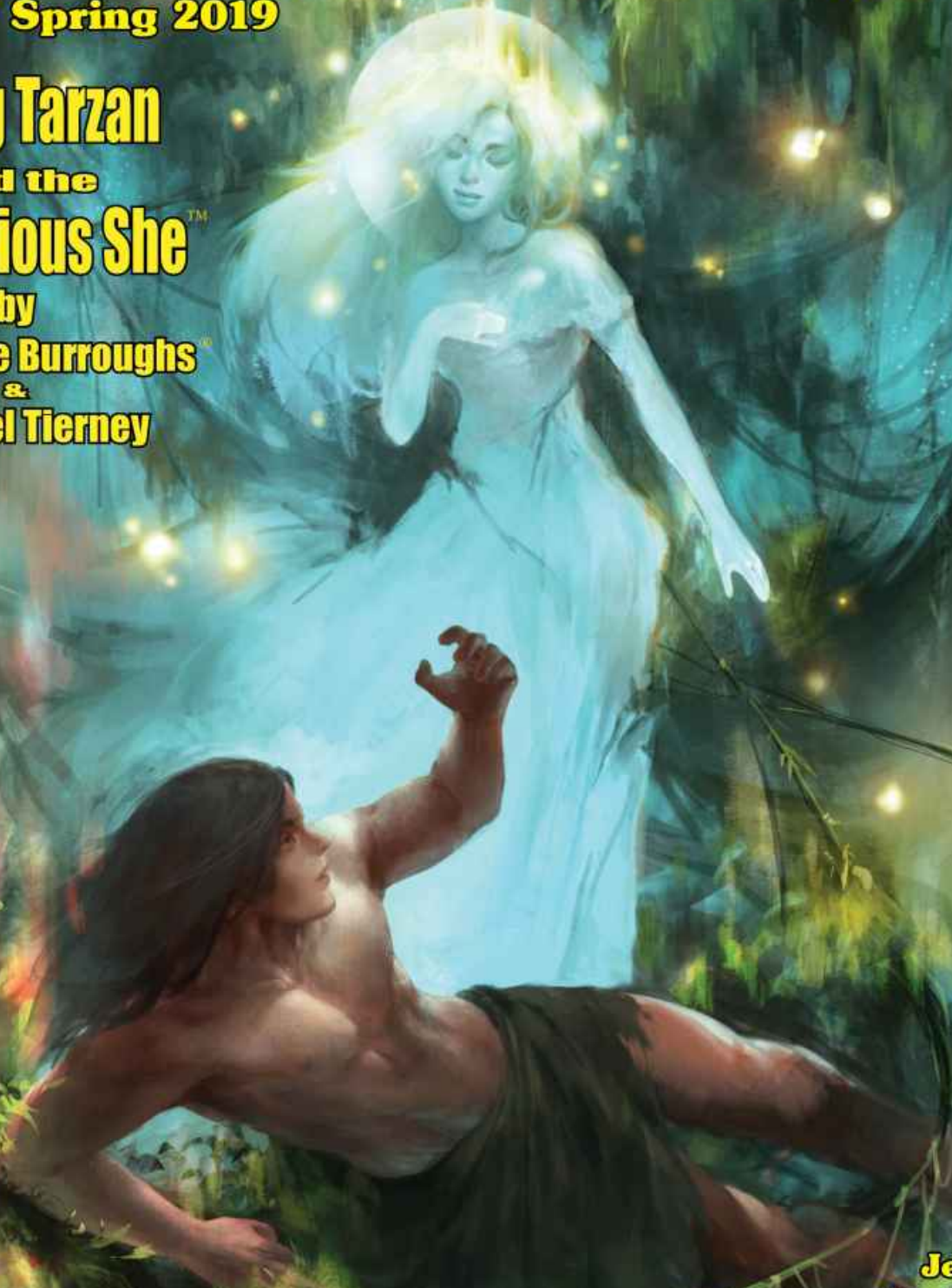


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Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense
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Young Tarzan
and the
Mysterious She™
by
Edgar Rice Burroughs
&
Michael Tierney



WL Emery
D.M. Ritzlin
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A Fantasy Novelette of the Otherworldly Dread

The Elephant Idol, by Xavier Lastra

Short Stories of Strange and Daring Adventure

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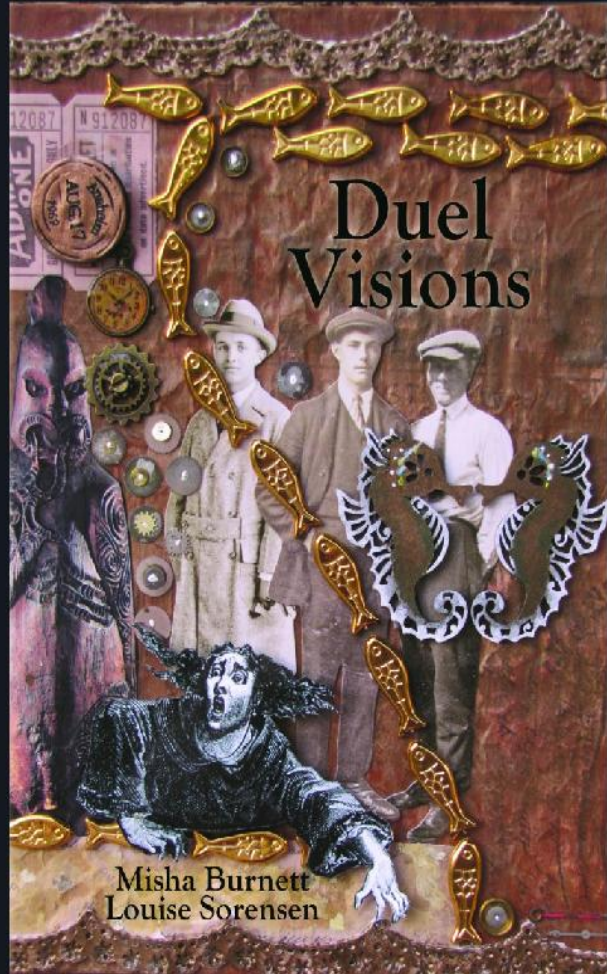
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Young Tarzan and the Mysterious She

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS *and* MICHAEL TIERNEY

Young Tarzan ponders his nature among his ape family in the jungle when he hears there may yet be another such as he! Who is the white-skinned she who lives among the Gomangani tribes, and is it she whose visage haunts the ape-man's dreams?!

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Kudu, the sun, rode high in the cloudless heavens above an African jungle lying mysterious beneath the concealing canopy of its foliage; hiding its secrets from even the all-seeing eye of Kudu, the ever curious, moving slowly over the world, striving to penetrate the quietly billowing waves of verdure that hid the jungle from him; only occasionally vouchsafing a fleeting glimpse of the myriad life that moved constantly among the eternal shadows.

To the likeness of Sheeta, the leopard, Kudu mottled the bronzed skin of a naked youth sitting at the foot of the bole of a hoary patriarch of the forest—a sylvan demi-god beneath a shock of tousled black hair, sitting with chin in cupped palms, a personification of melancholy.

Tarzan of the apes was depressed—a state of mind that constituted a new experience in his brief life, for youth and health, coupled with a vast curiosity and an unflagging interest in life and all its multifarious jungle activities, had heretofore maintained his ebullient spirits remote from any suggestion of dejection.

He was lonely. And yet all about him were the great apes of the tribe of Kerchak. These were his people.

Kala, his foster mother, was there, peeling the bark from a nearby tree in search of luscious grubs; Teeka, sleek and young and beautiful, whom he liked almost as much as he liked Kala, though with a difference that sometimes puzzled him when he took the time to think about it, was there; there, too, were Taug and Bo-lat, playfellows of those childhood days that, though he did not realize it, were already gone, for Tarzan was no longer a child, no longer the little Balu fierce Kala had nursed and protected during the years of his weakness.

Long since had Taug and Bo-lat laid aside childish things. Now they were fierce, hairy bulls, already bulking larger even in the presence of Kerchak, the king, or that other mighty mangani, Terkoz, who, looking with jealous eyes upon Kerchak, would be king.

In the meager language of the manganic, there were no words to describe the sadness weighing so heavily upon the heart of the foster son of Kala or its cause, but the truth was that Tarzan was the victim of an acute inferiority complex. Too often had he looked in the

still waters of the pool; too much had he brooded upon what they had revealed—the white, hairless skin, the grey pupils rimmed with white, the puny nose and that totally inadequate mouth armed with utterly futile teeth that transformed a snarl into nothing more than a provocation to derision. How might a bull impress an antagonist with teeth like his!?

Tarzan cast envious glances at Taug and Bo-lat. How beautiful those beetling brows and deep-sunk eyes, the generous noses of them—especially Bo-lat's! It spread almost across his face. It was his choicest possession, and that the tribe felt a certain communal pride in it was evidenced by the seal of their approval in the name they had conferred upon him—Bo-lat—which means Flat-nose in the primitive language of the mangani, the great apes.

Disconsolate, Tarzan moved closer to Kala and squatted down beside her. “Why am I not like Taug and Bo-lat?” he demanded presently. “Why is Tarzan so hideous?”

“You cannot help it,” replied Kala, “your father was a Tarmangani.”

“Did he have a white skin and a pinched nose and a little mouth?” demanded Tarzan. “Were his eyes white rimmed and hideous?”

“Yes,” replied Kala, “he was a great white ape.”

“Where is he?” asked Tarzan. “Where is the Tarmangani who is my father?”

“Kerchak killed him, when you were a little balu, in the lair by the wide water where you go so often.”

“Are there other Tarmangani?” asked Tarzan, for with the growing consciousness that he differed from his fellows of the tribe of Kerchak came the first stirrings of an urge to find others of his own kind.

“I have seen only one,” replied Kala, “but there are the Gomangani.”

“What are they?”

“They, too, are hairless like the Tarmangani, your father, but their skins are black.”

“Where are they?”

“Once Kerchak led us far from the hunting grounds of our people. It was a hungry year when there were no cabbage palms,

nor gray plums, and the pisaugs and scunatimes withered in the bud. We were compelled to hunt in a strange country. Then, for the first time, I saw the Gomangani.” Kala growled and bared her great fighting fangs and Tarzan knew that the Gomangani were enemies of the tribe of Kerchak.

“But you saw no mangani like Tarzan?” he insisted.

“I saw none,” replied Kala, “but Tublat, going close to the strange lairs of the Gomangani one night when Goro was fat in the sky and cast her full light upon the jungle, said that he saw a she Tarmangani—a young she with skin like the skin of Tarzan and hair upon her head that was like the light of Kudu bursting through the dark clouds that bring usha, the wind, and ara, the lightning.

“A young she who looks like Tarzan,” mused the youth. He glanced at Teeka, and his brows knit in a frown of speculation as he sought to visualize a she as hideous as himself.

Yet the thought of her stimulated his imagination and aroused within him a desire to investigate and perhaps as well an instinctive biological urge that attracted him to one of his own kind.

For some time he sat in silent meditation pondering the matter; then he sought out Tublat, his foster father. Between Tublat and Tarzan was an enmity as old as the youth.

From the time that Tarzan’s own father had been killed as he sat mourning his young wife’s death beside her body, and Kala had snatched him from his cradle, Tublat had hated him with a savage jealousy that had increased with the passing years during which Kala had been forced to devote all her attention to the puny, helpless man-thing instead of bringing sturdy young apes into the world.

During the intervening years, Tublat had sought on numerous occasions to destroy the man-child. At first Kala had thwarted him, and gradually Tarzan had developed such strength, agility, and cunning that of late Tublat had learned to fear that in an encounter he might prove the victim rather than the victor; but all this only added to his hatred, which was in no way lessened by the tricks with which Tarzan was constantly annoying him.

So when Tarzan approached him now and asked where lay the lairs of the Gomangani in which he had seen the golden-haired Tarmangani, Tublat only bared his fighting fangs and growled.

“Why ask what you already know?”

Tublat may not have intended to offer an answer, but he had given one. When Tarzan immediately slung his grass rope over his shoulder and turned in the direction of the river, Tublat growled for a moment and then, considering Tarzan’s departure to be a good thing, abruptly stopped.

Digging for grubs near enough to hear, Kala started to protest against Tarzan leaving; but with raised arms Tublat angrily threatened her into submission. While Tarzan felt indifference to Tublat’s dislike of him, whenever he treated Kala with disrespect, it made the young ape-man’s blood boil; but there was nothing he could do about the situation between his ape-mother and father, so he left before his actions raised Tublat’s ire even further.

It took Tarzan the better part of a day to reach the river across which dwelt the Gomangani. He paused in a tree overhanging the river bank and considered how he had crossed this river before; always with disastrous results. Even though he had defended himself, he felt strangely conflicted when killing his Gomangani attackers; which was why he had feigned ignorance of them to Kala.

Even worse was that of late he had begun to wonder if he should consider finding a mate among the she-Gomanganis he had seen there, feeling himself not worthy of a beauty like Teeka.

In the sky, seen between the vine lattices stringing above the river, he glimpsed a single cloud racing across the sky with speed that Tarzan had rarely seen. On the leading edge of the shifting cloud, the wispy edges separated and then reformed in what looked like the shape of an eagle. The white-winged bird of prey seemed to lunge and twist, and then changed shape once more, this time into the strange shape of a reptile with bat-like wings. The flying beast’s mouth seemed to open like Numa about to roar, and then the form abruptly morphed into what looked like a woman, with a finely detailed face that was turned away and looking off into the far distance. The cloud passed the sun, which bathed her hair with golden rays; and then the whole shape vanished into a funneling mist.

Any hesitation that Tarzan had felt before was now gone. His heart beating faster, he daringly leaped onto a vine hanging from the

upper terrace canopy, and momentum swung him across a river filled with hungry things that hoped he would slip and fall. Once safely across, Tarzan found the Gomangani the same way he would a tribe of Manu, the monkey; by following his nose and the noise.

Tarzan quickly found the village he had visited before and was tempted to inspect closer, but had no need. The moment the young ape-man reached the upper terraces of the trees surrounding the village, the gates were thrown open, and a statuesque she-Tarmangani strode through with the sensual movements of a lioness and the self-assurance of arrogance.

She was accompanied by an entourage that explained why the great apes had thought her captured. She was like the eye of a storm, which everyone else circled.

Closest to her walked a stooped, elderly Gomangani dressed in the skins of Sabor and Sheeta, with red feathers hanging from the ears of the eyeless head of Numa atop his head. He, in turn, was followed by a dozen Gomangani, all carrying long spears with pointed ends that reflected and flashed Kudu, the sun, into Tarzan's eyes like Ara, the lightning.

Other Gomangani, also dressed in skins and wearing the head of Gorgo, the buffalo, hovered near the side of the Numa-crowned Gomangani, reluctantly relinquishing the leashes of a pair of cows.

With feeble eyes, Chief Mbonga scanned the trees, searching for the white demon that haunted his tribe. An elderly man with a scrawny neck and a dried-up face, he had brought his people into unexplored jungles, and from time to time they'd been followed by others.

But only the bravest had ever ventured across the river and into the hunting grounds of the great apes, where they had glimpsed what they called the White Devil. Despite the fact that they always attacked first, even his boldest warriors had been killed by this uncanny man-like demon. Only a few survived to tell of the demonic action when the hairless white ape triumphantly sounded the victory cry of a bull ape over his fallen foes. And they had been followed back to the tribe.

Today, Chief Mbonga was concerned more than ever. The Witch Woman who had given his tribe a respite from bedevilment by the White Demon was leaving, along with two cows as payment for a spell that she swore would continue to protect his tribe.

Resident Witch Doctor Rabba Kega and his apprentice Tubuto each wore buffalo hides with the horns shadowing their faces, which made them look like arcane creatures that were half-man and half-beast. They were unconvinced of the Witch Woman's powers and unwilling to pay her tribute, but their protests to Chief Mbonga availed little result.

Although she watched the shadowed face of the Witch Doctor closely out of the corner of her eye, the Witch Woman La'Sharonda acted unconcerned. She too knew the powers that a mask could give. However, she also knew that to continue to hold Chief Mbonga in her thrall, the White Devil of the jungle must be dealt with permanently. Only then would her position within the tribe be cemented. This would be quite an accomplishment for the lowly daughter of a Witch Doctor who had been cast out for infidelity.

Her fortunes had turned when she happened across the remains of a tin-type photographer's safari, massacred by local pygmy headhunters. From the litter she found his costume bag, and taking a blonde wig and white-faced Kabuki mask, she created a new persona. With her mask on, she became a different person, and the subsequent reactions of worship she received from superstitious tribes only emboldened her avarice. The bag of black powder that roared smoke also helped.

Her first performance as the Witch Woman had helped her survive capture by the very headhunters who had given her this opportunity. While hers was a deception that worked best with limited exposure, during the course of her visits from kraal to kraal, La'Sharonda had gained an entourage of admirers that included warriors and chiefs, young and old alike, who coveted her favor, and followed her wherever she went. But none had ever seen beneath the mask.

If she ever hoped to reveal her true face, first she had to convince the M'bongas of the true power of her magic. For that she

would secure help from the pygmy headhunters who always lurked close to her, and she would do it with more than just trickery.

La'Sharonda turned and unexpectedly embraced a stunned Chief Mbonga; then snatched the reins of the cows from Rabba Kega's hands.

"When I make my offering to the Jungle Gods, I shall ask them to deal with the Red Devils as well as the White," La'Sharonda promised Chief Mbonga as she strode away, alone and unafraid into the jungle with dusk fast approaching.

Rabba Kega loudly cursed her name several times.

Something about this woman didn't seem quite right to Tarzan, but his curiosity had been piqued. When the blonde-tressed seductress rubbed her body next to the elderly Gomangani, as a dove would to her mate, all while waving her golden locks in front of the stunned chief's eyes and snaking her hair past his nose, Tarzan could see his knees shake and instinctively understood that consorting with this female was more dangerous than bathing with Gimla, the crocodile.

Finding her distasteful, he started to turn away, but then saw the two Gorgo-headed Gomangani following her along with several spearmen.

Tarzan climbed to the middle tree terraces and cut ahead of the trail, where a flash of her golden hair caught his attention once more. He moved silently for a closer look.

In a small clearing, the Tarmangani was joined by the most bizarre group of mangani that Tarzan had ever seen.

Tiny Gomangani gathered around her on all sides, dressed in various body adornments of paint, bone, and animal hide. They wore strange things made of material that perched upon their heads and what looked like the hide of Tantor, the elephant, on their feet. He debated calling the manu-sized men Gamanu, because their heads and bodies were painted in solid red coloring, and ga meant red; plus, they reminded him of monkeys. But he instead decided to call them Gamangani, because the pygmy headhunters were indeed small mangani and not monkeys.

His attention was drawn to the Tarmangani's golden hair, like Goro the moon just after moonrise, while still crawling over the treetops. But her body startled Tarzan. It was white, but too white—completely absent of color.

Creeping into the tree above the she-Tarmangani, Tarzan was confronted by an already disgruntled leopard trying to sleep in the tree. Taking advantage of the startled animal, Tarzan growled threateningly; "Mangani-Eater! I shall eat your heart! Your blood shall quench my thirst!" The leopard scampered away and disappeared into the canopy of leaf-laden branches.

The Gamangani were startled by the sound of the apeman's threats and the flash of the feline's movement. But at that same moment, the Gorgo-headed Gomangani and their warriors stumbled into the clearing.

Tarzan took a special interest in the ritualistic combat that followed, fascinated by the spears thrown by the warriors, watching the arc of their flight and their distance. The smaller Gamangani easily avoided the flying spears and skillfully tossed them back. It was a bizarre aerial dance that went back and forth, leaving the taller Gomangani with no chance to run. To turn would only present a back as a target and no chance to dodge.

Tarzan snatched the opportunity in their distraction to snake down the loop of his grass rope and encircle the she-Tarmangani, but she squirmed mightily when he pulled her up and he feared he had pulled off her head. Instead, he discovered only the veneer of a white face crowned with blonde hair in his hands. He felt betrayal at the sight of an angry-faced she-Gomangani glaring up in his direction and dressed in what he now recognized as animal skins bleached white by the sun.

She was closed in upon by the surrounding mass of suddenly agitated Gamangani. In contrast, the Gorgo-headed Gomangani began dancing about like man eating overripe fruit.

Letting the headless face drop, Tarzan left quietly, ignoring the angry shouting behind him.

Darkness was gathering faster than he could cross the river, so he looked around for a place to shelter as a pride of lions passed

beneath him, a golden-maned Numa leading his pride of Sabors to their nightly hunts.

Seemingly without warning, an ominous storm swept overhead as sudden, howling winds brought an early night.

There was a single scream, shrill and high-pitched, that ripped through the pause between rumbling thunder. Then the thunder and usha, the rain, became the only sounds.

Tarzan settled in for the night and pondered about a great many things. Just as there are the Bolgani, the Great Apes, and the monkeys and chimpanzees and so many other gani, how many types of hairless mangani might there be?

Despite his failure to discover another with skin and features like his own, now that he had seen manu-size Gomangani, he felt even more confident that a she-Tarmangani with blonde hair might really exist somewhere, across some even more distant river.

His imagination was already set afire when he discovered the blonde hair of the enchantress still entangled in the weaves of his grass rope. Working it free, he caressed the strange texture of the blonde hair and wondered many things about the woman who was once so prominent in his thoughts. He endeavored to remember the vision seen in the clouds earlier but, finding his efforts futile, flung the blonde hair away. The tresses caught on a branch and hung suspended, refusing to leave.

As darkness enveloped him, the hours passed with the storm, and Goro, the moon, made his way into the starlit sky and the golden hair glowed with light. The sleepy young apeman was abruptly startled by what he thought was a person standing beneath that golden mane.

She had white skin like him and a physical build that was delicate, like a balu, but with supple curves like the she-Gomangani he'd seen earlier. Then the face of the blonde white woman that he'd seen in the clouds finally reappeared to him, with a jawline like a teardrop of water, full red lips and a nose even tinier than his own, seen reflected in calm water. Her eyes were the same color as the clearest water and shined like the brightest points of light that not even Kudu could chase from the night sky.

Tarzan sat there well into the night, holding tightly to the vision of his imaginary companion. The sky thundered loudly and repeatedly, but she only smiled and winked at him. He fell asleep with her image afire in his mind.

Tarzan woke the next morning to a light rain beginning to fall upon his skin like soft kisses, only much more tender than any his mother, Kala, had ever given him. He raced back across the river and to his tribe's hunting ground.

After having seen the different reactions of the Gomangani and the pygmy headhunters, Tarzan held anxious anticipation for another reaction when he placed the golden hair on Kala's head, hoping that Tublat would finally treat his mother with the respect she deserved.

Kala was indifferent, and none in the tribe seemed to notice. "It is still Kala." Tublat shrugged.

The days passed and the blonde hair disappeared. Tarzan suspected a family of thieving Manu; but he wondered if the girl he had seen in the clouds might not once again have manifested beneath the mass of blonde hair and simply walked away.

Morning after morning, he woke with the face of his imaginary she-Tarmangani fresh in his dreams, so real to him until the waking world intruded. Then came the morning when he woke and realized his visions were pictures seen in his father's cabin.

As the weeks passed, his youthful fantasy slowly faded and was nearly forgotten, until he once again crossed the river and returned to the village, where he saw a Gorgo-headed Gomangani taunting a severed head atop a post outside the gate.

When Tarzan dropped silently to the ground and approached for a closer look, all the Gomangani began shouting and running into the jungle or behind the village gates, closing them quickly.

Tarzan was repulsed when he recognized the angry, dark-haired visage, mouth open wide in an endless scream. He turned away from the village, knowing that he would find no mate within.

Edgar Rice Burroughs was described by Ray Bradbury as "probably the most influential writer in the entire history of the world." Burroughs conceived many exotic worlds on distant planets and inside the hollow Earth, along with the fantastic peoples and

creatures who inhabit them, all of which have served to inspire the dreams of generations of scientists and explorers. Without a doubt his signature creation was Tarzan of the Apes.

Michael Tierney is best known for his long-running science fiction series of Wild Stars comics and novels. His other works range from historical fantasy to horror humor, and include non-fiction. His 4-volume, 1200-page Edgar Rice Burroughs 100 Year Art Chronology received overwhelming critical and fan acclaim. He has also been known to wear a mask while traveling internationally—as a Master certified scuba diver who hunts sharks with an underwater camera.

Atop the Cleft of Ral-Gri

By Jeff Stoner

The Nazis' never-ending quest for powerful and sorcerous relics to aid the Fatherland's conquests brings the SS to the mountains of Tibet, where a deadly and mysterious weapon is rumored to lay dormant and waiting for a new master!

Somewhere in Tibet, 1939

The Opel sputtered out when the mountain road climbed above four thousand meters. It blocked the crumbling, unpaved ascent, and the ragtag caravan of weatherbeaten men and ramshackle carts grumbled to a halt behind it. On one side a rock wall loomed. On the other, a chasm gaped. Tiny villages dotted the valley far below, their prayer flags sparkling in the Himalayan sun like colorful gems at the bottom of an ice-clear pond.

The driver worked the ignition. The truck vomited a single cloud of black smoke and died again. "It's no good, Herr Doktor. The motor isn't meant for this altitude."

Dr. Hans Schaefer sighed. He thrust his sunburnt head out the window. "Unload the truck," he shouted to the men.

There was a faint mutter of restiveness, for the Opel was laden with much cargo, but the men complied. Many were hired Sherpas and some were SS-men, lean and tanned. When they fell to shifting cargo, a lone man approached the cab. Schaefer braced himself, for Untersturmführer Riedel was the expedition's political officer. He resembled his master Himmler, with dark eyes and bleached brown hair draped messily across his seared, balding head. He'd lost his pince-nez two days out of Lhasa, to the general improvement of his appearance, if not his mood. Riedel put a foot on the dusty running board and got straight to the point. "Herr Kommandant, your transport has finally abandoned you. It is more sensible that you are, I think. Shall we return?"

"No. We will press on. We have plenty of room in the wagons, and stores for another two weeks."

