

Cirsova Issue # 9 - Fall 2018

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**Heroic Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine
Issue #9 / Fall 2018**

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**PC Bushi
Bo Balder
J. D. Brink
Paul Lucas
Robert Lang
N. A. Roberts
Xavier Lastra
S. K. Inkslinger
Michael Tierney
Edward McDermott**



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P. Alexander, Ed.

Xavier L., Copy Ed.

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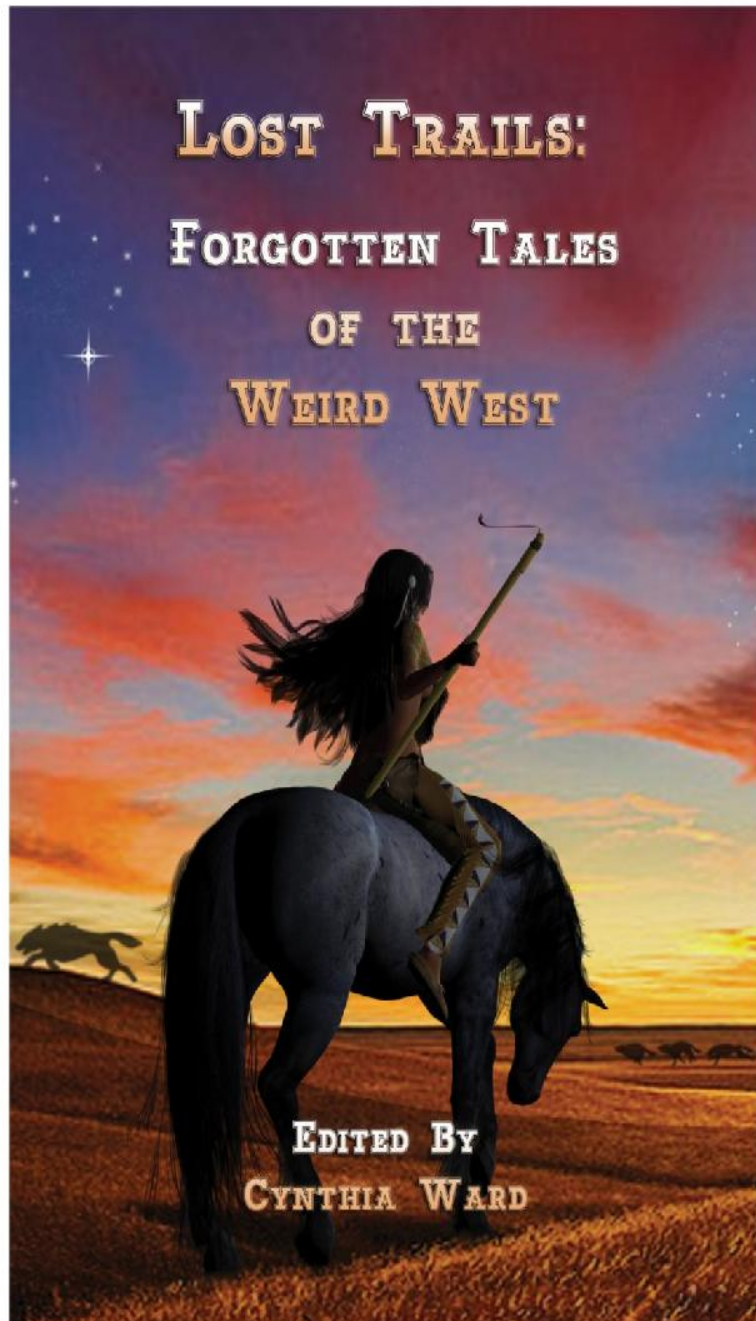
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Fall Issue Vol.1, No 9

2018 \$10.00 per copy

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The Faerie Pool

By EDWARD MCDERMOTT

His heir having vanished, Duke Ullan has decreed the Faerie Pool be blockaded with bells and iron—while elves stand ready to slay any who would leave the vale! Can Kheelan, who has lived in both the world of Men and of Fae, broker a peace?!

The rutted road meandered through the woods, shaded by mighty oaks whose roots reached out to trip an unwary traveler. However, this wanderer skipped lightly over them as he whistled a jaunty tune. The road turned, and he followed it into a small village.

“Ah,” Kheelan said to himself. “Wherever there is a church, I can find a pub and a tankard of ale.”

The church bell rang loudly. From the sun in the sky, he saw time for Angelus had passed, but it remained too early for vespers. The bell continued to ring as he walked into the town square before the church.

“Did you see them in the woods?” a burly blacksmith asked, spotting Kheelan. “Where do you hale from and what do you want?”

“A wanderer by nature, I come from everywhere and nowhere. A minstrel by profession, I will go to your local inn and trade songs for food, drink, and bed.”

“Did you see them? No? Then you do not know. Poor fellow. You are now cursed like the rest of us.”

Cursed? The fellow appeared healthy enough, standing straight with the strength of his profession showing in every blow of his hammer on the glowing metal.

“What is this curse?” Kheelan asked.

“Why no Son of Adam or Daughter of Eve may cross the woods. None can leave this village, not those who live here or travelers who visit. You are trapped like the rest of us. The Fair Folk enforce this rule cruelly. They command the wolves and the bears.”

Kheelan shrugged. A man who had never been five miles from the place of his birth was the type to blame a random bear sighting on the Fair Folk.

A large building of heavy timber jointed together stood on the square, with nogging of clay between the wooden pieces. Stepping through the doorway, he found a large common room with a fireplace at one end. At the other end, under the stairs to the second floor, he found the bar.

Empty.

Kheelan walked around the bar and drew a tankard of ale for himself, sat down at a table and pulled his lute from its case. He fiddled with the pegs for a moment and plucked out a merry tune.

The melodious notes danced through the room as the church bell rang outside.

“A stranger,” the publican said as he waddled down the stairs. From his girth, Kheelan surmised he enjoyed the cooking at the inn and hoped it proved worthy of this praise.

“Good day to you,” Kheelan began. “I am a minstrel who has just arrived. For supper, a bed, and breakfast on the morrow, I can entertain your customers with stories, songs, and music.”

“The food and the ale I can supply for the time being, but not the bed. For once, all my beds are full. However, there is hay in the loft.”

The sun set as the taproom filled. Kheelan tuned his lute and played. He sang old songs and new ones. He told stories and posed riddles, and soon the crowd gathered round him, asking for this song or that tale.

After an hour, he begged off to rest his voice. The innkeeper, smiling at his business, fed him well and gave him ale.

“Tis good business I have. There’ll be no shortage of work or coin if Lord Ullan hires all in his mad venture.”

“Tell me the tale,” Kheelan said. “I love a strange tale, and you hint there is one here.”

“Aye. Lord Ullan had six children of his wife. Three were sons and three were daughters. The first two were girls. He raised them to marry well, and so they did, for he is a good ally and a dangerous foe.

“The first son was to be heir, and the second son was to the church. The last-born lad was the apple of his mother’s eye and reared gentler than the rest. All was well until the first son died in a jousting accident, a broken neck. The church had the second son, so the youngest became the heir, and Lord Ullan tried to make up for years of softness with hard training.

“Now the lad, Ethan, was a good boy, and he set to work with a will, but he could never satisfy his father. He had the heart and the head, but he had no taste for blood. When Ethan spent the day hunting, he would return with his game bag empty.

“All said the hunting led to the meeting, and that led to the current conflict. The lad traveled through the woods, and there he met one of the Fair Folk, a witch who enchanted him and took him away.

“Lord Ullan is a man of action, not words. When he found his son and heir enchanted and stolen, he vowed no longer would the fairy folk be allowed to use their pool, which lies only a few minutes from here.

“At his command, a bell was hung over the pool, and it clangs both day and night. He rings that pool with stone and steel, for none can step across a sill lined with steel. The Fair Folk responded in kind. They have closed the forest and the roads to us. None may leave. So there you have it. Siege and counter-siege.”

Kheelan kept his own counsel. While the Fair Folk could not touch steel, it did not entirely bar their way. The ringing of the bell and loud noises could deter them, but not stop them. They were wise in the ways of war as those who live for a thousand years can be. Yet closing the road and the woods was a mighty reaction to the loss of a pool. They could have simply waited for a hundred years, when Lord

Ullan was dust and his quarrel forgotten. Kheelan realized the publican did not know or understand the entire tale.

In the morning, with a good breakfast, a few coins in his pocket, and nothing to do for the day, Kheelan walked around the village and then toward the bells and hammering.

He found the glade only a few minutes from the village, an opening in the woods where the grass was emerald green and the sun shone more brightly. In the center of the glade lay a pool with no stream flowing in or out. The water was clear as the blue of a robin's egg. It would have been a fair spot.

However, on every quadrant of the pool stood a rough wooden watchtower, and in each hung a large bell that rang without stop. Between the watchtowers, masons laid a rim of rough-cut stone around the pool, a waist high wall. Following the masons, a smith followed with long, curved flats of iron. These he fixed to the stone with heavy fasteners of iron, which his hammer drove home.

Kheelan smiled but said nothing. Nothing he could say here would help, and it might hinder. Instead, he turned and walked into the forest. Perhaps the Fair Folk did not bar all the passages from the village.

For a thousand years, the woods had stood untamed. The large oaks with trunks as wide as ox carts spread their branches, which interwove into a canopy, a living roof over the forest floor. With little grass or weeds, walking was easy, unless a traveler had to climb around a fallen giant or watch out for roots that could trip the unwary.

For the first ten minutes, everything appeared normal. Then Kheelan noticed furtive movements in the woods, following him. Resting against a massive trunk, he took out his lute and played a mournful tune.

A face appeared from behind another tree. At a distance, the stranger resembled a lad of ten or eleven, short and slender with the boundless energy and subtle movements of one who has not yet taken on his growth.

The bow and the blade he carried were no children's toys. His face was fair, but the eyes were older than the trees and without mercy.

"You play an interesting tune. I have heard it before," the stranger said.

"You should have, probably in Breena," Kheelan replied. "That is where I first heard it and learned to play it. Would you like to hear the words?"

"What do you know of Breena?"

"I know it as a child knows his mother, as a farmer knows his field, as a traveler knows his home."

"A great claim for a Son of Adam."

"Son of Adam, I am. Raised in Breena, I was," Kheelan replied. "It is a common tale. Empty arms are filled and a cradle is emptied. Would you like to hear more?"

"Yes, play another tune you learned in Breena."

Although the lute did not suit such a tune, Kheelan played the "Moonlit Jig", a rollicking beat that never failed to set a foot a'tapping.

After he had finished this tune, he put away his lute and stood up.

"A fine tune you have been taught. You know the secrets of the music of Breena, but I cannot let you pass, Son of Adam. Go back before you die."

With that, the guard was gone, hidden close, but out of sight. Kheelan walked away. Still, it rankled to be trapped within one village when the entire world was there to be seen and tasted.

The next day, Kheelan wandered back into the woods and played. After only a few minutes, he had company. Kheelan looked up from his playing and said, "Would you cross blades with me? I also learned the arts of war and those of peace in that fair land."

“I have no need. Look to your left and to your right. I only have to speak, and these wolves will do the work for me. Now go before they strike.”

The guard left, but the wolves did not. They stood and sniffed and edged forward; eager for the meal they had been promised.

Kheelan stretched his lips and made a cry that seemed out of place in the mouth of a human being. “Brothers, come and smell my hand, and know I am not your meat.”

The wolves approached and sniffed his hand and lay down on the ground before Kheelan. He rubbed their heads and played more. The wandering urge was in his limbs, but Kheelan held himself back. Somewhere, certain death waited for him if he ventured further.

On the third day, Kheelan once more entered the woods. He did not have time to tune his lute before the stranger returned.

“Well done. You can call the beasts. I believe your story. Still, I cannot let any Son of Adam cross through the forest. I have been charged. What is your name so that I may take word of you home when you have died?”

“I am called Kheelan now, but I was Kheelan of the dancing stream.”

“You may call me Raedself.”

“Friend, let us walk to where there is a willow and peel a pair of wands. Surely, you played that game as a child. It is a far better way for us to play.”

Raedself laughed. “I played ‘touch’ with willow wands before your great-grandparents were born. What makes you think you can best me?”

“Perhaps I was taught by your great-grandparent. I have no wish to shed the blood of my stepbrother. As we walk you can tell me of this charge and how it came about.”

Raedself led the way, and soon they came to a clear spot along a small stream where a willow hung. They cut two willow wands and stripped them.

Then like swordsmen, they cut and parried with the wands as quick and violently as if they fought for life. They battled up and down the streamside, but neither gained the upper hand. After half an hour, Raedself stood back and laughed.

“You were fair taught and taught me too, you have. I concede.”

“But I never touched you!” Kheelan protested.

“It is but a matter of time. Still, I cannot let you pass. You charm the wolves. You fence superbly. I will have to resort to an arrow to kill you, but I will stop you.”

Kheelan dropped to his knees beside the stream and drank deeply. Then he spoke. “You have yet to tell me why such a charge was placed. Why not simply leave? Come back when time has broken the bells and turned the iron to rust. Men forget.”

“We cannot.”

“Then tell me true, and perhaps I can riddle a way out for all. I like not this prison in which you have captured me.”

“You have walked on the silvery path the moonlight makes, home to Breena?”

“Yes, it is not always there or clear. Sometimes the path is crooked and leads to other places.”

“The pool is the safest clear way to and from Breena. The sons of Adam try to close it, and that cannot be allowed. If we cannot travel, then neither will they. If the path to Breena was open, you could go home.”

Kheelan was silent for a moment. He remembered a woman who was not a Daughter of Eve in Breena. He loved her still, but she did not love him. Oh, he could go back and spend all his days in the

home of the one he called mother. He could live the life of a petted favorite. He had not chosen that life.

“No, Raedself. I can walk the moonlit path, but I cannot go home. You, with all your years, should understand. If I could take down the bells and uproot the iron, would that be enough?”

“Perhaps.”

“I can but talk. However, I need a promise in return for a promise. You must bring back Lord Ullan’s son and leave him here with his father. The sons of Adam love their children, too.”

“I will take your words and see what the others will agree to. I am neither ruler nor warlord here.”

“That is fair. Each day I will return to where we first met until you come with an answer.”

Back in the village, the tavern keeper met Kheelan with a smile. “Friend, you sang too well. You will have both food and lodging, but not from me. Lord Ullan’s keep is on the hill, and they would have new songs this evening.”

Kheelan smiled. “You don’t look too downhearted.”

The tavern keeper pulled a wallet from his belt and tossed it gently in his hand. “I have been recompensed. Now sit for bread and beer and I will give you advice.

“Lord Ullan had three daughters. Two are married and away. The one who remains is but a year older than the missing lord Ethan. Play your songs to her, for she is the one who feels caged. Her father has a mind for nothing but the return of his son.”

That night Kheelan played in the great hall. He sang light, sometimes bawdy songs. He told the tale of the “Nine Maidens’ Wells” and how the bride outwitted her groom on their wedding day. The laughter was hard won, for there had been little in the household.

“What know you of the Fairies?” Lord Ullan’s daughter asked him.

“What would you like to know?”

“Are their women so beautiful?”

“More than beautiful. Enchanting.”

“Are they so cruel?”

“More careless than cruel. They live far longer, and we are but a summer’s day to their centuries.”

“Do they value anything?”

“Many things. Love, honor, courage. Sometimes a good song,” Kheelan concluded, and his fingers plucked out another tune.

For three days, Kheelan played in the great hall at night and walked the woods during the day. He saw no sign of Raedself, but other sentries guarded the road. He ground his teeth and tried to cool his rage. Anger would not free him.

On the fourth night, Lord Ullan raised his head and spoke. “Minstrel.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You go walking in the woods each day. What do you seek there?”

“Word of your son, my Lord. Isn’t that what we all wish for?”

“Why care you?”

“I am as trapped as any man—more so. I don’t think I have spent so many days in one place in years. For me this imprisonment is more bitter than you can understand. It wears my spirit down each day. It will kill me.”

“Do you hope to win your freedom by spying on me and betraying my plans?”

“Everyone knows your plans, Lord Ullan. I would get faint thanks for such a revelation. Besides, it is not in my nature to act so.”

“What is in your nature?”

“Why, to bring happiness with songs and stories. To travel and see and learn. To use words rather than sticks or stones. To enjoy peace, not to churn up war. I would bring you back your son, and you would, in return, tear down the ramparts around the fairy pool.”

“They took my son.”

“He went willingly.”

“Enchanted.”

“By chance, but not intention. With patience, it can be set right.”

“Get me back my son and you can have whatever you desire. Perhaps you wish to be made noble and marry my daughter.”

Kheelan spoke most carefully. “Such an honor is more than I could ever dream for, my lord. I am merely a traveler and singer of songs. You would find me a poor son-in-law.”

Did Lord Ullan know, after the candles were snuffed, his daughter’s serving lady led Kheelan to her mistress’s chamber?

In the woods the next day, Raedself arrived. “Some do not like your suggestion, Son of Adam. They feel such a compromise is a sign of weakness. They wish to use sword and flame to clear this blight instead.”

“I’m sorry,” Kheelan said. “I’ll compose a great ode to their courage and sing it over their graves. They will win and they will bury their dead. Such a waste.”

“Much older heads said as much. For a young sprout, you have wisdom. Shaylee will bring him back and leave him with you, at this spot, tomorrow. Tell the sons of Adam to cease the bells and leave the pool—and no bloodshed.”

Lord Ullan agreed and the bells fell silent. Kheelan paced and waited. Perhaps tomorrow he could leave.

Kheelan walked the woods again to the spot where he had first met Raedself. There he played on his lute as he waited, wondering all the while if Raedself had betrayed him. Little could make one of the Fair Folk keep their pledge to a Son of Adam.

She rode up on her horse. In her hair was the color of thunderclouds before a storm and in her eyes was lightning. Her face was so beautiful that mortal women appeared drab. She wore her glamor as armor, but her mouth sat in a harsh manner and her anger could be seen in the way she handled her horse. Kheelan had lived among the Fair Folk, but that gave him little protection from her glamor.

“So you are the one who forces me to give up my lover.”

“Begg, not forces, cajoles, not demands, most beautiful in all the land,” Kheelan replied. She stole his heart with a glance and Kheelan knew he stood in a dangerous place. “To you, he is but a springtime dalliance. To his father, he is the crutch in his old age. Be merciful, for it is in your power.”

“Very well, then,” she said, “But harpist, take care. You have made an enemy today, and I shall not forget you.”

Kheelan said nothing but bowed his head so he could no longer see her beauty. He didn't need to. It would remain with him for the rest of his life. Such was her magic.

Shaylee turned and with a push, tumbled the young man who rode behind her off her horse. She used the bit and the spurs and was gone. Ethan lay there for a second, cried, and tried to follow her. Kheelan knocked him out and carried him out of the woods.

Lord Ullan had no pleasure at the return of his son. The young man would neither eat nor drink and cried only for his lover. “Shaylee, come back,” was all he would say.

The next day Kheelan heard the bells ringing over the fairy pool. When he tried to approach Lord Ullan, soldiers barred his way. In desperation, he sought an audience with Lord Ullan's daughter.

“There is nothing I can do,” she explained. “Father believes his son is entranced. He will destroy those who have done this.”

“Then we all will die,” Kheelan replied. “The fairy shot kills at a distance. It strikes and sinks into the flesh. The fever comes, then swelling and finally death.”

“He blames you,” she continued, drawing closer and placing a hand on his chest. “I have argued you were a fair and honest broker who brought his son home, but his anger grows. You must escape and hide. I love you.”

Kheelan closed his eyes. He kissed her lips, thanked her for her kindness and fled the castle. Madness and bloodshed for no reason. And he was trapped with the rest.

In the wood, Raedself waited for him.

“Betrayed,” Kheelan said.

“Son of Adam, this, I could have foretold. You have spent too much time in the blessed land to understand your own brothers and sisters. What now?”

“I have failed. Ask what you will. I will help you in any way I can,” Kheelan said.

“Why do you think we need your help?”

“I can handle steel. I can silence the bells. Raedself, one thing I ask.”

“You are always asking for something, Kheelan. What is it, a last song?”

“Nothing so simple. Spare the villagers. They are no more guilty than you. They were simply caught up in greater affairs, like sparrows in a thunderstorm.”

Raedself nodded and walked away.

As Kheelan returned to the village, he heard another bell tolling, the one in the village church. Slipping into the tavern, he asked the

innkeeper, "What has happened?"

"The young lord was returned to his father," the tavern keeper began. "He would not eat nor drink. He raved. Lord Ullan thought steel might drive the demons out. He had the smithy heat a sword until it glowed. Then he laid it on his son's cheek. The boy screamed, broke his bonds and jumped to his death. They bury him today. God have mercy on us all, now."

That night Raedself and his brothers came to Kheelan. He poured melted wax into their ears so the bells would not hurt them. He gave them pads of leather for their feet so they would not burn on the iron. Then they approached the pool.

The moon was full and the wind calm. The vibration of the bells stirred the surface of the water. Four bells rang. Four arrows flew. Silence. The guards fell to the arrow and the sword in the moonlight, like wheat before the scythes.

Kheelan took out a steel wedge and hammer and one by one, he broke the fastenings that held the iron to the masonry wall. As he cut each free, the Fair Folk, hands gloved in heavy leather, carried the iron away into the forest where they buried it forever.

When the Fair Folk carried away the last flatiron, Raedself nodded to Kheelan. Without a word, he walked on the moonlight and disappeared.

A minute passed. Another. Then the wild ride burst through. A thunder of horses and riders charged out of the moonlight, across the pool and down the road. Shaylee led them.

They rode up to the castle, and with ropes made of spider silk, they stormed the walls. The guards on the walls died at their posts under the sudden, silent attack.

One raised the alarm, but Shaylee cut through all who stood in her way to Lord Ullan's bedchamber. She entered. His screams could be heard as he sailed out into the night air and fell to his death.

A moment later, the wild riders mounted and rode away. Kheelan stood for a second. So much lost. He thought of Breena and of Shaylee as he started down the road out of the village. When the sun rose, he didn't want to be there. He wanted nothing to remind him of the things he could not forget.

Edward McDermott spends his spare time pursuing a writing career. Aside from writing, Edward takes time for sailing, fencing, and working as a movie extra. His web page is: <http://www.edwardmcdermott.net/>

Our Lords, the Swine

By N.A. ROBERTS

A lone knight finds himself on the doorstep of an isolated and foreboding monastery while seeking respite from his travels! What ill hospitality would he receive in the hands of the debauched and depraved brotherhood cloistered within those walls?!

The Knight sought shelter for the evening, and when he saw the monastery on the hill above him, he turned his horse toward it. He was a tall man, and he rode in full plate-of-proof, with a spiked flail hanging at his belt. A snow-white cloak, flaming the gilded hue of an omen in the setting sun, swathed his figure. It was clasped upon his breast with an iron brooch. His hood was drawn up so that he seemed to be looking no higher than his horse's ears, and indeed, other than the gentle pressure of the knee with which he headed his mount towards the hill, he seemed to have no concern for the path. The black beast he rode traveled sure-footed up the rocky trail.

Horse and rider passed by clusters of craggy, man-high rocks and under the boughs of a stunted tree. Grass grew in clumps between the rocks, and faded yellow flowers thrust supplicating heads hither and thither over the trail only to be ridden down and crushed without

notice. The Knight crested the ridge and passed through a broken gate, and the monastery walls came into view once more. There were trees here, too—not thick with spring as those in the valley below, but bent and leafless. The space between gate and brooding wall had once been cobbled, but the grasses had long since claimed it. The Knight reached the portal, a huge oak door set deep in the wall. He raised his head and looked about slowly. Under the snowy hood, the sun glinted on the beak of his armet. His unseen eyes roved over the rank grass, the missing gate, the gray walls and the looming tower, the shadow it cast as silent as the bell it housed.

His mailed fist struck the door, and he shouted in a deep voice.

“Ho!”

There was no answer. A flock of crows flew up from behind the well at the far side of the yard and rustled away into the sun, shouting, cackling.

There was silence.

“Ho!” called the Knight again. “There is a traveler at your doors, good brothers.”

Silence again, but after a time, the door moved slightly. There was a creaking of bolts being driven slowly back, and the portal opened a crack. The dark within seemed to waft forth to meet the one who sat without, and his horse shook its head and neighed angrily.

A face came forward out of the dark—a plump, sallow face, hairless from poll to chin. No body followed, the face alone protruding unwillingly into the light. It blinked and licked its lips and stared from small eyes at the rider.

“Can you spare a pallet, or perhaps a cell or empty corridor, to a traveler tonight?” asked the Knight.

The face looked at his weapons. “This is a dangerous road,” it said. “I cannot admit you without the Abbot’s consent. I will go to him. Wait.”

With this, the door was shut tight once more, and the arduous grinding of the bolts repeated as they were forced back into place. There followed a long time, perhaps a quarter of an hour. The Knight sat stolidly during this time but continued to turn his head hither and thither. Once he caught a glimpse of another face peering at him from one of the casements below the eaves. Eventually, his attention was fixed once more on the door, as the shuffling and scraping began for the third time, and the leaves were thrown apart.

The sun now shone straight into the open passage, a bare stone hall, in the near end of which was clustered a bevy of short figures in gray habits. All had the same pale, sleek, fat look. The foremost held a candle, the only light to be seen within. He was the shortest of his fellows, and among the fattest. The cord which clutched his waist was not even visible beneath his overflowing flesh. He was shaven like the others, but he moved faster, with greater alertness, and while he blinked in the sunlight, as they did, his eyes were less furtive, his features stronger, and his voice, when he spoke, husky enough to seem hearty.

“Come in, my son,” he said. “You are welcome here. I hope our sense of caution has not discommoded you. We may be cloistered, but we must look after our own skins as well as another man, and the roads are not safe at all, no, not at all! But come in, come in. Brother Elgan and brother Gluddan, you must stable this Knight’s horse.”

“I shall attend my own beast,” said the Knight, dismounting. “If the brothers will show me the way.

“I cannot condemn your precautions, Sir Abbot. Indeed, I am perhaps more surprised that you admit one such as myself at all, if the dangers you face are so plentiful.”

“Ah! Pshaw!” said the Abbot. “A man of such knightly mien as yourself is welcome and more, for while you are here we need fear no robber—though,” he added with a touch of hastiness, “we have little enough to steal, merely the sacred vessels and such small charity as we receive from time to time.”

The Knight thought that charity must be easier to wring from stones than the sayings would have it, else these brothers on their deserted hill would be far leaner than he found them. He said nothing and followed the two brothers.

Around the angle of the wall they came upon a narrow defile cut into the hill. Down this, the two monks led him, and led him to a stable, walled on two sides by craggy stone and on the third by the monastery itself. The stalls were mostly broken, and the straw upon the hard-packed floor was mixed with dried refuse. There were two occupants. One, a dappled gray, looked restively at the intruders. Its companion, a short and glossy-white pony, took no notice and continued to chew mouthfuls of stale hay.

“As you see, we have few guests,” said Brother Elgan as the Knight glanced about.

“Nonetheless, I do not doubt you can provide for my beast,” replied the Knight.

“Of course! We do not have much, but do not worry! It will suffice; we could not treat any animal ill.”

And here Brother Elgan broke into a long chuckle, his shaven pate quivering with mirth.

“To whom belong these other beasts?” asked the Knight, when his own mount had been unsaddled and its manger filled.

“They were charity, Sir Knight,” said Brother Elgan. “A lady and her train, passing this place, gave them as an offering, after lodging here.

“Your beast will be well here,” he went on. “Come inside now, the Abbot will see you housed as well, and fed better.”

He led the Knight back up the gully, but Brother Gluddan slipped through a door in the wall and disappeared.

The Abbot was waiting at the doors, but none of the other brothers were in view. He looked at the Knight, who had thrown back his hood and removed his helm. The face now revealed was that of a handsome man with a small mustache, a sandy pointed beard that

had only just reached maturity, and short light hair that revealed a high forehead.

“I am Abbot Froguild, guide and servant of these poor brothers here,” the Abbot asked. “What may we call you, Sir Knight?”

“My name is Guyon,” was the reply. “Of Glenwild.”

“Then come to meat, Sir Guyon,” said the Abbot.

The sun was nearly gone, and the interior of the monastery had been lit. Not by torches, but by candles of all shapes. They stood in alcoves, their waxen feet mingling and joining each with its neighbors’, and in climbing piles shaped like evergreen trees upon the trestle tables in the main hall. The scent of the wax was heavy and heady and not displeasing. The Abbot led the brothers to table, bowed his head in mumbled grace, and looked towards the knight.

“I am afraid that we cannot offer you a fitting repast,” he said. “Bread and wine and some dried cheese and fresh herbs are our fare on holy days. Had you come a day hence, we could have shown you hearty welcome indeed, but the meat is not yet prepared.”

“I will not carp or cavil upon the subject of your customs while I am under your roof,” replied Guyon with a smile. “As long as there is wine, the meat matters little.”

“Good!” said the Abbot, smiling back.

Guyon found his trencher filled and piled his plate. Despite the Abbot’s modesty, there was fair amount to please him. The bread was fresh and covered in spiced oil. There was a salad of lettuce, mushrooms, and cheese, and wine better than he could have hoped. He ate and drank and found his cup refilled, and he would have found it refilled again, had he not declined.

Upon the close of the meal, the brothers once more bowed their heads and then rose and filed out after the Abbot. Sir Guyon found an unfamiliar brother at his elbow and was led by that brother down a low, candlelit hall and into a square cell upon the left. As with most monks’ quarters, there was no door, nor were there any furnishings

beyond a pallet of straw and a mat to comfort the knees of a man at his orisons. This straw was thick and fresh, however, and the mat deep and softly woven. It was an odd mix—the props of piety without any sincere asceticism.

The brother bade him good night and left him. Guyon looked at the mat, the pallet, and the small shuttered window. There were thick cobwebs in the casement. It did not seem to have been opened for a long time. There were many monks whose devotion to their vows was less than sincere, he thought. He looked up and down the corridor. There was no sound, no movement. He undid his armor and let it fall on the mat, soundlessly. Then he slept.

When Guyon woke, a sound had followed him from his dreams and come faintly to his ears—it was still audible. It was the soft flap of bare feet on stone. The candles had been left to burn down in a slovenly fashion, and it was nearly pitch dark. The treading was just outside the chamber. It came very slowly, one footfall, then a long, cautious wait—then another. He saw a dark lump in the doorway, hesitant...secretive. His hand moved in the darkness and took hold of his weapon.

The figure shuffled further into the chamber, three more cautious, padding steps. It shifted slightly, trying to stifle heavy, hasty breathing.

It was not yet at his side. Were it to reach him, he knew it would mean a treacherous death in the dark. Guyon leaped up, flail in hand, and flung the prowler out of the room with his shoulder. It fell with a yell and rolled away. In the light of the sinking candles he saw the round face of Brother Gluddan, pale and shining. A long knife clattered away down the hall. The monk scurried away after it like a beetle, still crying out, and from around the corner came four other monks, each with a spit or tongs or work-axe in their hands.

Guyon met them with his flail swinging. They ringed him in front, trapping him in the dead end corridor, but for the moment, they hovered outside of his reach in fear. Then the one with the skewer made a jab at his face. Guyon brushed him away, but the axeman

swept up his own weapon. At the same time, Brother Gluddan, having retrieved his knife, made a reckless lunge from Sir Guyon's other side.

The Knight leaped to one side, caught the lunge upon the haft of his flail, and struck back. The spiked head shattered the monk's face, and he toppled forward. Guyon whirled his flail, lashing the heads of his attackers, killing two, including the man with the axe. The tongs snapped at his arm, and he broke the hands that held them. As the wailing monk dropped to the floor, the remaining fellow fled, howling no less loudly.

Guyon flung himself into his armor, for the screams of the wounded man or the feet of the fleeing one would bring reinforcements. But when he reentered the passage, it was empty. He hastened along into the main hall. It was deserted, and he paused. There was a movement under one of the tables, and out scrambled the monk who had fled, bouncing and lumbering away. He exited through another door, the one from which the food had been brought to the tables. Guyon ran after him, through the door and down a long flight of steps.

He came into a room lit by a low, smoldering fire upon which greasy collops bubbled. Everything was sooty and stained, and the smell of smoke and spice mingled. There were kettles and cauldrons everywhere, dried meats hanging on hooks from every beam, huge knives thrust point-first in the wooden tables—the same sort of knife Brother Gluddan had held. Beside the knives were piled bones, not yet picked clean of stringy meat. Long bones, short bones, scattered fingers, and by it all a glistening skull—the skull of a man.

