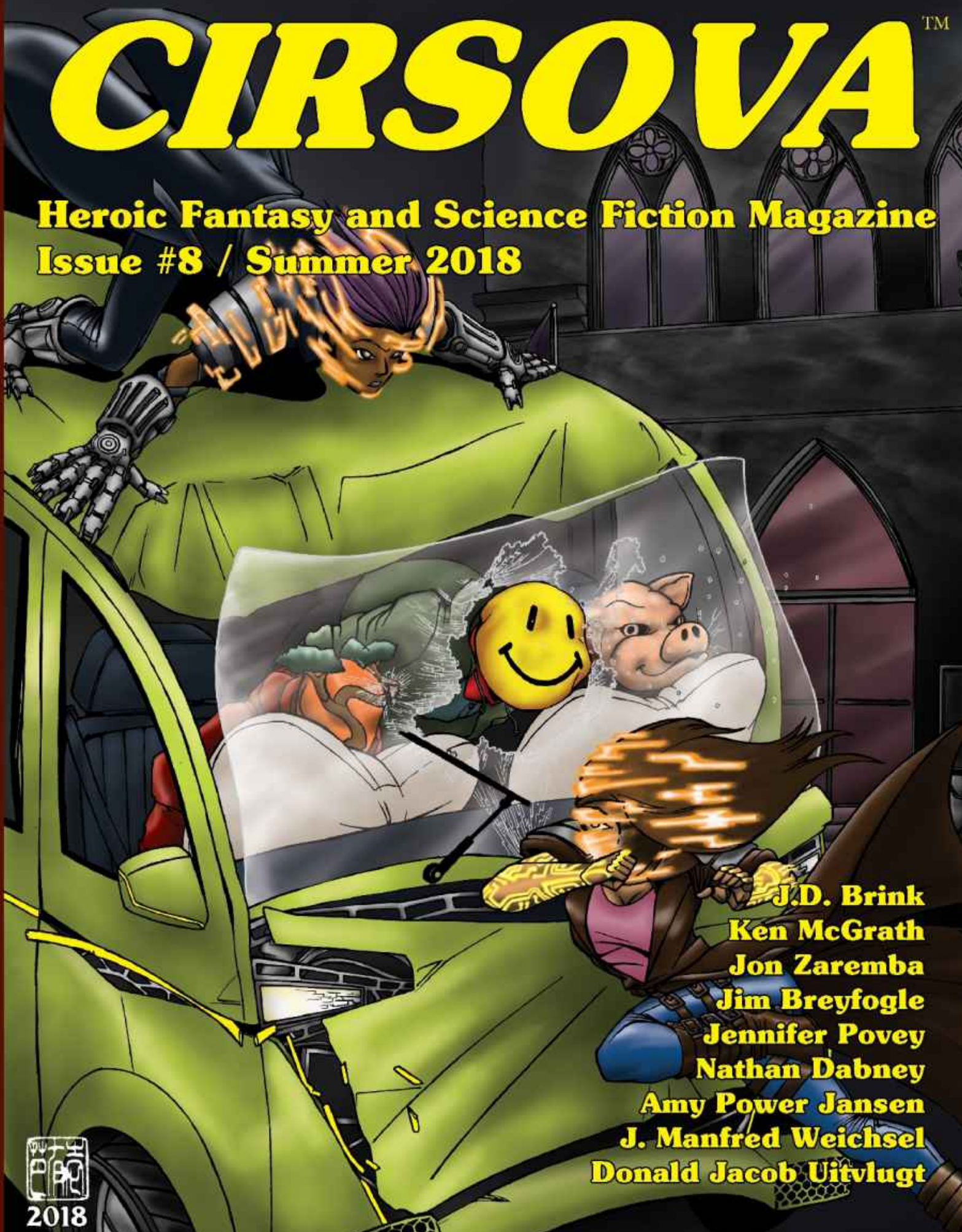


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J.D. Brink
Ken McGrath
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***TWO NOVELETTES OF PLANET
AND SWORD***

Slavers of Venus, Nathan Dabney

Promontory, Jon Zaremba

***SEVEN SMASHING SHORT
STORIES***

Littermates (Part 1 of 2), J.D. Brink

Brandy and Dye, Jim Breyfogle

Breaking the Accords, Amy Power Jansen

The Dream Lords, Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

Only a Coward, Jennifer Povey

Party Smashers, Ken McGrath

Going Native, J. Manfred Weichsel

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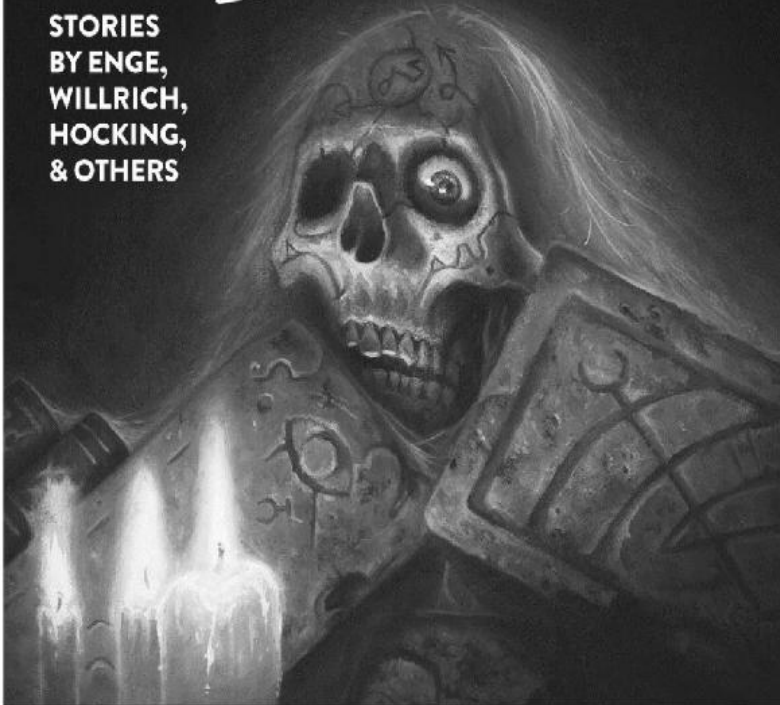
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Tales From The MAGICIAN'S SKULL

NO.1

ALL-NEW
SWORDS &
SORCERY
FICTION

STORIES
BY ENGE,
WILLRICH,
HOCKING,
& OTHERS



ALL-NEW
FICTION:

James Enge

John C. Hocking

Howard Andrew Jones

Aeryn Rudel

Bill Ward

C. L. Werner

Chris Willrich



THE SKULL SPEAKS: *Hear this, mortal dogs. You hold in your hands a magazine the likes of which has not been seen for many suns. Once there were magicians whose weird tales could change the wormy earth. They infiltrated your waking world, bringing wonder and glory and imagination. Fantastic visions you dogs could barely grasp. But mortals they were, all of them. They're dust now. With their passing a Thing was gone, a Secret passed. Well, no more. Magicians of the word, the weird tale-tellers: they may be gone, but their vision lives on. I am the skull and soul of one such word-wizard, and I'll bring you Secrets that haven't walked the earth in this century. Stories they'll be, stories that make you bolt up and hunger for adventure. You'll remember what glory could be, you'll realize how you worms have lost sight of the sun. I am the Magician's Skull. Which magician? One you've never heard of: a peer of Howard and Lovecraft, Burroughs and Derleth, Dunsany and Leiber. A wizard who knew Merritt and St. Clair and Vance and Brackett and Wellman and Weinbaum, and Clark Ashton Smith and even grand Gyax himself. All the word-wizards wove wonder, and it matters not whose bones I rot with today. All you need to know is: I bring tales of great fantasy and wondrous adventure. Get ready, mortal dogs. Enjoy this first issue. Enjoy the adventure!*

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Slavers of Venus

By NATHAN DABNEY

Dick Cooper has crash-landed on the jungle world of Venus! Attacked by a scaly warrior riding a giant ferocious lizard, Dirk finds himself caught in the middle of a conflict between the human and reptilian natives of the alien world!

Dirk Cooper awoke in the wreckage of his spaceship. There was a sharp pain in his head, and his vision was blurred. He was dimly aware of nearby electronics sparking, but at the moment he felt too sore to move. Groaning, he spat a goblet of red fluid on the console.

That's not good, he thought. That's very much not good.

An alarm klaxon rang, and it only made the pounding in his temples worse. Dirk wished for a brief moment that it would shut the hell up so he could go back to sleep, but then several thoughts struck him in rapid succession.

That red fluid was probably blood.

His head hurt so badly because he was probably concussed.

That sparking was probably vital equipment melting away.

And that klaxon probably meant that something important in the ship was broken.

Any one of these things could very easily cost him his life. It was entirely possible that if he went back to sleep, he wouldn't wake up. He couldn't very well just roll over and die—it went against everything they'd taught him in training, not to mention his basal instincts. He could hear his instructor's voice now, yelling at him to "Get on your FEET, COOPER!"

"Sir, yes sir," Dirk mumbled, more blood dribbling from his lips. He slid his hands over the instrument panel, forcing himself to a sitting position. This was more difficult than it should've been because his pilot's chair was tilted at a crazy angle, which pushed him forward into

the rows of buttons and switches. Slipping out of the seat, he managed to stand—swaying in the carnage around him.

His ship was nearly destroyed. He had minimal engineering training, but nothing on the level needed to fix something like this.

What happened? he wondered. He vaguely remembered his sensors lighting up, something about a wave of radiation, then everything had gone black. *No use trying to work it out now,* he thought. *If it's really that important, it'll come back to me. Now, just where the hell am I?*

Last he had been aware, he had been somewhere over Venus investigating an anomaly for the Federated Space Legionnaires in his one-man craft. He must have crashed on the planet, and now his ship was completely wrecked. Venus was still a mystery planet to the Federation—the cloud cover was too thick for their probes to penetrate, and any drones they sent never came back. They weren't even sure the atmosphere was breathable, let alone whether or not there was land to explore, or if it would be worth sending an exploratory team in the first place.

Dirk Cooper was very likely the first Earthman to set foot on Venus. Or, he would be, once he left the ship. *If that's even a good idea,* he thought. *I might be leagues under water for all I know. Or stuck in some swamp. Or the air might not even be breathable. I should check the damage to the instruments—see if I can get a reading on what's outside.*

He stumbled over to the computer; his weight caused the ship to shift position, metal groaning with the strain.

This just keeps getting better and better, he thought.

Being sure to test his weight and move slowly, Dirk stepped to the panel that held the monitors and sensors for the outside of the ship. He pressed a few buttons, flipped a few switches, and in short order an image popped up on one of the screens.

Well, he thought, *at least I'm not at the bottom of some ocean.*

The outer camera was showing him trees. Very, very large trees.

And a drop. A very, very long drop.

He was stuck in the canopy of some ancient forest. Dirk supposed he should thank his lucky stars that he hadn't actually hit the ground. If he had, his ship would be wadded up like a paper ball, and he most certainly wouldn't be here now. Getting out was the real question. It looked like his ship was caught in the fork of a tree. The hatch probably opened on nothing. There damn sure wasn't some kind of village up there he could step into. He knew that he had rope in the equipment locker; he just wasn't sure it would be enough to get him down from this height.

As he thought and watched the monitor, something began moving off in the distance. It was just a shadow between the trees at first, but after marking it, he could see it was coming closer.

Maybe it's some locals coming to inspect the crash. Possibly collect some salvage.

Well, he'd have to show them that you don't salvage an Earth man's ship. Not while he's still in it, at least.

Dirk crept back to the equipment locker. From it, he removed a laser pistol and a utility belt. On the belt were a couple of pouches of batteries for the laser, a cutting torch, and a unimolecular sword. He strapped it on and went back to the console. The thing on the monitor had disappeared, but he wasn't so sure that it was gone. He had a feeling, a tingling at the top of his spine that alerted him to danger. This is what separated the FSL servicemen who would advance, or at the very least stay alive, from those who wouldn't. It was still out there. It had to be. The... whatever it had been, was definitely coming this way. And it was big. Or the concussion was making him hallucinate. That was also possible. But he doubted it.

Palming the pistol, Dirk moved over to the hatch, trying his best not to shift the weight of the ship too drastically, and hit the "open" button. He sighed in relief when the door slid open and didn't completely

dislodge the ship to plummet god-only-knew-how-far to the forest floor. *At least something's going right today.*

The thought of anything going right was driven from his mind as a great creature loomed before him and roared, gobs of spittle hitting him all over his flight suit and landing in his hair. Shouting in surprise and anger, Dirk reflexively raised the laser pistol and shot the monstrous beast in the mouth. The monster reared back, shocked at the hurt this tiny being was able to deliver, and shook its mighty head. Dirk caught a look at its teeth—longer than his sword—and the pebbled, reptilian skin.

What in the hell have I fallen into?

The monster had recovered, and its slit-pupiled eyes refocused on him as they shone with malice. Dirk realized he was in deep trouble. He heard hissing and jabbering, and noticed that the thing was strapped with a saddle. Upon the saddle sat a man-shaped being, but this was certainly no man. Its neck was elongated, and its head was that of a snake. It brandished a spear in its clawed fist, shaking it at him in defiance.

Dirk took aim with his pistol and fired, catching the rider in the shoulder. It screamed loudly and yanked back on the reins.

The large saurian reared back and shook its crested head before screaming alongside its rider at this defiant, minuscule figure. Looking down at the ground, Dirk reckoned that he was somewhere around four or five stories up. If this thing decided to attack his ship, he was done for.

Dirk ran back to the equipment locker and got his life raft. Ships returning to Earth frequently landed in the ocean, and it was imperative that the pilot have a flotation device before the craft sank, taking him with it. Dirk pulled the ripcord and deployed the raft in the cabin. It inflated, taking up most of the available space with a soft air cushion. Dirk clambered inside and attempted to bend the raft over himself with limited success. He heard a deafening crack as the beast kicked the tree.

The ship groaned again, and he felt the weight shift far too much for comfort. This was it. He was going over. He heard metal shearing, and looked up to see the monster's teeth poking through the canopy of his ship. There was a disorienting sense of vertigo as Dirk felt the ship being lifted, and his concussed head swam with the sudden shift in position.

The giant bit down—crunching the ship into a useless heap of metal and ceramics—and pinned Dirk to the life raft. The spacecraft shook from side to side, and at that point, he blacked out. The monster shook the ship in its titanic jaws, growling and snarling around the mangled metal. At a command from its rider, it threw the ship to the ground, where it lay like a sad, broken child's toy. The giant roared its triumph to the heavens and shook the trees with its voice. Its rider rubbed the hole in its shoulder, and green ichor poured from the wound. He grimaced and spat down at the wreckage of the ship.

The creature didn't understand what the craft was, or what the thing inside it had been, but knew it was trouble. That much was clear from what it had done to his beloved mount, let alone his own wound. He hissed and screeched, gesturing with his spear, and commanded the giant. The saurian understood, and raised its leg to crush the ship.

As the giant lizard was about to bring its powerful leg down to crush the ship flat and kill the lone occupant, cries erupted from the trees nearby, and the air next to its head exploded. The rider was thrown from his saddle by the concussive force and hit several limbs on his way to the ground. His crumpled form lay unmoving at the foot of the tree that had held Dirk's ship. The great beast, on the other hand, was still very much alive and very much unhappy. It roared again, and attempted to intimidate its attacker. The thing was not smart, but it was the king of these forests and would not be cowed by lesser creatures. When it roared an explosive found its mouth. The explosive hit the tongue, the mighty jaws closed over it, and the explosion tore the top of its head off.

The monster stumbled, missing the ship by some miracle, and at last fell over, blood gushing from the stump where its head had been. The body continued to thrash, but eventually began to still and only twitched every now and again. As it expired, figures began creeping out of the trees.

They shimmied down the massive trunks until they came to the forest floor and the crumpled spaceship. They approached with caution, although anything that had been ravaged by a Tyrant saurian as this had been could not have survived. Still, this thing was strange to them, and they wanted to take no chances. It could be some elaborate ploy by the Reptoids to capture them. As they closed the distance, they heard groaning.

Dirk awoke in more pain than he'd ever experienced in his entire life, including that time his drill sergeant had decided to punish him by forcing him to run the entire obstacle course over and over again for three days straight with no breaks for rest or meals. He didn't want to open his eyes. The pain was so intense that he was afraid he would be missing everything below the neck.

A test, then. Just to make sure everything's still there.

Dirk tried moving his arm. He heard rustling in the direction his arm usually was and felt grass under his fingers. Everything hurt, but after repeating the test on his other limbs and various body parts, he concluded that he was whole.

I must be the luckiest guy in the Federation. Or unluckiest, depending on how you look at it.

Dirk's movement had attracted attention. He wasn't in his spaceship anymore, and he briefly wondered if he'd been thrown from it or dragged out. He didn't really want to think of the implications of either.

Dirk figured that he'd been rescued from death somehow and that it was a bad idea to question providence. Whoever his saviors were, they hadn't killed him, so they couldn't be all that hostile.

Dirk cracked open his eyes to take a look around. *God, even my eyelids hurt. I didn't think that was possible but here I lie, flabbergasted with aching eyelids.*

At first, Dirk thought he'd gone blind. He could feel thin tendrils of something on his face, and reached up to brush them away. A strong hand gripped his wrist, stopping him mid-movement. He coughed and tasted blood. He felt something cold and sharp against his neck and froze. As he blinked his vision clear, he wasn't entirely certain that he'd survived. Maybe he had died. Maybe this was heaven.

Before his eyes was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Perhaps it was just the sudden passing of the Reaper that made him think so, but think it he did. She was incredible. Her fiery red hair fanned out around her head in a sunburst, haloed by the sun, which was just visible through the tree canopy. It made her look like an angel out of the old legends. Dirk had never believed in them himself, but seeing the vision before him, he thought that maybe he wasn't so agnostic anymore.

It took a few more blinks to realize that she was glaring at him and it was she who had such an iron grip on his wrist. Frozen as he was, Dirk couldn't see what was being pressed against his neck, but he could guess where her other hand was. He smiled in what he hoped was his most disarming manner, and said, "Well, hello there."

Her eyes widened in surprise. She pressed what Dirk could only assume was a knife harder against his throat and fired off several questions—a bit too fast for Dirk to follow them in his injured state. "What are you? How do you speak our tongue? Why were the Reptoids after you? How did you survive that fall?"

Dirk closed his eyes tightly, trying to process her questions through the universal translator he wore at his neck—just below where he felt the knife blade. The fog in his brain didn't much help matters. He shook his head slightly to try and clear it but stopped when she renewed her grip and shook him.

"Speak!" she commanded. It was obvious by the tone of her voice that she was not used to being disobeyed—or working by other

people's schedules.

"First off, darling, I'm a human. Like you, I suppose. You look human enough, at least. I'm damn sure not one of those lizard men. So far as how I'm talking your language, I'm not. Not really, anyway. This thing on my neck is translating in real time. Must've picked up your language while I was out. Point is, we can understand each other, and that's all that matters. Just speak slowly, please. I'm new here, and my head is aching something fierce."

Her eyebrow arched. She was clearly not amused and didn't trust him. "You speak with odd words, outlander. I don't understand some of them, but I gathered enough. You are not one of them." She spat this last word with such venom that Dirk wasn't certain that he'd escaped the lizard men after all. When she continued, she spoke slowly. "Now, what about my other questions? Why were they after you, and how did you survive that fall?"

"You know, I think our conversation would go easier if you took that... whatever it is away from my neck."

"No. Answer first."

"Fair enough, I suppose. This is your world after all," Dirk sighed.

"Yes. It is. And I will reclaim it. But first we must decide what to do with you. So answer."

"Well, I suppose they came after me because they were curious. I'm guessing it's not every day a man from another world crashes on your planet." Her face screwed up in confusion. *I really need to be careful not to step in it here*, Dirk thought. *This lady's serious.*

"Another world?" She huffed in derision. "There are no other worlds. We are all there is. So where did you come from?"

Oh great, they haven't discovered astronomy yet. How did these people exist here this long without discovering basic science? "Your world isn't the only one, sorry to tell you. There are others out there, and I'm from one of them. It's called Earth, and it's the home of humans. Or at least I thought...."

“Hmm. I will forgive this blasphemy for now... human.” She spoke the word as if it was distasteful to her. Something new that she didn’t quite know what to do with, but definitely didn’t like.

“The name’s Dirk, by the way. That’s what I’m called.”

“Dirk, then.”

At least she adapts quickly.

“So, Dirk. How did you survive that fall? You must have powerful magic.”

“I ain’t got no magic, darling. Just some smarts and good equipment. I had an air bag, I guess you could say.”

“Air... bag?”

“Yeah, that’ll do for now. It cushioned me when I fell, I guess. I’m not too sure. I was unconscious for most of it, or at least I was after that big monster shook me like a ragdoll. Is that all you wanted to know?”

“No. I have many other questions, but they can wait. You are injured, despite surviving that fall. And as a warning, do not lie to me again.”

“Lie? I didn’t lie to you.”

“You did. We all saw you cast a beam of light at the Tyrant. It reared back in pain. Your magic is powerful, and you will show us. But for now,” she took the knife away from his neck, “you may rest. We have healers that will tend to your wounds. We have moved you away from the Tyrant. You will be safe.”

She made to move off, but Dirk grabbed her hand lightly, making it clear that he had no nefarious intent. “Can I know your name? You did save me, after all. Where I come from, it’s customary to thank people who save your bacon by name.”

She smiled a bit. “I am known as Talo.”

“Well then, Talo. Thank you for saving me.”

“Rest, Dirk. At least until sunset.”

“What happens at sunset?”

“The Tyrant will be dead, finally, and we shall feast.”

Dirk decided it wasn't worth it to ask. There would be time to learn all the idiosyncrasies of this planet later. Sunset came in a few hours, and in the meantime Dirk was treated by the group's healers. They seemed to have an uncanny command of human anatomy, and he wondered at the parallel evolutionary tracks their two planets had taken. These beings seemed to be ape-descended, but the Reptoids quite obviously weren't. Apparently, this planet hadn't experienced the cataclysm Earth had, and as such, what amounted to their dinosaurs had lived on. Taking that into account, Dirk could imagine why they hadn't discovered seemingly basic things like astronomy. *It's difficult to keep track of the stars when you're dodging giant carnivorous lizards every day.*

The healers checked him over for wounds and broken bones. By some miracle, he had none; he was just severely bruised. They ripped off his flight suit, much to his dismay, and rubbed his body with medicinal herbs. He struggled a bit, not knowing what they were giving him. They could've been rubbing him with their equivalent of poison ivy for all he knew. But after a moment, the pain in his body eased, and he left them to their business and enjoyed the relief their medicine afforded to his aching body. The whatever-it-was they used on him worked so well that he was able to get up and moving within an hour. Admittedly, he wasn't moving well. He felt like an old man, but it was an astounding amount of progress in so short a time.

As Dirk explored the area around the makeshift camp the locals had constructed, he noticed that they were resting in the shadow of the giant lizard. *The Tyrant, she called it.* People were milling about all over: tanning hides, sharpening weapons, making more of the explosives, and a dozen other tasks. There were at least thirty in what Dirk assumed was a raiding party. It was mostly men, but there were a few strong-looking women. Everybody was barely wearing anything, which made him feel a little less self-conscious about his own nakedness. He decided to seek out Talo. She seemed like she

was in charge and was the only one to talk to him. Everyone else just threw suspicious glances and got on with their work with more fervor.

After a minute or two of wandering, Dirk found her near a giant bonfire, where she was overseeing the stripping of the Tyrant's corpse. There were bones in the fire, a reptilian skull about the size of a man's, and what appeared to be rib bones.

Do they eat the damned lizard men too?

The majority of the raiding party seemed jumpy, so he decided to approach from an angle where she would see him coming. He waved as he drew near, calling out, "Talo! I was looking for you."

She turned to look at him fully, and he acutely felt her eyes roaming his body, but he tried to ignore her probing gaze. Talo didn't make it easy, though. It felt like she was... inspecting him. Sizing him up. Judging his character. She didn't act as though he'd been found wanting, saying, "And so you have found me, outlander. What do you wish?"

"Well, apart from a shave, a shower, and a change of clothes, I do have some questions I'd like answered."

"Shaving can wait until we are back at the village. I do not know what a 'shower' is, but it can wait as well. We can supply you with garments. Shrike!" she called to one of the people in the camp. A wiry man, thin and muscular, wearing a cloak and loincloth of lizard skin trimmed with fur, dropped his assigned task and came over. "Find our guest something to cover himself."

The man nodded and ran off. Dirk grinned at Talo. "Guest, huh? I guess it's better than prisoner."

"Do not be so quick. We have not decided what to do with you. We do not even know who you are."

"I'm pretty friendly, especially to people that save my life. Kinda makes things run a bit smoother in the getting-to-know-you department, I find."

"You speak very strangely, outlander."

“Yeah, I’ve been told that before.”

“I imagine. So, what questions do you have?”

“I’ve got a million of ’em, but for the moment I’ll settle for knowing just what the hell is going on around here. What was that thing,” he gestured to the bones in the fire, “and are there more of them?”

“That *thing*,” again with venom in her voice, “is called a Reptoid. Their empire is large, and they are cruel masters. We are little but slave stock and food to them. I do not know what they would do with you, but you would probably find it painful.”

“He sure didn’t look happy to see me up in that tree. But these things eat you?”

“Yes. We are little more than animals to them. They raid, take whoever they please, and kill the rest. We are on a mission to reclaim lost tribesmen before they are turned into slaves or vittles for these foul monsters.”

“Well, if that don’t beat all,” Dirk thought a moment and chewed his lower lip. Shrike returned and gave him a sort of lizard skin poncho, which he donned. “You know, I might be able to help with that. Seeing as how you saved my life and all.”

Talo raised her eyebrows in surprise. “We would be grateful for any help—especially from a wizard so powerful as yourself, outlander. We are well prepared, but more has never hurt. Will you teach us your magic?”

Dirk sighed, and his shoulders drooped. “I already told you, I don’t have any magic. All I have is a special weapon. And I don’t even know if it’s still working. It might’ve got broken when that Tyrant thing chewed up my ship.”

“We have stripped your vessel. You can find everything over there. Follow me.” Talo grabbed a torch out of the bonfire and walked off.

Dirk did likewise and followed at a short distance. He couldn’t help noticing that she looked very good from the back, and his mind strayed a bit to thoughts of just how close their evolutionary paths

had been. He straightened up as she threw an eye over her shoulder, eyebrow cocked, and turned to continue on with confidence.

They came to a small cleared out space in the grass, and Dirk saw most of the interior of his ship laid out. *Looks like they took everything that wasn't nailed down.* There was the now-deflated raft, the pilot's chair that had apparently become dislodged at some point, the tool box, his utility belt complete with the battery packs and cutting torch, his sword, and various other odds and ends, including, amusingly enough, one of the instrument panels.

Talo turned to him, and Dirk tried to keep his eyes focused on her face as she spoke. It was not an easy task. "Here is everything we were able to get. Can you tell us what these do?"

Dirk sighed. "Well, most of it's junk now. That chair, this thing," he toed the instrument panel, "the raft, we might be able to use. But what I really want are these."

He stooped and picked up the belt and checked the battery packs. Fortunately, they hadn't cracked and seemed to still be in working order. *Small blessings.* The cutting torch was in similar condition. Maybe a little banged up. The sheath for the sword was still attached and seemed undamaged to his quick inspection. He slid the unimolecular sword into it and turned his attention to the thing he was most concerned about, the laser pistol. Dirk jammed the torch into the ground and crouched near it, turning the gun over and over in his hands to check for any sign of damage. Amazingly, the pistol was scratch-free. He looked over his shoulder at Talo. "Mind if I give it a small test fire?"

She nodded, and he stood to point the pistol at a nearby tree. Dirk had never been much of a praying man, but he sent one up now. If this thing was too damaged, it could explode in his hand. He turned his head to the side and closed his eyes tight, pulling the trigger. A bright beam of light exploded from the barrel of the pistol and hit the tree, lighting a small fire. Talo marveled, and the camp erupted into alarm at the sharp shriek of the gun. Talo calmed the stir with a shout. *Still works. If there's a god listening, thanks.*

“Incredible,” Talo whispered, in awe of the obvious magic she’d just witnessed. “What is it?”

He flashed her a rogue’s grin and twirled the gun around his finger by its trigger guard. “It’s a laser gun. We’ve got them all over where I come from. Not magic, just science. Pretty damn powerful for its size, too.”

“Do you have more?”

“Unfortunately not. But I’m a pretty crack shot. Should be enough to earn my keep. For a little while, at least.”

“I should say so.” She appraised him again, thinking about the raid ahead and how this outlander might be used. “Will you ally yourself with us?”

“Darling, I don’t really have much choice.” He placed the pistol in its holster and donned his belt. “The only other people on this planet tried to kill me with a giant damn lizard. Y’all saved me. My momma didn’t raise no fools, and that makes the math pretty clear from where I’m standing.”

She grinned with a fierceness that almost frightened Dirk, saying, “Excellent! With this power, we will rescue our kinsmen for sure!”

“That’s the idea,” he nodded. “So, wanna fill me in on the plan? And maybe get some of that grub they’re rustling up over there?” He indicated the cooking fires. “My stomach’s rumbling like there’s a Tyrant walking around in there.”

Talo nodded and motioned for him to follow. He did—again admiring the view—and they sat down at one of the fires and began eating. Dirk was cautious at first, but he figured that he didn’t exactly have a lot of options and started eating with gusto after a few exploratory bites. Around bites of monster lizard, Talo explained that a slaving party had raided her tribe several days ago. Most had escaped into the jungle—they were sadly used to this sort of thing—but several had been captured in the nets of the Reptoids. They were following the slavers and expected to catch up with them within the

next day. The Tyrant had been one of them, coming back to inspect the crash of Dirk's ship.

"That was good fortune," Talo said, eating heartily. "We were able to ambush him and take him down thanks to you."

"Good fortune," Dirk rolled his eyes, "right."

"Maybe not so good for your craft, but that was their largest saurian. Without it, their force will be weakened."

Dirk was forced to concede to her logic. She went on about the ambush plans. Essentially, they were going to catch up and follow until the Reptoids made camp. They would use the explosives to panic the saurians and then rush in with spears and swords to finish the Reptoids while they were surprised. Dirk liked the plan and asked what his role would be.

"You will stay close to me and follow orders," Talo responded.

"Simple enough. I've been doing that most of my career." He stripped the last bit of gristle from his bone and threw it into the fire, licking the grease from his fingers. "Just tell me where you want me, and I'll be there. You're the boss."

"It is good you are so willing to take instruction."

Dirk laughed. "I know what it's like to have too many chiefs and not enough Indians. You're in charge here, and I do what you say." He smiled at her, and in the flickering firelight he thought she smiled back. "So, where do I sleep tonight? Wanna be all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for when we go kill those damned lizard men."

Talo shook her head. "Your speech continues to confuse me, outlander. But we will make you a bedroll, and you can rest. By morning you should be fully healed, and then we shall make all speed to catch those demons and rescue our people."

Dirk meditated on that as he settled down into the bedroll they provided. *'Our people'. Heh. They ain't my people, but I could be persuaded in that direction. Especially if they're all like Talo. There ain't no women like her back home, that's for damn sure. I doubt the*

Legionnaires are gonna come for me, so I might wanna get used to the idea that I'll be here for a while. Could be worse, I suppose. Could've been eaten by that lizard. Dirk laughed to himself about the vagaries of fate as he drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke, the camp was already a buzz of activity. The dawn was just creeping into the horizon, and Dirk guessed they wanted to get as early a start as possible. He clambered out of the bedroll and yawned, trying to mat down his hair. He threw the lizard poncho around his shoulders and strapped on his belt, sword and pistol resting comfortably on his thighs. The poncho also allowed him ease of access to his weapons, and he was looking forward to getting some personal revenge for his poor ship.

