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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

ORIGINAL FICTION BY:

Stuart Barrow

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Emma-Jean Stewart

Douglas A Van Belle

Katherine Woodbury

Featuring interviews with

Iain M Banks

Terry Dowling



Editorial

...Über-Professor Arrrrrrrrgghl Schlurpmftxpftpfll

Xenoethnologist, gourmand, and recent Earth tourist

Director of the Gargelhuisenflinx Prime Cultural Studies Centre, Alnitak IV

(Translated from the original Betelgeusian by Simon Petrie)

Earth has many more toilets, and far fewer Presidents of the United States of America, than their inadvertent interstellar broadcasts had led me to expect. Yet it would be wrong, or at least impolite as I understand it, to say that the planet has been a profound disappointment to me. For the most part, my time spent among the house-apes of Sol III has been enjoyable and rewarding, and it is with some regret that I now prepare to board the Andromeda Spaceways megacruiser which will, the promotional material assures me, probably return me safe and sound to my home planet. Somehow.

It is often said “there is nothing new under the sun”. This statement, which on the surface merely reflects a profound ignorance of the phenomenon of stellar nucleosynthesis, is in fact intended to indicate that contemporary society has become a fetid, stagnating, toxic cesspool in whose viscous, decay-infested, murk-ridden depths there is now no hope of encountering anything of genuine originality or freshness.

I disagree.¹

For example, this issue of ASIM marks the first in which an acknowledged extraterrestrial takes the editorial helm. It may have seemed odd to regular passengers of Andromeda Spaceways that all of the first thirty-four issues of this excellent and highly absorbent publication have been overseen by ostensibly human editors (though rest assured, Robbie, I am not going to ‘blow anyone’s cover’ in this editorial). Why, you may have asked, do all these editors hail from such an insignificant and unwarrantedly self-important little planet?

¹ The latter description does, however, fit the Andromeda Spaceways inflight beverages. I particularly recommend the ‘Rigellian sludgeworm, apricot, and coal tar smoothie’.

Why, indeed? I confess I do not know the answer to that one, but an effort to redress that imbalance is long overdue, and begins now.

The above-quoted idiom regarding the lack of subsolar novelty also has obvious and widely-raised implications for literature, the inference being that it is not possible to compile a truly original narrative in the face of the steadily accreting pile of verbiage which has preceded any such effort. Again, I beg to differ. A simple Google search suffices to reveal, for example, that the concepts ‘naked singularity’, ‘pistachio’, and ‘echidna’ have never previously appeared together in any published document, an omission which makes all the more galling the unkind and curt dismissal by ASIM of my excellent original narrative ‘The Pistachio, the Echidna and the Naked Singularity’ on the grounds of implausibility and clumsy sentence structure. Yet I do not raise this gaffe by ASIM’s overworked slushreaders as a comment against the editorial judgment of this generally well-meaning publication. Rather, I merely intend it to represent that novelty is still attainable and I comfort myself with the thought that, if my groundbreaking manuscript was overlooked, it was only because there were even better and fresher stories to which the editors had ready access, unlikely though that may seem.

Unlikely, but not impossible. Turn the page, and see for yourself.

‘Simon Petrie’
Editor, Issue 35

Hal Spacejock 4: No Free Lunch

Hal looked like he was going to throw the Navcom across the room, but instead he tried a new tack. 'Navcom, if I cross your battery wires, would you explode in a raging fireball or just go phut?'

'What kind of question is that?'

'I'm thinking of turning you into an improvised hand-grenade.'

'And I'm thinking you can go phut yourself.'

A cunning rival determined to ruin Hal's business, an attractive trainee peace officer facing a dangerous investigation and a planet with more bugs than a new operating system ... When Hal and Clunk set out to make a fresh start, this wasn't exactly what they had in mind.

Now Hal must choose: take on the rival to save his own business, or help the trainee with her first - and possibly last - investigation?

Whatever he decides, it's No Free Lunch for Hal Spacejock!



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Greg Hughes
2008

In the Kaladashi Fashion

...Geoffrey Maloney

At 10:00 pm local time, Jack Marlow's ship, *Pandora*, docked with Didi's orbital elevator. By ship time, it was morning for him, barely 5.00 am and he was still dozing. On the way down, in the Terran Diplomatic Authority's private capsule, he dreamt of a former lover he'd once worked with in Cultural Affairs on Earth. They were in a cafe at a railway station, saying goodbye, as she waited for the train that would take her back to her husband, an arms dealer who'd traded with the Deborchi terrorists on Mars. He was still thinking about Tyce and what a bastard her husband was, when the capsule opened.

Tristan Chandler, the Director-General of the Terran Diplomatic Authority on Didi, made his entrance wearing the latest in Kaladashi fashion. His cream and purple robes swamped the elevator capsule. He carried a long staff that had a little red light shining at its top, like a beacon to light his way. To some it bespoke of the power of his position. To Marlow it was just another useless Kaladashi fashion accessory.

"Your sartorial elegance is as impeccable as always," Marlow said, shaking the sleep from my eyes. Marlow himself wore the standard Cultural Affairs 'uniform': a smart gray suit that was looking a little crumpled from his sleepy descent, a white shirt and a black silk tie.

Chandler's welcoming smile turned to a frown. "When in Rome."

Marlow yawned. This wasn't 'Rome'. Didi was a Terran planet, a gift from the Kaladasha in recognition of the centenary of diplomatic service that humans had provided.

"You know the Kaladasha expect it," Chandler continued, "and because we're Terrans and we're so amiable and friendly and lovable, not to mention insecure, we try to meet their expectations. Didi may be a Terran planet, but the Kaladasha still act like it's theirs. In my position, of course, I have to accommodate both viewpoints, play the perfect diplomat and appease all parties. Your ship's not recording any of this, is it? I'd hate it if one of the CA spooks picked up my rather informal remarks in a random audit."

"*Pandora* was instructed to put herself into a dead orbit. She's probably asleep by now."

The smile returned to Chandler's face. "My car awaits."

Inside Chandler's limousine, Marlow gazed out at a city of ornamental gardens and floodlit public buildings. Beyond these, the moonlight revealed the white peak

of Mount Orara. It was a beautiful city that seemed to ask you to proceed through it gracefully, yet Marlow found himself speeding along amidst a cavalcade of motorbikes, flashing lights and wailing sirens. He felt he was in a street parade, part of some showy entertainment for off-world tourists. But he knew, just as Chandler did, that this was required. The Kaladasha would have been disappointed if their Terrans had not created a presence that demanded the attention of their friends, rivals and business associates.

Behind the limousine's darkly tinted glass, Chandler dropped his diplomatic front. Now he was as nervous as a housefly. His eyes kept darting all over the place, and his hands twisted themselves around each other. He reminded Marlow of Lady Macbeth, unable to get those damn spots out of her skin.

"I'll stick to the facts, shall I?" Chandler said, looking to Marlow for reassurance. Chandler was acting like he needed a big brother to look after him and he thought Marlow was it.

"I think so," Marlow said. His tone made it clear that he hadn't come all this way to listen to a string of excuses.

"The Pirin Ambassador is dead. The Pirins were about to engage in a major mining deal with the Kaladasha. I had organised their first meeting for the day after tomorrow. Officially, the Ambassador's still missing, but we found his body in a Terran hotel room. He was rather fond of our whisky apparently."

"I don't suppose the Pirin ambassador just happened to die of natural causes: organic failure at the wrong time, in the wrong place?"

"That would be embarrassing enough in diplomatic terms, but no, I'm afraid not. The whisky was poisoned."

"When did you tell the Kaladasha?"

Chandler squirmed in his seat. Marlow noticed a quivering around the edges of his mouth. "I was hoping to smooth things over with the Pirins first."

"And the Pirin response was?"

Chandler's quivering increased. "I haven't told them yet. I was waiting for you to arrive."

Chandler may have wanted a big brother, but Marlow was a special ambassador operating directly under instructions from Cultural Affairs on Earth. He waited a few moments before responding. "You should have told the Kaladasha immediately. You must contact them now and request an urgent audience with their High Commissioner."

"You don't think we should appease the Pirins first?"

"Well, I'm sure if we could hand over the assassin, that would be the first step towards appeasement. After that, you'll need to make some sort of public apology for failing to guarantee the Ambassador's safety, then some sort of generous gift might be appropriate, from the People of Earth to the People of Pirin Doran. And after that..."

"I need to resign," Chandler said in a soft voice. "Is that what CA told you to tell me?"

"Do you think you need to resign?"

"Only if the Kaladasha want me to." Chandler puffed himself up like some bird about to enter a mating ritual.

"When you speak to the Kaladashi High Commissioner, you should make that offer then. That's what the CA told me to tell you."

Chandler sighed. “And the Pirins?” he asked, forcing a point that he was reluctant to deal with.

“I’ll speak to the Pirins,” Marlow said.

Chandler relaxed a little. “I’d appreciate that, Jack. You *are* the Pirinese expert after all.” His voice even sounded a little jolly.

Marlow suppressed a grin. “I remember when we were junior officers. You once describe the Pirins as ‘the foul-mouthed ferals of the three galaxies.’”

“Did I?” Chandler said. “I don’t recall that at all.”

“I think you’d had one drink too many at the time.”

“Has that story been doing the rounds of the CA watering holes?”

Marlow shrugged. Chandler’s distaste for the Pirins was well-known. Like many humans he much preferred the delicateness and grace of the Kaladasha. They had a veneer of charm that was infectious. Their cuisine was superb and their philosophy sublime. But Marlow often found it infuriating how they would spend hours dancing around a point before reaching it. The Pirins were much more direct, and he held a grudging respect for them because of that.

“There was another thing CA wanted me to ask you,” Marlow said, and Chandler immediately tensed up again. “We’ve picked up a few rumours about a new Pirin locutor. Have you heard anything?”

“Only the scuttlebutt from the Woibai bazaar. The Pirins have been boasting they’re going to do us out of the language business with a new locutor they’ve developed, but there have been a great many Kaladashi translation devices developed over the years and none of them have been any good. I strongly believe, as you know, that Kaladashi is not a language that can be translated with technology. It’s too subtle. It needs the human touch. I have no reason to suspect this new locutor will be any different.”

“So you didn’t investigate any further?”

“No. I didn’t see any reason to give credence to bazaar gossip. Besides, being Pirin technology, it hardly warranted a second thought. Why, did CA want me to?”

“No, not at all. CA’s just curious, that’s all. Locutors come and go. And, as you say, none of them have been any good.”

“That’s what I thought,” Chandler said, sounding relieved.

Marlow’s apartment in the official Terran Authority residence turned out to be the bland, utilitarian box he’d been expecting: beige walls, low ceilings and suffocating central heating. Still, the fridge held plenty of ice and there was a bottle of bourbon on the table. He scanned the place and then physically checked it as well, not that he really expected Chandler would be bugging him. It was more out of habit than anything else, but he believed it was a good habit to have.

Reassured, he filled a glass with ice and splashed some bourbon over it. Just one drink to get himself ready for the night’s work. Then he called apartment 23. A woman’s voice came on the line with a faint “Hello?”

“Kelly, it’s Jack. I just got in. Your place or mine?”

“What apartment did they give you?”

“Thirty-five. I haven’t checked out the balcony yet, but I’ve probably got a good view.”

“Don’t worry about the view. I’ve got something better to show you. I’ll be right up.”

Marlow closed off the call and chuckled. Kelly Furey was a smart operator. She was going to have a big career in Cultural Affairs.

Two minutes later, she was at the door. Marlow had last seen her six years ago, when she’d been his junior officer on Mars during the terrible days following the bombing of the Kaladashi Embassy. She hadn’t changed a bit. She was still like a long cool drink of water. With a tall thin physique, all gangly arms and long legs, and a face full of sharp angles, she was the closest a human could ever come to looking like a Pirin. Marlow kissed her on the cheek, drew her into the apartment and poured her a bourbon.

“Think you could stomach one of these?” he said, offering the glass.

She took the glass, but didn’t drink from it.

“You’ve done a great job,” Marlow said. “Chandler suspects nothing. He didn’t even investigate the rumours about the new locutor. Isn’t he paying attention to what goes on in the Woibai bazaar anymore?”

Kelly sniffed her drink. “Too busy looking after the Kaladasha. He loves them so much, just like you used to.”

Marlow ignored her last remark. Things change. Sometimes you had to make them change. “CA’s pulling you out. You’ll be leaving with me.”

Kelly swirled her finger through her drink. “I think I’d prefer to stay. It’s closer to the action. Besides, Chandler needs me.”

Marlow looked at her in disbelief. “You’d prefer to stay? You just assassinated the Pirin Ambassador. CA’s not giving you a choice.”

“Tell me about this new locutor. Is it any good?”

Marlow walked over to the big glass doors that led out onto the balcony and opened them. He stood at the railing with his drink in his hands, gazing over the city. With all its parks and ornate buildings it was beautiful in a Kaladashi way.

Kelly came and stood next to him. “How good is it? I need to understand why I had to do the things I did.”

“It’s perfect,” Marlow said.

“It can’t be perfect. Pirin technology is...”

“Imperfect,” Marlow said. “But it’s not Pirin technology. Not all of it. The linguistic chip is pure Terran. I’m yet to see how well they’ve integrated it into a complete package.”

“Your work?” Kelly said.

Marlow nodded. “I never really understood what Deborchi hoped to achieve when he bombed the Kaladashi Embassy. But it was the Kaladashi reaction to it that phased some of us in CA the most. No retaliation, just a simple show of force and the clear message that we could misbehave all we wanted to, but they would never let us go. Our language skills bought us a ticket to the stars, but it’s all been on Kaladashi terms.”

“So a Pirin locutor that works and a diplomatic incident big enough to make the Kaladasha nervous about their mining agreements.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“We spill all the apples, Jack; then what?”

Marlow checked his watch. "You'll get the full briefing on your return. Just now, there's a few more games to be played out. I've got to go talk to a snake about a locutor. You need to start packing."

Around the same time Chandler would have been drinking his second glass of Kaladashi wine and getting ready to deliver the bad news, Marlow was following a large rat through an underground tunnel. The rat was a Pirin servant species, and the tunnel smelt of wood smoke and stale cooking odours. Marlow could hear water dripping, but it may have only been a sound effect to increase the cultural ambience of the place.

The Pirin Embassy was a maze of interconnecting chambers crudely carved out of the solid rock beneath the city, and left in its natural, unadorned state. The Pirins preferred it that way.

Marlow found the Pirin Assistant Ambassador taking its midnight supper, lying on the floor of its boraine before a glowing fire. Its long lean body was supported by a pile of smoothly polished furniture stones, an expensive luxury for an average member of its species.

"Hey, small dick face," the Pirin said in its guttural tongue. "What say you are?"

"Jack Marlow, Special Ambassador," Marlow replied, giving his best diplomatic smile.

"You look not so special," the Pirin said with a definite smirk. "Now tell me, Kaladashi turd-chewer, what you've done with our beloved Ambassador. That Chandler prick find him yet? He is Kaladashi brown-nose man, for sure!"

Marlow knew there was no point in holding back the bad news. He had more important things to discuss. "Your beloved Ambassador is dead. Poisoned whisky. Please accept my apologies for this terrible tragedy."

The Assistant Ambassador uncoiled itself from the stones and rose up to its full height. The thin body, almost snakelike, towered over Marlow. "Poisoned?"

Marlow stood his ground. He spat into the fire. "So we believe."

The Pirin dropped onto its stones. "Hey, bad news brings good news, dick face. I'm Acting Ambassador now."

"So it seems." Marlow spat into the fire once more.

"So who killed our illustrious representative?"

"We don't know, but our investigations are underway. Rest assured we will find the assassin."

Now it was the Acting Ambassador's turn to spit, but not into the fire. Marlow felt the moisture of its saliva pass his left ear. It had not meant to hit him; that would have been a breach of protocol. "The Kaladasha do this. They kill the Ambassador because they won't agree to our terms."

"The Kaladasha are not involved. It may have been the Deborchi terrorists."

"Deborchi is dead. You Kaladashi brown-nosers executed him after Phobos."

"Some of his supporters live on."

"You must kill them!"

Marlow shrugged. "We try. They are elusive."

A huge gurgling noise rose from the Pirin's stomach. It was laughing at Marlow. "You try! You try so hard to protect the Kaladasha. That is all you do. Yet the Pirins have what Kaladasha want: minerals, metals, technology. You just get in the way of our bloody good business."

"What technology?" Marlow asked. This time he allowed himself a smirk.

The Pirin's stomach gurgled like a volcano. It reached out a tendril and caressed the surface of a polished stone. "Sit, sit. You will appreciate this too much, I think."

Marlow eased himself onto the stones, the curves of which were designed to suit the gangly Pirin physique. He'd felt far more comfortable when he was standing.

A rat servant scurried in on its hind legs, bearing a small black box in its paws. It placed the box between Marlow and the Acting Ambassador.

"You will speak Kaladashi from now on," the Pirin said.

The device activated itself and began to wink little red and green lights. Marlow found it very reassuring to see those lights flash. He wanted to spit into the fire again, but didn't. "A locutor. Such a wonderful device. They're very good for making simple statements and requests, but hardly useful when it comes to subtle diplomatic negotiations, which is what we do best."

"This one is different," the Pirin said and the locutor spat out the precise meaning in Kaladashi.

"Simple, simple things," Marlow said in Kaladashi, and heard the locutor echo his words in precise Pirinese.

"So you want something more complicated, dick face?" The Acting Ambassador began to talk about several aspects of Terran science and philosophy it understood. The locutor translated it into Kaladashi perfectly.

Marlow did not want to appear too hasty, even though he was smiling inside. He let a few moments of silence pass before saying, "So, what do you want?"

The Pirin smiled. It took on a more diplomatic tone, dropping all vulgarities. Marlow guessed it had begun to record the conversation for the authorities back home. "It is not what we want, it is what we will get, what we will take if we must. Firstly, the assassin of our beloved Ambassador must be handed over and placed under Pirin authority by noon tomorrow. Secondly, from now on we will speak directly with the Kaladasha, here on Didi and on all our planets where the Kaladasha hold mining leases. We want no more Terrans manipulating our words and spinning deals."

Marlow held the Pirin's sharp-eyed gaze. "The first of your requests may be difficult to meet, but I can assure you the full resources of the Terran Diplomatic Authority will be utilised in finding the assassin of your most honourable Ambassador. The second of your requests, however...well, that is not one which the Terran Diplomatic Authority can meet. We cannot withdraw our services from the Kaladasha without being in breach of our longstanding agreement with them. The Kaladasha would have to terminate our services, and I doubt they would be willing to do that. However, I will arrange for the matter to be discussed with them as you have requested."

"You tell the Kaladasha that should we not get what we want, we will terminate their mining leases in our territories. You tell your masters that, if you are game enough."

The Pirin pulled a bone out of the pile that sat in front of it and began to suck on it. "Piss off now, turd-chewer."

“Ka, ka, ka-ka, ka.”

The Acting Pirin Ambassador rose up again like a snake about to strike. “How you know this, the first words that a Pirin baby speaks?”

“We’ve adopted it into Terran English. It means you don’t know shit.”

The Pirin Acting Ambassador spat again and this time hit Marlow right between the eyes. He wiped the gunk away and smiled diplomatically.

On his return to his apartment, Marlow found a holo of Chandler, buzzing green and blue around the edges, waiting for him on the sofa. Chandler looked morose.

“The Kaladasha are not happy?” Marlow said.

“I offered my resignation. They said they would consider it.”

Marlow nodded. It was only polite for the Kaladasha to give due consideration to Chandler’s offer to resign. The wheels of the Kaladashi bureaucracy moved slowly, subtly, but the way they approached things had a polite civilised beauty about it. Marlow realised he might actually miss the close relationship humans had with them. “The Pirins want us to hand the assassin over to them by noon tomorrow.”

“That’s not going to be possible. I’m afraid my police department aren’t making much progress.”

Marlow scratched his jaw to stop himself from smiling. “That might not be such a problem. The Acting Ambassador didn’t seem that unhappy about the fact that the Ambassador was no longer with us. Obviously, it’s a chance at promotion for him, but more than that he appears to be quite pleased that he’s got a diplomatic incident he can use to our disadvantage. His second demand is that the Pirins negotiate directly with the Kaladasha from now on, on Didi and all planets within their jurisdiction.”

“Impossible. The Kaladasha will not, cannot, learn their language, and the Pirins are incapable of learning a language as sophisticated as Kaladashi; it is simply beyond them.”

“There’s the new locutor. The scuttlebutt from the bazaar was accurate.”

“But it can’t be any good.” Chandler’s holo waved a ghostly, dismissive hand. “They never are.”

“This one is good. I used it tonight. In fact, it’s very good.”

Chandler’s holo gave a sad chuckle. “Don’t they understand that the Kaladasha will never accept it? They prefer the personal touch. Their diplomacy, it’s so subtle it needs living creatures like us to articulate it, not some crude machine.”

“I don’t think the Kaladasha have any choice. By allowing the Ambassador to be assassinated on Didi, we created this problem, whether we like it or not. Legally, it’s our planet and our fault. There appears to be little we can do to salvage the situation. The Kaladasha, as our employers, will have to take responsibility for what has happened. If they don’t accept the Pirin terms, then the Pirins will cancel the Kaladashi mining agreements in their territories. The Kaladasha certainly value us, but I don’t think they value us that much.”

“But if the Pirins succeed, then the Woibai will follow, then the Lumin, then the rest. Think of all those Terrans out there now, on all those planets where the Kaladasha have

their leases; they'll all be out of a job. Earth won't have a role any more. We'll be cut out of every deal in every solar system. We'll be the trash of the three galaxies."

Chandler spoke universally, but he was worried about himself. His prestigious position, the almost imperial authority he'd created for himself through all those years of serving the Kaladasha, would slowly disappear.

Marlow knew it was critical that the Kaladasha never suspected their trusted servant species had set them up. It was important that Chandler and others like him kept on trying to do what they'd always done, even while the Pirin locutors were doing them out of a job. "That's a rather pessimistic view. The Kaladasha may not agree to the Pirin terms. As you said, they prefer the personal touch. And even if they do, there's no guarantee the other alien species will follow the Pirin model."

Chandler's holo image shrugged. He looked defeated. "What do you want me to do? What can we do?"

"You need to advise the Kaladasha the Pirins wish to deal direct, that they have the technology to do this. All we can do in this situation is remain neutral and deliver the Pirin request, act as if it's business as usual, at least until the Kaladasha tell us otherwise."

Several minutes later Marlow stood on the balcony, watching the Director-General's entourage as it roared through the city on its way to the Kaladashi High Commission once more. He called *Pandora* as he saw the last of the Soft-tails recede into the distance and asked her to engage with the elevator.

Chandler reached Marlow on an audio link about an hour later. Marlow guessed he was feeling too insecure to use the holo again.

"The good news is that the Kaladasha haven't asked me to resign," Chandler said.

In some ways Marlow thought that was the bad news. He quite liked Chandler and, although he didn't know it, being asked to resign would have been the best thing for him. It would have enabled him to make a fresh start and get on with the rest of his career.

"The bad news is that they've accepted the Pirin's offer to deal directly using the locutor."

That was the news Marlow had been waiting to hear. For a moment he'd feared Cultural Affairs might have picked it wrong, that maybe, just maybe, the Kaladasha valued their special relationship with humans more than their mining leases with the Pirins. A smile crept across his face.

"Tristan, you know you can manage your way through this, don't you?" Marlow said, playing the role of big brother again.

"Sure, Jack, I'm still the Director-General of Didi." Chandler even sounded happy when he said it.

"Okay, I'll tell the Pirins their terms are agreed."

There was a silence on the line, then Chandler said, "Thanks. I admire you for that, the way you can deal with the Pirins. I've never been able to do it. I just don't like them."

"I know. They're a bunch of snakes."

Just then a soft knock sounded on his door. Marlow opened it to see Kelly standing there with a pile of luggage beside her. He gave her a thumbs-up. "Tristan, there was

one thing I forgot to mention before. CA's recalling Kelly Furey. She's wanted on a new project that's starting up. I'm taking her back to Mars with me."

Chandler sighed. "She's one of my best officers. It's been a hell of a bad news week."

On their way to the elevator, Marlow stopped by the Pirin Embassy. He advised the Acting Ambassador the Kaladasha had agreed to the second of their terms, but, unfortunately, the Terran Diplomatic Authority would be unable to meet their first condition.

He grovelled sufficiently when he told the Acting Ambassador that the Authority had no idea who'd killed the Ambassador and were unlikely to find out by the deadline set. The Pirins accepted this. It had worked the way Marlow thought it would. The Pirins believed they'd scored the big deal, but lost the small one. Who cared about the death of an alcoholic Ambassador when you thought you'd won an empire?