Guyon stared for a moment, but no more. A shadow moved from behind the open door, and he leaped back to avoid a blow. It was the monk whom he had pursued. Now he held one of the carving knives, and with it he stabbed again, aiming for the slit of the knight's visor. Guyon lashed at him, but the monk jumped away and ran among the kitchen furniture, lobbing pans and flinging knives in turn at his pursuer.

Cornered between a table and the hearth, the monk heaved with all of his fat bulk at the table and sent it over with a crash, but before he

could recover from his exertion, Guyon's flail had torn out his throat. The monk flopped writhing amongst the wreckage.

The Knight unbolted another door and found himself breathing the open air; open, but not fresh, for he smelled the thick odor of the stables and heard the whinny of his horse. This, then, was the door through which he had seen brother Gluddan slip back into the monastery.

"Soon, Holloch," he called softly to his steed. "I am not done here yet."

He returned to the main hall and flung open another door. This led to a long silent passage, and down it he walked. The scent of wax was now cut with the tang of blood. The head of his flail dripped red with every step. He reached an intersection and looked right and left. There was the faint sound of voices, mumbling or chanting, in the air. He turned left, then left again, and came to an open space.

The room was the size of a goodly church, but it contained no pews. Instead, a row of tables ran about the edge of the room, and at these sat the monks with whom he had so lately dined on bread and wine and spices. They were not dining now, but there were platters heaped with great slices of flesh on the boards before them. At the head of the room, upon a raised dais, Abbot Froguild sat behind the altar, his short frame perched upon a high polished chair. Behind him, the wall was decorated with a giant and lushly imagined picture of a swine, its body dripping filth on what appeared to be the figures of tiny prostrate men, who raised their arms rapturously to receive it. The pig-icon's eyes gazed down on the men as they piled at its feet, and one hoof was raised above them in dominion, or perhaps benediction; it was hard to tell.

In the center of the room, the flagstones had been torn up, leaving a great irregular hole. Guyon could not see what lay within it, but he could hear stomping and snorting. Overhanging this pit was what looked to be a timber gallows, and from it hung a young woman, her wrists bound above her head. She was naked and hung perfectly still. Candles were piled all about her on the gallows, and on the tables and the altar. They flickered in a weird frenzy, each flame swaying by

itself in unseen drafts, as if they strained away from each other, embraced, and broke eagerly apart again. They showed up only part of her features, but as she raised her head Guyon saw a white, clenched face, punctured by huge frightened eyes. Those eyes sought his and were foiled by his helmet. He saw the graceful body tense and tremble.

The monks had not seen him yet. Their eyes were all on the head of the room. The Abbot was speaking, and they responding. It seemed that grace was being said, but the words were strange and grotesque.

“Brothers, our Lords, the Swine, have granted us meat!” intoned the Abbot.

“Meat!” they repeated.

“They have granted us sustenance, wherewith we may advance upon the path of ascendance. Let them eat!”

“Let them eat! Let us eat!” they gabbled.

A brother who stood at the Abbot’s right hand stepped forward to the gallows.

“Oh, Lords,” resumed the Abbot, in sonorous ecstasy, “Thou shalt be fed with the choicest of thy own gifts. Let them eat!”

The monk bent to the fastenings of the rope. A great, eager squealing went up from the pit.

“Let us eat! Let them eat!”

Guyon stepped into the room. He advanced slowly, the bloodied head of his flail scraping the flags. The monks saw him and stood, their babbling voices stilled. The Abbot paled, looking gray in the candlelight, and glared at him.

“Your trespass here while yet living is blasphemy, Sir Knight,” he said. “But if you lay down your arms you will be pardoned. Your flesh will become the sustenance that shall make us as our Lords. It is an honorable usage for your body.”

“I may do better deeds with my body,” said Sir Guyon. “Freeing this damsel from the horrid end you design for her is one of them; hunting you and each of your reprobate flock to the death is another.”

“Reprobate? Ignorance!” cried the Abbot. “We are the only men who have seen the truth! The swine is the only creature upon this earth to be truly godlike! We follow that true divinity while most men degrade and devour it. We shall become divine and assume the forms of our Lords—see!” he spread his arms to the fat and porcine brothers. “We are already becoming holy!”

“You are no monks, and you are surely not holy,” replied Sir Guyon. “You are animals who prey on devout travelers. You are madmen!”

“More blasphemy!” said the Abbot. “Seize him! Strip him, cut him, bear him to the kitchens!”

Guyon swung his flail. The monks rushed at him, rolling, flopping, some unarmed, some with knives snatched from the board, some with chairs upraised. They tumbled over one another in a fearless frenzy, clutching at him. The knight gave back and brought down his flail; they rolled away with stricken heads and crumpled limbs, but more lumbered over the fallen. Here on their holy ground, they had no fear. He dodged around the pit towards the altar, but more monks, including the Abbot himself, intercepted him. Some ran on all-fours, and these dived at his feet and snatched his legs. Their fellows climbed upon them and seized him from every side. His right arm was pinioned, he drew his poniard with the other, and then he fell.

Right at the edge of the pit, he grappled with them. They held him down by sheer weight, and his arm had little play, but he stabbed as well as he could and pierced more than one. Blood poured over him. With his head twisted he could see the pit below him, a mass of movement. Huge, pasty-white, hairless swine milled in the mud, their voices and snouts raised greedily. The blood splattered down among them, and they became even more frenzied.

He kicked out and dislodged two of his assailants. They rolled over the edge and tumbled among the swine, who fell upon them and tore at them until they were nothing more than gobbets of gory flesh. Their

shrieks mingled with the squeals of the feasters for a few moments before growing silent.

With that kick, Guyon had loosed his right arm. He tried to tear free, but the men who held his body and legs were too heavy, and the movement rolled them over the edge of the pit. They dragged at him like millstones. He could feel his body slipping. With a thought too fast to be conscious, he flung out his flail towards the foot of the wooden gallows, which were near his head. The spiked head wrapped around the timber and caught. He flung his body over and fell along with the monks still clinging to him. Guyon grasped the haft of his flail with both hands in a death-grip no drowning man ever equaled.

He dropped and hung with a great jerk, but he was braced for the blow. His hands slipped to the very end of the shaft but were arrested by the pommel. The monks, with their flabby fingers torn free, were shaken loose like drops of water. They rolled under the hooves of their Lords, like the tiny men whose image overlooked their altar. Their hue and cry rose to an earsplitting calamity, and they were devoured.

Guyon hung, aching and breathless. His arms had nearly been torn from their sockets, his hands felt nerveless down to each fingertip. Looking down, he saw the unsated swine just below his dangling feet, and he shuddered. He dragged himself up, got an elbow, then a leg onto the solid flags—a tremendous effort, and one nearly beyond his power in full armor—and crawled upon his knees away from the gaping hole.

The woman still hung from the rope. The Knight stood, and dragged the beam of the gallows around on its axle so that he could cut her down.

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” she said in an unsteady voice. “I—I—could not have faced such a death. You fought like a god!”

And she slipped to the floor and fell to weeping with relief and emotion, kneeling and rubbing her bruised wrists.

Sir Guyon leaned his back against the altar and raised his visor.

“It was nothing, Lady,” he said. “I did not know you were a captive until I entered this chamber. I could not have done less.”

She dried her eyes. “My name is Linnet, what is yours?”

“Guyon,” he replied.

“Then, Sir Guyon,” she said. “I owe my life to you.”

Truly, he thought, he had done little more than preserve his own skin: “It was nothing,” he said again.

He wrung his hands and flexed his numbed fingers. His fatigue was passing. He looked up to find her eyes on his face. She blushed faintly and looked away. She was beautiful, he saw. The hair that hung to the angle of her jaw was red and glossy, and her figure was soft and delicate.

He rose and offered her his hand.

“We should leave this foul place,” he said. “Let us go.”

They left the chamber and went through the monastery and out to the stables. Linnet turned white and clung to him as they passed through the kitchen and saw the bloody bones and skull.

“My poor Edward!” she said, weeping afresh. “He was my attendant. He was my father’s squire many years ago.”

“I am sorry, Lady,” said Sir Guyon. “If I had known that a man was butchered here while I slept—!”

“We must bury him,” said Linnet. “He was a very worthy man.”

“I shall collect his remains then,” said the Knight. “You must dress in garb from my saddlebags. I do not know what they may have done with yours. When you are ready, come to me.”

Then he gathered the bones, as many as he could find, and carried them out of the cloister. The sun was breaking over the horizon. At the edge of the hill, there had once been a graveyard. There were still some weathered headstones standing, thrusting and sprouting in disorder, like broken teeth, but most of the flat ground had long since

slid down, and the remainder of the monuments lay broken and half-buried in a long slope of weedy earth and fallen rock, with the yellow-flowered vines creeping over all.

Here Linnet rejoined him, dressed in a spare cloak and loose crimson shirt and hose. With a fork from the stables Sir Guyon turned up the earth in a space well away from the other graves, and into this he loaded the squire's remains and covered them with rocks.

"What a wretched deed," he said. "I am glad I ended these madmen who waylaid travelers in the guise of holy men. I wonder how many they devoured or fed to their hoggish gods? Your father's squire has been avenged.

"Now let us be off," he said, looking at the dawn. "The roads are dangerous for a woman alone. I will see you to your destination."

And he smiled at her. And she smiled a wan smile in return. Her hair glowed like amber in the sun.

The crows flew back out of the sun as they rode away and clustered again on the gate-less gate, and the bell-tower remained silent.

N.A. Roberts is a writer and gamer who lives in the woods and has been obsessed with storytelling for the greater part of his life. He prefers fantasy and historical fiction, but may one day publish science fiction as well. He has a blog at: <https://fishingforfairytale.wordpress.com/>

PURITY WELLMAN'S FAMILY
THINKS SHE DIED IN 1958.
SHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SO LUCKY.

AS CLOSE AS KNOXVILLE LIES TO HER APPALACIAN
HOMETOWN, PURITY HAS TO TRAVEL FAR FROM
ANYTHING SHE'S EVER KNOWN.
BUT, PURITY ISN'T AS HELPLESS AS SHE USED TO BE.
WHEN IT COMES TO VAMPIRES, SHE'S POISON.

PURE
POISON

HAWKINGS AUSTIN

The Bejeweled Chest

By S.K. INKSLINGER

The Arcane Enclave has made its play to overthrow the kingdom, and the king is dead! Archmage Kell clings desperately to life, only his magic and will to catch the assassin keeping him alive as he chases the killer from world to world, aeon to aeon!

I was bleeding badly. I could feel the stream of warmth as the blood seeped through my tunic and trickled down the side of my legs.

Letting me escape was a fatal mistake for the Arcane Enclave. My breath came in ragged gasps; my thoughts and visions were clouded from the loss of blood. I will expose them for the treacherous fanatics their whole lot is. I won't let them succeed. I wouldn't let them...

In my mind's eyes, I could still glimpse the wrathfulness of the First Wizard, his voice crackling like a thunderstorm as he banished me.

"Archmage Kell... You have dared question our motives, our core teachings. Time and time again, you have stood against our fated rise to the rulership of this kingdom and aided the non-magical scum against your own brethren. With or without you, Kell, we will seize what is ours by the right of blood and arcane might. Now begone, but know that wherever you tread, you will not elude my sight!"

I had laughed a dry, pathetic chuckle that grated upon my parched throat. I had not run away.

Serves me right that they called me a blind, a deaf, a witless fool. I was thrown out of the sanctum, but I didn't flee. I rushed headlong to the aid of the king, to prevent this land's hope from being smothered out by the raging storm.

I failed. A blade had found my gut even before I caught a glimpse of the assailant's face. It had plunged straight through the king, who wasn't magically armored as I. The king lay gasping, dying upon my arms, whispering the last of his words. Those whispers had led me here...

Towering before me were the spires of Barker Mansion, a grand edifice that loomed stark and black against the field of stars above. Seat of the fabled Count Barker, it was the stronghold of the last man who had been a trusted ally of the slain king. The Arcane Enclave had taken control of everything else. He was now the kingdom's last hope, its only salvation...

As my feet, sore with travel, started upon the marble staircase, a surge of willpower seemed to course through my veins.

I have come this far, I will not let all of it be swept away so easily...

I thought of my sister Leira, of her radiant smile, her auburn hair tousled by the summer breeze. I thought of her hands clutching on mine, as if to never let go, on the morning I left to join the Arcane Enclave.

I had given up everything to protect you, Leira. I won't let it all be for nothing.

I clenched my teeth, trying to distract myself from the throbbing wound in my stomach.

I will not let them take you away too. You will live happily, get married, and have as many children as you ever wanted, just like in all those dreams you used to tell me. That, I swear on my life.

I was roughly shaken out of my reverie. With a startle, I remembered the words I heard whispered among members of the Arcane Enclave. *We shall strike... one hour after the full night. Once and for all our last thorn shall be vanquished. And this land shall be ours.*

My bloodied hands making a mess of the doorknob, I stumbled forward and made a crashing entrance.

I rushed headlong into a lavish party. The tunes of lyres and harps, fiddles and lutes filled the entire evening. Men and women dressed in the elegant suits of nobility were dancing about on the dance floor or standing by in groups having jovial conversations. It was the

celebration for the name day of the Count's firstborn son, heir to his house.

I must find him.

I heard a woman's scream from behind but did not turn back.

I must get to Count Barker before the mages do!

My eyes scanned through the faces in the crowd, and I glimpsed the peak of a bleached cowl amidst the flitting silks and suits of the guests. My heart stopped within my chest.

Is it just my imagination, or am I too late? Straining my eyes, I lumbered through the men and women, shoving carelessly despite the strings of curses I evoked.

An assassin of the Pale Meister. Instinctively, my hand went to my stomach, clutching the wound that still seeped crimson fluid.

I can't believe that the Arcane Enclave, as desperate as they are, would employ them. The Pale Meister was a notorious cult of magically gifted assassins, masters of stealth and the arcane. They were known for their ruthlessness and fanaticism, having slaughtered hundreds of people just to get to their targets.

So, an assassin of the Pale Meister must have been the one who had slain the king, I mused grimly, my eyes tracking the assassin's passage through the party. *With this coup, the First Wizard has truly thrown away all shreds of his humanity.*

Fury threatening to consume me, I clenched my fist, preparing my store of magic for the battle to come.

I must get to him before he reaches the Count. I must stop this, once and for all.

I cast a quick spell to muffle my footsteps then followed the assassin out of the throng of partygoers. I kept my distance, fixating my gaze upon him, making sure I had yet to arouse his suspicion.

The assassin left the main hall and the music of celebration to go into one of the numerous corridors in the manor house. With a single glance backward, I followed.

And immediately lost him. My heart fluttered in panic, but then I saw the man. At the end of the hallway was a single wooden door, left open, and I glimpsed the assassin's pale robes through it.

Just as I was creeping toward the opening, the door slammed shut with a splintering *crash*. As if in slow motion, I saw the Pale Meister smirk, then disappear behind the blur of the closed door.

"Bloody gods!" I cursed and sprang forward, slamming my shoulder against the locked door. It resounded with a dull *thump* but did not yield an inch.

I haphazardly cast a spell to enhance the strength of my fist, then I plunged my hand through the thick wooden panel. I grabbed the knob from the other side and swung it wide open. And the Pale Meister was gone again. Vanished as if he had been conjured from thin air.

The room was small, looking out over a cliff to the river below, but in its center stood a large chest, heavily encrusted with jewels and gem stones on its outer surface. It was gaping open, and a pale white light was emanating from it. It seemed familiar for some reason.

Then a sudden realization struck me like a bolt of lightning. I *had* seen the chest before. I had glimpsed it during one of those rare private audiences with the First Wizard. There were rumors that the mages owned an artifact of vast power, a magical chest that could open up the doors between worlds and dimensions, space and time.

I had dismissed these rumors as pure speculation... until now. Even if they were true, why would the First Wizard entrust such an important artifact to a mere assassin? Was this mission's accomplishment of such importance? I never had any desire to tamper with or manipulate the flow of time and space, for the price of that could be tremendous. Apocalyptic, even. It could disrupt the fragile balance between worlds and smash all realities asunder, if my mind wasn't shattered into a million fragments beforehand. If the Pale

Meister was in there, however, I had to pursue him and stop the Count's assassination at all cost.

With uncertain steps, I gingerly stepped into the mysterious chest. A nauseating, tugging sensation pulled at my stomach, and I fell. Truly fell...

I emerged, stumbling right into the midst of a raging battle. All around me, warriors roared with the ferocity and bloodlust of fighting men. Throaty war cries, mists and sprays of blood became the world.

A spear clattered against an enemy shield before splintering, and its thrower was run through by a blade from behind. Swords of bronze clashed loudly in the melee.

An armored warrior lobbed off the head of his more lightly dressed opponent, before being pierced in the side by a spear himself. Arrows rained down from the troops beyond, cutting both their comrades and enemies alike.

Corpses littered the ground, and streams of blood ran like rivers. Men screamed their war cries in different languages, all a raucous cacophony that added to the fiendish atmosphere of the battlefield.

What sort of hell have I landed in? I wondered, stunned by the landscape littered with bodies and gore before me. I belatedly cast a spell of invisibility as an arrow flew right overhead, close enough that I felt a twinge of pain across the top of my head.

Invisible to anyone else, I climbed up atop a large mound of corpses. Squinting my eyes against the sunlight, I gazed over the entire field of battle. Then, through the midst of blades and roaring men, I saw it.

On the other side of the battlefield, the Pale Meister was just stepping into the bejeweled chest, and then he vanished once more. The chest seemed to fade a little after the assassin, its conjurer, had dove into it.

I must get to him before he can return and take the Count's life!

I was trapped within a narrow mountain pass, where two vicious groups of fighting men barred my path toward the only escape from this hell. Before me was a small group of warriors clad in plates of bronze, armed with spears and swords, standing against a massive horde of enemies.

They seemed like ants compared to the endless legion of their nemesis, whose forces seemed to stretch toward the horizon.

It's suicide. There is no way such a small force could even hope to deter that massive army. Not even the greatest wizard could survive.

Against all odds, the bronze-clad men gave a blood-curdling cry, a scream that could be heard to the deepest pits of hell.

“Alalaaaaaaa!”

Hurling their spears through the air, not pausing even as the bronze-tipped javelins plunged into the bodies of their foes, they charged.

I stared, awestruck, as the warriors ran straight into the midst of their enemies and fought with a mad, fiendish fury of a thousand men. They mowed through ranks upon ranks of their enemies, each man felling dozens around him.

As I gazed at the magical bejeweled chest, I felt a surge of dogged determination overtaking me.

If I can't do it, no one else can. My title of Archmage did not come at such a cheap price...

Whispering the incantations for the spell, I rubbed my wizard's rings and redoubled the spell that ensured my invisibility. Steeling my emotions, I focused my senses and lunged into the bands of clashing men.

“Wruagghh!” A warrior screamed as his scimitar swung right over my head. I ducked past him and crawled forward, where I was brought short by a spear plunging into the ground inches from my face.

A man before me fell face down, his body run through by another spear. I gingerly stepped over him as a blade erupted from his killer's back and the man fell.

I skulked by, avoiding any physical contact that could disrupt the spell. Finally, there was a clearing within the ranks of clashing men, and I was free. So I ran.

I ran forward, darting between men hacking and slashing at one another, evading javelins and slingshot pebbles hurling through the air, spraying red mists all around me. I thought I had dodged them all, until a slinger's pebble cracked against the right side of my skull.

It was deafening. I went down, staggering, my vision infiltrated by dark blotches. When I looked at my hands they were covered in blood.

Many of the surrounding warriors looked down at me. The effects of the invisibility spell had faded when the rock struck me.

Curse the Gods! Before I could cast another spell, the raucous screams and wails of men disrupted my concentration.

Droplets of blood misted the air, men were cut and run down as a chariot plowed through the ranks of soldiers, friends and foes alike.

Without a second thought, I leaped onto the speeding chariot, hurling the archer atop it aside. The charioteer turned his head back in shock. I jammed my fingers into his eyes and threw the man into the horde of enraged soldiers.

With blood running into my eyes, I roared and whipped the horses toward the magical chest, plowing down any men that stood in my way. In a spray of dust and bodies, the vehicle had finally crossed to the other side of the battle line.

At the last moment, I swerved the chariot in a sharp turn and leaped off its platform, falling right into the chest of magic...

I am flying. Truly flying. I was standing in a sort of a hull, a large tube-shaped room with many oval windows looking out at the clouds

besides it. And the room was moving, the clouds passing by in clumps of white.

My feet were on a solid floor, carpeted, yet the long, cylindrical hull seemed to be flying. Unbelievably, flying at such a height exceeded by what is possible even for the largest birds of prey.

This is madness. Where did the chest take me this time? There were many aisles in the room—rows upon rows of them—and the people sitting upon them were gaping, staring at me in shock and amazement.

Where did the Pale Meister go? I waded forward, feeling every step taking its toll on my bloodied, weakened body. Gritting my teeth, I yanked at the collar of the man in the nearest aisle.

“Where are we? What is this strange thing we are riding on?” I growled. There was not much time left. The Pale Meister could be anywhere.

The man swore, his voice racked with fear, “I paid a large sum of money to be on this plane, you bloody lunatic! Get your hands off me!” Not having the time to listen to this rabble, I forcefully slapped the man across the face, loosening a few of his teeth.

“We are on a Delta flight to New York! You goddamn nutjob...” The man whimpered painfully. He continued to swear, his eyes filled with an equal measure of panic and rage.

I released the man unceremoniously back to his seat and didn’t bother to turn back as he made some more protests.

I am on a... “plane”? *Whatever sorcery that is.* The chest opens here, which means that the Pale Meister must also be here. As I was about to wade onward, a voice suddenly blared from the walls of the so-called “plane”.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign. We are now crossing a zone of turbulence. Please return your se... Wait, who the hell are you? You are not allowed in

here... Some... Somebody helppppp! Argghhhhh!" Then the sound was cut short and replaced by a buzzing noise before ceasing completely.

The men and women around me erupted into a state of panic, swearing and screaming words I couldn't even start to comprehend.

"Terrorists! The plane is hijacked!" one woman hollered.

"I don't wanna die!" A young man whimpered, huddling into a ball in his seat. A woman wept and embraced her three weeping children, one still a suckling babe. Some people started praying, their lips moving, but any words they uttered were drowned out by the cacophonous mix of hollers and raucous cries. A large, muscular man yelled that they should fight against the terrorists, but no one gave him any attention.

Unable to make a sense of all this, I yanked on the robes of a dark-skinned woman on the aisle on my other side.

"Where is that voice coming from? Where sits the man behind it!"

She gazed at me with shaky eyes, "There!" The woman pointed her finger at the narrow path ahead. "From the cabin!" I gazed forward and glimpsed a metallic door at the far end of the long walkway.

I started forward, then stumbled and fell. Discordant cries arose from men and women all around as the plane tilted madly, threatening to dip to one side and plunge down.

I clutched on the seat nearest to me until my knuckles went white, until I could feel the metal leaving marks on my palm.

The plane swerved like a drunken man, passing dangerously close to the pillars of lightning within the storm clouds. It rolled to the right, then left, then right again, throwing passengers against one side or another. It seemed like an eternity before the vehicle finally resumed a stable course.

Many people in the room sighed their relief. I stood up and tried to approach that door again.

The entire plane shook with a thunderous boom as a bolt of lightning struck its lower half. My ears were ringing, blood seeping out from them as I went deaf.

This time, the plane went into a straight dip downwards, the floor suddenly slanting in a steep angle. People screamed as they flew from seats, crashing into the one before them or stumbling onto the walkway.

Behind me I could see the lower half of the plane being engulfed in flames. The structure creaked and groaned before detaching completely and disappearing into the midst of the storm. Passengers went overboard, screaming as the wind tore at them, and vanished with the vicious gale.

The remaining people were desperately clinging for dear life to the seats around them, but even those would not last long. The plane was in a nose-dive toward the ground far below, where all would turn to flames.

I released my hold on the seat and strengthened the soles of my feet with a quick spell. I slid down the walkway like a tumbling boulder, my back scraping, as if on fire, as the plane dipped down even further.

It's approaching the ground. Approaching fast...

Only a few paces before the metallic door, I drew back my knees and steeled my body with powerful magics, preparing for the impact. It came with a jarring ferocity that shook my whole body, clattering my teeth against one another, threatening to drive my wounded body unconscious once again. The door to the cabin flew open with the tremendous force, and I rolled into the room.

It was filled with large assortments of panels and buttons, but only the chest standing between the two dead men caught my eyes. I only stole a quick glance at the bloody corpses before stepping into this gate between worlds...

I yelped, jerking out of my stupor. Around me prowled a voracious pack of jackal-like creatures. Their eyes were bulbous, clenched jaws dripping with saliva at the prospect of such a meaty prey. They were large as horses, with decaying peels of rotten flesh giving away glints of bones beneath. One of them took a chance bite and almost snapped off my ear. I jumped up and hollered. Raising my ring, I hurled a bolt of lightning at the fiendish beast.

The sandy earth shook with the thunderous *KA-BLAM!* as the beast was thrown off and charred to a crisp. Unfazed, the remaining jackals lunged with their horrendous jaws gaping.

I dropped onto the sand and rolled, letting the fell beasts collide among themselves. I tasted sand, and the grains scraped against my skin until I bled.

The beasts were still snapping at their own, wondering where their large prey had disappeared to. I channeled all of my arcane powers into my arms and felt the energy course through my veins, threatening to rip them apart.

My palms sizzling, crackling with power, I blasted a white-hot column of lightning at the packs of beasts. The fiends scuttled and yelped in agony as they were roasted to crisps, unable to flee from the leaping bolts of energy. The foul bestial stench mingled with that of charred meat as I made my way across this new, forbidding landscape.

From horizon to horizon, everything was covered in sand. The sun shone brightly overhead, scorching the dunes as I wove my weary path forward. The bleeding from my stomach and head seemed to have stopped for now, but without resting to reinforce my spells the wounds were sure to split again.

Having survived the assault of the monstrous jackals, I had time to ponder something that could be crucial in the battle against the Pale Meister. Back on the “airplane” in the world before this one, just after I’d stepped into the bejeweled chest and before I had been transported here, I had glimpsed the world to which I would be brought. I had been in too much shock the first time I stepped into the

chest, and later I had jumped into it from a speeding chariot, but I suspected I may have seen these images even back then.

Did this mean that it was possible for me to glimpse the world I'd be going to once I was inside the chest, moments before I had actually arrived there? That was another puzzle I'd need to solve.

As I grimly wondered if I would survive trudging along the seemingly endless desert, I spotted the crumbling ruins of a city in the distance. With sand-burnt soles, I stepped onto the roads to that ruined city.

The buildings were nothing of the sort I had ever seen before. There were massive towers that seemed to scrape against the sky. Winding between the buildings were great stone paths, hoisted by pillars as lofty as the most formidable castles.

This place used to be a great city. Perhaps even the capital of this advanced world, I mused grimly, my eyes scouring the place for any signs of life. I carefully trod among rows upon rows of smaller buildings.

All of them showed signs of desertion, as if they had not been inhabited by human life for a great long while. Most had their windows shattered, doors smashed in, and had been thoroughly looted for anything of value. Dust and sand pervaded everything, forming a thin layer over the buildings, the paths, and the sky-high towers. Only the hardiest of plants survived within the cracks between stones.

This vast megalopolis was but a great, decaying ruin, a bare husk of its former self—a pile of crumbling debris waiting to be devoured by the surrounding world of sand.

I thought back to the places, the worlds and eras I had been to with the power of the chest. I tried to reflect upon images of the battlefield where bronze clad men fought and died, of the flying tubular “plane” plummeting toward the earth, and of this abandoned, decaying world.

Worlds that were and worlds that will be. What is the Pale Meister's intention for traversing all of these worlds? Does he have full control over the chest, or was he just allowed a minor glimpse of its

overpowering might? That was another question that still bothered me immensely.

Treading upon the paths through the crumbling city, I strode onward, still desperate to discover any forms of life. There was not a sound besides my footsteps and the whooshing of the wind.

Wait. I had heard something. Faint, but definitely something. *Is that... music?*

The tune seemed to stand out more once I'd noticed it. I followed the source of music until I came before what seemed to be an abandoned tavern.

I stepped into the tavern, its original door smashed to pieces beside the entrance. The place was in shambles, with smashed bottles of liquor littered everywhere, chairs upended, tables smashed in. Dust coated the place in a thick layer, signifying that its tenants had abandoned the place long ago.

I stared at the source of music in awe and wonder. It was a metallic statue of sorts, standing solidly beside remnants of the tavern's bar.

I approached the dented statue and almost yelped as it suddenly spoke up:

"Last recording: 24th July 2179

They're all gone now. Even the last groups of refugees have left the city. I should have gone with them, but even that is hopeless. They are not going to survive the hordes of mutated beasts out there in the desert, much less without food and water.

Sitting here now, awaiting my death, I realized that this end is a punishment for our own wrongdoing. World War III, fought over three decades ago, had decimated much of our landscape.

Where the first bombs were dropped, no one remembers, but when the major world powers brought out their hydrogen bombs, the globe went into flames. Billions of people had gone to ash, along with most of our natural resources.

Nuclear winter came next, covering the world in an impenetrable haze. Even now that it is gone, we can no longer grow anything in this sandy desert. Most of the people who had survived the war end up dying from starvation, radiation, or those mutated monsters created from our own attempts to kill one another.

We are... no. I am one of the last of humanity now... and if anyone is listening, I would like to say that I'm sorry. We destroyed the world. Not from outside forces, nothing could have devastated us this badly.

We destroyed this world... by our own hands. Now we have paid the ultimate price...

Recording done by automaton G73H."

As suddenly as it had started, the lights went out from the eyes of the statue and the message stopped.

I gingerly stepped forward and shook the metallic figure to get it to start speaking again but to no avail. The statue had gone back to being a chunk of inanimate metal standing in the corner of the tavern once again.

What in the name of the Gods was that? I couldn't make much sense of what the "automaton" had said, only that a great war had happened here in this world.

That had somehow been the cause for abandoning this city, the mutated beasts roaming the wilderness, and the endless desert which spread to the horizon.

I couldn't understand much of it, but the statue's message had given me a chill that went down my spine. I prayed that such a punishment, such a grim end to all civilizations, would not happen to my world...

The sound of an explosion, followed by cascades of falling rubble, violently yanked me out of my reverie. I ran to the tavern's entrance and peered outside. A cloud of dust had settled over the street outside the tavern, forming an impenetrable haze that allowed no light through.

However, I could hear the sound of something moving—something big, dragging its feet along the stony road. Sounds of blasting rubble and explosions followed shortly thereafter.

I stood there in front of the entrance, trying to calm my nerves, waiting for the moment to move forward. When the dust finally settled, I burst onto the street and gaped at the battle in front of me.

A humongous lizard the size of an elephant towered on one end. It had scales as dark as pitch, jaws large enough to engulf a man's head, and a pair of massive curved horns that pointed toward its sides. Its claws were sharp as sickles, dripping with crimson blood. The monstrosity gave a blood-curdling roar as it bull-rushed its prey.

On the other end was the Pale Meister. The assassin was bleeding from several places, the claw marks upon his body still fresh.

He blasted the lizard monster with scorching balls of fire and bolts of lightning, and then the mage-assassin conjured a wall of witchery that completely engulfed the lizard-monster, leaving behind only a pile of smoldering embers.

Then he turned and saw me. The Pale Meister bolted toward the nearest building with the speed of an injured animal. I hurled my own bolt of lightning after him, but it only zapped against the building's stone facade. I sped after him into the crumbling ruin, renewing our relentless chase once again.

The Pale Meister leaped onto each new flight of stairs with wraith-like agility. He seemed to flit along the endless staircase as if he was a pale ghost. I barely managed to keep up with him, much less lessen the distance between us.

As I jumped over another step, I caught the assassin's eyes and saw him throw a lance of ice downward. It spiraled toward me.

I sidestepped just in time for it to only graze my shoulder, then I lobbed a fireball back in return. It struck home, and I heard the assassin roar in agony before moving away.

He was slowing down, burdened by the injuries he had sustained at both the monster's hands and mine.

I pressed my ring to the soles of my boots and cast a spell for feathered feet. Instantly, I could feel myself getting lighter, my steps less burdened than before. I flew over the seemingly endless staircase, getting ever closer to the Pale Meister.

Finally. I am finally going to catch him this time! The assassin was just one flight above me, now.

Fixated on the steps before me, I only heard the door slam shut when it was too late. I gazed up at the flights of stairs above, and the Pale Meister had vanished. My heart seemed to stop for a moment before I frantically climbed the steps and reached the door. I leaped forward and yanked it open.