Dirk found Talo, and she gave him some of last night's meat. He filled his stomach as she informed him about the direction they would be taking, the attack plans, what different people would be doing, and so on. It was mostly gibberish to him, but he tried to seem interested and latched onto the bits where she told him what his job was. From what he could gather, it was stick close to her and shoot lizard men, which suited him just fine. He might be a Ranger for the Legion, but he was far better suited to taking orders than making plans and worrying about what jobs other people had.

In short order, the camp was packed up and they were on the move. Dirk continued to be amazed at the healing powers of the salves these seeming savages had used on him. He was back to full capacity overnight and was keeping up with Talo as she led the group through the forest. They ran at top speed, not slowing for the members who fell behind. Everybody in the group was a trained hunter or warrior, and would be more than able to catch up. Dirk was just glad he was quick, or he doubted he would have been able to follow them. They weren't leaving much of a trail, he noticed.

As the day wore on, the group didn't stop. The men carrying the food supplies flitted among the group, handing out rations which they ate on the go. Dirk was grateful for the food but would've preferred a stop to rest his burning legs. No cease was in sight, however, and they ran on through the afternoon. As the sun was beginning to sink,

the group slowed to a trot, following the trail of trampled grass that the slavers had left behind. Talo called a halt, saying, "We're close. They are just ahead."

Winded, Dirk leaned over and placed his hands on his knees, sucking air. "Thank god," he gasped. As he looked to where Talo was pointing, he could see fires through the trees. He caught his breath and asked, "So, what now?"

"Now, we begin." She grinned evilly, and Dirk was again reminded that this vision of beauty had an iron core. Talo gripped the sword at her hip and motioned for several people to join them. The group of six spread around them, and Talo began giving orders. "Shrike, take your men and get the bombs ready. Go now, begin in ten minutes."

Shrike nodded and went off to rally his troops.

"Grok, you and Albeda get your men ready to free the slaves and get them out of here. Head immediately back to the village. We will follow when all of them are dead. Let Shrike's men start. When you hear the explosions, wait for the Reptoids to panic, then set to work."

They grinned in agreement and left the group to prepare the rescue force.

"Kirle, Gan, Mialee," Talo said to the three remaining, "ours will be the hardest job. It is our duty to keep the Reptoids away from the slaves while Grok and Albeda work to free them and get them to safety. I want no cowardice. We must slaughter them all. This is not just to free our brothers and sisters, but to send a message. We want these filthy creatures to know that we are not cattle for them to harvest whenever they will. We are men, and we shall fight for our freedom and the lives of our families. After this night, they will know that the people of tribe Uturka are not to be toyed with. We shall water the plants with their blood and salt the earth with their bones. Go and prepare your men, for tonight we shall have our revenge."

Dirk observed the gathered captains nodding along with Talo's speech and was impressed with their courage. Many of these people would be going to their deaths. Possibly even himself. But Dirk

figured that was the cost of doing business for soldiers. Get in the trenches, kill the enemy, and if it comes right down to it, die for the cause. It was a tale as old as civilization itself, and he knew it well.

As the final three ran off to muster their warriors, Talo turned to him. Dirk was again struck by her fierce beauty, and knew in that moment that if it came down to it, he would take a sword to the gut if it meant she wasn't hurt. This woman understood leadership in a way few women did in Dirk's experience, and she'd made him believe in her cause as fervently as any of the warriors that had set out with her from the beginning.

"Dirk? Are you well? You look a bit strange."

Dirk realized he'd been staring and promptly wiped what he hoped wasn't a stupid look off his face. "Yeah. I'm fine. Just gearing up. So, where do you want me, boss?"

"As I told you last night, you are to stick close to me and use your..." she searched for the right word, "magic to slay the monsters. We shall run in when we hear the explosion and take advantage of their surprise to cut down as many as we can."

"Sounds like a plan to me. How many do you expect?"

"They will outnumber us, be sure of that. But we will have the advantage, especially with your light weapon. I expect to lose few people, if any."

"Yeah, well you know what they say, darling: a good plan rarely survives contact with the enemy. Let's just hope they kill all the saurians these Reptoids have so we don't have to fight them too."

Talo nodded and motioned for him to follow her. They crept up to the edges of the camp, hidden from sight by the shadows of the fires and the trees. Dirk saw lizard men in armor milling about, some cooking, some sharpening weapons—it looked like a pretty average military camp to him. Off to the side, he could see a huddled mass of figures, well out of the warmth of the fires, and the occasional flash of a human face or pair of arms told him these were the captives. He took it all in, noting troop positions, where the fires were, tents,

everything, committing it all to memory. He didn't want to step in a roaring fire accidentally, so he constructed a mental map of the clearing.

The camp burst into a frenzy of activity as bombs wracked the night. There were shouts and hisses from the Reptoids, and they were soon running in the direction of the explosions. Even the creatures guarding the captives ran to the commotion. Dirk watched as the teams tasked with freeing them appeared out of the night like ghosts, cutting bonds and escorting hunched and frightened people into the safety of the forest. Dirk saw Talo move and followed her, sticking close to her back to give her cover. In his right hand he held his sword, in his left the laser pistol. They inserted themselves between the fleeing captives and the confused Reptoids, and then all hell broke loose.

Fifteen screaming warriors charged from the forest behind them and slammed into the Reptoids before the lizard men could recover. The humans were outnumbered two to one, but they took full advantage of their surprise charge and befuddled foes. Many Reptoids went down screaming in pools of their own blood and viscera. The monsters soon recovered, though, and began to fight back. The fighting soon devolved into scattered pockets of skirmishers, frequently with two or more Reptoids to a single human. The humans were fierce, Dirk noticed, and did not surrender or break, even as some of their own began to fall.

Dirk and Talo joined the fight as the last of the captives escaped into the night, and they changed the odds considerably. Talo ran screaming at a group of three who were about to wear down Gan. She leaped off a log intended as a seat, flew over one of the cook fires, and kicked a Reptoid in the side of the head. She landed on top of him, sword point down, and speared him to the ground through the chest. Wrenching her blade free, she swept it up and disemboweled another. The last struck out at her, but she blocked his attack and kicked him in the stomach. The Reptoid doubled over, and she brought her sword down on his neck and severed the head. It rolled away into the fire, and Talo took savage glee in that. She ran off to help another tribesman as Dirk followed her over the fire, letting fly

with his laser pistol. Dirk hit two Reptoids in his flight, and when he landed he came up shooting and swinging.

The Uturka tribesmen were roused to new heights by his ferocity in battle, and their second wind took a severe toll on the Reptoids. Dirk saw what appeared to be the Reptoid leader, wearing ornate armor and a frond-crested helmet. *Or maybe that's just his head, who knows?* Dirk immediately made for him through the chaos, knowing that if you cut off a force's head, then chaos and rout would soon ensue. He fired at the lizard's honor guard, taking down two of them, and then he was on top of the creature.

The Reptoid commander defended himself expertly, deflecting Dirk's sword thrusts with the flat of his blade and offering him no opportunity to use his laser pistol. The creature struck out, catching Dirk along the cheek and taking a chunk out of his ear. he screamed and cut upwards, trying to take the thing's arm off. It snaked back too quickly, but he managed to hit the blade of his opponent's sword full force, shearing it in two.

The Reptoid commander stared aghast at his weapon, not able to process what had just happened. Dirk took the opportunity for a gut thrust, but the creature rebounded and swept away. He danced to the side and threw one of his subordinates toward Dirk, grabbing him by the back of his armor and shoving him forward.

Dirk didn't waste time. He raised his pistol and shot the warrior in the face, letting the body drop past him as he pursued the commander, who was trying to make a getaway. The commander had cast aside his sword and was running full tilt for the cover of the jungle. Dirk took aim and fired, catching the creature in his leg. He cried out and fell on his face, then began crawling frantically away. Dirk strolled up casually and stuck his sword through his torso, pinning him to the ground. The ornate armor, all decked out in reptilian insignias, did little to stop Dirk's superior blade.

The commander screeched and cried; Dirk was surprised to note actual tears of pain streaming down his snout, but eventually the lizard man settled into waiting for his slow death. Dirk said, "Oh,

you're not going anywhere, my friend. We're gonna wait right here for Talo. She'll work out what to do with you."

He turned and looked back over the carnage and saw that the human victory was almost complete. There were a couple of Reptoids still fighting, but these soon gave up and threw down their weapons. They were not shown mercy. Dirk called Talo over and showed her what he had. She bent down next to the lizard and took him by the back of the head, forcing his face into the grass. She put her lips next to his head and whispered, loud enough for Dirk's translation circuit to catch, "When you get to the underworld, let your filthy gods know that their time is ending. My name is Talo Uturka, and I will be the end of your hideous reign."

She took the lizard's head in her hands and began twisting. He fought her feebly, but eventually there was a loud crack, and he was looking down at his own back as he gurgled his last. She stood, breathing heavily. Lit from the back by the firelight, Dirk thought she looked like some goddess of battle, or avenging Valkyrie, come to reap the whirlwind on those that challenged her. She turned on him and hugged him, pressing her lips to his. Dirk put his arms around her, returning the kiss, not knowing quite what was going on, but not about to argue. She drew back, grinning at him, and said, "We did it! The captives are safe, and we only lost Krieb, Trawl, Ghast, and Orl! Thank you, Dirk." She stared into his eyes. "We could not have done it without your help."

Dirk blushed a bit. "Oh, I think y'all would've done all right. It was your plan that made everything happen, after all."

"But we wouldn't have gotten all of them without you. Now, though," she broke their embrace, "it's time to send that message. Retrieve your blade."

He did so and helped Talo drag the corpse of the commander back to one of the larger tents in the encampment. Using her hands, Talo gathered up the blood of the commander and painted several symbols Dirk didn't understand on the side of the tent. When she was finished, the humans looted the camp of everything conceivably useful and followed the captives into the night.

Dirk, walking beside Talo, asked, “So what now?”

“Now,” she replied, “we go back to the village. I will inform my father of the success of the raid, and we will welcome our newest ally and tribesman.”

“Your father?”

“Yes. I am the princess of the Uturka. You did not know this?”

“I can safely say that this is a revelation, darling.”

“Then be joyful. With my blessing, my father is sure to welcome you with open arms. You will have a place of honor in our tribe for helping us and for capturing the Reptoid commander.”

“That’s all well and good, but there’s one last thing I wanna know.”

“Yes?”

“What did you write on that tent in the commander’s blood?”

“They are ancient Uturka runes which mean: Never Again.”

Dirk pondered this strange woman, and this stranger world that he had crashed onto, and he thought that this wasn’t the worst place in the universe to be stranded. They rejoined the other tribesmen, the captives were greeted with warm hugs and tears, and at last the group began making their way home. They would bury their dead, mourn their losses, and plan for the next raid.

*Nathan Dabney is an author, podcaster, blogger, voice actor, audiobook producer, and irascible alcoholic whose work can be found at jimfear138.blogspot.com. If you enjoyed this story, you can find more of his fiction in the anthology *Darkest of Dreams*, available on Amazon.*

What were the Pulp really like!?



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Littermates (pt 1 of 2)

By J.D. BRINK

The Pirate Captain Leonidas Hawksblood and the crew of The Lion's Share have put in to a port-of-call for some well-earned R&R! But they're barely into their cups when a band of gene-spliced clone-freaks set to making trouble, guns blazing!

Part the First

The bad thing about clones is that you can hardly tell them apart.

Now I know that sounds racist, but please don't be accusing me of stereotyping. Our own Mister Spleen is a vat baby, after all. Maybe that's why he chose to adopt the way of the machinist, eh? To go all

catfishy with the whisker and spine augments coming out of his otherwise already unattractive puss. Just so he could look in the mirror and know that he was himself, and not one of his dozens—maybe hundreds—of brother-spawn?

I never thought to ask him such a question. Rather impolite, if you ask me. And besides, I am his loyal corsair captain and it wouldn't do to be poking my boys with such a nosy line of questioning, would it? After all, we all have a dirty past we're trying to hide. Or outrun. Or both. Why else go into the pirate trade?

Speaking of impolite... On this one particularly rough and tumble day last Rebirth season, this squat-legged, furry-faced clone buccaneer came spring-heeled out of a big empty cargo box and nearly landed on my head. In one hand he swung an extra-long pipefitter's wrench welded with nasty spikes. In the other, an old-fashioned, slug-belching repeater. Damned noisy gun would have scared the starch right out of my lovely crimson shirt, had I starched or ironed or even washed it for the occasion.

Pardon me. I tend to fly headlong into tales of high adventure and lusty romance without the proper set-up, or even a warning that I'm doing so. I also tend to ramble. But you'll get used to that. For now, allow me to explain myself.

The name's Leonidas Hawksblood. Perhaps you've heard of me? Or seen my lovely, lamb-chopped mug on "wanted" casts throughout the sector?

As I was saying, we hearty crew of *The Lion's Share* had put to port on Alpha Dog, an orbital waystation on the ass-end of nowhere where the unsavory of the galaxy sometimes muster for a greater sense of community, some get-to-know-you, and mayhap a little bit of squelch.

(Though let me advise you, dear friend, to have a bit more discretion than most space-faring types when making your delicate selections of squelch. Don't just go with the prettiest face, most narrow of hips, most readily available, or cheapest of coin. Make good decisions using both heads, rather than just the lower, lest you

come back to the boat with a pox on your plaything that you'd not wisely accounted for.)

Believe it or not, there was even a little bit of religion to be had on that station. Yes, even freebooters and buccaneers preserve a tiny candle flame for the likes of Dog in All His Glory, having spent much of their lives in the Hopeless Lackluster Black, and there's a nice chapel maintained by some surly monks there on Alpha.

We had gone there for all those reasons I've just listed, especially being as it was springtime on Tully's Pride, a big orbital hab in this sector of the Vast with a population in the millions. Lots of folks call Tully's their once and future home—or their exiled for crimes unbecoming home—and plenty in this neighborhood hence carry on the traditions there. During the spring and rebirth season regulated by Tully's artificial ecosystem, they celebrate a holiday called Hearth Day. It's really more like a solid week, and the focus is on family. We on the *Lion* call each other family, but when you spend ninety percent of your time locked in a tin can floating on the Vast Empty Sea with said family, you tend to seek a little more when the sentimental seasons come 'round. So we, like many others, sought out Alpha Dog's welcoming space docks for some much needed communal time with friends.

That's not quite what we got, though. At least, not the way we expected.

So I was telling this story. Now that I've gone back around and sniffed my own rear on this tale, allow me to pick up where I'd left off.

There was this bug-eyed, newt-lipped, furry-assed bastard who'd come ambushing as best he could inside this cargo dock. And his best was pretty poorly, as it turned out.

Those lead hornets he was spraying about made an awful racket, which was lucky for me. I raised my flechette carbine just as I was ducking my handsome ginger noggin and let fly with a belt of ferris barbs of my own. The carbine fires a burst of fiendish mini-spearheads that make quick work of flesh and blood, and ole froggie was dead before he hit the corrugated deck.

“Is it me or do they keep getting uglier?” I quipped.

My battle brothers all smiled. It was an ironic question, you see. Clone jokery. And even Spleen, who, as I said, was born a clone himself, did enjoy the jab.

On this lovely hearth season aboard the pious neutrality of Alpha Dog’s floating chapel and friendly home, we had found ourselves in a life-or-death conflict against the Red Roo clan, a nasty family tree with roots in kangaroo-and-Adam gene-splicing from an Old World penal colony. These days, the clan heritage came out of a lonely corner of space where propagation is dependent on one of two primary means: redundant inbreeding or gene-stock cloning. New blood, in such a galactic backwater, is hard to come by.

Whichever method spawned the various strains of Roo, it must also have made personality hereditary, for they’re known far and wide as galactic jackasses with foul tempers.

So where was I again?

You know what, friend? Never mind that. I dragged you rather unprepared into this scene, which is frankly an irresponsible approach for a narrator who cares. And I certainly care.

If I’m to do this tale proper justice, it’s best if I jitterbug back a few steps and start over from the beginning...

The Lion’s Share broke free of Slip Space and re-entered existence in a lonely pocket of backwater blackness known only to the orphans and unwanted step-children of the civilized worlds. Projected on the Big Board, there in the crimson and tangerine mists of the nebula known as Hobb’s Knuckles, suspended in the soup of the Vast Empty Sea, hung a giant’s teacup. Instead of pearly porcelain, this teacup was a complex mishmash of black metal and pointy instruments. But cast against that colorful backdrop it sure resembled a neatly handled vessel of your granny’s favorite steeped and steaming.

Upon spying such a sight, my crew gave a collective, heartfelt gasp.

We were all crammed aboard the *Lion's* bridge, tight quarters for even we few. I myself—respected captain and illegitimate papa of this orphaned family—sat at center upon my proper throne as skipper of the boat. First Mate Pug was almost too large to fit in his station as pilot and first operator. Spleen, his oversized black visor dominating the upper half of his ugly, catfishy mug (but unable to hide the wide grin spreading beneath it) occupied his usual seat at the engineering and second operator's interface. The rest of my crew were also present, squeezed in where they could fit: tall and skinny Pigeon, Soot the unbathed, and Comely John. John's cologne might normally be an unnecessary sensory accessory for an all-male crew inhabiting a cramped, space-faring boat, but I welcomed the counterbalance to Soot's more natural body odor, especially in quarters as intimate as my humble, eggshell-colored command bridge.

All six of us in that small space were less than comfortable, but we'd been to sea for a good stretch, and the feeling of homecoming was a rare excitement we could all be excused for.

"Alpha Dog dead ahead, Captain," Pug's gravelly voice declared.

He immediately followed with a gesture I've rarely seen from him. He blessed himself at the slant reference of All Mighty Dog, even with His name loaned to a huge and hollow piece of dinnerware. Pug bowed his dark head then touched his pinched finger and thumb to forehead, nose, and bearded chin.

We have been out a long time, I thought, if my burly first mate has finally found religion.

It wasn't quite a fair statement; Pug was the most respectable and traditional of us all. While Cher (truly our seventh shipmate) was the mechanical mind of the ship, Mister Pug served as the conscience of her captain.

A few others followed his ritualistic example in sloppy, ill-practiced manner, but I refrained. My hypocrisy goes only so far.

The handle of the teacup is a multi-tiered mooring dock, and there were already quite a number of ships at port. There usually were. As

I've said, Alpha Dog is a popular hidey hole. All the amenities of home and your formerly-home town.

Our favorite such amenity was the Thirsty Maiden Cantina and Dance Hall. It was a roomy place, probably as big as all the living spaces of *The Lion's Share* lined up together and peopled with round metal tables, a large, lit-up dancing square, and three different bars for fetching your libations. We blew into the Cantina and were greeted by familiar hails from differing corners of the room. Comely John was quickly snatched up by a table full of attractive ladies—The Mothers and Daughters Auxiliary League, if memory serves—and had his evening's dance card filled in minutes. Mister Pug found an old drinking buddy at the bar, and Spleen had gone off to plug into some machinists' jackbooth. (That's a place where he could chat with the station's essence and other partial-organics like himself. Not quite the type of jackbooth *you* were thinking of, eh, mate?)

Pigeon and Soot—being less gifted in the social arts—stuck by the side of their beloved captain, Yours Truly.

I spied a girl I once knew—excuse me, a *woman* I had known, lo so many years ago—and steered well into the opposite corner. There, I was happy to reacquaint with a long lost friend by the name of Jean-Jacque Kristov. JJ was a fellow privateer, known by reputation as “The Black Cat.” His own ancestral tree, while we're commenting on them, harkened back to a line of princes from the Ivory Coast, a mystical kingdom of Old Afrique. The lighting in the Thirsty Maiden was such that I barely noticed the man, so dark was his complexion, but his booming laughter and hearty invitation were a welcome reminder of days gone by.

My mates and I sat and drank for a spell. JJ and I reminisced of virtues robbed and cargo stolen.

Eventually, I heard the shuffle of newcomers behind me. Jean-Jacque's bulging yellowy eyes locked on and he stopped mid-sea story. He rose slowly from his chair and released a string of wiley curses so unfriendly that I had to turn to see who the recipient was.

A gang of six Red Roos had come in, already appearing a bit stumbly and tumbly, this obviously not the first alehouse they'd ventured into this day. Of the six, there seemed to be only three variations of genetic stock, all being vat-born littermates of one breed or another. The most peculiar pair had very tall ears that peaked near the tops of their heads. All wore the crimson sashes that marked their cause, wrapped about their heads or lashed around their waists or chests. Their leader leaned on the bar, but their collective thirteen eyeballs were focused on my foul-mouthed friend.

"Red Roo Remy!" JJ spat. "You dare to trip into the very dancing hall where you insulted my bonny wife and left me this gruesome scar?"

JJ gestured to a small pink slash mark on his otherwise dark and meaty left shoulder. Perhaps he favored sleeveless vests just to show it off? Although, in all honesty, I can't say it was a particular gruesome scar, as he had purported. If I were he, I'd hide it and be embarrassed to still bemoan such a wound.

The Roo slammed his metal fist on the bar with a loud crack. His three eyes—one of flesh, two lighted lenses—glowered in JJ's direction.

"It's me!" JJ shouted. "The Black Cat! You dare feign a faded memory to avoid meeting my gaze?"

To be fair, the Roo leader was not avoiding his gaze. He was staring pretty hard, in fact. Retrospectively, I imagine now that he was waiting for ole JJ to see his own mistake.

"I am not Red Roo Remy," the accused did growl. "I am the fearsome brigand known throughout the Vast as Terrible Twenty-Two, scourge of the boundless skies! And I don't stand for insults flung from the mouth of a mere drunken pussy-cat!"

JJ's expression changed instantly. His angry façade disappeared and even turned mirthful. "Oh. Well, pardon me, dear friend," he said, lowering himself back into his chair. He had returned to his friendly, stress-free self, and the Roo's veiled threat had flown right over his

head. JJ scooped up his frosty mug and slopped a bit of foam doing so. “I’ve no beef with you, then. Hell, the truth is,” he said, tipping his beer in a toast to this new acquaintance, “that bony wench ain’t my wife no more anyway!”

The whole room—which had fallen deadly silent under the storm of curses that had passed moments before—shook with the Black Cat’s booming laughter. Others quickly joined in with meek and not-quite-sure giggles. I couldn’t hold down a good-natured chuckle, myself.

The Roo remained insulted, however.

“That’s it? You think you can offend a Red Roo captain and then scoff it off and sip your grog and all is well?”

His brother clones resembled their leader in mood as well as breed. As I’ve said, the Roos are known for their short fuses, and even as I sat there awaiting a peaceful resolution, my hand did wander to the flechette carbine holstered at my hip.

JJ’s jovial pardon of the whole affair now turned back toward annoyance.

On the whole, I’d have to admit that my fellow buccaneers—as a brotherly community at large—place well too much value on bruised pride. I’m sometimes guilty of this myself, but like to count myself among the more laidback and level-headed of my profession.

JJ’s great yellowy eyes widened and threatened to pop out of their sockets as baleful projectiles. “As I said, Timid Twenty-Two, it was my own flawed error, misjudgment, and misbespoken. It’s just that *all you Roos look alike to me.*”

That last line leaked venomously from JJ’s platinum-plated jaws.

I couldn’t help but snicker. Clone humor.

What followed was not very funny.

One of Terrible Twenty-Two’s shipmates—a Twenty-Someone, no doubt—swung up a short-barreled blunderbuss that dangled from his belt and fired. Its concussive charge blew the Black Cat, Yours Truly,

Soot, and our table itself off our butts and onto the floor. Luckily it was a charge of mere force and not a fatal shot. The delay it caused, though—in our reactions and those of everyone else inside the Thirsty Maiden—allowed the Roos time to arm up.

Pigeon had been spared the concussion and found himself still sitting in his metal chair all alone. So he jumped-to bravely and pulled his cutlass, a blade as long and slender as the man who wielded it. By the time my lungs had reclaimed the air that'd been blasted from them and I'd climbed to my feet again, Pigeon was engaged in a sword dance with one of the long-eared kangaroo brothers.

A second Roo had never had a chance to engage at all. I had just risen to the ready with my trusty saber and carbine when one unfortunate rogue fell forward and floorward onto his face. Mister Pug's vicious hatchet had been flung and stuck into his back. My First Mate nodded from across the room and pulled away from the lovely who clung to his leg, charging full-ahead into the fray.

I shot the blunderbuss boy and crossed swords with another. A stick-and-parry waltz ensued, but the music didn't last long.

The small band of Roos was dispatched in short order. My friend JJ had dispensed his own brand of justice on their leader, Tragic Twenty-Two, with the long, curved blade of a bone-handled knife that he'd inherited as a wee lad. Good ole Jean-Jacque had not, however, come away unscathed. When the fighting was over, he slumped rough into the nearest seat and took a long draught from someone else's abandoned beer. His pretty vest of green and amber was also wet with red. I half expected to see the brew he'd just drank foam back out of his wounds.

"Just like old times, eh, Black Cat?" I asked, sitting next to him with a hand on his shoulder. I hoped that my worry was not too apparent on my face.

JJ was sweating, too much for the short foray we'd just engaged in. "The Hawk and the Cat, together again," he said, voice trembling.

I knew then—as the breath shook from his quivering lips—that his wound was a grievous one.

One bartender—the wart-nosed male—called the station medical team, who arrived in short order. JJ was unconscious by the time they'd carried him off.

They also took three Roos with them, those they had at least a chance of saving. The others would go to the morgue, when time allowed.

We righted a table and thought to order more drinks, but it was not yet time to relax, as it turned out.

“There are *two* Red Roo ships in port,” Wart Nose told us, glancing anxiously at his screen.

“Those assholes never forgive,” Pug grumbled over my shoulder. “And refuse to forget.”

And that was how we came to be on a hunting expedition for Red Roo marauders.

To our own surprise, one of the Roo ships soon unmoored itself and departed from Alpha. Her captain broadcast a brief message to station ops, who felt obligated to send it 'round to all screens throughout the station; to let us all know, surely, but also perhaps to convince their fellows still aboard to stand down and give up the fight.

A face with the same heavy brow as the Terrible Double-Deuce came onscreen, this one carrying a beard that must have had kilos of weight to it. The two men's similarities ended with their gene stock, however.

“Twenty-Two was a thorn in more sides than can be counted,” this new Roo announced. “His death was of his own making and was probably overdue. Today was no special day. It's been marked on Twenty-Two's calendar a long time coming.

“The Roo clan, as a whole, will not bear responsibility for him. Nor will we further bloody the sanctity of Alpha Dog station, the noble religious order that tends to her, or the peace of the well-regarded Hearth Day observance. The mighty corsairs’ craft *Alice Springs* has departed, along with her full Roo crew. When next we meet, let us not speak of this common embarrassment to our kind.”

I swiveled, impressed, to my first mate. “Well I’ll be damned, Mister Pug. Mayhaps I was wrong about them Roos. Or some of them, anyway.”

I also slapped our man Spleen on the back, to ensure he knew I was not against the vat-born in general.

Then the safari resumed. Ole Double Deuce’s crew were still lurking about and bent on brotherly vengeance. I was a bit bent, myself, and not entirely confident that my good friend JJ would survive his injuries.

The monks themselves had also come out to enforce the peace. Shaved heads and orange linens were suddenly more present outside of the monastery decks and stalked about like they meant business. Now don’t make any false assumptions, friends, about those men and women of the cloth who serve Dog’s will here. The Monastery of the Empty Hand is a churchy bunkhouse that believes in improving mind and body in ways that perhaps your local preacher has not the stamina for. While we pirate-types brawl with sword, dart, and blunderbuss, these quiet monks bring peace by violence in an altogether more humbling way.

As we scrambled an organized fog walk to search for Roo mischief makers, I did witness one such monk enforcing the natural peace and order of their space station. Two scraggly rabble-rousers were attempting to take advantage of the momentary chaos to loot a storefront on the promenade. A lithe lady in bright orange and shiny scalp brought both villains to heel with swift kicks and sharp cranks of their bodily parts. She cowed those rogues barehanded in less time than I could with a handy sonic. And they are likely, to this very day, still repaying their debt to society aboard Alpha Dog station.

With the monks on parade, my bonny crew, and others alike intent to bring the loose Roos to order, it didn't take long to corral the last of the rabble-rousers back toward their dead captain's boat.

I first brought you in, dear friends, at an Alpha cargo bay where one spring-legged Roo had tried to jump me. We were nearing the final battle at that point. Unbeknownst to our quarry, Alpha had their vessel on lockdown, and there was no escaping back aboard the decks of the *Double Dragon*. (A poor name for a ship, in my humble opinion. It seems Terrible Twenty-Two's cruel and inept imagination had not spared his boat, either.)

So my flechette had leaked that clone ambusher's guts all over the corrugated deck plate.

My boys had joined forces with four of Jean-Jacque's vengeful shipmates, and we had all chased our prey to the end of the maze. We occupied that cargo hold, while they were hidden behind barricades in the next room.

Suddenly, a volley of iron barbs and lead hornets came screaming out at us, along with a great gout of yellow flame. Another step or two and we'd have all bitten those bullets or been barbecued for dinner. One of Jean-Jacque's mates, a wily fellow named Black Toof, spilled fully backward onto the floor, along with a small spatter of blood. We all feared the worst initially, but Black Toof crawled back to his feet, leaving just the pink circlet of his right ear on the deck behind him.

He pressed a hand to his head and let flow a steady stream of curses.

We all crouched around the corners and behind crates and boxes. We brothers of the *Lion* were starboard of the open doorway while JJ's boys took cover to port.

"This is it," Pug advised. "They're trapped against the locked doors of their own rusty boat."

"The climactic battle, then," a three-armed sailor said, raising his blades in triplicate and sounding rather roused.

“Aye,” I said. “But, as I believe Mister Pug was about to explain, rats are most dangerous when cornered with nowhere left to run. This will no doubt be the worst fighting of the evening. And with that vicious flamethrower in their midst, we dare not get too close.”

My first mate nodded solemnly.

I stroked the lush orange sideburns that grow at my cheeks. *What to do, what to do?* A frontal assault would be a suicide rush, especially with that nasty flame gouter in there. But there was only one way in.

Another round of slug-throwers barked from within the antechamber. Lead bullets slammed into walls and stockpiled goods. Comely John broke ranks, dashing back the way we’d come, away from the fray.

JJ’s sober crew gave us lions a doubtful glance.

I admit, I was at a loss myself. It wasn’t like John to dodge out of a fight without a word. (Correction: it actually *was* like him to do *anything* without a word, as he used them sparingly, like precious gold doubloons. But it *was* unlike him to cut and run.)

Pug turned to me apologetically, dutifully bearing responsibility for his man’s actions. “I’m sure John has a respectable reason, sir.”

“Mayhaps he had to go freshen up,” Black Toof said sarcastically, palm still pressed to his head. “His smellin’ nectar must be fadin’.”

My boys’ cockles came up, prepared to defend their brother’s honor in another brawl to happen right there and then. (Again with the pirates’ pride!)

Then John returned. He was awkwardly toting a cylindrical drum under one arm and bringing another along by its handle.

We all watched in high anticipation as he rejoined our hiding spot.

Pigeon checked the drum’s stencil and looked all the more confused by it. “Cooking oil?”

John thumbed behind him as Soot explained, as if the two spoke from the same mind: “There was a whole shipment of these things back there. It’s where that froggy fellow you dispatched leapt from, Captain.”

“I believe I have the scheme of it,” Pug said.

John nodded to him. Then a thick blade snapped-to in his hand.

He jabbed the plastic drum three times, once through the top and twice on the sides. Pug did the same, wedging his big hatchet in and out of the second drum. Both barrels bubbled rich, golden oil from their wounds.

