

CIRSOVA

Heroic Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine
Issue #1 / Spring 2016



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Spring Issue

Vol.1, No 1

2016

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The Gift of the Ob-Men

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

Cast out and exiled by his people, Sounnu braves the wilderness with only his wits and his ancient blade to keep him alive! But is he prepared to pay the price for the strange blessing which will set him forever apart from his fellow humans?

Sounnu was permitted one last night in the village. At dawn the shamans pronounced him exile and the young man left without ceremony. His fellow warriors stayed to their huts, unable to bear the spectacle. Even Tenno lay on his woven palette feigning sleep. Sounnu had been his constant companion for their entire lives. They were close as brothers until the day Sounnu's father died. The sword the old man bore, crafted by the forgotten lore of the ancients, passed into Sounnu's hands. Tenno's flint blades, though artfully made, had seemed worthless by comparison and a shadow of envy passed over their friendship. Sounnu was taking the ancient blade with him into exile; none had dared attempt to take it from the young man.

Though his heart was heavy Sounnu resisted the urge to look over his shoulder as he left the green vale which cradled his village. Trees and shrubs diminished until the steppe was underfoot. By sundown he had crossed the grasslands that separated the vale from the ruined city due west, a nameless relic of the golden age.

The next day he followed the western road as it made its long, winding detour around the edges of the city. The remains of its crooked towers slashed at the blue sky like jagged flint blades, a last blow from a long ago age when people could twist nature into grand shapes of their own design. The road had shrunk to a mere footpath by the time it reached the base of the old mountains. Like the city, the lands beyond the mountains were forbidden by old custom. In despair Sounnu scaled in the low peaks, now finally sparing a glance backwards to view the trailing tendrils of smoke in the far distance marking his former home. There was warmth and community, now forever out of reach. The high air stung his broad, naked back with

lashings of snow, shining like miniscule diamonds in the bright light of a cloudless sky.

On the other side of the range the grim warrior found himself standing before a forest of dark pine and stunted birch. Sounnu felt a palpable menace emanating from the line of black shadows draped under the gnarled branches. The presence of danger stirred his soul to something of its former buoyancy. Impatient for the thrill of combat he drew the ancient broadsword from its carved scabbard and plunged forward. He screamed his low battle cry into the mute trunks and scrambled over rocks and deadfall, ducking limbs and weaving through brush. No ghask nor ghoul nor ur-wolf answered his hoarse challenges. He grew tired and gave up seeking foes. Sounnu drank from a clear, cold stream and lay to rest on a bed of moss.

He awoke surrounded by tall heavy creatures, bearing the form of a mushroom bent into the shape of men. Their ill-formed, elongated faces were unreadable masks. The warrior sought the handle of his blade but found he could not move.

He spoke to the mushroom men in a voice heavy with despair. "By what art am I frozen?"

"By manipulating our spores we are able to cause specific calamities to fall upon the unwary," they answered in unison.

Sounnu sighed, "This is an inglorious end. Be quick, spare me this indignity."

The mushroom men laughed and replied, "Not so hasty! We will avenge ourselves slowly upon you and extract some recompense for the great wrong your people have wrought."

Sounnu's brow furrowed. "To what do you refer?"

The mushroom men leaned their heads back and shook slightly, an apparent expression of distress. Their low voices pooled over the soft ground around the young man like a cool mist as they spoke, "The memory pains us. Long ago your species attacked us with fire and steel, pushing us from our beloved vale into this place. Once we stood content underneath clean oaks as laughing fey danced around our thick legs. Now we work our spores into weapons to ward against ur-wolves and ghasks."

"In my village the shamans told stories of the hulking Ob-men who once ruled the vale. The ancients defeated them with much sacrifice,

expelling their evil from the land.”

The mushroom men let out a low, keening wail.

Sounnu winced, continuing, “I spoke hastily. Perhaps the term Ob-men does not refer to your ancestors.”

The mushroom men spoke in harsh tones, “No! That is the name they bestowed upon us. We were there! And now to learn you creatures have lionized our expulsion! Oh, the injustice is compounded! What variations should we apply presently upon this body to expend our rage?”

For the first time, one of the mushroom men spoke singularly. “Perhaps a spore to turn him inside out?”

Another suggested a spore to splinter the mind into dozens of warring identities. Sounnu felt cold sweat erupt along his muscular frame. He interrupted their conference.

“Would it, perhaps, lessen your anger to know that I am an outcast from the village of men? The great cities are no more. The temples lie in jumbled ruins. The punishment of exile now is a death sentence. And by killing me, you stoop to perform their errands and perfect their will.”

The mushroom men ceased their planning.

“You are an enemy of the humans?”

Sounnu spoke earnestly, “I am indeed. In a fit of pique I smashed an idol and offended the priestesses. The incident arose from an excess of energy on my part. The clans have faded away, consolidated now into one village. The tribes of ghask that once raided the vale are slain, and no ur-wolves dare come close to the village. There is no one for me to fight. To assuage my boredom I explored the vale. Inside a ruin I came across the idol, a strange thing with a strange face. Neither shaman nor priestess could explain its meaning. I became enraged and smashed it. At that time Yulik was thatching his roof and fell painfully. The shamans believed the events were linked and I was charged with bringing a god’s wrath down upon the village. They are clever men, though stunted and cruel, and look for any excuse to castigate a warrior.”

The Ob-Men replied, “Your story bores us. We would prefer you elaborate upon an earlier comment. The great cities are no more?”

“This is true. The elders tell us the city people died away, ignoring nature’s demands to work their great art.”

“So mankind now consists of only one village?”

“That is true also, to the extent of my people’s knowledge. Some dream that across the mountains and through endless ruins lay communities of men that live as in the golden age. They are admonished for their frivolity.”

The mushroom men stepped away from Sounnu and conversed amongst themselves. The warrior allowed himself to relax. He would be tortured to death. Such was fate. The mushroom men returned, now animated and anxious.

“We have decided to spare your life under one condition.”

There was a smell in the air, earthy and floral. Sounnu found he could move. He stood, shaking slightly from the spores’ effects.

“What is this condition?”

The mushroom men spoke in unison again. “You will return home and empty the village of people.”

Sounnu laughed. “That is impossible. Upon sighting an exile the shamans will fill my guts with worms and my ears with shrieking demons. The priestesses will publicly rebuke me with stinging words and the warriors will be compelled to kill me. Why not use your dire spores and perform the deed yourselves?”

“To answer your first concern, know that we will bestow upon you advantages. Insofar as completing the task ourselves, know that we also are a dying race. Our numbers have dwindled to that which you see before you. Should our spores be exhausted then we risk total annihilation. Do as we say and restore us to the vale where we may become contented again and the race of man trouble us no more.”

The mushroom men made Sounnu swear an oath on the souls of his ancestors and another on his prized blade. Satisfied, they then looked to one of their number. A squat specimen with black spots stepped toward Sounnu. The smell of bitter acorns filled his nose. Sounnu lost consciousness.

The warrior awoke at the edge of the forest. His head throbbed but he was otherwise unharmed. With no better idea he began the long walk back to his village. The pain began to center itself in his forehead, growing in intensity. He made a supper of wild berries and lay down on a slab of mossy granite to rest.

The dawn woke him gently. He opened his eyes. Sounnu looked up at the mountains. The range stood gray and stately as before. Then there was a moment of total disorientation. Sounnu fought to understand what he was seeing. The warrior saw the mountains through the eye of passing eons. He saw them push up from the earth as two plates met in slow violence. He saw wind and rain render them into rubble. The visions came all at once. He saw the mountains' birth and death in the same glimpse. He shut his eyes in confusion and held his head in his trembling hands. Sounnu jerked them away from an unfamiliar sensation. He gently placed his fingers back to his head and felt again. Scrambling off his bed of granite he sprinted toward a still pool.

The pool reflected the source of his horror in crisp clarity. He now possessed a third eye, centered in his forehead. The reflection shifted suddenly. He saw a death's head, then an infant, then the present again. Sounnu lay back until the dizziness passed, eyes firmly shut. He cut a length of leather from the hem of his leggings and wrapped it around his forehead, obscuring the eye. The visions ceased. The warrior sat a while; mind racing as he tried to understand what had befallen him. A sparrow's song lifted him from the maze of his thoughts. He did not understand the meaning of the third eye or its visions. There was nothing more to do for the present.

He continued on his path, letting his oath guide his steps. Sounnu dared occasionally to peel back the veil covering the third eye. Slowly, the warrior began to understand the visions of time, as they passed forward and backward, trailing off into numberless possibility. He saw his own body rent by bloody wounds, then wracked with old age, then a void, never having existed, then as now, hale and bronze from the sun. Sounnu avoided letting the third eye linger too long on his own form. He knew he would die one day as all men did. The eye seemed to show many fates, many deaths. It was confusing and paled before the majesty of a dying mountain or a forest rising from the earth before burning in an instant of vision-time from wind whipped walls of orange fire sparked by arcs of blinding lightning from a raging sky.

Day turned to night as he walked. Gradually the dizziness ceased altogether during his experiments. He found himself sitting, watching the moon shape itself from irregular rocks and then fall back down to

earth. Covering the third eye he reassured himself that it still hung in the blue black sky.

Before lying down to sleep he peeled the blind back one last time and was shocked to see his body crisscrossed with fresh wounds, torn by tooth and claw, seeping black gore under the moon's cool light. The vision was pregnant with immediacy. Sounnu shot to his feet. He covered the eye again and collected himself, nearly relaxing until he caught a stir of movement from the corner of his eye. There underneath the pines stalked an ur-wolf, a wizened alpha with two heads.

Sounnu drew his sword and settled into a stance. The ur-wolf circled.

Its mournful, rasping voices broke the silence.

"Nearly to bed, nearly asleep, nearly eaten. Now the man stands bravely with his biting blade bared to blue moonlight. Go back to resting reclining wretched man, accept your fate. Let us fill our empty belly baleful braying at the moon in our hunger. The hunger, horrible, heartbroken never full finished, satisfied."

The ur-wolf lunged. Sounnu ducked then sprung up, hurling the beast over his shoulder. The predator spun in the air, grazing the warrior with its long claws and snatching the blindfold from his shaggy head. The creature landed badly on a boulder, cracking its spine. The warrior was overwhelmed as the third eye opened. He saw the ur-wolf as a mewling pup, as a fur draped around his shoulders, and as it was now.

Sounnu saw the slain ur-wolf moments ago debating strategy with the pack. The rest were to come up from the nearby swale as the warrior was distracted, engaged with the leader at the pines' edge. He saw them through space, advancing on his flank presently. Sounnu moved to lean against another boulder where the ground dipped to meet the swale. One by one the ur-wolves darted past and were met by the young warrior's blade. He replaced the blindfold and skinned the leader and scraped the hide, working in the moonlight. Over a large fire he roasted the carcass on a spit and gorged himself on the meat.

In the morning he cracked open the ur-wolves' horned skulls and worked the brains into the leader's pelt, a fine prize, grey streaked with

jet black. He threw the still raw pelt over his broad shoulders and resumed his journey.

After a day's walk he rested and then woke again with the dawn. He crossed the old mountains easily with the aid of the third eye, seeing through time and space in order to pick the easiest routes, hidden paths and passages through tunnels of wind sculpted rock painted with the striations that once marked forests and swamps, lines of white demarking seas dried by the sun and lines of black writing tales of burning and destruction.

Presently he stood at the beginning of the western road. He disregarded the winding path and walked due east, heading straight for the silent towers of the empty city. At the city's edge he was overcome. The third eye bombarded him with chaotic visions, specters of the past, increasing in frequency. His mind flitted from one image to the next, racing along paths of causality that arced and contorted like bolts of lightning. The warrior saw countless people, living inscrutable lives in the pursuit of motivations that Sounnu could hardly comprehend. The towers gleamed, tall and arrogant, reaching toward the heavens and hosting a trillion dramas of daily life. Even through the crippling haze of the vision's speed he could recognize some emotions, love and hate, fear, anger. Others he could not. There were ideas built upon ideas, whole languages of abstraction, all spiraling down into realms of the mind that were foreign to the young man. Sounnu reeled back, feeling his own self, his mind, disintegrating. He replaced the blindfold with trembling hands. He sat against a wall and collected himself, breathing deep of the dusty air. After a time, he stood and resumed his journey.

The rows of jumbled ruins grew in size as he approached the city center. Everywhere was dust, gritty powders in colors of red and ochre, swirling in angry eddies in gusts unchecked by tree or shrub. Signs scrawled with forgotten glyphs cried mutely in colors now faded to dull gray and stained taupe. Nearing the city's center Sounnu noticed signs of occupation. Someone had made a futile attempt to keep the dust at bay, sweeping it into banks against the leaning wreckage of the once proud towers. The warrior saw a wide clearing ahead, a circular area lined with mounds of gray stone. In the center Sounnu spied the silhouette of a giant, a gleaming figure, perhaps ten

feet tall. He drew his sword and ducked behind a pile of refuse. The temptation to peel back the blindfold grew but he resisted. Sounnu peered over the edge.

The figure in the distance remained perfectly still. Sounnu ducked back down and sat stock still. His body was rigid with the discipline of the hunter as his breath came slow, measured, and quiet. He peered again. The figure had not moved. Cautiously he advanced.

He walked slowly, keeping one of the mounds of stone between him and the figure's line of sight. The strange objects loomed ahead. As they neared Sounnu realized they were great sculptures. Each was a head, jaw flush to the ground, worked with great skill and grace, capturing nuances of expression lost on the warrior. The figure of gleaming metal yet stood still. Sounnu finally permitted himself to relax slightly. The figure was obviously an idol, a god of the city that the people had surrounded with greater or lesser deities, the great heads, Sounnu could not decide which. He approached the idol.

The thing was formed from a bright metal that reflected the ochre tinged light in looping swirls. By its nature or by another's attentions it was completely free of the city's ubiquitous dust. The idol had no features, only the graceful outlines of a powerful musculature. Sounnu stood before it staring in wonder. The very sword he carried was made from a craft long lost to his people. This metal idol was a complete mystery.

With inhuman speed its arms lashed out. Sounnu threw himself back. Metal hands sought his neck but only grasped the pelt, tearing it away as Sounnu reeled. The warrior lashed out with his blade. The metal clashed against the idol, making not so much as a scratch. Sounnu scrambled away from another lunge. The idol moved forward now, pressing the warrior back against a stone head bearing an expression of fatalistic amusement. Sounnu ducked again, rolling on the dusty ground to spring up behind the idol. The metal man spun on its heels, already poised for another attack. A shrill voice rang out in the clearing.

“Servitor! Halt!”

The idol stood suddenly still. Sounnu stepped back, panting, seeking the source of the command. Atop one of the heads stood a tall, thin man, holding aloft a torn parasol. The man gingerly climbed down from the head and approached. He wore a suit of silver mesh, corroded

slightly, and a broad brimmed hat atop a mass of long, brown curls. His eyes gleamed behind rings of colored cosmetics as he looked Sounnu up and down.

“Easy, friend! Pardon my servitor. My spyglass is flecked with dust and I mistook you for a ghask. But you are no ghask, you are an outlander, a traveler, and now the glories of Omeyapolis are yours to behold! My name is Maneon. I bid you welcome.”

Maneon’s ruffled sleeves spread wide as he bowed. Sounnu stood still, mouth open, sword held at the ready.

Maneon frowned, affecting sadness artfully with his wide, painted mouth. He spoke again, lilting voice echoing off the stone heads. “Come now, friend. Lower your blade. Let us walk together. I mean you no harm. Whatever fate befalls you, good or ill, is preordained is it not? What is your name, traveler?”

“Sounnu the Exile.”

“An exile? How sad. What brings you here to bask in the zenith of refinement?”

Sounnu lowered his sword. “I pass through on my way to the village of men.”

“I hope your errand is not too dire. You simply cannot leave without getting the grand tour. Firstly, let us take tea in my apartments. You can tell me all about your village and I can display for you the art that is my passion, the summation of the human experience. Upon its completion mankind will be complete. How fortunate are you, to come at the moment when it nears conclusion!”

Maneon beckoned emphatically and Sounnu followed, sheathing his blade as he walked on wary steps. The pale artist snapped his fingers and the servitor came alive again, following behind its master.

The last whole structure in Omeyapolis was Maneon’s home. It was a warehouse, long and low, the leaning sides piled high with ochre dust. The thin man pulled aside a curtain of burlap and bade Sounnu enter. The warrior ducked under a beam and reeled from the smell of rot, the stench emanating from a source not visible. Sounnu jumped at the sight of another figure and then realized he saw his own reflection in a tall mirror. He inspected the interior with eyes wide with awe. Skylights let in rays of yellow light, illuminating a vast collection. Everywhere were boxes piled on top of boxes, objects and devices of a thousand descriptions. Racks and racks of clothes were lined far into

the dark recesses of the cluttered room. There were costumes of silk and satin, glittering fabrics, dark damasks, all in varying states of decay. And everywhere were more mirrors, large and small, some cracked and obscured by grime. Sounnu reached out to touch a garish coat of gold and disturbed a dozen moths. Maneon shooed them away. His face was in darkness underneath the broad brim of his hat. He gestured to a tatty divan.

“Make yourself at home, weary wanderer! Servitor will see to the tea while I change for the afternoon. I will return shortly.”

Sounnu gingerly lowered himself to the couch. Everywhere in his view were objects of unknown meaning and provenance. There were things that may have been tools, but for what purpose the warrior could not guess. Many of the objects could not have been shaped by human hands, their angles too perfect, surfaces too smooth. Even covered with layers of dust, the colors on display shocked eyes familiar only with nature’s palette. Sounnu laughed inwardly. The shamans were wrong to go to such lengths to instill fear of the cities. There were only strange men there, strange smells, and useless objects.

A man came suddenly around a stack of crates. The thin figure was clothed in an elaborate suit of muted red velvet, embroidered with geometric designs and fraying at cuffs and elbows. His hair was a shock of sharp yellow spikes. In his graceful hands he bore a silver tray. He spoke, and Sounnu realized it was Maneon, unrecognizable in his new garb.

The artist spoke, “There, refreshments for our weary guest. And now I am properly attired to receive guests and host a salon. You must be bursting with anticipation to view my art, are you not?”

Sounnu could only manage a nod of affirmation. He inspected the tray. Between two steaming cups was a plate arranged with cubes of charred meat, each speared with a tiny sliver of wood. At Maneon’s beckoning the warrior took a cup and sipped the bitter liquid, burning his tongue in the process. The liquid was near boiling. Maneon raised a thin eyebrow as he seated himself in a high backed chair held together by lashings of twine.

“Are you not hungry?”

Sounnu shrugged. “As it happens, no. But I thank you for your hospitality. What sort of meat is that?”

“Oh, these delicacies? It is a shame you will not partake. It is from my own private stock, an Omeyapolis original. I call it ‘critic!’” His shrill laughter echoed through the warehouse. He continued. “It is your loss. But who says outlanders are without manners? You are a graceful guest. I regret I cannot offer you more variety. Omeyapolis’ golden age is upon us and sacrifices have been necessary. All has given way to facilitate our art. All the servitors are inert save the one. Contact with the other cities is lost, no doubt due to a consuming jealousy on their part. Here, in this very city, mankind reaches summation. To live anywhere else must pale in comparison.”

“Where is everyone else?”

A spasm crawled spider like across Maneon’s face.

He replied, “Such a question. We shan’t dwell on such vulgar details.” He stood suddenly, waving his arm in a grand flourish. “Come now! I simply cannot wait longer. Let me show you the art that brings an end to old epochs and heralds a new future!”

Cup in hand the artist picked his way around stacks of books and boxes. Sounnu placed his cup on the tray and followed. The servitor awaited, half in shadow, as the pair reached an area of the warehouse cleared of debris. In the center of the clearing a tattered silk drape outlined a massive, dome-like form.

“Prepare yourself!”

Maneon pulled away the drape. Before Sounnu stood a sculpture like those in the clearing, only larger. He recognized the long, thin features as Maneon’s own. The artist’s voice rose with ecstasy as he spoke.

“Is it not divine? Here is man. Here is man’s soul, his spirit, the reflection of the infinite and ineffable, freed from restraint, from gods and from reason. Here we see the end! Is it not glorious?”

Sounnu’s inept pretense crumbled. His deep set eyes bored into Maneon’s. The artist stood staring, his own eyes glazed with emotion.

The warrior spoke, “You are mad.”

Maneon laughed again, throwing his head back.

“Mad? Of course! Of course I am. I have touched the center of the universe and rendered it for all to see. How could I not be mad?”

“I will leave now.”

“Not so fast, outlander! To see the secrets of civilization, to be so lucky as to peer into infinity, such a vision bears a price. My stock of

‘critic’ runs low. I shall add ‘barbarian’ to my larder presently!”

Sounnu heard the heavy steps of the servitor behind as it lunged. He rolled away, ducking the metal arms. Maneon laughed hysterically. From beneath his coat he drew a long, thin blade, rusted and spotted black save for its keen edge. Sounnu drew his sword as the servitor lunged again, missing only by a hair. Maneon sliced at his exposed back, opening a long wound. The sight of Sounnu’s blood sent him into paroxysms of delight. The servitor’s advance halted suddenly and the thing pitched forward, legs tangled by the drape that lay on the floor. Maneon squealed in fear as Sounnu turned toward him.

The warrior paused for the briefest moment, calculating. The servitor was a powerful foe. Despite fears regarding the overwhelming visions, Sounnu reckoned it was time to use the third eye. Its visions through space could prove the difference as well as exposing any further ambush.

Sounnu peeled back the blindfold. The visions began and then stopped. He fell to his knees as the scalding, bitter tea ran in rivulets down his bronze face. Maneon’s laughter reached new heights as he watched the warrior suffering. He threw the cup over his shoulder and bent to untangle the servitor’s legs from the jumble of fabric. He cursed.

“Oh, you stupid thing! You’ve gone and made it worse!”

Sounnu stumbled to his feet and wiped the stinging liquid from his eyes. His normal eyes were largely untouched but the third eye was blind, sending waves of searing pain into his skull. He stole behind the great head and leaned for a moment. He knew when the servitor won free it was only a matter of time before he was crushed by its gleaming arms. He felt the cool stone against his back, providing sudden, desperate inspiration. Sounnu sheathed his sword and turned. He sank low, bringing his hands up to grasp the sculpted curls of the statue. He pushed, with legs, back, arms, pushing until his powerful frame threatened to shatter. He felt the fibers of his muscles tearing. The massive stone stood unmoved. He heard Maneon admonish the servitor again then make a noise of triumph. The servitor was free. Sounnu strained again, veins erupting across his lean frame.

“Now, where did that foul outlander go?”

Sounnu felt his soul soar as the stone moved, first only a hair, then a hand’s width. With a great noise it pitched violently forward. There was

a desperate scream and a sudden shower of blinding sparks. Sounnu collapsed from the effort, nearly losing consciousness. He rose to his feet with difficulty, drawing his sword again with arms sapped of all strength. Shaky steps brought him around to the front of the sculpture.

There lay Maneon, crushed from the waist down. His long hands pushed weakly against a thin eyebrow of stone. Beside him the servitor was inert, only head and shoulders visible. Tendrils of energy danced across the metal skin, less and less, until nothing but the smell of ozone hung around the ruined machine. Maneon gasped his last breaths. His mad eyes stared past Sounnu as he spoke.

“It is finished.”

The warrior watched Maneon’s eyes grow dim as the ghost left. A dusty breeze sent yellowed pages of sketches across the filthy floor. Sounnu followed the wind to a hole in the wall covered by a frayed cloth. He steadied himself on boxes as he walked. The rotten smell became overpowering as he reached the alley just outside. There stacked up against the wall were piles and piles of human bones. The ones nearest the door still bore traces of blood and tendon. A great pot full of filth stood on blocks over the embers of a fire. Hung everywhere were rusted blades of all shapes and sizes, thick saws and hooked skinners. Sounnu left the grim tableau behind with as much speed as he could muster. Behind him the blades sang in tinkling chimes as the wind stirred them to kiss.

The sun sank low as he walked. He pulled the ur-wolf pelt tight around his back but could not completely staunch the flow of blood. He trudged through the night, unwilling to rest amidst the ruins. Sounnu massaged the third eye under its blindfold and winced. The burns were more severe than he had thought. The eye was swollen shut and oozing. The wound on his back began to ache horribly. Compounding matters he felt a heat building within.

Dawn saw grass under his feet. He spared one last glance backward at the crooked spires. The rolling grasslands that separated his village from the ruins stretched before his failing vision. He walked on for another few hours, hunger compounding his growing weakness. Sounnu felt the fever growing, the sickness that had felled many a warrior who celebrated survival prematurely. The city-man’s blade had born death on its rusted edge. He walked a time, afraid to stop moving.

The part of him given to reason knew that his life was near its end. Fresh trickles of his life's blood mingled with the dried remnants that stained all the way down the back of his legs.

Finally his legs gave out from underneath him. He lay on his back, watching the clouds roll across the sky. He forgot the pain in his back, the burning ache of the third eye, and resolved himself to death. In the narrowing tunnel of his vision a face appeared.

Underneath sun kissed locks of brown hair her smooth face bore an expression of surprise. Sounnu recognized her, a woman of the village, seventeen summers old, pretty, but quiet and withdrawn. Since her beauty became apparent she had been claimed by the priestesses and was compelled to avoid socializing with the men of the village, especially the handful of warriors who had followed Sounnu as their un-appointed leader. With his last strength Sounnu waved her away.

"Let me die in peace, Sila."

"Sounnu the Exile has returned."

Sounnu's voice grew low as the world went gray around him. He spoke, "I have. Now, be gone. I was sent back on a fool's errand on behalf of the Ob-men. I saw past and future as one. I slew the last city-man and his metal servant. But I have lost too much blood and a fever burns. Let it end here."

The woman shook her head. "The mighty Sounnu, Slayer of ghask, babbling like a madman and bowing to death. I spit on the shamans' will. I will save you, undeserving though you are."

Through the tall grass and swaying flowers she ran.

Sounnu recovered slowly under Sila's care. He spent his nights under the open sky, wrapped in the hide of a bear she had taken with a bow last spring. Twice a day Sila stole from the village under the pretense of gathering and fed him nuts and berries then turned him over to clean his wound. Sounnu received her attentions with awkward gratitude. Seven days passed. The warrior could now stand and walk again but third eye had healed shut. He gingerly attempted to peel back its lids but recoiled from the pain each time.

On the eighth afternoon he sat on a tussock tying snares as Sila approached, cradling handfuls of berries in her leather skirt.

"The warrior is near fully recovered."

“I am. Soon you will watch your efforts come to nothing. I am oathbound to the Ob-men’s errand. I must approach the shamans and priestesses and plead their case, at which time I will be killed properly.” He massaged his forehead as he watched Sila sit next to him. Her graceful form was at home in the tall grass, one with the flowers in a rolling sea of sunlit green. The eye ached to see her. Before he could stop himself his long arm encircled her waist. He drew her close and they kissed, sharing the sharp taste of the late summer berries that lingered in their mouths. After a long moment Sila pulled away. She sat facing him. She touched his face with her rough hands, running a finger along the strange scar on his forehead.

