



ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine



ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Alex Cohen
Richard S Crawford
Larry E Ferrill
Loïc Henry
Jeff Parish
Regina Patton
Simon Petrie
Sarah Totton



ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS Inflight Magazine

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Ed's Itorial

...Edwina Harvey

I'd like to open this issue of Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine with a string of 'Thank-you's.

Firstly I'd like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication that Tehani Wessely and Zara Baxter contribute to the Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine cooperative.

I'd also like to thank my two sub-editors for this issue: Sue Bursztynski, who also helped me out in her capacity as our Art Director, and Lucy Zinkiewicz. It was a pleasure to work with both of these ladies. My thanks also to the great artists I've been able to use in this issue. All three of them have done a stunning job. And the authors have all been very good to work with as well.

I acted like a filter-feeder in selecting many of the stories in this issue of ASIM. If a story passed my eyes in the slush reading stage and I liked it, I grabbed it without knowing who the author was until later. That's how I managed to select not one but **two** works from Simon Petrie. After the second one, I decided I wasn't selecting anymore stories without knowing who the author was first, to avoid pulling a Simon Petrie hat trick! As past issues of ASIM will testify, Simon is not only a prolific writer, but a very good one.

I hope you all enjoy the ride with this issue.

Edwina Harvey.

I Buried Elvis

...Larry Ferrill

I never been much for art, but here at the institution they let us surf the teleweb, and one day I came across a painting from someone named Francis Bacon that caught my eye. It's called *Three Studies for a Portrait Including Self-Portrait, 1969*, right panel. The fella in the painting's got a forehead like a caveman, and a face like Mr. Potato Head after a meltdown in a microwave. But you can still make out some of his features, just enough to see the outlines of an Elvissy face.

I like that painting, cause it reminds me of my friend from the carnival, the first friend I ever had and maybe the last: Aron Love.

Then there's another Francis Bacon painting, called *Self-Portrait II, 1972*. Androgynous albino with a fishbowl head, peering out from behind a dark corner with bruised eyes and a bulging jawbone.

I'd swear that's a portrait of me.

Aron and me shared an apartment in one of the six three-story roach ranches at the west end of the carnival grounds, on the other side of a rusted chain-link fence. The apartments once housed low-income families, and the four-acre lot next door was a Turbo-Kart course, till Victor Hagen bought both properties on the cheap and converted them into his American Classic Carnival. "Just down the road from Graceland," according to our ads, though it's actually thirty miles south of that mecca, and on a different road altogether. Hagen filled the lot with carnival booths and tents, and used the apartments to house the talent: Longhand, Gator Maid, Horseface, Trunk-8, Pignose, Goldipox, Jacko Lantern, Ratgrrrl.

The carnival, however, had been put on hold when Aron finally made his debut performance. Hagen had stripped down all the tents, except for a small one that housed the control board. That left nothing on the four-acre lot but Aron's stage, the grandstands, and a roaring sea of people.

To the east, Hagen had bought the neighboring shopping center and leveled it for additional parking. On the west side, the chain-link fence still stood, and sitting behind it were all the freaks whose freak shows had been canceled, surveying Aron's standing-room audience with jealous eyes.

I watched nearly the whole show from our apartment, on my teleweb screen. Wasn't until the show neared its end, and the audience started cheering for an encore, that I turned for the window.

The rifle was somehow just lying on the floor. Don't even remember putting it there.

It was one half of a set that used to belong to Scarecrow, who'd brought them with him — scopes and all — when he signed on with the carnival three years before. Scarecrow was a miscreated Jack Nicholson, or maybe Marlon Brando or Dennis Hopper — one of those actors who played wiggled-out characters in the late twentieth century, I can never keep them straight. We called him Scarecrow cause he was as light as a straw man and had a face that looked like it'd been pecked all over by crows. On stage, Scarecrow always made a grand entrance. He'd burst through a particleboard door with an axe, stick his head through the hole and say, "Heeere's Johnny." Which, I guess, is something one of those wiggled-out characters once said in a movie. Most of the audience never got the reference, but half of them laughed and half of them screamed, so either way, they got their money's worth.

Scarecrow and me were roommates back then, but we weren't friends. I was manual labor; he was talent, and like all the rest of the performers, he never let me forget my place. And he was always teasing me, telling me I needed to grow a pair — balls or boobs, take my pick. On nights when he got cozy with Jack Daniels, his teasing could turn violent, so I'd sneak out of the apartment and hide away until he passed out or sobered up.

But he was the one who taught me to shoot. He needed ammo, and I agreed to sneak it onto the monthly purchase order with all the other supplies, in exchange for shooting lessons. Target practice out by the dumpsters, after hours. I knew I had no business with a gun in my hands, but I have to admit I like the way it felt. The power. And when Scarecrow died of pneumonia a year later, I kept the rifles for myself.

I knelt by the window and cradled the rifle, settled under it and stared down the scope at the stage.

Same old wooden platform we'd always used. Wide-open, except for the beams that anchored the red canvas roof. Backstage was just as open as the front, with two guards parked at each corner and an armored limo purring a few feet away.

Directly behind the platform stood two people: Nicholas Jacinto and his wife, Niki. They were both decked out in helmets and silver dragline jumpsuits. Part of me hoped Jacinto would stay inside his protective suit for the remainder of the show, and part of me hoped he wouldn't.

The part of me that hoped he wouldn't swiveled the scope toward the man, took aim and waited.

I first met Jacinto nearly a year before, though I didn't know at the time who he was.

It was early December, the day after Aron arrived at the carnival, and I was headed for the storage room, which was inside a white concrete building that used to be a maintenance shack for the apartment complex. We used the back room for storage, but you could only get to it through the front, where Hagen's office was located.

As I reached the building, I noticed a black terror-proof limo parked out front. I peeked into the tinted windows, but saw only my own face peering back. Immediately, I turned away, marched to the office door, jiggled the knob and found it locked.

I banged on the door.

"Come back later," Hagen growled.

“It’s AJ. I need into the supply room.”

Footsteps and muffled voices on the other side. I waited. Behind me were the sounds of the carnival crowd, bellying up to the concession tent. The greasy, spitfire crackle of elephant ears, deep-frying in fat. Faceless laughter, hoots and hollers. And floating above it all, the sound of cheesy organ music, coming from rusty speakers on a nearby utility pole.

Finally the door squeezed open, just wide enough for Hagen’s bald melon. “Whatch your problem?”

“Bulb. Spotlight’s out in T-4.”

He ground his teeth, spit out the husk of a sunflower seed and grunted. “Can’t it wait?”

As if on cue, the speakers screeched and the music cut away, replaced by the smooth voice of Farthorn the barker, urging the paying customers to “Step right up to tent number four and witness teratologies more terrifying than anything Hollywood ever concocted.” Farthorn was exaggerating, but his spiel wasn’t an outright lie. There really were teratologies scheduled for the next show, but they were no more terrifying than Trunk-8, snaking across the stage, singing that he’s pleased to meet you and hopes you guess his name; then Pignose clutching an umbrella in his purple hands, tap-dancing and singing in the rain; followed by Jacko Lantern, bobbing his head — more like a pumpkin than a head — while he squeals and moonwalks across the stage.

I pointed to my watch. “Showtime in fifteen.”

Hagen sighed. “I’ll fetch it.” Turning from the door, he added, “Stay there.”

As he tromped to the storage room, I heard something jangle behind me. I turned and saw a little redheaded boy, clutching the chain-link fence and gawking at me. Soon as he caught my eye, he sprang back, his whole body shuddering and his freckled cheeks trembling like slabs of Jell-O. Seconds later, he ran away shrieking, “Mommy, one of them fweaks is loose!”

In that same instant, someone chuckled inside the office.

I spun myself around and squinted through the opening in the doorway.

There was Hagen’s littered desk, and behind it was a man I had never seen before. He had a broad, angular face and caramel skin, like a bronze statue, slowly coming to life. His whole body gave off an air of confidence and power, like an odor or a sound. Other folks might have found that sense of power attractive, might have been drawn to it, but it had the opposite effect on me.

What was a man with that kind of power doing at Hagen’s Podunk carnival?

“You are AJ?” he asked.

I nodded.

“AJ.” He tapped his chin with a bronze finger. “Are you male or female?”

“Neither.” I looked him in the eye. I always look folks in the eye when I tell them, so I don’t miss their reaction. “No genitalia.”

He blinked, but otherwise didn’t react. I could tell, though, that he was thinking about asking the same question everyone asks. The question that the thugs at the Oregon institution where I was raised answered for themselves, by dragging me kicking and screaming into the bathroom and demanding to see me piss.

But instead, he just smiled and dropped the subject. Maybe he thought I was only joking. He said, “Mr. Hagen says that he hired you because you are handy to have around.”

I had to laugh, because Hagen had never actually “hired” me. He’d once paid a visit to my institution, scouting for talent, but I couldn’t sing or dance and had no presence on stage, so Hagen rejected me. I didn’t give up so easily, however. I was naïve enough to believe Hagen’s spiel about how all miscreations at his carnival could live and work together as brothers, without fear of being treated as different. He made the place sound like some sort of freak utopia, so I determined it was where I wanted to be. To get there, I learned to do anything that could rake in a few bucks. Upgraded the institution’s network. Developed internal sites. Set up databases. Rewired the whole rat’s nest of a building. Eventually, I had saved enough to pay three nightshift staff members to look the other way while I escaped.

I erased my identity and showed up on Hagen’s doorstep, begging for a job and claiming I was simply “AJ,” with no idea who my genetic parent was. Hagen sent me packing. Or tried to. I refused to leave, kept making myself useful, initially taking meals and bed at the homeless shelter. After about two weeks, Hagen allowed me to eat with the talent. Two more weeks and he let me have a room. Another week and he started paying me in cash.

“I’m more than just handy to have around,” I said. “Place would fall apart without me.”

“I see.” He seemed to be losing interest in me. “And who is your gen-parent, AJ? Who were you supposed to be?”

Just then, Hagen returned with the light bulb, giving me a convenient reason to ignore the question. I reached through the doorway, palmed the bulb, and as I drew it back, Hagen asked, “You buried Elvis yesterday, right?”

That was one of my many chores at the carnival: bury the data trail of each newcomer in walls of bogus data. In this case, the newcomer was Aron Love, though that was not his given name at birth. If “birth” is the right term for someone created by a gen-farm. Someone kneaded in the mixing bowl of a DNA compiler and baked in the oven of a synthetic womb.

Aron Love’s gen-farm name was Elvis 3.1-M.

The *M* stands for “mutation,” which is what happens sometimes during the cloning process. Some folks prefer the politically correct term “miscreation.” Either way, it means the same thing: he was almost Elvis Presley, but not quite.

I nodded. “Finished it this morning.”

“Well, *un*-bury him.”

“Say what?”

Hagen frowned. He wasn’t much accustomed to repeating orders. “Said *un*-bury him. Put all his records back the way they was.”

The whole point was to fix it so that You₂, the gen-farm that had created Elvis 3.1-M, couldn’t trace him to the carnival. Undoing my work would leave Hagen vulnerable to a lawsuit for illegal use of the human entity rights, which You₂ still owned. I was so stunned by Hagen’s order that all I could do was sputter, which caused the man behind Hagen’s desk to chuckle again.

“Someone else is gonna handle *this* job,” Hagen said. And before I could protest, he slammed the door.

After repairing the spotlight, I did as Hagen ordered. By evening, the records of Elvis 3.1-M were once again available to anyone who wanted to look.

Twenty-four hours later, however, they were gone again. No record of him at the institution where Hagen had found him, or at the gen-farm — or anywhere else, for that matter. Someone had buried him so well, it was like he never existed.

I suddenly felt vulnerable. I handled everything from lowly maintenance to high-end tech, but if Hagen had found someone else to handle the tech, that only left maintenance duties for me. And Hagen could easily find someone else to do repairs. I was no longer indispensable.

Weeks passed. Christmas came and went with no performance by Aron. After New Year's Day was history, we tore down the tents and closed up shop for the season.

Aron had been with the carnival for four weeks — four weeks of free room and board, and he had yet to make his debut, had yet to earn a dime in receipts.

But it would be two more months before I would find out what Hagen had planned for Aron.

While the carnival was down, I searched through the security cam's records and snagged a picture of Hagen's visitor. Then I went to the teleweb screen in my apartment and did a mug search on his face.

The search results came back with a 99.9% probability match: Nicholas Jacinto.

I read several profiles of the man and discovered that he was a self-made billionaire, obsessed with security. Lived on a private, well-guarded estate on a Caribbean island.

He was the founder and CEO of Media of the Minds, a company that specialized in memetic advertising campaigns. They kept their client list confidential, but it was rumored that thousands of multinationals and hundreds of teleweb stars had signed on.

A handful of sites reported one more thing: he had a younger sister with crippling and disfiguring birth defects, who died before reaching adolescence.

As I read through the profiles, Aron came and watched over my shoulder. When he saw the picture of Jacinto, he pointed a trembling finger at it and said, "That's him. That's the man who took Niki away."

On the gray wall to my right, the portal we had installed to help Aron hone his performance suddenly came to life. Fifties Elvis. Young and sleek and forever. Guitar slung over his shoulder, begging us not to be cruel.

Aron blushed. "Said my password." He turned to the portal. "Niki. Off." And the portal settled back into a frozen image of Elvis.

"Who's Niki?" I asked.

Aron turned back. "She was just someone I knew." But his face told me she was more than that. His mouth was all tense, as if he wanted to tell someone but couldn't. Or maybe he'd been holding it in for so long, he didn't know how to say it.

But it turned out it was something else. Took me a while to realize it, 'cause I'd never had a friend before and didn't know how to act; but all along, he was just waiting for me to say something, waiting for me to tell him it was all right to confide in me. Waiting for me to reach out.

My experience with reaching out was that it was a good way to get the snout smacked out of you. Safest bet was to keep your head down and keep to yourself.

But I took a chance.

“She musta been special to you,” I said.

That did the trick. You could see his defenses crumble, like a mirror shattering. He opened his mouth and it all came tumbling out. Jacinto. Niki. The whole story of his life in the Georgia institution where he was raised.

All those institutions were alike, built to house us miscreations. They existed 'cause we existed, and we existed 'cause of laws that required gen-farms to treat mutations like any other human entity. That meant they had to gestate us in synthetic wombs, designed to reduce mortality rates. And this, in turn, had led to a small population explosion of miscreations.

I remember a Marilyn 2.6-M, who looked exactly like Marilyn Monroe. All she could do was stare at the walls. And a Madonna 3.4-M who was almost Madonna, except she had no arms or legs or mouth. A prisoner in her own flesh, tethered to an IV.

Aron's life, however, had been more sheltered than mine. When he was ten years old, a sixty-two year old woman named Lorna Hox took over as director of nursing and made Aron her pet. She nurtured and watched over him, assigning him to a private room at the far end of the building. Far from the odor of the soiled laundry barrels that roll-botted through the hallways and far from the other residents.

Aron's room was a shrine to Elvis Presley. Lorna's shrine, really. A pod player loaded with every song Elvis had recorded, the playback switch set to karaoke. Walls covered with posters of the King, half of them paper and half of them wireless portals to Elvis sites.

Aron liked to hold the paper posters to the mirror and hide behind them while he sang, imagining that he looked like the King. Imagining that he was a perfect creation, that he would spend his life serenading nightclubs and stadiums all over the world.

But when he lowered the posters and saw his reflection, it was not the smooth flesh of the young Elvis, the pouting lips, the high cheekbones, or the brooding eyes that stared back. It was the twisted face of a miscreation. He dreamed of expensive cosmetic surgery that would make him look “normal”, but there wasn't any kind of surgery on earth that could make him look like the King.

And yet, even with that miscreated face, Aron had been in many ways blessed. If his nose or his cheekbones had been twisted a little more, or if his deformities had extended to the palate or the larynx, he could have never sang in that famous voice. And if it wasn't for that voice, Aron would have remained institutionalized his entire life. That voice was his ticket out.

During her lunch hour, which always took place after the patients had been fed, Lorna carried a plastic sack filled with a bologna sandwich, two banana moon pies, and a bottle of Pepsi to Aron's room. Gave one moon pie to Aron for dessert and kept the other one for herself.

When he had finished eating, Aron sang to her. That was another thing Lorna did for him — she coached his performance till you would have thought it was the King himself singing in that room.

All was well with Aron and Lorna, till Aron turned seventeen. That was the year Niki arrived.

Niki was almost Natalie Wood, but not quite. She'd lived in an institution in Arizona until she was fifteen, when the state closed it and transferred her.

They were immediately drawn to each other. Every day they snuck off to a storage room to hold hands and smooch, and they secretly planned to run away and marry.

As their romance blossomed, Lorna began to shun Aron. She stopped visiting him in his room, stopped bringing him moon pies.

Then one day, some billionaire came shopping. One of those folks who had a taste for freak, rumored to have a private harem of miscreations. Had his eye on Niki, right off the bat. Set up the sponsorship paperwork and whisked her away.

With Niki gone, Lorna resumed her lunchtime visits. She told him, "It's time you got back to your lessons, *Elvis*."

Aron felt like she'd slapped him, and in a way she had. She'd never called him Elvis. That name was like a crinkled, brittle snakeskin he'd shed long ago. "Why you call me that, Lorna? That ain't who I am."

"May not be your name, but it's sure enough who you are. I can see that now."

"Don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" Her cheeks swelled and trembled. "Shoulda known you'd be just like him. Chasin' after women the way he done. Thought if I raised you proper, you might end up different. But I guess that sort of thing's in the blood."

"Lorna—"

"You get any ideas about taking up with any more girls, rest assured I'll send *them* away, too. This fella that took Niki pays good money for that sort of thing."

Six years passed. Aron continued to sing for Lorna, though his heart was no longer in it. Lorna neared retirement and seemed distracted when she came to his room, thumbing through tabloids while he sang.

Those tabloids were filled with pictures of smooth sleek celebrity faces, alongside faces not so blessed — vampire boys and snake men and alligator women, all real. I've browsed through ancient tabloid pictures on the teleweb and found them laughable, all dark, shadowy black-and-whites, so that you can't detect the rubber masks and makeup. But nowadays the photos are rendered in the same living color as the stars, because there's nothing to hide. Miscreations are just as real as celebrities, or maybe more so if you factor in all the facelifts, boob jobs, butt struts, and dermal buffings the stars indulge in.

Somewhere in all that trash were ads for the American Classic Carnival, placed by Hagen. I'd always thought those ads — no more than a quarter of a column long — were worthless, nothing to compare to the sites I'd created for him. Told Hagen several times he was wasting his money. Nobody ever reads those.

But Lorna did.

Hagen arrived, auditioned Aron and signed him to a contract. Then he reimbursed Lorna a twenty-five thousand dollar finder's fee and brought Aron Love to Memphis, Tennessee.

Just down the road from Graceland.

Aron never knew the name of the man who took Niki away, but he remembered the face.

“The name’s Nicholas Jacinto,” I said. “He’s been meeting with Hagen. About you.”

Aron scoffed. “He wouldn’t be after me, AJ. Bet he’s here to add to his harem. Trying to get Hagen to sign over Gator Maid or Ratgrrrrl.”

I didn’t believe that, but I kept my theories to myself. I knew that *someone* had done a good job of burying Aron’s records, and it seemed likely that Jacinto’s people would have been up to the task. How they had found him here in the first place, though, was a mystery. Maybe Lorna Hox at the institution had told them. Or, more likely, they’d hacked Lorna’s records and traced her finder’s fee back to the carnival.

However they did it, they had big plans for him. I figured they would begin using him as soon as the carnival reopened, but when March rolled around, Hagen still wouldn’t put Aron on stage.

Instead, he had me post an announcement on our site.

The announcement claimed that Aron Love was not a miscreation at all, but instead was a perfect, natural-born double of Elvis Presley. When he tried to make a career performing as the King, You₂ ordered him to stop, claiming that only their gen-farm creations could perform as Elvis Presley. But Aron continued to sing, despite their warnings. Then, late one night, he was abducted and taken to a surgical clinic, where his face and body were altered in such a hideous way that he could no longer pass for his genetic parent.

It was thought that this would end his career, but not so. The American Classic Carnival had signed him to a contract, and now Aron Love was scheduled to take the stage for his comeback on August 16, the anniversary of Elvis Presley’s death.

It was all bunk, except for the stuff about the concert. But it was linked to reputable newssites that had posted stories about people who were having their bodies surgically altered to resemble miscreations. It was apparently a growing craze known as “freak chic”.

All the stories had originated in the December-January period following Aron’s arrival at the carnival, and all could be traced back to a single company: Media of the Minds.

It was all part of a viral marketing campaign by Jacinto’s company, and it worked like a charm. Within a few days, the announcement had spread to sites all over the world. By May, we were flooded with ticket requests, and traffic at the carnival was up fifty percent.

Hagen believed the surge in attendance was due to people hoping for an advance look at the star. So he ordered Aron to stay locked in our apartment 24/7.

Months passed, and I was busier than ever, what with managing the overflow crowds and the new equipment Hagen had purchased. Aron, resigned to his fate, diligently practiced his show. Then one day, just a week before his debut, we got the word: Niki was coming for a visit.

Natalie Wood 2.0-M arrived the day before Aron was set to perform. Aron and me watched from the window as an armored stretch-limo pulled to a stop outside our building. Three figures got out, all wearing black helmets and silver dragline jumpsuits that shimmered in the sunlight.

Aron shielded his eyes from the glare. "What is that?"

"Bulletproof fabric. Woven from genetically engineered spider webs. Ten times stronger and lighter than Kevlar."

Aron pointed to the smaller of the three shrouded figures. "Thatten's her."

As the figures came to the entrance, I scrambled out the front door and waited at the top of the stairs. One of the figures entered, climbed the steps and patted me down. Then he cased the apartment, returned to the ground floor and waved the others into the building.

Niki came in and stripped off her helmet, revealing a face that Francis Bacon would have loved.

Cheekbones, nose, mouth, and chin all pinched together in a wolf-like snout. Left eye socket cocked at an angle halfway up her forehead, making it seem like she was winking at me.

Despite these miscreated features, she glided up the staircase like a princess on her wedding day. She carried herself with a dignity that I'd seen before in black-and-white video records from years gone by. When royalty still lived. Before instant celebrity had devoured it.

But then, as she passed me and proceeded into the apartment, I saw how fragile her dignity really was. She was a hothouse princess. Few minutes under a spotlight, with a half-drunk audience screaming obscenities at her, and that dignity would have cracked wide open.

I hated Jacinto then. His fortune could have paid for reconstructive surgery to turn her into a true princess. But he had kept her like this for his own reasons.

Aron threaded his way around the drum set, synthesizer, guitars and amps the band had left behind after yesterday's live rehearsal. He lurched along on his spindly, miscreated legs, unconsciously mimicking his genetic parent's quivering, swiveling hips. At the door, he stopped.

Hope and uncertainty were all over his scrambled face, and those emotions were just as apparent on him as they would have been on any "normal" face. It was like I wasn't even reading his face, but something beneath it. Some kind of light, below the surface, that every human transmits, beauty or beast.

Then he closed the door, and the last thing I saw was the coat rack in a dark corner of the room, and Aron's white jumpsuit, dangling beneath clear plastic. Like a rhinestone-studded ghost.

While Niki and Aron were alone in our apartment, I went outside and hung out in front of the building.

The carnival had been on hold the past few days for renovations, and with nothing better to do, Longhand and Ratgrrrl were making out near the south corner. His ten-inch fingers glided up and down her back. Her tiny gray tail wagged in response, nudging the butt of her black leather miniskirt up and down, revealing glimpses of

fleshy gray thighs. She noticed me watching and shot a pink-eyed, snarl-toothed glare my way. Then she elbowed Longhand. He came up for air long enough to wave a supersized middle finger at me before leading her around the corner.

I considered following them, but my attention was drawn instead to the limo that had brought Niki. With its black reinforced glass and black plastron finish, it looked like a hole in the landscape. A void. Like the actual limo had been cropped from the scene, leaving behind this black rectangle in its place.

I just stood there, giving the limo the skunk eye, thinking no one was in there but the driver, when the airlocks whooshed, breaking seal, and the door popped open.

A tall figure in a black helmet and a silver jumpsuit stepped out. Walked straight up to me. Unscrewed his helmet and lifted it away.

Jacinto.

He stared down at me, kind of amused by something. All that confidence and power was now amplified by his tall, broad-shouldered body. And as he continued to stare at me, I felt as worthless as a dung beetle under a jackboot. That feeling stirred a desperate anger in my soul, though truthfully he hadn't done a thing to cause my anger. My reaction was deeper than that, hardwired within me.

I decided to hate him just for his perfectly smooth, perfectly *perfect* skin.