Across the rooftop, the Pale Meister was making a run for it, leaving a trail of blood after his hurried steps. He flung a small trinket into the air, and I gaped in awe as it gradually expanded while airborne and landed as the bejeweled chest.

I threw a flashing bolt of lightning at the assassin. He leaped as the ground beneath him exploded in a shower of debris and blinding light. Without a second thought, the Pale Meister dove head-first into the magical chest. I cursed and jumped in after him.

We plummeted, like stones dropped from a castle tower perched amidst the clouds.

The Pale Meister seemed shocked at the location upon which we had appeared, but I had known it, glimpsing it as I lunged into the bejeweled chest.

Gusts of wind whipped at my hair, flapping my robes madly like the wings of a raven. Down below, the Pale Meister hollered, trying to grasp a foothold against the building's glass surface in vain.

This is my last chance to stop the assassination of the count.

With the roar of the wind howling in my ears, the thrill of falling freely and a sinking feeling as the ground rose to meet me, I kissed

my wizard's ring. Charging up the power, I hurled a gigantic bolt of lightning at the Pale Meister.

The man whipped around, conjuring a rough magical ward that barely deflected my spell. He pitched a voracious fireball that scattered to sparks as my own ward went up.

Lances of ice shattered, flames flew, and tendrils of lightning arced across the sky as both of our wards thinned. The ground rushed up rapidly, like a beast waiting to crush the two fools leaping right into its mouth.

I could see it clearly now: the pavement beside a street, thronged with passersby. They gazed up in horror at the two men plunging down the side of the building, their eyes met mine.

In a movement that snatched the breath from my lungs, the Pale Meister threw down the bejeweled chest. It slammed thunderously against the ground, immediately sending the crowd of onlookers scuttling away in panic.

Out of the assassin's hands, a smokescreen surged upward and enveloped me.

He's trying to flee again, through the chest and into another world. I can't let him do it!

Glimpsing the white of his cowl through the smoke, I threw a solid lance of ice at the flitting figure. The smoke instantly dispersed as his ward shattered and failed, and my spear impaled the assassin through his chest.

He howled and gurgled blood. A feeling of triumph rose up within me.

Before he collapsed, he whipped back and hurled a bolt of lightning that raced through the sky at me. It struck the ward then, and my magic failed. I screamed as lightning zapped through me, as my skin burned like the coals of a living flame.

I couldn't open my eyes. Each breath ripped through the tissues of my lungs. Pain blotted my senses as the world went to darkness.

There was a jarring impact as I smashed against the ground, but I felt no pain. I felt nothing at all.

The warmth and comfort of the darkness was persuasive as I let it envelope me, and I drifted into the abyss...

I woke up drenched in sweat. Evening sunlight streamed in through the western side of the room, bathing it in an orange glow. The smell of drugs and sanitizer hung faintly in the air.

Have I fallen asleep again?

Beside me, one of two children started to voice his protest, "Mister! So how does the story end? Does the hero defeat the bad guys?" The other child, the first boy's little sister, stared at me with big blue eyes filled with anticipation.

Sprawled open upon my knees was a children's storybook. However, I was no longer in the mood for stories. Not after that dream...

"Kids, it's time to get back to your own ward," a kindly nurse came into the room and gently herded the two children out of the door.

"Aww," the girl cried disappointedly, "See you later, mister!" Then they were gone.

I have had that dream again. Was that a fragmented piece of my past?

From what the doctor had told me, I had completely lost all of my memories after miraculously surviving a fall from a building. No one knows me, there are no documents of identification that could tell them who I am, where I came from, or who were my closest relatives.

They had found another man with me, dead upon the pavement beside the building, but other than that, the police will not reveal any details.

Lying beside my body after the fall was a chest, assumed mine. For some reason, it was stuffed full of rare coins, and those were used to

pay for my hospital bills.

My legs are still as leaden as ever...

As a result of the fall, I suffered from paralysis of the lower portion of my body. Whenever I want to move around, a wheelchair would always be needed. I am still learning to live with it...

Since I first came back into consciousness, I would often dream. A dream filled with adventure, magic, and intrigue. My doctor says that it is just my imagination, a result of the brain trying to regain its memories and regain its function, but I wonder.

Could it be some part of a life I used to know? Could such a thing be possible? It seemed like something out of a movie shown on the hospital room's television.

I ran my thumb along the ring on my right hand, a gesture my doctor had noticed and had recommended. He said that such a habit could help in the process of regaining my memories.

Are those glimpses I saw in the dream really my life before I had lost my memories, or are they just my imagination?

I could not remember much, but some names kept on repeating themselves in my head.

Who is the Pale Meister? Who is Count Barker? And why do I feel as if I have accomplished something, some sort of mission, yet I cannot remember what it is?

I tasted salt upon my lips. I reached up and found out that my face was wet. Among the images and thoughts scattered wildly within my head, one shone out more clearly than the others. It was the face of a woman, her auburn hair shimmering in the sunlight. Her smile warm and radiant as she gazed at me.

Leira... The name came up unexpectedly. I shook as I wept, unable to contain myself.

Only a single thought remained in my mind, glowing like a beacon amidst all else.

I must return. No matter what, I must get back to where you are.

Lost in thought, I gazed at the setting sun until it dipped below the horizon. As darkness enveloped the city, I noticed a pale, unnatural light within the room itself. I turned to look inside the room, and then I gaped in wonder.

It was the chest. It was closed, but a pale white light was emanating from within, spilling out through the slits between its covers.

It can't be possible. With trembling hands, I shoved against the firm mattress and rolled off the bed. I yelped in pain as I landed on the concrete floor, but staring at the wonder in front of me, I soon forgot about it.

I crawled forward using only my arms and hands. It was hard work, but before long, I reached my goal.

I slowly lifted up the lid of the jeweled chest. From its interiors seeped the ethereal white light. Just like in my dreams.

Will this chest really be a portal to different times and dimensions?

With a resigned sigh, I heaved my body up to the same level as the chest. *There is only one way to find out.*

I half crawled, half plummeted, as I made myself fall forward into the chest. A nauseating sensation tugged at my stomach, then I fell into the unknown...

A start-up writer from Bangkok, Thailand. S. K. currently studies as a first-year medical student in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His passions lie in tales of fantasy, action, and thriller. View his other works of writings here:

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All that Glitters

By PAUL LUCAS

Though small and twisted in ways that suit his profession, Theofian Nap is not as twisted as his sadistic blades, Pugio and Incisor! While Nap hungers for revenge on a fence who conned him, his cursed blades hunger and cry out for fresh souls!

Just as he was about to enter the tavern, Theofian Nap was interrupted by his knives, which were talking to themselves. Their voices were a little muffled underneath his dark cloak, but he could hear the pair of them muttering to each other. He turned away from the tavern door, reached down to his belt and took the blades out. Both had ornate, jewel-encrusted handles that gave off a faint oily-green glow.

“Hush, Pugio!” he said to the knife in his right hand, a stubby broad blade, and “Enough of that, Incisor!” to the one in his left, a long stiletto.

“I’m bored,” said a man’s voice from the knife in his right hand, the stubby one he had called Pugio. “You’ve not had me out in days, and I’m sure I’ve got some blood stuck between my handle and tang. You should take better care of me, I’ve worked for you so hard.”

“I’m bored too, Pugio,” said the more feminine voice of Incisor, “But at least Nap always keeps *me* in good condition.”

“Hush!” Nap said. “Quiet, the pair of you. If I can hear you, so might anyone in the tavern.”

“Only if you promise to clean me when you get home,” said Pugio.

“Aye, that I will, and give you a polish too. But don’t think you’ll fool me into pricking myself on you.”

“You’re such a dandy, Pugio,” said Incisor, “You always have been, ever since we were just milk teeth in the jaws of the demon. You should stop complaining about Nap’s care of you. He’s the most attentive owner we’ve had in centuries, and you know it.”

Nap interrupted before a full-scale argument could start. “Yes, yes, now hush, the pair of you, while I go trade in this gem.”

He put the knives away and entered the Unwelcome Wanderer Tavern. He nodded briefly to his friend Sark, a tall mercenary who was drinking with some companions across the room. Sark raised his mug and nodded back. Unlike the tall Sark, Theofian Nap was hardly over five feet tall, but taller men gave him respect out of his proficiency as a thief. He threw back the hood of his black velvet cloak, revealing dark brown hair which was cropped short, soft brown eyes, and a flattish, wide nose.

Sark held up a jingling bag, winked at Nap, then nodded toward the corner of the room. Nap spotted the fence Visor, so named because of the face-covering helm he wore. This helm had fine wire meshes where the eye, nose, and mouth holes should have been. Visor had first appeared nearly a year ago, paying well for stolen goods and not inquiring where they had come from—both agreeable to the various thieves and vagabonds he dealt with.

Nap walked past tables and ignored the babble of voices, men arguing over women or dice, and fighters telling stories of past adventures. He stepped over a filthy body sprawled in a drunken sleep on the floor, at last seating himself in his favourite corner niche, opposite his fence.

“Ale for myself and companion,” he called to a serving girl and flipped a coin in her direction.

Visor inclined his head and said, “I won’t reveal my face to you that easily, Nap. I’ve said before that if you saw my face, it would drive you mad.” He added, “If you aren’t already, choosing to frequent this cesspit.”

“I don’t understand you, Visor. I bring you valuable goods, at fair prices, and every time you insult me in some small way. Why?”

“Because life is short, power is fleeting, and I like to use it while I have it. Sooner than either of us thinks, we will both be with the King of Bones. Enjoy what you have now. I do.”

As the serving girl placed two tankards in front of them, Visor pulled his cloak further around himself, covering the armour over his

massive chest and even more massive stomach.

“Yes, Nap, remember this: you need my money more than I want your shoddy goods.”

“Well, let’s agree on something else instead,” Nap said, “which is that I want these two tankards of ale more than you do.” He picked up one with his left hand and inspected it silently, then downed the ale in one smooth swallow. Visor snorted and said, “Don’t try to impress me, Nap, save it for the gutter dirt you associate with.”

Nap smirked and replied, “If I associate with gutter dirt, what are you for associating with me?” He leaned back in his chair, pleased at being one up against Visor.

Visor snapped back at the thief, anger seeming to radiate from his non-existent face, “I only meet you for business, not pleasure. As if anyone could call this *pleasurable*,” waving a hand around to indicate the raucous crowd. “And speaking of business, what have you got for me today?”

At this, Nap leaned towards Visor, his right hand going furtively inside his cloak.

“Something very special,” he said, withdrawing his hand. Slowly he turned it to reveal a milk-white gem the size of a large bird’s egg. Visor reached for it, but the small thief quickly snatched it away, a grin appearing on his face at Visor’s show of interest.

“Would you care to purchase it from me, Visor, at a suitable price of course, or shall I take my wares elsewhere?”

Visor cagily asked him, “If it’s a true Basilisk Egg, which it probably isn’t, I’m willing to give you”—here he paused—“twenty Auros, not a copper more.”

Nap snorted in disgust and made as if to put away the gem. “One fifty, or I go to Baliman. Even though he’s the stingiest fence around, he’ll give me what it’s worth.”

“Very well,” replied Visor. “Twenty-five Auros.”

“One forty, or you can go steal one of these yourself.”

“Thirty, which is more than it’s worth, as you know.”

“You ought to try stealing one from under the nose of the Duke’s guardsmen. One hundred thirty Auros, and solid gold as well, not those iron-polluted coins you try to pass off to the beggars.”

After a few more minutes of heated argument, the pair agreed on a price of seventy Auros, but before they exchanged, Visor put his usual final argument to Nap.

“What do you say we make a mutually beneficial pact? A Geas to ensure we both get what we have been promised by the other.”

Nap snorted into his ale. “And put myself in your power? No way.”

“But it would be two-way. I cannot cheat you without punishment, and you cannot cheat me. Maybe a lightning bolt to the head of the malefactor. That sounds fair to me. I have a scroll here, and I know where Baskalleros is tonight. Powerless though he is, he still has enough wit in him to activate someone else’s spell.”

“Never! Magic that puts you in the power of another—even for your own benefit—is no magic, but oppression.”

Visor spread his hands wide. “In our country, the Law is Magic, and Magic is the Law. Enforceable on all who submit to it.”

“And that is why I won’t agree. Do you see any sorcerers here?” Nap gestured around the room, “Would any of these men ever allow themselves to be so tied by the Law, by Magic? No! Here on the edges of society we are freemen; we live by reputation, something far more valuable than any Law, and my reputation is my most valuable asset—as is yours to you. Now, the exchange.”

Visor sighed, then there was a chink of metal upon metal as he quickly passed Nap a pouch with his gains inside, while palming the gem for himself, and their business was done. When each had checked that he had gotten what he was due, they parted without a word.

Visor left the tavern, his corpulent body wobbling as he went. Nap strode to the bar, feeling seven feet tall inside his five-foot body. He threw a handful of coins on the counter and shouted, "A drink for everyone, barkeep." Men jumped from their seats and rushed to the bar, nearly knocking over their benefactor. In his good mood, Nap couldn't be upset over a little shoving and merely got out of the way, lifting another tankard to his lips.

Nap entered his room, his head still filled with the ale he had drunk to celebrate his gaining of transient wealth. However, he had not been so drunk as to allow the mugger who jumped him on the streets to get away uninjured. Nap smiled at the thought of a temporarily soprano vagabond.

He sat down on his pallet of straw and got out his pouch of coins, jiggling it in his hand and listening to the clink that it made. He loosened the thong around its neck and poured the coins out onto his bedding. He was elated, hardly believing that he had so much money. He knew that only he could have stolen Duke Wals' Basilisk Egg from its heavily guarded strong room without alerting any of the guards. He had been tempted to help himself to some other trinkets while there but knew that this would have been too risky and had made his exit, unnoticed by all.

And now, barely half a day later, he was the possessor of a small fortune, at least to one in his position. Nap fingered the coins, thick and heavy in his hands, a solid, comforting, feel to them. The coins reflected light from the candles set in the wall, but this was outdone by the glint in his eyes. He considered what to do with his newly gained wealth. First he would get some new clothes, a pair of leather boots, soft and supple as could be, and, most important of all, a better place to live.

"This hovel is all right," he thought, "for a man of small means, but lice and rats make poor roommates. A woman would be better."

He dropped the coins back onto the pallet and removed his dirt-stained boots, throwing them into a corner. He fumbled off his cloak

and laid it carefully to one side. Two rows of daggers crossed his chest, and a leather wallet containing more of his tools was attached to his belt, as were two other daggers with more ornate hilts—Incisor and Pugio. He took off the belt and lay it on the bed.

“Nap, we’re home!” came the voice of Pugio from the belt. “You promised to clean me!”

“Not just now. Give me a few minutes.” He hiccuped and felt a bubble of ale rise at the back of his throat.

Incisor spoke up also. “And what about that mugger you discomfited? Admirable restraint for one living in a civilised society, surely, but you could have dealt with him more permanently and let us have someone new to talk to.”

“I am not a barbarian or an assassin, my dearest Lady Incisor, but a thief. And a thief draws little attention to himself, either on the job or off it. Discretion is the better part of avarice.”

“Pfft! You are not a real man at all. Stunted in body and limb, and I’ve no doubt elsewhere!” said Incisor. “And I’m getting tired of hearing the same old arguments in here. It’s been a long time since anyone new joined us in the blades. How about a philosopher next time? The last one we had in here was...who was it, Pugio?”

“Alconus the Grey.”

“That’s right. Alconus the Grey, long long ago, and none of our owners since have ever replaced him.”

“Yes, she’s right,” said Pugio, “Centuries of discussions on the nature of reality and ethics, gone when Alconus was freed. It’s all been cutpurses and mollies of late, and since you got us...pfft! Nothing.”

“It depends on who I meet,” replied Nap, “and whether they put up a fight. It might be a long time yet before I have to—well, you know,” he mimed stabbing someone, not that his knives could see this, “and I pray to the King of Bones it’s never.”

“You’re such a weak and feeble thing,” Incisor replied, “Not a real fighter like the warrior who had us last—what was his name, Pugio?”

Nap ignored her taunts and the bickering between the two knives. He began to unstrap the blades across his chest when he remembered his coins. “Got to put you to bed as well, my darlings,” he muttered as he reached for them then frowned as he noticed that they were tarnished, which they hadn’t been only moments before. As he watched, the coins gradually became darker and less golden, more orange or red, then the colour changed again, swifter, until at last, it halted. He reached out and took a coin in his hand. Then his face darkened as he realised what had happened.

“Stones!” he shouted, “Stone chips witched to look like gold! I’ve been cheated!”

He’d suspected that Visor knew too much about sorcerers, but had never wanted it to be proved this way. He flung the fake coin onto the floor and quickly swept the others after it. His dark eyes became black pebbles in an even darker visage. In an instant, his dreams of luxury vanished and were replaced by thoughts of anger and revenge.

“I’ll kill that crooked fence, Visor,” Nap fumed, “I’ll make him wish he’d never tangled with me. Oh, how he’ll suffer before I let him die.”

“Fantastic news!” shouted Incisor, “New company is on its way.”

The shadow moved quickly from building to building, merging momentarily with one of its brothers before passing on to the next. Occasionally, a small flash of reflected light came from it—a dagger held in hand, prepared to be used. Hopeless though it seemed, Theofian Nap was slowly tracing the path of Visor across the less reputable areas of the city: places where parents sold their children into slavery or had them operated on to improve the take when begging.

From the Unwelcome Wanderer, Visor had wandered the streets, stopping briefly at a tavern here, at a street corner there, and then left

after making another transaction. Following these leads, gained at the cost of a few coins or the point of his dagger if necessary, Nap was at last closing in on his quarry. Now, he came upon a streetwalker wandering up and down the street. Going back to his normal routine had calmed him a little, and the wild flames of his anger had damped to embers—for now.

“Good woman, I’m looking for a man, you might have seen him go past just now.”

The woman laughed at this. Though she was skinny with just a few tufts of unnaturally white hair straggling from her head and her lips stained blue with pravis, there was something about her that Nap couldn’t help but warm to. The street hadn’t ruined her yet, and she reminded him of someone he knew long ago.

“A man you’re after, sweetie? Not a vision of loveliness like meself?”

She blinked her eyes over-dramatically and whipped out a silk cloth from somewhere and held it coyly to her mouth. Nap couldn’t help but laugh briefly. She had unusually pale eyes: almost white, with pink pupils instead of black, but those didn’t put him off. He’d seen stranger sights in his time.

“No, milady, a fat man. Walks like a waterfowl and has a helm over his face. No eyes in it.” Nap held out a silver coin in his right hand and made it flip between his fingers and thumbs, up one way then back the other.

“Crikey, you’re good with them funny fingers on that hand. Well, for that trick I don’t mind telling you he’s gone into a tavern on Blindman Street and not yet come out when I was with my last toby.”

Nap nodded and flipped the coin to her.

“He were whistling and half-singing a tune, ever so nice it was,” she said, “like he were right pleased about sumthin.”

“Here, something extra. Your fee for the Door Keeper and Light Bringer when it’s your turn to move on.” He placed an extra couple of coins in her palm, then was on his way.

“Don’t need it for them two,” she called after him, “But may my gods, the Kindly Gods, bless you, sir!”

“Nap, did I hear several coins chink there?” said Incisor after they had walked away, “Why ever did you give a streetwalker more than one?”

“The boy’s addled,” chipped in Pugio, “or being led by that other dagger, the one that dangles between his legs. Nice big woman, was she, Nap? I know what you little men prefer. We’ve heard it all over the centuries, we know what type suits every man.”

“Would you two shut up! And for the King of Bones’ sake, can’t a man be generous from time to time for no reason at all?”

“No,” they replied together then fell silent.

Nap turned onto Blindman Street and, reaching the tavern, loitered by a dirty and cracked window. He peered warily through, only his eyes and forehead above the window ledge. Drinkers sat round old crooked tables, downing tankards of different sizes, of grog and ale and mead. Voices drifted out, loud and coarse, as did the steady rattle of metal upon metal.

To the left of the main room, Nap recognised the sorcerer Baskalleros, once great but now reduced to doing conjuring tricks for money because of an addiction to pravis, which had robbed him of his powers and left his lips blue. He was entertaining a small crowd of people, making coins and balls appear from people’s ears, and disappearing into the air, the humiliation and shame showing obviously in his tormented eyes, despite his proud bearing.

Towards the back of the room, Nap could see Visor sitting next to two men. He was arguing with a one-eyed man, who gesticulated up in the air as if stirring something. Visor shook his head and held up three fingers. The one-eyed man’s bearded companion put his hand on his shoulder and nodded. Something swiftly changed hands, and Visor tucked his gains into his belt and made his way towards the door.

Nap retreated into the safety of the shadows and watched Visor leave the tavern and cross the street, his boots kicking up dust as he hurried on his way. Once Visor had turned a corner, Nap followed.

Bright Seris had long since fled the sky, leaving her youngest son, mischievous Hathoris, scampering across the heavens. His dim light undulated and wavered, rolling unevenly down upon the earth, both helping and hindering Nap. The streets were dark enough that Visor would not be likely to spot his pursuer easily, but neither would Nap be able to see Visor clearly. His eyes were good in the dark, but not when a torch flickered from the entrance to a property, and especially not when Hathoris' meagre light waxed and waned so randomly. Total blackness was best to allow his eyes to adjust.

He kept at the furthest limit of his vision, following the man on a twisting path through the nearly empty streets. The houses, or more accurately hovels, he passed were dark and silent, seemingly empty—but come daylight and hordes of beggars, vendors, cripples, and other poor wretches would spew forth out of the broken doorways to infest the city, like flies on a corpse becoming active in the heat of the day. But that occurrence was many hours away.

“How are you going to do it, Nap?” asked Pugio.

“And which of us will you use?” added Incisor.

Nap shrugged, then remembered that the daggers couldn't see.

“I don't know. I'm not going to rush him on the street—too many things to go wrong. It'll have to be somewhere that he can't see me. I'm not having his shade coming back to haunt me. A knife in the chest, possibly. While he's asleep would be best. And maybe I won't use either of you, but one of my ordinary knives. How would you like that?”

“That would be so unfair, Nap,” replied Incisor, “after all we've done to help you out in your trade. Without us...” She let her voice trail off.

“Using guilt, eh, Incisor?” said Nap. “I daresay you've learnt the art of manipulation over the centuries. Whose life is it I'm living, eh?”

Although I wield you two, somehow I always have the feeling that you are, in some way, wielding me.”

Neither blade deigned to reply.

Nap gradually moved away from the slums and dunghills of the poorer sector of the city towards the area where merchants and petty nobles lived. The hovels gave way to houses, and they, in turn, to small mansions where men and women slept. Dogs barked as Visor strolled down the streets, but none did so as Nap crept past.

At last, Visor turned into the entrance of a house, one of a decent size but not as large as a mansion, and there was the brief click of a key turning in a lock, then the sounds of a door opening. Once Nap heard the door bang shut, he ran forward and put his ear to it. He heard twenty footsteps, and then, judging by the change in tone, Visor climbed some stairs. Nap could just make out some more steps before another door opened and closed. He smiled to himself, now having a good idea of the path to Visor’s bedroom. He went round the corner of the house into the shadows and seated himself cross-legged on the floor to wait.

He thought it strange that someone as obviously wealthy as Visor would become a receiver of stolen goods or would cheat Nap for what, to Visor, would be a paltry sum. He chewed on this speculation while toying with one of his ordinary daggers—he didn’t mind nicking himself with one of those—at last deciding that Visor had his own reasons that he couldn’t know about. Waiting for Visor to go to sleep, he polished and sharpened each of his normal daggers with a small whetstone and rag from a pocket inside his cloak. Once he’d treated all these daggers, he pulled Pugio and Incisor from his belt.

“I will need one of your residents shortly,” he said to them, “but I’m not sure who yet, or what skills I’ll need. It could be someone who knows something about lock picking, or maybe I’ll need a spell caster to counter a Geas.”

Pugio replied first, “Ah, reduced to being a quartermaster of minds, am I, Nap?” to which Incisor responded, “I will consult with my residents, but I am not sure which of them will be most useful. They

are so recalcitrant. I know how it will go. *I have been here longest, it is my turn to leave* says one of them, but then another will say *I have the knowledge you need*, and they will fight and quarrel so that I can't hear myself think. But I will do my best, Nap, you have been so gracious at keeping me polished over the last few years."

The voices of his knives died to a murmur as they talked among themselves. Eventually, once he'd decided enough time had passed, Nap stood and went to the door. The lock was a complicated and unusual one, a type he had never seen before. However, he knew all locks worked on the same principles, and choosing a couple of tools from the many at his disposal, he held one tool firm with his left hand while manipulating the other tool delicately with his right hand. This hand had double thumbs: an extra one where the little finger would normally be. Though this weakened his grip, it allowed him to work with precision, and he swiftly had the door unlocked.

"Sendarl's blessings on whoever oiled the hinges," he murmured as he pushed it open a crack.

After blacking his face and hands, he was ready to go into the corridor. He closed the door behind him then crouched low with his hands exploring the floor for any traps or obstruction. He made his way gradually forward, measuring out the distance that he had heard Visor walk. His eyes adjusted to the lack of light; even starlight would have been bright within this passage, but his pupils expanded beyond that which was possible for other men, and he could see almost as clearly as in daylight by the time he reached the stairs. Just then, he heard a grunt come from somewhere at the top of the stairs.

He froze. After a few seconds, he could just make out the sound of something shuffling about and breathing. He quietly drew a dagger from the straps across his chest and mounted the steps. His soft-soled boots made no sounds, and he regulated his breath so as not to give away his presence. He passed several paintings hung on the walls by the staircase, portraits of previous masters of the house, or ancestors, he guessed. He lifted only his head above the top of the stairs and saw a passage leading away to the right. From inside his cloak, he took out a metal stick with a mirror at the end. He slowly

and gently pushed it up and angled it to face down the passage. The body of a large beast blocked off the corridor.

Whatever it was, Nap could see that it was too big to handle in a hand-to-claw fight. He shivered as the thing moved, red eyes glaring in the midst of a head which stuck out from the neck at a strange angle. He heard a rattle of metal from the chain holding the beast securely to one wall. He tried to gauge the gap between it and the other wall, deciding that there was no chance of slipping by unmolested. He would have to kill it to get to Visor. He stashed his mirror then retreated a few steps. He pulled his two daggers from his belt, holding Pugio in his right hand, Incisor in his left.

“Well, Pugio, Incisor, it is time,” he whispered. “Have you found anyone who might be able to aid me?”

“It might help if you told us what the problem was,” said Pugio quietly. “We don’t have eyes to see, nor noses to scent.”

“Ah yes, sorry. It’s a beast,” said Nap, “It is four feet high at the shoulders, a large misshapen creature with large curved horns above its eyes, with powerful hind legs that look made for jumping. Its front legs are smaller and end in sharp claws.”

“I have someone,” said Pugio.

A different voice came from the dagger in Nap’s right hand. “Hail to you, wielder of Pugio. I be Rulf the Stout, beast trainer to my old King’s court, many a king ago. I know of all beasts and their doings, and strong and weak points. Grant the use of Pugio in your business, and my freedom, and I will aid you as my knowledge may. I know this beast of which you speak.”

“But I have someone too, dear Nap,” said Incisor from his left hand. “An apothecary. Hear.”

There was a coughing, and then another feminine voice. “I am Salka. I was a hundred and eighty seasons when I was taken into the blade, and before that I was midwife and surgeon to the wives of dukes and kings for over a hundred seasons. Latterly, I was apothecary to the same nobles, and so all chymical blends I know. I

put myself at your service. Firstly, though, I must know what the beast is, what species and what type before I can diagnose a lethal dose for it and how best to administer it.”

Nap considered. “Well, one of you knows the beast, and the other knows how to kill the beast, once she is apprised of it. A pretty puzzle. Well, there is only one answer. I will use you both! In the end, I will strike at Visor with both knives, and we will leave it to chance as to which of you shall be freed and granted passage to the Hall of Bones. What say you both?”

Before either Rulf or Salka could reply, the knives burst in simultaneously.

“What! Unheard of!” shouted Pugio, and “Blasphemy!” from Incisor.

Up above, the chain rattled and the beast whined.

“Hush, the pair of you! You’ll be the death of me! But what do Rulf and Salka have to say? It would seem fitting that they say whether they agree, not you two hotheads.”

After some grumbling from the knives, Rulf spoke up. “I be willing to take that risk for the chance to be onwards in my journey, long halted these many seasons.”

Salka added, “Friend Rulf, I concur. Better a small chance at facing judgement than being trapped in this nothingness forever after.”

“Very well,” said Nap. “The matter is decided. And you, Incisor, Pugio?”

“Nothing good can come of this,” said Incisor. “You risk unforeseen consequences.”

“Nothing like this has ever been tried,” added Pugio, “and I pray that Incisor and I do not pay the price of your rashness. Think, Nap, you risk losing two sources of knowledge, both Rulf and Salka, for the gain of only one new soul. What a merchant you would make, selling your product at half its price, giving up two gems for the promise of only one in return.”

Incisor butted in, “And you don’t even know what knowledge this Visor has! Some knowledge of stolen goods, but what else? What a poor deal you are making. It’s not two gems for one in return, but two sparkling gems for one of paste.”

“Aye, you are right. I would rather not make such a deal,” said Nap. “As you say, it may, in the end, be poor, but this revenge—I want it. It is worth nearly any price. And one day you will trick me into cutting myself—don’t pretend you haven’t tried—or someone will steal you from me, as I stole you. We use each other as we must in this city. But what of our helpers? Rulf, what is the beast, and its weaknesses? And then Salka, how can I kill it?”

The two voices consulted with each, with Incisor and Pugio occasionally speaking up, while Nap listened for noises above. Finally Salka spoke.

“Rulf and I are in accord. What you face is a wetherbeast, a sterile mix of sundry others, vulnerable to many common poisons. Knowing what potions you are most likely to carry, I suggest a mixture of hearts-pain and nights-ease, but this must be delivered to the creature’s organ of thought by the eye socket. Right or left, it matters not.”

Nap nodded. “I carry those. The hearts-pain for discomfoting overzealous guards through their food, and the nights-ease I use in strength for removing guardian wolves and their like.”

From within his voluminous cloak, he pulled out a couple of small earthen jars; he dipped the points of a couple of normal daggers within each, before putting the jars back. He paused a little, weighing the blades in his hands, and when ready, he mounted the stairs and stepped up so he faced the beast in the passage. It saw him instantly and crouched, ready to leap, but before it could do more than this, Nap had thrown one of the daggers at it, which buried itself in the great mass of its body. The other dagger flew swiftly after the first and pierced one of the eyes. The beast reared up, kicked its front legs, shook its head wildly, and then sank to the floor.

Nap moved forward, pulling an extra dagger out in case the wetherbeast was not yet dead. He nudged it with a toe, but it lay still. He was careful to wipe the used daggers on the hairy body before tucking them away. It was a pitiful sight—not any single beast, but an unhappy mixture of many. It had an ornate collar around its neck, so he prised the jewels free and slipped them into the top of his boot.

He approached the door that he reasoned Visor had entered. It had the greatest wear by the handle and the most scuff marks at the bottom where feet had knocked into it over the years. He looked back to gauge the distance and nodded his head, assured that he was right. He tried the handle and was surprised to find that the door was unlocked.

“Visor must feel safe with that great brute outside,” he reasoned.

Inside, he could make out a large room with exquisite paintings and tapestries on the walls, and even a thick carpet underfoot, which was a new experience for Nap. He could almost feel the rich pile through his soft boots. It absorbed even the slightest sound his feet made. Some light filtered into the room through the curtains at the far end and also from a lit candle standing in a tall holder. Nap moved past the candle holder and saw a large bed flanked by two tables.

A body was under the covers, the slow rising and falling of its chest subtle but noticeable. On the left-hand table sat a helm with a visor. Nap could feel his heart speed up and the blood rushing in his ears as he stood beside his victim-to-be. He figured out the position of the sleeping man’s heart and lifted the daggers above his shoulders.

“I’ve never killed a man in cold blood,” he muttered, his hands wavering. “When attacked, in self-defence, yes, but this...I don’t know...I don’t know if I can...”

“Do not use us both to strike the blow!” cried Incisor from his left hand, and “Please, not both at once, else you broach our Geas!” cried Pugio from his right.

Visor snorted and rolled halfway over to the side, then returned to his back. “What...” he spluttered and started to lever himself up. Nap

plunged the daggers downwards, Incisor deep into the chest and Pugio into the neck. A flash of lightning flared between the daggers as they pierced the body. Visor moaned, arched his back, then slumped and was still. Nap let the blades go and staggered back, momentarily blinded.

