. Cedric wasn’t the worst of them, but there were some who said he hadn’t shown his real face since birth. Dimly I recalled Lady Gwynefar of Lesh mixing dream wine with wormwood at a henking party. It was a dodgy habit, one she’d formed after Cedric married her as one man and turned into quite another on their wedding night.

I twisted against the ropes. The Stones were playing now and Cedric’s fingers were tapping along with them. His hair had changed color again — something dark highlighted in gold. Oh, he was pretty, all right. Pretty and evil. The stupid bastard was about as rock and roll as you could get.

There had to be a way out of this, but I was too dizzy to think. Cedric would be taking me to the gateway — to Mother. Mother had clearly let him out of wherever she’d been keeping him...

“What did she offer you?” I demanded. Somehow I couldn’t see him wanting to twitch at the end of Mother’s tether. “Was it a pardon? A restored place at court?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Cedric said pleasantly.

“Let me guess: you’re going to marry some white trash nixie and revive your fallen House.”

“You could say that.”

It took a moment for the full sleaziness of his tone to hit me. “No,” I said. “She wouldn’t.”

"I believe the date is set for May." He laughed the wispy little laugh that had sounded so good the night before. I felt the car lurch, bushes snapping past the window as we veered into the forest.

"Already?" I hadn't meant to say it. And I certainly hadn't meant to sound so frightened. Cedric turned up the radio which was now, horribly, playing Van Halen. Golden-brown hair bobbed in the light as Cedric did a little head bang.

Then, he brought the Bug to a screeching halt.

When he flipped his seat up to get at me, I flung myself into the far corner. This only resulted in my being face up when he snatched me, but I had passed the point of dignity. I'd been caught by a changeling hired by my own Mother and now he was going to drag me back to the Twilight Zone, marry me, and sire a passle of brats.

"You might as well give over," Cedric said, lowering me out of the car onto a pile of damp leaves. "You won't get free of those ropes."

"What about a bargain?" I tried. Even from the ground I could see the spectral glow of faeryland, shimmering just beyond the next bush. Less than fifty feet lay between me and an eternity as Cedric's bitch. A rockless eternity. In Mortalia they would think I had simply vanished, borne up to the great gig in the sky with Joplin, Cobain, Hendrix. Which was actually, now that I thought it, pretty cool, but still...

"Please," I said. "There must be something you want."

A pair of booted feet planted themselves on either side of me. I looked up the length of Cedric Moss's perfect, frail body and realized he was wearing leather pants.

"There's nothing you can give me that isn't already mine," he said. The strains of an Eddie Van Halen solo floated around us. Cedric had left the radio on so he could hear it.

"My God," I said, the idea hitting me like a burst of light. "*You could do it.*"

"Do what?" Cedric asked.

I jerked my head at the Bug. "*That,*" I said. "That music."

Cedric scowled.

"Listen," I said. "It could all be yours. You were made for it, Cedric. The crowds, the girls. You don't even have to be talented. Just be yourself. There's nothing Mortalia won't give you if you're a rock star."

Cedric's scowl grew deepened and I knew I'd planted my seed. He raised one hand and the music blared through the clearing: Eddie freaking out, crusty ole David Lee raving about the exceptional attributes of his high school teacher.

Come on, Cedric, I willed him. You can have it made. Just let me go and embrace your inner Roth!

Van Halen gave up the ghost and became AC/DC and still Cedric stood, listening. He seemed to like Angus better than Eddie, his lips moving faintly as though trying to

follow the notes. As I watched, the barest hint of silver glinted beneath his coffee and cream skin. As Angus jerked his strings for their last ounce of mayhem, a foggy halo grew behind Cedric's head.

I blinked and it was gone. Cedric lowered his arm and sighed. "I like how fast it is," he said, almost to himself. "It suits me." He sighed again. "But there are complications."

I didn't care for the foxy way his eyebrows arched at me.

"Complications?" I asked.

He laughed and it was a slow laugh. A dark, wispy contralto that unfurled like a red carpet leading straight to hell.

"What complications?" I demanded.

In the summery light of Mortalia, Cedric Moss's eyes glinted like ice. "Oh, Eradia," he said, laughing. "We must think of the child."



There's nothing like learning you're pregnant with changeling spawn to dry up all thoughts of rebellion. I hardly noticed when Cedric untied my feet so I could walk. I plodded forward like a wooden thing, the shiver of the gateway passing through me. One minute Cedric and I were stumbling through the California redwoods in broad daylight, then twilight descended. The sound of birdsong was sucked away and crickets rose in their place. An evening wind, murmuring in the silver-blue grass, set ghost lights to dancing. I shivered.

We kept walking. Now and again I heard a rustling noise, or glimpsed the ragged end of a goblin coat as its owner scuttled into the undergrowth. I heard the gentle sweep of wings overhead and the sigh of elemental spirits. Our presence would be announced long before we arrived.

At last, my feet sore in their snakeskin boots, my bare arms clammy with dew, Cedric led me beneath the bough of a willow tree and we came upon the court.

Here, at least, there was light. Moonlight radiated in the faces of a thousand willowy immortals, playing in tresses of frosted blond and nightmare black. There were faey from every House here: cagey-looking knockers, imposing elf-lords and miniscule pixies who moved so fast their presence was a blur of light. In a pool far to my right were the Undine Houses: nyad, nixie, and visiting Merrow. On any other night, this collection would have made for a pleasant bash. Tonight there wasn't a smile to be seen.

My favourite cousin Magda stood at the front of the gathering, her coal black hair hanging against her Kinks t-shirt in ragged waves. Next to her, holding the neck of a Gibson Les Paul in one willow-fine hand, was Mother.

“Mom?” I said.

Mother raised silver eyes. “Gwyllion.” Her voice was a whisper. I found myself sitting on my knees in the damp. I huffed, struggling with my ropes — until they fell away beneath Mother’s stare.

“Hello to you too,” I said. I wrestled myself to my feet. It wasn’t enough that I was going to bear Cedric Moss’s brat — she had to make me look like an idiot. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Mother bristled, and Magda winced as if pricked. I wondered how Mother had dragged my whereabouts out of her. Magda’s credo was “won’t get fooled again.”

“You betrayed me,” Mother said.

“Betrayed?” I was shouting. “I’m not the one who sent a changeling to knock up her only child!”

“You betrayed me,” Mother repeated. “You shirked your duty and honor for *this*.” The Gibson flew from her hand and thumped down at my feet. “How could you do it, Gwyllion?” she asked.

As my true name left her mouth I felt a wave of shame. Oh, she was a charmer all right. In the faery-glow she looked younger than I did, her beautiful face so pained and innocent that Bon Scott himself would have had to back down. The court murmured their sympathy and I ground my teeth.

“I don’t understand you,” she continued. “If I hadn’t brought you home, you’d be mortal by now.”

“That was the idea,” I said.

Mother froze. “A child of mine,” she whispered.

“A *mother* of mine,” I said.

She drew herself up, her beauty a burst of twilight silver. “You left me no choice,” she said. “A child was the only way to tie you here, to make you accept your place.”

“A child of his?” I asked. “A changeling demon who’ll be a bastard the moment its father finds something with nicer legs?”

“Hey—!” Cedric said behind me. I ignored him. Magda was shaking her head in wordless warning.

“What did you do to Mags?” I demanded, my hands on my hips. “Tell me that at least.”

“Magdaline has been rendered dumb,” Mother said. “You should take care I don’t do the same to you.”

Behind me, Cedric was chuckling. I could just see the shimmy of his hip from the corner of my eye.

“You took her *voice*?” I asked. Mother’s face was implacable, her mouth as hard and silent as chiseled marble. “But, Mom,” I said when I could breathe again, “it’s only rock and roll.”

“It is *mortal* music,” Mother said. “Loud and coarse like their machines. And it took you away from me.”

The grove was very still. A spell rose on my tongue. Steal Magda’s voice, would she? Marry me off to Cedric the Cock would she? I raised my hand—

And found myself smote to the ground.

Cedric laughed uproariously.

“Good one, majesty,” he chortled. “I like her even better this way.”

I leapt to my feet, discovering on the way up that I wasn’t wearing clothes.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I yelled. I didn’t know if the words were for Cedric or Mother. At least I could still talk.

“You can’t escape this, Gwyllion,” Mother said. “If you think I’d let you spell me, you are sorely mistaken.”

Cedric was still laughing. I covered my breasts. Weird. They didn’t feel right, somehow. How could I have lost two cup sizes and not noticed?

I looked down and screamed.

The body I’d come in with was gone. In place of everything golden there was silver; goodbye Eradia, hello Gwyllion. For a moment, I *was* incapable of speech. When finally I could gather myself, Mother’s face had assumed its look of regal authority

“Gwyllion of the Fair Folk,” she said, raising her arms and voice to address the whole court. “I hereby strip you of your magic and glamour. You will not set foot outside the Greenwood. You will know no lover but Cedric of House Moss. For your treason, your cousin Magdaline shall remain hostage to my will, voiceless and imprisoned—”

“Wait!” I shrieked. Magda was looking at me in horror, shaking her head. Cedric was rocking back and forth on his heels in delight.

“Wait,” I repeated. My brain was racing. “You can’t do this. Even captive mortals get to bargain.”

“You dare speak to me of bargains?” Mother said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Give me an impossible task, a mission of goodwill. If I solve it, you let me and Magda go.”

“And let you raise my grandchild in Mortalia?”

“You have to!” I said. “By your own laws!”

“I won’t bargain with you,” Mother said. “You forfeited that chance when you abandoned your honor.”

“Then for Magda.” If I could get Magda free, there was a chance she could help. A small chance, but I wasn’t picky.

"I weary of this," Mother said. Her silver sheen was closer to gray, as if the act of stripping me had worn her out. "Very well," she agreed finally. "For Magda." A bitter smile touched her lips. "Hear my judgement. If you can show me the true face of Cedric Moss, I will release your cousin from her penalty."

The words drifted from her lips and settled in my stomach like stone. As I gawked at my own idiocy, Cedric broke into another peal of laughter. I thought about being married to him, how the bad-boy persona was already wearing thin. He would have made a killing as a rocker.

I recalled him standing by the Bug, AC/DC pumping into the woods. For a moment I had thought he might bite. A shimmer and a screech of guitar.

Show me the true face of Cedric Moss.

I sucked in a breath, the barest glimmer of hope stirring in my Gwyllion-clad soul. I met Mother's silver gaze. "Okay," I said. "But you have to lend me Magda."



Mother gave me a week. Ever try to form a band in the Greenwood? To be sure, faeryland has plenty of hell raisers, but theirs is by and large an old hell, spawned in the days when exchanging gold for lead was the epitome of cool. The concept of getting your groove on with anything racier than a dulcimer is, frankly, beyond the grasp of most faey.

It was Magda's idea to use a troll drummer. Trolls are a slow, menacing lot, but in a rudimentary sign language known only to the two of us, Magda swore Bruno could keep a beat. Bruno obliged her by smashing some rocks. Then he smashed her second best drums. He smashed them in rhythm with her guitar solo, so I really couldn't complain. I had only to promise him Magda's best drum kit (provided it still existed when we were done), and keep him from killing our bassist.

An elf's deft fingers would have been perfect for the bass, but no self respecting high-elf would dare lend aide to Mother's rebel daughter and her blacklisted cousin. We tried the dark elves, poking around in every foul hole a day's trek would afford. But even evil was keeping its head down. A pair of pixies could pull the bass strings with gusto but not rhythm. A swarm of knockers nearly stole the bass when we gave them a shot. Finally, Magda remembered Sheená — her chain smoking, goblin dating, crevasse-dwelling former auntie (a hell of a story) and managed to secure her talents in exchange for an autographed copy of "New York." When she passed the audition, Sheená whooped like a co-ed on a tequilla blitz and Bruno snapped his drum sticks. Trolls hate nyads.



The day of the gig didn't dawn bright and clear — or even at all. It was the same old twilight when me and my new mates made our way to court. Cedric and Mother were seated in front, with everyone else stern and silent behind them. If Cedric had looked one tick more amused, I think I might have stolen Magda's Gibson and bashed his face in.

"You look swell, Eradia," he called as I mounted the stage. "See you after the show!" I ignored him. In the middle of some last minute tuning, Magda flipped him off. Her smile was a rictus. Crazy nyads and temperamental trolls aside, she knew what we were playing for. I had never thought my desire to "rock for life" would manifest in quite this way.

"Is this thing on?" I asked, tapping the mic. One of my goblin roadies chittered at his friends and the mic crackled to life. My next "check" made the court hold their ears. I winced. Cedric laughed.

I turned to my mates. "Ready?"