As they rode the elevator up to *Pandora*, Marlow stood at the small observation window watching the surface of Didi disappear through the clouds. Interesting times lay ahead, but still he found himself feeling sorry for Chandler. Marlow had worked for the change and was ready for it, but it would be difficult for others to realise the benefits that would follow. They would see the new locutor doing them out of a job, and try desperately to cling to what they had, not knowing there was a brighter day just over the horizon. He remembered what Kelly had said before. It was like a cart of apples spilling over, except the apples were all black and had little red and green lights flashing. He turned to Kelly. "That new project you'll be working on, I think we'll call it Operation Applectart."

Kelly raised an eyebrow. "And I'll be doing what exactly?" she asked.

Marlow smiled. He was enjoying himself. "Helping me to figure out the best way of picking up the apples."

Kelly shook her head. "Makes about as much sense as spilling them in the first place. But who am I to question..."

"The locutors," Marlow said. "The controlling linguistic chip's been designed with built in obsolescence, and we're not planning on making anymore. We've got ten years to figure out exactly what we're going to do when they all fail. But one thing's for certain. Next time the Kaladasha come to us it'll be on our terms. No more following in the Kaladashi fashion."

Kelly looked uneasy. Marlow guessed she was going through all the ramifications in her head, trying to find the flaw. Then she suddenly burst out laughing. "Jack, it's mad, wonderfully mad, but I can't believe it. It's too much like a dream."

"A dream that will come true," Marlow said. He was certain of it, more certain than he'd been of anything. He turned back to the window. He thought about Tyce standing on the railway platform. Another dream. He imagined the train she was waiting for never arrived.

Earth for Dummies

...Lettie Prell

First, it is important to note there are myriad rules regarding food and food taboos, with eating customs varying widely among the dominant intelligent beings of the Earth planet. It is therefore advisable for Naverian tourists to keenly observe those around you, and act accordingly. For example, watch whether hands, utensils, or both are used when eating. With such complications in mind, we offer the following as general guidelines in this area, for they establish an overall frame of reference.

It cannot be stressed enough that when visiting the dwellings of the dominant bipedal mammals — called *homo sapiens* or humans — you should converse only with them, at least while they are present. Granted, the cetaceans, particularly the dolphins, are more interesting, understand us better, and have a keen sense of humor. However, communication with cetaceans and other creatures, even those termed ‘pets’, makes humans uncomfortable, and in some cases distrustful.

On a related note, it is best to visit the oceans of Earth via boats or ships provided by humans. If you must swim, do so in locations removed from human observation. The oceans of Earth are beautiful, contain an ideal salinity suitable for drinking, and cover the majority of the planet. However, humans fear their oceans, a fact marked by their tales of monstrous beings inhabiting the depths. Hence, they are easily disturbed if we spend too much time swimming in ocean waters and joking with the cetaceans. They may begin worrying that Naverians are actually monstrous beings. One might wonder that, given their aversion to the oceans, humans would not mind if we colonized there, but humans are insecure regarding their position as the dominant species, and harbor an innate fear of ‘invasion’, as they term it. Suffice to say this is a matter best left to our diplomats. For this reason, we urge all Naverians to observe proper etiquette when interacting with humans. We cannot jeopardize the strides we are making in this area.

When visiting the dwellings of humans, please note that food will be served at regular intervals in special dining areas. Normally only deceased creatures will be served, and these will be carefully prepared in a manner pleasing to humans, which usually involves the sustained heating of the deceased creatures’ flesh, sometimes in a seasoned broth. While there exists a peculiar stench surrounding such unusual preparation, the resulting meal is often surprisingly tasty. However, it is fortunate that particular foods known as sushi and sashimi are also available, for these normally consist of uncooked, raw non-cetacean ocean creatures, and are

thus well-suited to the Naverian palate. Nonetheless, strive to avoid wasabi, or at least consume it in moderation. While tasty, wasabi has hallucinogenic effects for our kind. Humans are not affected in this manner.

Having provided this general description of human food, it should come as no surprise to learn it is inappropriate to consume live creatures found in the human dwelling. Humans are fond of their so-called ‘pets’, and are quite protective of them. Other types of live creatures found in the dwelling are called infants and children. These creatures are not pets, but are actually immature humans. Remember that humans, as mammals, do not emerge fully formed from cocoons. Infants and children are stages in the normal human reproductive and growth cycle, and these stages are not considered unfortunate. Hence, when encountering infants and children, condolences are not to be offered. On the contrary, praise and admiration of the creature’s beauty and other characteristics is the expected response. When complimenting the characteristics of infants and children, do not refer to their enticing odor. Humans perceive such remarks as threatening.

Humans love to show off their dwellings and the things they have hoarded. It is polite to accept invitations to ‘tour’ the home. This behavior has been thoroughly studied by Naverian behavioral specialists, sociologists and anthropologists, and the collective wisdom regarding this is best expressed as, “It’s about blab.” (Click on hyperlink for a detailed discussion of the term ‘blab’, and related phrase, ‘blah-blah’.) The important thing to remember is, unlike Naverian artifacts, the objects humans hoard rarely hold deep spiritual or ancestral significance. It is therefore surprising how long humans will spend discussing these unimportant items. They blab and blab about the blah-blah all over their shelves, in their recreation areas, even in their closets. It is considered polite to listen attentively, make statements of praise and admiration, even to encourage the human to blab yet more about the object at hand. Blab appears to be humans’ chief means of achieving trust and goodwill among members of their own species, and so Naverians must participate in this behavior, and similar rituals, for diplomatic purposes.

It has become popular for humans to request Naverians with which they have ‘made friends’ to be ‘overnight guests’. This is another social ritual to further build trust and goodwill, and also appears to be a way for individual humans to achieve higher status, in the eyes of other members of their species. It is therefore important to consent to be an overnight guest, when invited. One must not underestimate the dangers surrounding this activity, however, especially if there is wasabi in the dwelling.

Indeed, the chief danger of being an overnight guest is related to meals. Humans in the household must engage in a prolonged rest period, which normally occurs at night. During this period, which usually lasts between seven and nine hours, no meals are prepared. Some Naverians have attempted to fast during the human sleep cycle, but inevitably the instinct to feed asserts itself. It is important, however, to avoid any potentially destructive feeding frenzy during the human sleep cycle.

Plant material and deceased, prepared creatures may be found in the area of the dwelling called the kitchen, undoubtedly included on your tour of the home. These foodstuffs can be accessed through an activity called ‘raiding the refrigerator’ which

humans consider an acceptable nighttime feeding strategy. However, during the nighttime, it is not uncommon for Naverians to lose their normal social sensibilities, and forget learned behaviors such as consuming only deceased prepared creatures. The presence of infants and children in the dwelling can exacerbate difficulties with conforming to learned social feeding behaviors, because of the enticing odor of these immature humans.

Should you inadvertently consume a living creature while serving as an overnight guest, the following actions are recommended, depending on the circumstances of your situation:

A. If you are discovered in the act of consuming the creature, offer condolences. Expressions of grief and remorse are appropriate and expected. (Click on hyperlink for a detailed discussion of the terms 'grief' and 'remorse', including video of convincing examples of these emotions as performed by Naverians.)

B. If you consume the creature without interruption, the advisable action is to leave the dwelling immediately, and proceed to the nearest ocean. Notify the Naverian embassy of the unfortunate event, so that skilled experts may take appropriate action.

Naverians have found that humans have some experience with other humans entering their dwellings without invitation and taking the lives of one or more creatures therein. In fact, detailed accounts of these events account for a large portion of the output of the human entertainment industry. In several cases involving the inadvertent consumption of living creatures, skilled Naverians have been able to alter the meal site to resemble a human murder scene. It is not advisable that you yourself attempt such alterations.

We strongly advise limiting night activity to raiding the refrigerator. Doing so will avoid disrupting relations with humans, and ensure an enjoyable stay on Earth.

Johnny Talley

...John Plunket

ASIM congratulates John Plunket on his first publication:

I'm excited to be published in ASIM. I've been writing for a number of years, but I've only begun to submit my work recently. I started reading fantasy and horror at an early age; favorites included Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, Fritz Lieber, Tanith Lee, and Gene Wolfe, among many others. Some of my earliest attempts at writing were because I ran out of reading material and wanted more stories. "Johnny Talley" was dreamed up during one of my first jobs after college, which involved catching plankton in the middle of the night, on petroleum platforms in the Gulf of Mexico.

This is a story from Louisiana — sort of. It doesn't take place in New Orleans. There are no cemeteries in it, no haunted plantations on the bayou, no voodoo, no gris gris. No French Quarter, street cars, or Mardi Gras. No hurricanes. There are Cajuns involved, but if they have accents, you'll just have to imagine those.

This is the story of Johnny Talley and Fat Harold and me. It happened on MP 293 — that's Main Pass, out in the Gulf of Mexico, south-east of Venice, LA. Two-nine-three was an old four pile petroleum platform, with yellow paint flaking off the rusty metal. It was nothing big, and the three of us were the only ones on it, with not a lot to do but monitor production and run out and fix things when an alarm went off. The rest of the time we'd just sit in the air conditioning, eating and watching satellite TV. You can get pretty fat working on a rig like that. Harold sure had. He was our boss, and real proud to be the boss, even if it was just the boss of two. He was about as fun to have around as a horny dog at a beauty contest.

Johnny was divorced, but somehow he had custody of his daughter M.K., why I don't know since we work a full week at a time on the rigs and M.K. was on her own then. She was 16 and Johnny was worried about the trouble she might get into. He'd call her all the time, or she'd call him.

"Johnny Talley, Johnny Talley!" Harold would shout over the intercom when M.K. called, like he was Bob Barker calling the next contestant, and Johnny would come running in, a mess of sweat and grease, and go into the office to talk to his

daughter in a low voice, stern and serious. Harold would smirk and roll his eyes at me, and make some smartass remark when Johnny was done: “She ain’t burned down the house yet?”, or, “Are you a paw paw yet?”

Though Johnny hid it pretty well, grinning and joking back, you could tell he didn’t care much for Harold’s shit — Johnny was under a lot of stress, trying to raise a 16 year old girl by phone. I’d do my best to cheer him up, crack jokes and all; but between his daughter back in Metairie, and Fat Harold on the rig, Johnny was about as happy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

For all the trouble she gave him, Johnny loved M.K. a lot, and the one thing that kept him on 293 was that he was making good money for her. He wanted to make sure she kept on the straight and narrow, went to college and had a good life. Work was all he did. He’d work as much as the company would let him, sometimes two or three weeks on the platform without a break. Good money, and nowhere to spend it — it all went to M.K.’s college fund. He’d always give her one last call at night, make sure she was at home and doing her homework. She always said she was.

There came a day when you could tell a storm was coming; the wind was picking up, driving lines of foam across the water. Johnny had some work to do on a satellite platform, and we happened to have a helicopter on deck — the pilot was waiting out the storm. He didn’t want to go up, and Johnny didn’t want to go up, but Fat Harold wanted the work done right then, and there was no arguing with that man. He was windier than a bag of assholes and he just talked over you until you agreed with him.

So up they went, and by the time Johnny had done the work and they were coming back, the sky was full of little thunderheads and the wind was gusting about 30 knots. The little helicopter was coming in fast, dodging the thunderheads. Harold and me stood by the stairs of the heliport deck and watched it. It came skittering in, we could see the pilot looking real tense and Johnny Talley next to him, waving at us with an exaggerated grin. They circled a few times, pulled away from a few attempted landings, and came in again. It looked like they were making it, the skids had just touched deck, when there was a fierce gust of wind. It batted the helicopter like a cat swatting a mouse, flipping it up and to the side.

“No, goddamn it!” yelled Harold. There was a long frozen moment when the chopper hung suspended with the pilot fighting for control and Johnny just staring right at us through the plastic bubble, not grinning now. Then the rotor smacked into the deck and broke apart. I pulled Harold back onto the stairs, crouching as pieces flew by, and then we watched the chopper plunge 200 feet down the side of the rig into the Gulf.

The impact must have broken up the fuselage, because it sank right away. When the divers came out later, they found the pilot, still buckled in, but they never found Johnny Talley. Not Harold’s fault, they said — these things happen all the time.

Well, the two of us just held down the fort while we waited for Johnny’s replacement, with Harold being more of a loudmouthed pain in the ass than ever, because he felt guilty, I guess. I felt pretty torn up about it, thinking of Johnny and M.K. And without Johnny around, it wasn’t much fun — Harold was driving me nuts. Especially when he started hearing things.

We were out on the top deck one night and he grabbed my arm all of a sudden.

“What’s that?” he said in a funny kind of voice. I asked what’s what, and I saw he’d gone all pale in the face, a rare thing for a live fat man.

“The footsteps,” he said. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

Pretty soon, I noticed he was spending all his time in the office; and when he had to go outside, he looked around very carefully, like someone might be hiding among the machinery. He even peered down through the metal grating of the deck, trying to see the decks below.

I thought he was crazy until I heard the footsteps myself. A production platform is a noisy place, you usually can’t hear anything like footsteps, but somehow I could hear these. They were clanking around down below somewhere, maybe on the plus ten deck just above the waves, and it sounded like someone wearing wet boots, someone who moved slowly like they were tired and didn’t know just where they were going.

Then we started to find tools moved around. At first I thought Harold had done it and he thought I had, but it wasn’t so. An alarm would sound, but by the time we got outside, the problem had fixed itself — or had been fixed, since the tools were lying there on the deck next to whatever component had caused the trouble.

It was three days until the crew change, but Harold wanted off the platform now. He kept trying to call out for a helicopter, but something was wrong with the radio: all he could get was one faint voice we couldn’t understand. It sounded like the man was trying to talk underwater. Harold’s bluster was gone; he looked ready to curl up and die. He’d jump at the slightest noise and look at me funny when he thought I didn’t see. He was scared, and I didn’t feel too brave myself. I took to keeping a fire ax near me, just for comfort.

I had the night shift that night. Harold went to bed in the bunkhouse, though I didn’t think he’d be sleeping much. Around 2 am I got tired of Jerry Springer reruns and went out to get some fresh air. It was a beautiful night, the stars were out, all the other platforms in the distance were lit up like constellations themselves, but something was wrong — the bunkhouse door was wide open. I could feel the air conditioning from where I was. Harold liked it cold, and he’d always complain if we held the door open too long going in or out.

Nobody was in the bunkhouse. It smelled like rotten seawater, which wasn’t surprising since there was seawater all over the floor and all over Harold’s bunk. The sheets were soaked.

Well, I went back to the office pretty quickly and shook hands with my friend the fire ax, not feeling too confident in it. My legs felt a little weak, so I sat down in the break room. Then I heard the footsteps again, coming slowly up the stairs, all the way from the plus ten deck to the top. They stopped for a second and then came squelching and clanking over to the office door.

And who came through the doorway but Johnny Talley, pale and dripping wet, with his hair plastered down over his face and his nose eaten off by fish. He took a fudgesicle from the walk-in cooler and plopped down on the couch next to me, smelling of the sea, grinning his old grin, happy as can be. A little crab kept crawling out his ear and then going back in, and I stared at it, just because I didn’t really want

to look at the rest of Johnny. On the TV, Jerry Springer started delivering his homily for the week. Johnny watched for a while.

“What are you doing, Johnny?” I finally got the courage to say.

“I’ll just keep on working up here,” he said. “No time off at all. Somebody’s got to look after M.K.”

“Johnny — I think you’re *dead*.”

His face started to droop, not that it wasn’t already, from being underwater so long. “Thanks a bunch,” he said. “I knew Fat Harold wouldn’t understand, but I thought without him around you and me could work something out. Now you have to go and spoil it. You know how long it took me to get back up here from the bottom? That’s a hundred and fifty feet of pilings to climb up.”

He got up and went to the office to make a call. I could hear him talking to M.K., and it sounded like quite the lecture. Finally, he hung up and came back to the break room. His skin was really starting to slough off, and he stank.

“That’s done, anyway,” he said, and sat back down next to me with his fudgesicle. “What’s on?”

That’s when I woke up. The sun was just coming up over the Gulf. I’d like to think it was just a weird dream from seeing Johnny die and watching too much late night TV, but there was a nasty wet spot on the couch with a fudgesicle wrapper on it, and someone had tracked seawater all over the floor. The divers never could find Harold, either.

I don’t work at MP 293 anymore, and neither does anyone else. It got decommissioned pretty quickly and turned into an artificial reef. I sure wouldn’t go fishing there, though — you never know what you might bring up.

I haven’t talked to M.K., but I hear she’s in college now and doing well. That last conversation with her dad might just have scared her straight for good.

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The Spirit and the Slave

...Stuart Barrow

There was a time when the markets of many-columned Arum were famed throughout the known world. While Arum's strong walls stood, these markets contained anything the heart may desire: spices, jewels, the most beautiful of slaves, the most enchanting of diversions.

In the end days of Arum, it was the custom of the sorcerer Shehrevor to walk these markets with his entourage of spirits, searching the stalls, taverns, brothels and libraries for some new pleasure, some stimulus to his imagination, so that he might direct his arts to some new lust. He spoke to no-one. His spirits whirled around him like a breeze, carrying the scents and sounds of the market to their master, whispering of the secret thoughts and hidden treasures of the merchants.

Foremost among Shehrevor's spirits was an elemental, a creature of wind and fire. This creature had a name, but names have power and Shehrevor did not yield power. He called it Sprite, and he wore it like a mantle about himself.

It was Sprite who whispered to Shehrevor, in the last days of the fabled city, "She is here, my master."

There was a woman in fabled Arum, an Enchantress named Fatin. She walked the markets surrounded by her servants, each wearing a veil and robe identical to hers. She walked slowly through the market, staring unmoved at all manner of wonders. It was only when her jaded eyes fell upon Shehrevor that they sparked with life.

She murmured his name — "Shehrevor" — and her servants echoed her whisper. Her foremost servant, known as Fatin's Slave, stepped forward. Names have power, and this is what he was. His own mind had long since been forced from his head; now his thoughts were her thoughts, and he knew no different.

Shehrevor and Fatin stood facing each other. Their servants fell still. Then Shehrevor's Sprite rose into the air, flaring and crackling with anger. He called to the spirits of the market's great braziers, who flared into mighty towers of flame in answer. He glared at Slave, whose slack face gave no response.

A camel cried in alarm, and a stallholder began to weep. A spirit brought a whisper to Shehrevor's ear: Effendi, no! Please, no!

At the same instant, Shehrevor and Fatin turned on their heels and abruptly stalked away. Sprite remained, and Slave remained, and they regarded each other, Sprite with burning hatred, Slave with no emotion at all.

Sprite flared and flashed, and then Slave began to murmur. Sprite felt a pressure upon his mind. This was not like the spells of his master, which bound his will with words of power. This was different; this was a caress, exhorting him to release his control of his body and surrender his will. Sprite laughed, called to the dying embers of the braziers, and coaxed them briefly back to life, expending all their substance in one last flash of light. Slave blinked, and paused in his murmuring.

Then Slave nodded to Sprite, and turned and moved away.

“You should have followed him. You should have killed him. He is her right hand. He is the extension of her will in the city. She would be crippled without him.” Shehrevar was not angry. His analysis was cold, dispassionate. Yet Sprite was stung by the criticism. Normally, here in the room at the top of the tower, Shehrevar would hold these discussions cloaked in Sprite. Now the sorcerer stood aloof. “I will see her humbled.”

“He is her right hand,” returned Sprite. “He is the extension of her will. I could no more kill him than you could kill her. I am powerful. I am not that powerful.” Sprite moved to embrace his master, but Shehrevar turned and stalked away. “But nor could he kill me,” Sprite shouted, “and I am the extension of your will. No doubt she is right now telling him that he should have killed me.” Sprite laughed, but Shehrevar had left the room.

The Prince of gold-paved Arum held a betrothal feast for his only daughter. It was the way of things that both Shehrevar and Fatin should be invited; it was the way of things that neither would attend. They sent their representatives, and Sprite saw Slave again.

“Shall I kill him this time?” Sprite had asked.

“If you get the opportunity,” said Shehrevar, “but do not insult the Prince.”

“What do you care for the Prince?”

“I do not. But I will not lose face before...” Before her, but he did not say.

Sprite presented Shehrevar’s betrothal gift: a hundred precious stones, each with a spirit bound inside. Each spirit knew the answer to a question that the bride would ask during her marriage, should the bride think to speak it.

Fatin sent a dozen slaves from the corners of the known world, each an expert in a form of pleasure. Slave spoke the words of a charm, and delivered the slaves’ loyalty from the enchantress to the bride. He remained surrounded by his own entourage: nineteen slaves carved to bear his likeness.

Sprite’s presence caused fear among the courtiers. None would willingly stand within his radiance, and when he passed them, they cast about, looking for minor spirits bearing curses. Sprite was pleased at the effect he had; it meant that the courtiers watched and followed what he did. The spirits that followed him were no more than spies and tattletales, but the fearing whispers that followed him across the room were meat and drink to them.

Slave and his entourage danced in the banquet hall, each identical slave with a different woman, following identical steps. Each slave murmured; the courtiers were as afraid of Slave as they were of Sprite, and none danced willingly. The vizier watched nervously, unhappy with this enchantment but unable to break it.

As Sprite approached, Slave looked up. He ceased murmuring his charm, and allowed his partner to drift blankly away. He gestured to Sprite: Come dance with me. His exaggerated courtly movements overcame the emptiness of the expressionless face.

Sprite laughed. He drifted over, and gathered about Slave.

"I am to kill you if I can," he whispered in his ear, "save that I may not insult the Prince."

Slave nodded, as if to say: And I may do the same.

They held each other close. Slave murmured his charm, which Sprite felt only as a caress on his mind. Sprite returned the gentle touch with his flames. Try as he might, he could not even singe Slave's clothes.

If Slave enjoyed the heat of Sprite's fiery embrace, he gave no sign.

Nineteen slaves with nineteen partners danced identical steps; Slave and Sprite could not hear the music over the wind and crackle of Sprite's body.

"You danced." The room at the top of the tower was cold and still. Shehrevar's voice did not waver, but he no longer looked at Sprite.

"I tried to burn him, but he was proof against my fire. He tried to charm me, but he could not."

"So you danced."

"So we danced."

"You know what he is to her. You know what she is to me."

"I know."

"And you danced."

"And we danced."

Shehrevar took to leaving Sprite in the tower when he went into the city. He found fewer reasons to take himself into Sprite's embrace, and he used lesser spirits in his protections.

One morning he came home with a wound on his face.

"Was it her?" asked Sprite. "How did she do it?"

"It wasn't her," said Shehrevar, "it was just a man."

"Just a man?" Sprite touched Shehrevar's face, and called a healing spirit. "How can this happen? Men cannot penetrate your defences."

Shehrevar laughed, bitterly. "My defences were low. I was unaware."

"But still. Fear of you alone should keep them from..." Sprite's flames became still. "They have lost their fear of you."

"They are losing it."

“We shall have retribution.”

Again, the bitter laugh. “You think that will help? A street tough killed, and so what? The people take her side, and they lose their fear of me because they think you are enchanted.”

“Why do they think that?”

“Because they see you dancing with her Slave. They think he has bewitched you. They think you will betray me to her. They think you are not my slave.”

“I am your servant.”

“You are my slave.” Shehrevar took his staff, and recited a string of words. Sprite remembered the spell; it was the incantation that had originally bound him to Shehrevar’s service. If that incantation had weakened, he would have felt the words impress themselves upon his being as the sorcerer’s bonds were renewed. But the words had no power. Sprite felt nothing.

But he acted as if he were in pain, because that was what Shehrevar wanted.

Shehrevar did not ask for retribution, but Sprite took it upon itself. He called Shehrevar’s spies, and had them find the one who had hurt his master.

Then he let loose a beast summoned from beyond the world, which stalked the thug through the alleys. The beast’s roars brought fear to that quarter of the city; its victim’s cries cemented it in their hearts. Sprite hovered above the man’s home, burning white, taking the screams and sending them across Arum.

And then Sprite carefully and meticulously oversaw the man’s death. Shehrevar was right: there was no sign of coercion, none of the tell-tale residues of enchantment. The man had acted alone.

But when Sprite left, burning through the door, he saw a woman watching with the empty face of the enchanted. A slave’s face, thought Sprite, Slave’s face. The woman moved forward as if to speak, but Sprite burned her where she stood. He had no wish to talk.

“Untidy.”

“Necessary.”

“Perhaps.” Shehrevar was more relaxed now, though he still held back from Sprite’s form. In Sprite’s radiance he cast a long, flickering shadow. “She will be angry. Even over a single slave.”

“Does this concern us?”

“No.”

Sprite collected the reports from his master’s spies, sifted through them for a pattern that would tell him of Fatin’s plans. If she was angry, there was no sign of it — nothing had changed, not her movements, not her pleasures, not her defences. More likely,

thought Sprite, that she was pleased at goading him into a public display of power; such a display betrayed his master's uncertainty.