“I had to do it... before he saw me. And you two! Deceitful daggers, I knew what you were like, but this! Risking my life like this—how dare you!”

There was no sound from either dagger. They protruded from the body, but the handles were tarnished now, much like the chips of stone that had earlier masqueraded as pure gold. Nap leant forward to investigate, and saw that the metal handles were slightly warped. A faint odour of smoke rose from them.

“Pugio! Incisor!”

There was no reply. He called out again, but again no reply. He touched the handles with the tips of his fingers, but they were cold.

“Dead, too! I never thought it possible of witched blades.”

Sweat was pouring over Nap’s body as the tension left him. After a few moments, he lit the candles on the tables by the bed and, taking one in his hand, he looked down at the face of the dead man. It was grey, bearded and old, the face of a once powerful man. The man’s hair and skin were so pale as to be white, and his lips were stained blue. The eyes, staring at the ceiling, were a very pale blue, almost white, but the pupils reflected pink in the candle’s wavering light.

“Strange,” thought Nap, “I could have sworn Visor would be younger.”

Dismissing the thought, he pulled his daggers out of Visor’s body—they made sucking noises as they came out—cleaned them and put them back in his belt, knowing that if he left the murder weapons here a sorcerer might identify him. As he turned to leave, a light appeared in the doorway, silhouetting a fat person with loaded crossbow pointing at his torso. The figure had a torch held high in its other hand.

“Hello, Theofian,” said Visor, “I’m glad to see that you carried out your errand successfully.”

“Who, what...” asked the little thief dumbfounded, looking back and forth between this new person and the dead man in the bed.

Visor replied, “My father. But let’s not talk about that just yet. I’ve got something of yours.” Visor placed the torch in a holder in the wall and approached Nap. Visor threw something to the floor, a white gem glowing and sparkling in the torchlight.

“Have your Basilisk Egg back. Oh, and here,” Visor detached a pouch from his belt, “Here are the Auros I owe you. Keep the gem for the inconvenience.”

Nap was confused, his original determination gone when he had killed Visor, or Visor’s father, as he now knew. Visor said, “I’d better explain what all this is about. I don’t think you’d like to be kept ignorant, and you deserve to know. You’ve played your part well.”

Visor undid the catch holding the helm in place and took off the whole thing, revealing long white hair and the deathly pale face of a young woman. Nap’s jaw dropped.

“You, you’re just a...a girl!” he stammered, hardly daring to believe his eyes. The woman grimaced and leaned against the wall.

“Now you know why I wore that helmet and covered my face,” she said then reached with her free hand to undo a couple of catches, one at each shoulder. The armour slid from her body to the ground, and Nap saw a mass of bulky padding fall with it. “Would you have done business with me if you’d known?” Her voice changed from the deeper one she had used before into a higher tone.

“I’m not sure. Maybe, maybe not.”

Visor shook her head, “I don’t think so, but that’s not important now. What is important is that you’ve done what I wanted you to, killed that beast that called itself my father.”

Realization dawned on Nap, “You mean the fake gold coins weren’t to cheat me of the money, but were just to get me angry enough...”

Visor nodded. “I knew you’d follow me, so I left an easy enough trail for you, and when I got home, I put a duplicate of my helm by the bed, every so softly, and left through the window so you would think he was me.”

“But why?”

The woman he knew as Visor shook her head, and her body started trembling. The crossbow wavered in her hands, and Nap prepared to jump aside, not that he expected to be faster than the bolt. She started talking again, but this time he had to keep his attention on her posture and demeanour to assess her state of mind, and so he had little time to spare for her words.

“He was always a cruel man,” she started, “But mother kept him in line...”

He could see that from her point of view she was the heroine of her own story, having destroyed the man who had caused her pain, but with a crossbow aimed at him, Nap had to look on her as the villain. He’d heard stories from his friends about being confronted by their enemies, something he had always managed to avoid—mostly by being a good thief, occasionally just by running away—and so he had never been monologued at before. He found it a discomfiting experience.

As his eyes followed the tip of the crossbow bolt or her hands, all he could pick out was the occasional phrase like “until he became a follower of the Kindly Gods” and “my poor sister Leanda, flogged and sold into slavery.” He moved his gaze to her face as the best indicator of her intentions. At this mention of her sister, she became sad and tearful, rather than angry.

“And I have never seen Leanda since, but I swore I would get revenge on him for it. But that monster had a sorcerer put a Geas on me, a spell to prevent me doing the same as my poor Leanda had.”

Nap found this last statement so perplexing he had to ask, “But how did he put a Geas on you without your consent? That’s impossible, surely.”

She spat on the floor. “In this life, the strong can always get the weak to submit to the Law, but never the reverse. You said as much yourself, back in the tavern.”

She waved the crossbow about to emphasise her points, and Nap flinched.

“The Geas had three conditions. I wouldn’t flee from my father, I wouldn’t try to harm him, and I wouldn’t hire anyone to harm him. As payment, my father let the sorcerer do with me as he wanted. I’ll kill him as well, sooner or later.”

Here she stopped, her body quivering with the suppressed tears and rage she was holding in. Nap said quietly, “But the Geas couldn’t stop you tricking someone—tricking me—into killing your father.” She nodded, her hair causing shadows to fall across her face.

“You were the most suitable I could find. I goaded you, I cheated you, which I knew would drive you crazy, and did everything I could so that you would try to kill me. I knew you were following me home and could have killed me at any time, but I’d rather have died than live with that man any longer.”

Nap could see the tears streaming down her cheeks now, as she was unable to hold them in. The crossbow drooped in her hand, and she let it slide to the floor.

“But it was all worth it,” she said, “because now I know that that monster is dead.” She spat across the room at the body, which hit it on the stomach.

Nap stood quietly for a moment, wondering what she would do next, when he heard a familiar voice calling his name, another woman’s voice, but this time it was coming from his belt.

“Incisor?” he said, and pulled out his two daggers and held them up between him and Visor. They had changed back to their original state, the hilts glowing a greenish hue and the whiff of burning gone.

“Nap, a wonderful thing has happened,” said Incisor.

“You mean you are well and whole again?” he replied.

“Never mind that,” she replied, “My resident has not been freed! Salka the apothecary is still here.”

Pugio now spoke up also. “Nap, you have hit upon an act of genius. With your talent for improvisation, a new life awaits all three of us! Genius, I say! Striking with both of us at once, we are replenished! A new voice, new conversations, and we did not even lose our current residents. Rulf and Salka are still here—cursing us, aye—and we gained a new resident. We can glut ourselves on as many souls as we want now. Oh, such joy! Listen.”

Visor approached Nap, ignoring the crossbow on the ground, and reached towards the daggers. “I heard you speaking nonsense,” she said, “but I didn’t know it was to these knives. I thought you were just thinking out loud, a thief’s habit.” Then she flinched as another voice emerged from both blades at once.

“What is this?” said a gruff man’s voice, “Where am I? Blackness around me and limbs stilled. Kidnapped am I, hooded and bound? Fools, whoever you are, I shall pay no ransom, nor will that dimwit daughter of mine!”

Visor fell back until she was half resting on the bed, her hands touching the still body of her dead father.

“He is alive! Despite everything, he is still alive!”

“No,” said Nap, shaking his head, “He doesn’t live. He merely exists in the blades. See, his body is behind you.”

“But I hear his voice, that familiar, horrible, voice. No!”

“Daughter, is that you? Where are you? Listen to me. Do not negotiate with heathens, foolish girl. The Kindly Gods will look after me and restore me, if only you have faith.”

Visor was stricken dumb and motionless as the voice continued to shout instructions and foul abuse. Used to such disembodied voices, Nap contemplated the daggers—not just their new thirst for souls, but their new ability to take them. He knew how they would torment him now. But he also knew that he couldn’t just abandon them to be found

by another, someone like Visor's vile father, or worse. After all, Nap had his reputation to consider, his most valuable asset. He looked at the woman. Her father continued to rant at her, and she continued to cower. At a break in the tirade, Nap broke in.

"Would you like to...to take them? To take my daggers from me? To finally have control of him, your father? What fitting acts of revenge you could inflict on him, trapped in the blades! And I freely confess, you would be doing me a great favour, also."

He held the daggers towards her. She stared at them, entranced, and reached for one of them—the stiletto Incisor. "Just let it end," she moaned, "Let my pain be over."

She grabbed the knife, then thrust Incisor towards her own chest. Nap jumped at her and snatched her arm back, wrestling Incisor from her grasp.

"Do you want to be trapped in that blade forever with your father? Think!"

Visor dropped to the floor and just stared mutely up at him. Nap looked away from her, at the two blades in his hands. He knew what to do. He removed an unused torch from its sconce in the wall and wedged Pugio into the slot, handle in the wall, blade protruding into the room.

"Nap, what are you doing? I cannot hear anything," shouted Pugio.

Nap ignored this and lifted Incisor up to the sconce so that her blade rested flat against Pugio's blade, but with the tip just wedged into Pugio's handle. The two daggers were now facing each other like duellists, blades towards each other's throats. Nap looked around for something heavy. The crossbow! He took the bolt out and lifted the weapon with both hands so that it was level with the daggers.

"What are you doing, Nap?" shouted Incisor, "Something is happening, I can tell. You are plotting something. Listen to us..."

He swung the crossbow behind him, then forward as hard as he could. It connected with Incisor's handle and thrust her blade into

Pugio's handle, and then Pugio's shorter blade likewise into Incisor. There was a massive crack as of thunder, and a flash of light filled the room. Nap was thrown against the far wall. Smoke billowed out and spread out of the doorway and into the passage. Nap could barely see or breathe, but lay coughing on the floor.

After a little while, the smoke cleared and Nap looked round. Visor was awake and shaking her head. Where the wall and daggers had been was nothing but a smoking hole.

Paul Lucas spends most of his time traversing the gulf between Earth and the Internet. He can be found online at <https://paullucaswriter.wordpress.com/> where he discusses pulp fiction and other good stuff. He can occasionally be found crossing swords with alien bounty hunters on Twitter @realpaullucas. All That Glitters is his first publication, and is based on his oldest existing full story, resurrected and greatly rewritten after years of practice on others. It's proof that you should never throw out anything you've ever written, just wait until the time is right for you to come back to it.

Days after he and a friend discover the victim of a werewolf, Alex Stryker is attacked and bitten.

As his wounds heal, his senses sharpen, and his anxiety around strangers mounts, he prepares for what he sees as a frightful transformation during the next full moon.

And what he may have to explain if his family or his friends ever find out what he is.

*(For Werewolf, Young Adult, and Science-Fiction readers, as well as those who are tired of pointless romance and needless -- *cough* vampiresandwolfwords -- supernatural fluff in said genres.)*

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The Orb of Xarkax

By XAVIER LASTRA

The lost tomb of the sorcerer king Xarkax the Indomitable has revealed itself in the wake of prophecy! Will the scoundrels who seek the tomb's riches find the promised wealth beyond imagination, or does only death await those foolish enough to enter?!

The local populace knew of that forgettable mountain only for its treacherous ledges and the old tales of bandit hideouts near the top. Until two weeks ago, nobody would have given it more than a passing glance, but two men now stood forty paces away from its base, studying from a safe distance the square, clearly artificial opening a recent landslide had revealed.

The men were not there by accident, for the blind, deaf, and mute sage Evaristus had pointed them towards it during his last rapturous trance. Since the old man had collapsed after revealing to them the secret location, his timely demise had given his message a dramatic weight the two men couldn't ignore. Nor could they ignore his many references to treasure, for that unassuming black entrance was the tomb of Xarkax the Indomitable. And inside, the riches of the once king of the known world awaited them.

Lanky, rustic, twitchy, and always unkempt, Olokhos the Swinemonger was the one who had first crawled into Evaristus' tent with the intention of robbing the old man, which had scared him into having the vision (and the fatal heart attack) that had led them there. The other man, scrawny, hungry, pockmarked and destitute, but dressed in the faded garments of old nobility, called himself Panjandrum the Magnificent, and his most notable trait was that he always seemed to be posing for an imaginary audience.

Panjandrum had been milling about the market, accosting strangers and claiming he was an old family acquaintance who had lent them money a long time ago, when he heard the commotion coming from inside the tent. He had rushed in just in time to hear the old man's revelations and the allusion to Xarkax's hidden treasures. Wasting no time, he announced that he was a man of justice and innumerable talents and swore that he would accompany Olokhos to the Tomb of

Xarkax. As he explained to the perplexed Olokhos in a punctilious and legalistic fashion, he, the Swinemonger, was a man of somewhat flexible morality (as, he pointed out, looming with a sword over the medium's body clearly proved), so if he, Panjandrum, appropriated half the treasure for himself, his righteousness would compensate Olokhos' wickedness and restore the balance unsettled by the death of the old man.

Olokhos had almost murdered the deluded toff right there, but he had seen a kindred spirit in that strange man, a spark of congenial immorality behind his unctuous manners. He thought that he could also use a meat shield for whatever dangers lurked inside the tomb, and since a mob was already starting to gather outside the tent, and the punishment for killers, robbers, and their accomplices was death or the amputation of a hand, they both slipped away at once and set off to where the drooling man had said the tomb had appeared. And he had not lied.

"Our destiny awaits us there, my new best friend," Panjandrum said. "I can almost feel Xarkax's Golden Orb in my hands."

"You and your Orb," Olokhos sighed. He took out a biscuit from one of his pockets and slowly nibbled it away, knowing well that Panjandrum had not eaten anything that day. "I don't know what you heard from the lips of the old fool, for I remember no damn Orb. But I do remember the mountains of coins. Still, you can keep your golden ball... the real money is mine, understood?"

"Yes, yes! But let's go in," he said, grabbing his partner by the shoulders. "Xarkax's mausoleum may go back into the bowels of the earth any moment now."

"The tomb isn't going anywhere; it's just not hidden anymore. In fact, I'd go back to town to fetch a wagon to bring back all the treasure in there, but someone may beat us to it while we are away."

"I'm not a greedy man," Panjandrum quickly said as he thought of his Orb. "I'll be content with anything I can carry in my hands. At least we should explore it to see if the rumors are true. Shall we?" he said, pointing at the entrance with a flourish.

Olokhos grunted. "You first."

Panjandrum grabbed the lit paper lantern, the small sack full of candles, and a thick rope they had stolen from a nearby farm. Meanwhile, Olokhos grabbed his backpack and checked his sword. With these meager tools and a less-than-developed plan, they valiantly walked into the tomb of the man who once had been the tyrant of the whole world.

The narrow dark path that greeted them, wide enough only for one of them at a time, was unimpressive, and the two adventurers didn't keep silent about their disappointment. The rough ground was uneven, carved directly from the featureless rock, but at least dry and without a draft or bugs. They waited for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, trying to ignore each other's presence even though they were just a few inches apart and had to huddle together if they wished to use their scant illumination to see their way. Then they proceeded, cautiously and a few steps at a time, Olokhos in front and prodding with his sword every crevice, bump, or shadowy feature he saw. Feeling as if Xarkax's vengeful spirit was watching them, they halted every few steps, watching over their shoulders to make sure the entrance hadn't sealed behind them. Following that exhausting routine, they finally reached the end and stepped into a wider room.

Their lantern's weak radiance allowed them to slowly inspect the chamber, which soon showed to be tiled and with decorated walls, but still as empty as the previous path.. Men with a scholarly bent would have jumped up and down in excitement at the sight of the carvings and inscriptions on the walls of the rectangular room, the pious and superstitious would have fled immediately, and the god-touched would have gone insane, but to these two, ignorant of any language except their degenerate, vulgar tongue, and their minds blind to anything but the sparkle of treasure and the glittering of wealth, the room was as dull as the previous path, but in a deliberate manner that made its starkness even more infuriating. Cursing their luck, they kept investigating, and on the far side of the room, twenty paces from the entrance, they finally found a wooden door, still in perfect condition despite the age of the place.

“Halt, you fool!” Panjandrum shouted as Olokhos approached the door.

“It’s just a door,” Olokhos said, dismissing his companion’s concern with a mocking gesture. In the deep darkness that surrounded them, he could only see Panjandrum’s arms holding the lantern, but he noticed it was quivering. “You really think the door could be dangerous?”

Suddenly and dramatically, Panjandrum lifted the light to his face, “Yes! You know what they say about Xarkax, that he was a devil, a soul-eater, a ravisher, a master conjurer, a speculator, and a heretic. Who knows what contraptions guard this tomb... Hold this,” he said as he gave Olokhos the lantern.

Panjandrum used the rope to tie a knot around the door handle, and when he was satisfied with it, he stepped aside so he could pull it open safely. “Now, my new and dearest friend, you stay on the other side, with your sword ready. I’ll count to three, and anything that comes through when I open the door, whether material, spiritual, physical, or metaphysical, you carve it like a pig. Yes? Good. One, two... and three!”

A loud ‘thump’ followed his powerful pull, but the door didn’t open.

“Strange,” Panjandrum said. “Let me try it again...” he pulled once more and then repeatedly, each attempt more disinterested and weak until he was barely making any effort and his end of the rope dangled slackly.

Olokhos groaned heavily and sheathed his sword. Then he went to the door, and ignoring Panjandrum’s high-pitched warnings, he opened it—inwards.

“Ah...” Panjandrum managed to say.

An uncomfortable silence followed, soon cut short by Olokhos’ mocking laughter. “You go first... my dearest friend, and shout if you fall into any deadly pit,” he told Panjandrum, every syllable simmering with disdain. He whipped out the sword again, and with it, he pointed at the open door.

It was a larger room, but not the web-covered crypt they had expected. They found no sarcophagus, niche, or ossuary indicating that the dead—any dead, whether wealthy or poor—rested there. The only features of interest they found were a carved relief in the opposite end of the room and a frugal, beige, crossbanded table near that wall. It was long, shaped like a dining table but without chairs, and certainly no silver crockery. A few oddly-shaped vessels lay on it, apparently candlesticks, and Olokhos struck angrily at one with the flat of his sword. It fell on the floor and broke into multiple, worthless pieces.

“Common clay. What a waste of time,” Olokhos said. Grunting with frustration, he tossed his backpack against the wall, where it clanked heavily with an oddly metallic sound. “This place may have been unsealed for months or more! Everything of value, if there was anything, has already been looted.”

In the darkness, Panjandrum heard Olokhos whip out his sword and pace angrily about the room, cursing Evaristus and lamenting he had not gutted him when he had had the chance..

Panjandrum had begun to think that his association with this truculent and irascible man had been a mistake almost as soon as it had started, but now he was quite sure of it. But the Orb! The kingly symbol of Xarkax’s power and authority! Now, if he could survive his companion’s outbursts or channel somewhere else...

“I don’t think so,” Panjandrum finally said, trying to appear as calm as possible. “I see no dust in here, and we haven’t seen even the smallest critter. The place looks as new and clean as the day it was sealed. And I think you are wrong about the lack of treasure! This table may be older than all known kingdoms of the world. It’s what professionals and experts call... what’s the word, an antiquary, yes, and all manner of wealthy wastrels with more money than sense are willing to pay for findings like these. Even the candlesticks may be valuable to an art collector!”

Olokhos stopped pacing and lowered his sword, apparently calmed. He grabbed one of the clay figurines and inspected it approvingly near the flickering light of the lantern. Then he roared in anger and

threw it at the wall, where it shattered. He laughed, a vicious and deafening laugh that tailed away into a sigh.

“You may be right, friend, you may be right,” he said, patting the ashen-faced Panjandrum on the back. “But the table seems too wide for the door or the tomb entrance. Hmm, I wonder how it got here in the first place...”

Panjandrum lit more candles and placed them on the table. He soon set himself to inspect and evaluate the piece of furniture, an activity he did out loud, almost as an incantation to soothe both himself and his aggressive companion. Although his voice was confident, he missed all the important features and misnamed those he managed to identify.

“Hmm, yes, yes, a fine piece,” Panjandrum whispered. “Its straight lines are an obvious sign of the post-Mertorial style that thrived after the demonic outbreak around the end of the thirteenth era. Straight lines, as everybody knows, are abhorrent to demons, which explains their preference for possessing wome... eek!”

Panjandrum yelped, and the paper lantern fell to the floor. Its light showed a deep crack in the wall.

“What? What happened?” Olokhos shouted and ran up to him. He put his light near Panjandrum’s face and saw that the now-tremulous man was looking downward at the wall.

“A goblin, a bugbear, a ghost perhaps! I don’t know, but I swear I saw it in there. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there’s a cleft in this wall, and something inside was staring at us.”

Olokhos, sword drawn backward and ready to spring, approached the hole. There, a shape no bigger than a child scurried away from him and his insignificant candle.

“Well, look at that, you were not hallucinating or lying for once!” Olokhos said. Without wasting a moment, he thrust the sword into the crack, reaching as far as his stretched arm and body could. “Come on, you little pest,” he shouted, “it won’t hurt you that much. It’s just like sleeping!”

His murderous efforts went like that for awhile until he gave up.

“Did you catch it?” asked Panjandrum.

“No, I think not,” he inspected the blade under the candlelight and shook his head. “No blood that I can see, and I think that anything that flees like that surely has blood in its veins. I only managed to chip my sword,” he said and then spat on the ground.

Olokhos stooped by the crack and shouted, “We have a whole army outside and ample resources at our disposal. Either you come willingly, or we will fish and drag you out with spears and hooks. And if that fails, we will smoke you out!”

There was no answer.

“I see. Well, Panjandrum, get the tar and the pyre ready!” he said, still yelling to the hole in the wall.

“The what?” Panjandrum asked. “We have none of that.”

Olokhos grunted and dabbed his sword at him menacingly. “I was blinking as I said that, you idiot.”

“I can barely see my own feet in here; you can’t expect me to keep track of what your eyelids are doing!”

“Just bring a bunch sticks and fire from our camp. We will suffocate anything hiding in here. Gold is gold,” he said, “even if smoked.”

Panjandrum shrugged and set about to his task when a long, high-pitched wail came out of the crack.

“Nooooo...” the thing from inside said, a moan that lasted for a few long seconds. “No fire, no smoke! Please, I come out. No harm!”

“Get ready, Panjandrum. If the beast is violent and aggressive, I expect you to jump at it and grapple it.”

“What? Why me? And it doesn’t sound violent!”

“Well, I carry a sword, so my function is clear. Someone else must get hold of the monster. Just grab it, and don’t worry, I won’t stab you

by mistake...”

Panjandrum had no time to protest because the creature’s pale hands were already out of the crack, palms first, raised in the universal sign of peacefulness, goodwill, and disgraceful impotence.

“I’ll be good,” it said. “You won’t harm good and harmless Festus, yes?”

White like milk underneath grime and detritus, shaped like the claws of a malformed homunculus and attached to fragile arms, its hands were already bad enough, but the whole was even worse. Smelly and hairless except for a few filthy, swept-over wisps on its head, the creature looked like a starved boy who had aged too fast, or perhaps an old body in a kid’s frame. Its chest was sunk, and its spine lumped forwards, which gave its belly, the only part of its body that seemed to hold some fat, a protruding, unhealthy shape. It hid most of its face behind its big hands, but from what they could see, the creature seemed human enough and, perhaps, it had been human once. However, its whole appearance was one of destitution and worthlessness, and aside from a few tattered, faded cloths around his waist—what once could have been a yellow or red (it was too discolored now to be sure) piece of garb—he was completely naked.

Olokhos scrutinized it for a while and then shook his head in disappointment. “No, this is a mistake. I will skewer you and save us all the trouble of having to converse. Panjandrum, be a good friend and hold him close to your body,” he said.

“No, don’t harm me!” Festus yelled, which was not that different from what Panjandrum was thinking. “You are brave heroes, yes? You want the Master’s treasure, yes?”

“The mountains of gold?” Olokhos asked, suddenly interested.

“The Orb?” Panjandrum added immediately.

The creature nodded to both questions, and Olokhos lowered the sword but kept it ready to swing a quick, upwards slash if necessary. “I’m listening.”

Crookedly, with his hands nearly touching the ground, the half-man who called himself Festus walked to the area of the wall with the bas-relief. There, he sprang his arms wide open as if to embrace it.

“The door to Master’s crypt and reliquary,” he said as he bowed repeatedly.

“You say Master, as if you know him,” Panjandrum said. “You mean Xarkax?”

“Yes! Oh, mighty Xarkax!” He accelerated his genuflections.

“For how long have you been here?” he asked, but not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

Festus halted his agitated bowing. “I don’t know... since the Master died.”

Panjandrum’s heart skipped a beat, and Olokhos chortled as he pointed at Festus. “Ha! This may be the oldest living thing in the world, and he looks like a turd!” He cackled. “Fate has a cruel sense of humor. Anyway, how do we open the door to the treasure vault? I want to see the piles of coins.”

“Yes, yes, coins!” Festus repeated.

“Wait a moment,” Panjandrum interrupted them. The creature’s eyes, almost human, had caught his attention and he couldn’t help but feel that there was more intelligence in them than his crude appearance revealed. “How have you survived all this time?”

Festus scratched his head and gave off something that sounded like a hiccup and a burst of laughter. “Well, there are little children in the nearby villages...” and then he giggled.

“Well, that’s it,” Olokhos said. “I’m going to finish you off. Stay put, please.”

Festus cried and crawled back to the crack, “No! Just joking, just joking! I said it because I’m ugly and monstrous, yes? Funny joke! Haha! I eat pigeons, tasty pigeons. I crawl through the small cracks in

the mountain, and one leads outside, where I can catch the birdies when it's dark."

Festus slipped inside his nest before Olokhos could catch him, but after a few seconds he came back, hands in front as before but carrying a bunch of feathers, almost as if it was an offering.

"See? No children," he said. "Only pigeons. That's is not evil, right?"

Panjandrum stroked his chin and posed philosophically. "Well, the three-eyed mystics of the vast continent-fortress of Bongi-La regard pigeons as the most sacred and wise of all animals," he said. "They cherish and protect them, placing them above their many slaves and wives, and they would deliver brutal retribution to anyone who harmed them. Luckily for you, I'm from the hamlet of South Netherwallop, and there we just throw rocks at pigeons when we are bored. Your moral standing is exemplary, as far as I'm concerned. What do you say, Olokhos?"

The man mouthed something that could have been an agreement, a swear, or a burp, and then shrugged. "Just tell us how to open this thing."

"How to... open it?" Festus repeated, his face suddenly a pitiful mask of bottomless imbecility.

"Yes! You told us about the treasure!" he shouted as he brandished the sword.

"I did, I did!" Festus whimpered. "I saw you talk about the table, and I was really sad because you'd go away thinking this was the whole of the Master's treasure!"

"I can't believe this!" Olokhos shrieked and pointed the sword at Festus. "Does it think we are a couple of tourists?!"

"He is right, though. He did point us to the new room, which we would not have noticed otherwise. Besides, I'm sure that with enough time..." Panjandrum fell silent.

He had almost said that, with enough time on their hands, they could simply pry it open, but guided by a sudden apprehension and

fear of Olokhos' increasingly violent outbursts, he chose not to mention it. A plan began to form in his mind.

"I don't know," Panjandrum said in frustration. "Maybe we should just go back to the camp and think this over."

"No, no..." Olokhos said. He had stepped back into the darkness, but Panjandrum shuddered at the malevolence his pleasant voice was trying to hide. "I'll fetch some things from the camp; you stay here. The rope is still tied to the door, right? Good. I'll be back in a few minutes. You keep an eye on that thing and try to light up the place a bit. And... don't move."

Panjandrum nodded dutifully and began to light and place a circle of candles by the door to the reliquary, whistling as he did so. Behind him, he heard Olokhos cut the rope and leave.

"Come here, Festus," Panjandrum said once he thought Olokhos was far enough. "Tell me about this," he said, pointing at the door, but not touching it.

"It's a door..." he said and scratched himself nervously.

It was indeed one, although set in the wall with such precision it would be hard to notice it even under natural light. Panjandrum studied the floor and saw no marks except a few dark, rust-like patches. He scratched one and got a bit of it under his nail, then showed it to Festus, who just shrugged as an answer. Panjandrum suspected the substance had to be old—perhaps ancient—dried blood, but rather than voice his hypothesis, he feigned frustration. He followed its trail up the door and saw more of it splattered on the door, and quite a lot covering a small, waist-high niche on the right side of the door. It was big enough to hold a hand, and it contained a corkscrew-like device, probably a handle, within. He looked quizzically at Festus but, once more, got no answer.

"When was the last time someone like us came here?" Panjandrum asked all of a sudden, still studying the door with a candle.

"No, you are the first ones," Festus said, scratching himself again.

“Of course. I forgot.”

There was more blood, and Panjandrum noticed a long, horizontal slit at head-height, running from one end of the door to the other. He tried looking through it but couldn't ascertain whether the blackness he saw was what lay on the other side or not.

“Interesting carvings,” Panjandrum said to himself, noticing the cartouche in the middle of the door.

It showed an upright rectangle holding a skeleton that had been cut into pieces or perhaps torn apart. Oddly enough, it lacked quite a few body parts, including the left hand, but on the right hand...

Panjandrum gasped and fell to one knee, enraptured by a sudden elation. “The Orb...”

Surrounding the rectangle, probably a coffin or a catafalque, were five prostrating men who were offering up other body parts, both external limbs and organs. A cavalcade of winged beings whose beautiful features were at odds with the grisly central piece encircled the image.

“You know something about this?” Panjandrum asked Festus when his excitement had simmered down a bit.

“Nu-huh,” he said, his scratching more subdued this time.

Panjandrum went to the entrance of the room and saw Olokhos coming back, a dark point set against the distant afternoon light that was almost blinding to him now. He quickly went back to the door and faced Festus.

“This will hurt you only for a moment, but trust me, it's for a good cause,” Panjandrum said as he grabbed one of Festus' long hairs, twirling it around his finger. Then he pulled it out with a sudden yank.

“Ayy!” Festus moaned and then massaged his bald head. “How unfair. Everybody hurts poor Festus,” he said and skulked back to his crawling space.

Holding the oily, dangling hair in one hand and a candle in the other, Panjandrum adopted a pose of concentrated study in front of the decorated door. His stomach rumbled fiercely.

“Oh, you hungry, too?” came Festus voice as he took a peek outside his lair.

“Yes, but get back in there,” Panjandrum hissed through his teeth, not even turning his neck. “I require utmost concentration for this!”

A moment later, he heard Olokhos’ approach. His steps became louder until he knew he had entered the room, and then they stopped.

“What’s that?” the man asked.

The question had been innocent, friendly even, but Panjandrum gasped, and as he whirled to face Olokhos, who was nothing more than a shape in the darkness, he immediately closed the fist that held the hair and hid it behind his back.

“No-nothing, just looking closely at the door.”

There was no answer, but Panjandrum felt Olokhos’ murderous gaze piercing him from the dark. Before he could do or say anything, the rogue pounced on him with the speed of a wildcat, sword in hand. He slammed him against the door and placed the edge of the sword against his throat, ready to slice. His other hand painfully clutched the wrist behind his back.

“What. Was. That,” Olokhos slowly said.

Panjandrum gulped, which gave him a small cut. “It’s a hair... Xarkax’s hair.”

“What?” Olokhos asked, almost laughing. He drew his weapon back a bit and let go of Panjandrum’s hand.

“I tried to open the door, turning the handle, but nothing happened. Then I found this hair stuck on the table,” Panjandrum said. He opened his palm and showed him the barely visible hair.

“So?”

“Well, it was the only one, stuck on the white crossbanding. And look, if you let me show you something,” he clumsily pointed at the door behind him with his head.

“Go on,” Olokhos said and let him go, but he kept his blade ready to strike him down.

“I think it’s a key, hidden as the most inconspicuous object. See this drawing? They are offering body parts to Xarkax, his own body parts I presume, to make him whole again.”

“A hair is not a body part!” Olokhos roared, but then his eyes focused on the drawing. “The piles of coin!” he said, pointing at the image. A curious combination of greed and awe seemed to have seized him, and the rogue lowered his weapon.

Panjandrum looked closely at the image again and saw no piles of coin, just his beautiful Orb. “Why, yes, the mountains of coin! Right there! Beautiful aren’t they? And this could be our key,” he said, brandishing the flimsy hair. “As I’m sure you know, according to Lubricious’ theory of Cosmic Atomism, the essence of every living thing is hidden inside all the particulates that constitute its body, and everyone knows how mages keep all sorts of illusionist tricks in their lairs, right? The implications are self-evident!”

“Quite so!” Olokhos said, still gazing the bas-relief. “But I may have missed some of the details...”