Magda did a quick Hendrix riff and grinned at me. Sheená, cackling under her breath, gave the thumbs up. Bruno bashed the cymbals and I flinched, convinced he'd killed them once and for all.

Fenris Rockbottom, King of Goblinland, made his entrance with numerous relations in tow. Sheená hadn't lied to me about her connections. Most of Fenris's crew crashed at the front of the stage, but some followed my request and fanned out. The Rockbottom boys would help me get this party started or I wasn't fit to wear leather.

I nodded to my band. "Hit 'em hard."

Magda nodded back. I counted off.

Later, I could never remember how the court reacted. I had a vague impression of something frail bending under the strain of something heavy. Perhaps I should have played something softer: something Zeppy from the days when mortals were trying to be more like faeries than the other way around. But I didn't have time for universality and when you come right down to it, neither does rock. Rockers like to brag that rock is the universal language, but mostly, it just has a way of saying things that don't sound the same any other way. And what I had to say, I sure as hell couldn't say with flowers.

At first it looked like nothing had changed. Cedric sat there, gloating. Mother sat next to him, remote as an iceberg, even as Fenris and his goblin progeny began to boogie at the foot of the stage. Little pockets of the court were jiving with them, but most were grimacing. We were playing AC/DC after all.

When we kicked off the second song, Cedric began to frown. Magda was doing her best Angus impression: running from one side of the stage to the other while walking down a billion notes per square inch. I think it might have been that, and not the savagery of my thrusting hips, that really got things going.

It took root mid song, that faint glow flickering behind Cedric's head. He set his jaw, trying to sit still. His head nodded of its own accord. It stopped when Mother glared at him, but resumed when she looked away. The glow expanded, his hair shimmering. His expression grew pained, but he couldn't stop moving to the beat.

Keeping time with my hips, I nodded to Magda. We'd discussed this. As Cedric bounded to his feet, searching for a way out of crowd of goblins, Mags and I went into attack position, leaning on each other back to back like a horny producer's wet dream. It had worked for every rock duo you could name.

And baby, it worked for us.

I heard a scream that I thought was my own. Even lolling in hyper-sexual abandon, Mags and I were still teasing our instruments for every last drop. But when a current of magic stirred my hair I knew it wasn't me.

It was Cedric.

I abandoned my swoon, letting the song die. Mags followed suit and, after a moment, so did Sheená. Only Bruno kept playing, delighted with the hollow pop as he finally smashed through the surface of one of Mags's drums. He wrecked the rest with a good natured roar, then stood there beaming like a child.

I couldn't find Cedric. The court was murmuring, heads turning towards the canopied sky. The glade seemed lighter.

"No!" someone howled. With a clunking of bootheels, Magda trotted to my side and pointed. Confused, I followed her finger and burst out laughing.

I don't know what I had expected to see. A hideous fiend would have satisfied me. A satyr with goat feet and inadequate sex organs would have explained a lot.

I looked at Cedric Moss and laughed until my sides hurt. They said he hadn't shown his real face since birth; if you've built yourself a reputation that hinges on everyone thinking you're David Lee Roth, the last thing you want them to know is that you're really the chick from Sixpence None the Richer.

Yeah. Cedric Moss was a girl.

I laughed in hilarity and relief. If this was Cedric's true face I couldn't be pregnant. Light was spreading through the glade now, weird but comforting for its long absence. I wasn't the only one taking pleasure in the sight of the shivering, ringleted girl-child who stood naked by my Mother's side.

"And *that's* why this place blows!" someone crowed. I squeaked as Magda flung her arms around me. "Hey, Gwil," she said. Over my shoulder she addressed Mother.

“Don’t you just *hate* that, majesty? Don’t you hate never knowing what you’re going to get?”

We swaggered to the front of the stage. Mother, who had been regarding Cedric with the air of Bruno sizing up his next drum set, turned her coldest stare on me. I utterly failed to be phased. Mother’s long, wearied sigh filled the glade, whispering over the heads of the fair folk and evaporating in the golden beginnings of light. The sunrise made her look several centuries too tired. Her defeat gave me no pleasure. She had no child to make me raise, no husband to bind me and, through her own folly, no inducement for me to stay. I felt sorry for her — for anyone tied to a realm of twilight through an honor and duty more outdated than it had any right to be.

And yet, there was light...

The Cedric girl squared her shoulders for the coming storm.

“You betrayed me,” Mother said.

“Well, yeah,” Cedric said in an indignant voice. “It’s what I do. Changeling and all.”

“You would have made me wait for years,” Mother said. “For a child who would never be born.”

“You locked me up for thousands,” Cedric replied. “That was jolly fun.”

Mother turned her face to the sky as if to ask who had ordered this strange new reality. Then she hung her head.

“Do you know why I wanted your child so badly?” she asked me. “This place needs children more desperately than you need music. Imagine *that*, Gwyllion. It is enough to drive me mad.”

Somewhere nearby, a bird twittered. The court shifted, their whispers like the scraping of dried leaves. Mother seemed smaller with every minute, uncertain in the face of day. Gone was her stately faery wrath. As the birdsong rose sweet and clear through the dissipating gloom I realized that the answers she had sought through deceit (and one truly lousy one night stand) were there for the taking. I held them in my hand.

Or, at least, my throat.

“Mom?” I said softly. “Can I show you something?”



My second concert with Magda, minus the jarring ministrations of Bruno and Sheená, came off much better than the first. Unless, of course, you happened to be Cedric. Still naked, she spent the entirety of my Joni Mitchell medley squirming on the grass, trying to free herself of her invisible bonds. As the light grew and the courtly

faces blossomed into smiles, she looked ready to vomit. Inner rocker or no, she would always belong to the shadows.

She rallied a bit when we played "The Battle of Evermore." The pagan warbling of voice and guitar was a combination no faey could resist. I think that's when the light really came on. When the song was over, Mother rose from the grass and came to me, her face open with disbelief.

"This is mortal music?" she asked.

Magda and I shared a quick glance, not about to reveal our suspicions as to the true origin of one Robert Anthony Plant.

"Sure," I said. "Half those songs were written by a Canadian."

Mother pursed her lips. "This is valuable knowledge," she said.

"Yeah," Magda said. "Notice anything different around here?"

Mother turned, the sunlight catching the coils of her hair. For a long moment she stood still, taking in the sounds of bird and the far off running of water. There were smiles in the crowd now. Only Cedric was scowling, and I couldn't blame her. As glorious as the Greenwood was now, I was still hungry for Mortalia. The mates would be looking for me. There was a tour to finish.

"If I let you go," said Mother, "will it last?"

"I think so," I said. "As long as you're open to it."

"And you?" Mother said. "What of you, Gwyllion?"

I squirmed under the longing of her gaze. "Well," I said, "as long as you stop trying to play matchmaker I think Mags and I could visit sometimes. Show you a few tunes to keep the sun shining."

For a wonder, Mother smiled. "That would be nice," she said. She folded her arms, regarding Cedric with some of her old malice. "Is there anything you want me to do to...her?"

"Actually," I said, "I think you ought to let her go."

"What?" The cry came from two throats.

I spread my hands. "If you keep her here," I said, "she'll just be that much worse the next time she gets free. Besides, I think I can guarantee she won't be bothering the Greenwood again."

"And why is that, *Eradia*?" Cedric asked, leaning on her hip.

"Because," I said, "your beef's with me now. I beat you. Don't you want to get me back?"

Cedric considered this. "You mean out there, don't you?" she said. "You still think I like your filthy music."

"I know you do."

"I'll mop the floor with you," Cedric spat.

"I surely hope so. Mother?"

Mother nodded and it was done. Magda and I watched Cedric stalk away in her restored male glory.

"You won't have a groupie left to screw by the time I'm done with you!" he thundered, pushing through a throng of giggling goblin women as he strode towards the gateway.

"We'll see about that," I called.

"Ah, Gwil," Magda said, head swinging a little as she followed the movements of Cedric's leather-clad derriere. "Do you really know what you're doing with that one?"

"I don't know," I said. "But the music is sure going to rock."

Passenger Dossier

Name: Hannah Strom-Martin

History and Writing Credits: Hannah is a graduate of Bennington College and the Odyssey Fantasy Writer's Workshop (both '03).

Writing Credits: Hannah has appeared in ASIM 11, *Scared Naked Magazine* and writes regularly for the *North Bay Bohemian* of CA. Her erotic short story, "Sex With Ducks" will appear in the upcoming anthology *Amazons: Sexy Tales of Strong Women* (06).

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Mail Chauvinism

...G Scott Huggins

It was the day they issued us the chainmail that I really began to regret a career in retail bookselling. Oh, it kept me in shape, and it was challenging enough. But the glamour was an illusion. As a girl, when I'd watched episodes of *Combat Retailers* and seen them snagging shoplifters with varistaffs, striding through malls in vinyl boots and shockjackets, it had all seemed so dashing. They hadn't worn chainmail. It grated on my skin as badly as the voice behind me did on my ears.

"Miss? Oh, Miss...Fry?"

"Not unless it's impractical to eat it raw," I said automatically. The name is Friday, because Dad was an unregenerate Heinlein fan. Fri to my friends and if you have to ask, you're not one. I hate it when customers try to read my name badge. Fortunately, most of them can't read.

This one could, which made her unusual for a customer in Silos and Dukes Booksellers. She was also the size of a baby elephant, which didn't.

"Yes, ma'am?" I sighed.

"Well!" she sniffed, and I could tell I'd let my attitude show. Doubtless she was already logging a complaint about it through her implant to the store's inbox. I'd get written up in about a week, by which point I'd be used to the chainmail anyway, so why was I bitching now?

I'd bitched at the boss this morning when the stupid things arrived. The shockjackets we already had were impervious to electrical shock, corrosives, and most bullets.

"So what are we trying to accomplish with chainmail, Lily?"

"You know full well that Silos And Dukes' Internal Salespersons' Training department did a study correlating the wearing of mail shirts and the prevention of injuries among its staff."

"SADIST doesn't have to wear them," I shot back. "Besides, that wasn't a study, it was that airhead Mary Jo Finkelstein coming to work in Renaissance Faire garb and having a fight with her boyfriend in front of the registers. Didn't she get fired for that?"

“Yes, but the chainmail saved her life when he tried to stab her with that vibraknife. Now be a dear and shut up. I’d think someone with a Consumer Retail Ancillary Management Personnel degree could figure out a medieval shirt.”

And of course, anyone with a CRAMP was also expected to figure out how to placate angered customers. “I’m so sorry, ma’am,” I cooed now. “How may I have the privilege of helping you?”

“Oh, my dear,” she simpered. Apparently, all was forgiven. “Can you help me find that book, you know, the one that was on that lovely show with that woman last week?”

Without pause or thought, I swung into the Litany of the Bookseller:

Friday: “Do you know the title?”

Customer: “No, I don’t remember.”

Friday: “Do you know the author?”

Customer: “Oh, it was that tall lawyer man.”

Friday: “Do you know any words in the title?”

Customer: “It was ‘The’ something.”

Friday: “Can you remember what show it was?”

Customer: “I think it was Oprah’s daughter. You know, the thin one.”

The thin one, yeah, the one that weighed *under* 150 kilos. I reversed the pommel of my varistaff, typed in the show and did a search for her guests of the past week. Sure enough, an appearance by John Grisham IV promoting his latest legal bodice-ripper.

“*The Firm Client?*” I asked the customer.

“Oh, you’re so clever, how do you do it?” she burred as I extended the varistaff’s tip out six meters and used its static-charged head to grab a copy off the far display table. It took me two tries; the chainmail, stuffed as it was between my shirt and shockjacket, threw all my moves off.

“How gifted you are,” the customer giggled. “I’m sorry my nephew didn’t see that trick. Now where did he go?” She looked around. The import of her gesture hit me.

“Your nephew? Um, how old is he?” I tried to sound nonchalant even though my knuckles were white around the varistaff.

“He’s thirteen; a dear boy.” *Oh no. Surely she couldn’t be that stupid.*

“Ma’am, perhaps you weren’t aware—” *because you didn’t read the twenty-foot high red sign with white lettering hanging over both entrances* “—that we ask all minors to be kept under a guardian’s direct supervision at all times?” I scanned the floor as I spoke. Nothing.

“Oh, really? Well, he’s harmless...”

“Liability, ma’am, foryourownprotectionexcuseme,” I said as I vaulted down the escalator to the children’s department. I took the steps two at a time while calling Lily.

“Did you mention our Readers’ Ultimate Benefits Exchange card?” Lily asked as she picked up the phone.

“RUBE will have to wait, Lily. We’ve got code ADAM.”

“Tell me you’re kidding. Adult Dereliction: Abandoned Minor?”