“I love you.”

“You love a dead man.”

She looked to the ground, plucking a white flower from its stalk. “Everywhere is death. You tell me you have slain the last city-man. Our village dies. There are but a handful of warriors left and they follow Tenno since you are gone. They range for days in the vale, overturning rocks and peering into caves in the hope of finding another blade such as yours. The priestesses gather the women to them like beads on a string. The shamans seek their visions and speak in tongues no one understands. The names of the gods are forgotten. Every year fewer children are born.”

Sounnu laughed. “I should have bade the Ob-men to simply wait a few summers.”

Sila looked to the horizon. “We should run away. Break your oath to them and we will flee.”

The warrior’s face darkened. “In whatever time we have left you will not say such a thing again to me. I bear the sword of the ancients, made by my ancestors who cloak themselves in the past as the vale wears mist in spring mornings. Exile could not part me from it. And I will not sully its honor with a broken oath, however stupid that oath may have been.”

They held each other again. Over her shoulder Sounnu saw a line of figures cresting a low hill. The villagers approached. Sounnu smiled, pushing a lock of her hair from her brow.

He spoke, “My time is near its end.”

The third eye itched under the fused lids.

Now we know where Sila spends her afternoons.” Oxl grabbed his daughter roughly, thrusting her into the waiting arms of a troupe of priestesses. A pair of warriors held Sounnu at bay with bows drawn while the others milled about. Tenno stood pensively. He bore a great flint axe. Its pointed head rested in the crook of his folded arms. The priestesses forced Sila to the ground with burly arms. A powerful matron draped in necklaces of sea shells inspected her with rough hands.

“Her maidenhead is intact. Lucky that, we may spare her life.”

Quewe, the head matron, shook her head no. “We do not know what blasphemies they have shared. They both must die.”

Retul, leader of the shamans, came before Sounnu. Dried mud held his hair in rough spikes. His small eyes bore into Sounnu from the darkness of his painted face.

He spoke, “Why does an exile haunt our grasslands?”

“I swore an oath to the Ob-men of legend. They want the vale back.”

“Indeed? And how did you think to affect this miracle?”

Sounnu shrugged. “I had not thought that far.”

“No matter then. You die now.”

Tenno stepped forward. The hawk feathers that hung from his braided hair stirred in the breeze. “No, shaman. Sounnu will die as a warrior.” He made a hissing sound between his teeth, the signal to advance during the hunt. His dozen warriors surged forward. Sounnu was held before he could draw the sword. He struggled lamely, still somewhat weak from his healing wounds. Tenno reached forward and drew the sword, holding it aloft to admire the ancients’ craft. The blade shone brightly.

Tears welled in the corners of Tenno’s eyes. “Now it is mine.” He tossed the axe to the ground at Sounnu’s feet and continued, “Take the axe and defend yourself. In your last moments you will know envy.”

Sounnu bent and picked up the axe. Tenno swung the sword, clumsily, unused to its balance. The long blade was difficult to direct. Sounnu jumped back to avoid the blow. Tenno laughed, exulting in the feel of the ancient steel, unfamiliar as it was. He swung out again, both hands grasping the ornate handle. Sounnu brought the axe head up to block the blade. Chips of flint stung Tenno’s face and his expression twisted. He let out a bloodthirsty yell. Retul joined his voice to Tenno’s and soon all present were screaming in rapt anticipation, their hoarse

voices celebrating the coming spectacle of death. Tenno swung once more. Sounnu leapt towards Tenno before the deadly edge could be brought to bear. The pair was locked together for a moment. Tenno reached back and smashed Sounnu's face with the hilt, a maneuver no less effective for its lack of grace. Sounnu crumpled to the ground, bleeding from the nose and a cut on his cheek. Sila wailed and fought impotently against the matrons' grasp.

The axe fell from Sounnu's limp hand as he struggled to remain conscious. Tenno laughed heartily, raising the sword and looking back at his troupe who roared their approval. Sounnu lay on his back, his hand reaching for the axe's handle but finding only grass. Tenno fixed his eyes on Sounnu and taunted.

"Just a few more moments, old friend. Just a few more. I thank you for the blade. It is everything I thought it would be. I must test its keenness."

Tenno laid the tip of the sword on Sounnu's jaw and flicked the blade upwards. A thin red line opened.

He exclaimed, "Sharper than obsidian! And it will remain so for all eternity! What powerful magics the people of old must have possessed."

Tenno squatted down to see better. He laid the tip on Sounnu's forehead and drew it across. Another line opened and more blood spilled. Tenno peered at the wound, marveling for a moment at a sight unexpected. He froze, staring into a third eye.

Now Sounnu saw all before him through the lens of eternity. The clouds ceased their march across the sky as birds slowed mid-air. In space he saw the axe's handle mere inches from his hand. Tenno stared in frozen horror as Sounnu took the axe and with all his might smashed the cruel point into the side of Tenno's head. The skull shattered like a bird's egg. Tenno went limp instantly and collapsed. Retul screamed. Sounnu took the sword and stood.

He watched as the archers' fingers loosed their grasp. Slowly the arrows came forward. With the flat of his blade he knocked the missiles from the air. Time moved forward. The warriors had drawn their flint blades and unhooked gnarled clubs from their hide belts. Sounnu saw severed heads rolling, arms and legs rent deeply, life's essence spurting from open arteries. He stepped forward, swinging his

blade in great arcs and in moments made the visions a reality, staining the grass crimson and filling the air with death cries. He saw the shamans and priestesses waving arms and working their magics. Foam spat from their lips as they hissed. The threat of their spells had no more hold on Sounnu. He fell upon them, blade rising and falling as he met each in turn. He saw their bones bleach in the sun as he slew. He saw the grass rise and fall, green and brown, the hills becoming mountains and the plains becoming oceans.

All were slain. He stood calm in a sea of green marred with streaks of red, chest heaving from the exertion. He grew faint and tottered to one side. Sila caught him before he could fall. Their eyes met.

The third eye showed him her death and birth. He heard her last breath escape and a moment later her newborn wail. He saw her beauty throughout. Blinding light showed through her womb. Sounnu laid his gore stained hand on her flat belly. There he saw one day his seed would grow. From Sila's womb would rise a new race of man. He watched the future unfold before him.

His descendants would multiply and cover the world, learning again the secrets of iron and grain. The gods would return, led by an all-father with three eyes and a goddess of grace and infinite mercy.

The descendants would form first kingdoms and then great nations. They would war amongst themselves under a hundred banners. They would make symbols to record their deeds and art to display their vanities. They would raise great cities of metal and temples of mirrors and forget again the names of the gods. They would become lost in the labyrinths of their own minds. The great towers would crumble and the cathedrals would fall. The cities would rot as man would return to the earth, again stalking the forests for game and fighting their enemies with blades of stone, building great bonfires to hold the terrors of the night at bay. They would dwindle in numbers, debased and fearful.

Then a day would come when a warrior would stalk the ruins and find the idol of a forgotten god, a strange statue with three eyes.

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My Name is John Carter (Part 1)

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

Former CSA Captains John Carter and James Powell search for gold and riches in the Arizona wilds in the first part of an epic verse retelling of a Princess of Mars.

My name is John Carter. I hail from Virginia.
I held to her customs and lore.
I greeted my neighbor and worshipped the Savior
and fought an unwinnable war.

Virginia gave thanks and I rose through the ranks
and they cheered as I rode on my way.
When I came home again I had half of my men
and Virginia had nothing to say.

So, my belly unfilled, I went out to Brazil
with a dream of a place in the sun
but they'd wooed us with lies and the fever and flies
did the work that the war had begun.

Still we mostly survived and we started to thrive
and I spat in the eye of the Fates
till the talk of the war got too hard to ignore
and I took a boat back to the States.

So I thought it was best if I headed out west
where you got a new start, so they said
where the talk never strayed to our noble crusade
or the widows of those that I led.

I went west with a friend that I'd met at the end
of that terrible year, 'Sixty-Three.
Name of Captain James Powell, he was wise as an owl

or at least he was wiser than me.

Like the Spanish of old we went searching for gold
in the hills parched and bitter and burnt
where we guarded our claims and told no one our names
as we dreamed of a fortune unearned.

Unearned did I say? If you don't count the way
that the heat nearly sent us deranged.
But be that as it may, we hit paydirt one day
and I thought that my life might have changed.

And Jim said to me "Jack, I think I should go back.
We'll need dozens of good engineers.
We've uncovered a load that's as long as a road
and we won't reach its ending for years."

We agreed that I'd stay and keep trouble away
while Jim rustled up men and supplies.
We'd seen hardly a soul in our dry little hole
but they say that the hills have got eyes.

When I'd felt at my worst I'd believed I was cursed
so perhaps I was drunk with relief
but I watched the sun rise and felt tears in my eyes
and it seemed to dry up all my grief.

Too elated for speech, we took one rifle each
and Jim rode down the trail to the plain.
As I watched his descent I felt more than content:
for the first time in years I felt sane.

I had holes in my shirt and I sat in the dirt
but I felt like a king on his throne.
I just sat there that day watching Jim ride away
till I noticed he wasn't alone.

Jim was barely a dot and I couldn't see what
was pursuing him over the flats.
And who knew if they went without evil intent?
Though I gave little credence to that.

There was hardly a tree that was not foul to see
in this sinister stretch of the West.
I have heard it proposed this is where God disposed
of the trash after making the rest.

There was hardly a man without Cain's burning brand
and most men were a country of one.
No, this wasn't a land where you held out your hand
if that hand wasn't holding a gun.

Thinking thoughts such as these did not quell the unease
that completely took hold of my mind
so I got on my bay and set off right away
with the gold left for any to find.

When the sun had near gone I was still riding on
as if chased by the Devil's own hordes
though I knew very well that the only real Hell
was the one I was riding towards.

For in these parts the law was as rough and as raw
as the men it was bringing to heel
and most took the advice that "They can't hang you twice
so you may as well murder as steal."

I rode on through the night, vainly hoping for sight
of a cloud of dust swirling ahead
till I saw what they'd left from their cowardly theft.

It was Jim, lying injured or dead.

When I made my way near it was horribly clear
they had done what the Yankees could not.
Jim had lived as he died: with a gun at his side
and I counted four bandits were shot.

I abandoned the chase, not from mercy or grace
but because of the hope that I lacked
just as if a great weight made of merciless Fate
was immovably bound to my back.

As I buried poor Jim I felt envy for him
for his pain was at least at an end
and I wondered "O Lord, the next time you grow bored
what new grief will it please you to send?"

My existence on Earth from the day of my birth
seemed unspeakably empty and base.
All my mountain of gold left me utterly cold
and I hated the whole human race.

I looked up at the sky as if asking God "Why?"
but I saw no Creator to ask.
If He really was there He was hidden from prayer
like a bandit who creeps in a mask.

And I raved in my mind "Are you wicked or blind?
Are you Jesus, or Devil, or Fate?
Have you chosen to hide, gone demented or died?
Who rules over this Earth that I hate?"

As I looked at the stars my gaze fixed upon Mars
which was burning as brightly as shame

and that god of the sword seemed a more likely Lord
than the one the apostles proclaimed.

As with Richmond ablaze I could not turn my gaze
till it seemed that all else disappeared
as it hung in the sky like the lone baleful eye
of that Odin the Vikings revered.

And it seemed that I heard a demand without words
from that terrible god of the North
in a voice of command that I could not withstand
that decreed that this mortal come forth.

Then, against every clause of all natural laws
I flew up like a giant's spear hurled.
I could do naught but look, as if caught on the hook
of an angler whose lake was the world.

Yes, my will to resist felt no stronger than mist
as I sped like a moth to the light
yet I freely confess, as I'm sure you will guess,
I had but little will left to fight.

James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. He fights crime as Poetic Justice, but his day job is acting. You might know him by his stage-name 'Brad Pitt.' He can be found at <http://apolitical.info/teleleli>

This Day, At Tilbury

By KAT OTIS

With the Armada closing fast and Spanish monks calling down lightning from the heavens, it was do or die for the son of the Earl of Leicester and the outnumbered British force standing between invaders and the Queen at the mouth of the Thames!

On this day, his fourteenth birthday, Robin Dudley knew he was finally a man in the eyes of his father.

When Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Lieutenant and Captain-General of the Queen's Armies and Companies, had given his base-born son permission to join him at the Tilbury encampment, Robin had at first been thrilled. He'd spent the entire trip from Oxford imagining the stories of heroism and valor he would be able to tell his friends after he helped Leicester repulse the Spanish invasion. He would fight bravely, of course, and Queen Elizabeth would reward him with lands and riches and titles, just as Queen Mary and King Philip had rewarded Leicester after the Battle of Saint Quentin. He could hardly wait.

Robin had only begun to understand the danger when he arrived at Tilbury and saw the old, D-shaped blockhouse had been reinforced by new earthworks and a wooden palisade, all of which stood guard over a boom of chains and ships' masts that now stretched across the Thames to Gravesend. He felt the first stirrings of true fear when word came that the Duke of Parma had made landfall in Kent, at Margate, with an army that outnumbered Leicester's six to one. And when the battered remnants of the English fleet limped up the Channel, fleeing before the might of the advancing Spanish Armada, Robin had stood before Leicester—his knees and voice shaking—and refused to join the Queen in the relative safety of Richmond Palace.

"I have to stay and fight," he'd told Leicester. "What message would it send to your men, if you sent me away on the eve of battle?"

"That you are still a child," Leicester retorted.

"Maybe I am today," he shot back, "but tomorrow I won't be."

And so the next morning he stood atop the earthworks with Leicester, amongst a score of extra cannons scavenged from the broken fleet, shading his eyes against the rising sun and watching for the Armada that would soon be upon them.

Waiting for a battle to begin was equal parts terrifying and boring. Robin tried not to fidget in front of Leicester, but failed miserably. The fourth time he caught himself checking the sharpness of his sword's blade in the space of a quarter hour, he jammed his sword back into its scabbard with a growl of annoyance. If he didn't do something soon, he would go mad with waiting. So he closed his eyes and *reached* with his mind.

All around them, Robin could feel the heavy metal of the artillery, each cannon filled with black powder that cried out to be set alight. The reassuringly familiar sensation helped settle his nerves a little. Calling fire to such a ready vessel would be child's play; it was a game Leicester had taught him when he was only seven years old and it had first become apparent that he'd inherited the family talent. Neither wind nor rain ever silenced Leicester's cannons.

When he came back to himself, Robin saw Leicester watching him. So his inattention had been marked. He felt heat rush into his face, but braved it out. "The cannons are still ready."

"So they are." Instead of chastising Robin, Leicester pulled a handful of straw out of his pocket. He plucked a few pieces free and held out the rest towards Robin, who took it automatically. "I find it can be helpful to have something to concentrate on, to focus the mind before a battle."

Leicester suited action to words, holding up a single piece of straw between his fingertips and calling the tiniest spark of fire. It traveled with unnatural slowness up the straw, a feat of awesome control that Robin couldn't possibly hope to match. Still, he tried, dutifully pulling out a single piece of straw and concentrating as hard as he could on calling only a *little* bit of fire.

With an audible whoosh, the entire piece of straw went up in flames.

"God's wounds!" Robin swore as the flames licked his fingers. He flung the straw into the air where it quickly burned out and became only a scattering of ashes.

"Language," Leicester said, mildly. "It's only a matter of practice."

It was more than that, Robin suspected, but didn't argue. Leicester's talent was rather weak, as such things went. Even if the old King Henry hadn't dissolved all the monasteries and sent the talented back to their families, Leicester probably wouldn't have been forced to take holy vows. Robin, on the other hand, was both extremely strong and illegitimate; he'd have been an oblate the moment his talent manifested.

Thirty-four straws later, Robin still had not managed the trick, though he had mostly avoided singing his fingers any further. He would have kept trying, but the wind suddenly began to pick up and he didn't want his bits of straw to accidentally be blown into something important—or worse, flammable.

It wasn't just the wind, Robin realized, as he shoved the last of the straw into his pocket. Thick clouds had gathered in the sky above them, making it almost as dark as it had been an hour earlier, in the dim light of false dawn. His stomach lurched and he fought down renewed fear. "This is their doing, isn't it?"

Leicester nodded. "I expect they're almost to the bend in the river. We'll see them, any moment now."

It could only have been a minute or two later when the cry went up and the Spanish Armada appeared.

They flew upon the wings of the storm, the winds puffing out their sails. Rank upon rank of them, bristling with guns and soldiers, filled the river for as far as the eye could see and beyond. Four proud galleys lead the Armada, each one's canvas sails emblazoned with a different emblem. Three of their emblems were much the same in shape and design—some sort of Greek cross that differed only in color. The fourth was shaped more like a bloodied sword—the Cross of Saint James, sign of the Order of Santiago.

The holy monks of the four Spanish military orders had not marched to war together since the last of the Moors were driven from Granada, almost a hundred years ago. This wasn't just an invasion—it was a crusade.

He was looking at the Wrath of God, made flesh and blood.

Robin didn't realize he was trembling until Leicester clapped him on the shoulder. "Imagine, embroidering on sails like they were your Sunday-best gown!"

The thought of hundreds of women sitting around those sails, chattering as they embroidered, startled a laugh out of Robin. He wasn't the only one; everyone within earshot joined in, breaking through the nervous tension. Robin felt the worst of his fear begin to slide away and even the rumbling of distant thunder couldn't bring it back. The militant monks were just men, for all their God-given talents. And didn't Robin have a talent of his own?

A shift in the wind made the sails abruptly go slack and the galleons slowed to a stop just before the first one would have hit the boom of chain-wrapped masts. Another rumble of thunder filled the air, louder and closer this time, like the sky itself was growling the Armada's challenge.

"Robin," Leicester said, his gaze flickering up to the sky for a moment. "Did I ever tell you of the battles I fought for the King of Spain, when he was wed to our Queen Mary?"

"Only Saint Quentin," Robin answered, surprised by the question. Leicester rarely volunteered to speak of his life before Queen Elizabeth took the throne, especially the years when Queen Mary and King Philip ruled. "Where your brother Henry died."

"Hmm. I'm beginning to think King Philip recalls me with about as much fondness as I recall him." Leicester reached out and ruffled Robin's hair, before he could duck away. "Run, find Sir Norreys, and tell him I sent you to help with the blockhouse artillery." Then Leicester was striding forward, shouting orders to his men.

Robin felt a thrill of mingled excitement and terror; Leicester was trusting *him* with almost half the army's artillery. Part of him knew it was not so great a confidence—Leicester's marshal hardly needed assistance managing a mere twenty-six cannons, tucked safely behind the fortified walls of the blockhouse—but the rest of him was determined to make his father proud, anyway. He turned and ran down the earthwork just as the first drops of rain began to fall. In moments, it was a downpour that he could barely see through and he had to slow to a trot to keep from running into anyone.

Behind him, he could hear the boom of Leicester's cannons and the answering cannons from Gravesend, across the river. He was just beginning to wonder why the Armada hadn't yet returned fire when he heard Leicester's cannons fire a second volley.

Then the world exploded.

Robin found himself face down on the ground, his ears ringing. He pushed himself to his knees and instinctively looked back towards the earthwork.

Several of Leicester's cannons were smoking, blasted ruins. It looked like half their artillery had been destroyed in a single moment. Robin didn't understand at first. Then lightning flashed down on the Gravesend side of the river, thunder filled the air again, and he knew. The Spanish monks had called down lightning—*this* was their response to Leicester's attack.

Slower than he should have, Robin realized there were bodies scattered on the ground around the cannons. In fact, not a single man remained standing.

A strangled cry tore out of Robin's throat. It wasn't possible. His father couldn't be dead, he *couldn't* be.

Robin lunged to his feet then froze. All around him, his father's men were watching with fear in their eyes. Lightning had just struck their ranks, like the punishing hand of God Almighty. The men didn't know how to respond, which meant they would take their cue from him. If he wailed and cried like a child, if the men lost heart, then the battle could be lost before it had truly begun.

Robin swallowed hard and drew his sword to mask his hesitation. If his hands shook a little, at least his voice came out steady and confident. "The Spaniards' tricks won't take out the blockhouse artillery so easily!"

He could see the men slowly begin to rally their courage as they recognized the truth of his words; lightning could hardly do much damage to a stone building, not in comparison to cannons laid out on open ground. His father would have known that, too, Robin realized. Somehow, his father had guessed what was coming and had sent him away to save his life.

No. He couldn't think about that right now. There was still a battle to be fought.

Robin turned towards the river to take stock of the situation. The storm seemed to be dissipating, the rain becoming a mist and the rumbles of thunder dying away entirely. The Spanish cannons were firing now, and soldiers were pouring ashore in the Armada's longboats. He ought to run to the safety of the blockhouse, while the

fighting was still confined to the riverbank. That was where his father had ordered him to go.

But instead of moving, Robin's gaze was drawn to those first four ships, the ones closest to the boom. That was where the lightning must have originated—with the monks of the four Spanish military orders. And as if the monks weren't deadly enough, each of their galleys also had a full complement of cannons, mercilessly pounding away at the English defenses.

An idea occurred to him then, and Robin felt his mouth drawing back in a mirthless grin. It was reckless and foolish, and he didn't care; the Spanish monks were not the only ones whose talent could destroy an enemy's cannons.

"Droit et loyal," Robin whispered his father's motto then took off at a run for the river.

If it weren't for the Spaniards, he never would have made it. But the English troops were too busy returning enemy fire and defending the riverbank to concentrate on stopping one half-grown boy who barreled through their lines like a cannonball, only without doing as much damage.

Robin only slowed in his headlong charge when he neared the river and ran into a knot of hand-to-hand combat that he couldn't simply dodge around. He'd often wondered what it would be like to kill a man—he'd heard that the first time was always the worst—but the moment came and went in a blur. A Spaniard stepped in front of him, sword raised. Robin side-stepped to avoid the attack, then slashed his own blade across the man's neck, half severing it. He kept running and never saw the body hit the ground.

He angled towards the flat-bottomed barge that anchored the boom on this side of the river, trying to get as close to the galleys as possible. His father had detailed a group of veteran infantrymen to protect the boom, and Robin had a bad moment when he belatedly realized they might not want to let him through to the barge. But one of them recognized him and waved him aboard, calling out to the others, "It's young Robin, the earl's son!"

Robin leapt onto the barge and crossed to the far side, already reaching out with his mind towards the galleys. This would be close enough—it had to be, he couldn't get any closer.

"Have you come about the boom?" Another of the men asked, anxiously.

Startled, Robin tore his attention away from the galleys and looked down at the boom. A greenish film had begun to cover the chains and the ships' masts had odd pock-marks on them, as if they had begun to rot from within. Whatever was happening to the boom, it wasn't natural.

"God's wounds," he swore, then winced, remember the last time his father had chastised him—had it only been an hour or so earlier?—for his language.

"It's been getting worse ever since the lightning stopped." The man glanced over at the galleys and made a sign to ward off evil.

Robin bit his lower lip and tried to hide his uncertainty. If the man was right, then the storm hadn't lessened because it had accomplished its deadly purpose. Instead, the monks had become distracted by a more pressing need for their collective talents: the boom. Without it, there would be nothing to stop the Armada from continuing upriver to sack London, and maybe even take the Queen herself.

He couldn't do anything to reinforce the boom—he hardly understood how the thing had been constructed in the first place. The monks, however, were another matter entirely.

"I'll take care of it," Robin said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. He closed his eyes and sent out his mind again.

The first galley was well within his range; he sent his mind through every inch of canvas and wood and powder, finding everything that was flammable. The second was difficult, but he only had to push himself a little more to reach it. When he reached farther, trying to touch the third galley, he missed entirely.

Robin swore under his breath and tried again. He stretched his mind out as far as he could, pushing himself harder than he'd ever done before. He thought his head might split apart from the strain, but he kept on trying until he managed to just barely brush his mind against the bow of the third galley. The contact only lasted a second, perhaps two, and then he lost it again.

Panting hard, Robin opened his eyes. It wasn't going to work, not from this far away. Destroying three of the galleys might have been enough for revenge, but it wouldn't be enough to stop the monks from

breaking through the boom. But how could he get any closer to ships stretched out across the entire width of the river?

The barge wouldn't move for him—if they deliberately opened the river, then it didn't matter whether or not the boom failed. There was no way he could get near any of the Spanish longboats either—that was where the fighting was hottest.

Then there was the boom itself.

Robin didn't think twice, afraid that reason might reassert itself and make him lose his nerve. He climbed onto the first of the ships' masts, rotten wood spinning and giving way beneath his feet. The men from the barge shouted after him, but no one dared follow.

A rod. Two rods. He scrambled from mast to mast, feeling horribly exposed. The Spaniards onboard those galleys had to have noticed him, out there alone. But no lightning struck him dead. No rifles or bows shot at him. They didn't see a threat, just a harmless, helpless boy.

He'd show them how wrong they were.

A quarter of the way across the river, Robin slowed then stopped. Once again he closed his eyes and this time he found all four galleys with ease. Canvas and wood burned so nicely. Powder burned even better.

He started the first dozen blazes in the middle of their sails, burning the emblems of their Orders to a crisp.

The Spaniards were just beginning to shout in alarm when he redirected his attention and started his next blazes below decks. He made sure to put several in the middle of their powder magazines.

Then Robin turned and ran at full, reckless speed towards the barge.

The world exploded for the second time.

The force of the explosion sent Robin flying through the air. He missed the barge by several rods and landed in the river itself. Luckily, he held onto his wits enough to thrash his way into shallow water and get his feet underneath him. He stumbled onto the muddy riverbank and turned to see what his talent had wrought.

All four galleys were doomed. The two in the middle, which had borne the brunt of the simultaneous explosions, had already mostly sunk. Men were leaping off the flaming ruins of the other two galleys,

which looked like they weren't going to be far behind. Those shipwrecks would block the river almost as effectively as the boom, making it impossible for all but the smallest of boats to safely pass. No matter how many of the Spanish monks survived, the sunken galleys wouldn't be going anywhere soon.

Not that losing four galleys would do anything to stop the thousands of soldiers pouring ashore from the rest of the Armada's ships.

Robin's head pounded with the strain of working fire at such a distance, but when he closed his eyes he could still sense the flames of the nearest two galleys, ready and willing to obey his commands. He encouraged them to spread, leaping to adjacent ships that hadn't—quite—gotten out of range yet. The Armada's tightly-packed formation would be their undoing... if he only he could reach more of the ships before their formation broke apart.

He instinctively reached for his sword, only to find that he'd lost it. For a moment, his resolve wavered. Maybe he'd done enough. Maybe he could find somewhere safe—and dark and quiet—to rest his head until the battle was over.

But his father wouldn't have let a little thing like a lost sword stop him.