“Of course. What is the key to dispelling these illusions they keep, to cross through the spectral walls that hide their treasures, to see through their lies and astral manipulations? Themselves, of course, for every mage is immune to his own tricks,” he said and lifted up the hair. “And this is a piece of the sorcerer, left here so his servants can also see through the illusions but without having to carry his master’s finger or a bag full of his bitten toenails.”

Olokhos thought about Panjandrum’s theory and found it reasonable enough and consistent with his knowledge of the arcane arts. He was almost ready to congratulate Panjandrum when he realized something.

“You were going to keep this a secret, right?” He asked and pushed the tip of his sword against Panjandrum’s throat until it drew blood. “That’s why you wanted to leave. I’m sure you had already found the hair, and then you were going to come back alone another day... and steal my coins!”

The rogue pressed the sword a bit more into his flesh.

“N-nonono,” Panjandrum stammered. He had known, in fact, wanted, that Olokhos would come to that conclusion, but he was taken aback by this sudden viciousness. “Here, take it, it’s yours!”

The Swinemonger took it and then rudely pushed his partner to the table, kicking him a few times, too. He gave him the rope and ordered him to tie himself—one of his legs. The table weighted considerably, so his movement would be greatly hampered if he tried to flee.

“Good,” Olokhos said. “Behave, and I might not let you rot in here. I may still need someone to carry the treasure for me. Now, I will to test your theory.”

Panjandrum had no desire to provoke his violent companion anymore—he was lucky he had avoided being cut down—so he fell silent and watched as Olokhos tried to open the door to the reliquary. He held his breath and suppressed a wicked smile.

Olokhos’ greedy mind didn’t pay attention to the dark-colored patches all about the door. After shoving and pushing it a few times, he tried the handle. As soon as he turned it, a swift wheezing sound was heard, and the door receded an inch and began to open as it slid to the left and into the thicker wall. Panjandrum cried with joy as Olokhos’ body crumbled to the floor, his right hand and head no longer attached to it. With a slower whirling sound, the serrated blades that had sliced him retreated into the door.

Panjandrum laughed. “Ha! Serves you well!”

“Oh, bad man lost his head,” Festus said from his hiding post. “Need help?”

“No, I can manage. A hair! Pah!” He spat and shook his head. “And the mountains of coin! What nonsense! This is clearly my Orb. Poor, deluded idiot... the darkness here clearly affected his already diminished mental faculties. Let me tell you, Festus, you need to be brilliant like me to survive in this crypt-raiding business!” he said as he tapped his temples repeatedly. Festus nodded.

Slowly, Panjandrum untied his leg and, once free, walked where the bloody remains of Olokhos lay.

“And to the victor, the spoils!” he said. “You get out of the way,” he added, kicking the head away.

He stole his belt, sword, and scabbard, although those were not what most interested him. He also found a few shillings but grunted in disappointment when he found no trace of the biscuits with which the rogue had taunted him during their whole journey. Either they were in the camp, or Olokhos had already eaten them all. He glanced at Festus. “You wouldn’t have one of those pigeons in there, wouldn’t you?”

“No, not yet.”

“Oh, well, at least I have the sword. Maybe I can hunt a squirrel with it later. Ah, but the treasure! The door is open, and I can already feel the Golden Orb. Come here, Festus, I can’t see you there lurking in the dark. Now that the bad man is gone, tell me the truth, tell me about Xarkax’s wealth. And don’t hide anything from me, I know this is not the first time a visitor comes here. I can see the blood stains on the door.”

“Well, sometimes men come when the mountain opens, but that doesn’t happen often,” Festus said, and Panjandrum noticed certain ruefulness in his voice, and he didn’t seem to speak in the same child-like speech anymore.

“Has anyone ever come this far?” Panjandrum asked, pointing at the pitch-black darkness that was the open door.

“No,” Festus replied.

Panjandrum's whole body tingled with anticipation. However, he feared the door might close soon, but then he remembered Olokhos' backpack. He rushed where the man had thrown it and found it held some fetters and other nasty tools of equally cruel purpose.

"This is probably the destiny that awaited me! Chained by this cruel man while he ran away with my Orb."

He also found more candles and a pry bar. He grabbed them and thought of using the bar to keep the door from closing, but a wicked thought made him decide against it. Instead, he dragged Olokhos' body, legs wide open, and placed it with its back against the jamb.

"Much better!" Festus commented approvingly.

Panjandrum lit all the remaining candles and rolled them into the room. Most wheeled in without encountering opposition or triggering anything, but two of them hit a raised structure of smooth, black stone.

"Yes! The coffin, most certainly. Hmm, I don't see anything that shines or sparkles anywhere. Festus, where is Xarkax's treasure?"

"You will find the Golden Orb," the little humanoid said behind him. "There's nothing else, and never will."

Panjandrum laughed maniacally and peered into the room. He could already feel his prize and the end of all the homeless, hungry nights. His mind could hardly conceive any wealth beyond bare survival, and the prospect of holding a fist-sized sphere made of gold was to him as intoxicating as a hungry rat discovering an unprotected granary filled to the brim. But the respect, the adoration the artifact would command! That was even more important than mere wealth.

"Any extra protection or traps I have to keep in mind?" Panjandrum asked once the sudden exultation had toned down a bit.

Festus shook his head. Panjandrum didn't wait for anything else and stepped inside, holding the lantern and Olokhos' sword ready.

"Well, there's Bob," Festus said from behind.

“Bob? What a ridiculous name. You made that up, didn’t you?” Panjandrum asked as he approached the coffin cautiously.

“No, that was his name. But he never speaks or does anything anymore.”

Panjandrum looked back and saw the pale little creature pointing at the right wall of the room. At first, he saw nothing, but then he noticed the humanoid shape, reclining or perhaps crouching.

“You there, uh, show yourself! I’m armed and viciously dangerous!” Panjandrum shouted. “The mutilated corpse of my traitorous companion back there attests to my martial prowess.” Panjandrum boasted.

There was no answer. He grabbed one of the candles lying on the floor and threw it at the shape. It was a skeleton, sitting cross-legged as if meditating. A bronze sword lay on its lap, and tied to his waist were the remains of an orange skirt. Recognizing the similarity, Panjandrum looked back at Festus and the few threads clinging to his filthy body.

“An old friend of yours?” Panjandrum asked, and Festus nodded. “Not enough pigeons for two, I guess. No wonder he doesn’t say anything anymore.”

But then Panjandrum realized something was quite wrong with Bob—exceedingly so. The skeleton spine was straight, and all its bones were in place, but it lacked any tendons, shreds of old muscle, or any other mechanism that could explain its bony firmness. Its bones, quite simply, were held together as if they were still part of a living being. Tentatively, he took a few steps and tapped its pate with the point of the sword. The skull bobbed a bit but kept attached to the neck.

“Hmm, maybe it’s just a superior adhesive made by the ancients? Somebody there?” he asked as he poked its forehead from the farthest distance he could manage.

There was no answer, unearthly howl, or unnerving wail, which made the next event even more harrowing. The skeleton looked up straight at him and slapped the sword away with its bony hand. With

abnormal springiness, it stood up, with the bronze sword held firmly and parallel to the ground. Panjandrum squeaked, and behind him, the door out of the crypt began to close at an alarming speed. He squealed again.

“Bob, you are alive!” Festus shouted happily. “Now I have a friend to play!”

Panjandrum glanced back and saw that the door had stopped its sliding since the now squashed body of Olokhos was in the way, leaving a hand-sized squeeze for him to slip through. In the split of a second it had taken him to look back, the skeleton’s arm sprang forward and almost managed to stab him in his face.

Panjandrum backed up a few steps and took a defensive stance, but to his horror, the skeleton refused to play by the usual rules of swordsmanship and simply began to walk toward him, silent as death, utterly unafraid of getting hit, and viciously piercing and slashing at the air in front of it with its longer sword.

“Ey, back away!” Panjandrum tried to land a blow but was unable to do so through the spinning blade of the undead. “I warn you, you get closer and I’ll... stab you!”

As he paced back in the dark, not daring to turn his back again, and as he tried to get away from its deadly moulinettes, Panjandrum realized the undead was keeping the pace as he tirelessly slashed and hewed, no matter how fast he tried to retreat. There was hardly any skill in its technique, and Panjandrum found that his few lunges were quickly frustrated and his thrusts were easily deflected. When he finally managed to hit its left leg, the blow only managed to cause a tooth-rattling, scraping sound that hurt Panjandrum more than it hurt the undead. In exchange, he got two nasty cuts, and his left earlobe got chopped off. Meanwhile, Festus, apparently unaware or indifferent to the danger he was in, kept trying to grab the attention of his newfound friend, and he even began to tell Bob about the events of the day.

His feeble attempts at offense beaten, Panjandrum tried to outrun the skeleton by circling the room, to no avail. Panic set in, and

Panjandrum feared it was trying to exhaust him—and succeeding. It was either a sudden flight to the exit, with the risk of being stabbed in the back as he tried to slip through or... He glanced at Festus, who was still prattling away in excitement.

“A wiser strategy is required,” Panjandrum conceded between gasps.

Panjandrum kept retreating, but this time veering toward Festus. Then when he was at his side, he suddenly rushed behind him. The skeleton accelerated with uncanny agility and as it followed him, its sword almost cut off his other ear. Panjandrum dropped the sword and lifted up Festus, who protested strenuously. Whether recognizing the ugly man as an ally or as an inanimate object, the skeleton staggered a bit, and its constant swinging halted for an instant. Panjandrum seized the opportunity and threw the little man at Bob.

Wailing through the air, Festus slammed into Bob’s bony face, making it stumble down. As it fell, crashing with a resounding crack, its hip broke. With Festus still on top, it kept slashing at Panjandrum nonetheless, using the other arm to hold itself up and crawl.

Panjandrum laughed and stood still for a few seconds, a heavenly reward after all that prancing. Then he steered clear of the deadly blade and circled to the creature’s back. He grabbed Festus and pushed him away.

The skeleton was now defenseless and too slow to turn efficiently. With a few powerful blows, Panjandrum first cut off the legs, and as he circled, following the skeleton’s attempts at facing him, he hacked at the back, spine, neck, and finally sliced the wrist that held the sword. Although harmless, all the bits and bones kept twitching or trying to move toward Panjandrum.

“Oh, poor Bob,” Festus mourned.

Panjandrum was gasping and almost crying with joy, exhaustion, and relief.

“You are not that good, you know,” Festus said as he carried Bob’s skull away. “Better than the other, but not that good.”

Panjandrum snarled and felt a sudden urge to strike the annoying, little, miserable, scrawny, destitute creature... but the Orb! There it was, on the open coffin, golden as he had imagined, as he knew it had to be, grasped by a skeletal hand. He leaned on the casket, and he finally cried. Only then he noticed the radiant glow of the Orb, illuminating the whole room and dispelling the darkness entirely. For a moment, he wondered how had he not noticed the light earlier, but the thought died even before it could coalesce into anything more than a passing whisper.

The skull of Xarkax, with its black, obsidian teeth, rested on the coffin along with many other body parts, some just bone, others with muscle, some fresh, others dried. From behind, Festus approached carrying Olokhos' head, and with a swift jerk he pulled out the right eye, which he then placed on Xarkax's skull. None of that seemed strange, or even noticeable, to Panjandrum, for what was the relevance of the little man's rare rituals when he had found the Orb?

Panjandrum grabbed it with both hands and held it aloft with reverence. Confused, he lowered it, since it felt soft now, almost spongy. And now that he was paying more attention, it didn't glow at all; it just shimmered in a dull, ugly yellow that barely dispelled the darkness surrounding his own hands. The Orb began to stink, a retching fetor like the fermented fish his mother forced him to eat when he was a sickly, anemic child, and which he always ended up vomiting. And the Orb wasn't yellow anymore but was turning green, with black, stretch marks all around it. Something ugly, humanoid but malformed, throbbed inside it, and there was no light in the room anymore, only absolute, everlasting blackness. The only sensation he felt was his fingers sinking into its acidic, slimy inner core until they touched the twirling thing inside.

The Orb slipped from his fingers, and as it splashed on the floor, exploding like a rotten egg and fouling his feet, Panjandrum tried to move, to run, and to flee, then to speak, to shout, or to cry, but he could do nothing. From all around him, Festus, Xarkax, Bob, Olokhos, and a whole orchestra of vengeful ghosts began laughing. And they kept laughing, never stopping, not even when Xarkax, above the deafening cachinnation of his servants, addressed him.

“Poor Panjandrum, pockmarked, hungry and destitute,” the voice said. “You have so little, yet you brought me presents; I had desired a new eye for so long! And you have been quite amicable with my loyal caretaker. Let him reward you.”

Panjandrum couldn't see what Festus did to him, but he felt it. With sharp, inhuman teeth, the homunculus bit his left wrist. He snapped and twisted until he finally ripped off his hand. At first, the pain was greater than anything he had ever felt, but after some time, perhaps minutes or hours during which he felt nothing but feverish pain, dizzying blackness, and the mocking laughter of the damned, it finally decreased until it became a hot, numb pain.

“Your hand will be useful, but do not believe I'm not grateful, for I have branded you,” Xarkax said. And as he said so, he felt as if his hand were still there, but as if it were made of molten iron. The pain subsided soon.

“One day I will return,” Xarkax said. “And when that happens, when I judge this world and clean it of life and sin, if you are still here, my mark will set you apart. And who knows, perhaps you will be spared.”

The surrounding laughter redoubled and flared up.

“Now, my boy,” Xarkax said, “go!”

Whatever cacodemon had been holding him finally set him free, and Panjandrum ran away. With barely any light to see, he managed to slip through the door gap, tripping over the body of his companion, who tried to grab him by one leg. Olokhos' decapitated head cursed him as he stumbled through the dark. He didn't look back, not even once, and had no thought in his mind other than the salvation promised by the twilight's dim light at the end of the path. And as he came out outside, his brief happiness was cut short by a frightening wind that rammed at him as if possessed by a malevolent will of its own, soon followed by a terrifying deluge. He tripped over a thick root and fell, and for a moment, he thought of giving up, but as he looked up, he saw a glimmer of hope: the root was immense, as was the tree. He crawled and clawed its way under the roots of the great tree,

where he shielded his ears from the howling tempest as best as he could and waited, his fate now out of his hands.

An hour later, perhaps two or three—he couldn't tell—and already nighttime, Panjandrum came out of his hiding spot. The rain had stopped, and no sound disturbed the night, only a chilly breeze occasionally whistled among the trees that had withstood the onslaught.

Panjandrum felt a prickling sensation in his left hand and fingers, but when he looked down, he saw only a mud-covered stump with a malevolent golden rune on it, like decorative stitches or a branding mark. He still felt the hand and could swear he was moving the fingers, but they weren't there anymore. He clumsily cleaned it a bit; it almost didn't hurt now, and although yet not healed, the nasty scar at least didn't look fresh. There was no sign that blood had even flown from it.

Panjandrum looked in the direction of the tomb but didn't see it. The entrance wasn't there anymore, and there was no indication that it had ever been there. It was dark and dreaded to come closer to check it, but he suspected that even the signs of the landslide would have been washed away by the storm. He checked around to see if he could find the remains of their meager camp but gave up soon.

With no particular direction in mind, cradling his stump like a baby and with an ominous laughter still ringing in his ears, Panjandrum set off, away from Xarkax's Tomb.

Xavier Lastra was born and lives in Spain, where he reads and writes. He also helps copyediting Cirsova, fussing over comma splices, participle clauses, and such things while at it. His personal blog and other published material can be found at emperorponders.blog



COMING SOON!
THE ILLUSTRATED STARK!



Jack's Basement

By MICHAEL TIERNEY

A boy seems possessed by a strange and possibly malignant spirit! He furiously scrawls page after page of apocalyptic imagery... Can his psychologist solve the mystery of the bizarre pictures that have his mother looking for an exorcist?!

The psychologist shifted through the young man's piles of artwork, each sheet filled with apocalyptic scenes of strange alien beings that were surrounded by dramatic explosions from the havoc and destruction they wreaked.

The young man fidgeted on the couch, seated next to his worried mother.

“My son sees the end of the world,” she said.

“I understand that you also inquired about the services of an exorcist?” asked the psychologist.

“You always seemed to have a gift,” she ran her fingers through her teenaged son’s hair, drawing a look of irritation, “like a sixth sense. But this . . .” she gestured at the stack of drawings sitting on the coffee table between them, “this is something new. It started when we moved into this house.”

“Can I see his room?”

She nodded to the nearby door that led to the basement. As the psychologist rose, he noticed the red doorknob and paused. He patted his chest and pants pockets.

“This is going to sound silly,” he said, “but . . . can you see me?”

The mother looked bemused, with a tinge of irritation.

“Never mind,” said the psychologist. “When you mentioned a sixth sense, well . . . I’ve been watching too many movies.”

His inspection of the basement revealed the typical things that one would expect to find in the room of an adolescent boy, except the walls were covered by many more examples of his artwork. The psychologist returned up the stairs and shook the mother’s hand.

“Let me do a some research; there’s something familiar about his drawings.”

He returned a week later.

“Nothing’s changed,” the mother lamented as she laid a fresh sheaf of artwork on the coffee-table, “he just keeps churning out these horrible visions that get worse all the time! He’s warning us that the world is about to end.”

“You know,” said the psychologist as he flipped through several pages, “this might not be such a bad thing.”

The mother gripped a fist, and for a moment the psychologist thought she might strike him.

“Ma’am, please. Let me explain. I did some research on this house. How much do you know about the previous owners?”

“Oh, my god!” She shook her head and held a hand to her mouth. “I knew it! My son has been possessed by an evil spirit of the dead!”

“I don’t think so. A previous owner of this house was a comic book artist who did all of his work in that basement. Your son seems to be channeling him somehow.”

The mother looked confused as she began flipping through different pages of her son’s artwork, randomly pointing at different illustrations.

“But the fingers all look so square! And what about these black spots covering every page? These are all images of Earth’s destruction by a black hole!”

“That was a technique called Kirby Krackle. I brought along some old Marvel comic books to show you. You can see how this drawing looks like the Fantastic Four fighting Galactus and the Silver Surfer; that’s Orion of the New Gods; and this is . . . the Demon,” he faltered, realizing his mistake of being too honest, but tried to recover. “Well, that was really a swipe from Hal Foster’s Prince Valiant. Fans called the artist “King” Kirby. He had a flair for dynamic art.”

“Art?” She fumed. “There’s not a flower in the bunch! I’m calling that exorcist and we’re kicking that thieving demon right out the door.”

“But ma’am, Jack Kirby was no demon spirit!”

“Then what is this?” She held up one sheet that depicted a gigantic tyrannosaurus rex with what looked like a small monkey perched atop its head.

“Devil Dinosaur,” he replied sheepishly.

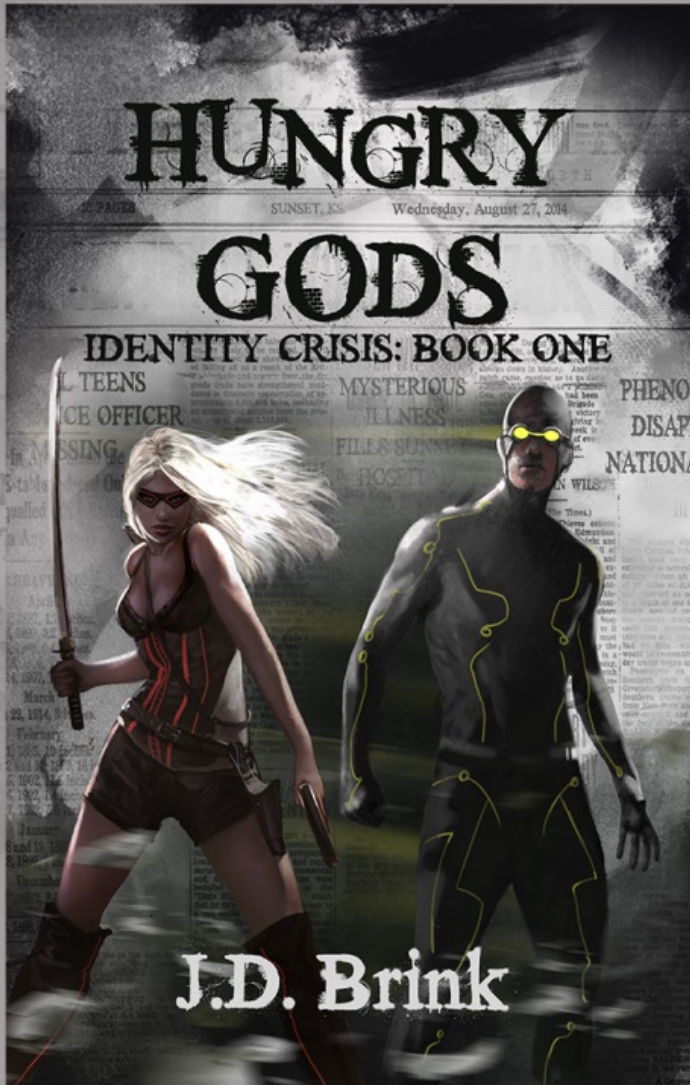
“You said he was comic book artist?”

“Yes!”

“That’s worse. Now Simon will never move out of the basement. I’d rather deal with the demons and the devil.”

This is Michael Tierney's fifth appearance in the pages of Cirsova, the most recent being his Wild Stars III: Time Warmageddon in the Summer Cirsova Special. This summer Michael also released his highly anticipated 4-volume Edgar Rice Burroughs 100 Year Art Chronology, and is currently writing, coloring and lettering an online web-comic that adapts Burroughs' Beyond the Farthest Star.

Superheroes. Undead. Nuff said.



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Capes aren't just for kids anymore.**

Antares

By PC BUSHI

Yhs and his bondmate Yhs-ka scavenge the ruined cities of the wasteland in search of weapons and raw materials that will aid their tribe... Though aided by powerful magics and their wits, Yhs and his mate face great perils within the haunted city!

In a system far from here, on a blue world once much like ours, orbiting a sickly green sun, the city of Antares stood towering over a barren landscape. Like an old, forgotten graveyard, scattered edifices marked the remains of a once great people now returned to the cruel red dust from whence its proud ancestors had crawled and clawed their way to evolutionary ascendancy. Within and beneath the husks of these stone obelisks and steel turrets fed vermin of strange and monstrous form. They fed upon decay, upon whatever scant vegetation was hardy enough to cling to life in the filthy clay of the old city, and upon each other.

In the crumbling, conical frame of what had long ago been a laborers' tenement structure, a land cephalopod, armored in a grimy, green and brown metal shell, hauled itself across the floor with horrifying alacrity. A furry oblate creature, too late in sensing the threat, let forth an earsplitting screech of terror from its mouths, its eyestalks flitting about wildly. The cephalopod, possessing no ears, proceeded unfazed to surround the pitiful prey with its bulky form and writhing crimson appendages. Unable to escape the quickly encircling doom, the hairy ball retracted its many legs and projected rows of wicked subdermal spines, razor sharp and oozing a foul, viscous ichor. This defense mechanism was a most effective proof against all but the nastiest inhabitants of that ancient barrow.

Unperturbed and with a grim intelligence, the shelled horror curled its limbs inwards and balanced itself to orient its heavy armored bulk skyward. Then, with a disturbingly powerful thrust of its limbs, it launched itself into the air and folded its snaking tentacles partway into the shell. With a heavy crunch and the splatter of viscera, the dread cannonball landed upon the smaller, hairy beast. Slowly turning itself over and extending its mouth organ from the inner darkness of its metal encasing, the creature began to feed.

Across the city, a short ways off from the faded rocky remnants of a major causeway leading into the dead metropolis, two travelers paused to gather their strength and prepare for their incursion into the core military sector.

Yhs inspected the haft of his spear, slowly spinning the sturdy, grey wooden handle trice and then turning it over to admire the sharp ivory blade set just above the metal crossguard. His tongue flicked out in prideful approval as he rotated the weapon to glance at the black sauroter capping the butt of the spear. Satisfied, he turned his attention to a copper sickle-blade and addressed his wife.

“Bondmate, your prayers are nearly finished?”

The female did not immediately answer, her violet reptilian eyes fixed upon the ground and her arms raised high as her long tongue formed hiss-like entreaties for strength and protection to the Daybringer.

Finished checking his weapons, Yhs brought his scaled tail up and around to his front and tightened the fitting of his miniature thagomizer spikes. From his pack, he then pulled two rationballs of pim, a dried and preserved amalgam of animal fat and pale green sarkoy berries. One of these he began to chew, and the other he handed to Yhs-ka when she had concluded her ritual.

Accepting the proffered nutrition with one hand and taking up her own spear in the other, her eyes conveyed the equivalent of a warm smile to her husband. He had never told her so, but it was those lovely, burning violet orbs which had first driven Yhs to seek her bond.

“The Sun is warm on my skin this day, Strong One,” she finally responded. “There is great peril in this place, but I believe the Eye will shine upon us even in the shadows of these great dead halls.”

The reptilian moved his broad shoulders in a gesture that indicated acknowledgment. “That is well. Come, then, and be alert.”

Yhs-ka imitated his gesture, exaggerating the motion with her slighter, feminine shoulders in an act of mocking playfulness. Focusing on the task at hand, her husband pretended to ignore the

antic, but amusement and a flicker of cheer warmed him inside. He was glad of her company.

As the pair proceeded cautiously into the city, they encountered several of the small ovoid beasts known to them as “furries.” Most skittered away quickly on wiry, centipedal legs, dashing into shadowed buildings and gaping holes that had once been part of the municipal sanitation system.

One of the furries judged the two strange bipeds to be an inescapable threat, gave forth a piercing scream and assumed its defensive position. The two reptilians winced in pain, and Yhs-ka swiftly ran the creature through with her spear to silence its alarm. As she quickly checked her implement for damage from the sharp, furry barbs, Yhs looked about uneasily.

“We should have given a wider berth. Scavengers are sure to come,” he admonished. Yhs-ka gave acknowledgment.

“What is done is done, my Shield,” she addressed him in the customary manner. “Let us make haste.”

He indicated agreement, but his unease was evident.

“Would you have me work magics?” she asked, her gaze lingering on him as they stalked quickly down the deteriorated central roadway.

He considered. Who knew what they would encounter here in this strange place? It would be best if all of their powers were available to them. And yet, if they could possibly bypass ill fortune and deadly hazard...

Yhs stopped next to the decayed skeletal frame of some ancient metal engine, long rendered useless and unrecognizable by the cruel passage of time.

“Very well. Call the green magics, Bondmate. Preserve the blue.”

At his word, Yhs-ka drew forth a small pouch of black cloth from her pack, carefully opened it, and delicately poured its contents into the palm of her right hand. Clutching her fist tightly closed, she lowered herself to the ground and lay prostrate against the warm, rocky clay

earth. After a few moments, she began to incant as she had during her prayers, slowly raising her scaled fist to the sun. Finally, she pushed herself back to her feet and opened her hand to reveal a faintly glowing green powder—the dust of the jade-like aoishi stone, imbued with a secret power.

Yhs-ka raised her hand to her face, and for a moment Yhs looked on in silent awe at the contrast of bright violet set against brilliant green. Then suddenly she blew a portion of the dust onto her mate, scattering the rest upon herself.

The reptilian man waited while his wife took the lead. Normally, his place would be in front, but now they would receive guidance through Yhs-ka.

The seekers continued down the road. The female would occasionally pause and motion for her husband to follow her down a side path or alleyway. As they passed by, Yhs recognized that some of these buildings smelled of death—not the general decay of this city of ghosts, for he had visited both barrow cities and battlefields and was not unaccustomed to the stink of corruption. This was something different, something unnatural. His senses were keen—those of a hunter—but they had now been heightened, and the odious premonition he now felt was beyond physical sensation.

The furies they now chanced upon were no longer fleeing their path. Instead, they continued to root about for insects and mold and whatever other nutrition they could find.

They turned a corner and saw a gigantic, bowlegged monstrosity plodding silently straight towards them. Great mounds of pale flesh hung off its large frame and jiggled as it marched grimly forward. It might have been a comic sight if not for the grotesqueness of its blotted, horny face and its terrible, bladelike, sheening claws.

Yhs immediately dropped into a defensive stance, lowering his spear and gripping it tightly with both hands. His people were incapable of vocally crying out as such, but before he could raise any kind of alarm, his mate grabbed his arm and applied light pressure, the expression of her eyes offering reassurance.

The reptile man motioned understanding, and she released him. The pair moved aside and stood quietly while the horror slowly passed them by. Despite its ponderous gait, the monster could move with great speed if it so desired. As it neared, a terrible stench reminiscent of both rot and rust assaulted their nostrils, and they both held their breath.

When it had finally passed, Yhs-ka quietly remarked, "I believe the magics spent, my Shield."

She did not ask whether he desired them renewed, nor would he request it. Like with all magic, the power often came at a cost and was not unlimited.

"Very well. Stay behind me, Warmth of my Life," he intoned as he resumed the lead.

They continued, winding their way back around to the main road, and began to notice a difference in the old structures. They were shorter here in this part of the sector, and many were surrounded by the crumbling remains of what once were protective walls.

"Here we will search," he indicated a random nearby building. Though he had no way of differentiating the large stone housing from any of the others, its slightly less eroded appearance was encouraging, as was the rise of two rusty steel guard towers along either side of the entryway. These suggested that this place had been important enough to protect at one point.

Yhs led the way, and they found themselves standing at the entrance to a large atrium. Great gaps in the ceiling allowed sunlight to shine down into the dusty green chamber. There was something different about this place, indeed! The searchers had seen little plant life thus far inside the city limits, but greenery seemed to run wild here. Strange vines wound their way around pillars and ancient stone tables.

At the far end of the hall, several empty doorways led to unlit chambers. Beside each opening stood a curious metal statue, many of which had been almost completely enveloped by the wild flora.

Motioning to one of the doorways, Yhs started forward, only to halt after several steps as something crunched beneath his leathery foot. He bent down to brush away the greenery and immediately recognized the sick white tinge of bone. At almost the same moment, his companion issued a sharp hiss of warning.

One of the statues began to move, its previously vacant eyes now blazing with infernal light. The strange black golem, somewhat taller than Yhs, stood on two legs like the reptilians, but it possessed no tail, nor were its facial features like that of Yhs' people. It looked more like the mammalian ape-men of the northern lands. In its left hand rested a devilish brand of the same dark metal from which it was made.

Pulling free of the clutching vines, the statue advanced several steps and then somehow vocalized a series of strange sounds that neither of the two understood. Receiving no reply, it again moved forward, lifting menacingly its right arm, to which a narrow tube was attached.

Yhs and Yhs-ka leapt swiftly to either side of the metal monster in a flanking maneuver, just in time to avoid the blast of thunder that had issued forth from the tube. Yhs' ears rang, and his head pounded, but the warrior quickly overcame his surprise and lunged at the figure with his spear extended. Bone met metal, and the weapon was chipped and turned aside. In stunned silence, he dropped the spear and reached for his blade. But what good would a copper edge be, if sea dragon bone could not penetrate the steely skin?

The figure rounded on the reptilian man as it raised its sword. It cut at him with impressive speed, but he danced back quicker than it could strike. He retreated into the nearest open chamber, hoping to find some terrain or feature of the building he might use to his advantage. Yhs caught a brief sight of his bondmate riffling through her pack as he backpedaled to evade the savage blows.

A large portion of the adjoining room was encaged by a loose metal mesh, somehow untarnished. Boxes and crates of some dull gray material lined the walls, and a peculiar blue glow emanated from an elongated object on the surface of what looked like a silvery table in

the center of the room. But his antagonist was upon him, and Yhs had no time to investigate.

With an explosive bound, Yhs hurled himself at the thing and locked his steely, muscled arms around its slick metal neck. Despite Yhs' not insubstantial bulk, the statue remained upright and tried to chop at his dangling body. The reptilian pulled himself up as far as he could, and keeping hold with one arm, he began to hack wildly at the metal head with the sword in his other. He felt a chunk of his tail being severed, but he continued to slice at the impenetrable cranium until the copper blade lost its edge and fell harmlessly to the floor.

Yhs spat in fury and pain but kept hold of the beast. He saw that Yhs-ka was there, retrieving the shabby sickle-blade from the ground and immediately applying a pale luminescent paste to the worn sword. She then tossed it back to her husband, exhorting him to the fight.

“Strike now, my Warrior! Strike mightily!” Her purple eyes blazed.

Yhs caught the weapon, and its heft was much greater than before. He brought it down in a tremendous blow upon the metal monster. He felt its body shudder beneath him, its head collapsing in. He rained more heavy blows upon its crown, and the crumpled metal head fell to the floor like a cracked and broken helm.