The two men dropped their blades, stood up, and hoisted their charges over their heads. The delicious goo oozed down their faces and smoothed back any hair out of place. Then Comely John chucked his mini-barrel into the airlock antechamber.

As they’d anticipated, the wound-up Roos inside fired all they had at the first sign of movement. Bullets and barbs ripped that first barrel to pieces just an instant before the flamethrower’s dragon breath caught up to it.

Whoosh! Suddenly the greasy goodness that had been spattering everywhere lit up with tasty orange fire. Flickering brightness shone forth, illuminating the very screams on the air.

Next, Pug tossed his greasy grenade into the well-lighted room. His throwing arms are considerably thicker than John’s (or any of ours) and his leaking keg hit the opposite rear wall. It bounced off there and landed in among the Roo rats behind their cover. If the flames had yet to claim them to that point, they’d be well engulfed now.

And so the final conflict with Terrible Twenty-Two’s tasty crew came out smelling like a deep-fried chicken. Those brigands who survived the ordeal ended up batter-dipped and served with a side of coleslaw at a station dining hall.

Just fooling. A bit of gallows humor. You looked a touch mortified there for a sec, and I thought you could use some reassurance.

Actually, those that survived both the grease fire siege and the rest of the sweep for bad elements were all salvaged at the medicae and recruited into the unconditional forgiveness of the Monastery of the Empty Hand. Under their tender mercies, those lost souls no doubt became honorable devotees of the mysteries of All Mighty Dog. (That must be how the orange-clad and celibate meet their recruiting quotas: rehabilitations and reformations.)

I also believe the monks made use of ole Twenty-Two's pirate pontoon, the *Double Dragon*. Whether they auctioned it off, salvaged it for parts, or put it to their own use, the ship's value in labor, resources, or credits would help maintain the monastery and the station itself for years to come.

As for Jean-Jacque Kristov, he too recovered from his grievous injuries. Though he did come out a few feet shorter of colon, and was on the plus for a silvery and interesting new method of ridding his body of digested foodstuffs. "The Black Cat" Kristov rose from the monks' sick bay to carouse again, like any good pirate worth his mettle. It was rebirthing season, after all.

J. D. Brink has recently rejoined the civilian world after 13 years in the Navy. His fictional adventures take place in the Identity Crisis superhero universe and Endless Dark sci-fi universe, among others. You can find out more and sign up for his "Conspiracy Theory Newsletter" at <http://brinkschaostheory.com/>.



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Brandy and Dye

By JIM BREYFOGLE

High atop rock spires, above the breeze from the Devil's Arse, men toil to collect the valuable guano of the Minix bird for Royal Dye! With their industry threatened by distillers at dizzying heights, the dyers hire Mangos & Kat to bust a few heads!

Four months after the fall of Alness.

Mangos watched the birds fly below him, their rich, dark red feathers in contrast to the white tops of the clouds. The sun shone through the hole in the mountain, illuminating birds and clouds even as it left the rest of Talhorn Mountain in shadow.

The hole couldn't possibly be natural, but there was no reason for god or man to carve a perfect circle five hundred feet across clear through the mountain. It existed as a mystery, sitting at the valley's head, but because it was on the edges of the world, nobody cared.

The plank deck of the rope bridge swayed as Kat came up behind Mangos. She paused to look over the edge. "Minix bird," she said. "That's what it's all about."

The clouds gave the illusion that the valley was only a hundred yards deep and dusted in cotton. In truth, only the makeshift bridge deck and rope handrails kept them from falling seven thousand feet to the valley floor.

"You'll not want to fall," a man said. He stood on the edge of a *holmen*, one of the spires of rock that rose from the valley floor. The network of rope bridges connected the numerous *holmen* with each other and the ridge that divided the valley in two.

"I didn't think I did," Mangos muttered as he finished crossing. "Are you Harlin?"

"If you're the two adventurers I'm expecting, then I'm Harlin." He snorted loudly, dragging phlegm from his throat and spitting it over the edge of the *holmen*.

"Mangos," Mangos said. "My partner Kat." He half turned so Harlin could see past him as Kat crossed the bridge.

Harlin scratched white dust from his hair as he peered at Kat. "You're pretty. You remind me of my sister. Except she wasn't pretty."

Mangos wasn't sure of the compliment, but Kat acted as though she expected it. She should, Mangos thought, for men always acknowledged her beauty but never showed any desire. He didn't ask why, though he sometimes wondered.

"You sent out a call?" Mangos asked. A call for adventurers with an offer of a royal reward. He liked the sound of that.

"You know what we do here?" Harlin asked.

"You mine Minix guano and process it to make dye," Kat said.

Harlin nodded. "Exactly. The birds eat the ridge berries." He pointed to the ridge dividing the valley, which was green with bushes. More

bushes grew atop the *holmen*. Mangos could see red berries on the nearest ones.

“They eat the berries, and they,” he looked at Kat and clearly changed the word he was going to say, “poop. We make the poop into dye.”

“People want bird *poop* dye?” Mangos asked.

“The dye never fades,” Harlin said. “It smooths the fibers of the cloth, making wool feel like cotton, cotton feel like silk, and silk feel like heaven.”

“No accounting for what people will do,” Mangos said.

“The color is absolutely unique, and the dye very rare,” Kat said. “Only kings and emperors were allowed to wear it during the Age of Empires. That’s why it’s called Royal Dye.”

“We make so little that we can’t even fill the demand of the kings and princes of today,” said Harlin.

“So what’s the trouble?” Mangos asked.

“Distillers. They harvest too many ridge berries to make their brandy. The birds don’t have enough. The birds eat less, we have less—” he hesitated as he substituted again, “guano.”

“Can they eat anything else?” Kat asked.

“No. If the Minix birds eat anything except ridge berries, their guano won’t make good dye.”

“Huh,” mused Mangos, glancing at the green ridge, down at the carpet of clouds hiding the valley floor, and at the spidery network of bridges the workers must cross.

“They’ve hired thugs to intimidate my workers,” Harlin continued. He stuck a grimy finger up his nose and fished around until he was satisfied. He inspected the result and flipped it over the rail. “The guano dust gets into you,” he explained. “Into your eyes and nose, and folds of your skin.”

“Lovely,” Kat murmured.

“You need to stop the distillers. Dyers have been harvesting guano from these *holmen* for generations. Now these distillers are destroying our trade. I don’t care what you do,” he raised his eyebrows, clearly conveying any option, no matter how gruesome, was acceptable, “but get it done.”

The next morning, the sun crested the eastern horizon, flooding the valley with light and making the clouds glow gold. The Minix birds flitted around the ridge, dots of motion rising from and settling back into the green bushes. Smaller flocks ate from the bushes growing on the *holmen*.

The scrapers were already up, putting on their harnesses and tying to the safety pins. They tied their buckets to their belts and held their tools through loops of cord.

The clouds parted enough to see down to the valley floor. Mangos then realized how ridiculously thin the *holmen* were, and wondered that they did not snap from the wind and their own weight.

“Don’t drop your shovel,” remarked Mangos to a nearby scraper. “That’s a long way down.”

The scraper shook his head. “Can’t get it. Wind’ll kill you,” he pointed to the hole in the mountain. “The Devil’s Arse funnels the wind coming through it down into the valley. We’re above it, but below the clouds, it’ll take the flesh off your bones.”

“Devil’s Arse?” Mangos chuckled at the thought, looking at the hole more closely. With the sun lighting the face of the mountain, he could see the difference between the mountain rock and a massive ice ledge above the tunnel.

“You should see the snow swirl around in the winter,” the man said. “The wind through the hole blows it back up until it catches on the mountain above or gets pushed to the side.” He tugged on his rope, nodded to Mangos, and began to lower himself off the side of the *holmen*.

“That explains why they work up here,” said Kat, “and not down below.”

Mangos nodded, looking down at the barren valley until the clouds closed back up. “The wind must be terrible indeed.

“Do you think the distillers will intimidate easily?” Mangos inquired as he ducked back into the small hut where they had spent the night.

“No.” Kat started to gather her things.

Mangos shrugged. It didn’t seem hard to run off some distillers. Just drop one over the edge and the others would see reason. “Where are they?”

“Over by the edge of the valley. There’s a small grouping of *holmen* close to the north wall off to the east.”

“We can just cut the bridges.”

“You do that and I’ll not pay you a thing,” said Harlin. Mangos started and spun, only relaxing as he recognized the head dyer. “You’ve no idea how hard it is to string the first lines of a new bridge.”

“Might be worth giving up a few *holmen*,” Kat said.

“No. I want every square inch of ridgetop and *holmen* for growing ridge berries. I’m not giving up a thing. Those are the terms. If you don’t like them, that’s too bad.”

His tone bothered Mangos. “It’d be easier—”

“I can cut the bridges myself,” Harlin snapped. “I’m hiring you because I don’t want to.”

Mangos nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He grabbed his pack, knocking over a pile of supplies at the same time.

“Ha,” Harlin gave a short barking laugh. He kicked a small keg that had been hidden by the pile. “Alcohol. Not supposed to be up here.”

“Brandy?” Kat asked.

“No. Just raw alcohol we use in dye making.”

Mangos eyed the keg. It would fit in his pack.

Kat smirked. "Seems like a drunk man would be susceptible to flying lessons."

Harlin laughed. "It happens. That's why I don't allow alcohol up here." He shrugged. "Glad to see you're getting on with the job."

"I guess he didn't mean he doesn't care what we do," Mangos said once Harlin left.

"He doesn't care what we do to the vintners." Kat said, "as long as it doesn't affect him."

When Kat looked the other way, Mangos pushed the keg into his pack. Harlin would assume whoever hid it came back, and the person who did hide it couldn't complain because it shouldn't have been there in the first place.

He braced himself and swung his pack over his shoulder, trying to make it look no heavier than usual. "Ready."

The distillers and dyers were essentially a small group of men sharing the same dangers so it didn't surprise Mangos they were expected. Two men stood at the far end of the bridge to the distillers' *holmen*.

"You've no business here!" one called.

Mangos slipped off his pack and walked onto the bridge. He felt it bounce as he crossed. "We do." A small stone slipped between the planks and dwindled to invisible as it fell.

The man who spoke stepped onto the bridge, unhooking a heavy club from his belt. "No, you don't. I'll drive it into your head so you'll remember." The second man carried an iron-tipped spear. A third appeared from a small tent on the *holmen*. He carried a crossbow and immediately fitted a bolt into it then began to work the crank.

"Not afraid of heights, are you?" asked the first man.

“No,” replied Mangos, unconcerned by the swaying bridge or the long fall beneath him. He drew his sword. If this was how things were done here, that was fine, though the crossbowman worried him.

The man swung the club back and forth as he walked forward, timing his swing and steps so Mangos had to parry or give ground.

“Keep running,” the man taunted. “It’s the smartest thing you can do.” The second man peered around the first, not interfering with his attack.

“You boys need to stop messing with the dye makers,” Mangos said, stopping his retreat.

“Not your business,” the man said then attacked.

Mangos spun, lay back onto the rope handrail, and let the club swing in front of him. The rope creaked with his weight, and he knew if it broke or his feet slipped he had a very, very long fall, and the last thing that would go through his mind would be his ankles.

His weight shifted the bridge, pushing it away from him and tipping it sideways. The handrail now supported his weight while his body forced the bridge deck to a steep angle.

Kat cried out but grabbed the other rail and leaned into the tilt, somehow keeping her feet.

The man with the club cursed as his feet slipped, he fell, then slid over the edge. The clouds, which looked so thick, did not stop his fall. He plunged inside and was lost from sight.

The spear wielder fell, grabbing the planks as his legs swung toward the abyss.

Mangos’ feet slipped from the bridge. He clutched the rail, felt it dip again. The bridge swung back and struck him in the stomach, knocking the wind from him. His right hand slipped; he wrapped his arm around the rope and gripped it tight. Now he hung from the rope handrail, dangling past the deck of the bridge, gasping for air.

Kat advanced past him, not heeding the bridge's movement. The last guard scrambled to his feet, trying to free his spear, which had stuck between two planks. He yanked it up just in time to fend off Kat.

"Get up," Kat ordered.

Mangos rolled his eyes, afraid to let go of the rope to grab the bridge. His heart pounded, and he found it hard to breathe.

"You killed Jarin!" the guard yelled, his eyes wide.

"It's a long way down," Kat said. "He's not dead yet." She turned her head so Mangos could see her profile. "Get up!"

Mangos heaved his legs up, doing no more than kicking the underside of the bridge. He tried again, managing to get one leg onto the bridge. He lay, mostly over air, one arm entangled on the railing, looking down.

The bridge rocked and swayed as Kat and the guard fought.

Letting go with his left hand, Mangos grabbed the bridge and pulled himself over, the railing rope rising as the bridge took more of his weight. As he stood nearly upright, he unwrapped his other arm.

"I dropped my sword," he said.

Kat glanced back. "Now we can kill this guy." She lunged, knocking aside the guard's spear and laying open his arm. She dropped her blade low, drew it across his leg, and stepped forward to shoulder him off the bridge.

He threw his spear so he could grab the railing. Kat plucked the spear from the air and threw it to Mangos. Then she cut the guard's hands from the rail, sending him screaming down to the valley.

"Well, doesn't this make all kinds of problems," the man with the crossbow said. He pointed the crossbow at Mangos. "I can kill you," he assured them.

"But you can't crank that thing fast enough to prevent me from killing you," Kat said.

“I could kill you instead.”

“And face the same fate from me,” Mangos added.

“The moment you pull that trigger you’re a dead man,” Kat said.

“Who joins me?”

“You don’t have to die,” Mangos said. “Stop harvesting berries, and there isn’t a problem.”

The man sneered. “Except how I would make a living. Besides, the problem really isn’t my picking berries.”

“Truce?” asked Kat.

“For how long?”

Kat brushed her hair back. “Until we can get close enough to kill you?”

The man snorted. “Two hours.”

“Fine.”

The man lowered the crossbow. Kat sheathed her sword. After a moment Mangos grounded his spear. “I’m not giving up on this job,” he whispered.

“Of course not,” whispered Kat. “But he thinks he’s safe from us in two hours. I want to know why.” She crossed over to the *holmen* and said, “If your picking the berries isn’t the problem, what is?”

“Lijas,” the man introduced himself. He didn’t answer Kat’s question, instead saying, “I started in the dye business. I made the grain alcohol that’s added to the dye to keep it liquid. They don’t need much, three gallons or so a year. The lads drink a lot, but not enough to keep me busy.”

“And what does this have to do with our problem?” Mangos asked.

“I began experimenting with the ridge berries. I fermented them, which made a fair wine. Then I distilled it, which made a better brandy. Then I accidentally allowed the brandy to freeze, which

serves to distill it again, and something happened. Fire in the first distillation, ice in the second, and the result is incredible. I cut it with meltwater from Talhorn and call it Imperial Brandy. I can set my price.”

“And you’re making too much,” Mangos said. “The birds don’t have enough berries to eat.”

Lijas shook his head. “Here’s the thing. Harlin’s dye can only be made from Minix bird guano after the bird has eaten ridge berries. No berries, no guano. But, the berries only grow in soil fertilized by the guano. No guano, no berries. They have taken so much guano from the ridge and *holmen* that the bushes are sickly and don’t produce much fruit.”

“So you’re saying it’s not your fault.”

“It’s not. When Harlin took over from his father several years ago, he almost doubled his dye production. Now the bushes won’t even grow on half the *holmen* anymore because the soil is too thin.”

It made sense, and Mangos believed him. It meant stopping Lijas wouldn’t solve Harlin’s problem, but sometimes the world worked that way. There were no right or wrong sides of issues, only the side you were on.

“That doesn’t change the fact that your making brandy means fewer berries for the birds to eat,” Kat said.

Lijas nodded. “Essentially, yes. But in another five years, there won’t be any Ridge Berry bushes, so I don’t see how it matters.”

Thousands of Minix birds rose squawking from the ridge as workers crossed the bridges to begin scraping guano.

Lijas shook his head. “Stupid. They scare the birds off the ridge and *holmen*, so the guano falls into the valley. They should wait until afternoon, when the birds are done feeding.”

Mangos ran his hand through his hair. “Doesn’t some of the guano always fall in the valley?”

“Of course, but do you know how much guano it takes to make even one flask of dye? No, you obviously don’t. I use in a season fewer berries than it takes to make the guano they waste by harvesting in the morning.”

Mangos struggled to sort this out.

Kat shuffled her feet a little, moving the soil as if to see how thin it was. “Haven’t you talked to Harlin?”

“Haven’t *you* talked to Harlin?” Lijas countered. “You know how productive that is. It got me nothing, and I had to hire Jarin and Charl when somebody set fire to my still.”

Mangos knew exactly who the “somebody” was.

“Huh,” Kat said, clearly thinking. “It’s our job to shut you down.”

“Walk away,” Lijas said. “You can kill me once the truce is up, but it’ll kill you. Walk away now, and you might live.”

“Ha! You think you can kill us?” Mangos thumped the spear on the ground.

Lijas set down his crossbow. “I don’t need to. Those lads you killed were kin to half the workers up here, and friends to most of the rest. You’ll have a dozen men after you as soon as word gets out. Stay around until our truce ends and you’ll never make it off the *holmen*.”

“Their kin must work for Harlin then,” said Mangos. Why would family members work for bitter rivals, especially ones fighting each other?

“Course. That’s the reason I hired them. They’d not kill their kin, and their kin wouldn’t kill them. Everybody makes the right noises and nothing changes. That suits me even if it doesn’t suit Harlin.”

“But they tried to kill us,” Mangos pointed out.

Lijas smiled, looking a little sad. “I didn’t say they were smart.”

“And that’s why Harlin hired people from outside the valley,” Kat said. “Because he wanted change.”

Lijas pointed to the other *holmen*. “Looks like word is getting out. The mob might be here before the truce ends. I’ll warn you Jarin’s brother is rash enough to cut bridges and Harlin be damned.”

Mangos took a step toward the bridge. “I’d rather not be trapped on a *holmen*.”

Kat nodded. She stepped close to Lijas. “I’ll not break the truce, but neither will I walk away from a job. We’re not done here.” She spun and led the way across the bridge.

Mangos followed, watching the men gathering on other *holmen*, mapping ways along the network of bridges, trying to figure a path to the valley’s side.

There were two bridges to the valley side, one to the west, closer to Talhorn mountain, the other further east. They wanted the eastern one.

“We can take them,” Mangos said as he picked up his pack.

Kat glanced over her shoulder. “Unless they cut the bridges.”

“There is that,” Mangos frowned.

“Or they have bows.”

“That too.”

The sound of pounding footsteps and creaking ropes surrounded Mangos as he and Kat raced from *holmen* to *holmen*. Workers shouted the news to other workers, who pulled themselves up like insects to the tops of the *holmen*.

The men gathered in twos and threes before moving together to form larger groups. They brandished pickaxes and iron bars, and a couple had small bird bows.

“Go east,” Mangos said. Any fight would slow them until they could be overwhelmed. He began to run.

“Cut them off!” Four men ran toward the eastern bridge. “Stop them from escaping!”

“West!” called Mangos, as their escape east was blocked. They veered off, seeking a way around, but other groups converged.

Mangos led them further west, from *holmen* to *holmen*, the pursuit getting closer and more numerous.

“Not that way!” Kat shouted.

Mangos stopped at the beginning of a long bridge. There was no other way off the opposite *holmen*.

An arrow buzzed past, glancing off the rock at his feet. A bowman stood on the only other bridge, drawing another arrow.

There were three ways off the *holmen*: one blocked by a bowman, one led to a dead end, and a mob of angry men closed from the way they had come.

Mangos rushed the bowman, shouting wildly. The man shrank away, his eyes wide, as he loosed his arrow.

“Give way.” Mangos swung his spear like a stave, knocking the man aside and jarring the bow from his hands. He rushed past, only pausing to ensure Kat followed. The way to the western bridge was clear.

The long bridge bounced under their feet. The arm of the valley neared.

Mangos’ foot shot through a board, he lurched, hitting the bridge hard, knocking the air from his lungs and wrenching his leg. He pulled himself forward, jerking his leg out of the hole. “By the gods of Eastwarn!” he swore. He tried to bend his leg, but pain shot through his thigh. He reached up to grab the hand rope. Kat grabbed him under his shoulder and yanked him up.

“Run!” she urged him.

Using his spear as a crutch, Mangos ran as well as he could. The pursuing men slowed to cross the gap he had made, so Kat and he reached the end of the bridge well ahead of them.

The only path along the valley arm was a narrow, rocky trail; the fall off into the valley was harrowing, the slope to the top of the valley's arm unclimbable.

A half-dozen men crossed the eastern bridge and turned toward them, blocking the path.

"Left!" Kat called. "Go left!"

There didn't seem to be much choice. Mangos turned toward Talhorn Mountain.

The trail narrowed as they approached the face of Talhorn. The sound of the wind ripping through the Devil's Arse grew louder.

Muscles aching, breath laboring, Mangos followed Kat up the trail. Shouts and footsteps grew closer, and he didn't want to look back. He wished he knew where the trail led, besides up.

The air felt cooler as the wind eddied around the ice ledge. They were beside it now, a dirty white projection, impossibly large, like a giant growth.

They reached the ledge proper. It wasn't a solid sheet, as Mangos had supposed, but was riddled with cracks and fissures from the summer heat. "You're not thinking of crossing this."

"You want to stop and die?" Kat tested the ice.

A thin layer of meltwater made the surface slick. Mangos' feet slid, and he found himself leaning on the spear, going too slowly, he thought, and a glance back confirmed that their pursuers were only dozen yards behind.

Mangos could almost feel the ice shake from the force of the wind passing beneath it. The ledge sloped down, just a little, and it didn't take much imagination to envision sliding off into space to ride the wind until dropping seven thousand feet. The sharp edge looked too much like a knife.

Somebody screamed. Mangos snapped his head sideways and watched one of their pursuers slide down the ledge, scrambling to

catch hold. The man gathered speed as he neared the edge and launched into the air where he and his screams were lost in the howling wind.

Mangos swallowed hard.

They neared the highest point on the ledge, and he realized the tremors were not his imagination. The fissures here ran deep. While the far side was only sixty yards away, he could not see a trail.

“Give me your keg,” Kat shouted over the wind.

“What?”

“Give me the keg!”

Mangos shrugged off his pack and opened it. “How did you know I had one?”

“How could I not? It weighs your pack like a lead bar and gurgles when you run.”

She took the keg of alcohol, fumbling a little from its weight, to a fissure near the mountain’s face.

The men were nearer, jeering and threatening, but walking carefully on the slick ice. They did not need to hurry.

Kat lifted the keg and smashed it in the fissure.

“Hey!” shouted Mangos, but she ignored him. She tore the end from her shirt and took a fire starter from her pack. She squeezed the handles, making sparks fly. After several tries, she caught the rag on fire and tossed it into the fissure. She jumped back as flames and heat roared out after her.

“You’re burning—”

“Time to go,” Kat said. “If this works, we don’t want to be here.”

Mangos took the hint. He reversed his spear, took two steps and drove it into the ice, pushing himself forward. He threw himself down,

sliding by their pursuers who, taken by surprise, could only flail wildly and curse as he shot past.

He pulled himself off the ice the same time as Kat. He didn't need to be told to run.

A crack, like the crack of an angry god's whip, ripped through the air. Mangos turned in time to see the ice ledge slide down the face of the mountain. There was a grumbling, a rumbling, as it twisted and began to crumble.

The men grabbed whatever they could, but it all fell with them. If they screamed, the fall of the ice covered it.

"By the gods of Eastwarn," Mangos whispered, though that, too, was drowned out.

When the last rocks and chunks of ice settled, it was silent.

Silent.

No shouts. No screams. No wind.

Mangos looked down at the mass now plugging the Devil's Arse. "There are a dozen men in there." He looked at Kat, shocked that they could have been so quickly wiped away.

It seemed the ice fall had sucked all the sound from the valley and it was only slowly coming back. The remaining men on the *holmen* murmured to each other, casting black looks at Mangos and Kat, but nothing more.

"You killed my men," Harlin said, his face full of fury.

"We're here to get paid," Kat said.

Mangos spun to look at her in surprise. "What?"

"Paid? For killing my men?" Harlin growled like an angry dog.

"For solving your problem," Kat said. "You said you didn't care how we did it."

“I didn’t expect you to kill *my* men.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised,” Kat retorted. “Bring our pay. I’ll explain.”

Mangos couldn’t figure what might have changed other than a dozen men dying in an avalanche. That hadn’t affected Lijas at all.

Harlin grumbled as he followed them over the bridges until they reached Lijas’ *holmen*.

“You’re here to kill me,” Lijas said, holding up his crossbow. “You’re right, though, the one I’d choose to kill is Harlin.”

“What? You treacherous scum!” Harlin ducked behind Mangos.

“I didn’t bring him for you to kill,” Kat said. “You are to agree not to gather ridge berries from the ridge or any *holmen*.”

“In return for my life?” Lijas curled his lip.

Kat turned, shielding her hands from Harlin, and pointed down. Lijas furrowed his brow. Kat pointed down again, then toward Talhorn. Lijas half-turned to look at the mountain.

With a sudden smile, Lijas cleared his throat. “Ah, yes, I’ll not gather any berries from the ridge, or the *holmen*.”

Mangos blinked. He opened his mouth in surprise and snapped it shut. He wanted to ask why, but didn’t trust himself to speak.

“You mean that?” Harlin stepped out from behind Mangos. “Of course. You’re not stupid. Good.” He scratched his head. “Very good.” He glared at Lijas. “Don’t think of changing your mind.”

Lijas lifted a hand and shook his head. “It’s all yours.”

Harlin sniffed. “Make sure you remember it.” A sly smile crossed his face as he regarded Kat and Mangos. “I can get new men. Well done.” He reached into his tunic and drew out a small flask. “Here you are – a royal reward.”

Mangos took it. “What is this?”

But Harlin had already turned away and crossed to the next *holmen*.

“What is this?” Mangos repeated.

“A royal reward,” Lijas said. “A quart of Royal Dye.”

“*Dye?* We risked our lives for a quart of dye?” He drew back his hand to fling it off the *holmen*, but Kat gently took it from him.

“We may as well keep it,” she said. “It is rare, after all.”

Mangos rolled his eyes and turned to Lijas. The vintner stood with his crossbow pointed down, staring after Harlin.

Lijas laughed, softly. There was no chance Harlin could hear. “Ah, Harlin, you poor fool!” He laughed again, dropping his crossbow. “Come!” He beckoned to Mangos and Kat. He clapped each on the back as they stepped from the bridge. “You two may as well have worked for me!”

“What will you do now?” Mangos asked.

“Do? I have the whole valley!” Lijas threw out his arms and smiled broadly. “Think of it! Hundreds of years of guano building up! And now that there is no wind, I can plant Ridge Berry bushes. I will have the entire valley, while Harlin is stuck on these tiny little *holmen!*”

Incredulous, Mangos started to laugh as well. The sun was setting, silhouetting the solid bulk of Talhorn, the mysterious hole plugged by the avalanche.

“It will take a few years before the bushes are old enough to produce berries, and I’ll want to hire guards in case Harlin dislikes our arrangement,” Lijas said. He shrugged. “But come, my friends. Harlin has given you a royal reward, let me give you an Imperial one.”

Mangos grinned. “I’ll drink to that.”

Jim Breyfogle currently resides in Pennsylvania. When he isn't writing he is gathering an army of terra-cotta warriors with which to aggravate his English Mastiff—thus far, the dog still wins.

ACTION!

EXCITEMENT!

MUD MEN!

On a distant planet, a man must choose between love and hate. And where his choice leads him might not be where he expects...

GREY CAT BLUES

by JD Cowan



Breaking the Accords

By AMY POWER JANSEN

When the Trigai Empire threatens to bring destruction upon her kingdom, Askia, Junglespeaker of the Kawari, is ordered by her queen to call up old spirits to turn the tides of battle! Only one Kawari spirit remains, however... The most powerful!

Askia tracked the refugees' progress. From where she stood, they looked like so many ants flowing from the jungle and into the port city of Qimba. But she knew each ant was one more person fleeing the Trigai Empire.

"Still they come," Zakoi said, joining Askia in the balcony. "At first they came only in the shade of the morning and evening. Now they come even in the heat of the day." He sighed. "What do you think, Junglespeaker?"

"It is not my decision to make."

"But if it were."

"It is not."

Zakoi shook his head. "It is not my decision to make either, but this is my city, my people."

"What would you do?" Askia asked. She watched as the man shifted his weight, his cloth of blue and long gold chains swaying against his dark skin.

"I would go south, to our kin. I have already sent my heirs. Here we are stuck between the leopard and the viper. We may raise the viper to kill the leopard, but in the end she will kill us too."

Askia allowed the silence to lengthen. She shared Zakoi's view: better to let the spirits sleep. But she could not voice this—not before their queen made her decision and not after.

Ku, queen of the Kawari, stalked onto the balcony, into the sun and out to the edge. The strong muscles of her shoulders rippled in the light. Unlike the king, she wore little adornment: only a loincloth at her

waist, made from the skin of a leopard she'd slain, and the ceremonial headdress of her position. The headdress covered more than the loincloth, reaching its plaited tendrils down over Ku's shoulders.

As the queen, Ku ruled the river cities and commanded their armies, while Zakoi, as a descendant of the line of Kawari kings, commanded the coastal cities and dictated trade with their friendly neighbours.

"Look!" Ku instructed, pointing out at the refugees. Her voice drew Askia across the balcony, with Zakoi close behind. "Look at my people. Why should they leave their homes? Why should they flee?" She thumped her left hand down on the baked-sand wall. She glared at the king.

"It grieves my heart as much as yours," he said.

"No, it does not. Here, your tree-lined roads are still thronged by your own people; here, you live in your own palace. You have not lived to see the work and blood of your ancestors—our ancestors—despoiled by the presence of their enemies." She paused. "But you will. Unless we stop this... madness."

"This is the way of empires," Zakoi said, shaking his head. "One rises, another falls. Your way is... it is unnatural. It is madness."

"Madness to prevent our people being driven into the sea, washed onto the beaches where we must beg for the scraps from another kingdom's kills? No, I will not see us fall yet further. I would fight."

"We cannot fight the Trigai."

"We must raise the Jungle's spirits and take back our place."

"We raise ours, and they will raise theirs. We will plunge the world back into the madness of before the Accords. How many will have to die? How many generations lost before the spirits will be chained back to the earth?"

"We can raise weaker ones. Ones that she," Ku motioned to Askia, "can control."

Zakoi frowned. He shook his wrists in frustration, and the gold bangles tinkled. “That would be greater madness still. Their weaker ones are stronger than ours. And if they raised Nevilim, we would be done for long before we could raise... her.”

Ku’s lips spread into a smile, revealing teeth a startling white against her black skin. “So you agree then. We should raise her now. Take the strategic advantage.”

Zakoi shook his bangles. “I do not like raising the jungle-spirits... but if it must be done, then at least it should not be done by half-measures. That will accomplish nothing.”

Askia packed the tools of her trade: an ancient pendant passed down through the Junglespeaking line, a few rags made from a leopard’s skin, and a necklace of assorted teeth. Only the pendant, and maybe her staff, retained any virtue, any power. She’d been taught that a Junglespeaker’s mind was her greatest tool. Her master had been fond of reminding her that it was not Kukuray’s staff, nor any other ornament, that had allowed him to chain Selifi. Of course, her master had added that the people needed the ornaments. It convinced them of the Junglespeaker’s authority.

Few people would witness Askia’s task. Only Zakoi and a few warriors would accompany her to the place where the ceremony would be performed. They couldn’t risk the Trigai realising what they were doing. If they did, their spirits would race across the landscape before Askia could complete the ceremony, and the last of her people would be wiped out faster even than the Trigai army could accomplish the task.