Robin headed back into the fray, darting around active pockets of fighting whenever possible. When he did have to go near the fighters, he let half his mind roam—turning swords and knives and rifles red-hot—and kept only part of his attention on where his feet went. Whenever he drew near to a new ship, he turned his talent on them instead. He burned the longboats, too, to keep them from going back to ferry more soldiers to shore.

After the first five or six ships, the fighting around him died down. Robin didn't understand at first, though he was grateful that no one was trying to kill him anymore and that he could direct more of his attention towards the true enemy.

Then there was a flash of motion to his right—sunlight glinting off bared steel as it swung towards him. Before he had time to do anything more than flinch, the Spaniard was cut down by three different blades. Only then did Robin realize that there was a circle of his father's men around him.

I have an honor guard. The idea struck Robin as both amusing and proper. He had been wrong, before. He had thought the four Spanish

galleys represented the might and the glory and the wrath of God Almighty, but if that was the case then why had he been able to strike them down?

No, the Spanish monks were not the Wrath of God incarnate—he was. And he rained the fires of heaven down on those false prophets who dared to claim God's power for their own.

The world burned and burned until, quite suddenly, there was nothing left to burn.

Robin snapped all the way back to himself and nearly collapsed from the blinding agony in his head. But that was hardly surprising, after what he had done. Everything had a price.

So long as the price was not his talent! Robin's hands shook a little with sudden fear as he pulled out the last of the straws his father had given him. The effort of calling fire to those straws nearly made him weep, but he *did* call fire and he imposed his will on it, forcing it to creep slowly up the straw before burning out.

Robin grinned at his accomplishment. His father would be so proud when he saw.... No.

Slowly, he turned back towards the blockhouse and the earthwork where the artillery had been stationed. His heart pounded almost as hard as his head. Surely, if he was the Wrath of God, if he had done God's Will this day, then God would see fit to make his father alive. Wouldn't He? After all, men survived lightning strikes all the time. Well, not all the time, but Robin knew it could happen.

At first he walked, but then he picked up his pace to a trot. His honor guard followed him, keeping him safe from any Spaniards who might still be alive and fighting on the riverbank. But as he neared the blockhouse he broke into an all-out run; he left most of his honor guard behind before he reached the earthwork, and lost the last few in the scramble up its steep slopes.

He picked his way through the bodies, searching for survivors—searching for that one survivor who he knew *had* to be there. Finally, he caught a glimpse of his father's white-and-gold doublet, on the far side of one of the ruined cannons.

"Father!" Robin cried, staggering into a run one final time. He rounded the cannon to find his father sitting almost upright against the barrel, eyes wide open—and filmed with death.

Robin stared trembling then spun to look out at the battlefield again. As far as his eyes could see, there were flames and smoke and ruin. They had won. *He* had won. He would be rewarded beyond his wildest dreams. His name would become a legend and the story of his triumph would be told for hundreds and hundreds of years to come.

But it wasn't enough to balance what he had lost. It would never be enough.

On this day, his fourteenth birthday, Robin Dudley knew he was only a man in the eyes of God.

And he fell to his knees, amidst the ashes of his victory, and wept.

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At the Feet of Neptune's Queen

By ABRAHAM STRONGJOHN

Moments from being crowned King of Mars, Ch'Or was abducted, wrenched through time and space, by a woman as diabolical she was seductive. With the fate of his friends and Mars' future at stake, he would not be made to kneel!

I

"Quickly, Bi'Tik, to the left!" shouted Ch'Or. The glowing blade of a superheated sword cut into the frosty carapace of the Ice Bug. Bi'Tik rolled out of the way of a lance-like foreleg that came crashing down into the ice where he had just been. "Behind you!"

Another fierce insectoid creature reared up as though to strike at Bi'Tik with all of its might then twitched and stiffened with a gurgling hiss that only partially drowned out a fierce battle cry. Bi'Tik scrambled aside as the thing fell forward, Ra'Ana perched atop it and withdrawing her weapon from its neck.

The beast attacking Ch'Or was still reeling from the loss of its limb when the battle hardened edgeman brought up his blade to sever its head.

Green ichor covered the icy ground, the sloping blue-white walls of the labyrinth and the heavy garments of the Martian warriors, except for Ra'Ana who had made her kills cleanly. Even here on Neptune, Ch'Or observed, Ra'Ana was graceful as ever.

"Is that the last of them?" Bi'Tik asked hopefully.

"For now, perhaps," Ra'Ana answered, deftly stepping down from the back of the monster she had slain.

The Neptunian Ice Bugs were twice the size of even the largest Martian aurochs Ch'Or had ever seen. The greyish white insectoid creatures had scimitar-like mandibles and each segment of their legs was almost as long as a man was tall. This group had been the third bunch the Martians had encountered in the maze.

"We need to rest," Bi'Tik insisted between labored breaths.

“Staying put would be certain death,” Ra’Ana shook her head. “What if more come?”

“Only long enough to get our bearings, Bi’Tik...” Ch’Or used his weapon to melt a large gash in one of the walls near a still-twitching carcass. He waited as Ra’Ana jogged a few dozen paces back the direction from whence they came and, finding the previous mark, signaled to him. With another slash, Ch’Or completed the symbol to indicate the direction of their path and that they’d not yet had to double back from this branch.

“Why do you think we are here?” Bi’Tik addressed no one in particular. His frustration had been understandably mounting since this morning found them cast into a deadly maze, though it still disconcerted Ch’Or, who only weeks ago was moments from receiving the crown of Mars.

“We are here at Vraala’s whim,” Ch’Or replied, in no mood to discuss the matter. “Further speculation aids us not.”

“Surely it had been a thing we have done or offense we have given,” Bi’Tik continued. “Damnable mess we’re in.”

“Cool your head, Bi’Tik,” Ch’Or warned his sword-servant. “I need your blade to be true, now more than ever.”

“Did you say something to offend her?”

Bi’Tik’s accusatory tone bordered on impropriety; Ch’Or opened his mouth to chastise his companion when Ra’Ana clapped her gloved hand on Bi’Tik’s shoulder and said “Offense is taken, not given. Do not forget your place.”

“Our place is on Mars,” Bi’Tik muttered sullenly. Ra’Ana, if she heard it, chose to ignore the remark and resumed marching down the frosted avenue.

Ch’Or carefully regarded Ra’Ana: though covered head to toe in Xilland furs—the only thing between them and a chilly death—she managed to strike a graceful figure and move with feline swiftness that was uncanny for one as unused to clothing as she. For a moment, he became lost in thought, longing to be back in Pavonis City. It had been summer when they were taken from Mars.

Realizing Ra’Ana had put more than a few strides between them, Ch’Or motioned to Bi’Tik and said “Come, we should get moving.”

Bi’Tik swore. “To think that foul harpy had toasted and feasted us just days before. And then to toss us in here? How I’d love to get my

hands around Vraala's neck!"

Ch'Or knew that wasn't the only part of Neptune's monarch Bi'Tik wanted to get his hands on. He'd seen the way Bi'Tik had looked leeringly at their captor Queen at those banquets in their honor. Vraala's customary attire would be immodest by the laxest of Martian standards in the Elysian summers. How could the blue-skinned royal so comfortably wear naught but a translucent sapphire gorgeryne and spidersilk loin cover when even her courtiers seemed to enjoy having some protection from Neptunian weather? Ch'Or now knew the answer. Vraala was colder than the planet she ruled.

II

Ch'Or stood naked atop the pyramid temple before the smoldering brazier on the high altar of Mars. His eyes were locked forward as the priest spoke the ancient words of the ceremonial rite. With the crown that was to be bestowed upon him, Ch'Or would inherit the responsibilities of the King of All Mars, an honor held by his father and his father's father, not by heredity but by uniting the Martian tribes against a common threat and preserving their way of life. His own accomplishment had been the slaying of the Godworm of Ius who had, once woken from an ancient slumber by violent tremors, wreaked havoc upon the four great cities of Tharsis and laid waste to the orchards of Daedalia.

The scent of burning sacrificial flesh filled the air, but though it stung his eyes, Ch'Or did not blink. Nor did he look down at the vast crowd gathered at the base of the pyramid ready to break into revelry the moment the crown of Mars was placed upon his head. He knew that foremost among the crowd were Bi'Tik, his childhood friend and loyal bloodguard, and the stunning warrior maiden Ra'Ana who was to be his betrothed. He could feel the love and respect of her stern eyes upon him, yet he pushed her from his thoughts to focus on the priest's solemn words. It was what she would want from him.

Duty. Honor. Fatherhood. Strength. All these things the priest invoked as the province of not just a king, but of all Men, among whom Ch'Or must be the first and foremost in embodying these ideals if he were to lead his fellow Martians to prosperity. A Man must find strength within himself to command strength in others, and only a Man who had mastered these things could be a King among Men.

The ceremony was nearing its climax. “Who shall be your Wisdom and make whole your knowledge?” the priest inquired formally. “For only through woman may man learn the mysteries of Fatherhood and understand the Duty to his kind, test his Strength, and be truly Honored.”

“Ra’Ana of Arsia,” Ch’Or proclaimed boldly, loud enough that all at the pyramid’s base and beyond could hear, “who aided in the slaying of the Godworm shall be my Wisdom, my Queen.”

“Who shall be your Knight and see that your words are heard and abided? For without loyal men, a Man is alone and goes unheeded by his fellows.”

“Bi’Tik of Pavonis,” Ch’Or replied as forcefully as before, “who aided in the slaying of the Godworm shall my Knight, my blade when I have none.”

“Then let Ra’Ana of Arsia and Bi’Tik of Pavonis ascend the steps that they may take their place at the side of their King!”

Ra’Ana emerged first from the crowd, naked save for a finely crafted gold medallion worn over a sheer silk shawl and sash skirt. Her long red hair streamed gently behind her, lifted by Martian breeze as she moved elegantly up the steps of the massive temple structure. The tone of her bare skin so matched the stone of the holy site that, to those remaining below, she appeared to become a part of it; some from the crowd whispered that she was like some goddess-embodiment of the planet itself.

Behind her, in flamboyant white battle raiment cut from the hides of Syrian tigers, Bi’Tik hustled to catch up, fighting to hide the throbbing in his head from the previous night’s festivities. Bi’Tik caught up and remained two steps behind Ra’Ana, as ceremony required, until they both reached the summit and took their places at Ch’Or’s side.

To Bi’Tik, who stood on Ch’Or’s left and was still breathing heavily, the priest handed an ivory knife. “Obey your King with love and strength, for you are to be his Knight.”

To Ra’Ana, who stood impeccably still on Ch’Or’s right, the priest handed an Ophir Lotus. “Guide your king with love and strength, for you are to be his Queen.”

To Ch’Or, the priest turned and held above him a plain circlet of gold. “Guide your people well, good king. Trust your Knight and Honor your Queen, and they—as all of Mars—will do Honor unto you.”

Ch'Or had just bent his neck to receive the coronet when he realized something was wrong. The priest took a fearful step backward, and a loud din of panic grew from the crowd below. Neither Ch'Or nor his companions saw the intense beam of light streaking across the evening sky until it had enveloped them. And when it had, all of Mars dropped away around them. Ch'Or felt Ra'Ana's hand grasp his own as the trio was violently torn through time and space.

III

As Ch'Or led his companions further into the maze, he replayed the events of their arrival in his mind. When the light which had ripped them from atop the pyramid at Pavonis' base had faded, the Martians found that they had arrived in a rounded circular chamber. Several men, heavily armed and wearing thick leathers unlike any the Martians had ever seen, escorted the Martian prince and his companions down a long bejeweled corridor. Dazed and completely unaware of their present location, the Martians could do little but follow and wait to see what perils or profits might await them. Naked and unarmed as he was, Ch'Or had been envious of Bi'Tik's tiger-hide garments; in the drafty cold of the alien palace, even Ra'Ana's scant clothing would have been better than nothing. At the entrance of a magnificent throne room, one of their captors informed them that they were to be presented to Vraala, Queen of all Neptune.

Her cerulean skin was impossibly smooth save for the bit of gooseflesh surrounding the lapis lazuli peaks atop her ample bosom. Sapphire lips curled in a devilish smile to reveal her perfectly white teeth. Upon seeing the discomfort of the Martian prince and his companions, the queen ordered her slaves bring robes for her guest and invited them to the first of what would be many feasts in their honor. While preening, the queen heaped praise and flattery upon Ch'Or, Bi'Tik and Ra'Ana and made a grand show of feigned magnanimity until Ch'Or at last demanded to know why they had been brought.

She had replied "Are you not proclaimed Overking of your world, Martian? And are these not your illustrious champions? I am the Queen of all Neptune, mistress of a mighty empire! It is only right that I should formally offer not only my congratulations, but perhaps even my fealty. What wonders might come of a union of our two worlds! My only

intention is to celebrate your ascension, good Lords of Mars, and show what hospitality that Neptune's queen is able to offer!"

When Ch'Or had explained that the coronation ritual that would have made him king had been interrupted by whatever powers Vraala used to bring them to her, she dismissed this as unimportant, a mere side effect of scrying and transporting individuals over such great distances of space, even assuring them that once the festivities she had planned for them had concluded, she could return them to not only the place but the moment from which they had departed. Ra'Ana, though distrustful of every word out of Vraala's mouth, acknowledged that this must be the first challenge of diplomacy Ch'Or would face as Martian monarch, acquiescing that discussions of interplanetary relations should be approached with a cool head despite the circumstances surrounding this first contact. Bi'Tik, already helping himself to the proffered refreshments being brought by nubile blue slave girls who had been attending Vraala, agreed.

For days after their arrival on the alien world, the trio of Martians had been pampered and provided with all manner of delight and amenity. Nonetheless, they had been kept separate from one another and clearly were prisoners of their host. The only time they were able to see one another had been at the 'celebratory' feasts held in their honor. At first, they enjoyed the festivities: the exotic fruits, meats and beverages were delights to the palate as much as the dancing and musical entertainments were delights to the eyes and ears, but as the days wore on so too did the Martians' hope for ever returning home.

At these dinners, the Martians would be seated on either side of Vraala so that she might converse with them freely, though they could not all speak together as one. Ra'Ana always seemed most uncomfortable on evenings when she was placed directly beside Vraala without either Bi'Tik or Ch'Or on her other side. Before they were separated and returned to their rooms for the night, Ra'Ana once caught Ch'Or and whispered "I know not what Vraala wants of us, but if we are to return home, it will be by your hand, not hers." The following night, Vraala kept Ra'Ana alone on her right, though she neither addressed nor acknowledged the Martian princess' presence. Nor did Ra'Ana speak to her companions during the meal. The sullen expression on her face troubled Ch'Or, but the Queen's banal chatter

with Bi'Tik who sat between them that night, made it impossible to find out what the matter was.

Only when he was dragged from his cell later that night after dinner's conclusion did Ch'Or discover the depths of their peril.

IV

Just as Ch'Or arrived back at his cell under escort, one of Vraala's personal bodyguards appeared and nodded for the other guards to depart. "Her majesty desires a private audience, your highness," the burly guard addressed Ch'Or with noted sarcasm. "Come with me."

Keeping his hand on the hilt of his heat sabre, the guard led Ch'Or through the winding halls of the palace, down improbably long corridors and up a daunting spiral stair in a remote tower with windows lit by Triton and his dancing sisters, until they arrived at a door flanked on each side by spear bearing sentries. The door swung open as if by unseen hand.

"Send him in then leave us," a familiar voice hissed from the abyss beyond the portal, inducing the guard to shove Ch'Or into the darkness beyond and close the door behind him.

Ch'Or blinked a few times, straining as his eyes adjusted to the Neptunian moonlight. Within the dimly lit chamber, Vraala stood dignified and naked save for the many gems strung about her collar.

"Welcome, Ch'Or, King of Mars."

"You say you wished an alliance between our worlds, yet you..."

"A union is exactly what I desire," Vraala interrupted. "I have seen many things while scrying your and other worlds, including your heroic deeds."

"What is the real reason you brought us here?"

"Why have I brought you here? Because there is no Neptunian man brave enough to bed me, give me an heir, be a king worthy of my glory."

"And yet you brought three of us. You not only kidnapped me, but you also took Bi'Tik and Ra'Ana from Mars. Why?"

"Why not Bi'Tik? He was your royal champion. I wanted to see him for myself. Perhaps he would make an amusing diversion, but he lacks what I truly desire. And while the one called Ra'Ana might have provided me suitably entertaining companionship, it is clear she has eyes but for one, so she is sadly of no use to me."

Ch'Or said nothing, able only to glare at his captor, grinding his teeth as thoughts filled his head as to the cause for Ra'Ana's earlier distress.

"Imagine the combined might of Mars and Neptune! What a glorious empire we could lead... With my magic and your martial prowess, all the ten worlds might someday offer supplication at our feet. Am I not lovely that I might stir your heart and your loins? Am I not mighty, bringing you across space and even time that I could generously show the bounty of my kingdom?"

Within her voice, Ch'Or could find no human passion, only calculation and ambition. While it was filled with desire, it was loveless.

Vraala seized his wrists and drew them about her waist. "These are the hips that would carry our child." Ch'Or nearly recoiled at how chill her flesh was beneath his fingers, but he kept steady, looking straight into the queen's eyes. They were dark as the gold-strung sapphires resting atop her breasts. Vraala took his right hand and placed it just below her navel. "And in this womb, your seed shall grow into a line of kings!"

Ch'Or drew away just as she sought to push his hand further downward.

"You shall not have me, sorceress!" Ch'Or growled in defiance.

The lust on Vraala's face contorted into hatred. "Then you and your friends will die! Guards!"

The brawny Neptunians who had been waiting outside with spears burst into the room, seizing Ch'Or by each arm.

"Return our guest to his room and make certain he stays there," Vraala commanded. "Tomorrow, he, his consort and their idiot companion are to be placed in the Labyrinth."

"Yes, majesty!" the guards replied in unison.

The look Ch'Or gave the seething Vraala somehow stirred her arctic heart and set her quivering.

"But," she croaked, pulling herself against Ch'Or, "I am forgiving, and do so wish to give you one last chance," then, turning her head slightly to address one of the guards, "See that they are provided with proper weapons and attire so they may fairly earn my mercy. Now remove him at once!"

A massive gate studded with all shape and manner of turquoise, topaz, and iolite fitted and arranged into swirling abstract mosaics stood wide at the end of the rift-like pass. The high walls of the maze beyond the portal opened into the wide bowl of a great amphitheater. The warriors slowly advanced beyond the gate and emerged amidst the cheers and jeering cries of countless Neptunians ahead and on either side in the frost-white maeniani of the arena. Opposite the entrance was a podium where, atop an ice-hewn throne, the wicked Vraala sat smiling cruelly and wearing opulent regalia that still seemed to fail at covering any of her supple form. A pair of slaves pushed closed the towering gates behind the Martians, leaving them no egress.

“At least we’ve come to the end of her damnable labyrinth, eh Ch’Or?” Bi’Tik said leaning in towards his lord. “Whatever that witch has in store for us, let us give Neptune a show to remember us by. For Mars!”

Ra’Ana and Ch’Or kept steady their pace toward the center of the arena as Bi’Tik took several quick strides ahead, thrusting his glowing sword into the air, shouted fiercely, and approached the wall. This sent the crowd wild; the roar and applause were almost deafening as thousands of Neptunians stood, riled by the warrior’s cries.

For a moment, Ch’Or dared hope that they might profit from winning the approval of the enormous audience, but over the noise he heard Ra’Ana remark “Everyone loves the baited bear, from its first snarl to its last drop of blood.”

When the whooping Neptunians showed no sign of exhausting their fervor, Vraala stood and slammed the butt of her staff on the podium floor. A pale ripple of gaseous light issued forth from the staff’s crystalline head along with a thunderous boom, silencing the crowd. Even Bi’Tik fell quiet, and all eyes were upon Queen.

“Congratulations on reaching the heart of my maze,” Vraala crowed, raising her free hand in a mocking salute. “But further challenge awaits you, if you hope to gain my favor. Prove your worth, and I shall let you bask in my glory and fulfill your desires!”

“We desire only our liberty, majesty!” Ch’Or replied loudly, his voice carrying to the highest reaches of the coliseum’s stands.

Vraala’s sly smile curled into sneer. “Then you must fight for it!” She brought the end of her staff down again with another echoing crash

that rung in Martians' ears. The crowd exploded once more. Vraala sat back on her throne, crossing her legs suggestively. She leaned forward, beaming with sadistic expectation, as a high pitched shriek filled the skies above them.

VI

A grey silhouette shot across the twilit sky. The air froze about a great gob of spittle and white crystals exploded into a jagged monolith between the three Martians. The icy pillar split into shards as the massive beast landed on two fiercely taloned limbs. The Neptunians let out a thunderous cry of exuberant blood lust with fervor nearly matching the shrill emanations of the creature as it spread its bat-like wings to their full span, nearly stretching from one side of the arena to the other.

"The devil is that thing?" Bi'Tik stepped back as he stole a quick glance at the shattered pillar of frost, holding up his flaming blade between himself and the beast.

"A worm of this world?" Ra'Ana suggested, assuming an evasive stance. "Though no worm have I seen with wings."

"Then we shall cut them off and slay this one like the other!" Ch'Or boasted as he readied his sword.

The creature glared with red serpent eyes at its prey. A circlet about the monster's neck briefly lit, seeming to cause some irritation, for the thing closed its eyes, craned its neck and convulsed slightly. When it opened its mouth, a clear stream issued forth, first liquid then solid. Like a glassy battering ram, the projectile careened toward Ra'Ana. Ra'Ana deftly tumbled aside, avoiding the shot that would have smashed her against the arena gates.

The beast lurched forward. Lacking forelegs, it awkwardly braced itself on its wing-tips, apparently unable to take flight from a standstill. Ra'Ana regained her footing and signaled to Ch'Or, who in turn signed to Bi'Tik. Bi'Tik nodded. As the creature began barreling towards Ra'Ana, Ch'Or ran to the monster's left while Bi'Tik circled its right.

The gambit failed; noticing Bi'Tik moving along the arena's wall, the beast paused its lumbering gait. The creature snapped its crocodilian jaws in the direction of the harried Martian. In the same motion, the beast whipped its great tail behind it. Ch'Or would have been knocked off his feet had he not leapt at just the right moment.

“Let’s see you eat this, snake!” Bi’Tik struck at the monster’s snout with his sword to little effect beyond enraging the creature further. As the beast lashed at Bi’Tik, Ch’Or seized its tail and worked his way towards their foe’s lower back, clinging to the spines protruding from it.

By now Ra’Ana had recovered from the shock of seeing a colossal bolt of ice spat at her. She sprinted at the wyvern’s left flank. Just as a glancing blow sent Bi’Tik skidding a full bow-shot across the arena, Ra’Ana’s blade cut through the membranous flesh of beast’s wing.

The monster reared up, nearly throwing Ch’Or from its neck. Thick greenish blood spurted onto the frosty ground as Ra’Ana quickly withdrew beyond the beast’s immediate striking range. Some in the crowd began throwing trash, food and stones from stands. Most of the objects missed the Martians, as they were such small targets; the wyvern, being much larger, was not so fortunate. Maddened by its injury and confused by the pelting it was receiving, the creature thrashed about wildly and snapped at the heckling audience, giving Bi’Tik time to regain his feet. Ch’Or was barely able to hold on but managed to cling tenaciously to the spines of the monster’s dorsal ridge.

Ch’Or only saw Vraala as a blurred streak in the stands as the wyvern bucked and therefore did not see the glow her crystal staff had begun to emit. He did, however, notice the torc about the thing’s neck begin to faintly illuminate just prior to the beast seizing up, turning toward Bi’Tik and bringing its head back.

“The collar!” Ra’Ana shouted. “The witch controls the brute with it!”

Ch’Or furiously hacked at the enchanted ivory collar which bound slave to mistress. Fragments of the polished bone splintered as the ring cracked with each stroke. Whatever effect Ch’Or’s blows may have had, they were not enough to interrupt the creature’s attack. As the torc fell to the ground, the wyvern spat an arc of daggers toward Bi’Tik. These splashed upward until they formed a motionless wave that towered over the Martian.

Breaking the tether between Vraala and her pet would not be enough to stop the thing, but with the mystic link broken, the confused creature provided Ch’Or with an opportunity to strike a decisive blow. As it paused and looked at Vraala for some sort of guidance, Ch’Or scrambled the rest of the way up the creature’s neck to the base of its skull. Bracing himself on one of the beast’s horns, Ch’Or jammed the

point of his heat blade in the monster's right eye then placed his fist squarely into the wet, soft cornea of its left.

The beast railed in pain so violently that Ch'Or had no hope of holding on. The Martian prince was flung backwards to ground. Though he was able to tumble to avoid the worst of the impact, Ch'Or was stunned and weaponless. The crowd howled in delight at the carnage.

The wounded beast lurched and turned about, failing to shake Ch'Or's blade from the blood-gushing sightless socket. A swing of its tail smashed the wall it had just spat at Bi'Tik, showering him with jagged fragments, as it began stalking blindly toward where Ch'Or lay. Ch'Or put his hand out in attempt to lift himself only to find that the wet vitreous humor covering his gloved hand had frozen, causing his arm to slip out from under him.

Hit in its head by a sharp bit of debris, the monster turned from Ch'Or. Ra'Ana was shouting and hurling objects which the Neptunians had been throwing into the arena to get the beast's attention. The creature clumsily spun to face Ra'Ana and began shambling toward her as before, telegraphing its deadly intent to spit. Ra'Ana met the beast, running at it headlong. Just as the wyvern's head came down, jaws open and liquid death issuing forth, Ra'Ana broke into a feet-first slide. Holding her thermal blade aloft in both hands, Ra'Ana sliced the beast open from collar to vent as she skidded between its wings and legs.

Dark green ichor spilled beneath the creature as it crashed headfirst into ground.

VII

Still slightly dazed, it took Ch'Or a moment to realize that the ringing in his ears was actually the uproarious cheers of thousands of Neptunians chanting the Martians' names in a deafening and atonal chorus. He saw Ra'Ana half-crouched, half-lying, and breathing heavily. Her Xilland furs were soaked with dragon blood. Bi'Tik, with a slight limp, was strutting for the crowd and encouraging further ruckus. Staggering to his feet, Ch'Or saw that even Vraala managed an enthusiastic clap, smirking at the bloody scene of carnage below.

When the furor showed no sign of abating, Vraala pounded the ground at her feet once with the butt of her staff. A clap of thunder was

followed by eerie silence, and all eyes in the coliseum were upon Vraala as she stood. A slave appeared at her side, handed her something discretely then vanished behind the white throne. Vraala raised up a single golden garland in her left hand.

“You have bested my maze. You have slain my dragon. You have demonstrated yourselves to be exceptionally worthy and puissant warriors. I am prepared to reward the victor.”

“End this game and let us go!” Ch’Or’s cry echoed in the coliseum as he inched toward the head of the fallen beast, intent on retrieving his blade from its eye.

“I have but one wreath, my Martian prince,” Vraala crowed.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bi’Tik demanded.