Riedel scowled. "Two more weeks. We've been here for months with nothing to show but a dozen cases of syphilis."

"We've gathered more anthropological data than any previous expedition," Schaefer shot back.

"Anthropological data, you say. Is that what you call your collection of pornography?"

"It is not pornography!"

"Of course not. Your films of savages copulating will be of surpassing value to the Reich's scientists."

"Those images are a small part of the collection, and quite necessary," Schaefer retorted. The truck jounced alarmingly. "Careful with the plates!" he hollered out of the cab.

“Yes, be careful! The Fatherland must have more smut!” Riedel shouted, laughing.

“Need I remind you who is the leader of this expedition?” Schaefer snapped.

“Need I remind you that your expedition cost over a hundred thousand Reichsmarks? The Ahnenerbe might not mind spending good money on pornography, but Herr Reichsführer-SS expects a more tangible return on his investment. A *useful* return, if you get my meaning.”

“I know what he wants,” Schaefer growled. “That’s why we’re ascending again. I’ve discovered the location of the Dvesha Vajrayana.”

“The Dvesha Vajrayana? That’s nothing but the fantasy of opium fiends!” Riedel scoffed. “You’re wasting the last of our supplies chasing poppy-smoke.”

“What if it’s real?”

“Of course it isn’t real.”

“Is that so? In this age, no rational man believes in the power of holy relics. Does that stop Himmler from searching for them?”

Riedel averted his eyes and stared across the valley at a distant ridge. “No. He inquires after them ceaselessly.”

“In that case, he will be most pleased to receive the weapon of a god,” Schaefer replied. He eased his lanky frame out of the cab, forcing Riedel to retreat. A quick check of the truck bed confirmed that the men were finished. “Bring up timber,” Schaefer commanded.

“Now what?” Riedel demanded.

Schaefer nodded towards the truck. “We must clear the road so the wagons may pass.”

“This vehicle is the property of the consulate!” Riedel protested, but it was too late. The men strained at their levers. The old truck lifted on one side, teetered, and plunged over the precipice. The men gathered along the edge of the trail to watch as it crashed down the slope, trailing a plume of golden dust. It was soon lost to sight.

“The consulate may recover it, if they like. I don’t imagine anyone else will take it,” Schaefer remarked drily.

Riedel glared at him. “I hope you know what you are doing, Herr Kommandant,” he said. “If you don’t, the consulate will be the least of your concerns.”

Schaefer lit a battered Juno and took a long drag. “Life is a game of chance, Herr Riedel, and this is my last trick. Now, go play your part and help load the wagons.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” the little man grumbled, and stalked away. But Schaefer stared long over the precipice at the bright valley. Riedel was not wrong. He was taking an enormous risk, and there would be hell to pay if he returned empty-handed.

Seven days earlier.

It was long past midnight. The hoary, vine-grown viahara was lit by a single spirit lamp. Two men reclined on either side of it: Schaefer, who was taking his turn at the opium pipe, and an ancient lama with a face as dark and craggy as the bark of an oak. The lama had not spoken, nor even moved, since the pipe was lit. But his eyes were mobile. All at once, they locked on Schaefer.

“I know what you seek,” he said in a voice like a thin breeze blowing down from desolate heights.

Schaefer lowered his pipe to the mat, suddenly focused. He had said nothing of his quest for Dvesha Vajrayana to anyone, not even Riedel. “If it pleases your holiness, I would hear more,” he said.

But the lama ignored him and rolled another bolus of opium. He smoked it slowly, exhaling ghostly streams of smoke that danced suggestively in the faint flicker of the lamp. When he finished and laid it aside, he unexpectedly continued.

“There was once a prince named Daluo. He was the least son of the king, but the wisest. His brothers were proud men with armies and many ships, but Daluo had only his wisdom. When the king died, Daluo’s brothers fought against each other for the throne. But Daluo went alone into the west, away from battle, seeking Dvesha Vajrayana.

“Many days and nights he travelled until he reached Tama Khijim at the foot of the Forbidden Mountains. The road ended there, for in those days none braved the heights. But Daluo climbed. Six ranges he climbed, and six times he turned in his course, thrice right and thrice left. When he reached the seventh valley, he beheld Dvesha Vajrayana high above him, in the cleft of Ral-Gri.”

The lama paused. Schaefer looked up from his frantic scribbling. He’d retained the presence of mind to capture the directions in his notebook. “Please, go on,” he said breathlessly.

The old man nodded. “Wise Daluo knew that he could not enter Dvesha Vajrayana without breaking the seals. This he did, though he was weakened by hunger and thirst, and beset by the guardians of the mountain. But in his wisdom, Daluo did not break the final seal, but

secreted it away in his prayer cloth. In this way, he came to Dvesha Vajrayana and took up the vajra he found there.”

“What do you know of the vajra?”

“It is the weapon of a dead god, able to slay Asura and Deva alike. Armed with the vajra, Daluo returned to the kingdom. He slew the armies of his brothers and sank all their ships in a single moment. From that day forward, Daluo was king. He was master of all he could see, for the vajra was ever at his side. But in his wisdom, he feared the vajra, for it whispered unclean things in his ears. After a time, he decided to return it to Dvesha Vajrayana. The vajra divined his intent, and they contended on the pinnacle of Ral-Gri. But wise Daluo brought forth the hidden seal from his prayer cloth, and the vajra was subdued. It remains there to this day.”

“It remains? Are you sure of it?” Schaefer asked.

The old man licked his cracked lips with a tongue as black as soot. “Yes. I have seen Dvesha Vajrayana.”

“Why didn’t you take the vajra?”

“I had no use for it.”

It was a perfectly predictable answer for a Lama to give. But he scanned his notes and realized he was missing a piece of the puzzle.

“What of Tama Khijim? Where is it?”

The lama made an expansive gesture with his hands. “You are in Tama Khijim.”

This is too easy, Schaefer thought. “Thank you. Yet I wonder. Why are you telling me this?” But the lama fell silent and did not speak again that night.

Like a golden sword threatening the heavens, a great pinnacle of rock beetled above the expedition, its snowy flanks catching the last rays of the setting sun. Close at hand rose a lesser peak, already lost in shadow. A dizzy, curving rock height stretched between the enormous mountains like a curtain wall. In the falling dusk, Schaefer thought he saw a switchback trail that led to the top. There, silhouetted against a ruby-lit cirrus, the telltale hump of a stupa slouched on the skyline.

“That is the cleft of Ral-Gri. Tomorrow we ascend to Dvesha Vajrayana,” Schaefer announced. A few Germans nodded, but most were too exhausted from the long climb to acknowledge him. The Sherpas were more alert, but ill at ease. They furtively scanned the shadows that flowed down from the western ridges, as if they expected an attack.

Riedel came up, limping a little because of his foot blisters. Everyone knew he had them, for he complained of them constantly. In his infirmity,

he tripped on a long bone protruding from the rocky drift. He cursed quietly, and waved towards the dim heights. "There's nothing up there, you know," he said.

"Don't you see the stupa?"

"Ja, ja, I see it. There's been a stupa or ten at every godforsaken pass we've crossed. What makes you think this one is different?"

"This is the right place. The road was clear, once we found it. This is the seventh valley. If that isn't enough, haven't you noticed our Sherpas? They're scared because we're on forbidden ground."

Riedel snorted. "They're scared because we're three hundred miles from the nearest settlement and running out of bread. Another day, maybe two, and we'll be starving."

"The road back will be easier. But you said it yourself. Himmler wants a return on his investment. I'll get it for him, bread or no bread."

"Couldn't you have found something in a more civilized place? Somewhere where there's food and a roof over our heads?"

"Artifacts are where you find them, Herr Riedel. If they appeared where convenient, Himmler might find one on his bedside table—oh! Who's this?"

While they spoke, a grizzled old Sherpa had approached, and now stood close by. The old fellow wasn't familiar to Schaefer. Was he a member of the party? There was no way to be sure. But when the Sherpa stuck out his tongue in a traditional greeting, it was brown and cracked, like old leather.

"Disgusting," hissed Riedel.

"Shh!" Schaefer admonished. He addressed the old Sherpa. "*Tashi delah*, grandfather. May I help you?"

The man shook his head. "No, but you may help yourself. Pass this place by, and do not return."

"I know where I am, grandfather, and what lies in Dvesha Vajrayana."

"You do, do you? Did anyone tell you how it came to be here?"

"No. Does it matter?"

The old Sherpa chuckled, a sound like thick syrup dripping into a bowl. "Perhaps. The vajra is not of this Earth. She fell from the heavens long ago, before the great waters came. The men of old sacrificed to her here, in this place. You may still find their bones when the snows melt. Hungry is the vajra."

Both Germans looked down at the bone that had nearly felled Riedel. Bleached snow-white and splintered at the end, it *could* be human.

Schaefer turned back to the Sherpa. "I'm grateful for the warning, but I believe we are safe from antediluvian monsters. We have rifles in case any appear."

"The vajra is not troubled by the weapons of men. Her flesh is like water and her bite is that of a thousand tigers. But if you will not heed my words, at least take my gift. It is a small thing, but even a grain of sand may tip a balance." He thrust forth a bit of bright cloth, the traditional Sherpa gift for travelers.

Schaefer received it graciously. "*Thuchi chi*, grandfather."

The Sherpa nodded and shuffled away.

"Wait!" Schaefer called after him. "Why did you speak of the vajra as if it were a woman?" But the man had already vanished behind the wagons.

"Rude, but refreshing," Riedel said. "Usually they ramble on so at goodbyes. But why was his tongue stained? I never saw anything like it before I came to this miserable land."

"Of course you've never seen it before, Herr Riedel. Sorcerers are scarce in the Reich," Schaefer replied knowingly. He spread his bedroll on a sandy spot. "Now, I'd like to get some rest, if you don't mind. You should, too. Tomorrow will be arduous."

"With you every day is arduous, Herr Kommandant. Good night, then," Riedel said. He hobbled off, muttering to himself as he went. "Savages and sorcerers and a rock for a pillow! Schiesse! What I wouldn't do to be at home back in Munich!"

Schaefer secretly agreed with the little Nazi, at least the part about being at home in his own bed. No matter which way he turned, he found a sharp rock under his shoulder. What was more, the night was unquiet. The omnipresent wind whined in the rocks high overhead, but tonight it seemed to Schaefer that it hid reedy snatches of evil mantras. When he at last opened his eyes, he found the heavens suffused with ruddy aurorae, even though it was summertime. Cirrus as black as cat-o-nine-tails scudded beneath it. But no clouds trespassed within the cleft of Ral-Gri. The little stupa perched atop the col stood out clearly against the blood-red loom.

Schaefer remembered the old Sherpa's gift. He lit his torch and fished out of his pocket. At first, it appeared to be nothing but an ordinary prayer flag. But on closer inspection, he realized that he was mistaken. Instead of the traditional woodblock print, this cloth was closely embroidered with strange hieroglyphics and patterns of linked dots. Schaefer recognized nothing, though he could read archaic Chinese and the stele of ancient

Mesopotamia. To his eye, it resembled the Agrippa of a Renaissance magician more than anything he had encountered in Asia. It was a puzzle, but Schaefer was tired. He doffed his light and pulled his blankets close. Sometime in the small hours of the morning, he finally fell asleep.

“*ALARM! Erwache schnell!*” screamed a terrified voice. Schaefer snapped awake and sat up, knocking a dusting of fresh snow from his blankets. For a moment, he couldn’t tell what the fuss was about. Men were rushing to and fro in the grey light of dawn, but there was no fire, nor was a snow leopard loose in the camp. Then it hit him.

The Sherpas were gone.

Riedel appeared, bread bag in hand. “Three loaves!” he shouted. “Those inbred savages left us only three loaves! How can eight men march for a week on that? How?”

“Calm down,” Schaefer ordered, kicking his bedroll aside. “When did this happen?”

“Hours ago. The sentry saw nothing. He—”

“Sentry? Who?”

“Moritz.”

“Moritz, kommt schnell!” Schaefer roared.

A terrified young SS-mann with snow in his blonde beard trotted up, Mauser rifle bouncing on his shoulder. “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant?” he gasped.

“Were you on duty when this happened?”

“Ja.”

“Why didn’t you sound the alarm earlier?”

“I was incapacitated, Herr,” Moritz replied anxiously. “A snow squall blew in around 0400. I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. I tried to shelter in the lee of the wagons, but while I was standing there everything went dark. The next thing I knew, it was light, and they were gone.”

“In other words, you fell asleep at your post! I should have you shot for this!” Riedel screeched.

Schaefer held up a hand. “Let him speak. What of the wagons? Were they robbed?”

“I showed you the bread!” Riedel exploded.

“Besides that. What about our rifles?”

“They are untouched, Herr Kommandant.”

“Good. It’s time to issue them. Herr Riedel, call the men together at the wagons.”

Moritz was right. The rifles were still snug in their crate, but there were only five of them. Schaefer distributed the weapons to the men, but chose a spade for himself. He handed another shovel to Riedel, who was incredulous.

“Is this your idea of a proper weapon, Herr Kommandant?”

Schaefer set his eyes on the heights. “The men will guard us. We have other work to do.”

“You aren’t seriously thinking of going up there! We must leave now!”

“The ascent and return should take no more than a few hours. Take your spade and follow me.”

With the rest of the men following a few paces behind, Schaefer walked the last klick to the cliff face. The going was slow. There was an old trackway, but cut through in many places by dry streambeds. More than once the men were forced to scramble over slick boulders. They received a small mercy when the sun cleared the massif at their backs because the snow vanished the instant the golden light touched it.

Moritz was close enough that Schaefer overheard him mutter. “That wasn’t natural snow.”

Schaefer couldn’t help but agree.

They soon arrived at the foot of the cliff. It stretched to the heavens, a mottled grey curtain slashed with orange sun-stripes. But the switchback trail that Schaefer thought he saw yesterday was nowhere in sight.

“Riedel, you go right. I’ll go left. Look for seals.”

“What kind of seals?”

“Just look for anything out of the ordinary.”

They separated, walking head-down to scan the ground while their guards looked on curiously. Schaefer went for many meters without seeing anything in the gritty talus, save for a few curious lumps of reddish stone that bore an unsettling resemblance to the crowns of buried heads. One even seemed to sport a topknot. But there was no sign of a trail. Daluo had come this way two thousand years ago. After an hour, Schaefer would have bet his last Reichsmark that no one had been here since.

He was considering making a perilous direct ascent when something caught his eye. There was a tiny splotch of pink in this universe of grey sand and rock. Schaefer picked it up and was astounded. It was a dollop of hard-fired terracotta the size of a penny, embossed with a strange but familiar branching sigil. Schaefer withdrew from his pocket the prayer flag he’d received from the old Sherpa. He caught his breath. Here, amongst a constellation of unfamiliar scribbles, was the selfsame sign, only mirrored.

“I’ve found something!” he shouted, as shots rang out behind him. Schaefer shoved his find and the cloth deep into his pocket. When he turned to face the action, he found himself face-to-face with a peculiar little man. The interloper’s skin and clothes were brick-red except for his right shoulder, which was black and sported an epaulet of gray lichen. But he held a rusty saber in his hand. Schaefer parried his thrust with his spade, but the force of the blow knocked him off-balance. He lost his footing in the loose talus and fell at the feet of his assailant.

The red man raised his ancient blade high for the kill. But there was a gunshot, and his grimy head exploded. Not a meaty explosion of blood and brains, but the friable crunch of breaking crockery. The headless figure toppled, struck the ledge of rock, and shattered into a thousand jagged pieces. Schaefer could scarcely believe his eyes. His attacker was nothing but a terracotta statue.

Moritz arrived at a trot with his rifle at the ready. When he saw the crumbled wreck of his target, his jaw dropped. “*Donnerwetter!*” he hissed. “What is it?”

“Some magic of the old world,” Schaefer coughed, struggling to his feet. “The Lama said there were guardians. I should have taken him more seriously. Is everyone all right?”

The young SS-mann shook his head. “They got Herr Ihlfeldt and the Stabs. The rest of our men ran off. There was fire from Herr Riedel’s direction, too. I don’t know what’s become of him.”

“I’m fine, no thanks to any of you!” shouted the little political officer. An instant later he appeared from behind a boulder, covered with dust but otherwise none the worse for wear. “What sort of hell have you brought us to?!” he barked, holding out the head of one of the terracotta men, suspended from a crown of scraggly gorse. The thing’s eyes were alive, and when they fell on Schaefer, its mustachioed visage contorted into an expression of pure hatred.

Schaefer smacked the head away with his shovel. It burst asunder on the rocks. “I’ve only done what your master demands. Look!” he exclaimed. Beginning at the shelf above where he’d found the sigil, a trail had appeared. It cut diagonally all the way across the rock face.

Riedel shook his head. “That wasn’t there a minute ago. There’s no way I’m climbing it.”

“Feel free to stay here,” Schaefer said with a shrug. “You won’t want for company.”

“Company?”

Schaefer motioned toward the ground. All around them, the talus was in motion. Here and there appeared a red hand, or a head, or the tip of a rusty scimitar like the fin of a shark.

“There must be hundreds of them,” Moritz gulped.

“Thousands,” Schaefer corrected.

“RUN!” screamed Riedel. He gained the rock shelf in a single bound, the others hot on his trail.

The climb was difficult, but the trio didn't dare to rest. They encountered a brief delay when the trail petered, but Schaefer soon located and smashed a clay seal identical to the one he'd found below. The next turn of the switchback trail magically appeared before their eyes. In this way they ascended, breaking the magic seals as they found them. And even though their legs ached and their heads swam, the unceasing faint tromp of many feet far downslope spurred them on.

The sun stood at the zenith when they crested the ridge. The flat col atop it was broader than it looked from below, and barren save for the weathered cone of the stupa. The stupa was unremarkable as stupas went, smallish and unadorned, with a sealed entrance facing east.

“So this is Dvesha Vajrayana. I expected more, somehow,” Schaefer said wonderingly.

“I did not,” Riedel said wearily. “What now, Herr Kommandant?”

“I'm going in. The weapon hidden in there is our only hope of getting off this mountain alive.”

“You are utterly mad,” Riedel grumbled.

Schaefer ignored him. He swung his spade against the earthen seal. It shattered easily. A strange scent, like jasmine and ozone admixed, flowed out of the dark interior of the stupa. Schaefer ducked inside. At first, he saw nothing but nitre-encrusted stone. But when he moved, the beam of his torch fell on the single, lonely occupant of the stupa: a wizened mummy atop a bier of black stone. It was ancient, naked and black with time. A disk of red terracotta lay in the center of its rotten breast.

“So here is your ultimate weapon! How the enemies of the Reich will tremble!” Riedel sneered behind Schaefer's back. The little man stalked impudently to the bier and whirled to confront Schaefer. “For these bones, we marched a fortnight into trackless mountains. For this offal, we have bled and starved!”

“Herr Riedel, please! There is more.”

“Yes, there is!” Riedel interrupted. He scooped up the little clay seal from the chest of the mummy and waved it in Schaefer's face. “We're

going to die! Torn to pieces and smashed by those things below, just like this!" He crushed the seal in his hand. Red crumbs trickled out between his stained fingers.

"That may have been important!" Schaefer exclaimed.

Riedel laughed like a madman. "Important?! Nothing is important anymore! No one will ever find our bones, and it's all your fault! But there is a final service you can render to the Fatherland."

"What are you talking about?"

"You can die for driving this expedition headlong into ruin!" Riedel shouted, drawing a hidden Parabellum pistol from inside his jacket.

Schaefer cast about for a means of escape. His eyes fell on the bier. The mummy was gone.

"Herr Riedel, no! Something terrible has happened!" Schaefer cried.

"Be quiet!" Riedel roared, jamming the muzzle of his weapon between Schaefer's eyes. "Take your punishment like a man!"

Before Riedel could pull the trigger, a stark white arm, graciously feminine yet powerfully muscled, snaked around his neck. A gorgeous face appeared above Riedel's head, with full lips, high cheekbones, and uncanny silverplate eyes.

Riedel squirmed in her grasp but couldn't break free. "Ah! Let go!" he demanded.

"Who broke my seal?" she asked. Her beautiful voice was as clear as the Himalayan sky and deep as a storm wind.

"Him! He did!" Riedel dissembled, jiggling the business end of his pistol toward Schaefer.

The enormous woman's gleaming eyes sparkled with delight. "A liar!" she cooed. "Your kind never changes. A fine breakfast your black heart will make."

"What?!" It was Riedel's last word. The woman fell on him like a wild beast. As Schaefer watched in horror, she tore open the political officer's chest with her bare hands, ripped out his heart, and swallowed it whole.

As if as an afterthought, she took the gun from Riedel's dead hand. She held it up in the dim light and studied it closely. Her eyes flew wide. Before Schaefer could react, she had his arm in a viselike grip. She thrust the Parabellum under his nose. Her sharp, bloody fingernail indicated the little eagle-and-swastika Waffenamts stamp on the gun's frame. "Is this your sign?" she asked.

"My what?!"

Her grip crushed down. Schaefer's arm bones flexed alarmingly. She was as strong as a machine. "What is this mark? Say, or I will consume

you.”

Lying was unthinkable. “It is the seal of Greater Germany, my Fatherland.”

She threw away the gun and raised a powerful fist to the heavens. “The prophecy shall be fulfilled!” she exulted.

“What prophecy?”

Her argent eyes gleamed down at him in the gloom. “Before my master died in battle, he showed me the sign by which his essence might be wrested from the abyss. It is here, graven in the steel of this fiery weapon. It is just as my master foretold. In steel and fire shall Greater Germany raise his altar. Ten thousand times ten thousand sacrifices will you make in his name, though you know it not. The smoke of their burning will reach the highest heaven, and my master will live again!”

Schaefer was astounded, and cold fear gripped him tighter than the monster woman’s crushing hand. “Your master? Who is he? Who are you? They said this place hid the weapon of a god!”

“What is his name to you, frail man of miry clay? But you have found the weapon you seek. I am called Orgia, for I am wrath incarnate. My master made me for slaying. But long have I withered here, atop the peak you call Ral-Gri. I hunger for stronger meat than the clammy heart of a coward. I can see from afar that your Fatherland brims with men who are stalwart, yet unwary of their souls. I shall wax immense among them, and make myself ready for my master. Come, my table awaits me!” She strode forth out of the stupa, dragging Schaefer behind her like a child.

Moritz stood a few paces away, peering nervously over the lip of the col. He turned at the sound of their approach. “What is this?! Who are you? Halt!” he blurted, shouldering his rifle to draw a bead on Orgia.

She smiled. “An honest man. I covet a meal before a long journey. He will do nicely.”

“He’s not for eating!” Schaefer protested.

“I choose my own meat, and I never deny myself,” Orgia replied.

Desperate, Schaefer pulled hard on her restraining arm and kicked out at the back of her knees, hoping to topple her. She did not move an inch; he might as well have grappled with the mountain itself. In the next instant he was flying, tossed aside as easily as a stuffed toy. “Moritz! Shoot!” he hollered as he landed painfully amongst the cobbles.

Moritz fired as fast as he could work the bolt of his Mauser, and his aim was true. Five crimson blossoms erupted on Orgia’s shapely chest. But when the bloody gouts slid off, they left unbroken skin in their wake.

While Moritz fumbled with a fresh charge, she leapt forward and tore the rifle from his shaking hands.

“Your weapon cannot harm even the pale shades of dead men,” she said mockingly. “How do you expect it to hurt me, who has devoured holy angels? Now, come to me, for I am ravenous!”

Moritz shied away, but Orgia leapt after him like a flash of silver lightning.

She caught him out of the air, just as ruddy arms grabbed her legs from below. She stumbled and forgot Moritz. He ran to Schaefer, narrowly avoiding the terracotta army that swarmed over the lip of the height and over Orgia, who was lost from sight beneath the onslaught.

“What do we do?” Moritz wailed.

“Get inside and be quiet,” Schaefer hissed, shoving him into the stupa. From their dubious hiding place, they watched the unholy army come. Some were broken, dragging fragments of legs and arms. Some were seared black and others were red as the day they were fired. But all of them bore sharp swords, and the dark pits of their eyes were alive with unclean magic.

From their midst came a laugh, and a shout. Orgia stood proud and tall, though pierced by innumerable spears and blades. “Begone, rabble of hell!” she roared in a voice that shook the mountain to its roots. The clay men paused, looked to the sky, and burst apart as one. A billowing hurricane of dust and sharp flinders drove the men to the back wall of the stupa. There, they huddled in darkness, hardly daring to breathe.

“Is it over?” Moritz whispered.

“No,” Schaefer replied curtly, for he was frantically searching for something in his pockets.

The dust cleared, and a shadow appeared in the doorway. It was Orgia. She was unharmed but filthy with crimson grit. “You men and your petty sorceries!” she scoffed. “None may harm me! I was once hindered by a man, but he knew names that you cannot guess, and his magic was broken with my seals. Yet I grow weary of this game. I have no need of a guide, for even now the rumor of Greater Germany’s wickedness reaches my ears. All I need to do is follow it. But first, I shall have my fill of the both of you!”

Moving faster than a human eye could follow, she fell on Moritz, who was closer to the door. He screamed when Orgia’s mouth found his throat, but Orgia herself went stiff as a corpse when Schaefer pressed to her forehead the clay seal he’d secreted away in his prayer flag. When he was sure she was inert, he rolled her away from her terrified prey, making

sure that the seal never left her skin. He then carefully tied it to her head with one of his boot laces.

Moritz struggled to his feet. "Danke, Herr Kommandant. What is she?" he wheezed.

"The weapon of a dead god. I understand why she was sealed away. That old Lama was trying to kill me, damn him."

"What are we going to do with her?"

It was a good question. The safest thing to do was to seal her up and get away as soon as possible. But Schaefer was a man on a mission that he could ill-afford to shirk.

"Go quickly, and find the men. Have them get two long boxes from the wagon, and bring them back before nightfall."

"Why, Herr Kommandant?" Moritz said.

"One box for is Riedel. The other is for her. Himmler wants a weapon. I will bring him one. Now go! On the double!"