Finally, he spoke. "Mr. Hagen claims to have no idea who your gen-parent is. So, tell me AJ — who the hell *were* you supposed to be?"

I gave my standard response, designed to piss off: "You."

He barely reacted. "You really don't know who your gen-parent is?"

I shook my head. But of course I always knew. I also knew that most people are like Lorna Hox. When they see people like us, all they ever see is who we were supposed to be, not who we really are.

"A pity. While you may be indispensable here, we have no use for your ... *talents* at my estate, and certainly not with my company. I'm afraid you will have to remain here when Aron moves on to bigger things."

I laughed, sucking down air as greasy and thick as Mississippi mud. Smelled like it, too. I spat. "What 'bigger things'?"

A smile slithered across his face. "The kind of stardom that I can provide for Aron is not the throwaway, disposable-income sort of fame that you and Mr. Hagen peddle here. We have memetic campaigns ready to spread all over the world, similar to the one that created the interest in tomorrow's performance. Eventually, people will crave portals of Aron and demand plastic surgery to look just like him."

I tried to imagine how people could be persuaded to see Aron as a sex symbol. Jacinto's people might create sites with video of Aron performing, edited to make him appear sexy or mysterious. A few gullible people might be deluded into having their bodies surgically altered to look like him. Their new look would influence others to join in. Then mainstream media would report on the trend, which would encourage even more people to take part.

"So how come you wanna hold the show here?" I asked. "Couldn't you reach more people at a stadium?"

"If we book large venues too soon, people will know that a mega corporation is promoting the show, and they will be far less suggestible than if they believe the craze started at the grassroots level."

I glanced toward the lot where, for the past week, construction crews had been hard at work, installing temporary grandstands to seat Aron's audience. Those grandstands didn't look like grassroots to me, and neither did the camera drones or the new sound system, but I let that point slide. "You₂ won't let you get away with it," I said. "Aron's DNA is Elvis Presley's. They own it."

Now his eyes were black ice. "Aron's DNA is a mutation of Elvis Presley's, so it is unique. And unregistered — until last year, that is." He shifted the helmet from his fingertips to his side, tucking it under his arm like a football. "The moment that Mr. Hagen signed Aron's contract over to me, I registered Aron's DNA. You₂ will no doubt put up a fight, but I have considerably more resources available to me than does Mr. Hagen; I will win any court battles that come along."

All of a sudden, he softened his glare. "Trust me. Aron is safe, in my hands. We'll immediately compile his DNA so that in eighteen, twenty years, he'll have an army of younger selves to perform for him. He can retire and quietly live out his life in anonymity, if he chooses."

I was rattled by his plans, but I tried not to let it show. "Can't happen without Aron, and he won't perform unless Niki's backstage tomorrow."

"That is where we will be. Perhaps I will see you there — has Mr. Hagen told you that we've brought in someone for the control board? Someone more ... professional." He pursed his lips around the word, like he was blowing a kiss.

The control board was the server that managed the camera drones and sound system I'd been noodling around with for months. Hagen hadn't said a word about replacing me. "Just means less work for me." I shrugged.

Without another word, Jacinto slipped his helmet on and returned to his limo.

Niki was with Aron for over three hours. After she left, I went into the building, climbed the stairs and heard music coming from inside our apartment. Lite-rock horns and aching piano chords. But that famous voice was silent.

I went inside and found Aron staring out the window, lost and lonesome in a daydream. At the sound of the door closing, he turned and gave me a nod.

I signaled that I wanted to talk and squatted on a speaker casing. Aron shut down the background music, pulled up his own speaker and sat.

I asked him how things went.

He shrugged. "Asked her if she loved him. Know what she said? 'I've grown accustomed to him'. The hell's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Means she doesn't love him."

He looked like I slapped him. "He loves *her*, I know that. Them rumors about a harem ain't true. He's got dozens of miscreations on his estate, but they're housekeepers, groundskeepers — she says he treats 'em all well."

Aron went on to claim that Jacinto had seen how sad she was about leaving Aron behind and was doing all this just to please her.

"Don't kid yourself, Aron. Maybe she really does miss you, but that's not the reason he's doing this. He's doing all this for money. Power."

"You're wrong, AJ. He's doing it 'cause he loves her."

"Do *you* love her?"

He quickly turned away and raked his knuckles across a Stratocaster leaning against the wall. “Makes no matter. Couldn’t never offer her the things he can.”

“Do you love her?” I asked again.

He turned back, face drawn tight as if bracing for a slap. “Always did, always will. But that don’t matter.”

“How come?”

“Cause I’m afraid I’d end up breakin’ her heart.”

“Who put that fool idea in your head?”

“Lorna. Remember? She said chasin’ women was in my blood.”

“Inherited?” I laughed. “Aron, your genes just give you the *potential* to be something. But it’s how you were raised that determines who you are.”

“But ain’t that how come I’m a singer? ‘Cause it’s in my blood?”

“You’re a singer cause Lorna gave you the right environment. With a different environment, you might’ve been a different kind of singer. The wrong environment, and you might not have been a singer at all.”

“How come you’re so sure?”

I thought about that a moment. “Look at the gen-farms. They spend millions to set up the right environments for their creations.”

“Always wondered what happens on the gen-farms.” Aron leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin resting in his hands, shoulder blades rising like crippled wings beneath his tattered blue T-shirt. “Tell me.”

“Aron, if you’d a been blessed to look as much like Elvis as you sound, know where you would have been raised?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “In a dirt-poor shack, with actors pretending to be your relatives and friends. All your childhood experiences would have been pre-planned by corporate psychologists. Everything you did, everything you ate, everything you saw or smelled would have been designed to mold your personality into Elvis Presley’s.

“You would have grown up listening only to the music that inspired him. Rhythm and blues, gospel. None of his actual songs. You wouldn’t even have known who Elvis Presley was.”

“But if I didn’t listen to his music, how would I know what to sing?”

“That would come at night, pumped into your room while you slept. Dream music. If all went well, you would imitate it perfectly when you came of age.”

“Dream music,” he whispered.

I nodded. “When the creations come of age, the gen-farm finally tells them who they really are. That’s the roughest time for them. Many rebel when they find out the truth.”

Aron stared at me with a hopeful look. “What happens when they rebel? They run away and live their own lives?” He was almost begging me to say yes, somehow needed it to be true.

But it wasn’t true, and I couldn’t lie to him. “If they run, they don’t run far. See, the courts ruled that they’re legally responsible to repay the gen-farm’s expenses for creating and raising them. There’s no way they can afford to do that unless they perform as their genetic parent. But legally they can only do that if they’re licensed, and the gen-farm’s parent corporation owns the rights. So they end up working for the corporation the rest of their lives.”

Aron stared at the floor. His jutting forehead threw a dark shadow over his face, draping his misshapen features like a veil. “Why they have to go and make us? Don’t they know that when you copy something special, it ain’t special no more? What they need with a thousand Elvis Presleys, anyway?”

“Same reason they wanna make assassins. Or dictators and serial killers. Cause they can.”

“They really do that?”

I nodded. It occurred to me that Aron had never asked me who I was supposed to be. He’d immediately accepted me for the person that I was. And it occurred to me that this was the reason he had won me over as a friend.

“There are projects devoted to that, Aron. They compile the DNA of Dahmers and Hemingways, Mengeles and Einsteins. Raise them in all sorts of controlled environments. Then they compare notes, see which environments are better for developing creative minds or crippled minds. They use people like lab rats. And people like us? We’re just the rats they got no use for. They lock us away in some institution to keep us separate, keep us from sowing our miscreated seed in the rest of the world.”

Aron huddled his arms to his chest. “I won’t never sing for one of them corporations.”

I wanted to tell Aron about Jacinto’s plans to compile his DNA, but I knew that if he found out, he wouldn’t go on stage tomorrow. And I needed him on stage, though I think I only knew that subconsciously. I certainly didn’t know at the time what I would do.

“Well, you definitely wanna sing tomorrow. Niki’s gonna be backstage, waiting for you.”

“Where you gonna be?”

“Tent next door, running the board,” I lied, threading my way back across the room to the coat rack. I grabbed the jumpsuit. “You need a dress rehearsal, make sure this monkey suit’s not too tight.”

We spent the rest of the day rehearsing in our apartment. After supper we both turned in early, but I don’t think either one of us slept much. He was in his room, wondering if he would fail, and I was in mine, wondering what I was capable of.

Turned out he had nothing to fear and I had plenty.

Aron was completely relaxed on stage, as if he’d been performing before an audience his entire life, which of course, wasn’t true. So where did he learn that, where did that confidence come from? Not from Lorna’s environment, tucked away in his private room, that’s for sure. So maybe it really was in his blood from the start.

He launched into his encore, “Love Me Tender”, and as the crowd roared, Niki removed her helmet, turned to Jacinto and whispered something. Then she hugged him.

Jacinto stripped off his helmet and kissed her. A moment later, with the audience singing along to the chorus, he released her, turned to put his helmet back on — and that’s when I caught him.

His forehead was right there, right in my crosshairs.

I suppose it was me who pulled the trigger. But to my dying day, I'll swear that it felt like someone else was there, squeezing it for me.

Someone who longed for the crack of a gunshot and the smell of scorched air all around him.

Someone who wanted to see Jacinto fall to the ground in a shower of blood. Someone who wanted this so much that he'd twisted my mind into thinking this gun could solve everything.

I knew who that person was. I knew who was holding that gun at that moment, and I didn't want any part of him.

But he was strong. I could not drop that gun, could only manage to tilt it a little, nudge it away from its target.

To this day, Jacinto claims that he let go of Niki to put his helmet on, but to my eyes, he shoved her aside and ran for the cover of his limousine.

The bullet struck one of the corner posts. The red canvas roof collapsed and blanketed the stage. Aron had the presence of mind to crawl to the back, not the front where that sea of people had turned into a raging storm. He leaped to the ground beside Niki, took her hand and led her to safety.

I turned away from the scene and noticed that Pignose, Jacko Lantern and Ratgrrrrl were all looking toward the window, staring directly at me. I dropped the gun and ran. Out the back, where I darted into that stampede, hoping to get swept away.

But I'm not the kind of face that can disappear in a crowd.

When my DNA test came back, they put me in this institution, and it's much more secure than the one where I grew up. So maybe they're right, maybe I'll never leave.

Been five years now, and I haven't seen or talked to Aron since the day of his show. I read that he married Niki after her divorce from Jacinto. She asked for only one thing in the settlement: release Aron from his contract.

Aron has never taken the stage again, so maybe a love of performing isn't in his blood, after all.

Or maybe, when I pulled that trigger, I buried Elvis all over again. Maybe I sent Aron to live in an environment that thwarted the development of his Elvis persona. Maybe I gave him the freedom to forge his own identity.

But if that's the case, then his true self is still there, lying dormant inside him, waiting for the right moment to rise up and seize control.

All I can say for sure is this: during that show, his one and only show, Elvis 3.1-M was exactly who he was supposed to be.

And in the end, I was not.

— Alek James Hidell (Lee Harvey Oswald 2.0-M)

Dreadneck

...Jeff Parish

Gerald poked a hole in the wet ground with his finger and dropped in a seed. Squishing the hole closed, he cupped his hands over the spot. His lips moved silently for a moment, then he scooted sideways on his knees and started the process over again. A smile flitted across his face as faint tremors announced the spread of roots through the earth. He had worked hard to develop this particular strain of devilweed, and he was proud of the results. It would remain dormant until called, but he doubted even the gods could get past once it sprouted. *Those Mechanics and their contraptions are going to get a nasty surprise tomorrow.* He chuckled at the thought and scrubbed a dirty hand through his close-cropped black hair.

His row finished at last, Gerald rose with a groan and knuckled his back. Black mud spattered his emerald robes. The dozen or so Gardeners standing and kneeling around him in their various verdant shades sported equally dirty clothing. The smell of rain and freshly tilled earth hung over everything. Good, honest soil from the earth; better than the unnatural grease of some engine. He nodded in satisfaction. With a dense forest on one side and the beginnings of a marsh on the other, the terrain would force the Mechanics to come this way. They might have forced the battle, but the Mages had picked the field and sown it for their destruction.

He turned and hauled his short, round frame up the hill with a sigh. He was breathing heavily by the time he reached the spot where his clan chief waited.

The Thaumaturge stood perfectly still, hands folded in the sleeves of his black robes. His hood cast impenetrable shadows that obscured his face. Gerald couldn't tell for certain he was breathing. Some said he didn't.

"The field is prepared and sown," he said and bowed low.

"Excellent work, my son." A sonorous voice rolled from the hood like the rushing of a river. "In the morning, we will finally assert our independence from the Mechanics."

Gerald shifted his feet and picked bits of mud from his robes, balling them and tossing them down the hill.

"Is something troubling you, Master Gardener?"

"Not troubling me, exactly." He paused and took a deep breath. "I am confused. I wish to ask a question, Thaumaturge."

"Ask, my son."

“I mean no disrespect in this.” The hooded head inclined in a nod. “But we picked the site of battle. I don’t understand all this effort to prepare the field down there. I may not be a Warmonger, but I have heard it is best to keep the high ground. After what the Riders reported the Mechanics did to the Viper Clan, I would have thought we’d seek any advantage we could get.”

“You think I have committed a folly, Master Gardener?” A slight note of amusement entered the deep voice.

“No, Thaumaturge. I just lack the foresight to see the wisdom of your plan, and I wish for enlightenment.”

“What is our clan’s creed?”

Gerald paused, puzzled. Why ask something every child knew? “Nature in all.”

“And what does that mean?”

“We seek the power of the natural earth.”

“And the Mechanics do not? They are men. Is man not a part of the ‘natural earth?’”

“Of course he is. But...what...I mean...” He trailed off.

“Yes?” A questioning tone, a nudge to keep speaking.

“The Mechanic clans seek the power of men and the things he can create. They aren’t content with what the gods have created for us. They eat the earth and leave a wasteland behind them. They may have once been men, but they have become iron.”

“They are iron,” the Thaumaturge agreed. “And we are stone.” Releasing his hands from their sleeves, he cupped a palm in front of his chest. Blue and red light gathered and swirled above his fingers. “A lesson about iron, Master Gardener: Iron is hard. Iron is strong. But it is also brittle.”

The light spun faster, picking up speed until it coalesced in a white ball that slowly dimmed until it left a glass sphere in his hand. He crouched and released the orb. It raced down the hill. Near the bottom, it bounced over a tuft of grass and struck a rock. The ball shattered with a bright tinkling sound and released a brief smell of roses.

“Tomorrow, Dragon Clan makes its stand in that field, and they will roll to us.” Hands back in his sleeves, the Thaumaturge turned and walked to the other side of the hill.

Gerald watched him leave, then ventured slowly down to the field. He paused to retrieve the glass shards and put them in a pouch hanging from his belt. He called his band of Gardeners and led them over the hill to the Mage camp.

Mechanics outdoors slept in something called “tents” made from large pieces of cloth, or so he had heard. If so, Gerald felt sorry for them. Where was the joy in such an encampment? Where was the life? As he topped the rise, he could pick out the various members of his clan just from their quarters. The Thaumaturge’s miniature ice palace stood in the center, sparkling in defiance of the fading spring day’s warmth.

The Warmongers had congregated their domed stone huts to the south in case the Mechanics launched a sneak attack in the night. To the north, Cavalry milled in barely controlled chaos where Riders and unicorns would sleep under the stars.

The smallest camp lay to the east, a collection of huge beehives that housed the Rednecks. The farmers handled the army’s food supply, logistics and cooking. *A pity we don’t have more of them*, Gerald thought with a rueful shake of his head. He would have thought farmers, men close to the land, would appreciate the Mage clans’

plight. But ever since Mages had declared their independence with the Great Sacrifice decades earlier, the Rednecks had nearly all sided with the Mechanic clans. They claimed *technology* helped them more than the natural magic the gods had provided, impossible as that seemed.

Carefully fingering the bits of glass through the leather pouch, Gerald led his Gardeners to the east, where what appeared to be a miniature forest had sprung up since the morning. As they entered the shade, the riot of leaf and limb resolved itself to a collection of bushes, trees and vines grown to form small sleeping alcoves around a clearing. He smiled and took a deep breath, savoring the floral perfume that permeated their encampment. *It's just like home.*

"Gerald! Glad to see you've returned."

Long, spindly arms wrapped themselves around his shoulders, and Gerald found himself pressed against a scrawny chest. He grinned and looked up at the thin face beaming down at him.

"It's good to see you, too, Alix." He stepped back and led his friend to a massive stump large enough to seat a half-dozen men. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now, actually. The Thaumaturge demanded we finish preparing our fields back home before joining the battle." He laughed. "I don't think I've seen those men ever work so fast."

Gerald laughed. "I hope they didn't work too quickly. Remember when you made that oak tree grow all at once?"

"You would have to bring that up." Alix grinned. "Forty feet in a matter of minutes. She looked magnificent until the wind blew her over. I still can't believe I neglected the root system. How much corn did she crush?"

"A lot."

Their laughter was suddenly cut off. With a great rustling of leaves and creaking of limbs, the western wall of the Gardener's enclosure suddenly parted, revealing a night sky and scattered campfires. One of the Cavalry entered, using her spear as a walking staff while gently guiding her mount with a hand on its neck. Some sort of wrapped bundle lay draped across the unicorn's back. Everyone rose.

"You honor us, Rider," Gerald said with a bow. "Please, be welcome."

"Thank you for the greeting, Gardener," she replied in low, musical tones that somehow carried to every corner. Something of their mount's otherworldly nature passed itself onto Riders who spent long years in the Cavalry. "This is not a social call, I'm afraid." She gestured at her mount's burden, which groaned and shifted.

Gerald gasped. What he had taken for a cover was actually a green robe. He and Alix rushed over, gently lifted the wounded Gardener and laid him on the ground, careful even in their haste to thank the unicorn for its assistance. He knelt beside the prone figure and used a corner of his robe to wipe the man's battered, bloody face clean.

"He's not one of mine," he said, rocking back on his heels.

"I found him to the south on a scouting expedition. He looked to me to have wandered far in great pain. All he would say was that he had dire news for the Dragon Clan." She reached into her cloak and pulled out a tattered ball of cloth. "I found this in his hand after he fainted."

It unfurled into a rough square with a faint suggestion of a scale here, a fang there.

“Gods below,” he breathed. “He’s one of the Viper Clan’s Gardeners. He must have been wandering out there for weeks.”

The wounded man’s eyes fluttered open. His hand snaked up and grabbed Gerald’s wrist in a feverish, iron grip. “Coming! They’re coming!”

“We know, brother.” Gerald made shushing noises. “Please, be calm. We’re ready for the Mechanics and their contraptions.”

If anything, his panic increased. “No! Not just Mechanics! They...iron...demons. Dread! Dread...necks...” His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped. Gerald laid the dead body gently to the ground.

“Gods preserve his soul.” He pointed to two Gardeners. “Take his body, give him back to nature.” They nodded solemnly and carried the corpse off. The Rider followed them out. Gerald stood as the trees folded shut once more.

“Dreadnecks?” Alix asked. “What was he talking about?”

“He was feverish. I wouldn’t put too much faith in his words.” He scratched his chin. “Still, the Thaumaturge should be advised of his message. It could be that the Mechanics have created some new devilish toy.” He paused. “‘Dreadnecks.’ I wonder if maybe he was trying to say ‘Rednecks.’ Could it be the farmers have actually joined in the fighting?”

Alix snorted. “They wouldn’t dare fight alongside those gearheads.”

“Wouldn’t they? They already provide a great deal of food and support to those ‘gearheads.’”

“Sure, but to actually take up weapons? They’ve never done such a thing.”

“Maybe, but what if it’s true?”

“If it’s true, Gerald, then we face a much larger battle in the morning than we hoped for.”

Dawn broke bright and clear. The sun crept over the horizon to reveal the Mage clan’s great host gathered behind a thick wall of shrubbery well back from the base of a hill. Gerald blinked and stifled a yawn. Even though he stood well behind the Warmongers and the front line, he couldn’t help a shiver of anticipation. *Get a grip on yourself, Gardener. You’ve a job to do.* His fists tightened until the knuckles popped. Eyes closed, he counted slowly until his breathing evened and the tension melted from his shoulders and limbs.

A harsh *blat* shattered the still morning. Gerald’s eyes popped open. A huge bear of a man stood at the top of the hill, a curved horn raised to his lips.

“Mages!” he called, his voice as harsh and unforgiving as the clashing of metal gears. “I give you this one chance: Renounce your insurgence and honor the ancient alliances. If you do, you walk home today. If you don’t, you feed the crows. What say you?”

The Thaumaturge responded from the center of the line. “I think not, Mechanic.” His voice boomed up the hill. “What you call ‘alliances’ are merely a fancy word for slavery. We will not relinquish our natural freedom. Instead, I offer you this: Turn back now and never trouble our lands again, and we will spare your lives.”

“A fine joke, nature boy.” The Mechanic laughed. “But if that is your final word, then we have no choice but to do some trimming.” He waved a hand and dropped back behind the hill.

Dozens of uniformed men marched over the rise and crouched, leveling what appeared to be long rods at the Mages below. The Thaumaturge raised his hands as a series of loud cracks sounded. Several Warmongers fell before a thick sheet of ice rose to halt the remaining shots.

“Hellguns!” he shouted.

Stone barrels pushed forward, flattening the shrubs in front. A stout Warmonger stood behind each, drumming on the cylinders with their fists. They boomed in quick succession, throwing liquid fire up the hill. Flames splashed among the Mechanics. Most were incinerated on the spot while others ran screaming. The thunder increased, raining an inferno over the hill. Finally, the Thaumaturge called a halt.

Gerald rose on his toes, head cocked to catch any sound over the distant screams and crackling flames. *Surely they haven't given up that easily.*

Something shrieked at them from the other side. Gerald flinched. A metallic clanking followed. What appeared to be an odd, plated carriage crested the hill. Huge spiked wheels dug into the earth, pushing it forward. A drum sat on top with a great cannon poking from a wide slit in the center. The noise rose to a mechanical chorus as two more tanks rolled up to flank the first one, each belching smoke and steam from stacks at the rear.

The Warmongers reacted first, pounding their hellguns. Fire splattered the iron, spread and winked out. The tanks rolled on. The centermost vehicle paused. Its turret swiveled slightly. The tank jerked back as its gun fired. The shot exploded toward the center of the Mages. Gerald saw several of his brothers ripped to shreds as shrapnel scythed through their ranks. A sudden wall of evergreens rose. The other pair fired, splintering and shattering wood.

“Gardeners!” he called. He stepped forward, joined by Alix and about a half-dozen others stepped forward. “Bile ivy?” he asked Alix. His friend nodded and passed the word along.

They raised their fists in the air, chanted briefly and slammed them into the ground. A tremor rolled up the ridge. The tanks rattled and bounced but continued their forward momentum. They fired once more, smashing what remained of the wooden barricade. Suddenly, the leftmost vehicle swerved and crashed into the center tank, knocking it over. The other halted, surged forward with a loud creak and stopped. Its whistle shrieked again and fell silent. Vines snaked around the wheels and crept up the metal sides, growing larger as they climbed. The ivy entered wherever it could find a gap. A few tendrils wrapped around the hot pipes and withered away. As he watched, flowers bloomed and wilted, leaving behind great pods that sloshed slightly then burst. Gerald wrinkled his nose at the acrid smell. Men screamed inside the contraptions. Outside, a viscous liquid etched itself into the metal as it ran across the tanks.

The Mechanic general reappeared, cursing and screaming at them. The Thaumaturge chuckled inside his hood. “Did you think it would be easy? My offer stands: Leave, and we'll spare the rest.”

Purple with rage, the general raised one finger and pointed. “Kill them!” he roared and bounded down the hill. He drew a pair of pistols as he ran and fired

at the Thaumaturge. The bullets came within a few feet of their target, then struck something that flashed blue and sent them ricocheting away with a whine.

The Mechanic army poured over the rise like a swarm of locusts. A few of the tanks lumbered among them, along with several smaller, less armored brethren. Something like thunder sounded from behind the hill, shaking the ground as it came.

Snapping his arms left and right, the Thaumaturge signaled his forces to join the battle.

The Cavalry attacked first. They sang as they rode, a haunting tune that crept into the mind long before they arrived with spear, hoof and horn. Gerald found himself smiling at their battle hymn. Several Mechanics, however, sank to their knees and covered their ears in a vain attempt to block the sound. A couple even shot themselves in the head.

Warmongers were not far behind. Some tossed exploding stones while others brandished witchguns, slender branches that spat fire. They pushed through the line, spreading death as they went. The Thaumaturge fought with them, slaughtering men by the score with great concussive blasts of fire and shards of ice. Stones ripped themselves free of the earth at his command and smashed into the enemy.