Was he being enchanted? He could detect no sign of it. He strained against his master's bonds, not to break them but to test them, to make sure they were still fast. He found comfort in those bonds, found comfort in performing to his master's will.

He was loyal.

He did not know how he could prove it.

Sprite hunted, alone. Shehrevar usually kept Sprite closer now, but the spirit was unable to take pleasure in his master's company. Shehrevar's orders were peremptory, Sprite's tasks trivial. Sprite had lost his position of trust; every command was a test, every instruction an assessment. Shehrevar berated him for any slowness of action, any independence of thought.

Now, Sprite revelled in his few moments of freedom. Nothing he did now could prove his love for his master; so be it. But he could prove his hatred of his master's enemy.

He sought out her servants, shadowed them, tricked them, attacked them when they were vulnerable. Sometimes they went easily, in a satisfying explosion of flesh, cloth and ash. Others were better protected, and it was only with his full strength and intellect that he proved victorious.

But he could not find Slave.

He wanted to find Slave.

"Three I have killed. Three more I have broken beyond usefulness, and another I have freed from enchantment with my guile. And you are angry!" Sprite hovered in the centre of the upper chamber, and the braziers flared as he did. "You fear her, and you let her control you with your fear!"

Shehrevar kept his voice level. "She goads you. She sends these servants to bait you, and you do her will. Who have you killed? No-one of value to her — but the daughter of the Spice-master. Who have you broken? The cousin of the Prince." And now, Shehrevar's control broke, his voice ringing through the chamber in a shattering shriek. "You are the extension of my will in this city, and the people know it! They think I did this, not her! You rouse Arum against me, and I will not have it!" Shehrevar's voice dropped to a whisper, and he continued, "Her arts are different to mine. I do nothing; I summon nothing, from nothing, to do my will. She uses what she finds, and destroys people in the process."

Sprite's body dimmed, and the braziers flickered and died. "Am I nothing, then, master?"

The sorcerer snapped out the words. "You are nothing." And he swept from the chamber.

Sprite was alone. Shehrevar formed a guard of Sprite's lieutenants, and no longer needed the protection of his former favourite. Sprite remained bound, but had no orders to carry out.

He spent some time in the firepit in the market place, watching the people. There was a change in the air. In the faces of the townsfolk, he saw fear reflected, as much as before, but there was anger, too. His master, though — his master was hated.

Sprite watched from the firepit as the people walked past. Surely — no! — there were more blank faces, more stiff movements. As he watched, he saw a man's jaw slacken, his empty eyes cast around, mechanical movements jerk him briefly across the square. And then a few mumbled words, and the townsman went about his business as before — and another man's eyes glazed as he fell under the enchantment.

It seemed to Sprite that Fatin's power had grown; as the town had come to hate Shehrevar, so they had grown to trust his enemy. They were forever afraid, yet now they surrendered willingly to her spells.

Sprite feared then for his master. My doing, he thought. My failing. He flexed his ethereal body, ready to streak back to his master's tower.

Someone saw him — a townsman, not enchanted. The townsman yelled, and pointed, and closed his eyes — he was inviting possession by Fatin. His eyes came open, blank and empty.

Sprite burned him, but not before half a dozen other townspeople had seen him — and again, surrendered their will. Then they all began chanting, and Sprite felt the caress on his mind once again.

Surrender. Release. Let go of yourself. The spell gathered power, pressed in on his mind. He tried to gather the firepit's spirit to his aid, but it was sulky, sullen, and didn't want to dance. It held him, though, sheltered, hiding him as best it could.

The spell was softer this time, without Slave's power to support it. And yet it gathered momentum, as more and more people gathered in their anger at Sprite, and their hatred of his master, and surrendered themselves to his enemy.

Even without Slave, Sprite found the spell seductive. What would happen if he surrendered himself? Would he fall under the enchantment, and betray his master? He was an elemental spirit. His will held his fiery energies to his shape. His will was his very being. If he surrendered, he would be as his master had said — nothing.

Then Slave entered the marketplace, striding and chanting. The runes on his cloak crackled with power, as they channelled magical energy from his mistress. His eyes found Sprite immediately, through the flames, and the two held each other in their gaze.

"Now you come to me," said Sprite. "You are hers and I hate you." Slave's face did not change. Sprite sneered. "I thought you were like me. My master thought you were like me. He thought that you had the power, the will, to enchant me."

Slave said nothing, made no movement. Sprite looked for a response, and saw nothing.

Slave began to murmur, and Sprite felt the pressure grow on his mind. Slave's power was no greater than before, but now the spell had the support of the townsfolk. But if Sprite released himself, if he surrendered...

If Fatin had gained a grasp on the city's mind, the balance was already broken. And Sprite was nothing, now.

No. Not nothing. He was still his master's slave.

Sprite broke away from Slave's glare, and looked across the marketplace. This was an army of the enchanted; once they dealt with him, there was nothing to stop them marching on Shehrevar's tower. Though the carnage would be immense, Shehrevar's spirits could not hold out against all of cold-hearted Arum, united against him.

If Sprite fell, his master was doomed.

But the pull to surrender, to give himself over to nothingness, was overwhelming. The pull wasn't only coming from Slave's chant: it was coming from within himself. Shehrevar's tower was a presence in his mind — his home, his prison. And there was nothing for him there.

Sprite gathered his energies. He stoked up the bonfire's spirit, roused it, got it angry, then took its flaring brilliance into himself. He called the nearby spirits, demanded that they feed his power. He flared now, white-hot and powerful. The enchanted townsfolk did not flinch, did not look away, even as his brightness burned through their eyes.

He smiled at Slave. "You are like me," he said. "You are nothing to me, nothing to her. You are nothing." For a moment, Slave paused in his chant, and stood still. Some vestige of his own mind caused his eyes to widen and his mouth to close. Nothing.

And Sprite released himself to Fatin's spell.

Without Sprite's will holding his body together, the forces within him exploded through the marketplace, through ill-fated Arum. Fatin's servants were incinerated, and the vestiges of Sprite's mind whipped their souls into frenzy. Nearby spirits exulted in the release of power, and threw themselves into the winds with a violent passion.

The splendid walls of Arum shook and shattered. The streets and buildings were torn asunder.

Slave stood at the centre of the maelstrom, holding his arms out against the swirling, scorching winds. His protective enchantments held momentarily, and his mouth moved itself slowly into a smile before he, too, was caught up in the release of Sprite's being.

From their towers at opposite sides of Arum, Shehrevar and Fatin watched the explosion and its aftermath.

Fatin wept silently, as though the loss of each slave gave her physical pain. Her mind drew inward, abandoning her control over those of her people that still remained. She fell to her knees, clumsy, broken.

Shehrevar's face was cold and stiff; his familiars gathered around him, anxiously awaiting orders that never came. He held his arms tightly around his body. He could not warm himself even in the bitter, burning wind.



The Jackal's Waltz

...Douglas A Van Belle

I would have taken a dozen meatheads like Gussy. She may not have been one of those big, bad and brutal fighting machines that challenged the bladder control of an enemy, but she was by far the best soldier I had ever found. She always thought before she acted, but not too much. She pushed when she had to, but let things coast when she could. She knew when to kick ass and when to take names. She always got it right.

When she saw Darns sitting there with his face still buried in his computer display, she instantly, instinctively got it perfect. Making enough noise to give the professor a fighting chance of reacting, she veered a good five yards to her right so she could 'accidentally' clout him in the back of the head with the bundle of poles she was carrying. She hit Darns just hard enough to knock him off the log he had claimed. She even managed to separate him, momentarily at least, from his damn computer.

Darns scowled at Gussy, but her friendly little nudge to the back of his skull probably saved his life. If she hadn't knocked his face out of the computer display, he would have never noticed the way Stokes was casually swinging around the shirt packed full of flinty rocks.

Stokes. There was a lot that could be said about Stokes, little of it complimentary. He was erratic, hotheaded and stupid. He was stupid even for a meathead, but I could always count on him. Regardless of the situation, regardless of the consequences, he would always push it too far. If I was worried about mayhem, I could just watch him because he was always going to be where it would start. At the end of any shore leave, I knew that I could find him simply by asking the local cops where they were holding him. He was always available when I wanted him for a mission because he was always sitting on someone's disciplinary shit list, guarding a forgotten outpost or marching around in circles, and sometimes, that kind of stupid brute was exactly what you wanted on a mission. Especially a suicide mission.

Darns barely managed to react fast enough, but his arm took enough of the impact to keep all the squishy parts of his head tucked safely inside the hard parts. I suppose that was a good thing, homicide being bad and all.

I didn't bother to yell at Stokes for sending our beloved Professor Darns tumbling across the camp. Partly because I wished I could have been the one knocking him around, but mostly because even if Stokes was mentally capable of understanding the fact that 0.73g made things easier to carry but did not reduce their momentum, he wouldn't have cared.

Darns was... I would have never picked Darns for anything. If you believed that our hosts, the Chaatok, were the galaxy's perfect hunters, then you also had to believe that Professor Jeremy Darns was something close to their opposite. Actually, no human could have compared to the nightmare of claws, teeth and predatory fury of the Chaatok, but you would think that for a mission this important, the suits dumping shit on our heads could have done better than Darns. I would have traded him for the worst soldier on the force. Hell, I would have traded him for a ballerina.

I hated everything about Darns. He was smart enough not to bitch, whine or complain, but even when he did the right thing, he managed to fuck it up. He went about not saying anything completely wrong. Sighing and frowning like he was disappointed in me or us or something, the professor shuffled unsteadily back over to his log, sat daintily with his legs crossed above the knee, and returned to his computer.

That really pissed Gussy off, and it pushed Stokes to within a neural twinge of a brutal homicide. Or maybe a stroke. Hard to tell the difference with Stokes.

"So Professor, how'd you manage to start a fire?" I asked Darns, using the question as an excuse to step in front of Stokes.

Darns unscrewed the lens from the video projector on his precious little computer and held it out over a pile of leaves. In moments, the point where it focused the sunlight started to smolder.

"Clever." I said, coldly.

"Thank Piggy."

"Who?"

"Piggy, from *Lord of the Flies*. He used his eyeglasses to start fires."

"Whatever." I had no idea what Darns was talking about. "Put the fire out so we can go."

"I figured we could use the fire to harden the spear points," Darns objected. "And we are going to need a fire tonight."

"We aren't camping here." I informed him. "There's a spring a couple miles south."

"No," Darns objected.

I glared at Darns, and when that did not elicit the appropriate response, I lifted an eyebrow.

"The area around a spring will be dangerous," Darns squawked, finally realizing how close I was to setting Stokes loose. "This is a semi-arid savanna ecosystem, a great deal like the Serengeti used to be back on Earth, and on the Serengeti the largest predators tended to stalk the waterholes, taking prey as it came in to drink."

Somewhere in there, Darns had slipped out of a horrified squawk and into his 'I'm a professor' lecturing voice. He probably thought he was trying to contribute, but that loud confident version of his nasally voice really grated on my nerves.

"Perfect," I said.

"Do you realize how big the predators are here?"

I held my hand even with the top of my head. "About six and a half feet tall."

"Feet?"

"Two metres, Professor. Two metres."

Darns started flipping through images in his computer, trying to find the example he wanted to show me, but I wasn't interested.

"We're moving. Put the fire out."

“We should at least...”

“Professor! Enough!”

“Okay. Sorry.” Darns surrendered. “Give me a few seconds.”

Stripping off his field vest, Darns pulled off his shirt before donning the vest again and spreading the discarded shirt on the ground next to the fire. He laid a thick layer of green leaves on the garment, followed by an inch of sand. He then used one of the bark-like scales from a nearby tree to scoop ashes and coals onto the sand. Lifting the corners of the shirt up, he tied them together to form a bag and nodded at me. Apparently Professor Darns was ready to go.

I had to put Stokes on point to keep him and his menagerie of lethal twitches away from Darns.

“So, Professor, is this everything you hoped for?” I asked as I sat down on the empty half of Darns’s log and started chipping bits of flint off of another rock. Although Darns hadn’t known exactly how to make stone tools, he had found enough info to help me figure it out.

Darns pulled his head out of the computer projection, but he had to think for a long second before replying. “Hoped for?”

“Is our suicidal little safari worth pulling strings, calling in favors and whatever else you had to do to get in on it?” I asked, speaking loud enough to make sure Gussy and Stokes heard.

Darns looked at me, still not getting it.

“You got some kind of death wish and want to go out in a blaze of glory?”

That finally seemed to register and Darns stared at me like I was crazy. “You think I *want* to be here?”

I don’t know what I expected Darns to say, but that wasn’t it.

“Some suits yank me out of the middle of a lecture. No explanation, no apologies, nothing. They ship me halfway across the galaxy under lock and key, thank me for volunteering for this damn hunt, give me an hour to write a letter to my wife and half that to raid their supply closet before they toss me into a shuttle with you meatheads. Who would want that?”

“So why the hell would they want you so bad?” Gussy huffed from across the camp. “You got some secret Guru Voodoo to help us kill one of these things?”

“Yeah, what you got?” Stokes jumped in to follow Gussy.

“I’m just a professor,” Darns said.

“Bullshit,” Gussy snapped at him.

“Yeah, bullshit,” Stokes sang Gussy’s chorus.

“They wouldn’t pull Kingali from our team for just some pansy-ass professor,” Gussy said.

“They did,” Darns said, spreading his arms as if presenting himself. “Ancient literature.”

“Literature?” Stokes cursed. I wasn’t completely certain that Stokes knew what literature was, or why he might hate it.

“Fucking literature professor,” Gussy snorted. “They don’t make’m any prissier than lit profs.”

“Actually, philosophy profs are the prissy ones,” Darns said, deadpan. “But I study the social construction of the hero in epic poetry and the adventure genre, so I guess it’s a fair enough mistake.”

There was a long moment of silence, then Gussy snorted. I think it was supposed to be a laugh, but her honking, squeaking spasm sounded like she was trying to dislodge a squirrel from her nasal cavity.

“I don’t buy it,” I said as Gussy continued her struggle to evict the squirrel. “Suits are stupid, but not *that* stupid. They must have had a damn good reason to pull Kingali for you.”

Darns tried to ignore me, but I crossed my arms and stood there until he said something.

“It seems that you meatheads get your asses handed to you in every simulation they run,” Darns said. “It’s so bad that it doesn’t seem to matter if there are four of you or just three, so I get to be the lucky fourth casualty.”

“That still doesn’t explain why they wanted you,” Gussy said, her voice cold and hateful, though it wasn’t exactly clear where that hatred was aimed. She detested suits and desk jockeys.

“Yeah, it don’t.” With Stokes, the target of his hatred was quite clear.

There was a very long silence.

“You know stuff,” Stokes said. Surprisingly enough, he was the first to catch on to the fact that we needed any hint of hope we could find, even if it came from a pansy-ass professor. “You made a fire, and told us where to find these rocks. They sent you ‘cause you know stuff to help us kill something.”

“Stories,” Darns said. “I write about mythical heroes, so I know a lot about the stories they used to tell about fighting without real weapons and I have read all about how people used to survive in the wilderness.”

“But...” Stokes was thinking so hard that it seemed to hurt his back, forcing him to hunch over and wince.

“And I know how find shit in the computer,” Darns added.

Stokes nodded. He still didn’t quite understand, but he no longer seemed compelled to figure it out.

“But that still doesn’t explain why you are here,” I told Darns, giving him The Glare.

Darns set his jaw.

“You know,” I growled. “You know why they sent you.”

The professor had a pretty good glare of his own, kind of a knowing, piercing scowl. I could see it melting the souls right out of twittering coeds.

“This is my command, my team,” I said, evenly. “Every decision I make out here is life and death and I don’t have to tell you that death is looking pretty damn likely.”

Darns let his scowl slip, frowned and looked off into the distance.

“I need every bit of everything I can get, and that includes you,” I said. “No matter how worthless, weak and harmless you might be, you are one of the weapons they gave me, and I need to know how to use you. I need to know *why* the fucking suits dumped you on me.”

“I’m here because I’m a poet,” Darns eventually said, his voice barely above a whisper. “They sentenced me to death for being a God-damn poet.”

“A poet?” Gussy grabbed the sides of her head and grimaced. I had often joked about people having strokes, but it was something else entirely to think I might actually be witness to one. “Why in the hell? A fucking poet?”

“The stories the uglies write about these hunts are a big deal,” Darns said, his voice an unidentifiable mix of emotions. “And since you are going to fail anyway, the suits seem to think it’s worth sacrificing me for a good story.”

“Shit,” Gussy spat. “I told you this hunt was all some pony show so those fat-assed...”

“No.” Darns said, softly, but with enough conviction to stop Gussy’s impending tantrum. “I don’t think...I... When the suits and spooks briefed me, I could see the fear on their faces. They were afraid.”

Darns looked like he wanted to say more. He looked like he wanted to scream, but he didn’t. He just shook his head with a sigh of resignation and turned back to his computer.

“So this hunt isn’t a goodwill gesture by the Chaatok, or a diplomatic coup for us humans, is it?” I asked.

“I suspect it’s a test.” Darns stopped and took a deep breath, the wavering kind of deep breath that a person takes when they are on the edge of breaking down, like chicks do when they know you are about to dump them.

“The Chaatok have been campaigning against us on The Council, trying to deny us status as a predator.” Darns looked up from his computer. He looked right at me. “And if we aren’t predators...”

“Then we are prey,” I finished the very unpleasant thought.

“The suits think that if I can write a story that makes us sound...predatory enough, it might let them salvage something,” Darns said. “It might give our allies on The Council enough leverage to keeps us off the menu.”

I looked over at my team. It was clear that Stokes didn’t really get any of that, but Gussy did, and that was enough. Stokes would follow her lead.

Darns volunteered to sit first watch and I let him, mostly because I couldn’t figure out what the hell else I was supposed to do with a poet. I set a watch schedule to make certain that someone would be up if something big and nasty wandered by, but I could tell by the way that Darns half-ignored me that he wasn’t going to be waking any of us for our shifts. And I was right. When my nagging little internal clock convinced me that I should have been up for the last watch of the night, Darns was still sitting there with his face buried in his computer. He looked like shit kicked up hill and wrung out, but at least he was trying to do what little he could to help.

“So have you found anything in there that we can use?” I asked Darns.

Without looking up from the computer, Darns nodded toward some odd-shaped sticks. I picked one up, but before I could ask what it was, Darns was projecting an image from the computer. It showed a primitive looking man setting the butt of a thin spear in the little cup formed by the crook at the end of the stick. With the spear held along its length, the man used the stick to help fling the spear a very, very long ways.

“An atlatl,” the professor said. “Sort of. It extends your leverage when throwing a spear.”

“I see that,” I said, watching the throwing technique.

“All the animals here seem to be armored, so I don’t think the added range will help, but the increased velocity should give you better penetrating power.”

I nodded and patted Darns on the shoulder.

“Anything in there to help us with some strategy?”

After a few seconds of staring off into the distance, Darns shrugged.

“Maybe. I’ve got translations of the Chaatok sagas in here, and a bunch of them from the other Council species they have invited here for a hunt, but those stories aren’t going to help us much. The uglies are real big on screaming charges with claws flying, and the details in the stories focus more on where the blood splatters than the strengths or weaknesses of the animals they attacked. The butchering records might be helpful though.”

Darns pulled up a diagram for field dressing an animal that looked like a water buffalo assembled out of steak knives. Pointing to the diagram and flipping through different close-up shots he said, “Butchery is something of an art form for the council species and the Chaatok especially. In fact, the species on this planet are named after the first individual to direct the butchering of one. Some of the details might give us some ideas about vulnerabilities.”

“A weak spot in the armor of one of these beasts might help,” I said, hoping that Darns would eventually come up with a hell of a lot more to offer.

The spear throwers worked. They worked damn well. They had an annoying tendency to drive the point of the spear down as you threw, but since we were using them for power and not range, and since the flanks of these animals were roughly comparable to the side of a proverbial barn, that didn’t matter much. The problem was that all the extra power the spear throwers helped us put into the spears still wasn’t anywhere near enough. The teardrop-shaped scales that covered every creature we found were easily as hard as composite body armor.

“What in the hell is this?” I asked as we wearily pushed through the thicket that defined the edge of our camp.

“A nap,” Darns said as he sat up and stretched his neck.

“I mean that,” I said, pointing at the muddy basket steaming away over the fire.

“Shit, I would think that even a meathead was smart enough to recognize food when he saw it,” Darns said, deadpan.

The instant Darns said food, Gussy and Stokes rushed in. We were trained to go days without eating, but that didn’t mean we liked it.

“But how?” I asked.

“The clay is the secret,” Darns said. “As long as the basket stays wet, it won’t burn and the clay keeps...”

“No, how did you find something to eat?”

“I found a file on bird snares,” Darns said, shrugging as he nodded at his computer. “Nothing flies here. No bird analogues at all, but it was pretty easy to modify the snares

to snag some of those little climbing animals, and they had no reason to associate a human scent with predation, so..."

"But I thought traps were taboo," I said as I reached in with one of the little baskets and scooped out some of the soup. The baskets were actually pairs of baskets, nested inside each other with a bowl-shaped layer of clay mashed in between. I could taste the clay, but I wasn't about to complain about muddy soup.

"For the official hunt that would be a serious breach of etiquette," Darns said. "But a couple of sagas talk about the hunting team scavenging a carcass to keep their strength up..."

Darns let the statement trail off as he reached into the cooking basket using a pair of sticks. With surprising deft, the professor pulled out leg quarters of a rabbit-sized animal, set them on pieces of the scaly bark from the surrounding trees and started handing them around.

"Maybe I don't hate you so much," Stokes said as he bit into the meat. "You're still a pansy-ass prick, but maybe I don't hate you so much no more."

The professor nodded, taking that as the closest thing to a compliment he was going to get, and wandered back over to the far side of the camp.

"Don't you get tired of staring into that fucking computer?" I asked Darns as I finished my dinner and wandered over to his log.

"I have four days to write the last story I will ever write," Darns said.

"Two days," I corrected him.

He looked up at me.

"A little over two days left before that shuttle leaves, with or without us," I said.

Darns nodded.

After a long pause I asked, "So what have you written so far?"

"Nothing," Darns said.

"Nothing? You've had your head buried in that thing since we landed. How can you have nothing?"

"Stone tools, atlatls, bird snares, cooking baskets, and I've been reading the sagas the other species have written about their hunts," Darns frowned and looked off into the growing shadows. "Those sagas... There's something... They are more than just stories. You have to be real careful about translations, especially from alien languages, but these hunts are more than just hunts and the sagas are something more than just stories."

"They'd better be," I said. I nodded back toward the other side of the camp. "Gussy and Stokes...they are good soldiers, good people really."

At that moment Gussy decided that Stokes needed a smack upside the head. It was just a minor attitude correction, but the blow was still more than hard enough to leave Stokes spitting blood.

"They may not be dinner-party people, but they're still good people and I... I have to believe that this stupid-ass story of yours is worth giving up the chance that Kingali would have given us."

Darns nodded, then after a long second he asked, "What are the odds that she kills him?"

I gave Darns a questioning look and he nodded my attention back across the camp. Still drooling a bit of blood, Stokes was sitting just a little too close to Gussy, and he was talking just a little too enthusiastically. Gussy had a pained expression on her face.

“Has he been doing that the whole time?” I asked, trying to think back through the last two days, and also all our training sims.

“Yep,” Darns said, then he switched to dead serious. “He just doesn’t realize that he’s barking at the wrong bush, does he?”

It took a moment for the innuendoes in the comment to sink in.

“Just because she’s a meathead, doesn’t mean she’s a muffer.”

“She is,” Darns said, absolutely certain.

I looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m a literature professor,” Darns said, almost sadly. “The only time I ever see a heterosexual woman is when a girl gets lost trying to find the psychology department.”

“I thought you said you were married?”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” Darns said, slipping into the dry deadpan that I suspected was his idea of a humorous tone. “But that...that is a whole different story.”

I chuckled, mostly in appreciation of what it took for a man in our situation to even try to keep his sense of humor.

“Yes,” Darns said, suddenly serious.

“Yes? Yes what?”

“Yes, I get tired of burying my face in the computer,” Darns said. “Sick to death of it.”

I nodded, clapped him on the shoulder, gently enough to make sure I didn’t break him, and wandered back over to the meathead half of the camp.

It was Gussy’s watch when the monster let us know it was there. The beast, some kind of big predator, never howled, growled or did anything like that, but its presence seemed to radiate out to fill the camp, as if it was big enough to exert a gravitational pull on your spleen. Slowing to a stop at the very edge of the firelight, it turned slightly toward us and considered us for a while. It was shit-your-pants scary. Metallic looking claws and sharp edges jutting out of everywhere, it was a bizarre amalgam of a double-ended rhino, a T-rex, and a battle bot. Standing in the shadowy limits of the light, it almost didn’t look real.