The young SS-mann slogged off the mountaintop through drifts of crimson dust, leaving Schaefer alone with his thoughts. "If Himmler is fool enough to unseal her, may he be her first meal," he said to himself, and sat down to rest in the shade of the stupa.

Jeff Stoner is a mild-mannered software tester by day and a caffeine-and-alcohol-fueled SFF writer by night. His stories incorporate elements of his many interests, prepared with a trademark pinch of mysticism and dash of deep-seated psychosis for flavor. You may find him hiding from his characters on Twitter @Stoner_68.



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The Idol in the Sewers

By KENNETH R. GOWER

A reverse of fortune sends Kral Mazan fleeing through the labyrinthine sewers of Vasaros empty-handed from his audacious heist! His life may be forfeit to the rat-men who lurk in the tunnels—unless he accepts a job to retrieve their idol for them!

The sewer's fetid stench threatened to overpower Kral Mazan completely. He fought off the urge to retch and walked down the damp passageway. His torch, held aloft, cast an autumn hue upon the slime mucked verdigris of the tunnel walls. The squelching sound of his footsteps echoed along with the refrain of droplets falling in an ever-present torrent.

The thief cursed the circumstances that caused him to wander, bereft of treasure and folio of arcane alchemical lore, through the dank cesspool beneath the city of Vasaros. His successful burglary of the city's most prominent optimate had filled his knapsack with more wealth than the kings of Inbidia, Pevnost or Ticaret. But the machinations of an incensed sorcerer had swiftly reversed Kral's fortunes and he had fled into this subterranean labyrinth to escape. All his purloined pelf, save the basket-hilted sword he wore at his side, lay within the wizard's clutches forever out of reach.

Kral had been wandering for hours in what he hoped was the general direction of the city outskirts, desperately searching for an escape beyond its walls. Vasaros was a sprawling metropolis and its sewer system ran for miles. Completely unfamiliar with its intricacies, he quickly became lost.

As he neared a shadowed intersection, subtle chittering could barely be heard above the ambient sound of dripping water, like a child knocking slimy pebbles. Kral drew closer, squinting to get a better look within the tenebrous gloom.

A guttural cry echoed down the cavernous corridors as a horde burst from the shadows. Kral was momentarily stunned by the strangeness of the creatures that careened toward him. Their squat bodies were covered in fur, and they had protruding snouts and wide, round ears. Vermicular tails wriggled behind them as they ran. Long-fingered hands carried crude clubs, daggers, spears or shields; the pale flesh wrapped around handles like grub worms on desiccated bones.

With pardine swiftness, Kral unsheathed his sword and ran to meet the rushing band. He parried the thrust of a spear and smashed its owner's face with his torch. Flame sprouted upon the creature's matted fur, and soon it was completely alight. It screamed a raspy epitaph and ran amongst its fellows, spreading the blaze before it collapsed in a smoldering heap in ankle-deep water. Shrieking rat-men

rolled in the fecund flow to douse their burning coats. Dozens more rushed, unfazed, past the cinders that remained of their fallen comrades.

In moments Kral was immured by the force. His sword sang as it sliced through the air, biting deep in flesh and bone; soon the virid waters turned a deep crimson. But he was one man against a horde and he was quickly pulled down and pummeled by the mob.

The rat-men led Kral, hands bound behind his back, down winding paths. Stripped of the scabbard, his sword now lay in the grime-crusting hands of the lead rat. Their band was around thirty strong and they walked in a three-column formation, keeping Kral in the center, surrounded. Struggle as he might, he could not break the bonds even should an escape route present itself.

A feeling of insurmountable doom fell upon him. He did not know why these creatures had captured him alive, especially after he had slain so many of their fellows, but it could mean naught but ill.

Without a torch, his eyes could barely make out the path they took in the gloom. They went in silence, save for a few moments when chattering conversation rippled through the ranks as the group slowed near crossroads and sent scouts ahead to check for ambush.

After seemingly interminable hours of careful marching, the corridor opened wide into a vast chamber that spanned many levels and stretched out beyond his sight. Hundreds of tunnels ran their course to open in this underground atrium. Filthy water fell in rivulets into a scummy, iridescent pool many feet below. Clumps of phosphorescent fungi clinging to the walls cast dim illumination.

Dwellings roughly constructed out of bits of cloth or hide filled the cavern. Each varied wildly in size and design. Kral had been taken to the village of the rat-men. Curious bystanders gathered to watch as he was led down makeshift walkways of hide and bone, through avenues of tents and shacks whose occupants stared out with glittering, inhuman eyes. A wild clacking rippled through the cavern.

The procession came to a stop in front of the largest building he had seen so far. A door in its center was the sole egress. Kral's captors roughly shoved him forward to the front of the group. The door opened, and the head of a grey, black-eyed rat poked out. It looked Kral over quizzically.

“You are Kral Mazan?” he asked, strangely stretching the syllables in a voice that whistled through murine teeth.

Kral stood still in shocked silence for several seconds. He had not thought the rat-men would want him for anything more than food or cruel sport. That they had a personal interest in him was entirely unexpected. He didn't know how to take it.

“What?” Kral asked.

“I said,” the rat replied slowly. “You. Are. Kral. Mazan?”

“Oh. Yes, I am,” Kral managed. “Who are you?”

“I am Skrit, but that is not important. Please come in. The King would like to speak with you.”

Skrit opened the door and beckoned Kral to enter.

Inside the ramshackle hall of the Rat King, low amber light from sparsely placed oil lamps cast dancing skeletal shadows. Rat musk was strong in the stuffy, windowless room. A long table of moldy wood dominated the hall; dozens of mismatched, chipped plates and platters dotted its length, covered in rotten fruit, partially eaten fish and gnawed bones.

Beyond the table's head, raised upon a dais, stood an ancient, broken chair, its upholstered seat ripped and stained. Piled like a dragon's hoard behind it was a magnificent collection of gold and jewels. The Rat King sat proudly on his throne. A golden circlet lay atop the white fur of his head. His red eyes burned brightly in the lamplight. The King spoke in a voice of strange, inhuman timbre and sibilance as Kral was led before him from the opposite end of the hall.

“Welcome to our city, Kral Mazan. I hope my troops were not overly rough in detaining you.”

“No more rough than me,” Kral said dryly. Flanked by Skrit, he stood in front of the rickety throne looking up into the Rat King's eyes. “What do you want with me? If I'm to burden your decrepit table as a ceremonial feast or some other fribble, be on with it! I've no patience for a gloating pre-disembowelment speech.”

The Rat King burst into laughter. “I have no intention of eating you! I have need of you. Word of your looting Geigar Varakas' vault has already reached us here in the sewers. No other thief has ever entered the confines of his walls and lived.”

“Why would you desire the service of one who has killed so many of your soldiers?” Kral asked.

“All soldiers must be prepared to die for the will of their King, Kral Mazan,” said the Rat King.

Kral’s face lightened slightly, and he mentally shifted now that being the King’s next meal was off the table. “What do you need that only a thief of my unparalleled skill can provide for you?” Kral nodded to his bound hands as he spoke.

The King gestured to Skrit who stood to the side inspecting Kral’s broadsword with unabashed awe. The sword was a fantastic example of the bladesmith’s art. Its complex hilt of latticed bars cupped a grip of black galuchat wrapped in silver wire. Its brazen cat’s head pommel was textured in fine detail and engraved with a flower. Incised lines followed the ricasso and fuller, and runes that defied his understanding ran within the groove. The broad blade had a chatoyant luster as it caught the light, its silvern metal like steel, yet keener and stronger.

Skrit began to cut free Kral’s hands, and the King leaned forward on his throne. He continued in hushed tones so his voice would not carry beyond the throne room.

“Long ago the froscielde, frog-men who live deep within these tunnels of muck and slime, crept into our city during the night. They silently killed our sentries and cunningly sneaked into the throne room itself. The filthy toads slaughtered the old king as he slept and stole the déofolgiel from its pillar.”

“What was this déofolgiel?” Kral interrupted.

“An idol of great power, carved from green stone. When we were still a young race beneath the surface of the earth, a scout happened upon this junction in which we now live. As he drank from the pool that is fed by the many waterfalls, he discovered the déofolgiel below its slick iridescent surface. The stone was carved in the shape of a grinning rat, and a prickling cold coursed through the body of all who touched it.

“The scout became our king and founded this city, the only city of the rats. Mighty buildings were erected, treasure was scavenged from the waters, food was plenty and we multiplied.

“Now, our city has fallen from greatness. The once resplendent buildings are rotting shacks; the very chairs we sit upon crumble

beneath us.”

Kral cleared his throat to interrupt the Rat King’s soliloquy and wondered what the rat-men’s definition of a mighty building could be. “What does all that have to do with me?”

The rat narrowed his eyes and a hard edge crept into his tone. “You? Why, you are to steal the déofolgiel back for us, of course. None of our expeditions sent to retrieve it over the generations have ever returned.”

Kral chuckled. “If your own people haven’t been able to get it back, why do you think I can?”

“Because you are the only thief that has set foot in Geigar Varakas’ manse and lived,” said the King.

“It is true I am quite skilled,” he said, unconsciously rubbing the fresh scars on his left forearm. A woman’s schemes had almost cost him his life that night. Yet, Firiën’s involvement had curiously escaped notice. “I don’t usually work for others. What do I get out of this deal?”

It was the Rat King’s turn to chuckle. “If you bring me the relic my people have so long desired, we will show you the way through our tunnels. My soldiers inform me you have become quite lost.”

Kral frowned. He was quite lost, there was no denying it. But getting further lost trying to find an idol for some crazed rats did not seem like a great improvement to his situation.

“Well and good, but how am I to find this déofolgiel without losing my way again? I don’t know where these frog-men reside.”

The King gestured behind Kral. “Skrit will show you the way and assist you in any other way you require.”

Kral turned and looked over the gray-furred rat. “No offense but I don’t think an old greymien is going to do much but slow me down.”

“I am not old,” Skrit said.

“I assumed, since you’re so grey...” Kral’s voice trailed off.

“The color of our fur has nothing to do with age. It is merely decorative,” Skrit replied, a note of irritation in his voice.

“Skrit is one of my most loyal bodyguards,” the Rat King broke in. “His skill in swordplay is unmatched among our people. He will do all he can to help you.”

Kral sighed and held his hand out to Skrit. “Very well then. I’ll take my sword back now.”

Skrit led the way through a maze of twisting passages. A longsword dangled in its sheath at his side; its decorated pommel the size of a tangerine.

The strange fungal growths Kral had seen on the cavern walls now served as torches, softly illuminating their path. The complex network of interweaving corridors taxed Kral's memory as he strained to remember the route Skrit was taking. Occasionally they would reach a crossway and pause while Skrit raised his snout and sniffed the air cautiously.

"What are you doing?" asked Kral the first time Skrit stopped them.

"Following the scent of froscielde," the big rat replied. "It has been many years since any rat has been to their city."

"Don't you know the way?" Kral asked concernedly.

"Only the general direction. But we'll find it. Their stench is a trail even a child could follow."

The way slowly narrowed until eventually they were forced to crawl on hands and knees to fit through its confines. The oppressive, stagnant air made Kral sweat, and his lungs tighten in his chest. Every breath he took was a sticky, ragged, claustrophobic nightmare. The smell of offal and wet rat fur filled his nostrils, and slick walls pressed in upon him from all sides.

Just when he thought he could take no more, the tunnel widened, abruptly opening into a vast and brilliantly lit cavern. Fresh air, cool and sweet, filled Kral's burning lungs as he moved up to stand beside Skrit and peer over the edge.

Light filtered down from somewhere above in the unseen heights, vaporous motes danced in the beams. Around the cavern, hundreds more tunnels breached the stone wall, and cascading opalescent waterfalls sparkled as they fell to crash into an ultramarine pool below. Even the water at their feet fell free in a crystal-clear flow. Fine, cool mist wafted up to them in a refreshing spray.

Beside the scintillant pool stood the most beautiful city Kral had ever seen. Its shining towers of green marble bricks were polished bright and gleamed in the light from above. Streets and avenues of smooth stone ran hither and yon in an ophidian knot of pathways leading to homes and buildings crafted in heart-wrenching beauty.

Along these avenues strode tall creatures in ivory togas embroidered with cloth of gold that covered mottled irised skin. Long graceful limbs ended in webbed appendages, and broad heads stooped upon wide shoulders, topped by two bulbous hemispherical eyes. Frog-men gestured to each other as they went along their way. The city below was a bustling hive of batrachian noises and activity.

Skrit made an unsettling growl at the sight of the frog-men, and Kral quickly motioned for silence. The rat gave him a sidelong glance then grunted his assent.

“Has the city of the frog-men always been so wondrous?” asked Kral.

“No rats now live that have seen it, though our stories do not describe it so.” There was a note of shocked numbness to Skrit’s voice. “The frosciende were thought to live in crumbling hovels much like our own.”

They looked out onto the city once more. For several minutes they sat in silent awe of its breathtaking beauty.

“In a city this large, how will we find the déofolgiel quickly, and without being seen?” Skrit asked, a worried expression in his eyes.

“Luck will keep us from being seen,” Kral replied. “As for finding your idol, that’s easy,” he pointed, indicating a marmorean dome that towered in the center of the city. “Surely that’s where it will be.”

“How do you know?” asked Skrit, disbelief in his voice.

“Intuition, friend. It’s never steered me wrong.”

Skrit grunted. “There are a few more hours yet until the time of sleep. We can wait here until the streets clear of vermin, then make our way down.”

“At least there’s fresh air here,” replied Kral, stretching out his limbs. “But how the water manages to be pure in this place puzzles me.”

They waited patiently as the light gradually dimmed to a pearlescent glow. Slowly the streets below cleared until it seemed to the thieves they looked upon a city abandoned. Skrit produced rope from a battered leather satchel and tied it fast to an outcropping of rock. Far below the unwound rope could be seen running against the length of the stone wall to finally dangle in the limpid pool.

Noiselessly the two made their way down the rock face, past many more openings that poured out into the cavern. Once they

reached the bottom, they swam across to the gleaming city that loomed above like a verdant colossus.

From the streets, the imposing forms of the green marble buildings seemed to be built in twisted, unreal angles. The alien architecture took on an otherworldly air as they made their way down snaking avenues. Darting shadow to shadow, they soon arrived at the dome finding it unguarded.

The dome dominated the area, its hulking presence casting long, deep shadows in the cavern's dim illumination. Swirling green marble polished to a virescent sheen made up its structure. A portico formed by fluted columns of green hematite ran around it. Tall, peaked windows stood beside giant double doors, banded in wrought iron.

Crouching by one of the doors, Kral gently tried and found it locked. Quickly inspecting the iron lock, he removed a set of picks from his belt pouch and worked them into the keyhole. Skrit stood beside him, eyeing the courtyard and the shadowed crevasses of surrounding buildings, wary for any sign of an ambush.

With practiced ease, Kral deftly worked the lock free and quietly cracked the door open. Inside not a soul could be seen.

The entryway led into a large chamber of descending concentric circles. Stone steps descended to a wide floor upon which five pillars stood. Each was carved with strangely contorted figures, their blank eyes and faces staring out from green and black stone.

Upon the central pillar lay an effigy on a stand of brass. Light from some orifice in the curved ceiling cast down upon it in an opalescent stream. The soft light reflecting off all the polished marble made the thieves feel as though they stood at the bottom of the sea in some lost and sunken city forgotten to the winds of time.

Kral turned to his companion and signed for him to stay at the chamber's entrance. The rat nodded agreement, handed over his empty knapsack and watched as Kral made his way to the pillars below.

The green marble floor seemed like a swirling carpet of forest moss beneath his feet. Soundlessly he passed the unnerving blank gazes of carven figures; their undulating contortions emphasizing the strangeness of the scene. With uncanny speed Kral scaled the central pillar, his soft leather boots easily gaining purchase on the stone. At the top, he stared at the graven image of a frog cut from a pale green

stone. The idol was distorted, with a broad mouth showing rows of strange teeth.

Kral stared at it for a moment, motionless. Realization dawned that he was not reclaiming the rat-men's mainour, but looting the frog-men's shrine. It was the rat-men, however, who had promised to show him the way out of the sewers, and he doubted the froscielde would be receptive to anything someone who had infiltrated their temple had to say.

Carefully, Kral picked up the idol; it was icy cold to his touch, like a copper goblet filled with snow. He stashed it in the knapsack and jumped to the ground.

Skrit smiled and waved for Kral to hurry back to the entrance. As Kral began to make his way back, a loud crack reverberated through the dome. The thieves stood transfixed by shock at the sudden outburst. Again the plegnic clangor echoed through the room, and the thieves watched in horror as the figures carved into the pillars jerkily pulled themselves free of the stone.

Whipping his sword free, Kral sprinted for the entrance but was quickly surrounded by ten stone guardians. Their forms were carved in grotesque imitation of fighting men of varying shapes. Rat-men, frog-men, and humans in armor—their bodies were misshapen and faces twisted in hideous expressions. All ten figures advanced upon him, arms held out to grasp and rend. Kral crouched low, sword held at the ready, then sprang at the foremost figure of the cyclolith.

His blade swept the air in a great arc. There was a clang of steel on stone and his sword cleaved through the arm of an oncoming statue, slicing through stone as if he cut through suet. The severed limb crashed to the ground, gouging great marks in the polished marble floor. The guardian lashed at Kral's head, unperturbed by the thief's attack.

Kral twisted and dodged blows from oncoming figurals. One struck Kral on the left arm with a blow like a blacksmith's hammer. Kral's arm went numb, and he spun, lashing wildly. His sword bit through a stone chest and a statue fell in two. To his horror, the torso continued to scabble forward, stone fingers rending the floor, gap-mouth gnashing the air.

Watching from the entrance, Skrit too drew his longsword and, with an inhuman shriek, ran at the circle of animate statuary. The first

sculpture had its back to the rat and was unprepared for an attack from the flank. Skrit's blade descended like a butcher's cleaver only to clang ineffectually against the hard rock. Fragments of stone flew from the gouged head, and a great notch formed on the sword's once-fair blade.

Turning, the animated stone struck, mute orifice wide for a bite of exposed flesh. Skrit shoved the monster away then took his sword by the blade and brought the gigantic pommel crashing into the skull of swirling green marble. Stone shards sprayed through the air at the impact and the statue fell to the ground, lifeless once again.

Bending down, he heaved the stone guardian by an arm and a leg; his murine thews straining, he swung it into the next. Green bodies exploded in a shower of marble fragments.

Several statues turned from Kral and descended upon Skrit. Kral's blade landed a mighty blow on a passing guardian, cleaving the head from its shoulders. The stone form collapsed in a heap upon the ruined floor.

Turning back to his companion he saw Skrit beset by the monsters. Their implacable fingers gripped legs and arms, pulled fur and clothes; stone mouths bit down into yielding flesh. Kral sliced at the biting form on Skrit's back. Its severed head flew through the air and Skrit pulled the clinging body from him, swinging it down to crash upon the figure chewing his thigh.

Kral's sword was a blur as he cut down the statues facing him. In Skrit's hands, the remains of a stone femur smashed another against the head over and over until both leg and head were splinters dusting the once-unmarked floor. Eventually, all that remained standing in the circular chamber were the panting, bleeding figures of Kral and Skrit. Their bruised and battered bodies ached, their lungs burned, but they had no time to recover.

The sound of a horn blaring through the night filtered through the walls of the dome. The thieves looked at each other for a brief moment then ran for the door.

They burst out into the shadowy streets. Once-silent avenues now echoed with the sound of confused croaks and shuffling feet. Kral and Skrit ran straight for the shore and the refuge of their tunnel waiting beyond.

Shocked frog-men began to appear at the mouths of intersecting streets. Startled cries lit up the night in a cacophony of batrachian croaking. As the thieves reached the crystal pool, they were a scant few feet ahead of an angry mob. They dived into the water and swam with all their might for the rope that dangled among the rocks on the far shore.

The gathered throng of frog-men threw rocks at the retreating forms of the human and rat and then parted as three tall, broad-shouldered specimens armed with long spears forced their way through the crowd. Their bulging muscles coiled beneath mottled skin as they crouched and sprang into the water.

The thieves reached the rope and began the fifty-foot climb to the dark passage above. Below them the rabble jumped and danced in rage, their angry croaking echoed through the massive cavern. Kral and Skrit charged up the rock face as quickly as their burning muscles could pull them.

After what seemed an eternity Kral reached the mouth and heaved himself over the side. Turning to help Skrit, he was shocked to see three frog warriors climbing the rope right behind them. He reached down to offer the rat his hand. Skrit reached to take the proffered assistance as a spear thrust caught a glancing blow on his right calf.

Shifting his stance, Kral drew his sword. Leaning out over Skrit, barely clinging to the rocks around the ledge, he cut the rope beneath Skrit's feet in one savage strike. The frog-men gave startled croaks then fell like stones to the pool below.

Suddenly a muculent tongue streaked through the air and wrapped round Skrit's leg. The weight of the falling frog-man hit and almost dislodged him from his perch. Only the quick reaction of Kral, who grabbed the rodent's hands, kept him from being pulled into the crystalline depths below.

The last frog warrior wriggled and swayed in the air as he tried to unroot his prey. Kral desperately pulled his companion into the tunnel, corded muscles straining against the weight of rat and frog. Finally, inch by inch, the rat was lifted over the lip. His scrabbling claws finding purchase, he held on as Kral lifted his sword once again and chopped through the clinging frog tongue. Far below they heard a pain-filled shriek soon followed by a splash.

The pair looked at each other for a few moments, relief on each of their faces.

“That’s twice you saved my life now,” said Skrit, exhaustion made the s’s whistle through his teeth.

“Of course. I don’t abandon friends in a fight.”

Tired and in pain, they turned and walked back the way they had come. As they rounded the bend, blocking off sight of the fantastic city of the frog-men, a great groaning, creaking sound reverberated around them. It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth itself. The tunnel shook, and a thunderous roar rumbled through their core. Then, abruptly, all was still again.

The thieves made their way back as fast as they could manage. Skrit limped as he led them into the village. Word spread quickly that they had arrived. As they walked through the dingy streets by ramshackle homes, a crowd formed around them. Young rats flitted in and out between the legs of adults, laughing and screaming with no true idea of what was going on. When they reached the King’s hall, soldiers gathered and kept the crowd back, clearing a wide path.

Skrit walked up to the door and opened it without preamble. Inside little had changed from Kral’s first visit. The long dilapidated table was now bare, rows of braziers cast bright incarnadine light through all corners of the room. The Rat King sat proudly upon his broken throne, ruby eyes burning with a hungry fire as he watched the two approach.

“Show it to me,” said the King. His voice was hushed and trembled with anticipation.

Kral apprehensively reached into the bag that hung at his belt, felt the icy chill run through him as his fingers wrapped round the idol, and drew it forth. It was a misshapen lump of green rock. All three of the figures stared at it as it shimmered in the flickering light. The Rat King hissed, Kral and Skrit stood in muted shock.

“What is this?” the King demanded. “The froscielde debased our idol and this is all that remains?”

“It did not look thus when we took it from the froscielde’s temple, sire,” said Skrit, eyeing Kral carefully. “Some sorcery must have turned it so.”

“Even as it is,” Kral added, “there is a power in this stone. You can feel it in your bones as you touch it.” Kral handed the idol to the King.

The King accepted the remains, and his eyes brightened at the feeling of that cold chill. “It holds a great power indeed. Well done. We will honor our agreement and show you the way out of the city, but first you must stay and celebrate with us tonight.”

Even as he spoke, the idol began to dissolve in spumes of sea foam. They stared in amazement as it sloughed away, leaving the graven image of a snarling rat.

“It seems the idol is much more than a simple stone,” said Kral. The others nodded in silent agreement.

That night the King’s hall was crowded with important citizens and high ranking soldiers. Kral sat near the head of the long table at the King’s left hand while Skrit sat to the King’s right. Musicians in a corner played a vibrant tune. Servants brought wine in silver pitchers and poured into goblets of gold and brass. Fresh fruit was carried on silver platters and Kral eagerly ate the grapes, dates, pomegranates, and oranges.

Kral felt a pleasant glow from the good vintages and palative viands. As the platters emptied the King stood and clapped twice to gain the attention of his servants.

“Bring in the meat!” the King roared and the crowd of rats banged the table with fists, letting out exultant shouts.

From the back of the room, four rat-men carried in a small cage of rough wood tied together with leather thongs. In the cage crouched a red-haired woman, her violet eyes burned with porphyrean fire.

“Let me out, you vile rodents!” she screamed, showering maledictions upon the gathered throng.

It was Firien, the woman whose selective information had led Kral into a trap in the manse of Geigar Varakas. Though she had later saved his life, he harbored her no gratitude. A shameful satisfaction at her current situation thrilled the thief’s soul. Kral turned to Skrit and the Rat King.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Another human we caught wandering our domain,” the Rat King replied. “We promised not to eat you because you brought us our

long-lost idol,” he added after seeing the look on Kral’s face.

“Eat humans often, do you?” Irritation began to gnaw at the better part of Kral’s psyche.

Skrit, sensing the dangerous direction the conversation was heading, attempted to intervene.

“Perhaps, sire, Kral would like to take the woman as another gift?”

“And ruin the main course?” cried the King. “No.”

Firien finally noticed Kral as she was carried nearer and nearer the table’s head. “You! Get me out of here!”

“Why should I care what happens to you?” Kral growled. “You used me as a distraction in your failed attempt to enter Varakas’ vault. If not for my considerable skills with a blade, I would even now lie dead upon his carpeted floor.”

Unabashed, Firien clung to the bars and tried to look deep into Kral’s eyes. “Of course I knew you would handily dispatch the guards I was too frail to face myself. Don’t forget, it was I who threw you the endowed sword that now hangs about your waist. If not for me, you would now fill the belly of a demoniac horror.”

Her diatribe was cut short as she was finally laid upon the table in front of the King and his honored guests. The Rat King drooled and picked up tarnished utensils as a servitor prepared to thrust a long misericorde through the cage.