“Another Damned Adolescent Menace.”

“Dammit, this is no time for jokes!” Lily yelled. “You remember what happened to Edd Miller.”

I shuddered. One day, Edd Miller out in Denver got Code ADAM. Little girl who’d seen one too many episodes of *My Little Hulkster* gets away from Mommy and lays a copy of *Counting With Hulky* (plush, like all children’s books — can’t have kids exposed to paper cuts) on the basement floor, then rides the escalator up to the top floor. Edd spots her just as she goes over the railings with a squeal of delight in anticipation of the ride she’ll get when she bounces back up, Just Like On TV. Luckily for the kid, Edd plucks her out of the air with his varistaff about two feet before impact, neat as you please. Kid gets a dislocated shoulder instead of a broken skull, and Edd recovers from a mild heart attack.

Of course, Mommy is jailed for Neglect, and after doing six months, she sues Edd and Silos And Dukes for ten million dollars for Pain and Suffering, Loss of Childhood Innocence, and Emotional Trauma. She wins handily on the basis that Edd used a Tool In A Manner Likely To Cause Harm to her daughter. Edd’s fired and the last I heard he was Selling a Kidney to Stay Out of Debtor’s Prison.

I wanted some action in my job, but not *that* badly, so I was already halfway down the stairs when the skidrom fell on my head. I hear from my grandfather that skidroms (or “compact discs,” as the old man calls them) used to weigh just a few grams. That was before they decided to encase each of them in five centimeters of polymer with a hardness of 9.8 on the Mohs’ scale, so people couldn’t scratch them. Ah, the good old days. Why couldn’t SADIST, in its finite wisdom, have sent us helms?

I staggered under the blow and looked up just in time to hear the laughter of a pimply towhead as he ducked back from the railing. I dialed the varistaff to its maximum extension of four meters and vaulted across to the up escalator. Another skidrom came at me and I batted at it. The scratchproof, silvery disc arced away. Normally,

I’d have tried to catch it on the end of the ’staff for easier resorting, but this wasn’t a weekend game of skidrom frisbee with a bunch of high college kids. This was an actual child. There was no greater danger to the store, or to my job.

The shelves were silent, glittering with the silver edges of skidroms. Their title holograms sought out my eyes, turning the shelves into a forest of three-dimensional figures gesturing for my attention. A MiG-37 jet dove at my head, breaking off right

before flying through a woman with a torn bodice and a longing expression. Titles flashed over and around the images. It takes some customers awhile to get through the shelves, but you learn to filter it out.

This was stupid; the kid knew I was after him. I could hear Lily's voice somewhere above me, remonstrating with the aunt. "I'm afraid your nephew is causing a bit of a disturbance, Ma'am, throwing skidroms..."

"Well really! Donald's not hurting your store or your skidroms! They're very durable, I know. He's a sweet young man..."

Yeah, sweet with an aim that had almost brained me. I'd have a knot on my temple; my own fault but no one had gotten the drop on me like that since the neohippie chick with the prehensile hair a couple of years ago, and she'd been a professional.

"Donald," I called softly. "Your aunt is looking for you. Can I help you find anything?" Like the exit? At high velocity?

I heard a contemptuous snort, and running feet. He burst from the shelves, sprinting. He was thin and well-muscled for a thirteen-year-old. I'd been expecting him to look like his aunt. He was already down the escalator to the bottom floor. I followed him at a measured stride, leaping over a roll of skidroms he'd set up in the aisle to trip me. I nearly fell over Ron the Resident Wino just beyond them. As I cleared Ron's head by centimeters, he growled, "Have some respect for the homeless, ya leather-plated slut," and swiped at me.

Some planning ability, this kid. What was downstairs — the children's department? What would he want with readable pillows?

It was at the bottom of the escalator that I heard paper tearing, and my blood ran cold. He was in among the oldboox. I strode into the section: a maze of twisty little bookshelves, all alike. It was an atmosphere that appealed to the oldboox crowd. No holograms, and the layers of shelves dampened the sound from the electronic parts of the store. Everything in here was extremely expensive, and mostly irreplaceable.

A paper airplane sailed around a corner and I caught it on the sharp tip of the varistaff. Page 421 of *The Lord of the Rings*. All right. Now I was mad. The varistaff changed as I twisted the control rings. Lily would freak if she saw this, and part of me was gibbering as well. I'd hacked the varistaff's program for just such an occasion as this.

Electropolyfiber is a wonderful thing. Sometimes a short, sharp shock is the best way to deal with these kids, so long as you don't touch them. My special setting was one molecule wide at the edges, with a one-meter extension. For all practical purposes, a broadsword.

Another folded page shot past me. With a long "*Ki-yai!*" I sliced it in half in midair, and leapt into the corridor. I had the pleasure of seeing the kid standing there, holding

the thick, red leather-bound book, his eyes open wide in shock. What the hell, the little shit had already ruined it. My follow-up stroke sliced the book in two and placed the blade point just a centimeter from his eye as the sheared pages tumbled from his hands.

“Sir, for your own safety, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave the store.” Gods, that felt good!

The kid’s mouth opened in a wide, saucy grin. “Pretty cool, book babe, but I don’t think so.” He raised both hands. There was a thick glove on the left one. To my disbelief, he carefully pinched the tip of the ‘staff’s blade with the glove, two centimeters behind the point.

Pain arced up my wrists and into my body, and the world tilted away, taking me with it.



Dark clouds swirled through my head. I was lying on the floor, my head mashed up against a bookshelf.

And the kid held my varistaff!

“Rap on!” he said. I watched him take *Walden* off the shelf and toss it in the air. A casual flick of his wrists bisected the book. My hands twitched. What the hell had happened? And then I knew. A taserglove. Good self-defense weapon: street legal and everything. My shockjacket would have shrugged it off, but the varistaff was conductive. And now he had it. Shit.

He noticed my movement and stuck the point of the thing in my face. I stayed very still. Monomolecular edges are much sharper than anyone who’s not an expert can guess, and this kid was certainly no expert. He probably didn’t realize he could cut my head off with just one nervous twitch. No murderer, this; just a boy drunk on power. After all, he’d beaten a combat retailer.

“I don’t wanna leave,” he said with a smirk. “I wanna stay right here.”

“That’s all you want?” My mind raced. I was in about as much trouble as I could possibly be in. If I hadn’t jiggered the staff to produce that kind of sharpness...if I hadn’t actually dialed it in like a damned show-off...*Edd Miller move over, the new Legendary Dumbass Bookseller is here.*

I was at the mercy of a thirteen-year old with an infinitely sharp blade, and I was the one who had given it to him. If Lily chose this moment to appear, I’d be more canned than the plot of the average skidrom. That was assuming I survived. The varistaff wouldn’t cut the single-crystal titanium chainmail, for which I was grateful,

but that wouldn't help me if he jiggled the blade a little too close to my neck or my head.

"Naw, that's not all I want," said the kid. "First, I'd like to have you help me make some more paper airplanes out of these fossilicious books. Then I want a picture of you kissing my foot, to put on my website." He giggled, pulling a pocket camera out of his pants. "Then I want..." He seemed to think about it. "Then I think I wanna see your tits."

Three years of working retail have given me excellent self control. But I must have flushed red at that point, because he laughed and brought the 'staff down to my neck. "Let's head further into this maze. Wouldn't want auntie disturbing us," he said.

Or my manager, for that matter. The walk through the bookshelves to the far corner seemed to take forever, made worse by the periodic sight of my staff's tip flashing out ahead of me as we walked. The little bastard had figured out the extension controls.

"Okay, off with the shirt." I guess the excitement had gotten to be too much for him.

"No airplanes?" I asked, playing for time.

"Screw that. Take off the shirt."

I reached under my shirt for the clasps of my chainmail. My *metal* chainmail. I gave him my best seductive smile. "You just want to look?"

"Huh?" the kid said.

"You sure you wouldn't rather touch?" I purred. Great Ghu, it was so easy; the kid's whole face lit up.

"Really?"

"Sure, you're cute enough. Most guys I see weigh 100 kilos and bury themselves down here. I just...I just don't like cameras. Wouldn't you rather have me cooperative?"

The camera disappeared. "Way cool," said the kid. He put the 'staff down carefully behind him, out of my reach. I considered jumping him, but couldn't count on grabbing the glove before he touched, say, my hand.

The hand with the taserglove tentatively reached for my right breast. Slowly, I picked up his other hand and put it on my left breast.

"Let me show you," I crooned, "Like this." Then I pressed the fingertips of the glove up against myself. Hard.

"NNNNNNNNNGGGHHHHHHHHHHH!" said the kid as the taserglove's 20,000 volts coursed over the chainmail, bounced off my shockjacket and went back through his body via his other hand. And he couldn't let go. He just stood there, both fists full of chainmail and...well, me...and twitching.

"I know you find conversation difficult right now," I said. "So we'll keep it simple. Try one 'nng' for yes and two 'nng'h's' for no, okay?"

“NNGH!” He was frightened and in pain, but not in real danger. Volts don’t kill; amps do, and the taserglove was decidedly sublethal.

“Good. Now you’re fairly smart, so I’ll make this quick. After I knock you away from me, I keep your taserglove and you leave. Agreed?”

“NNGH!”

“Also, I look at your wallet and find out who you are, and if I should somehow lose my job because of this, I kill you, okay?”

“NNGH!”

“Good, because sometimes electrical shock can have the strangest effects on the body; certain muscles just...” My nose told me that those “certain muscles” had indeed let go. I had all I needed on this kid. Besides, his hands were pinching. Grinning, I socked him in the stomach as hard as I could, breaking the contact.

It took almost no time to pick the kid’s pockets as well as retrieve my ‘staff and his glove. He lay there groaning, a very impressive urine stain spreading down his jeans. He flapped his arms feebly as I snapped a couple of pictures and downloaded them into the ‘staff.

“Call it a souvenir, Mr. Donald Hillich of 1307 Lilac. Now let’s get you back to your aunt. I suggest you tell her the truth.”

“What?” He was ashen.

“You sneaked down here to look at a porn skidrom and you forgot you had on the taserglove while you were...busy.”

“Oh no...please...”

“Or I could show her these, tell her the *real* truth, and these pictures could find their way onto a number of fascinating websites.”

“You can’t...I mean, please don’t...”

“The choice is entirely yours.” I dumped him in a chair and sat back down.

He said in a small voice, “I’m sorry. I didn’t think...”

“You’d get caught? None of you ever do. That’s what they pay me for.”

A different fire caught in the kid’s eyes. Curiosity. “How’d you *do* that?”

“Trade secret, kid.” I wasn’t about to admit that an elementary knowledge of electric currents would have told him why a taserglove isn’t the best of weapons. Nor was I going to cop to wearing chainmail. Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea after all. “That’s what being a Combat Retailer is all about.”

“Shit, you mean being that much of a badass is really part of your *job*? I thought that was just on WV.” He was impressed. Actually, I was impressed. Finding a kid who doubts the awful truth of all things on WebVision is rare.

“Oh, yeah, kid, it’s a great job. Excitement. You meet all sorts of people, and you do tend to get that little extra bit of respect on the street.”

“Cool. Do you think, that is, um...” He looked guiltily at me. “Do you think I could learn to do it? My mom and dad want me to be a lawyer, but that’s so, y’know, *boring*.”

He was waiting for my approval. This kid, who a minute ago had been threatening me with my own weapon was now waiting for me to change his life. To say: yes, you may join this elite siblinghood that guards consumers everywhere from belligerent drunks, lowlife shoplifters, and flying skidroms.

“Well,” I said with exaggerated care, “you might. If you worked hard and got into the right three-year college, I don’t see why not.” He probably could, at that. He’d caught *me* out, after all. “I might even write you a recommendation when you’re ready to apply. In five years, you could be right where I am.”

Doing what I do. I could see him now, varistaff at the ready, chasing after three screaming kids while their parents sipped Chokacino in the autocafe.

His eyes got big at my offer, and he stammered thanks. My smile in response was warm and genuine. And why not? Revenge is a thing of beauty.

Passenger Dossier

Name: G Scott Huggins

History: Scott was born in California and raised in Kansas, which explains his profound personality conflicts as well as his tendency to violently attack people who make *Wizard of Oz* references around him. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, Katie, who will shortly be a veterinarian. When he is not working his day job, he commits various acts of literature and cat maintenance.

Writing Credits: “Bearing the Pattern.” *Writers of The Future Vol. XV*. 1999. “Requiem With Interruptions,” *Amazing Stories 2000*. “Bovine Intervention,” “When the Fleet Comes,” *MOTA 3: Courage*. “Abandoned Responsibility,” *Fantastic Visions IV* (forthcoming)

Tiny Sapphire and the Big Bad Virus

...Josh Rountree

“Scarlet?” Her mother’s voice entered her head by direct MindFi transfer.