“Let’s keep that fire built up,” I said, after it lost interest and wandered off.

I got nods from a wide-eyed Stokes and a slack-jawed Gussy, but Darns hardly seemed to notice, or to care. He was already back into his computer, working on something. Perhaps he was finally getting down to writing the saga of our impending demise.

Whatever Darns was doing during the night, by morning he had a plan. I’m sure Gussy hated it and that meant Stokes hated it, but I didn’t give either of them the opportunity to say anything. I didn’t have to ask to know that neither had any better ideas and I sure as hell had nothing better to try. That didn’t stop me from resisting, but after a long morning of failing to kill anything, and damn near getting my head taken off by the

sudden kick of an annoyed grazer the size and shape of a ballistic reentry pod, I went with Darns' plan.

"Which one, Professor?" I asked, crouched next to him at the edge of the grassland that opened west of the waterhole.

"That one."

Darns pointed at a sleek animal that looked vaguely like an oversized, fish-scaled antelope which hadn't been put together right. It had four springy looking legs, but instead of coming in under the creature's body, the legs came out of the top. About six inches above the animal's haunches, a knobby joint turned each leg back toward the ground and the body of the creature hung from those odd legs, giving the animal both long springy limbs and a very low center of gravity. Beneath the front edge of that low-slung body, a flexible snout, like a stubby elephant's trunk, hung down and moved around along the ground, snuffling around. Along the animal's flanks, vertical slits opened and closed in a sequence that rippled from one end to the other as it breathed.

It was a standard body structure for a good proportion of the animals we'd encountered, though the odd form was a bit exaggerated on our fishalope.

"We might be able to kill that." I looked at Darns. "If we can catch it. It's got to be faster than hell."

"I think it's the fastest thing out here," Darns said. "According to the butchering record I found, it's got leg tendons stretched so tight that cutting them from one side of the leg and not the other snaps the bone. Springs like that should make it fly."

"Like I said, it's going to be fast. We'll never catch it. We might be better off going after one of the bigger slower ones, like that moose-looking thing."

"No, we can catch it," Darns said. "We just have to take our time."

"I'll give you a couple hours."

Darns didn't react to that.

Standing up, Darns trotted toward the fishalope, waving his short, thick spear and shouting. The creature spotted him and wasted no time bounding off into the distance. The professor was right, it really could move. The initial spring was a good ten feet up and thirty feet away and it covered a hundred yards before I could swear, but Darns was completely unperturbed. He just trotted after it. About ten minutes later, I spotted the fishalope bounding back towards me, with Stokes jogging in its wake. When it was close enough, I took my turn, leaping up and shouting, chasing the animal towards where Gussy waited. It might have been my imagination, but by the time she jumped out and took over, herding it toward where Darns was supposed to be waiting in the place where Stokes had started, the fishalope looked like it was struggling for breath. The ripples were running down the vertical breathing slits faster. A lot faster.

It was almost over by the time I got my second turn to chase it. The fishalope was starting to look haggard. With the vertical slits on its sides buzzing with effort, it walked between listless bounds, trying to snatch moments of rest.

We started pushing it a little harder, each of us running after it with a little more zest as we realized that we really could tag-team it into exhaustion.

Our circle gradually shrank until we were just a few dozen yards apart and our chase became more of a tennis match as we stomped, shouted and swung our sticks at it to scare it back and forth between us. When it finally realized it was trapped, it

panicked. It darted back and forth frantically, buzzing and kicking at everything, and then it was over. The fishalope staggered, fell, struggled back to its feet and just stood there, its breathing slits a blur as we closed in around it.

Stokes, a big-ass grin on his face, stepped to within a few yards and launched his spear. The sharpened stick was pretty hefty, a good ten feet long, and the fire-hardened tip was pretty damn sharp, but the spear just hit the scales of the fishalope and glanced off, falling harmlessly to the ground.

Gussy tucked her spear under her arm and charged in, but even with all of her weight and momentum behind the spear, all she managed to do was knock the animal on its ass. At least I think it was the ass. Regardless, no real harm done. Our fishalope struggled back to its feet. The damn thing was even starting to look like it might be catching its second wind.

“Professor, how do we kill it?”

Darns ignored me, staring off into the distance and shaking his head as if he were debating some invisible demon.

“Professor, how do we kill it?” I shouted.

Darns looked at me, but it took a long moment before any hint of comprehension crossed his face. He looked at the fishalope, then at me, then he said, “We don’t. We don’t kill it.”

“What do you mean we don’t kill it?” Gussy snarled.

Instead of answering, Darns ran forward and swung his short, thick spear like an oversized baseball bat. He hit one of the fishalope’s spindly legs right at a joint. The damage didn’t look that great, but the animal did go down and before I could swear at Darns, he jumped up in the air and stomped on one of the animal’s legs with all his weight. The snapping, popping noise from the breaking bones was nauseating.

“Jesus.” Stokes said, turning his face away.

Darns stomped again, destroying another leg, looked at what he had done, stumbled off a few steps and retched.

Signaling Gussy and Stokes to wait, I let Darns hurl away. When his body finally decided to quit trying to find something to expel from his empty stomach, I went over.

“What in the hell was that for?” I asked, softly, trying to sound like I gave a shit.

“The predators...” Darns said, spitting bile. “That big predator from last night has no name.”

Darns had definitely lost it. Which, actually, wasn’t that surprising. Three long days of struggling to balance the expectation of death with just enough hope to keep from rolling over and saying “fuck it all” was brutal to the point of torture. And coming out the other end was no picnic. I had seen the unexpected return of that hint of real hope take down the most grizzled of veterans. There was something perverse about realizing you had just cheated death. It was like your mind suddenly unleashed all the fear that the acceptance of impending doom had let you ignore. Busting up the legs of the fishalope was an odd way for Darns to blow that out of his brain, but it was a hell of a lot better than putting a spear in my back.

“Let’s hold off on field dressing it until the professor can check those butchering guides in the computer,” I said. “Stokes, I think that if you take a spear to this thing’s underside, right there by that snout thing, you can put it out of its misery.”

“No.” Darns said, stumbling back over toward the animal.

“What do you mean, no?” Gussy snapped.

“We need it alive,” Darns said.

“Like hell we do,” Gussy barked, raising her spear and approaching menacingly. “We hunted it down. We kill it, butcher it and hump it back to the shuttle and we are done.”

“We need it alive.” Darns insisted, placing himself between the spear and the fishalope.

Taking a cue from Gussy, Stokes grabbed Darns and pulled him away, clearing the way for her to spear the underside of the animal.

“Wait,” I said, putting just enough grunt behind my voice to make sure Gussy stopped. “We’ve managed the hard part. Let’s just keep our heads.”

Everybody stopped and looked at me.

“It doesn’t hurt to keep it alive ‘til we get it back to camp. Just truss up its good legs with a belt and start humping it back,” I said. “I think the important thing is to get back to camp before we lose our fire. I also want to get back with enough daylight to gather plenty of wood for the night.”

Gussy shrugged and said to Stokes, “Hell, you and I are the mules and if we gut it now we’ll both be a bloody mess by the time we carry it all of the way back to camp.”

Stokes accepted Gussy’s rationalization without question, probably without really comprehending it, and much to our stupid meathead’s delight, it turned out the easiest way to carry the fishalope was for the two of them to walk side by side, arm in arm, and sling it across both of their shoulders in sort of a couple’s version of a fireman’s carry. Gussy handled the weight of the fishalope easily and endured the rest of the experience with a pained look on her face.

After we got back to camp, I was fully convinced that it was a good thing I indulged Darns’ second thoughts about killing the fishalope. He was absolutely out of his skull; it wouldn’t have taken much to push him all the way into a meltdown.

Darns was almost manic. Gathering firewood, tufts of feathery grassy kinds of plants, twigs and just about anything else that would burn, he built dozens of huge mounds around the edges of our little clearing. Then he threw himself into making what had to be torches. Pitchy goo, wrapped in grass, and more pitchy goo from the trees. He made dozens and dozens of them. Then he dove into his computer display with the same manic ferocity.

It was a weird way to celebrate our success. We just sat in silence around the fire, watching Darns freak out and trying not to notice the suffering animal lying on the ground. That was really tough. The haggard, stuttering buzzing of the fishalope’s breathing slits was hard to ignore.

Without warning or provocation, Darns suddenly threw down his computer and ran over to the fishalope, pointing at the middle of its back.

“There’s a joint right here,” Darns said. “In all the butchering records and in those little climbers we ate... The spine is like a truss made out of two laminated spirals of bony plates, tendon and muscle, but they also have a modified hinge joint right in the middle.”

I had seen all kinds of crazy in my time, but that manic, swirling panic burning away behind Darns' eyes was something else.

"Side to side, laterally, the animals here are extremely agile, dangerous," Darns said, staring at me until I nodded.

It was past dusk, but still well before full night, when the monster returned. We all felt that unidentifiable sense of the big predator's presence, but it was the fishalope that first recognized that sense of foreboding for what it was. The injured animal made a bleating noise, froze for a moment, and then suddenly started thrashing around, making a racket that sounded like a pack of wild dogs fighting over an accordion. A few minutes later we heard the big predator, thrashing about in the trees just out of sight.

"Damn, I was hoping we wouldn't see that thing again." I said, scooting closer to the fire and picking up one of the spears.

"Predators are always good at tracking down wounded animals," Darns said.

Something about the way Darns said that made me uneasy, but it was his reaction to the beast, or lack thereof, that sent a chill down my spine. He wasn't surprised to hear the beast. He had been expecting it. Suddenly the professor's torches and big piles of wood made sense.

"You knew it would come," I said, accusingly.

"The predators don't have names," Darns said, as if he thought it meant something important.

I looked at Darns, and the look of success in his eyes told me the last thing I wanted to know.

"You wanted it to come." I couldn't express the rage and disbelief that choked my mind. "You made us keep the fishalope alive to make sure that monster would come back."

"It might not have come after a carcass," Darns said, his voice devoid of the slightest hint of humanity. "But a wounded animal...wounded animals make noise, thrash around and give off scents of distress. No matter how that thing hunts, a wounded animal would have to do something that attracts it."

"What in the holy living fuck were you thinking, you crazy son of a bitch!" I screamed. "We can't fight that thing off. Hell, we couldn't even get a spear into this stupid fishalope, and *that* monster is built like a fucking assault tank!"

"You, son, of, a, a, bitch." Gussy stood, dropped her spear and started striding over toward Darns, pulling her arm back to strike.

"Not now," I barked at Gussy.

Gussy opened her mouth. She spoke. She said something, but I didn't hear any of it. The beast was charging. There was no hesitation at the edge of the firelight tonight.

It was even more of a nightmare than I had thought. A good twelve feet high at the shoulder, it carried at least the mass of an elephant, but in a more elongated form. Like the fishalope, its legs came out of the top with the thick armored body hanging down close to the ground, and it had a series of breathing slits that opened and closed in sequence along its flanks, but that basic body structure was where the similarities ended. The predator was covered by a gnarled hide that looked like metal slag, its

body was studded with a random scattering of short, blade-like horns, and it ran on its knuckles, its fists opening slightly — exposing a bundle of foot-long claws — every time it lifted a foot off the ground. A ridge of horns like huge shark teeth ran up the outside of each leg, and another ridge of horns stretched from a two-foot long monster of a horn on the tip of its front snout, all the way up to where the top of the body met the front legs.

It was clear that the monster was entirely focused on the fishalope. In one motion it eviscerated the wounded creature with a slashing claw and seized it in a wicked pair of vertically opposed jaws. Flinging blood and gore in every direction, the predator shook the life out of the fishalope with a single sideways snap of its front end, and then it began backing out of our camp.

My thoughts immediately jumped to what it would take to hunt down another fishalope. If we hit out at dawn, we could easily kill another one before lunch and that would give us plenty of time to get it to the shuttle before sunset.

Then the monster hesitated.

The professor had cut off its retreat with a fire, a big fire, and that wasn't all. Darns was running around with a torch, lighting all of the brush-and-wood piles.

The beast turned completely around, twice, clawing at the ground as its primitive mind tried to comprehend the encircling ring of fire. Dropping the fishalope, it stood absolutely still for several seconds. Then it charged at me.

I reacted before I even realized what was happening. I braced the spear under my arm, jumped to the side and tried to drive the point of my sharpened stick into the crease between its foreleg and body. The impact drove me backwards and knocked me to the side, but the spear did no damage.

Stokes charged in and put all his weight into a stab at its rear flank, but the beast scarcely noticed and when it spun around, it had me.

Even though I managed to hold onto the spear as I rolled to my feet, I was off balance and the predator was instinctively charging toward the spot where it knew my momentum was carrying me. That was when Darns leapt in. The professor waved a torch at the monster and screamed like a little girl gone psycho. Not exactly out of the training manual, but the prissy little wimp actually leapt into the fight. And he accomplished something.

The beast shied away from the professor's torch.

After a long moment of confusion, the monster made a half-hearted charge at Gussy, but Gussy had already worked out the beast's reaction to fire. Shouting at the monster and waving her arms to get it to charge her, she worked the fire. Keeping close to the flames, leaping past them whenever the beast looked like it might actually get close to her, she distracted it, giving us the chance to find a way to do some damage.

Stokes attacked the ass end of the creature again, without success. The tail snout was just as heavily armored as the front snout, and a reflex kick from the rear leg nearly took off Stokes' head.

Realizing that there was no way we were ever going to kill the thing, I switched tactics. I grabbed a torch, and when the beast turned toward me I thrust it at the monster, trying to drive the predator toward a thin spot in the encircling ring of bonfires.

The beast lurched away from me, but its instincts wouldn't let it run past the fire and when it changed its mind, it whipped itself around so quickly and it came back at me so suddenly that I damn near caught that two-foot-long snout horn with my face.

I flinched. Swiping at it with the torch as I stumbled backwards, I accidentally struck it with the burning ball of pitch and twigs.

Every battle has that one image, impact, sound, or smell that imprints itself upon your soul and that incidental swipe of the makeshift torch was it. That was the indelible moment. After everything that had happened, that splat of burning pitch that stuck to the beast would be the one thing that defined all those days toiling in the face of death.

Panicked by the fire sticking to its snout, the monster lurched backwards, ducked down and then spun in place. It bent in the middle, almost in half, then sprang around and seemingly by accident it brought its snout right up into Gussy, driving the big horn up through her thigh, lifting her off the ground.

I had never imagined that Gussy could scream like that: hurt, surprised, fragile... human. It was the first sound I had heard from the fight. It was the only sound I heard.

Suddenly reversing the direction of its pirouette, the beast dropped and twisted its head, snapping its snout back the other way, driving the long row of smaller horns into her stomach and chest.

Flopping forward, Gussy seemed to cling to the beast. Her arms wrapped around what you would have to call its neck. Her mouth stayed open but it spewed blood instead of noise. Still, her eyes managed to scream.

I rushed forward, but stopped. Helpless.

Darns came running in, holding a long spear up above his head, like a pole-vaulter. The spear hit the side of the beast and it did no damage whatsoever, but as it slid along the flank, it caught under the edge of one of the vertical breathing slits and the instant the tip slid under that armored flap, the beast reacted.

With the kind of response that could only be driven by the deepest instinct, the predator twisted away from the spear and its rear leg shot out to the side.

Darns was standing too close to the monster for the claws to open up and slash him, but the half-clenched fist caught him just above the knee and the blow transformed him into a rag doll. Darns's leg snapped back even as it bent at mid thigh. Tilting forward as his body flew backward, he made a complete rotation and a half in the air before landing on his chest. As his limbs flew out in impossibly contradictory directions, he looked up at me. His face was questioning, desperate for some confirmation that I understood.

I had no idea what the professor thought he was teaching me, but Stokes did. For all of his intellectual shortcomings, when it came to fighting and killing, Stokes was a genius, and he instantly understood the hint of vulnerability that Darns had exposed.

Stokes waited until the beast's weight was coming down on its hind limb before he charged in from the rear. He used the beast's own mass and momentum to pin that lethal hind leg to the ground. He also went for one of the breathing slits well in front of the hinge joint in the middle of its spine. That put him far enough forward to take advantage of the beast's instinctual reaction to flinch away from the invading spear

point. Stokes drove a good foot worth of sharpened stick into the monster and darted away toward the front, escaping unharmed.

The beast spun, bucked, reared up and swiped at the spear with its hind leg, accidentally scattering our fire with its thick tail.

I saw a hint of grayish brown blood at the base of the violated breathing slit and I didn't hesitate. I scooped up a spear, hesitated just long enough to get the timing right, took three running steps and drove the spear into the same breathing slit on my side. I didn't quite have Stokes's feel for the optimal moment of attack, but the beast was wounded and distracted.

Our dance with the beast turned in our favor as Stokes and I coordinated our attacks. The monster may have been a killing machine, but it was stupid, hardly smarter than Stokes, and it exposed itself over and over to that same attack.

Through it all, I swear Gussy was fighting with us. Impaled on those horns, her arm flailed about and her hands seemed to claw at the beast's eyes. I knew it was just my imagination, but I caught glimpses of her face during the fight and it seemed like she was there.

Fighting for every last shred of life, the beast didn't die easy, but it did die. Without warning, right in the middle of a swing of its horned snout, it collapsed into a heap, like a building brought down with explosives. It was obviously dead, but we shoved a few more spears in anyway.

I pulled Gussy off the horns of the beast and laid her down. She had died quickly. The row of horns running up the monster's snout had torn her almost in half and there was nothing left of her stomach or chest. It made me sick. I had lost men before, but for some reason, seeing her like that, being forced to admit she was dead, gnawed at me. I didn't know why. I didn't even like her. Hell, I didn't even know her first name, but it still felt like a gut-wrenching personal loss.

Stokes stomped over to Darns. Ignoring the man's injuries, Stokes grabbed him by the hair, dragged him over and shoved his head down at Gussy's mutilated body.

"See what you did?" Stokes screamed.

With that question Stokes gave Darns a crushing right cross to the face.

Darns didn't make a sound as he flopped back over toward his log.

"We had our kill," Stokes shouted as he stomped over and grabbed Darns for another round.

Darns just stared at Stokes with dull eyes, almost like the professor welcomed the assault.

"Stokes," I barked. It came out as more of a shriek than the command I was going for, but it still worked. Stokes hesitated.

"Get over here and help me cut this fucking monster up," I said. "I want to start humping it back to the shuttle at the crack of dawn."

After a long moment of trying to think, one of the tectonic plates in Stokes' head shifted. He dropped Darns and stomped over to help me.

Somewhere in all the thrashing about, the beast had given itself a substantial gash in the gut. I grabbed a flint knife and set to extending that while Stokes chose a more

Neolithic approach. Pounding on the beast with a big rock, Stokes managed to break one of the bigger blade-like horns off of the creature's leg. Once Stokes got the horn's serrated edge in under the armor scales, it cut through hide and flesh with ease.

"Tell me what you're doing." Darns said, his voice weak.

I looked over at Darns, having trouble believing he was still functioning enough to talk. Hell, I was amazed he was still alive.

Stokes dropped his makeshift knife, murder glowing in his dim-witted eyes, but I stopped my meathead with The Glare.

"What?" I asked Darns.

"Describe the butchering to me," Darns said, struggling to drag himself over to his precious little computer. "We have to document the butchering. For the saga."

"You and your fucking story," I growled.

"It's important," Darns said as he fought through the adrenaline shudders to activate his computer. "The Chaatok...all Council species...they treat the butchering like an art form. I need details."

I desperately wanted to be rid of Darns. I wanted to rush over and squeeze the life out of his skinny little neck, but that look in his eyes... I wished I had known he was capable of that kind of determination and focus. I wished I had known from the get go that I had that kind of weapon on my team.

Turning back to the carcass, I started rattling off details. Even after Darns quit scratching at his computer, I kept up the monologue and by dawn, Stokes and I had what looked like the meatiest chunks of the monster dressed out into several 50-pound, hide-wrapped lumps.

"Packs," I said. "We'll make a couple of packs to carry it, maybe make a couple of trips."

Stokes nodded agreement, but that didn't mean much beyond an acknowledgement that I was speaking aloud.

"We suspend the rest of it up in the trees, to keep it out of reach of scavengers until we get back to haul a second load to the shuttle," I said.

"Take the story," Darns croaked.

I thought Darns had died hours earlier.

"It's important," Darns insisted.

"More important than Gussy?" I spat.

"More important than all of us," Darns said.

Darns meant it. There was absolutely no way to doubt that he believed...no, he *knew* with absolute certainty that his stupid story was worth our lives.

"Take it," Darns whispered hoarsely, struggling up onto an elbow and holding the computer out to me with an unsteady hand. The computer fell out of his hand, but he didn't seem to notice. "If you make it back with our kill, they won't come out looking for our story."

"Professor..."

"The hunt is all about the saga," Darns insisted.

Stokes got up, growling, but I cut him off. As soon as I was sure Stokes was at heel, I went over.

"Why did you do it?" I asked, leaning down and trying to make Darns comfortable despite the satisfaction I found in his agony. "We could have all gotten out of here alive. We had a kill."

"The predator has no name," Darns wheezed.

"You keep saying that like it makes sense," I grumbled at him.

"They name these species after the first team to hunt one down and butcher it," Darns said. "And none of the predators down here have names."

I scowled. It almost made sense, but I couldn't pull it in.

"When we finished chasing the fishalope down, it all seemed wrong," Darns said. "The other species who had hunted the fishalope picked it because of the challenge of its speed or the thrill of chasing it into an ambush, not because it was the only thing they thought they might be able to kill."

"So isn't that your job?" I said. "Aren't you supposed to be the super poet who turns us all into Odysseus?"

"You know who Odysseus was?"

"Not all of those literature students of yours are dykes," I said, getting a hint of a wry smile from Darns.

"The saga isn't just a story." Darns eyes slipped out of focus, drifting off to look at some bit of nowhere over my left shoulder. "The uglies use these sagas to try to express who they are, to demonstrate the ideals of their species, kind of like the epic poems and myths of ancient Earth."

"But why trick us into fighting this monster?" I asked.

"Would you have listened to me if I suggested it?"

I didn't answer.

"This is our first hunt." Darns coughed, a weak wheezing flinch. "This hunt lays the foundation for how the members of The Council will always think of us as a species. Any hint of weakness and we will always be weak, vulnerable, a target."

"So we had to kill something impressive," I said, finally starting to get it. "Or at least die attacking something big and scary."

"No. We had to hunt a predator," Darns said. He fell silent for several seconds and I thought he was done, but after a couple of croaks and gasps, he continued. "It didn't matter if we managed to kill it, as long as we passed up the sure thing we had in order to go after a big predator at the top of the food chain."

"But why? Why not go after one of the big grazers?"

"All the Council species are predators," Darns said. "Their whole idea of an interstellar civilization is built around an idealization of the predatory food chain."

I looked over at the discarded remains of the beast, and suddenly realized just how much it reminded me of half the species on The Council.

"They name these animals after the first to kill and butcher them," Darns said, his voice fading.

"And if none of these big predators have names, that means they have never been hunted," I finished for him.

"I suspect the Council species would think it uncivilized to want to hunt another predator."

"Predator or prey," I said. "Black and white, one or the other."

"I describe us as a species that is kind of frightened of what we become when we embrace the urge to hunt," Darns said. "We choose to be philosophical and contemplative and we farm for our food because when we unleash the predator inside of us, we kind of go psychotic. We get such a thrill from hunting an animal that can hunt us back that we can't help but go all out after the biggest, nastiest predator we can find."

Darns coughed, but I could see him struggling to continue, so I waited. It took a while.

"You'll want to go over the part about Gussy throwing herself at the beast before you read it at the banquet," Darns said. "The details are pretty gruesome, and they might be a little tough to read, and you really need to make that part sound like she was launched into ecstasy by the thrill of sacrificing herself so we could make the kill. That should horrify them. If we can scare The Council a bit, it should give the suits plenty of leverage to convince them that it might be dangerous to call us prey."

"The big picture," I said softly.

Darns nodded.

"You did good," I said. "I still hate you, but you did pretty damn good for a pansy-ass little prick."

"Travois," Darns whispered as he closed his eyes and sort of crumpled back down to the ground.

"What?"

"Make stretchers, not packs," Darns said. "Load them up and drag one end behind you. Low g, pretty flat terrain, if you rig a kind of harness over your shoulders to carry the weight, each of you should be able to haul at least a hundred kilos of meat. More than enough."

Coughing once, Darns sighed and kind of drifted off with a satisfied look on his face. I picked up the computer and took a second to shift him out of the awkward position he had collapsed into before turning my attention to stretchers and harnesses.

"Hey," Stokes said, objecting, complaining and asking a question all with that single grunt.

I ignored him.

"We should take Gussy, not him," Stokes said.

"He's still breathing," I said.

"But he's a prick," Stokes said.

"And you are a psychotic asshole with all the smarts of a Christmas ham," I said. "But I still bring you back from every mission you survive."