Kral realized he could not allow a fellow human, even one who had wronged him, to be eaten by these vermin. He turned to the King once more. “Let her go, and we’ll be on our way.”

The King narrowed his eyes at Kral, leaned forward in his seat, and said, “No. I will not be ordered about in my own hall. Be still, man.”

Like a bull, Kral charged up from his seat, sending it flying to the ground behind him. He drew his sword and struck the King’s slaving face with the basket hilt. As the King fell sprawling to the ground unconscious, Kral sprung atop the table kicking the shocked servitor in the stomach. The rat fell to the floor. Kral slashed the bars of Firien’s cage, and they flew apart like straw blown in a gale. Firien jumped from the cage and stood beside Kral, arms on his side. The hall sat in stunned silence for a heartbeat.

Guards from around the hall closed in on Kral, swords drawn. Skrit, a sad frown on his face, slowly stood from his chair and drew his

longsword.

“Stay with me,” Kral said to Firien, then dashed across the table to the waiting door. Guards ran to the door to stand at the ready, swords held high. Kral kicked a sitting, screaming rat in the face and sent him, chair and all, into the crowd of guards. Several fell, tangled with chair or moaning reveler. Kral’s sword flashed in the light of braziers. He thrust and slashed, and red blood splattered the floor of the hall.

With a start, Kral saw that Firien had disappeared. Shocked and dismayed, he looked desperately around the room and finally saw her behind the King’s throne searching through piles of treasure. Kral groaned. He did not know how she had gotten there, nor how she would get back through the murine sea.

Kral parried and feinted, pierced and sliced in a whirlwind of bloody destruction. His sword weaved a skein of death as he fought for the door. He was cut on his face and arms, but the guards gave way under his onslaught. Out of the crowd, Firien appeared again at his side, a leather satchel slung round her shoulder.

More rats streamed in to replace their fallen brothers. The door stood a scant few feet away, but Kral’s progress was checked by the swarm. Kral prepared himself for a final push, then Skrit barreled his way through the crowd, arms held up in appeasement. Kral and Skrit stood staring into each other’s eyes for several moments. Firien looked from thief to rat-man and back again.

Skrit turned and opened the door. “I owe you my life, twice over. Now we are even. Go, both of you.”

Kral nodded and pulled Firien through the door.

“Do you happen to know a way out of these sewers,” Kral asked as they ran through the village. “Preferably one that leads outside the city?” Curious eyes began to shine in the darkness as they ran past alleyways and shadowed recesses.

“Yes, of course. I was making my way out of the city through the sewer’s twisting tunnels when these vermin attacked me.” Her face was red with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. “Exhausted, I was unable to perform the rites and incantations I had memorized for my defense. They overwhelmed me before I could dispatch them.”

“I didn’t know you were a witch,” Kral said uncomfortably. “Well, lead the way.”

“I am a sorceress. Backwoods medicine women in knitting circles are witches.” Firien pulled up short and began to rifle through a satchel that Kral hadn’t noticed before. She produced a large, jagged heliotrope and held it in her hands. “This lodestone will show us to the proper course.”

Kral followed her through the rat village. It seemed as though the run-down shacks were standing taller as they neared the waterfall pool. Kral was shocked to see the once scum-ridden water was now crystal clear and blue as topaz.

The lodestone guided them to the mouth of a tunnel three levels above. Handholds were abundant in the rock. As they climbed, a rumble shook the stone beneath them and reverberated throughout the cavern. Frightened they hurried their ascent and felt relief when they entered and found the passage clear. Firien led the way further into the depths.

Kral began to follow but turned to take one last glance at the village below. His gaze rested on the most beautiful city he had ever seen, save for one other. Its gleaming green marble towers were only exceeded by a monstrous dome looming from the center of the city.

Kral turned and followed Firien away.

Kenneth R. Gower writes sword & sorcery, science fiction and weird stories. He lives in Texas with his wife and three children. To see more from him, visit www.kennethgower.com.

A GAME OF THRONES... ON MARS

A MYSTERIOUS
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RED PLANET TO
ARRIVE.

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TELLS THEM
HER STORY,
EVERYTHING
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WE KNEW
ABOUT OUR
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Born to Storm the Citadel of Mettathok

By D.M. Ritzlin

For aeons, Verrockiel the Warlord has struggled vainly to seize the stronghold of Mettathok! With infinite time and resources at Verrockiel's disposal, what of those fated to claw, tooth and nail, inch-by-inch, progress towards their master's goals?!

I achieved consciousness in total darkness. Moist, squishy walls hemmed me in on all sides. Groping blindly, I found an opening and crawled down what I believed was some sort of corridor or tunnel. A spot of light in the distance rent the curtain of abyssal gloom, and the walls behind me closed in and pushed me forward. I was violently ejected through an aperture and found myself on solid ground, covered in a viscid ooze of roseate hue.

I rose to my knees and wiped the ooze from my eyes with a claw gray as granite. I turned around, curious as to the nature of the enclosure from which I had escaped. Immediately, I regretted it. My eyes were offended by the sight of an immense nude female form, lying spread-eagle, that was as large as it was grotesque. The being, whose sore-riddled skin was the color of old parchment, appeared comatose. A number of smaller creatures were spat out from her orifice in rapid succession. The appearance of any one of these was much like another. One description could apply to any with little discrepancy. Approximately five feet tall, gray skin, pointed ears, bald, with fearsome fangs and claws. These creatures, I was soon to learn, were moon-demons like myself.

At first I was too engrossed in wrapping my mind around the meaning of this appalling vision to notice the cacophony surrounding me. Cries of anguish, yells of exultation, and the relentless clash of steel on steel mixed together to form a crude sonic hammer that punished my eardrums. Piercing this din was a bellowing voice, the voice of one who demanded obedience.

“Ho there, newborn recruits! March this way! Now!”

Our commander was a demon of towering height and swinish countenance. He bore little resemblance to myself or anything I had heretofore seen. A leather belt from which many skulls dangled decorated his enormous jiggling gut. No other apparel adorned his body.

My brethren and I marched beneath the night sky, its blackness nearly overwhelmed by the multitude of shining stars. The illumination was so great I could see almost as clearly as if it were day. I discerned a look of confusion on the slime-covered faces of my fellows, who were even more perturbed than I at our circumstances.

As we marched across an open field of stone we passed more of the “mothers” (it sickens me to name them thusly) who were spewing forth more demon-bastards to swell our ranks. Our troop numbered roughly one hundred by the time we were ordered to halt.

Our commander stood in front of us and introduced himself as Verrockiel the Warlord. “You were born for one purpose,” he told us. “To

slay! That is all I ask of you. You need bring me the head of but one defender of yonder fortress and your servitude to me is complete. Few of you will succeed. Perhaps none of you, if you be a poor batch... but those who triumph shall receive a reward undreamt of! Slay or be slain!"

I cleared my throat and spoke my first words. "And who is it that we shall slay, Warlord?"

"The thralls of my arch enemy, Mettathok!" snarled Verrockiel. "Long have I coveted his citadel. But I am patient. Eventually, he will succumb to my hordes. His warriors may be superior in battle, but more fall with each wave I send. He can never replenish his numbers; however, that is no problem for me! Ho, ho!"

The demon to my left raised a claw. "Why do you desire the citadel of Mettathok?" he asked.

Verrockiel quickly leaned down and slapped the demon. "Ask me no irrelevant questions."

"I have a question that I believe to be relevant," I said. "What if I choose not to risk my life, which has only but recently begun, by participating in this ceaseless war against Mettathok?"

"Ah, now that *is* a good question! If you refuse your duty, I will give you to Minndo the Tormentor! No torturer in all of Uzz is more proficient than he! And none take more delight in their work than Minndo, either! Already in my mind I can hear his jovial laughter as he hammers poisoned spikes into the flesh of the cowardly!" Verrockiel's snout wrinkled in glee. "It would not displease me if you refuse to fight. You would provide fine entertainment indeed! Do any of you choose Minndo over Mettathok?"

There were no volunteers.

"Very well, then. Onward to the citadel!"

We resumed our march. In spite of our warlord's impassioned speech, morale was poor. In a short time, the prize which Verrockiel coveted so greatly came into our view. Even at a distance I could hear the clash of steel and smell the stench of death. The citadel's lofty spires loomed high, seemingly reaching amongst the stars. The towers were of varying sizes and placed erratically throughout the structure. The walls of the keep were ten times my height, but only half as tall as the smallest tower. Piled against all sides of the outer walls was a veritable mountain of demon corpses. The innumerable casualties our army had suffered lent us some advantage, as our troops could climb this agglutinated heap of vanquished soldiers and do battle with the enemy on the parapets. No need for siege engines!

Our troop joined the mass of legions surrounding the citadel. We waited for our warlord to issue the order to attack, our anxiety mounting by the minute. Eventually we heard Verrockiel's bellowing voice. "Now! Remember, only one head earns you a reward undreamt of! Slay or be slain!"

We charged towards the ever-growing pile of the dead and began our ascent. As we climbed we armed ourselves with the swords of those who had fallen before us. Some of the blades were dented and rusty, while others were in fine condition. I found a splendid one, virtually unblemished, with a crossguard sculpted into the shape of a twisting serpent. Its previous owner must have perished before being able to use it.

We neared the summit of the horrible mount, anxious to strike. Misfortune befell us at once. Before any of us could swing a blade, a torrent of noxious green acid splashed down upon our right wing, taking us completely by surprise. A dozen of our troop screeched in agony as what remained of their disintegrating bodies writhed in their death throes. I glanced upwards at the nearest tower and saw a monstrous face protruding from the wall, which I mistakenly took to be a stone carving. The face proved animate, opening wide its maw and vomiting forth another quantity of the terrible hazardous substance. A half dozen more of us perished ignominiously. The face looked down upon the devastation it had caused and beamed with pride. The survivors hurried away from the tower of the face and sallied forth.

Finally we drew close enough to engage the enemy in hand to hand combat. Up close, I could see that the keep's defenders were of a much greater size than I thought. Verrockiel would look puny standing next to them. For weaponry, they wielded deadly two-handed scimitars, axes, and maces. Silvern helmets encased their heads, but they wore little other protective covering apart from bracers of thick black leather.

The reach of those mighty tools of carnage, handled by even mightier thews, proved disastrous for us. One sweep of an axe sheared limbs and heads from demon bodies, drenching the parapets with thick brown blood. I shouted to my brethren to fall back.

"We must use our only advantage—our numbers," I told them. "We will divide ourselves into squads of five. Each group will choose one particular enemy to swarm. Some unlucky ones may fall, but enough will survive to bring one down, and those survivors will return to Verrockiel and collect their reward."

None disputed the wisdom of my plan. They merely nodded in silent agreement. It dawned on me that the brain activity of my fellows was quite limited, which did not bode well for our chances of success. All the more reason for me to take command of this mission. Never place your fate in the hands of fools.

After picking four for my squad, I selected an enemy on the battlements. "That one is our target. Now charge!"

My fighters rushed in before me. The foremost met his fate immediately. The defender crashed his mace down upon his skull, pulverizing it. Though he died a grisly death, he served his purpose. Before our enemy could lift his weapon again, the rest of us grabbed his arms and attempted to pull him over the parapet. Even with four against one, it was an incredible struggle, but we accomplished it. His body landed on the corpse-mount with a thud.

The warrior of Mettathok dropped his mace and rose to his knees. With each hand, he grasped the throat of a demon and squeezed. Veins jutted out on the demons' foreheads under the pressure of the warrior's iron grip.

With my opponent focused on crushing the two unfortunate ones with his bare hands, I seized the opportunity and struck. My blade sliced into the back of his thickly-muscled leg, severing tendons. Bestially he screamed, more with fury than with agony, and cast aside the two feebly-struggling bodies in his hands. I do not know if they died by his hands, but I never saw them again after they tumbled down the corpse-mount.

The still-kneeling warrior turned his attention towards me and smote me with a great fist, sending me sprawling. My fangs rattled and my head was a-spin. As I regained my footing, the last member of my squad besides myself who was not yet incapacitated struck a blow upon the warrior's helmet with a resounding clang. It did little harm to the giant. My comrade attacked again, this time aiming for the neck. The warrior raised his left arm and blocked the strike with his leather bracer. Brown blood seeped through the cut, but if he felt pain, he showed no sign. Instead, he disdainfully snatched my comrade's sword from his claws. With one hand the mighty warrior lifted my fellow demon by the neck, and with the other, disemboweled him with his own blade.

While the warrior disposed of the last of my comrades, I circled behind him. With a savage thrust, my sword pierced through the unprotected muscles of his exposed back. Thrice more I struck, doused by the arterial spray released from his body. The wounded giant

collapsed. With no small effort, I rolled him onto his back. The time had come to deliver the fatal blow.

I reached for the warrior's silvern helmet. He half-heartedly swung a fist at me, but was too weakened to prevent me from removing it. What was revealed beneath that helm startled me, for the warrior had not two eyes like all creatures I had heretofore seen, but a single massive optical organ in the middle of his forehead. The most natural course of action, I thought, would be to jab my thumb deeply into that eyeball, so I did precisely that. The warrior's struggles ceased.

I wiped the gore from my claw on the giant's chest and drew my bloody blade. I hacked again and again at the corded thews of his neck until the ruined head came loose. Victory!

With the grim trophy in my possession, I sped down the mound of corpses, nearly losing my footing. I had descended about halfway before it occurred to me that I did not know how the other squads fared in their battles. Curious, I turned around and gazed upwards. Not a single member of my troop had survived. They had all been born but an hour ago, and now they lay mangled and lifeless beneath the starlit sky. I wasted no time mourning them, instead hurrying to the foot of the mountain.

Verrockiel could not contain his excitement as he saw me approach. "Give, give!" he said, pointing to the severed head. I pitched the foul thing to the overjoyed warlord, who was so delighted he kissed it on the lips. "I am one step closer to my goal—one step closer to the doom of Mettathok! Ho, ho!"

"I believe this terminates my service," I said.

"Yes, of course! Follow me and I will lead you to the reward you so richly deserve," he said.

"A reward undreamt of?"

"Undoubtedly!"

Verrockiel gave orders for the next troop to attack before he led me across the stone field. As we walked, he studied the head I had delivered to him and laughed with elation. Soon we came to the area of the large females who gave birth to me and the rest of Verrockiel's army. No newborn soldiers were in sight, and the females appeared deflated and empty.

"Where is my reward?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Here before you!" said Verrockiel. "I can see by the dimwitted expression on your face that you do not comprehend. I shall elucidate. By virtue of your magnificent fighting skills and tenacity, you have earned the

right to father a new breed of soldiers! Your reward is the glory that will come from spawning the army that will lead to my inevitable triumph over Mettathok! Now, commence impregnating.”

Disgusted and flabbergasted, my jaw hung open. I stared at my warlord in disbelief. “Does this displease you?” Verrockiel asked. “Worry not, for you need only perform this duty until victory is mine. Or one hundred and one years pass. Whichever comes first. But with your superior sperm fueling the birth machines, I do not think it will be long at all.”

“No!” I cried. “I will not perform this repulsive task!”

“What? You dare refuse the honor I have bestowed upon you?” Verrockiel said, offended. “Must I summon Minndo the Tormentor?”

I gulped. “Nay, Verrockiel,” I said through gritted teeth. “Call not your torturer. I will do as you bid.”

“Good, good. Now get to work!”

The war is no closer to ending now than it was on the day of my birth, and I have served nearly half my sentence. Countless numbers of my spawn have gone to their deaths with little to show for it. Very rarely is a head of one of Mettathok’s warriors captured and added to our warlord’s trophy collection. Each day a thought constantly reoccurs in my mind: All those years ago, was I mistaken to have not chosen Minndo?

D.M. Ritzlin is the editor and publisher of the sword-and-sorcery anthology series Swords of Steel. He has also reprinted obscure works by pulp fantasy authors such as Henry Kuttner and Nictzin Dyalhis. After editing stories by other authors, he has now begun to pen tales of his own. For more information on all of his projects and releases, visit dmrbooks.com

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?”

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The Book Hunter's Apprentice

By BARBARA DORAN

An ancient and powerfully magic book has laid a curse of death upon a sage who had spitefully defiled it! Can Zhi, a book hunter, and Qing, her apprentice with the power to "fall" into nearby closets, retrieve the volume from a haunted manse?!

Qing hadn't meant to spy. Hadn't meant to eavesdrop. Had absolutely not meant to get caught.

Yet caught she was. Kicked to the ground, knocked dizzy, blood dripping from her nose, she lay still, hoping the beating was over. It was, but not because her abuser stopped willingly. Someone stood between her and her master. The bookseller—sturdy black cotton boots blocking Qing's view.

"Enough, Mister Xiang." The woman's voice was calm, but there was a faint edge of anger. "She's half your size."

Xiang Deng was not a man to be thwarted. "She's my slave, bookseller. I'll teach her to sneak into my study and hide in my cabinet...." He fell silent, breath sharp in his throat.

Qing dared a peek upwards, seeing only the woman's back and shoulders. She carried no sword, no weapon of any kind, but there was something dangerous about her stance. Master Xiang's bodyguard, Gang, might have dared argue, but Master Xiang was tall and skinny, too weak to do anything himself.

"The law may allow it." The faint edge sharpened. "But what of the Gods? Would you care to ask them directly?"

Qing braced herself, expecting more violence, this time aimed at her protector. Instead, Master Xiang said, "I've no wish to fight. I didn't ask you here for that, Bookseller Zhi. But I can't let a dirty little kitchen slave poke her nose into my business."

Thoughtfully, the bookseller asked, "And if she were not your slave, but mine?" At Master Xiang's puzzled silence she explained, "I've lost my apprentice. You may not think it, but this is a dangerous job I do. I offer this pearl for her." Something glittered between her fingers, almost glowing in the lamplight.

Not quite trustfully, Master Xiang demanded, "And my cousin Cai's book? Will you still retrieve it?"

"I intend to try. Is it a bargain?"

The alacrity with which Master Xiang snatched the pearl frightened Qing. What was it the bookseller really did? Why was the job dangerous? And how could her meager life be anywhere near as valuable as that pearl?

Not that she dared argue when the bookseller picked her up in her arms and carried her away.

"Clean yourself up."

This was the first time Qing had seen her buyer's face. Disoriented, vision shifting strangely, she stared blankly at oddly familiar features. Bookseller Zhi was a dark-haired older woman not much taller than Qing. Her stern expression said she accepted neither foolishness or mischief. Her eyes were calm, though, suggesting she'd judge fairly if one were honest with her.

Zhi's clothing was as plain as the rest of her, tan cotton leggings stuffed into boots, a cotton undertunic beneath a heavier hemp coat woven in patterns of blues, greens, and browns. A tall pack swathed in brown oilcloth sat on the ground beside her, the characters 'book cover' and 'library' in bold calligraphy on its back—a play on the bookseller's name, Zhi Wen Ku. No one would name a child so strangely.

"Don't stare. You'll have plenty of time to look at me." Bookseller Zhi pushed a damp cloth in Qing's hand. Repeated, "Clean yourself up."

Silently, Qing did as she was bidden. She stared at their surroundings, unsure how and when they'd gotten there. Her mind still reeled from her fall into the cabinet. Strange thoughts and memories whirled in her head—thoughts that were simply nonsense. She was a slave. She'd always been a slave. She'd never be anything but a slave.

They sat at a table beneath the heavy awning of an outdoor restaurant. Trees and bushes surrounded them. A dirt road coiled through the woods not far away. Every so often someone walked past, some stopping to find a seat. The smell of roast chicken and steamed bread filled the air, as did the sound of their fellow guests eating, drinking and talking.

Someone slid a plate of chicken and bread in front of Qing, startling her. Another plate and a small jar of cheap wine landed in front of the bookseller. Zhi dropped coins in the waiter's hand and waited until he'd left. "Eat. Slowly. You can tell me your name and how you got in Xiang Deng's cabinet between bites."

"I'm Qing, honored one."

The woman blinked, startled. Then, "I'm a bookseller, child. There's no honor due me." Drinking her wine in what seemed like a single gulp, Zhi beckoned the waiter for more. "Now. How did you get in there? No lies."

Qing hesitated. "I was hiding." There. That was the truth.

"That's what you were doing. Not how you got there."

"I'm not sure." Also true.

"Not a good enough answer."

“I sneaked in. Cook was mad at me, and I wanted to get away.”
Sort of true.

Setting her third wine jar down, Zhi eyed Qing sternly. “How did you sneak in?”

Now she had to lie. How could the bookseller possibly believe the truth? Qing didn’t believe it herself, no matter how often it happened. “I just went in when Master Xiang was gone and climbed inside.”

Zhi leaned close. Too close. Her eyes met Qing’s, trapping her. “Liar.”

Unable to move, unable to argue, Qing admitted, “I fell inside.” Before Zhi could call her a liar again, she added, “I don’t know how it works. It just happens. One minute I’m one place, the next, I’m falling elsewhere.”

For a moment they gazed at each other. Then Zhi smiled. “Good. Better. Can you control it? Do you know why it happens?”

“I can’t control it, no. I think it’s when I really want to be somewhere else. It’s always a cabinet of some sort, and I’ve never gotten very far.” Qing’s fingers shredded her chicken without her really noticing. “It doesn’t work when I’m scared.”

“Just as well, I suppose. What if you got a body part stuck?” Zhi gestured at Qing’s food. “Good enough. Once you’ve eaten, we’ll get to work. That book Xiang Deng wants isn’t going to be easy to get.”

Qing recollected Master Xiang’s request and tried not to blanch. Zhi was right. Qing didn’t know much about books and still less about booksellers. But she did know it’d be easier to steal the Emperor’s own seal than it would be to get so much as a single page from Miser Xiang Cai’s library.

Not with all the dead things guarding it.

Xiang Cai’s mansion stood on the hillside overlooking Zhu valley, directly across from his cousin Xiang Deng’s home. Designed for the Xiang clan’s twin sons a century ago, the two houses had been identical before Xiang Cai had painted his walls vermilion, installed golden tortoises upon his pillars and covered his roof with gold-plated tiles. Now the walls were rotten, falling down around decrepit old buildings that bore some resemblance to a cemetery. Or would, if its dead would just stay in one place.

It wasn’t so bad by day. Miser Xiang Cai’s household didn’t like sunlight. They stuck to the shadows, hopping slowly back and forth as if

going through a normal day. One tried to do laundry, uselessly swirling empty hands over a cauldron. Another decapitated a struggling chicken, a waste of time given the head was already missing.

Qing wondered if she could run away. She could use her strange gift but wasn't sure where it'd take her. All she needed was to land in a cabinet inside Miser Xiang's house.

"What... what are we going to do?"

"Do you know how things got this bad up here?"

Not sure why the question mattered, Qing tried to think. "I've heard Old Miser Xiang offended the Gods, seeking immortality."

"We'd be waist deep in hopping ghosts if the Gods punished every fool seeking immortality. There's that one breaks every sect he enters, just to keep his little life." Zhi leaned against the wall carefully, peering inside. "Do you know how this happened?"

Qing struggled with memory. Why did it all seem so unreal? She always had trouble recovering herself when she fell, as if the hole she dropped through had to be repaid in kind. Perhaps it did? Realizing Zhi was waiting, she forced herself to recollect more. "He found an alchemical manual and learned to turn metals into gold." She indicated the building tiles, gleaming dully in the sunlight.

"Interesting. And left unmolested by thieves? The house must have some powerful defenses." As if to prove Zhi right, a cloud shaded the courtyard, allowing a few of the dead to wander out to practice their martial arts. Rotten flesh dropped ceaselessly from their bones, turning to dust as it fell. One lost an arm, hitting a wooden pole almost as rotten as he was. Without missing a beat, the dead man picked it up and stuck it back in place.

"They say if you die on the premises, Xiang Cai hires your corpse." They'd be cheap servants. The dead didn't eat or drink.

The bookseller regarded the scene a little while longer. "Unless I miss my guess, the book Xiang Deng wants is that very same manual. Apparently he likes the idea of repeating history."

More likely Master Xiang just wanted to learn to make gold like his cousin. "You're better off not trying. If Xiang Cai is alive in there, he surely won't let you steal it."

Zhi scoffed. "Who said anything about theft? Books are my trade. What would people say if I went around stealing them?" She straightened and resettled her backpack. Then, with a deep breath that almost sounded nervous, she walked up to the broken doors of the old

mansion and stepped through, crossing the courtyard to the entry hall as if she belonged there.

The inside of Xiang Cai's mansion was a wreck. Gold everywhere, yes, but the wood beneath was rotten, so every frame creaked in a dusty breeze. Undead servants hopped slowly through the halls, silently going about their business. One, an old man in a steward's simple robes led Zhi and Qing towards the other end of the hall.

A man sat in a golden chair, his expression blank, his eyes scared. From his resemblance to Master Xiang, he had to be Xiang Cai. Unlike his servants, he didn't appear to be dead, but he didn't seem properly alive, either. There was a peculiar translucence to him, as if he were fading away.

"You're the bookseller from before," he whispered.

"It seems so." Zhi gazed sternly at the man. "You appear to be missing something important."

"My shadow," Miser Xiang admitted. "When I tore the book...."

Zhi started. "Tore the book?"

"You... you were there. You saw."

After a moment's silence, Zhi agreed. "Ah, yes. The backlash made me forget. And it has been three years, after all." She spread her hands. "Have you learned your lesson? It was never rightfully yours, but will you accept my offer for it now?"

"Your offer? I will give it to you as a gift if you save me from this hell." Miser Xiang didn't move, but his gaze indicated the undead surrounding him. "Please. I know that if you take it, if you repair it, my shadow will return to me."

"It should, yes." Zhi bowed. "Where is it, then?"

"Still in my vault. I... I can't move from here. You'll have to fetch it yourself. My servants won't help you. The book won't let them."

Zhi's tone was resigned. "As expected. Qing, this place's layout is a mirror image to your old master's house. Did you know that?"

"I... didn't."

"How long have you worked for Xiang Deng?"

The question made no sense but Qing tried to answer. "I'm not sure. All my life, I think?"