Gerald's smile faded as he took in the battle. For every Mechanic ablaze or speared through the heart, a Rider was pulled from her mount and a Warmonger shot in the head. Several of the smaller tanks had been destroyed, along with a couple of the larger ones, but most still remained on the field, blasting away. They were headed his way. And still that distant thudding continued. *It feels closer. What devilry have they concocted? And why are they waiting to bring it into the battle?*

With a wave of his hand, Gerald sent his Gardeners around the field. Each had his own row to tend to. Alix went to the front, just a few rows ahead of Gerald. His friend bent low and whispered to the earth, hands rippling just above the dirt. Something brown sprouted low against the ground. He straightened and stood with one arm bent back behind him. Gerald stood behind his own row with fingers spread at his waist. *All we can do now is wait.*

They didn't have to wait long. A pair of armored vehicles circled around the main battle and rattled toward them, steam and smoke streaming from their pipes like a banner. Nearly a hundred men followed. The great guns fired first, leaving craters in the ground but hitting little else. Gerald grinned mirthlessly. He had scattered his Gardeners, hoping to lessen the tanks' effectiveness. *The men are as safe as they can be in this hell, and the roots are too deep to blast out. They'll have to come to dig us out.* The soldiers fired their rifles, and a few Mages fell. Before they could reload, Alix jerked his arm forward.

Long, slender branches whipped off the ground. Barbed thorns broke free and whistled toward the approaching enemy. Men screamed as they fell, trying to jerk the thorns free from their throats, eyes, legs, wherever they had landed.

The Mechanics approached more cautiously after that, but they still approached. And they died.

Despite the carnage, Gerald found himself enjoying the sight of wave after wave of men falling to plants. *For all their precious machines, they can't hope to stand against nature,* he thought as a bed of twisting sunflowers cut soldiers off at the knee. *Any man who survives this day probably won't so much as pick a daisy for his mother after*

this. He chuckled, watching as stout willows pulled the last of the small tanks apart and strangled the remaining soldiers.

He lowered his fingers. *Pity. I was looking forward to calling the devilweed today.* He looked down the field to the main battle. *I still might.* Most of the Mechanic army remained, but things clearly weren't going well for them. Guns and gears could only hold out for so long against spear, horn and fire. The ground shuddered at another monstrous thump. Gerald stumbled. What is that?

A gray-skinned demon crested the hill, blocking out much of the sky behind. It screamed joyfully and lumbered down to the battle, trailing smoke behind it. Everyone froze. Gerald's hands covered his mouth as four more pounded their way to the field.

The Thaumaturge recovered first. "No!" His thunderous voice carried a wavering note that seemed equal parts terror and rage. "This cannot be, Mechanic. It must not! Even if they tolerate your tanks and your steam engines, they will surely strike you down for this blasphemy. How *dare* you create golems?"

The general laughed. "Soiled yourself, didn't you, Mage?" he roared. "If the gods don't like our dreadnaughts, they can deal with it themselves. In the meantime..."

He flicked a hand, and the nearest demon raised one massive arm. A long tube pointed straight at the Thaumaturge. *That has got to be the biggest cannon I've ever seen*, Gerald thought. The other arm sported a large, serrated disk.

A glowing sphere appeared in the air just before the dreadnaught. Colors streaked across its surface as it spun. The orb shrank with every revolution until it was nothing but a bright, wildly oscillating point. It collapsed in on itself with a massive concussion and a white flash that outshone even the noonday sun. When Gerald's vision cleared, the dreadnaught and a large section of the hill had disappeared.

Another of the giants lumbered forward and leveled a cannon nearly in the Thaumaturge's face. It detonated with a thump Gerald felt through the ground. The explosion ripped a crater in the earth, leaving not even a body behind. Tears trickled down Gerald's cheeks.

Two Riders galloped forward. They charged one of the giants, apparently trying to pierce its heart. The spears fell short and bounced away with a *clang*. *Are those things iron? But they're so huge.* One of the unicorns reared and tried to skewer the dreadnaught's leg. Its horn snapped off. A massive hand reached down, snatched the screaming beast and started swinging it about like a club.

Then the spell broke, and the battle resumed in earnest. A few Warmongers tried turning their hellguns on the dreadnaughts, but to no avail. Two of the giant warriors fell among the stone cannons and kicked them apart. A Rider dashed forward and hurled her spear. It connected with something at the demon's heart. The dreadnaught halted, and a figure fell to the ground.

"They're just machines!" Gerald called to the Gardeners. A few nodded grimly. Most stared silently at the battle.

Suddenly, the motionless dreadnaught started up again. The disk on its arm began turning, slowly at first, picking up speed until it sliced the air with a high-pitched whine. Its monstrous brethren did the same.

Their attacks fruitless, the Mages focused on human targets, trying to push the fight away from the machines. But the dreadnaughts brought the battle to them, sawing through men and unicorns alike, blasting at whatever targets lay within their

sights. Within moments, what had seemed a sure victory threatened to become a rout.

Gerald called his Gardeners. "Go to the battle. See what you can do to help. I'll stay with Alix to keep the defenses here ready."

They nodded and started toward the seething mass. One of the giants saw them coming. It turned and headed their way, trampling several of his men as it approached.

As the machine drew closer, Gerald saw it bore only a vague resemblance to a man. A mass of pipes crawled upward from the round boiler and engine on its back, spitting smoke and steam with every step. Hoses snaked across its surface, throbbing like a heartbeat. Metal cables twanged as it moved. A man had been strapped at its heart, twitching as if he wanted to escape. Gerald squinted. Whenever the Mechanic's leg moved, the dreadnaught's leg moved. When he jerked an arm, the machine's arm swung forward. *So that's how it works.* He signaled to Alix, who nodded.

Branches leapt from the ground, hurling thorns that bounced off the dreadnaught's metal legs. Alix bent his arms awkwardly and whipped them upward. Most fell short or ricocheted away, but Gerald caught a yelp as one or two bit into flesh. He saluted Alix, who raised his fists in triumph.

A spinning disk swung like a ponderous pendulum, sawing through branches and Alix.

Sobbing, Gerald ran to the edge of the swamp and held both hands over the water. The pond roiled like a soup kettle on the fire. He swept his hands up. Giant insects, each the size of a large puppy, exploded from the water and swarmed the iron giant. They had been bred from mosquitoes, but given a very different hunger.

Long proboscises spiked their way through the thing's iron armor, seeking the lifeblood that kept the machines running. A few cables gave way, parting with a loud *twang*. Mosquitoes on the hoses started to swell. The dreadnaughts slowed with a vast groan. One leg lifted with a jerking motion. Gears ground together, then screamed in protest, and the giant came crashing to the ground.

He walked toward the wreckage carefully, halting when a groan sounded from within. A hunk of metal rose, fell, then shifted to one side. A man's hand popped up and slowly pulled him out. He fell off the heap onto the ground. Gerald took a few more steps.

The driver sat up and leaned back against the wreckage, breathing heavily. His right arm hung awkwardly. He glanced at Gerald and grinned.

"That was pretty sneaky. I always figured we didn't give you plant boys enough credit."

Gerald frowned. The way he talked seemed familiar. "Redneck?"

"Yup."

"But why would the farmers get involved like this?"

He spat, wincing as the movement jarred his shattered arm. "Cause we're sick of all your fighting. Y'all get to feudin', and you tear everything up. How are we supposed to grow anythin' if there ain't no land left to farm?"

"Then why not help us? The Mage clans have never..."

"You don't get it, do you? The Mages're history. The Mechanics are gonna win." He patted the metal behind him. "One of y'all dies, that's it. You tear a leg off one of

these beauties, and they just put another one back on.” He sighed. “We’re just backing the winnin’ horse.”

Gerald frowned and waved a hand. A stalk sprouted from the soil next to the farmer. A bud formed, then opened and grew to a yellow flower.

“That’s right pretty,” he said, leaning forward. “But what good does it really…” The sunflower twisted, its petals slicing through his skull.

A sudden thud and a flash threw Gerald from his feet. Dirt rained down, nearly burying him. He struggled to breathe as he clawed his way free. His head hurt. He wiped a mix of blood and black mud from his eyes and realized he lay on the edge of a crater.

The light dimmed, and he glanced upward to see another dreadnaught striding over him. Straight into the row he had prepared the day before. Gerald stuck his fingers out and pushed his hands skyward.

Something like giant grass shot out of the earth, sprouting large, half-moon pods as it climbed. The machine halted, and the serrated disk started spinning. Pods opened to reveal row after row of hooked thorns. The plants darted forward and sank their teeth into the dreadnaught, which in turn mowed through them with its saw. Gerald grinned.

Each cut sprouted new growth with more pods that attacked the giant even harder. It tried slicing through them once more. When the frenzied assault redoubled yet again, the machine froze as if in thought. A pair of pods ripped the saw arm free. The dreadnaught swiveled at the waist with a loud clanking and pointed its remaining arm straight at the ground.

“No,” Gerald whispered.

The cannon fired, straight into the roots. Blades wilted and fell away. More blasts followed, until the devilweed withered and died.

“Nice trick, Mage.” A mocking voice floated down to him. “But I got one better.”

The arm came around until the barrel pointed straight at him. It was like looking into the black portal of hell itself. Gerald slowly backed away. The mocking voice laughed. Gerald’s foot slipped in the mud, and he fell. His head squished into the ground next to an oak seedling. Reaching across to cup the tiny tree, he closed his eyes. He felt a tingling in his hands. The oak trembled in response, then started to grow.

The tree shot upward until it towered over even the dreadnaught. The voice laughed again. “Thanks for the shade, Mage.” The giant turned slightly and brushed the oak.

It crashed to the ground, carrying the machine with it. Gerald climbed to his feet, glanced at the tree’s tiny roots and laughed.

The smile wilted at yet another thud. He looked south. The battle was over. Men and machines had started their march north once more. He ducked behind the fallen oak, then scrambled backward as it trembled. The dreadnaught was trying to push itself free and join its fellow death engines.

Gerald looked around, searching for any robed figure headed his way. *I’m the last*, he thought. Hiking his robes, he dashed into the forest. He had to flee. He had to warn the Lion Clan they were next.

The Dreadnecks were coming.

Andromeda Productions

Presents

**RICHARD S.
CRAWFORD**

A MOST HEINOUS MAN

**KIRSTEN ANDREWS
JENNIFER CRAWFORD
KEITH PHEMISTER**

*THEY NEED
RAW MATERIAL...
TO RETURN THE
DEAD TO LIFE!*

Written by
**RICHARD S.
CRAWFORD**

Edited by
**EDWINA
HARVEY**

Illustrated by
**LEWIS P.
MORLEY**

In glorious **TYPVISION**

I hear the car's tires crunching on the wet asphalt as it drives up the road to the house, so I run to hide in the secret passage beside the foyer. Just in time, I slip into my hiding spot behind one of the portraits and open the door so I can peer out through the painting's eyes.

From here I see the front doors open, and a family steps into the house: a Mom, a Dad, and a little girl. The daughter's maybe eight years old or so, real cute, with pigtails and a blue dress. They're all damp and windswept by the storm. They look around the place, holding hands, eyes wide. Dad sets down the small suitcase he's carrying, takes off his fedora and wipes rainwater from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Whew!” he says. “That’s sure one heck of a storm out there. I didn’t think this house would be so hard to find.”

The mother lets go of her daughter’s hand and lowers the hood of her jacket. She takes a step forward, glancing nervously at the paintings on the walls, at the improbably massive chandelier suspended over the foyer on a disturbingly thin chain, at the windows rattling in the wind. “I don’t know, Ward. This place looks awfully dangerous and desolate.”

Dad, whose name is apparently Ward, scoffs. “Hush, Alice. This house is perfectly safe. My uncle would never have lied about such a thing.”

“Oh, so we’re trusting werewolves now?” Mom rolls her eyes. “Honestly, Ward, you’re a good man but far too trusting.”

“How can we not? He’s my uncle no matter what those Gypsies did to him.”

“Well, we’re not letting him in our home again, not after what he did to the carpet.”

Watching them, I think Alice has a point. Actually, I remember Ward’s uncle. Name was Ebenezer. Ebenezer Talbot. Lived in this house for fifty years and never even went into the basement. I suppose he’s a werewolf now, which explains why I haven’t seen him around. Werewolves have their own agenda. Who knows what he might have been up to?

I step away from the peephole and close the little wooden door. Master’s going to want to know about this particular development. I make my way down the passage, through the kitchen, and down the stairs to the basement. The union rules sign on the wall reminds me that I’m required to lurch in the Master’s presence, so I start dragging my foot and raise one shoulder up higher than the other. The squinting is easy. The acid scars all over my face make it natural.

In the basement, Master is leaning on the table, head down, shoulders hunched over. I cry out to him and jump up and down to get his attention. I have to do this for a full minute before he finally notices me. He looks up at last, despair and annoyance mingling on his face.

“What on earth is it, Igor?” he says.

“Master! A family! A family has arrived in the house! A family!”

Master sighs. “And what of it, Igor? How can that possibly ease my pain? How can their presence even begin to bring solace to a mind frustrated in its pursuit of pure knowledge by a lack of suitable donors?”

“But Master! They may be able to help you!” Master has been very depressed lately. These days, it’s hard to find freshly executed murderers that haven’t been embalmed. It was much easier years ago, before the Zombie Union forced some new legislation. Embalmed zombies don’t rot as fast.

“Oh, Igor, your naive innocence is such a breath of fresh air to my tired and pathos-laden ears. But you know that living people cannot help me. Not when the very purpose of my scientific quest is to reanimate the dead and bring them back to life!”

“But, Master, it’s easy! We can kill them! Then they wouldn’t be living people anymore. And you can do the brain transplant experiment you’ve always wanted to do.”

Master looks surprised, as if he hasn't already thought of this himself. "Such an act would be truly monstrous, Igor. I cannot condone such heinous behavior. Never speak of it again in my presence!" Yet he winks at me, so I know what it is that I must do.

So for the rest of the evening, I keep an eye on the family. At length they retire to the spare bedrooms on the second floor, and I follow. Mom and Dad decide that they're going to share the larger room, and, foolishly, they let their young daughter sleep in the smaller room just across the hall from them.

When their lights go out, I keep listening outside the door until their breathing is calm and smooth. I sneak up to the parents' door and shove the bookcase in front of it so that they can't open it from the inside. Then, as quietly as I can, I open the door to the girl's bedroom and tiptoe inside, locking it behind me.

The daughter is very young, very young, very small, and very delicate. You'd expect such a young, delicate girl to be very demure, very quiet and sweet. But this is not the case. She wakes as I approach her, and immediately she opens her mouth and starts screaming. She jumps off her bed and to her feet and runs past me to the door. I try to shush her, but she just keeps screaming. The door is locked, so she cannot open it. I approach her, trying to calm her, and she runs again and curls up against the far wall. Sighing, I go over to her and twist her head sharply to the left. Once that's done, she expires in the demure and quiet manner that I expect from her.

But before I can leave the room to take care of the parents, I hear a loud crash from the hallway outside. I turn quickly, and the bedroom door crashes inward. A big, black, furry, kind of man-like shape with lots of teeth and huge claws, bursts through, looks around. I try to keep completely still, hoping the creature doesn't see me. But then it leaps, and crashes right into me. I'm thrown against the far wall, and then everything goes black and cold.

I wake up on my back, feeling sore. I can hear voices, soft and low. I lift my head and open my eyes. Although everything's blurry, I can still make out Mom and Dad and Master. We're in the basement. My head's swimming.

"Ward, you should have told me your uncle bit you," Mom says.

"I simply didn't want to worry you or Ginny."

Mom sobs. "Well, I'm not sure how comfortable I am being married to a werewolf. And Ginny's still dead, Ward. Some safe house this turned out to be." She wipes her nose daintily with a Kleenex from her purse. "Oh, my poor little girl! We should never have believed your uncle!"

Master coughs. "Don't worry, Mr. and Mrs. Talbot. Your daughter's sacrifice will not be in vain." He turns and approaches me. "How are you feeling, Igor?"

I open my mouth to tell Master that I feel fine and that I'm sorry I failed him, but all that comes out is a tiny squeak. I raise my hands up to my throat, but instead of the rough, bumpy flesh I've lived with all my life, there's nothing but smooth skin and tiny fingers. "What's happened to me, Master?" My voice sounds strange to me, like I've been sucking on one of the Master's strange cylinders again.

Master turns back to Mom and Dad. "There, you see? Because of your daughter's noble sacrifice, not to mention Igor's, we know now that it is possible to transplant a brain from one corpse to another and bring it back to life!"

“Hm,” Dad says. He’s tapping his chin, looking thoughtful. “I’m not sure I approve of this. You’re sure you couldn’t have preserved our daughter’s own brain?”

Master shakes his head. “Oh, heavens, no. You mauled the other body quite beyond usability.”

“Well,” Mom says, “that may look like our Ginny, but it’s definitely not her. Ward, we’re going to leave her here. I can’t imagine going on with that... person, and I certainly won’t have her in my car. Having a werewolf for a husband is quite enough of a burden, I’m sure.”

“Quite right,” Dad says. He turns to Master. “You’re a heinous man, sir. I hope that our paths never cross again, or I’m afraid I may find it much harder to control my temper.”

Master nods. “Of course. And I certainly can’t find it in my heart to blame you.”

Mom and Dad leave, and as I hear their car drive away Master comes up to me and leans over me. “Well, Igor,” he says. “ You’re probably too small now to dig in graves and carry the bodies of executed murderers back to the lab, but I’m sure we’ll find other uses for you.” He sighs. “Looks like I’ll have to revise my mission statement yet again.” He shakes his head and walks away slowly.

I play with my pigtails and pout. Master’s always been good to me before, but now I start to wonder if I should get in touch with my union rep. I may just have to file a grievance over this.

Celadon Green

... Loïc Henry

To Aziliz, Aelaïg and Izoenn, my beloved daughters.

Santxo 1.

In certain jobs, routine is not an option.

If you're supposed to spot criminals, smugglers, illegal immigrants and the like, you can't expect all of them to shudder when they hand over their ID cards. You need to focus on details, peculiar features, illogical associations, special attitudes. If a lone man tries to integrate into a group, if a young couple does not even exchange glances, if a businessman looks lost in an airport, you may have a clue. No definite evidence of course, but a pattern. And a starting point.

The customs officer is no perfectionist. While I was queuing, he let through at least two smugglers and a soldier in disguise. Still, he has noticed me before I give him my ID card. Not a great feat, I reckon: you tend to take note of a sixteen-year-old boy with a shaven head and a long black gown, edged in yellow and white. The colours are a clear hint but still very few people are able to figure out their precise meaning.

He inserts my ID card into the terminal and he frowns:

–From Earth?

–Yes.

–Your name is Santxo. A delegate from the Vatican?

–Correct.

–Never heard of it...

Of course he hasn't. Catholicism is not even represented on his native planet, Balafenn, "the one ocean, twelve-island-heaven", as the advertisement puts it. Plus, Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Pope are hardly the most recurrent names on popular shows.

–Anything to declare?

–Well, yes. A standard rifle, three handguns, a couple of grenades, a high-technology laser... That's it. Oh, no, two combat knives as well. You'll notice that my card includes all the relevant authorizations though.

–I doubt it!

The Catholic Church may not be as powerful as it used to be but it still has some influence which it does not hesitate to use when needed. And, God, it is sorely needed. The pope himself insisted that there had not been such an important mission for Catholicism – maybe for humankind, he added sententiously – for at least two centuries.

The customs officer types a couple of words on his computer, then looks at me again, astounded:

–I guess it's clear.

–Thanks.

–... Who are you?

I take my bag and go through the customs without a single word. In my job, routine is not an option either: I'm a Vatican assassin.

As soon as I leave the astroport, a myriad of butterflies start dancing around me. Their fragile ballet sketches colourful ribbons, like a welcome from the most renowned inhabitants on this tiny planet. A butterfly with sapphire and malachite wings, lands on my right forearm and I freeze to admire its subtle gradation. It stays there for a short instant, then it flaps its wings and joins vermilion, crimson and indigo friends for other ephemeral arabesques.

I stroll towards the city centre. I will have to walk for a while but it is the only way to immerse myself into the atmosphere of this planet. I know I only have two more days before the occurrence and the more information I can gather from now on, the better. Even if the previous occurrence was minor and peaceful, nobody knows if this one will be crucial or futile, and history is a sharp reminder that both aggression and collaboration, loneliness and multitude, concord and death, follow each in turn.

The mathematicians will be there of course: they haven't missed an occurrence since the eighteenth century and some Cardinals even suspect that they attended some we overlooked. While the clerical hierarchy easily accepts other religions, it is still troubled by the mathematicians' presence in what they view as the paragon of faith.

The pope expects around eight religious emissaries and I tend to trust its information agency. A few freaks will probably be there too but their number as well as the talents they possess are completely unknown to me.

However, the main question is: why is the occurrence located outside Earth for the first time ever? – well, at least for the first time since we recorded the original one in Bethlehem –.

Urdirn 1.

Today, the atmosphere wavers between blue and green.

Between azure and emerald to be precise, which means that the surroundings are peaceful and emotions well below the aggressive threshold. Of course, I sense the distant offensive, bedecked with gold and ruby, but it's still too weak to affect my psyche.

I rarely talk.

Words are deceptive. They convey a false sense of accuracy whereas colours reflect the moment, and its possible evolutions. The sentences or even the silences hardly reveal anything, but a crimson soul bellows violence with absolute certainty.

There's a hitch though: so far, I've never met another person who has the ability to see coloured feelings as I do. I spent most of my childhood in mental institutions where a multitude of psychiatrists and psychologists tried to convince me that reality, my reality, did not exist.

It was subtle. They never stated openly that I was mad but their ingenious questions betrayed their scepticism:

–Urдин, how do you know that celadon green is synonymous with curiosity?

–How do you see colours: spots, shapes or threads?

–What's the difference between purple and mauve, Urдин?

At first, I really thought I was victim of hallucinations. However, my own experience was a constant reminder that feelings were tinted with colours, from the various shades of red, which heralded conflicts, to the pure turquoise love of a mother for her newborn.

I simply stopped talking about it and it seemed to suit the doctors and my family fine. How can you describe light to a blind man? You can explain the theory behind it, but, if everybody around him is also blind, he will simply disregard your explanations.

Luckily, I realized early enough that children were just as cruel as adults, while more candid. I rarely saw celadon green, but the vermilion doubts and the khaki mockeries were ubiquitous when I was under five. Now, I look like a normal thirteen-year-old little girl, albeit a taciturn one. I just hope that, one day, I'll meet somebody who shares my secret gift.

The past two days have been weird. I've seen new colours.

When I woke up this morning, a slender lace of ochre lit my bedroom. It was too frail to be traced, and I could not immediately assign it to a given emotion, but it reminded me of the delicate ultramarine I had felt during the night.

So, I'm waiting for the offensive, my soul tinged in celadon green.

Santxo 2.

When you land on a new planet, with a very short period of time to fulfil a nebulous mission, you are expected to find a hotel room, a vehicle, maybe a weapon, and start enquiring, right?

Wrong.

I already have weapons and I don't care about a nice bed in a fancy room or even a fast car. I have the most relevant religious insight from one of the most ancient

human organisations. What I need is to integrate into society. What I need is to melt into the background so nobody will even imagine I am a foreigner. What I need is state-of-the-art photographers to compete with each other to take my picture for the “most-representative-young-Balafenn-boy-ever” competition. What I need is to find a freak, somewhere in a remote city of this planet, and force him to tattoo the word “standard”, tangled with Balafenn’s coat of arms, inside my skull.

What I need is to belong.

I buy black trousers and a pale grey shirt, which nonetheless seem kind of rebellious. Then I wander through the streets for a couple of hours. I watch young people’s attitudes, the way they walk; I listen to their accents; I hear the occasional burst of laughter. I am a sponge.

I shun the business district to join a huge park dotted with dismal black benches. At first, I thought that I could learn more about the behavioural manners of the native teenagers but I spot them as soon as I arrive. The three of them are sitting on a bench near a pond: an old man and a couple in their forties. Had they had a flashing sign above their heads, with an integral and a derivative having a shag, or a T-shirt saying “Mathematicians do it Pi times in a row”, it would not have been more obvious.

I sit nonchalantly on the grass and start drinking some cranberry juice, since the local teens have not yet discovered the joy of alcohol. Startlingly, they are exchanging sentences full of mathematical gobbledegook and it reminds me of a language I used with my friends when I was a child, which basically consisted in swapping one syllable for another in the middle of a long word: not really clear, even nonsensical, but fun. But we were children, not old folks with solemn expressions on our faces.

I look ostensibly at their sheets of paper scattered all over the place, full of formulas, theorems and lemmas. Then, I clap my hands Balafenn-style:

–Looks complicated.

–Not really, answers the woman.

–Well, I might have a few questions about my homework then.