“Dear Bi’Tik, my offer stands,” Vraala suggestively leaned over the lip of the wall.

Ra’Ana shot Ch’Or a puzzled look.

“You will send me home?”

“And you will be king of two worlds.”

“What treachery is this?” Ch’Or thundered.

“You had but to be gracious; did not you both spurn our host? Did not we all three bring down the Godworm of Ius? And where you would be king and queen, I was to be your dog?” Bi’Tik’s eyes were aflame.

“Strike now, warrior,” Vraala commanded, her face lit with magic and sadistic glee, “for they have betrayed you!”

“She speaks lies, Bi’Tik,” Ra’Ana warned, but it was too late; Bi’Tik, possessed by some otherworldly rage was lunging at her sword first. She barely parried his thrust.

“Do you think I would have let us be trapped here? Like he did?!” Bi’Tik roared, striking wildly. “Mine! You should have been mine! Mars should have been mine!”

Ch’Or snatched his sword and dashed toward Bi’Tik. He shoved the staggering Ra’Ana aside to turn away what would’ve been a fatal blow. Bi’Tik gibbered and spat curses at Ch’Or, who even injured was the better swordsman.

“Must I always wait in your shadow?” Bi’Tik leapt forward to attack but found himself on Ch’Or’s blade. The hatred left his eyes to be replaced with dread and tears.

“You were always welcome at my side,” Ch’Or uttered through clenched teeth. “You chose to skulk behind me.”

Ch'Or pulled his sword from his companion who fell lifeless to the icy arena floor. He reached out a hand to Ra'Ana, helping her to her feet then taking her in a close embrace.

"My closest companion betrays me; I fear I am unfit to rule," Ch'Or uttered solemnly.

"No, not your closest." Ra'Ana looked hard at him with her ruby eyes. "You will make a fine king, my love." Ch'Or was about to reply when Ra'Ana stopped him with a kiss.

"A charming display," Vraala pronounced dryly. "Now kill her and claim your prize. I shall let you kneel before me."

"I'll not besmirch my honor at your feet this day," Ch'Or declared, "for a thousand worlds, much less this wretched ball of ice."

Ra'Ana smiled and gave Ch'Or a nod.

The warrior prince locked eyes with Vraala. "Return us to Mars... or I shall bathe this place in blood!"

"Brave words, Martian. Twice you have refused what no man has. You should not have spat upon my mercy." Vraala raised a delicate hand and pointed. "Kill them!"

From the galleries and vomitoria, armed guards began to pour forth and awkwardly climb down the wall to the arena floor. Ch'Or hastily hacked a spine from the dead wyvern to use as a crude parrying dagger. Feeling the heft of his heat blade which burst forth in radiance anew at his command, the Martian prince smiled as he watched the Neptunian soldiers clumsily scramble, some dropping their spears as they slipped onto the ice. These were no fighting men but weak eunuchs, fat and lazy in the service of a woman who wallowed unchallenged in indolence. They would be no match for a son of Mars!

Severed limbs flew through the air and blood spilled upon the ground as Ch'Or cut his way through the approaching host. Despite the impellations of Vraala, some of the guards began giving Ch'Or a respectful berth.

A few of the Neptunians in the audience had already started making their way out coliseum, particularly those nobles who'd had the privilege of sitting near Vraala's podium. What had begun as a thrilling spectacle suddenly seemed an unpalatable risk to the well-being of bloodthirsty onlookers. The calm and orderly exodus of Neptunian civilians broke into an all-out panicked free-for-all as Ch'Or planted the tip of his blade firmly into the arena wall and hurtled into the front row

of the stands. The few slaves brave enough to put forward a hand to stop the rampant Martian swiftly lost them and bought Vraala only too few moments to flee.

Vraala cursed her courtiers who now clogged the nearest exit passage as they sought to flee the wrath of this barbarous off-worlder. She shoved a few aside, and those were trampled by their fellows, but Vraala's efforts proved futile as the Martian prince's brawny arm found its way around her neck. She was wheeled about to face the arena and those who had not or could not leave the stadium. The point of a dragon spine pressed into the naked blue flesh above her breast.

"You will call off your gelded dogs and then you will return us to Mars," Ch'Or growled into Vraala's ear. The queen lowered her head in defeat. A few of those Neptunians on the arena floor had made the mistake of assuming that the injured Ra'Ana might make an easier quarry; they were faring little better than those who had faced Ch'Or and glad to see their mistress signal them to stand down.

"I am beaten, Prince. Humiliated before my people. I will send you from my world."

Ch'Or sheathed his blade and wrenched the crystal staff from Vraala's hand. Ra'Ana sprung from atop the ice drake's corpse onto the arena wall and approached the queen's podium, remarking "It seems you have now defeated three worms, my king."

VIII

The furor that had gripped all just an hour before had died down into the uneasy calm of a hostage exchange. The Royal Palace had been locked down and all courtiers, servants and civilians were being barred from entry until a resolution had been reached. The Neptunian royal guards escorted Ra'Ana and Ch'Or at a respectful distance as Ch'Or escorted Vraala at knifepoint; the queen led the tense entourage to the circular chamber in which the Martians had first arrived.

Vraala silently signaled to be left alone in the teleportation room with the Martians. To Ch'Or's surprise, there were tears in the Queen of Neptune's eyes.

"I would have given you an entire world," Vraala spoke softly, her gaze upon the floor.

"I already had a world, milady," Ch'Or replied and gave a look to Ra'Ana, "and much more."

“And you have shamed me as no man has ever dared,” Vraala continued, her voice cracking along with her carefully maintained demeanor. “I pray that I will never see you again.”

“A sentiment we share.”

“Stand on that platform,” Vraala instructed with little more than a whisper, “and I shall send you from this world. Here.” She removed her carcanet and tossed it at rather than to Ra’Ana. “You have my staff. Take this, the other symbol of my station. A gift. Spoils. It no longer matters.”

Ch’Or and Ra’Ana both stood on the transporter platform. Vraala fiddled with some knobs on a nearby console. The machinery began to hum and whir. “Concentrate on Mars,” Vraala told them, a smile upon her lips, as light enveloped them. “You will never see it again.”

A screeching sound filled their ears as the Martians rode upon a tubular spiral of light past the walls of Vraala’s palace and into space beyond. In the time-breadth of a humming-bird’s wing-beat, Ch’Or and Ra’Ana found themselves standing in a shadowy fen with great mushroom trees towering over them. The buzz that continued now was not that of the machine but the cacophonous sounds of wetland fauna all around them. There were no swamps such as this on Mars.

A great blue sphere loomed above them, as if a fat and gaping hole had been punched in the firmament of night to reveal daylit sky beyond. Ch’Or was about to curse aloud Vraala’s inevitable betrayal, for there had been no way to guarantee their return, when the heads of several small greyish men appeared, rising from the tallgrasses. They looked on at the Martian couple in wonder, spoke in a hushed tongue among themselves, and motioned for one of their own to step forth. The selected man was naked except for the bindings around his ankles, wrists and collar. The marks of suffering and servitude marred his slight frame, making it immediately apparent to the Martians that this man and his fellows were much abused slaves or prisoners of this world. The ash-skinned man took a few hesitant paces then prostrated himself before the Martians. A moment later, his companions did the same.

Before Ch’Or could speak, a report sounded and the supplicant fell dead on the marshy ground before him. The other grey men scattered on hands and knees back into vegetation. Ch’Or turned to see several Neptunians aiming metal rods with crystalline fixtures at him and

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Ra'Ana. The newcomers wrenched the staff and sapphire jewels from the Martians.

"I'm sure that Her Majesty Vraala will be happy to have these returned to her," said the Neptunians' ringleader. "Though I do wonder how you came by them. Regardless, the Magelords of Ruach will have you sorted out and at work in the slave pits soon enough. Welcome to Triton."

Abraham Strongjohn can be found in the pages of Cirsova as his manuscripts from the early mid-20th Century make their way through time to the present.

Rose by Any Other Name

By BRIAN K. LOWE

Kaine had been drawn to the mysterious Old Machines, trying to unlock their perilous secrets. But this traveler from the future soon learns that the secret of one mysterious girl traveling with a talking ape may be the most dangerous of all!

Kaine was crouching before a crystalline console tinkering with an ancient mechanism whose function he only thought he understood.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on soft, close-cropped grass. He remembered falling, tree branches raking his skin as he fell from the sky. He remembered his fingers skidding painfully off loose, oily bark, and how he managed to hang on to the next branch just for a moment before it broke under his weight. His body throbbed in pain in time with his heartbeat, but he couldn't feel any broken bones or the sticky spread of blood.

The Old Machines, like the one he'd been trying to activate a few moments ago, operated on principles so poorly understood as to seem deliberately malicious. God only knew where he had been dropped this time. Through his dizziness, he heard distant voices.

"What was that?" demanded one, guttural and wary.

"Never mind," another muttered. "They must've heard us! We've got to do it now!" Feet beat a tattoo on hard ground not far off, and drawing closer.

Kaine's head was starting to clear, enough to allow him to orient himself. He tumbled to his feet, threatening a new wave of dizziness. He detached the telescoping staff on his left hip, but left his heavy ancient pistol holstered. Kaine hoped he appeared more ready to defend himself than he felt.

The park-like glade he had landed in was illuminated dimly by the half-moon and the glowing graffiti on the surrounding buildings. *At least please tell me I haven't travelled through time again.* Glancing up, Kaine could see that the crack in the Moon looked the same. It was a small reassurance.

Most of the glade was covered in the short wild grass to whose cushioning he owed his life, or at least his limbs. Behind him the tree through which he had fallen grew alongside a graffiti-covered wall and cast gnarled shadows that might have offered him shelter—but now it was too late.

Four figures stopped short at the sight of him. Three were native human, shorter and lighter than he by half. They were of little consequence. The fourth... was a breen.

A genetic blend of man and wolverine, the breen bulked nearly six feet of lean muscle covered by sleek silver-tipped brown fur. The breen sported needle claws and intelligent close-set eyes that glittered in the moonlight. He could easily be at Kaine's throat in heartbeat. But breen were also known for their tendency to kill any other creature on sight, not to stand companionably in the company of humans. Why would this specimen be traveling with these three?

Kaine drew his staff instead of his pistol because his supply of ammunition was virtually irreplaceable. He hoped he wouldn't regret his thrifty impulse while the others studied him.

"My god," one of the humans said. "He's a giant! Where did he come from?"

"When" would be a better question, Kaine thought as he shifted his grip on the staff. To them, he was a Neanderthal. "Look, I don't know what you're after, but it has nothing to do with me."

They ignored him. "What do we do, Morgn?" one asked. "We don't have much time."

"I know." The smallest of them, Morgn, was balding and round, but his words were quick and clipped. "He's seen Secanthe. He'll raise the alarm." He gestured past Kaine. "You two follow the others. Secanthe, kill him."

The breen whom Morgn had called Secanthe howled its fierce, shrill cry designed by long-dead genetic engineers to paralyze his prey's nervous system. But Kaine met the scream with a cry of his own, knelt quickly, and angled the staff to meet the creature as it came down. At the last instant, the breen gave an inhuman twist to avoid the pole that would have impaled him. He landed badly, but was on his feet before Kaine might press an attack.

Kaine had no such suicidal intent. He backed up to the wall, giving Secanthe less room to maneuver.

Kaine had no time to draw his sidearm, but his staff gave him the advantage of reach. The breen had strong hands and fingers, but lacking an opposable thumb, he would not be able to seize the staff from Kaine's grasp. And breen had been created to attack, not besiege. The longer Kaine could keep him at bay, the more frustrated he would become.

Morgn's remaining men had run off to fulfill whatever mission had brought them into Kaine's path, but their leader hung back, either wanting to see the breen at work, or amazed that Kaine still breathed.

Secanthe feinted, a quick thrust to see how the large human would react—and got a rap on the knuckles for his trouble. He paced back and forth, awaiting an opening that Kaine was not about to give him. Morgn, his eyes following every motion, left his own gun holstered, making no move to rob the breen of his prey.

Secanthe began to range further and further in each direction, leaving his flank open, but Kaine had chosen his ground and stuck with it even while the cold sweat began to drip down his spine.

There was a sudden flurry of sound just out of sight down the path. Secanthe cocked his head to listen, and Kaine struck—only to see Secanthe sinuously dodge the staff and aim a wicked clawed kick at his belly.

But Kaine's lunge had been a feint as well. He leaned out of harm's way, stabbed the staff into the earth and pushed off, above the kick, then returned it with interest, driving his boot straight into Secanthe's nose. The breen grabbed his snout, howling in an oddly flat tone, and Kaine drew his sidearm, firing point-blank. Secanthe crumpled to the earth, and Kaine swung around to confront Morgn.

The little man gaped at the pistol, hands over his ears. "What was that?"

"Never mind." Kaine gestured, and Morgn tossed his own gun aside. Kaine collapsed his staff one-handed and slapped it into place at his side while keeping Morgn covered.

He heard a shout; Morgn's men had reached their prey. Kaine stepped up and felled Morgn with a quick, short punch then sprinted for the sound.

In a moonlit defile formed by two buildings, a figure whom Kaine recognized as part of Morgn's gang stood pointing a glowing cylinder

at a pair of bodies lying on the ground. As the bandit straightened his arm with unmistakable intent, Kaine shot him.

Kaine arrived as the intended victim groaned and sat up, and Kaine, who had extended a hand to help him to his feet, suddenly withdrew it again. Strong as he was compared to most men, Kaine would not boast of being able to lift a gorilla.

The ape did not seem to take offense and raised himself slowly without aid. "Thanks," he said, shaking his head, in a smooth bass voice. "Since I'm still alive, I assume it's thanks to you."

Kaine had met so-called "humanized" animals before, but never one quite so imposing as the massive silverback which stood before him. "They're all dead," Kaine said, to cover his surprise. "Except their leader, and he's back there sleeping."

"Good," the gorilla said, peering into the shadows. "Thorne? You can come out now. It's all right."

Kaine heard a scraping among the bushes, and tensed, but the gorilla put an arm in front of him. A girl emerged from the shrubs. She was slim and small, only lately come into adulthood. Her hair shone silver-grey in the dim light around her pale face, and her wide eyes flicked back and forth from her friend to the helpful stranger.

"I'm Balu," said the ape, turning to Kaine. "And this is Thorne." His attitude, like the girl's, was friendly but wary.

"Kaine."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"That's not polite, Thorne," Balu said gently, before Kaine could decide how to respond. "How many people would have helped us—" abruptly he stopped, his nostrils dilating, and his voice rose in surprise —"against a breen?"

The girl sucked in a frightened breath.

"Don't worry. It's dead," Kaine grunted. He disliked drawing attention to himself, and these two not only drew attention, they drew assassins. Not to mention that the gunshots had been loud enough to wake the dead. But the gorilla was not to be shunted off so easily.

"And yet, he carries what appears to be a very large gun. Those are illegal."

"As are beam weapons," Kaine said. "Which your friend here tried to use on you. So perhaps we should simply say our goodnights before the police show up."

"Not a problem in this neighborhood." Balu casually reached to pick up one of the cylindrical weapons. He barely had to bend his knees. "Cantalian needlers. Not black market. You know what that means?"

"I assume it means these weren't just casual robbers. But we knew that already." Kaine nodded back the way he had come. "Human and breen don't work together. Ever. We can let the police figure it out."

"Yet these did." Balu quickly stepped to the other two bodies and relieved them of their weaponry. "And stop worrying about the civil guard. If they come around before morning it'll be a miracle." He handed one of the small cylinders to Kaine. "Can't use three."

Kaine glanced at Thorne inquisitively, but Balu either did not pick up on the implied question, or else ignored it.

"The authorities are going to have a lot of questions," Kaine said. "Two human bodies, and a breen... my gunshots. I'd really like to be somewhere else when they get here—whenever that is."

"So would I, but I've got questions right now," Balu said. "You said you left one of them alive?"

Kaine nodded and turned to point, then cursed as he saw Morgn disappearing into the distance, bandy legs churning over the grass.

"He must have been tougher than he looked."

The gorilla shrugged. "No help for it now. No reason to stick around, either, I guess."

"Well, good luck. I hope you find out who sent them to kill you." Kaine patted his weapons. "Nice meeting you, Thorne."

Balu stopped him with a touch. "Hold on. We're in this together now. They've seen you, too. Besides, we owe you."

About to brush the offer aside and leave, Kaine abruptly realized that he had nowhere to go. He didn't even know where he was.

"Do you have a safe place to spend the night?" he asked.

"We do."

"Then you can pay me back by taking me there."

Balu and Thorne's room was clean but spartan to a fault. Upon their arrival, the lights brightened automatically, glaring harshly until Balu ordered them toned down. At Thorne's command a bed extruded from one wall. She sat on it while Kaine and Balu claimed two plain chairs that rose from the floor.

"We could order some art," Balu said, indicating the sickly white walls, "but it costs extra."

"Not much of a fan anyway," Kaine said. "Uh, do you mind if I ask where we are?"

Balu snorted. "I don't think this place has a name. That's why we picked it."

"No, I mean, where are we? I kind of found myself here by accident."

Balu blinked. "The town's called Bacclay. I guess there's no reason you would ever have heard of it. It used to be something but now it isn't."

Thorne had not taken her eyes off of Kaine for several minutes. "You're different," she blurted. "Why?"

By now, though, Kaine had had time to anticipate her odd moods.

"You tell me your story, then we'll see."

"Why? I asked first."

Kaine glanced at Balu, who answered for him. "He saved our lives, Thorne. He didn't have to get involved. We owe him an explanation." Kaine refrained from reminding them that his involvement had been entirely accidental.

Thorne frowned. "I ran away from home," she said after a pause. "They didn't understand me. They wanted me to be something I wasn't. I was looking through some ruins, hoping to find something I could sell. There was a bright light, and when I woke up, I didn't look like myself any more. I looked like this." She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "I didn't know what to do. I found some coins in the dirt, and I used them to buy some food and stuff, and then these men came looking for me and started chasing me. I ran into Balu, and he helped me get away."

"You were playing around in some ruins, there was a bright light, and now you're in another body...?"

Thorne lifted her chin. "You think I'm lying. But there was an Old Machine in those ruins."

Remnants of Earth's long past, Old Machines had survived their original eras in bits and pieces whose operation was now forgotten, but glorified in song and story. Kaine had had more experience with Old Machines than he'd wanted, none of it good, but he couldn't leave them alone; they were his only chance to go home.

"Okay, I believe you, but why is someone after you?"

Balu reached into his pocket and extracted a coin. "This is one of the coins she found in the ruins." He passed it over.

Kaine turned it over in his hands. Coins were still used in this era, but mostly by children or those with no credit history—such as himself. This one was small, brown, and old, its serrated edges worn down by decades, if not centuries, of handling. On one side was an image of the sun, circled about by writing he did not recognize. On the other side Kaine saw a familiar face. He looked up and saw the same face.

"Someone thinks Thorne is the woman on the coin."

"Thorne is the woman on the coin. In appearance, at any rate. We rented a data port in town. Apparently this woman was really important about five hundred years ago; she was queen or something. We think somebody recognized her face and they think Thorne used a Machine to change herself."

Kaine nodded. For reasons no one knew, only a few people could safely activate an Old Machine. Many sought the relics out; most met with failure—by turns complete and catastrophic. Anyone who survived an encounter with an Old Machine was highly prized, either to be hired, or enslaved and sold to the highest bidder. Balu would have been amazed to know that not one, but two, of those rare people were with him in this very room.

"But you don't know how you did it," Kaine said, drawing more from experience than Thorne could have guessed. "So why don't you just go home? I'm sure your family would protect you."

"Protect me? They wouldn't even know me. And even if they did, it would be the same as before. I ran away, remember?" Thorne put her head down on her raised knees and said almost inaudibly: "Not that I'm doing very well here, either." Thorne was young, and attractive, yet when she looked up her appraising gaze made Kaine uncomfortable. "Still..."

He hastily changed the subject. "Why were you outside after dark? Seems rather risky, under the circumstances."

"I was hungry," Thorne said. Suddenly she jumped to her feet and began to pace rapidly. "I'm hungry now!"

"The change seems to have had an effect on her... metabolism." Balu explained. "She acts on appetite."

Behind Balu, Thorne stopped pacing long enough to fix Kaine with a stare that said her appetites were not confined to food.

"That's why I think we should go back to the ruins." Balu said, oblivious to the by-play. "If you can figure out how that thing works, you can name your own price."

"And I'm telling you it's too dangerous!" She stomped back into his line of sight. "We should leave town; there's got to be another Machine I can learn to operate. With you to protect me, we could live anywhere."

"We can't just run blindly; they almost caught us tonight. We know where these Machines are—if we go back to the ruins, maybe we can find a way to use them. And Kaine..." Balu turned his attention to Kaine. "Do you want a job?"

The question took Kaine off-guard, but he was going to have get a look at this Machine sooner or later. Every encounter with them told him something. Perhaps Thorne could help him understand it. Perhaps between the two of them they could even learn how to operate it.

Kaine nodded. "Yes. I'll go with you..."

Somewhat to Kaine's surprise, their room could actually manufacture semi-private sleeping bays for each of them. He lay in the dark, dressed but for his boots, his mind struggling to adjust to his current situation. He had followed his last clue to his last Machine which had brought him here. Was being here, where there were at least more Machines, any worse than being on his own?

One of the walls around his bed folded back into the floor. He saw a shadow pass before the room's single window and felt a presence next to him, then the wall rose again. He tensed as the shadow leaned forward, dark on the darkness, and tensed again, differently, as warm lips met his mouth. Thorne's arms wrapped about his neck and, as in a dream, she was on top of him.

For a long moment he returned her passion, his body arching, lifting to meet her. She was amazingly light but stronger than she looked, and it took an effort to tear away from her. Already he was panting.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

She covered his mouth again. "I'm sure," she whispered when she came up for breath. "Balu's great but—he's not what I need. Please, Kaine, you don't know what I've been through..." And then she managed to lock her legs around his thighs and he could feel the heat

of her as she began moving sinuously in an ancient dance that he couldn't fail to respond to.

Hours later, he thought he awoke to feel her silently sobbing against his breast, but his aching body could not sustain consciousness, and he slipped back to sleep unable to say if it had been just a dream.

"What the hell did you do to her?"

Kaine awoke to find the bedroom partition down and Balu leaning right in his face. He gripped his staff convulsively, but the gorilla was already backing away, pacing the room.

"Look, what you two want to do in the privacy—well, what you want to do is your business. I saw the way she looked at you last night. She's been looking for something since I met her, something she's missing, but damned if I know what. Now she spends the night with you and in the morning she's gone!"

Kaine was not eager to test the limits of Balu's patience. He dressed hurriedly, racking his brain for any clue he might have missed last night. For the life of him, he couldn't recall the details. It had been too unexpected, too..."passionate" wasn't the word he wanted. It had felt almost more like war than love. And had she been crying...?

"Do you have any idea where she might go? Has she talked about her family, or friends? Anything about who she was before this happened?"

Balu stopped pacing and stared out the window.

"No. Like she said, she was a runaway. And now she's done it again."

"You think maybe she went to the ruins?"

Balu's face crinkled. "Why would she go to the ruins? That's exactly where she didn't want to go."

"You said it yourself; she's a creature of appetite. If she thinks whatever she's looking for is there, that's where she'd go."

"I've been trying to get her to go back there with me for a week!"

"Maybe she thought it was dangerous, and she was trying to protect you."

"Protect me?" Spreading his arms and rising to his full height, Balu almost filled the room. "From what?"

Kaine shrugged helplessly. "We're not going to find out standing here. Do you know where the ruins are?"

"Yeah, there's just the one set of 'em. It'll take us about an hour on foot."

"Then let's go. We may not be the only ones looking for her there."

Kaine and Balu lay under the cover of scrub bushes on a hillside overlooking a small gully choked with giant ferns, dry and yellowed by the sun. The ground was splattered with patches of short, bright red lichens, the clash of colors threatening to give Kaine a headache. Near the bottom of the gully stood four walls and part of a roof, the last remnants of a non-descript two-story block building whose age and purpose were both lost to time. To the builders' credit, however, the doors were still intact.

"Okay," Balu said, dragging out the word. "Now you want to tell me what you're doing here?"

"Waiting to see if anyone else shows up."

"That's not what I meant. You pop up out of nowhere last night the size of two men, save our butts, and swallow Thorne's story like you hear it every day. But you never answered Thorne's question. Now I may be just another country gorilla, but I know you aren't a typical human. And since we're out here facing who knows what dangers together, I have a right to know: what's your story?"

Kaine frowned. He had hoped to come up with a plausible lie last night, but Thorne's visit had upset his plans. A familiar theme: before he'd walked into that cave in France, he hadn't planned to be within a million years of here...

"I'm a time traveler." The weight that suddenly fell from his shoulders told him how Thorne had felt the night before, admitting her secret. In a few sentences, he told Balu about the war, the time travel expedition and their tragic end at the hands of his enemies, and how he'd been forced to flee through a time portal leading to a strange land and time. "From what I've been able to gather, if there's any way home, it's through the Old Machines. I've been hunting from one to the next, hoping I can figure out how they work, and trying to find one that will send me back."

Balu was silent for several heartbeats. "All right, so Thorne's story isn't the most bizarre thing I've ever heard. And is that how you happened to be there last night?"

"Actually, no. I'm here completely by accident. I think the Machine I was working on exploded. Anyway, I woke up and I was here."

After a moment, Balu asked: "How long ago—did you come from?"

"How long has the Moon had that crack through the middle?"

"Um, I don't know, always? I've never heard of it not being there."

"Well, it wasn't there where I come from."

"Really? Wow." Balu took a moment. "No wonder you don't want talk about yourself. If anybody knew about you, you'd be worth a fortune. Is that where you got that huge piece of metal you wear on your belt?"

Kaine withdrew his sidearm from its holster. "This is one of the few things I've held onto from my own time. It's called a Colt 1911. It fires a copper-jacketed projectile when you squeeze the trigger, here." He pointed out the various parts of the weapon. "It kicks like a mule and its range is nothing like a beam weapon, but the noise is very distracting, and it punches right through refractive armor."

Down below, a feathery yellow branch moved without a breeze. Thorne slowly emerged from the ferns near the abandoned installation, looking each way.

"There she is," Balu whispered. "She's being careful."

Apparently satisfied that she had remained undiscovered, Thorne approached the building. She waved her hand through the air alongside the door, but nothing happened. From his hiding place, Kaine saw Thorne frown and wave her hand again. When the results were the same, Thorne's frown twisted into an expression of growing dismay. She slammed her hand on the door. To her watchers' surprise, the portal slid open meekly, allowing Thorne to dart inside, before shutting behind her.

"Didn't see that coming," Balu said. Kaine was already rising to his feet.

"Well, she's in. The question is, is anyone else coming?" Kaine began to sidestep down the hill, Balu following him easily.

"Like somebody who hires breen to do his dirty work?"