"Really?" Zhi sighed when Qing looked confused. "How well do you know his house? Do you know where his vault is?"

Qing was startled to realize she did. She couldn't remember why she'd gone there, nor what she'd been looking for, but she knew where it was. She admitted it, reluctantly. "It's in his study."

"Yes," Miser Xiang agreed, sounding anxious. "You should hurry. Please."

Zhi gestured towards the back of the house, her command clear without a word. Running was still an option but Qing was accustomed to obedience. She led the way, pausing here and there to avoid the dead maidservants going about their business. Or, rather, trying to go about it. Cleaning a mansion was hard enough for the living, nearly impossible for the dead.

Especially when some of that mess was their own rotten body parts.

The study lay in wrack and ruin. The roof had fallen in, gold tiles scattered all over the floor, gleaming dully in the afternoon light. The shelves were covered in dust, spider webs, and rotting books and scroll cases. Most were poetry, just as they'd been in Master Xiang's, but a whole wall covered Imperial law and governance.

The vault wasn't easy to find. Qing wished she could remember how she knew it was there. Whatever the reason, it was another of those befogged memories she'd long since given up probing. "The switch is somewhere here," she told her new master, indicating the shelf behind the broken old desk. "I don't know exactly where."

Zhi set to work, movements quick and sure. She appeared confident, but something seemed wrong to Qing. As calm as Zhi had seemed, as sternly in control, there was a faint air of nervousness about her now. Not that Qing blamed her, given they were in a house filled with hopping ghosts.

"Why did Miser Xiang say we have to hurry?" If there was a time limit on this thing, Qing wanted to know it.

Removing the books, Zhi swept her hand along the back of the shelf. "Aiyahh. I hate splinters," she muttered. Before Qing could repeat the question, she added, "It's almost sundown. We have about an hour to get in and find the book and get out."

"I don't understand."

"Right now the ghosts are going about their daily... ah. Found it. Their daily lives. When night falls, they'll turn vicious." Pushing

something at the back of the shelf, Zhi jumped away as the floor dropped beneath her. "It would be under the house."

"We could leave. Come back when we have more time."

"It won't matter," Zhi gestured at the broken roof. "Up here, there's just enough sunlight to keep the ghosts calm. Down there, it could be full noon and it won't do us any good. Besides, they'll realize what we're up to and make it harder for us if we leave and come back."

While Qing puzzled over the idea of the hopping ghosts being aware, Zhi slid her backpack off. "Let's get this over with." She undid the ties, revealing a lacquered wooden cabinet whose odd carvings sent a sharp chill down Qing's back.

As Zhi opened the cabinet and reached in far deeper than ought to be possible, Qing demanded, "What is that thing?"

"A boon to booksellers everywhere." Zhi pulled out a book and reached into its pages to remove a sword and a glass lantern. "As is this book of tools." She sounded pleased with herself as she returned the book and closed the cabinet.

"That's not an answer."

"True. It's a magical item, a tool used by my sect." Zhi patted the backpack smugly, adding, "It's big enough to walk around in, inside. And protected, so you'd have to be a powerful sorcerer to get in without permission."

Qing was torn between admiration and irritation. The backpack truly was a marvel, but Zhi behaved as if it were an Imperial gift granted to her and her alone. She didn't say so, just watched as Zhi lit the lantern's candle.

Blue-tinted fire formed a sphere of soft light around them both, its glow strangely safe and comforting. Its light gleamed briefly against Zhi's weathered features, creating a strange impression of someone younger and lighter skinned. Before Qing could look more closely, Zhi rose, holding the lantern at her side. "Come along. It isn't safe to stay here alone."

Once again, Qing was forced to choose between escape and the certain danger of an ill-advised quest with her new master. In the end, some instinct made her follow, though her heart quailed at the thought of what lay below.

Blue light glowed steadily against lichen-covered walls. Whatever it was, it wasn't flame. The slight breeze would have set it flickering, even

within its patterned glass. Its light gleamed against Qing's rough clothing, tinted her hands blue and made them seem both darker and larger than they really were. Qing forced herself to look ahead.

The light didn't show much, but Qing was sure she could see faint outlines of shelves around them. The shape of the room was familiar, exactly like her old master's vault. The smell, however, was quite different. Master Xiang took care of his possessions, protecting them against the elements. The books here stank of damp and rot. She didn't know why, but the stench made her want to weep for the poor abandoned things.

Something moved in the darkness. A shadowy figure, pressing close against the edges of the light, claws raking at the glow, shredding it. Zhi gasped, stepping sideways, voice deepening as she muttered, "Damn it! Cai's shadow. I knew it wouldn't be that easy."

Zhi's voice cracked strangely, and Qing looked at her. "You're a man!" she exclaimed, seeing the way the blue light cut through Zhi's disguise, revealing a knife-edge sharp nose, bushy eyebrows, and a gawky throat. "A boy!" she corrected.

"I'm old enough," Zhi protested. "And this isn't the time. Stay back. You're in no state to deal with shadows." He thrust the lamp into her hand and drew his sword, stepping forward as he swung the blade, its surface shining with green-tinted characters. He moved almost too fast for her to read them, but she thought they said something about green water and starlight.

The shadow howled in the darkness, forced back by the sword. "Keep moving," Zhi ordered. "Look for a torn book!"

Qing obeyed, working her way forward. Zhi was a blur around her, constantly striking, constantly shifting. Their attacker moved just as fast, clawed hands daring the circle of light to slash at them both. Screaming, burning, cut and stabbed, its fury was stronger than its pain. Nothing would stop it, Qing feared.

"I see the book," she gasped, spotting the poor thing on the damp stone floor. It was old, terribly old, its pages formed from narrow sheets of folded parchment. They were scattered around, its bamboo covers broken in half. "It's wrecked."

"Cai must have damaged it to spite his cousin," Zhi told her, voice tense and growing tenser. "Gather it together."

There was something strangely familiar about the parchment. The style of writing was ancient, ink partly washed away by the damp. Yet

Qing recognized the character for gold and guessed this was the spell Xiang Cai had used to create his treasured tiles. "But how can I read this?"

"Is this the time for questions?" Zhi demanded in return. "We have to get out of here." All pretense of calm and self-assurance left his voice. "Hurry!"

It didn't seem reasonable to find herself having to take charge. "What good is it like this?"

"Deng has the other half. Once they're together, the book's magic will restore it."

That was why the book had seemed familiar. Now that Zhi had said it, Qing remembered similar pages in Master Xiang's vault. They were in better condition, not having lain on damp stone for three years, but they'd been torn as well.

Hurriedly, Qing scooped and gathered while Zhi ducked and slashed. He was fast. He was good. But he was neither fast nor good enough. Their attacker was too strong, too determined, for him to evade forever. He yelped, chest bleeding sapphire blood as one set of claws scored.

Sapphire? Qing would have thought it an illusion caused by the lantern but for the way his blood glowed. He wasn't human? No. She shoved the thought aside in favor of finishing her task. She stacked her prize in a neat pile. "I have them. Let's get out of here!"

"How?" Zhi demanded, falling back beside her, sprawling at the center of the light, where the shadow couldn't reach them. "The way's blocked!"

He was right. The shadow wasn't their only enemy. The servants, tempers changed with nightfall, crawled down the steps, moaning hate.

There was only one thing they could do. Qing shoved the poor tattered remnants of the book into her tunic. "Grab on!" she ordered. "Hold tight!"

As he obeyed, silently and without question, she let herself fall, dragging Zhi along with her.

It was too much to hope they'd land in Xiang Deng's secret room. Too much to hope they'd find the other half of the torn book quickly. It was also too much to hope they'd land unnoticed.

The cabinet Qing's peculiar talent dropped them into opened, dumping them right in the lap of Zhu Town's magistrate. They tumbled

to the floor, landing in a tangled heap as Magistrate Wang rose to his feet.

He was on them in a flurry of strikes Zhi just barely managed to block. The boy sheathed his sword, dodging and rolling to evade his attacker, excited grin strange on the stern older woman's features he once more wore.

"Run!" Qing shouted, realizing Zhi was enjoying himself. Apparently, he was in the mood for a scuffle with someone who couldn't rip his throat and guts out. When he took an elbow to his eye, she felt no sympathy whatsoever.

Enjoying himself or not, Zhi obeyed, leaping out the nearest window into the magistrate's garden. He landed in the pond, a mishap warning Qing to be careful as she followed. "Here." He caught Qing around the waist and leapt for the garden wall.

They raced through Zhu Town, shouts fading behind them. Only when they were in the forest, hiding in a stand of pines, did they finally stop. Qing squatted, thoroughly out of breath while Zhi leaned against a tree and gasped.

The only light came from Zhi's blood and the heavenly river above them. Its stars were just bright enough to faintly see Zhi, or rather the older woman's, face. It had to be the lantern that'd revealed his true appearance down in Cai's vault. "Who are you, really?"

"Best stick with Zhi for now," the young man answered, calmer now they were out of danger. "We're not done yet, and I don't want to confuse things." He was trying to sound in charge, though his hand on his tattered side showed his true state. Sapphire blood seeped between his fingers, glowing softly.

Qing had spent most of her life avoiding conflict and arguments. She'd been too scared to fight for herself, no matter how annoying or infuriating those around her were. Their fight and narrow escape just now, combined with Zhi's feckless desire to duel Magistrate Wang, was enough to make her snap, "Never mind names, then. Who are you? What are you?" At the same time, she went to work binding his wounds.

The expression on Zhi's face didn't belong there at all. An embarrassed smile, combined with a slight hunch of the shoulders, proved the person behind the masquerade was still a youngster. "I'm the real Zhi Wen Ku's apprentice," he admitted. "I'm not sure what happened to my master, but I have to finish the task she started three

years ago. OW!” The last was because Qing had pulled too tightly on the bindings.

Feeling like the tables had turned from earlier, Qing pressed on, “Don’t move. I’m not done here. And what are you? You’re obviously not human.”

“Would you believe I’m a dragon?” At Qing’s dour expression, Zhi added wistfully. “Well, maybe not yet, but I might be one day. If I survive long enough.”

Given Zhi’s apparent tendency to fall into trouble, Qing suspected he wouldn’t, at least not without help. “What is a dragon, or a would-be dragon, doing hunting books?”

Zhi sighed. “It’s my job. Mine and my master’s. We’re from a sect of sacred book merchants—the *Zang Shanghu*. Someone stole a section of our library a century ago. As you saw, some books are too dangerous for mortal hands.”

The story was fantastic and seemed impossible. Yet they lived in a world where dead servants went about their duties, where monstrous shadows could shred flesh. Where, for that matter, a little slave girl with a murky past could fall through darkness and land entirely elsewhere. For the first time in her life, Qing found herself wondering just what she was and how she could do such things. And why was it always cabinets?

“I have to get Xiang Deng to give me his half of the book too,” Zhi said suddenly. “He was lucky he wasn’t the one who tore the thing. That’s why Xiang Cai’s in such trouble. The book took offense.”

The book took offense. Qing almost threw her hands up in disgust. Except she had the strangest feeling he was right. Hadn’t she, herself, treated its damaged remnants like a beloved and injured pet? She pushed the thought aside, unwilling to think about it. “If you give Xiang Deng this part of the book, he’ll do the same thing his cousin did.”

“If he tries, it’ll kill everyone around him and strip him of his shadow, just like Cai.”

No matter how true that was, Deng would never believe it. Qing’s old master might have been frightened enough of Zhi’s power to sell a useless and annoying slave to ‘her’, but listen? Surely not. “We have to get into his vault and get the other half of the book.”

“How?” The question was plaintive, and if Qing weren’t fighting panic, she might have wondered why the boy expected her to have the answers. “I can’t just walk in the front door and ask him for it.”

An idea occurred to Qing. It'd depend entirely on her ability and on her learning to aim where she fell. She'd have to practice, but if she could control her strange gift they just might manage. "Do you know, I think you can."

It took several days of effort for Qing to become confident in her ability. Falling into cabinets all over town was the easy part. Falling into the right cabinet, without ever being noticed? That was a great deal harder. She spent much of her time running. Running and praying no one recognized her dark-clad figure when she failed and had to escape.

Falling into people's cabinets meant overhearing all sorts of interesting and embarrassing things. The two swordsmen at the inn who turned out to be more than just partners when they were alone. The fact that Magistrate Wang's brother was a chicken thief who'd been hunted out of every village he visited. She also acquired a nice collection of drugs from the pharmacy for Zhi's wounds. Naturally, she left sufficient silver for what she took. She was no more a thief than Zhi was.

At last, as sure as she could be that her gift would do what she needed, Qing sent Zhi to visit Deng with Cai's portion of the book. Once it was safe, he was to release a small wren, bought from the market, to let Qing know it was time.

She waited impatiently, knowing she mustn't act too soon. She waited as the day grew warmer and the shadows drew back into themselves. Zhi had entered just a little after mid-morning, and now it was almost noon. Something had gone wrong.

Qing hesitated. Was it her sense of time? Was she rushing in when she wasn't needed? Perhaps Deng was so pleased by Zhi's return he'd wanted to celebrate? Zhi liked his wine. What if he'd become distracted? What if Deng kept such a close eye on him he couldn't release the wren? What if he'd been caught in the act?

Unable to wait any longer, Qing focused her talent on the cabinet in Deng's study. The last time she'd fallen there, she'd been startled and cried out. This time, practiced in the skill, she landed and relaxed among the scrolls and brushes. This time she was silent, drawing no attention to herself.

"Master, she is unconscious. Shall I kill her?" The voice was Deng's bodyguard, Gang. Qing hadn't dealt with him much, being a mere kitchen scullion, but she knew he was huge and strong.

“No. Kill a *Zang Shanghu* Sect follower and ten more arrive to avenge them. Tie her up. We’ll deal with her later.” Some muffled sounds followed, then Deng ordered, “Bring her and that backpack along. It’s time my book was restored.”

Qing listened. Hesitated. She didn’t feel nearly as afraid as she ought to. If anything, she was out of sorts with Zhi. He shouldn’t have allowed himself to be captured and knocked unconscious. “You drank his wine, didn’t you, you silly carp?” she muttered softly to herself once it seemed the study was empty.

Carefully, Qing peeked out of the cabinet. The study was empty, the vault entrance gaping in the floor. She slid out of her hidey hole, and crept down the stairs, ears perked for every sound.

The hidden room was as she remembered. Clean where Cai’s was filthy. Dry where Cai’s was damp. Brightly lit where Cai’s was dark. The light complicated Qing’s plans. Zhi was rolled off in a corner, his arms and legs tightly bound, his pack beside him. Luckily for Qing, Deng and Gang were sorting through the pages she’d gathered from Cai’s vault, Deng complaining angrily at the mess.

“It’s a magical book,” Gang pointed out. “And the bookseller said they repair themselves.”

Zhi’s foolish mouth had made things worse. If Deng hadn’t known the book would restore itself, he’d have taken the time to clean and repair the damaged pages. Now nothing would stop him from repairing the book and casting the spells within.

Qing slipped back upstairs, trying to think. She had to free Zhi and rouse him from his stupor. If he could distract Deng and his bodyguard, she could get the book into the safety of Zhi’s pack.

Wait—the backpack. It wasn’t the usual sort of bookseller’s pack. Zhi had said the lacquer case’s insides were quite a bit bigger than it looked. The spells protecting it might prevent her from getting through, but right then it was the only chance she had. She focused her thoughts on the thing and let herself fall.

Spinning, mind whirling with thoughts not her own, Qing struggled through the darkness. Memories collided and only some were real and true. She couldn’t tell which. The kitchen slave ought to be strongest, but the other wanted out and badly. Wanted a weapon. Wanted to fight.

She didn’t have time for her two selves to argue. She had to get that silly carp safe before Deng repeated his cousin’s mistake. The

book was already offended by its mistreatment. It was sure to react. Worse, whole, its power was more than doubled. Everyone in the valley would be endangered.

The knowledge came from her other self but Qing accepted it as right and true. She searched around, finding a lever to light the surrounding darkness. She gaped at rank upon rank of shelves, filled with books and scrolls and strange devices glowing faintly in the distance. She didn't have time to gawk and instinctively headed for a shelf beside a pair of lacquered doors.

The book Zhi had taken the lantern and sword from earlier stood alone, its bamboo case covered in carvings similar to those on the lacquer cabinet. She opened it, flipped through page after page of drawings. She'd know the right one when she found it. Unconsciously, her fingers stroked the cover's patterns until the image of a priest's horse-hair whisk appeared.

She grasped the tool from the book without hesitation, then took Zhi's sword from the next page. Armed, she pushed the cabinet doors open in time to hear Deng mauling the ancient words of the transmutation spell. The manual's true master could get away with such mistakes, but Deng was one of those who'd harmed it in the first place.

"Boy!" Qing growled, spotting Zhi. "Wake up."

He roused himself. Struggled to turn. He'd lost his disguise, revealing a long, lanky frame and narrow features twisted with fear and regret. "Help!" His gasp was terrified.

Automatically, Qing slashed with her whisk, cutting the boy's bonds easily. Crawling through the doors, she handed him his weapon. "Get up."

He stared at her wildly. "Yes, ma'am."

The boy's meek reaction startled Qing, but not her other self. She ignored the confusion. They had work to do. "Keep Gang off me. Deng, stop babbling and give me that book. You have no idea what you're doing."

Deng stared. Opened his mouth to protest. He never got a word out. The book, still in the process of mending itself and in no mood to behave, released its power. Every shadow in the room roused, swirling around its occupants.

Deng and Gang shrieked in panic but Qing swung her whisk, tangling the shadows and flinging them to the side. Before more shadows could form, she flicked again and the suddenly lengthened

hairs wrapped around the book in Deng's hands. She tugged it into her arms. "There, there," she said when it struggled. "It's bedtime, little one. Go to sleep." She cradled it gently, patting it like a baby. "Shhh."

It fought her, but she knew best how to calm a frightened book. She cuddled it, sang softly, wordlessly. Until at last her charge settled in her arms. Only then did she retrieve its broken parts so it could finish mending.

When Deng tried to grab her, she flicked her switch in his face and sent him sprawling. The boy helped in his turn, a series of sharp strikes knocking Gang into the wooden chest on the other side of the room. As the bodyguard fell inside, she caught its lid with her whisk and pulled it down.

Turning a sharp look at the boy, she said, "Pay him."

"Oh... yes... of course." He searched through his pouch and pulled out a huge gold ingot and a black opal sphere. "Here you are, Mister Xiang. Ten times what you and your cousin paid for it. A pretty profit, if I do say so myself." His cheerful air faded as he noticed Deng's expression and he added, "Really, you don't want to keep the book. Not unless you want your place and your cousin's to match perfectly again."

She raised her brow as Deng looked ready to protest. "He means you'll be trapped, your shadow reft, your flesh fading, with only your undead servants for company. And don't ask what they'll feed you. You really don't want to know."

Deng couldn't accept the offered price with more alacrity.

She walked down the road, the boy trailing behind her silently. Preoccupied with her thoughts, with recovering her true self, she ignored him. Until, "Ma'am?"

"Are you sure you want to talk to me right now?"

"Er... I'm sorry... Really."

She stopped. Made sure no one was coming. Beckoned him closer. Swatted him with her whisk. "That's for making me look like a straitlaced old woman without an ounce of humor."

He flushed. She swatted him again. "That's for waiting three whole years to get me out of there." A third swat. "And that's for not breaking the memory bend as soon as you did get me out."

"Ma'am..." It wasn't quite a protest, but it was close. "I looked for you all over the place. How could I know you were transformed into a little girl?"

She eyed him thoughtfully. “I suppose that’s true. I did send you on another job while I confronted Cai. And you couldn’t know there was a backlash when the book tore. I had to hide from everyone, including myself, to escape it.”

His pleased expression made her scoff. “However, one question. Even if you didn’t recognize I was using your name at the restaurant, you would have seen who I was in the Truth Lantern’s light. Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I... thought you were deliberately disguised. I didn’t want to ruin it for you.”

“Liar.”

He tried again. “I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“Closer to the truth, but still a lie.”

With a sigh, he admitted, “It’s been three whole years, Master Zhi. I was enjoying being you. I wanted to enjoy it a little bit longer.”

She swatted him one last time, lighter, so it was more a caress than a strike. “Silly young carp. If you want to be a dragon one day, you need to think about consequences. You were nearly killed back there.”

Qing, the real Qing, bowed his head and shifted their cabinet around on his shoulders, walking more spritely now that his punishment was over. Zhi Wen Ku watched him, expression stern, eyes crinkled with humor she hoped he didn’t notice. After all, it wouldn’t do for one’s apprentice to get ideas above their station.

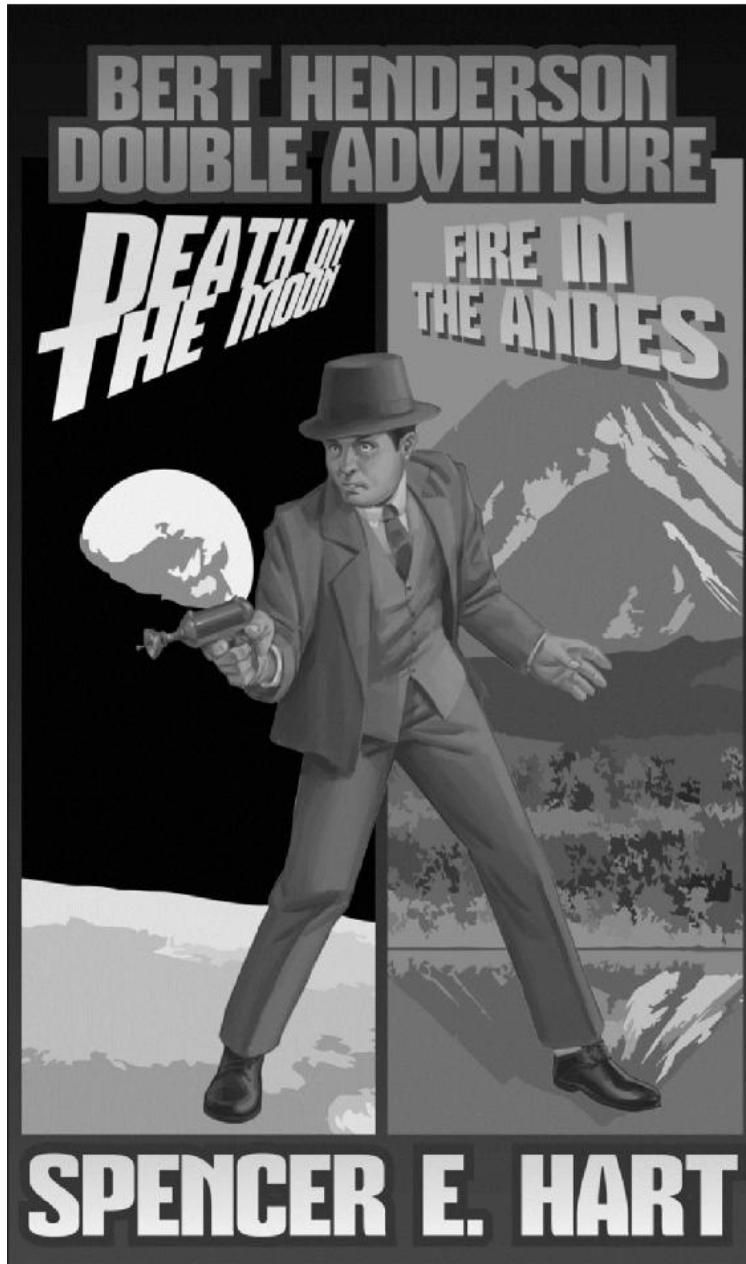
“How many more books do we have to find,” Qing asked as they continued down the road.

“Oh, a good ten thousand or so, surely. Not to mention finding old Wen and punishing him for releasing them in the first place.” It’d take a while. Might take years. Even centuries.

Fortunately, they had the time.

Barbara Doran is a New Pulp writer with Airship 27. Her works include three original novels in the Golden Dragon series (a masked adventurer martial arts/fantasy series set in 1950s California), one book in the planned Wu Dang series (Gold Rush California meets Wu Xia fantasy), and several anthology stories.

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How Thaddeus Quimby the Third and I Almost Took Over the World

By GARY K. SHEPHERD

A strange object has fallen from the sky and into the hands of one Thaddeus Quimby III! The alien artifact creates life-like facsimiles of anything imaginable, so it's only a matter of time before everyone's wildest dreams may be fulfilled, right?!

My long-time associate, Thaddeus Quimby III, had taken various recreational drugs during his misspent youth but had long since discontinued the practice. He was, therefore, quite surprised when an extraterrestrial spacecraft materialized in the air above him, dropped the Whatzit on his head, and then disappeared. The reason we called it a Whatzit was that the first thing Thaddeus said when it knocked him to the ground was, “Whaaazzzaattt?”

Thaddeus had been dumpster diving behind the A&P at the time of the incident. I wasn't with him, of course, since I do not engage in such lowly pursuits. You must understand that Thaddeus is not the sort of person with whom I normally socialize. However, we had been involved in a number of somewhat profitable business dealings in the past. So, when the aforementioned assault occurred and the UFO disappeared, leaving Thaddeus in possession of a strange-looking artifact, I was naturally enough the first person to whom Thaddeus thought of bringing it.

I was not pleased to see him at first, because he had been scavenging through garbage and was appropriately aromatic. Then, when he began babbling his story to me, I merely thought he had found something alcoholic in his expedition. But when he produced the device he claimed had been dropped upon him so unceremoniously, I was forced to revise my opinion. It was an intriguing-looking object, consisting of a conical black body about fifteen centimeters long, with a crystalline lens at the narrow end and a fat, fuzzy bulb at the broad side. There were no apparent buttons, keys, plugs or controls of any kind. It was very heavy.

“Lookadda bump it put on my head!” exclaimed Thaddeus, pointing at his abused cranium. “I tell you, Doc, if they wazzn't from anudder planet, I'da sued 'em.”