"Yeah, most of the time," Stokes said, grudgingly.

"He's part of this mission, part of *our* team," I said.

Stokes stared at me for several seconds.

"Give me that one," Stokes said, grabbing the harness for the stretcher I had put Darns on.

"But..."

"I'm bigger. It's heavier," Stokes said as he started dragging it away.

"Stokes," I said.

Stokes glared at me, a determined look on his face, like he was ready to risk another court-martial arguing over it.

"Other direction," I said, pointing toward where the shuttle waited for us.

Sydney Harbour, 1942

...Helen Patrice

Basho died,
having written it.
A life's work
in seventeen syllables,
three lines.
Those who found it, died,
until a blind man
secured it for the Emperor's vault.

A poem that cracked open the mind –
the last line a leap
into eternity.

Those submarines
in Sydney Harbour
came not with guns,
but five million copies
of Basho's haiku.
Sydney, then Australia fell.
Perfection is not for the living.

We ride now,
not on the sheep's back,
but the whale's.

And the haiku smoulders
in a vault in Canberra.

We are Japanese now
in the best Australian way.



Dragon Feasts

...Aliette de Bodard

Dragons gathered in the sky overhead, dancing under grey, heavy clouds. Mei-Lin, busy grinding a human skull into powder, did no more than glance at them. Her son was coming to her, and wherever her son went, dragons and rain followed. Because of her. Because she had stood by while the other villagers made a god of him.

Time to work changes, she thought. On the hearth under the porch, the mortality potion, a mixture of turtle scales, ginger roots and wrinkled tea leaves, had started to boil, its colour deepening with each cluster of bubbles.

By the time Mei-Lin had finished, her hands were covered in grey powder. She emptied the contents of the mortar into the liquid, brushed her hands above, as if washing them: years of being the village apothecary had taught her not to waste powder. A strong smell of over-brewed tea filled her nostrils.

Having finished with the book of medicinal herbs, Mei-Lin put it back on the shelves. She glanced upwards. The dragons had formed a double line, like soldiers welcoming a general: lesser immortals making ready for a greater one. She withdrew the vessel from the hearth, poured its contents into a glazed terracotta teapot. There. This was the only thing which would make her son mortal again, would undo her acts of fifteen years ago.

Then she settled in the inner courtyard to wait.

Two dragons arced across the waiting lines, the scales on their serpentine bodies shimmering with rainbow hues. They dived for the courtyard.

Mei-Lin, watching them, could not tell at which point the maws became mouths, the scales iridescent human flesh, the stubby limbs slender arms and legs. Her mouth was dry by the time they finished their transformation, and two human beings stood before her.

She bowed, with her arms crossed and her hands slid into her sleeves.

“Mother,” a man’s voice said.

She lifted her gaze. A stranger met her eyes, a stranger dressed in robes of yellow silk, with distant eyes that still remembered the rhythm of the dance in the sky. She had often seen him, in his dragon shape, revelling in the storms, his immortal laughter mingling with the thunder. Often enough to know she had to bring him back to her, no matter by what means.

“Kuan,” she said, smiling to hide her pain. “The gods’ blessing on this meeting.”

“That is easily arranged,” Kuan said. He turned to his companion, a slender woman with pale skin and black hair knotted into an elaborate bun. She, too, wore yellow silk robes, embroidered with phoenixes. “Mother, this is my wife, Xia.”

Xia bowed in turn. “Mother,” she said.

Mei-Lin did not speak for a while. She had thought Kuan would come alone, not with another pair of eyes to question her purposes.

She said, at last, “You must be hungry. Come.”

She left them in the dining room while she went through the inner courtyard to get the meal. On her way, she extinguished the incense in front of the ancestral tablets. This was what had called her son to her: a prayer to him sent up to the heavens. No other entreaty would induce him to return. She glanced at the tablet which bore her husband’s name. “You would not have approved,” she said, to Sie-Lung, dead of a wasting sickness these past ten years. “But I do what I have to.”

In the kitchen, the rice was still warm. The smell of pork, stewed with ginger and star anise, filled the room now.

A noise made her turn round. Xia stood on the threshold, watching her. “May I help you, Mother?” The tone was respectful, but the eyes mocked her.

“No.” Mei-Lin bent to retrieve pairs of chopsticks, hoped the meal made for two people would stretch to three. “I was not told you would be coming.”

“We had not thought there would be a meal,” Xia said.

“It is the Feast of Lanterns, a time of the year to celebrate with one’s family,” Mei-Lin said. “Why else would I call my son?”

“What do you want of him?” Xia asked. Her eyes held Mei-Lin. They were the green of jade, and yet in their depths shone an unearthly light, like a memory of the Celestial Abode.

Things he cannot give. “I am an old woman now. Soon I will pass through the threshold into the Courts of Hell and I will never see my son again. Don’t I have the right to speak with him a last time?”

Xia shook her head. “You show no passion when you speak of that. I think there is another reason you called him here.”

“He is my son,” Mei-Lin said. A son who, in fifteen years, had not come down to speak to her; not even when her husband lay dying.

“Not anymore,” Xia said. Was there a hint of sadness in her voice, or was Mei-Lin so desperate to see her as human? “You were sitting by his graveside when he rose, fifteen years ago. You should understand what that means.”

“I remember.” Her hand still bore the scars of that rise, of her last attempt to hold onto her son. And she remembered, all too well: Kuan, eight years old, thrown backward by the strength of the spear thrust; blood seeping into his clothes, into the earth, into Mei-Lin’s hands as she held him for the last time; his blood, as the villagers lowered him into the waiting grave, and erected a marker to commemorate

his sacrifice. They had rain after that, dearly bought. Her sin. Her unforgivable sin. What mother stood by when they killed her son?

A swish of silk brought her out of her reverie. Startled, she saw that Xia was gone. So was the terracotta teapot in which she had put the potion. No. Her heart sinking, she ran out of the kitchen.

She arrived to find Xia pouring tea in the last of three bowls. "Mother," Xia said. "We were waiting for you."

Mei-Lin found herself speechless. She knelt, quietly, and took the proffered bowl, inhaling its strong aroma. She was mortal; the potion would have no effect on her. But Kuan should drink first.

Alas. He turned to his wife, and, with a smile that was almost tender, said, "Honour to the born immortals."

Xia smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. She took her bowl. *No!*, Mei-Lin thought. The word stuck in her throat. *This is not meant for you.*

She saw Xia raise the bowl to her lips, saw her tilt it, her throat contracting. "Kuan, I—" Xia said, and then her hands faltered.

The bowl fell to the ground, shattered. Mei-Lin had moved at last, slowly, trying to reach Xia before Kuan did. Shards of the bowl crunched under her feet. She saw something rush away from Xia's face like storm clouds blown by the wind, until the skin seemed as lacklustre as terracotta, the hair dull and brittle.

Xia was on her knees, sobbing.

"I'm sorry," Mei-Lin said.

"What have you done?" Kuan asked, his voice as taut as a bowstring.

Mei-Lin did not answer. Xia's weeping was the only sound between them.

Kuan knelt by his wife's side, tilted her head upwards, so that he could see her eyes. "I see. Many are the ways to bring about an immortal's fall from grace, and it seems one of them can be found in an apothecary's backyard."

"I did not mean—"

"You did not mean what? To harm her?" Even kneeling, he was greater than her, his voice echoing as if in a great temple. "She is harmed, Mother." He spat the last word. "She was born in the Celestial Abode; the Eight Immortals themselves attended her naming day. And now you have made her mortal."

"Is that so terrible a thing?" Mei-Lin asked, defiant. He understood nothing, nothing of what she had tried to do. Now and forever he was a stranger to her and her ways. *My fault*, she thought, desperately. *My fault.*

"You will undo this," Kuan said.

She shook her head. "I can't. I found the recipe in one of Sie-Lung's scrolls, and followed it. No antidote is mentioned."

"You—" Kuan said.

"You should not have brought her," Mei-Lin snapped. "I called you, and you alone. She has no place here."

"And have I one?" Kuan asked. He had moved closer, his arm raised as if to strike at her.

Xia's hand on his sleeve held him back. "Kuan, attacking her will not change anything," she said.

Kuan did not answer. His eyes rested on Mei-Lin, before his gaze moved away, as if the very sight of her were an offence. "Then I will find a way to undo this."

"Kuan—" Mei-Lin said.

His voice was a snarl as he turned back to her, yellow eyes shining with a savagery that held nothing human anymore. "I will find a way," he said. "You are responsible for this. You will watch her."

It was clearly not a request, and there was nothing of love in it. Mei-Lin was the only mortal Kuan knew; she was convenient, nothing more.

Xia had risen, but did not move. "Kuan. She is your mother."

"Yes," Kuan said. "Because of who she was, once, I will not call on the dragons to flood this village."

Xia said nothing, only stared at him. "I will be back," he said, tenderly, all traces of anger gone from his voice. "I promise. Stay here."

She reached to him; he bent down, gathered her in an embrace of swishing robes, and kissed her. Mei-Lin said nothing, acutely aware of how much had gone wrong.

Kuan left the smaller dragons behind him. A thin drizzle of rain hung over the village, working its slow way through silk and skin, until the very bones held its chill. Mei-Lin could see the dragons sporting behind the clouds, hear their savage laughter, which drowned out the village's songs of celebration.

She stood in the doorway with Xia, watching Kuan leave, a sinuous shape soon lost in the distance. Xia was weeping quietly, all the while.

"Xia," Mei-Lin said.

"Don't touch me. Haven't you done enough already?"

"Xia, come inside. I'll show you a place where you can sleep."

"No," Xia said, still watching the dragons above her.

In the end, Mei-Lin coaxed her into the room that had been Kuan's a long time ago. It still held its aura of sorrow, of unsaid things, and Xia must have sensed it, for she shrank visibly from it.

"It smells of death." Xia's eyes were on the bed. They had changed nothing since Kuan's sacrifice; it was still that of a child. Mei-Lin unrolled a rush mat, and opened a cupboard to retrieve a lacquered pillow.

"There are no other rooms," Mei-Lin said. "Only mine, and my husband died in it. It would feel worse to you."

"I can guess." Xia's mouth twisted in something that might have been a smile. She took the proffered pillow, but did not say a word of thanks.

Mei-Lin left Xia in the room, staring at the walls as if she could still collapse them with a word.

In her own room Mei-Lin undressed, faced the empty bed and the memories of sickness. "Sie-Lung," she said. And then, more softly, "Kuan."

She fell asleep, and dreamt of dragons, mocking her with their twisting patterns. Of her son, who stood on the other side of a river, calling on the rain to drown the

stepping stones, and the waters fell in a curtain until she could no longer see anything of him.

In the morning, she rose before dawn and went to see Xia.

Xia was not in her room. Mei-Lin, panicked at the idea that she had already failed Kuan, finally found her in the inner courtyard. She was sheltering under the kitchen porch, staring at the dragons in the skies.

“Xia.”

The other did not even turn her head.

“I can make some dumplings for breakfast,” Mei-Lin said.

Xia did not answer.

“We can go to the market afterwards. I’ll say you are a relative come to stay for a while.”

Xia turned at last, stared at her. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and the circles under them told Mei-Lin that she had not slept.

“You were never meant to drink it,” Mei-Lin said. *You were never meant to be here*, she added, silently, and then felt ashamed of herself. It was her fault that Xia had become mortal.

“You may not have wanted it to happen.” Xia’s voice was cool, emotionless. She slid her hands into the sleeves of her robe. “That does not change anything.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Mei-Lin said.

Xia said nothing for a while, staring at her. “You made the potion for Kuan. Why, Mother? It makes no sense.”

“He is not human anymore,” Mei-Lin snapped.

“No,” Xia said. “No more human than villagers who sacrifice a child to bring rain to the parched fields. No more human than a mother who kills her own son.”

“I did not kill him,” Mei-Lin said, louder than she had intended to.

“There were others who did.” Xia glanced upwards, at the dragons. “I have no wish to go outside, Mother. Please leave me alone.”

Mei-Lin bowed, relieved she would not have to endure Xia’s presence, a mute reminder of how much Kuan had moved away from her. “As you wish.”

She went into the entrance hall, which also served as her shop, and checked her stores of medicinal herbs. No one would come so early on the day after the Feast of Lanterns, but later on she might have some customers who had drunk too much the night before.

Women were not meant to serve as apothecaries, but since Sie-Lung’s death no one else had had the necessary skills. Mei-Lin had learnt from working with her husband, and after his death she had taken over the shop.

She frowned, glanced at the sky through the pillars of the porch. Time enough to go to the market and replenish her stores before she had customers. She put on an outer robe, and left the house.

Since Xia was not with her, she went to the Taoist temple. It stood on the marketplace: the pagoda tower overlooked the whole area, its decorated roof and lacquered walls setting it apart from the modest homes of the villagers.

Despite the early hour, a number of merchants had already gathered, displaying their wares. One of them sold incense and amulets near the temple door; Mei-Lin hurried past him, lifting the hem of her robe to avoid stepping in puddles.

Woo Shan, one of three monks maintaining the shrine in the pagoda, was busy dusting the statue of Iron-Crush Li, oldest of the Eight Immortals. Mei-Lin waited patiently for him to finish.

“Mei-Lin,” he said, finally turning to her.

Mei-Lin hesitated, remembering who she was talking to. She would have preferred any other monk to Woo Shan. “I need advice,” she said.

“Indeed?” Woo Shan asked. His aquiline face revealed nothing of what he felt. He had drawn lots, fifteen years ago, among the children of the village, and fate had chosen Kuan. He had also headed the mob that had taken her son. Since then, she had taken great pains to avoid him and all he represented. “What kind of advice?”

“You are a learned man.”

“You flatter me.”

“You know about the immortals in their Celestial Abode.”

“Yes,” he said.

“If an immortal should fall to earth, how can she go back to heaven?”

His brow furrowed. “Fall to earth?”

“Become mortal,” Mei-Lin said.

Woo Shan grew very still. “And you come to me to ask this.” He shook his head. “Of all people, you should know, Mei-Lin. There is only one way to turn a mortal into a god.”

“No,” she breathed, seeing, all too clearly, what was expected of her. *Please, not a second time.*

“Anyone who wishes to join the dragons must first give their life to them, as a sacrifice.”

“Is there no other way?”

“No,” Woo Shan said.

“An immortal might—”

“Immortals are no wiser than we are in this matter. This is a mortal matter, and it falls to us to create new gods, gods that were not born in the Celestial City. Only to us.” There was no arrogance in his voice, simply a quiet pride at knowing his place in the order of things. Mei-Lin wished she had his certainty.

“I see,” Mei-Lin said. “Thank you.”

“Is there any reason you wanted to know this?”

“Out of curiosity,” Mei-Lin lied.

“Odd thing, curiosity,” Woo Shan said. “I, personally, find it curious that so many dragons have taken up residence over your house.”

There was no answer she could make to that. She turned and left the temple, feeling his gaze on her all the way to the door.

She came home with a few spices, and some jasmine tea to replenish her stores. Xia was still sitting in the inner courtyard, in the same position. Mei-Lin shook her head, and went on.

This is all my fault, she thought.

She had lost her son with this act, and had his wife to contend with. She could not lie to herself and pretend things were going to be fine.

In the afternoon, a few peasants came to her, wet, bedraggled, and coughing so severely Mei-Lin feared it might be pneumonia. After taking the pulses in different parts of their bodies, she prescribed honeysuckle and loofah, and hoped the rain would cease.

Of course it would not. Not so long as Xia was there.

Once, she turned and saw Kuan's wife watching her from the doorway, still wearing her yellow robe. She was acutely aware after that of how odd her own behaviour must have seemed to an immortal who ate the peaches of the Celestial Garden every day, and who had no need to fear sickness.

Near the end of the day, Xia said, "Let me help."

Mei-Lin almost shook her head, then thought better of it. She had Xia search the medicine-stores for herbs, and write down records for the day: in case the patient came again, she needed to remember what she had prescribed. She kept Xia away from the patients, though; they were far from death's door, but there was no telling how Xia would react to sickness.

Xia, her face a stone mask, revealed nothing of what she felt.

In the evening Mei-Lin closed the shop, and only then did it occur to her how many people had seen Xia, in her yellow silk robes. Among mortals, yellow was reserved for the imperial family in the capital at Sian, and she could imagine how the rumours would swell in the village. Would reach Woo Shan, who had good cause to remember her visit.

That night she did not sleep, lying in her empty bed. She stared at the ceiling and wished Sie-Lung was here to advise her. And so she heard them before she could see them; the steady sound of footsteps nearing her house, the whispered words turning bolder and bolder as they came closer to the doors. She remembered.

She rose, slowly, tied her hair into a bun and slid the pins in place. She slipped on her robe, fastened the elaborate knot in her belt, and went to the main doors as quietly as if she had been expecting guests.

They were all here, waiting for her. The merchant with whom she bartered daily for beans and wheat. The clerks from the tribunal, the peasants who worked the fields. And, at the forefront of the mob, Woo Shan, looking paler than most of them.

The lantern lights danced on their faces, giving them the air of demons from one of the Courts of Hell.

“Wang Mei-Lin,” the merchant said, calling her full name.

She moved, filled the threshold. She was alone, as she had been fifteen years ago — Sie-Lung had already been disabled by the sickness when they had come for Kuan. In her mind’s eye she was seeing the mob as they had been then, younger faces with the same hunger, the same madness. And she, standing aside to let them kill her son.

“No,” she said.

“We saw her. She belongs with her kin in the Celestial Court, not here among us.”

“And so?”

“We have to help her go home.”

Such pretty words, to disguise the reality of what they planned to do. Her hands remembered the slickness of blood, Kuan’s bleeding body. Xia’s fear of death. “No,” she said. “She is mortal now. Leave her alone.”

“Why should we?”

She had no answer. How many times had she seen that same scene, how many times had she wished she could undo the threads woven in the past? And still, she had no answer that could turn aside the madness of men.

“Because I will order the dragons to devour you if you so much as set a foot inside this house,” a cold voice said, behind her.

She turned. It was Xia, still wearing her embroidered yellow robe. There was steel in her bearing that was not human, and her voice did not quiver as she faced them.

They stared at her. It was one thing to threaten, another to see the victim. A child they might have slaughtered, but this cool, composed creature, who faced them without apparent fear, was another matter entirely.

“My Lady,” one of the clerks said. “We would help you.”

“I have no need of your help. None,” Xia said, taking a step outside, towards them. Her voice was the stab of a blade.

Rain fell over all of them, becoming thicker and thicker as the dragons snaked down.

Woo Shan spoke at last. “I told you all it was foolishness.”

No one would meet his gaze. Their faces were barely visible in the thick curtain of rain. The lanterns were wavering lights far away from each other. Most of the vehemence had been drained already; grumbling, they dispersed. Woo Shan was the last to go. He stared at both of them, said, “You made your choice, Mei-Lin. I pray you have no cause for regret.”

Only when they were all gone did Xia fall to her knees. Mei-Lin ran to her side. Kuan’s wife was shivering uncontrollably; her fine clothes drenched by the rain, her skin cold under Mei-Lin’s touch. Dragons hovered above her, puzzled.

“Let’s get you inside,” Mei-Lin said, coaxing her upright. “Come.”

Mei-Lin brewed some red tea, as thick and acrid as she could make it. She poured, carefully, into a bowl, and carried it to Xia, who sat, still shivering, a woollen shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Thankfully, the dragons, too big to fit under the porch, had stayed outside. Mei-Lin expected them to lose interest soon.

“Thank you,” Xia said. Her face was still ashen, and the shiver had invaded her voice. It broke Mei-Lin’s heart, to see this wet, bedraggled creature, compared to the memory of the unearthly young woman who had stood in her courtyard only two days ago.

“They won’t come back,” she said, sitting on her knees before the hearth. Not one of them would dare touch Xia now. It had taken drink, and the gathering of a mob, before they could bring themselves to think of killing her. A goddess, even fallen from grace, was sacrosanct.

Xia laughed, bitterly. “No. They thought they would find no resistance. We frightened them.”

“You did most of the frightening.”

“Perhaps.” Xia sipped her tea. Her face twisted as she swallowed it, presumably at the acridness of the drink. “They wanted to kill me.”

“Yes,” Mei-Lin said.

“Why?”

“They believe that if they sacrifice you to the dragons, you will rise as one of them. Like Kuan.” Her son’s name still tasted bitter on her tongue. She thought of him, scouring the heavens and the hells for the remedy, secure in his immortal arrogance. Why could he not turn his gaze to the mortal world?

“Then perhaps I should have had the courage to let them kill me.” Xia’s voice was a whisper. “I fear death, gods help me.”

“You are mortal. We all fear death.”

“Like a sword, always hung over your neck. I had not thought it could be so bad.” Xia fell silent, watching the hearth. “You misjudge him, you know.”

“Who?” Mei-Lin asked, although she had no need of asking.

“He is one of the youngest of us. Risen among us, not born. He enjoys a high status only because he worked so hard to rise through our ranks, to gain the approval of every official in the hierarchy. And he still feels he has to prove who he is to everyone.”

“What does it change?” Mei-Lin asked. “He was my son, and now a stranger has come into my house. I cannot speak to him.”

“He is too proud to acknowledge where he rose from,” Xia said, her face thoughtful. “But he bore you no ill will.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know,” Xia said. “He is angry, but it will pass.”

Mei-Lin said nothing. It was obvious, painfully so, that Xia loved Kuan as she had loved her own husband, and who was she to reproach Xia for that?

“You should sleep,” she said.

At last Xia answered, “Thank you. For standing up to them. You did well.”

I did nothing, Mei-Lin thought. *For the sake of a fifteen-year-old memory I refused to stand aside, and I should have.* But she knew that were the past to run backwards, she

would still make the same choice. Xia's paths were her own. But never again would they kill someone in this house with Mei-Lin watching.

Kuan came back two months later, in time for the Feast of Ancestors. Mei-Lin had been busy preparing dumplings in the kitchen, with Xia watching her, and so she almost dropped her bamboo basket when a male voice said, "Mother."

Her heart pounding, she rose, and saw Kuan in the doorway. He wore blue robes with embroidered dragons and turtles, and his face was expressionless.

"I was not expecting you."

Kuan did not deign to answer. He had turned to Xia, who gave him a weak smile. His own face was grim. "I have found no answers," he said. "But I could not spend another day without seeing you."

"I have missed you," Xia said.

Kuan's face twisted in pain. "I need you," he said. "I need your voice and your smile, and the songs you play on the zither strings. Without you I—"

Mei-Lin, embarrassed, tiptoed out of the kitchen. She sat on her knees before the ancestor tablets, and lit a stick of incense before Sie-Lung's memorial. She prayed that he had been reborn in a loving family, far away from any rain sacrifices, that he had forgotten about Kuan's death and his subsequent estrangement from them.

"He was a good man," Kuan said, behind her.

She rose, her nostrils filled with the smell of incense. "Yes," she said. "He would have liked to speak with you, before he died."

"I had other things to take care of," Kuan said.

Mei-Lin bit her lip. How dearly she wished that he had drunk the potion, or at least that he might understand something of the mortal world. Too much to ask, obviously. "And do you still have places to scour for the remedy?"

Kuan's eyes blazed. "You mock me." He raised a hand, stopped with difficulty. "I have yet to ask the Judges in the Courts of Hell, and the Eight Immortals. One of them should know."

Precious little chance of that, Mei-Lin thought. She remembered a boy who had loved to play in the inner courtyard. Nothing was left of him now. Because of her.

"Well," she said. "I won't detain you, then. I must go to leave food by Sie-Lung's grave."

"I will come as well," Kuan said, stiffly.

He somehow talked Xia into coming. He held his wife all the way to the graveyard: her face as pale as the full moon, supporting her when she would have fainted, whispering words Mei-Lin could not hear.

At the graveside, they stood apart from Mei-Lin while she laid the dumplings into Sie-Lung's offering bowl. Xia's eyes were closed, and Kuan would not look at the grave, or acknowledge the whispers rising around them — by now the whole village knew that both of them were, or had been, immortals, and guessed the reason for the presence of the dragons. Perhaps they, at last, found some guilt for their part in Kuan's death. Perhaps.

Afterwards, they walked back home, and Kuan left without a word to Mei-Lin.

Xia helped Mei-Lin in the apothecary, when the fancy took her to do so. She spoke little, and spent the rest of her time in the inner courtyard, watching the dragons with an intensity that frightened Mei-Lin.

After Kuan's visit she grew moodier still. Mei-Lin offered her painting materials, but Xia shook her head, and went on staring at the dragons. Every day that Mei-Lin brought her food she worried that Xia would refuse it, and starve herself to death.

Two months after the Feast of Ancestors, in desperation, she dragged Xia out of the house to help her buy medicinal supplies.