They reached the bottom of the hill and trotted up to the door, but it would not open to their waving hands any more than it had for Thorne, and unlike in her case, it did not respond even to their pounding.

At Balu's suggestion, they circled the building but found no other means of entrance. The gorilla stopped at the rear and looked up. The wall here was cracked, with holes where the material had fallen away

just above their heads. Balu placed his hands on the wall, trying to fit his fingers into the cracks.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a pretty good climber. I think I can make it to the roof and get in that way."

Kaine looked at the wall, then at Balu. Back in the century of his birth, apes still climbed trees and did not talk. He could not help but wonder how much Balu knew about where his climbing skills originated.

"Try it, then, and see if you can find Thorne. She could get herself in a lot of trouble."

Balu nodded and began to pull himself upward. Kaine watched for a moment then returned to the front of the building, intending to hide again.

It was not necessary.

"A giant and a gorilla. Not hard to find, if you're willing to spend a little for the information."

One or two of the waiting men were nearly Kaine's own size. All of them had some kind of assault rifle pointed in Kaine's direction. Morgn stood in his accustomed position at their center, beaming with evident satisfaction. Two of his men stepped up to relieve Kaine of his weapons.

"No breen today?" Kaine had hoped to unnerve some of Morgn's men by this remark. He was disappointed, though; their stony faces registered nothing.

"My business is none of your business," Morgn replied. "Tell me where the girl is. And if you say you don't know—" he added quickly—"my men will shoot you."

Kaine closed his mouth, swallowing his intended response. He was outnumbered six to one, not counting Morgn, who was not showing a weapon. Not long odds, merely astronomical.

"She went inside."

"Did she, now?" Morgn hesitated. The look on his face told that the little man was plainly torn between the wisdom of holding Kaine against the chance that he was lying and the satisfaction of having him shot right then and there. Prudence won out, apparently, and Morgn ordered two men to take him aside to the edge of the clearing and hold him.

As Thorne and Kaine had before him, Morgn tried to activate the door with hand gestures and, just as Thorne and Kaine had, he failed. He looked at Kaine, who suggested brute force with all sincerity. Unsurprisingly, this also failed, as did the obvious next step, blasting the door.

"Never mind!" Morgn spat at last. "If she's in there, she has to come out. Spread out around the back." As this required one of Kaine's guards, Morgn took his man's place at Kaine's side. Kaine wondered how long it would take him to realize he could free up two men and eliminate a threat at the same time.

And then the screaming started.

The first, from behind the building, was abruptly cut off. They heard the air sizzle with burning radiation, then another gurgling death rattle, this time closer. Morgn and his henchman stared at each other across Kaine—who spun and hit the larger guard in the face.

Grabbing his captor's rifle, Kaine scrambled across the man and stumbled about to face Morgn, but the short man merely toppled forward, the back of his neck neatly and silently sliced open. Kaine heard another shot from behind the building, and then nothing.

He edged toward the building, eyes darting back and forth, stolen gun at the ready. It was so quiet he thought he could hear the dust move. Just as he reached the door it slid open.

"Get in here, quick!" Hardly waiting to see if Kaine's feet had cleared the entrance, Balu sealed the door again.

Despite centuries of neglect, upholstered chairs still awaited visitors, the floor was covered with clean, soft green carpet, and the red wooden reception desk was dust-free, evidence of automated systems still at work. Balu half-dragged Kaine to a staircase and went up. The wide corridors on the second floor were clean until they passed through a still-functioning pair of glass doors, where dust and cobwebs became the order of the day. Up ahead, the gaping roof was all the explanation needed for the change.

Kaine and Balu stopped in a corner room dominated by a smooth glass console in the center. The dust had been hastily wiped away. Beyond the console stood a half-enclosure whose interior was painted a once-bright red. A thick transparent cable ran from the console to a bank of cabinets on one wall directly below the gash in the ceiling.

Kaine knew an Old Machine when he saw one, but he noted it only in passing.

"Where's Thorne?"

"Down there." Balu lead him to a window that had not been visible from below. "It's all right. They can't see us."

A small clearing at the back of the building marked what might have once been a patio or landing pad. As Kaine watched, the gunman he'd hit slipped into view, a weapon held ready. A grey streak flung itself from cover, blurring past him. The gunman fell, his blood pooling on the ground.

"What was that?"

"That was Thorne," Balu said. Kaine stared. "She said she'd been transformed, Kaine, she just never said how. We assumed she was human all along, but we were wrong. Now she's back to normal."

"I was standing nearby when she came out of the machine. I thought I was dead. But she just ran past me, jumped on those cabinets, and out through that hole in the ceiling. When people started screaming, I went looking for you."

Kaine may have muttered his thanks, but his eyes were glued to his narrow slice of the outside world. They heard no more shots, no more screams. Then the grey shape appeared again.

It was smaller than Secanthe, the breen Kaine had killed the night before, but its claws dripped blood, and its fur was streaked with red. It raised its head, letting out a screech, and other, larger, breen started to appear like magic until fully a half-dozen surrounded their red-streaked comrade. Kaine's blood froze as they raised their heads as one, unerringly seeking him through the window they should not know was there, teeth bared.

But the small one must have said something, for they turned back to her, and all at once the entire pack loped into the brush, not hurrying, letting their retreat be watched, contemptuous in their ease. Even so, they were gone between one heartbeat and the next.

"They wanted us, too," Balu murmured.

"But she told them to let us go." Kaine let loose a shuddering breath.

"You were right. She wasn't afraid someone was going to follow us if we came back here—she was afraid she'd kill me. That's why she came alone. But why now? She could have come back any time."

"Last night. With me." Kaine said. "She was trying very hard to fit in, to be human. She was hoping that I could help her do that, but it didn't work. So she ran away again, back home."

They leaned against the wall and sank to the floor.

"I know the breen were looking for her, too," Balu mused, "but it's still weird that they'd be working with humans."

"I was thinking the same thing," Kaine admitted. "I'd like to know how they did that. I'd also like to know how Thorne made the Machine work. Maybe there's more to the breen than we think."

"You want to ask them, you go right ahead."

Kaine looked around the deserted laboratory, the Machine, the hole in the roof, and thought of the bloody bodies outside.

"Breen can't climb as well as you, right?"

"I hear they're really bad at it."

"Then I think I'll stay here a while."

"Yeah," Balu said. "I think I will too."

Brian K. Lowe is a 20th-century man living in the 21st century writing fiction about the 100th century. On his rare visits to the present, he can be found at brianklowe.wordpress.com.

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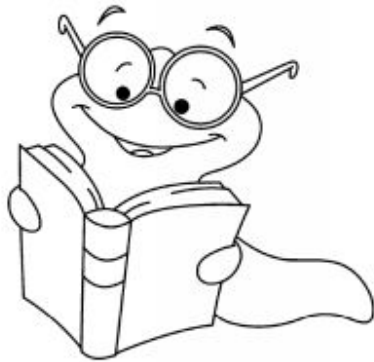
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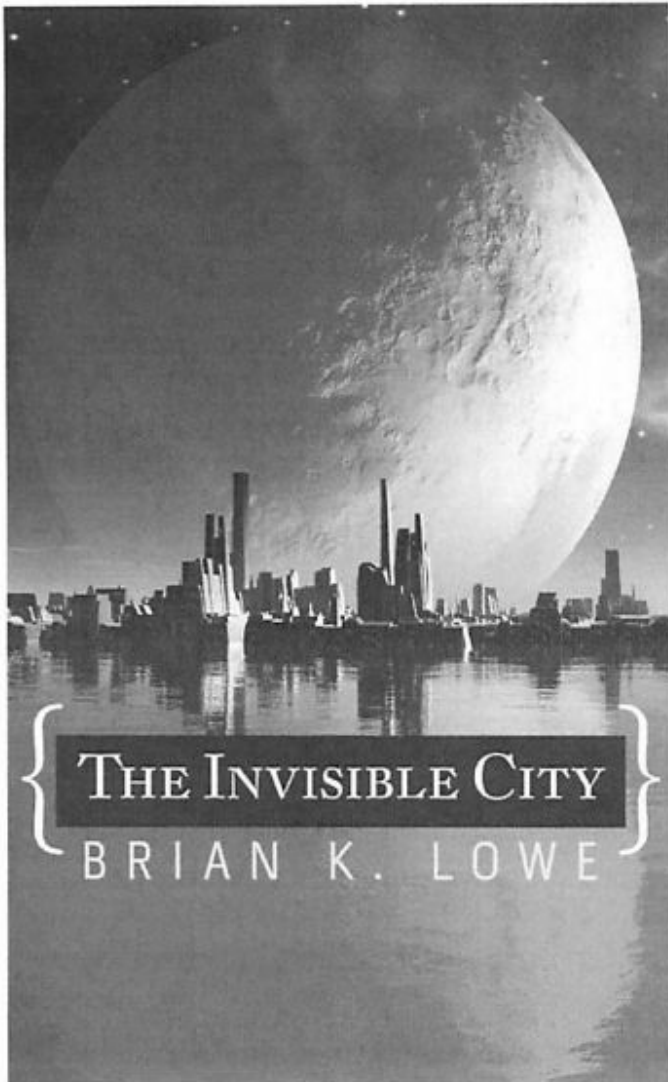
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Late Bloom

By MELANIE REES

The cruel air lord Shackleston's newest invention, a time reversal device, has ripped open a new vista for him to plunder! Can the lovely Cassandra and a mysterious stranger torn from his own time stop the mad inventor's fiendish plans!?

The grandfather clock chimes eleven and then ten. The airship shudders as the pendulum strikes. One second Cassandra stands by her beloved timepiece, the next she's back beside the desk, tumbling to her knees. She was here an hour earlier, scrutinising schematics for Shackleston's latest contraption.

Cassandra hitches her skirt to adjust her petticoat, and runs her finger under the ebony boning of her corset, freeing her bosom from the skin-pinching, rib-digging scaffolding.

It is hardly a dignified act, but floating among the other airships, she almost feels alone, almost feels free.

She returns to her cherished clock and runs her fingers over the mahogany casing, feeling the intricate etchings in the woodwork. The delicate painting of a red flower on the glass clock face intrigues her. Who painted it? What inspired such vibrant colour? On the dusty plains below, the odd pale blue or purple flower peeps through rock crevices, but never a red one. The idea of something else outside the airship's walls fuels her to persist.

Shackleston bolts into the room. He jumps into the air, clicking his heels. Under his arm, he holds a box which he dumps on the armchair. 'Did you feel my ship thrust through time?' Shackleston grabs Cassandra by the waist and pulls her hips to his. 'Did you feel it?'

'Yes, My Lord.' She tries to pull back to free herself from the gas smell lingering around him. But she shouldn't object. This is the way of things. He is the man, the master... the monster. She wrinkles her nose at the thought of him close.

'Oh, come on. Show some enthusiasm,' he pleads.

Cassandra forces a smile. 'So this new contraption—'

‘Contraption!’ The edge to his voice makes Cassandra sit back down on the armchair.

‘So this new ... invention,’ she corrects herself, ‘casts the ship in a reverse direction?’

‘I know. Isn’t it stupendous?’

‘So can you change the past?’

‘Change? Why would you want to change anything?’

Why indeed? She’d pondered such things since the first moment he talked about this device. She would travel way back to when forests graced the ground below instead of raiders and coal farmers.

Cassandra lifts a teacup to her lips to conceal that she is gnawing on her lower lip. Shackleston hates that. So did her father. She can still hear her father’s voice bleating in her ear. “If you wish to stay in the airships you must do as the Lords abide.”

She wonders if it is that terrible on the wastelands these days. At times, even the coal farms have their appeal.

Shackleston smiles like a hyena that has had too much dental work. ‘I almost forgot.’ Reaching past Cassandra, he plucks a wooden cylindrical device from the box.

He steps back and cranks a handle. Cogs turn and a coil compresses within the woodwork.

‘What does it—?’

The coil springs back and something whooshes past her head and smashes into the glass paneling on the grandfather clock.

‘Woops,’ he chirps like a canary in a coal farm and sniggers. ‘Be a good dear,’ he begins, ‘and clear that up.’

She gazes at smashed glass on the floor. The painted red flower has scattered like fallen petals. ‘Impressive,’ she says feigning interest. ‘How does it work?’

‘Why would a courtesan need to know such things?’ He looks her up and down.

‘Sorry, my Lord. Idle curiosity.’ Social expectations clasp her vocal chords and she continues to speak in just a whisper. ‘With your time reversal invention...’ She knows she shouldn’t pry into his business but something intrigues her. ‘What should happen if you changed the past? Let’s say you went back and inadvertently killed your father...’ Cassandra’s voice trails off as she sees Shackleston’s forehead pucker into tight wrinkles. Thank goodness she hadn’t said what she

really thought: say I went back and kill you, will you still be there when I awoke?

‘Let’s say I went back and killed my father,’ she rephrases the question, ‘I would never be born, therefore I could never go back to kill my father? Do you see the dilemma?’

‘What?’ Shackleston snickers. ‘What an utter load of nonsense.’

‘Maybe.’ She bites her lower lip contemplatively. ‘But maybe every time you change something an alternate timeline is created.’ Maybe even a new world. She hangs onto that fantasy.

‘How about you let the men do the thinking.’ He has that look in his eyes and she knows to quit before she infuriates him further.

The pilot storms into the room. He raises his beady goggles on top of his head, revealing even beadier eyes.

Shackleston slaps him on the back. ‘Reginald, old chap. Did you feel it? It worked.’

‘Oh, I felt it. But have you seen it?’ Reginald’s greasy moustache twitches like a butterfly trying to free itself from his face.

‘Seen what?’

Reginald glances to the portal at the side of the ship. The glass has taken on a brilliant green hue. Cassandra follows the men to the window. A viridescent crack pierces the sky.

‘The steel merchants are flying nearby. They say they can see through it. They say the land on the other side is covered with a large expanse of trees! Not like the plantations here. They extend forever.’

‘Another world?’ Cassandra feels something akin to hope kindle inside.

Reginald chuckles, but his moustache remains plastered in a static grimace and doesn’t share in the laughter. His beady eyes bear down upon her chest. ‘Where did you pick this one up? I thought you would have a greater selection from the coal farms?’ Reginald leans in close and whispers, ‘one that knows her place.’

Cassandra tastes a hint of blood and realises she is biting her lip. Shackleston hasn’t noticed. She can tell his brain was ticking over, trying to work out whether they could harvest the trees Reginald mentioned.

A thunderous boom saves her from Reginald’s torment. He pulls back, pushes her out the way and presses his face to the window.

Cassandra peers past them to see a peculiar ship plough through the slit of light. There is no woodwork. It is just metal: solid and strong and sleek with its tapered nose that cuts through the air. Peculiarly, no steam streams from the vessel. No balloons or sails keep it aloft.

‘What do you believe powers it?’ Cassandra asks, curiosity making her forget herself.

Fortunately, Shackleston has other concerns. ‘Trees you say?’

Reginald nods. ‘Who knows what else?’

‘Maybe even coal,’ Shackleston muses to himself and wanders to the armchair. He picks up the wooden contraption that dismantled Cassandra’s precious clock. Shackleston thrusts the weapon out of the window.

‘What are you doing?’ Cassandra runs to the next portal and peers out.

Shackleston’s weapon discharges. Sparks fly from the foreign ship. The nose dips forward and it plummets towards the wastelands below. The scene blurs. Cassandra realises she’s breathing so close to the glass it’s started to fog up. She wipes it with her fist in time to see a man shoot out the top of the ship and float down with a parachute. An explosion echoes below as the ship hit the ground.

‘Nets!’ yells Shackleston.

Reginald darts out of the room.

‘What will you do to him?’

“‘What will I do...?’” he mimics. ‘What concern is it to you?’ Shackleston grabs her shoulder and spins her to face him. ‘And stop biting your lip.’

She snaps her mouth shut.

‘But since you asked. He’ll let us know exactly what is through there and how we can get it. And if he doesn’t he can join the other slavers in the coal farms.’ He leaves her and strides from the room.

Outside, the large net unfolds beneath the falling man. For a second, it appears that he will guide his parachute away from the trap but the billowing fabric folds up on itself and the man plummets. She hears Shackleston ‘wooping’ from the lower decks and the net navigates directly underneath the poor soul. His legs crumple underneath him as he lands, and the parachute engulfs him in a tangled mess.

Cassandra gazes back at the green light still twinkling mid-air. Maybe she can encourage Shackleston to venture there. She can accompany him and then run. Run free. Free through their forests. The image sends chills across her skin. But how far would she really get with Shackleston breathing down her neck.

She fetches an ordinary pane of glass, reaffixes it to her clock, then sweeps the shattered glass into a metal dustpan. She picks up a shard of glass. That painted flower gave her hope. Maybe it still can. For the first time in a long time confidence brews within.

Cassandra slows her pace as she approaches Shackleston's invention room. The wooden boards beneath her feet creak with each step, breaking her calm. She intended to storm into the room and demand for him to be merciful; instead, she tiptoes closer and pries her ear to the door.

For a moment, there is nothing and then a painful deep groan torments her eardrums. The floorboards creak beneath her. She looks at her feet. She hasn't moved. Why...? She realises that isn't wood creaking but bones cracking. Or breaking.

Cassandra presses her forehead to the door. Just walk in, she pleads with herself. The cracking bones on the other side plead with her too. An aching in her hand distracts her from the noises. The glass shard digs into her hand. She drops it and dabs a line of blood on her palm with her skirt. The glass clatters on the wooden floor and heavy boots thud towards her from inside the room.

She falls forward as the door opens. Shackleston stands with his brass corkscrew in one hand and an unusual metal contraption with a barrel and handle in the other.

'Oh, it's you,' Shackleston says.

Cassandra bites her lip, trying to distract herself from her stinging palm. 'I'm sorry. I just...' Cassandra glances down at the glass shard. She can just bend down, pick it up and thrust it deep into his dead dark heart, but that corkscrew drills into her subconscious, threatening her with its glistening brass. 'I just thought... you might need some help... with your interrogations,' she stutters.

Shackleston walks towards the prisoner who is strapped to a chair against the far wall. 'She wishes to assist me. Isn't that amusing?' He slaps the man with the back of his hand. 'I said, isn't that amusing?'

The man cranes his neck a fraction as if to speak and then spits a gob full of blood on Shackleston's leather shoes.

Such defiance! Cassandra has been too preoccupied with the corkscrew to pay the man much attention. Her feet move on their own accord as if she's in a trance. What are you doing, Cassandra? You can leave now. Despite the self-talk, she walks closer and closer to the man and to Shackleston.

'Since you won't tell me how this weapon works...' Shackleston throws the metal contraption on the massive oak table and it chinks against another small one, startling Cassandra. '...you can tell me what the deal is with your pointy-nosed ship.'

The weapon lies on the table besides the gas lamp. Cogs and spare clockwork litter the table around it. It looks like Shackleston has attempted to attach his mechanical work to the weapon, but now the used cogs and clockwork litter the table like discarded kids' toys.

The man raises his head a fraction. Blood drips from the side of his lip; behind swelling and fresh bruising, green eyes glance in Cassandra's direction. The motley greens of his unusual garments accentuate his eyes. A matt of ginger hair clings to his brow, from sweat or blood she can't tell in the dim lamplight.

'Would your ships attack me?' Shackleston grabs the man's chin, forcing the man to look at him.

The man smiles. An old scar above his lip creases like a dimple. Despite herself, Cassandra finds herself returning a wry smile.

'Oh, do you think someone of your class would have access to such women?' Shackleston asks the man, and then turns to Cassandra. She wipes the smile from her face as quick as she can. 'I bet you don't have women like this where you're from.' Shackleston grabs the back of her neck and forces her body forward. Her head slams on the wooden table next to the man's weapon. She casts her eyes to weapon as Shackleston hitches up her skirt.

'We have women like that, but we don't treat ours like that.' His voice hisses with the fury of a steam train. No one ever speaks back to the upper class like that. No one ever dares speak back to Shackleston.

'You bloody what!'

The pressure on the back of her neck subsides and heavy footsteps thump away from her. She rises slowly and hitches down her skirt.

‘Do I have to remind you we are several hundred feet up in the air? Can you fly without your little pointy-nosed toy?’ Shackleston rests his weight on the man’s right hand. Cassandra notices his fingers are twisted in different angles. She turns to block out the sight, but can’t block out the man’s feverish and agonising groans.

A thud resonates besides Cassandra. On the table, Shackleston jams the corkscrew into the woodwork. ‘Will you watch the prisoner for a while? I have to see Reginald so we can plot a new course.’

‘Are we going to fly to the parallel world?’ Hope rises in Cassandra’s chest. Please send me elsewhere and give me a slim chance of escape.

‘You aren’t. It’s no place for a woman. You are going to stay..’ Shackleston turns the corkscrew so that it digs further into the timber. ‘...right... here.’ He twists it again. ‘If the ship goes down, we all go down.’ He storms out the room. The lock clicks and his heavy feet thud off into the distance.

‘Please. You gotta help me,’ pleads the man. His words are short and fluid. He seems to have a way of running his words together that make it sound like the murmur of the stratospheric winds lashing airships’ sails.

‘He may be testing me. He might still be outside the door. I daren’t defy..’ She notices a poppy embroidered on his breast pocket. A red poppy! Never has she seen anything so bright, so delicate. ‘Do you have such flowers in your world?’ She catches the man’s eyes. ‘Are they really that red?’

Although he barely seems to have enough energy to move, he nods.

Cassandra turns to the door, half-expecting it to open. When nothing happens, she crouches besides him and tugs at the rope fastening his wrists to the chair. His breathing is ragged and deep. She frees his good hand.

‘Are you okay?’ she asks before realising it wasn’t his breathing that echoed in her ear, but her own heavy breath.

‘I won’t let him hurt you.’ He rests his fingers on hers. ‘You know when that green light appeared I thought I was dreaming for a second.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I’m sure I’m dreaming.’ The man unties the other ropes with a few quick tugs. ‘I lied before.’

Cassandra backs towards the table. There is something dark and dangerous about his appearance. Who's to say he isn't as awful as Shackleston?

He stands and walks towards her, towering over her lithe frame. He smiles, his scar creases beautifully. 'I lied. We don't have women like you.'

He is so close now that her cheeks feel warm under his breath.

She presses her palm to his breast pocket. His heart beats intensely. 'We don't have red flowers,' she mutters without thinking. As soon as she says it, she feels her cheeks flush red with embarrassment.

His lips and his scar smile like flowers in bloom.

She turns towards the door, expecting Shackleston to storm in. 'I should um... fix up your hand.'

'It's fine. At least my left one is fine.' He runs his hand up her back making her spine tingle. With a single tug of a chord, he loosens her corset. Ribs breathe, breasts exhale, her body trembles as it is freed of its caging.

Pressing his body to hers, he reaches past her and plucks the two metal weapons from the table. He reaches down the inside of his boot and pulls out a handful of small metal cylinders. Opening a chamber on the top of the metal weapon, he loads the cylinders and closes it again with a click.

'This is the safety,' he says pointing to a little latch on one of the metal devices. 'And this is the trigger.'

'I don't understand.'

He hitches up her skirt, slides a warm hand along her inner thigh and secures the weapon under the elastic of her undergarments. Against her leg, the metal is cool and hard.

'Come with me,' he whispers, his breath hot in her ear. He draws back and presses his lips to her cheek and then her neck.

'It is not my place to make such decisions.'

His lips touch her chin ever so gently. She feels the ridge of his scar against her lower lip. He kisses her lips briefly.

She takes a deep breath as he pulls back. 'You can't let them follow us. They will decimate the forests they saw to make more ships.'

He walks around the other side of the table. Yards of fabric are scrunched next to a backpack. He unravels string and fabric and rearranges it in the pack. 'So how do we close this portal? How did it

appear in the first place?' He slings the pack on his back and then yanks the corkscrew from the wood with his good hand.

'His time reversal invention sparked this. I presume disabling it would render the portal inactive.'

He cocked an eyebrow. 'Time reversal?'

'It is but a silly invention. Who would want to relive moments again?'

'I'm guessing it depends on the moments.' He kisses her again, this time for longer. 'Where do we go?' he asks.

'His invention is up on the deck. But more to the point, we have no way to get out of this room.'

He looks at the door, steps forward and kicks the wood with his hefty boots. The lock gives way with a creak. 'Where to?' He cocks his head towards freedom.

Cassandra tiptoes out of the room, holding her breath, hoping against hope that Shackleston isn't outside. The floor creaks as they make their way up the stairs. She peeks out of the hatch leading to the deck and pauses.

'Trust me. I won't let him hurt you.'

Despite their predicament, she can't help but smile. 'What is your name?'

'Red. Or Wayne if you want to be more formal.'

'Cassandra,' she replies. 'Red? Is that on account of your poppy?'

He cocks an eyebrow and tugs at his hair.

'Oh.'

'But I will take you to see red poppies, I promise.'

'Hey!' Reginald shouts behind them.

Before she knows what was happening he climbs the stairs and thrusts a knife in their direction. 'Shackleston!' he screams.

It won't be long before Shackleston will be here with his weapon.

'We give up.' Red takes a step forward.

'I should think so.' Reginald's moustache twitches as he points the knife down the stairs. 'Chop! Chop! You too.' His beady eyes gaze at Cassandra.

Red takes another step closer and then swings the corkscrew, hitting Reginald in his jaw. He falls sideways. The moustache rips from his skin and flutters free.

Red grabs Cassandra's hand, dragging her up the stairs.

She runs across the deck to the helm. Shackleston's device is a complicated wooden box adorned with cogs and clock faces and levers. Inside the casing is a light. She studied the schematics but never quite understood how it worked.

'I don't know how to deactivate it.' Directly ahead, the green light shimmers. Airships crowd around, eager to invade the new world.

Thudding of heavy boots resonate from the deck below.

Red points the metal weapon at the box. The device makes a clicking sound and then an explosion that rattles her chest.

'What have you done?' Shackleston appears on the deck wielding his wooden weapon. 'You cheap pathetic courtesan!'

'Go!' Red screams in her ear and runs to the prow.

Cassandra tries to keep the pace. The light in front begins to close. Airships back away; possibly afraid they will be swallowed whole. She wants to be swallowed whole, with him, and lie in a field of red flowers forever watching the seconds tick by.

'Cassandra!' yells Shackleston. He points his weapon towards the prow and fires.

Splinters of wood hit her legs. Her pinafore tangles around her legs, tripping her. The deck knocks the wind out of her as she lands. Shackleston shoots again. Wood explodes just ahead of her. Dust and woodchips obscure her view, but she hears a deep guttural scream and her name echo on the wind. She crawls forward to see Red falling. The parachute opens and he veers towards the light.

'Jump!' he screams, and holds out his hand.

She creeps towards the edge. Just leap, she thinks. What is the worst that could happen? She leans forward, but Shackleston grabs a handful of hair and yanks her head backwards. Something thumps the back of her head. The line of green light diminishes, and everything sinks into darkness.