“Yes, yes,” I said, a trifle impatiently. “Hush a moment, Thaddeus.” I wasn't too worried about his condition, I confess. He was conscious, lucid--at least as lucid as he ever became--and showed no symptoms of a concussion. Frankly, there isn't too much inside Thaddeus' head that would be damaged by such a blow. “We must ascertain what this thing is and whether it has any monetary value,” I continued. “If what you say is true...”

“It's true, I tell ya,” he insisted. “I saw 'em come and they dropped the thing on me, and then they went away and I saw a buncha lights.”

“Not surprising, considering the impact you received,” I pointed out. “It’s a wonder you’re not still seeing stars.”

“Naw,” demurred friend Quimby. “Not from my head. I been hitina head lozza times, Doc. This wazzn’t anything like that. It was after I got hit, and after they left. I saw allkinda lights in the sky, like fireworks.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps that had something to do with the extraterrestrial propulsion system. Or perhaps not. We have so little data with which to work in this case. Your Whatzit could be almost anything.”

“Betcha itza raygun!” said Thaddeus, happily forming his fingers into a pistol shape and making zapping noises through his teeth.

I hefted the thing in my hands. “It could very well be. Or it could be the equivalent of an empty aluminum beer can, disposed of precisely because it had no value. Still, even the ejectae of a sufficiently advanced civilization would be valuable to primitives like ourselves. Observe the cargo cults of native New Guinea, for example.”

Thaddeus was beginning to look worried. “Maybe we awta tell the guvermint about this thing.”

“Indeed?” I snorted. “And have them immediately confiscate it as a national security risk, with no reimbursement to us? I think not!” In my irritation, I squeezed the object forcefully, and suddenly it became warm, and a kaleidoscope of colored lights ran brilliantly over the ceiling of my apartment and then disappeared.

“Thazit!” crowed Thaddeus. “Thazza lights I saw.”

I sat down, bemused. “I wonder why it made those lights, and if that was all it was doing. Did you feel anything, Thaddeus?”

“Ya mean howzit got kinda warm for a second?”

“Precisely,” I said eagerly. “So you felt it as well! Yet it didn’t burn my hands at all.” I turned the Whatzit over and over in my hands, twisting and turning it. “I only hope I don’t inadvertently destroy the world with my inexpert prodding,” I said, half-jokingly.

“Be careful with that thing,” said Thaddeus. “If it izza raygun, yer gonna kill us both with it.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “Even if it were a weapon, surely an advanced race would equip it with all manner of safety devices to prevent accidental discharge. I’m afraid I’m more likely to break it than to blow up something with it.”

Suddenly there was a dazzling flash of light, and a strangely attired young man of about medium height was standing in front of us. He

smiled and raised a hand in greeting.

“Whozzzat!” barked Thaddeus, as always the picture of proper etiquette. “Whajawant?”

The man spoke in a gentle, soothing monotone. “Greetings. You have indicated to the central processing unit that you do not know the correct procedures for operating this delineator. Therefore, the processing unit has activated this tutorial program to provide you with the proper training so that your delineator will function according to your desires. If you wish to continue the tutorial program, please indicate in the affirmative.”

“Hey!” laughed Thaddeus. “He talks just like you!”

“He’s not a person at all,” I gasped, awestruck. “He’s some kind of holographic computer image, projected by this machine. I think he’s going to teach us how to use it!” I turned to the hologram and bowed courteously, if a trifle self-consciously. “Yes, of course, please continue.”

“Your Mark Three, full-spectrum delineator is designed for easy operation by even the most novice operator,” said the man pleasantly.

“Skip the commercial and get to the meat of things,” I muttered.

The program must have overheard my comment, and obeyed. “To operate your delineator, simply encode the characteristics of the original into the databank by using the entry port...” The hologram lifted a replica of our Whatzit and pointed at the crystalline side. “Then you simply touch the playback end...” He touched the fuzzy end. “And the delineator will reproduce a full five-sensual image of the encoded object, just as it is currently broadcasting this image.”

“Five sensual?” I queried. “Does that mean that I can see, hear, touch, taste and smell you?”

“That is correct,” said the tutorial program. “Observe.” With that he reached out and touched my hand. It was, to put it mildly, creepy to be touched by someone that I knew wasn’t really there. But it didn’t feel in any way different from touching normal human skin.

“Just a minute,” I protested. “How is it you know our language?”

“The central processing unit is programmed to pick up and understand the language of any operator,” explained the program pleasantly. “This service is provided to our customers at no extra charge.”

“Just a minute!” I repeated. “Where is it you come from? Why were you left here? What exactly is a delineator? Who or what manufactured you?”

“Those questions are not within the parameters of this program,” said the man, still smiling. “If you wish to review the tutorial program, please indicate by verbally addressing the tutorial. Thank you.” And with a friendly nod, he disappeared.

“Hey!” gaped Thaddeus. “Wheredahelldihe go?”

“He was never there at all, you dolt!” I snapped. “He was nothing but an illusion.” I frowned. “But a very convincing illusion, I must admit. Apparently that’s what your Whatzit does; it projects images of whatever is recorded, kind of like a three-dimensional video recorder.”

“Ya mean for ‘Lassie’ reruns and crap like that?” said Thaddeus, clearly disappointed. “We got stuff like that on Earth already.”

“Ah, but this is not just for television programs, friend Thaddeus,” I said. “But three-dimensional, five-sensual images. Let’s give it a try, shall we?” I had a nice little African violet on my kitchen table I had acquired from the lady in the next apartment when she wasn’t looking. I pointed the narrow end at the flower and touched the crystal. It glowed slightly for just a second and then stopped. “Well, that seems simple enough. Now let’s try the playback.” I reversed the Whatzit, or delineator as the tutorial had called it, and touched the fuzzy bulb. It glowed likewise, and a reproduction of the flower, perfect down to the last leaf, appeared on the table beside it.

“Wow!” said Thaddeus. “Thaz neat!”

“Neat indeed.” I said, thoughtfully taking a whiff of the pseudo-blossom. “Perhaps there is some return to be made from this device after all.” I removed my wallet and retrieved from within the lone five dollar bill residing there. Placing it on the table, I repeated the operation and in moments there was another five on the table next to it. In no time at all, I had manufactured a neat little stack of them.

“Jezuz!” exclaimed my odiferous acquaintance. “Thziz great! Iz like that guy with the magic lamp, only we get all the wishes we want!

“Yet, as is usually the case with genie’s wishes, there is a catch.” I sighed, picking up one of the duplicates and comparing it to the original. “Unfortunately, this is a perfect copy.”

“But that’s good, ain’t it?”

“No, Thaddeus, that’s bad,” I replied sadly, waving the duplicate at him. “It’s a perfect imitation, all right, down to the identical serial number. If we tried to spend these, we’d be apprehended by the authorities for counterfeiting in short order.”

Thaddeus looked discouraged a second, then brightened. "I gotta idea!" He grabbed my original bill from the table and then dashed for the door before I could stop him. "Be right back," he called over his shoulder.

While he was gone, I amused myself by reproducing various items around the room. He returned momentarily, clutching one of the greasy products of the burger emporium down the block. He placed it on the table and said, in a triumphant manner, "There ain't no serial numbers on that!"

"True enough," I conceded and handed him the Whatzit. It was simple enough for any relatively intelligent chimpanzee to operate, so I was confident that Thaddeus would have little difficulty. He managed to produce half a dozen imitations and gobbled them down promptly. Then he stopped, looking puzzled. "They taste good, but I'm still hungry. Iz like I din't eat nothing."

I nodded. "That makes sense. They are illusions, after all. Even though you can smell, feel, and even taste them, they can't fool your stomach. It still knows that it's empty. You could eat a hundred burgers and never be satisfied."

"Dang," said Thaddeus. "I spoze the same thing'd happen if I copied a bottle of booze?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "You could drink a gallon of vodka and never get drunk."

"Then whutdabe the point?" he grunted in disgust.

"It would make the streets safer, I suppose," I replied absently. "But it doesn't do us any good. It's a pity we have only one. We could make a fortune selling them to the diet industry. Dieters could eat a hot fudge sundae every day and never gain an ounce." I set the Whatzit down on the table. "We must ponder this matter for a time, Thaddeus. Surely there must be some way that we can turn such a marvelous device as this to our monetary advantage."

After we had sat staring at the Whatzit for several minutes, Thaddeus stirred uncomfortably. "Can I watch TV?"

"Yes, yes," I said, waving him away. "Just keep the volume down."

I did my best to ignore the sound of Thaddeus' chuckles as he watched cartoons in the other room, and bent my considerable mental powers to the question of how we could best exploit the Whatzit. Suddenly I overheard Thaddeus exclaim, "Whatta babe! Wish I could...hey!" He sprinted into the room, snatched the device and bolted

back to the living room. After a moment, he returned, grinning. "Wait'll you see this, Doc!"

He touched the playback, and a striking young woman with prominent eyebrows appeared and said in a perky voice, "Hi! My name is Brittany and I just love my new jeans."

"Whaduya think of that, eh, Doc?" chortled Thaddeus. "I recorded her right off the TV." He walked over and took the young woman's hand. "Hey you!" He called out to the air. "Tutorial guy! I gotta question."

The tutorial's image appeared. "Yes?" it asked helpfully.

"If we make a copy of a person, will the copy do whatever we tell'em to do?"

"Certainly," said the tutorial. "Within the limits of the original. It could not, for instance, leap tall buildings at a single bound."

How droll, I thought. A computer with a sense of humor. But then I caught the look in Thaddeus' eyes and became disturbed. "Friend Thaddeus," I said gently. "I believe I sense the tenure of your thoughts, and I must urge caution."

"Hell, Doc," said Thaddeus. "When'm I ever gonna have a chance like this again?"

"But she's not a real woman, she's just an image."

He grinned evilly. "Even better. An image can't get knocked up, or getta headache, or tell me I drink too much." He turned to the girl. "Come wid me, kiddo."

"Okie-dokie," she said, in the same perky manner. He started for the bedroom, pulling the pseudo-popstar behind him, then paused. "If you'll excuse us, Doc," he asked.

"Oh go ahead," I said, waving him away. "Far be it from me to deny you your animal needs."

Thaddeus and his paramour disappeared into the bedroom. As I trudged into the kitchen to fetch a rag and clean up the remains of Thaddeus' repast, my mind was preoccupied. I truly did not begrudge Thaddeus his fixation on his basic urges. After all, he's only human...if that. But another idea was forming in the back of my mind, a plan of such fiendishly clever proportions that I was surprised that I hadn't thought of it before.

Returning to the table with my cloth, I discovered that the crumbs and wrappers from Thaddeus' reproduction burgers were gone. Only the original remained. A minute later, Thaddeus reappeared, looking

slightly dishabille and extremely agitated. "She's gone!" he groaned. "She just faded away allasuddden."

"Tutorial!" I called out. "Are the images created by the delineator only temporary?"

"Naturally," replied the tutorial image when it appeared. "Due to the onset of temporal distortion, the quality of the image begins to degrade quickly. There is a limit to the useful life of the image. They are set to disappear before the distortion becomes apparent, after about five minutes."

"Damn," muttered Thaddeus. "Five minutes ain't near long enough."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Be of good cheer, my friend. Whilest you were otherwise occupied, I have hit upon a plan to use your Whatzit to our material benefit. If this works, you should have the company of as many young women as you desire."

I led him to the nearest shopping mall, and we stationed ourselves beside one of the automatic teller machines in the main lobby. We had only to wait a few moments before a dignified gentleman in finely-cut clothes approached the machine, his ATM card clutched in one wealthy paw. He glanced at us somewhat suspiciously and asked, "You guys waiting to use the machine?"

"Not at all," I said, bowing graciously. "You go right ahead, sir."

With a shrug, he went about his transaction. Meanwhile, I had surreptitiously activated the delineator, which was tucked under my arm. As soon as he was out of sight, Thaddeus pounded my arm. "Whadahelwuzdat all about?" he demanded.

"Watch, Thaddeus," I said patiently. "Watch and learn." I activated Thaddeus' Whatzit and an image of the man appeared. "Go ahead and repeat your transaction," I told it. Wordlessly, it walked over to the cash dispensing device and faithfully re-enacted what its original had done. The poor ATM was no more able to distinguish between this reproduction and his card than a human being could have. It efficiently ejected a small stack of crisp twenty dollar bills. I had the image hand me the money and return to the machine. By the time the image had reached the end of its useful life and disappeared, it had run the ATM up to its maximum limit per card of \$500.

"Holy crap!" exclaimed Thaddeus, as I handed him half the proceeds. "Izza gold mine!"

“Precisely, my friend.” I replied, pocketing my share. “Just think of it! We could do the same at every ATM kiosk in town. Or for that matter, at a real bank. No teller would ever know the difference until it was too late. Every bank account is now at our beck and call. We could even make an image of a bank president, and have it order the bank vault opened for us, after hours.”

I was getting loud, and bystanders were beginning to stare. So I hustled Thaddeus out to the parking lot, away from unfriendly eyes, and let my imagination run wild. “Nor need we stop with mere money. Suppose we made an image of an industrial tycoon, and had it give his stock portfolio to us. Or suppose we made an image of the President of the United States, and had him issue an Executive Order appointing us head of some covert agency. Suppose we made images of senators and congressmen, ready to vote on key issues when the originals were not around. Why, we could take your Whatzit on world tour, and get images of the leaders of France, Russia, Britain, Japan...of Popes and Presidents and Princes! Then we could make them do whatever we wished. We would be the puppet masters, Thaddeus, and the world would dance when we pulled the strings!”

Overcome by enthusiasm, I had raised my arms to the heavens, so I was looking directly upward when another alien spacecraft appeared. Before I could utter a sound, it had transfixed Thaddeus and me with a bright light. We stood immobilized as the craft settled to the pavement before us.

A hatch irised open and, instead of the pseudopodic monstrosity that I was half-expecting, a rather ordinary chap not unlike the image of the tutorial program emerged and confronted us. “You are in possession of a chronologically incompatible device,” he intoned seriously. “Which is a strict violation of the Temporal Code.”

I clutched the Whatzit to my chest and said possessively, “Sir, we came into the possession of this machine honestly. It was left behind by one of your craft. We have committed no crime.”

He nodded and said in a conciliatory tone, “We are aware of the circumstances. Nevertheless, technically you are still violators. Please surrender the device.”

“I take it that you are the equivalent of an officer of the law,” I suggested hopefully, “And you can present some documentation that demonstrates your right to take this artifact into custody, I presume?” Yes, I know, I was grasping at straws at this point. But you must

understand that it is a hard thing to have the mastery of the world snatched from your grasp, just as you became aware that you had it.

The man smiled. "No, I am not an officer of the law. I am what you would call a professor of theater. The two reprobates who lost my delineator were my student assistants, who were collecting images to be used as props for my course on historical drama of the early Twenty-first Century. They have already been severely disciplined for their conduct, I can assure you."

"Then you're not from another planet!" I gasped. "You're from the future!"

"Quite so," he remarked, then held out his hand. "My delineator, if you please." When he saw I was still hesitating, he said, "Please, let us have no unpleasantness. Although I am not one of them, there are chronological police who enforce the temporal code and guard against the appearance of anachronistic technology. And the penalties they impose are very severe."

I smiled with as good a grace as possible and gave him the Whatzit. "Thank you," he said with a bow, then retreated to his vehicle. Over his shoulder, he called, "I think it would be best for all concerned if as few people as possible heard of this escapade."

"Agreed," I said, as he, his time machine, and our ticket to easy street all faded away into the unknowable future.

"Damn," muttered Thaddeus. "All we gotawit was a louzy five C's."

"Easy come, easy go, Thaddeus," I sighed.

"N'ontopawit all, he says we can't even tell nobody!" snorted Thaddeus in disgust.

That gave me an idea. "Perhaps there is a way to recoup something from this incident after all," I said excitedly. "Suppose I were to write this up as if it were a short story and attempt to sell it to one of the science fiction periodicals. That way, we would receive some partial remuneration for our efforts."

"I dunno," said Thaddeus. "Who'd buy it?"

"Time will tell, my friend," I replied. "Time will tell."

Gary K. Shepherd's work has appeared in such publications as Buzzymag.com, Schrodinger's Mouse, Bloodbond, Buckshot, Alternaties, Another Realm, Millennium SF and Mystery Time. In addition, he has won first place in the science fiction division of the annual Writers Digest genre fiction contest.

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Deemed Unsuitable

By WL EMERY

A beautiful young woman is at the center of a high-speed chase and shoot-out right where Morgan, a crack-shot Construct, was about to grab some lunch! Against his better judgement, Morgan enters the fray, but who is after this woman and why?!

They learned to clone. First invertebrates, then animals. When cloning humans was proposed, the moral authorities objected and laws were passed.

Genetic engineering was discovered. Generations invested uncountable amounts of time and money in genetic research. Diseases were cured. Body parts were grown in vitro, custom-made for a particular consumer. Birth defects became an old wives' tale.

A superior species of homo sapiens was developed in vitro. The new species were called Elevated people. Results of the new process that were deemed unsuitable were disposed of as bio-degradable waste. When the outcry from the moralists could no longer be ignored, a compromise was reached. The unsuitable results were released into society. They were called Constructs by the government; the Elevated called them garbage.

Generations passed. The scientific community announced that galactic and even intergalactic travel was now possible. We weren't alone in the universe, and our neighbors were numerous and varied.

The Constructs were the first to explore the newly discovered ancient galactic world. They enjoyed it.

The underground tubecar hissed to a stop. Just about the time I thought the old hulk had burned out a servo, the doors opened with a rattle. A cheap, mechanized voice announced in bad standard galactic that all departing freight would find itself on platform twenty-five, low level three, sector R, and wished all beings a joyously productive wake period. There was more, but it was lost to me as I pushed through a group of workers trying to board.

I paused for a moment and breathed deep, grateful for the stench of stale sweat, burnt-fried chum, and the bodily excretions of a hundred different life forms. I'd been forced to share the tubecar with a Nantusian, and I'd spent the past thirty minutes dealing with the sound and stench of her digestive tract. You haven't truly lived until you've had to share a tubecar with the bodily discharges of a well-fed female Nantusian in heat.

I moved further down the platform to avoid the crowd of workers, all of whom had been trying to politely force their way into the car before the doors closed. When the eager, early liners discovered what they'd have to share the car with, they performed an about-face that

would satisfy any drill instructor and were now doing their best to get out and wait for the next car. The late liners still on the platform continued to politely try to force their way in past the early liners. Not one of the late liners wondered why a group that was so eager to get inside the tubecar had suddenly changed their collective minds, proving that Workers aren't all that bright. But then, that's the way they were made.

I had just landed at the Franhausen Intergalactic Spaceport. Per instructions from our noble leaders that be, and per spaceport regulations, I hadn't been able to retrieve my gear from Galactic Import Security until now. I didn't have to look far before I spotted the garbage can-sized mech that was carrying all my worldly possessions, including six hundred credits in hard that would have the local scavenger squad doing the tahtah on my head if they knew about it. You can't track hard, and that's kind of the point of it all. I pulled my gear out of the mech's cargo cavity and gave it the once-over.

The spaceport isn't free. In fact, it's a not-terribly-benevolent dictatorship run by a megacorporation calling itself a government. The city surrounding it is free. If it's yours, you're free to do what you like with it. The point behind all of this is lucre. Shiny stuff, eatable metal, whatever you want to call it. Good old hard is king of spaceport city, because without free trade, there would be no credits floating around, and no credits means no fees, taxes, tariffs, licenses, or skim for the corporation. No corporation, no spaceport.

Part of this is being able to keep your property, so almost everyone is armed. I say almost, because the workers and their ilk, being designed to be docile little herd animals, wouldn't pack ordnance if their lives depended on it. Local law protects them, so long as the protection racket doesn't get too dangerous or involve any real work. That's where I come in. I'm in security when I'm on planet.

My blaster had a three-quarter charge left, and I had two spare charge cans, but the barrel was getting so thin that I knew I was going to have to replace it soon. Real soon. The edge of the barrel was sharp enough to shave with. I spun it by the trigger guard and slid it into the holster on my hip. Loose, but not too loose. Some guys like a spring-loaded holster, or a snap-open job. You grab the stock and the entire holster snaps open, shooting the blaster right into your hand. Nice, but if it fails to open you'll never need your blaster again. I pulled

out my slug thrower. Twenty in the magazine, and only one spare. I left the other three mags back on Vetness IV with the contents scattered all over the place. A gang of unsupervised locals had decided that, in the true spirit of social civilization everywhere, they deserved an equal share of whatever hard I was carrying. I didn't agree, and by the time I felt it was safe to leave they were headed toward entropy. I was still in one piece, not leaking. Since I felt threatened during the encounter, the local peacekeepers called it self-defense. Just to be sure, they brought in a government telepath, who took one look at me, verified that I'd been in fear for my life, then went into convulsions. When I left him, he was coiled up on the justice room floor, drooling and braying like a fugswallet at feeding time.

I put on the harness and slung the slug thrower, then checked my pack. According to the most recent import and security treaty, starport security was supposed to respect my privacy. They don't, but they're supposed to. I noted that they hadn't stolen anything this time, which cheered me up. I slung my pack. I was ready for my mission: food, drink, and a quiet place to sleep for the next twelve gee-standard hours.

I took the pedaladder up to topside. One advantage I inherited from my dear old father's side of the family is a strong set of legs and the lungs of a filterfish. Climbing three levels with a full pack was nothing to me, and in a few minutes I was walking along the pedapath in center city, taking in the sights and mixing right in with the sweaters, eetees, and government mechs. It was late afternoon, sun time. By my comm link, I had another three hours of daylight. I started looking for a food service room, something that had locals sitting inside it. I opened my comm link and asked signal central about an ef-ess room, shaping the words carefully in my mind. Central suggested that I'd like the Feed and Seed, only fifty ells ahead. It turned out to be the wrong sort of room.

I paused on the pedapath, thinking about what I wanted and trying to formulate those thoughts into something that Central would understand when the premonition came in.

Move, you idiot! You're about to be killed!

I didn't think about it, didn't question it. I lunged for the doorway of the Feed and Seed, which snapped open for me. That's when I heard

the screeching hiss of a laser cannon and the crash of several fliers colliding. I half-turned, looking up over my shoulder.

Ten meters up, three fliers were involved with each other. Two belonged to an Elevated human, one being private security and the other a luxury flier. The third was a utility cargo flier – mounting a laser cannon where the cargo compartment should be. I took all this in at a glance, then the gunner on the laser cut loose again. The dazzling burst would blind anyone within eyeshot of it—anyone except someone like me. All three of my nictitating eyelids closed, my eyes adjusted, and the glare faded to a discernable beam of light. The private security flier got it all and was left held together by scraps of fuselage armor and a few cables. Something fell out of the security flier and landed on the street with a meaty thud. I didn't have to look; I know what a laser cannon can do, and I know what a body sounds like when it hits pavement.

A second later there was the familiar sound of an automatic weapon and muzzle flashes coming from the rear of the luxury flier. I didn't wait around to watch. I ducked inside the eff-ess room, exchanging places with the head server who wanted to go outside for a closer look. I was headed for the back door that led to the alley. My plan was to cross the alley and cut through another shop, then keep that up until I couldn't hear shots, explosions, or the screams of the wounded. Anyone who hangs around when he hears laser fire is just asking to be overcooked meat.

I heard explosive slugs hitting the street behind me, followed by the scream of someone collecting a quarter pound of shrapnel in his vitals. So much for the head server.

The doors to the food prep area were dead ahead of me, blocked by three servers who should have been running out the back, but who were milling around in place. That's what you get with sweaters. I shoved two aside and ran over the third, then I was running through food prep and knocking over a tank of Erestian crustaceans on my way past. They scattered over the floor behind me, claws and stingers waving. I smiled. That would keep any pursuers busy for a long time to come. Those little bastards were carnivores, with nasty little claws and a poisonous sting on their tail.

I made a running kick against the back door, breaking the lock and flattening any being who might be on the other side. Then I was in

the alley with a nice, solid building between me and the fun and games on the street. A second door was right in front of me, standing open invitingly. Without a thought, I ran through it and found myself in a dark storeroom. My eyes adjusted to the darkness.

The room was filled with off-world cargo crates. Clothing hung on racks. Bolts of cloth were stacked on top of each other.

I heard the distinctive hiss and crackle of the laser canon again as I ran through the storeroom and straight through a clothing store, leaving a half-dozen startled sweaters behind me. Just outside the front door I paused to look around. Luck was with me. The street was clear, and a metal fabricator shop was just across the street with a nice, wide-open door. Then I heard the scream.

I'm slightly psychic, probably inherited from my mother. I can receive telepathic messages, if the psychic signal is strong enough. I can send, but not well. An old ground-pounder told me once that if I took up meditation, I'd likely qualify for a position in ess-corp. Like I really needed another problem. The scream I heard wasn't audible. It was telepathic. Someone was in big trouble, probably a life or death situation, very likely behind me. I made it halfway across the street before I got the cry for help.

Fainter than the telepathic scream, it was still clear. I could tell that it was a she, was human like me, and was helpless. I turned around and started running back.

'Morgan, don't be an idiot! Get out of here!'

'Morgan, don't be a coward. The girl needs you, now!'

I've always had a weak spot for women, and it's coupled with a weak spot for the visiting team. Both of these weaknesses have gotten me in a jam more often than not. I ignored my own good advice not to get involved.

I sprinted back through the clothing store, across the alley, through the back door of the eff-ess room and slammed to a stop, backpedaling furiously. Scattered across the floor right in front of me were several hundred agitated Erestian crustaceans, pincers and tails waving. I could feel my balance going. I bent my knees and made a diagonal leap to the preparation table, ran the length of the table in three strides and made a clean leap to the kitchen doors, which snapped open obligingly. I ran through the chaos in the eff-ess room and pushed through the crowd at the door. I stuck my head outside.

The security flier had hit the deck fifty meters down the street and was on fire. The luxury flier was twenty meters ahead of it. It was surrounded by six off-world military types dressed in black coveralls and combat harness. The utility flier with the laser cannon had a few holes in it, but was still airworthy and hovering five meters off the pavement, laser cannon trained on the luxury flier. There was only one thing to do, and I did it.