In the marketplace, coloured banners had sprung up everywhere, in preparation for the dragonboat race. Xia accompanied Mei-Lin, silently, watched as the crews of the boats jostled one another, boasted of their prowess, bought amulets to secure their victory. Woo Shan was there as well, reminding anyone who would hear him that the race had been dedicated to the dragons since times immemorial. To the amusement of the crowd, he launched into a long sermon on dragons; his eyes strayed often to where Xia stood, but he never once referred to her.

Through it all, Xia's face did not change, nor display any emotion. When they had finished with their purchases, she thanked Mei-Lin, stiffly, and went back inside the house, to the inner courtyard. Mei-Lin sighed inwardly, and tried to think of another idea.

Seven days later, on the eve of the dragonboat race, she made up her mind to ask Xia to attend it. She went into the inner courtyard, where she found a dragon curled up at Xia's feet, its neck raised so that its mouth almost touched her face, whispering to her words Mei-Lin could not hear.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," Mei-Lin said.

Xia lifted her head. Her eyes were still rimmed with red; Mei-Lin did not believe she had got any sleep. "It doesn't matter. We're finished talking anyway." Her hand was closed over something so tightly Mei-Lin could not see what it was.

She wondered what they could have been speaking about, bit her lip. Xia was entitled to some privacy. "I came to ask whether you wanted to go and see the dragonboat race."

A fleeting expression crossed Xia's face, was gone before Mei-Lin could see what it was. "Why not?" she asked, tonelessly.

The Dragonboat Feast was a boisterous affair, one of the great annual festivities which broke the monotony of village life. Crews laboured for months painting the prows of their boats to resemble dragons, and the whole village put on their best clothes to see the race, and placed feverish bets on which of the various teams would finish first.

Mei-Lin and Xia arrived late, and found many people had already gathered near the finishing line. They could have gone further back along the course, where the crowd was sparser, but Mei-Lin knew that it was over the last stretch of water that the

race became the most frantic, and the most interesting to watch. So they hung on at the back of the crowd, barely able to see the river from where they stood.

“They’re coming,” Mei-Lin said.

“I see,” Xia answered.

Standing on tiptoe, Mei-Lin could see the first boats approaching, their oars close to getting entangled. If one of them overturned, there was a good chance that crewmen would drown. It was a frequent occurrence in such a violent event. Xia seemed to be fascinated by the race, watching each boat as it passed them by. At least something had caught her interest.

Not until the first boat was well ahead of them did Xia’s intense attention start to worry Mei-Lin. She turned. Xia’s face was filled with an odd kind of hunger. “What is it?” Mei-Lin asked, knowing already what the answer was. Drowned crewmen were considered sacrificed to the dragons.

Xia turned towards her, and the remoteness in her eyes chilled Mei-Lin to the bone.

“Good-bye,” she said.

Mei-Lin reached out, grabbed her shoulder. “Xia, wait.”

“I am not your son,” Xia said, softly, her eyes never leaving Mei-Lin’s face. “Will you deny me this?”

No, she was not Kuan, would never be, this tall, remote woman who had been born in the Celestial City, who had descended to earth only by accident. Mei-Lin had never had any hold on her. She withdrew her hand. “Good-bye,” she said, and found herself weeping.

Xia ran towards the river. People parted to make way for her; something about her frantic race seemed to tell others to get out of her way.

She did not slow down as she reached the river bank. It seemed to Mei-Lin, who stood frozen at the edge of the crowd, that Xia’s race continued over the river, and for a moment she hung above the waters, as if she could walk over them. Then she fell, and ripples marked the place where she had sunk.

The first boats had reached the finishing line; some participants in the slower boats, seeing they had lost the race, dived into the waters to save Xia. Mei-Lin moved at last, taking her strength from an infinitely remote place. She knelt by the bank, watched rower after rower dive into the murky waters, come up empty-handed, and a different kind of prayer rose in her mind. *May you ascend, she thought. May you be judged worthy, and your path to the Celestial Abode be true and straight.*

She went back to the silence of her home, followed by the sounds of celebration. She sat, for a while, in the inner courtyard, watching the puzzled dragons mill over her house. She knew what they would see: an old woman, her back bent by age, with none of the radiance of the immortals. Her eyes stung.

In Xia’s room she found the message the dragon had carried to Xia, crushed so she could hide it in her hand: *I have found no remedy. I am coming to speak with you. Do not despair.* She had despaired, Mei-Lin thought, staring at the characters until they

all blurred before her eyes. She had seized the chance offered to her, wanting so much to return to her own world, to be with her husband.

I wish there had been another way.

There was nothing you could do, a colder voice said in her mind.

No. I had done enough.

She rose, put on a white dress — white, for grief. She combed her hair before a mirror, let it fall down her shoulders in a cascade of grey.

And then she left the house, and sat by the banks of the river, waiting for dawn. The dragons followed her, all the way, not making a sound.

Light crept over the horizon, grey shapes turning to pink, and then to golden. It danced on the waters of the river, outlined the scales of the dragons above her. She felt as though she would weep, but she had no tears left.

There was a soft noise, like silk unfurled by the wind. The scars on her hands tightened, as she remembered what would happen, but she did not move.

Golden light erupted from beneath the water, spread to the skies above, until everything shone as if gilded: the houses of the village, the two willow trees on either side of the banks, the pagoda like a yellow spear thrust towards the heavens.

The dragon rose from the heart of the river, its radiance blossoming like a great fire. Droplets of water scattered as it shook its mane, but its gaze remained fixed upwards. Mei-Lin had fallen to her knees.

“Xia,” she called.

The great head bowed to her. Green eyes held her as a snake holds a mouse in thrall. “Mother,” it said, in her mind, with a voice like thunder. “I am going home.”

“Yes,” Mei-Lin said, quietly. “It is best.”

The other dragons had gathered around it. Waiting, it occurred to Mei-Lin, but she could not tell why she thought so.

After a while, another dragon came, with turquoise scales. It stopped, stared at Xia, as if not believing what had happened. At last it came closer, nuzzled her. Their heads bent together as if they were sharing a secret knowledge.

Kuan.

She did not move. She could not move. And she understood how foolish she had been, to think she could make them other than what they were. Whether born or created, they were immortals, and so far beyond her she was nothing.

“Mother,” Kuan said, at length. “Thank you for taking care of my wife.” The voice was stiff, and did not invite an answer. Mei-Lin had no words.

Xia bent towards Kuan, her maw buried in his mane. He nodded.

Mei-Lin felt the air swish around her. When she raised her eyes, the other dragons were gone, and only Xia stood before her, in human shape.

“I am sorry,” Mei-Lin said. “None of this need have happened. I thought I could unmake the past.”

“No one can.” Xia said. She knelt, took Mei-Lin’s hands in hers. “I will give you a gift, Mother. Kuan will not say it, but I have learnt things he has forgotten.”

“Xia—”

“I forgive you,” Xia said. “Live in peace.”

“How can I?” Mei-Lin said.

Xia smiled an unfathomable smile. “Hearts heal.” Her touch was cool, and the cold spread to Mei-Lin’s hands and chest, until she could feel nothing. “Good-bye, Mother.” Xia’s shape started to blur; she leapt towards the heavens, shedding more and more of her human appearance the higher she went.

And then she was gone.

In the morning, Mei-Lin found a basket in the inner courtyard. When she lifted it, the strong, sweet smell of peaches filled her nostrils.

There was a message, on rice paper. *Mother. These are a poor payment for years of silence, but everything must have a beginning. Xia.*

And, beneath, in a different hand: *Until the next Feast of Lanterns. Your son, Kuan.*

She stood, for a while, seeing those words over and over, imagining dragons changing shapes in her courtyard, bringing rain, bringing gifts.

“Thank you,” she said, to the clear skies. “May you live in peace.”

She heard nothing, save perhaps for a faint noise, like a far away peal of thunder. The peaches shone in her hands.

She turned, holding them, and went back inside her house.

The advertisement features two book covers. The left cover is for 'The Painted Portal' by Christine Croyden, showing a large, ornate building with a spire and a face-like structure, with a pair of large, intense eyes in the background. The right cover is for 'Australian Nightmares' edited by James Doig, showing a dark, desolate landscape with a lone figure in the distance and a dead animal in the foreground.

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Devil's Pet

...Katherine Woodbury

Petra watched the Devil's minion from a bench on the edge of the square. Opposite, a panel of shops and cafés with cheerful awnings fronted the brick quadrangle. During the summer, the cafés set out tables and chairs; employees on lunch-break sat to watch prophets and anti-war protestors cry down havoc on the world.

The minion's office was above the deli. He sat outside on sunny days, wearing corded sweaters and loose-fitted khakis. He was not, as most minions tended to be, svelte, dark and saturnine. He had light hair and brows and a compact build. He looked like a young businessman of the technology class or the manager at an employee-friendly corporation: foosball and free soda.

Only the rings indicated his vocation: heavy gold bands with emerald and ruby insets. They sparkled coyly beneath his knuckles. Summer light stroked them into brilliance.

Petra held her résumé on her lap. Her lunch hour ended in twenty minutes. She had spent the last forty minutes copying her résumé onto various colored paper, searching for the right fit. Not pastel. Not speckled. Not too dark. She'd settled on heavy, grainy, white bond.

Tomorrow. I'll try tomorrow. Better tomorrow when there's more time.

But the minion might not eat outside tomorrow.

Refracted light from the rings flashed across her eyes, signaling contempt at her slowness, her timidity. She pressed her notebook under one arm and approached the minion's table.

"Excuse me."

He passed her his cup, an ambivalent gesture. She rolled it in her hands and looked about for a waitress.

"I don't work here," she said finally.

"My apologies."

"I have an offer," she said, balancing her résumé and notebook on the edge of the table.

He eyed the pile. "We no longer buy souls."

"I'm not selling."

"Or lease—"

"I want a job."

His writing hand paused. He left-handed the résumé, and she blinked as the sapphire on his left hand seared her eyes. She turned her head towards the square's fountain; mist washed the blue glow from under her lids.

"What are your salary requirements?"

She took a breath and gave him a number that outstretched anything she had made in the past seven years. The minion blinked. An eyebrow lifted and resettled itself. She forced herself to not back down — *he can afford it* — and waited.

"I have no position of this type."

"You could create one. You must need assistance."

He frowned. The rings were still, and she studied them: the sapphire; a corpse-green emerald; a ruby, bleeding red light like ink from a broken pen. Her eyes settled on a black onyx set in a pearl band. It graced his right middle finger, gathering light, casting no shadows. *One of these rings frees the damned.* She blanked her thoughts and focused on the coffee cup.

The minion was musing: "Dealing with headquarters is a problem. They want reports by email and fax and hardcopy. Makes the benefits of technology rather pointless, don't you think?"

"Typical management."

He smiled. "Typical? Where do you think bureaucracy comes from? We're the original, or don't you appreciate the havoc we create?"

"I'm impressed," she said, which was true, in its way. "I've worked under hundreds of managers—"

He snorted. "Don't exaggerate, child. You've only begun to sink."

She was close enough to thirty not to mind "child." She shrugged and watched the rings and pondered, as she had pondered all that week, the moral implications of stealing from the devil's minion. *Does one sin cancel out another?*

Careful. People said minions could read minds, and this minion turned now and smirked at Petra. He held out the hand with the onyx ring. The stone was dark as spilt toner.

He said, "And your real motive?"

"You think I've lied?"

"Oh, yes, Pet. I very much question your ethics."

"Ambiguous ethics should commend me."

"No, Pet. Even evil wants ethics. The essence of evil is its hypocrisy, its desire to be treated with the consideration it refuses others. Your average manager understands this."

Petra stopped herself from shrugging. She had expected cynicism, no matter how incongruously it sat on the minion's regular, uneventful features.

He slid the onyx ring from his finger, held it out. "Take it. To keep, but first, you must prove your usefulness. You claim to understand the ways of management. Prove your knowledge, and you'll get the job."

She snagged the ring between her forefinger and thumb. The band was warm, but the stone chilled her skin. Cold mist swept upwards, washing her face, submerging her eyes, so she blinked against the sensation of drowning.

The square — its pigeons and colored awnings and stone benches — vanished. Petra materialized alone in a marble lobby with high ceilings and a banistered mezzanine. Wooden desks surrounded her. From the desks, men and women glanced up over piles of paper, ringing phones and stacked binders. Their eyes narrowed. They watched Petra until a shapeless woman with hard, gray eyes hurried towards her.

She handed Petra a clipboard. “Your seat,” she said and pointed to a dais at the center of the lobby. The dais was topped by a row of pearly chairs where suited men and women sat hunched over paperwork, gabbling into cell phones. One wore a transmittal drilled directly into his skull. He mumbled and complained, his hands moving maestro-like.

“The managers sit there,” said the shapeless woman.

The managers peered at Petra as she mounted the steps, their monotonous uhuhs momentarily checked. There was an empty chair at the far end of the dais, and she sidled towards it over knees and clutched clipboards. An onyx decorated the inside back of the chair. Petra sat and gazed around the rectangular lobby. Exits faced each other across the lobby's length. Directly in front of Petra, an archway emptied out of the lobby onto a bare landscape. Gray earth rolled towards a smooth horizon. Darkness, lighter than the onyx, glimmered in the distance: moonlight on water, moonlight in a well.

People hurried back and forth across the lobby. They ran up the stairs, hauling large files. They stepped into elevators, called out floor numbers and stepped off again. They waved papers, rushed binders from desk to desk. Petra scanned their faces, trying to appear relaxed, unconcerned. *She must be here. She loved busy work.* But she recognized no one although she recognized the behavior: appear busy, especially when the manager comes to visit.

A frazzled man in a bowtie ran up the dais steps and thrust papers into Petra's lap. She noted his bitten nails as well as the sapphire ring on his left hand; the minion wore a similar ring.

She said to the frazzled man, “Are you happy here?”

“Happy?” He gaped and then, “No,” a spurt of viciousness, his paunchy chest heaving. “I've worked here fifty years,” he said, though he looked no older than forty. “Fifty years, I haven't missed a day, but they never promote me — ‘not competent’ they say. Not competent!”

“Fifty years is a long time. You should be a manager by now.”

He stared. “These are the Managers,” he muttered, spreading his hand to indicate the seats beside her. His other hand pointed towards the desks: “Everyone down there is an underling.”

“There are different levels of managers. We believe in rewarding loyalty. What would you say to... Pre-Assistant Coordinating Duty Manager?”

“The same work—” he was scornful.

“Oh, there'll be a pay rise—” she said, and a pleased smile twitched the mouth's bitter corners, “—but you mustn't fraternize with the other underlings. You understand — we need your discretion.”

His smile gained self-satisfaction.

“Of course, of course,” he muttered and hurried down the steps. Underlings spoke to him as he neared the desks. He replied grandly and walked on, superior and indifferent. They stared after him jealously. Their faces closed off; their bodies turned inwards.

A rush of cold air, and the devil’s minion sat on the step beside Petra’s chair.

“Clever,” he murmured. “Non-fraternization, a class structure with no discernible reasoning or benefit — the reverberations of this action are already felt in Hell.”

“There’s more,” Petra told the minion. “Contact managers, scheduling managers, filing managers. There are a thousand ways to engender envy and arrogance.”

“Understood, but your suggestions are unnecessary. They’ve been watching you—” a casual hand indicated the managers on the dais, “—and listening over the static. They’re already making plans to promote the incompetent, massage the egos of the power-hungry and paranoid, give underlings more reasons to keep their eyes down than up. Sweet thinking, Pet.”

“I get the job. As you said.”

“We lie, Pet. You don’t get the job yet.”

He rose. Petra discarded her clipboard and followed him down the dais steps. The minion strode idly, hands in pockets, his unremarkable demeanor portraying mild anticipation.

He said, eyes on the underlings, “Did you ever have a manager you liked?”

“One or two,” Pet said. “The last died — cancer. She worked herself to death. Literally. It was stupid. No paper-producing job is worth someone’s life.”

“Don’t say that too loudly, Pet.”

They passed under the right-hand arch and descended steps to a concrete sidewalk split by a boat-filled canal. The minion headed towards the bridge that spanned the canal. Petra loitered, gazing at a couple waiting on the sidewalk. They hunched away from each other, faces tight and sneering.

A boat, propelled by a drab, gray man, bobbed alongside the sidewalk. The couple clambered inside; they tossed rings — sapphires, Petra noted — into the oarsman’s hand. The boat floated down the stream through a narrow opening.

“Promotions,” the minion said. “Hell needs new bureaucrats.”

“This isn’t Hell?”

“Yes. And no. Think of Dante’s circling chasm. Think of Lewis’ crack. The narrowest point is Hell. All else is mere preparation. We are,” he shrugged, “somewhere in the chasm. Not too far down. Not too far up.” Another shrug. “This is reality: offices upon offices; drudgery; the daily grind. Promotions go lower.”

“What about demotion?”

He didn’t answer as they crossed the bridge, then, “Don’t get ideas, Pet. No one escapes without cost.”

On the opposite side of the bridge, they ascended steps and entered a long carpeted room lit by dim fluorescent lights. The rush here was muted. Men and women paced in circles, delivering folders to the desks that lined the walls. At the last desk, they began the circuit again. The men wore dress suits, the women stylish skirts. Long elegant legs gleamed in the unwarm light.

They nodded gravely to Petra as the minion led her to a heavy oak desk and chair at the center of the room. Black onyx gleamed on the chair's ornate headrest. The desk was lit by one green lamp. Petra slid into the chair as a folder appeared under the circle of light. Another covered it. Another.

Petra straightened the folders. The minion watched from an office doorway. The circling underlings did not look at him.

A hand, a folder. Another hand, another folder. Petra caught the wrist of the third hand. She looked up, past the glaring lamplight, into a woman's precisely made-up face. The woman's brows rose in surprised hauteur; she faltered, lips parted.

"Tell me," Petra said. "Is everyone here doing their job?"

The woman's lips compressed. She leaned over Petra. Her voice was a self-protective whisper: "That woman—" she glared at a stocky matron on the other side of the room, "—watch how she tosses her folders. She thinks she's better than the rest of us."

Petra stroked the inside of her captive's thumb. "Keep an eye on her. I want to know everything she does."

The haughty woman breathed deep. She nodded regally, her mouth pursing with anticipation.

Behind Petra, the minion laughed.

She let the haughty woman go. She skipped two underlings before stopping the third, a man this time, not a woman. *I shouldn't be too obvious.* To the man, Petra whispered, "Who's the newest?"

She heard the minion stir. She gripped the man's wrist, willing an answer.

He shrugged. "Guy behind me."

Petra sighed. Not the answer she wanted. "Any good?"

"You know newbies: chip on his shoulder — he'll learn."

Petra grinned. "Just between you and me, he's riding for a fall. We can't carry slackers," and the man snorted agreement. He deposited his folder and moved on.

The minion leaned across Petra's shoulder. "Sowing rumor and distrust amongst the workers: You are an impressive manager, Pet."

"Should I ask—?"

"No." He lifted her, hand below her upper arm. "Not yet," and then, "You were looking for someone?"

"No," Petra lied. "New employees are always easy targets," and the minion laughed.

They walked down the carpeted room and emerged into gray-green light. They stood on another sidewalk. It too was split by a canal, but the water here ran in the opposite direction.

Another couple was waiting. The minion hissed, pulling Petra aside, as the couple settled, faces serene, into one of the gondola-like boats. The woman laid her arm along the gunwale; on her hand, a sapphire ring winked at Petra.

The gondolier, a figure wrapped in muted white cloth, pushed the gondola away from the sidewalk. The current washed the boat through a wide opening towards a misty horizon.

Petra tugged her arm free from the minion's hold. As she did, her skin brushed the sapphire on his hand. The horizon rushed towards her, covering her in the formless void of palpable night. Darkness unfolded gently before her like an envelope unfolding. Petra stepped over the folds into a vast room. Wings crossed her face and a sound like thunder, or waves, echoed around her. The ground glowed like glass, moved like a sea. Before her, a tree opened its branches. White light poured down, illuminating the tree's fruit, sheer glass balls in which colored light swirled. The glowing ground caught the colors and tossed them ebulliently into the unwrapped world.

The world shook, colors warping. She reached for the fruit, and as she did, hands pulled her back onto the grim cement walk.

"If you want to be hired," the minion said, "you'll stay away from that place."

"Like you?" she said, unnerved, and he grimaced as they crossed the bridge.

"I doubt it exists. Ah, your new assignment."

They stepped into a long room filled with whirs and clicks. All around them, machines spat and belched and commanded. Behind cube walls, underlings hunched over keyboards, copiers, faxes, typewriters.

"Your office," said the minion and motioned Petra into a square, corner room. The grayness of the outer world pressed against glass windows. An onyx paperweight dominated the middle of the desk. Petra slid into a leather-backed chair. The minion settled on a leather settee, curving his hands around one knee.

An underling rushed in.

"Morning. Morning," he said to Petra. "Do you want coffee, tea, water, juice? Anything I can do?"

Petra tossed over a file. "Take care of that."

"Wha-what do you want me to do with it?"

Petra sighed. "If you don't know, maybe you should look for another job," and she watched as the underling twisted the file, chewing his lower lip.

"Look," Petra said when he didn't move, "I suggest you get a move on unless you want to be written up."

The underling rushed out.

"You'll never see the file again," the minion said softly. "He won't have the initiative to ask for help."

"That is the idea."

"I see — my apologies. Please, continue."

Another underling entered. Petra tossed over a file with the same lack of instructions. Ten underlings later, she leaned back, stretching her legs.

"Subtle," the minion said. "Not dramatic but effective. Your desk is clear of work, but you retain none of the responsibility — what?" his voice sharpening.

An underling hovered in the door. Petra looked around for a file, but the underling came forward and slid a document under the onyx paperweight.

Petra flicked it with her finger. "What is this?"

"You wanted it typed—" an uneven, husky voice, faintly edged. This underling was a thin woman, all dark lines and quivering tension. Petra looked up into grim, evasive eyes. Her heart thudded. *Careful. Don't be obvious.*

The husky voice said, "One of the others asked me—" The shadowed eyes fixed on Petra's face, and the woman faltered, brows contracting.

Petra said quickly, "This isn't what I asked for. Did you read your manual?"

"I wasn't given one—"

"You should have asked. We like employees to show some initiative."

"How could I know—?"

"Did you go to training?"

"This wasn't covered in training."

"I'm hearing some attitude here," Petra said. "What's your name?"

"Marguerite." Marguerite's frowning eyes peered into Petra's. She swallowed. "You know how hard I work—"

"Look," Petra said with an irritable sigh, "you can stay here and whine or you can get to work. If you want to waste the company's time—"

"I don't — I didn't—" Marguerite's face twisted, mimicking Petra's stomach. Petra had sat through dozens of these interviews herself, she on the other side of the desk, trying desperately to communicate to ears that would not hear. She kept her eyes on Marguerite and avoided the minion's narrow-eyed scrutiny. *Careful. He's not stupid.*

Marguerite said, "I don't have to put up with this. I quit."

"That's not an option," the minion said, and Petra swiveled to face him.

"Some of them leave," she said. "We saw them, the — demotions."

He glared and shook his head. Despair is an aspect of Hell, Petra knew that, but no one had prevented the last couple from taking their boat. She kept her eyes on the minion.

He snapped, "She was a manager," jerking his head towards Marguerite, "who bitched at those beneath her. We have her. We earned her. She gave up her sapphire."

Petra winced inwardly. She didn't look at Marguerite who, she knew, watched her. She looked instead at the minion. She kept her expression blank, her eyes absent. *He mustn't guess.* When she could no longer trust her face, she gazed beyond him at the dense white sky.

"If she was a manager," Petra said finally, "she needs to learn how to listen."

Like all the managers Petra had ever pleaded with, managers who tackled every word like a ball in a match they intended to win. That isn't in my favor, ignore it. That is in my favor, keep it.

Marguerite said, "I had sloppy secretaries. They took coffee breaks, cigarette breaks, chat breaks. They didn't bother to file things correctly or pass on information. They scheduled things wrong, and then didn't tell me—"

"All your secretaries?" Petra said, her eyes on the paperweight.

"Not all but even the responsible ones didn't care about the work — not as I did. They screwed up—"

"You lost your temper—"

"I was frustrated."

"So am I," Petra said. She held out the typed document. "Take this and do it properly — unless you want a promotion."

Marguerite blanched. "I already got one."

And gave up her sapphire. “Then you’ve risen to your level of incompetence. Get on with it.”

Marguerite backed out into the clack and hiss and whistle of the cubes.

The minion said, “Never ask their names. Never get close. Act personal, act coyly interested in their lives if doing so will get you what you want, but never learn more than functionality demands.”

“Her sapphire—”

“She wanted a promotion. Judgment placed her a level above this one, but stagnation cripples — remember that, Pet, use it. They choose to go deeper out of desperation or malice.”

“The passengers on the last boat kept their rings.”