The skies are dark by the time Cassandra comes too. She lies slumped in an undignified position in the armchair and her head aches.

A lock clicks.

Cassandra straightens her skirt, and pushes herself up from the armchair.

'Stop biting your lip!' Shackleston slaps Cassandra's mouth.

Her tooth digs into her lip drawing blood. Perhaps it will scar like Red's. At least he made it back to his home with its peculiar gadgets and ships. Cassandra suddenly becomes aware of the cool metal against her inner thigh. She hitches her skirt and extracts the curious weapon.

'What are you going to do with that?' Shackleston laughs. 'Even I could not figure it out.'

Cassandra rolls the metal container open. The small metal cylinders are still inside. She closes it again and clicks open the lever Red said was the safety switch.

'Oh, you are right, my Lord. I'm a cheap courtesan, what would I know?'

The bang as she pulls the trigger underneath the barrel resonates throughout the airship and sends shivers down her spine. Blood sprays from Shackleston's body and he falls.

She walks past Shackleston slumped on his side and inspects her beloved grandfather clock. The red flower on the glass pane has bloomed once more.

Melanie Rees is an Australian writer with a love for speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in markets such as Aurealis, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Apex, Cosmos and Daily Science Fiction. She lives online at flexirees.wordpress.com and on Twitter @FlexiRees.

The Hour of the Rat

By DONALD JACOB UITVLUGT

Moving swiftly through the shadows and evading guards and servants, a girl means to retrieve an important heirloom, but Nezumi would soon find out she was not the only one looking for revenge in the house of Lord Tomigawa no Kana that night!

shigururu ya

nezumi no wataru

koto no ue

—Yosa Buson (1716-1783)

winter rain

a mouse runs

across the koto

Nezumi's heart pounded as she pressed against the wall. She willed herself to be as invisible as the night all around her. She put a hand over her mouth so that the puffs of her breath would not give away her position. Within the estate beyond the wall, a guard approached her position. Nezumi whispered under her breath.

"Namo amida butsu. Namo amida butsu..."

She used the prayer to keep time. Two hundred repetitions between the passes of the guards as they made their rounds. Not much time to get over the wall. Nezumi shivered. It was going to rain. She didn't know how she knew, but she always knew.

There. One hundred. The guard would be at his farthest point away. Nezumi pulled out the rope she had hidden in the folds of her dark kimono. It took tries, but the rock tied to the end finally caught on the tree in the courtyard beyond. Nezumi scrambled over the wall and dropped down into the shadows behind the tree. She heard footsteps on the gravel path and froze.

The footsteps froze, right at Nezumi's tree. She tried not to breathe. A soft moan and the guard let loose a stream of urine at the base of the tree. Nezumi swallowed down bile. She mentally cursed Umeko as the man emptied his pathologically large bladder.

It had to be Umeko, and Nezumi was going to make her pay. Or at least that had been the plan. Now she wasn't sure she could even find the servants' quarters with the clouds hiding the moon. Well, one problem at a time.

The man finished at last and walked away humming an off-key tune. Nezumi dared a look from behind the tree. She could just make out the servants' quarters perhaps twenty yards away. Quiet and quick, quiet and quick. She crouched low and darted for the next tree.

To her right, something rustled on the tiles of a nearby roof. Nezumi looked and saw nothing. Vermin, perhaps. The thought that she wasn't the only creature sneaking into the estate tonight made Nezumi smile. The sight of a guard's lantern in the distance reminded her why she was here.

She made it to the servants' quarters and slipped in the kitchen door. The room glowed with the embers from a large cooking fire, pots and utensils glowing a strange red. Nezumi thought of the stories her mother had told her of the one night a year when household goods came to life. She hoped that tonight would not be that night.

A kitchen-girl slept curled up against the hearth. Onna-san would have skinned alive any girl in her kitchen for falling asleep. The coals might catch the room on fire, or even worse, the fire might go out and the master would have a cold breakfast. Nezumi was glad that she had moved up to a house-maid, but all the servants back home were still under Onna-san's watchful eye.

It was Onna-san who had, unwittingly, given her the idea for tonight's adventure. The old hag was always accusing Nezumi of being a thief. Tonight she was acting like one. Nezumi took a kitchen knife from her sleeves, shuddering to think what Onna-san would do if she discovered it missing in a few hours' time. Nezumi had to be done by then. She arranged a hood over her face, masking all but her eyes. Then she shook the kitchen girl awake.

"There's a knife at your throat." Nezumi hoped the girl would be too scared to realize it was the dull back of the blade. "Cry out and you're dead. Nod once if you understand."

The girl shook so much her teeth almost rattled, but she nodded.

"Does Umeko the maid live here?"

Another nod. The acrid smell of urine filled the air. The girl had wet herself. Wonderful.

"I'm going to take the knife away so you can tell me where her room is. Scream, and I'll kill you."

Nezumi pulled the knife back. The girl's eyes stayed wide. She took a few breaths, as if she was afraid her lungs wouldn't work.

"Down the main hall, third door on the left." Nezumi had almost turned when the girl continued. "But she's not there tonight."

"Where is she?"

The girl looked down at the floor. She didn't want to answer. What was scaring her more than a masked person with a knife? It took the pressure of the tip against her cheek to get the girl to answer.

"Master Tomigawa. I saw her being led away to the master's chamber, dressed like a high-class courtesan. With powdered face and combs in her hair and everything. She hasn't come back." The girl looked at the floor again. "The pretty ones never come back."

Nezumi was only half-listening, her mind in rapid motion. She had taken enough chances tonight getting to this outer building. The master's chamber would be in the center of the estate. Could she get there and get out again? Did she have any other choice? It certainly wouldn't hurt to get the lay of the land.

Nezumi turned to the girl, her knife flashing in the light of the coals. "Tell no one about me and I may let you live..." The girl's form went slack. She had fainted.

Nezumi positioned her against the hearth. Perhaps when she woke the girl would think it had just been a bad dream. It would be nice if the whole situation were just a nightmare. But if it were a nightmare, Nezumi had been dreaming it since her mother had died and her father had sold her as a kitchen-girl to pay his drinking debts.

It could have been worse. Onna-san loved to tell stories of disobedient girls sold to work in "tea houses." Illegal brothels catering to the roughest clientele. Somehow Nezumi found it hard to be grateful to her father for being only a half-bastard.

Her master and mistress were better than others of their class. She had never heard of her master testing the killing edge of a new sword on a servant or forcing himself on one. Her mistress never beat her. She let Onna-san discipline the female servants. Nezumi was fed, clothed, even given the occasional festival free of duties. Umeko's master seemed to be of the more traditional sort.

Served the bitch right.

Nezumi listened for footsteps and then slipped out the kitchen door. The night had grown colder, and much quieter than Nezumi liked. This time of year the insects would be hibernating, or dead. Fewer sounds to cover her movements.

She took a moment to orient herself. The next building over likely belonged to the mistress of the estate. Then came an elaborate garden, complete with a hut for the tea ceremony. Which meant the large building beyond it held the master's chamber. Light filtered through the paper walls of the central building. All the others lay dark. Nezumi crept onward.

She reached the edge of the garden with no problem, crouching beneath a low evergreen as a guard walked past. Quiet as a mouse. She forced her imagination away from what might happen to her if she were caught. Studied the central building for a way in.

The light filtering from the building silhouetted three tall objects. At first Nezumi thought they were statues, until one of them slapped his neck. More guards. Big guards. Nezumi needed to get past them. She had now idea how.

Another guard slapped at his neck. Nezumi frowned. It was the wrong season for mosquitoes. A series of screams suddenly rang out from the house. They started like the screams of a woman in absolute terror and crescendoed into shrieking, bestial cries. The guards did not react at all. As if such screams were commonplace at this estate.

The sound at last cut off. Nezumi shook in her hiding place. What had she gotten herself into? The third guard slapped at his neck. Just another night for him. That was it. Nezumi couldn't risk getting caught. She had to go back.

Nezumi turned from the main building, giving her eyes a chance to readjust to the darkness. From behind her came three soft thuds. Nezumi looked back at the house. The guards no longer stood sentinel. Three masses lay where they had been.

It was a sign. Some god had decided to aid Nezumi in her quest. She took a deep breath, released it. All she had to do was cross the garden, enter the house, find Umeko, and take back what was hers. Easy. Right.

She still trembled as she made her way across the garden. Darting from shadow to shadow, she made the journey quickly, quietly. There would be footprints in the sand bed, but Nezumi would be long gone

before anyone discovered them. She reached the steps leading up to the porch of the main house. She permitted herself a smile.

Strong arms pulled Nezumi against a form slightly larger than herself. She felt her hood ripped off. The edge of a cold blade pressed against her throat. Fear prickled up her spine.

Someone spoke in a quiet, rough voice. "The knife will slit you open if you make a sound. Nod if you understand."

Nezumi couldn't help it. Irony forced a strangled, hysterical giggle out of her. The blade pressed closer. Nezumi gave a frantic nod. The knife relaxed but did not withdraw.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"N-nezumi. I serve a household a few streets over. I'm...looking for something."

The whisper of a blade sliding back into its sheath. Nezumi felt around her throat, finding a drop of blood weeping its way down. She pressed her thumb against her neck to stop the bleeding.

"The Hour of the Rat is a suspicious time of night to be...looking for something." There was humor in the person's voice, but Nezumi was still held in a tight grip. "And in a neighbor's house. In other words, you are a thief."

"No. I'm just taking back what's mine."

Silence. At last the arms released Nezumi. "If justice is truly what you seek, I will not stand in your way. Tell me your story."

Nezumi turned to face her attacker. She put a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. The figure was wrapped head to toe in tight-fitting white garments, only the tips of the fingers and the eyes visible. A long knife and a sword as a samurai would wear hung from a belt and a bracer of what Nezumi assumed were throwing knives strapped across the chest. The tight costume made it clear that the attacker was a woman.

"You're the White Ghost!"

A laugh, surprisingly musical with none of the earlier roughness to the voice. The woman gave a mocking bow, mocking Nezumi or her own nickname, Nezumi was not sure. "You may call me Fuyu, Nezumi-chan. But come now. This midnight hour grows short. You owe me a story in exchange for your life."

Nezumi tried not to think of the stories she had heard about the White Ghost. A female assassin who was more spirit than human.

Killer by night, upper-class courtesan by day. Or mistress of the shogun. Or daughter of the emperor. A demon in human form who could kill with a thought, or a touch. Nezumi suddenly realized why the three guards fell. Fuyu. She knew the name of an assassin.

She closed her eyes, concentrated on her own story. "Umeko is a maid in this house. We're not really friends, but we talk together when we're both sent to the market. Gossip, mostly, foolish women's talk. How one day a rich young samurai was going to see us in the market and fall madly in love with us and take us to be his wife. That kind of thing."

Nezumi rubbed at the back of her head before continuing. "The last Festival of the Weaver, we were both given time off. We dressed in our finest kimonos, and I wore the lacquer combs my mother had given to me before she died. They're all I have to remember her by.

"Umeko and I had a very fun evening. So fun that I don't remember how I reached home. I woke up in my own bed, fully clothed, except my mother's combs were gone. Umeko must have taken them. I saw her eyeing them all night. Each time I tried to confront her about it, she acted like she didn't know me.

"At last I decided to take back what was mine. I, uh, let myself in over the wall, and a helpful kitchen girl told me Umeko had been summoned to her master's chamber. I was about to go find her when you stopped me. That's all."

The other woman slowly eyed Nezumi up and down. "It is a good thing you had no attachment to this Umeko. If Tomigawa has summoned her to his chamber, she is no doubt already dead."

A chill went through Nezumi that had nothing to do with the season or the late hour. Dead? She had wanted Umeko to pay for her theft, but not...

"How can that be? How are you so sure?"

"Let us just say that I know something about Tomigawa's...deviant appetites. You are not the only one seeking justice tonight."

Nezumi recalled the scream she heard not long ago. What kind of perversion would cause such a scream? She didn't want to know. And then another question occurred to her.

"Justice for one of your...clients? Or for yourself?"

Fuyu did not answer but turned toward the house. "I will help you find your property, if I can. Follow me closely, do exactly as I say, and

leave when I tell you."

Before Nezumi could respond, the woman was up the steps. Nezumi had no choice but to follow or be left in the garden with three dead guards. She tried not to look at their bodies as she passed by. Once on the porch, the door into the main house slid back and as easy as that, they were inside.

Nezumi smiled. Before them lay a polished wooden floor, a wide corridor running the whole length of the house. The glow seen from outside was only slightly stronger here, shining through the paper walls of a large room in front of them. Its door was only a few yards away.

Nezumi took a step forward only to have a firm hand forced against her chest. "Wait. Nightingale floor."

Nezumi froze. She had heard of the nightingale floor before, but she had never been in the house of someone rich enough to own one. Master carpenters cut and joined the planks and supports of a floor in such a way that it creaked or sang out when someone walked on it. There was only one silent path across the floor. Thus only one who knew the secret could cross the floor unannounced.

"How are we—"

"Quiet. I need to listen."

For what, Nezumi wanted to ask, but she remained silent. Fuyu closed her eyes and held her head tilted for a long while. At last she nodded and opened her eyes.

"Step exactly where I step."

Without looking back to see if Nezumi was following, Fuyu executed a series of steps and hops that seemed like a bizarre children's game. Nezumi swallowed and began following Fuyu. She almost lost her balance twice, but by wheeling her arms wildly, she kept herself from falling. By the time she reached the doorway where Fuyu stood, she was exhausted.

They listened at the doorway. No sound came from the inner chamber save a low drone, something like the hum of a bee, and the sound of dripping water. Fuyu slowly slid the door open.

Nezumi fought back the urge to vomit. The light of a single lamp on a stand showed a man naked to the waist sitting in a cross-legged meditative posture. His eyes were closed as if in sleep. Above him was what remained of Umeko. She had been affixed to a frame above the man's head, her limbs tied spread-eagle to the frame. Her cheeks

were powdered, her hair bore Nezumi's stolen combs. And her dead eyes stared unseeing with a look of absolute terror.

A lattice-work of cuts covered Umeko's naked torso. Blood ran down these channels in the woman's flesh and dropped from the juncture of Umeko's legs onto the head of the seated man. His face, beard, torso—everything was covered in blood.

"Tomigawa no Kana. The hungry ghosts of your victims await you in hell."

Fuyu's voice was so soft Nezumi could hardly hear it. The icy words shook Nezumi even more. Across the room, the man's eyes snapped open. The droning sound ceased. He hadn't been asleep, Nezumi realized. He had been praying. Praying to some dark god from the pits of hell.

"They will have to go hungry a little longer."

With an unexpected grace for so large a man, the seated figure rose and drew a sword. Umeko's blood dripped onto the floor behind him.

"The White Ghost, I assume. Your reputation precedes you. I was not aware, however, that you had an apprentice."

Fuyu's hand clenched and relaxed over the hilt of her sword. "She has no part in this. I am your opponent."

The man nodded his head. "As you wish." He let out a shout and rushed Fuyu. Nezumi scurried back to a corner of the room. Her heart raced. Fuyu still hadn't taken her sword from its sheath. At the last possible moment Fuyu drew and sliced, pivoting away from the attack.

The two opponents faced each other, panting. Lamplight glistened off Fuyu's upraised blade. A thin trail of blood ran down the edge. A thin red line marked Tomigawa's face. The man's brows narrowed.

"You are very skilled. For a woman. But not skilled enough. A shame you will not live long enough to refund your client his money."

"I was not paid to exterminate you, Tomigawa no Kana. I have been looking forward to this moment for a long time."

The man looked Fuyu over in a way that made Nezumi's skin crawl. He smiled and beckoned her on. "Let the foreplay begin."

He launched himself at Fuyu again. The two blades sang as they crossed, moving so fast that Nezumi could hardly see them. As the fight moved, she circled along the edge of the room to stay out of the way. She found herself right by the frame that held Umeko's body. She

looked up at her mother's combs, then at the battle. The two had eyes only for each other. Nezumi hurried to the frame.

A wooden pin held the frame upright. Nezumi's hands shook as she used both of them to draw it out. The device groaned and then hinged downward. Umeko's dead eyes looked up at Nezumi. She swallowed, retrieved her mother's combs. She put them in her kimono, close to her heart. Hesitated. Then she reached to close Umeko's eyes.

"Namo amida butsu..."

When Nezumi looked up, the fight had made its way back to the center of the room. Tomigawa was cut in many places, though it was hard to tell what blood was his and what Umeko's. Fuyu was breathing hard, blood streaming from numerous wounds. Her white garments were cut to ribbons in many places. Nezumi's eyes went wide. The entire left side of Fuyu's body bore the scars of old burns.

Nezumi was no expert in swordfights, but it seemed Fuyu was getting the worst of it. Although the woman had much more grace and finesse, Tomigawa's reach and strength were coming to bear. His lips were twisted in a leering smile. Nezumi did not want to know what the man was thinking as he fought.

Nezumi acted before her better sense could stop her. When Tomigawa's back was turned, she scurried out behind him. Fuyu pressed her attack, and the man went toppling over Nezumi. She tried to crawl out of the way and then screamed as he took hold of one of her ankles. She kicked and kicked, his pull wrenching her hip. At last he let go, Fuyu's sword through his belly.

Nezumi shivered and pulled her legs close to her body, making sure she was beyond Tomigawa's reach. The man on the floor swung his sword at Fuyu, but she kicked it out of his hand. Then she reached up and pulled the hood from her head. Nezumi gasped. The right half of Fuyu's face was that of the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Long black hair, high forehead, porcelain skin. The left half was hideous—twisted and scarred, the scars burning an angry red with Fuyu's exertion.

"This is for killing my mother." She drew her sword from Tomigawa's belly and drove it in again. "This is for raping my sisters." The sword pierced the man's groin. "And this is for burning my village to the ground." With a swing of Fuyu's arm, the man's head went flying. It

knocked the lamp off its stand and into the paper walls, setting them on fire.

There was no sound save for the crackling of the fire and Fuyu's heavy panting. Then she let out a shout and began to hack at the corpse. A smile twisted the woman's lips that made Nezumi shiver. She looked from her companion to the growing fire.

"Fuyu. We must leave."

Nezumi's voice seemed to call Fuyu back to herself. Her eyes took in the fire in a single glance, and she nodded at Nezumi. Nezumi rose, and they both turned to leave. From the corner of the room came a sound Nezumi had not expected to hear. The laugh started low but grew louder and stronger. It came from Tomigawa's severed head.

The eyes fixed on Fuyu. "You did not think that it would be that easy, did you? I have fed on the blood of thousands. I have become immortal. I am the hunger that never dies."

Black blood bubbled from Tomigawa's corpse, collected together, began to rise from the floor. Took the shape of a monstrous spider. So large it seemed it would burst the burning room. Fuyu's sword looked to be no more than a splinter of wood in comparison.

"Leave, Nezumi. This is not your fight. If I survive, I will find a way to thank you."

With a last look at the other woman, Nezumi hurried from the room as fast as her injured leg would let her. The nightingale floor sang under her feet. As she reached the garden she heard footsteps running on gravel paths. The perimeter guards seemed to have noticed the fire at last. Nezumi would have to use their distraction as her opportunity to escape.

"The master's chamber is on fire. Fetch water. Hurry."

The men ran off in various directions. Nezumi limped her way toward the servants' quarters and the tradesmen's gate. She unlatched the door and slipped out into the street behind the manor. It began to rain.

She looked behind her. Flames covered the central building. She could hear people running everywhere. With a loud crash of splintering wood and crashing tile, two forms suddenly burst up through the flames. A giant white serpent battled with the monstrous blood-black spider. Nezumi wished Fuyu luck. Then she felt her breast. Her mother's combs were still there. Safe, unharmed. With a smile, Nezumi slipped into the night.

Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast of the United States, but mostly in a haunted memory palace of his own design. If you enjoyed "The Hour of the Rat," let him know at his blog <http://haikufiction.blogspot.com> or via Twitter: @haikufictiondju

A Hill of Stars

By MISHA BURNETT

His master who had lived countless eons lived no more! Kuush Vorbus, human servant of Vorbus the Clement would set out from the City of the Great Ones in search of his own kind only to face a peril older even than the ancient Autumn City!

For twenty-six years I was the property of Vorbus the Clement, Ninth Inhabitant of Autumn City.

On the final day of the season of morning mists, Vorbus allowed its body to grow still and consigned its mind to the Fields Celestial. It had dwelt within the City for thirty thousand years.

Obviously I was but the last of its human possessions. It had been preparing for its stillness—the Great Ones do not die in the manner of Earthly creatures, but only as an act of their own will—for longer than I have been alive.

When I was young there had been others in the household. I had been purchased with a contract for a wet nurse, who cared for me for ten years. I was trained in those of the arts mechanical that Vorbus deemed that a human could learn and in the rudiments of warfare. As the Great Ones had grown still, one after another, tribes of wild humans, former possessions as well as those born wild, roamed the plains outside the City and even made forays onto the wide empty streets, looking for scraps that their dying masters had left behind.

Vorbus had insisted that I know how to fight against wild humans, with all weapons or with none, should the need arise. Later I would come to appreciate its foresight in this matter. The man who trained me was called Kuush, which in the speech of the Great Ones means ‘handle of a tool’.

I am also called Kuush. Among humans I call myself Kuush Vorbus. I never knew my human parents to take their name. The Great One was the only father and mother that I have even known.

As the sun reached zenith on the last day of the season of morning mists, in the twenty-sixth year of my life, Vorbus the Clement, Ninth Inhabitant of Autumn City willed the eons of its life to an end.

Its vast body—lying on the stone, the barrel of its trunk was twice my height in length and more than twice my thickness. Its five flexible arms, now curled, could reach three times the length of my own outstretched arms, fingertip to fingertip—ceased the gentle whistle of breath. The dozen eyes that studded its spherical head were sealed behind its translucent eyelids. I had never before seen all of its eyes closed at once.

I had seen death before, in the animals that I had slaughtered for our meals, in humans, even in members of our own household. I had found Kuush the elder cold and unresponsive three years ago and had buried his body in the household garden to mingle his proteins with the thousands who had gone before him in Vorbus' service.

I had expected the death of a Great One, the ending of a life so unimaginably prolonged, to be something different, grander, somehow, than the death of an Earthly creature. But in the end my master simply lay still on the stone and grew cold, no different than a tapir or a man.

You must not presume that I felt grief at the death of the one that I had so long served. On the contrary, I was filled with a savage joy at the possibilities that now beckoned from the world beyond the city walls.

Grief, I had known. I wept when my wet-nurse was sent away, and I wept again when my mentor and namesake died. At those moments I had lost ones who loved me and whom I had loved.

To Vorbus I was nothing but a tool. It was a thoughtful owner who kept its tools in good repair, and for my part I took pride in my usefulness. Love, though, was something that our species could never share—if, in fact, Great Ones could experience love at all.

Lacking sexes—the method of their generation is a mystery that may remain eternally opaque to human eyes—they cannot feel the tender affection of man for woman and woman for man. The love of parents and children would seem to be unknown to them for the same reason as well. I suspect that they share the comradeship of colleagues among themselves, respect for another's scientific or aesthetic achievements, but that was all.

The gulf that separates their minds from ours makes such a bond between our kinds impossible. Absurd, even.

Vorbus had adjured me to remain with its body for a quarter of a day following its growing still, to insure that life did not return—a possibility,

I was given to believe. This was no hardship on me, for I had already resolved to spend one last night in my chambers and quit the City at dawn on the morrow. I gave my master the quarter day's vigil it had asked for and then the rest of the day besides. Its body grew rigid, the soft leather of its skin becoming steel. The edges of its folded wings, once so soft and thin, became like knives.

The sun sank over the Autumn City. The stillness and emptiness was so familiar to me. Often I had sat for an entire day on one of the house's many balconies, working to dissect the intricacies of one of my master's machines or struggling to study one of its enormous books, without seeing a single human servant pass through the many-sided plaza below. Months could pass without seeing a glimpse of a Great One.

The City was dying. My master was dead. Life, I knew, must lie outside these walls. I would go and meet with the wild humans, learn their ways, join their tribe. I was still young. I could win a mate, raise a family. The world was changing and soon it would belong to humans, not the Great Ones. I longed to take my place in that new world.

Not, however, quite yet. While I intended to join with the wild humans I was not so naive as to believe that it would be easy to find them or simple to gain their trust.

This early in the year the nights were twice the length of the days. I could have waited—should have waited—for the season of sowing, when day and night were equal length. I had no patience for prudence, however. In the morning I had my scant possessions packed and waited with irritation for the belated dawn.

The clothing that Vorbus had provided me was woven of an artificial fabric that was nearly indestructible. In addition to the trousers and tunic I wore I had two other sets. I had a pair of stout boots on my feet, a second in my pack. I had a powerful light, with a beam that could be focused to a point intense enough to ignite kindling. A compact set of tools completed my store of durable goods.

I packed as much dried jerky and hard bread as my pack could hold—not enough for a long journey, but I anticipated being able to hunt and forage along the way. Water I would have to carry with me, since I wasn't sure how long it would take me to reach fresh waters of the ocean. The city took its water from the ocean, pumping it through vast artificial caverns, but I did not know how far our drinking water traveled

on its way to reach us or how long it would take me to travel that distance on foot. Two days, I thought, but it might be three. The water bag was the single heaviest item I wore.

For weapons I took a pair of short staves, each a bar as long as my forearm made of light, hard metal, with a soft grip. Of the weapons that I had practiced, I felt most comfortable with them, and they were easy to carry, each having a sheath alongside one of my thighs. I also had a blade, half the length of the staves, in its own sheath on my belt. I considered it more tool than weapon, though.

This, I felt, was all that I could carry while still making good time on foot. I considered a cart, but those I had access to were built for smooth pavement, not dirt and rock.

At last the horizon began to redden and I left the household. I knew the streets of the City well, and it would be full light before I reached its limits.

I felt, I confess, a slight pang at leaving the only home I had ever known, but it was soon swept away by the thrill of freedom and the call of adventure.

I saw the city with new eyes, knowing that I was leaving it and might never return. The broad thoroughfares, the gently curving ramps, the myriad balconies... The buildings of three, five, or seven sides, studded with hemi-elliptical doors and windows. It was designed by and for the Great Ones, with entrances made to their scale, many of them far above the ground. Everywhere there was the echo of their five-fold radial symmetry and the gentle curves of their sinuous bodies.

Never before had I felt so keenly how my own body, with its rigid bones and bilateral symmetry and awkward upright posture, never quite fit in the City. Never before had I any other vista to compare it to.

The City ended with a wide set of terraces leading down to the plain. The western horizon was red with the dawn, the sun throwing the long shadow of the City along my path. I walked down the ramps that lead back and forth from terrace to terrace, the five sided blocks smooth beneath my feet. At last I reached the earth, stepping through wild grasses as high as my knees. I took one look back at the huge angular mass of polished stone then headed out to freedom, and whatever awaited me there.