They smile, as if trying to remember what mathematical concepts they absorbed at my age.

–By the way, aren’t you at school? asks the aged one.

A wily one.

–Nope. On holiday. I was supposed to work with a friend of mine for a week but he doesn’t need me after all. So I guess I’ll go back home tonight.

–Where do you live?

–In the North.

They look at each other and I can almost see the triple helix in their brain.

–Would you be interested in a job for the next three days? asks the woman.

I frown:

–Legal?

–Yes. We need a guide.

–I’d love to but I haven’t got a place to sleep anymore.

–You would stay with us at our hotel.

–How much?

It takes them off balance: they do not have the slightest clue of the salary they are supposed to offer. The middle-aged man eventually finds a way out:

–At what price do you value your services?

–One hundred a day plus room and food.

–OK.

I smile.

–My name is Sacha.

–Nice to meet you, answers the old one. I'm Leonardo and here are, uh, Sophie and Carl.

I nod in a way that is supposed to be cool. He has given me false names of course; I can even trace the origins: Leonardo Pisano Fibonacci, Sophie Germain and Carl Friedrich Gauss, all famous mathematicians.

–So, what are you interested in?

The woman lowers her voice:

–Something is going to happen here in two days.

–What do you mean “here”?

–In a forest, near the capital of Balafenn.

One point to Santxo.

I had a list of three possible locations on the main island of the planet but the Vatican theologians were not as precise as my new friends. As I brace myself for new questions, she whispers:

–Not here. We'll talk at the hotel.

They are kind people. They don't try to bargain, which is nice even if they don't care about money. I just hope I won't have to kill them stone dead.

Urdin 2.

I am the first one in the glade so I sit down, my back against a granite rock. I don't have to wait too long though, as a group of four people step in a few minutes later.

They're different.

The three adults are shrouded in obsidian black logic, with a blue-green gradation, which soothes its purity. They are looking at me with interest, with growing spots of celadon green curiosity dotting their soul.

And the boy, my God! I've never seen such an explosion of colours in my whole life. He's a rainbow. The ashen prudence and the chocolate temerity are intertwined. The lilac cynicism flirts with the lapis lazuli compassion. While the jade empathy flows all around, the scarlet haze is a constant threat.

–Hello, says the eldest one. I'm Leonardo and here are Sophie, Carl and Sacha.

–Urdin.

As I remain silent, he hesitates. Then, the woman, Sophie, asks me:

–Hello Urdin. Are you waiting for something special here?

–Of course. Like you.

–Are you a native?

–Yes.

–We’re foreigners.

–I know.

–Well, apart from Sacha.

I know from the boy’s grey annoyance that he’s not from Balafenn, but my early life has taught me to stay silent when in doubt. The old man clears his throat before asking:

–How did you know?

–I followed the butterflies, obviously.

–You followed... he repeats, astounded.

–Yes. And you?

He looks at his friends before answering:

–We run the maths.

–The maths?

My turn to be surprised. I don’t have a clue about the link between such an emotional event and the sheer logic of maths, but his soul radiates white sincerity. I nearly ask Sacha the same question but his carmine mist puts me off instantly.

The woman sits down next to me:

–Do you mind if we talk?

–No.

–And share?

I take a peek at Sacha.

–All right.

–I’ll start, if you want. As Leonardo said, we run the maths: all we know is an occurrence is going to happen here, in this glade, in five hours, at two a.m., local time. From our perspective, it’s a major one, in the sense that its amplitude is extremely high. To the best of our knowledge, it’s also the first time it’s going to happen outside Earth, even if we suspect that it might have taken place in the past.

–An occurrence?

–Yes. Is it what you call it?

–I don’t know its name. I just anticipate...

–Yes?

–Emotions.

She pauses for a minute as if wondering the meaning of the word:

–Do you expect Balafenn friends?

–Not really. But other people are coming.

–How do you know?

–I... feel their presence.

The woman touches the old man’s arm and her anxious eyes ask a mute question. He nods and glances in Sacha’s direction:

–Look, it might become dangerous. I think you’d better go back to town and maybe it would be wise to take Urdin with you.

–I’m staying, I answer distinctly.

Sacha grins nonchalantly:

–I’ll also stay then.

Santxo 3.

The glade is naturally well protected. There is no overhanging hill or mountain, and the surrounding woods are pretty thick. Of course, a group of soldiers could be scattered around the glade and intervene at a given signal, but the main threat comes from the narrow path which snakes down to a stream. Currently, it's clear but I've mined it with tiny radio-controlled exploding devices at various strategic places. Just in case. I scratch the ground and I bury the last one, only one inch deep. It's so simple : two buttons on my remote control, red and blue. On or off. Explosion or deactivation.

Strangely enough, when I stroll in nature with my deadly gadgets, I let the insignificant details vanish and I focus on my real mission. I'm neither a delegate, nor an emissary, nor an ambassador. In the past, the Vatican used to send dignitaries , bishops or cardinals. Most of them were extremely clever and educated, they had a lot of experience and knew the most arcane consequences of their words and deeds.

Which means they were unfit.

Occurrences are not about strategies or negotiations. They are about whether or not you miss the critical heartbeat, about decisions you have to make in a split second, about the invaluable piece of information you can retrieve, or loose forever. They are about intuition.

In the Vatican, I'm one of the youngest but I'm the best. I promised the Pope that I would not disappoint him, whatever the costs and the consequences. He trusts me. And I'm ready.

Back in the glade, there are more than twenty people now. Most of them are religious and I can even identify a young druid in a long white gown. As expected, there are a few freaks too, except that their mere presence proves that they're not that spooky after all.

So far, so good.

Three minutes to two. I look around and the glade now appears like a salt statues' competition. I even wonder if the eldest ones still remember they should breathe from time to time to avoid suffocation.

I guess I should thank Urdin for my reaction – and my life –. She suddenly stares at a young man in the middle of the glade, with a distinct terror in her eyes. Maybe I should think, search him or ask questions but I don't. I react as I've been trained to.

According to the ephemeral panic I've caught in a little girl's irides.

Urdin 3.

When a man passes away, the last colour to fade is anthracite.

Nobody needs my power to realize the man is dead though: the sharp blade stuck in his throat and the improbable angle of his neck provide ample evidence. Sacha – or whatever his name is – remains extremely calm, but lethal ruby streams still flow all around his soul. He slowly walks towards the dead body and picks up his combat

knife. He wipes it clean before putting it back into a leather sheath, strapped to his right calf.

A middle-aged man seems to wake up:

–Are you nuts or what?

Sacha doesn't even acknowledge the man's presence. He turns towards me with an ambiguous smile.

–Open his jacket, I whisper.

Sophie is the first to react. With a little aversion, she complies and a large explosive belt appears underneath the jacket. Reluctantly, she takes the dead man's hand out of his left pocket and reveals a home-made detonator.

–What...

She glances at me:

–How did you know?

Then, she turns towards Sacha:

–I suppose you've saved our lives. But you owe us an explanation, Sacha.

–Yes and no. Yes, I've saved your life, and mine too, which I really tend to worry about. But I don't owe you anything, Sophie. By the way, my name is Santxo.

The tension is almost too high for me to endure. Doubt, anger, fear forms a perilous mix but among the confusion, Santxo's crimson residues remain potentially deadly. The paroxysm is so close that I burst into tears, which is the only way to divert the attention from him. I touch his forearm:

–Please, Santxo. Calm down. Please...

More than the recent murder, these simple words seem to convince the adults that Santxo is not the frail teenager he looks, but a dangerous person one should treat with caution.

Silence sets in but it does not last for long. I feel a drop of water on my forehead, soon followed by a drenching rain. We all run for cover, hoping that the canopy will protect us from the torrential rain. When we arrive near the trees, we realise that it's not raining anymore, or rather, that it is confined to the glade, while the rest of the forest remains as dry as before.

As somebody starts to voice their surprise, a deafening clamour silences their words. One after the other, grey rocks fall in front of us. I look warily above me but, once again, the phenomenon is limited to the glade.

I try to concentrate on the marvel but the glade radiates white clarity, without the least colour. Celadon green threads speckle souls around me and they soon engulf the other hues.

Save Santxo, the human rainbow.

Santxo 4.

Now that the rain has stopped, we cautiously walk back towards the glade, half-expecting another odd event. We all wander around the rocks for a while, trying to distinguish some kind of pattern. Some rocks have signs engraved on their sides :

lines, dots, circles, triangles, stars, even a few letters. Personally, the only conclusion I draw after more than twenty minutes is that their total number is eighty-nine.

Good. Very good. Brilliant. Fantabulous. So what?

Obviously, Sophie, Leonardo and Carl are processing formulas on their computers like crazy, while exchanging mathematical nonsense from time to time. Most religious envoys are praying. And the freaks, well, they're freaks anyway, so who cares?

Then, Urdin whispers:

–Some of them are russet.

–What do you mean? asks an old woman. They're all grey.

Urdin hesitates for a second:

–Well, no. Five of them are russet.

–That's nonsense, groans the woman.

I come closer.

–Which ones? I ask.

She walks among the rocks and touches five of them, indeed as grey as the others. We are all following her, in a weird procession, looking at these five rocks, stroking them as if they could talk. I notice the signs engraved on the rocks : one has two vertical lines, another has three and two have only one. On the last one, I recognize a clumsy "V". Sophie, Leonardo and Carl haven't exchanged a single word but they're smiling, as if they were looking at a toddler's jigsaw puzzle.

–OK, I say wearily. Tell us, Sophie.

–The Fibonacci series. You get the next number by adding the previous two.

–Numbers? I'm sorry, but where do you see numbers?

–They're Latin numbers, Santxo.

As I look at her, a little bit ashamed of my own ineptitude, she explains:

–One, one, two, three, five. And the next one is eight: three plus five.

–Is there a rock with a "V" and three vertical lines? someone asks.

There we go: more than twenty people running like hell among rocks at two thirty in the morning, in a remote glade on a distant planet. I just can't help laughing.

–There's only one.

We all gather round the rock. I glance at Urdin:

–Anything special?

She shakes her head.

One by one, we look, touch, inspect. Some even listen or smell. A few of them pray.

A shaman approaches and, eyes closed, starts droning out an old mantra. While he remains still, the beat soon speeds up and becomes nearly hypnotic. Abruptly, it stops and the shaman opens its eyes.

Nothing.

An orthodox priest, a lama, a rabbi and a Muslim cleric follow one another around the rock with as much result as the shaman. For some reason, I think for a minute that the lama will be more successful, probably because he looks more convinced. Or more coloured. Or more exotic. Whatever.

The young druid is sitting on the grass a few yards away, with a tiny computer and a map in his hands. I leave the others with their expectations unmet and I sit next to

him in silence. His screen shows our location on a map, and he has positioned the eighty-nine rocks, with their numbers, on a grid.

–Convenient when picking mistletoe.

He doesn't answer my sarcasm. He draws a straight line from a circle at the periphery of the screen to rock number eight. The line passes between two rocks at the edge of the glade, nearly stuck one to the other, and seems to avoid other rocks before touching number eight.

–There we go, he says merrily.

–There we go? Really?

Depending on the line you draw, you can have hundreds of other pairs, no more relevant than this one. He feels my reluctance and smiles:

–The line corresponds to the sun rays, at dawn, at the equinoxes.

–At the equinoxes? And it's important?

–Of course, it's the limit between the clear and the dark seasons.

Of course.

I bury my head in my hands, unable to hide my dismay any longer. He doesn't feel offended though, and he gives me a pat on the shoulder.

–Look, rock number eight is at the western edge of the glade and it's extremely unlikely that no shadow from another rock darkens it when the sun rises in the east. So unlikely in fact that it only happens twice a year.

–At the equinoxes?

–Yes. And the two rocks are similar to a thin door.

Sounds interesting this time. We both get up in silence to explain his theory to the others. I guess we should focus on these two rocks now.

How long is it going to last, for Christ's sake?

Urdin 4

It's nearly three thirty in the morning now and these two rocks look like a dead-end, at least for us. Should we look for another link? Should we act? Should we wait?

I feel a little anxiety so I turn towards its source: three young men are looking at their hands with concern. I get closer and I realise that their palms have become fluorescent. Everybody looks at their own hands, but the weird phenomenon is limited to the three men.

–What are you doing? asks Leonardo.

–We haven't got a clue, answers the youngest one.

–Is it painful?

–Not really. It's warm.

–Do you know each other?

–Yes, we're brothers.

–Where are you from?

–Catagg.

Nobody answers but I feel the ivory surprise surfacing in the souls. Catagg, one of the most recluse planets, focuses on biology and genetic research. While their scientists are considered to be the best in this field, they seldom exchange ideas or data with the outside world, which reproaches them for ignoring ethics. There is no central authority dealing with moral questions but all planets, save Catagg, have set limits, according to their culture and religions. Catagg is not a pious planet; it even prohibits all religions and that has led to some dire atrocities in past decades, which could not remain hidden despite the planet's isolation.

–Why are you here then? asks one of the religious envoys.

The three brothers look at each other.

–Well... Our father died ten years ago and he made us promise to come here, on Balafenn, at this particular time.

–Who was he?

–One of the prominent biologists of the time.

–Religious?

They smile wryly.

–On Catagg, nobody is. Well, nobody alive.

–How did he know then?

–He didn't tell us.

They look at their glowing hands and the youngest one walks towards the two rocks; he puts one hand on each, soon followed by his brothers.

A faint sparkle rises from the stones. It ascends slowly in the sky and I realise that I'm not the only one looking at it. Being able to share visual emotions, instead of staring at them like a forlorn clairvoyant, cheers me up somehow. The flicker adjusts slowly to form the pattern of a virus. I've never studied biology seriously but, for some reason, I'm pretty sure this one represents the sexually transmissible disease which has decimated the poorest planets for two decades. Then, a common vermilion butterfly appears; it flaps its wings near the virus symbol, which gradually wanes in the darkness.

Soon, a dim sketch appears above the two rocks, and, despite its simplicity, it clearly displays a few malign cells. The figure grows as the cells multiply, covering the whole glade. Two butterflies emerge from the woods and wander through the trees; the cerulean one is tiny and it moves up and down with amazing speed while the lavender one seems clumsier. They fly around us, performing sibylline arabesques, and the image stops expanding to shrink until it is too insignificant to see.

One by one, we observe the cruellest natural killers being wiped out by various butterflies. I have no doubt that the display reveals something deeper than a simple allegory. I even believe that, by finding the right butterflies, you could cure any ailment.

At the very end of the colourful waltz, we all watch the bare sky for a long time. When our eyes are reluctantly drawn from the night to settle on the glade, the rocks have disappeared.

The message is clear. So clear that we all come back from the glade hand in hand, convinced that the butterflies will offer a cure to hundreds of diseases, healing millions of people. The young druid kisses Sophie on the cheek while the orthodox priest exchanges jokes with Japheth, Ham and Shem, the three Catagg brothers.

Personally, I am so ecstatic that I nearly offer my grenades to a young woman as a kind of princess-of-the-dawn present. Alleluia! We're all brothers and sisters. United despite the light-years and the black holes between us. Kyrie Eleison!

Give me a break! I hate crowds; I abhor the comforting feeling of unison; I loathe unanimity. If everyone agrees, this means that the hurricane is not going to bypass the bay after all, that the meteorite will crash right on the new house you've mortgaged your life for, that this sleeping volcano will spit its anger right now, when you're trekking with your old sneakers. That means you're stuck. And worse, everybody wonders why you're not celebrating.

I am not because I know we were in big, huge, massive trouble.

To compound my worries, it starts to rain again. Not the thin drizzle common on Balafenn, but the downpour which is not even supposed to occur anywhere on this planet. Urdin touches my arm for the second time this evening:

–Relax, Santxo! It's good news. And we're the messengers.

When we arrive in the city, it's pouring down. I hesitate between cursing the Gods, all of them, right in front of their representatives, or waiting for the next morning to gun down the editor of the newspaper, which has predicted a bright sun for the coming days.

I'll start with the first option and keep the second one open.

Urdin 5

When Santxo leaves me at the astroport, with a virtuous kiss on the forehead, I catch a tenuous filament in his soul. Love is generally associated with a pink heart, but its true colours are cyan intertwined with thin shreds of black purity. I read temporary feelings, not minds, but I have the conviction that he will come back to Balafenn in the near future. Not for the butterflies. For me. Before he does, he'll be among the ones who will inform the world that Balafenn, the marine planet with its twelve islands, harbours magnificent creatures which are going to remedy suffering and early death across the whole galaxy.

I know my soul radiates cyan and black. I don't even imagine that, when Santxo ends its two-month-journey, I'll be dead.

Santxo 6

Details are important. And I missed one.

Maybe I was a little too tired, maybe the atmosphere of euphoria contaminated me after all, maybe I let the routine seep into my veins for a minute or maybe things happened as they were meant to.

And now, in the cabin of the spaceship, I know the truth. I could reveal it to the crew or the other passengers, but it would be useless since nobody can communicate when the spaceship travels so close to the speed of light.

I overlooked the three brothers' names. I knew I had heard them before, but I could not pinpoint where. I neglected the divine warning.

And I'm pretty sure that the rain hasn't stopped, that it has become heavier, inflating the rivers and the seas, that the ice fields have melted and created a deluge which has drowned the low islands of the planet, thus killing its inhabitants, humans and butterflies alike. I'm also aware that only a tiny minority – the rich, the powerful, the well-connected and the lucky – will have the opportunity to escape the planet before it becomes a single ocean. Not Urdin. The holy bible in my hand, I whisper the names of Noah's three sons: Japhet, Ham and Shem.

We had a treasure in our hands but we didn't realize – I didn't realize – that it was as ephemeral as a delicate butterfly. But the one treasure I'll miss most is a little girl who could read my emotions. What is the colour of my sorrow, now that I'm certain she's dead?

The Rising

...Alex Cohen

The warm smell of baking dough wafted through the city of the dead.

Nadjim dusted flour from his hands, straightened up, and caught the evening breeze coming over the waist-high wall surrounding the bakery. He could see, above the neighboring buildings, the half-completed Akhet-Khufu, the great tomb that would contain divine Khufu's body while his spirit walked the afterworld. On it like ants on a crust of bread were thousands of workers, dragging and lifting the enormous blocks of stone that would form the greatest monument ever built.

He reached for the jar of starter to start the next batch of bread, but a commotion tore his attention away. An excited murmur was rising from the main avenue through the workers' city.

His assistant, Beni, had heard it, too. "What is that?"

Nadjim hadn't even replied when an elaborately dressed man turned from the avenue and strode toward the bakery. Beni's eyes opened wide.

"Baker!" the man called. "The Son of Re requires your bread to feed his family. Accompany me." Nadjim knew that this man was only a servant, a minor functionary, but his association with the divine Khufu made him nearly divine himself.

Nadjim and Beni swept away the hot ashes that covered three baking molds. They removed the lid of the first, then carefully inverted it. "Usir, let the bread be pleasing to divine Khufu," Nadjim said under his breath. The cone-shaped loaf fell out without sticking, perfectly golden brown. Usir was with them so far.

They removed two more loaves, loaded them onto a hurriedly cleaned-off platter, and followed the servant through the narrow alleyways between the buildings of the workers' city. A mad, insistent flutter started in Nadjim's heart. The divine Khufu would eat his bread? Had asked for his bread? He could not help wondering what would happen if the bread did not meet with his favor. What if he broke a tooth on a stone? Could divinities break teeth?

Too soon, they came before the royal procession, a half-dozen richly appointed palanquins carried by superbly muscled bearers and attended by a cloud of servants. First was Khufu, and it was strange to see the living face that Nadjim had only seen in stone before. Following him were four other men, one of whom so strongly resembled Khufu that he must be the prince. The last member of the procession was a young woman. Nadjim had never seen her before, but from her

strong features he guessed she was a sister to the prince. She was beautiful, the most beautiful woman Nadjim had ever seen. Each moment he stared at her, he was all too aware that Khufu might decide he was being impertinent and order him beaten. But he did not look away.

Fortunately for Nadjim, Khufu was attending to other matters, arguing with his architect about the rate of progress on the tomb. Nadjim tore his gaze away only when the royal party noticed the bakers. Khufu expressed pleasure that they had made their breads into the shape of his monument. Has he never had risen bread before? thought Nadjim. Certainly he must have bakers in the palace who could make it. But perhaps breads, when served at his table, must be presented in some way appropriate to his divinity. Maybe even sliced.

Sometimes, when he worked in the bakery, he felt pinned between the heat of the sun and the heat of the oven. He felt like that now. Despite forcing his gaze to the ground, he felt on one side the presence of the Son of Re, living embodiment of divine authority, scarce cubits away. On the other side was the princess, her beauty crowding out all other thought.

An asp is beautiful, too, thought Nadjim. And to touch one is to die.
Yet he knew he must see her again.

The museum was quiet at night, except for the soft whoosh of the state-of-the-art climate control system.

The temporary exhibits gallery had a new steel-chain shutter pulled down across the entrance. A bored security guard shone a flashlight through it, casting long shadows across the statues of sandstone and granite, then continued on his route, which would bring him to Classical Sculptures, Late Renaissance Italy, Images of the Frontier, and Modern Portraits before he began his rounds again.

Inside the gallery was a massive stone sarcophagus, carved with invocations of the gods. The lid was off and leaned against the wall to one side. Within, under a sheet of plexiglass lay a linen-wrapped mummy, arms at its sides. It was adorned with lapis lazuli and a funerary mask of gold and malachite. The mummy did not strictly belong in the sarcophagus; in fact, it was from a dynasty almost two thousand years earlier. But the museum had found that visitors expected to see mummies. Since none came with the exhibit, the museum had borrowed one from a cooperative university.

Inside the sarcophagus, the mummy stirred. Over the last few weeks, since arriving in this city, it had slowly torn the linen holding its arms to its side. Now, arms free at last, it freed its legs as well. Silent and patient, it waited for the security guard to pass.

After the last gleam of the guard's flashlight had faded, the mummy lifted the plexiglass and stepped out, glad that the sarcophagus lid had been left off. The eternally preserved bodies of royalty had strength far beyond the living, but the tomb had been designed to stay shut.

The mummy looked around the room, at the statues of Isi and Usir, Inpw and Djehuti, of a dozen unfamiliar kings. Then it tore a narrow opening in the gate and slipped through.

Nadjim stared at the mound of dough and sighed. He reached into a jar, took out a handful of emmer flour, and dusted the dough with it. Had it been real? Had the Son of Re truly eaten his bread? And, at the very end, when he and Beni were bowing and departing, and he'd looked up... had the princess really been watching him?

"If you work that slowly on every loaf, there'll be a lot of hungry workers come morning," said Beni with a smile. Nadjim realized that the dough was more than ready. He quickly placed it in a pot to rise.

He crossed the bakery and halted in front of a delicately painted jar. Five inundations ago, he had paid a scribe from the temple of Djehuti to paint sacred writings on it that dedicated the contents to the gods and asked their blessing. Murmuring a prayer to Usir, who died and rose again and taught the art of making bread to the people of the Two Lands, Nadjim reached into the jar and lifted out a doughy, bubbly mass that emitted a sharp but welcome sour smell. "Thank you, grandfather, for welcoming the spirit of leavening into our house. We hope we will continue to deserve its blessing." Beni inclined his head as well; both knew that their livelihood depended on the continued magic of the rising spirit. Each loaf of bread took a portion of the starter, but it always regenerated, fed only by flour and water. It was truly a gift from the gods.

As Nadjim mixed the dough for the next loaf, he wondered if he would have a son to whom he could pass the gods' gift. Having seen the princess, he suddenly found he couldn't imagine marrying any other woman.

Beni put a hand on his shoulder. "You have been dreaming all morning. What is it?"

Nadjim sat down heavily on top of the low wall and rested his head in his hands. "How can I see her again?"

Beni frowned. "Who?"

Nadjim looked up in irritation. "You were there. Princess Semry!" He began to pick apart a burned loaf, rolling the fragments into balls and angrily tossing them at the oven.

Beni sat down next to him. "Is that who that was?" He shrugged. "What does it matter if you see her again?"

Nadjim turned to him, but before he could snap at his assistant, they were interrupted.

"Which of you is the baker Nadjim?" Another royal servant, this one even more richly dressed than the one that had come yesterday, strode toward them.

Nadjim jumped to his feet. "I am."

The servant pointed at him. "Follow me. You work in the palace now."

Nadjim and Beni looked at each other in astonishment. And slowly, like the sun rising after its journey through the underworld, Nadjim realized that this was the answer to his question, and to his heart.

Lucius Capitolinus, called Albinus by the other soldiers in his maniple since the day he mustered for duty covered in flour, respected bread. His father, back in Roma, was a baker, and when he himself finished his ten years in the army, he planned to join him. And, in the midst of so many strange scents here in Aegyptus, he recognized one familiar smell.