God, nobody uses that technology anymore. She is so yesterday.

“What, Mom?” Scarlet’s response traveled through the regional synapnet. She hoped her mother could process it. The old lady was so out of touch, she probably didn’t even have the latest chipset.

“Your grandmother’s experiencing some system failure again,” said her mother. Apparently she *was* hip enough to use the synapnet after all. Shock.

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Enough of that tone, Scarlet. A few of her memory partitions have damaged files. She may have contracted a virus. She’s running an older software rev, and she’s pretty susceptible to that sort of thing. My fault. I should have installed the latest rev last week.”

“And this has *what* to do with me?”

“I want you to install the update. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Mom! I’m interfacing with like five different people right now. Plus, I’m scanning the subwebs for German history information so I can construct a file report for school. I don’t have time for this.”

“Make time. You haven’t interfaced with your grandmother once since she died. You might even enjoy it.”

“Mom, she’s an archive. Nothing but old memories.”

“I don’t care. She’s your grandmother. No more arguments. Here’s the software.”

“Fine!” Scarlet opened a port in her firewall to receive the download. “I guess I’ll just flunk history class and drop out of school.”

Her mother didn’t respond. A quick ping told Scarlet that she’d unjacked. Why was she always doing that? She might miss something. Scarlet would never understand old people.

Okay. Let’s get this done.

Scarlet left the surface web, rerouting to one of the regional sub nets — BLACKWOOD 4.3. It was used for nothing but memory archives of the deceased, and the net traffic was all but nonexistent. She gave her web persona shape, and found herself standing amid a forest of digitized trees. Crisp leaves showered the winding path at her feet, and the branches overhead hid all but the slimmest rays of sunlight. The scene was so perfectly rendered that only an occasional motion artifact betrayed the fact that this was a pix-gen environment and not the real thing.

Scarlet wore her customary red sweater and jeans, blonde hair pulled back into a tail and tied with lace. A lot of people liked to trade web personas every other day, but not Scarlet. She was happy with hers — TINY_SAPPHIRE16. Why mess with perfection?

She followed the path into the forest, hoping it was the one that led to her grandmother's files. If she got lost and had to backtrack through a drive's worth of directory trees, she'd never finish that report.

At length, the path wound around an outcropping of thorny bushes, and Scarlet stifled a gasp. A man blocked her way. He had a bushy orange beard, unkempt hair and clothes that looked like they'd been plucked from the garbage. Thick hair carpeted his hands, and his fingers curled into sharpened claws. Why would anyone look like that when they could take on whatever image they chose?

"Hello, little one," he said. "Visiting someone?"

"Jeez, you scared the crap out of me. How'd you sneak up like that? I didn't even feel a ping."

"Maybe I have a newer firmware revision that you do. Or maybe your virus definitions are a tad outdated. Can't be lazy with that sort of thing, you know."

Scarlet snorted. "You're not a virus. You've got a persona ID — BBGRIMMWOLF99. I just scanned your info."

The man laughed, and Scarlet noticed twin rows of pointed teeth growing from his gums. What was this guy supposed to be, some kind of monster? A werewolf? He had enough hair.

"Sure, kid. I'm not a virus. They don't have persona IDs, right?"

"Nope," said Scarlet, trying to sound braver than she felt. They appeared to be the only two users accessing the subnet, and she didn't like being alone with some wolf-guy. Sure, it was just an avatar, but Scarlet had heard plenty of stories about users who'd been hacked while accessing subnets alone. "I need to go now."

"Who's stopping you? Your grandma's files are that way." He pointed to a leaning cottage just a few paces down the path. Scarlet hadn't noticed it before, but she could tell by the system ID that it was the place.

"How'd you know I was here to visit my grandmother?" Scarlet was getting worried. There was no way another user could know that. She hadn't logged a network path.

“Why else would anyone come here? Nothing but dead memories, right?” He chuckled, then dissolved into a whirling cloud of pixels.

Thank god he logged out.

He couldn't be a virus, but he'd certainly acted like one. Scarlet didn't want to admit it, but she was a little scared. This place was weird and lonely. Nothing but fake trees and dead people. She hurried to the cottage, eager to be done with her chore.

It was a fairy tale cottage with stone walls and a groaning millwheel that was urged forward by a silver brook. Ivy climbed the walls and the smell of fresh bread carried through the open windows. Scarlet knocked. When no one answered, she opened the door and stepped inside.

“Grandma? It's me, Scarlet.”

“In here, darling.” Grandma called from the bedroom, her voice crackling with electronic interference. It was like that sometimes with older files.

Scarlet walked to the bedroom. Her grandmother sat up in bed wearing a cotton nightdress, her gray hair stuffed into a sleeping cap. She looked very much like she had the last time Scarlet had seen her alive. Scarlet smiled. Her grandmother was dead, but the archives almost made it seem like she wasn't.

“Hello, stranger,” said Grandma, her face lit with pleasure. “Haven't seen you in a hound's age.”

“Sorry, Grandma. I guess I've been kind of busy.”

“That's the way with children. Always run, run, run. Come, child. Take a seat with me on the bed and tell me why you're here.”

Scarlet did as asked. The bed sagged beneath her weight, and Grandma placed a cold, bony hand over hers.

“I need to update your software,” said Scarlet. “I scan you at 11.6 but you need to be at rev 12.2.”

“You're a good girl. Taking care of an old lady. I never was much good with this computer stuff.”

“That's okay, Grandma. I'll get you up to speed.” Scarlet was preparing to upload the new code when she noticed a single strand of orange hair escape from her grandmother's cap and fall down past her shoulder. It was coarse and curled, and it reminded her at once of the wolf-guy.

“Grandma,” she said, halting the interface process before the data transfer could begin. “You have an orange hair. Where'd it come from?”

“This is a place of memories, child. When I was your age, my hair was an orange bonfire. The older files mingle with the new at times.”

Of course. But still.

“Your eyes,” said Scarlet, feeling her grandmother’s digital pulse against the back of her hand. “They don’t look like they used to. They’re all black and shiny.”

“Just some file damage, dear. Bad sectors. That’s what you’ve come to fix, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Scarlet, feeling foolish. The wolf-guy had unsettled her, and now she was looking for threats where they didn’t exist. “I’ll transfer the new code and it’ll fix all the bugs.”

Scarlet accessed her grandmother’s central file bank and began the upload, loving the way the bit transfer made her hair stand on end. Her grandmother smiled. Scarlet saw her teeth.

“Grandma?” Scarlet began to panic. Her grandmother was seriously beginning to look like the wolf-guy. Scarlet tried to abort the upload, but she couldn’t break the connection.

“Yes, dear?” Grandma’s voice was an electronic buzz.

“Something’s wrong with your teeth. They’re huge.”

“So they are,” said the wolf-guy, at last casting off Grandma’s persona. His feral-man persona flickered away as well, and a new avatar crouched on the bed — a mangy, orange-coated wolf. “All the better to infect you with, my dear.”

The wolf lunged, sank his teeth into TINY_SAPPHIRE16’s shoulder, and began to devour her. Scarlet felt a sudden loss of information and functionality. The wolf was undoubtedly a virus, but she couldn’t imagine how he’d functioned as a web persona. She tried again to break the connection, but her files were being corrupted, fragmented, deleted. She tried to perform an emergency unjack, but the wolf’s hold was strong. It wasn’t just TINY_SAPPHIRE16 that was in trouble. Scarlet — the real Scarlet — was as well.

She could feel the wolf probing at her RAM bank and the gigaprocess chips planted in her brain. He’d penetrated her firewall like it was nothing, and it wouldn’t take him long to scramble her synapses. She screamed. Nothing came out of TINY_SAPPHIRE16’s mouth but broken static. Scarlet wondered if her body was screaming in her room, or if it remained silent as her brain slowly burned away.

She heard a sound like snapping wood. It echoed in her head with the same buzzes and hums that the wolf emitted. Images exploded behind her eyelids as the virus sapped away sights, sounds, experiences. Scarlet was only vaguely aware of a burly man with a plaid work shirt forcing his way through the chaos — a shimmering avatar that she was certain hadn’t been in her memory banks before.

As quickly as the wolf’s attack had begun, it was over.

Scarlet tumbled from the bed, her persona flickering but intact. The wolf shrieked in simulated pain as the stranger struck him repeatedly with an axe. Seconds later, the wolf avatar vanished, and nothing remained of the virus but fractured bits of data.

“Are you okay?” asked the stranger. He dropped the axe and climbed down from the bed. He wore tan work boots and a dirty knit cap that covered his ears. Kneeling, he examined TINY_SAPPHIRE16 with concerned eyes.

Scarlet recovered quickly, rebooting several of her central systems and locking down the firewall. TINY_SAPPHIRE16 reformed to her normal shape, and Scarlet mumbled a shaken thank you to the man who’d saved her life.

Instinctively, she scanned his user info. WOODSMAN41 — an avatar registered to Marilyn Rogers.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“Mom?”

“Are you okay?” her mother asked again, shedding her male persona and taking the form of her standard avatar. MARILYN895, a younger version of herself.

“I’m fine,” Scarlet said. “What was that thing?”

“One of those next generation viruses I was warning you about last week. They use random bits of chaos code to acquire persona IDs and hack vulnerable users. We talked about this, Scarlet. Do you even listen when I speak?”

“You’re always going on about something, Mom. It’s too much to process.”

Her mother sighed. “I want you to logout and unjack until you update your virus definitions. We’re getting you a level 4 firewall too. No more web life until we do.”

“Okay,” said Scarlet, embarrassed that her mother had been the one to rescue her. Maybe Mom wasn’t totally useless with computers after all. “Thanks for rescuing me.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

“So what’s with the woodsman persona, anyway?”

MARILYN895’s eyes grew wistful. “Just something from a story. The cottage, the wolf. It all reminded me of a book your grandmother used to read to me when I was a kid.”

“A book?” said Scarlet. “Mom, you’re such a dork.”

Passenger Dossier

Name: Josh Rountree

History: Josh’s short fiction has been appearing in small press and professional markets for the past few years. This is his first appearance in ASIM.

Writing Credits: More of his fiction can be found in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Shadowed Realms*, *Lone Star Stories* and plenty of other cool places. His story, “Wood on Bone,” received honorable mention in the *Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror Volume 17*.

The Once and Future Creepy

...Andrew Hindle

If I had a dollar for every time I've told Creepy that it's not possible to build a time machine out of an old exercise bike, three coat hangers and a clock radio, I'd have seven dollars and fifty cents.

I was halfway through telling him for the eighth time when he actually managed to do it. Although if you ask me, assuming you were going to build a time machine at some point in the future, then just sitting back and waiting for your future self to travel back and show you how it was done — that, to me, seems like cheating. But that shouldn't come as a surprise. Cheating is Creepy's way.

Creepy is my housemate, and in this story I have the dubious pleasure of introducing you to not just one Creepy, but two Creepies. The one from the present day is skinny, with long hair and a fondness for Coca-Cola and the colour green. The Creepy who arrived from the future was much the same, except he wore a glittery silver rubber suit with green piping, and a helmet made out of aluminium foil. He materialised with a *whunk*, right in the middle of our living room.

"Hey," I said as he dismounted from the hissing, popping, steaming vehicle, "you're blocking the TV."

Future-Creepy whipped off his helmet and raised a hand in swashbuckling camaraderie.

"Greetings, citizens of the past!" he intoned. "I mean you no harm!"

Having heard this sentiment from Creepy on more than one occasion — often shortly before being harmed — I took the opportunity to arm myself with a couch-pillow and a stale cheese straw. It might not seem like much, but you'd be amazed how much those pillows can absorb, and a cheese straw in the right squidgy region can put a stop to even the most dastardly villain's machinations. Creepy, sadly, has fewer squidgy regions than your average human. Truth be known, Creepy has fewer squidgy regions than your average cutlery drawer.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, craning my neck in vain. The TV was thoroughly obscured.

“I think he’s proving you wrong, Hatboy old chum,” Present-Creepy said, raising his glass to salute his future self. “And making an impressive entry in the process.”

Future-Creepy folded his helmet carefully and looked around with clinical distaste. “It seems to have worked,” he muttered, holding the square of aluminium foil in front of his mouth like a small recording device. “I have successfully navigated the currents of time and arrived in the distant past...”

“Why didn’t you bring me with you?” I demanded.

Future-Creepy dealt with this question in the manner Creepy always dealt with questions when he didn’t know the answer or didn’t want to share it with me — he didn’t answer it.