I walked all of the first day without leaving the plains. I could see the dark line of the ocean growing gradually thicker far ahead of me and

the great stone bulk of the City slowly recede behind me. Without those landmarks I would have been unable to be certain that I was moving at all. The plain lay flat and trackless, mile after monotonous mile. I had been prepared for wonder and terror, adventure and danger. I hadn't counted on the boredom.

Insects rioted in the grass, from gnats that made noise far out of keeping with their nigh-microscopic size to slowly crawling beetles bigger than my foot. Once I saw a herd of some kind of saurs in the distance. They were miles away and never got close enough for me to identify the species, although they must have been huge for me to have seen them at all.

Other than that and the omnipresent carpet of wild grasses I might have been the only living thing in all of creation.

I walked until it grew too dark to see then sat down, took off my pack, and used it as a pillow. One spot seemed as good as another for camping.

It grew darker. Darker than I had ever seen before. And then the stars came out.

In the City there is always some light. The walls along all of the major streets are painted with a soft phosphorescence. I had seen the stars, of course, looking up into the night sky, but what I had seen before was a scant handful between the walls.

Now the sky was alive with stars. The moon was absent, below the horizon or else new. Instead there were numberless points of light. My breath caught in my throat. The heavens boiled with them, a mass that seemed more solid than the unseen ground beneath me. It seemed as if I could climb that glowing mass and reach some new world with wonders unseen.

I felt very small and alone, looking up at that mass of starstuff, foothills before an unimaginable mountain range. For the first time since the death of my master I wept, not for it, but for myself, because I was very small and very alone.

In the morning my body was frozen with pain. A day spent walking followed by a night on the cold ground left me feeling ancient, petrified. I made myself move, got to my feet and rummaged through my pack for food and water. I began walking as soon as I could see my own feet. At first it was agony, and then simply uncomfortable. By the time

the sun was high in the sky, it felt good. The sun was warm, the gentle breeze cooling, and the ground soft underfoot.

Dark caught me that day close to the ocean. I would reach the beach the next morning.

I wasn't so stiff or so sore the next day. Neither had the sky seemed so overwhelming. I had gone to sleep easily.

I had, however, been awakened in the dark by a cry from the ocean. It had been a long, low dirge issuing from the throat of something vast. I had known, of course, that there were creatures in the oceans far larger than anything that could live on land. Still, hearing the voice of such a creature in the flesh was sobering. I lay in the dark, listening and waiting, but the cry wasn't repeated.

Once it was light, an hour's walk brought me to the edge of the sea. I had seen maps of the world and knew that the City was at the south end of the western shore of the great landmass that covered a third of the Earth. Yet looking out at that expanse of water, it was hard to imagine it curving around to meet the land on the other side of the world.

The grass thinned out at the edge of the water, giving way to sand and rock. I took the last dozen steps cautiously. I sat down in the wet sand, removed my boots then waded out. The water was cool on my skin, but soon I grew used to it. Under my feet the bottom was smooth sand.

I left my pack and my shirt by my boots and went deeper, carefully feeling my way across the shallows with my knife in my hand. I ducked my head and tasted the water. It held a strange taste that I could not identify, but my stomach accepted it, so I filled my water skin.

There was life in the shallows, darting fish and crawling crustaceans. It was hard to see them in the flickering light that filtered down from the surface. I crouched down, my face close to the water, my knife in my hand. I had some vague idea of spearing one of the crabs and roasting it over a bed of burning grasses. Remembering the cry from last night I kept looking out to sea for larger beasts, things that might be hunting me.

I should have been watching the land.

The riders came over the grassland faster than I would have thought possible. They were mounted on saurs, lean predators twice the size of a man with powerful hind limbs and forelegs tipped with vicious

claws. By the time I noticed their approach and struggled out of the water to my possessions they had formed a half-circle on the shore, blocking me from the land.

At rest the saurs reared back on their hind legs, bringing the riders' heads to more than twice the height of mine. They were human, though slightly smaller and darker than myself.

I stood, my feet in the surf, and slowly bent to set down my knife. They were an intimidating company. They were clothed mostly in leather, a mixture of saurian and mammal. In addition they wore ornaments of bone and feather. Each carried a long spear of stout wood with a leaf shaped blade of copper or brass. The spears seemed ideal for mounted fighting, but I saw other weapons hanging from their saddles. The saddles were complex webs of leather, and I saw how they allowed the riders to shift their seating to adapt to the changing posture of the beasts.

They were all men, although it took me a moment to determine that, for they were beardless and wore their hair in long braids.

While I was regarding them, they had been studying me. Their leader was obvious—he was in the center of the company and his face was battle scarred, his braids streaked with white. Both his saddle and his clothing bore twice the ornamentation of the others. He had four men on each side of him. Nine seasoned warriors, armed and mounted on vicious looking riding saurs, and me barefoot and shirtless.

The leader smiled, and spoke. “Shipwreck fisherman.”

His words were clear enough, but his phrasing was strange. After a moment's thought I decided that had been a question, so I answered, “Fisherman.” I gestured cautiously at my knife. “I was trying to catch a crab.”

That seemed to amuse the riders, they glanced at each other with tight smiles.

The leader spoke again. “Klaxtil. Klaxtil's tribe.”

I nodded. “I am Kuush, of the Autumn City. I was of Vorbus' household.”

The leader—Klaxtil, evidently—sat back and considered me. “Kuush now of Klaxtil's tribe.”

He gestured at the other riders, and the ones immediately beside him pointed their spears at me. One cradled his close to his body,

ready to thrust it like a lance, while the other held his loosely, preparing to throw. I stood very still.

Klaxtil dismounted, sliding quickly from the beast's back and leaving his spear attached somehow to the saddle. In one hand he held a thick bladed knife, like a cook's chopper, also made of coppery metal. I spread my hands slowly. If he slashed I might be able to grab the blade, but his comrades would skewer me, and even if I dodged the spears I had nowhere to go except back into the ocean. Wading through the surf would make me an easy target for the others.

Klaxtil gestured with his blade, his meaning unmistakable, and I backed up slowly. He reached and grabbed my pack with his left hand, not taking his eyes from me, and tossed it behind him. One of the other riders dismounted and picked it up. Then he picked up my knife and stepped back. He gave it a quick glance and smiled at the color of the metal, stuck it through his belt.

“Clothes on,” he said to me.

I quickly put on my boots and shirt. While I was dressing he remounted his beast. “We ride. You walk,” he said.

The group headed back along the beach with me in the middle. The riders spread out, some leaving the group and racing off on scouting trips. There were always at least three of them close by me at all times, though.

The sun was close to overhead when we headed inland. The land grew rockier and the grassland became forest, thin white-trunked trees set close together. There were paths through them that the riders took easily, clearly familiar with the lay of the land, but I slowed to a crawl, fighting roots and thick shrubs.

We reached a clearing, and in the clearing was a village.

On one side of the clearing was a high walled pen containing a dozen or more of the riding saurs, and on the other side a lower pen held an equal number of tapirs. Between them was a circle of crude huts made from the white trees and in the center of the circle a grander hut, festooned with stands of bright orange blossoms.

Men, women and children thronged the space, fifty or more. They all stopped to watch Klaxtil and his warriors ride in. I was quickly ushered through the crowd, curious dark faces staring up at me as I passed, and to a third pen behind the central hut.

The poles that made up this fence were sharpened to wicked looking spikes. One of the riders dismounted to open the gate while the others held their spears down for thrusting.

Klaxtil gestured, "Enter, Kuush of Klaxtil's tribe."

Inside was a patch of bare earth. A handful of people sat around the edges of the pen, watching me but making no move to rush the gate. It would have been suicide.

I walked into the pen and they closed the gate behind me. Making contact with the wild humans, I had to admit, had not gone as well as I had hoped.

There were seven others in the pen, two of them women. I stood awkwardly by the gate, looking around. The others were dressed raggedly and seemed not to have bathed in some days.

"Sit yourself," one of the women said, her accent different from Klaxtil's. "I'll catch neck strain looking up at you."

She was sitting close to the gate, so I walked over and sat beside her. "My name is Kuush," I told her.

"Talia sebVarner," she replied. "Welcome to Klaxtil's tribe."

Her skin had a reddish tinge, and her hair was black, streaked with green. Her face was marked with a pattern of black lines.

I glanced ruefully from her face to the walls around us. "Accommodations for the new recruits are a bit primitive."

A chuckle. "Aye, but they are secure. Himself takes care that his hospitality is accepted."

"We're prisoners, then," I said, trying to work it out. "Are we to be slaves?"

She looked away. "Not that, no. We're to be fed to the eater."

"The eater?" I asked. It didn't sound good.

"Ye have no eaters where you come from?" she sounded curious. "You have the look of a devil's slave."

"I once belonged to one of the Great Ones," I agreed, guessing that was her meaning.

"Great Ones," she repeated, "Devils. Whatever you call them. It's said they made the eaters, then lost control of them."

I frowned, an idea taking shape in my mind. "Describe this eater."

"It has no form," she said. "It flows like water, burns like fire. Like a froth of bubbles on the shore, but the size of a grazing saur."

“A shoggoth,” I exclaimed. “These men have captured a shoggoth? And they control it?” It was impossible to believe.

“Neither captured nor controlled,” she replied. “But they feed it. They think if they give us to it then it will leave them alone.”

I shook my head. “That won't work for long. The more shoggoths feed, the more their hunger grows. It should be killed, and soon.”

“You can't kill an eater,” she replied, as if it were a truism. Then, considering, she added, “Can you?”

“They can die,” I said with assurance, although I had never seen one killed. The Great Ones kept them away from their cities. They had originally been created as workers and had raised most of the buildings in Autumn City. But sometime over the eons they had stopped responding to orders and gone wild. The Great Ones had killed the ones they could find, but I knew that many had escaped and roamed the world outside of the cities.

“You're mad,” someone called from across the pen. He was tall and thin, his hair white. “Devils don't die, and neither do their servants.”

I raised my voice to address him. “The ones that you call devils do die. My master died two days ago.”

“Your master,” another man muttered darkly then spat.

The ones in the pen seemed to be all of different tribes than Klaxtil's. I began to get the picture. He raided the countryside, looking for captives to offer to the shoggoth to keep it docile.

I stood and addressed the group. “Listen. The shoggoth—the *eater*—is a living thing. Its flesh is different from ours, but it is mortal. The nerve clusters are vulnerable. One of those spears that Klaxtil's men carry would be long enough to reach the central cluster.”

They were looking at me, but not with comprehension. I suspected that I was using too many words that they didn't know. I was speaking the formal version of humankind, the original language that the Great Ones had made to communicate with their servants, but the language had surely changed in the mouths of the wild humans.

I tried again. “They have brains. Not in their heads, like men or animals, but in their bodies. They are fibrous masses—they look like bundles of hair. Many small ones, and one big one. If you put pressure on the small ones, it causes pain. That's how the Great Ones—the devils—used to train them. If we can pierce the largest mass, it will die.”

“Killed a lot of eaters, have you?” It was the other woman who spoke. She was sitting close to one of the men, and the pair seemed to be of the same tribe. They were both small and plump, and their ragged clothing looked similar.

“No, I never have,” I admitted. “I’ve never seen one in person before. But I have studied the devils’ books, and I know how they are constructed.”

The woman looked away from me and began a low conversation with her companion. The others in the pen were looking at me with open hostility. I sighed and sat back down.

“Do you really think you can kill it?” Talia asked softly.

I shrugged. “It’ll be risky, but it can be done. If I can convince Klaxtil to send his warriors against it with their spears—”

Talia laughed bitterly. “He’d never risk his own men. The whole village is terrified of the eater. It’s how Klaxtil stays in power—he’s got them convinced that throwing captives to it is the only way to survive.”

I considered that. “I need one of their spears. I have to be able to reach its brain from outside the reach of its tendrils.”

“They won’t give you one,” Talia countered. “They send the captives in unarmed. He makes the whole tribe watch the ceremony.”

“You’ve seen it before?” I asked.

She nodded. “When they captured me, one of his men wanted me for his woman. After a month I told them I’d rather wed the eater.”

“Where will they take us?” I asked.

“It’s an old devil’s place, about a quarter day’s walk from here. A deep pit, with tunnels leading off underground. The eater lives in those tunnels.”

I considered that. “A conical pit? With five ramps that spiral along the sides and tunnels at the bottom shaped like this?” On the bare earth I sketched half-oval shapes.

“Yes,” Talia said, nodding. “You’ve been there?”

I shook my head. “No, but the Great Ones built many transportation hubs like that. Some of the tunnels probably lead to Autumn City. The others... could go anywhere in the world, really.”

She lowered her voice. “Are you thinking of running away through the tunnels and going back to your city?”

“No, the shoggoth would catch up with us quickly enough. And there might be other things down there in the dark. Worse things. I am just

trying to get a feel for the battle ground.”

An old man came shuffling up to where we sat and I looked up politely.

“He's most likely right,” the man said, and I saw that what I first took for age was infirmity from old wounds. He was older than I, surely, but not so aged as he'd first appeared. “I reckon that you are mad to make war on a devil's pet.”

“They aren't devils,” I countered, “and a shoggoth is simply a different order of natural beast. It can be killed, and I intend to try.”

He held out his hand, so suddenly that I flinched back, thinking that he meant to attack me. Then he said, “Arak, of the Oestern Reach.”

I offered my own hand, and he grasped it firmly.

“Kuush, of Vorbus,” I said.

Arak grinned and released my hand, then sat carefully on the dirt beside us. “I'd rather die fighting. I'm an old soldier, walking meekly to the slaughter sits ill with me. Madman or not, I'll follow your lead. Don't want it said that an Oestern man skirted a fight just because it was folly.”

I glanced over his shoulder at the others.

Arak shook his head at me. “Don't expect anything from them. Klaxtil's got them beaten down too far to fight back.”

I turned back to Talia.

“Tell me about this ceremony.”

She did, in great detail. She remembered it vividly and admitted that at the time she was already planning for when she would herself be ushered down the ramp to the bottom of the pit.

Talia explained how prior to the ritual, the captives had been gathered together and then marched in the center of Klaxtil's mounted warriors, with the rest of the village trailing behind. Klaxtil himself had brought up the rear, watching for escapees—either captives or villagers. When they had reached the old construction, they had headed down one of the ramps (knowing the scale of the Great Ones' buildings, I was sure the entire village would have no trouble descending via a single ramp). The villagers then stopped a few turns from the bottom while the warriors ushered the captives the rest of the way to the floor of the pit and stationed themselves at the foot of each ramp back up.

“They stayed on their saurs?” I asked. “With the spears?”

“No,” she said. “They left the saurs up above the villagers. I think the smell of the eater made them skittish. They kept the long spears, though.”

“Good,” I said.

Arak looked at me askance. “Have you ever charged a long spear when you're unarmed?”

I shrugged. “No. But it's got to be easier when the man's on foot than on the back of a fighting saur.”

Arak laughed. “I admire your spirit, son. You'll die fast, but at least you'll die smiling.”

“I don't intend to die at all,” I said. The elder Kuush and I had practiced with staves as long as the warriors' spears, and I thought I might have some moves that they wouldn't be expecting. I was also counting on them not wanting to kill the prisoners before the shoggoth had its chance. Shoggoths preferred live prey, and I assumed Klaxtil knew it, else he'd kill the prisoners and throw their bodies into the pit. That would be safer for him.

“So there are warriors at all five ramps?” I asked.

She shook her head. “There were only three ramps. Part of the wall has collapsed. I suppose it buried the others under rubble.”

I considered that. The Great Ones built to last, but no stonework lasted forever. When the ground itself gave way any building would fall.

I gestured for Talia to continue, but the gate to the compound creaked open before she could. Outside there were four mounted warriors and three women who held gourds of some kind. The prisoners meekly came forward and each received a hollowed gourd that was filled with some kind of stew.

I waited until the others had received their portions and before I took mine I addressed the warriors. “I need to speak with Klaxtil,” I said. “Tell him that I can kill the eater if he gives me some assistance.”

The warriors were impassive. They didn't seem to even hear me. The woman held out the gourd. I took it, still looking to the warriors.

“Feeding it prisoners won't last forever. Tell him that. Tell him that it will come for this village, sooner or later, unless he helps me kill it now.”

They shut the gate in my face. Somehow I felt confident that they would deliver the message, although I doubted that Klaxtil would heed

it. Still, I had made the attempt.

The stew I had been given was thin, consisting of vegetables boiled to mush and without much flavor. I was hungry, though, and it filled my belly. Klaxtil wasn't fattening us up for the eater, but he wasn't starving us either.

Talia, Arak and I discussed our plans until it grew dark. They were both skeptical. In fact, I was sure that both were humoring me and they simply preferred to die fighting. I was sure that we had a chance, though. Maybe not even odds, but a chance.

As we talked, I had seen that the lines on Talia's face were artificial, thin scars impregnated with ink of some kind. They made her face look strange but not, I thought, unattractive. Her eyes were large and oddly pointed, of a rich golden color, and quite lovely. I could see why the warrior had desired her as his woman.

I forced myself to thrust such thoughts aside, however. There would be time enough for them if both of us should survive our meeting with the shoggoth. As darkness fell she made no move to leave my side. We slept side by side, separated by only an arm's-length against the fence of the pen, Arak an equal distance away from her on the other side.

Klaxtil made his appearance at the pen at dawn the next morning. He was on foot, surrounded by mounted warriors carrying torches.

"Kuush Devil-slave," he shouted. "Attend me."

I stood and walked over to him. Fortunately I've always been able to wake quickly. Klaxtil's entrance had been meant to be intimidating, but I spoiled it somewhat by making him look up to me. Growing up in a city built by Great Ones I had never felt particularly large, but I towered over Klaxtil and his tribe when they were not mounted upon their saurs. The biggest I had seen came to my chin.

Klaxtil didn't like looking up, so he spoke to my chest. "My men tell you claimed you could kill the eater. Is that true?"

"I know how they can be killed," I said. "They have vulnerable points. A well-placed thrust from a long spear can destroy the brain."

Klaxtil laughed (a bit forced, I thought) then looked around to his warriors for validation. They obediently laughed as well.

Then the tribal leader looked back at me, fiercely glaring up at my face. "Eaters are devil's work," he said slowly and loudly. "They are not

flesh and blood, but malign spirits. No man can kill a spirit.”

“You're wrong,” I told him. Silence followed my statement. I had the feeling that no one had ever dared say that to him before.

In their silence I spoke quickly. “Shoggoths are artificial constructs. They were built as tools by the Great Ones, manufactured from living cells grown in vats of ichor. There is nothing magical or spiritual about them. They are flesh and blood—not as we are, or any Earthly animal, but every bit as mortal. The more you feed it, the bigger it will grow, just like any other animal. When it grows big enough, it will come for you, unless you kill it now. I can show you how—”

“*Enough!*” Klaxtil roared. “You say you can kill the eater? Very well. You will have your chance. We leave after the beasts have been fed. I suggest you spend the morning preparing yourself for the task.”

He turned without giving me the chance to reply, and his warriors hastened to close the gate.

Talia came up to stand at my shoulder. “What did you expect?” she asked dryly.

Arak joined us. “Son, I hope you weren't counting on a career in diplomacy.”

I kicked the dirt, fuming. “That arrogant short-sighted fool!”

“You've doomed us!” the other woman prisoner cried out. “You've doomed us all!”

Talia whirled on her. “Stow it, cow!” she hollered. “We were already doomed, now we know when.”

That shut her up. None of the other prisoners made a sound.

Arak looked thoughtful. “You've goaded him into reacting in anger. Anger is so heavy a burden that those who carry it often drop prudence. He may make mistakes. We have to watch for them and be ready to take advantage.”

I took a deep breath. Let it out and nodded. “Right. He did suggest we spend the morning preparing.”

I knelt down on the ground and cleared a patch, then started sketching. “Depending on the size, shoggoths have five, or fifteen, or sometimes twenty-five ancillary nerve nodes. Probably not twenty-five. If it was that big it would have already eaten this miserable village. They will be arranged in a sphere, with the central node occupying the center. They look like balls of hair.

“In addition to nerve nodes, there will be a number of food vacuoles. Probably not many, and not large, unless someone else is feeding it. They make them as needed. We have to watch out for them because they may have solid objects—bone, usually—from their earlier meals—that could deflect a thrust.”

“The other internal structures we can ignore. The main thing is to avoid the tendrils. Any part of its surface can produce tendrils, and those can reach about two-thirds the length of the main body. They don't have any fore or aft, up or down, so don't think you're coming up behind it. Always assume it's aware of everything around it...”

I told them everything that I had read about shoggoths, which was quite a bit. They were fascinating creatures, the pinnacle of the Great Ones biological arts, and I had studied them extensively. I had never thought I'd need to put my study to quite this practical use, however.

Talia and Arak paid close attention, and I could see them beginning to believe that we might have a chance after all.

The sun was just over the wall when the gate opened again. This time the entire village was there. Klaxtil was mounted in front with his warriors, as always, surrounding him on their own saurs. Behind them the rest of village stood, making a wall of flesh.

“Time to go, spirit-killer,” Klaxtil announced mockingly. I stood and walked to the gate without replying, Talia and Arak in step beside me. The other prisoners shuffled to their feet and followed.

As we passed the men who held the gates open Talia spoke to one of them.

“How's the leg, Filsor?” she called cheerfully.

He glared at her then turned away. When all of the prisoners were out of the pen, and the men closed the gates, I saw that the one Talia had spoken to—Filsor—did walk with a pronounced limp, lurching along and leaning on a short staff.

The mounted warriors surrounded us, and the villagers surrounded them. We walked in the center of a large crowd. Even if the villagers were unarmed we would have no chance of getting away from the mass around us and escaping into the woods.

I walked close to Talia and spoke softly. “Who is that man?”

Talia grinned. “Filsor? He's the one that Klaxtil meant me to wed.”

I frowned. “Klaxtil gave you to a lame man?”

Talia's grin got bigger. "He wasn't lame when Klaxtil gave me to him."

As Talia had predicted, we walked for about a quarter day. The trees grew thinner until we were back in the grassland. I could see neither the sea nor the City on the horizon. The sun was directly overhead when we reached the pit which was bigger than I had imagined it, although the shape fit pictures of transport hubs that I had seen. A bowshot wouldn't have crossed the width of it, and a dozen riders could have ridden comfortably abreast on each of the ramps.

I studied the pattern of blocks that made up the construction. It was an older style, alternating pentagrams, heptagrams, and triangles, lacking the lush ornamentation of the more decadent and relatively modern architecture of the City. At a guess I'd say it was seventy to a hundred thousand years old—and likely abandoned for at least half that period. The entire far wall had crumbled, spilling the massive masonry blocks into a rude giant's staircase.

One of the warriors slapped me with the flat of his spear blade. "Don't dawdle," he said gruffly.

Talia edged up to me. "See anything interesting?" she asked quietly.

"Very much so," I replied. "This structure was probably part of the initial colonization effort by the Great Ones. It could have been part of the mechanism they used to drain the inland sea, you know."

She blinked at me. "And that helps us how?"

I shrugged. "Well, it might not be directly applicable to our situation," I admitted, "but I do like to take notice of my surroundings."

"Try taking notice on how to keep us alive, Treetop," she suggested.

I was noticing that as well. The sun filled the pit—that was in our favor. Shoggoths avoided the direct sunlight when they could. It wasn't the light, which they had no way of perceiving, but the heavy electrical waves that the sun emits that bothered them.

They would still come out to feed, of course, but I was greedy for any advantage.

The warriors dismounted and left their beasts on the upper ramp. Half of them had their spears slung on their backs and held short thick blades. Massed together and ready for trouble they would be more than a match for all of the prisoners together, much less just Arak, Talia and myself.

The smell grew thick as we descended, burning my eyes and nose. It was no wonder that the saurs with their far more sensitive noses could not be coaxed down the ramps.

At a word from Klaxtil, the villagers halted and the warriors drove us down further. I could see the tunnels, half-oval openings three times my height. I counted seven and estimated that there had been eleven of them before the collapse. The shoggoth could be lurking in any one of them.

Outside of the sunlight the tunnels were as black as night and the stench of the thing was everywhere. They could move faster than a man could sprint—we would have little warning before it was on us.

We reached the bottom of the pit. Jagged rocks were scattered across the smooth slabs of granite. There was also an unnatural sheen on the stone: residue of the shoggoth's passage, like the trail of an immense snail.

The warriors prodded the prisoners with their spears, and we stepped out onto the floor. Two of the men stood close beside the other woman—the one from her tribe and the aged one who had called me mad. Maybe they would fight to try to protect her.

The others shambled. Arak was right, in their minds they were already dead.

From the darkness of one of the tunnels came a whistling. I had read descriptions of it, but words couldn't do justice to the reality. Played on a dozen notes at once, discordant and impossibly complex, was a sound I could feel scraping over my bones. It was the song of madness.

The hunting howl of the eater echoed in that space. It came from all around us, from under our feet. I moved in a slow circle, trying to watch all of the tunnel mouths at once. Arak took my arm and halted my spin. "Watch those three, lad," he told me as he stood between Talia and me.

Talia saw it first.

"There!" she pointed.

The shoggoth foamed out of the tunnel. It was a mass of bubbles—hundreds of them—from the size of fist to an arms-length across. As it flowed into the sunlight I could see through it. It wasn't transparent but rather cloudy like filthy water with streaks of blue and green roiling across its surface.

Arak slapped my arm. "They'll be watching me," he hissed. "Get that spear."

He bent and picked up a jagged shard of rock. "Ay-Ay-lo!" he cried, mimicking its keening cry. "Io-la, ye great glob of mucus!"

He threw the rock viciously and it splatted into the creature's semi-solid hide.

I spun on my heel and charged for one of the ramps. I had picked out this warrior—he was young and, I hoped, inexperienced. He saw me coming, but his fellows were watching Arak pick up more stones and hurl them at the shoggoth along with inventive curses.

As I had predicted, the warrior turned his spear, seeking to strike me with the flat of the blade. Klaxtil must have instructed them not to kill us if they could avoid it.

I grabbed the spear just past the blade. I saw him begin the haul back on the shaft, thinking that I meant to try to pull it from his grasp, and I pushed instead. Off-balance, he went down hard, and the spear was mine.

I turned just in time to see the shoggoth engulfing Arak. He'd had no chance at all. The stones angered the thing, but could do no real damage. The shoggoth had him encircled with a dozen stinging tendrils and I could see them sinking into skin and burning his flesh with acid.

I charged. Behind me I could hear commotion from the warriors, but I had no thought of them. Only the shoggoth mattered.

Arak was struggling hard against its tendrils, but he wouldn't last long. The creature's digestive venom was eating him alive.

As I ran I tried to peer into the shadowy mass and locate the central nerve node. The sunlight glittered on its slick skin, making it hard to see its insides. The node should be near the center of its mass.

I hit the thing at a dead run, leaning into the thrust of the spear. At first it penetrated easily, but then I felt resistance. It was like driving a post into mud.