It was a sourdough starter, he was sure, although with some strange and unfamiliar ingredient added. Whatever it was, it was something special.

Albinus looked around. In the bare few days that Octavian and his Roman army had been in Aegyptus, discipline had already become lax; after Cleopatra's and Antony's forces had been broken in Greece, there wasn't much left for the army to do. Of course, anything looted was ultimately to be turned to Octavian, but what Albinus was about to do would hardly be looting... right?

He followed the scent to one of the yellow-grey brick buildings that filled this poorer section of Alexandria. He paused in front of the entrance, listening. He put his hand on his gladius, intending to draw it in case there were defenders hiding silently behind the doorway. But then he thought of his father, and walked through the entry, hands empty.

Only a little light streamed through the door, but he still knew this place as a bakery, even aside from the now strong smell of starter. That pot would contain flour; that pitcher must hold water. You could use that flat stone to knead and roll. As Albinus took it all in, he could easily imagine himself mixing the starter, flour, and water; kneading, rolling, feeling the heat from the oven. But when he rested his hand on the oven, the stone was cool to the touch. The owner had probably fled with his valuables.

But not with everything of value, Albinus thought, as he found and opened the jar containing the starter. He inhaled deeply; it had a sharp tang unlike any of the starters back home. He imagined bringing it home to his father, using it with honey and crushed almonds to catch and balance the sour.

He picked up the jar, and almost dropped it in surprise when he saw a young man standing in the darkness, watching him. How long had he been there? Albinus stammered, an instinct making him offer to pay, but the man didn't seem to understand Latin. He turned his hand outward and spoke a few words. And although Albinus didn't speak any Aegyptian at all, somehow he knew that this man was giving him permission to take the jar. No, more: telling him that he must take it with him.

Shaken and confused, Albinus hurried out of the bakery, holding the jar in his arms.

All the way back to Roma and for the rest of his life, Albinus dreamed of Aegyptus, especially when he ate bread made from the starter he found — was given — that day.

For Nadjim, working at the palace differed little from his time in his old bakery. He offered sacrifices to Usir. He mixed dough, he filled pots with batter, he covered them with hot ashes to bake. Here, at least, he had a wider array of ingredients to add: honey, oils, olives, spices.

The other bakers were astonished at his starter; only two other bakers there had been blessed with the dough that rises, and even their breads did not have the taste of Nadjim's. When he tried to share his starter with them, it lasted only for a few loaves before turning rancid or settling into flat dough. But he cared little for bread now.

Days would pass when he would not see Princess Semry. Then for one moment he would glimpse her passing across a doorway, and his head would hurt and his stomach clench. At night, he sleeplessly listened to the howls of jackals and wondered why he was so accursed.

Still, he saw her more and more often, and one time she came into the bakery, inspecting the operations of the household. She was surrounded by a cloud of attendants, of course, but Nadjim ignored them and boldly looked straight at her, ignoring the glare of one of her guards. I exist! he thought at her. Look at me!

She turned from looking over the inventory of flour, and faced him. And her mouth turned up in a smile that made Nadjim's heart swell, as though it were dough rising in the summer sun.

Nadjim and all the other bakers, not to mention the rest of the palace staff, were working late into the night. Divine Khufu was receiving a delegation from Sumeria, and the feasting would last much of the next three days. Nadjim was faint from heat and exhaustion, but he had another dozen loaves to start before he could sleep. Of course, it helped immeasurably that the palace bakery was so much larger than his old one in the workers' city. He sat down on a cask of flour; he had a summer-short hour before he needed to remove the next batch from the oven.

A pounding of feet and a sob woke him from a reverie. To his great shock, it was Princess Semry, fleeing into the bakery, the kohl around her eyes running. He stood so suddenly that the cask overturned and caught his legs so that he staggered forward onto his hands and knees.

She startled, then laughed a little as he ruefully stood up and attempted to dust himself off. "I hope you're more careful with the breads than you are with yourself. I hate to think that we've been eating bread that had fallen to the floor."

Horrified, he began to stammer out a denial, but she waved him quiet. “Forgive me — I only jested. Sit back down. I only came here to get away from my father and those strange foreigners.”

Nadjim, before he could think better of it, said “You can stay here, if you want. I have fresh bread.” He smiled cautiously. “It’s barely even touched the floor.” At that, she burst into real laughter, her tears stopping entirely.

He loved the sound of her laughter. His heart thumped heavily and loudly against his ribs. What was he doing? Other than the two of them, the bakery was deserted. Where had everyone gone?

“What happened?”

She sniffed again, then her mouth set in an angry line. “My father would send me to a brothel to pay for his beloved tomb.” At Nadjim’s look of shock, she shrugged. “Not an actual brothel, true. He will marry me to a prince of Sumeria, in return for tribute. But it amounts to the same thing. Worse, as I’ll never be allowed to come home — ” She broke off and sobbed into her hands.

He watched his arm lift towards her like he would watch a snake. He was courting death here. She could show him familiarity if she wanted; she was the daughter of a god; that did not give him the right to do the same.

She looked up then, and her eyes met his. His vision swam, and a cataract roared in his ears. She interlaced her fingers between his and he bent his head to kiss her. Her lips tasted of salt and flour. A moment, then she pulled away and looked intently into his eyes.

“Take me from this place. Please.”

Giovanni’s eyes filled with tears. He rubbed furiously at them. “Dammed smoke! This oven needs a good cleaning!”

His son smiled. “Yes, Papa, but I won’t be able to do it.” Marco was already carrying his bags for the journey to Genoa, where he would board the ship to the New World with the missionaries. He embraced the older man.

His mother, sniffing, stepped forward to smooth an unruly lock of his dark, curly hair. “Be careful of the savages!”

Marco turned to embrace his mother. “It’s to save their souls that we go, Mama. I can hardly avoid them.”

Giovanni turned away for a moment, and came back holding an earthenware jar. “If you’re going to be doing the baking at the mission, you’ll need this.”

Marco’s eyes widened. He lifted the jar and inhaled the sour aroma. “Grandfather’s starter! I can’t take this to the New World. It wouldn’t survive the ocean crossing. Besides, you should at least keep half.”

Giovanni shook his head. “Not only my father’s; he got it from his father, and he from great uncle Paolo. It has been in this family for longer than we remember, and now it’s ready to move on. And it’s a strong old thing; it will cross the ocean with you.” His faced turned from dreamy to stern. “But don’t forget to feed it! A handful of flour and a cup of water every few weeks!”

Marco managed a weak grin, but then the smoke from the oven began to bother his eyes as well. For a moment, it seemed that another young man stood in the room, but Marco blinked rapidly, and he was gone. Eyes still smarting, he embraced his father.

She gripped his hands. "Would you follow me to a land where I can be safe from my father...?" She chewed her lower lip, looking very young and uncertain in that moment.

He couldn't believe she would even ask such a question. He barely restrained himself from breaking into song. "I would sacrifice anything." But another thought darkened his joy. "But where is beyond the reach of your father?"

"We cannot be together in this world, but we can be together in the next."

The next? For a moment, it didn't make sense. Then her meaning became clear. "But our spirits will not be allowed into the afterworld if we commit..." He trailed off; he could not say the word.

She smiled sadly and placed a hand lightly on his forearm. "My mother's younger brother is the high priest of Usir. He will arrange everything, and prepare our bodies for eternal life together in the afterworld."

He shook his head, not in denial but confusion. "I cannot be without you. But even in the afterworld, how can we be together? I will be a worker there, just as I am here."

"When you awake in the afterworld, leave the river and travel west, farther into the land of the dead. Keep going until we find a place where we can be together." She paused. "But it must be tonight. Are you ready?"

His head swam. He thought about the joy of being with her for eternity. "Yes." He swallowed. "Yes, I'm ready." But then a thought intruded. His starter, the legacy of his grandfather: what would happen to it? "No. There's something I must do first."

She grasped his hand and looked into his eyes. For a moment he thought she would refuse, and his own resolve quavered as tears welled in her eyes. "Very well, but you must be careful. My father already suspects that I plan something, and I may not be able to wait for you." She kissed him then, her lips tasting faintly of almonds. "We will meet again in the land of a million years."

He held her tightly, knowing that they would see each other again in the afterworld, but unable to let go of her in this one. After a brief moment, however, he heard a distant shouting, and he kissed her a last time and ran out the door.

Noises and shadows dogged his steps as he slipped through the passageway to the bakery, but he reached it without being stopped. He lifted the painted jar containing his starter and carried it out of the palace into the desert night.

A sliver of moon cast just enough light for him to see. As he made his way to the river, he twice thought that he heard a noise behind him, but a quick glance revealed nothing. He reached the bank and roused a man sleeping in a small boat. The man complained, but when Nadjim offered him all the coin he had, he grudgingly agreed to carry him to the far shore.

After disembarking on the western shore, Nadjim walked through the workers' city. It was hard to find his bakery — Beni's, now — in the dark, amid the mazelike narrow alleyways. But by keeping his eye on the Akhet-Khufu, rising moonlit pale above the buildings, he finally made his way. He reflected that if it hadn't been for the tomb, Princess Semry would likely not have been betrothed to the Sumerian, and Nadjim would never have had his time with her.

He entered the bakery and placed the starter on the wall; he saw that the starter he had left with Beni had already turned flat. He took a handful of flour and released it onto the starter with a trembling hand. He lifted the water jug, but he turned at a noise from the entrance. A soldier in royal colors stood, his bow drawn taut and aimed at Nadjim's heart.

A brief instant of terror was followed by mirth; all the soldier could do was speed Nadjim on his way to be with Semry. Then the arrow appeared in Nadjim's chest without seeming to travel the space between the two men. Nadjim wondered at the lack of pain, and then realized in horror that if his body were left here unpreserved, his spirit would be trapped in this world.

He fell to his knees. "Inpw receive me. Maat find me worthy," he thought. He fell to the floor, his head facing the starter. "Usir, watch over and preserve the gift of bread with which you blessed my family..." For an instant he felt as if his spirit was indeed welcomed somewhere, and then all was dark.

The further the wagons traveled into the desert, the better the bread tasted. Not just better: richer, and more biting sour, and when Francis ate it, he was filled both with a sense of loss and a sense of arriving home after long absence.

Francis had been traveling west with the other '49ers for many months, meandering through the southwest territories. But this was no arrival home for him; a long journey still lay ahead before they reached California, beckoning like a golden lure.

His brother back in New York had been right about the starter; Francis wouldn't have expected it to survive the trip, but in fact it had thrived, gaining Francis a reputation among the other travelers for his bread.

The wagon train pulled to a halt alongside the river. They had been traveling downriver for a week and a half now, and Francis was still disoriented; for some reason he expected the sun to be setting to the left of the river. But that made no sense, of course; they were headed west to the sea, just like the rushing waters.

The desert was darker and rockier than he expected; he had imagined sand like flesh, all pinks and reds and whites. This land, while clearly desert, seemed a rougher, more unfinished place.

There was little wood to be found here, so Francis dipped into his limited supply of charcoal to build a small fire; he had quickly learned that the nights in the desert were bitterly cold.

He carefully hung a kettle of water over the flames, and opened the starter jar to start a new loaf. As he mixed the flour and water in with the starter in a Dutch

oven, he looked westward, where the sun was just touching the tips of the mountains ahead. His fingers sank into the bubbly dough.

“We travel into the land of the dead,” he thought, and then wondered from where that thought had come.

The mummy strode down the street, its wrapping in tatters and fluttering in the wind. Beneath the wrapping, the mummy’s skin was a lustrous black, as if it had been dipped in pitch. Periodically, it stopped and lifted its head, as if smelling the air, seeking one particular scent among thousands.

It came to a stop in front of a bakery with wide glass windows and a hand-painted wooden sign that read “The Oasis,” amid cartoonish illustrations of palm trees and camels. In smaller letters below, it claimed to be “The Home of the Original Sourdough!” The inside was dark, and the glass showed only a dim reflection of the mummy, lit by dull yellow street lights.

The mummy stepped toward the door and touched it with outstretched arms. The glass shattered with a musical chime, and the mummy stepped through the door and into the building.

The room was cluttered with musty sofas and small circular tables with upended iron-frame chairs resting on their tops. The mummy made its way to the back of the cafe. In front of a display case of breads and pastries, it paused and rested its hand, almost tenderly, on the glass.

It turned then, for the first time seeming tentative, or even afraid. It walked toward the door in the back of the room, which swung open at the merest touch. The room was dark, illuminated only by yellow light through the windows, which gave the chrome of the kitchen appliances and fixtures the appearance of gold.

As the mummy walked forward, its appearance swam and shimmered. Dark hair, flesh, pristine linen appeared amid the tattered wrappings.

Another door took the mummy into a flour-dusted room, with rows of canisters stacked on shelves, and a large oven, still warm. The figure stood before the canisters and began to reach; but before its hands could grasp, the canister split with a loud crack.

A bare second later, the canister shattered entirely, tiny shards of clay ringing to the floor. The contents were flung into the room, but instead of hitting the walls or falling to the floor, a dense cloud of tiny white particles hung suspended in the air, sparking and flickering. The mummy watched as the shape of a young man coalesced from the shimmering cloud. The mummy reached forward, and as its own image solidified, the remains of its linens and dry bones and flesh collapsed into dust, leaving only a beautiful, strong-featured woman. The two figures came together, every step crossing a thousand years and a thousand miles, and as they embraced, a light and heat from a sun that shone on ancient sands warmed their long-cold spirits and led them into their long-sought home.

The smell of baking bread filled the sleeping city.

The Stone Man

...Sarah Totton

I met her for the first time at the shock demonstration. She was the shock demonstration. Live demos are an essential part of a medical student's education. Sure, videos and textbooks have their uses. So does the new Resusci® Anne: simulated bleed-out, simulated pop if you crack the ribs doing compressions — but you can only learn so much from anatomical simulators. Real people are more complex. And at Moloch Inc. they're cheaper.

Moloch ran these demos to give us Company medical students an edge over non-Company medical students. I'd been up all night on my work-study, and I'd slept in. I hadn't read the lab manual beforehand, so I arrived late, unprepared for what I was about to witness.

Dr. Fitch was there in his greens surrounded by vital sign monitors. The Company students in my year stood along the observation deck. I caught Nick's eye as I crossed the floor, and he looked skyward with his 'Not again, Jonesy' expression.

I took off my Company jacket and dropped it by the door. Fitch stopped talking and looked at me, narrowing his eyes on the name tag pinned to my scrubs.

"At what level of blood loss does one enter shock, Mr. Jones?" he asked me.

I froze. "Uh...about..."

Fitch's expression hardened.

"A loss of thirty to forty-five per cent of total blood volume, sir," said Keen. Know-it-all.

"This patient weighs forty-eight kilograms," said Fitch. "How much blood is in her body, Mr. Jones?"

"Uh..." Brilliant, Jonesy. No wonder you got into med school.

"Five liters, sir," said Keen.

"Which means that we must remove at least one-and-a-half liters to induce shock," said Fitch. "Mr. Jones, insert a catheter into the patient's vein please."

I stood there in a daze until Fitch pulled me by the arm to the supplies cart. When I reached for a catheter, Fitch smacked my wrist. He flicked two gloves out of a box on the cart and presented them to me. They were a size too big. My hands were shaking. I'd placed intravenous catheters into anatomical simulators before, but not with an audience.

The an-sim lay on the table under a sheet, its hand exposed. Its chest rose and fell. Simulated breathing, I thought. Must be a new model.

When I grabbed its hand to position the needle, I thought, my god, it's warm, but then I was advancing the needle through the skin until a drop of red fluid welled out of the hub. I threaded the catheter into the vein and withdrew the needle. As I released the an-sim's hand, I felt something hard on its wrist. Fitch attached an IV line to the catheter and taped it in place. The IV line filled with red fluid, draining into the empty bag Fitch hung under the table, and I saw what I'd felt just then; a bracelet hung from the patient's wrist. A string of plastic beads: little daisies, butterflies, a honeybee. Then I realized that the patient wasn't an an-sim. She was real.

The students closed in around her, blocking my view.

"Note," said Fitch, holding up the patient's hand, "as blood loss progresses the patient's skin pales. The patient is entering shock due to acute blood loss. The extremities cool, the depth of breathing decreases."

Peering between people, I saw the movement of her chest, now quickening as she bled to death in front of me.

"Now," said Fitch, "observe the changes in the patient as the blood is returned to her body...."

I stared at the honeybee on her bracelet. Fitch jarred the table as he hung the bag filled with her blood on an IV pole. The bee swung on its string.

Time seemed to stop. The next thing I knew, I was following the class across the hall for debriefing. I didn't absorb a word Fitch said.

Afterwards in the cafeteria, Taylor raved about the demo. "Did you see the heart monitor? She was throwing PVC's! I thought for sure she was going into arrest."

One of the flunkies came around and placed a condiments holder on our table.

"How do you spell 'lawsuit'?" said Nick. "You couldn't pay me enough to do that."

I picked up a honey packet from the condiments holder and stared at the cartoon bee on the label. Tiny wings, oversized head, smiling like it didn't know what was going to hit it.

"You should spend less time babysitting monkeys and more time studying Company policy, Nick," said Des. "She wouldn't sue Moloch if Fitch had cut off her arm by mistake."

Nick nudged me. "You okay, Jonesy? You look like crap."

"Migraine," I said. I stood and headed upstairs, fast. Lucky for me my migraines were infamous; no one suspected. Inside my dorm room, I tried to catch my breath. I kicked the pile of Nick's dirty clothes over to his side of the room and collapsed against the door. I pressed my eyes against my knees, squeezing the honey container in my fist until it popped into a sticky mess in my hand. I couldn't stop shaking. Wimp, I thought. First time they give you a real patient, and you fall apart.

It was the summer of 2021 when my parents put me up for ‘adoption.’ I was nineteen. A pathetic little weasel, not quite smart enough for a scholarship, folks too poor to pay med-school tuition, too much of a coward for the army. My only option was a Company sponsorship. Moloch Pharmaceuticals adopted me. Moloch paid my way through med school, in exchange for five years of my life after graduation. Moloch would lead me to strength and wisdom. But then I met the Stone Man, and that led me to her, the second time.

I was behind in my semester work quota. I’d have to either log some hours soon or pull midnight shifts during final exams again. I knew from experience that I came apart without sleep, and I couldn’t afford to let my marks slide any lower. If the Company pulled my sponsorship, I’d be out of med school and working for Moloch the rest of my life paying off my debts. Another flunky bussing tables in the cafeteria.

I found a posting on the third-year students’ job board: research assistant for a clinical trial on an anti-anxiety drug. A grad student named Pilchard interviewed me.

“Ten hours a week,” he said, “starting tomorrow, before the subjects get their first dose of the drug. You’ll monitor their responses and conduct follow-up interviews. Details of this study are confidential. Breaching protocol would be grounds for expulsion. Understand?”

Pilchard handed me a headset pager and keys to the lab building. “The subjects have had background checks, but we’re being careful about building security. We had a bomb threat last week. Keep those keys on your person always, Jones. Sleep with them.”

He printed off a confidentiality agreement for me to sign. The header at the top of the page read: Stone Man Clinical Trial 450.

“Who’s the Stone Man?”

“Come with me,” said Pilchard. “I’ll introduce you.”

He led me from his office into a lab where he took a key from a hook on the wall and unlocked a refrigerator.

Pilchard held up a bottle wrapped in foil. “This is the injectable form of the drug we call the Stone Man. It degrades in the presence of light, hence the foil.”

She was the last of my ten subjects. She looked familiar. Her hair was woven into a mass of braids studded with clicking beads. She wore a thick, hand-knitted sweater, so bulky that I thought there must be another sweater underneath.

“You’re Subject Number Twenty-Three,” I told her. “Remember that. It’s your name for this study. Don’t tell me your real one.”

“Why not?”

“This is a double-blind study. You don’t know whether you’re getting the real drug or a placebo, and I can’t find out if I don’t know your name. (Surely somewhere there’s a record saying what “Patient 23” is getting? It keeps things objective. Hang on....” I adjusted the wall camera by remote to frame us both on my desk monitor.

She shifted uncomfortably. “Do you have to record this? It’s like having a gun pointed at me.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “No one’s going to watch this unless there’s a concern about the results. I have to place some monitors on you now.”

“Is this the pain test they mentioned in the consent form?”

“No. These measure your pulse, breathing and skin temperature during the interview.”

I peeled off one of the wireless sensors and had her roll up her sleeve. That was when I saw her bracelet. “You’re the...”

“The what?” she said.

What was I going to say? You’re the girl I exsanguinated a week ago? “Your bracelet. It’s...nice.”

I felt the cyclops gaze of the camera on us, and I realized that the beads in her hair matched the ones on her bracelet: goggle-eyed butterflies, smiling daisies. I stuck the sensor to her wrist beneath the bracelet.

“I have to ask you a series of questions,” I said.

I read them from the protocol so I wouldn’t have to meet her eyes.

“I worry constantly,” she said. “That something bad’s going to happen.”

“Such as?”

“Like I’m going to get sick, or die in some horrible way, like getting killed by wild animals.”

I’d worked as a keeper at Moloch’s primate colony a year ago, and while I’d never felt as comfortable around monkeys as Nick did, they didn’t scare me. Looking at her sitting there, frightened, I felt brave and calm.

“When I say it to you,” she said, “it sounds stupid. But when I’m alone, it all seems possible. I never feel safe. I want this drug to help me. Mo — My employer thinks it might. That’s why I enrolled in this study.”

“Now we have to determine your pain threshold before you receive the drug.”

I wheeled a table over to her chair. On the table sat a cotton-padded board and a metal plate marked with a handprint. I plugged the device into the wall.

“What’s that?” she said.

“This machine generates an electrical field. You put your hand on the plate, I turn it on, and a current runs through it.”

“Will it hurt?” she said.

I felt sick. I didn’t want to do this to her. “Not at first. I’ll turn up the voltage in stages. When it becomes uncomfortable, you tell me.”

“Then you’ll stop?”

I paused. “No. I’ll keep turning it up.”

“Until it hurts?”

“Yes.”

She picked at a loop of yarn in her sweater.

“Twenty-Three?”

She looked like she was about to cry, but she put her hand on the plate. I taped her fingers to it and secured her arm to the board with a rubber restraining strap.

She tugged against it. “What’s this for?”

“It’s to determine your true pain threshold. If we let patients report pain voluntarily they’d notify us before they did, to avoid getting a painful stimulus.”

When I switched on the device, she flinched. The plate hummed. She watched my hand as I turned the dial from zero to one.

“Okay?” I said.

“No. It’s uncomfortable.”

I was surprised. None of my other subjects had complained of discomfort until level three or four. When I turned the dial to two, she cried out, recoiled and snapped the strap.

“I broke it,” she said.

“That’s supposed to happen when the voltage intensity reaches your pain threshold.”

She flexed her fingers. “Is that it?”

“Yes. I’ll see you in two weeks. But if you have any concerns before then, call the number on the consent form. It’s my pager.”

“Oh,” she said. “So if anything happens, I can talk to you?” She was looking at me like I had all the answers, like she trusted me, and I felt completely unworthy.

That night, I had a nightmare. I was crunching down the middle of a white road in a pair of cleats, punching a broken red trail amid shrieks and scarlet rain and a hail of colored beads. I felt like I’d failed her.

I woke to the pager’s reedy alarm in my earpiece. I opened my eyes and read the message projected on the inside of the pager’s headset. I fumbled for my clothes, dodging a kick from Nick in the other bed, and staggered down to the foyer so I could talk privately.

The dorm’s foyer was designed to impress people — parents, prospective customers. You know the basic setup: glass, brass, kiss-my-ass. A statue of Moloch’s founder posed in the middle of a fountain. Every now and then, someone got cute and put something in the water — blood, beer, whatever. Tonight, it was cherry Kool-Aid. I sat on the edge of the fountain, inhaling the smell as it frothed in the pool.

I entered Twenty-Three’s phone number on my headset.

“Hello?”

“You paged me. Anything wrong?”

“Something’s scratching at the window.”

“What — ?”

“They’re trying to get in.” There was an edge of hysteria in her voice. “They’re going to kill me.” She insisted. She spoke with such conviction that I almost believed her.

I suspected she was having a drug-induced delusion, and I was terrified she might harm herself in that state. Talking on the headset, with her voice in my ear felt so much more intimate than speaking to her in the interview room. I talked to her calmly, but it was five a.m. before she settled down enough to go back to bed.

I held the copy of our recorded conversation in my palm. I was sure if I listened to it, I would sound like a gibbering idiot. Pilchard had told me to record all conversations with the subjects, but he hadn't told me how to help them when they needed it. There had to be something I could do for Twenty-Three now. I found Pilchard's home number, called him and told him what had happened.

"I think Twenty-Three should be pulled from the study, sir."