“Hatboy,” he said, eyeing me up and down. “Have you lost weight?” He smacked his forehead lightly. “Of course you have! This is almost a year ago.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “So much for that diet.”

“Ah, but if I hadn’t mentioned it, you might not have given up on the diet, and therefore you might actually have *lost* weight in the future, in which case I would not have mentioned the phenomenon in the first place.” Creepy looked at his present-day self with an inscrutable expression that was eerily similar to his smug expression. “Causality and paradox,” he said. “You have to know about this sort of thing, when you’re a time traveller.”

“Astounding,” Present-Creepy circled the time machine. Future-Creepy looked around again, and gave a quiet laugh. “Amazing, the way we used to live.”

“It must seem so primitive to you now,” gushed Present-Creepy, his eyes bright with admiration.

“He’s only from a year in the future,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but who knows what sort of advances they’ve made in that time?” replied Present-Creepy.

“The secret of time-travel, for example,” said Future-Creepy with a smirk.

“Exactly!” Present-Creepy hurried towards the kitchen door while I ground my teeth. “Can I offer you a drink? Are you able to take liquid refreshment, or do you regenerate in an alcove?”

“I imagine he’s a lot like his ancient one-year-earlier precursor,” I said, “and gathers his energy by annoying me.”

Creepies ignored this.

“I shall take one-and-a-half units of Coca-Cola,” Future-Creepy announced, unfolding his hat into a rumpled conical shape. “You may place it in my poly-gamma-cyber-hydro...”

He was still telling Present-Creepy the name of his helmet when I got back to the living room with a bottle of Coke and a handful of paper towels.

“...fiber-phosphate-flexi-flonko—”

“You made that up,” I accused, putting the paper towels on the floor before pouring him a drink. A thin drizzle of coke immediately began to leak out of the bottom of his gadget and on to the paper towels. Neither Creepy noticed.

“I can’t expect you to know what flonko is,” Future-Creepy sighed. “Not in this bygone millennium, just centuries after the invention of food.”

Present-Creepy got a question in before I could rally. “So now that you’re here, what are we going to do?”

“There’s that pioneering spirit!” Future-Creepy clapped Present-Creepy on the back. Coke slopped well beyond my preventative measures. “What we’re going to do is, we’re going to get onto my amazing chronomobile and solve the greatest mystery of them all!”

“How a person who drinks coke out of a rolled-up bit of aluminium foil ever managed to make a time machine?” I suggested.

Creepies looked at each other. “Does he get funnier as the aeons go by?” Present-Creepy asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

I pointed my cheese-straw at Present-Creepy. “If I kill him, will you both cease to exist?”

“If you were going to do that, I never would have arrived in the first place,” Future-Creepy said, as if this was somehow meant to discourage me. “No, you see, when I started out on my life of adventure, I had hoped to answer those ultimate questions about the nature of existence.” He spread his hands dramatically, spilling more Coke. “When did it start? Where is it headed? When will I rule it?”

“That’s easy enough,” I said. “It started at the beginning, it’s going to Hell in a hand-basket and you’ll rule it when it gets there.”

Future-Creepy ignored me. “But then I found something disturbing, and it led to the most pressing mystery of all.” He paused, and looked broodingly out from under his eyebrows. “My friends, the universe is in terrible danger!”

“And you expect to save it by gambolling up and down the timeline of this living room, do you?” I was genuinely curious. “Or will you be expecting us to walk somewhere?”

“Us’?” Future-Creepy blinked. “Who said you were coming?”

“Oh,” I sat back down on the couch and looked suspiciously at Creepies. If something seems too good to be true, my motto goes, Creepy’s probably not telling you something. “Okay then. Hurry up and go, you’re blocking the screen.”

Future-Creepy finished his drink, folded his foil back into a soggy little square, and consulted it. "That's not how it's supposed to go," he protested. "I'm supposed to tell you that we don't want you along, and you're supposed to beg us and then we finally relent, after getting you to agree to do all the hard work."

"I see." I topped up my glass and looked at the silver-clad chrononaut. "And what colour was the sky on the planet where *that* plan worked?"

"It's just...well, okay, we'll need you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Somebody has to pedal."

I studied the coat-hanger-festooned exercise bike. "Pedal?"

"It runs on pedal-power."

"That part makes sense. I'm stuck on the bit where I have to pedal. Why can't you pedal? Didn't you pedal on the way here?"

"I didn't need to. It was all downhill."

"What?"

"I only needed to pedal enough to get the swirly vortex of wibbliness active, and I could coast from there," Future-Creepy explained. "Future to past. And I didn't even have to pedal to do that, because I used a battery." He reached into a small hole in the bike frame and pulled out a little cylinder. "Now it's all used up."

"We have more of those."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, my australopithecine friend. Only this is a type of battery unavailable in this era."

I squinted. "Looks like a normal double-A to me."

"Ha!"

"Okay, why can't you or...you pedal?" I looked from one Creepy to the other.

"I wish I could, old chum," said Future-Creepy with a cavernous absence of regret. "But since I don't technically exist yet in this timeline, my pedalling would have no effect."

"*Him*, then."

Both Creepies chuckled at my foolishness. "Obviously, getting my past self to do something which I can't do in this time-stream would cause a temporal implosion," said Future-Creepy, "thus bringing the entire space-time continuum to the premature end from which we're trying to save it."

"Let me make sure I've understood this." I stood up and pointed at the contraption with my cheese straw. "If I don't get on that thing and pedal, I'll be stuck with two of you."

"Yeah."

"Forever."

“Yeah.”

“I’ll get on that thing and pedal.”

We climbed awkwardly onto the machine. I perched myself on the seat, and a Creepy stood on either side with his sneakers hooked around the base. I noticed that Future-Creepy had not just the same sneakers as Present-Creepy, but also the same socks beneath the cuffs of his squeaky futuristic costume.

“Why do we have an exercise bike in the house anyway?” grumbled Present-Creepy. “Its very name is redolent of exercise.”

“Don’t you remember?” I nudged him. “Halloween ’93?”

“Oh yes, your Chamber of Horrors thing. It wasn’t a bad one — but why is it still here for me to make an amazing chronomobile out of?”

“You threw it into the oubliette.”

“I forgot we had one of them.”

“I think that’s sort of the point.”

“Touché.”

“You were going to take it apart and make a Modern Art snack bowl out of it one day,” I went on. “Might be a bit difficult now that it’s been made into a time machine—”

“Chronomobile,” Future-Creepy corrected. “And for us to get *anywhen*, you have to pedal.”

“When are we going to?” I asked, putting my feet reluctantly onto the pedals.

Future-Creepy twiddled a hanger. “The Lower Psychotropic era.”

“How are we going to save the universe in the Lower Psychotropic era?” I wasn’t even sure there had been such an era as the Lower Psychotropic. “Why don’t we go forwards and buy some more of those batteries?” I answered my own question: “Because that would cause another implosion and destroy everything, right?”

“Egad, he’s learning!”

I rolled my eyes and pedalled. Future-Creepy fiddled with the clock radio. The hangers jangled. Cold white steam curled up from the handlebars. The swirly vortex of wibbliness coalesced around us like nothing that hasn’t already been covered in the name ‘swirly vortex of wibbliness’. Everything went grey. Future-Creepy slapped my back and urged me to keep pedalling for the sake of the space-time continuum. I wondered, not for the first time, just what the space-time continuum had done for me lately. The chronomobile went *whunk*.

I looked around.

The Lower Psychotropic era was a lot hotter and sandier than I’d predicted. I’d imagined a sort of ferny jungle with mood lighting and a bunch of dinosaurs talking about pinstripe as an emotion. Instead we were on a hillside that turned out to be, on

second glance, a huge sand dune. It sloped down quite sharply into the ocean, which was a good deal closer to the site of our house than it would be in a few million years' time. A glance at the clock radio's dial didn't tell me much — it was a big nonsense jumble of numbers and letters.

I elbowed Future-Creepy, although technically they were now both Future-Creepies and I didn't want to think about that. "Can I stop now?"

"What? Oh, oh yes, all right."

I slowed, then stopped, and leaned back with relish. "And who exactly is going to do the pedalling from now on?"

Creepies paused in the act of disembarking.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the way I see it, we're all from the future now, and none of us exist in this time-stream, so none of us can pedal."

"Ah," Future-Creepy got that radiant look that told me he was pregnant with an asinine excuse. "Ah, but there's only one of you, not two, so paradox will self-repair and causality—"

"I think maybe you could risk *trying* to pedal on the way back, just to see if it works," I suggested.

"Too risky." Future-Creepy shook his head.

"Just as risky as me doing it."

"Wilderness law," spoke up Present-Creepy.

"What?"

"Wilderness law. We're alone in the wilderness, we have to survive on our wits and act as a team. Therefore, we put all life-and-death decisions to a vote." Present-Creepy raised his hand. "I vote that Hatboy pedals."

"I hate you."

Future-Creepy raised his hand. "I vote that Hatboy pedals and that he apologises for those smarmy remarks he made earlier."

"Seconded," Present-Creepy chirped.

"I can't apologise for smarmy remarks another version of me made in another timeline," I protested. "It might unravel the space-time whatever."

Future-Creepy jumped off the chronomobile and began walking along the slope of the dune. I stared at him suspiciously. Was he measuring out paces? Yes he was!

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"Quiet," he called, turning at right angles and pantomiming the opening of a door. "Two, three, four, stairs..."

"You're not saving the universe at all, are you?"

“Of course I am. Take my word for it, my every action is performed with nothing in mind but the welfare of the cosmos.”

“How do you *know* the universe is going to come to an end?” I jumped off the chronomobile and moon-walked through the sliding sand to where Future-Creepy was now kneeling.

Present-Creepy disembarked and headed straight down towards the beach.

“If you came straight to our time-frame with your battery,” I continued, “how could you know what’s going to happen in the future?” I looked down at the spindly shape of Present-Creepy, who was examining the high-tide line with great interest. “Don’t step on any fish that might be trying to walk out of the sea,” I advised him, then turned back to his future counterpart. “Well?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Future-Creepy was digging now.

I was beginning to fear that I understood only too well. “Where’s the Hatboy from your time?” I asked, glaring down at the silver-clad figure as he toiled in the dry sand. “He built the damn machine, didn’t he? And you decided to go for a test drive, and of course he pedalled, didn’t he? You went into the future somewhere, and something happened, and the universe was put in fatal jeopardy because of some stupid thing you did. And Hatboy stayed there, and you used a battery to coast back to the time you came from, only you overshot and ended up a year in the past, and you were too lazy to pedal back.”

Future-Creepy looked up at me. “That’s not even close to being exactly what happened!”

“Only two things still puzzle me.”

“Yeah?”

“One: why you’re wearing that stupid outfit and foil hat,” I continued loudly before Future-Creepy could explain, “and two: why we’re in the Lower Psychotropic era and you’re digging a hole in the sand just outside where our front door will be in however many millions of years.”

“I don’t know why you keep referring to this as the past,” Future-Creepy said querulously. “It’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“Since when was there ever such a prehistoric era as the Lower Psychotropic?”

“Oh.” I blinked and watched Creepy dig for a few moments, then said grudgingly, “I suppose I can still pedal, then.”

Future-Creepy looked up. “Huh?”

“Do you even *listen* to your stupid rules while you’re making them up? If we’d gone backwards to a time when I didn’t technically exist...hang on,” I looked around. “How far in the future are we?”

“Couple of million years.”

“I thought you said the universe was coming to an end!”

“It is.” Future-Creepy sat back on his heels and rested a moment. “It was. It ended about a hundred years back.”

“Looks like it’s still here to me,” I said.

“Look up,” suggested Future-Creepy, going back to his digging.

I complied, dubiously. The sky, a much paler blue than I’d ever seen, seemed otherwise normal, and the clouds were...clouds were...clouds...

“Pretty weird, huh?”

“Pretty weird,” I agreed faintly.

“If you like those, listen to this.” Future-Creepy jumped to his feet, holding something lumpy and vaguely remote-control-sized in his hand, and went back to the chronomobile. He leaned over, switched on the clock radio, and tuned it to Jazz FM.

“Okay, switch it off,” I said after about three seconds. Creepy obliged me, and the cold moaning sound was silenced. I had no doubt the sound I’d heard had been coming from the things in the sky. “What are they?”

“Holes,” shrugged Creepy. “I guess. Or static. It’s all falling apart, see. The universe has already ended. This is just a fading picture. The TV has been switched off, but the screen’s still glowing.” He looked up. “Not much longer now, and those holes will spread out, the Lower Psychotropic will become the Higher Psychotropic, and everything goes very quickly indeed. We’re right on the edge of it, old chum.”