The shoggoth whistled deafeningly; I could feel it in my teeth and spine.

It didn't die, but instead surged forward, driving me back as I clung to the haft of the spear. With numb horror I realized that I had pierced not the nerve center, but a food vacuole. The nerve cluster was just above and to one side of the spear point. I tried to wrestle the spear to

cut through the mass of the creature, but the thing's liquid flesh fought me.

I had failed, I realized. I was about to die.

Running footsteps came up behind me. A soft warm mass impacted my back as strong slim arms encircled me, their hands joining my grip on the spear haft.

"You said you could kill it!" Talia hissed in my ear.

"I missed the nerve center," I gasped back, straining against the shoggoth's relentless flow. "Help me. We need to get the point up."

Together we leaned against the spear, and I began to fear that that haft would break from the strain. I was dimly aware that Arak's lifeless body had fallen from the shoggoth's tendrils as it concentrated its attention on Talia and I.

I ducked my head away from the stinging venom of the tendrils that lashed at me. Most of them struck the spear; the shoggoth didn't seem to realize that the weapon wasn't part of me. Slowly and painfully, I dragged the point through the thick flesh with Talia adding her not-inconsiderable strength to my efforts.

I was forced to bow my face, eyes blurred with tears of pain, as more tendrils lashed at me. I feared that our efforts were useless and braced myself to dive headlong into the shoggoth's mass. Maybe I could buy Talia a chance to run for it.

Then the resistance dissolved, and I collapsed. Talia staggered and nearly landed on top of me. The spear cut easily through flesh becoming suddenly liquid.

We'd reached the nerve center. The shoggoth was dead. Without the spark of life animating its substance, it quickly reverted to a thick, oily scum.

I let the spear fall and crawled to Arak. He was dead. His skin and much of his muscles were burned away. His face had been left a grinning skull, and the white of his bones showed through his ravaged chest.

Talia took my hand and helped me to my feet. I could feel blisters forming all over my body, but the acid burns were not deep. I would heal.

The next sound I heard startled me.

The villagers started crying out, shouting in triumph, calling my name. I looked up, breathless and confused. I had never heard so

many human voices at one time before.

Klaxtil got to his feet and shouted for silence. The cheers broke off, raggedly.

“Stranger Kuush Vorbus,” Klaxtil said loudly. “You have earned your life and your freedom. Take them and go in peace.”

I lacked the strength to speak, so I simply nodded.

“We've earned much more than that!” Talia spoke up from beside me.

Klaxtil glared at her. “I will—” he began.

Talia cut him off. “We have saved your hide, thug, and the lives of your thralls. You owe us, and you will pay your debt.”

The tribal leader looked to me. “Will you permit this woman to speak for you?”

I shrugged then found my voice. “She's doing a fine job,” I told him.

Talia grinned at me then turned to Klaxtil. She began walking towards him, and I walked in step beside her.

“Two riding saurs. A week's food for each of us. Freedom for all of the other prisoners. Your pledge that none of us will be followed or harassed.” Talia spoke her demand confidently.

Klaxtil stared at her, outraged.

“That is—” he started.

Again Talia's voice spoke over his. “Less than we're owed, but all we can carry.”

We had reached the ramp, and Klaxtil was but a few steps away.

“Oh,” Talia added, “Also you will return to us all of our possessions that you stole.”

She held out her hand and looked pointedly at Klaxtil's belt. I followed her gaze and saw a sword finer than any of the weapons his warriors carried thrust through his belt.

I spoke softly to him. “I don't think that your subjects will stand for you killing us. Giving us what she asks will get rid of us.”

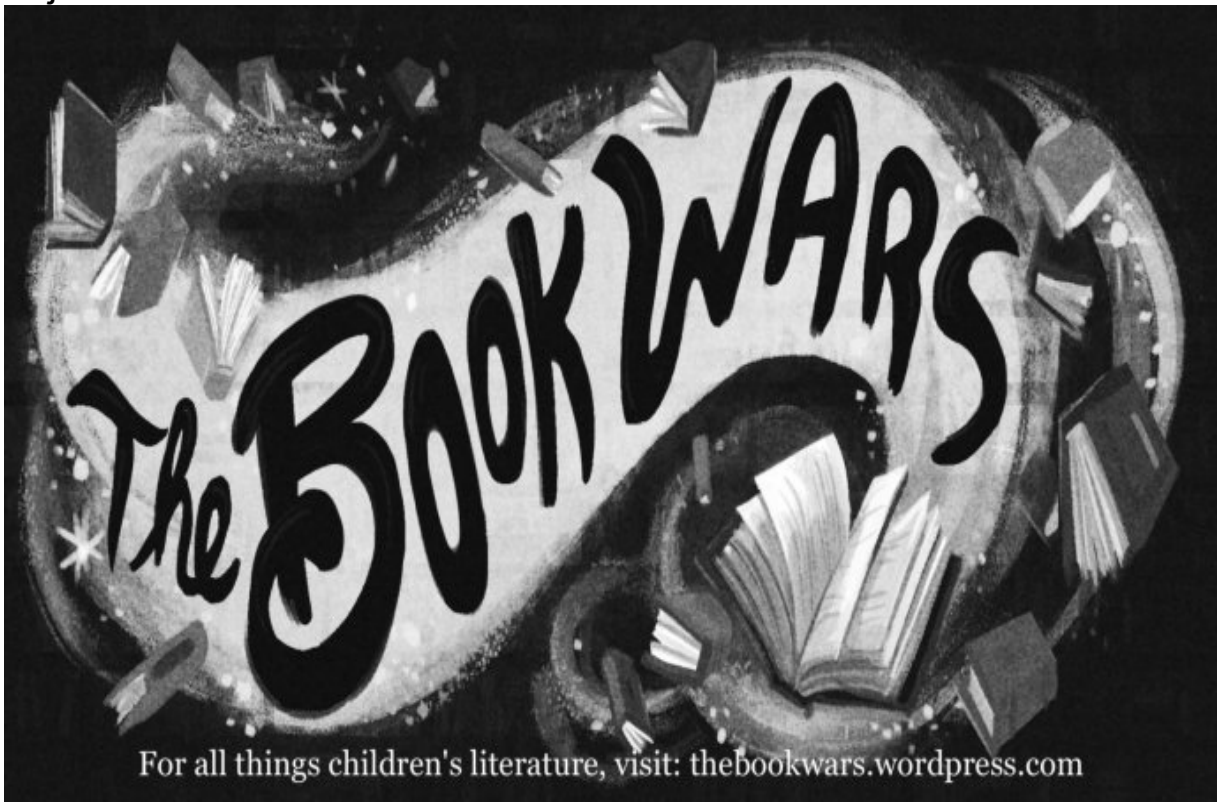
Klaxtil trembled with rage, but he yanked the blade free from his belt and thrust it towards Talia. She took it with a mocking bow.

Then Klaxtil turned and addressed his people. “It will be done as they say. We owe them our lives and will honor our debts.” Somehow he managed to sound magnanimous.

By dusk we had returned to the rude village, and Klaxtil's warriors outfitted us as Talia had demanded. The leader himself had vanished into his hut and refused to see us off.

I wasn't pleased with the idea of traveling by night, but it seemed safer than risking the enraged Klaxtil's hospitality after dark. We mounted our saurs—an operation that was more complicated than it looked—and headed to the coast. Talia said that we would be safer riding along the beach. We hoped to be out of Klaxtil's lands before dawn.

The moon was a sliver above the black ocean, swimming through the jeweled heavens.



We spoke little as we traveled, although I thought much of her beside me and of the easy way we had become companions. Strange she was to me, as I was sure that I was strange to her, but there was a comfort in her shadow barely visible against the night.

I breathed the free air, listened to the gently rolling surf and watched the vast immensity of the sky, all of those lights in the heavens, brilliant and lonely, the savage new landscape that lay before us.

We would climb that hill of stars together.

Misha Burnett is a self-educated and self-published author who draws upon his professional background in the security and maintenance fields to bring a solid sense of reality to his fantastic tales. He is the creator of The Book Of Lost Doors series of novels; Catskinners Book, Cannibal Hearts, The Worms Of Heaven, and Gingerbread Wolves, available on Amazon.

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Retrospective: Toyman by E.C. Tubb

By JEFFRO JOHNSON

Jeffro Johnson takes on Traveller's "Middle Passage", the implications of setting and space-faring adventures on and between disparate worlds in this retrospective look at "Toyman", the third book of E.C. Tubb's gripping Dumarest Saga!

The Traveller role-playing game has ended up being as frustrating as it is endearing over the years. Of course, people that are fluent in hundreds of pulp science fiction stories are going to be quite capable of interpolating all kinds of scenarios from a stray world profile code, a rumor, or a random patron result. But not everyone has that kind of deep genre knowledge on tap, and even with some of the impeccably well-crafted setting supplements for the "official" setting, the sheer scope and sprawling nature of the background material can sometimes get in the way of a novice referee getting a game off the ground. Fortunately there is a path through this Scylla and Charybdis of Traveller gaming, and surprisingly enough the key turns out to be inside a nearly-forgotten series of novels.

There is an additional reason for these books' obscurity beyond the mere passage of time, however. While both Traveller and AD&D both have a rich range of literary antecedents, Traveller's sources were never explicitly cited the way that Gary Gygax did for his in his Appendix N list. For those of us that are just beginning our excursions into what things were like before the overwhelming influence of blockbuster movie franchises, it's surprising how much that playable results can be obtained by looking at the games' most immediate influences. Just as Sterling Lanier's "Hiero's Journey" can give you new insights in just what is really going on in the Gamma World setting, so too can Michael Moorcock's Elric stories inform your handling of the sort of epic level play that people could take for granted in the seventies. And for the Traveller referee's time and money, E. C.

Tubb's forgotten 1969 novel "Toyman" is about the best value around if you'd like to reinterpret those iconic "little black books" through a far more pulpy and action-oriented vision.

Just as one example, a staple of Traveller gaming is of course the now-classic idea of tramp free traders picking up passengers, cargo, and mail and transporting them to nearby star systems in an effort to "keep flying." The passengers famously come in three varieties: High, Middle, and Low. The pilot for the Firefly television series just so happened to capture the overall sense of both extremes with the courtesan Inara traveling in the high class accommodations and the super-powered River Tam coming along in a hibernation chamber. Combine this with ex-Army characters and the "guns in space" premise and it's no wonder that so many people leapt to conclusions when Wash shouted "Hang on, Travellers!"

But the original inspirations for these gaming elements are surprisingly different from even what many Traveller fans would expect to see. By now, most players are aware that Traveller's high death rates for low passage (one-in-six chance normally, one-in-twelve for passengers revived by someone with Medic-2 or better) are due to the fact that in the Dumarest setting, the most desperate of Travellers were willing to take a chance on riding in "boxes designed to hold livestock." (Derai, page 17) So one of the more befuddling elements of classic Traveller was pulled directly from this series of novels, but the *reason* for it was left behind! This ends up being one more thing that a referee has to either explain or explain away in order to convey his Traveller Universe to his players.

You see something very similar happening at the other end of the travelling spectrum as well. Going by the books, it turns out that Traveller's High Passage is called "travelling high" not just because it includes all of the "high-end" amenities. The passengers are actually *high* on the drug called quick-time, which slowed their metabolism so that "time streamed past and a day seemed less than an hour." (Derai, page 18) Meals were anything but fancy even for the rich; smaller ships would not even be able to serve anything other than "basic", a warm liquid that provides a day's rations in a single cup. One again, the discrepancies here are due to an idea being taken straight out of the Dumarest novels without also taking along the reasons behind them.

A starship's voyage in the Dumarest universe would thus include passengers that were either frozen or else walking around in slow motion, experiencing time at entirely different pace. Where does that leave the folks travelling "middle"?

Early as it was the establishment was open for business. It was, Dumarest guessed, never closed. A place mainly catering to those who rode Middle, the men who crewed the metal eggs which travelled the gulfs between the stars; a taste of adventure who spent their lives in a grey monotony of emptiness. (Toyman, page 79)

This is wildly different from *Traveller* where Middle Passage was more or less equivalent to riding "coach"—the ticket cost twenty percent less, but the service and the food were much poorer. The passenger was also on standby and could be "bumped" by anyone that was willing to pay the higher rate for High Passage. In contrast to this, the thing that set it apart from the other two modes of travel in the Dumarest stories was that (a) it was primarily how the starship crews went and (b) it was mind-numbingly boring. It was so boring, a starship crewman was liable to unfreeze someone that was travelling "Low" three days before making planetfall just to have someone new to talk to. (This is exactly how the Dumarest series begins in the first novel of the series, "The Winds of Gath"!) The reason that this didn't survive the translation process into the Traveller role-playing game is obvious: operating a starship was intended to be at least half the fun!

While the Dumarest stories did provide a great deal of material to serve as the backbone of a science fiction themed variant of the original "little brown books" of original D&D, many of the more extreme aspects of the setting were largely smoothed away in the translation process. The overall trend of the Traveller ethos is to lean towards a much more conventional spin even when a wild pulp style series from the late sixties was being cannibalized to get the gaming franchise off the ground.

This is especially evident in depictions of Traveller's air/raft, the default on-world transport for ex-Scouts operating a Type-S ship on a reserve basis. They inspire warm feelings of nostalgia for gamers to this day in spite of their hum drum utilitarianism. It's hard to imagine them being used to systematically to mop up survivors of an over-the-

top arena battle, but that's exactly how they debut in the pages of Toyman. The picture on the back cover of the UK edition shows them manned by credibly intimidating goons in Cylon-like armor, scouring the countryside in a raft that has odd claw-like panels extending upward on either side of the pilot. It's strange, but changing just this one aspect of the default setting would yield an entirely different flavor for the game.

One item that came in more or less unchanged, however, is mesh armor. In Traveller, it is "a jacket or body suit made of natural or synthetic leather and reinforced with a lining of flexible metal mesh." In other words, it's a surprisingly durable outfit not unlike the suits worn by Matthew Murdoch and Wilson Fisk in the first season of the Daredevil TV series. According to the rules, they grant the wearer a -4 on to-hit rolls against him from daggers, blades, and foils and a -2 on to-hit rolls from spears, halberds, pikes, and cudgels. With to-hit rolls starting at 8+ on 2d6, these are fairly significant penalties that show just how effective the designers intended this item to be. The rules perhaps contradict this to some extent, but judging from this passage from Toyman, mesh armor would also serve rather well against certain types of animal attacks:

Slowly, spider-like, he crawled up the vertical wall. The wind pressed against his back like a giant hand.

His fingers brushed twigs, the structure of a nest perched on a ledge. He moved his hand, pushed aside the obstruction, clamped fingers on the smeared surface. A bird screamed and flung itself at his back. The blow was hard, punishing, only the metal mesh buried in the grey plastic saving him from the vicious beak. Its neck broken, the creature fell, its place immediately taken by its mate. Dumarest released his right hand, snatched the knife from his mouth, slashed as the bird lunged towards his eyes. Feathers spun in the sunlight as the headless creature plummeted to the sea. Grimly Dumarest continued to climb. (pages 44-45)

As gritty as the Dumarest stories are with desperate travellers engaging in knife fights and routinely betting their lives on a 15% chance of death in Low Passage, the setting nevertheless includes a degree of biotechnology and genetic engineering that is rivaled only by the Ancients of the "official" Traveller setting:

Dumarest turned as the light grew brighter, ducked through a door, found it gave onto a flight of stairs leading down. He followed it, another, two more. He must now be at ground level, he thought, or even lower. The air held a musty dank smell despite the soft breeze from the air-conditioners. A passage lead into darkness, water splashing at the far end. He hesitated, then, as sounds echoed from above, ran down the corridor.

Halfway along something grabbed him by the ankle.

He fell twisting so as to land on his shoulders, kicking out with his free foot, feeling something yield beneath the impact of his boot. Water splashed and a faint green phosphorescence illuminated the area. In the dull light Dumarest could see an amorphous shape floating in a tank of water, a naked skull in which shone blue eyes, a fringe of tentacles, a lipped mouth from which came bubbling words. 'Come, my pretty. Come to me. Share my home.'

He slashed with the edge of his stiffened hand as a tentacle reached for his throat. Another wound around his waist, tightening, dragging him to the edge of the water. Desperately he leaned forward, thumbs stabbing at the shining blue eyes. The thing screamed, threw him backward, threshed the water into foam.

'Cruel!' it blubbered. 'Cruel to treat me so!'

Sickened, Dumarest climbed to his feet, raced down the passage. A woman, he thought. The thing had once been a woman or a scrap of germ plasm which would have grown into a girl had not the biological engineer interfered. She had cut, altered, adapted, grafted a new gene pattern, stimulated with chemicals, treated with forced growth under the impetus of slow time. Created a freak for the titivation of her fellows. A pathetic thing destined to provide a momentary amusement. On Toy not only the weather was cruel. (pages 57-58)

What keeps the Dumarest setting from descending into some sort of transhuman nightmare society? A combination of widespread poverty and the extreme decadence of the average world's nobility. In contrast to the more or less static nature of the Third Imperium setting, worlds in a Dumarest story are liable to have significant shifts occur in their government types. For example, the world depicted in Toyman has had rapid and fairly recent transition from a corporate world

government (Traveller code 1) to a Charismatic Dictatorship (Traveller code A):

'Do you know anything about the economics of Toy? It is a corporate world,' she continued, not waiting for an answer. 'Every original settler was a shareholder. In theory the system works perfectly. All share in the wealth of the planet. The dividend credit cannot be accumulated, so a constant stream of money is in circulation, thus providing work an expansion. Exports ensure a check on inflation and a market for our surplus.' She snatched up her glass, drank, set it down half empty.

'For a while the system worked and then the inevitable happened. First outside labour came to the planet, men who had no real share in the economy, and thus a hereditary aristocracy grew up. Then greed reared its head. More stockholders wanted larger amounts of stock. There were struggles, challenges, manoeuvrings for power. In such a situation those that have the most get more. The Toymaster has always had the most.' (page 149)

The Dumarest universe lacks the sort of Imperial Navy that could keep the peace. There really is no indication of any sort of centralized interstellar government holding everything together. Worlds are far more isolated here than in the typical Traveller campaign because space travel is a luxury reserved only for an elite fraction of society—*and* the most audacious of space hobos that don't mind taking on extreme risks and the most desperate of jobs in return for a means of moving on to a place where they can do it all again.

Needless to say, this sort of premise is going to be inconsistent with the kind of heavies that emerged in the course of Traveller's development. There are no land-grabbing Aslan elbowing their way into human space. There are no militant vegetarians picking fights with worlds that patronize hamburger franchises. There is no amalgam of Soviet Russia and the KKK waging a massive interstellar war against an Imperial juggernaut. The materiel for these sort of epic level space battle shenanigans just isn't there.

The stakes in a typical conflict in a Dumarest story not only take place at a much smaller scale, they are invariably far more personal than standard Traveller fare. The recurring bad guys just don't have a

massive armada that would make a group of player-characters more or less irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Instead they have a cabal of mentat-like cyborgs that are in direct competition with the building-sized computers that grant worlds independence from this clique that would monopolize the flow of information. The model for conflict in a Dumarest story is not derived from Cold War era superpower politics, but rather the much more insidious subversion of Cultural Marxism:

Qura looked at him, eyes soft with her woman's intuition. 'You hate them,' she said. 'They have hurt you terribly in some way.'

'Yes,' he said shortly, not wanting to think about it, to arouse old memories. 'I hate them and I know them. They spread, touching world after world, insinuating their way into a position of power. Oh, they don't rule, not openly, but where you find a cyber you find the power of the Cyclan. And they have power. Subtle, unnoticed, but very real. A word, a prediction, a guiding of opinion. They almost won Toy. Take warning, they will try again and yet again. They do not like the opposition of your machine. It makes you independent, others too.' He paused, looking at his hands. They were clenched, the knuckles white. Slowly he forced the fingers to uncurl. 'The Cyclan does not like independence,' he said gently. (page 187-188)

It's a pleasant surprise to read this book because while it is full of off-beat Traveller elements this really is unlike anything I've ever considered running with a Traveller session. And given how many people have complained about the near-impossibility of player characters to have a meaningful impact on the Official Traveller Universe, I think there are answers here to things that have stymied a great many referees in the course of actual play. A big part of this is that the "official" Traveller setting was established with an eye towards accommodating a line of hex n' chit wargames and miniatures rules. And given that the Traveller role-playing game was designed originally with no thought in mind of bolting the Imperium boardgame onto it, it's not terribly difficult to take the original "little black books" and a couple of old E. C. Tubb novels and go off in an entirely different direction. If you're working up a subsector of your own, you may want to consider tilting things toward the kind of setup that inspired the game in the first

place rather than work around the kind of design decisions that were optimized more for people that had to get product out the door on a positively grueling basis.

Jeffro Johnson is the author of Castalia House's long-running Appendix N series, for which he received a Hugo nomination in 2015. He is also the proprietor of Jeffro's Space Gaming Blog and has been writing about vintage games there for over a decade.

Letters from the Nest

By P. Alexander (Ed.)

Well, that was exciting, wasn't it? The first issue of the Cirsova sci-fi/fantasy magazine in the can and in your hands! I hope you enjoyed this little foray into pulpy action adventure as much as I did.

There are a number of reasons why I wanted to launch a Cirsova magazine, not the least of which being Jeffro Johnson's Hugo nominated Appendix N Retrospective series which both coincided with and helped spur my own look into a lot of older SFF stuff. Planet Stories in particular has become a favored inspiration of mine, and while I would not say that I plan or planned to model Cirsova on that particular publication, I cannot and would not deny the influence.

When I first put out the call for stories, a part of me was worried that that I'd end up with few or no submissions or that the submissions I would receive would be further outside the lens of adventure fiction than I would be willing to go. The response I received more than exceeded what I could've hoped for. One by one, these amazing stories were trickling into my inbox. I would be hard-pressed to answer which was my favorite, because they're all excellent.

I could be wrong, but I feel like I may have stumbled into quite a neglected niche; the mid-tier publications focusing on adventure fiction that can offer semi-pro rates are few and far between. I want to be able to offer Cirsova as a market for authors who write the sort of fun pulpy yarns that would've been at home in Planet Stories, Weird Tales or Thrilling Wonder Stories. To do that, I need the support of readers who want those stories, to connect the writers with an audience. So to you, holding and reading Cirsova Issue #1, I offer a heartfelt thankyou on behalf of myself and the authors who grace these pages.

What's in store for next time? More awesome fantasy and sci-fi action! Maybe some novellas, maybe some more artwork, maybe an ACTUAL "letters" section with letters from readers. With your support, we will accomplish amazing things!

-P.A., Ed.

Get in touch with us and let us know what you think! Visit cirsova.wordpress.com for reviews of old pulp stories, board games, tabletop rpgs, game design and news about the Cirsova magazine. Interested in submitting a story to Cirsova? Follow us on wordpress to find out when we are accepting submissions! Want to have a letter published in our next issue? Visit us online for details!

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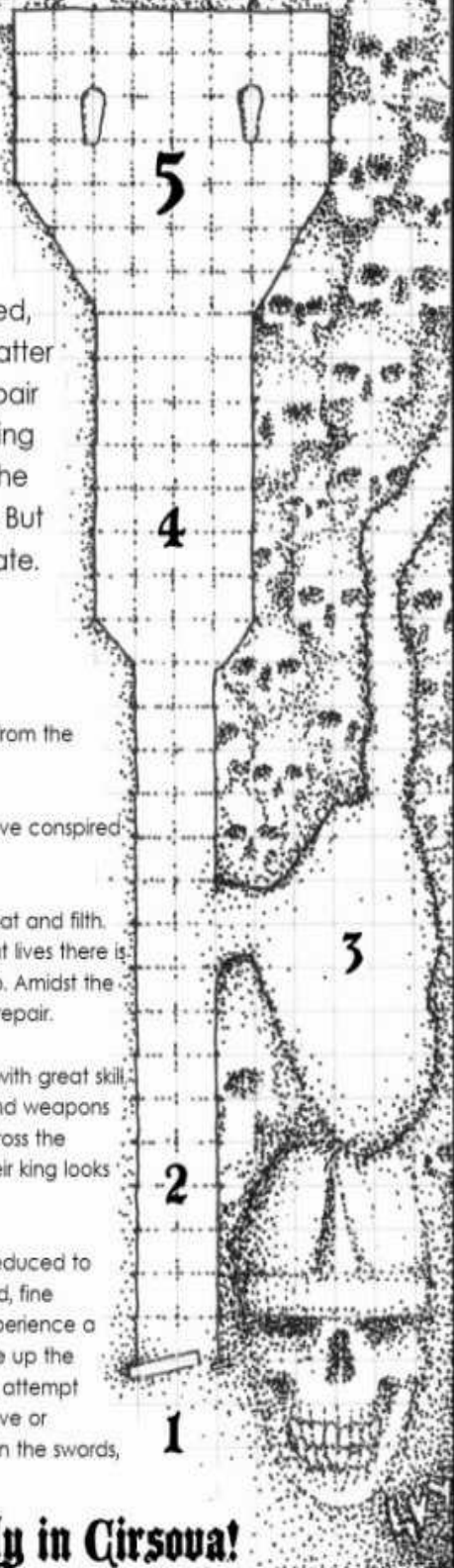


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The Tomb of the Duellists

None remember their names, nor even the king they served, but all in the village know of the warriors who settled a matter of honor with bared blade before the old mountain. The pair fought for days until finally slaying each other, each piercing the other's heart. Their king was so moved as to entomb the pair together that they may find peace in the next world. But neither warm blood nor cold death could quench their hate. On moonless nights can yet be heard the clash of steel, echoing through the chill air...

- 1 The entrance has been disturbed, perhaps by earthquake. Cool air pours from the opening, carrying with it the scent of mold.
- 2 A long, gently sloping hallway leads into the gloom. Moisture and mold have conspired to make the walls and floor slick and perilous.
- 3 A collapsed section leads to an underground cavern reeking of rotten meat and filth. If the party is exploring during the day, there is a 50% chance the ogre that lives there is out hunting. At night there is a 50% chance the party finds the ogre asleep. Amidst the detritus the party may find 6D6 copper pieces and bits of armor in poor repair.
- 4 The hall widens to accommodate panels of elaborate bas-relief, executed with great skill. The panels depict an epic duel between two warriors, arrayed in armor and weapons from a bygone age. The artist has captured the hatred and anger writ across the warrior's faces. The last panel depicts when the two slay each other as their king looks on, weeping.
- 5 Here lie two sarcophagi, surfaces thick with mold. Within the warriors are reduced to mere fragments of bone and armor. But their swords shine as if just polished, fine weapons, forged with great skill. Should a PC take up a sword they will experience a flashback of the duel, from a warrior's perspective. Should another PC take up the other sword, the two PCs will be compelled to fight each other. PCs may attempt to break the spell at the beginning of each round with a successful Will Save or Saving Throw. If the spell is broken for both combatants the PCs may retain the swords, both magical weapons, +2.



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