The minion’s eyes flickered. “They’re fools. They could go lower — instead they choose nothingness, a gray wasteland.”

“My vision—”

“Wishful thinking, Pet. If the vision were true, wouldn’t a price be asked? No — it’s a lie. All lie — devils and gods; never trust them, never trust what you can’t control.” He watched her over his clasped hands.

“Do I get the job?”

Teeth glinted behind the entwined fingers. On the left hand, the minion’s sapphire flashed, inviting speculation.

“Yes. Congratulations and all that. Come, I’ll show you my office.”

Petra followed him, her eyes on his left hand. They passed a series of cubes. Marguerite’s dark, bowed head emerged from behind a maroon wall.

Petra tackled the minion, pulling at his sapphire. He yelled as she tore it downwards over his knuckle. She thrust past the minion and gripped Marguerite’s shoulders, hurrying Marguerite towards the steps that led to the canal. A gondolier turned a shrouded face in their direction. Petra shoved the ring onto Marguerite’s hand and pushed her towards the stream as the minion’s arms encircled Petra from behind.

Marguerite fell into the boat. The gondolier poled away from the sidewalk; the boat floated through the wide opening. It vanished into soft mist as the minion threw Petra against the bridge. Her head struck the steps; she rolled to the side of the canal where water lapped the cement. She gasped with pain as light faded.

Petra woke to thick, afternoon sunlight. She lay on a backless couch beside a large window. It showed her the square: the usual vendors, protestors, lawyers, programmers, and tourists eating lunch at the cafés’ tables. She was on the second floor above the deli. She was in the minion’s office.

Her head hurt. She closed her eyes, pressed a hand to her forehead. She felt the hard curve of a ring. She opened her eyes to the black of the onyx stone.

“My employee.”

She turned her head towards the speaker, a careful movement. The minion sat in a chair on the edge of the light, legs stretched out, head tilted back. His hands gripped each other.

“Not wise,” he said, “to attack me. You knew the costs. Stupid, Pet. You sent her to oblivion.”

Petra said, “Your beliefs are not the same as fact.”

She sat up, still careful, but the ache was fading. She balanced on the edge of the couch.

She said, "Marguerite was my boss. The one who died from cancer."

"I guessed as much. You had an opportunity for reprisals."

"I could have been a better secretary. She could have been a better boss. She wasn't a bad person, and that was more important."

"More important than her management skills?"

"We had a relationship, however flawed. I owed her some loyalty."

He shrugged, a tense, scornful motion. On his left hand, a ring flashed. It was a sapphire.

Petra gaped. "I took that from you."

"This isn't mine."

Petra frowned. She wasn't hungry, she realized, or cold or even warm. Her head had struck the concrete steps to the bridge. She had struck them hard enough to break her neck.

She rubbed her neck now.

"You're dead," the minion said.

She nodded, staring down at her hands. She wore the onyx ring on her right ring-finger, but her left hand was bare.

The sun drifted lower. Light glowed against the windows. The light that filtered through covered the minion with tangled shadows, giving him, for the first time, an unworldly aspect.

He said, "You should have questioned the terms, Pet. They never do. They always think, 'It will be different this time.'"

Petra smiled. "It was. This time."

He didn't respond.

She said, "You want that sapphire, for all you don't believe."

"I prefer you not to have it."

"You would be wiser if you disposed of me entirely. Send me to oblivion if you're so sure it exists. The devil loathes defiance, and I outwitted you once already."

He didn't move, his face a mass of broken lines, and then he shrugged and returned to uneventful ordinariness.

"Ah—" he said. "Yes. But the devil's minion, Pet, the devil's minion prefers a challenge."

And she was hired.

The Bigglio-Muller Experiment: A paper on the effects of Metaphysical Astrophysics

...Lawrence Buentello

The physical sciences being what they are, I suppose a short scientific preamble is in order before the actual effects are described—

All bodies in space create and reflect the presence of a gravitational field (even small ones: imagine a ball bearing the size of a marble floating in space — now imagine a pea from a really cheap whistle falling into that ball bearing's 'orbit', which is, of course, created by the ball bearing's gravitational field — so, all right, you understand physics). The tantalizing question that remains is: what is gravity?

Scientists were certain for a very long time that all bodies in space verified the existence of gravity. So what was gravity? Was it a particle? A hitherto undiscovered quality of real-matter reality? A clever trick perpetrated by devious bits of quarks? Were bosons really the culprit? The answer was, of course, none of the above. Human psychology being what it is, scientists remained distracted by the demands of traditional 'empirical science'¹ until the Bigglio-Muller experiment.

Bigglio and Muller, as the texts read², were transcendental astrophysicists conducting research at the eminent University of the Southeast Just below Newport News in the year 2015. Both held legitimate doctorates in Transcendental Astrophysics from the Universidad de Americas, South, contrary to some popular reports, which are not relevant to this entry. In any case, the Bigglio-Muller experiment was based on the Bigglio-Muller Theory of Gravity, which proposed that all matter existed in all times; which is to say that past, present and future matter has existed at all times and in all times, a subtle difference from the Theory of Conservation of Matter. The Conservation of Matter describes a universe where matter-energy states could be altered but not degraded to zero mass. The Bigglio-Muller theory contended that because matter existed in all forms at all times (in space-time) that a new spatial mechanism must be at play.³

Gravity, then (remember our fine example of the ball bearing), according to the theory, was produced as an effect of matter constantly traveling between points in time. That is to say, our ball bearing, existing at all times in the history of space, produced a hole in the 'thingness' of space, a hole which, like any hole in the fabric

of a 'thing', simply invited an object to fall through. But an object cannot fall through a filled hole (unless it pushes really hard), especially a hole filled by matter existing in all times.

So we have this phantom attraction which explains the quality of gravity without having to explain the quantity of gravity. Gravity is simply the effect of a constant process.

Of course, this met with great skepticism in the time of Bigglio and Muller.⁴ Critics of the theory pointed out that matter in space may assume any number of physical incarnations over the course of time, so how could a body possess an infinite existence? Bigglio and Muller effectively addressed this question by first ignoring it, and then by suggesting that a complicated process also existed between energetic particles called 'Time Sharing'. This included the conversion of matter to energy (the so-called 'Lit-Match Phenomenon') by suggesting that, not unlike the religious theory of the conversion of the body-soul into the soul-soul, matter was constantly transforming itself into matter through its own particle time-line. Unfortunately (and sadly, I might add), once popularized, this concept contributed to the short-lived societal trend of body-soul time travel through self-immolation.⁵

Having proposed their monumental theory to the scientific world, Bigglio and Muller proceeded to devise an acceptable (again, a necessity demanded of the lords of empiricism) physical experiment that would verify their theory in no uncertain terms. This had to wait for a couple of years, as the University of the Southeast Just below Newport News succumbed to an unforeseen case of bankruptcy, and Bigglio and Muller had to find a suitable institution to continue their good work (as very few extant universities offered a program in transcendental metaphysics, let alone heard of it). Once ensconced in the almost-suitable laboratories of the University of Very Upstate New York, their ground-breaking studies resumed without interruption.⁶

Confirming the existence of matter in more than one time proved more than a challenge: Bigglio and Muller discovered this immediately (and thus straining scientific credulity) when, having first placed a piece of granite in a sealed container (duly notarized by a reputable legal firm from Canada), they opened the container three weeks later to discover that the granite had remained unchanged throughout the designated period. This experiment, though in theory quite dynamic and perfectly legitimate, did little to sway the opinion of their critics. Bigglio and Muller decided that they needed more convincing results.

The very nature of time itself proved to be the key. Most theories on the nature of time (or, in some provinces, Time) concluded that time was a perceived effect of the continued process of energy manifestation measured by varying states of entropy; those particles of matter, having come together in the form of our ball bearing, would eventually fall apart due to the effect of their unceasing motion (even slow motion).⁷ But, when seen against the majestic backdrop of the Bigglio-Muller theory of gravity, the effect of motion alone could not explain the entropic quality of chaos-order-chaos (nor could many esteemed professionals, when asked this question on a widely circulated questionnaire). Therefore, some other quality of nature was at work in the process of 'time'.

Bigglio (or was it Muller?) brilliantly explained the effects of entropy by concluding that, as all matter exists through time and in all times, the same must be true for time; time, then, must exist with all matter at all times! Thereafter Muller (or was it Bigglio?) produced the following bit of *curiosa*: the process of entropic motion (whether by a man-made ball bearing or a ball bearing already existing in nature) was the effect of a physical influence existing at either end of time.⁸

But what was this influence? How could it exist in both creation-time and death-of-the-universe-time? Both beginning and end? And at which end was entropic time influenced? Did these effects somehow meet in the middle? Was one end of time more dexterous than the other? Was all motion the effect of an infinite game of ping-pong?

The Bigglio-Muller experiment was an effort to achieve some understanding of these seeming paradoxes (or seaming, depending on how they were arranged on a chalkboard). Using fundamental transcendental principles refined through decades of close study, Bigglio and Muller enlisted the entire student body (and some willing faculty members) of the University of Very Upstate New York to participate in a cosmic mind-closure with the time-line of all existing matter. This was accomplished with much difficulty (the so-called ‘tuning problem’), but eventually the bugs were worked out, and the proper wavelength for their meta-physiological mantra was achieved.⁹

First hand (nay, *empirical*) knowledge of this historical event is, of course, sketchy, since all of the participants were immediately disassembled according to the effect (unknown at the time) of time-line equalization. Once all of the physical evidence was swept up from the parking lot, serious analysis began. Witnesses to the event (several custodial personnel who were in the process of noontime beer-break ablutions) claim that Bigglio (or was it Muller?) muttered a single cryptic word before he (and everyone else) fell to the asphalt in a quivering mass of disassemblage: the word, now famous in the doctrine of transcendental metaphysics, was “shift”. Or something to that effect, but the result was the same: the Bigglio-Muller theory had been proved viable (and in a really colorful empirical way).¹⁰

Of course, further experiments were conducted in the ensuing years (including the Great Tabby Cat Transformation, Frogs Across the Universe, and the spectacular Ball Bearing Drop), offering additional credibility to Bigglio and Muller’s surviving work, culminating in the breath-taking Theory of Universal Creation and Destruction (and Then Creation Again, Ad Infinitum) by virtue of the now universally accepted ‘tennis ball effect’, which states that time flows back and forth across creation, neither being created nor destroyed, but replayed over and over, and quite probably repeating itself again and again.¹¹

Thus the Bigglio-Muller Effect stipulates that you actually *can* go home again, in time — though I’ll be damned if anything really different happens.¹²

(Addendum: Bigglio and Muller were posthumously awarded the Nobel Prize in Transcendental Astrophysics, as soon as the category was created in the summer of ’26).

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Interchange

...Emma-Jean Stewart

ASIM congratulates Emma-Jean Stewart on her first publication:

I enjoy writing stories that start with a negative outlook on the reality of my circumstances, and explore 'what if?', just to put the protagonist in an even worse situation.

I lived in South-East Queensland from the time I was nine. Through high school, my landscape was filled with yellow and brown vegetation, and creeks and dams with receding waterlines.

Stories we repeated in high school, when we were trying to scare each other, involved creatures that came up from local waterholes and ate cattle and unwary humans; or seduced young men, luring them back into the murky depths of the creeks.

When my friend hurt himself on the bottom of the creek bed — badly enough to scare us into giving up playing on our tyre swing over the water hole for a few weeks, but not badly enough that we had to actually tell any adults about it — I wondered where these creatures would take their victims when the water dried up.

Interchange is a story that has been in the back of my mind for a few years. I'm happy that this story is out of my head, now, and on paper.

It is hard to remember exactly what she looked like, or even how long it has been since I saw her. Her scent, however, lingers: a perfect sense-memory, which I know I will never forget even if I live to be a hundred and three. Damp soil. She smelled the way the ground does, right after rain.

The first time I saw her was at the bus interchange in Toowoomba. She was hopping off the bus empty-handed, conspicuous amongst the tourists, backpackers and travellers with their over-packed suitcases, packs and bags. She saw me staring at her and flashed me a shy smile. Her teeth were white against her dark skin. I

looked away, berated myself for being so rude. When I looked up she had gone. I lit another cigarette and leaned back against the wall and took a drag. The stars were starting to become visible in the sky to the east and the western sky was turning orange and fuchsia.

“Hi,” she said. I knew it was her. I nodded my greeting and offered her a smoke, which she took. Her hand was wet.

I sat forward and turned to get a better look and saw that she was drenched as though she had hopped directly off the bus and straight into the shower without stopping to undress. I didn’t ask why.

“You from round here?” she asked. I shook my head, no.

“From Gundy. Going down to the coast. Looking for work,” I explained. “Not much work back home since the drought really kicked in. No-one’s got any money to pay me. Rains all the time at the coast, should be work there.” She nodded and we smoked in silence until I thought to ask, “What about you?”

“Same. From out bush, going to the coast. Because of the drought.”

“Really,” I asked, stupidly excited. “Maybe we can go and, I don’t know, try and find a flat together or something!” She was the first person I’d met who hadn’t laughed at me, a country bumpkin trying to make good in the big city. But she giggled then at my enthusiasm. It actually sounded like the tinkling of babbling brooks. (I joined in. It was hard not to.)

Then I looked into her eyes, the colour of mud and moss and night. She looked back at me and I felt ashamed for being so rude, for staring, but I couldn’t break her gaze. Her scent was tangible, intoxicating.

Then, after an eternity, she told me.

First she said that my plans had changed. (I believed her. Completely.)

She leaned in and whispered. Told me who she was, how many thousands of years she had spent living in the in the creeks and billabongs of South-East Queensland. Thousands of years, she said, and looking into her eyes, I believed her. But now without rain, the water would dry up, and so would she. So she left in search of the wet. I know, it sounds a bit ridiculous when I tell this story. I have no idea how a person could just dry up, but when she got to that part of her yarn I took a long look at her, and she was no longer saturated. (Her hair was maybe a little damp, but that’s all.) She wasn’t the ordinary girl she had seemed to me when she’d hopped off the bus an hour ago.

She told me more. She told me about others who had gone out in search of the wet and had dried up before they reached the monsoonal north. She told me of the generations of children who played in her home, who she watched grow older, and their children and grandchildren that played in her home as well. She told me of lovers who met by the trees by her home in the moonlight, and those that came alone to remember past loves. The words of her stories, or maybe the way she told them, made me feel like I was there, and it felt good. I have never been good at imagining things, making up stories or any of that. This was like I was seeing it on a television inside my head, only the television had smell and temperature and the feel of the wind, too. I felt like I was really living. Maybe not living my life, though, because

my life was never so rich or full as that. A farmer without land, saddest thing in the world, that's me.

I was caught up in her world of stories when she explained that she would use my ticket to take the night bus to the coast and be there in the morning. I would wait here, she said, and tell the others where she had gone and what they were to do next. She told me more, but I don't recall. I won't recall it until I need to, she said.

Then she went and had another shower, and then she was gone.

So, here I sit, at the Toowoomba Interchange. I let her take my luggage, my ticket, my smokes. I didn't try to stop her. It didn't occur to me. I was high on her smell, on her stories. I just sit here. I don't eat or drink any more. Seems I don't need to. Something else is sustaining me now. Nobody bothers me or asks me to move. It's like they don't really see me, I don't register as being there. But the others see me.

The first one to come by was a girl on her own, but after that they came in pairs and threes. They all get off the bus empty-handed and head right for the shower. They sit with me and offer me smokes which they have taken from who knows where. And it turns out that she was right, I do remember what to say when I need to. They tell me that I won't have to wait here much longer, that there are very few of their kind left. That maybe someday soon they won't need me to stay here, a human signpost for ancient creatures. That soon I can go back to my old life.

But I know I won't. I know where she's gone. It was my ticket she took after all. I will track her down, I know I can. I have her scent. I will find her. And when I do, I will beg her to tell me her stories while I lie under a tree near her new home, and spend my days with tangible pictures in my mind, surrounded by the smell of damp soil.

Time for Tom Rynosseros: An Interview with Terry Dowling

...Edwina Harvey

It has been a good year for Terry Dowling, with the release of his novel, *Rynemonn: Leopard Dreaming*, his most recent successes in winning the Australian Shadows award for his horror stories, and receiving the Peter McNamara award at the Aurealis Awards in January. Edwina Harvey recently interviewed the prolific author about the future of Tom Rynosseros, a character who has endeared himself to many of Terry Dowling's readers.

EH: I believe your Rynosseros series recently came to a close with the publication of Rynemonn, the fourth (and final?) book in the Tom Rynosseros series. Are you sad to see it go, or do you feel that the time was right?

TD: Some writers have careful strategies for what they do, but as projects have a way of taking on lives of their own, I try not to play things in a too structured fashion. I could have easily kept writing Tom stories (and may yet do so, either fitting them into existing timeline events or producing stories exploring the adventures of the other Coloured Captains) but it certainly is a time to stand back and look at the whole thing. The main determining factor for it going this way was, of course, my dear friend and publisher Peter McNamara's serious illness in late 2002 that led to his tragic and untimely death in June 2004. Peter was so full of life and energy and, in those final twenty or so months, wanted it to be business as close to usual as possible. He edited *Wonder Years* for Bill Congreve at MirrorDanse Books, and put together *Forever Shores*, a major anthology of new stories, with his long-time friend and colleague Margaret Winch. He asked me to submit something to the project and I was delighted to do so. In a way it forced my hand, which is often the best way for things to be creatively.

I'd already written the last few pages of what was to be the 'final' Tom story, "Sewing Whole Cloth" back in 1993-94 soon after *Twilight Beach* appeared. I knew how the fourth collection would end, especially after the desperate events described at the close of "Ship's Eye", the final story in that third volume of Tom stories. I already had a working title for the fourth Tom collection (*Leopard Dreaming*) before meeting Jesse Polhemus at Jack Vance's home in Oakland in late 1999. Jesse introduced me to the Anglo-Saxon word rynemonn, meaning "one skilled

in mysteries” and was only too happy to let me use it in my Tom Rynosseros work. It was perfect. Most of the stories in the final collection had been published in one venue or another, but they were all tailored to that ending written back in the early 90s. I already knew what the linking pieces — finally called “Doing the Line” — had to add to the whole. Had there been more time, those linking segments may well have become fully-fledged stories delivering the same narrative payloads, but they stand as effectively — perhaps even more effectively — just as they are.

EH: You have a loyal readership (both in Australia and overseas), but from my point of view this series had a particularly strong group of readers. Was it your fans that kept urging you to write in this universe? And if so did you ever feel trapped by it the way Douglas Adams possibly felt trapped by Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy?

TD: Not for a moment have I ever felt trapped in any way. In a curious but very important sense, I’m one of those writers who write the stories I myself want to read. This was a narrative and spiritual journey I had gone on for personal reasons, and, as with many of us with the books we read, the movies and television shows we enjoy, the music we listen to, this became a vital part of this individual’s journey. I’m honoured and gratified that it struck a common chord, found such a place in the life journeys of others.

EH: It doesn’t seem a particularly easy task to write SF based in Australia, but you seem to have done it with aplomb. The only other examples I can think of are Damien Broderick’s The Dreaming Dragons, and Traci Harding’s novels. Have overseas readers of your work said they particularly enjoy the Australian background to your stories?

TD: First, thank you for your kind words. Overseas readers often do enjoy the exotic and epic background to the Tom stories, but it’s more that they’ve sensed an adventurous, romantic, universal aspect in the work that remains valid — to use that word — and representative of where humanity is at in these last few decades. Just as *Dune* told a traditional story of conflict and transcendence in a far-off exotic setting, so does this series of tales, and, as with so much SF, the more you read, the larger this setting of Tom’s gets. It is actually a truly universal setting as we finally learn, one with specific reasons for its existence. That was something I never needed to resolve, of course, and originally did not intend to, but found that the stories themselves led me towards that sort of resolution. They really did, do and should take on a life of their own. I think the whole series has gained immeasurably by this sort of open, organic approach. As I’ve said before, I discovered Tom’s journey at the same time he did. But then I’ve always allowed that the self is so much smarter than the ego speaking for it. Sometimes you control things strictly, according to set goals and narrative tasks; other times you proceed and just see what happens.

EH: I discovered that Katherine Cummings and I had a shared perception about your writing where you present something to the reader that we think we understand, but then we're not quite sure. Your belltrees are an example of this. I felt I instantly knew what you were talking about, and then I didn't! Kate said she enjoys that about your writing.*

TD: Never deny your readers the chance to use their own imaginations. Always allow that their imaginings might be better, more effective, more intense, more appropriately intimate in terms of reader engagement with an author's work than anything you yourself can deliver and lock in with mere words. We're designed for these powerful imaginings as creatures, but more and more it's leached out of us by overconventionalisation of experience, by consumerism, franchise thinking, lowest common denominator expectations, the general everyday stylisation of human conduct we see all around us. All the savvy writer has to do is provide the right triggers. The traditional storytelling corollary is: "Show, Don't Tell", but as with Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, many others we could name (yes, including TD), the ideal refinement is "Don't Just Show, Suggest!" The words we use to describe something can also damage that description — something the great majority of writing workshops never begin to address. Less can be so much more.

EH: Are you still writing computer games? I'm not sure if it's the storyline you write, then give to computer game developers, or the other way around?

TD: I'm set up to move quickly if a new game project eventuates. With the first title, *Schizm: Mysterious Journey*, I worked closely with Maciek Miasik in Rzeszow, Poland, and provided the entire gamestory and game-title, the characters, dialogue etc to go with an existing game-setting they had already been working on. I fleshed out their setting with what we all felt was an appropriate planetary geography and an intriguing narrative and they adapted what they had to the existing gaming format with its gaming rewards etc. With the sequel, *Schizm II: Chameleon*, I did the same creative design tasks but this time with my story providing the up-front planetary setting as well. Maciek and the Detalion team in Poland then brought that to life in consultation with me, while adapting that material to a gameplay/level-design approach. For our third collaboration, I did the same tasks, but this time with the game-story based entirely on my short story "The Ichneumon and the Dormeuse", which meant I had the added pleasure of seeing an existing story of mine I like a lot being given 'cinematic' treatment.

EH: Is there likely to be a Tom Rynosseros computer game in the offing? Marianne De Pierres had at least one of her books developed into a computer game by an Australian company.

* Terry Dowling launched the second edition of Katherine Cumming's book, *Katherine's Diary*, at Gleebooks in December 2007. They have been good friends for many years.

TD: Film or television mini-series treatment, graphic novel, yes, but the way gaming is currently set up, I think not. Existing computer game formats and platforms are not yet an optimum form. They're certainly heading that way, but this is the 'silent movie' era of game design and the whole interactive fiction industry is presently piggybacking on a gaming approach. It can be interesting, even very promising, sometimes exciting, but it's still very much a short-term solution for what interactive experience will become.

EH: Damien Broderick was once described (by Russell Blackmore, from memory) as "the enfant terrible" of Australia SF. If that's the case, what does that make you?

TD: That's for others to say, of course. I'm not sure I qualify as an 'eminence gris' yet. I have applauded a good deal of what Damien has done but, personally, never really saw him as all that much of an enfant terrible. Some of his more rarefied, experimental work remained just that, elusive and distancing, and I personally have always preferred it when he just cuts loose and tells a terrific story in an outright fashion. But this is all relative, of course. Given how lean and low-key the Aussie scene was in the 60s and 70s, it was possibly necessary, relatively worthwhile and comparatively easy to cut a swathe as a maverick or rebel. The scene became very different in the 80s. I truly believe Aussie SF came into full bloom in that decade and Damien certainly helped shape that crucial blossoming.

EH: You're also the only Aus SF writer I know of who's had a mailing list set up to discuss your works. I know you've always been very open and communicative with your fans, but how does this make you feel? Are you on the list at all, and likely to contribute in the same way Larry Niven occasionally posts to his list?

TD: I visit the yahoo group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/terrydowlinggroup/>) several times a week and, as you see, have posted lots of game photos and such that give interested parties some idea of the details of certain projects. There's even a video of Cottesloe Beach in WA that gives just enough of a feel of *Twilight Beach*. If someone directs a specific question my way, I make sure I'm there to answer it.

EH: Did your time on Mr Squiggle have any connection to your interest in Science Fiction?

TD: It was all part of the same creative package. Before Squiggle, I did some presenting on ABC science programs, so I became a singing-dancing robot called Mister E at one point, an astronaut to Mars (with a song called "Come on in, the Ammonia's Fine"), a pirate etc. Squiggle became the culmination of that, all part of a very special watershed time creatively.

Rynemonn: *Leopard Dreaming*, the most recent instalment in the Tom Rynosseros saga, was published in 2007 by Coeur de Lion Publishing.