I suppressed a shiver, and changed the subject. “What was that thing you just dug up, and why did we come all the way here to get it?”

Future-Creepy held his prize up with a grin. It wasn’t a remote control, not that it would have surprised me if it had been. It looked like a corroded piece of grey metal.

“This,” he said, “is a piece of firmament.”

“You’re being silly.”

“No I’m not. It’s actually firm-a-ment, a special metallic element created about a thousand years ago, used as a form of concrete. It has a half-life of two million years. This used to be a block about yay big.” He demonstrated ‘yay’ by holding his hands a few inches apart.

“If it was discovered a thousand years ago, and it’s dissolved that much, this piece must have been buried...” I wrapped my head around the stupidity of time-travel, “...about the time you arrived in our living room.”

“That’s right,” Future-Creepy beamed. “It had to be, because if it’d been buried *after* Hatboy was locked up, the universe would have been long gone before the half-life was over. So I had to have faith that—”

“Don’t think for a minute I missed that ‘Hatboy was locked up’ bit,” I said, “but how do you know all this? How do you know about those holes, and the radio, and the firmament and when it was invented?”

“Well, obviously you told me,” Future-Creepy said patiently, and pointed towards the seaside. Down on the beach, Present-Creepy was sifting excitedly through a pile of bubbly seaweed. “I was busy down there, so I didn’t find out any of it for myself until you explained it later.” He hefted the lump of firmament. “As for this, I just had to have faith that it was buried where you said you’d buried it.”

“You’re doing this on purpose.”

“Come on,” he climbed onto the railing of the exercise bike. “We should get out of here before they arrive.”

“Who arrive?”

“Nobody.”

“We can’t leave Creepy here.”

“We only need one of us.”

“I’m not leaving him here to get swallowed by those holes in the sky, even if he does survive the arrival of those people you won’t tell me about.”

“I never said they were people.”

“Look, set the machine and I’ll go and get him. I assume we’re going back to when Hatboy was locked up and the universe was doomed.”

I clambered down the sand dune and took a moment to look at Present-Creepy. I’d never seen him at the beach before, and I’d never seen a person who belonged at the beach less.

“There are little wormy things that have discovered fire,” he said excitedly. “They rub two bits of seaweed together, but every time a wave comes it puts out the fire, and—”

“We’re leaving,” I said.

“What’s going on?” He stood up and dusted off his pants.

“I’ll explain it to you as soon as I find some way of doing so that doesn’t cause a temporal paradox.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“This time I mean it.”

Both Creepies were grumbling as I clambered onto the seat and began to pedal. The chronomobile went *whunk*.

The not-quite-as-distant-as-before future was a dingy sort of place. It might have been a house, or an angular cave with classically well-placed phosphorescent mushrooms.

“Are there people here?” I whispered.

“No.” Future-Creepy rolled his eyes. “Hatboy found *himself* guilty of wanton desecration of holy ground, and imprisoned *himself* with a firmament device.”

“No need to be sarcastic. Are they human?”

“No way. Humans were all mutated away to nothing after the Biogenic Wars, and then the Twisted Ones came along.”

“Right.”

“Then the Twisted Ones were hunted down and eaten as a delicacy by the Loathsome Bugs.”

“Oh.”

“And I think the Loathsome Bugs were all ground up and rubbed on the skin of the Really Gross Beings.”

“Ew.”

“Then these guys turned up, and the Really Gross Beings thought they were disgusting, so they left.” Future-Creepy led the way through the shadowy passage, and finally stopped. “Here it is.”

He pushed the lump of metal into a slot in the wall. There was a deep rumble.

“It analyses the block’s age and opens if it’s past the right point,” Future-Creepy said. “I think.”

“And it was two million years for me?”

“Yeah.” Future-Creepy’s grin was visible in the gloom. “But only because they liked you.”

The rumble faded, and there was a door. I’d expected a door, but it was still a surprise to suddenly see one there. It swung open, and I found myself face to face with a version of me from one year in my future.

He wasn’t noticeably fatter than I was.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, stepping into the passageway. “They’ve all gone to do something disgusting, but they’ll be back. It’s just lucky they didn’t find out about the chronomobile.” He eyed Future-Creepy up and down. “I see you’re still dressed up like a dork.” He turned to me. “I know this won’t do any good, but for future reference, when you tell him you’ve built a time machine and you’re going to see what the future’s like, don’t give him time to get changed.”

“I *knew* it was me who built it,” I grunted as we headed back the way we’d come.

“Hang on,” said Future-Creepy, “what about the universe?”

“We’ll get these two back to their proper time-frame, and then we’ll deal with the dread menace of destruction.” Future-Hatboy leaned closer to me, and lowered his voice so the Creepies couldn’t hear. “I had to tell him something in the time they gave me before sentencing was carried out,” he said, “and I knew he wouldn’t bother doing anything unless the universe itself was in danger.”

I wondered if causality would allow me to not build a time machine, and to pretend none of this had ever happened. “But the universe *is* in danger,” I said. “We were just there. It comes to an end in about a thousand years.”

“Oh yeah, these guys play around with all sorts of stupid machines, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if they manage to end the universe. But the question you have to ask is, who really cares?” He patted my shoulder. “You’ll see them for yourself in a year or so, and then you’ll understand. The universe is no big loss, if it takes them with it when it goes.”

An alarm was going off in some distant part of the warren. I assumed it was an alarm. Nothing should make a noise that disturbing by accident.

We reached the amazing chronomobile, and spent a few quality moments figuring out just how much larger a group of people could be with one added Hatboy. Then the alarm entered a more urgent and even more nauseating phase, and we all miraculously managed to crowd aboard. I pedalled with one leg while Future-Hatboy pedalled with one of his, and the Creepies clung on for dear life and tried not to bend the coat-hangers which Future-Hatboy adjusted with a few deft twists. The swirly vortex of wibbliness leapt up around us and the chronomobile went *whunk*.

“Back in the misty dawn of time!” Future-Creepy said happily, jumping off the handlebars and pulling out his foil communicator-hat-cup. “I have never been so relieved to breathe the fetid, unhygienic air of...”

I tumbled off my own side of the exercise bike, and looked around the familiar living room. We hadn’t even missed any of the TV show. “You got us back with pinpoint accuracy,” I complimented myself.

“I should hope so,” I replied. “One tiny mistake, and we would have arrived a fraction of a second early or late, and there would have been *another* set of us.”

“Good point.”

Future-Hatboy nudged Future-Creepy. “I’ll just have a word with me, and then we’ll get right on with saving that universe,” he said, giving me a solemn wink and jerking his head in the direction of the door. “You two behave yourselves.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to leave them in the same room with the chronomobile?” I asked as we left the house and wandered down the front steps.

“Perfectly safe. No batteries.” Hatboy reached into the pocket of his bulky jacket — I was glad to see that faithful friend had not changed in the ensuing year — and pulled out a gleaming block of metal exactly yay-big. “You’ll want to bury this under the loose slab, and make sure Creepy remembers where it is in relation to the living room rug.”

“The firmament key,” I said, hefting it. “They put it inside the cell with you?”

“It’s more fun for them this way. There’s a slot on the inside as well as the outside, but it wouldn’t open until the metal was two million years old. Like I said, those guys won’t be any big loss, and if they take the universe with them, I’d call it a fair deal.”

I winced as a crash came from inside. “They’ll be fighting over the remote.”

“I’d better be off,” said Future-Hatboy, and headed inside.

“Hey,” I called after him.

“What?”

“I was just wondering.”

“How Creepy could tell you all that stuff which you apparently told him, but there’s nobody who could possibly have told you except for me, and that would lead to a paradox that might erase the space-time whatever?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s simple,” Hatboy grinned. “Make it up. Use words like psychotropic and biogenic and he’ll believe anything you tell him.”

After Future-Creepy and Future-Hatboy departed from our living room, I buried the block of metal under the loose slab, making sure that Creepy watched me do it.

“I wonder if they managed to save the universe,” Creepy said when we were back on the couch.

“I guess we’ll find out in a year or so,” I said, pouring myself a Coke. “With me to do the pedalling and you to wear the stupid rubber outfit, I don’t see how we can go wrong.”

Passenger Dossier

Name: Andrew Hindle

History and Writing Credits: Born and bred in Western Australia, Andrew went north one winter and never came back. He now lives in Finland with his wife Janica, and has given up the heady life of a migrant steel mill worker for the even headier life of a migrant technical writer for Nokia and other vast corporate empires.

Writing Credits: Aside from the obligatory university journals and a number of utterly incomprehensible instruction manuals (and knowing modern creative writing, there really isn’t much difference between the two), this is Andrew’s first publication.

Love in the Land of the Dead

...Shane Jiraiya Cummings

I ate her brains out of love, but there was more to it than that.

For months it was just the two of us, along with the zombie hordes. Apocalypse was a bastard like that, a great gore-spattered lottery. When the city, then the suburb, and then the mall survivors dwindled down to just Laura and I, I felt like I'd won that lottery. Laura was a babe — sassy, and a bullseye with a shotgun.

Life became a blur of eating out of tins, running hand-in-hand, and adrenalin-charged sex. I came to love Laura, and she loved me, but we hit tough times when the ammo ran out.

There were so few safe places to hide. So many zombies. Knots of them clogged every street. As Laura and I eked out a life in the cracks and shadows, I had my realisation.

We were rushing around, exhausted, in a state somewhere between life and death. But the zombies were different, well, except for the life and death thing. Sure, some of their limbs were missing, and they stunk to high heaven, but by God they were serene. They had such a laid-back lifestyle — never in a hurry, never needing to be anywhere.

In the end, I really dug their Zen attitude.

Laura wasn't as supportive of my change of heart as I'd hoped.

We fought repeatedly; she wanted to look for survivors, while I found myself increasingly fascinated by the zombies lurking at our every turn. Soon enough, our arguments led to carelessness. The zombies found a way into the warehouse where we were holed up.

Their shambling line encircled us. True to her nature, Laura took to them with a chunk of wood. Her last stand was beautiful to watch — a flurry of bludgeoning and desperation. I loved her more in that moment than I ever had before.

But even that wasn't enough. The zombies were inexorable — a groaning, stinking tide of arms and teeth. Laura was thrown to the ground, bleeding and unconscious.

Fascination held me as the zombies moved in. I knew they were hungry but with typical suave they took their time.

I got to her first. I had to.

That's when I ate Laura's brain. Her skull was already cracked, her life already ebbing, and I'd seen enough blood and gore not to get all skittish about it. She tasted salty, like jelly with a hint of chicken. I found out why the zombies hankered for the taste so much. Laura's brain was ambrosia, food for the soul.

I ate her brains out of love, but there was more to it than that. I'd been feeling it build for weeks. All those eyes watching me, all that expectation. Peer pressure was a bitch.

I didn't know how else to show my zombie brothers and sisters I really did belong. They left me alone from then on. It's a Zen thing, I guess.

Zombies are cool like that.

Passenger Dossier

Name: Shane Jiraiya Cummings

History and Writing Credits: Shane is a graduate of Clarion South and a member of the Horror Writers Association. Aside from writing, he's been editing anthologies, including *Shadow Box*, *Robots and Time*, and the forthcoming *Australian Dark Fantasy: The Best of 2005*. He is also the Australian columnist for *Hellnotes* and the Managing Editor of *HorrorScope: The Australian Horror Web Log*. Shane lives in Perth with his partner, one of two step-daughters, and Sahma the poodle. He thinks zombies are cool.

Writing Credits: He has had more than thirty stories published/accepted by such publications as *Aurealis*, *Shadowed Realms*, *Borderlands*, *Ticonderoga Online*, *Daikaiju 2*, *Book of Dark Wisdom*, and more.

Trent Jamieson

...interviewed by Tansy Rayner Roberts

Trent Jamieson has sold over fifty short stories in the last ten years. His work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, most recently *Aurealis*, *Daikaiju*, *The Devil in Brisbane* and *Encounters*. He also edited the acclaimed dark fiction magazine *Redzine*. Trent's story "The Catling God" was published in the very first issue of *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and "Marco's Tooth" appears earlier in this issue. His collection of short fiction, *Reserved for Travelling Shows*, will be available from Prime Books early in 2006.

Where did "Marco's Tooth" come from?

Basically the opening image. I had two people climbing up this thing floating in the air, and I just wanted to know why they were there. It took me a long time to find out. I wrote the first scene about six or seven years ago, and I kept going back to it, and, one sentence at a time, it was revealed to me. I'm an extremely slow writer — extremely slow — something not to be confused with careful.

Seriously, it took me three years to discover it was set on a gas giant, and almost five years to get to the secret of the teeth, and my protagonist's life.