Askia sighed, turning over the well-worn pendant and traced its sigil. Her task would have been much easier if, like the Trigai, the Kawari had maintained their ties to the spirits. The Trigai had honoured the Accords, but they had also spilled out sacrifices binding their spirits to the earth they had conquered. Their weaker spirits, of which they had many, were so close to the surface that the Trigai Junglespeakers would need little energy to bring them back.

Askia was only one, and bringing Selifi back would probably cost her more than it had Kukuray to bind Selifi in the first place.

Askia paced across the ground the warriors had cleared, tapping the metal that had been laid across the grove. The sigils chiselled into the metal, their golden shine dulled by age, were like those on her pendant: vines wound around the circular edge, and the face of a great cat stared out from the centre. Eagle's claws clung to a vine, and female forms hid in the cat's mane.

The ritual was simple but long: Askia would allow her abilities to flow through her, to anchor themselves in the metal. It would be days before her mind would engage in the process. First, the metal had to soak up her strength—and for that Askia need only be present and keep her energy up.

Askia sat down, crossing her legs, and lulled herself into a meditative state while her strength seeped into the metal.

After many hours, a dark mist oozed out of the metal. Askia motioned to the closest warrior, but the man's eyes were locked on the mist.

"Help me," Askia croaked. Mucus slicked her throat. Blood pounded in her ears. The warrior glanced at Askia, his eyes widening when he realised that Askia had called to him. The man approached, his eyes flitting between Askia and the mist.

"Help me get further away."

The man lifted her up, supporting her weight as they crept further into the jungle. The other warriors followed their retreat, as did Zakoi. Askia sank down onto the ground, resting her back against a tree. She could still make out the mist spreading across the jungle floor, but they were far enough now that it would not reach them.

The mist formed a circle and started to build, layer upon layer, spiralling upwards to the thick canopy overhead. The vines around the edge of the sigil slithered forth from of the metal, coiling upwards, forming a dense cone. And then, as the smoke reached the canopy,

the vines parted, and a woman's form climbed from the eight-foot smoke-chrysalis. Even at the distance of ten or so strides, Askia could see the glowing, cat-like pupils, and she shuddered.

A female figure walked out of the mist, which had begun to dissipate, her eyes locked on Askia. As it approached, Askia saw that despite the human shape, the differences didn't end at the eyes: her slim cat-feet managed a graceful elegant stride, the hands, curled and clawed as they were, betrayed a savage grace.

"You summoned me," the smoke-woman said, her voice low. Her eyes held Askia's from above.

Askia tried to stand using her staff but staggered under her own weight. An arm caught her under the elbow and levered her up. From the thick scent of perfume, she knew it was Zakoi.

"Yes," Askia answered the spirit. "Our people need you."

"Do they?" Selifi raised one claw to her face, flicking her vine-like hair from it. "Convenient. You bind me and raise me at will?"

Askia swallowed.

Selifi laughed, and the jungle swayed. "You are lucky my cause is bound to yours, then. Your people have been pushed up against the coast, as has my land. Even here," she glanced around, "the jungle is no longer wholly mine."

A vine slithered down from a low-lying branch, stretching across Selifi's shoulders.

"Yes, yes, I know," Selifi said to the vine as she patted it. "But it's true. Much as you'd like to be all mine."

Her eyes flicked briefly back to the warriors behind Askia as her claw soothed the vine. Then they paused. Selifi's eyes narrowed, the lids closing in from the sides instead of from above and below.

"I recognise that staff." She shook her head, pursed her lips. Then she smiled. "But you have not the strength of the one who wielded it first."

Askia pulled the staff closer, keeping her eyes trained on Selifi.

“I will travel with you,” Selifi said.

The warriors guarding the western gate nodded Askia through, but their eyes were not trained not on the her as much as on the dark cloud enfolding her. As they progressed through the city, a hush descended as people stopped and stared. A child tried to run forward, but her mother caught her, pulling the child back from the street and then dragging the child back into their home.

Askia felt their gazes tight upon her. What were they thinking? Was she an emblem of hope? No, there was no cheering. Did they fear her and what she brought with her? Would they blame her? She was the queen’s emissary; she had followed her ruler’s command. And the king walked next to her, his eyes raking the crowd.

When they reached the palace, the mist started to thin as if Selifi was stretching herself out, clinging to the walls and doorways. As they entered the audience chamber, a square room whose walls tended upwards to a smaller square ceiling, the mist crept forward. Ku, standing on her dais in her loincloth and headdress, nodded to Askia before focusing her attention on the mist.

The queen stepped down from the dais, a glimmer of a smile tugging at her lips. Ku lowered herself onto her haunches and laced her fingers through the mist.

The mist snapped back to reveal Selifi, whose long vinelike hair covered her body down below her waist. Her brown-green skin glimmered in the uneven light of the chamber, let in by a small overhead opening. Her feral eyes glinted at the queen.

Askia drew in her breath, grateful for once not to be the centre of Selifi’s attention. Seldom had Selifi deigned to acknowledge the warriors, or even Zakoi, but in the presence of the Kawari queen, Selifi’s attention had finally shifted.

“Welcome,” Ku said, her deep voice booming through the room. She spread her arms wide.

Selifi turned away from Ku and paced across the room, her eyes briefly flicking to Askia as she passed a hair's breadth in front of the Junglespeaker. "Why have I been brought back?" Selifi's voice was softer than the queen's but as resonant. The spirit stopped pacing to glare at the queen.

Ku lowered her arms. "The Kawari have need of you." She strode closer to Selifi. "The Trigai have taken our lands, your lands. They have driven us almost into the sea." Her voice seethed with anger.

Selifi laughed, a laugh that set every nerve on edge. Askia saw the blaze in her queen's eyes. Askia glanced between the queen and the spirit, silently urging the queen to exercise restraint.

But whether the queen heard the silent urgings or not, she held her temper, squaring her shoulders as she drew herself up. "You will help us."

"Yes," Selifi said, treating it as a question. "For now."

Askia looked down at the battle maps Zakoi had explained to her. They were alone in Zakoi's study, an expansive room set into one side of the palace wall. Large windows let in the cool evening wind to caress their skin.

Like Askia, Zakoi was to remain in the city while much of the army pushed out as Selifi cleared the way. None of them knew what to expect, but Selifi had warned them to stay back until she had secured the area. She would push out to the river, the traditional border separating the Kawari from the Trigai.

"Ku tried to convince Selifi to go further," Zakoi said, "but she refused. When she pushed her on it, Selifi dissipated, leaving the echo of her laughter."

Askia's muscles tightened at the thought of Selifi mocking her queen. But at the same time, she approved of Selifi's refusal to push further. Ku wanted too much; her desires had always been more closely matched to one living in the golden era of the Kawari, rather than their twilight years.

“Do you think we can trust her?”

Askia considered the question, one hand trailing down the length of her staff. “Yes. If the Trigai take the land, they will sow it for their spirits, not her. As we are forced back, so is she. Her interests lie with ours.”

“But for how long? What happens when the land is retaken?”

Askia met the eyes of the king, a small smile creasing her lips. “That’s not what worries me. I worry about Nevilim’s return. Surely the Trigai will not be long in summoning him.”

“That is the first smile I’ve seen on your face for a while,” Zakoi said, raising an eyebrow. Then he sobered, “We may have to summon more spirits. Are you fit for it?”

Askia nodded. “Selifi restored much of my strength after I summoned her. I feel... odd. But I can do it.”

“Good.” Zakoi stretched out his arms. “I think I had best be getting some rest. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?”

Askia was not yet ready for bed. She drew up a stool and sat on it, staring at the maps furred out in front of her. Why had Ku excluded her from the conference? She had done what Ku had asked. She’d always done what Ku had asked.

It was true that Askia had never been part of the war council, but for the same reason Zakoi had never been—they were behind the lines, too far to be a part of things. Here in Qimba, it should have been different. Zakoi had been summoned to the council, and Askia had waited for the summons that never came.

“You will not be able to summon any more spirits,” a voice whispered.

Askia glanced over her shoulder. Dark mist coned next to one of the shelves of scrolls. Selifi stepped out of the shadows. Except for her eyes, she looked very different. Instead of the vine-like hair, her hair was close to her head, like small flower buds—similar to the hair

of ordinary women. She wore a cloth that looked like knotted vines, and her hands and feet were quite human. “The others are gone.”

“Gone?” Askia shook her head. “I knew it. We should have tended the grounds as the Trigai do.”

“No!” Selifi’s cry sounded involuntary. She moved around the table, tracing fingers across the map. “No. That is not the way. Besides most of the Trigai spirits are gone also.” She curved her finger down the river boundary.

“But the sacrifices...”

Selifi gazed into her eyes, her golden orbs. “Blood is not the natural food of a tree-spirit.” She closed her eyes, extinguishing the light. “You fed us on it, and many developed a taste for it. Many... all, I should say. You trained us to hunger for it, but it was not true nourishment. So they have faded. All but me and one other.”

“Nevilim.”

“Yes,” Selifi nodded. “My strength ebbed over the ages. But his—his has not. He is the oldest of spirits and has fed on the souls of humans so long that to him it *is* nourishment. He’s hardly even a tree-spirit anymore, so corrupted has his purpose become.”

“How will you defeat him?” Askia asked, her hands clutching the table.

“Perhaps I will not. Perhaps he will defeat me.”

Selifi coursed through the earth, revelling in its warm embrace. How close her confines had been when chained, how tightly the Kawari had allowed her to be suppressed! She stretched herself out to the edges of her former realm.

Despite her mission, she allowed herself to brush each tree as she passed, reminding every part of the jungle who she was. The trees reached out to her, hungry for her presence, her protection. It had been so long since the trees had felt the embrace of a tree-spirit.

As much as she delighted in their reception, she knew she could not linger, could not caress each branch, each root, could not marvel at her old friends' offspring. She had set her sights on the river, her old boundary, and to the river she would go.

On the surface above her, Trigai drums beat back and forth. The warriors readied for their march on Qimba. In their camps, a low battle hum thrummed. Junglespeakers roamed through the camps, fulfilling their role as guides and mentors. They assured the warriors of the jungle's love for them, of her approbation.

Selifi reached the river, and the earth rumbled as her exultation shuddered through her. She turned her sight back on the jungle and called to her trees. The trees assured her of their acquiescence to her every desire, their eagerness to please.

A shout went up amongst the Trigai as the jungle seemed to bend towards them in benediction. Battle cries rose to the canopy above; the canopy shifted closer as branches interlaced. The battle cries faltered and died.

The trees closed in as trunks packed together, cutting the Trigai war camp into darkening pockets.

Selifi heard the enemy warriors scream. Branches bound together to push them towards her, thrusting them deep into the ground. The screaming stopped.

Askia stood on the bluff, staring down at the river beneath her. Never in her life had she seen the river that had marked the ancestral boundary between the Trigai and the Kawari. And she had never expected to. The expansion of the Trigai had begun in her grandmother's time, and all Askia had ever hoped was that she would not stand witness to the Kawari's last gasp.

Even in the half-light of evening, the sheer breadth of the river and the strength of its current reminded her more of the sea than any of the tributaries or streams she had seen before. The evening wind

combated the current, whipping the water into tufts of foam reminiscent of waves.

“Have you seen any sign of movement on the far bank?” Zakoi asked. Askia started at the sound of the voice that had cracked the evening’s silence.

Askia peered into the deepening gloom. The shore was too far to see much of anything. “Too far.”

“Hmmp. Even our scouts haven’t seen any sign of movement, not even at the bridge. They have retreated to Nevilim’s temple, I am certain.”

“Why do we not pursue?”

“Selifi has forbidden it. When the queen threatened to cross, Selifi said she would pull down the bridge.”

Askia wondered what she should say to that—Selifi had restored them, but now not even the queen could go against her. What sort of tyrant had they raised?

“The Trigai have more boats than us,” Zakoi said with a shrug.

Askia glanced at him. The king looked out across the river, but Askia was certain it was not rivers, or bridges, or boats that occupied his mind.

“She insisted on you being brought up from Qimba.” Zakoi smiled. “So perhaps not all her advice is bad.”

Askia stiffened and then forced her muscles to relax. Ku had embraced her so warmly and readily that Askia had hoped the queen had called her to her side.

“I should rest.”

“So should I.” Zakoi turned back to the jungle, and the Kawari camp pegged out below them. “Who knows what tomorrow will bring?”

Selifi roared, shaking the jungle and forcing warriors apart. She locked the trees together in a thick barrier, parsing the battle into two parts. Warriors swarmed around the barrier, but it was not their passage she sought to block.

Nevilim forced his way beneath the earth, enticing trees, claiming ground. She pushed back at him, encouraged trees to revolt. But his promises of blood, of nurture, seduced more and more.

Selifi had been pushed back from the river. The sacrifices of the Trigai made the ground easy prey for Nevilim. Selifi had given more and more ground, though she and the Kawari still controlled twice the area they had held before they had launched their offensive against the Trigai.

Nevilim and Selifi wrestled beneath the ground. She dragged him down, worming herself around him. She knew how to defeat spirits. She knew!

And Nevilim taunted her to do it, to finish him. "Do it," he whispered to her, his spirit vibrating against hers. "Come on, Selifi. Do it!"

"No!" she screamed, shaking the jungle again. If she absorbed him into herself, she would defeat him, but then he would be in her, part of her. His anger would be hers. His bloodlust.

Her spear long abandoned, Askia fought her Trigai combatant machete-to-machete. The two warriors wound their way around each other, wove through trees. Deep scarring below the warrior's eyes declared him a Trigai Junglespeaker. He lunged, and Askia retreated. Then Askia turned the tables with a quick leftward feint and a swift follow-up.

The Trigai Junglespeaker bared his teeth at Askia then spat in her eyes. She stumbled backwards, eluding the swings of her enemy's blade.

The earth shifted beneath them, and both warriors fell to the ground. Tree roots clawed their way out. They grabbed the enemy Junglespeaker's leg. His eyes wild, the man hacked at the limb until

the root released him. Askia sprang forward, slicing her machete into her enemy's exposed chest. She pulled it out, and the man's body slumped. As the sun had risen overhead, and the Kawari had been forced back, Askia was using the trees' erratic behaviour to their advantage as well as she could.

She glanced around, but the battle had moved on. She retrieved her spear and then slunk further back into the jungle, hoping to find a vantage point to gauge where best to rejoin the battle. A wall of trees extended to her left, and only a few grunts emanated from that direction. To her right, the fighting sounded fiercer but in the whirling dance through which the battle had raged, where would the Kawari forces be concentrated?

Nestled behind some rocks, Askia peered down at the battle. The Kawari had been pressed back into three separate groups by the Trigai. Of these groups, the largest was furthest from Askia, and she was unlikely to reach them safely. The group closest to her was also large and still held off the Trigai. To her right, the smallest group struggled under an outcrop similar to the one she hid behind.

Askia knew she could reach them, but it was unlikely she could tilt the odds. The Trigai warriors opposing them wore the dark tattoos that proclaimed them their king's elite. A scrap of colour caught Askia's eye. The queen's pennant. Ku was in there.

Her heart beat against the bounds of her chest. Askia slipped down the boulders, shifting back into the shadows of the jungle. Light as a panther, she ran through the trees, ducking below the vines that reached down to ensnare her.

Askia balanced her spear in one hand and drew her machete with the other. She took a deep breath and ran, her lithe muscles responding with renewed vigour as she catapulted herself off the rocks and into the midst of her enemies.

Behind her, the Kawari managed a ragged cheer. Askia hurled herself against the enemy, stabbing with spear and slashing machete.

The Trigai gave ground, their eyes flicking between the whirling warrior in front of them and the rock from which she'd sprung.

Askia pressed her brief advantage taking one, two, three warriors down before the other Trigai realised no-one followed her, and they surged back against the Kawari. Askia fell back into the front ranks, not daring to glance to her sides or behind her to ascertain the position of the king.

Only when Ku let out her signature cry, deep and guttural, did Askia realise she fought alongside her queen. There was no one behind her, no layer to reinforce when they fell.

She fought on.

But the sheer mass of the Trigai forced them against the rock itself, where even the sunlight trickling from the canopy was shut out. In the darkness, the Kawari had the advantage, which is why Ku must have chosen this position to retreat to. But the advantage was too slight compared to the numbers of the Trigai.

Warrior after warrior fell until only Ku, Askia, and another warrior remained. Askia and the other warrior forced their bodies forward to form a shield around Ku, temporary as it was. Perhaps they would be relieved, even now. If only the queen could be saved.

A machete-blade bit into Askia's arm and she cried out, dropping her spear. She waved the machete, but the Trigai spears were too long, and she was forced onto the defence without her spear to wave aside those of her enemy.

The ground rocked beneath her. She kept her footing, while some of the Trigai fell back.

A vine slithered past her ankle, but she could not afford to look down. She would be unable to avoid it, and it would drag her down, leaving Ku unprotected.

But the vine did not tangle its way around her. It grabbed the Trigai warriors and threw them out of the outcrop. The warriors screamed

as vines and roots dangled them high in the air and then tossed them back to the ground.

A feminine figure stepped into the light beyond the outcrop. She strode towards Askia and Ku, her pet vines meting out punishment to the Trigai warriors.

“The battle is done,” Selifi said.

The warriors staggered out. Ku met her gaze. “We won?”

Selifi shook her head. “They have withdrawn, but we will not be able to reach the river again. Nevilim’s power is too entrenched.”

“But...” Askia said, her voice trailing off.

“This battle is over. Nevilim and I have disengaged, and each of us will remove the enemy soldiers from our land.”

“I did not authorise a truce.”

Selifi narrowed her eyes at Ku. “What makes you think I need your authorisation?”

“I am queen.”

“You are a fool...” Selifi paused. “This is my and Nevilim’s battle, and for now, we will rest.”

They marched back into camp, heads high and shoulders flung back, Askia cradling her injured arm. Ku had instructed that the day would be treated as a victory, whatever Selifi had said. There would be feasting and dancing deep into the night. The Trigai would hear the beat of Kawari drums and shudder.

Warriors lifted up their spear-arms to salute their queen. A ragged cheer tracked their progress through the camp.

In the very centre where the command shelter had been erected, Ku’s generals waited, standing proud and stony-faced. But Askia saw the worry lines creasing the temples of the warrior who approached them.

The warrior saluted Ku. "A glorious victory, my queen."

Ku nodded. "Glorious, indeed." She glanced to and fro along the honour guard standing in front of the shelter. "Is the king injured?"

"No..." The lines around the warrior's mouth tightened.

"Then where is he?" Ku tolerated no disrespect, even from her co-ruler.

"He is dead, my queen."

Ku gaped at the warrior, her face immobile. The warrior stepped back into his place. No one moved. Ku's mouth opened slightly, but she paused before she spoke, something Askia had never seen her do before. Then Ku nodded to herself as she reached an internal decision. "This victory we will dedicate to his memory. On his death, we will lay the foundation of the rebirth of the Kawari Empire. All will remember that it began here. The second, and brighter, ascendance of our people."

Silence settled back into the clearing. Ku's words, low as she had spoken them, had been heard and recorded by the warriors present. Askia knew that the words would be repeated through the camp, building themselves into a frenzy Zakoi would never have approved.

Askia knew there was no time to grieve. No time to mark the passing. Ku had set her course, to twist the king's death into a precursor to battles Askia was unsure they could wage, let alone win.

As Junglespeaker, Askia had a shelter to herself. She'd been attended by one of the few medicine-men with the army, who had stitched up her arm and checked her cuts and bruises.

Askia slouched against the side of the shelter, a pose she would never have allowed any other to see her in. It had been hours since the battle ended, but in her mind she remained trapped in that outcrop, between the rock and her enemies.

Ku had taken Askia aside, insisted that she bring Selifi into line. Askia could only tell Ku the truth: Junglespeakers raised spirits; one had been able to force them back. No-one controlled the spirits; no one ever had.

What now? Ku had asked.

“What now?” Askia repeated into the darkness.

“Now?” Selifi’s voice said.

Askia straightened. When had Selifi slunk into the shelter?

“Now, we wait. Nevilim cannot beat me, but I cannot beat him.”

“So these are the new boundaries?”

“No.” Selifi strode across the tent, her form a shadow against the structure’s side. “Both of us will grow stronger, but he will grow faster, fed by sacrifices. Then, when he knows he can defeat me, he will return.”

“Ku would sacrifice if she thought it would win her this war.”

Swift as shadows, Selifi moved to pinch Askia’s windpipe between her fingers. “Don’t you dare even suggest it! Don’t you dare. I will wish myself out of existence before I’ll become like... him.” She released Askia. “Why should I help your people? Why do I fight for you?”

“The land...”

She laughed, deep in her throat. “Nevilim would cede his land to me if I joined him.”

Askia’s breath caught.

“But I won’t.” She shook her head. “I never will. I never would.”

“I always thought you were the stronger. It’s what all the legends said.”

“I am.”

“Then why didn’t you defeat him? Why were we pushed back?”

“I could have defeated him.”

Askia didn’t say anything, her thoughts tangling together.

“Do you know what happens when one spirit defeats another?” Selifi’s head turned to Askia. “It consumes it, and all the power that was the defeated spirit’s becomes the victor’s. That’s how I became strong. I travelled with a young Junglespeaker. He traced spirits for me, weak enough for me to beat and over time I became stronger and stronger. The strongest of the spirits I defeated were those so tied to their land, so in love with it. They had never tasted blood. They were so pure, and I took their lives, their joy from them, for a ’Speaker who wooed me in my infancy.”

“Kukuray?” Askia whispered. Selifi had never been heard of before Kukuray’s time. When Kukuray was young, he had been exiled from the council of Junglespeakers for his ideas—he believed he knew a way to strengthen spirits that was better than sacrifice.

“Yes.” Selifi glanced down. “He was right. It is a better way to grow strong.” She nodded to herself. “But now there are no more spirits left. Only me and Nevilim, and I won’t consume him. My strength is greater but his... anger runs so deep, into his power. I can’t risk it. Our strengths combined would be too much, and the only difference between my consuming him and him me would be in the measure of the rage of the combined spirit. It would be terrible.”

Askia closed her eyes. “Is there no other way?”

Silence answered. But when Askia opened her eyes, she saw that Selifi stood there, her dark form outlined by the campfire light outside the shelter.

“Why did you jump off that outcrop today?” Selifi rounded on Askia, her catlike eyes blazing. “You could have died.”

“To save my queen.”

“You would not have saved her.” Selifi stalked towards Askia, yanked her to her feet. “If I hadn’t come, you would have been dead.

Just one more death.” She dismissively threw Askia aside.

Then Selifi’s form faded into shadow and dissipated.

Askia sat up, nursing the arm onto which she had fallen.

A hand shook Askia awake. She grabbed it, but it wasn’t human—a claw. Askia’s eyes sprung open. Huge, slitted orbs bore down on her.

“Wake up!”

Askia struggled up, pushing the claw away. “I’m awake. I’m awake.”

“Good, get your things and follow me.”

Selifi stalked out of the tent. The camp-fires had burned down to embers. Askia grabbed her spear and her machete, then left the tent and followed Selifi through the camp. When Selifi reached the edges, she wound her way away from the camp, managing to avoid both rings of sentries.

Askia tried to reach her side, but Selifi always managed to keep ahead. Close enough so that Askia could follow but not so close that they could speak. When Selifi stopped, it was near to where Askia suspected the Trigai sentries patrolled.

“What are we doing?”

“You want to defeat Nevilim? There is a way.”

“But then you...”

“No, there’s another way. Well, it’s the same way. But after defeating him, I shall will myself out of existence.”

Askia drew back. “Suicide.” It was a dirty word amongst the Kawari.

“In a way. I’m not human. I’d just stop.” Selifi shrugged. “No more spirits.”

Askia’s thoughts tumbled. If what Selifi had said earlier was true, this was the only way to avoid Nevilim destroying them. Without her,

the battles would be hard fought, but the Kawari might stand a chance. “Why are you telling me this?” She wondered if Selifi wanted to die.

“Because... I thought you’d understand. The land is broken, the spirits are broken. We’re not guardians of the Jungle as we were supposed to be. It’s time we... were gone.”

“Couldn’t we bind you and Nevilim, like Kukuray did?”

“I don’t like being bound, and... I don’t want to come back.”

Askia stared at Selifi, who ran her golden eyes over the jungle around them.

All Askia’s life, she’d held the course her queen had set, following it as a Junglespeaker should. This went not only against the orders of her queen but against a deep belief of their people.

Eventually, Askia asked, keeping her voice low, “Why do you need me?”

Selifi glanced back at Askia, exhaled and pulled her body straight. “The land has given itself over to Nevilim. It won’t let me back in. I need you to take me in.”

“How?”

“In that.” Selifi pointed at Askia’s staff.

Askia’s hands were slicked with sweat, and at the edge of her senses, Selifi’s presence tingled. It had been easier than expected to creep past the patrols. Askia’s hearing seemed heightened as if every susurrantion through the trees was exhaled into her ears.

Even at the river, their greatest obstacle, Askia had been able to slip onto a boat carrying supplies back to the main camp. The boat’s captain had peered into the gloom where Askia had concealed herself amongst the cargo, and his gaze had slipped past the Junglespeaker with nary a pause.

Askia glimpsed the temple of Nevilim through the trees. There was no city around it, no dwelling-places. It struck out of the ground, and covered in vines as it was, this tall, multi-tiered building seemed part of the jungle.

Junglespeakers crawled up and down the terraces of the temple through the day. Askia concealed herself in a thicket soon after arriving, and the 'Speakers betrayed little sign that they expected intruders. There were guards, but all more interested in keeping people in than out.

Askia's heart trembled in her chest as she watched Trigai tribesmen drag children into the bowels of the temple. The youngest fell, crying out for its mother, and a Trigai guard hauled him to his feet and thrust him into the temple. For a second, as the child's eyes raked the jungle behind the guard's back, Askia almost responded to the unspoken plea. And when their screams had echoed out of the temple, when all the 'Speakers had paused to bow, when the bell at the top of the temple had tolled, Askia berated her cowardice.

But she kept her vigil. These were not the first children to be dragged to Nevilim's altar, and if Askia failed today, they would not be the last.

Once night settled over the jungle and the 'Speakers had left the temple for their homes in the nearest villages, Askia extricated herself from her hiding place. The bracken below her feet crunched in the darkness, but no one appeared to intercept her.

Askia climbed the steps that ran up the face of the temple. The archway yawned above her as she entered.

The oblong room reminded her of the audience chamber at Qimba, bare and empty, except for the one object that held its central purpose: not a dais, but an altar. A cold stone altar, supported by etched feet—the only adornment in the room.

Askia approached the altar outlined in the moonlight spilling from the opening directly overhead. She threaded through the pools of blood clinging to the floor around the altar. When her bowels shifted

within, she closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. Then she continued her advance.

As she reached the altar, she sensed the presence brooding below. It seemed to pay Askia little heed but left her feeling menaced nonetheless.

Askia held out the staff, laying it across her palms over the altar. Then she called to Selifi.

Selifi oozed out of the staff, allowing her presence to unfold itself from the silent nothingness in which she'd hidden.

She reached out for Nevilim. His attention snapped to her, and she could feel his presence closing in around her. Having pulled herself free of the staff, Selifi pushed her power out in a great wave.

Nevilim's presence staggered back into the dank undergrowth below his temple. He growled. Selifi flung herself down at him, reaching for his essence with her spirit-like claws. She'd restrained herself for long enough. Now she would rend him apart.

Nevilim circled away from her, leading her away from the temple. Selifi raged, shaking the jungle about them. This might be Trigai territory, but with her power unfurled, few of the trees could resist her. She eluded their eager embraces, despising these broken trees, rank with bloodlust and anger. Instead, she hurled herself after her enemy, closing in about him.

"Selifi!" he called, her name a curse and an embrace on his foul tongue. "Selifi, why are you here?"

"To defeat you."

"To join with me?"

She roared after him, catching his spirit before it could retreat further. Her claws caught at him, and her fury laced at him. She engulfed him and pulled him deep within herself. She felt his uncertainty and then his exultation as she subsumed him.

Indignation shot through her. How dare a human use her for his ends? How dare she, Selifi, allow herself to be used? This was her earth, her world.

“No!” she screamed. “No! I will not be.” And with the cry, she turned her claws against herself.

The earth shuddered again. Above her, Askia heard the ceiling crack, the baked earth giving in to the shaking of the ground. It blocked the exit. She ran to another that led to a terrace. Below her, the temple walls were cracking, long jagged edges racing up its sides. She sprang down from ledge to ledge as it shook.

A length of terrace gave way as she landed on it, and she tumbled down and down. Her leg cracked as she reached the ground, but she pushed up on her staff and dragged herself along with it, trying to put as much distance between her and the temple as possible.

Askia crossed the river before dawn after finding a small boat in the first strands of morning light. The Trigai forces on the other side of the river seethed, but there was little purpose in their movements, and Askia eluded them, dragging her broken body along through the undergrowth.

Askia moved passed the last Trigai patrol and entered Kawari land again. She crawled to a tree behind her people’s lines and rested her body against it. Her people would find her, and then she would have to explain herself to Ku.

The queen would be angry, but Askia was not afraid. She’d done what needed doing. The spirits were gone.

Amy Power Jansen lives in Johannesburg, South Africa with her husband, Stephen. She works in the financial services industry and escapes to worlds weird and wonderful whenever she gets the chance. Her stories have previously appeared in Abyss & Apex, Perihelion SF, Bloodbond, Myriad Lands: Volume 2, Orthogonal, Deep Magic and Futuristica Volume 2.

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The Dream Lords

By DONALD JACOB UITVLUGT

The New Gods have descended upon the plateau of Leng and made it their home in the twilight of the Old Ones... As Zain pursues his outlaw brother, they feast on the nightmares of men, plotting and scheming for dominance over the Eldritch Earth!

Zain's nose wrinkled as he gazed down from the mountain pass upon the village below. Two longhouses dominated the valley, the rough-hewn boards on one painted a bright crimson, the other an imperious blue. One house of ill repute in a village was bad enough, but two? Distasteful.

"Just the sort of place in which Atalan might hide."

He made his way down the winding mountain trail to the village. By the time he reached the valley floor, he was leaning heavily on his staff. The wound on his left palm throbbed beneath its stained bandage, confirming his suspicion that Atalan had come this way.

The westering sun glinted off the crystal embedded in the head of the staff. Peculiar shadows cavorted among the wooden buildings of the village, dark, cold creatures with impossible numbers of limbs. Zain resisted the temptation to pull his cloak tighter around himself. He could not afford to grow weary. He did not know how much farther his search would take him.

"Halt!"

Zain did as ordered. He made out the shape of two men against the setting sun. Guardsmen of some sort, judging by the matching badges on their tunics.

"Peace of the Dream Lords upon you, traveler."

Ah, so this village held to the new gods. Another mark against it. Zain gave a non-committal nod in response.

"You have the look of a pilgrim upon you." The younger guard spoke for the first time.

Zain found no reason to contradict the man's assumption. "I seek food and lodging for the night before continuing on my way."

"All are welcome in Almok Vanosu," replied the first guard, "but the peace of Leng prevails here. You must leave any weapons with us. They will be returned to you when you depart."

Zain frowned, but what else could he do? He had sworn a blood-vow to search everywhere for Atalan. He untied the thongs connecting the lizard-skin scabbard to his belt and passed the sheathed knife to the guard.

"That knife was a gift from my departed mother. I would be most... cross should anything happen to it." He produced a couple of nuggets of unrefined copper from his pouch. "Make sure that nothing does."

"Of course, good sir." Knife and nuggets disappeared into the guard's tunic. "Enjoy your stay."

They moved aside to let Zain pass. The younger guard called after him. "The Peony has the best beds in town. Tell them Ivar of the watch sent you."