Dial 'M' for Matter: An Interview with Iain M Banks

...Simon Petrie

The fourth published novel by Scottish writer Iain Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (1987), was his first to feature a middle initial 'M', and the first fully-fledged science fiction novel to have appeared under either variant of his name. It also introduced an advanced, pan-Galactic society known as the Culture, a loosely-knit and, for the most part, benevolently anarchistic grouping of humanoid and non-humanoid intelligent races. Since *Consider Phlebas*, Banks has used the included initial 'M' to distinguish his SF work from his mainstream novels. His latest offering, *Matter* (published by Orbit, in February 2008), is another novel of the Culture, and (to the interviewer's mind at least) shows he hasn't lost his knack for producing entertaining, thought-provoking, large-scale science fiction. During a telephone interview on January 21st, 2008, Simon Petrie asked Iain M Banks about several aspects of his writing and his life as an author.

SP: You've made a trademark for yourself of alternating between SF and mainstream or literary fiction in your writing. What attracted you (and, presumably, keeps you attracted) to this oscillation between styles?

IMB: It's indulgence, actually. I'm a very self-indulgent writer. I think the science fiction, particularly the Culture novels, the Culture's all about self-indulgence, it's what the Culture stands for...but the main thing is I get to write in two different genres. It stops me getting bored. I get bored extremely quickly. And writing the same books twice in a row, I think especially for that amount of time, I'd just get bored, I'd get fed up. So because I write in two different genres, it means I'm always writing in a different genre to the book I've just written, and I think that keeps my interest up... I suppose, in a sense, it could be any genre. I could be writing science fiction and westerns, or something. Or else mainstream and, oh I don't know, detective fiction or whatever, and that would probably have the same effect. The point is, though, that science fiction is the genre that I love...it just

lets me exercise the imagination, and that's the point about science fiction. It's about imagination, it's about ideas, and those are the two things that I absolutely treasure, you don't get in any other genre. It's all very well me talking about writing westerns, or erotica, or detective fiction, or romantic fiction, it's only science fiction that's about ideas, about imagination.

SP: What degree of overlap is there, between audiences for your SF and mainstream books?

IMB: I don't know, to be honest. I've never really done that sort of market research job on this. There's certainly a degree.

I quite often meet people who say, "Oh, I just don't read science fiction," but I virtually never meet someone who's a science fiction fan who says "Oh, I never read mainstream." Probably they do, but I've never met them. At least, I've never met anyone who's admitted to it, anyway. The thing is, science fiction readers I think are more catholic in their tastes, they're more open to reading other genres...there's a Venn diagram in there, somewhere, isn't there, of the overlap. I don't know what the actual percentage is. I suspect there's something between ten percent, fifty percent, goodness knows.

SP: It's been eight years since Look to Windward was released, and now Matter has finally — er — materialised. Will we need to wait so long for the next Culture novel? Or do you have something else in mind along the lines of The Algebraist, your intervening SF book?

IMB: I suspect the next SF one will be a Culture novel. I don't know, I haven't made up my mind yet. The sequence is pretty definite. The one I'm writing later this year will definitely be mainstream, and the one after that will definitely be science fiction. Probably.

Matter was like the filling in the sandwich of a three-book deal, a three-book contract that I signed, so *Matter* was the one science fiction novel with a mainstream on either side. So in theory I could write what I damn well please. I'm not committed to writing science fiction after the one I'll be writing this year. But probably, yeah, it'll be another science fiction. Will it be Culture? I don't entirely know...but having said that, I love writing about the Culture, I just absolutely adore it, I almost have to force myself not to. So, chances are very much that the one after the next one (which is a mainstream) will be the next Culture science fiction novel.

SP: How did the Culture originate? As a concept, I mean, rather than as a Galaxy-spanning civilisation...

IMB: Partly through having read lots and lots of science fiction as a teenager and thinking that I could do this, and I could do it better. A lot of it is a reaction to lots of science fiction that I'd read. Much of what I read, especially the American stuff, well, the American science fiction often seemed to be quite right-wing... I thought it somewhat bizarre to imagine that all sorts of technology matures, but economic relations are somehow still anchored in the Eisenhower era. That seemed to be a bit bizarre. So really, a lot of the British science fiction I was reading seemed unnecessarily doom-laden. American science fiction tended to assume that capitalism would triumph... British science fiction often seemed to imagine that communism would triumph, and there'd be a horrible grey future where everyone ate the same food and dressed in the same grey overalls, getting crushed, ground down by society. They really annoyed me, both of them, in different ways. The American stuff at least had a kinetic energy about it, where the British stuff was just miserabilism, although it was usually rather better written and in some ways more realistic. And I just, you know, tried a curse upon both their houses, I wanted to write something that was basically gritty and realistic, but with the pioneering feel that you find in space opera. What Brian Aldiss called widescreen baroque, I've always loved that, that saying "Space opera is the widescreen baroque."

That was the feeling behind, in some ways, anyway, *Consider Phlebas*, the first one [published] of the Culture novels. But the society, as an idea, of the Culture, had been around, had been germinating as a reaction to all the science fiction that I'd read...for a period of I'd guess about sixteen years before I set pen to paper. The very first novel of the Culture novels was in fact *Use of Weapons*, which goes way back to late seventies, and the Culture was kind of, well what it crystallised around, in a sense, was me trying to think of a futuristic society that could honestly justify employing, using someone like Zakalwe, the central character in *Use of Weapons*. And that was the grain of sand that the Culture pearlised around.

SP: One of the characteristics of both your SF and mainstream writing is the detail and precision with which the locations are described. You obviously put a lot of thought into worldbuilding: indeed, the word 'worldbuilding' is almost a pun in the context of Feersum Endjinn, your second non-Culture SF novel. When, for example, you've set large chunks of action in the outer layers of a Jupiter-like gas giant, as in The Algebraist, how much of the description is research-based, and how much is artistic extrapolation?

IMB: As much as you can get away with, to be honest, I suppose. I did actually do some proper research for *The Algebraist*. I pretty much did it online...the thing is, you can learn as much as you can, and then you let the imagination off the leash. I think the stuff that it could be challenged on, you know, is the stuff that no-one is going to know. I stayed as true as I could to what was known about the rheology, as it were, of gas giants, and after that you have to wing it, basically, which is one of the joys of science fiction, is the fact you do it as you go along, it's part of the fun. As long as it sounds convincing, that's the point, I have to get it past my internal nonsense detector.

SP: There have been screen or radio adaptations of several of your mainstream books. What would your thoughts be on the possibility of one or other of your SF books being adapted for the big screen? Is this something we're ever likely to see happen?

IMB: I'd love to see some of the Culture novels on film. I mean, they'd do it wrong...the Culture starships would look not the way they should look. But that'd be a small price to pay. I don't know. It's always a possibility, and I'd love to see it happen...especially *Consider Phlebas*, the most action-packed of the lot, but there's nothing on the horizon at the moment. I don't think any of the Culture novels have even been optioned. So I wouldn't hold your breath.

SP: Who were the authors who inspired you to take up writing?

IMB: Oh, just about every single one I ever read, as a child and as an adolescent I guess. I knew I wanted to be a writer from an early age, from the age of ten or eleven, and possibly before that, I knew I wanted to be a writer...but there was no single author, or even a collection of writers I could name, it was just the idea, I just realised that I loved writing. And at some stage I suppose I must have heard that there was such a thing as a professional writer, you could actually do this stuff and if you were lucky, and dedicated, like that, or whatever, you could actually make a living from it. And that was it.

SP: What would you most hope that readers take away from your books?

IMB: I don't know. It's kind of up to them, really. I don't really design them to have a specific effect... I write them to entertain, and I suppose to make people think a bit as well, but even that's a bit presumptuous, I suppose. Whatever seems suitable to them, whatever seems the right thing for them. I think you have a duty as a writer, not to be too deterministic. You kind of have to leave it up to them, as a mark of respect.

A technical note at this point: there were in fact a few more questions I put to Iain Banks during the course of the interview, but, due to a conspiracy between my volume-impaired speakerphone and my Collins-class tape recorder, his recorded responses to those questions frustratingly defied transcription. I am thus unable to report those responses verbatim, but I can provide the gist of those answers:

When asked about the ‘M’ in his SF-author moniker, Banks reports that it stands for ‘Menzies’, omitted from his first three literary novels at the suggestion of his publisher (concerned that it might be seen as pretentiousness). Following some family members’ disappointment at what was seen as a denial of his heritage, Banks reinstated the ‘M’ for his SF debut *Consider Phlebas*, and the pattern was established. It’s a pattern he regrets in some respects, for the division it creates between his genre and non-genre writing (allowing the persistence of SF’s ghettoisation in the eyes of the ‘literary’ reading public).

For an insight into his own tastes in reading, I ask what he’s read most recently. He mentions *Black Swan Green*, by David Mitchell, and Clive James’s *North Face of Soho* (and adds that he’s a longtime Clive James fan, having at one point owned all of the LPs put out by Clive James and Pete Atkin during the 70s, before lending the albums out to friends...). Next on the list is likely to be *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead*, Crystal Zevon’s biography of ‘the late great Warren Zevon’.

When asked about any disconnection between the writing of arguably escapist SF and his own public stance on real-world politics, Banks gently corrects me on the ‘passport incident’ — it’s been reported in some places that he cut up his passport on TV to protest against Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war; in fact, says Banks, there was no TV involvement: the passport was cut up one morning and, along with his wife’s, was then sent to Tony Blair as a protest. He doesn’t feel it’s his place to be pushing his own points of view too directly in his fiction: writing provides an extra platform, but he regards his views on the right things to do, in today’s society, as something personal and distinct from what is the appropriate content in his written work.

It’s been a somewhat daunting exercise for me, this phone interview; which is silly, because Banks is affable throughout. Inevitably, while transcribing it, I think of questions I could have asked, but didn’t; but overall, of the questions I did manage to ask, there’s one particular follow-up thought that resonates:

Is it just my misperception, or would Peter Jackson be the perfect director for *Consider Phlebas*?

Reviews

Pool

By Justin D'Ath

Ford Street Publishing, September 2007, 297 pp

ISBN: 978-1-876462-51-2

Reviewed by I.E. Lester

Previously published at <http://www.andromedaspaceways.com/bookreviews.htm>

Wolfgang Mulqueen is a sixteen-year-old schoolboy in New Lourdes, Australia working a summer job at the miracle pool that has put the town on the map (and caused its renaming from Loddon Springs). The water in the pool has a slope — finding its “level” a few degrees off horizontal — and, since an incident a dozen years previous, a reputation for healing properties.

A butterfly lands on one of the pool’s visitors, a blind girl slightly older than Wolfgang named Audrey, who visits the pool daily but not to experience its waters, preferring to sleep in the shade of an umbrella poolside. The butterfly collector in Wolfgang cannot resist taking a closer look and so he announces himself to Audrey so his approach does not scare her.

This single event begins an unusual summer for Wolfgang. He begins a friendship with this unusual blind girl — one that is encouraged by her father who actually pays Wolfgang to spend time with his daughter, so worried is he by her solitary and nocturnal nature. Their friendship blossoms, despite Wolfgang seeing her more bizarre side, including a liking for walking through cemeteries at night, and finding out more about the mysterious events of her past.

This is a young adult novel. I thought I’d better mention it. It doesn’t read like other young adult fiction I’ve read. Its plot is more surreal, and its characters more flawed — just witness the monetary agreement between Wolfgang and Audrey’s father for proof. It’s also not a book for traditional plot-strand resolutions. This is not a give-away, by the way. Right from the off you feel this is not going to be a standard boy-meets-girl-during-a-supernatural-event-happily-ever-after tale.

There is a deal of the boy-meets-girl in this book, the two go on dates and there are first kiss moments, but there is something different underlying the whole. Audrey’s back-story, with regards to the accident that left her in a coma for months and caused her blindness, has uncanny timing when compared to the sloping pool and Wolfgang’s

own life. She also seems disconnected somewhat, as though she never totally returned after reviving from her coma.

The human side of the story is not lost amongst the spookiness. Wolfgang is a typical sixteen-year-old, full of hormones and very much aware of Audrey as female. He matures through the book, as witnessed by the changing of priorities regarding his butterflies. And, although he still has childish tendencies including a stutter when he becomes embarrassed or nervous, the Wolfgang at the end of this book is noticeably older than at the story's beginning.

There are some tender moments in the story, in the relationship between the two main characters — most especially during a trip to the zoo butterfly house, so he can properly introduce her to the creatures and show her his passion for them. It's their interaction that is the strongest part of the novel — D'Ath has managed to make their stuttering feelings totally believable.

It's not a book that is going to make me concentrate on reading young adult novels; I still want more to my fiction. But it is one that proved to me that books for younger reader have great merit.

Blood Ties, Book One of The Castings Trilogy

By Pamela Freeman.

Hachette Australia, 2007.

ISBN 9760733522113

Reviewed by Edwina Harvey

Pamela Freeman has established a name for herself as a children's author, though *Blood Ties* is her first novel for adults.

I found *Blood Ties* a very easy book to read. Freeman's writing is refreshingly simple and straight-forward. While occasionally I felt she perhaps paid too much attention to descriptions, this attention to detail didn't complicate the telling of a good story. The book itself seems to be many stories, all plaited together like the strands of a rope. Each chapter is named after the protagonist of that story strand. The three primary characters are Bramble, Ash and Saker.

Bramble, keen to follow her Traveller heritage finds herself taking to the Road in a way she could never had imagined: mounted on a roan horse. Horses become an integral part of her destiny. As I like horses, I particularly liked reading Bramble's story, even if I did wonder if the author was inspired by National Velvet when penning Bramble's tale.

Ash is also of Traveller heritage, and on a separate journey from Bramble's. As a young man his parents find him an apprenticeship with a town mercenary as he is not really suited to the Traveller life his parents lead. Like Bramble, Ash finds himself taking to the Road in a way he couldn't have imagined.

Saker is more mysterious. His is a story of remorse and bloody revenge. The chapters devoted to Saker aren't particularly long as his story is unfolding.

While I got used to the idea of chapters being organised by characters, I'm puzzled why Freeman gives some apparently minor characters a chapter of their own where they address the reader directly and tell their story. This usually happens after the character has entered

the story via another thread. It reminds me of a medieval play, but my curiosity is piqued, and I'm interested to see where it leads.

I really enjoyed immersing myself into the world Freeman has created, where people consult stone-casters to know their future as a matter of course, where the gods stick close to the people who believe in them, often whispering in their ear, where ghosts hang around on street corners, and where the dead rise again after the third day.

Deep Water, the second volume of this fantasy trilogy, will be published in 2008, with the third instalment, *Full Circle*, being published in 2009. I can hardly wait!

The Opposite of Life

By Narrelle M. Harris

Pulp Fiction Press, 2007, 268 pp

Reviewed by Tehani Wessely

Previously published on at <http://www.andromedaspaceways.com/bookreviews.htm>

There are a lot of supernatural dark fantasies about at the moment, so for Pulp Fiction Press to take a chance on a relatively unknown author in this genre, they must believe the story is something special. In this case, it's a pleasant surprise to find they were not far off the mark. In *The Opposite of Life*, Harris has taken quite a different turn in the paranormal field.

While there's nothing terribly new here, the treatment of the protagonist and the vampires involved in the story is just a little unusual. This is especially evident in the description of Gary, the vampire that our hero, Lissa, gets to know best.

The brightly coloured tropical shirt was a dead giveaway. It was unbuttoned, revealing a faded green T-shirt which tightened slightly around the middle and flowed over the top of equally faded blue jeans. His mop of untidy, light brown hair topped a round, pale face. Beneath the fringe, a pair of hazel eyes blinked owlishly at us.

Later, he's referred to as "the tubby guy in the tropical shirt". A far cry from the ridiculously gorgeous brooding vampires normally encountered in this type of book! It makes a nice change.

The protagonist, Lissa, is a librarian, not a superhero, and although she comes prepared to take on the world, underneath she is a hurt little girl, still mourning the loss of a sister and brother at quite young ages, and the subsequent distancing of her parents that followed. This too is nothing new, as most of the heroines of these type of books have family issues or other flaws. What is different is the way Lissa presented; not overly whiney, not uncomfortably argumentative, not insanely suicidal. Just an ordinary girl who's had more than her fair share of life's hard knocks.

Another point of interest is the setting. I don't know Melbourne well — I've visited a couple of times but never truly explored — but there is a very strong sense of what it means to be part of the rich and varied Melbourne night life in this book. The setting is every bit as much a part of the book as the characters, and although this is not normally something I notice in a novel, it is integral to this one. Alongside this, the 'feel' of the book is something quite different from others in the genre; even the Riley Jensen books by fellow Aussie Keri Arthur don't have quite the same sense of the Australian about them. But it is not a broad

ocker Australianism that tries too hard to capture the national identity; it simply is. It is a very hard quality to capture or describe, but I think Harris has done it successfully.

There is a certain clunkiness in some parts of the writing, but these are things a writer of more experience will iron out of her storytelling. In spite of this, the book was a good read, and it drew me along... I have a To Read pile as big as a bookcase and I didn't feel I wasted my time on this.

As I noted previously, there is nothing truly innovative in the book. Having said that, I did NOT see the ending coming, and although I wasn't necessarily satisfied with some aspects of it, the finale made sense in terms of the novel itself. In all, *The Opposite of Life* was a pleasant way to spend a Sunday, and it is deserving of a place on your list of books to read if you like the paranormal genre.

Tehani Wessely is a judge for the Aurealis Awards. This review is the personal opinion of the writer, and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of any judging panel or the Aurealis Awards Committee.

The Flight of the Kiwi (with apologies to Fiona Kidman)

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Association of New Zealand (SFFANZ) has decided to create a listing of science fiction/fantasy/horror (SF/F/H) works by New Zealanders (including those living abroad) and by foreigners living in New Zealand. Why? It seemed like a good idea at the time, and nobody said there was a lot of work involved.

The purpose of the listing is to provide a useful reference listing, and to demonstrate to those that are interested that SF/F/H by New Zealanders extends beyond Peter Jackson's home movies and Cherry Wilder's scribbles.

At the moment the bare bones of a listing exists on SFFANZ's website at: sffanz.sf.org.nz/lists/lists. As will be apparent to many this is not a comprehensive listing of authors, film makers, TV show programmes and so on. But it is a start.

The listing is expanded by people supplying details to lists@sffanz.sf.org.nz.

To guard against the posting of wrong advice details will be checked. SFFANZ now knows for a fact that Leo Tolstoy did not write *War and Peace* in a caravan park near Franz Josef Glacier (it wasn't even his editor checking the galley proofs).

So if you know any Kiwis, or are one yourself, the nurds back in NZ want to know what they (you) did during their (your) holidays.

Simon Litten
President
SFFANZ

About the authors...

Stuart Barrow is a bureaucrat in the nation's capital, happily providing advice to Australians on how best to live their lives.

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she holds a job as a Computer Engineer. In her spare time, she writes historical fantasy and other types of speculative fiction. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Orson Scott Card's *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and in *Interzone*. Visit her website at www.aliettedebodard.com, or write to alietteb@yahoo.com.

Lawrence Buentello is the author of several published short stories and poems. He is also the co-author (along with John Buentello) of the short story collection *Binary Tales* and the humorous science fiction novel *Reproduction Rights*. He lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife, Susan.

I.E. Lester is a lifelong reader, having acquired the bug as a child during a washed-out family holiday when, sheltering from the rain in a seafront kiosk store, the cover on an Isaac Asimov short stories collection attracted a nine-year-old eye. Having read all Asimov's fiction (as well as Heinlein, Clarke, Moorcock, and many others) he moved onto non-fiction, encouraging a love of science and history. He studied Mathematics and Astrophysics whilst at University and works as a software designer. When not reading, he can often be found watching cricket or rugby, or wandering medieval streets in France or Italy.

Geoffrey Maloney has published over seventy short stories in magazines and anthologies in Australia, the US and the UK. His collection, *Tales from the Crypto-System*, is available from Prime Books in the US: www.primebooks.net. Look out for his short collection *Six Silly Stories* from Elastic Press in the UK, due in August 2008. www.elasticpress.com.

Helen Patrice is a writer who has lived in Melbourne, Australia all her life. She has published in magazines as wide as *Mother & Baby*, *ASIM*, *Aurealis*, *Starlog*, and is currently a columnist for *NOVA* magazine. Helen teaches Creative Writing, Meditation, and Middle Eastern Dance in community houses across Melbourne's eastern suburbs, and reads tarot. She is working on poems, short stories, flash fiction, and articles. Helen wishes NASA would just wake up to themselves and make her an astronaut, despite the height restrictions for the space shuttle toilet.

John Plunket has lived throughout the Southeastern United States, usually working as a biological research technician. He currently teaches science at a South Carolina high school. He is a regular contributor of film reviews to *Tales from the Moonlit Path* (moonlit-path.com) and has also been published in *Dark Wisdom*, *Bulletin of Marine Science*, and *Louisiana Agriculture*. This is his first fiction publication.

Lettie Prell's first novel, *Dragon Ring*, launches in May 2008 with Flying Pen Press. For an early glimpse, see the upcoming April/May issue of *The Lorelei Signal* (<http://www.loreliesignal.com/>), which will contain a short story excerpted from the book. Prell is the editor of the *Broadsheet* (<http://broaduniverse.org/broadsheet.html>), which celebrates women science fiction, fantasy and horror writers. Her personal website is at <http://www.lettieprell.com>.

Emma-Jean Stewart has wanted to be a published author since the age of three. (Sometimes these things take longer than you think.) Emma-Jean likes telling stories in lots of different ways: short film, comics and tabletop roleplaying. The stories usually come from imagining a bad situation and trying to make it worse somehow. (Her mum would rather she wrote fairytales.) Emma-Jean helps her best friend to run Phase Two Comics. (www.phasetwocomics.com). When she's impersonating a grownup, Emma-Jean teaches Chinese to small mammals. (When she finally does grow up she wants to be Neil Gaiman, Stephen Moffat, China Miéville or a pirate.)

Douglas A Van Belle has often been asked what the A stands for. He's not sure. It isn't in any of the paperwork and Supreme Commander will not say. Supreme Commander did order him to stop telling everyone that all those "fictional" texts he was disseminating were just part of standard assimilation preparation procedures, but Supreme Commander has said nothing about the A. Actually, to be honest, Doug always just thought the A was an indefinite article. After all, he isn't the only Van Belle model assigned to this planet.

Katherine Woodbury's stories have been published in a variety of science fiction and fantasy magazines, including *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Space & Time*, *Talebones*, and *Leading Edge*. She teaches English at two local community colleges and also online. Before becoming an English instructor, Katherine worked for ten years as a secretary for companies ranging from law, escrow, and healthcare consulting to family counseling, software production, and yellow page sales. She uses her experience at these companies in her writing. Katherine spends her free time watching *Star Trek* and *Columbo*, taking books out of the library (and forgetting to return them), and posting to her blog: www.katewoodbury.blogspot.com.

About the artists...

Eleanor Clarke has been a practicing artist for the last five years, studying Commercial Photography and earning her Fine Arts Diploma. Although she loves to draw the vivacious activity of her two sons keeps her moving and open to new ideas. Discovering an acute addiction to 3D art, Eleanor has branched out into the digital world using Poser and Photoshop.

Tom Godfrey has fun producing art using a variety of media, from the traditional to the wacky and weird. Tom's pastel and acrylic wildlife paintings show off his almost photo realistic rendering skills, with light, drama and a sense of space, being key components for him. His cartoon themes have varied, according to client needs and he has always had great fun conceptualizing and producing them. Tom recently discovered the joys of "digital painting" in the Sci-Fi and Fantasy genre. Visit <http://www.tomgodfrey.com> or <http://www.redbubble.com/people/lefrog> to see examples of his work.

Martin Handford says "I'm 34, live in Ledbury, Herefordshire (U.K), I went to Herefordshire College of Art and Design, I've done work for Games Workshop, Mongoose Publishing and a few other 'gaming' companies but most of my work has been for (Heavy Metal) bands including Bal Sagoth, Solstice, Isen Torr, Slough Feg, Ritual Steel, Forefather and a fair few more besides. I'm a big fan of Resident Evil and play far too many video games although I like to call it 'research'! PS I don't have my own website but anyone is free to contact me at martinhanford@freeola.net"

Greg Hughes originally had training in graphic design before drifting into fine art. From about the age of five, Greg developed an interest in science fiction. Although he had no idea what was going on the imagery he saw on television made a lasting impression. Greg became interested in illustration after seeing the work of Mark Salwowski, Chris Moore and Fred Gambino. Samples of Greg's work can be seen at <http://arrowfire.deviantart.com/gallery/>

Born in Russia, **Anna Repp** moved to the United States at the age 17. She graduated from Pratt institute in Brooklyn, NY, with a BFA degree in illustration. Her illustrations are published in many magazines and e-zines throughout the world. Most of the art can be found at Anna's website at www.annarepp.com. She has also exhibited as a photographer in New York, New Jersey and London, UK. Anna lives in a Chicago suburb with her two-year-old daughter Dasha Sonora.

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