Pilchard snapped at me. "She's experiencing normal side effects."

"Sir, what if she's suicidal?"

"Any concerns you had could have waited until regular office hours. I expected more sense from a third-year student."

"Yes, sir, I'm—" The receiver clicked.

I slid off the rim of the fountain and leaned back against it, feeling the spray on the back of my neck. Idiot! But how was I supposed to recognize the side effects if no one told me what they were?

I headed over to the lab.

The fluorescent lights sizzled as they came on. I took the keys from the hook on the wall. One of them unlocked the data cupboard. Inside, I found piles of interview tapes. Along a shelf, in chronological order, were the blue books for the Stone Man Trials conducted over the past ten years. I took down the most recent volume.

450. All female. No numbers for the subjects, though. (That must be in a password-protected file somewhere.) I flipped through the rest of the book. No side effects mentioned. I skimmed the other books. Two trials with non-human primates, toxicity studies, necropsy reports...

They'd also tested the Stone Man in rats. Here, I read a disturbing experimental summary: Forty-eight out of fifty female rats that received the drug demonstrated a greater tendency to cross an electrified field to reach food compared to rats receiving a placebo. The experiment had been run a second time with the drugged rats still showing a significant tendency to cross the electrified field. However, this time there had been one change in the protocol: there had been no food on the other side.

Studies on female primates showed similar effects. An experiment involving male rats had to be terminated when—

"Putting in overtime, Jones?"

I jumped. "Hey— Dr. Pilchard. No, I was just dropping off a tape. Twenty-Three's, from this morning."

"That's not for your eyes," said Pilchard, taking the book from my hand. "If you have a problem with one of your subjects in future, have her come into the lab and record the interview. Don't call me in a panic at 5 AM. This is research. Act like a professional."

Twenty-Three paged me five times over the next week. She refused to come into the lab but I convinced her to meet me privately. Screw their protocol, I thought. She needs help.

I didn't want to risk being seen, so I suggested the museum. It was a relatively safe part of town, but I wore my Kevlar vest and left my Company jacket behind. Off campus, the demonstrators who loitered outside the perimeter fence used anyone wearing Company logos for target practice. Last year, one of the Company students had been shot.

The demonstrators usually congregated near the south gate. I left by the north gate, making sure it locked behind me. Fresh graffiti had been sprayed on the compound wall: Drugs for the Rich, Dregs for the Poor. Animal Killers. Burn in Hell.

I found Twenty-Three on a bench in the museum's concourse. She wore a long-sleeved top and a skirt with a brown leopard print. It rippled like a wheat field when she moved. She was knitting.

"Hello, Twenty-Three."

She jerked, startled. "Hi! Um...Dr..? Sorry, I don't know your name."

"Jonesy. I'm not a doctor. Just a med student."

"Oh. Strange name."

"My first name's Paul. What are you knitting?" I said, to change the subject.

She put her work on the bench between us and I saw it was a knitted fox.

"My hands don't shake when I knit," she said. "Or sew. I would have been a good surgeon." She laughed, but it was a sad sound. "Why do you want to be a doctor?"

"It's a noble profession."

It was the answer I'd given the Moloch rep at the adoption interview. But this girl was looking at me like she knew I was lying. She had the glimmer in her eye of someone who grasped a larger truth, lived in a bigger world than mine. I realized then that she was beautiful.

"Look at me," I said. "There's nothing about me that's going to impress anyone. I figured if I went to med school, I'd learn the secrets of life and death. I'd become someone people would look up to no matter who I used to be or how I look. But I don't know if that's going to happen. Most of the time I just feel like a dumbass."

"I think you'll be a wonderful doctor."

I smiled, hating myself. "I doubt it."

"You're going to all this trouble for me and how many nights' sleep have I cost you? You're even meeting me here. You must be a good student that you can spare the time."

"I'm not. I failed two exams last semester. I'm on academic probation. I'm not even supposed to be talking to you outside the lab. I'd get expelled if they found out."

"Then why are you here?"

"Show me your bracelet?"

She didn't take it off, just held out her hand to me. I pulled back her sleeve and found the scar where I'd placed the catheter.

"I did that to you. At the shock demo."

"The what?"

“The shock demo. When they used you.”

“I don’t remember.” She ran her thumb over the scar. “They told me they needed me for a lab — that I’d be under anesthetic. It sounded safe. When I woke up afterwards I felt sick. They said it was the anaesthetic. What did they do to me?”

“I...” I stared off across the concourse. I looked at her. “Why did you let them—” let me “—use you?”

“They took a thousand off my debt for it.”

“What?”

“I’m a flunky, Paul,” she said. “You didn’t know? I used to be a med student but I had panic attacks before exams. I spent so much time worrying I was going to fail that...I did. I still have panic attacks. Sometimes they’re so bad, I can’t go out, I can’t work. Moloch said I wasn’t making good on my debt. They signed me up for the lab demo; they entered me into this study. I’ll still be paying Moloch for the next twenty years, but at least I won’t owe them for the rest of my life.”

Company property, I thought. “You used to work at the Company library.”

“Yes, and before that, I loaded dishwashers in the cafeteria.... It’s not so bad, Paul. The Company covers my healthcare. They give me a place to live. Who knows? Maybe this drug will cure me.”

“You don’t need drugs,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“There is something wrong with me, Paul. I feel like I’m in a cage.”

It was like seeing the sun rise. I had a vision, and I knew what I had to do; I would graduate, finish my contract with Moloch, and then I would buy this girl her freedom. Something — anything — to earn the faith she seemed to have in me.

I entered the cafeteria that afternoon, beaming. I found Des and Taylor sharing a table near the back. They both stopped talking and gave me a grim look as I sat down.

“Hey guys, what’s up?”

“Where have you been?” said Des.

“Work-study,” I said. “It’s confidential, okay?”

“So I guess you didn’t hear,” said Taylor. “Your roommate got his face ripped off by a monkey.”

I blinked. “What?”

“He did not get his face ripped off,” said Des. “He got attacked this morning while he was working at the primate colony. That’s all they’ve told us.”

“Fuck. Is he—?”

“No,” said Des. “Just calm down. Sit down, Jonesy. They said his injuries aren’t life-threatening.”

“I don’t believe this,” I said. “Nick’s good with the monkeys. He’s careful.”

“You can ask him what happened later,” said Des. “They’re not letting anyone see him yet. We’ve got a lecture now. And by the way, certain profs are starting to notice your absenteeism. You’ve got to stop cutting classes.”

“Hey, Jonesy,” said Taylor, tapping my chest. “You always wear Kevlar on your work-study?”

I slipped out to the campus hospital between classes, and was told that Nick had been moved to the medical facility inside the Moloch compound ‘for his own protection.’ I wasn’t surprised. I knew how the public viewed Moloch’s primate facility and the people who worked there.

On the way out of the hospital, someone hailed me — a guy in a suit. Not a prof, not a clinician.

“Hey! You work for Moloch?” he asked. “Can I talk to you?”

Something about the guy’s eagerness bothered me.

“I’m Nick’s father,” he said. “Do you know anything about what happened?”

I froze. Nick’s father had died seventeen years before after a car accident. Nick’s family hadn’t had the money to pay for emergency treatment, let alone the cash for an ambulance to take him to the nearest public hospital. He’d died on the road; Nick had been five years old. Though he didn’t talk about it, I suspected he’d applied to med school so the same thing would never happen to him.

“Nick who?” I said and started walking.

The man kept pace with me. “I heard you ask the receptionist.”

“You’re not his dad,” I snapped. I tried to sound angry. It came out scared.

“Hey...” Without breaking stride, he tucked a business card into my shirt pocket. The gesture was slick. Like he did it every day. “If you want to talk...”

I sped up, pulling ahead of him. At the edge of campus, I lost the sound of his footsteps, but I didn’t stop until I reached the lecture hall. I fished the card out of my pocket: Leo Tarrington, Exposing the Truth and a phone number. I crumpled it and dropped it into the garbage. My hands shook for an hour afterwards.

I didn’t have a chance to talk to Nick for the next two days; they weren’t letting anyone see him. I was so distracted worrying about him and catching up on missed work that I didn’t realize Twenty-Three had stopped paging me.

When she arrived for her follow-up interview, I almost didn’t recognize her. She’d undone all her little braids and rewoven her hair into a single thick one, flipped over her shoulder and tied with a white ribbon. That spark I’d seen in her before — she was glowing with it now.

“Any changes since the last session?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yeah. I got a new job. Working with animals.”

This time she looked eager when she put her hand on the plate. Following protocol, I turned the dial, holding it at each level for five seconds. At level six, the table started to vibrate. She looked at me and smiled. At level seven the muscles in her arm were spasming, but she kept her hand there. Eight. She didn’t move. The recoil that would snap the restraining strap was involuntary; she couldn’t be faking

this stoicism. Things were flipping through my mind: that the highest level was dangerous; that I was frying the hand that had knitted that little fox.

“What level now?” she asked.

“Ten.” My hand was shaking.

“I want to ask you something.”

At five seconds by my watch, I turned the dial down, fast. As I did, the back of my hand touched the plate. I screamed. It wasn't just pain; it was an invasion, like plunging my hand into a bucket of iron filings. I jerked away, pulling my hand back like I was wrenching it from a leghold trap. I expected to see flesh hanging from my wrist. But, no, my hand was intact, fluttering like a moth.

Twenty-Three took her hand off the plate like she hadn't felt a thing. She started toward the door, and I felt a savage pain in my heart watching her leave.

“What did you want to ask me?” I said.

“Walk me home?”

“If I'm seen with...” Yeah, tell her you're scared you'll get caught. “Sure. I'll meet you outside the north gate.”

As soon as we were out of sight of the compound, I removed my Company jacket and stuffed it into my knapsack. We went for a long walk, even though the wind was blowing cold and I'd long since missed my next class. We ended up in a park across town.

We passed a vandalized maintenance shack where a garbage bag, eviscerated, spewed its contents across the weeds. On a bench nearby, a homeless man attempted to sleep. I became conscious of the absence of my vest.

“How are you feeling?” I said.

“You asked me that already. How about you? You seem subdued.”

“A friend of mine got hurt a couple of days ago on his work-study.”

“At the primate colony?” she said.

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“It was in the newspaper.”

“I don't know what happened, but I used to work at the colony and those monkeys aren't dangerous if you know how to behave around them. When you didn't page me, I figured—”

“Sometimes fear makes you feel more alive.”

She veered away from me down the riverbank. I watched as she kicked off her shoes and hopped from one stone to the next across the water. She seemed so sure-footed. So fearless. She leapt to the grass beside me and put her shoes back on.

“Why did you do that?” I said.

“I was bored.”

“Aren't you cold?”

“Yes, actually.” She came around behind me and unzipped my knapsack.

“What are you doing?”

She stepped in front of me with my jacket flapping around her, the Moloch logo emblazoned on her chest. Then she skipped away. Not far off, a couple stopped to watch. The woman pointed at us.

I ran her down, and ripped the jacket off her. My heart beat like a hammer. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?!” I stuffed the jacket into my knapsack.

“Scared?” she said.

I realized right then, that she wasn’t. And I was.

And with that, my self-respect disintegrated

“I’ll walk myself home, thanks,” she said. And she left me standing there. The couple watched as I made my way to the street. I heard the man’s voice shout, “Corporate whore!”

Anyone could be an activist. Moloch taught us never to engage any member of the public who threatened us. But as I retreated, I felt like an utter coward.

“I dunno,” said Nick. “I had my back to him sweeping up, next thing...he’s biting my head, screaming.” Nick, drugged cold, pupils constricted to specks, shaved scalp crossed by a fifteen centimeter suture line, speaking in a monotone... It was hard to connect him to the person I knew.

“How are you doing?” I asked him.

“How the fuck do I know!? I’ve had enough people asking me...what did you see, what did you do, how’s your dad? Fuck off, Jonesy.” He rolled over in the hospital bed, turning his back to me in dismissal.

I went outside and pressed my forehead against the wall, feeling the flare of a migraine. I looked up in time to see Pilchard coming up the hallway.

He knows about me and Twenty-Three, I thought. But he walked past me and went into Nick’s room. I left. A reprimand from Pilchard was the last thing I needed.

I stopped at my room to take some migraine pills and then called the primate colony and talked to Pete, the head keeper.

“I can’t tell you anything,” said Pete. “I wasn’t working that shift.”

“What about the surveillance cameras?”

“Company guy took the recordings,” said Pete. “They’re doing an internal investigation. He told me not to mention the surveillance to the cops.”

“Which monkey was it?”

“Enigma,” he said. “We’ve isolated him.”

“He’s still alive? He could have infected Nick with something. Why didn’t they do a necropsy?”

“I’m following orders,” said Pete. “But this is a clean colony, no diseases. Nick should be okay.... Hang on.”

I heard the hiss of dead air and felt broken-glass cracks spreading through my skull. I closed my eyes.

“Sorry,” said Pete. “I’m training Nick’s replacement. She’s never worked with monkeys before. Gotta go.”

Two days later I was in the library studying for the Pharmacology final. I was taking a break, looking out the window, when I saw her again.

She was wearing a T-shirt and bike shorts, her hair flying out behind her like a stream of sunlight. jogging down Moloch Walk in the snow, She disappeared around the back of the primate colony.

I went back to my books and spent an hour reading the same paragraph until I realized what had been nagging at me for days. I called the primate colony and got Pete again.

“Pete!?”

“Jonesy? What’s up?”

“The new employee you hired. What does she...? What’s her na—” Don’t say another word.

“Jonesy?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Forget it.” I cut off the connection.

That evening, she called me.

“Jonesy, I need you.”

“Twenty-Three?”

“It’s Enigma,” she said. “He’s gone crazy. You know how to load a tranquilizer dart, don’t you? I’ll be at the west entrance of the primate colony.” She disconnected.

The wind bit into me as soon as I stepped outside. She met me at the colony entrance in the same T-shirt and bike shorts.

“Did he try to attack you?” I asked.

She was agitated, but I think, even then, I knew it wasn’t fear.

“Follow me,” she said.

She led me through the observation room to the food prep area. In the corner stood the padlocked drug cabinet. On her way there, she twitched a couple of disposable gloves from a box on a shelf and tossed them at me.

She unlocked the drug cabinet and stepped back. “The black box. Take it out.”

I got a tight feeling in my gut when she said that. I must have had some inkling then of what she was planning. I popped open the box. Inside, nested in cups of foam lay two clear glass vials.

She slapped two syringes onto the counter beside me. “You know what to do?”

The vial on the left contained etorphine. The drug on the right was the reversal agent. Most of Pharmacology I forgot ten seconds after I put the book down, but, when you’ve worked with a drug so potent that one drop on your skin can kill you, you remember it.

“I need a pair of goggles. And you have to stand back.”

“That’s why I need you, Jonesy. I’m not good with this kind of stuff.”

I loaded the first syringe with the reversal agent. When I turned around, she was holding the dart gun case in her hands.

“No,” I said. “Get the blowpipe. I’m a better shot with that.”

“I can’t find it.” She opened the case and set the gun on the counter.

I recapped the syringe and handed it to her. “This is the reversal agent. If anything goes wrong, you’ll have to inject me with it. Try to hit a vein if you can. You remember how to do that?” Because if you don’t, then I’m dead.

“Sure,” she said.

I loaded the etorphine into the dart and pressurized it so it would empty when it hit Enigma. If I hit him. I got the dart into the gun and held it like a grenade with the pin pulled out. “Okay. Which enclosure is he in?”

She just stood there. Then she laughed.

“What the hell...?”

“Point the gun at me, Paul.”

She stood about three meters away from me, hands on her hips.

“You’re kidding me, right? Where’s Enigma?”

“I didn’t bring you here for Enigma.”

“Are you all right?” I couldn’t believe how calm I sounded.

“Sure, Paul,” she said. “Humor me.”

“This isn’t funny, Twenty-Three.”

“You know what would be funny? Your supervisor finding out about our private meetings, or that you asked Pete what my name is.”

I went cold all over, like she was holding the gun on me. “You wouldn’t... I’d get expelled.”

When she looked at me, I felt like I was the crazy one.

“I’m in this with you, Paul. So do this for me. Please? Just lift up the gun. You can do that.”

That I could do. I lifted it up to shoulder height. I had to use both hands to keep it steady. My arms were quivering all over. The glove powder had turned to paste from the sweat of my hands. I aimed across the room, at right angles to her.

“Now, bring it around,” she said. “I won’t move.”

“If it goes off—”

“I’ve got the reversal agent.”

“Give it to me,” I said. I held out my hand, felt her slap the syringe onto my palm.

“There,” she said. “Better now?”

I couldn’t see her, but she sounded...intense. Strong.

“I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do,” she said.

I edged the gun around, the room panning across the barrel, a collage of frog posters tacked to the wall, a stack of buckets, a rainbow of cabinet doors. I saw her in the corner of my eye and stopped.

“Bring it around a bit more, Paul. Just a little.”

She raised her hands in the air like someone in a TV stick-up. I stopped with the gun pointed just shy of her flank. “What if it goes off?”

She stepped forward and grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want to,” she said. “You want to.”

“That’s sick!” But there was a part of me that did want to, a deep, locked-up part of me — the part of me that wanted her. And that terrified me more than anything else. I pried her hand from my wrist. My whole body shook.

“Okay,” she said. She sounded disappointed. I felt like the weakest, most pathetic person alive.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t. I can’t even pretend. If something happened to you...”

I unloaded the gun and returned the etorphine to its vial. As I left, I didn't look back. I couldn't face her.

I returned to residence. Before the hour was up, a migraine had blossomed in my skull. I spent the night trying not to move. The following day, I wrote the Pharmacology final. Well, I put my name on it and circled a few letters on the multiple choice, noting how the circles looked like beads. I stared at them until my time was up. Afterwards, I called her at the primate colony.

"You're using me," I said.

"Sure," she said. "Why not?"

"Why do you need me? Why not just walk into traffic?"

"Have you ever tried to tickle yourself?"

"No."

"Right. It's not possible. When you have total control, there's no excitement. If I step onto the highway, I'm controlling it. Whoopee-shit."

"Why do this at all?"

"I need to. Before, things came at me too fast. When I got the drug, things slowed down. It was okay for a while, but now it's too slow. It's like being dead. But if I put myself in a situation that used to scare me — working with monkeys — I get a buzz. I feel alive. Things have to happen to me. I have to make you make things happen to me."

"I won't do it."

"Yeah, you will."

"Why?" I said. "Because I'm weak?"

"Jonesy, if you had any balls, we wouldn't be having this conversation. A little weakness is exciting. But you need to grow some balls. Or I'll have to find someone who already has." She disconnected. Her words echoed in my head like catcalls.

I woke up at two a.m. and knew what I had to do. As I crossed the dorm's foyer, I saluted Moloch's statue. Tonight, the fountain smelled like champagne.

I went to the lab and unlocked the fridge. The silver bottle sat on its metal rack inside. The foil whispered in my fist as I picked it up. I cracked open a twenty-two gauge needle and twisted it onto a syringe. Prepping syringes, drawing drugs — I'd done it so often I could mime the motions. But until now, the drugs I'd pulled up were never going to end up in me.

The needle squeaked as it pierced the rubber stopper. I drew up two CCs of the Stone Man. Funny. He was blue, like a baby's eyes.

I set the syringe on the counter with the needle recapped. The drug had to be administered intravenously. I unlaced my shoe and used the lace to tie off my arm. Making a fist, I tapped the crook of my elbow to raise a vein. Then I uncapped the needle with my teeth and spat the cap onto the floor. Touching the tip of the needle

to my skin just over the vein, I pressed down, denting the skin, but not piercing it. A chill went through me.

Quit stalling. Inject. My thumb trembled on the plunger. I couldn't push it. The syringe slipped out of my hand and rattled to the floor. I sat there for a while, then a sudden sick convulsion of fear shook me. I mashed my palms against my eyelids, smearing the moisture away.

I picked up the syringe and shot the Stone Man back into its bottle. I returned it to the fridge and discarded the syringe in the sharps bucket. Coward. Should have known she was too good for you. What made you think she ever liked you in the first place?

On my way out, I stopped at the data cupboard. She'd kept a diary for the study. Had she mentioned me at all? I had to know what she'd really thought.

The keys to the cupboard weren't on the hook so I found a screwdriver and pried the lock until the door cracked and popped open. Inside, I couldn't find anything that looked like a diary.

The spines of the blue books stood like a row of cardboard soldiers. I pulled out the one Pilchard had caught me with and flipped to the section I'd been reading. The experiment with male rats...had to be terminated when rats in the colony began unprovoked attacks on each other: rats eviscerated, legs bitten off....

In the back room, the fridge's motor stalled, shuddering, and I jumped.

On the next page, someone had written in big letters, pressing almost right through the paper: Hypothesis: The Stone Man may have discrete gender-specific effects: In females it has anxiety-reducing and/or analgesic properties. In males it engenders extreme aggression.

An arrow ran from the last sentence to the margin where someone had scribbled in red ink: Military application? And below that: Male primate studies to follow.

With a sick premonition, I pulled down the blue book for the primate studies. Experimental trials on female primates had concluded two years ago. One trial on male primates was in progress. The subjects were all monkeys in the clean colony, where Nick had been working. One of the males in the colony had received an injection of the Stone Man a week before the attack.

I remembered Pilchard going into Nick's room at the hospital. And Pete telling me that the colony's surveillance tapes had been confiscated for an internal investigation.

I snapped the book shut and got the hell out of there. It wasn't until I hit the blowing snow outside that I realized with a jolt that the blue book was still in my hand. I turned to go back into the building and put my hand against the wire-gridded glass. Then my pager went off. The headset was back in my room, but the earpiece, still in place, was shrieking. It felt like someone had struck a match in my skull.

"Yes, what?"

"Where are you right now?" said Twenty-Three.

I dropped my keys in the snow, picked them up. "I'm outside the lab building. Why?"

“I’m at the colony right now, and I’m about to shake hands with Enigma. I can make the colony from the lab in a two-minute sprint, but I’ll give you one hundred seconds, because you’re quicker than me.”

“Stop playing with me.”

“I’m not playing. You’ve got one hundred seconds... starting now. If I don’t see you by then, goodbye, Paul.”

She was winding me up.

Or maybe she wasn’t.

I bolted to the primate colony. Halfway down Moloch Walk, my unlaced shoe flew off and I took a bad fall on the ice, half-catching myself from going right down with the spine of the blue book. It took me ten seconds to get up again. I know, because I felt every one of them pass.

When I reached the colony, I threw open the door to the observation area for the animal enclosures. An empty chair with a backlit panel for controlling the cameras in the armrest faced a one-way mirror looking into paired adjacent enclosures. To the left of the mirror, four infrared monitors displayed views of the enclosures. I saw movement in one of them and turned on the lights.

A monkey the size of a collie dog was sitting on the ledge below the mirror. Enigma. A stain like a beard blackened the lower half of his face. He put his hands to the glass and seemed to peer in at me.

I whipped the book at the mirror, and he darted off, bounding to the opposite end of the enclosure. He left a red handprint on the glass.

“Bastard!” I screamed.

My hands were burning and stiff, but I managed to pan the camera by remote around the enclosure until I found her. She was still warm enough to emit a green glow on the infrared image.

I hit the intercom. “Twenty-Three?” I didn’t even know her goddamned name.

I switched on the enclosure lights and squinted in the blinding glare. A violation it was, to look at her like that, twisted toward me, her throat opened like a clamshell, the shock of white. If I’d had any hope that she would answer me, it died in that moment.

I picked up the blue book from where it lay split open on the floor, all the while averting my gaze from the observation window. Then I retrieved the surveillance tape and held it, cold in my hand. On the observation chair, I found her bracelet, discarded. Maybe, I let myself think, she left it there for me. I picked it up and it dangled from my fingers. One of the beads shone yellow in the light and seemed to wink at me.

I found Leo Tarrington’s name in the public phone directory.

He picked up on the sixth ring. “Tarrington, hello.”

“This is one of Moloch’s whores,” I said. “I have something for you. A couple of things.” I pocketed the surveillance tape as I left the room, locking the door and her, behind me.

Of all the things I did afterwards, I feel guilt only for leaving her there. Walking out of the Moloch compound with my card jammed in the slot, leaving the north gates wide open, dropping the lab keys into the snow by the gate, giving the tape and the book to Tarrington — I feel nothing at all about those acts, numb like Nick the last time I saw him. I know that I left an open invitation for the activists. I knew that Tarrington would take Moloch's secrets and expose them to the light of day. I didn't have the balls to do what had to be done, but I made it possible for the people who did.

No one was in the lab when the bomb went off. How much data, how many precious chemicals were vaporized? I picture the Stone Man on his silver throne, his heart in a shining bottle, his kingdom exploding in a rainbow of glass.