Inside the exposed neck hole was a honeycomb of shining metals and nests of slick, glowing thread. Despite the loss of its head, the statue still moved and still cut in uneven, jerking motions.

The warrior released his grip and hopped away, blood flowing from half a dozen wounds on his tail and back, dripping onto the green-covered floor to water the vegetation of this ancient tomb. The golem still advanced, though more slowly now. Yhs backed away towards the center of the room.

A deep, evil sound reverberated from a dark, shadowed corner. The headless body halted and answered with its own bizarre vocalization. Its movement ceased.

Yhs-ka rushed silently to her wounded mate, once again brandishing her spear. The warrior readied himself the best he could for whatever new devilry they now faced. Without warning, a large, bulleting form flew from the periphery of his vision and crashed with a thud into his mate. A monstrous, tentacled form lay atop her as she gasped for breath and struggled to raise her weapon.

Yhs hissed in anger and fell upon the new monster. He batted vainly at its metallic shell, but the energizing strength had left the sword. The warrior tried to reach around to pry the thing from his companion, but two white feelers repelled him. Another two limbs sought and intercepted the spear before Yhs-ka was able to bring it to bear, enwrapping and snapping it like a dry branch before tossing the two severed pieces into the darkness.

She hissed in pain as the creature brought the opening of its shell upon her, and blood began to flow heavily from the contact point as she fought to extricate herself. Yhs beat at the thing desperately, then stood to seek anything he might use as a weapon. His eyes fell upon the light source at the center of the room. Frantically he dashed toward the illumination to find a smooth, shiny handle, hooked and pointed at one end and suspended slightly above the surface. It was definitely a weapon, but he had no time to contemplate its nature. The painful hisses of Yhs-ka seized coldly at his heart, driving him to blind fury.

He grasped the cool metal haft and leapt upon the tentacled demon once again, but when he hefted the weapon to meet the impeding limbs, the sharp head pitched forth violently and extended to pierce the intended target, pinning it to the floor. The monster let forth a raw screech.

The warrior's astonishment did nothing to slow his assault. As he drew back the now spear-length weapon for another thrust, the blade retracted once more into the handle. The cephalopod turned to meet the new threat, Yhs-ka's lifeblood dripping from its gnarled maw, but as soon as this vulnerability was exposed, Yhs extended the weapon once more, driving deep into the weak, pale corpus. He thrust several more times before the berserk furor left him.

Burning rage turned instantly to cold horror as he looked upon the bloody form of his wife, struggling to breathe. He heaved the limp lump of metal and flesh off of her and sucked in air sharply as he took in the grievous gashes which had rent her torso.

“Violet Eyes, Warmth of my Life,” he sputtered as he hurried to retrieve a length of clean cloth and medicinal herbs from Yhs-ka’s bag.

Her eyes smiled painfully up at him. “What is...done is done, my Shield. And we have found what we sought,” she managed to reply. Her heavy breathing slowed as Yhs hastily applied a poultice and bandages to her chest, and she surrendered to unconsciousness.

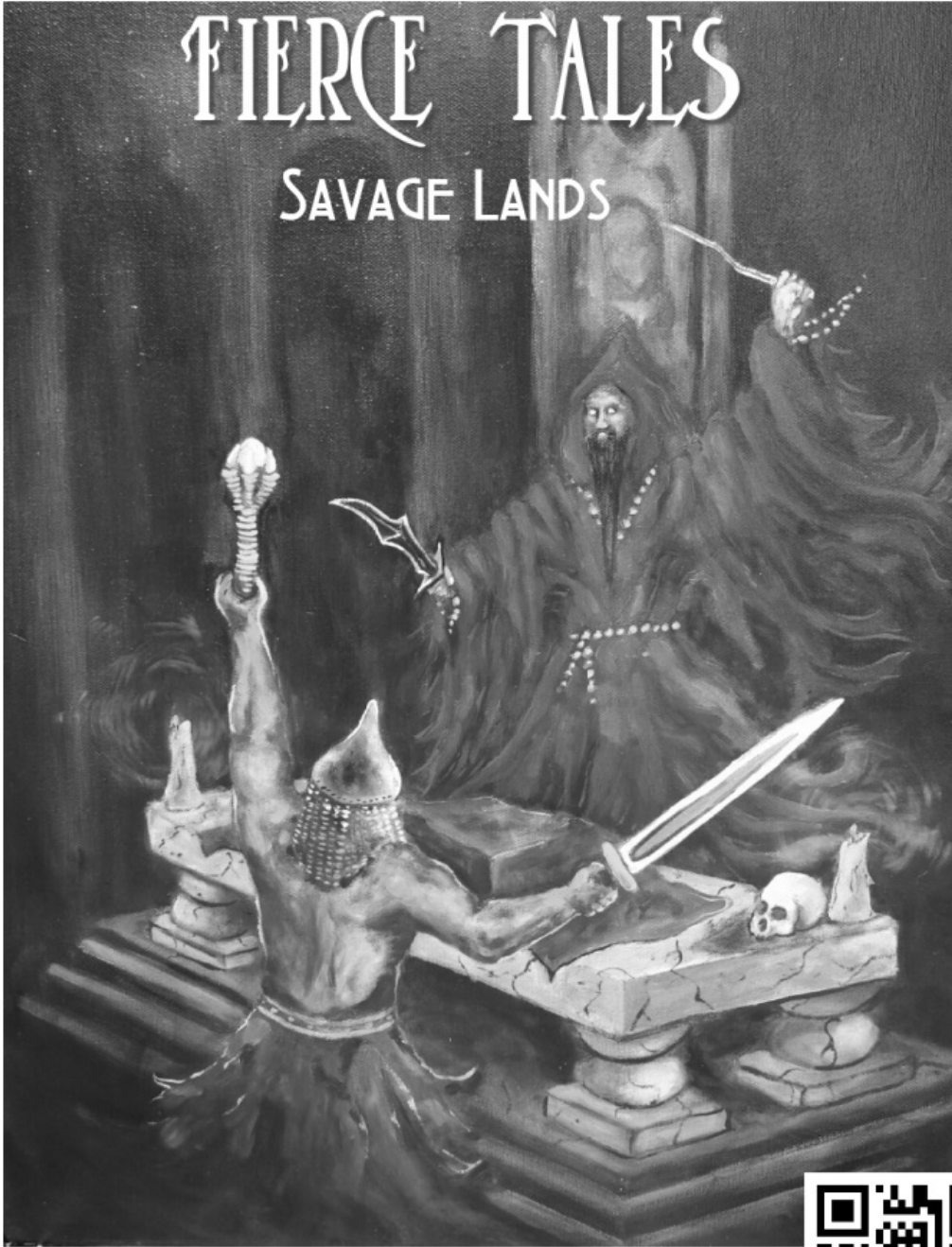
Having done all he could, Yhs cradled her body for several long moments as anger and grief battled inside him. Finally, he raised himself off the ground and looked slowly around the now still room. He clutched tightly the handle of the strange light-born weapon as he considered the next course of action.

Their people would benefit greatly from this expedition, but Yhs-ka had paid a heavy price here in Antares.

Bushi is a husband, father, tech grunt, former teacher and wanderer currently living in the blasted wastes. His mad scrawlings can be found at pcbushi.com.

FIERCE TALES

SAVAGE LANDS



The journey begins November 1st

Stories by Misha Burnett, J. Manfred Weichsel, Michael Colangelo, Jeffrey L. Blehar, and Vidarr

**MILLHAVEN
PRESS**



Name: Varra

Relationship Status: It's Complicated

Hobbies: Falconry, Project Management

Likes: Strong Men, Swimming

Dislikes: Weak Men, Lazy Slaves

“Will you fight for me?”

The 70th Anniversary

Illustrated Stark:

Enchantress of Venus

Coming Spring 2019!

Cirque des Étoiles

By BO BALDER



The Cirque des Etoiles is the greatest show amongst stars—and it's nearly broke! On the verge of insolvency on an alien world populated by inhuman creatures, the Circus struggles not only to keep the lights on, but the air and gravity as well!

The First Commissioner of A'a'a undulated into the Circus ring. Fourth Continuity Girl leaned back as far as she could to follow the Commissioners to their garlanded box. The First Commissioner, an extraterrestrial luminary who the PR Department thought had huge influence, would decide if the Circus would be allowed to perform in other locations on their homeworlds. The First was a dark-brown mountain of a creature, white tentacles curling away from his broad face—if it was his face—like plumes of steam. Something black that looked like a robe, but seemed to move in invisible winds, was draped around him. Clothing? Symbiont? Part of his integument? The circus workers seldom found out.

The other Commissioner was of the same race, but more lilac-tinged, and her tentacles drooped rather than exploded. The PR department thought she might be female but hadn't been able to make sure of that.

Fourth Continuity Girl's hands twitched, aching to subdue the Commissioner's wayward tentacles and change the color of his robe—creature because it made him look sallow. She clasped the rebellious hand around her knee. It was not her business to judge her betters. They must have good reason not to dress to their best advantage. They probably didn't think mere aliens merited perfection in their turnout.

Fourth Continuity Girl bent until her cheek nearly touched the floor. She needed to check if the lead tenor was wearing the right color spats. She held her little Touch with the correct color tone next to the white leather and frowned. What was wardrobe up to with the spats? They seemed cooler in the pictures.

"Wait here," she told the lead tenor. "I have to check something with Third Wardrobe Mistress."

The great man patted at the sweat pearling through the thick stage makeup on his forehead. “Get me some more handkerchiefs!” he called out after her.

Fourth Continuity Girl sighed, but she could hardly blame him. Their alien public tended to show their lack of approval in surprising, inventive, and often physical ways. Surely, Wardrobe didn’t mean to risk Pavarotti’s life and limb by letting them appear in the wrong clothes of the wrong color temperature?

Her sandals clacked loudly as she hurried through the echoing corridors of the circus ship. The magnetic soles were loose again. If only the Barnum wouldn’t be so stingy with gravity—it slowed them all down. And the loose soles indicated she must have offended First Continuity Girl; there was no other explanation for all the little failures with her personal attire this week. And what for? She was nobody. Eons more powerless and unimportant than First.

She bowed to Second Wardrobe Mistress, but that lofty personage didn’t acknowledge her humble greetings. In the dressing room, she whipped out the rows and rows of identical spats. They were all perfect. How for the Empire’s sake had that ivory-tinged pair gotten among the lot? She hurried back with a new pair and a spare and managed to get them onto Pavarotti right before he was due to sing.

Before her mind’s eye, she held the perfect fan she’d made of the remaining spats, curling like a lily. Beauty and perfection calmed her down.

She knelt behind the curtains, behind the sandaled feet of Third Continuity Girl, and watched the matinee. Pavarotti warbled like a crane in its death throes, his voice trilling and writhing through songs that were only a vague memory in the present age. Why had he been picked to perform? The acrobats and jugglers in their bright clothes whirled around him, in theory complementing his music, but in her opinion, outshining him.

Next, the stage was transformed into an ice-rink. The hands of Sixth Stage Hand as he held the water hose looked so manly, broad and brown and tapering into strong wrists and stronger forearms. She

watched from the corners of her eyes as the Stage Hands toiled and sweated under the dragon eyes of Third Scene Changer. Sixth Stage Hand caught her eye and threw her a wink. She put her forehead to the floor to cool it off and hide her blushes. She loved him. They were destined to be together.

After the Ice in Space performers sailed past in a blast of icy air, Fourth Continuity Girl sat patiently through two more scene changes while the other Continuity Girls came and went. She hurried off herself to help Vaclav Nijinsky and Anna Pavlova, and sank down again, panting, to watch her favorite, the death duel from Hidden Tiger Crouching Dragon.

When the performers took their bows, a breathless silence filled the great hall. The Barnum stood and opened his mouth to speak, but the Commissioner rose like an angry volcano from the surface of the earth and started spitting fire.

“Disgrace! Shame on you. Is this the best humanity has to offer? Is this how you maltreat our expectations? By comporting like fools? Caterwauling, prancing, making fun of our lower tentacles? Barnum and creatures, I order you to depart forthwith.”

The first Commissioner swirled about in his shining slopes of robes, now pale with some alien emotion, and blasted off in a waft of ammonia, pulling the second Commissioner along in his wake.

Fourth Continuity Girl put her forehead to the cold floor, praying that she would survive the shame of it. Third Continuity Girl’s white socks of filled her field of vision. They weren’t white. The closely-knit white cotton was actually grimy with the imprint of a sweaty foot sole and five toes neatly descending in size. She bit her lip. She would not go there now. Probably the underside of her own tabi looked like that too. The shame. The utter shame.

The offices of Cirque des Étoiles trembled from the Barnum’s rage. “I trusted you all. I trusted you to get me the show of shows, the stunner, the epitome of human achievement, and you gave me what?

Third-rate provincial amusement? What do you think will happen to us now? We won't be paid for this performance.”

Fourth Continuity Girl bent closer over her repair work. Her stomach hurt when he shouted like that. She peeked at First Continuity Girl, and then at Wardrobe Mistress. They looked as pale and tight-lipped as she must herself. She forced herself to return to her sewing. She just had to trust that her superiors would know what to do. Otherwise, being a small and insignificant cog in the machine would be unbearable. The Barnum would figure this is out and tell them all what to do.

“I'm going to insist on extra effort from all of you in the next location. If we do not wow the Klamath Cluster, our reserves will be gone. We won't even have enough energy to return home.”

Fourth Continuity Girl inhaled sharply. He didn't speak of the sword and the large towel he'd get for breakfast back home, as he usually did when berating them for failure. He wouldn't even get home to be offered the honorable way out. And neither would the troupe. She would die out here in the void, without ever seeing her family again. Without the smell of home, the arms of her mother around her. She massaged her belly, taut with fear.

“I want all of you to deliver extra effort. PR department, you carry much of the blame. You must do a better job of finding out what these aliens like. Wardrobe, whatever the next set of aliens see or hear or perceive or whatever, you must replicate it in the costumes. You haven't been trying hard enough. We've shown them the Earth's best. Maybe we should beat them at their own game. If they communicate by scent, we will billow clouds of perfume. If they communicate by shaking their appendages, we will shimmy right back.”

It should have been a thrilling, rousing speech, but sadly, Fourth Continuity Girl recognized many phrases from previous, not very successful speeches. How would the troupe come up with something new and better if even the Barnum couldn't? It frightened her.

“First through Fourth ranks will remain awake during the journey. We need all hands on deck!”

She dawdled as the big inner space of the spacecraft emptied out. It was dining room, exercise room, and workshop all at once. At times during the first voyages, it had been empty when Firsts through Sixths had rotated shifts. Now, it never was.

Budgets weren't her responsibility, but she couldn't help but worry about the cost of all that extra oxygen and food the Barnum was spending. What if they failed? What if effort and will weren't enough?

People pressed against her back and she couldn't tarry in the door opening any longer. Sixth Stage Hand hadn't come filing past her, so she couldn't say goodbye to him. He would be asleep during the voyage.

She hugged Fifth Continuity goodbye and hurried to the bunk that she would have to share with Third. She entered the room with her face averted in case Third was still in the room. As usual, Third hadn't managed to leave the room, as was the agreement, before Fourth's sleep shift came on.

Fourth refused to look Third in the face. She bowed a tad too shallow as Third shuffled by in a cloud of deodorant and perfume.

"This girl apologizes for her presence," Third rattled off.

"This girl accepts the apology," Fourth answered, on the same note.

Third had made the bed, for once. Fourth took off her kimonos and smoothed them against the clingy closet wall. She folded her tabi and arranged her sandals for the second time. She knew she was putting off the moment of stepping into bed. There was never time to air the sheets or the energy allotment to wash them daily. No alternatives either, not with the ship so full. She pulled open the covers and slid in fast, pinching her nose shut. She knew with her mind that someone else had slept here, but she wished very hard her body didn't have to know it as well. She could try closing off her nose, but her skin couldn't help noticing the leftover warmth of another body, or the grease other cheeks had left on the pillow. She couldn't even pretend it was Sixth Stage Hand; it smelled too feminine.

She breathed deeply, quietly, attempting to sink into sleep fast so she wouldn't have time to worry about the future. Now was bad enough. Now her sheets smelled of someone else, and now she constantly had to turn to the side, face politely averted, to let other people pass in the gangways. Rows and rows of fans unfolded in her mind, whites, creams, doves, taupes and grays, but they couldn't calm her. At last, she found a memory of a long-ago cherry blossom festival and stilled as white petals rained soundlessly on her ten-year-old face.

She had to admit that putting so many people together paid off. Three people had more good ideas than one or two, and three people to implement them shortened the time from inception to tryout enormously. The plays and operas went through more rapid growth than ever before.

The last day before the opening festival arrived with a soft chime.

When she knelt in the audience for the final rehearsal, the tragic love story sounded her heart like a gong. She wept quiet tears in the one real handkerchief she'd brought on the trip. The story, the glorious voices couldn't fail to move anyone—anyone human. She peeped between the silk folds, embroidered lovingly by her mother and aunts. Female human beings. Would the aliens have sexes like humans? Did they have tear ducts? Would they understand the story? These were not her concerns, but she couldn't help creasing, smoothing out and recreasing the precious silk. What if it went wrong again?

The pilots entrusted their precious vessel to the alien guidance systems that passed them from level to level, descending further into the alien gravity well. The alien pilots brought exotic smells to the ship and the strange rhythms of their speech and movement. Secretly, Fourth Continuity Girl thought that bringing them to Earth as performers would garner them the audiences they hadn't gotten on alien planets.

“What do you think, Third, do aliens even think people are interesting? Or is it just people that are fascinated by creatures different from themselves?” she asked.

Third shrugged. “This girl doesn’t understand the question,” she whispered over her shoulder.

Third needed to be slapped, hard. Fourth let go of her irritation with a soundless sigh. Her fingers flew over the keys of her Touch as the performers filed by her and her Third and Second to be checked for continuity. Some said it didn’t matter, as this was the first performance, but she knew the importance of getting it right the first time.

There. The last performer of the first act slipped away to wait in the wings for her signal to enter. Fourth Continuity Girl knelt with Third and Second between the props for the later acts. Fifth Stage Hand and many of her friends were still in storage. Gravity and air on the Klaamath planet were too expensive to waste on lookers-on. There would be a shift change after a few performances.

Fourth had brought an extruded paper handkerchief, sure she would need it for her tears, but although the performance was more, rather than less, polished it didn’t move her as much. She looked at the other girls pinking away easy tears that left their makeup intact and wondered. Did people’s emotions get bored? Maybe. Or was it the performance? Did rough edges maximize the effect, the semblance of real life and real emotion?

She wished she could see the alien public, but with so many out of stasis, her spot wasn’t as good as it had been for that last disastrous evening on the tentacles’ planet.

“Third Continuity Girl, can you please tell me if you see anything?” she whispered against the kimonoed back of the superior apprentice.

“Shush,” Third hissed back. “They seem attentive. They’re rattling something, gourds maybe.”

Fourth wanted to ask if that was good or bad, but how would Third know? Third had ten years on her in apprenticeship experience, but

none in Klaamath culture.

First clapped her hands a few minutes before the scene change, and they all rose like a flock of white and grey-patterned doves to take up their positions in the dressing rooms.

The evening passed in a rapid exchange of waiting in the wings and frantically checking the costume changes for continuity. Gold slippers danced by her, a swirl of red skirts, white leotards and again skirts, skirts, skirts. When the final act died down, she was exhausted. She kneeled on trembling legs for the big applause that would surely rise, even though it hadn't before. The Klaamath probably didn't have hands. Would they shake their gourds again?

The silence went on and on. After an unseen signal, the performers came filing back, their heads high and their steps measured as long as they could be seen. As soon as they entered the safety of the wings, the dejection dragged down their shoulders and faces showed their true age. There would be no party afterwards, and the Barnum was sure to leave the rest of the crew in stasis for an extra day.

"Did they like it?" one of the Shoe Dressers, Fourth couldn't see what number, asked the godlike performer slouching past.

He was too kind, or too weary, to berate her and answered, "Who can tell? The Barnum will confer with the translators."

And so they waited, tense and tired, but too anxious to go to sleep.

Fourth jerked awake when heavy footsteps sounded. The Barnum was finally returning to his troupe. He strode into the narrow space behind the wings. Someone turned the lights up so everyone could see. Too high, for now the pallor of the Barnum's face seemed more pronounced and the lines in his forehead deeper.

"Beloved Cirque des Étoiles," he began. "I have talked long with the translators and First Public relations Officer, and it seems we are off to a reasonably good start. The Klaamath approved, although the translator couldn't gauge quite how much. We are looking for new translators, who are more versed in the intricate meanings of gourd rattling, and we are quite hopeful for the rest of the run. We have at

least received enough credit for air and gravity to tide us over for a few more days.”

Fourth Continuity Girl’s heart slammed into her throat. Tide them over? The Barnum hadn’t said it out loud, but it was clear enough, between the lines, that they hadn’t had any reserves at all. If they hadn’t succeeded tonight, however modestly, they would have died some hours later of asphyxiation, or possibly decompression injuries first. Such a frightening thought. Her heart thundered in her ears so loudly she missed several sentences of his speech.

“We will have to make sacrifices. We ask all support crew to wear your oxygen flower at all times, as we will mix the air as thin as possible. Wear your sticky shoes, so we may save on expensive gravity. Walk slowly, check everything twice. We will also change shifts for fresh people who may last longer during the hardships of the days to come. We must save these resources for the performers. Good luck! Thirds and Fourths, you may call in at the stasis chambers for relief as of now.”

Fourth Continuity Girl’s arm shot up before she had finished formulating her thoughts. “I volunteer to stay on!”

The Barnum looked into her eyes gravely. She’d never received that much attention before, and it took all of her silk and steel not to wilt under his round-eyed gaze. It was rumored he was part gaijin, and that made him hard to read.

“Permission granted.”

She shut her eyes and let the cherry blossoms rain again, however wasteful it was to use a perfect memory so often. She would see Sixth Stage Hand again. Perhaps they would meet and exchange a few words. Perhaps he would touch her hand.

Fourth Continuity Girl wanted to hurry, but her Velcro slippers and the thin air made that harder. And her promise to the Barnum made it impossible. So she walked slowly, counting to five before inhaling extra oxygen through the flower mask she wore around her neck.

This route was a detour, but she hadn't seen Sixth Stage Hand yet and she couldn't wait for fate. Fate was taking too long. Unfolding fans in one's mind worked perfectly well for tiredness or concentration problems, but love wasn't to be stopped by fans. Love blasted through every plan and left a trail of crumpled handkerchiefs behind.

She rounded the last corner to the big hangar, where the scenery that was too big and elaborate to be extruded by their machines was kept, and stopped. All oxygen left the air. She gasped like a landed fish and put her hand around her throat as if that would help her breathe. It couldn't be.

That dangling calf, it couldn't be Sixth Stage Hand. Although she knew every lineament and bulgy muscle, it couldn't be his. Because on top of the thighs that were attached to the handsome calf, sat Third Makeup Girl. Giggling. In his ear. The ear Fourth continuity girl had imagined herself whispering tender secrets in.

And worst of all, he laughed out loud. She'd never heard him laugh before, and although his laugh was overly hearty, she'd wanted to cause it. She didn't care about refinement. How could he? Hadn't their eyes met every single time she looked up? Hadn't their glances made promises to one another?

Fourth Continuity Girl staggered back. Black spots danced before her eyes. She leaned against the wall, bent over like an old woman, gasping and sobbing and trying to catch her breath. At last, it occurred to her to put the flower to her nose, and she inhaled in a huge hiccupping wheeze, only to expel all the precious oxygen in a loud wail.

The wall of the corridor flickered.

Her heart spasmed in fear. A static hiss filled the air.

The wall flickered again.

She dropped the flower and clapped both hands over her mouth. How indecorous to howl, and even more so in a public corridor. What would people think! She stifled her sobs, although her midriff continued to buck and her eyes smarted from the burning tears that

sprang from them as if eager to be away from her. He loved someone else. How could he betray her like that?

Another hiss of static and the outside wall disappeared.

The shields must have held, otherwise her skin would have bulged out in the lack of pressure and she would have started to die from ammonium poisoning, but the illusion of walls was gone. Another of the Barnum's budget cuts. The brown and yellow and putrid violet made her feel queasy, and she started to move away from the strangeness.

Outside the ship, the blotches moved. They looked back at her.

They were aliens—Klaamath, she assumed. They'd caught her in the shameful, private act of crying and wailing and gulping oxygen. She couldn't put her finger on why this was so intensely shameful when the eyes were alien, but it was. They were meant to see the glitter and glamour of perfectly polished performances, not the private grief of a junior Support Crew member.

She would have fled, but the aliens moved away first. The bigger one was surrounded by five smaller ones in a pentagon. They kept that formation even when they ambulated out of her frame of vision. She searched on her Touch until she found footage of the first performance. The audience was made up out of single, large Klaamaths.

Nobody had mentioned that Klaamath had young or even members or females of lesser rank. She had to tell someone about it.

She didn't manage to find a moment until she caught a glimpse of Second PR Representative in the rush of the second night. She saw his back move away from her, but she couldn't abandon her duties right now. Enough remarks had been made about her swollen eyes. Nipping away would get her a demerit on her apprentice record. She'd vowed she'd never cause shame to be brought upon her mother's household.

She hesitated too long, and the PR Representative disappeared around a corner. Second Continuity Girl rapped the back of her hand to catch her attention.

“We’re working here, not daydreaming,” she said.

Fourth Continuity Girl bowed her head and tweaked the fall of a hem until it matched the picture. If only she was Third Continuity Girl, ten years older and wiser, and no longer relegated to floor level, she’d be checking makeup and might even chat with performers. Nobody chatted with someone kneeling on the floor all the time.

The performers rushed past to take their position in the wings.

Fourth Continuity Girl crawled around on her knees to pick up stray pins with a little magnet. The Barnum tended to panic about stray pins floating around in space.

The sea of hushed voices going about their business foamed and swirled around her without her picking up a single word. When everyone fell silent, one by one, she looked up. All her friends and colleagues sat or stood frozen. Why?

She inched around, still on her knees, and found the target of their locked stares in the sheet-white face of one of the lead performers in the first act.

The man swallowed. Pavarotti again, she saw. Finally he managed to form words. “There’s no one,” he said. “No one.”

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The performer wilted visibly as this lack of reaction continued.

Fourth Continuity Girl spoke first. “Get the Barnum,” she said. She had to repeat the words after the first attempt came out in a strangled squeak.

A wave of relief rolled over the group. Yes. Of course. The Barnum would know what to do.

The singer lurched off, presumably in search of the Barnum. What on Earth was going on in the great auditorium? Everybody was

whispering and casting anxious looks around, but nobody moved. She didn't want to be the only one. She skimmed her hand over her Touch and searched for the video feed of the performance. There it was. Pavarotti had been right. On the stage, a few performers milled around or sat dejectedly on a prop, but the space for the audience—the seats had been cleared since the Klaamath were not equipped to sit—was empty. Not even one alien person or whatever one should use when thinking of the Klaamath. None.

Disaster had struck the troupe a final blow. It had been limping alongside their dwindling success, but now their fate was sealed.

Fourth Continuity Girl put her Touch aside and tried not to weep. They'd be dead soon. She could have borne the failure and the shame, if only it had been on Earth. In the arms of her mothers. And maybe if she'd been on Earth, she would have bowed to the inevitable. Instead, a fan unfolded in her mind. A fan not silk or ivory or rice paper, but a fan of glittering steel that opened with a snap and a flash and could have cut off a man's head if thrown with sufficient force.

A Continuity Girl didn't go down without a fight. The honor of her profession demanded it. She rose silently, bowed once in the general direction of the paralyzed First Continuity Girl and walked off.

She took a route she'd never taken before. On the brink of a new corridor, one with walls that didn't flicker and a richer scent in the air, she hovered. She hadn't been invited here. No one under the rank of Second ever was, but she didn't have time to whisper it in the ear of someone Fifth or Sixth, accompanied by a gift, and hope it would percolate upwards through the ranks.

She balled her hands into fists and stepped over the airlock threshold. Nothing happened.

What had she expected to happen, really? The Barnum had better things to do than admonish Fourths who strayed off the path, especially now.

Doors appeared to the side of the corridor. It seemed impolite to stare openly at their designations, so she peeked at them from the corners of her eyes, while her head was bent over her Touch. There. Third PR Officer. Should she try him or go straight to Second? She chewed on her lip while she decided. Second it would be.

She knelt down before the threshold to the small office and touched her forehead to the floor. There was no audible or visible reaction from the inside, yet she heard someone breathing. After a few minutes, she knew he would never acknowledge her. The steel fan glittered. So. There were other ways to do this.

She rose and bowed deeply, then stepped over the threshold into the office.

“Excuse my boldness, esteemed PR officer,” she said, “but I have something important to tell you.”

No answer. She raised her eyes to him. He sat slumped and rumped behind his desk. No wonder he hadn’t asked her in. How shamefully unprofessional to let oneself go like that.

She was still formulating her thoughts when he started talking to her.

“So, we’re done for, eh? It’s been coming for a while now. Bit of a relief, actually.”

Fourth froze. Relief? Giving up?

He went on. “We got a small donation yesterday, so someone likes us, but it’s no more than a couple of hours of air. At 27:14:03:59... What do you think happened then, eh?”

He didn’t look at her, so she assumed he didn’t really expect an answer. She fished her Touch from her sleeve and entered the time stamp against her personal log anyway. Hallway outside Stage Props 14, it said. That was the moment the screens had failed and she’d found a group of Klaamath staring at her.

The revelation struck her like a blow. They’d paid the troupe for *that*? But why?

The PR Officer turned bleary eyes to her. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

He could see the colors of her office and the buttons of her rank perfectly well, but he’d asked anyway.

“Fourth Continuity Girl, esteemed PR Officer.” She omitted his rank, suggesting it might be even higher than it was. He looked quite old for a Second.

“This girl has something to report. At the moment you were asking about, the screens failed and this girl saw six Klaamath looking at the ship. At this humble girl.”

He scratched his wild hair, loosening his topknot even further.

“Huh?”

“Six Klaamath, sir. Five small ones forming a pentagon around a bigger one.”

He stared at her, rubbing his finger over his upper lip.

She waited, unsure of what he expected.

“Are you suggesting something? Out with it, then!”

She faltered. Didn’t he see it himself? “Perhaps—perhaps we’ve approached the wrong audience? Maybe these young Klaamath, or whatever they are, are more interested in Humans than the big ones. Or maybe they have sexes or subsidiary species. Couldn’t we find out? And direct our PR at them? Sir?”

For a second, she thought she saw a flicker in his eyes. But the momentary spark dulled, and he turned away. From a drawer he took a large, space-weight sword; plastic with only a molecule thickness of steel on the outside.

“This is where we’re headed, girl. An honorable death. Although the Barnum has decreed that we must witness the lower orders’ deaths first.”

Kill themselves? Already? She didn't know what to feel yet. It was too big to process.

"How do you women kill yourselves? Poison, eh?" PR officers asked, his eyes on the sword.

"We hang ourselves, sir," she answered.

And fled.

Nobody paid attention to her stumbling walk and burning eyes on the way back. Her Touch started dinging with death reports before she'd reached her cabin. Stored people first, Sixths and Fifths of the menial professions. Toilet Cleaners, Hallway Sweeps. She refused to think of Sixth Stage Hand, who would not quite be among the first to die, but hard on their heels. He'd chosen the cherry of his heart, and it wasn't her.

She'd tried. Now, she must bow to tradition and prepare herself for an honorable death. She must look her best. Her turn would come soon. She looked up at the ceiling. She'd always wondered what that hook was for. Now she knew.

She laid out her best kimonos on the lowest bunk, clean tabi, her makeup kit, her ivory combs. There was water left in the shower. Perhaps she should have waited for the higher-ranking girls, but she didn't want to. Couldn't she just be a little selfish for once?

She showered and dressed, taking her time. The Touch dinged softly in the background. She decided not to look at the death toll. Nothing mattered now.

The walls were flickering again, but that didn't matter either.

Or maybe—she wanted to be done with her death before the ship exploded into the poisonous atmosphere. She glanced up. There was no way to tell how long the shields and the internal pressure would continue to work. The gravity still held, set as it was on the bare minimum that would keep them from floating to the ceiling.

The walls hissed and faded in and out. Her quarters must be close to the outer surface of the ship. Non-essential personnel, right? Behind the layers of suddenly transparent shielding, she discovered two groups of pentagonal Klaamath. Easier to see if you had done it before. They were more bluish than the other purples that dotted the landscape so randomly, at least to her human eye. The smaller members of the pentagons gently circled the bigger centers. One of them clockwise, the other anti-clockwise.