Zain nodded his thanks. He did not miss the evil look the older guard gave Ivar. Apparently, he had an arrangement with a different establishment. Both were fools. His knife was important to him because of what he had vowed to do with it, but his staff was far deadlier.

The Peony was not far from the longhouses, a fact that puzzled Zain. He would have thought an inn and such houses would be in competition for the same patrons. Perhaps the local "god" had decreed that the buildings be put in their present arrangement.

A dozen or so young men and women milled near the entrance of the Peony. Zain made note of their beauty. Leng was not kind to beauty, especially since the coming of the cold new gods. In spite of the evening chill, the youths wore short garments, tunics sheer enough to hint at the bodies beneath. Some were dyed red and some blue.

A young woman in blue approached him. Hair like midnight fell past her shoulders and she gave a warm smile.

“A—” The girl caught herself and stepped back from Zain a full pace. “Ah, weary traveler.” Her smile now did not touch her eyes. Zain read confusion and curiosity there instead. “I welcome you to the village of Almok Vanosu. May your dreams all be pleasant.”

She gave Zain a formal embrace of welcome. Her body was warm in spite of the evening. He made sure that his cheeks did not touch hers. When she released him, she turned away. Zain caught her wrist.

“Have any other strangers passed by here recently? I search for a man of my height and build by the name of Atalan.”

A look passed over the young woman’s face that Zain could not read, but it faded quickly. She shook her head.

“I know of no one by that name, but many enter Almok Vanosu seeking the blessings of the Dream Lords.”

Zain frowned, not sure why the girl was lying. She had seen Atalan, perhaps more than that. He shifted his gaze to the other red-and blue-clad youth.

“Perhaps I should ask one of the others.”

The girl gripped his wrist with surprising strength.

“Tonight.” The whisper was so soft Zain could hardly hear the words. Her breath smelled of fresh honey. “I will explain all tonight.”

He considered for a moment what weight to give the promise of a whore. At last he nodded, and the girl released his wrist.

“Do not drink the mead,” she whispered and returned to the rest of the young people.

Zain frowned, unsure what to make of the brief encounter. If he believed her, all would be made clear in a few hours. If he believed her.

He entered the inn, ducking his head to avoid the low-hanging beams. Perhaps three hands of people were there, most gathered around the hearth at the end of the room. Zain’s nostrils took in the earthy scent of a peat fire.

“Welcome, traveler!” A round man behind a counter greeted Zain. “Come to rest up before taking your pleasure at one of the Houses?”

This earned him a few laughs from the men at the fire, though Zain did not see the joke. He took a few more nuggets of copper from his purse and rested them on the counter.

“A bed for the night and a meal.”

The copper disappeared so quickly that Zain was not sure where it went. “Of course, good sir. Right this way.”

The innkeep wiped his hands on his dirty apron and let Zain down a low-roofed hall. They passed through a doorway of skins and lit a tallow candle on a side table. The room was small but surprisingly clean. Zain nodded, and the innkeep smiled a brown, snaggle-toothed grin.

“Dinner will be along shortly. Pleasant dreams, good sir.” The man went off chuckling softly at another obscure joke.

Alone, Zain sat on the bed and stretched out tired muscles. The past three weeks seemed like a lifetime. He had almost lost Atalan’s trail several times but always managed to pick it up again. Every step took him deeper into Leng. Was Atalan’s crime somehow connected to the new “gods”? Why would the creatures have wanted the death of the matriarch of a small clan from the shores of the ocean?

Then again, why did the star-spawn do any of the things they did? Why had they changed the climate of Leng? What did they do in their deep mountain burrows? Why were they on this world at all? And why did the old gods permit their depravity?

Zain sighed. Time enough for questions after he had brought Atalan to justice. He would not stop until he had caught his brother and made him pay for what he had done to their mother.

A soft cough brought Zain out of his musings. The innkeep made an apologetic bow and set a tray on the side table next to the candle. He departed without speaking. A hunk of dark bread lay next to a steaming bowl of stew and a wooden tankard of mead. Zain frowned at the drink, remembering the girl’s words. He started in on the stew instead.

It tasted of little but salted meat and tubers. Zain ate simply to fuel his quest. He did not touch the mead. In a few moments, he was dabbing the last dredges of the stew with the last hunks of bread. His body sated for the nonce, he blew out the candle and stretched out fully clothed on the bed.

The next thing Zain was aware of was a small form next to him on the bed. He made to push it aside, and a slender finger pressed against his lips.

“We haven’t much time. Take your belongings and leave. Leave now.”

Zain pushed the girl away from him.

“Why?”

“Because the gods will visit Almok Vanosu soon. Perhaps tonight. I do not want you to fall into their snares.”

Zain sat up on the bed, his eyes just able to make out the barest outlines of the girl’s lithe form.

“What do you care?”

“You... resemble someone who was kind to me. I help you for his sake.”

“Such noble motives from a whore.”

The girl gave a low, caustic laugh. “Is that what you think I am? But I suppose there is a certain truth to that word. Everyone in Almok Vanosu has prostituted themselves to the Dream Lords.”

A noise sounded in the corridor. The girl tensed.

“They’re coming. Pretend the mead worked and feign a listless compliance. If they offer you a choice, choose blue. That’s the only way I can help you any further. Remember: Blue.”

As quickly as she had arrived, the girl vanished. Apparently there was a secret way in and out of the rooms. Next time Zain would be more cautious in his choice of lodgings. If there was a next time. He stretched back out on the bed and stilled his breathing.

The footsteps told him that three, perhaps four people had entered his room.

“Told you he was a big one.” Zain recognized the voice of the innkeeper.

One of the others grumbled something Zain could not hear. A voice he did not recognize.

“They demand their quotas to be filled. Do you want to stand in his place?”

That question seemed to settle all arguments. Zain felt them move to pick up his body. Now was his moment, when they were most dispersed. He lashed out with his leg, catching one of his would-be assailants under the chin. At the same instant, he snatched up his staff from the mattress and dealt a satisfyingly solid blow to the head of another.

He rose from the bed and immediately regretted doing so. The low ceiling kept him from using his staff to his best advantage. A shadowy figure blocked the dim light coming from the doorway. A blow from the butt of Zain’s staff knocked the breath from the man. He doubled over, and Zain attempted to vault over his prone form.

More men appeared in the hallway with candles. Zain ran into the corridor, but someone landed a lucky blow on the back of his head. Nausea seethed in the pit of his stomach, and he sank to his knees. A series of further blows stunned him.

He was vaguely aware of the sensation of being lowered to the floor. Time passed, and then it felt as if he was raised into the air. He floated along, eventually seeing a large red shape. A dark opening swallowed him like the maw of a great beast, and even these vague, fleeting impressions ceased.

The next thing he felt was a wave of heat. Great, searing heat, so intense it felt it would melt the marrow within his bones. He thought of the stories his mother had told of the dim world of Carcosa, but even the new false gods could not have transported him so far so fast.

He tried to open his eyes and winced at the brightness of the light. A pair of hands reached under his neck and shoulders, helping him to sit up. They were small, with long, nimble fingers.

“Slowly at first. It takes some time to adjust.”

It was the girl. Had she displeased her masters for speaking to him? Or had she been sent as some kind of minder? Whatever the reason, he chose to ignore her.

He shrugged off her touch and got to his feet. The world swam before his eyes, and he struggled to keep his balance. He saw his staff at his feet. Bending to retrieve it caused a strong wave of nausea, but he felt more centered with its solidity in his hands.

He scanned his surroundings. Everywhere seemed to be dunes of grey sand. Little distinguished the ground from the hazy sky. Trusting his instincts, Zain began walking in the direction he assumed to be north.

The girl appeared at his side, walking with quick steps to keep up with his longer strides. He ignored her, but no matter how quickly he walked, she still kept pace with him.

“You know, you’re nothing like him,” she said at last. Though she took at least two steps for every one of his, she did not sound at all winded. “Atalan is so full of life. But you, death hovers around you like carrion lizards around a corpse.”

Nothing in the girl’s prattling required a response, so Zain remained silent. He paused, surveyed the featureless horizon, and set off again in a slightly different direction.

“You wear the same face, but you’re nothing like him!”

Zain whirled about, stopping so abruptly that the girl almost collided with him. He glowered down at her.

“Thank all the gods that I am nothing like him.” His words were icy as a wind blown from the pits of Leng. “I am not the one who killed our mother.”

Confusion clouded the girl's face. Good. Zain turned and set off again, caring not one whit whether the girl kept up with him or not. He crested one of the grey dunes.

As he did so, the world around them changed. He set the butt of his staff not on sand but on great slabs of black basalt. Ahead stood the ruins of a structure or structures once made of the same substance, but the stones seemed melted almost to their foundations. Zain looked behind him. The sea of sand had disappeared, replaced by a world of blasted stone.

The girl wore an amused expression. Though not the architect of this mystery, she knew more about it than he. He was about to question her when a sound from among the stone blocks drew their attention.

It started almost below the threshold of hearing, a low thrumming felt in the back teeth. Then it shifted to a deep moan. Zain glanced at the girl.

"Don't look at me. This is your world, not mine."

Zain did not have time to ponder her words as the source of the sound made its way through the stone blocks. Several shapes shambled toward them, their outlines vaguely human but their limbs and features as melted as the basalt. Shriveled black pits served the place of mouth and eyes. Yet in spite of their weird grotesqueries, Zain could not shake the perception that there was something familiar about the creatures too.

"Get behind me." He interposed his body between the girl and the monstrosities. He focused on them, staff in both hands. "I do not wish to harm you."

The creatures only moaned louder. There were more of them now, dozens perhaps. If they attacked him as a group, he would be overwhelmed. He charged the lead creature and delivered a blow to its chin with the butt of his staff.

The thing's head burst like an overripe melon. The others did not hurry to avenge their fallen comrade, but their moaning grew louder. Zain thought he could distinguish words.

“Murderer...”

“Traitor...”

“Kinslayer...”

Zain’s staff pushed back two more of the creatures, but it seemed only a blow to the head stopped them. Their moaned accusations grew louder and ever more distinct.

“Liar...”

“Oathbreaker...”

“Kinslayer...”

Zain whirled about, bursting two of the creatures’ heads with a single swing. His blood pounded in his veins. Charnel smells filled his nostrils.

“Deceiver...”

“Heretic...”

“Kinslayer...”

“That wasn’t me!” With a shout, Zain leapt among the creatures. His staff dispatched several with every swing, yet always there were more. “It was my brother!”

As soon as the words left his lips, he realized why the creatures seemed so familiar. As twisted and distorted as they were, they wore the features of the villagers he had left behind when he had embarked on his quest. The stones too. Though the material was all wrong, the locations of the melted blocks suggested the arrangement of huts in Zain’s home village.

The unrelenting horde of creatures pressed all around him. Had the gods cursed his people for his failure to bring Atalan to justice? Perhaps a plague had descended upon them? That would not explain the melted stone. He used his staff to push a handful of the creatures back, reluctant now to deliver killing blows.

Perhaps he deserved to die for letting Atalan escape.

“They’re not real!”

Zain turned in the swarm of creatures to spy the girl where she stood on a raised stone block.

“Whoever you think they are, this isn’t them. Do not let your guilt overwhelm you.”

Zain’s back straightened. The girl was right. He had a sacred duty to perform. He took his knife from his belt and cut a slit on the palm of either hand. He gripped his staff with blood-slicked hands. The wood of the staff drank in the blood, hungrily, greedily. His hands warmed, a burning sensation intensifying until it seemed it would sear his hands to the staff. Zain raised the staff above his head.

A sphere of blue energy burst forth from the wood, knocking the first rank back and then reducing it to dust. Zain’s limbs trembled. He sank to his knees, but forced himself to his feet.

The girl was at his side in an instant, helping him away from the creatures before they had a chance to regroup. As they fled, a thought occurred to Zain.

The guards had taken his knife. And the men who had rendered him unconscious certainly would not have let him keep his staff. How did he have both of them now?

He turned to the girl. “What did you mean, saying that they were not real?”

A wry smile crossed her face. “None of this is real. We are caught in the world of your dreams.”

“Dreams? That attack seemed real enough.”

“The dream always is reality to the dreamer. Until he awakes. Tell me, are you wounded in any way? Or even winded?”

Zain took stock. She was right. He was uninjured. He took in gasping breaths, not because his body needed the air, but because he expected to be gasping. He had no need to be breathing hard.

He pushed away from the girl, earning another wry smile.

“When the...gods came to Almok Vanosu, they set up the two houses. The Red House gives men dreams, any dream they wish. I have seen weak men dream they are great warriors and proper married men dream of nights spent in seraglios of leather and lace. I have seen women dream of murdering their husband and children and dancing on their graves.”

Zain silenced her with a motion of his hand. “Enough. I know something of the deprivations of the human heart.”

“The dreams in the Red House would school even the most jaded sybarite.”

“And the Blue House?”

The girl fell silent a long moment before answering. “The devices of the Blue House take dreams from men.”

Zain frowned. “To what purpose?”

“Some men sell their dreams. These become the basis for many of the fantasies of the Red House. Others are haunted by nightmares. For such, the Blue House is a haven of peace.”

The girl hesitated. There was more, a part of the tale she feared to tell. Zain felt he knew in which direction the information lay.

“And the gods of Almok Vanosu?” he asked. “What advantage do they gain from the twin Houses?”

She closed her eyes as she answered. “I had thought their intentions only benign—to relieve the tedium of our harsh existence, to draw noxious dreams from stricken souls. That is why I chose to wear the blue, to minister to such. Then Atalan came, asking questions I could not answer.”

“He is my womb-brother. Our thoughts move along similar lines.” *Though only one of us is a heretic and kinslayer,* he added mentally.

A strange look passed over the girl’s face, and she opened her eyes and studied Zain’s face before she spoke again.

“Atalan voiced the opinion that the Dream Lords, in some strange fashion, feast on the minds of men. Human dreams are thus a delicacy, or perhaps an aperitif. That is why, when pilgrims are scarce, we must make up their number in any way we can.”

Zain pondered this. Nothing he knew of the creatures calling themselves the Masters of Leng, and here the Dream Lords, contradicted this theory. In fact, it meshed well with the limited information he did have. Then another thought occurred to him. He threw back his head and laughed.

“I see nothing amusing.”

“The Houses—I had thought them common brothels. Instead I find them to be brewing vats for monstrosities drunk on delusions of godhood.”

The girl’s brow furrowed. “A fine analogy. Especially when we’re the grapes about to be squashed.”

Zain laughed again. He could see why Atalan had become enamored with her. That such had happened was clear on every line of her face when she spoke of his brother.

“Your masters have made a grave mistake, letting you into this dream with me to give me this information.” Zain passed the head of his staff in a wide arc before him. The sky above them changed from hazy grey to a deep violet banded with orange clouds.

The girl gasped, and Zain smiled.

“Dreams are housed in the mind, girl. Thus I can change this world with a mere thought.”

Another wave of his staff, and the ruins around them re-assembled, dark stones becoming whitewashed huts. Zain could almost smell the salt air of his homeland. He frowned and dissolved the village with his staff. It pained to see his home, even in a dream, while his brother still lived and his mother was unavenged.

A path appeared before him, paved with black stone smooth as obsidian.

“Follow me, if you wish. Or not. It makes no difference to me now.”

He strode forward, the trail blossoming into existence a few paces ahead of his steps as he walked. He felt the body heat of the girl close behind him. He did not yet comprehend her complete role in all this. A fellow-victim of her former masters? Or perhaps the bait of a cunning trap. Did she follow him because she feared this dream realm? Or because she had been commanded to follow?

The clouds he had formed in the sky had turned into dark swirls, no doubt due to the chaotic questions turning in his mind. He willed them back into orderly bands.

The chaos remained. If anything, the clouds grew darker. Zain waved his staff. A wind rose, assailing him and the girl. He frowned. Another force, another mind was at work in this dream-world, but he refused to admit that its will was stronger than his.

“Forward!”

The rising wind snatched at Zain’s clothes, and he had to lean against his staff. Its magic provided a narrow wedge of calm through which he could advance. A small hand rested on his shoulder and the girl pressed her slight form against his.

A loud boom sounded, and the skies opened, but the liquid that rained down upon them was not water. Gritting his teeth, Zain extended a concave shield above them. Viscous drops splattered against it, smearing its surface a dark red.

The girl’s fingernails dug into his shoulder, and she pointed with her other hand. In the midst of the bloodstorm rose a dark structure. Blood ran over obsidian blocks, making it seem as if it had been birthed from the ground itself only moments ago. Given the perverse logic of this realm, perhaps it had.

A large portal stood open before them, and although the girl was trembling behind him, Zain strode inside. Once inside, the storm ceased with a suddenness that made him wonder if he had gone deaf. He willed away his shields. A faint blue glow from the tip of his staff illuminated the way forward.

The layout of the fortress corresponded to no arrangement Zain had before encountered. It seemed as if the mind that had conceived it either could not comprehend the notion of rectilinear lines or rejected their existence as a matter of philosophy. Corridors doubled back on themselves or spiraled into dead ends. Inexplicable protuberances jutted out from floor, walls, and ceiling at irregular intervals. Zain could not decide whether the pattern eluded his understanding or no such pattern existed, the randomness intended to drive a rational mind insane.

As they walked on, a smell grew overpowering—a stench like a field of rotting blossoms. The path opened up into a great hall, at the center of which stood the lord of this keep.

Zain had heard reports of the creatures who claimed sovereignty over Leng, but this was the first time he beheld one with his own eyes. This specimen had assumed a roughly humanoid shape, as if a blood-black slime mold had grown over a tall man. The surface of the creature seemed constantly in motion. Limbs and appendages of unknown purpose extended from the central mass but were soon absorbed with viscous squelches.

“Why do you fight us?” it asked.

The voice was high and piping, as if created not by any animal mechanism but by an iron tool scraping against a metal plate.

“Because you destroy the old ways and set yourselves over the people as gods.”

“We ask so little and give so, so much in return.”

“Well-fed and drugged slaves are still slaves.”

It seemed to consider these words. While it did so, several new protuberances emerged from and collapsed back into its form. Were they connected to its mode of perception? To its form of cognition?

“You are not like the other minds of this world,” it chirped at last. “Submit, and you will have knowledge unlike any your kind has ever known.”

“I have a duty I must perform.”

“Duty is an irrelevant concept.”

“Not to me.”

“Pity. Unwilling extraction sometimes damages the specimens.”

Some of the creature’s appendages fluttered, and pain stabbed into Zain’s mind. He screamed as shards of ice drove through his skull again and again and again. Gritting his teeth with effort, he raised his staff.

“I... reject...”

Sweat beaded on his brow. Lightning crackled from the crystal top of his staff.

“I... reject...”

The strange creature gave a fluting chirp of distress. The assault on Zain’s mind grew more furious, but the flashes of his staff parried more and more of the mind-flaying blades. Behind him, the girl screamed. He could not allow himself to become distracted.

“I reject... *Fhtagn!* I reject this construction. This is not the real world. This is a prison of your imagining. I reject this world...”

The creature whined in pain, and the scream behind him grew ever more piercing. Zain winced and closed his eyes against the blue beams of light blazing from his staff. With a sound like the smashing of a thousand thousand pieces of pottery, the world exploded...

...and resolved into the interior of one of the village longhouses. Zain rose onto shaky legs from a low table, pulling metal tendrils from his naked body as if they were no more than cobwebs. His clothes, staff, and knife lay in a pile nearby. As he dressed, he surveyed the room.

On a raised dais, fallen among strewn cylinders made of a metal he did not recognize, lay the creature from his nightmare. It sprawled on its back like a crab crashed upon rocks. It twitched and wheezed as if gasping for breath.

Zain went to it. “Tell your leaders that some of us still follow the old ways. Tell them that your harvest stops now.”

The creature whistled and clicked, like a chariot wheel in need of grease. Though Zain did not understand its language, he did understand its refusal.

“Then I suppose that this will be my message to them.”

He drove his staff into the center of the creature. The crystal atop it flared into life. The creature writhed and screamed and was suddenly still.

Zain leaned against his staff for a moment. There would be consequences for this action. He had just declared war on the creatures who had made themselves masters of Leng. No matter. After he had found his brother, they could do to him whatever they willed.

Or at least, they could try.

A soft sound brought him back to the present. The girl rose from the table next to the one on which he had lain. He went to her and freed her from the metal tendrils attached to her body.

“The energy I spent on your master seems to have rendered most of your village unconscious. However, I believe that they will awaken soon.”

The girl looked at the black ooze on the dais and then at Zain. An enigmatic smile pulled up the corners of her mouth. “When they awaken, you will be less welcome here than even your brother.”

He nodded and turned to leave.

Zain had not quite reached the outskirts of the village when the girl caught up with him.

“You have unfinished business with your brother.”

Zain made no reply. It was obvious that he did.

“So do I.”

He walked on, not welcoming to the young woman’s presence, but not forbidding her from walking beside him either.

“You have no provisions for the journey,” she observed after a moment.

“The gods provide for those who use their wits.”

“Do you even know where Atalan is?”

Zain turned at this. The young woman shivered in her too-thin robe and struggled with a pack far too large for her. He doubted her sandals would last more than a day and a half of heavy walking.

“What is your name, girl?”

The young woman looked at the ground for a moment and then lifted her gaze to meet Zain’s eyes. He was surprised by the fire he saw there, and then realized that he should not have been.

“Your brother called me Meleta.”

“A geas compels me, Meleta. I am bound to seek my brother wherever he has fled, to the snowy wastes or the lifeless flame deserts or the core of the earth itself. Why do you seek him?”

Meleta met his look without flinching. “Because I carry his unborn child.”

He considered her words, weighing the truth of them, considering what they meant for his quest. At last he took the pack from her shoulders and bore it himself.

“You had better follow me then.”

They walked in silence. The wind howled around them as thoughts swirled in Zain’s head. If Atalan had a child, then his family’s line could continue. Perhaps this would release him from his task. Yet the power of his oath pulled him onward, toward his brother. He wondered if Meleta would survive the journey.

He wondered if she would stand in his way when the time came for him to kill his brother.

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

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Only a Coward

By JENNIFER R. POVEY

Though the traditions of her people demand that Selien follow her husband into death, Selien would rather follow her husband's killer! Breaking taboo, Selien rides out across the steppes in pursuit, living only for her revenge against his murderer!

"Only a coward chooses death over a difficult life," Selien spoke those words as the knife hacked through the thick braid of her hair.

"Selien..."

She ignored the voice speaking her name, and then she tossed the braid onto the pyre. It fell across the partly consumed body, sending up a flow of sparks. "That is all I owe him, that is all I will offer."

With eyes that dared those present to stop her, the woman turned to walk away. Though at first it appeared that no one would, finally, the crowd parted in her path.

Then the old man was in her path.

"Out of my way, Larok." The back of her neck felt cold, chill, her head oddly light.

"You know I can't permit you to violate tradition in this manner. Not unless you are with child."

"Out of my way," she repeated. The force of her eyes almost made him step back.

Almost—then Larok lifted his hand and slapped her. She raised her own to block, but she was too slow, and the imprint of his fingers was left on her cheek.

"You shame your family. You shame the memory of your husband. What are you but a coward and a fool?"

Her eyes did not soften for a moment. "It is you who are the fools, all of you who perpetuate this." Her hand swept, indicating the entire

scene. It still had the knife in it; it ended its arc with the blade pointing directly at Larok's throat. A gasp went up from those gathered.

Larok stepped aside. Selien walked, the knife ahead of her like a wand. No one crossed her path.

"You are dead to us."

"Fine!" Her voice echoed as she reached the edge of the crowd. She took the nearest pony, a shaggy dun gelding that would serve her well enough. It had, in any case, belonged to Deben.

Deben. She would never again feel his hands running through her hair. She would never again know his touch, never feel his child quicken within her. Yet, she would also not follow him into death. Her heels touched the pony's sides, and it leapt forward.

Pursuit would not be far behind, and she dared not stop for any of her possessions. She had only the knife, the pony, and the rough halter he wore. Not even a proper bridle, and if she stopped...

No, she would not even need to stop. The whistle of an arrow fled past her, then another. She crouched lower, asking the gelding for even more speed. They could not, she knew, let her live.

Now that the shock of her refusal was over, they would hunt her to the ends of the earth. Part of her did not care, as long as she first found Deben's murderer.

Part of her cared very much indeed.

This was where he had gone. Selien rode into the village better equipped. She had stolen the bridle from another camp, for no clan would ever accept her now. She had ensured that when she cut off her hair. At least subconsciously, that had been why she had done it. If she could not return to her family, then she would not return to her people.

The villagers were different and the same. Three half-naked children ran across the street in front of her, startling her pony a little. She ran a hand down his neck to calm him.

He settled, although he was clearly not happy, ears cocked back towards her as if waiting for some signal, neck and shoulders tense. Selien felt much the same way herself. Not being able to recall his name, she had called the gelding Deb, a short form of her husband's. He would have appreciated the memorial. Some believed the strongest warriors and their women came back as horses. As the very best horses, of course, the ones who ran free in the breeding herds. Still, it was all she could offer him.

He waited for her, she knew that—knew it in all of her being. Yet she also knew that he would not want her to join him yet.

No, he would want vengeance. And then? Then, perhaps, she would...have nothing to live for.

That cold flowed through her for a moment, and for a moment, she recalled the words she had spoken and knew them to be true. Her life would, indeed, be difficult from this moment forward. Yet, it was the only life she had.

There was a tavern in the village. She hitched the pony outside and dismounted. Her feet felt the soreness that came from being on horseback all day. She wished she had also been able to steal a saddle, as much for Deb's sake as for hers.

Selien tossed one of the few coins she had to the boy who was watching the horses, and then she stepped into the tavern.

Her appearance drew every set of eyes like a magnet. She was stared at, and she responded as she had at Deben's funeral. Each individual stare, she retaliated against fiercely. Once more, people got out of her way, sensing she was a woman on a mission.

The barkeep, seeing her, developed a bit of a nervous twitch, polishing a glass that was already as clean as it was likely to get.

"Ma'am," he greeted her.

"Relax. I only bite those who have actually drawn my ire. A mug of ale, please."

She disliked ale, but she had to buy something, and it was likely to be the safest option. Besides, nobody in the valleys drank anything

else.

Weaklings, she thought as she glanced around. Pathetic, all of them, none now willing to meet her gaze. Then again, neither were her own people. Perhaps she was indeed marked by a curse, and it was visible in her eyes or on her forehead. That was what they would say—that she was cursed because she had refused to follow her mate into death. She shook her head. She would rather be cursed than be dead.

She glanced around again, and that was when she saw the man. He sat in the corner, one hand curled around an ale mug, and when their eyes met she felt an emptiness, and perhaps that was what others sensed when they met hers.

This was a man who had no heart, no soul left—one robbed of all—and with a shiver, she turned away. She was supposed to be finding Tobit, not distracted by cloaked strangers.

“I am looking,” she told the barkeep, “for a man. A steppe-man, light blonde hair, grey eyes, about half of a beard.”

“And why?”

“Do I have to tell you why?” She slid another of her coins across the bar.

The barkeep made the coin disappear. “Yesterday. He turned south.”

South, then. He was running, of course, knowing that somebody would come after him for Deben’s murder. He would not, though, expect her. No, he would not expect a woman. She slid another coin across, drank the ale quickly and left. It took all she had not to make a face at the bitter taste of the brew.

She did not notice that the cloaked man was following her.

Selien had never taken the road south. The villages were at the edge of the steppes, and the south was beyond that—beyond and away and a different world. The fact that Tobit had taken this route?

Tobit knew he would be caught if he stayed, and he knew what the clans would do to him. They did not take kindly to a killing in cold blood.

He did not know what she intended to do to him, and her face and her heart hardened as Deb's hooves beat against the dry dirt of the road, sending up small puffs of dust. It had not rained in days, but at this time of year that was not unusual.

She was a day behind Tobit, but she knew better than to push hard. She would not catch him by wearing out her horse, and he had one just as good. No, it was best to pace herself, alternating gaits to keep the animal fresh.

As the sun set, she kept going. She could rest once she had found him, rest once she had his blood on her hands. Then, yes, she would rest. Then, there would be nothing left.

She heard the hooves behind her—a longer-legged horse catching up with her own pony. The cloaked man from the tavern reined in next to her. "A woman should not ride at night alone."

"Anyone who tries to touch me will die," she told him, deliberately trying to put a chill in her voice. Then again, would such a one be intimidated? Men were seldom intimidated by women other than their wives.

"Ah. So, what is it you want of Tobit? His death? That could be easily arranged."

The cold feeling flowed over and through her. "I don't want your help." She wanted his death all right, but at *her* hands, *her* blade.

"Ah, you want to do it yourself. And how will a slip of a girl like you overpower a full grown man?"

She fumed. "There's always a way." She knew there was, she was not giving up. She was not backing down. And she was not accepting help from a stranger.

"When he gives you a thrashing..." The man tossed her what looked like a coin.

She caught it by reflex. It burned cold into her flesh, as if it held within it the very ice of winter.

She opened her hand, looking down. The coin bore a symbol she did not immediately recognize. It almost seemed to move, to writhe. When she looked up, the man was gone.

Selien thrust the coin into her purse and turned south again, forcing the odd encounter out of her mind with difficulty.

She rode, and the trees changed as she descended further into the valley. Taller, broader, reaching more leaves to the sky. Beneath them, animals she had not seen but vaguely knew to be pigs rooted in the ground.

There was, as yet, no sign of Tobit.

There had been no sign of him by dusk. Selien hoped he was getting closer, not pulling away. Perhaps she did need help after all.

She tugged the odd coin out of her purse. It had not warmed any, it was still as cold as winter, as cold as ice, as cold as her heart.

The only experience she had with magic was when the shamans went into their trances and predicted the future. The only thing they ever seemed to get right was the weather, and counting clouds could achieve that as well. The only thing the shamans had done for her was to bind her to Deben and then try to take her life.

They had no real magic. But this? This might well be it. She turned the coin over. It held the same symbol on either side. Perhaps it was a cheat's coin, intended to fool another into making a bet he could not win.

Perhaps the cold was only the cold of the northern wind. It bore with it the scent of her home, painfully inescapable.

There could be no returning, but then she found herself with a problem—a crossroads. Had Tobit gone further south, or had he turned east or west?

Selien dismounted to examine the ground, the coin still held in one hand. As she stepped westward, though, its chill seemed to deepen.

She frowned, making a circuit of the crossroads. It was clear. The further she went on the western road, the colder the coin became. Was this accepting the odd man's help? How could she ignore this sign?

She retrieved the gelding from the crossroads, swinging easily into the saddle and turning his nose toward the westward path.

He balked, looking back the way they had come. He wanted the steppes, his herd, his friends. She felt bad bringing him, yet she had had no choice but to do so, and this was her path.

Of course, the coin's chill could also have been her imagination. Or leading her away from him. The man could have been hired by Tobit to send her on a wild goose chase.

She chose to take the risk and pushed the gelding into an easy canter. It was day, now. An odd energy seemed to support her. Perhaps it also aided the horse, for he seemed as fresh as if she had just mounted. Any other time, that would have bothered her.

The symbol on the coin.... No, she did not know it. Or if she did, it was in the depths of her memory and she could not locate it.

The road widened a little at a spot that would have made an excellent campground. Selien could see it had been occupied very recently. There were signs of someone having sharpened a knife, hoof prints no larger than those of her own mount, and Selien found the core of a fruit.

Tobit, or someone very like him, had been here not long before. Excitement rose within her. He would be dead soon, then. Or she would. Either way, her troubles would be over.

Perhaps they would go into the darkness together, and she would haul his soul to Deben and tell him what she had done. Show him that he had been avenged, so he could rest.