I try to remember her the way she was when the Stone Man first touched her, before he took her completely. She seemed to know her road from the day I met her, and where it would end. I wish I knew mine; I only know I was on the wrong one.

Six Subliminals

...Simon Petrie

Undergrad

Richard was so totally over Zoology 1.

The mating-behaviour stuff had been cool, if a bit awkward; but the mazes they'd been putting him through had been getting too confronting in recent weeks. And then Jesse had mentioned the dread rumour 'dissection' when they'd met this morning in the rec cage.

Highway Patroller

Candi pulled to a halt behind the other vehicle. Her amplified voice boomed from the front speaker. "Please exit the vehicle, place your hands on your head, and await further instructions."

The accused driver opened his door, stepped out, and plummeted to certain death.

Candi thumped the dashboard. Dammit, another one. She'd have to get used to these newfangled flying cars, or the chief would have her hide.

Working Girl

Memory returned. Doug opened his eyes, grinning. He'd been stoned, had met this amazing wild-haired chick, some kinda sculptor, at the nightclub. They'd really hit it off; she'd taken him home. What a night! Rolling over, he wondered if she still lay beside him, and whether she'd finally removed her shades.

Medusa smiled. A good night's work, this one, its face showing contentment without the least hint of surprise. It should fetch thousands. Arising, she dragged the still-warm statue from her bedroom through into the front-room studio, according to pride of place in her shop window.

Here Be ...

The captain furled the ancient map and again raised the spyglass to his good eye. There was so much riding on the success of this voyage: if he could return with firm evidence of these reported astonishing beasts, then his fame, his fortune, were assured.

He spied something through the small telescope. Unbelievable!

Shaking his head, he unrolled the map. Whether the fault lay with his predecessor's nearsighted navigator, or his semi-literate cartographer, was uncertain, but his disappointment was stark. Crestfallen, he obliterated the word 'Dragons', writing 'Dugongs' instead.

Double Agent

The liberation of Toad Hall had failed. They'd lacked the expected element of surprise. Now the weasels' three captives tried to figure what went wrong.

"They knew we were coming," complained Toad.

Badger glanced at his two truest friends. "Perhaps there was—"

Ratty, disgusted, finished the sentence. "—a mole in our ranks."

Transmutation

Midas, hands gloved as always, surveyed his domain from the vantage of his highest balcony. Now that he'd bought out that meddling farmer's freak goose, the monopoly was his for the taking. Idly he examined the curious pebble he'd just received from his royal alchemist. Why had the fellow thought he'd care for a mere rock? He allowed the small stone to chink on the balcony railing, and leaned forward.

Too late, he realised his mistake as the suddenly-soft yellow metal of the railing gave way...



R. JAN 2007

The Derby

...Regina Patton

Prior to the yearly Salmon Derby in Homer, Alaska, ten king salmon are caught, tagged by officials and released back into the bay as the grand prize catches of this renowned fishing tournament. Rarely are any of the tagged fish re-caught. The impact of this tagging on the individual fish and its place in the salmon population has not, thus far, been researched.

Salmon Protection and Environmental River Management

Every community in the world has its designated misfit, some poor soul to pity or avoid or be glad we aren't. In Homer, Alaska that misfit is James Michael Beaumont, though everyone just calls him Jimbo. His father "isn't around" and his mother is the village alcoholic, but Jimbo has managed to survive a neglectful childhood and become something vaguely adolescent. He is big for his sixteen years, clumsy and hairy. Jimbo eats his bedtime snack, a Big Mac, fries and a strawberry shake, every night at the McDonald's across the street from his house and this evening is no different. He likes it there because the old people drinking coffee ignore him and last year they installed four video games in the play area for all the tourist kids. The video games are free and only let you play one level of each game. Jimbo usually beats the level on all four games and then goes home to watch T.V. till he falls asleep on the couch which is also his bed.

Tonight, as he plays, two teenage boys strut into the McDonald's and place an order. They attend Jimbo's high school and he knows them by name, even considers them his friends, but he hunkers down on the little red kiddie stool and concentrates, hoping they take their order to go. The tall, dark-haired one is Paul Malcolm, the star athlete of his little town. He flirts with the cashier, who also attends Haines High. When Paul and his buddy, Felix, get their orders they turn to leave but Felix stops, noticing Jimbo's hunched back.

“Paul, wait,” Felix says, nodding toward Jimbo. “Don’t we need one more deckhand for your boat tonight?”

“No, man, we’re good,” Paul answers. He avoids Jimbo for reasons of his own, reasons he doesn’t want anyone to know. “Come on, Felix,” he coaxes. “Tonight is the first night of the Derby. There are going to be boatloads of bored, fishermen’s daughters out there tonight. We don’t want to have to baby-sit Jimbo.”

“Paul that’s the same shit you pulled last year.” There are boats of horny chicks out there. My Dad’s boat is a pussy magnet. We’re gonna get laid at the Derby.” Felix mocks Paul acidly. “Man, the closest I got to a bush last year was when you nearly ran us aground. You just say all that stuff to get me to run that damn boat while you stand there and fish.” Paul is obsessed with catching the \$100,000 tagged fish for the Derby but his dad hasn’t participated in the Derby since Paul’s mom took off on them. He lets Paul use the boat, but the Derby requires verification by someone over eighteen. Felix, a fifth-year senior, is over eighteen. “Fuck that! It’s boring,” Felix continues his rant. “I want Jimbo along this time. Put a couple beers in that guy and he’ll be a fuckin’ riot. Come on.”

If Jimbo is the ticket that will earn Felix’s participation, Paul is willing to risk it.

The Homer Salmon Derby will begin at 12:00 a.m. on Friday, August 4th and end at 12:00 p.m. on Sunday, August 6. Any person who has a validated Derby entry ticket is eligible to fish all three days of the Derby. Non-entrants may not fish in the same boat as entrants but may go along for the enjoyment of the outing.

Official Derby Rules

Jimbo sits stiffly on the boat deck, bathed in the mellow, blue-dark of Alaska’s summer twilight. His life jacket is too tight. The strap cuts into his belly flab and he doesn’t like to be at sea. It brings back vague memories of when he was very little, before his father left. He has been told his father loved to fish. Jimbo hates the idea of fishing because he likes all animals. They remind him of himself: voiceless, different, and misunderstood. He also believes in reincarnation because he’s seen recognition in the eyes of pigeons, cats and stray dogs. They definitely know him from somewhere. He thinks that in his past lives though, he has always been

Jimbo, that maybe he’s stuck, lodged in position like an actor who knows his role too well. He would like to come back next time as a hawk.

Paul stands at the rail to Jimbo’s left, placing each pole in its rig, setting his lines, checking everything meticulously. Now that the boat is anchored, Paul is fishing and Felix is in the cabin, digging out beers from the tiny fridge. So far, he hasn’t harassed Jimbo further than telling him crass jokes about sex with fat women. Jimbo understands most of Felix’s jokes but doesn’t understand why Felix tells them. He

doesn't know he is the butt, the punch line, and so he thinks Felix has a very poor sense of humor. Still, he is thankful he came. He has never been out on the bay for a Derby night.

Jimbo gets up and walks over to stand next to Paul, who is scanning the dark water for signs of fish.

"My father caught a tagged fish in 1992," he tells Paul.

"I know," Paul nods without looking at Jimbo. In the history of the Derby, only two tagged fish have ever been caught, both only \$10,000 tags. Henry Bucket caught one the first year they were introduced in 1973 and Rodger Beaumont caught one in 1992, promptly taking off on his wife and two year old son, James, with his \$10,000 winnings, never to be heard from again.

"I might be good luck," Jimbo says and Paul wants desperately to believe it.

"I need this," Paul whispers, not really talking to Jimbo but to fate, to God, to whoever might have sway over his destiny. Saying it is like opening a stopper. "I won't get a scholarship to college, Jimbo. Even if I was good enough, college scouts don't even come here. I don't want to end up selling t-shirts that say "Spawn till you Die" in my Dad's souvenir shop for the rest of my life. I've gotta get out of here, man! I need some kind of freakin' miracle."

Jimbo feels connected to Paul. He senses his urgency, his desperation. A shooting star suddenly flashes across the horizon in front of them and then another and another as the sky is filled with a dance of cosmic sparks. Both of them point at each new flashing wonder for the other, laughing as their arms cross. They can't keep up with the display. There is a noise, a whistling in the air and then a loud bang from behind them as something hits the deck. They both turn, startled. At first, they see only the darkened deck and Paul thinks that Felix has pulled a prank, but then a pin-prick of a twinkle becomes a glow, as the meteorite that has miraculously landed on deck begins to flare.

"Oh shit!" Paul panics, trying to remember where the fire extinguisher is. His mind whirls and his body doesn't know which direction to go. Jimbo walks across the deck, amazed and entranced by what has just happened. He can clearly see what Paul does not. There is no fire, no hole or dent of impact. The rock from the heavens is emitting an internal light, a radiance that seems to beckon Jimbo, to call to him with a voice like a siren. He stumbles forward, drops to his knees and reaches out to touch it.

"Nooo!" Paul yells and throws himself at Jimbo's prone back, clutching at the bulky lifejacket to pull him away, but it is too late. As they roll entangled across the deck, he can see Jimbo's hand inside the meteorite, as if the rock were a stone glove made to fit. It glows and throbs with Jimbo's hand melded into it, and then they are flying.

Jimbo has time to think he is like a hawk, as the rock hurtles back toward space dragging him and Paul with it.

The proper lure is the key element of success for the serious salmon fisherman. By far the most effective are the StingKing lure with the EChip, the Crocodile, and the Coyote. All of these come in a variety of colors and sizes. Some also come in glow-in-the-dark which can be very effective.

The Pro-Troll Lures information page

Draynuld Odobenidaed reels in his twenty, Derby-approved, flash-action lures on invisible laser line with the simple slap of one large red button. Nineteen of the indicator lights flash off and on, showing they have caught nothing, but number five's light is green and steady. Draynuld claps his flippers together joyfully and swivels on his captain's stool to read his monitor. Line number five is three tay out and closing fast, carrying 536 mets, a hefty weight for the class Draynuld is fishing. It is a big fella. He might win largest catch for this location, even if it isn't one of the 10,000 sentients tagged for the Derby. Draynuld's whiskers quiver with anticipation. He flops from his seat, propelling himself with his flat grey forelimbs away from the control panel toward a viewing porthole on the floor at the back of the bridge. The catch will be deposited through the hatch below. Draynuld presses his soft muzzle against the cool, clear pane. He loves these first few moments when a creature flops, its eyes roll and it opens its mouth over and over again trying to suck in the new atmosphere. This is Draynuld's third Earthling Derby and he considers himself an expert at snagging humans.

For a moment, just below him, Draynuld's catch dangles as the hatch doors close and then it is dropped to the floor as the lure releases it. Draynuld barks in surprise. Not one, but two humans slump to the bottom of the holding tank, a leaner one clinging inexplicably to the middle of the plumper one which had taken the lure. Two! With one lure. Draynuld has never heard of such a wonder. In his ecstasy, he cavorts about the cabin, head-butting his favorite floating sphere, letting it alight gently on his nose but then he quickly returns to his viewing porthole.

Drat! He has missed most of the desperate flailing and gasping. The thinner human is now sitting up against the wall of the containment bay, looking stunned and glassy-eyed but the plumper one is looking around, strangely curious and seemingly unafraid. He looks up at the porthole, right into Draynuld's face, and smiles. Draynuld pushes back out of view, disconcerted by the knowing look his catch has given him. A loud beep from his control panel informs him that all his lures are in. He moves sinuously back to the control panel and slaps in the course coordinates for the nearest Derby weigh-in station. There his catch will be weighed, recorded and scanned for prize tags. Draynuld hopes the Derby officials will let him enter their combined weight. At the very least he might get "The Most Unusual Catch" trophy. He claps his flippers again and leans back for a little nap. He dreams of swimming in the deep grey waters of his home planet, of fishing the way his ancestors, the Silkae, once did; their sleek

bodies and sharp teeth pitted against their prey. It is a dream of good luck, and he smiles in his sleep, baring his long pointed teeth.

To be eligible for any of the cash prizes, the tagged fish must be presented to Derby officials with the current Derby's tag still attached to the fish. DO NOT REMOVE the tag from the fish until after it has been verified at a weigh-in station.

Official Derby Rules

Jimbo sees the dark liquid eyes and fuzzy muzzle of the sealman pressed against the glass above them. The rounded walls and ceiling of this room, with its pale translucent blues and crystal whites, remind him of glacial ice, the window like a fishing hole cut into it. The sealman's slitted, grey lips are curved into a warm smile though, so Jimbo smiles back.

"Look!" he cries, grabbing Paul's arm and pointing to the alien face but it is already gone. Paul's head veers a little but in the wrong direction. Jimbo can feel Paul shivering through his thick letterman's jacket, can see his dull eyes. He is in shock. He has receded within himself to a safer place where he doesn't have to face being abducted by aliens.

Jimbo sighs and pats Paul's shoulder. "It's O.K. Paul. This happens sometimes. We'll be alright." Jimbo stands but he doesn't know what else to do. Directly across from them near the hatch they'd come through is an inset window filled with stars, streamers of light, passing by so quickly they make a tunnel of lines. They are going somewhere. Fast. If there is a doorway into the ship itself, Jimbo cannot see it. He feels protective of Paul. He should stay close to him but Jimbo doesn't feel afraid while he waits. He feels that some question he's always had is about to be answered. He knows he has been here before, caught like this, and he is determined to understand.

After about half an hour, the stars in the hatch window slow, return to pinpricks instead of lines, and something massive and barge-like looms into the forefront of space, blocking the stars altogether. A deep clang reverberates through the floor and walls around him and he senses they have arrived at their destination at last. The hatch emits a hiss and a blast of warmer air that puffs Jimbo's shaggy hair across his face. Jimbo puts his hand to Paul's shoulder bracing them both.

The hatch swings open and the sealman bumps in followed by two other aliens that look nothing at all like him. One of the new aliens is lumpy, shaggy and blue. It sweeps across the floor like a mop without any visible legs. It has two arms with three fingers each and two bulgy white eyes that look like golf balls someone has glued loosely to its head. The other alien is tall and whisper thin, with oddly jointed arms and two sets of hind legs, like a praying mantis. In one of its serrated claws it holds a small black device which it points down at Paul. Jimbo jumps in the way, crying out when a red beam of light strikes him in the chest. It spreads, lighting him up from

head to toe but he feels no burn of pain, no searing death. The mantisman bends his triangular head over the device, reading something. It looks up at Jimbo, its bulging eyes bulgier than ever, and says, "This human is tagged."

"Tagged? Tagged? You mean a Derby prize tag?" asks the sealman in a baritone bark, rocking from flipper to flipper in his excitement.

"Wait," says the mantis with an air of authority, looking at his device again. "Yes, definitely a tag but something is wrong."

"Wrong. What is wrong? Nothing is wrong," says the sealman, almost squealing now.

The mantis pushes several more buttons while the seal tries, without success, to peer over his tall shoulder. The mantis looks up at Jimbo again. "How incredibly improbable," it says. "It has a Derby tag, true, but it is not current."

"Not current? I don't understand," the blue mop joins in now, puzzled.

"This human has an expired tag from the first Earthling Derby" explains the mantis. "No good for prize money but amazing all the same."

"I protest! I lodge a complaint," says the seal, flopping to the floor and rolling over so that he is looking at Jimbo upside-down. "It can't be as you say. How could a human still have a tag from the first Derby? That derby was thousands of years ago, and they rarely live a hundred years."

"Sir, get hold of yourself," the mopman scolds the seal, sliding closer to Jimbo and scrutinizing him. "We

don't tag their bodies. That would be too obvious. We tag their essence. This one must have been tagged for many, many lives. Truly amazing!"

Jimbo understands what they are saying. He understands the language each one uses, though he knows

they aren't speaking English, or any other language known to man. He understands the words and he understands something just beyond. He stands taller and looks the mantis thing right in the eye.

"Take it off," he says to it. "Take it off me right now."

Over the years, the Derby Commission has used several types of tags. The earlier tag types used were ethereal dart tags which must be cut from the creature's eternal essence. Take note that removal of these tags can sometimes cause damage to the specimen.

The Earthling Derby Commission

"The procedure is not without pain," says Leskin Wav slowly to the "talking fish" standing boldly before him. As an Earthling Derby official, Leskin has tagged tens of thousands of humans over the years, might even have tagged this very one. He had officiated at the first Derby. But he has never had to de-tag a catch. "I think you

should lie down,” he says and it obeys promptly, lying on the floor at his feet. Leskin’s claws click nervously and he drops his scanner on one of his lower, left leg segments causing him much embarrassment. His assistant, Pooshout, picks it up quickly in her three-fingered hand and begins to hand it back to him but he nods to the other human leaning dumbly against the wall. It hasn’t been scanned yet. Procedures must be maintained, even when mishaps arise. Pooshout nods back and shuffles off to process the other fish. The tagged one on the floor turns its head, following her movements. “We shall begin!” Leskin says, leaning his long abdomen over the sentient and extending his jack-knife of a claw.

“Wait! What about my prize?” the Silkae demands suddenly from behind him. Leskin has completely forgotten about the hurdle of the disgruntled fisherman, who is, unfortunately, also the key to Leskin’s livelihood. “I caught these two with one lure,” it whines like a petulant cub. “One of them has a tag and it talks! Surely I deserve something for this magnificent catch?”

“My friend, you deserve far more than just ‘something’. For their combined weight, you have won Largest Catch for certain. While a first run Derby tag like the one I am about to remove is worth millions to a collector.”

Pooshout interrupts in amazement from the side of the other fish she is scanning. “These two fish share molecular lineage. They are related!”

“There you have it!” Leskin says, laying his long arm across the Silkae’s rounded shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. “Most Unusual Catch of this Derby, of any Derby, which will get you a prominent place in the Hall of Fame and a significant purse.”

“I’m related to Paul?” the prone fish asks but Leskin ignores it. He isn’t done with the Silkae. Its whiskers are quivering and it is about to go cavorting about the chamber in its excitement but he must clinch the deal before it does.

“The talking is quite inconsequential really. Unusual, but not unheard of. Still, I suppose it should be reported. In triplicate. Then you’ll have to wait for a Commission Ruling to claim your prizes.” Leskin begins to turn toward the hatch but the Silkae bumbles around to the front of him.

“No, really, that all sounds in order. No need to file a claim.”

“You’re sure? It’s no trouble,” Leskin says easily.

“Quite sure. Don’t want to clam up the works. I’ll make the Hall of Fame? You’re sure?”

“I’ll lodge the request with the Commission President myself,” Leskin says and with that the Silkae is off, bouncing around the chamber jubilantly before returning to the main part of the ship where he will call all his old fishing buddies to tell them about his latest catch. Leskin can now deal with the bigger problem at hand. Pooshout has returned from processing the proper catch and she hands him the scanner with a smile.

“I’m related to Paul?” the strange fish asks again.

“Half-siblings. Male sire molecular configuration is a match. You have the same father,” Pooshout tells the thing as if it could understand something that complex. Leskin doubts it can. Obviously, its rudimentary understanding of the Universal language is some kind of anomaly related to wearing a tag for so long, nothing more. Leskin extends his sharp claw once again as Pooshout clutches the catch. When he

begins to cut it, it screams and screams and screams but Leskin isn't squeamish. He knows that human beings, barely sentient, don't feel pain the way more advanced life forms do. If it ever got back to the Commission that a catch actually asked for its tag to be removed, the Sentient World Advocates would have a heyday and The Earthling Derby would be over for good. Leskin Wav cannot have that.

"Catch and release" fishing is a humane, environmentally friendly way to keep fish populations viable for generations to come. When you release a fish, gently set it back in the water rather than throwing or tossing it back. Sudden re-emersion can cause shock or even death. Remember, the overall goal of "catch and release" is that fish will live to be caught another day.

Salmon Protection and Environmental River Management

Jimbo wakes on the shore from a nightmare of seals, giant bugs, blue mops with hands and indescribable pain. He sits up, his life-preserver so sodden it makes a noise like a wet sponge. He is soaked through with salt water and a piece of kelp is wound around his right leg.

Beyond his legs he sees something roiling in the surf. When it rolls over its face is white in the moonlight. Jimbo crawls through the sand, grabs Paul by his jacket and drags him further up onto the beach. He rolls Paul over, watches the sea water dribble from his mouth, hears him gag and retch before he can draw another breath. Paul is alive. His brother is still alive.

He knows the brother part because the aliens told him and the rest, the truth about his father and Paul's mother, a whole lifetime of other understandings, has come to him because they cut something away, something that had always held him back.

"Jimbo, what happened?" Paul asks in a bewildered voice. He is sitting up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "Did I wreck my Dad's boat?" he asks, sounding afraid now. He turns his face toward Jimbo and Jimbo flinches away. Something is wrong. Paul is different than he was, as if a veil has recently been drawn between his mind and the complex truths of this world. And Jimbo knows what they've done, those fishermen from the sky. Even before they de-tagged him, they had been tagging Paul.

"You fucking bastards!" Jimbo screams, surging to his feet and flailing his fists at the starry void spread like a mantle over them. For a moment he thinks there is a twinkle in the sky, that in his new found power he has called them back and by the force of his will he can change the very makeup of the universe. But it is no use. The Earthling Derby is over for this millennium. There is no one to help Paul but Jimbo.

Jimbo stumbles back to his brother and helps him up. They walk weakly together, arm in arm, toward the dirt road that leads out of the little bay. They walk the mile to Homer where there are still two nights of the Salmon Derby left.

Next year Paul will work in his Dad's souvenir shop sweeping up because the cash register confuses him. In two years, James Beaumont will miraculously earn an academic scholarship to college, but he will come back every summer to be with Paul. And Homer will always have its rumors about what happened to Jimbo and Paul that fateful Derby night when they fell overboard and washed up exchanged, one for the other. And only Jimbo will ever really understand.

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Dragonblog

...Simon Petrie

Day the Third: Beginning have doubts about this assignment. Half his kingdom, all well & good; hand of daughter in marriage, yes alright maybe; but haven't actually *seen* hand, or any other portion, and kingdom bit down-in-dumps, charred & decrepit. Peasants smelly, grimy, rude. Am wondering if get choose which half kingdom (expect not, and fair bet half without castle), and if half inclusive peasants.

Road still well marked. Bloody horse went under low overhanging branch, new armour now prominent dent on left side. Hurts when turn suddenly. When stopped for lunch (streamside v. reminiscent of yesterday's spot), tried beating breastplate back into shape with rock, only managed make worse. Still, maybe gives impression actually having been combat before. If viewed poor light. By poorly-sighted person. From considerable distance.

Day the Fourth: Asked peasant directions. Think laughed behind hands at start but answered respectfully enough otherwise. Dragon basically ahead and to right, in distance, follow trail smoke, can't miss, best luck. Proceed, make good time. Almost have another overhanging-branch incident, but avoid last second.

Should armour show rust after only four days? Market dealer assured get several years before tarnish developed. Am wondering, though, if better shelled out extra for fully-welded, tailored model, not just off-rack soldered OSFA. Still, only need for one encounter, touch wood. Don't see point all added expense just for one afternoon.

Day the Fifth: Finally, just curious, took sword out scabbard first time. Had not realised at time purchase "vorpal" means small, round-tipped, best suited pâté. Explains unusual scabbard shape, but suddenly even more unsure whole dragon business.

Decide to make camp streamside lunch spot. Nice place, like where stopped two days ago. Hope this bit included half kingdom. If ever get that point. Otherwise, might request ashes scattered here. If anyone able retrieve them.

Spend evening trying to find horse. (Must remember tether properly this time. Knot.)

Day the Sixth: Didn't sleep well again. Dreamed being chased by dragon, trying defend self with teaspoon. Awoke pools sweat throughout armour. Might see about sleeping out of suit tonight. Preparedness all very well, but there are limits.

Try to see about reshaping sword-tip, bashing with rocks. No bloody good. Atleast sword seems well-forged, sturdy. Made for many applications pâté, suppose. Maybe can try throw down dragon's throat, might choke. (Yeah, right. Maybe squadron of flying pigs turn up, just when I arrive dragon's lair, take out dragon for me.)

Might stay this spot another day, make sure well-rested. Need be in peak condition. (Horse, too. Must find horse again, remember tether properly this time. Double knot.) Dragon not going anywhere, after all, hoard to guard, plenty peasants to pick off.

Might take up sketching, pass time, while getting peak condition. No point rushing things.

Day the Seventeenth: Sketching not going well, charcoal not my medium. Should probably move on. Smoke on horizon looks darker today, maybe most recent peasant went down wrong way. Feeling bit guilty at delay. Wonder can retrace steps to market, try to purchase better sword. Check purse. Not an option. Really should get going again. After lunch.

Difficulty getting armour on this afternoon, seems to have shrunk.