Did she care? No longer. She went on combing and pinning up her long black hair, and when she was done, she brushed her teeth and put on the first layer of proper makeup.

Five Klaamath stars circulated close by.

Staring at the human creature preparing herself for her laying out. Silly human, making up her face, since there would be no one to take her down from the ceiling and prepare her for burial. She'd swing there by her own silk scarf, forever.

She went on anyway. She penciled in her eyebrows, dabbed her whitened lips with crimson and flushed her cheeks a becoming pink, like the shading of a camellia blossom.

Eleven stars now, outside.

She halted, the perfume stick motionless in front of her. She inhaled deeply. The air seemed richer than a moment ago. The PR Officer had mentioned incoming credit at the exact moment she'd been sniveling in the hallway over a certain male person she would never see again.

She dabbed the stick into the hollow of her throat, slowly and securely, making sure her face was turned to the small crowd outside.

Nothing happened.

Of course it hadn't. She'd have to find out if credit had been put into the Cirque's account. She hesitated, Touch in her hand. Maybe she could find it herself? No, she had to stop the killing right now, not a

second to lose. She just knew she'd found the key to pleasing the alien audience.

She slid into her magnetized shoes and ran outside. The fastest way to the innermost cabin was again through forbidden territory, but the second time around her trepidation was less. She strode through empty corridors. Most people would be in their cabins to commit the final deed.

She swung herself around a corner and saw the Barnum's open door. She skidded inside, flailing because Velcro soles didn't skid.

The Barnum sat on the floor, slowly polishing his blade with a yellow rag. On his lap he had a stack of pristine white towels—they would be red soon—and his belly was bare. How galling to have to use the belly gash, and no honorable second to behead him when he started screaming.

"Barnum, sir!" she gasped.

He looked up, annoyed. "Go to your cabin, girl. Your superiors are waiting for you. All fourths are supposed to be gone to their deaths already."

"Sir, please sir, check the accounts. I think we've got new funds."

He didn't stop his polishing. "Why ever would there be new funds? Come, my dear, I understand your fear and reluctance. But it must be done, and soon, before we run out of air and gravity."

"We should already have run out of air! And we're still breathing," she retorted, not even hesitating for one second. Who knew she could be so bold. "It will only cost you a few seconds of your time. Surely that's worth it?"

He sighed. "Oh well. I've been like a father to all of you, and like a father, I will indulge the foolishness of my daughter."

She told him about the growing audience of star-grouped Klaamath. And that he should check the incomings in their balance at those exact moments.

The Barnum's polishing ceased. "Tell it again."

She obeyed.

He put his sword on its yellow velvet cushion and reached for his Touch. He frowned and pulled at his lip as he accessed their accounts, as set up by the alien liaison officers of the Klaamath.

The Barnum kept silent for a long time. Fourth Continuity Girl's panting quieted, even though her heart still galloped.

"Are you telling me," he started, something dangerous growling just below the surface of his voice, "that the Klaamath have been paying us for off-stage glimpses of you?"

"Not just this girl, sir," she hastened to say. "Although I was very sad, both times."

"Are you telling me they would pay to watch us while we suffer, pacing up and down like animals in a Zoo!" His words rose to the roar that had threatened to come to the surface before. Fourth Continuity Girl fell to the floor and prostrated herself in fear of that thundering noise.

She didn't know what a Zoo was, but the emotion in his words didn't need explaining. She felt the burn of that shame in her own belly. Yes, that was what she'd guessed. She nodded, her forehead scraping against the floor. They weren't valued for their skills and charisma, their meticulous preparation. No, they were valued for their peculiar humanoid habit of emotion.

She peeped upwards at the Barnum's face. Would he be prepared to humiliate himself to save himself and his people?

His face worked, staring at his Touch. Then he put the Touch away, and his hand went back to the sword.

She spoke quickly, before he could utter words his pride wouldn't allow him to take back.

"Perhaps we mustn't put our own feelings before the worth our information could have to humanity. Who knew about the star

formation the Klaamath use? Who knew they are fascinated by our emotions, that they bring their children to goggle at us? We owe it to the Earth to bring that news. We can't put personal issues before that."

The Barnum's hand hovered over the sword for one more moment. Then it snatched the Touch back up and started Touching furiously.

The walls to the Barnum's office flickered and disappeared. The office was surrounded by corridors, all empty at this moment of crisis. Then, like peeling an onion from the inside out, all the walls of the ship popped off in concentric rings, spreading to the outside. Suddenly the air was filled with crying and desperate whispering and arguing.

She couldn't help looking for Sixth Stage Hand, but too many people stood or sat in the way. Faces looked back in forth in an attempt to understand what was happening.

Pain. Enough of that emotion going around. Tears welled in her eyes. So much death. So much roiling pain in bellies and hearts. Pain she couldn't help sharing.

Red notices scrolled down the Barnum's Touch, alerting him to incoming credit. Air hissed into the room. With a clunk, a heavier gravity asserted itself.

Against the background of the poisonous colors of the strange world, and the purple star-formations of their host, the members of the company were revealed in their most intimate moments. Grief, guilt, despair, frozen in that one moment. More poignant and gracious than any performance could ever be.

The sobbing lessened as people were shocked out of their grief and started to look outside. They breathed in the rich air and wondered.

Tears ran down Fourth Continuity Girl's cheeks. She wiped them off with the hems of her sleeves. She didn't care about her makeup or her brocade garments now. She'd won.

She'd get home and never leave again.

Bo Balder is the first Dutch author to have been published in Clarkesworld and F&SF. Her short fiction has also appeared in Escape Pod, Nature Futures and other places. Her sf novel "The Wan" was recently published by Pink Narcissus Press.

Visit her website: www.boukjebalder.nl

Hot Water in Wormtown

By ROBERT LANG

Lady Alexia FitzClarence has spent most of her life relying on a bit of luck, a lot of talent, and her composite servant, Foskin, which she's not about to give up to a small town on a backwater world seeking to destroy it as an unholy blasphemy!

"I don't know why I ever listen to you," said Lady Alexia FitzClarence to Foskin, her composite servitor, as they trudged abreast through the desert heat.

"I'm very sorry that you hold my counsel in such low esteem, my lady."

"Sometimes I forget that your brain is just a dead vole and some dried herbs inside a wooden box."

"And yours, with the utmost respect, my lady, is just a quantity of blancmange occupying a bone enclosure. I know which one I find more reassuring."

Lady Alexia swung the flat of her hand at the composite's head, but her heart wasn't in the effort—she overshot and missed. It was a small target: a scuffed steel globe about four inches across, made from two welded hemispheres, in which the wooden box containing the entity's consciousness sat immobilised by a shell of shock-absorbing foam. The servitor was human from the collarbones downward; its globular head, barely interrupting the line of its bulky

shoulders, was connected to the body by several metal pipes that penetrated into the zone of scar tissue from which the neck had once emerged.

“I swear you get more impertinent by the day,” said Lady Alexia. She wore cracked leathers and dusty urban camouflage gear, a submachine gun slung carelessly across the front of her body.

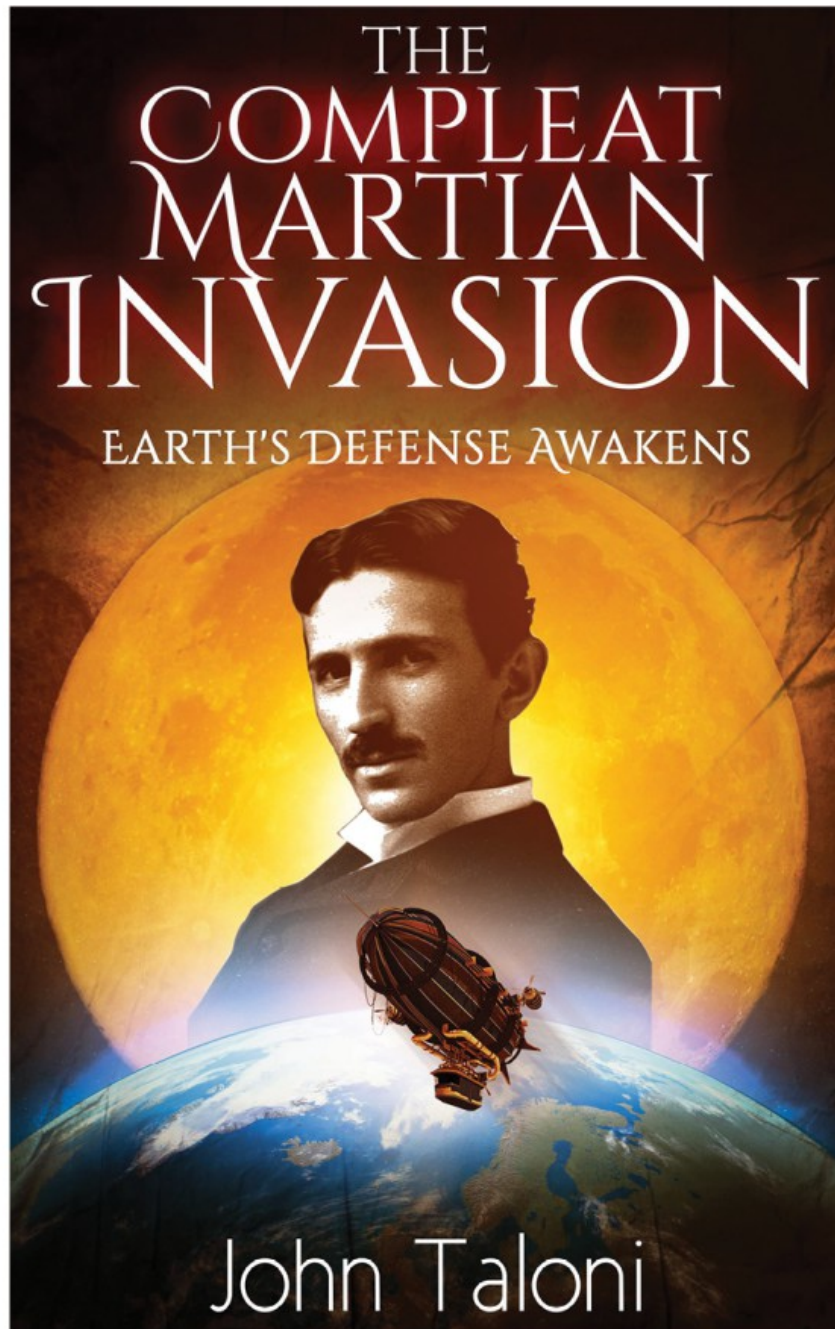
“That is not possible, my lady,” replied Foskin. The composite wore denim jeans, a pair of sneakers, and a sweat-yellowed white T-shirt that strained against its highly-developed musculature. The hilt of a claymore stuck up over its right shoulder, and in its left hand it held a parasol, whose shade it directed onto Lady Alexia as they walked. “My runic program is precisely machined, fully certified, and unalterable by anything short of determined sabotage.”

“If only they’d written smaller, maybe they could’ve fit more in and made you smarter. Binoculars.”

The servitor rummaged in the pack, retrieved a pair of binoculars, and handed them to Lady Alexia. She used them to scan the terrain in the distance and then passed them back.

“But my lady, if I were smarter, then I might find myself the victor at chess every time, instead of on only two occasions out of three. The sport would be far poorer.”

She swiped at Foskin’s head again, and this time she struck it, clanking her rings on the metal and causing the servitor to stagger a little. “Never mind, pinhead. Things are looking up: that’s definitely a settlement yonder.”



It's 1899 and the Martian invaders are returning.
Can Earth be ready in time?

It was a wretched excuse for a town: a hundred or so shacks and lean-tos made of sackcloth and corrugated iron, huddled up for shade against the north face of a giant rock formation. The place's economy was apparently centred on a large, open-air wormskin tannery, where

sunburnt men and women laboured yanking the legs and antennae out of live pink annelids, plunging the creatures' guts out with wooden implements, and tugging what was left of them over little phallic stretching-posts arrayed on long tables.

"I don't think I like the way everyone's looking at us," said Lady Alexia as they passed down the main street. They were out of direct sunlight now; they had identified the most sturdily-constructed building in the settlement and, taking it to be the town's administrative centre, were making toward it.

"My lady, I fear that it is I, rather than you, who am the chief object of their attentions."

The structure's interior revealed it to be a kind of communal dining hall, a single large space where a cook worked at a range and a couple of dozen people sat eating and drinking at tables. The woman and her servitor caused palpable consternation as they entered.

Lady Alexia approached the maître d', who stood behind a makeshift counter regarding them with a look of undisguised hostility.

"Can I get a bath here?" she asked him.

The maître d' said nothing, only looked hard at Foskin. Behind Lady Alexia, a man halfway through his meal got out of his chair, moved toward the door without rushing, and was gone into the street.

"Look," said Lady Alexia, "I have been three weeks in the desert—the last two days without food, and all of it without enough disposable water to so much as splash my armpits."

The maître d' pointed a rigid finger at Foskin. "You need to get that thing out of here."

Lady Alexia turned to face the rest of the room, where people were getting one by one to their feet.

"Oh Christ," she said, "haven't you goddamn rustics ever seen a composite before?"

"My lady, I fear that your tone may be worsening our position."

“Oh, I’ve seen composites,” said the maître d’. “And I know that they use the bodies of hanged men to make them. Murderers, rapists, yeah—also cutpurses, addicts, debtors, subversives—”

Someone else piped up, “Most of ’em just poor bastards trying to get by in a stinking world whatever way they can.” There was a general rumble of agreement.

Lady Alexia was silent for a moment, then nodded. “As you like. We will leave.”

A young man, anomalously clean, with neatly oiled hair and a carefully trimmed moustache, came to stand before them. He left a small child—presumably his own—alone at their table. “Or maybe,” he said, “maybe we take this abomination of yours, rip out the magical assembly and give the body a decent Christian burial.”

Foskin drew its claymore with a smooth motion that made the scrubbed-looking young man flinch back. Lady Alexia’s submachine gun was suddenly in her hands.

“Allow us a path to the door, please,” she said to the assembled, “or we clear one for ourselves.”

“Daddy,” said the child, rising.

“Sit down, my love,” said the young man, extending a hand to check his daughter. “Sit down, and everything will be fine.”

The girl resumed her seat, though the expression on her face was one of agonized doubt.

Lady Alexia and Foskin edged past glowering men and women out of the structure and into the street. The situation there was not better: townsfolk were abandoning their work and coming out of their shacks *en masse* to converge on the interlopers. A mob formed, surrounding them as they progressed down the street; people started throwing projectiles, which Foskin deflected from Lady Alexia using the blade of its sword while sustaining dozens of impacts to its own body.

“My lady,” said the servitor, “I fear that we are now unlikely to get clear of the settlement without serious incident.”

“Oh, nitwit, your tactical insight is just one of the reasons why I keep you around.”

The clean young man followed them, getting closer than any other dared, keeping up his righteous harangue: “You should not have brought the taint of your witchcraft here. We shall never know his face, this man whose head you lopped off and tossed on a midden while his body went to the plants, but we can honour what remains of him.”

“If you get any closer to me,” said Lady Alexia, “you are fucking dead.”

Stirred to fresh anger, the man began slashing his finger in the air and took another step toward them; Foskin matched the step, swinging its sword overarm and splitting the man down the middle from shoulder to hipbone.

The servitor kicked the newly-bifurcated corpse free of the weapon’s blade and stood ready again, its discoloured T-shirt freshly drenched with scarlet. A great cry of horror went up from the mob, and people surged toward the dead man.

“*What the hell did you think would happen?*” Lady Alexia screamed at them.

“We rush them,” shouted a tactician in the crowd. “We rush them quickly, and we’ll have them down in seconds.”

“You should consider revising that estimate,” said the servitor.

Suddenly a door behind them clapped open, and a voice roared over the braying of the mob, “*You two! In here! Quickly!*”

Lady Alexia turned toward the sound. The town’s Christian church was a humble building made of ancient, sun-bleached wooden planks; from its doorway, a shaggy-haired old man wearing a frayed soutane was beckoning to them in a frenzy.

“My lady, perhaps—”

“Yep.”

Lady Alexia and Foskin backed toward the church, and as they neared its front wall, the crowd in that direction began to thin out. As soon as the way was sufficiently clear, Lady Alexia bolted, streaking up the steps and through the door, barging aside individual members of the mob as she went and almost colliding with the priest on the way in. The servitor lingered outside for a moment to cover Lady Alexia's retreat, then followed her.

The interior of the church lay shuttered in gloom, under a general layer of dust.

"You are safe," said the priest, lowering himself stiffly onto a pew. "This is the oldest, holiest structure in the town, and all respect its sanctity to a greater or lesser degree. They will not subject you to force while you remain within its walls."

"Thanks," said Lady Alexia.

"Do not thank me. I have not done this for you, or for your monster. I am just a man who is able to detect a massacre when it is imminent and prefers to avoid one."

"Okay then: no thanks, but nicely done." She squinted through the crack of a shutter at the scene outside. "They aren't dispersing. I don't think this situation is going to de-escalate any time soon."

"I can't believe you parade that thing around so flagrantly."

"First time I've had a serious problem. Actually, he once had a very sophisticated craniofacial prosthesis: wet eyeballs, real hair growing from biological inserts under the skin, the works. When we stuck a neck brace on him so nobody wondered why he never rotated his head, it was completely convincing."

"What happened to the prosthesis?"

"Somebody, ah, got drunk in a bar one night and took exception to the smug look on it—so they doused it with gin and set it on fire. We managed to quench the flames pretty quickly, but the prosthesis was

a write-off. I had to cut him out of it the next morning through a force-nine hangover.”

“You aren’t from around here.”

“Not even close to it.” Lady Alexia turned to face him. “So what happens now? You have a plan? A secret tunnel we can use or something?”

He shook his head. “No tunnel. No plan. I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.”

She nodded. “Okay then. How about this: I am going to sit here, and you are going to draw me a bath.”

The priest got the bathtub from his own home and dragged it down the street to the church. Some of the townsfolk tried to accost him on the way and were stopped by others, who restrained them or moved to interpose themselves.

“I brought food, too,” he said, tossing a wormskin sack at Lady Alexia’s feet. Looking at Foskin he said, “Does it eat?”

“You think he gets that size by not eating?”

The church had a tiny side room containing a faucet and a stove. The priest used the stove to heat saucepan after saucepan of water, emptying them one after another into the tub. Meanwhile, the servitor dragged over a table, cleared a space among the pews, and set out a meal for itself and Lady Alexia. The priest had brought them bread, cheese, a little dried fruit, and some annelid giblets. Foskin divided the viands between itself and Lady Alexia; its own share it put into a marble pestle and mortar that it took from their pack. Before she started eating, Lady Alexia took the filled mortar and spat into it five or six times.

“It is my very great honour, as always, my lady,” said Foskin as it received the mortar and began using the pestle to crush its meal into paste. When it was done, it reached into the narrow space between its metal head and its human body, unscrewed a cap which it laid

aside, and began spooning the amalgam of food and saliva into its own open oesophagus.

The bath was ready. For reasons of propriety, the priest had also brought an old folding screen, which he set up in front of the tub.

Lady Alexia wasted no time in cleaning her plate. When she was done, she stood, thanking the priest on her way past, and went behind the screen.

The priest heard her undressing and climbing into the tub. As she bathed, he sat and watched Foskin. Foskin, for its part, sat and gave no indication whatsoever of where its attention was directed.

“I hear you glaring at my servitor,” she called from behind the screen.

He snorted. “You have me. I am wondering how such barbarous magic persists into a technological age.”

“Comes down to economics, I suppose. Materialistic artificial consciousness is certainly achievable—if you’re prepared to remortgage a solar system in order to finance it. By comparison, composites are dirt cheap. And if the spell calls for a dead dormouse, a sprig of St. John’s wort, and the body of a hanged man, then that’s just what it calls for. There’s no modernising it.”

She finished her bath, dressed, and stepped out from behind the screen. “That is so, so much better,” she said. “Your turn, Ping-Pong-Face.”

The composite, perhaps judging that its nature excepted it from nudity taboos, undressed in front of the screen, to the priest’s silent discomfort. He saw that the composite was neuter—it had no genitals, only a concavity lined with scar tissue at the point where its thighs met.

Foskin began bathing in the second-hand bathwater. Lady Alexia caught the priest’s eye and smiled.

The day wore on. The air lying upon the town became saturated with heat, the rock formation offering scanty shade as the greater part of the settlement—Christian church included—baked in the direct sunlight. The sweating mob laying siege to the building sent in a representative to parley.

Lady Alexia sprawled on a pew looking bored.

“All we want is the composite,” said the representative, who had introduced himself as Marsh. “Hand the composite over, and we let you go unharmed.”

She laughed. “Fuck no.”

“You doubt our honour?”

“Not for a moment. You just aren’t having Foskin.”

Marsh glanced at the composite, which stood by at Lady Alexia’s back. It wore a check shirt that the priest had given it to replace its bloodied tee.

“You think that thing is your friend?”

“Certainly not. It’s my servant.”

“You think it has feelings?”

“No.”

Marsh ran his tongue over both rows of teeth and then tried again. He jabbed a finger at Foskin. “Scratch the wrong sigil off the inside of that monster’s metal noodle, and it’d kill you where you stand.”

She shrugged. “Put a clamp on the wrong part of your brain, and you’d become a paedophile.” She grinned at him obnoxiously. “Assuming that you aren’t one already.”

Marsh turned purple. Struggling to keep his voice steady he said, “Care to step outside the Lord’s house and say that to me again?”

“I’m a lady. I don’t stand in the sun.”

He showed her his teeth. “This is your last chance to come quietly.”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

When Marsh left he was so enraged he could hardly walk straight.

The priest said, “You talk pretty salty for a lady.”

“I’ve been in exile since I was nine. It rather tends to coarsen one’s edges.”

She twisted in her seat to look at the priest across the nave. She smiled. “I suppose you’re wishing you never came to my rescue.”

“I’m starting to.”

“Relax. I have a plan.”

She stood, approached the priest, took a slip of paper from an inner pocket, and handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a list. A few common materials that I need for a spell.”

His face twisted in disgust. “You think I’m going to let you practise your witchcraft here? That I’m going to run and fetch ingredients for you like some lackey, so you can make fresh mischief in the house of God? No, I won’t do it.”

Lady Alexia sighed. “Look. This remains a very simple equation. I don’t want to die—and you don’t want me to take half of your parishioners with me when I do it. Therefore, you are going to get me those items.” She waved a hand. “You’re wasting time. Go.”

The priest said nothing, and moved slowly, as he went to the door and out of it.

From the street outside the church came raised voices and sounds suggestive of a scuffle. A minute later the priest reentered with a black eye. He went to the table and threw down a curious clutch of items: a potato, a collection of cigarette ends, half a bottle of turpentine, and a piece of flint.

“Here, then. For your damned magic.”

Lady Alexia shook her head. “Not my magic. I may be the first daughter of Alexis FitzClarence III, 18th Duke of Deimos and Magician General to King Breethe of Hellas Planitia, but I inherited none of his talent. Magic resides in the flesh and in the bones. Ball-Bearing-Features here”—she indicated Foskin—“is the one with the puissance.” She pushed the ingredients across the table to where the composite sat. “Get to work.”

“Of course, my lady.”

From their pack, Foskin took and placed upon the table a capacious glass flask, several unlabelled bottles of liquid stoppered with corks, a tiny baggie of scintillant black powder, and a scorched oaken rod that may have been a stirrer. To the pile of ingredients it added a handful of wood shavings that it scraped from the planks of the church’s wall using the flint.

As the composite worked, the priest, agitated and in search of distraction, said, “I can’t say I’ve heard of him.”

“Of whom?”

“The Duke. Your father.”

“Oh.” She shrugged. “I’m not surprised. An obscure kingdom, a very long way from here.”

She fell silent. The servitor began making elusive passes of its hands over the glass flask and chanting groups of alien syllables in long, complex, looping cycles.

“You said you were exiled,” said the priest a little desperately. “What happened?”

She waved a hand. “Oh, you know. Father was very gifted, but something of a humanist. At first a progressive, at last a subversive, he became one of the ringleaders of a conspiracy to depose King Breethe and replace him with their preferred candidate—who had a fairly weak claim to the throne, I understand, but also a great deal more sympathy for the peasantry. They were betrayed and their

scheme was exposed. There were purges, writs of attainder, and related unpleasantness.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Foskin was the last gift Father ever gave to me—and after that I was cast out into the universe, with nothing but my composite, some rudimentary combat training, and an absolutely bulletproof sense of personal entitlement.”

The flask jumped, settled, and began to boil violently, sending vibrations through the tabletop.

Lady Alexia clapped her hands together. “Excellent.”

“What happens now?” said the priest.

“Now,” said Lady Alexia, “we wait until the liquid in that flask becomes transparent.”

A few moments passed—then the turbulent clouds inside the flask cleared suddenly, and the liquid became crystal clear.

The servitor backed away from the table; Lady Alexia and the priest approached the flask.

“What does it do?”

“Well.” Lady Alexia signalled to Foskin; the composite stepped behind the priest and took him in an iron grip, pinning his arms at his back.

“I’ve got some bad news.”

“What the—”

“It’s about your flock.”

His mouth opened and the colour departed his face. “My flock?”

“I’m going to have to kill”—she raised her hand with thumb and forefinger held fractionally apart—“one more of them.”

“No!” he howled, struggling against the composite’s grip hard enough to break his old bones.

Lady Alexia went to a shutter and squinted out through the crack. “It’s getting ugly out there. Ten minutes more and they’ll be breaking the door down.”

The priest bucked and raged but was impotent. “You need blood for your witchcraft?” he yelled. “You need a—a soul? Take mine!”

“Don’t be a simpleton. You’re one of the good guys.”

Tears of anguish stood in the priest’s eyes as he ceased fighting, and a wordless moan of grief escaped him.

“It’s all right. Look—I’ll pick the meanest, cuntiest-looking one. How about that guy? Or her? Or—oh, oh, but look who it is!” She beamed. “If it isn’t our good friend Mr. Marsh, shoving his way to the front of the mob.”

Wearing the mischievous expression of a little girl, she lifted the flask containing the transparent liquid, scurried over to the door, and toed it open. Meeting Marsh on the steps, she cast the contents of the flask into his face; as he staggered backward into the arms of the crowd, she leaped back inside again and slammed the door shut.

In the moment between his catching the potion in the face and his becoming obscured, it could be seen that a strange radiance was kindling in the recesses of Mr. Marsh’s head. As the crowd caught him, his brains ignited spectacularly, sending painful shafts of light lancing from his eyes, his ears, his nostrils, and his open mouth. As Lady Alexia FitzClarence stood there with her back to the door, smiling dreamily, the light coming from outside grew and grew, forcing its way into the church through the shutters, around the door, and through the cracks in the woodwork, ramping up and up and up beyond anything that ought to be possible in a good and sane world. It was like a new sun being born in the streets outside.

The priest came to suddenly and gasped.

“Hello again.”

“How—how long was I—”

“About ninety seconds.” Lady Alexia and Foskin were moving around the nave, gathering their belongings. Outside, light levels had returned to normal and the noise of the mob had given way to silence.

The priest tried to stand but could not; grasping feebly at Lady Alexia as she came past him, he croaked, “In the name of Heaven, what have you done? What evil has—”

“The townsfolk are fine—with the exception of Mr. Marsh, who is now more than just figuratively brainless. The rest are simply unconscious.” She started to turn away, then added, “Although, no doubt they have all voided their bowels. Also, I can’t guarantee that every single one of them still has a tongue.”

For a moment, the priest was too stupefied by the aftereffects of the magic to speak. Then, just as the woman and the composite were preparing to leave, he managed to say, “Wait. Wait. There is one more thing I must know.”

Lady Alexia faced him again. “What?”

“Your father, Duke—Duke—” he floundered.

“Duke Alexis.”

“After the coup failed. Was he able to escape?”

“Of course he wasn’t.”

“What happened? What became of him?”

She frowned. “What do you think became of him? They hanged him and cut his dick off.” She gestured to Foskin. “C’mon pinhead, we’re out of here.”

The woman and her servitor exited the church, picking their way down the front steps over a confused tangle of unconscious bodies, and were gone.

“Robert Lang is a writer based in Cardiff, UK. He likes to sleep in, shovels popcorn for money, and spends his free time in endless rewrites of his own work.”

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Littermates (pt 2 of 2)

By **J.D. BRINK**

The immediate crisis with the Roos handled, the crew of The Lion's Share hopes to finally partake of some R&R on Alpha Dog... until Captain Hawksblood's old flame shows up with a business proposal that puts them in the middle of a double-cross!

Part the Second

We'd come all the way to homey Alpha Dog station and had not yet found the rest and relaxation bragged about upon the brochure (had there been one).

That was soon remedied, however.

Having been at the vanguard of the dirty Roo policing force, we quickly became a celebrated company of fine fellows and were offered a free round at every watering hole aboard the giant teacup. Along with some other pleasurable perks, which most of my lonesome crew eagerly took advantage of.

Several hours and many more drinks into the evening, I was three sheets to the solar breeze and parked comfortably at a tavern by the name of Gert's Bail Bonds and BBQ. The "bail bonds" bit was a joke on the occupational nature of her clientele, though the barbeque portion was no jest. Gertrude has rented a large space aboard the station for raising cattle and livestock (and has the arms to wrestle the stubborn beasts about as she pleases). The smoky essence of their finely prepared corpses brings in customers from a full deck above and below the establishment.

I was seated there at Gert's late that evening, sharing a chess board and a rather expensive rack of pork ribs with an orange-wrapped monk whose name I never caught (one of those oath-silent types). I'd lost three games to him and so was determined to keep him planted until I managed a win. This particular clergyman—though against uttering a single word of the Venusian language—surprisingly had no issue with consuming pork or fermented barley, and so I kept him prisoner by continuing to supply both. My hope was that if I got enough beer into him, eventually his rooks and bishops and queen

would sloppily stagger about the board and thus give me the advantage I needed to win back my pride.

Deep into the fourth game and fifth ale, there was yet no hope in sight.

Then two familiar figures did dally up, arm in arm, to my table.

“Lookie who I found, Captain,” bade a familiar voice.

One of the pair was my shipmate Pigeon, tall and thin with his feathery blond hair fixed into a topknot for the vacation season. Pigeon is not the brightest bird in the nest, but he’s loyal and good-hearted. Looped about his arm was his own natural born twin sister, Gabriella. One can see at a glance that they must have shared a womb together, but it’s equally obvious that Gabby made off with the lion’s share of genetic benefits. She’s tall and well-built with a lush head of deeply auburn hair. Her shoulders and hips are wider than many women’s (and her brother’s), supported by an athletic body that’s even stronger than it looks. Sprinkled about her face is a scattering of red freckles, lending her an air of innocence that she surely does not deserve. The confidence in her eyes and smile, combined with the aforementioned features, makes her a powerful force in any negotiation. And pretty much any other situation.

Now here, I must confess something to you, my friend: I have a weakness.

Well, truth be told, I probably have several. But one I am particularly fond of is the vulnerability I have for Pigeon’s sister. Gabby and I have a fiery history together. And like Pidg, I have a poor record of giving in to her demands.

She also commonly carries a bit of trouble in her pocket, and she’s likely to turn out those pockets shortly after introductions and reacquainting. And that bit of trouble nearly always comes with a request for help, or a rare bargain you dare not pass up, or a deal with surely no strings attached... Until suddenly you find yourself short on oxygen and dangling with those strings wrapped ’round your neck.

I'm good at saying no the first time, maybe even the second, but in the end it all comes crashing down in a domino effect. I say no to what she really wants and manage to resist what I really want (which is another tender portion of her lovely white flesh). Then, somehow, we wind up in my quarters and naked for a few hours of passionate debate. And at the end, up comes that first thing she wanted all over again. And now that I've said yes to her so many times—repeated in the throes of lust-making to the point where even the *Lion's* computer essence, Cher, is turning up the volume on the ambient noises of the ship just to drown us out—that giving her one more yes just seems proper and polite.

So there you go: dominos set in motion, destined to fall by the end of the track.

On this particular occasion—after an evening of life-threatening violence, will-draining drink, and lonesome merrymaking—just seeing Gabby's luscious form appear there before me had set my ethereal self on hands and knees, lining up the dominos and begging her to kick over the first one.

"Leo," she purred.

"Gabriella," I said, with a bit more awe in my voice than I'd have liked. "I'll be damned."

"You will when I'm done with you," she said, that wry, seductive smirk on her thin, unpainted lips.