Selien saw that Tobit had taken a white horse. That had been a mistake, for it meant she could see him well. The way he rode, the set of his shoulders—it was him, all right. The man appeared to be in

agony as he rode. But Selien, in pain herself, refused to recognize that suffering.

She ducked off the side of the road. That was not an easy task, as it would have been on the steppes. She had to weave through the trees, which were now close together.

The road curved a little, oh, so conveniently, as if she had been led to the perfect ambush spot. She would take it. Whether she should, whether it was honorable, she set to one side. After all, she had already given up her honor in its entirety. Life and vengeance were more important. How could they not be? There he was, not even looking from side to side. Perhaps he believed the trees would shield him. For a moment, they did, and they almost seemed to move to block her path; then she was out of them.

Selien knew she would have only one chance, and she saw it with a sudden clarity. Her horse next to his, she leapt as a warrior would and landed behind him. As she wrapped her knife arm around the man to slit his throat, the white bucked.

Selien was airborne for a moment, then they were both on the ground, scrabbling. He managed to twist around to face her.

“Selien!” His voice was more incredulous than afraid.

“You were expecting Deben?” Something within her urged her on, to go for the kill now, and to make it hurt. She had the opportunity, him pinned under her, the knife close to his bowels. She could ensure that he would not just die but endure hours of agony.

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“So are you.” She lowered the knife; its tip cracked his flesh, leaking a few crimson drops.

He swallowed; “Selien....”

The moment seemed to last forever. Do it, said one voice. The other saw his face, the pain in it. Not anger, not rage. But he was the murderer, he had to...

“It was an accident!” It was as if the knife tip tore those words from him as she started to thrust it deeper. “I would...could...never have hurt you!”

Never have hurt her? But he had, for he had ended her life as thoroughly as he had Deben’s. She pushed the blade.

He screamed. “Selien!”

An accident. Of course he would claim that, he and Deben hunting. The two horses, running across the steppes. She saw it as clearly as if she had been there, Tobit suddenly turning, lifting his bow, placing an arrow straight in the other man’s throat.

Do it, said the voice in her head. Make him suffer as much as she had suffered.

An accident. A hunter creeping through the brush, not so different in color from the steppe deer. Good hunters did not make mistakes. But to say it had never happened...

She pulled the knife out, rocked back on her heels. The only person who could prove it was dead. One way or another....

Tobit moaned, reaching for the wound, but she knew it would not be fatal. She looked at him. “An accident.”

“Do you really think...”

But his words were interrupted, for Selien’s pouch suddenly went from cold to hot, the coin falling through it, burning the leather, hitting the ground next to him.

She leapt back, releasing him in her shock. The symbol on the coin began to unravel, to grow from its surface.

Tobit was too paralyzed with fear or pain to move as the snake began to move towards him.

“No. He’s mine. You can’t have him!”

She wanted him dead, but dammit, not like this, not until she knew the truth. This was *her* revenge to claim or not, as she chose. Only her hands could take Tobit’s life. Or spare it.

The blade struck chill flesh and shattered, pieces of good iron falling to the road. Tobit was scrambling for his own blade, but there was no time. She threw herself between the two.

“He is mine!” Selien repeated. And darkness claimed her.

“Selien.”

Her eyes opened, Tobit kneeling over her. He did not seem to be armed.

“What the hell?”

“That was a senrik demon. They’re used to eat souls...preferring those of murderers.” He rocked back on his heels then, as she sat up, offered her a knife, hilt first.

He was still bleeding a little from the wound she had inflicted, so she had not been unconscious long.

“That’s a stupid thing to do,” she said

He shook his head. “Go ahead. My life is over anyway.”

“So is mine,” she met his eyes. “You... go. Go before I change my mind.”

An accident. She would never know, but at the same time, perhaps she should have suspected. Had she not been so angry and afraid, she might have accepted that Tobit would never have deliberately killed his own brother.

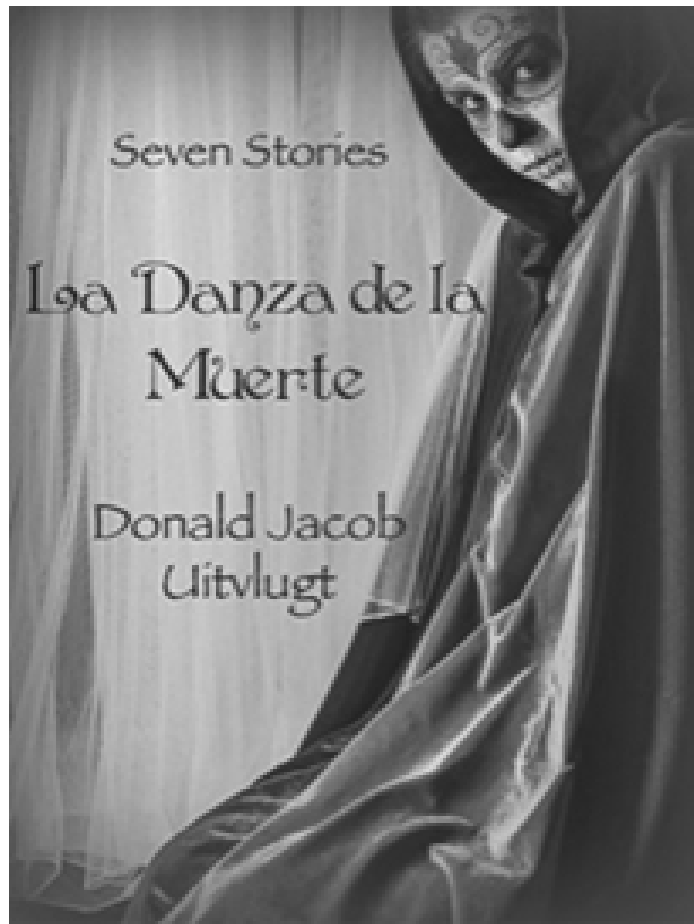
“And where will you go?”

“South,” she said. “South where a woman can ride free, if she so wishes.” She did not know it was true until she spoke it.

Yet she did not move until long, long after Tobit’s horse had gone, vanished from sight and sound. She could not kill him, in the end, for he was kin to her.

Besides...he was the one she had truly wished to marry.

Jennifer R. Povey is in her early forties, and lives in Northern Virginia with her husband. She writes a variety of speculative fiction, whilst following current affairs and occasionally indulging in horse riding and role playing games. She has sold fiction to a number of markets including Analog, and written RPG supplements for several companies. Her latest novel, "Fallen Dark," was released in the summer of 2017.



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Party Smashers

By KEN MCGRATH

Scramble and Haywire, a crime duo for hire, are given the contract of a lifetime—take out CloudRunner, the eco-terrorist son of the Minister for the Environment! Can the Party Smashers track down and bag their mark before son kills father?!

From the safe-house window, Haywire watched the second explosion lift the roof off the laundrette down the road. Bodies streamed out onto the sidewalk from the adjoining shops to see what was happening. There was a further anti-boom, like a sharp intake of breath, and the air filled with a snowfall of paper, as if from a massive confetti gun. The people's shouts changed to excitement as they realised what was falling from the sky.

Haywire turned to her associate, who was seated on the other side of the room, and quipped, "That Mason gang really took the whole money-laundering thing quite literally didn't they, Scram?"

Before Scramble could reply, a fog-horn ring-tone interrupted her. The two women shared a quiet look, and Haywire plonked down on the couch while Scramble tapped the phone's screen to answer. An icy blue hologram of a woman's head unfolded and frowned at them.

"I'm assuming that's your handiwork I can see flooding my breaking news feeds, ladies," Clutch-Moth said.

"Just finishing up a job," Haywire replied. From outside, the sounds of sirens filled the air like a disturbed nest of hornets.

"Well, if you're interested, I've got a new one for you. Strictly confidential. Info on acceptance only."

"Oh yeah?" Scramble said. She leaned back and cracked her knuckles. "And what can we expect to get for it? Better be good. Myself and Haywire were due to take a little vacation after this number wrapped up."

Clutch-Moth sighed. An obscenely long string of digits flashed up in front of her. Despite themselves, both Scramble and Haywire whistled.

"They want mercs who can get the job done quickly, efficiently. Dead or alive. I figured the Party-Smashers fit that bill," Clutch-Moth said.

"She's got us there, Scram—it matches our M.O. all right." Haywire flashed a grin and nudged her partner.

"So?" Clutch-Moth said; the question was left hanging.

“It has to be some nasty bitch of a job if that’s what they’re willing to put up,” Scramble said. Beside her, Haywire gave a reluctant shrug of agreement.

“Of course it’s nasty,” Clutch-Moth’s face folded into a severe pinch of anger. “I wouldn’t be talking to you two if it wasn’t.”

“No need for the tone, Missy,” Haywire snapped. She jabbed a finger in the contract-broker’s direction.

“Hold up,” Scramble pushed herself forward. Palms flat on the table, the circuitry tattoos of enhancement which covered her fingers like ivy clearly visible. “Surely you’ve got to understand our concerns, Clutch-Moth? Last job we took from you was the Mister Richter affair, and everyone was lucky to walk away from that all limbs still attached.”

“The reward is high because of the timeframe involved, and there’s a certain, I suppose you could say, celebrity attached,” Clutch-Moth conceded. “That’s all I can give. It’s extremely hush-hush. Full info on acceptance only. I can’t bend any further. Your answer?”

Haywire and Scramble looked at each other, shrugged and by silent agreement both placed a thumb on the phone’s Code-Box. A smile crept onto Clutch-Moth’s semi-transparent face.

“You are being commissioned to capture the Minister for the Environment’s eldest son,” she said.

Haywire choked, coughed.

“Are you joking?” Scramble gasped.

“No. Not at all,” Clutch-Moth said flatly. “I told you it was a doozy. And since you’ve accepted the contract, you will therefore, by midday Sunday, have delivered Jim Darn Don, aka CloudRunner, leader of the eco-terrorist group the Nvyro-Mentals to the designated drop-zone or suffer the reputational damage and financial repercussions. All other details are being sent to you now. That’s less than four days, my dears, so you’d best get rolling.”

The projection clicked off. Clutch-Moth disappeared like a light and seemed to suck all the air out of the room with her. From outside, the

sounds of cars colliding seeped in, but neither woman bothered going to the window to watch.

“What makes you so sure it’s Papa CloudRunner who’s put the contract out? I know it’s gotta be embarrassing, his son heading up an outlaw gang intent on bringing down the government, but it’d still be pretty cold putting a hit out on him,” Haywire casually swiped through stills lifted from Nvyro-Mental propaganda videos. “These guys have been having a go at every big corporation and developer around over the last eight months. Could have been any one of them.”

“Here, have a gander at Minister Don’s public appearances calendar,” Scramble leaned across her colleague and moved some icons around. “There’s a big session happening Sunday afternoon, right here in FyreSyyde, all about environmental impacts and sustainability and so on and what not. My money says the Nvyro’s are expected to make a big splash at Daddy’s event, and the government boys put the contract out for sonny-boy to disrupt those plans. Make sure no-one lays a finger on the precious Enviro Minister, like.”

“So what’s the plan, Scram? We just park outside the Grand Western Hotel and wait for CloudRunner to show up with his bunch of crazies?”

“Nope, first things first, Hay,” Scramble pulled a screen across the table. Fingers slid across the glassy surface like figure skaters. “There’s always a rat to find, we just need to know where to look. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Haywire called up transcripts of CloudRunner’s speeches and began to skim through them while Scramble ran her identification programmes. She was struggling with yet another tract about the evils of disposable plastics and quickly losing the will to live when Scramble spoke.

“Bingo-bango. I got us an ID, right here.”

Scramble spun the screen. She pointed at a picture that was lifted from CCTV footage captured at a job the Nvyro-Mentals had pulled. It was date-stamped five months prior. The screen split to show info

gathered from a database of Scramble's own alongside the still. A name and a face flashed red.

"And where do you go looking for a rat but in a cellar, eh?" Haywire said with a grin when she saw the location.

"Yep, fanatics. They always bring about their own downfall by letting in the hangers-on," Scramble agreed.

"Definitely. Hey, you know what, for all his mouthing off, he's not bad looking, this CloudRunner chap. For a tree-hugger an' all, I mean."

"Haywire, no, seriously," Scramble groaned. "Could you really cope with all that preaching about Mother Earth and so on?"

Haywire tapped on a screengrab where CloudRunner was standing atop a burning digger, shirt torn, chest streaked with dirt and sweat. He was very obviously in the middle of a vitriolic tirade.

"I'm telling you, if I got myself pressed up against that body I can guarantee he wouldn't be preaching about planetary woes," Haywire purred. "Although he might end up giving out about how the ice caps would be in danger of melting 'cause things'd be so hot."

"Oh God," Scramble rolled her eyes and turned away.

"It wouldn't be carbon emissions we'd be dealing with either, if you catch my meaning," Haywire grinned. "Geddit, Scram, huh?"

"Lah lah lah lah," Scramble sang, fingers jammed firmly in her ears.

Haywire laughed. "This job is gonna be fun. I'll get my coat."

Mervin Stoner was in the sub-cellar of the basement bar, The Rum Deal. As he unpacked a stock delivery, he hummed what could almost be identified as Deep Purple's "Smoke On The Water" when he heard a cough behind him. It was very a deliberate "just letting you know I'm here" noise.

"Wit' you in a mo'," he grunted as he put down the crate he was holding. His hand slid out to find a handy, well-placed crowbar, which

he raised cross-body as he turned. “Now, what can I do for... who the hell are you?”

Mervin wasn't sure who he'd been expecting, but these two women certainly weren't anywhere near the top of the list (although the brown-haired one might make his wish-list). The shorter one, a blonde with a half-shaven head and an obvious attitude, took a step closer. Marvin raised his weapon. He'd been around long enough to know not to underestimate anyone. He'd seen lads half these chicks' size taking down guys three times his. Everyone was a threat unless you knew differently for certain.

“Nice to meet you, Merv. We'd like you to tell us something,” the brunette said. She was taller and broader than her companion, wore a full-length jacket despite the unseasonably warm weather, and had on some serious stomping boots.

“And what's that?” Mervin grunted. He glanced around carefully to make sure these two had no-one else along, hiding in the shadows. “I'm sure I don't know nothin'.”

“We'd like you to tell us what you know about the Nvyro-Mentals.”

Mervin scoffed. “Beat it, sister. I don't run wit' them no more.”

The brunette stepped forward, and her half-step quickly turned into a run. Mervin swung. Just before the crowbar connected, Haywire raised an arm to block the blow and braced. An electric orange glow illuminated her visible skin. The crowbar bent on her arm, and Mervin was carried off his feet by the force of his own swing.

“Damn augments,” he growled before a fist crashed into his temple and unconsciousness snatched him away.

“He's waking up,” Scramble said before Mervin had even opened his eyes.

He was tied to a chair, still in the basement, and a lone bulb dangled above his head like a parody of an interrogation room. The buckled crowbar was thrown on the ground in clear view, no doubt a reminder to him of what they could do with very little effort.

“So buddy, are you going to tell us what we want to know? We know you used to do jobs with the Nvyros. Surely you must keep some tabs on what they’re up to. Get wind of their upcoming jobs when they need extra bodies....” Haywire said. Her skin had returned once again to its normal shade now that the augments were deactivated.

“Who the fuck are you?” Mervin spat.

“We’re the people who want to talk to you, and you’re going to tell us exactly what it is we want to know,” Scramble said quietly. “Cause if you don’t tell us willingly, we’re going to just take it.”

“It’s against nature, what you did to yourself. Getting those circuits put in.”

“Maybe so,” Haywire smiled. “And in this case, you’re actually a hundred percent right, ’cause we’re against CloudRunner and his Nvyro-Mental-heads, so we are, in every sense, against nature. Hey Scram, you geddit? Yeah?”

Scramble’s only reply was to roll her eyes. Haywire shrugged.

“Right, Mervin,” she said. “Tell us, and remember you’ve got one chance: what jobs have the Nvyro-Mentals got lined up?”

“Nothing. I know nothing,” Marvin growled.

“Well, I guess it’s time for you to do your thing,” Haywire turned to Scramble. “I feel sorry for you dude, I really do, ’cause whatever secrets you have are about to be ripped from your little mind. You might not be much, but you’ll never be the same again. You really don’t know who you’re dealing with, do you?”

The man in the chair just looked at her, confused.

“You sticking around to watch?” Scramble asked as she removed her gloves and shoved them in a back pocket.

Haywire shook her head. “Not after last time.”

“Fair enough,” Scramble said and cracked her knuckles. She lifted her right hand, thumb and baby-finger bent forward to touch each other, the remaining three fingers spread like the tines of a fork. Her left hand

mirrored its inverted twin but stayed by her side. The circuits tattooed down the backs of and across the fingers of both hands lit up orange. Mervin's face went white and sweat broke out on his brow. He twisted and turned his head frantically but could do nothing to stop her as Scramble leaned over him, spread the fingers of her right hand across his forehead and placed thumb and pinkie-finger on either side of his nose.

"You're not going to like this at all, pal," she whispered. She put her left hand on the back of his neck to keep his head steady.

The screams had already started before the cellar-door fully swung closed behind Haywire.

Haywire was inspecting the rows of bottles on the display shelves behind the bar when Scramble emerged from the cellar.

"Question; why would a bar that's called The Rum Deal only sell whiskey?" she held up a container of honey-brown liquid and scratched her head.

Scramble looked at the label and shrugged. "Who could even fathom what these idiots do be thinking."

"So, you get anything good from him?" Haywire placed the bottle back on the shelf.

Scramble shoved herself up onto the bar, legs swinging. "Would you believe, my dear, that they have a job planned for this week? And I don't mean the 'let's kill the Minister for the Environment Daddy Don' affair. Our friend downstairs knows pure nothing about that, if indeed that actually is a plan of theirs and not something I've just made up. No, what's on the cards for tomorrow is this: a shipment of ancient Indian spirit stones, the largest collection of said spirit stones in the world, in fact, just so happens to be getting delivered to the FyreSyyde Natural History Museum tomorrow afternoon."

Haywire raised an eyebrow.

"And the 'Vyro-Mentals are lined up to hit that," Scramble continued. "Hard to imagine them actually passing up a caper such as that, if you

think about. It was believed that the stones could be used to communicate with Mother Earth. Utter nonsense of course, but if you believe in that line, this stuff is a must have, I'd say."

"Good job, Scramble," Haywire said, suitably impressed. "And our rat?"

"He won't be waking up until Monday, at the earliest. I shut him down. Don't want him getting word out to CloudRunner."

"Awesome. I've mucked up the CCTV here already, so let's hit the road."

Since they had locked the door, wedged it shut with a table pushed up under the handles, turned the sign to CLOSED and pulled the blinds earlier, they skipped out through the backdoor.

The terrorist in the tree-mask fired shots into the ceiling. Insulation, plaster, and bits of tiles fell in chunks on the museum staff who were sprawled on the ground in front of him.

"Stay down or you won't be getting back up again," he warned. "You'll be precious fertilizer if you move."

Over his shoulder, two other Nvyro-Mentalists, one in a cloud-mask, the other with a big yellow smiling emoji covering his features, were struggling under the weight of a crate containing the spirit stones. They navigated it out the door, where two further masked terrorists were standing by a van, weapons raised.

Tree-face followed them out and fired more shots into the exterior of the building before he climbed into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut.

The driver, this one wearing a pig-mask, gunned the engine and pulled out into the street. They bashed against cars, the heavily reinforced vehicle cutting through the pre-noon traffic easily as they spun onto Marco Polo Avenue. That's when they saw the woman walk out into the road up ahead of them.

“What the fuck?” Pig-face yelled. Tree-Face instinctively reached across to jerk the steering wheel, but Piggy slapped his hand away. “No time.”

Pig-Face put the foot down, and behind the mask he grinned.

Haywire, her features obscured by a static-mask, turned to face the oncoming van, long jacket flapping out behind her dramatically. She could see the two people up front, wearing some sort of pig and tree masks. A third head, this one covered with a giant smiley face, popped between their shoulders, trying to see what was happening.

Haywire closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and braced herself. The circuitry tattoos on her body lit up, and her enhancement activated. Haywire’s mass increased; her skin hardened. The van hit her full force and buckled around her like a stream of water meeting a rock.

The back end of the vehicle rose up into the air as it tried to move around the immovable object. Smiley-face flew through the windshield and collided with Haywire. He spun off in a broken trajectory, hit the road, skidding along until he squelched to a stop, a mess of mashed up human mulch.

The van crashed back down with a thud, engine dead, steam clouding from the shattered front end. Haywire let out a breath and unclenched, feeling herself coming back. She felt like a lamp-post as she pulled herself out of the furrow and looked at the damage with a sense of pride. The two terrorists in the front-seat were slumped over in varying states of damage.

“That’ll teach you to wear your seatbelt, fella,” she quipped in the direction of the gory smear which painted the ground beside her. It looked like a swipe from a giant paintbrush and was beautiful in its own corrupted way.

A crowd had started to gather along the sidewalk, snapping pictures and video with their hand-helds.

“Get out of here, you vultures,” Haywire shouted. She pulled two guns from beneath her jacket and fired over the heads of the

spectators. They dispersed like birds from a wire.

Scramble, wearing a pair of gripper-gloves, ran up and tore the side panel off the van. A flurry of gunshots spat from the opening.

“Are you serious?” Scramble muttered, voice obscured behind her own static-mask. She unhooked a stun grenade from her belt and lobbed it into the van. There was a mild pop followed by a huge flash. She stepped into the breach to find the occupants slumped over, unconscious. The crate of spirit stones had split open and spewed its contents everywhere, but not before crushing one of the Nvyros and spilling his contents everywhere as well.

The terrorist in the cloud-mask was the only one who'd strapped in and he remained held loosely in place by the safety harness. Scramble flipped his mask up. There was CloudRunner, unconscious yet alive.

“Well aren't you just the most safety conscious young man ever?” Scramble said as she threw a cloth-bag over his head so no cameras could pick up his features. Gripper-gloves primed, she ripped the entire seat out and dragged it into the street, with the politician's son still locked into place.

A getaway vehicle pulled up, and the side door slid open. Scramble shoved their payday inside and followed immediately before Haywire swung in, dragging the door shut behind her. Scramble was already removing the sleeping CloudRunner from the straps.

Sirens could be heard in the not too distant distance.

“Got what you needed, ladies?” Deco said from the front seat. His face was hidden behind a clown-mask—freaky chalk-white, oversized grin, big cheeks and tufts of green hair sticking up wildly. “Very good, very good. Now let's depart these bloody shores before the Man comes to hunt us down.”

The van pulled off the main road onto a side-street where Deco tapped a switch that activated the highly illegal static-scramble-paint that coated the vehicle. By the time they'd emerged onto Rodan Avenue less than a kilometre away, the vehicle's exterior had changed again to now resemble a beat-up family car cruiser and was promptly

ignored by the numerous CCTV cameras clustered on the street corners.

As they crawled along, a police wasp-flyer-bike zipped overhead but registered nothing of interest, and the trio with their quarry moved along slowly, another anonymous part of the constant traffic.

Two hours later, back in their safe house, blinds closed and sound suppressors activated, Haywire and Scramble propped their captive up on a chair, his hands and feet bound securely with tie-binds.

Haywire reached out to pull the bag from CloudRunner's head.

"Right so, let's get a look atcha, fella... who?" she gasped.

"What the fuck?" Scramble spat.

The man propped up on the seat was like a melted version of Jim Darn Don. Whereas the outlaw CloudRunner had strong, high cheekbones and a wide forehead; the imposter sitting before them looked like his face had crumpled in on itself.

"Susspissime," he rasped, broken features leering.

Haywire grabbed him by the neck. "What is this? Who the fuck are you?"

The imposter smiled a crooked smile then crunched down hard on the inside of his mouth. Scramble and Haywire both heard the sound as a tooth cracked followed by the unmistakable stench of rotten eggs. The man's head lolled forwards.

"Goddamn it, suicide tab," Scramble shouted, shoving the man. She stepped back as the chair toppled over with a crash. "Goddamn."

"Who the hell was that?" Haywire asked. She looked from the dead man to her associate and back again. "Did you grab the right guy?"

Scramble gave her a look that was all knives.

"Course I did. And I checked, too, to be sure. Fucker must have had a face-lift. Probably injected himself with it before they went on their little ram-raid so they'd all look CloudRunner. No matter who we

grabbed we were going to think it was him. Fuck,” she shouted and swept an arm over a table shoving a load of computer gear onto the ground where it crashed, smashed, and broke. There was no satisfaction in the noise. “They must have had wind there’s a contract out for CloudRunner.”

Haywire bent down and, holding the edge of her top over her nose, carefully went through the corpse’s pockets.

“Well lookie what I found here. A staff keycard for entry to—what’s it say? The Richmond Palace Hotel. Fancy.”

Scramble raised an eyebrow. “Either our Nvyro-Mental here had a day job waiting tables, or there’s something going down at the Richmond this crew is a part of.”

“Doesn’t make sense, though,” Haywire said. “The Palace is all the way across town from the Grand Western where Jim Dum Dum’s daddy is doing his talk. Unless—you reckon there’s any chance they share staff, you know, when they’re busy? The Nvyro’s might be using one to get into the other.”

“Possibly,” Scramble said. She took the keycard from Haywire. “It looks legit. I’m going to do some digging, see what I can find out. Do you mind?”

She indicated the stiffening corpse on their floor.

“Doing meat disposal?” Haywire shrugged. “One of us has to. You get the next one, though.”

“Deal.”

“Excellent. I’ll pop into the N-Counter on the way back, grab us some eats. You fancy anything in particular?”

“Sure. Something organic,” Scramble said. She eyed the ex-Nvyro, “but nothing with red meat on it, okay?”

Haywire laughed.

“Right, so,” Scramble wiped mustard from her mouth, “what we’ve got is actually quite interesting. Mr. CloudRunner’s daddy dear is doing a talk on Sunday, which we knew already, but guess where he’s staying the night before?”

“You serious?” Haywire placed her tub of noodles on the table and took a prawn from another container.

“Yep. Apparently, they don’t like putting their politicians in place until just before the time. Lets them make sure the place is properly clean.”

“And so his boy is going to hit him the night before. Not even wait to make it a public spectacle,” Haywire nodded appreciatively. “Crafty.”

“Yep. And cold.”

“Well, I think you better start looking into getting us some rooms in the Richmond Palace Hotel, ’cause we’re staying out in town tonight,” Haywire popped the curl of prawn in her mouth and bit down. “Nice.”

Scramble’s hands were lit up orange all along their tattooed circuits as she pushed into the face of the Nvyro-Mentalist.

“7... 8... 9... 3...” he gasped, each number delivered like a smoker’s gasped-out breath. “Ben... jamin... Stauss...”

“And there we go. Now we know what room he’s in and under what alias. Wasn’t that hard at all, now, was it?” Scramble said. She gave the man’s head a shove and let him collapse back onto the bed like a broken marionette. His eyes rolled back in his skull, looking like two peeled boiled eggs. She nodded towards Haywire.

Two hours earlier they’d walked right in the front door and collected the keys to their pre-booked room. Just a couple of ladies out for a little alone time together. No-one looked at them twice. Politicians staying in the hotel was nice and all, but it didn’t mean all other rooms were immediately unavailable, and it wasn’t like Din Darn Don was the president or anything. Haywire maintained it was always easier to just walk in the front door and act like you belong there than it was to sneak in around the back of anyplace. People sticking to the shadows drew

attention to themselves, those standing in the middle of the floor were invisible.

“Well done. You gotta give it to them, it was a good plan having their crew all dress up like staff, but no five-star hotel is going to let their porters walk around with fingernails as dirty as that,” Haywire said. She gave her colleague a small round of applause. “Now, let’s go and get our man.”

Din Darn Don was bored. His five-man security squad might have been the finest muscle available, but they lacked anything even resembling a sense of humour, and with such a big day ahead tomorrow, his superiors had banned him from hiring in any women. He sat on a low couch in his hotel suite chewing on an unlit cigar, looking very, very unimpressed with life.

There was a sharp knock at the door, and one of the muscled slabs heaved itself over to answer it.

“Oh excellent, something to eat. Finally,” Din Darn Don muttered. “That’ll at least give us something to do besides sit here looking at each other.”

The lead security official grunted and stepped outside. He returned a moment later accompanied by a sextet of waiters pushing trolleys that smelled of expensive good things into the room.

“And not a looker among them,” Din Darn Don groaned. He ground his cigar into the ashtray and sauntered across the suite to the dining area. He sat down and tapped the table with his fork handle. The main waiter brought over a covered dish.

“Just leave it on the table,” Din Darn Don said dismissively.

The waiter smiled nastily and, tilting the plate so the politician could see clearly, lifted the lid. Laid out on it was a dead bird choked in oil, eyes bulged, tongue looking like it had gotten wedged in the too-widely-open beak while it was in the middle of being vomited up.

“What is this?” Din Darn Don pushed himself away from the table.

“This is a small result of your policies,” the waiter growled. He shoved Din Darn Don back down into the seat. The politician heard a series of thumps and gasps. He risked a quick look around to see that the other waiters had completely immobilised his guards, who were now just five piles of muscle scattered around the floor. “Looks like you should have insisted on a better security detail, pops.”

The waiter smiled, and beneath the facelift, Din Darn Don could make out the features of his wayward son.

CloudRunner saw recognition dawn and smiled broadly. He grabbed the dead bird, flipped it onto its back, and pulled a wad of green leaves from its stomach which he unwound to reveal a small handgun. CloudRunner leaned forward and placed the gun against his father’s right shoulder.

“Hiya,” he purred. “Good to see you after so long.”

“Jimmy?” Din Darn Don gasped.

“Hello Dad,” CloudRunner said with a wicked smile and pressed back on the trigger, which was the exact moment the ceiling caved in.

Haywire dropped through the hole, activating her augmentation as she did. All guns in the room except for CloudRunner’s discharged; the bullets tore holes in her clothes but bounced off of her skin, flattened from the impact. She crouched down while they unloaded their ammo at her.

The suite was filled with dust and smoke, screams and howls and groans, as deflected bullets zinged dangerously.

CloudRunner dragged Din Darn Don across the room and threw him into the relatively sheltered space between bed and wall. He fired two shots off in Haywire’s direction then dove in after his father, just as the door to the room blew inwards. Scramble leaned around the shattered frame long enough to throw in a handful of stun grenades before she ducked back out again.

CloudRunner felt a ripple of unpleasant nausea just as the stunners went off. With a curse, the Nvyro-Mental’s leader shoved the

deadweight of his father off him and stood up, ready to fight. Haywire was crouched on the bed.

“Hey, honey,” she said and punched him in the face, the chest, the head, and finished the combo with an elbow to the jaw. He dropped to the floor, and she grabbed Din Darn Don. Haywire dragged the retching politician to his feet and shoved him towards the door. “Run.”

Then she jumped on CloudRunner.

The politician stumbled over the wreckage of the room. At the door, Scramble pushed him out into the hall. “Keep going. Get safe. Don’t trust any of the hotel staff. Just go.”

“Who are you?” Din Darn Don spluttered.

“People who are here to capture your son. Keeping you alive isn’t part of the contract, so this is me being nice. Now go.” She emphasised it with a push. Scrambled watched for a moment as Din Darn Don fumbled his way down the corridor, making sure he was actually leaving.

In the room, CloudRunner was gaining the upper hand against Haywire; ducking a right hook, CloudRunner retaliated with a flurry of punches to her stomach. He reached into Haywire’s jacket, and his hand emerged holding her cuffs. He drove a knee into her side and jabbed her in the eyes. Then, before she could recover, he’d locked the cuff to her right wrist, dragged her down and clicked the other end closed around her left ankle. Scramble turned back in time to see Haywire tumble onto the floor.

“Back down, fella, there’s no place for you to go,” Scramble said from the doorway, her weapon aimed at CloudRunner’s chest. “Personally, I want to bring you in alive. Helps build reputation better, but really it’s no skin off my nose to have you not breathing.”