Day the Eighteenth: Finally get horse untied. (Must remember tether properly next time. Slip knot.) Make good time, find nice streamside spot for camp. Am feeling more positive than have for days, decide it's good be back on quest.

Dragons? Who's afraid dragons?

Day the Nineteenth: Find track leading off ring road. Terrain now looking rockier, singed. Feeling apprehensive again. Would stop, but nothing worth sketching here. Best keep going.

Day the Twentieth: BLOODY HELL! Am expected to take out *that*?!!!! With glorified butter knife?!!!! Size of those *teeth*!! Length of those *claws*!!! Lucky could find rock to hide behind.

Shame about horse. Still, can't have felt anything. Much.

Half kingdom nowhere near enough. Hand of Princess better be pretty bloody special.

Feeling slightest bit inadequate.

Day the Twenty-First: Have sighted lair, suppose dragon off marauding again. Now need develop plan of attack.

Day the Twenty-Sixth: No bloody feasible of plan attack possible. Like trying to take on flying castle with spatula. Bloody futile. Suicidal. Delusional. Would retreat, but dragon knows I'm here now, would pick me off soon as I crawled out hiding-spot. Getting tired of this earthworm and slug diet. Will just attack tomorrow, hope for best. No point putting off any longer.

Day the Twenty-Seventh: Will just attack tomorrow, hope for best. No point putting off any longer.

Day the Twenty-Eighth: Slept terribly, awoke nauseous. Not good idea to vomit in armour. Spend afternoon decontaminating best I could, but suspect still bit niffy. Can't be helped.

Day the Twenty-Ninth: WOOOHOOO!!! HAVE SLAIN DRAGON!!! FEEL BLOODY AMAZING!!!

Happened like this. Dragon strafed hiding-spot on morning peasant run. I clambered out, unseen, after it flown over. Ran. Reached lair. Checked out hoard, not as fabulously wealthy as I'd been led expect. Knew I didn't have much time, looked for new spot hide in. Nowhere decent. Looked for better weapon, sword from fallen hero maybe? Didn't find, but did see quite striking gold coronet, encrusted with many gems. Fits quite well. Admired self in jewel-bordered mirror, rakish angle, could grow accustomed. Dragon returned while I was investigating large bejewelled pendant. Dragon understandably pissed-off, to say least. Retreated to corner and attempted bargain for life. Negotiations heated (shoulder still singed) but managed strike deal, take turns riddles. If I answer wrong, dragon eats. If dragon answers wrong, dragon still eats. Not mad keen, admittedly, but best manage circumstances.

Nearly tricked dragon: "what four legs, two wheels, flies", but dragon heard before. Dragon's riddle tough, "Hero better served raw, or baked in armour?" Decide don't know answer, put cunning plan into effect. Pull sword from scabbard, rush headlong at fiery brute shouting "Now die, worm!". Dragon snorts derisively – think right word – and lifts paw ready strike. Then –

Don't bloody *believe* it. Stranger just walks up, just now, as I'm writing this last bit down. First think peasant, but bit better dressed than average peasant, washed recently. Don't know where appeared from. Minstrel, apparently, or so he says. Supposedly known far wide, but never heard of him. Anyway, offering three-quarters bigger kingdom across mountain range, option for more attractive hand, if I sign him exclusive rights to dragon-slaying details, to use in new ballad. Said I need think about, give answer in week.

Day the Thirtieth: Where they all come from? This morning, travelling merchant, representative X Calibre swordsmiths, offering new sword, horse, spare shoes, full set ox knives, all for my permission use likeness on tapestry, sword displayed prominently.

I point out not actually use X Calibre sword slay dragon, but apparently doesn't matter. Said I'd think about.

Another minstrel, this time already written a ballad of my exploits, gave quick run-through. Sound reverberated horribly in helmet (horribly). Same story, exclusive rights. This offer smaller kingdom, three-storey castle, permanent materials, ocean view. Again, said I'd think about.

Monk, wishes to record story, fully illuminated, as inspirational tract on parchment.

Tax collector, asked to have close look at hoard, make assessment.

Adventurer, wants me to sign up for three-dragon deal, all transport, victuals. Generous provision made contract for rain delay and difficulty finding dragons (clause in contract?). Own armour a must.

Sculptor, asks permission to carve likeness with foot resting on head of slain dragon, plan to place in centre local town square, between tavern and stocks.

Young damsel, claims to be princess, wants know if I'm interested in matrimony. (Thought princesses washed more often, must say.)

Three children, said they kicked their ball into dragon's lair last month, wonder if they can come in poke around to find. Also looking for their friend, Eowulf, or pieces thereof, if still recognisable.

Day the Thirty-First: Thinking about.

Day the Thirty-Second: Not sure which smells worse, decomposing dragon or horde of hangers-on.

Day the Thirty-Third: Scales fallen from eyes (suspect design flaw with helmet.) Call meeting with assembled parties, announce have made my decision. Not interested in selling exclusive rights to slaying story. Will reveal all details to all assembled. Rushed dragon, drew sword (actually, drew sword before rushed dragon, otherwise not here now), rolled at crucial moment, struck fatal blow into dragon's heart, dragon died, end of story. Hand assuredly guided by fate, destiny, forces greater than ourselves, whatever. Very lucky to still be alive, obviously. Don't feel heroic, but honoured to be the one who brought about the beast's demise. Humbled.

(In truth, some details omitted, don't wish disillusion all & sundry. At crucial moment tripped, not rolled; nearly broke bloody neck. Looked up in time to see dragon pounce headlong, closed eyes, whimpered, took final breath. Final breath lasted unexpectedly long time. Looked up again, dragon impaled on rusty lance left sticking up from middle hoard. Remember earlier thinking someone could hurt self on that. Dragon brought down not by bravery or swordsmanship but own poor housekeeping. Lesson us all?)

Those assembled allowed in lair, five minutes' max, permitted carry out all they can hold, as long as take piece dragon meat as well. No returns, no refunds, no exchanges. No loitering, or I'll show blade that slew the dragon, if they get drift. Just want to be left peace after that. Can't be bothered with half kingdom, daughter's hand, all other nonsense. Ridiculous fuss.

Protests from throng, they seem to think some sort acclamation required. Seem to want shower me with gifts. Unhappy with this. I eventually concede in some small extent. Place request for:

New horse

Scrolls for sketching

Year's supply pâté

Day the Thirty-Fifth: Back on ring road. Camp at nice streamside spot, lose new horse. (Must remember tether properly. Reef knot.) Realise forgot request something to spread pâté on, but too late now. Spend afternoon looking for good spot to sketch, stumble upon huge plant in clearing. Thick trunk, colossal leaves, bright green. Looks like massive beanstalk.

Wonder what's at top?

Bruce Boston: Flashing the Dark

...reviewed by Michael Lohr

I am a huge fan of short-short fiction, also known as flash fiction. Within the artistic medium of flash fiction a writer has the creative opportunity to explore and experiment with a diverse array of genre topics. Creatively speaking, flash fiction can simultaneously be the most difficult and most fun to write. Conciseness and fluid plot prove to be the most elusive aspects of flash fiction. Most writers avoid writing it altogether. Bruce Boston is not one of those.

Being a past winner of the Pushcart Prize, Asimov's Readers' Award and the Bram Stoker Award, poet and writer Bruce Boston doesn't back down from any speculative writing challenge. With several erudite collections (around forty in all) of prose and poetry under his belt, Boston seemingly keeps getting better with each new release. But with *Flashing The Dark* he outdid himself. This accumulation of taut, entertaining flash fiction stands tall among some of the best genre short story or flash fiction collections around including Brian Hodge's *Falling Idols*, Bruce Holland Rogers' *Thirteen Ways to Water* and the incomparable Paul Di Filippo's *Lost Pages*.

Of his extensive accrual of work, this collection may be his best. Though his traditional short story collection, *Masque of Dreams*, is of such a quality that instructors in MFA creative writing programs could use it as a textbook, *Flashing The Dark* goes a step further. Forty stories in all, he seamlessly moves between light and shadows, painting exotic landscapes that captivate his readers. "Around the omniverse in forty stories," could have been this collection's subtitle. *Flashing The Dark* starts out with the thought-provoking *Thinning the Bicycle Hordes*, a look at the bothersome annoyance of bicyclists in urban areas as seen through the lenses of a psychotic *Tour De France* hater.

In such stories as *The Collector of Boxed Worlds* we understand that no matter how big and powerful a being is, there are still consequences to one's actions and even big fish in the sea must be mindful of the fisherman's hook. *The Last Novitiate* forces us to look at ourselves and our world in a new social context. Granted a world without a moon, but that is just a prop. The real mechanism in this story was the implied social cast system and the evils that beset a willfully obtuse culture.

Not everything about this collection is perfect though. Granted while there is little fault to be found, the oddly humorous murder mystery, *The Talltale Stomach* is a coarse, vulgar account of a woman driven to commit murder due to noisy digestion and clattering water pipes. While well-written, I found this particular story to be out of place and well, disgusting. However, the dark humor will probably be appreciated by fans of Poe and hardboiled mysteries alike. While *Kyle Almost Goes Home* feels incomplete. It leaves the reader wanting to find out more about the character and his life. Reading this story is like being really thirsty and only being given a teaspoon of water. But that is the catch 22 with short-short fiction, you cannot always provide a lot of detail, and sometimes this hinders the story.

In stark contrast, stories such as *The Cathedral of Lost Faces*, *When We Replicated Charles Dickens* and the provocative *Severed Yellow Children* display Boston's talents to their maximum. Each of these stories represents textbook examples of what a short-short story should be; concise, visual and enjoyable. Also included is the exceedingly different, and incredibly interesting *Children of the Mutant Rain Forest*, which is derived from the shared world genre poetry collection, *Chronicles of the Mutant Rain Forest*. Published by Horror Head Press in 1992, Boston co-authored *Chronicles of the Mutant Rain Forest* with Robert Frazier.

If you're a fan of genre fiction or flash fiction, or both, *Flashing The Dark* is an excellent collection to get your hands on. I highly recommend you pick up a copy as soon as possible.

Bruce Boston – Flashing The Dark

Sam's Dot Publishing

Trade paperback

102 pages; \$9.95

Michael Lohr is a professional journalist, outdoorsman, treasure hunter and adventurer. His writing has appeared in such diverse magazines as Rolling Stone, Esquire, The Economist, National Geographic Adventure, Cowboys & Indians and Men's Journal, to name a few.

His webpage can be found at: http://www.internet.is/artist/writer/michael_lohr.htm

State of the art: Nanotechnology

...Dirk Flinthart

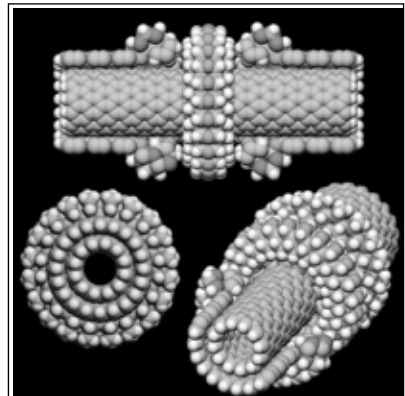
When did nanotech really start to make an impression on SF? Was it Neal Stephenson's *Diamond Age*? Bruce Sterling's *Islands In The Net*? It's hard to say. It seemed to come from nowhere. One day the idea was just another minor SF trope; the next it was a full-blown staple of the genre.

The term 'nanotechnology' was coined because it is anticipated that one day, we will create complex machines built at and designed to operate on the scale of nanometres: 10 to the -9 metres in length. That's about a thousand times smaller than most bacteria. The underlying idea is that by operating on and controlling matter at the nanoscale, we can achieve — well, miracles.

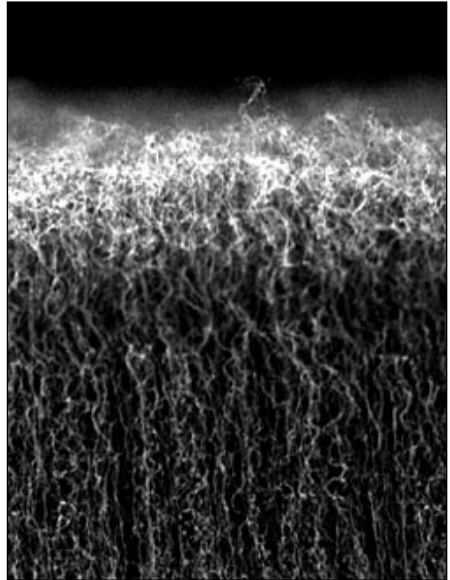
Starting with Richard Feynmann's famous 1959 talk "There's plenty of room at the bottom" (<http://www.resonancepub.com/feynmann.htm>), nanotechnology has been heralded as the means by which humankind will finally solve all the problems which beset a technological civilisation. The vision includes such wonders as self-regenerating machines; substances which can morph intelligently from one shape to another; biological nanomachines to live inside the body and repair the effects of injury, illness and age; limitless manufacturing by direct manipulation of molecules — literally, the Age of Miracles.

The promise is out there. At the moment, it's still just a promise. Nevertheless, there are some shiny new toys on the drawing boards already. Here's a sample:

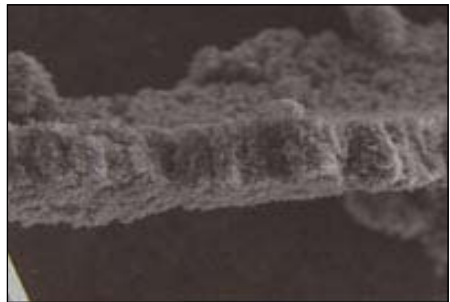
Nanotube TV: flatscreen television which makes use of tried-and-true cathode-ray-tube technology. The twist lies in the actual ray-tubes, which will be carbon nanotubes (right) laid out in an array behind the glass, each shooting one electron to create one pixel. In theory, the whole thing could be less than a centimetre thick.



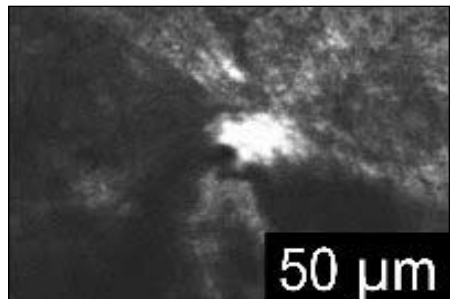
Nanotube storage batteries: the capacitor is a lovely thing, capable of storing considerable energy and releasing it in a single burst, or even slowly, like a battery. Sadly, the storage qualities of the capacitor are governed by the interior surface area of the device, which means that to hold significant quantities of energy, you need a really big capacitor... unless, of course, you can find a way to massively increase the internal surface area. And how might one do that? Oh, by coating it with carbon nanotubes and then folding it thousands of times. The result: a battery/capacitor which can be recharged in less than a minute, while holding enough energy to run for many hours.



Jacob's Ladder: the ground-to-orbit tether. In theory, carbon nanotubules of sufficient length could be bonded into a ribbon with more than sufficient tensile strength to anchor a geostationary satellite. All you have to do then is devise an elevator to go up and down said ribbon, and presto! The solar system is in reach. Well, the nearby bits, anyhow.

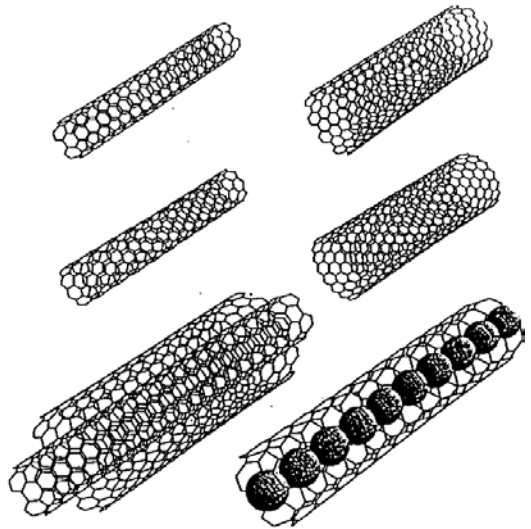


Targeted medications: The idea here is to emplace your medical agent within a nanosphere and then use the biological and electromagnetic qualities of the sphere to move your medical agent precisely to the designated target for delivery. Such a system would permit super-accurate chemical treatment of tumours, potentially making cancer a thing of the past.



None of these little beauties is ready to go yet, but if you look close, you'll see they're all based on one thing: itty-bitty particles doing simply what itty-bitty particles do. Reason being, that's what's producing results in the world of nanotech so far. Not super-duper nanites that can restructure mud into starships, but particles that have valuable properties precisely because they're very small. In other words, now that we've started looking for and building nano-size particles, suddenly we're finding uses for them. In the same sense that we've found uses for gravel because of its particular size, we're now discovering uses for nanoparticles.

Right now, the nanotech world is being rocked by socks impregnated with nanoparticles of carbon which act to kill stinky-foot stuff. Another variety of nanotech sock utilises silver-based nanoparticles to do the same job. But it's still just a stink-proof sock. Nano-waxes are being used to make cloth proof against liquids and stains. Ultrathin layers of nanowax make for better skiing, apparently. Oh, and nano-dispersed zinc oxide particles permit the creation of zinc sunscreen that goes on clear, not white, saving you the embarrassment of... well, looking like somebody wearing zinc cream.



Do I sound underwhelmed?

I am, somewhat. I'm a longtime SF fan and reader, and I have to admit, I've been hoping for a little more from my nanotech than stink-proof footwear.

There is some light down the bottom of the rabbit-hole, to mangle a metaphor, and most of it is provided by carbon. One of the most abundant and chemically versatile elements in the universe, carbon was once known only in a few limited forms in its pure state. Diamond and graphite are two of the best-known of those forms. Over the last twenty years, however, chemists have managed to build relatively gigantic, complex molecules of pure carbon in the shape of tubes, and spheres. The spheres are often called 'Fullerenes' after Buckminster Fuller.

To date, carbon nanotubes are the single most interesting area of nanotech. They have unusual conductivity, holding out the potential for relatively high-temperature superconductors, and their tensile strength is beyond anything else we've ever

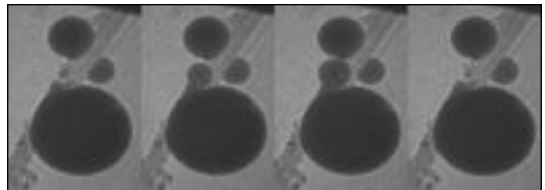
manufactured. Of course, at the moment we can't manufacture a carbon nanotube longer than about half a centimetre, which makes manufacturing a ground-to-orbit cable a little tricky. Nevertheless, if we can figure out how to do it, the ability to produce nigh-indestructible conductive fibres of any desired length will revolutionise — practically everything, really.

But it's still not turning straw into gold, is it?

That exciting, magic vision of nanotech, wherein we build nanomachines that can build other things, and manipulate matter at a molecular level, hangs tantalizingly in front of us. This is Stephenson and Gibson's nanotech, that rebuilds sea-floors into islands and towers. This is the nanotech of Greg Bear's *Slant* wherein a squeeze of toothpaste (full of nanoassemblers) combined with a handful of plastic and ceramic transforms into a fully loaded handgun. This is the real stuff of miracles.

The truth is, we're a long, long way from there. Some very basic elements have been created. Nanoscale motors have been built, but they're nothing but curiosities right now. Likewise the nanomanipulators, nanocogs, nanolevers and such. In fact, it's possible they may never actually be more than curiosities. Two major problems stand between us

and the Diamond Age. First, there's the simple fact that physics at the nano-scale isn't quite the same. For example, the second law of thermodynamics appears to be a great deal more flexible



at the nanoscale, which makes all kinds of planning tricky. Likewise, when you get downscale far enough even things like simple Brownian motion become major issues. In fact, working at the molecular scale, even stray photons can screw up your whole day.

The second problem is perhaps even more difficult to surmount: the problem of control. One of the oldest fears regarding nanotech lies in the so-called "gray ooze" scenario. In this situation, your nanotech scientist makes an error in programming his nano-assemblers, and instead of stopping once they've done their job, they just go on building and replicating, grabbing new materials to build and replicate, build and replicate, until the whole world has been converted into a "gray ooze" of nanomachines desperately disassembling each other and trying to build new versions...

The question is this: how the hell do you maintain contact with literally billions of little nanomachines to make sure they do what they're told, and no more? The answer appears to be that they need to have an inbuilt, programmable memory of some sort. In other words, every little nano-machine that you require in order to build your miraculous island from the sea floor must be created with its entire action-plan

already built in.

Right now, we can't do that. Truth be told, we can't even conceive of how to begin to do that.

Since that's the case, you might well ask: what's the point in pursuing nanotechnology at all? Where's the evidence that something might actually come of all this?

In answer to that question, I'll pose another: what is the single largest built structure on the planet? Well, that would be the Great Barrier Reef, off the eastern coast of Australia. Not as long as the Great Wall of China, no – but at tens of kilometres wider and many metres deeper (or higher) the Barrier Reef is an enduring monument to the building abilities of very tiny creatures.

Admittedly, the coral polyps responsible for building it are on the millimetric rather than nanometric scale, but the reef itself is over two thousand kilometres long, composed of thousands of individual structures of calcium carbonate, built up purely from materials leached out of the water itself, and bits of organic material gobbled up by the little polyps. (Assisted, in some cases, by symbiotic single-celled algae which actually live within the polyps.)

In other words, cell biology is nanotechnology which occurs naturally, and the cunningly programmed memory required to carry it out is commonly known as DNA.

Nanotechnology. Plain, inorganic chemicals drawn from the environment, converted by complex nanoscale machinery into world-spanning, self-aware biological machinery. It's already happened naturally, so we know it can be done. The question that remains: can we find a way to do it for ourselves?

For the moment, we have to make do with stink-proof socks, better batteries, and the many possibilities of carbon nanotubes – because that's the State of the Art.

About the authors...

Larry Ferrill is a Writers of the Future prizewinner who lives in Indianapolis, Indiana. By day he is an instructional designer, developing classroom and computer-based training.

Jeff Parish is a 30-something native Texan. He and his wife have a girl and two boys. He has been writing since middle school, where he concentrated mostly on (bad) fantasy tales and (even worse) poetry. His writing skills developed over time, much to his delight and the relief of everyone he forced to read his work, and he gravitated to prose over poetry. His work has appeared in *Triangulation: End of Time*, *The Edge of Propinquity*, *Gryphonwood*, *The Late Late Show* and *55 Words*, with more forthcoming in *Legends & Fables* and the *Speculative Realm* and *Grants Pass* anthologies. He's also currently writing an online serial horror novel called *Jennings Grove*, <http://jenningsgrove.gravesidetales.com>.

Mr. Crawford lives in an appropriately ancient and drafty house in Sacramento, California, with a wife and six nearly normal cats. His work has appeared in *The Harrow*, *Pseudopod*, *Shimmer*, *Anotherrealm*, and elsewhere. You can find out more about him at his website, <http://www.mossroot.com>. To this day, he continues to deny involvement in the Sacramento zombie duck invasion of 1879.

The old Breton chorus « Me zo ganet e kreiz ar mor » (I was born in the middle of the sea) could have applied to **Loïc Henry** in autumn 1971. Well, nearly... He spent his childhood in a Celtic oasis at the edge of France, where *Korrigans* and *Bugale an noz* (Breton pixies) still live. Some dismiss them as mere myths, but they actually hide in remote forests or on secluded beaches, and they whispers ancient tales to those who take the time to listen. His pouch full of legends, he set off to study in France and England. Then, he worked in Hong Kong for a while, before settling down near Paris. He has published several science-fiction short stories in French anthologies, and a fairy-tale, illustrated by Christian Croset. A science-fiction novel should follow... soon.

Simon Petrie is a Canberra-based chatbot which has been given unreasonably free access to printing and emailing services. This has regrettably led to its infestation of otherwise fine specific outlets such as *ASIM*, *AntiSF*, *Yog's Notebook*, *365 Tomorrows* and *Jupiter*. To date, the bulk of its output has been mercifully short, but there are rumours of longer works in the pipeline.

Sarah Totton is the Regional winner (Canada and the Caribbean) of the Commonwealth Short Story Competition, 2007. Her short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Writers of the Future XXII* and the Canadian anthology *Tesseract Ten*.

Regina Patton lives mostly in her head but occasionally visits her scenic home in a remote valley in New Zealand. She writes fantasy, science fiction, and feminist poetry and though she doesn't like to fish she supports the rights of others to, if they find it necessary.

About the artists...

Rob Jan sculpts, costumes, paints, draws, makes photographs and writes in a manner best described as "Play with a sense of art" . He also helms Zero-G, the Science Fiction, Fantasy & Historical Radio Show on Melbourne's 3RRR FM (rrr.org.au). For more artwork see: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/83287853@N00/sets/>

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