I pulled my blaster and put three shots into the powerplant of the laser. The laser cannon is an awe-inspiring weapon, and it makes you feel invincible the first few times you use it, but it's actually pretty delicate. No power, no laser. I nailed the powerplant and backup batteries, reducing the laser from a heavy squad support weapon to a lawn ornament. What I hadn't counted on was there being only one powerplant for the utility flier, and I'd just deactivated it the hard way.

The fans and gyrostabilizers on the flier started winding down, and the whole thing tilted and began to slide sideways, spilling the gunner and two crew out onto the pedapath before slamming into an adjacent building and hitting the deck with a spectacular crash. I couldn't afford to wait and admire my handiwork. I had six on the ground to deal with.

I framed a soldier in the sights of the blaster and let him have it, splattering him across the tail of the luxury flier. I scorched the guy next to him, who hit the deck and started rolling back and forth, screaming like a track transport with a bad set of bearings. I tried for a second target, but a hail of blaster bolts and slugs splattered off the building just over my head and my shot went wild. I ran diagonally across the street, throwing another blaster bolt at them, not expecting to hit anything but wanting to keep their heads down.

I took hard cover in a recessed doorway and checked my blaster. It was done. The barrel glowed a cherry red, and several large chips had been burned out of the end. I could try one more shot if I felt lucky, but I had the feeling my quota of luck was used up for the day. Then I heard the telepathic cry for help again. They had her, and they were going to take her away. She was helpless and terrified out of her mind.

I ejected the barrel and upper assembly from my blaster, then stuck the lower assembly into my holster. I pulled my slug-thrower out. I stuck the barrel out around the corner of the doorway, then hastily

pulled back as a dozen blaster bolts melted hunks of concrete from the building around me. Heat washed over me. I gritted my teeth and tried it again, only to be forced back in another volley of blaster fire. I needed a diversion.

I pulled a blaster recharge canister off my belt and tossed it across the street. Pushing myself back against the wall, I sighted along the barrel of my slug-thrower and torched off a single shot. The red-hot slug hit the canister, which exploded in a bright white light of energy and molten metal. There's nothing like a ball of plasma to brighten up your day, and this one gave me the break I needed.

The instant the canister went up, I had my slug-thrower around the corner of the doorway. I torched off a few shots and dropped two sewer-scum who were backing away from the burning canister, arms raised against the heat. That left two more. I hoped.

I waited, and sure enough, one suicidal soldier drew the short straw and poked his head up above the body of the luxury flier. I put a single shot into him, and his head exploded. I slammed a fresh magazine into my slug-thrower and ran across the street, diving and rolling under the nose of the luxury flier. I came up barrel first, saw the black uniform, and torched off five rounds, getting the last one in his midsection. I waited a few seconds, and when no one else popped up to get rid of me, I got my legs under me and circled the flier.

The cockpit had two humanoids in it, both dead. The pilot had been cut up by the laser, and the other one in the copilot seat had taken a blaster bolt to the lower belly. She was completely bald and was wearing the traditional robes of the priesthood of Chechenian III. That marked her as a psychic, and a fairly powerful one at that. Likely that's where the telepathic scream came from.

I looked into the back passenger compartment. There were three more dead, all workers, all killed by blaster fire. The interior was scorched and smoking, ready to burst into flame. Then I found their target.

She was so beautiful it was almost painful. Her eyes were cobalt blue, her hair as dark as deep space, and her features were so finely chiseled you'd swear a master craftsman had completed his magnum opus and left it right here for you to look at. She was dressed in a royal blue flowing robe that was almost, but not quite, translucent. Under that robe, her body would be the most perfect woman you could

never imagine, because no one has that kind of imagination. I know, because I knew what she was.

I hated her.

She was a Tuber. A stinking EI. She and her kind were genetically engineered to be better than everyone else. She was grown in a tube, and at birth she was automatically a member of the government. The same government that oppressed my family, and labeled us Constructs. Accidents. Garbage. The government, *her* government, split our family up for 'welfare of society' reasons. My father was sent to an assembly plant on the west coast. My mother was someplace on the moon, working in the service industry. I used to know where my three sisters were, but they vanished into the system years ago.

I turned away, sick with rage. If I'd known what she was, I'd have done all this differently. Now, thanks to my own weakness and stupidity, here I was.

"It isn't what you think. Please!" I felt her hand on my arm and unwanted sympathy in my head. She was psychic. I knew the feelings weren't mine, but that didn't make them any less real.

"You're a damned Tuber," I said, refusing to turn around and look at her. I knew what I'd see.

"No! I'm not what you think. Please, they'll get me, and... Please, please help me!"

I half-turned back to her. I was going to shake her hand off my arm and maybe backhand her a good one, but the tears on her face and her helpless expression got the best of me. I hate my soft heart more than my hard head.

"All right, come on," I said, taking her hand and pulling her up from the floor of the wrecked flier. She moved carefully, picking her way daintily over the body of a personal servant.

"Hurry up. Once the gunfire stops, the peacekeepers will think it's safe to show up and confiscate everyone they find near the wreckage."

"I can't. I... just—I can't."

She must have hit her head during the fracas. I put my arm under hers, locking her elbow tight against my side, and lifted. I got her to her feet and started running down the pedapath, intending to get around the corner and maybe borrow a ground transport or a flier. We made it to the corner and she stumbled a little, trying to keep up.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to find a flier that no one needs just now. Or a grounder, I’m not particular. There!”

I spotted a flier two hundred meters down the street, docked with the hatch open. This was perfect. The few sweaters on the street gaped at us and stayed out of our way, and I rushed us towards the flier. We were home free.

That’s when I felt a big, soft wad of plasti-goo catch me right between the shoulder blades. The slop wrapped around me, pinning my arms and clogging the action of my slug-thrower. A second wad hit me in the legs, and I did a classic face plant on the pedapath. I managed to roll over, but that was as far as I was going, and I knew it. When it comes to taking someone out of action without killing them, not much can beat a plasti-goo squirter and a sense of humor.

Three hairy Ralengens in partial body armor knucklewalked up to me. Each dragged an empty squirter, and one had lost his helmet. Ralengens make good security guards, so long as the orders aren’t too complex and don’t involve independent thought. They’re stupid and they can’t run, but they’re stronger than a Lysarian Kanth; they can climb almost anything. With enough patience, they can be taught to use simple weapons. A slug-thrower is mentally challenging for them, as they’re just as likely to empty a magazine into the air as they are to shoot someone. I think they like the noise. Their home planet is a giant greenhouse, where everything is a jungle.

“There two. What we do?”

“Orders say get girl. Only girl. This man. Kill him, take girl.”

I struggled and the goo held.

“Shoot in head! Fun watch!”

The third one wanted to shoot me in the head with a wad of plasti-goo and watch me suffocate for the entertainment value. This is Ralengen culture at its most advanced. I had to find a way out of this.

“No. Orders say no kill. No kill. We take both.”

I couldn’t see him, but I sided with the second Ralengen. He was probably the leader of the group.

“He’s right,” I said. “If your orders state that you aren’t allowed to kill anyone, then everyone better be alive, and that includes me. You know what happens if you don’t obey orders.”

An argument started between the three. One still wanted to kill me, one was trying to weigh the benefits of killing me against the possible punishment for disobeying orders, and one was trying to assert control and take us both back to headquarters. While this was going on, I was slowly working at the plasti-goo. Getting out of goo can be done, but it takes time and patience. Move too quickly, and the goo shrinks and gets harder. Move slowly, and you can cause the goo to stretch, eventually freeing you. I had patience but my time was limited.

“No! Fun watch! Shoot in head!”

“No! Orders say no.”

“You know,” I said to the unseen leader, “if you let him defy your authority, you’ll have problems later on.”

“You shut eat-hole!”

“Are you going to let him talk to you like that?” I asked innocently, although I was pretty sure that last comment was directed at me.

What followed was a common insult delivered in Ralengenese, suggesting that the target of the insult has his ingestion and defecation orifices confused, and eats by shoving his dinner in the wrong hole. I think it loses something in the translation.

There was the familiar wet blapping noise of a squirter being fired, and one of my captors hit the pedapath outside my range of vision. I could hear him thrashing around and screaming in fury. There was a second shot and he stopped thrashing but continued to scream. Then I heard a third blap, and the screaming abruptly stopped.

“No kill. We take back to headquarters place.”

Dead silence. I could hear the girl sobbing quietly. I inched my arms apart slowly and gained another finger span of freedom.

They picked us up and tossed us into a flier. I got thrown into the cargo compartment, which was fine with me. The cargo door slammed shut and left me in darkness, which my eyes automatically adjusted to.

I continued to pull my arms apart, forcing myself to move slowly, with a constant outward pressure. I didn’t know how long I’d been locked up in the stuffy cargo compartment. I only knew that I’d finally freed my arms. After that the work went a little faster, as I kicked my shoes off and slid out of my pants, leaving them behind in the sticky mess of goo. I freed my slug-thrower, then my equipment harness. I pulled my clothing loose, and when I was dressed and had the last bit

of plasti-goo pulled off my gear, I started looking around for the release lever for the door to the passenger compartment. It took me a minute, because like most things designed for sweat-heads and other mental midgets it was hidden in plain sight. I checked my slug-thrower for a final time, then pulled the lever and pushed the partition down.

I took out the two Ralengens before they had time to bring their squirters up. In the confined space my slug-thrower sounded like an atomic warhead going off, and my ears involuntarily closed to block most of the noise. I'd nailed one in a major blood vessel, and he made a mess of the place. The other wasn't much better.

The girl was lying on her back in a big double wad of goo, staring up at the ceiling. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"You're here! You got loose!"

I nodded grimly. I still had the pilot and co-pilot to deal with. They were behind a bullet-resistant partition, probably augmented with an energy shield. I looked out the window and estimated our altitude at well over ten thousand meters. I reversed the slug-thrower and banged on the partition with the butt of the gun. The pilot's voice reverberated through the small passenger compartment.

"Resistance is futile. Cooperate, and you'll be rewarded when we reach our destination."

"Where are we headed?"

"Resist, and you'll spend the rest of your artificially prolonged life hooked up to a Zyrtext Behavior Modification and Resensitizing System."

That gave me pause. If he was telling the truth, this could be literally worse than death. A lot worse. ZBMs were illegal on all but the worst systems, and even then, only the government had them, and kept them secret. Top secret, if they didn't want to get the entire planet interdicted for employing excessive torture on sentient beings. I looked down at the girl, still bound up with goo. I wondered if I had been giving this enough thought. I didn't even know her name—not that I cared a whole lot, given what she was. I frowned.

"Just who are you, anyway?"

She blinked away her tears and tried to speak. Failed, and tried again.

"I'm Five-Three—"

“Her identity is not important. Let her alone, ride quietly, and I can promise you one hundred thousand intergalactic credits when we reach our destination. In hard, if you want it that way.”

I ignored his orders, but I felt a distinct twinge of panic from him in my mind. Whatever was going on here, he was getting desperate.

“Keep talking,” I said.

“I’m called Five Three, or just Five. I’m the fifth life form, third attempt. The first two were deemed unsuitable. I’m—”

“Enough! One million intergalactic credits, any way you want it. One million!” I didn’t need any psychic ability to hear the panic in that voice.

“—a spare,” she finished.

This was a new one on me.

“A spare? What do you mean, a spare? A spare what?”

“Form. Body. Spare body parts.”

“You mean you’re a living... organ bank?”

She closed her eyes, and in a telepathic flash I saw the truth of it. She was born to house spare parts for an Elevated member of the government. Then I saw myself from inside her mind, through her eyes. An old adage that my mother taught me came to mind.

‘You are not what you think you are. You are not what I think you are. You are what you believe that I think you are.’

I’m no one’s hero. I’m hard-hearted, callous, a survivor. I have no cares for anyone but myself and my welfare, but that’s not the way she saw it. I took a deep breath, not knowing what to say.

“I’m a perfect match for Claris Llana-Vinton, of the Vinton energy and mining group. Should anything happen to Claris, I’ll provide a replacement organ. Liver and kidneys are common.”

My mind raced. That’s why they needed her. Something must have happened.

“I heard them talking,” she continued. “This time they need a spine. An entire spine.”

She smiled bitterly.

“My spine. That’s what they’re going to take. I’m supposed to feel grateful that my life has, at last, served a useful purpose.”

“Then the people... they were—”

“Rescuing me. Yes. We were making a run for it. It was a one in a million chance, but when the communication arrived from Claris, we

were sent to meet the company transport ship in orbit. We thought, all of us thought, that if we could only reach the spaceport we could get off-world. Emigrate to another world being colonized. We almost made it," she finished ruefully.

Relief flooded over me. She wasn't one of them at all. She was more like me than anyone. I banged on the partition again.

"Open the cockpit," I said to the pilot.

"Not a chance. Look, be reasonable. You know what she is. They'll pay millions. Ten million in intergalactic credits."

I reversed the slug-thrower and pointed it at Five's head.

"Open the cockpit, or I'll blow her to hell and gone."

Five's eyes got big. The pilot's got bigger. My mind got a double jolt of terror.

"No! Wait, don't..."

"I'm not kidding around. I'm as serious as a Feng with a neuroscrambler. Now drop that partition."

He hesitated.

"If you kill me, you can't pilot this flier. It's coded to me and me only."

"The partition. Now."

The partition slid partway open. Not wide enough for me to climb through, but wide enough for what I needed. The plasti-goo squirter made a funny slurping noise as I sprayed it over the pilot, immobilizing him. I reached in with the barrel and flipped off his neuro-control headset. Lacking anyone to control it, the flier switched to autopilot and started a descent. The partition disengaged and slid fully open. I smiled.

"What did you do? We'll crash!" Five protested.

"No, we won't. These things are more fool-proof than the fools who fly them. Think, would you trust someone who's had their ability for independent motivation curtailed to fly an expensive piece of equipment without a failsafe device? The flier is worth ten of him any day. When he screws up, it simply lands itself."

I rummaged in the belt pouch of the Ralengen on the left, avoiding most of the blood that was oozing out. Shoot a Ralengen, and he's bound to bleed out, even if you nail him in the head. The heart of a Ralengen continues to beat long after death. I found the

pressurized canister that I was certain would be there. I shook it and found it full.

I played the stream of solvent over the goo that was binding Five. It came off in small pieces, then big chunks of it fell away. When the last of it came loose, I picked her up and held her until she stopped shaking. Then I looked down into her eyes and kissed her.

“What do we do now?” she asked me.

“Huh? Now?”

“Won’t we be captured again?”

“Nope. Not a chance. Claris Llana-Vinton thinks you’re on your way to surgery, which is in orbit. The flier knows that it’s on its way to the nearest airport, and in this case that happens to be the intergalactic spaceport. We’ll be one of several hundred small fliers that land there every hour, and with the Vinton logo on the fuselage we won’t have any resistance from port security.”

“But what do we do then?”

“One of us buys two tickets to somewhere, and we go there. From there, we go somewhere else. Eventually we’ll find a nice world to settle down on, and that will be that.”

Five looked down, thinking. She tightened her arms around me, which I found pleasant.

“I’ve never been off-world. I’ve never even been outside the Vinton compound. Will you... stay with me? Only as long as you want to.”

“That could be a long time.”

WL Emery is a semi-retired curmudgeon who used to be a lot of fun at parties. For his sins, he lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he spends his time drinking, dancing, and writing - fantasy and science fiction. Find him on his website at www.WLEmery.com, and on Facebook.

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.

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*(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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Warrior Soul

By J. MANFRED WEICHSEL

A strange man with a mysterious camera claims that he can capture the truth and inner beauty of a subject's soul! Lured in by the photographer and his entrancing prints, a pair of young women find themselves imprisoned and in dire peril!

Late in the evening on a cool February night, a woman followed a man down the maze-like halls of a dingy hotel. She was not disturbed by the paint that peeled off the walls, or the stained carpet that was damp in parts, and worn to the floor beams in others, or the lights, which flickered often, threatening to give out.

The man was old, or rather he looked older than he was. He had scraggly, thinning white hair that clumped together in strings along the back of his neck. His jowls sagged. His eyes, which were large, watery, and bloodshot, had a blankness to them. He had a pot belly, walked with a limp, and breathed heavily from the exertion.

The woman looked very young in spite of the heavy makeup that was meant to make her look older. Her makeup made her look twenty-five, but without it, she looked about fifteen. Her real age was twenty-one, so she said, but she had been saying that for years.

She wore bright red stilettos, silk stockings, garters, a skirt that hugged her ass tightly, a lace halter top, and a coat of gold and white fur. She was covered in jewels of many colors. Her leather purse, which she held by its strap, matched her shoes.

Her name was Peace although, as grinning men had commented many a time upon first hearing it, there was nothing peaceful about her. Peace hadn't given the man her name, because he hadn't asked.

Although this was all routine business for Peace, something seemed off, so she asked the man again, "Are you sure we've never met?"

He looked her over with his bloodshot eyes and replied, "No. I'd remember you if we had," took a key out of his pocket, opened a chipped wooden door, led her inside a room that gave off a stale, pungent smell, and turned on the light.

Although the building was designated as a hotel, it was in reality a flophouse, and people lived there, some for a week, others for a month or two, and some for decades.

This unit had been lived in for a few years. There were dirty dishes piled on top of a hotplate. The carpet around the hotplate was permanently ruined. Parts of the floor were piled high with trash. The twin bed was unmade.

The man handed Peace a wad of bills. She counted the money, stuffed it in her purse, and completed the transaction by providing her service.

The man fell asleep immediately after he was done. It had started to storm outside, and Peace didn't feel like leaving in such heavy rain. She

picked her purse up off the ground, sat on the straight-back chair in front of the dresser-drawer, rolled a joint, and lit it.

She drew the smoke into her young, healthy lungs, and when she exhaled it formed a thick cloud as it rose to the ceiling. Peace had not provided the man the courtesy of opening his window, even a crack. The marijuana, as marijuana often does, put Peace in a reflective mood, and her mind wandered up and down her long and storied history, until landing on a moment from her past that it wanted to explore.

During the hottest days of summer, naked children used to splash around in the basin of the large fountain in Washington Square Park. The water gave off a moldy smell, and Peace often thought how gross it was that parents let their kids play in it. One day someone let their golden retriever into the fountain, and Peace laughed uncontrollably when it took a giant shit in the water and none of the children listened when their parents called frantically for them to get out.

Peace was laughing about the dog, even though the incident had taken place the day before, when an older girl, who was very beautiful, with a short bob of strawberry blonde hair, approached Peace with her hands on her hips and a cross look on her face. "So, you're the reason I'm not making any money!"

Peace looked at the girl, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I've been panhandling in this park for three summers now, and I've never done this bad. I asked around and learned that there was a new girl, taking all my business! You've been stealing my customers! This is my turf."

"Relax. I've been doing pretty bad lately too. It's not me or you. My theory is I try to get attention by wearing very little, but just look around you! Nobody's wearing that much."

The girl looked around and thought a bit. "You may be right. I try to get attention by wearing as little as possible too, but in this sweltering heat, everybody's pretty much naked!" She held a fist up to the harsh sky. "Damn you sun!" She looked back at Peace and smiled. "Maybe if we team up we can get more attention and make more money. I bet we'll make four times as much as usual if we go out together. We'll split everything fifty-fifty. How about it?"

"Deal."

Peace and her new friend, who said that her name was Millipede but that Peace could call her Millie or Mil, laughed as they pulled down their collars and stuck out their chests, competing to see who could show the

most cleavage. “The more cleavage you show off, the more money they give you,” Mil said.

“I know,” Peace replied. “The only thing is, my boobs aren’t as big as yours.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

Mil laughed. “I’m older than you are and I’m not twenty-one. Anyway, see that guy there? Sitting alone reading a book? Let’s go.”

Peace and her new best friend skipped over to the man Mil had pointed out, stopped abruptly in front of him, held hands with one another, and simultaneously said “Hi,” drawing the monosyllabic greeting out with an up-pitched drawl. The man placed his book on his lap, looked up at the two girls, and the first thing that caught his eyes was their cleavage. His eyebrows raised an inch. The two girls made eye contact and giggled.

“Um, hello.” The man seemed nervous, and unsure.

“We were wondering what you were reading,” Mil said.

He looked down at his book. “This? Just an old book. Real old.”

“Is it romantic?” Mil asked.

“Yes. It’s romantic.”

“Is it sexual?” Peace asked.

The man hesitated before answering, “Yes. It’s sexual.”

The two girls made eye contact and giggled. The three talked for a while and then Mil said, “We’re hungry and we were wondering if you could give us some money for a bite to eat.”

The man wavered for a bit and then after some coaxing from both girls, who blew into his ears when they talked to him and ran their hands through his curly hair, pulled out his wallet. Mil grabbed the three large bills before the man could speak, said, “Thanks, this’ll be enough,” and the two girls skipped off together, leaving the man with his book.

The rest of the day was spent in the same manner. When five o’clock came, the park began to thin out, although it was still hot and the sun was still high in the sky. Peace and Mil, exhausted from laughter, strolled out to the lawn, and Mil set a picnic blanket down on the grass.

Peace and Mil counted their money and split it evenly as they shared a joint. Peace was giddily telling Mil about all the nice things she’d be able to buy when a man came walking towards them, across the grass. He was a tall man, muscular, and young. He was dressed all in black and looked too upscale for the park. He walked with a confidence that the girls had not seen from any other man all day. Both girls watched him intently, with a mixture of suspicion and interest. When he was within earshot, he

opened a firm mouth set squarely in a finely chiseled face and said, "What, are you girls having a picnic?"

The two girls made eye contact and giggled, but there was a bit more nervousness to their laughter this time, and much less confidence. Mil hardened her gaze and looked up at the man. "What do you want?"

The man smiled in reply. "I am a photographer. May I sit down?"

The man sat without waiting for a reply and took his camera off from around his neck. Peace's eyes widened when she saw it. The man could have pointed it at the Manhattan skyline from across the Hudson and gotten a clear picture of a woman changing through her bedroom window. A camera like that was very expensive.

"I noticed you two earlier this afternoon, and I've been watching you all day," the man said.

"What do you want?" Mil asked again, with more hardness in her voice than before.

In answer, the man silently turned his camera around, showed them the display, and scrolled through photographs of the two girls as they approached different men and left with their pockets a bit more stuffed with money. The girls looked at the pictures with horror and fascination. There was something almost supernaturally beautiful about the pictures, and the girls were unable to look away. Although the girls were simply going about their activities, and although the pictures were taken by a photographer who was ostensibly taking pains to conceal his presence, there was something about them. Something amazing. Peace whispered, "That's messed up."

The man innocently raised an eyebrow. "You don't like them? I could delete them."

He reached a finger to the controls. Peace and Mil, loving their own images, panicked at the thought of their images being destroyed and shouted, "No!"

The man smiled and pulled his finger back. "These pictures are nothing. Mere test shots, and they are so good you can't bear to part with them! But I have a studio, and if you let me photograph you both there, I could make you look more fabulous than you ever imagined."

Mil asked, with a quavering voice, "How much will you pay us?"

The photographer named a very large number, and Peace and Mil followed the mysterious and handsome man to a large and expensive-looking brownstone. Inside, they followed a long, wide hall with marble floors, lit by golden chandeliers. At the end of the hall was a curtained-off

doorway. They went through it and stepped into a photographer's studio with lights, camera equipment, and a large space to take pictures.

"Come," the man said. "I want to show you something first."

He led them through the studio to an open door at the other end and turned on the lights, revealing a small gallery.

The walls inside were lined with black and white photographs of... of women? Peace couldn't tell. Although she was looking right at the pictures, she could not see them. It was as if her mind refused to register what her eyes showed her, no matter how hard she looked.

There was something alluring about the pictures, but something that repulsed Peace, as well. She was both fascinated and disgusted by them. Most girls experience such contradictory emotions upon seeing porn for the first time, but not Peace. When an older boy first showed her porn, she dug it right away. Now, she felt that which most experience as children, except exponentially greater in its intensity.

Peace looked around at the pictures, disoriented, having been thrown completely off balance by the breathtakingly beautiful images that she could look at but not see. "What are they?" Peace asked breathlessly.

"They are photographs of models' souls."

"Photographs of models' souls," Mil repeated in a daze. She had been as affected by the pictures as Peace.

"Yes. I photograph the flesh, but the true art is in the soul. So, what will it be? Would you like me to photograph your flesh, or your souls?"

Peace and Mil hesitated, not breathing, their hearts beating rapidly. They made frightened eye contact and then looked back at the man resolutely. "We don't want you to photograph our souls," Peace said.

The man let out a good-natured laugh. "The flesh it is then. Come on." He shut the door to the gallery and had the girls stand in front of the curtain in his studio.

The photographer snapped a few pictures. At first the girls were stiff and rigid, still affected as they were by the photographs. But the photographer was an expert and was able to coax them into relaxation with his soothing voice. It was a breezy shoot, and the girls had fun striking different poses and flirting for the camera. The man had a large collection of wardrobe, and he had the girls change costumes often.

At first, they went into another room to change. Once they had grown more comfortable, they changed behind the curtain, and finally, they just threw off whatever they were wearing the moment the man brought out a new change and tried it on, unconcerned that he could see them.

Gradually the wardrobe options became more and more skimpy, until eventually both girls were nude.

The man snapped the shutter of his camera rapidly, taking pictures of the girls covering themselves modestly, and immodestly letting it all hang out. He took pictures of them from the front and the back, from above them looking down, and below them looking up. He took pictures of them dancing around and acting silly and lounging about acting sultry. All the while he gave them instructions, and they followed his instructions without hesitation, no matter what he asked them to do, and no matter what he asked them to show.

The photographer indicated that he was finished, and the girls, exhausted, fell back laughing into a divan that was off to the side of the studio. They were so comfortable with the man at this point that they didn't bother to dress. The photographer sat down next to them and showed them shots as he scrolled through his work. They looked at the viewfinder, fascinated by their own images.

"So," the photographer said, "Now that you two are a little more comfortable, how about you let me photograph your souls?"

The two girls immediately stiffened. The man laughed. "Imagine your souls as works of art hanging on a wall, for anyone who passes by to see."