One thing I'll give the girl: she never painted herself in the cosmetics that most other ladies feel the need to hide behind. Gabby was all natural and proud of it. She sure as hell didn't need them, and bearing that confidence to the world made her all the more attractive to me.

I slipped out of my seat and proffered it to her brother. "Pidg, you've come along just in time to rescue me. I've lost three games to this gentle holy man and my honor's dangling on the precipice of Dog's Hell. Here's some rib of pig and half a pint of leftover ale. And I'll ask

Gert's man to send you a pitcher of the sweet mead you enjoy most. Save my immortal soul, dear Pigeon, by taking over this war of wits."

"Meanwhile," Gabby said, reaching out and taking me by the hand, "I'll negotiate with a different devil for the fate of the very same..."

What followed was a ritual of exorcism and ecstasy, the likes of which I hadn't experienced since last we'd run into one another. I can't speak to the final fate of my immortal soul, except to say that if Dog or the Devil want it, they'll have to wrestle it from Gabriella's strong-armed embrace.

As expected, first came the pillow talk, then the deal-making.

Well, first came the jungle cat rough-and-tumble about my quarters. And I mean to say, *all about* my quarters. No living space aboard *The Lion's Share* is generous or luxurious, even the skipper's own Hawk's Nest (as we call Captain Hawksblood's chambers), but damned if we didn't try knocking down a few bulkheads for expansion that night!

Upon boarding the *Lion* again, we had found First Mate Pug still up and walking the ship, not yet ready for sleep and making security rounds to ensure no vengeful Roo sabotage had occurred. Surprise and wary anticipation showed on his dark, bearded face when his eyes fell upon Gabriella, but he did bow and bid her a welcomed return. Gabby thanked him and kissed his cheek, happy to see him again. (Happier than he was of her, I'm quite sure.)

Then we passed Spleen's quarters, where he was seated with his feet up and his door open. His black coveralls were unzipped and mostly removed, bunched up around his waist. His scrawny, emaciated body set ribcage and augments on display. His bony arms were cocked up behind his thrown-back head, the long, drooping catfish whiskers of antenna hanging from his face like wire mustaches without his usual black helm and visor in place. Spleen was relaxed and chatting up with Cher, the ship's own feminine brain, recounting the myriad conversations he'd had while plugged into Alpha Dog's cybernetic networkings. My shipmate nearly spilled backwards out of his chair, though, when he saw Gabriella go by. She

waved like a friendly school girl and giggled at his near-crash experience.

Once we made our way to my room, the polite how-do-you-do was over. She tore into me like a starved panther, and I had to fight back for my own survival. Most decorations that had been on my walls were eventually tumbled onto the deck, and everything on my desk ended up scattered about the floor. (Including a toy trophy I'd been working on for Soot, nominating him for "Engineman of the Light-Year." Something fun for recognition and morale, you see. That damned thing was quite uncomfortable when it was pinned beneath me an hour later, Gabby riding on top and enjoying the pain on my face almost as much as the use of my other parts.)

We'd spent nearly three hours hunting ole Twenty-Two's wayward Roos and locking horns with them in life-or-death mortal combat. But that was nothing compared to the exertion and depletion I'd experience after an hour and a half of live-for-all-your-worth lust-making with the red-haired amazon I'd invited aboard my humble bachelor's yacht.

My muscles were cramping when finally we'd flung our sweaty, sticky bodies apart. By that time, we'd tossed the narrow mattress from my rack onto the floor and so were resting in relative comfort, though panting for breath and gasping for hydration. Gabby's fortitude exceeded my own and she was able to fetch a water jug and a half-drunk bottle of rum while I lay recovering.

"Now that we've caught up," I said, accepting a tug from the rum bottle, "why don't we catch up? What have you been up to since last we tangled, Dear Miss?"

Gabby's lovely head was propped up by one freckled arm, the other doling out sips of liquor from her to me and back. Her auburn locks cascaded over her face and hand like red-tinged coolants from a leaking engine valve. Her eyes—I still couldn't say whether they were hazel or green, for the color seemed to change with her mood—watched my own eyes and lips and back again.

“Same as usual, Leo, darling. Business and pleasure, in not quite equal measures. Though I will tell you, I’m sitting on quite a chest of credits just now. Business has been booming lately.”

“Quite a chest,” I repeated, fondling her ripe fruit. “Booming, I must agree.”

That girlish smile, the twinkle in her eye. Damn but I’m a sucker for her charms. If ever that daring and deadly L-word were to bubble from my lips, I must shamefully admit that it would be for Miss Gabriella. How tragic for poor ole me.

She made no move to interrupt my fun, but pressed on with questions of her own. “And what have *The Lion’s Share*, my dear brother, and the love of my sweet life been up to lately?”

The lone butterfly trapped within my innards did flutter to life at that phrase from her sugary lips—“love of my sweet life”—but I fought the insect back down into its gastronomic prison.

“More of the same,” I said, pulling the rum back to hide my flushing face behind. “Steal from the rich to give to poor, most poor being ourselves. Nothing too dangerous, as our ship’s weapon reserves have been getting low. Luckily, my bluff is as effective as my bite.”

She slapped her own plump, snow-white ass. “I’m not so sure about that, Leo. And I think I have the bite mark back here to prove otherwise.”

A quick kiss expressed our mutual gratitude for an evening of soul-enrichment and exercise. Then she asked where we were headed to next.

“Tokyo Grand Circus is the plan. A strong economy for trade, and just in time for the Circus Grand Prix. Some good-spirited gambling to be had at those ostrich races. Plus, the boys might have a piece of a gyro-bird there to boot. Soot knows a guy. He, John, and your brother might be able to work the pit for one racer. Stand to win a lot of money, and have some fun besides.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Her eyes flicked away and her fingers twisted into my wiry, ginger chest hairs. “It’s not a long trip, either, is it? What, a couple weeks in the Slip? Not long if you have a ride, at least. If you’re walking, well... It’d take a lifetime...”

Ah, here it comes, I thought.

Her eyes—clearly the brightest shade of green imaginable at that moment—came back to mine. “Do you have room on this sturdy boat for one more, sweet Leo? A bunkmate, perhaps?”

I sighed and rolled the other way. “I have a strict no-female policy aboard the *Lion*, dear. You know this.”

“I do,” she said, scratching a wandering path now with one nail down my back and across my pale cheeks. “I also know you’ve made exceptions in the past. Because *I* have been that exception. *Twice*.”

“You’re a special case,” I begrudgingly admitted.

“Very special,” she purred.

Then she feigned offense to her tender heart. “If you prefer your captain’s privacy, I can stay in my beloved brother’s room. Or even sleep in a cargo hold with my things.”

“*If* you were to join us as a passenger, Deary Miss, I certainly wouldn’t make you sleep in the cargo... Wait a minute. *What things?*”

I rolled back over to meet her impish grin. “As I said, Leo, business has been good. I have some things to sell. And the market at Tokyo Grand Circus is ripe for just this kind of business.”

“I knew it,” I snapped. “The turning out of the pockets!”

“What? What pockets?” She checked her soft, naked hips, finding none there.

“What Devil’s deal am I making here, Gabby?”

“The only devils here are the ones between our legs, my love, I swear it.” She looped an arm over me and snuggled in. My traitorous little saber saluted her, all ready to collude again.

“Art,” she insisted. “All I’m dealing in is art at the moment. It’s been a lucrative career choice thus far, and certainly safer than some of my previous ventures.”

“Art, huh? That’s all? You swear to All Mighty Dog in his Palace Among the Stars?”

“Oh, sweets,” she breathed, her lips suddenly brushing against my own. “Dog will never invite our dirty feet to walk upon those pristine white carpets...”

We slept late the next morning, yet there was no escaping her brand of damnation. She corrupted me again upon waking.

“If ever I get another ship,” I told her, panting for breath when it was all done, “I’m naming it after you.”

“Oooh,” she cooed, lying next to me and wearing only our own filth. “The good ship *Gabriella of the Scarlet Locks*? Or *of the Emerald Eyes*? It better not be *Gabby of the Golden Squelch*. Actually, I’d be okay with that, too.”

“Oh no, my very vocal voluptuousness. I’ll call her, *The Banshee*.”

I heard the complaints, much later on, that nearly all of the crew had been bunking in their own racks that night. And despite the exhaustion of combat and sleeping aid of alcohol, they’d all had difficulty getting undisturbed sleep. Only Comely John had found himself either a room on Alpha or had stayed with a lady friend that evening. (*Two* lady friends, if the rumors be true. Though John is no braggart. In fact, he barely peeps a casual word. Unless it’s at the conclusion of a meal or round of cards that he hates to see end. Then John will pipe up with various questions and changes of topic just to draw out the encounter. Rather bothersome when you’re fit and ready for your rack or have other things to get to.)

We spent two more days docked at Alpha Dog. Gabriella was present for quite a bit of it, enough to make the crew suspicious of what was coming. It was no surprise, then, when I announced that

she'd be joining us for the trek to Tokyo Grand Circus. Pug rolled his eyes and huffed and sighed, expressing his displeasure but not wanting to question his captain directly. Pigeon was, of course, excited to have her along. They ultimately spent more time together than she and I, which is as it should be. Besides, had I any more exposure to her honey-laced venom than I had, I might have grown tired of her too early, come to my mortal senses, and changed my mind about bringing her along.

On the third day, we purchased a month's worth of provisions, emptied Gabby's holdings from the monastery vault (the most trustworthy banking system in all the stars), loaded her things into cargo bay three, and made ready to put to sea.

Gabby's belongings took up only a small corner of bay three. Everything was packed up in sturdy crates of various sizes or safety-framed and wound in trans-wrap. My eyes were searching for articles of precious art, works of creative joy and collector value. Not that I didn't trust her story, but... Okay, I didn't fully trust her story. But I also wanted to regale my own aesthetic curiosities with cultural wonders. (I needed something new on my cabin walls, after all, after our passionate hurricane had damaged some of my better décor.)

"This..." Gabby indicated a framed and wrapped rectangle, about a meter by two-thirds and several centimeters thick. "This is the *pièce de résistance*. A painting centuries old, harkening back to the Old World. Now knowing your destination, Leo, I've swapped some slip beam traffic with a few folks at Tokyo G.C. There are some very interested collectors there. I'm very excited." She hugged my arm and kissed my hairy cheek. "Thank you, my love."

Don't thank me yet, I almost said, trusting that something—anything—could yet go wrong. But I held back my poisonous optimism.

"I'll think of many ways you can thank me along the way," I told her instead.

She kissed my lips then, satisfied that a fee of flesh was something she could afford. I'd wait until we reached the Grand Circus to tell her

I wanted a small slice of her monetary profits as well. (I am a businessman, after all.)

My able crew secured all gear adrift, including our new supplies and holdings, and prepped for departure. Pulling out of space dock is just as careful and dangerous a routine as pulling in, for the deadly cold and airless vacuum of space threatens all aboard the ship and the station involved. But we left without a hitch and were soon on our way at a leisurely pace. We made our heading coreward, toward the galactic center, and would shift into Slip Space at a safe distance from Alpha Dog; about thirty to forty minutes out.

We did not, however, get that far.

I was in my own chambers, appraising my bulkhead space. Gabby's venture and valuables (whatever they might have been beneath all that packaging) had set me in an artistic mood and I wanted to see what new piece of beauty I might make room for. I had Cher projecting an encyclopedic array of contemporary artworks for me to browse through, targeting known works of living artists hailing from our next port call, the orbital Tokyo G. C. Most of what the computer showed me were cartoon drawings, all in similar style: big round heads with huge eyes and circular mouths; androgynous figures toting swords that would be far too heavy to wield in anything greater than half a G of gravity; and either robots or battle suits of fearsome symmetry that made me nervous for pulling any back alley business aboard the Circus, just in case they represented the policing or military force of the place. None of it particularly appealed to me.

"This is it?" I asked the *Lion's* essence. "They all do the same thing?"

"The Tokyo culture is very traditional and rather inflexible in their expectations of expression, Eon," Cher replied. I had long ago programmed her to call me by that nickname, and only her and Spleen ever used it. And if there were any note of jealousy in her databanks at another female being aboard the ship, the computer's voice showed no sign of it. "These represent the most popular style of the current dynasty. I can search the previous cultural dynasty...."

The broadcast image changed to a grid of examples that sharply contrasted the first. These, Cher informed me, were watercolors and old-fashioned block prints of the natural world: tigers crouching in the jungle; an ancient village nestled among mountains, trees, and sky; peasants of a long lost civilization carrying burdens and going about another day in their laborious lives.

These appealed to me a great deal more. Though the irony of artists who'd probably never walked a green planet's surface painting landscapes was not lost on me.

"Relatively modern works," Cher explained, "patterned after ancient traditional—"

Her helpful curation was abruptly cut off by Mister Pug's gruff and concerned voice: "Captain to the bridge, please. Crew, standby for possible call to action stations."

That last bit put some speed in my step.

"We're being pursued by a vessel," Pug explained when I reached our cozy command deck.

The vessel in question, displayed on the Big Board, had a predatory look to it, built rather like a spiny starfish with all of its appendages cast forward.

"Is it possible they are just going our way?" I asked.

Pug's glare told how unlikely that was. "I've made casual course changes, sir, and they've matched each one in turn."

"It's a sure bet they're riding our ass, Eon," Spleen said, sounding rather like Cher in tone and inflection. "And these..." He straightened his arm toward the holographic screen and tiny red circles appeared, as if projected from his finger. They highlighted spots on the starfish's leading limbs. "These read like weapon ports, sir. Photon lances, a railgun here, and two possible torpedo tubes."

I was quite taken aback. "Well, Hades take my daughters. Those bastards are armed for a fight, aren't they?"

“No doubt,” Mister Pug agreed. “Raiders would be my guess.” His disrespect for the more violent mercenary types was plain. Sure, we buccaneers used violence to steal for our meal, but more often settled on threat of violence rather than actual spilling of blood. Raiders, reavers, and sell-swords were an altogether more savage class of rogue. They’d rather kill than not. It was less work, to be honest, and most of them were lazier of brain.

“Well, boys, I’m really not in a fighting mood today, having just had a nice holiday and all.”

“We’re all well aware of your mood currents at present, Captain,” Pug grumbled. “It’s *their* disposition I’m worried about just now.”

I took my seat and a deep breath, then gave Pug the go-ahead to call action stations.

“Maintain course while we prepare for shadow dancing,” I commanded. Then I fingered the com switch. “Greetings, fellow traveler, and Dog’s good grace be with you. I see we’re all neighbors in Alpha station’s neck. Did you enjoy a healthy gulp from the big teacup, as we have?”

Without waiting for an answer, I toggled off the mic and asked Pug, “Do we know what that second Roo ship looked like? The one that left port, what was it...? *The Alice Springs*? Mayhap that nicety-nice bit they gave us about Tricksy Twenty-Two was a load of malarkey. Maybe this is their revenge come swooping down.”

“I thought the same,” Pug replied. “But this ship pulled out of mooring just after us and we can trace its trail back there. *The Alice Springs* left days ago. It might have come back to port, but I suspect we’d have heard about that.”

I agreed. Tensions would have been notably higher about the station. And surely someone would have warned us if any of the Roo clans had come back aboard while we were there.

“Response coming back, captain,” Spleen reported. I could see digital words running backward through the black visor that covered his eyes. “Not verbal, though. Text only. Cher has translated it from a

Boheme dialect: ‘The game.’” He turned toward me, drooping wire whiskers echoing the frown on his own confused, grey-pale face. “That’s all, Eon. Those two words: *the game*.”

“What game?” I asked no one in particular.

“Roos don’t hail from the Boheme sectors,” Pug reasoned.

Suddenly red lances of laser fire streaked the emptiness. Four ruby lines emitted from two pointy starfish limbs, arcing above and below our trusty vessel, and then vanished again.

“Warning shots,” Pug stated rather loudly.

“They’re repeating the message,” Spleen said.

“Pull our bedsheets over our heads,” I commanded.

Spleen powered our shields.

Pug eyed me wearily. “If this comes to a shooting match, sir, we’ll be at a significant disadvantage. Our magazines are low on ordinance, not that we’re a battle barge to begin with.”

“Agreed. But, maybe this is merely some sort of game, as they have suggested.”

“I, personally, am not acquainted with any Bohemian mercenaries,” Pug said, “and I certainly don’t know about any of their vacuum-taunting sports.”

I scratched my chin thoughtfully. “Nor I. But I do know someone who might be one to cohort with Bohemians and all other sorts besides...”

To my surprise, I only had to call Gabriella to the bridge once. I guess she was bored, having no action station of her own to occupy while everyone else was busy prepping for death. She climbed the ladder and rose into our presence with a touch of rosy excitement on her cheeks.

I started on her easy and smooth, getting only so far as, “Gabriella, dear,” before my first mate jumped in:

“What game are we playing at?” Pug demanded.

She feigned shock and hurt feelings at being accused of something without a proper lead-in.

The starfish probed our rear shields with a pair of laser lances, a clearly hostile act but not a terribly threatening one; quality shields can dissipate a good bit of raw energy of that type. Should they crank the juice to high, or start shooting with slightly heavier ordinance, however, we’d find ourselves in a deathly struggle very quickly.

The lancings did manage to raise the volume on mine and Pug’s voices, and both barraged poor Gabby at once.

She threw up her hands. “Stop, damn you! One man’s hatred and accusations at a time, please!”

Yet we pair continued, me in full, polite sentences, while Pug spat fragments like, “Bohemian raiders,” “damnable game,” and “atoms scattered to the clouds of Hobb’s Knuckles.”

“I did have a deal with some gentlemen from Boheme,” she finally admitted.

“Are you sure they were *gentlemen*?” I asked.

“Perhaps not so gentle,” she said. “Nor very trustworthy. Or well paying. So when I got some estimates and offers back from the Grand Circus, I decided to sell my piece there instead.”

“Without telling them, I take it.”

“Yes, Leo. And, now that I think about it, I might have forgotten to give them their deposit back, too....” She made that innocent oopsy face, but none of us bought it.

The Bohemians weren’t going to buy it either. A stronger charge on their lances hit us in the rear, testing the buckle on those shields.

“Doors opening on the front ends of that ship,” Spleen reported. “They’re fixing to fire something bigger, Eon.”

My hands whitened on the chair arms. *Fight or flight? Or try to bargain?*

“What if we chucked their prize out the airlock?” I suggested. “They could easily pick it up then, and would have to break off pursuit to do so.”

Gabby grabbed my arm. “Oh no, Leo, you can’t do that! It’s worth a fortune!”

“Not as much as our *lives*, my dear. I may be a filthy pirate, but I know the value of things, and a dead man spends no coin.”

“It might also be that having it aboard just now,” Pug suggested, “is the only thing staying their trigger finger at this moment. And ugly reaver-types like this, they might not forgive as easily as all that anyway.”

“Hunt us down and kill us,” said Spleen, following Pug’s line.

If we were to kick into a higher velocity or start dodgy maneuvers, it would signal to our chasers that we were not intending to play nice. But putting off a response of any kind was also testing the edge of their patience. I waved a silencing hand to those around me and fingered the mic once again. “We’ve identified the trouble, friends,” I told our pursuers. “The good miss is preparing your items for purchase as we speak. Wait one moment, please.”

A response came immediately, translated by Cher and repeated by her man Spleen: “Game or death.”

“I don’t think they’ll be delayed for long, Captain.”

“Nor I, Mister Pug.” Then I turned back to Gabby. “What ‘game’ are we playing?”

“It’s the name of the painting,” she said. “*The Game*. Very old, a relic. Their leader was very taken with it. He gave me a tidy sum of credits and the gold-cast pinkie digit from his own bionic hand as a down payment.”

“He gave you his *finger*?” I asked, clearly impressed. “And you thought you’d just walk away and keep it for yourself?”

“No way he’ll let us go about our merry then,” Spleen mumbled, either to himself or to Cher.

I concurred.

“But if we turn to shoot,” I mused aloud, “we’ll be facing down more cannons than we can ourselves muster. And at this close range...” I traced an imaginary line between our blip and his on the display. “Our EMP payload will likely cripple us along with them.”

“If that were to happen at close range,” Pug said, lacing the fingers of one meaty paw with another, “we might get entangled. And if *that* were to happen, as capable at tangling as our crew might be, those sell-sword reavers are more so.”

And if we just give up the treasure, that won’t likely do it either, I thought.

No one plan seemed to be of much use. But perhaps, maybe, if we combined them all...

I took Gabby with me to cargo bay three. “Pick one worth losing,” I told her. “Something they might mistake for their prize.”

She glanced over the tiny hoard. “You don’t have something else on this ship, Leo, an item of less resale value that we could sacrifice instead?”

“You need to learn a life lesson here, dearie. You brought on this trouble, you pay the fine to get us out.”

“Oh, it’s an education you’ll be giving me, then?” she asked, all offended. “Because I’m the tiny school girl and you’re the big, mature grown-up?”

The logic did sound a bit off, but, “Apparently so, Gabby. I’m a bit surprised myself. And disappointed.”

“Oh, not the disappointment!” she crooned, wading into her belongings. “Anything but that!”

It took her only a few seconds of checking labels to pick a rectangular package she could trade all our lives for.

And though time was precious, I had to know. “Where’s *The Game*? Show it to me.”

While she was unwrapping, I contacted the bridge to have Mister Pug signal the Bohemians, tell them we’d found what they were after and were preparing to give it over.

Unraveling all that trans-wrap took longer than I’d expected; in retrospect, it was not the appropriate moment for an appraisal of aesthetics. But when I finally laid eyes on the highly-sought relic... Much like my relationship with Pigeon’s lovely, dangerously manipulative sister, I was both enamored and amazed at the stupidity of it all.

“This is what I’m about to die for?”

She gave me a look. “No, my sweet love. *I* am what you are about to barely escape the jaws of Dog and death for. Remember?”

“Don’t be so sure, Gabby. Right now, I’m thinking we should launch you out *holding* that thing for a hand delivery... Take it to Pidg and John in bay two. Then get your lovely ass into a space suit and take refuge in my quarters, just in case they poke a hole in this boat.”

I barely made it to the bridge again before the next volley of warning shots taxed our rear shield again.

“Shield gen two is on the verge of bursting,” Spleen reported.

“They won’t kill us right away, as it’d take too long to root through all the debris to find what they want. But if they just speed past the donut we toss them, they might lose it. Those boys ready in bay two?”

“All stand ready, Captain,” Pug said, looking rather less nervous now that we had a plan.

“All right. Let’s slow them down.”

We reduced the *Lion’s* speed to a crawl, and the raiders matched, even falling behind a few extra kilometers. Then the outer doors on cargo bay two opened. This they’d likely be able to read on their ship, but should be expecting. How can we give up something if we don’t open a door? They would less likely to be able to tell, scanning from behind, that bay two also houses our second-hand, triple-threat of torpedo tubes.

We were idling along now, crawling through the black, and the Bohemians had matched our speed.

“Dip to port and chuck it.”

My able-bodied crew obeyed. The ship leaned slightly left, enough to allow the package to slip out of our open mouth without hitting an ear on the way back.

The temptation then was to bolt as fast as we could, but that might give us away. “Steady as she goes... But with fingers to triggers...”

Our pursuers slowed to float around the sea. It would take a painful bit of effort to find and collect an object of that small size. Unless they were geared for—

“Sir!” Pug shouted. “They’re deploying nets. Seems they’re equipped for salvage operations.” His eyes bulged in anticipation of my next order.

What we hoped would take tens of minutes might only take ones instead. This was our window of opportunity, and it would slam shut quicker than we’d planned.

“Spin us about, Mister Pug! Full reverse. Loose the fish at the optimal distance.”

Artificial gravity yanked us all sideways as *The Lion’s Share* spun around to face our foes, then threw us near out of our seats as we jumped to speed away from them.

But launching our electric eels at this range might capture both them and us within the EMP's sphere of influence. We'd be cutting our own throats then. And even at the outer edge, the pulse might buckle our forward shield and leave us open to retaliation.

I sat with my chin in my hand, propped on my knee, watching as the Big Board counted the distance.

The enemy vessel began moving again, sliding to its starboard side first, then easing forward. "Nets are retracting," Pug said.

They'd either found it or given up on it. In a second, those range numbers I'd been watching would be counting backwards instead. Closer rather than farther.

"Let's assume they have the package."

"Their cargo doors are closing—"

"Hit it, Mister Spleen!"

Upon my order, Spleen fingered the transmitter signal. Once the package was fully inside their ship, behind bulkhead and shield, who knew if its ears would still hear our message?

Luckily, it did.

A bud of orange flame blossomed on their port-most starfish arm as the explosive charge we'd strapped to the artwork detonated. Sensors indicated flying debris instantly.

My mood perked up instantly, too, though the fireworks hadn't been all I had dreamed of. "I was hoping for follow-on explosions of ammo or ordinance, but maybe we got lucky and took a shield gen with it. Fire fishes, one-two-three."

The boys complied.

Torpedoes leapt from our open cargo bay, in sequence. The first two were both electric eels—EMP warheads—the third a bit more terrible. The *Lion* continued to retreat as fast as she could run in reverse.

The enemy vessel had closed all hatches, save that which was now ragged and unclosable, and was again accelerating toward us. We were watching intently, all ready to bounce from our seats in celebratory cheers, when our lead fish exploded a couple kilometers from detonation. The raiders were spraying defensive shot and it had taken out our first weapon.

Luckily, that fish swam in a well-learned school.

The second went off a bit early, thanks to Pug pushing its button and not waiting for the torpedo to make up its own mind; had he done so, its brains might also have been blown to the solar winds before it could make use of its payload. The Bohemians' own vector and velocity ensured that it met the EMP's wave front head-on, flying right into the effective radius. We, on the other hand, had been flying backward the entire time they had been still and were well out of the torpedo's effective range by then.

That electromagnetic pulse frazzled its remaining forward shields and played havoc on some of the ship's internal systems, as well; apparently our surprise package *had* weakened some of their defenses. The Bohemians listed a bit on their course, drifting enough to roll the damaged port side toward our third deadly fish.

Shouts of victory and relief gave sound to the silent plumes of destruction on screen. The first explosion was shortly followed by two more as, no doubt, that ammo hold I'd hoped to find lit up and blew out. As we turned to face front and sped away, Spleen's damage estimates on their dreary starfish were forty to forty-five percent. If that crew of art connoisseurs was half as good at sailing as they were at deal brokering and poetic communications... Well, I suspect many of them survived, in spite of all that.

Our voyage to Tokyo Grand Circus would take a dozen days in Slip Space, per Pug's estimates. That would give us twelve days to ice our bruises, rest our bodies, and mend any fractures in our goodly relationships that might have occurred in the heat of battle and betrayal of trusts.

To our mutual fortune, Gabriella and I both forgive rather easily.

I was sprawled out all naked and comfy in my rack, as Gabby adjusted the position of *The Game* on my quarter's bulkhead. I had decided that an ancient painting of hound dogs smoking pipes and playing poker was a grand fit for my décor.

"Those are some mighty talented mutts," I mused, watching her bare white ass shift with each change of footing. "A bit to the left, please. A bit more. No, wait, sorry, back right. And a few centimeters higher."

"I'm beginning to feel abused," she complained.

"That's okay, you've earned it."

Gabby settled on a spot and disengaged. "That'll do," she said conclusively, then rejoined me on the bed.

She gazed on me with the hazel aspect of her eyes, chin in hand, auburn locks falling about her freckled face. "Someone should make a painting of us, right now, like this," she said.

"I can call Soot in," I told her. "His hands hold many talents."

"No, thanks," she giggled. "But really, don't we deserve a tiny bit of immortalization?"

"Oh, I'm already working on it. I call it *Memoirs of a Space-Faring Bastard*. Catchy, eh?"

"Terribly. Am I in it?"

"Oh, yes," I said, securing a red lock behind her ear. "You'll get your very own chapter, my dear. I'll call it, 'The Space Siren.'"

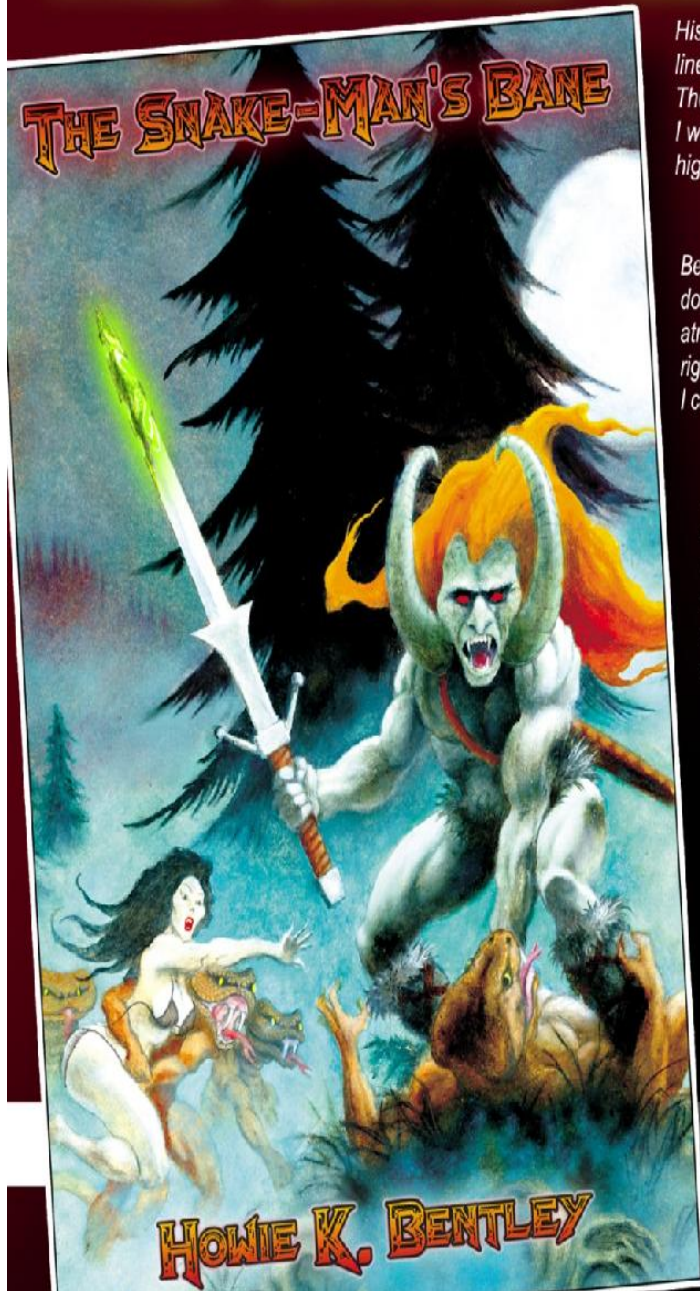
My sea nymph's eyes magically shifted to an honored and grateful shade of green and she licked her lips hungrily.

The lusty song that issued from my quarters over the next hour surely made the rest of the crew want to bash our pretty little ship against the nearest rock.

If taking a college fencing class, eating from the trash can, and smelling like an animal were qualifications for becoming a sword-swinging barbarian, J. D. Brink might be Conan's protégé. He plans to immortalize Captain Hawksblood and the crew in a book series, right after he finishes the Identity Crisis series of spandex novels. Learn more at <http://BrinksChaosTheory.com>.

When Vegtam the Wanderer came to Herod-Thaar he was expecting good coin to play his lute and sing. Instead he kills a snake-man and has to go on the run with Tawna, the beautiful tavern wench. Their only possible escape from the reptilian-ruled city is a path through the demon-haunted ruins of Nephasth. Will Vegtam and Tawna escape the horrors closing in on them, let alone those that lie ahead? Find out in this collection of six savage sword-and-sorcery tales from the pen of Howie K. Bentley...

THE SNAKE-MAN'S BANE



His series reminds me of 1970s sword and sorcery along the lines of Karl Edward Wagner or in Swords Against Darkness. There is a very memorable plot and secondary characters. I will remember this story in the future, which is one of the highest compliments I can give.

– Morgan Holmes (Castalia House)

Bentley's prose is good, and his sense of pacing on target. He's done a good job here, successfully melding mystery, creepy atmospherics, and bloodletting, creating a tale that would be right at home in one of Lin Carter's or Andrew Offutt's anthologies. I can't give a story a better commendation than that.

– Fletcher Vredenburg (Black Gate)

...Where There Is No Sanctuary by Howie K. Bentley is next and it is a real punch in the face. This might be my favorite story in the issue. A werewolf warrior cuts his way through a demonic tower that has fallen out of time. Lots of action, horror, and imagination. This is the type of material that I read Cirsova for.

– wastelandandsky.blogspot.com

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WILD HUNT BOOKS

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