So is that a common thing for you — to eke a story out gradually over many years?

Yes. A story grows slowly inside me. "Slow and Ache," which is currently short listed for an *Aurealis* Award, I started around five years ago, sitting out the back of work on my lunchbreak. Another recently published story, "Tumble," which was published by *Ideomancer Online* and has been picked up by *The Year's Best Australian Horror and Dark Fantasy*, is as old as "Marco's Tooth" and began with a snippet of dialogue that kept playing at my mind. I'm slow, slow, slow. Fortunately, I have a least ten or twelve stories going at one time, and another twenty or so sitting in the background, not to mention the literally hundreds of notebooks I have with ideas and opening sentences. I do a lot of writing on the train to work, which can be hard if you don't get a seat, but I tend to find it gives the writing a sort of rhythm that is different to what I get when I'm sitting in front of the computer screen.

"Marco's Tooth" quite an emotionally exhausting story — was it difficult to write?

I'm glad that it is emotionally exhausting, I was trying for that. I kind of see this story as a bookend to "Clockwork," another story of mine. Both deal with loss, time, and, I suppose, father son relationships. Family is something very important to me.

Love and loss are themes that permeate most of your short fiction — do you deliberately write to certain themes, or do they just appear in your fiction?

I wish I could say I chose my themes deliberately. I am in awe of authors who do that. I've never sat down and thought, "Now I'm going to explore this theme in this story." I suppose those themes are just reflections of thoughts that I'm exploring in my own life. I fear losing those I love, I dread it. And there has been some serious illness recently in my family, which I am tending to see crop up in the stuff I'm writing now. Love is such a flawed, but wonderful, wonderful thing. And it is so fleeting, because our lives are so fleeting.

If you love someone, tell them, as clearly as you can, because once they're gone, it's too late. And, on one level, that's what so much of my fiction is. I'm really only writing to one person most of the time, and that's only to tell her how much I love her.

Your first short story collection is due out very soon — where does the title *Reserved for Travelling Shows* come from?

Sadly, it's not particularly profound. I used to walk to work through a field that was "reserved for travelling shows" and I always thought it would be a good title for a collection.

What was the process like, to put the collection together? Did you have editorial input on this, or did you choose the stories themselves?

It was relatively painless. I had a very strong idea of which stories to include, and I genuinely believe these are the best stories I've written, and that they track my development as a writer. The hardest thing was choosing the single unpublished story for the collection, it's called "Persuasion" and I think it's a rather sweet love story.

What kind of reaction would you most like to receive when the book is released? What do you hope it will do for your writing career?

I hope people enjoy the stories, some of these stories have been published in magazines that genre readers are not likely to have encountered. I also hope they hold up to multiple readings, I would love this to be a collection that people feel the need to return to from time to time. That would make me happy.

As for my writing career, I hope the next couple of years see me finishing a couple of longer projects, and having a short story collection out certainly won't hinder my chances at finding them a home.

You've worked as an editor of some fairly prestigious material in the past, including the magazine *Redsine* and K.J. Bishop's novel *The Etched City*. Are you planning any more editorial projects?

I'm currently helping Geoff Maloney and Zoran Zivkovic on the follow up project to *The Devil in Brisbane* called *Fantastical Journeys*. But my role is fairly minor. I've enjoyed my editorial work, and while part of me misses it, I much prefer writing. It's fascinating though how the tasks use totally different parts of the brain. My structural approach to

stories as an editor is extremely different to my approach as a writer. If something were to catch my eye, I might say yes, but I rather like having my weekends back.

You're working on a novel right now — do you prefer to work in short stories or novel length? What are some of the differences?

The novel is called *Roil*, which started out as YA, but now is not, and I'm enjoying the longer form, trying to see how many ideas I can fit on a page. I wish I wrote a little faster. A short story can take me years to write. One of the things I've struggled with is trying to fit my way of writing into the novel form. The way I write tends to be somewhat disjointed, not one for linear structure, and I tend to slam old and new drafts together, mix them up and then rewrite the result. It's taken me nearly a decade to work out how to do that with a novel, but I think I may have finally managed it. It's certainly working on my rough notes for my next novel, and I think it's working on *Roil*.

Considering how popular YA fantasy is at the moment, it's interesting that you are moving away from that — was it a deliberate choice, or did the novel just naturally go in that direction?

The novel just moved that way. Every draft has made it darker. Which is satisfying, if the work can lift you along, and keep you going, and if it can keep changing — hopefully for the better — then you've just got to go with it. I agree though, that YA is extremely popular, but working in a bookstore, in the returns department, I'm seeing a glut in the market. Time is coming for sf writers to write for adults again. I kind of feel we're living in the last great age of books, it's the time to be writing challenging books.

What's the best thing you read in 2005?

Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell for its fine mixing of genres. There's been a real shift in mainstream literature lately. SF tropes are actually being explored intelligently. Other standouts for me this year were *Specimen Days* by Michael Cunningham, and *The Possibility of an Island* by Michel Houellebecq. All of which had nary a whiff of SF in their marketing.

What's the best thing you wrote in 2005?

Of the things published in 2005, I would say "Tumble," the story in *Ideomancer Online*. This story really didn't start to work for me, until I realised that the protagonist lived in a world where cities were extremely addictive, then it started to fly. The stories I'm most excited about are the things I'm working on currently.



The Mainstreaming of Speculative Fiction

...Cory Daniells

Disclaimer: To mention just the TV shows and movies that my survey via the VISION eList turned up would reduce this article to a series of lists. So if I skim over one of your favourite TV shows or don't mention a movie that aroused your imagination please forgive me.

Back in the 60's, when Disney used to be our Sunday night's TV viewing, my brothers and I would sit with bated breath as Tinker Bell selected the topic for the night's show. Would it be *Future World* (SF), *Cartoon World* (Fantasy & Horror)? Yeah!! But most often it was *Frontier World* or *Nature World* — booo! As a child I relished anything with spec fic content. I can remember the thrill of watching *Forbidden Planet* one hot Saturday afternoon. After watching *Jason and the Argonauts*, I developed a thing for men with bronzed thighs in short skirts and sandals. *Jason and the Argonauts* still looks good today and holds the attention of my children who have been reared on computer generated special effects. Astro Boy was my hero because he believed in the rights of robots. Needless to say I did not have a lot in common with the other kids on the block.

To research this article I did a very unscientific survey via the VISION e-list, (many thanks to those who replied from right across Australia). There were responses from multi published authors and people who were just getting interested in writing, from those in their early twenties through to those in their sixties. And it became clear that unless you were lucky enough to be born into an understanding family, an interest in all things spec fic led to an isolated childhood...that is, until *Star Wars* created the great perception shift in the 70's. Those people who responded to the survey, who were lucky enough to grow up post *Star Wars* said they had no trouble finding friends with similar interests. Thanks to George Lucas, they shared a common cultural medium.

Even before *Star Wars*, children fared better than adults with *Doctor Who*, *The Jetsons*, *Get Smart*, *Thunderbirds*, *Captain Scarlet*, *Land of the Giants*, almost every cartoon, *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Catweasel*, *Lost in Space*, *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* as well as many other shows that the network executives didn't realise were stimulating subversive young minds. Children's shows and books have always had a high fantastical content from the very first nursery rhymes with talking cats, through the classics like *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But children were expected to put away the thrill of the imagination when they entered the adult world.

Back before the proliferation of spec fic TV shows for adults, we had *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *Blake's Seven*, *The Twilight Zone* and obscure shows that slipped in the side door. You could classify *The Goodies* and *Monty Python* as spec fic. And what about the James Bond movies, fantasy with near future gadgetry?

And then there were the comics. My mother didn't approve of comics so I had to sneak away to a friend's place to read them. Thanks to Marvel and their superheroes, generations of children were introduced to spec fic concepts in comics. These covered every aspect of the genre, from fantasy through science fiction to horror. Who can forget *Vampirella*?

Like the genre itself, comics have always been fringe, with a strong cult following. My husband still has his collection dating from the 60's and 70's. He was lucky enough to discover European graphic novels through people like Hergé, Druillet and Mobius. And then there were the Japanese comic artists giving the genre a cultural twist that added martial arts and school girls in sailor suits. Just as speculative fiction makes up a large percentage of computer game content, it has always been a staple of comics.

Until I moved to Melbourne the year after the '75 World SF Con and became involved in Fandom I didn't even realise the things I loved to read and watch belonged to a genre that had a name.

With Fandom I discovered people who could hold a conversation on topics other than football and cricket. I discovered conventions and a whole range of authors from Fritz Leiber, to thrill and delight, through Ray Bradbury, who could twist the everyday into the bizarre, to Isaac Asimov, who made science accessible. With Fandom I met people who weren't afraid to look into the infinite and wonder where we would be in twenty, fifty or a thousand years time. But this didn't carry over into the real world. Back in those days Fandom had a Them and Us mentality. The spectre of journalists denigrating spec fic by concentrating on the propeller-topped-beanie element was very real — mostly because we were a fringe group of oddballs. Any spec fic gathering had a tendency to look like the party scene from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with people of every shape and size, but they were accepted and their eccentricities embraced. That was the wonderful thing about Fandom.

While the books and stories I was reading explored consequences of cloning and the alienation of an underclass, things which our world are now grappling with, movies

and television shows generally played it safe. *Star Trek* portrayed a future where we explored space according to a code of ethics which would have prevented Europeans handing out poisoned food to Australian indigenous people. As usual, the English pushed the barriers with *A Clockwork Orange*, which is still confronting today, and *2001: a Space Odyssey*, a movie that appeared at exactly the right time.

If you look at the top grossing movies of each decade* as an indicator of what the popular tastes were you get an over view of the general public's preference. In the 60's, despite the popularity of Jane Fonda in *Barbarella* and Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.*, the top ten grossing movies contained only five with spec fic content, and three of these were children's movies: *101 Dalmations*, *The Jungle Book* and *Mary Poppins*. If you consider the James Bond movies spec fic then there were six.

In the 70's, *Star Wars* delivered visually exciting adventure SF to the masses in a readily digestible form. Suddenly, everyone was talking about "sci-fi". But *Star Wars* didn't appear until 1977. The early part of this decade saw several top grossing movies with spec fic content such as *The Exorcist*, *Jaws* and the Bond movies. Later, there were *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Superman*. Depending on which list you consult, between five and eight of this decade's top grossing movies were spec fic.

But it is during the 80's that you can see the shift in public tastes. Nine out of 10 of the top grossing movies in the 1980's were spec fic, with *ET, the Extra Terrestrial* the top grossing movie for the whole decade. But spec fic content did not guarantee top ticket sales. There were some beautifully made spec fic movies in the eighties that did not make the top ten list. *Legend*, *Blade Runner* and *Willow* are all good examples of their genre that never achieved massive financial success.

The success of the big blockbusters did open doors for other movie makers and TV producers. Australia's *Mad Max* appeared in 1979, a near future movie made on a shoe string budget. After the *Star Wars* phenomenon the Miller brothers went on to make *Mad Max 2* and *3* with much larger budgets.

A generation of movie makers, script writers, special effects people and computer game designers have grown up post *Star Wars*, never knowing the desperation of living in suburbia's Desert of the Imagination, or the dizzy delight of discovering an oasis of stimulating ideas and visuals. This generation have taken the ground work of previous writers and directors who championed spec fic and built on them with the next generation of TV shows and movies and the new genre of computer games.

What was a marginal genre has become increasingly popular. Through the 60's and 70's, only four or five TV shows with spec fic content managed to make the top rated 25. Shows like *The Wonderful World of Disney* (some spec fic), *Bewitched*, *My Favourite Martian* and *Get Smart* in the 60s. And in the 70s, shows like *Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Fantasy Island*, *Spiderman* and *Mork and Mindy*. Yet, of the top 20 Cult TV shows, nineteen are spec fic with the only marginally mainstream *The A Team* coming in at number 20. Of course spec fic features prominently on the lists

of worst movies and TV shows as well. Who can forget Ed Wood with his cardboard gravestones and flying saucers made from, well, saucers.

Was the lack of adult spec fic content on TV due to the reluctance of the networks to run it or because people didn't want it? It took years and the groundswell of popular support to convince the large studios and TV networks to review their decision to discontinue *Star Trek*. 726 episodes, 10 movies and hundreds of books have now been based on this series. Look at the popularity of *The X Files*, and *Buffy* which comes in at number three on the Cult TV list. Then there's the perennial *Doctor Who*. Who would have thought when it first appeared in 1963 that it would run for 26 years, spawn a movie in 1996 and be revived as a TV series 42 years after the first episode went to air?