CloudRunner looked at the damage and injured, retching, and unconscious bodies scattered about the room. He shook his head.

“Don’t you people even care? Don’t you see the damage my father and his cronies are inflicting on our planet?”

Scramble shrugged. "I'm here for the good time, buddy, not the long time."

"A joke? Really? At a time like this? That's a great attitude to have. You people really think it's cool not to care," CloudRunner growled, his eyes angry.

He took a step towards Scramble, and an orange glow lit up around his feet. The step turned into a burst of speed as Scramble pulled the trigger. The bullet zinged over his shoulder and ended up just off-centre in an expensive looking painting of a sunset.

She tried to find another line on CloudRunner but his enhancement gave him too much of an edge. He was behind her and had kicked the legs out from under her before she could aim. Scramble turned as she fell. CloudRunner was almost out the door when she fired. The bullet that tagged him in the ass sent him into a tailspin. He crashed into the opposite wall with a roar of pain and looked up in time to see his father's secret service agents coming down the hall.

"Next time, I promise," he shouted as he pushed through a fire-door and down the emergency stairs, feet glowing orange and a hand clamped tight to his stinging butt.

CloudRunner burst from the building, shoulder first through the fire-exit, his head low. The getaway van was right where it should be, side-door wide open, waiting.

The terrorist hurled himself through the gap, and the van was moving before he'd even hit the deck. They bashed through the gates, the speed-bumps jolting CloudRunner about. He slid the door shut and clambered carefully into the passenger seat.

The driver, wearing a clown-mask, weaved through traffic with expert skill. CloudRunner grinned over at him.

"Nice one brother," CloudRunner said as he snapped on the safety belt. A look of uncertainty crossed his face. "I don't recognise the mask. Is that you J-O? Peter?"

“The name’s Deco,” the clown said and jammed a tranquilizer into CloudRunner’s neck. The terrorist flopped about wildly for a moment, then collapsed, unconscious.

“Well that’s that,” Scramble said as she hung up. “Our boy has the cargo en route to the drop-zone.”

“Nice one,” Haywire smiled. They were seated outside a café down the road from the Richmond Palace Hotel where FyreSyyde Police Department vehicles buzzed. “Here we’ll have two coffees please, when you get a chance of course.”

The waitress, a girl just out of her teens turned and looked at them with her mouth open. Her entire expression read hungover. “You got any idea what’s goin’ on over there?”

“Must be someone famous,” Haywire shrugged. “I heard that the Jubbly Boys were spotted in town last night. Something to do with a secret gig down by the docks.”

“Really?” the waitress gasped and tucked a greasy strand of her rainbow hair behind an ear. She looked longingly in the direction of the swarming police vehicles for a moment before she sighed and disappeared into the café to get their order.

“You’re mean,” Scramble laughed.

“Meh,” Haywire grunted. “Still can’t believe you shot him in the tush. Ruining a perfect piece of meat like that. I’m disgusted with you.”

“Yeah, ’cause when he had you in handcuffs it was purely for the kink factor,” Scramble said with a laugh.

The two of them sank into a comfortable silence and watched the flashing haze of red and blue lights descend across the road.

“Well, that’s that job done anyway,” Haywire said finally.

“Yep,” Scramble agreed. “Another party smashed.”

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<https://kenmcgrathauthor.tumblr.com/> or @thebigface if you want. He wouldn't mind being a Transformer when he grows up.

Promontory

By JON ZAREMBA

Two ageless and eternal forces do endless battle throughout the aeons! This time, a piece in their everlasting game has been brought into play—will Joshua Day cleave his way through the swarming undead tides to finally put an end to the conflict?!

I. Mark Oberheim

I've lived longer than any rational man should. Although I do not wholly regret this choice of eternal life, there are momentary spells of weakness in which I wonder if I should have taken him at his word and accepted a seat in his supposed kingdom of peace. Yes, of course, I enjoyed my younger decades fighting and killing for him. The kill was payment in itself. But now, centuries later, I am not wanted in Hell and have no want for Heaven. It seems that my sole purpose has become to deflect the maddening weight that looms overhead. Forever vital and yet utterly exhausted.

I continued to fight and kill, but no longer for him. For me. Hoping to find one stronger than myself to rid me of this curse. But my endless searches only brought endless slayings. In lieu of relief, my skills were honed. Each year, increasing in strength and prowess, evading death's calling, prolonging my immortality. By mastering life, I've earned nothing more than a relentless salacity for loneliness and an unabated yearning for death.

Recent centuries have allowed me to fabricate a sense of comfort, becoming perhaps too content. I've managed to ignore the devolution of humanity by hiding away in this cabin deep in the still-unsettled mountains of North America. As comfortable as it may seem, I know this time is ending, and my retreat is no longer a sanctuary. The truth is that ignorance, especially when deliberate, does not provide a lasting foundation for contentment.

Once again, the wind blows the stench of civilization in my direction. Their feeble machines are erecting some ridiculous monstrosity across the ridge-line of my valley. Mankind mindlessly crawls over everything, always procreating, and always failing to reach its full potential. Every moment another failure is spat forth by some mother, a child more hopeless than its father. An entire generation hell-bent on retarding whatever progress might have been made by their ancestors. I yearn for the golden years of this race's existence...the years when barbarism reigned...and the freedom to die made life worth living.

But there is one who defies this paradigm... one who was born with a lust for death that rivals my own... one whose exemplary abilities have been stifled by his peers. Repressed but not extinguished, his avidity begs to explode. Joshua Day's inner rage has been ratcheted down since childhood, his bloodlust abashed by countless foster homes and religious frauds. A tenacity yet unseen, locked away by a moral code that is beyond reproach of most... but not all. I will break Day. His floodgates shall be opened, releasing a torrent of hatred, angst, and contempt by his own right of self, fueled by thirty years of spiritual frustration for being born a man with the skill of conquest but crippled by a world in which the tools of his craft have been resigned to mythology.

Long ago I accepted the fact that my patience for life would be continually tested, and a time would come when I was ready to forfeit it all. From the first moment I saw Joshua Day's aura, I knew my era had ended and that my skin would absorb the gore of battle once more and that the joy of this final slaughter would be shared with him.

I will no longer allow the pressure of civilization to force me into a corner of my own brooding. Although I may question my chosen path, I will not lapse into sorrow. Despair shall not suffocate me. Instead, I will grip firm my hammer and employ hundreds of years of honed dexterity to destroy many. Once again I shall unleash my rage

onto Korg Crumar. His death will flood this realm, and this time, I shall not fight it alone.

Crumar: this, an ancient seed, born with the dawn of life on Earth. Immortal like me, but unique in that no amount of malice will bring his end. He may be reduced back to the minuscule evidence of his physical existence, but never eliminated entirely. Each chapter ends by sending him back into the earth to slowly sprout elsewhere centuries later.

He has taken root in the ancient ones' network of tunnels that lay hidden within this valley, sprawling under the nearby town of Merli. A fitting town to be his tool. Merli was doomed from inception and now teeters on the brink of extinction. A rotting town built atop their ancient site. A town forced upon the world by those who live without consequence. Crumar has blossomed here like a dandelion on a dung heap—growing only to be hacked down, blown blindly by the wind, weightless of self, deposited anywhere.

Korg Crumar's lack of volition grants him immediate kinship with the many aimless humans here, all of them carried by unseen forces, forfeiting their will to fleeting urges. He will create an army of lifelessness from their shells of flesh, injecting them with an insatiable appetite for life consumption... all in the name of wretched altruism. In fact, it has already begun. All of humanity is now in the process of unifying.

All but one: Joshua Day—a defiant human who does not succumb to the whims of the wind—a man who does not wish to live forever, and an individual in the truest sense. The moment is near when the ancient steel that lay buried beneath this cabin shall again taste blood.

Ah yes, I smell the rising of death in the air tonight! Day will lead it through the valley to this cabin. Here we shall reduce Crumar's necrotizing horde of the dead to an indiscriminate mush. And then I

will at long last cure myself of this curse and exit this insipid world with honor.

II. Korg Crumar

Bile. I am the administrator of the earth's digestive faculty. Born time after time, place after place, always different and yet always the same. A transient moment of flesh, here now to formulate these thoughts. Existence is circumstantial. At the whims of disorder. I neither care when nor where. Incoherent fleeting ambitions of these inhabitants vex and offend. I have but one desire, to deconstruct, consume, and absorb all. Created to lose but not to die.

The differences are only peripheral. Nothing truly changes. Forever contracting and expanding. Fluid to flesh and back again. I am the tide rhythmically reduced by the one called Oberheim. Flesh for now, but only until he comes. He will find me, reduce me, and feign cyclical victory again.

I destroy not with hate, but with apathy. I harbor no disdain for Oberheim or any of the creatures on this planet. All life is equal and therefore all life is meaningless. And as such, his stoicism and pretentious illustrativity are foolish. To obstruct me is to obstruct the persistence of nature... of digestion, my only constant.

His interest in this other—the irritant. This is a new investment for him. He knows there is nothing to gain. Thousands of years spanning hundreds of cycles—he has never gained. And now he risks immortality and the balance of every *thing*. If his will is to make this time different, then so be it.

Both he and the irritant will be reduced to the muck of the earth, one with all death. I shall absorb and process whatever element of the self that inspires, until every last remnant of individuality is an unrecognizable conglomerate of the colorless sludge of things. Then Oberheim will realize his true form, that being the equal of everything else, liberating him from the suffering of choice.

And this irritant, this Joshua Day—he will forfeit his obstinacy and appreciate transduction...as all men of this earth do in the core of their being. For his current stance—his pride—must be agonizing. He has a disillusioned mind frozen by the absurd code of transient volitional autonomy. I take no joy in my vocation. But if such an emotion were possible for me, I would take joy in Day's revelation.

I did not create my role. I create nothing. But nothing is the destiny of man. Destiny is what I bring to this sphere. The world seeks, I seek not. I bring the world what it wants but lacks the courage to demand. And my cycle of death is a subconscious relief for these fools.

I am the selfless giver that history's mystics and philosophers persuaded men to become. Although my role is integral, I seek no praise. If worship is to be paid, let it be to my resolve... the destiny of nothingness.

In his heart, Oberheim knows that this is necessary. His rebellion and the ensuing conflict is mere posturing. He plays the hero. But he knows it's all for naught. Why make this cycle different? Why include Day? Whatever his aim, nothing shall be accomplished. He must know this. The disorder of things is not his to change. The destiny that I provide binds us both.

As I come to form, it begins. Miles from the catalyst, deep in my dark, I await the destiny of death. These insignificant men have stumbled upon a new door. It opens as the gray man dies. Gray by choice and a martyr by fate. The impetuosity of the mob, chanting with signs, delusional self-importance. Their irrational conviction so easily swayed—they are the lever I pull for commencement.

Motion is injected back into this dead man, instigating the havoc that shall ensue, escalating towards apotheosis. The grayness of this man shall become the calming grayness of the masses, unified in their confusion.

In such, the end of all reiterates as this man stumbles forth through the door that the mob has opened for him. He shall meander aimlessly, spreading gray along his path. With each new death, another new door. They shall walk through these doors to spread decay until all life is reduced to the slow creep of the featureless union of all things that once were plural.

Joshua Day! You stand at the shoreline of an uncompromising deluge of anti-life. It will overcome, drowning you as you stand. Suffocating as you sink, consumed from outside in until all of your misguided virtues are deflated and your will broken. As you become one with what has drowned you, you will come to appreciate the peace I bring. Your living agony will beckon death's sweet apathy as your soul evaporates and your vessel becomes an anonymous drop in the tidal wave that crashes against the cliff of existence.

III. Joshua Day

I've only recently recognized that I've always wanted a reason to kill, and I'm grateful to Mark Oberheim for giving me many. I grew up alone and left school early. I excelled at every task I undertook and yet still failed to meet society's standards. Many opportunities to lash out were presented, but I always ignored the beckoning violence. I met many who didn't deserve life but felt it wasn't up to me to take it from them. Each cheek I turned became a weight on my shoulders, pressing me down further and further. In time, it became impossible to confront my antagonists. How does one confront the whole world?

Had I not met Oberheim, I wouldn't have thought such a bloody retort to be possible. I would have withered away, having never scratched this itch...dying full of regret. But instead, Oberheim brought me a most righteous slaughter. The itch was cleaved, and I found true contentment. Allow me to explain how I reached this epiphany.

After school, I floated around until I took a construction job in Merli, Virginia, working on a new wind turbine power line in a nearby

unsettled forest. The town was more or less controlled by a band of environmentalists who objected to the deforestation necessary to build this new emerging energy source. They strong-armed local businesses and regularly harassed the company that hired me. My boss's lack of foresight and fortitude didn't help matters.

It was early November in the Virginia hills. Several days of cold rain had softened the autumn ground, turning the forest floor into a sinking sponge of decay. Rotten logs were indistinguishable from fallen leaves, mushy acorns, and the carcasses of the previous season's invertebrates. The rain slowly pounded everything into a singular mass of feces-colored muck.

I waded through this sludge every day, carrying out my duties to remove the tree line that would become the site of a series of windmills. Behind me, their stumps protruded from the earth resembling tombstones in the early morning light. The ground was so soft I imagined that a single man could up-heave and topple the mature trees with a strong push.

In the valley below I could see a small herd of deer slowly migrating single-file along a flooded stream. Their golden heads reached just above the layer of fog that covered the quiet water, bobbing in sync with their cautious gate.

The valley narrowed sharply about a hundred yards in, ending at a tall rock outcropping that divided the stream. As the deer approached the sharp cliff edge, I saw him for the first time. He was leaning casually against the rock, fading in and out of visibility as each deer passed in front of him, so closely that he could reach out and grab them if he desired. Either they didn't know he was among them or they were at peace with his presence.

He stood motionless, calm, and tranquil as if an extension of the rock itself. I would have thought him to be sleeping if it weren't for his piercing blue eyes. His gaze cut through the fog, and even from such a distance, I felt as if he were standing immediately in front of me. This was my introduction to Mark Oberheim.

A tattered and worn old man of unearthly strength and vitality. Beneath his wrinkled, leathery skin pumped the potent blood that fueled his untiring musculature. His long gray hair and beard, a knotted mess, hung down to his waist, covering much of the muddy rags that were his clothing.

Oberheim stood and watched me work, knowing that I was aware of him, cautious yet curious like a stray dog. What did he hope to gain from me? A stray dog perhaps, but not a desperate one.

When I first came to Merli, my coworkers mentioned an old hermit who lived a few miles into the valley. Their talk was of legends and lore, none of them sure of his existence. Be that as it may, my employer cautioned us to avoid any confrontation with him if sighted. If he wasn't seen, then he didn't exist. And if he didn't exist, then there was no threat to production. The truth is that Oberheim had no interest in the consequences of our work. I would discover his only interest was in me, studying me from the fog since I arrived in town.

That afternoon I went about my work, making no mention of Oberheim to my coworkers. I sensed that our paths would eventually cross but felt no need to involve others.

As the days and weeks passed, tensions rose between my employer and the protestors. Sign waving became shouting which escalated to pushing and shoving. It wasn't long until fists flew and one of the men rendered an environmentalist unconscious. They retaliated, not for their own preservation, but in defense of their irrational ideology.

The protestors set fire to our local headquarters. It happened after hours, and they probably assumed the building to be empty, but my employer was working late. They unknowingly killed him that night, which allowed an intersection of all life and death. The charred corpse crawled from the rubble and had stumbled forth into the dark, cold night. Later I would discover that the act the protestors assumed would merely stifle production at the site had been an impetus for Korg Crumar's centuries-old plan.

This once-dead man spread the birth of living death to his father and family, who begat it to their neighbors. Within hours, the townspeople were transformed into a mob of slow creeping mortality, stammering out in every direction with only one goal: to create more death.

It wasn't viral. Nothing lived within the human shells. No *thing* was given from one to the other; all was taken instead.

It is necessary for me to describe the unnatural nature of this plague in detail. My initiation came while waiting at a drive-through restaurant window an hour or so after the fire. The couple in front were paying for their food as a haggard figure stumbled across the parking lot to the passenger window of their car. I noticed the trail of blood behind him glistening in the moonlight like the slime from a snail. The woman rolled down her window as it approached, most likely thinking he was a homeless man begging for change. She didn't notice the opening in its gut until it was too late. As soon as he could, he reached in and twisted her hair about his fingers. There wasn't much she could do as he slowly leaned down and bit into her throat. He wasn't feeding, just killing in the easiest way possible. Her blood spurt onto his face and down the side of the car.

The panicked man behind the wheel tried to speed forward. The vehicle made it just a short distance before it slammed into the back of a parked truck loaded with camping gear, including a metal canoe on the roof. The impact thrust the man's head into the steering wheel and sent the canoe through his windshield. It must have razed his skull because it was only a moment later that his headless body poured out of the car.

Without hesitation, the now-animate headless corpse scrambled around the perimeter of the car, wearily bracing itself against the trunk. Its blind fingers felt their way around the corner and pulled its body towards the passenger door. The girl wasn't dead yet, and it knew it.

This was real. My mind struggled to make sense of what my eyes were seeing. Confused, it took me a moment to decide what to feel. Rather than fear, my mind chose hatred. All I wanted to do was destroy this thing which, by simply existing, defied science. So I stepped on the gas, hurling my car in death's direction.

One's attention was drawn towards me as my engine revved. The front of my car slammed into its soft torso, heaving his flaccid body onto my hood, splattering it like a giant pustule of blood and bile. I was startled by the amount of thick fluid that his body contained, seemingly under extreme pressure. Its skull shattered like a rotten melon, spreading its brain onto my windshield. The slimy gray bits adhered to the glass and slowly tried to make their way closer to my face with suction like that of a tree frog. The very matter of this thing's being wanted to take my life.

The thing's brains, guts, and sludge were drawn to me like a magnet. An unnatural force controlled every cell of death. This was the power of Crumar's "spell". I cringe at the use of that word, but I don't know how else to explain it.

I turned on the windshield wipers and put my foot to the floor, careening into the headless one that was still fumbling towards the dying woman hanging out of the passenger window. I tensed up and squinted through the purple that glazed my view.

The sack of gore on my car compounded with the headless one's body, sandwiching them between both vehicles. Their limbs were haphazardly intertwined and cemented with a thick crimson paste. In the silence, I could hear a gurgling sound. It was the woman gasping for air through the open gash in her throat. I put the car in park and ran over to check on her. She was slumped over the open car window, blood forming a puddle on the pavement below.

I gently pushed her shoulders back against the seat and opened the door. Her reddened chest heaved one last time before life left her. All was silent for just a moment before shrieks broke out of the restaurant. A few people scrambled out but stopped short at the site in the parking lot. As my attention was drawn to what they were

running from, I felt something cold and wet prodding at my chest. She had been reanimated. I swatted her hands away and took a few steps back.

She slowly rose up from the vehicle, her eyes still vapid in death. She awkwardly walked towards me, one slow step at a time. It seemed to cause her body terrific difficulty to approach me, but her face showed no signs of discomfort—just a lethargic stare of boredom. I looked to the mash of flesh between the two vehicles. It writhed and wiggled, slipping itself free, but not in whole—in chunks. Pieces of hewn body slowly clumped to the pavement and inched in my direction. There was no way to breathe rationality into the situation. I made up my mind to flee from this abomination of reason, slowly walking backward away from the scene.

As I got further away, I noticed a change in the things' behavior. Random limbs from the two men had attached themselves to the woman, creating a disorganized asymmetrical mess that began shuffling towards the people standing outside the restaurant. There was nothing I could do to save them. Instinct took over as I sprinted towards Oberheim's forest.

I hadn't shared more than a passing glance with this man, and yet I was certain that he was the key to my survival. I ran full speed through several neighborhoods, making my way to the trail opening that would lead to the valley where I spotted him previously. Along the way I could hear sirens from multiple directions. People screamed, died, and lived again in the houses on either side of the street, relinquishing their humanity.

At first, a few dark figures were standing disjointedly along the sides of the street. I kept running, passing several more. They were slow and clumsy. As I neared the trail head, more and more appeared, eventually filling the street in front of me. My sprint slowed to a jog and quickly ended with me covering my face and neck as I shoved my way through the crowd. I felt their wet fingertips grasp my arms, clothing, and hair as I pushed through the soft wall.

At the trail head, I paused to look behind me. To my horror, I saw that the masses of figures had congregated in my pursuit, moving slowly together, lumbering in unison... becoming one organism of shared intention, leaving an ever-widening puddle of thick gore behind them. What was once a series of figures had become a blob of suffocating doom that slowly and deliberately rolled after me. Wasting no more time, I darted down the darkened trail, my chest heaving.

Exhausted, I pressed on, trying to gain as much distance from the horde as possible, stopping only momentarily to catch my breath, treading cautiously but quickly, guided by the full moon which now lit the valley floor.

I followed a small stream down the valley, eyeing the steep hillsides to the left and right. I could see the silhouette of our windmills high on the ridge to the left, along with several smaller shapes stumbling down the hill. As they closed in from all directions like a flood of melted ice, I couldn't shake the feeling that this valley would be my grave.

Finally, perhaps a half mile ahead in the center of the valley floor, I saw a large fire burning. The flames colored the tall rock face where I had seen Oberheim previously. From this vantage point, I could now see a small cabin behind a row of trees along the sharp edge of the rocks which towered more than one hundred feet above. I stopped short of the cabin's front door, half-expecting to find him there, but the shack was dark and empty. I pushed open the dilapidated door. Inside were a small wood-burning stove, handmade table, and some scraps for a bed. Was this the home of my savior or a deranged derelict?

There was no retreat behind this cabin or around the rock. The stream split here and petered out into the thick brush on either side. Everything in this part of the forest funneled to this end. It was either go back through them or die here. My heart sank as my attention was drawn to the silence, aside from the crackling of the bonfire

outside. I stepped out and gazed up at the tall rock cliff above, thinking how I could climb to the top to hurl myself down, die on my own terms, and bring punctuation to an otherwise unfulfilled life.

Then, from behind and above me, I heard his booming voice. I still remember his words quite distinctly: “Joshua Day! I am Mark Oberheim. You’ve done well to abolish faith throughout your life, but don’t let a new found contradiction persuade your heart. You are to play an integral part in all of Creation’s history! Regardless of how it seems, we are not outnumbered! It is our two individual minds against the one of theirs. Two against one! Tonight, embrace your rage and give in to the lust of slaughter!”

I turned around and looked up. Standing on the roof of the cabin, arms folded in front of him, stood Oberheim, his frenzied smile shining through the darkness. With unnatural nimbleness for a man of his age, he leaped from the roof, landing solidly on the ground in front of me.

“I know who you are, what you are capable of, and the fire within you that has been smothered by this world. Tonight it will burn anew.”

I followed him back to the cabin. Mark slid the pile of bedding to the corner of the room, revealing a trapdoor in the cabin floor. A cloud of dust filled the room as he flung it open. We descended the rickety wooden stairs into a dark hallway. Once he lit a torch, I could see that the hallway was constructed of precisely-fitted stones, in stark contrast to the rotting wood shanty above.

The hallway descended steadily downhill as we proceeded forward. The cut stones slowly changed into large rectangular blocks consistent in girth. As I felt the chisel marks in the huge megaliths, I wondered how such a structure could be buried under the earth here in Virginia and remain undiscovered. What else was down here?

“Civilization is older than most care to contemplate,” Mark said as if he’d read my mind. “These tunnels were built long before the native tribes inhabited this continent.”

In the flickering torchlight I noticed several side passages. At one intersection there was a panel built into the wall with a series of unusual levers and buttons. I stopped to get a closer look but was interrupted by Mark, a few paces ahead of me.

“Hurry now. They’re still coming, and we haven’t much time.”

We walked a long distance before the tunnel spilled out into a round chamber with a tall ceiling. In the center of the room lay a long rectangular container made from cut stone. The lid to the box was cut from stone, as well, and perfectly fitted to the precisely-edged chest. Various glyphs of a forgotten, or never known, civilization adorned the lid.

“Grab an end. Gently.”

The two of us lifted the stone lid and cautiously set it down next to the box. Mark slowly panned his torch over the contents, revealing a broadsword the length of a young adult and a hammer with an enormous head and very long handle. Through the layer of gray dust, I could tell that both weapons were handmade, of exquisite craftsmanship. They were completely free from markings and carried a non-reflective matte finish. No adornment or battle scars were to be found, and I still don’t know from what type of stone or steel they were forged. Regardless of the material, they were ridiculously heavy and unwieldy. The hammer’s head was the size of a man’s chest and must have weighed more than a hundred pounds. I couldn’t imagine the thin handle supporting its weight. I looked up at Mark and chuckled at the ridiculousness of the pretentious weapons he presented.

“His tactics are always the same. He expects to fail each time, believing that there is strength in unity and sacrifice. He’s a wretched puddle,” sneered Mark, completely ignoring my doubtful glance.

“Korg Crumar. He is the instigator. And by now there are thousands of them above us,” he continued as he casually reached down and lifted the enormous hammer from the box as easily as if it were made of foam.

He brought the hammer over his head, held it for a moment, then let it crash down onto the floor, splitting one of the embedded megaliths into several segments. Dust fell from the ceiling and walls. The sound of thunder boomed through the chamber and reverberated into every passage of the underground maze. The low-end rumble sustained for a minute until the dust settled around us, revealing Mark's now familiar bearded grin from behind the torch flame.

"I know you've yearned to kill throughout your entire life. Tonight, your barbarity will finally be liberated. Grab the sword, Joshua," he calmly commanded.

It had only been a few of hours since this all had begun. Yesterday I was a day laborer, and tonight I was taking up archaic arms. There was no time to debate with myself and no time to question reality. Stifling my senses would be both foolish and impossible at this moment. An uncontrollable heat quickly began to course through my body, fueled by years of repressed hatred. Memories came rushing into my consciousness of past setbacks caused by a failure to lower my standards to that of the populous. I began to think of the collective mass that crawled on the surface above. They represented everything about the world that I loathed.

This new-found violent agitation provoked my epiphany... The compulsion to kill the dead, reducing them to mush if necessary, became my only god and commander. Would this night be my last? It didn't matter, because I knew it would be my best.

I lifted the giant sword from the stone box. Amazingly, it was weightless in my hands. Fueled by self-righteous fury, I grabbed the hilt tightly, turned my back on Oberheim, and sprinted into the darkness of the tunnel, returning the way we came. I heard him let out a startled chuckle as he quickly followed, waning torch in hand.

As my adrenaline pumped, the sword seemed to get even lighter.

After a few moments of running headfirst into the dark, I collided with something soft, knocking it to the stone floor. They had not only made it to the cabin but found their way to contaminate the underground. A putrid odor hit my face as the thing of flesh used my body as a ladder to right itself. I quickly slapped its moist mitts off of me, took a step back, and scratched the itch that had been burning in my consciousness.

With a spinning motion, I swept my sword through its torso, slicing effortlessly from shoulder to hip. I heard the rotten meat fall into two piles. As I stepped through it, some bits pawed at my ankles. I sloughed it off and continued forward, sword outstretched.

Ahead I could see the faint blue light of the cabin's opening, and I heard a low rumbling sound from the earth above, slow and deliberate. Behind me, Mark's torchlight approached. Impatiently, I pushed through two or three more of them, cutting effortlessly as I passed. I lowered my sword and climbed the ladder up into the cabin.

As I reached the top rung of the ladder, I looked up to see several desperate hands haplessly reaching for me. There was no time to descend, nor room to attack from this position. Their clammy hands grabbed fistfuls of my hair and, with the strength of one unified muscle, pulled me up through the floor and hurled me into the corner, skipping my sword to the other side of the room.

They were on top of me in an instant. Dozens of them had filled the small cabin. I felt their fingernails claw at my skin, cracking and falling from their impotent digits as they drew blood. I felt their soft mouths leave teeth sticking to my face and neck by the tacky slime that coursed through their bodies. More of them piled on top of me, pawing and pressing, twisting my limbs, penetrating my nose, mouth, and ears. Restrained by their weight, I couldn't even cover my face.

I quickly realized my foolishness. Their sole ambition of suffocation, digestion, and coalescence proved them to be a much more formidable enemy than I had thought. In an instant, my

emotions spiraled from unabashed triumph to the undeniable fear of despondency.

Their weight pressed on as more poured into the cabin. Above their dissonant moans and breathless gasps, I heard a dull thud. Then another. And then the splashing sound of pounds of gore being shoveled from the pile on top of me. Mark's massive hammer cleared a circle in the cabin, swinging ferociously in all directions, demonstrating unbelievable prowess. Their languid bodies splattered against the walls, covering the interior with a thick batter of brown and purple.

"You must stay on top!" he shouted as he wiped a thick layer of sludge from his eyes.

He kicked through the pile of quivering appendages that buried my sword, sliding it towards me. I grabbed the hilt and used it to straighten myself. Still shaken, I quickly wiped the teeth and nails from my skin, spit out their slime, and cleared my brow.

During my adolescent years, I witnessed the same natural passing of life as any other young man, assuming it to be a remarkably peaceful moment of closure. So serene that I often longed for it myself, to free me from the dissatisfaction of what life has had to offer. However, it was obvious that there would be no peace in death and my ability to avoid its eternal agitation was dependent on my ability to remain vehemently focused, having a conviction for no other ideal than that of life itself. I knew this and yet my mind remained muffled and my confidence smothered by self-doubt. The degree of perspicacity needed to overcome their doom seemed superhuman.

I'd find no consolation from Oberheim. Having read my woeful expression, he raised his hammer to point outside. Through the doorway I saw the waves of them filling the valley, their moist corpses glistening in the bright moonlight, slowly and steadily coursing up and down, rhythmic as the tide. There were hundreds or thousands of them with the sole purpose of consumption. I dropped my sword and covered my ears to guard my mind from the effect of

their haphazard atonal moans and sighs of desperation. I wasn't ready for this. Nobody could be.

I looked back at the cabin floor and saw the disembodied limbs inching towards me. Their insatiability filled me with doom, and I looked up at Mark's grimacing face, equally disgusted with me as with them. He knew that there wasn't time to waste empathizing with me. Our only chance of survival would be to diminish it, sunder it to insignificant and harmless parts, until all that was left was dirt. Oberheim's grimace twisted to a scowl. This man of at least twice my age shoved me aside, raised his hammer high, and charged towards the approaching wall of noxious softness.

"Unity is their weakness!" he shouted with unabashed hatred for them and gutting disappointment in me.

These words resonated in my soul. In that instant, I realized all that has ever pinned and pained me was rooted in an ascendancy of assimilation...the orphanages, schools, social cliques, religious groups, political insanity...everything. With one sentence, Oberheim summarized the cause of both my angst and the world's stimulus. Unity would be their end. We would make it so. With determination in my dogged head and vindictiveness in my frigid heart, I picked up my sword, gripped it tightly, and ran after him, prepared to drown in their slaughter if need be.

I couldn't guess how long we beat them into the ground. It very well could have been several hours. A euphoric rage took over my body as I hacked limbs and torsos while Mark splattered chests and skulls. Grips and maws tore into our flesh, spilling much of our blood, but we kept moving to stay on top. We penetrated deep into their horde, slamming and slicing until they surrounded us from all directions, now thousands slowly closing in, former humans and beasts of the forest alike. All manner of the dead were in motion again, working in unison. But we remained diligent, fighting back to back, their wall of death shredding against us like cheese on a

grater. We fought in sync as one, evening the odds. A singular force of mindful punctuation against an innate blob of mindless weight.