With the increase in shows and movies with spec fic content the general public is more prepared to accept outré ideas. But they are still left floundering sometimes.

When *The Matrix* first came out reviewers were marvelling at the central premise. 'Wow, they were fooling with our perception of reality'. This is a very familiar concept for spec fic fans. *Forbidden Planet's* pivotal revelation was that monsters from the Id could come to life. A lot of the time the general public don't even realise they are reading or watching spec fic. *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, sold a million copies in Australia, which means one in 20 people bought a copy. Yet, if you'd asked them, they would have said they don't read SF.

In the 90s nine out of the 10 top grossing films were spec fic with *Titanic* the only mainstream representative. And in the first half of this decade all 10 of the top grossing films have been spec fic. In fact I checked out the top 50 grossing films of all time. Only seven were not spec fic and some of those could be classified if we stretched the definition. *Forrest Gump*, an allegorical fantasy? *The Passion of the Christ*, a metaphysical look at humanity's striving for a greater purpose? *Mission Impossible One and Two*, another version of James Bond? *Troy*, fantasy sword and sorcery. That only leaves *Pretty Woman*, *Titanic* and *Saving Private Ryan*.

The superheroes of our childhood comics have been reborn on the large screen mostly to resounding success. In Japan Miyazaki has been working his magic for 40 years but it is only now his work is readily accessible to the Western public.

With the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Sixth Sense* and the Matrix trilogy spec fic has become part of our shared culture, not just the preferred medium of a group of misfits. It is through these movies, TV shows and computer games that the popularisation of concepts and ideas long discussed in fandom have reached the general public. Fandom itself has been immortalised with humour and affection in *Galaxy Quest*.

Thanks to speculative fiction we are prepared to discuss the future. Asimov gave us the Three Laws of Robotics and we are all familiar with matter transference (beam me up, Scotty). We even have antique futures. When I was 11 years-old Apollo 11

landed on the moon. Like Marge Simpson, I wanted to grow up to be an astronaut. I thought we'd be living on the moon by the year 2000, going bravely where no one had gone before.

Instead we are living the adventure vicariously, through the medium of movies, TV shows and computer games. And speculative fiction is the preferred genre of the majority of the viewing public. When the edge of the genres blur to the point where a movie like *Wag the Dog* explores the premise that a President might create his own fictitious war to divert public attention from troubles at home, then even the every day becomes speculative fiction, and what was an obscure genre is now mainstream.

*There is some discrepancy from site to site as to what were the top grossing movies each decade.

Website resources *(warning: some sites listed below have pop-ups)*

Top Grossing Films by Decade	www.nostalgiacentral.com/index.htm
Top Grossing Films by Decade	www.filmsite.org/boxoffice2.html
Top Grossing Movies	www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide
Top TV Shows from the 50s, 60s and 70s	www.fiftiesweb.com/pop/pop-history.htm
UK Cult TV Site	www.bbc.co.uk/cult
Top 100 Cult TV Shows	www.cult.tv/index.php?cm_id=222&cm_type=article
Cult TV, Radio and Film	www.cultv.co.uk
The SadGeezers Guide to Cult TV Sci Fi	www.sadgeezer.com
Doctor Who	www.gallifreyone.com
Academic Essays on Buffy	www.slayage.tv
Star Trek	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Trek
Worst Films	www.thestinkers.com/worstever.html
Worst Films	www.imdb.com/chart/bottom
Australian Aborigine	www.answers.com/topic/australian-aborigine

R

Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine welcomes book reviews or books to review, however we can't guarantee publication of any review, or to review every book sent to us. For more information please contact the Reviews Editor, Ian Nichols, at asimreviews@gmail.com.

E

Olympos

by Dan Simmons

Eos, 2005

Hardcover, 704 pp

reviewed by Tansy Rayner Roberts

V

Ilium was a book that I really enjoyed for its style and characters and sheer epic scope — even though I didn't know what was going on most of the time, and found the read somewhat — well, hard work. It's not badly written by any means, it just takes an awake brain and a hefty dose of commitment to plough through in order to get the good stuff. Not a beach book, unless it's a beach being invaded by Greek soldiers and quantum-teleporting gods...

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If you haven't read *Ilium*, don't pick up *Olympos*. It's not so much a sequel as Part Two to *Ilium*'s Part One — a victim to the new trend of US publishers to slash huge epic books in half. Mind you, if they hadn't, the *Ilium/Olympos* monster would have caused some booksellers a serious hernia. The books are big. And packed. For those of you just joining us, *Ilium* related the story of Hockenberry, a dead Classics scholar resurrected in order to commentate a bizarre re-enactment of the Trojan War, on Mars, complete with heroes, kings and gods. Meanwhile, some cute little robots with literary fetishes are travelling from somewhere to somewhere else, and back on Earth the post-human society is under attack. Sounds busy? Yep. And epic. And compelling. And really weird...

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Olympos had a lot to achieve — it had to be bigger and better than *Ilium*, plus answer all the questions (the most important being: what the **** is going on?) as well as bringing resolution to at least 20 important characters.

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The good news is that it does all of the above. The better news is — it answers the “what the **** is going on?” question! *Olympos* takes the story to a higher level of battle, tension and drama (including some kick-ass twists, particularly with Helen's character), then resolves the lot in a

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way that I certainly didn't see coming. I was totally satisfied by this book — if you liked *Ilium*, you'll be pleased to know that *Olympos* is worth the effort it takes to get through. Then again, if you liked *Ilium*, you're not averse to a difficult but worthwhile read.

Olympos is better, actually, than its predecessor because the 'following the thread of the Iliad' plot that *Ilium* followed until the very end of that book continues to spiral off the rails, providing a fascinating alternative universe that is nevertheless consistent with the classic characters as presented by Homer.

One of the many Amazon reviews dedicated to this book suggested that *Olympos* ends with too many loose ends hanging, with no third volume in sight. Technically, this is true, but I would dispute that a third book is necessary. The ending is one that left me believing that a really interesting story was on the horizon, but I didn't need to read it — just knowing it's out there is enough for me. My **favourite** kind of ending, truth be told.

The important thing, with such a massive sequel to a massive first book that promised so much, is that *Olympos* is a reading experience that repays your commitment in spades. And clubs. And swords...

Hammered

Elizabeth Bear

Bantam Spectra, 2005

Paperback, 352 pp

Reviewed by Cherie Priest

Across the internet there has been much discussion lately over the male to female ratio in speculative fiction. Tradition declares that the genre world is largely a boy's club, but talented women are changing this conventional wisdom — and one of my favorite leaders of the pack is Campbell Award winning author Elizabeth Bear.

Bear's debut novel *Hammered* follows retired Canadian special forces officer Jenny Casey through a tangled post-revolution adventure mystery that begins in Hartford, Connecticut. 2062 is a tough year to live in New England, and Jenny's old built-in military bioware is failing. But although she's in constant pain and increasingly uncertain about her own future, Casey takes on the streets to track down a deadly drug — and learns that she's up against something much more dangerous than an organized crime syndicate.

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Battered body and all, Jenny is the perfect subject for a classified government project that will either make or break her. And when all is said and done, there's no telling who or what will be left standing.

Bear's style is quick, gritty, and decidedly post-noir in all the best ways; and Jenny is the perfect vehicle character to complement the writing. She navigates the minefield of futuristic hazards with grim persistence and paranoid wisdom — giving the reader a protagonist who is believably reliable without being a template alpha superhero. Her primary motivator has nothing to do with landing the hunky space god. She is not a flashy egomaniac. She does not show a lot of cleavage, and she'd probably laugh at you if you suggested it.

I must insist upon these points despite the book's cover — which, while being eye-catching and tasteful, *does* feature a woman wearing a spandex suit with an awfully deep zipper down the front. Therefore, every time I dropped this book into my purse and took it out on the town to read, I was bound to have a spectator sneak up beside me and say (something to the effect of), “Hey, chicks in space!”

Well, not exactly.

In fact, the very lack of a “chicks in space” feel is the bulk of its charm. There were a thousand and one cliché directions this story could have gone, but instead Bear deftly keeps *Hammered* what it needs to be from the first page to the last — a smart, engaging science fiction novel that defies pretty much every expectation a reader might bring to it.

Innocence Lost — Kingmaker, Kingbreaker 2

by Karen Miller

Harpercollins, 2005

Hardcover, 560 pp

Reviewed by Davina MacLeod

In *Innocence Lost* Karen Miller has laid a feast before us once again.

If you have had the pleasure of reading Book 1, *The Innocent Mage*, you may recall how palate cleansing that entree was. You may also remember that just as you were cosily tucking into the main course it was whipped from the table, so to speak.

Never fear the craving will now be assuaged. The table is set, and old friends have returned. Asher speaks his mind plain as ever. Gar is more the royal than before, and does what he must to save the kingdom, while trusting that Asher will do whatever he asks of him.

Matt is still the gentle yet stolid Horsemaster, and at last Dathne starts letting go of some secrets, while keeping Asher flummoxed, but in love. You will enjoy a visit to Conroyd's home where you join his guests at a lavish dinner. Like me you may cheer when you witness his hopes crumble, yet wonder if he will let go of his dream so easily.

Can Asher and Darran make peace, and keep it, when Gar begs them to? They do try. But what is Conroyd and that weasel, Willer, hatching together, will they manage to bring Asher down?

Don't expect the expected with this serving. Although Miller has brought most of the same tantalizing ingredients to book 2, she has added a few more spicy tidbits to the mix in the same inviting manner as she did in book 1. Get ready to tuck in.

Knife Of Dreams: Book 11 Of The Wheel Of Time

by Robert Jordan

Tor Fantasy, 2005

Hardcover, 784 pp

Reviewed by Tehani Wessely

Please, please, please Mr Jordan, let there only be one book to go! The wait is driving fans mad, but Jordan seems to finally be winding up the myriad plot lines that have been enthralling us for well over a decade. Enthralling and frustrating, as we wait eagerly for each instalment, aggravated by the long delays between books, and annoyed by the teasing prequel (*New Spring*, 2004) and companion volumes that have contributed to these delays (no matter how enjoyable the side story may be). But surely now the series is winding down. Prophecies are being fulfilled and Tarmon Gai'don comes. In *Knife of Dreams*, we revisit all the primary characters, Rand, Mat, Perrin, Egwene, Nynaeve and Elayne, and follow many of the threads drawing together in the tapestry to show the whole picture.

Rand struggles to achieve aspects of prophecy he knows must come to pass if he is to find victory in the Last Battle, still struggling with the persona of Lews Therin in his head, and despite the fact that he and Nynaeve have cleansed saidin of the taint that destroyed so many men who channelled, he still fights it every time he channels. Meanwhile, Mat and Perrin fight their own battles, both personal and for the cause, as Mat tries to understand the vagaries of Tuon, the Daughter of the Nine Moons, while trying to keep her safe from her own people, and Perrin

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desperately searches for a way to rescue Faile, even making a bargain with the Seanchan to accomplish his task.

Egwene is captured and taken to the White Tower, where she continues to quietly consolidate her position as Amyrlin of the Aes Sedai, working against the divisions within and without the Tower. At the same time, Elayne is seeking to consolidate her own position as heir to the throne of Andor, struggling with the fate of a nation as well as her pregnancy, being separated from her 'sister' Aviendha, and wondering constantly about Rand and what he is doing.

During the novel, we also get a glimpse of other characters, such as Elayne's brother Galad, Nynaeve's husband Lan, and even are rewarded with a mention of Moraine, the Aes Sedai who started the wheels in motion way back in book one, indicating that perhaps she's not quite as dead as she may have appeared (and who among us didn't pick that one coming?!).

Jordan's scope is epic, and it has been building throughout the books, but where readers have been frustrated by the crawling pace of the last few novels, *Knife of Dreams* finally picks up the tempo and thrusts the story forward. The writing is still perhaps over-wordy — a first time author would be told to cut and cull the description — but for some, this description may be what brings the Wheel of Time world alive. The characters are as finely drawn and conflicted as ever, which is part of the morbid fascination we have for this story — none of the characters are paragons. They have their good qualities but they also have the darker, less virtuous traits, which make them human. I began reading the series soon after the sixth book was released, and was drawn in by the depth of the character study and the intricate plots Jordan wove for us. I'm so pleased I didn't start when the first book came out, or my wait for the finale would have been so much longer. I've promised myself that when the final book arrives, I'll re-read the series from the beginning to allow continuity to really have effect. But it's worth the wait, and I can't not read each instalment, waiting desperately for the conclusion which will be, I'm certain, stunning and incredible in its detail and shocks when we finally discover the ending. And I, for one, will then be looking for Jordan to write more in this world, as I'll miss the characters that have been part of my life for so long!