Strangely, I did not tire. This amazing weapon was weightless in my hands. My dismembering was only matched by Oberheim's bludgeoning. Together we spun and dug into the rotten wall that inched closer from all directions. Brains, blood, and all manner of guts turned the ground below into a deep crawling mud. Even though its residue lived on and made its way around our ankles and up our legs, it was still slow and inept. We remained swift and slung it back to the heap as we continued the massacre. It seemed that this fight was not at all hopeless. Every moment of my life thus far, both good and bad, meant nothing compared to the joy I felt in that moment as we killed the dead over and over again for hours on end. This was living.

However, the more of it we shed, the deeper we began to sink and the further it crawled up our bodies. I began to struggle to keep my eyes and nose free from the splattering. In time, we were knee-deep in strewn bone, muscle, and intestines, and soon enough, we were struggling to remain mobile as this encroaching menace reached our waists. My euphoria quickly diminished as I realized that we weren't reducing this thing, only changing its ever-expanding shape.

The more we killed, the more we sank. Bits of man and beast waded towards us, only to be struck down into smaller bits. However, the dead remained vigilant. They not only continued to advance inward from across this lake of gore, but also from below. It was as if all organic matter that had long since expired was reanimated and working in concert with the human death that crept forth that night. All of it, mindlessly connected, volition subdued, controlled by someone or something with one purpose—to make us part of it.

It seemed only a moment later that my feet no longer rested on solid ground. The power of this monstrosity created a suction that attempted to draw me down. Either the earth had turned to slime, or so much of it had poured into the valley that I was now treading to stay afloat, struggling to hold on to my sword, and becoming

exhausted very quickly. My heart sank as I glanced at Mark and saw that he was suffering similarly.

Our bonfire had long been smothered, leaving only the moonlight against the darkness. The pungent stench—and taste—surrounded. What was once a cacophony of moans and various mouth noises had turned into a guttural hum that vibrated throughout the valley as the gore trembled and spasmed, shaking the foundations of all around us.

Over the rising and falling vibrations I heard Mark shout, “He will consume us! We must seek higher ground!”

Somehow he managed to swing his hammer up overhead and pointed towards the tall barren rock outcropping that originally divided the valley’s natural stream. This promontory was our only hope of survival.

It took all of my strength to fight the suction of uniform damnation. I pushed forward through the ebbing tide of flesh and bone, keeping my face as clear as possible and using my sword to feel for the rock like a blind man with a cane. Random arms, legs, and heads pawed and prodded us. I slung bits of entrails and indistinguishable organs to the side. Before I knew it, I had totally lost sight of Oberheim. Finally, before complete desperation had taken control of my senses, I felt my sword tip strike the solid rock.

I pulled myself close and pressed my body to the stone, digging my fingers into a crevice. The top of the promontory was only several man lengths above, meaning that nearly the entire height of the valley was now under gore. I looked up to see Mark standing on a small ledge in the cliff. My strength was spent, but the sight of him offered a smattering of hope.

I had no choice but to release my sword, letting it sink into the deep, and began to climb up the vertical rock. As I neared the top, Mark lowered his hammer. I grabbed on to the massive head with both hands. Again with remarkable vigor, the old man heaved me up

and onto the ledge. The tide was still rising, even now reaching our feet.

“Higher still!” he shouted.

We continued to climb to where the promontory plateaued, slinging ourselves over the edge. The feeling of solid ground seemed foreign. As I slowly stood up, I wiped as much of the gore from my skin as I could and looked out over the valley.

Now a colorless shade of gray, the sea of death filled the valley and stretched as far as I could see. Bones of men mixed with long-rotting carcasses of animals, heaved up from the depths of the earth, all sloshing back and forth, causing the trees high on the hillsides to the left and right to sway and fall. Further down the valley I watched our windmills slowly slip and slide down the hillside amongst the trees. For a moment, I noticed Mark’s cabin floating on the gray before it was crushed and sucked underneath.

The thick, syrupy gore remained determined. Even the soil that filled the cracks throughout the rock on which we stood became alive and was certainly bent on our destruction. More waves of gore crashed upon the promontory. The hum that it emitted rose in frequency each time a wave met the edge of our cliff, as if to express impatience.

With each wave, our circumstances became direr. There was no way to escape the valley, and it was only a matter of time before we were subdued. I saw the gore rising quicker with each crash, its hum twisting into a sound more like a discordant scream that reverberated for miles. It was obvious that this event wasn’t confined just to Merli. The whole of the earth was part of this nightmare. Quite literally, this promontory—and all the living—were sinking.

The weight of the hopelessness crushed my ethos. A violent chill hit my body, causing me to vomit gobs of gore involuntarily. The puddle of soupy blood at my feet immediately amalgamated with the

stains in my clothing and began moving up my leg. I quickly shook it away and looked towards Oberheim for some sign of hope.

He somberly raised his hammer, pointing towards a dim purple light emanating from a wide crack in the rocks a short distance further along the plateau.

“Korg Crumar,” Oberheim spoke plainly. “End him and end this madness.”

And as if to punctuate the sentence, he dropped his hammer, turned his back to me, stepped towards the edge of the cliff, and with a small casual hop, cast himself into the sea. No further words or explanation were offered. A large crimson wave lashed out of the sea, seemingly to reach up and grab his body as it dropped. It let out an orgasmic scream of agony and ecstasy as it engulfed him, pulling his body to the depths of the deluge.

In an instant, this stranger was gone...my only chance for an explanation to all of this...my only hope for survival.

I rushed to the edge, reaching down into the gore, desperately grabbing for something solid. Instead, the gore grabbed me, nearly pulling me in, head first. I jerked back and scurried away from the edge. There was no saving him; to even try would be to disrespect the choice he made. He got me this far, and for that I was grateful.

The unanswered question swarmed in my head. I still didn't know who Oberheim was, what was underground, or why he chose me, nor did I understand most of what had transpired in the last twenty-four hours.

Time was running out. The promontory was no longer a safe haven as the tide brought red antipathy both over the edge as well as through the small crevasses all around. I looked towards the opening in the rocks ahead. The purple light glowed brighter, pulsating, beckoning me to investigate.

Utterly exhausted, I crawled towards Oberheim's hammer. As my arms struggled to support the weight of my chest, I realized that my body was involuntarily shivering. Another surge of vomit made its way up and out, blending with the gore I pressed through. I shuddered at the thought of how much more was inside me. My shaky hand reached forward and grasped the handle of the gigantic hammer, using it as a crutch to force myself upright.

I mustered whatever strength I had left, expecting great difficulty in lifting the hammer. Instead, similar to my sword, it was extraordinarily light. As I raised the head up and over my shoulder, I felt my vitality begin to return. My nerves settled and all of my muscles began to feel unnaturally stronger. Again, so many questions to ponder, but so little time to do so, for I was now knee-deep in gore.

Quickly but cautiously, I approached the narrow opening; a vertical crevice just barely wide enough to squeeze through. Purple light poured out from within the cave.

He was in the center of a large round chamber, in an upright standing position, but levitating an arm's length above the ground. His bare feet hung lifelessly, toes pointed down, seemingly to balance his body as it rotated at a medium pace with the poise of a dancer. The purple light that filled the chamber seemed to emit from under his body like the intangible exhaust from a rocket. His hands were pressed together tightly in a meditative praying position. Everything fell silent, including the atonal shrieks of death outside.

Although he was humanoid in shape, he lacked many commonly distinguishable features. His unnaturally smooth skin was pure black and oily in appearance. There was no sign of hair anywhere on his head or body. His tattered gray robe hung loosely over his emaciated frame, a hood covering much of his nearly nonexistent face. I could not locate a mouth or nose, although there was a ridge across his forehead in place of eyes. Either he was sightless, or his eyes were so tightly shut in woeful concentration that they disappeared into his somewhat egg-shaped skull. This being was Korg Crumar.

His insect-like frame expressed a deep-seated spitefulness; the sharp bony edges were held with poetry and tact. I sensed nothing but torture and hatred from him. He was suffering. And while I assumed him to be dangerous, I felt no threat while approaching him. I stepped closer, lowering Oberheim's hammer as I neared this floating marvel of destitution. At first, I considered speaking to him in the hopes of procuring an explanation, but I felt that doing so would require cowering... sacrificing myself to a being that wielded great power through his own self-sacrifice.

Crumar showed no sign of fear and remained expressionless. As I neared him, the flame under his feet slowly dissipated, and his body gradually lowered to the floor, leaving the cave nearly dark except for the faint blue of the moon that shone through the narrow opening. His bony hands relaxed and slowly drifted to his sides. Perhaps it was the effect of time standing still or the silencing of the calamity outside, but I began to consider reaching out and embracing his brittle frame. What use would a hammer be against such a harmless creature? And was there not some justification for his hatred? Again, he was suffering. Shouldn't kindness be considered?

My indecision quickly mutated into an oppressive weight of self-loathing. After everything I had seen and survived, why now, when a conclusion can so easily be had, would I doubt my own self in the face of this pathetic creature?

He dropped to his knees in front of me, arms outstretched, palms up and cocked his head back, his expressionless face pointing to the ceiling of the cave in complete and utter helplessness. Crumar wasn't begging for his life. This prostration was a sincere plea for self-destruction.

This was the one who controlled it all, who quite literally had destroyed the world. After bidding all of creation to devour itself, becoming the animated digestion of the living, turning solid into sludge and order into tumult... why now would such a nefarious

creature beg for a selfless ending? Would destruction by my hand bring him undeserved satisfaction?

My momentary deliberation seemed endless until I decided that it didn't matter what he wanted. My satisfaction and the actions that would bring me joy were all that I lived for and killed for this night. Let him invest in his rotten altruistic destruction all he wanted or wanted not... It would end now with Oberheim's hammer, a weapon of unquestionable veracity, made for one unmistakable purpose.

With reawakened conviction, I raised the mighty hammer high above my head, standing strong and tall above the meek faceless wretch below. I took note of the satiating silence around me as I let the hammer drop cleanly onto Crumar's skull. His entire frame folded under the righteous weight, collapsing and disintegrating as if made of burned paper. The hammer shook the floor of the cave and echoed a thunderous resound.

All that was Korg Crumar was gone in an instant, leaving nothing behind but a small amount of fine, black dirt and something resembling a hardened seed. I swept it aside with my foot, rested my hammer on my shoulder, and walked outside towards the now rising sun.

Jon Zaremba is a retired electronic musician with over 30 albums in his catalog. Originally conceived as a screenplay but later adapted as a concept album, Promontory is his first published story. Jon's music, photography, and other projects can be found at www.jonzaremba.com.

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Going Native

By J. MANFRED WEICHSEL

The strange and exotic allure of alien girls is an ever-present temptation to the itinerant youth vacationing across the galaxy... But one young man soon learns ignorance of local custom and xenobiology may have unforeseen and dire consequences!

I was walking along a golden beach, the soft sand caressing the skin between my toes, the sun making my skin feel warm and crisp, with the most beautiful woman in the galaxy at my side. She had raven black hair, and red skin—the shade of red associated with “red delicious” apples. I was in my green swimming trunks, but she was

without garments of any sort, as was the custom of her kind—and yes, like an apple, she looked delicious. Her large auburn eyes were set far apart on her small head, and her full lips settled naturally into a pout.

As a high school graduation present, my parents had gotten me an unlimited season pass on the galactic lines so I could see something of the galaxy before returning to Earth to continue my education. They wanted me to soak up as much culture as I could, but I was much more interested in soaking up sun and surf. The museums, temples, music, theater, and architecture of the galaxy could wait. My first stop was the resort planet of Neesee, and I was loving it so much I had it half in mind to make it my only stop of the summer.

I looked at the woman walking by my side, letting my gaze go from the tip of her head all the way down to her feet, and then slowly back up to her eyes. She caught my gaze and smiled. She was about my age, maybe one or two years older. My tenth grade English teacher assigned us a lot of mid-twentieth century science fiction, and one thing those ancient science fiction writers consistently got wrong was they thought humans and aliens would be too different genetically to reproduce. But evolution is a reaction to environment, and species that develop in similar environments develop similar features, and since DNA is a reflection of external appearance, many independently developed human species, spread far across the galaxy, have similar enough DNA that they can mate.

The woman next to me was so beautiful. The tips of her white teeth gleamed in the sun beneath those luscious, slightly parted red lips. My heart pounded in my chest. It was scientifically possible for me to mate with her, and I was ready to experiment.

She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me towards the clear blue water. “Come on,” she said. “I want to swim.”

Holding hands, we ran into the warm, calm sea, creating clouds in the water as we disturbed the seabed, leaving a foamy white trail in our wake. The warm water enveloped my ankles, and then my waist, and then my feet lost contact with the ground, and I was bobbing next

to her, her hands in mine, as we smiled and looked into each other's eyes.

Although mating with aliens is definitely possible, it is also extremely taboo. I remembered sitting in class after class in school as the teacher warned us about all the diseases one could contract. But she looked the picture of perfect health. I couldn't believe she could carry any diseases at all. The teachers also warned us about cultural misunderstandings and religious differences, but I shook all of those thoughts out of my head. I focused on her smile instead. There could be no cultural misunderstandings. We both wanted the same thing.

She pointed to some rocks jutting out of the water, indicating that she wanted to go there, and we both took off swimming. As the rocks grew closer, I could see that it was actually a small island with a few trees growing off of it.

We reached the island, and she said she wanted to go to the side facing away from shore. We swam around the island, and as we turned the bend, I stopped with startled breath. Mere feet in front of us was a giant green monster, its huge back jutting out of the water in a hump. Its head, hovering high above us, was perched on an elongated neck. The head bent down and tore a mouthful of leaves from one of the island's few lush trees. She laughed. "It eats plants, not us. Don't worry."

She tugged my arm, and we swam under the beast's neck into a cave on the side of the island. My feet touched the ground, and the water receded as we walked up the slope, deeper into the cave. The walls danced with purple and white phosphorescence from the water behind us and a pool in front of us, giving enough light so that after only a few moments of adjustment my eyes could see just fine. It was hard to believe I had only known her for three days. Less, because we met in the evening. Two and a half then.

In my loneliness, I had snuck out of the tourist area and followed the sound of drums to a native dance. Some natives danced alone, while others danced in couples, men and women, the women adorned with colorful feathers, the men with teeth and animal bones, which was more than I ever saw a native wear my entire time on the

planet. There was something so savage about the dance, and so liberating.

I saw her in the throng, dancing alone, pounding one foot forward, the other foot back, and she motioned for me to join her. I did, and imitated the dance, at first with a mocking smile to hide my uncertainty, but then with more confidence as I lost myself in the pounding rhythm. We had been inseparable since that night. I had wanted her all that time, and all the energy that had built up in me was crying for release. The pressure was unbearable.

I took her in my arms and locked my lips in hers. The phosphorescent light danced around us as I lowered her to the muddy ground of the cave. She pulled my swim trunks off with one thrust. "I don't know why you wear these things," she said.

The next morning we swam together back to shore. I wanted to go back to the tourist area and meet her later, but she wanted me to go directly to her house to meet her family. I was a little put off by the idea of meeting her family so soon after she and I had met, but of course I didn't say that, and my excuse was simply that I wanted to take a hot shower and get some food in me. She began to plead and whimper, which annoyed me further, but eventually I agreed to go with her—not because of anything she said, but because I realized that I had forgotten my swimming trunks in the cave, which would have made it awkward to enter human-controlled territory, to say the least.

Her house was a large one-story structure made out of a kind of hardened mud, divided into many rooms roofed with leafy branches. She introduced everybody to me as either her brother or her sister. Given that everybody seemed about the same age, and that I met dozens of them, I knew that this was unlikely and resolved to research the familial customs of her species at a later date. Perhaps my translator chip was mistranslating "brother" and "sister."

One of her "brothers" put two wooden bowls of liquid broth on the table, one in front of me and one in front of her, and then all thirty or

forty of them sat around the large table with no food in front of them and watched us eat. This was awkward too, and I made a mental note to look up the planet's eating customs. The broth was thin and salty, but I was famished, and I ate it right up, bringing wooden spoonful after wooden spoonful to my mouth.

There was one sister of hers that I couldn't keep my eyes off of. She sat across from me, and her breasts were just perfect. I made notes in my head, comparing the breasts of this sister to the one I had come here with, and then stopped abruptly, embarrassed. Of course, it was rude of me to lust after one of her sisters, even though I would be off on the next leg of my trip soon enough and she would be nothing to me but a pleasant memory.

I found the broth strangely filling, even though it had the consistency of ocean water. After we ate, she took my hand, bid me to rise, and led me to a corridor with many wooden doors on both sides. She opened a door, and inside was a small room with nothing in it but a wet mud floor, the exact same grey, soft mud as in the cave. She pulled me down into the mud, and we embraced and locked our lips together as our bodies sank into it. I didn't really want to have sex, mind you, so soon after I had eaten, but it seemed to be the appropriate thing to do based on her behavior, and after a bit of fooling around in the mud I got to feeling pretty horny.

Later, I had a dream that we were making love again, but this time I was becoming a part of her. Our bodies melted together and out of the mass of apple red and suntanned white swirls shot tentacles, writhing, grasping tentacles that shot with a speed meant to deceive the eyes of wary prey. We burrowed into the mud and came out the other end into the sea, where we swam around by shooting a jet of water from an orifice in our middle.

I woke up around the same time she did and mentioned that I was starving. She gave me a strange, loving smile and said that she was starving as well. We walked hand in hand into the dining room, which was empty, where we ate the same clear, salty liquid broth. I was impossibly hungry and couldn't bring the spoonfuls of broth to my mouth fast enough, so I lifted the bowl and drank straight from it.

While eating, I noticed suction cups on the palms of my hands going up my arms and ending on the insides of my armpits. I also noticed suction cups going up my inner thighs and stopping right at the edge of my testicles. Here's the thing, though. I know this will be hard to understand, and I know I am not explaining myself very well, but you know how in a dream strange and bizarre occurrences can happen but go unnoticed, as if they were the most natural things in the world? That is what it was like when I saw the suction cups on my body. I looked at them, took notice, and then went on eating as if nothing was out of the ordinary. I was awake, everything was as real as could be, but I was reacting to all of it with the logic of a dreamer.

When I had finished eating, she took my hands, and I rose from my seat. With the detachment of one within a dream, I noticed that her bowl was empty as well, and that the residue of the broth glistened on her bowl's wooden finish. With the same detachment, I noticed that her body was transformed with suction cups along her arms and inner thighs just as mine was. She led me back to the mud room where we made love again, our arms and legs twisting around each other's like tentacles, the suction cups of our thighs making kissing noises as they stuck to each other's cups and pulled apart. I have to admit, with embarrassment, that it was the most pleasurable experience of my life. The suction cups on my twisting arms and legs pulsed and flared with orgasmic intensity wherever they touched hers.

Afterward, I slept, dreamed, and awoke again starving. She took me by the hand and led me towards the dining room. I could see, looking down, that my chest was now covered with suction cups, as was my stomach. I thought I could feel suction cups on the backs of my thighs as I walked.

Something gnawed at me, but in my waking dream state I didn't know quite what it was. I tried to focus my mind on it, and finally it hit me. I didn't know how many times I had done this, or for how long I had been doing it. Fuck, sleep, eat. Fuck, sleep eat. I had a feeling that this routine had gone on far longer than I remembered. The second to last instance in the mud room was already a hazy memory, and I couldn't remember the time before that at all. But judging by how my body felt, a kind of tired and worn feeling, a kind of feeling

that this routine was habit and was wearing on me, I must have gone through it dozens of times. Possibly more.

These thoughts receded into the ungraspable distance like thoughts during a dream often do, as she sat me down at the dining room table in front of yet another bowl of clear broth. There was something inside of me. I couldn't identify what it was. I thought and thought, focusing my mind, trying to figure out what was wrong, and all I could come up with was a vague feeling that I missed solid food. But this vague feeling was enough. I concentrated all my energies and managed to stammer out, "I think I should go back to the tourist area now."

She recoiled in what can only be described as horror. "Why would you want to leave?"

"Well, I want to eat human food. Solid food. And I want to be around my own kind."

Her eyes shot daggers as she took a menacing step towards me. "Do you know what you're saying?"

I took a step back and put my hands out, afraid of what she might do. "Just for a little while. I just want to take a shower. Get this mud off me. Sleep in a real bed."

She pointed her fists in the air and cried out in anguish like I had never heard in my life, "But you're my husband!"

I shook my head, trying to free it from the cobwebs that still enveloped it. Her husband? But we weren't married. But then all of a sudden I realized that we were. I don't know how this knowledge came to me. I think it had something to do with the fact that our bodies had been melting together, and in the process some of her common knowledge must have transferred to me, but I realized that at the dance where I had first met her, when people broke off into couples and danced together, that this meant that they were married, so when I joined her in her dance, I had in effect married her. She looked at me now, her eyes wide with rage. "How can you be so cruel?"

The look in her eyes was painful to me, so I averted my eyes in order to avoid her gaze and glanced down at the suction cups that covered my body. I lifted my gaze and looked at the suction cups that covered her body in the same places, and suddenly the dream-like state I had been in lifted and left me wide awake with nothing but nightmarish horror at the situation I was in. My mind reeled with panic. I took a step back. My legs were soft, both because I was terrified, and because they were in the process of transforming into tentacles. I almost tripped on my two feet, but I managed to remain standing as I turned and ran.

I ran into the long corridor where the room we had been having sex was located. Both sides of the corridor were lined with doors. I opened one. It was identical to the room I had been accustomed to and was empty except for its wet mud floor.

I ran on a bit and opened another door. Inside was a couple having sex, melting into each other, extending blood-red, hairy tentacles from the mass of flesh, and attaching suction cups in the areas that had not physically merged.

I slammed the door shut and opened another one. Inside was a blob of flesh the size of two grown adults. The blob was writhing and pulsating, and eight hairy octopus tentacles emerged from strange areas and reached into the air, groping.

Smaller blobs of flesh pulled away from the main blob. All of a sudden one broke off with a plop, and I could see that it was a tiny octopus, rolled up in a ball, covered in milky white mucus. The mini octopus immediately unrolled itself and burrowed into the mud. Then another broke off from the main blob, and another. I became aware of an unbearably thick, salty stench.

I slammed the door shut in revulsion, disgusted to my core. She was standing there in the hall, facing me with tentacle-like arms outstretched, with the tears of a desperate beggar in her eyes. My mind was reeling, trying to understand everything I had seen. "You and your siblings," I stammered, "You're all the same age."

"Of course we are."

“H... How?”

“I thought that you understood, but now that I have absorbed more of your knowledge, I see that this is not the case. Your race is so strange. So different from mine. You see, shortly after they are married, a couple merges through multiple intercourses until finally their bodies become one. Then, the body breaks up completely into multiple larvae, each larva containing a portion of the knowledge from both parents. The larvae all burrow in the mud until they emerge in the sea, where they live together until they mature into their land forms. Then they live together on land in a house until the most suitable find mates.”

I backed away in horror. “I... I didn’t know. I don’t want my body to merge with yours. I don’t want my consciousness to be divided among tiny octopi. I... I....”

“I know now that you didn’t. But you see, now you have no choice.” She put her hands to her temple as if she were thinking hard and then said, “I see in your culture you have a concept, something called divorce. We don’t have that in mine. If our merging isn’t complete, I will never get another chance to reproduce, and more than anything else I have always wanted to reproduce.”

She lunged at me with her tentacle-like, suction cup covered arms outstretched to embrace. I turned and ran down the corridor until it came to an end and I found myself outside. Right in front of me was one of her brothers holding a spear pointed right at me. Gambling that he wasn’t prepared to kill me, dove, and tackled him to the ground. I got up and ran into a wooded area. More of her siblings poured out of the house holding spears, nets, and crude flint knives. A spear whizzed past my shoulder and hit a purple tree trunk. That was too close for me. I searched her knowledge that was in my mind and learned, to my horror, that merging was still possible hours after the death of one partner.

As I ran through the woods, pursued by her siblings, tripping over roots and elevated sections of ground, it struck me for the first time how alien the landscape was. When I first arrived on the planet, it had seemed exotic, that is, unfamiliar but in a mysterious way. Then, after

I got used to it, it became familiar to me. Now it just seemed foreign. I knew the landscape well enough, but with that knowledge came a certain amount of rejection on my part, as if finally, after all this time, I knew it well enough to know for sure that I didn't like it.

I ducked, barely avoiding another spear, and fell to the ground. Her siblings took the opportunity to surround me, spears, knives and casting nets all aimed in my direction. She made her way through them and got on top of me. There was nothing I could do to stop her. I felt the familiar sensations as our bodies merged together into a single blob, and I knew somehow that this would be the final time, that our bodies would remain merged together in a single entity until that entity broke apart into tiny octopi that would live in the ocean as they matured into the humanoids that were this planet's dominant life form.

I lost myself in her. I lost all sense of self. I was her, and she was I. I was an unseeing blob, pulsating, writhing, striving to break apart into tiny pieces of myself. It was an orgasmic feeling, encompassing all that is associated with the beginning of life, as well as its end.

Then, I felt an unpleasant heat. This heat had nothing to do with our coupling, as it seemed to come from without, while the sensations of our coupling came from within. I strove to try to figure out what this heat was, so foreign was it to the orgasmic sensations I was experiencing.

Then, as my body began to separate from hers, and I regained my senses, I saw the happiest sight I had ever witnessed. We were surrounded by space patrol. By human beings!

Some patrolmen were firing heat guns at the natives, with heat set low enough to hurt, but not kill. The natives were running this way and that in panic, making loud whooping noises. Other patrolmen were firing at us, separating us with blasts of low-frequency heat waves. I had never been so glad to see the white helmets and white suits of the patrol in my life.

I was in a doctor's office on a ship heading away from the planet, dressed in nothing but a paper gown. Parts of my body were still amorphous and blob-like, my arms and legs were still partially tentacle-like, and I had clusters of suction cups all over my body. The ship doctor gave me a shot of something in the arm as he chatted cheerfully.

"Don't worry. These shots should have you as good as new by the time we reach our next stop. It's the galactic museum at Taurus. You could spend a lifetime and only see a small portion of it."

I groaned. "Sounds wonderful."

"You know, you really are lucky. If the patrol had shown up a few minutes later, there would have been nothing they could have done. It really is an interesting species. Their method of reproduction evolved to be localized to a very specific habitat. The broth you drank is made from a kind of fungus that they have developed a symbiotic relationship with. It has certain properties that loosen the cellular structure of the body and mind, making it possible for two bodies and consciousnesses to merge. The mud is where their larva burrow, so naturally it holds sentimental value for the adults, which is why they conduct all their lovemaking on it."

I buried my head in the sea worms that were my fingers and wept.

"What's wrong?" the doctor asked. "I said we'd have you as good as new."

"I'm just so embarrassed."

"What happened to you is more common than you probably think. Well, not exactly what happened to you. There are so many species out there that man can mate with. Tens of thousands of species, with more being discovered all the time. Since man can mate with them, it's only natural that he will try, even though it's almost always a bad idea. You know how men are. We want everything now, now, now, and we aren't even willing to take the time to learn about what we might be getting ourselves into. No, don't be embarrassed. Treat it as a learning experience: don't fuck the native chicks."

I wiped the tears from my eyes. “I won’t. I won’t, uh, fuck the native chicks, never again.”

The doctor dropped the serious lecture guise and gave me an indulgent smile. “I don’t believe that for a second, nor would I want for it to be true. There are infinite experiences to be had out there in the universe, and you deserve to have some of them. You’re a young man at the beginning of your travels, and there will be other native chicks on other planets who will awaken your desire. Have your way with them. Just don’t go native, and for the love of God, do a bit more to protect yourself from the consequences.”

J. Manfred Weichsel is an avid reader of science fiction and pulp. His twitter handle is @JonWeichsel. This is his second published story, although it was his first accepted story. His first published story can be found in Millhaven's Tales of Wonder Volume 1, which can be purchased here: <https://www.amazon.com/Millhavens-Tales-Wonder-Millhaven/dp/1985129922>. Also, keep an eye out for short stories from him in the Earth and Pluto anthologies from Superservice Press. His self-published novella Ebu Gogo can be purchased here: <https://www.amazon.com/Ebu-Gogo-J-Manfred-Weichsel-ebook/dp/B07232DLH1>

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Notes From the Nest

Having gone back to a quarterly schedule, we've been crazy busy this year! But not only are we working on Cirsova, we've got a couple big projects on the horizon. In the immediate future, we've got "Wild Stars III: Time Warmageddon" by Michael Tierney.

Cirsova Publishing and Little Rocket Publications will be teaming up to put out a special limited edition of Time Warmageddon for the 35th Anniversary of the Wild Stars. This exclusive magazine edition will feature art by Tim Lim (*Donald Thump, My Hero Magademia*), Mark Wheatley (*Jonny Quest, Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall*), and maybe even Mike DeCarlo (*Batman, Thor*) illustrating an all new short novel set in the Wild Stars universe.

We'll be taking pre-orders for Time Warmageddon VERY soon (anticipating a July release) and will be giving old fans and new fans a chance to get their hands on rare and out of print Wild Stars comics, prints and art portfolios.

We also hope to be moving ahead on our Illustrated Eric John Stark project before the end of the year to celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the publication of Queen of the Martian Catacombs. This edition will feature three fully illustrated novellas with over 30 pieces of original artwork, bringing Leigh Brackett's stories to life unlike anything you've ever seen before. More details on that later this Summer.

Finally, we'll be closing out Volume 1 of Cirsova Heroic Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine this year. Is it the end of Cirsova? No, probably not. I mean, just look at all of that stuff we're doing!

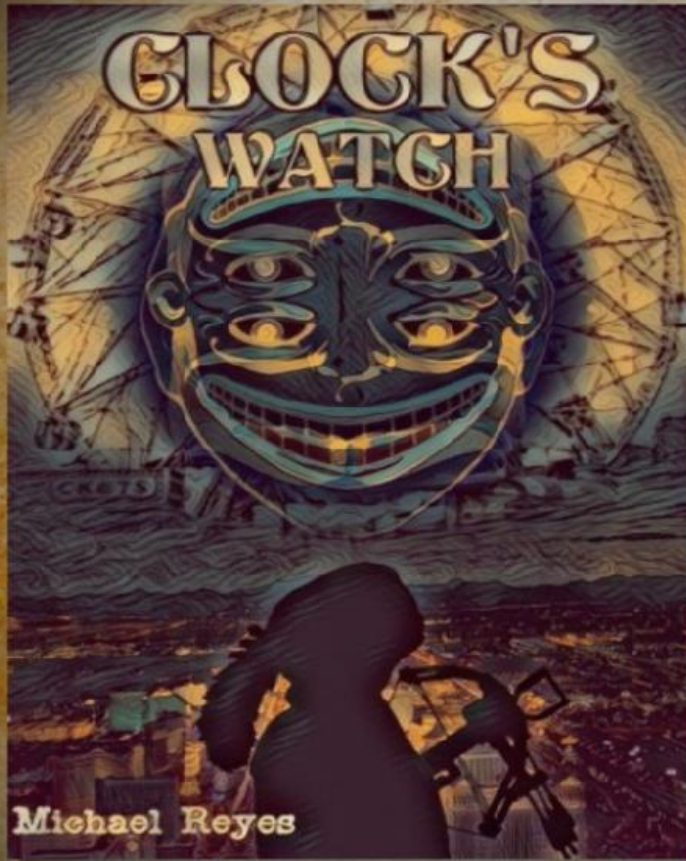
There may be some changes, however, should we keep it up. First of all, we will also be changing our pay rates in an effort to become more financially sustainable. We'll still be semi-pro, but won't have a two-tiered rated. To balance this out, we'll be reducing our exclusivity period to three months.

Second, the format may be changing a little bit. We aren't going digest, no; I mean the format of the stories we're looking for. You may see a bit of that change in stories in our next issues (particularly

Crying in the Salt House and *Our Lords the Swine*). More weird, more horror, more gothic. But there will still be ray guns. We promise.

-P. Alexander, Ed.

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