The two girls made hesitant eye contact, but neither spoke.

"A photograph of the flesh can be copied into infinity, but when you photograph a soul there can be only one copy, and a soul can be photographed only once, so when getting your soul photographed, it is important to choose a photographer who is also a great artist, and you are unlikely to meet another photographer of my caliber ever again."

Both girls realized they had lost. They were too curious. The pictures the photographer had taken already were too beautiful. Neither could resist.

"The process does take a long time. Do you have anyplace you need to be?"

"No," Peace answered.

"Me neither," said Mil.

"You both don't have boyfriends waiting for you at home?"

Both girls answered with an emphatic "No!"

"Then get back in front of the curtain. There is no need to dress. Clothing only serves to obscure the soul."

The two girls dutifully complied as the photographer removed the lens from his camera, took another one out from his drawer, and screwed it in

place.

The lens had three separate layers of glass held in place by clamps. The glass was like crystal, and the light that refracted through it came out the other end in a rainbow pattern that danced all about the photographer's face as he looked through the viewfinder, carefully focusing his instrument on the two girls.

The man commented, with solemn seriousness, "You say that your name is Peace, but I am looking at an in-focus image of your soul, and there is nothing peaceful about it. This is very interesting. I have never seen one before, but I think you have a warrior soul. There is a restless anger inside of you. This restlessness will always be present, no matter where you go or what you do. It is why you so often take rash actions, heedless of the consequences. Your soul is beautiful, but not peaceful."

Peace felt a thrill at having her soul looked at in such intimate detail. For the first and only time in her life, her body shuddered in its nudity. She covered herself with her arms and hands, and then let her arms and hands fall to her sides again. Peace was driven mainly by a frustrated desire to feel something, and now, in one of those rare moments when this desire was being realized, she was going to experience it in its fullness, shame be damned.

The man continued to look into his viewfinder. "Mil. You have a sensitive soul. But sensitivity is a delicate thing, and the circumstances of your life, which have been harder than you let on, have hammered the sensitivity out of you. This is why you so often use humor as a defense mechanism. To protect your soft, delicate core. Neither of you will recognize yourselves in the pictures of your souls because your souls are so much different than you are."

The photographer continued to carefully focus his instrument, and the girls felt an electric tingle deep within themselves as the strange lens probed their innermost beings. The electric tingle grew hotter the longer the photographer worked, but it was a pleasant sort of heat. Almost but not quite orgasmic.

Finally, the photographer told the girls to be especially still, to not even breathe, and pressed the button on his camera. There was a bright flash of light, brighter than anything the two girls had ever seen.

Peace waited a moment for the light of the flash to dissipate, and the spots to appear in front of her eyes. But this didn't happen. The light of the flash remained. It was a strange kind of light. It was white, but instead of containing all colors as white light normally does, it seemed to contain no colors. It was a pure white. A solid white.

Peace looked around for her friend, but she was nowhere to be seen. All Peace could see was uniform whiteness, which was made up of no colors, like black. Peace reached out her arms gropingly towards where Mil should have been. She couldn't see her arms or hands in front of her. The whiteness, which had the characteristics of darkness, was so bright, or so dark perhaps, that it made invisible everything about her, including herself.

A hand grasped Peace's arm in the whiteness that had the qualities of darkness. Peace's body jolted, then relaxed. Mil's voice called out hoarsely. "Peace! What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know." Peace moved her legs. She realized that there was no ground beneath her. "It's as if we're floating in a vacuum. No, not a vacuum, because we are breathing."

"Are you breathing? I'm not."

Peace paused. She realized that she was not, in fact, breathing. She could talk, but it was as if her lungs were always full of air. Startled, she exhaled, but no matter how much she exhaled, her lungs were always full.

The two nude girls could each feel the other's warm body pressing against her own, but the whiteness, which was darkness, was so complete that they could not see each other or themselves. Mil's wet tears landed on Peace's shoulder. "I'm scared, Peace."

Peace combed a hand comfortingly through Mil's hair. "Don't be."

The two girls remained as they were, clinging to each other in a void of white, in a vacuum that didn't rip them apart, not breathing, not sleeping, not needing to eat. They had no way of knowing how long they remained clinging to one another, there being no sun, no night, no day. They didn't get tired. They didn't get hungry. They had no way of knowing if they were stationary, or in motion.

After what could have been hours, days, or weeks, a small black spot appeared in the distance, no larger than a period at the end of a sentence. Mil was the first to notice it. "Look, Peace! What's that?"

"I don't know. It's like darkness, but look at the way it flickers. It's like... like a star."

There is a whisper deep within every one of us. This whisper is a tangible thing and is housed in a room inside a room inside a room. We rarely hear our own whispers, except during moments of deep contemplation. The black star slowly grew larger as the girls drifted nearer to it, and as it did, the whispers within both girls grew louder.

"Do you hear that?" Mil asked.

"What do you hear?" asked Peace.

“A soft voice coming from inside myself, like a murmuring brook.”

“I hear a loud voice coming from inside myself, that roars like a lion.”

The star was black, but it gave off a full spectrum of colors, just like white light. It was a different spectrum though, and it lit the girls in a range of dark colors that were completely alien to them. As they raced closer to it, the voices within the girls continued to grow louder.

When the dark star was the size of a fist, the girls soared past the first set of heavenly bodies that circled around it, a belt of large, dead asteroids. The asteroids, being lit by the dark star, were strange, murky colors. Mil shuddered and looked away. Peace glared at the asteroids with a simmering hatred like nothing she had ever experienced.

As the two nude girls, clinging to each other, sped on, their inner voices grew to a state beyond that of sound, which caused the atoms that made up their bodies to vibrate, and they heard their voices no longer in their ears, but in the vibrations of their atoms.

The girls hurtled on through white space past planets that revolved around the star in swift, clockwork-like precision; some of rock and some of gas, some dead and some raging with storms, volcanoes, and other geological activity, all lit up in evil, ghastly, otherworldly colors.

The girls' inner voices were now cacophonous and caused the particles that made up the atoms of their bodies to loosen from the electrical bonds that held them. The particles that made up the atoms of their bodies began to take on the qualities of wave patterns.

Peace felt an unbearable amount of piercing pleasure, that had all the qualities of pain, in every particle of her body, and her mind was consumed by the panic that always accompanies unbearable discomfort.

When the black star was about the size of our sun, their course, which up until now had been in a straight line, diverted towards a large asteroid hurtling through space. The surface of the side of the asteroid facing them was a smooth, perfectly round disc. A giant dome of steel bars crisscrossed the surface disc.

Peace and Mil, their bodies fully transformed into the wave patterns of their formerly inner voices, fell at the speed of light towards the bars, and passed through them. Peace and Mil slowed down, as if the force of gravity from the rock served to cushion them instead of pull them. As they drifted towards the smooth surface, their particles realigned into atoms, and their atoms gradually slowed their violent movements until both girls landed softly on the disk.

Peace looked at Mil and saw matter and electrical energy behaving by a set of rules completely alien to anything she had ever known. It was

beautiful. It was evocative, too, of a profound sadness, of delicacy, of sensitivity. Peace realized that she was looking not at her best friend Mil, but at Mil's soul.

Mil recoiled from Peace in horror. Peace took a step forward and held out her hand. "What's wrong?"

"Stay away from me," Mil cried.

"Mil, it's me, Peace."

"No! You are not Peace."

"What do you see when you look at me?"

"Savagery. Violence. Rage."

"You are seeing my soul. And when I look at you, I see your soul as well."

Mil calmed down and her crying softened. "What do you see when you look at me?"

"Goodness."

Dozens of figures approached from the distance. Like Peace and Mil, they were the souls of beautiful models that had been trapped by the photographer. The souls stopped a short distance from Peace and Mil, and three souls stepped forward. One's appearance evoked laughter from Peace and Mil, and Peace knew that she was a jester soul. The second's appearance evoked terrible misery from the two girls, and Peace knew that she was a sad soul. The third's appearance emanated serenity, and Peace knew that she was what is incorrectly called an old soul.

It was the old soul who spoke. "Greetings. I am sure you have a lot of questions."

Peace growled back in response. She surprised herself with the intensity of her anger. She was her pure soul now, with none of the trappings that develop through experience in the material world. "Where are we?"

"This is a prison, in an alternate universe from our own, where the non-corporeal body resides inside the corporeal soul."

"How do we get out?" Peace growled.

"This is an artificial universe, and this solar system is the only thing in it. There is no way to escape."

"We'll see about that."

The jester soul let out a violent moan, which she tried to suppress. She bent over and moaned again, louder. Mil held Peace's arm, frightened. Peace growled, "What's wrong with her?"

"A man is looking at her soul. The photographer who trapped all of us charges men to come into his studio and look at pictures of women's

souls. The men get great pleasure out of it. We, on the other hand, suffer the humiliation of not knowing who is pleasuring themselves with us.”

Peace was outraged upon hearing this. It was not the idea that men could look at her soul against her will that bothered her, but the idea that the photographer was profiting off of it and not sharing the money with her. “That’s bullshit.”

Mil released Peace’s arm and doubled over. “Oh no,” she cried. “Oh no, oh no, oh no.”

The old soul said, “He must have a group of men over. He lets them take the pictures off the walls, and bring them into private rooms spread out around his brownstone.

Peace glared at the old soul. “How do you know this?”

“Because sometimes, if I concentrate very hard, I can see through my picture frame, and look into the eyes of the man as he pleasures himself to my image.”

Peace felt a warmth in her groin, a kind of pleasure that seemed to come from nowhere. She realized that her picture was being looked at. She doubled over, braced herself against the pleasure, and looked up at the old soul. “How do you look through the picture frame?”

“I don’t know. I am the only soul who is able to.”

Peace breathed heavily a few times to clear her mind. She fought back against the unwanted pleasure that was growing in her loins and spreading throughout her soul. She fought back against the involuntary moans that accompany such pleasure. She stared straight ahead, breathing hard, sweating profusely. A picture frame appeared in front of her eyes, and a white spot appeared in the center of the frame. In the center of this white spot was a male face, twisted in ecstasy. The man seemed unaware that Peace could see him.

As a warrior soul, unencumbered by the trappings of civilization, Peace knew instinctively that if she just concentrated her will, she could climb through the picture frame back into her home universe. She reached out an arm, and it touched a solid surface. She reached out her other arm, and pressing them both against the sides of what felt like a tunnel, hoisted herself up. There was a terrible rumbling as she crawled into the invisible tunnel, and the world of the soul prison vanished.

She heard an inner voice again, but this time instead of her inner soul talking to her outer body, it was her inner body that was talking to her outer soul. She crawled on and found herself in nothingness. She could feel by groping around that she was in a tunnel that curved upwards, but it was neither light nor dark inside the tunnel. She could feel that the tunnel

had walls, but they were invisible, and there was nothing beyond. There wasn't even a void. It was just nothing.

Just as before, the voice of her inner body took on a quality beyond that of sound, and as she crawled, it made the atoms of her soul move in waves. As before, this was accompanied by a terrible pleasure that had the qualities of pain. The difference was that this time Peace was in control of her movements. She could have turned back and ended the insanity-inducing sensations, but with grim determination, Peace soldiered on.

After crawling for what could have been hours, days, or weeks, Peace saw a white light in front of her. It grew as she crept towards it. She reached out a hand and grabbed the edge of the picture frame. With her last bit of strength she pulled herself upwards, and her head burst through the glass of the frame, sending shards everywhere. The picture frame shook and rumbled as Peace pulled herself through it and climbed out onto the twin bed the picture was lying on.

Peace was nude, and she was covered in cuts from the broken glass. She stumbled out of the bedroom in a daze, down a hall, and into the studio where the photographer had captured her soul. All the expensive equipment was gone. In the gallery, the pictures of women's souls had been removed. The photographer must have realized that Peace was escaping from the prison with plenty of time to make his exit.

On the ground in the middle of the studio, a hand-printed pamphlet sat open, as if discarded in haste. Peace walked over to it, lowered her head, and read the open page. It said, "Your custom built soul-catching lens comes with its own pocket universe capable of holding one trillion exabytes, which should allow you to store up to fifty human souls. WARNING: This device is not intended to store warrior souls."

Peace finished her joint and put it out in an open beer can that happened to be on the dresser. The man was sleeping on the bed, snoring loudly. The storm outside was now just a light drizzle. Peace got up and looked around the room, opening closets and drawers, and peering inside boxes and beneath piles of junk. She was motivated by boredom, but had she seen something she liked, she would have thought nothing of taking it.

There was a wooden trunk in one corner of the room. She opened it, and inside were framed black and white photographs. They were the photographs of model's souls. Suddenly, Peace realized where she remembered the man from. He stopped snoring and jolted awake. Like

many older, overweight men, he suffered from sleep apnea. She pointed an accusing finger at the man. "You!"

He gave her an uncomprehending look. Peace returned it with a mocking stare. "Don't you recognize me? Or were you so busy looking at my soul that time, that you never took a proper look at my face?"

His eyes widened in horror. In a raspy whisper he exclaimed, "Peace! The woman with a warrior soul!"

"Yes. It's me. But you were a young man. How did you get so old? That was only a few years ago."

"Looking at pictures of souls aged my body prematurely. Like all addictions, the soul depletes you. I knew what was happening to me, but I couldn't stop. I'm sure you understand why. You felt it too that first time, when you stepped into my gallery and saw the pictures hanging there. The naked soul possesses a certain power of attraction."

"I was disgusted that time."

"I was disgusted the first time that alien showed me a picture of a soul in that underground club. Disgusted, but enticed. You experienced something of the same, I imagine. I needed more. I needed to be as close to the soul as possible. So God help me, before the alien left Earth I talked him into selling me his infernal lens. And look at me now. Look what all these naked souls have done to my body."

"And as your body became degraded, so did your appetites. You are no longer interested in the soul. If you were, you wouldn't have paid me for my flesh."

"That's right. I can no longer derive pleasure from a woman's soul. A weakening of the senses is the natural result of overuse. I only keep those pictures now for their sentimental value."

"But why are you poor? Your pictures, surely you must still be able to find men willing to pay to look at them."

"Just as my body became what it is today, so did the bodies of my clients, and when they became unable to derive pleasure from the soul, I didn't have the heart to go out and find new ones. I guess you could say I developed a conscience."

Like all women of her profession, Peace never went anywhere unarmed. She pulled from her garter a tiny .380 that was hidden there. The man didn't even make an attempt to dodge the bullet that tore a hole through his heart. He had given up on life long before. The man convulsed and died.

Peace took the pictures and laid them all on the ground. These were beautiful souls like her own. They were her people, and they were

suffering. She knew that there was no returning to the material world for them. Peace put on her stilettos and one by one she broke the glass of the frames with her heel.

Perhaps the souls within the frames would travel on to a better place. Or perhaps breaking the glass was a futile gesture. But either way, at least Peace felt like she was doing something to help her own kind.

*J. Manfred Weichsel is a widely published author of short fiction. Keep an eye out for his collection *Going Native* and other stories coming soon from DimensionBucket. And if you are a fan of swashbuckling pulp action, check out Weichsel's novelette *Paradise Discovered* coming May 1st in the anthology *Fierce Tales: Lost Worlds*.*



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Seeds of the Dreaming Tree

By HAROLD R. THOMPSON

Its fruit are the subject of myth and legend—some hope to exploit it for knowledge and medicinal purpose while others are prepared to kill to keep its secrets! Can the bookish adventurer Anchor Brown survive the trials of the Dreaming Tree?!

Anchor Brown met his contact at the foot of the pier. She was sitting in one of the public swing chairs, a rope net suspended from a pole with a cloth awning for shade. Brown wondered how long she had been waiting. Probably days.

"You're Brown?" she said, looking hopeful.

Brown dropped his duffel at his feet and tipped back his hat.

"Yes."

"You had a fair journey?" the woman asked. She was thin, perhaps forty years old, with a pinched face tanned almost as dark as the natives, though her hair was fair, a few yellow wisps sticking out from under the wide brim of her straw hat. She wore a light cotton dress, almost ankle length, in contrast to most of the people on the quay, who wore close-fitting wool caps and knee-length robes of drab wool despite the heat.

"Long," Brown replied. This was the agreed code. "Four ports of call."

"Happily the fifth is the last."

They exchanged faint smiles of satisfaction.

"I'm Alice Rale," the woman said, sliding out of the swing and extending one slender hand. Brown shook it. Her fingers were like sticks, the skin rough.

"Allow me to escort you to your hotel," she added.

"No hotels when I was here last," Brown said as they walked. "Burdanapore was nothing but jungle and hills, rivers and lakes. A few villages and towns along the river routes. Now look!"

He waved a hand at the bustling quayside. Foreigners seeking trade in blackwood lumber, exotic fruits, fine cloth, and spices had brought change and prosperity, but also steamships and warehouses, with brick buildings in the Artorian style sprouting all along the main water street, their blocky shapes in contrast to the more pyramidal stone structures the Burdanapores preferred, and had for thousands of years.

"Do we bring wonders?" Brown quoted. "Or do we bring doom?"

"I'd been told," Alice said, "that you like to rattle off bits of poetry."

"Prose," Brown corrected. "Almost always prose. That's a bit of Danton."

The hotel was four stories, made of local limestone. Loitering near the double oak doors was an ancient native woman leaning on a blackwood staff. Brown tipped his hat, and the woman gave him a toothless grin.

Brown hesitated. Something about the woman, something in her eyes, unnerved him.

"Who might you be, grandmother?" he asked.

The woman laughed, a harsh cackle, and limped away, her staff tapping the packed earth of the street.

"She's been here every day," Alice said with a shrug. "I have no idea what she wants, but she seems harmless. Never mind her. We have much to discuss."

The hotel room was standard, like something from the south beaches at home in Artor, save for the mosquito netting over the bed and the wind-up fan in the ceiling. Alice gave the brass crank in the wall a few turns, which set the fan spinning, providing minor relief.

"My room is next door," Alice said, dropping into a rattan chair and producing a cigarette case from a skirt pocket.

Brown took the other chair in the room and leaned an elbow on the adjacent table.

"All right," he said. "So where do we start?"

"What do you know of the legend of the dream tree?" Alice said.

"That it's no legend. 'The Dreaming Tree is unto a god, its seeds the gateway to heaven.' So said Ronald in his famous treatise."

"So you've seen it. The tree, I mean."

"Yes. There's only one. It's very old. I didn't go too close. God or not, at one time they sent their undesirables to it, criminals and the like, who either survived its poisonous visions or didn't."

"I haven't been able to confirm that. No one will speak to me about it."

Brown reclined in his chair. Of course, this is why he had come to Burdanapore at the behest of the Imperial Secretary of Trade, because he alone of his countrymen had seen the legendary dreaming tree. His private ventures had not been doing as well as he had hoped, so he had accepted the mission. With some reluctance. The truth was, he was not happy to be working for the Government again. It seemed a step back.

"I expect that the folk here," he told Alice, "know little enough about it. It's almost forgotten, its existence denied, hidden."

Alice lit a cigarette with a match, and the smoke rose in a spiral toward the ceiling fan, like a miniature typhoon.

"I understand that. I had a team with me, four experienced men, all soldiers like yourself."

"Former soldier," Brown corrected.

Alice waved a hand in dismissal, suddenly seeming irritated.

"They went searching for the thing. They never came back. That was a month ago."

Brown stroked his chin. He did not like the sound of this, and he thought of the toothless old woman outside the hotel. A spy? Would they

be that protective of the tree?

He wished he had some whisky, but doubted there was any to be had in the entire country.

“Look,” he said. “Why do we want to find the tree so badly?”

Alice looked perplexed.

“You’ve read Ronald, and so you know the properties of the seeds. Think of the medical applications! The seeds are poison in large doses but have a calming and numbing effect in small quantities. Think of all the people we could save by taking away their pain during surgery. Think of the welfare of our troops! You can understand this.”

“The natives won’t trade the seeds. So we’re going to steal a few?”

Alice stamped out her cigarette on the arm of her chair. “This is for the good of all humanity. Why should they keep something that can save lives *secret*?”

“Will we share this knowledge with all of humanity? Including the empire’s enemies? The Valgurnians, for instance?”

“Dammit Brown, I don’t know! I’m a medical officer. This is my project, my initiative, and I want it. For Artor! All nations act according to their self-interest, and this is in our self-interest. How can you argue with that?”

Brown nodded.

“I can’t.”

There was one more Artorian agent in the country, a man named Arnold who ran a small screw steamer, plying the rivers as a transport for hire. He had taken Alice’s lost team into the interior.

“I waited days for ’em,” he told Brown. “I’m still hoping they’ll turn up.”

They were chugging up the Grumptor River, a muddy meander that, according to convention, led nowhere. Brown had dressed for the occasion, sporting a dark green canvas jacket with many pockets, canvas trousers, and brown leather boots. He carried a gas pistol in addition to his canteen, haversack with three days rations of biscuit and dried lamb, and a wide-bladed brush cleaver known as a hoongar.

As the steamer rounded a bend, he pointed to a narrow crescent beach, flanked on either side by piles of smooth boulders.

“Put in here and let us off,” he told Arnold. “If we’re gone longer than five days, I suggest you leave.”

“Are we so near the tree?” Alice asked, gazing around at the rising land beyond the river banks.

Brown pointed at the surrounding hills with their steep green sides.

“We can cross these hills and come at the tree from the west. No one will see us. But we’ll have to cut our way through.”

Alice looked satisfied, and there was an odd glint in her eye, a hunger.

“This is why I sent for you,” she said.

Arnold maneuvered the launch in as close as he dared, but Brown still had to wade to shore. Alice came with him. She had traded in her dress for clothes similar to Brown’s, and the water soaked her trousers to mid-thigh.

“I still think you should stay with Arnold,” Brown told her.

“Why? I’ll remind you again that this is my project. I want to see this tree, dammit!”

“I go now to lay down my life,” Brown quoted, a line from the *Book of City Tales*, “in the eternal quest for knowledge and understanding.’ Something like that?”

“I don’t intend to lay down my life!” Alice said.

Brown chuckled.

“No one ever does. But there are things in this forest, non-human things that can kill you very quickly. Stay close by my side and do as I do.”

He plunged into the jungle. The terrain was well suited to moving fast, the trees large and spreading, with not much undergrowth, and he knew he could make short work of this journey. He just hoped that Alice, with her slight frame, was able to keep up the pace.

“How is it that you were able to find the tree before?” she said, puffing as she followed him uphill.

“I was studying the ruins of the ancient Munyirs,” he told her, “a conquering people who absorbed Burdanapore three thousand years ago. Their ruins are all through these woods. My guides showed me the tree and told me its tales, how they once used it to test prisoners but now it was considered very dangerous and no one should ever go there. They avoided it.”

“That explains the sparsity of the scholarly record. The best sources describing the medicinal powers of the seeds are almost a century old, and from an Artorian naval surgeon. And Ronald, of course.”

They made their way up and up, Brown sometimes using his hoongar to clear fallen trees and brush. He made good time, and Alice stayed with him, though he sensed her struggling.

Late in the day they emerged onto the crown of a hill, a clearing littered with square stone blocks, some half sunken in the soft turf, many with patterns etched into them, lines and waves and spirals.

“Munyir hill fort ruins,” Brown explained. “We can camp here and continue on in the morning. Look!”

He pointed to the east, where another hill rose. In the golden light of evening, a low green dome of foliage stood out from the rest of the canopy. It resembled the top of a massive umbrella.

“The tree,” Brown said. “We can reach it late tomorrow, I think, if we maintain this pace.”

Alice stared with her mouth open.

“That’s it, then. The tree itself.”

“Yes.”

She pointed.

“I can see the trace of the river,” she said, “running through the jungle. It looks like it goes right past the tree! We could have just followed it there!”

“We could have,” Brown admitted, “but that, I presume, is what your team did. Walked up to the front door. We’re going in the back.”

Alice did not seem convinced and was silent as Brown searched for a sheltered place amongst the ruins to make a fire and brew some tea.

That night he wrapped himself in his single blanket and propped himself against a stone wall, dozing and waking, his gas pistol in his hand. Alice snored beside him.

Brown thought about the mission. Something seemed off, something wrong. He hoped it was just his dissatisfaction, his creeping sense of failure. An image of his father came to him, of the old boy’s smiling face, his moustache like steel wire. He had been proud of Brown when he had entered the army.

What would he think of his son now?

In the morning they started early, descending the hill into the darkness the dawn had yet to touch. They moved quickly, not speaking, saving their strength. By noon they had reached a small valley and started to climb again. Several small birds flashed by overhead, moving in straight lines, their wings buzzing. A kind of hummingbird, Brown thought, until he saw one light on Alice’s left shoulder.

“Stop!” he hissed. “Don’t move.”

Alice froze, shoulders hunched, mouth open.

“What is it?” she whispered. “I can feel it.”

Brown took careful steps. More of the creatures were humming overhead, gathering. He looked at the specimen that had landed on Alice, which was now crawling toward her neck. A giant wasp, at least three inches in length, its body striped black and pink.

Brown remembered a story of wasps that drank nectar from the dreaming tree. Their sting contained some of the poison.

He raised his hoongar, intending to flick the wasp away from Alice.

Another wasp landed on his hand. It was so large he felt its weight and could not stop himself from flinching.

He felt the stinger pierce his flesh like a heated dagger. For a second he saw an explosion of light within his eyes, then the soft forest floor was rising to meet him.

Brown's disorientation was short-lived after he woke. He knew exactly what had happened, and he groaned as he rolled over and struggled to a seated position. His hands were tied at the wrists in front of him with very tight and narrow rope, his feet tied at the ankles. He was having trouble focusing his vision but could make out Alice beside him, wrists and ankles bound in the same fashion.

"I wondered when you were going to open your eyes," Alice said, sounding disgusted.

"The wasps," Brown said, but a shadow loomed over him, and a harsh cackling made him look up to see the toothless old woman they had encountered outside the hotel. With her was a young man, head bare and black hair standing up like quills. He had sad eyes, Brown thought, but in his hand he held a hoongar.

Brown's hoongar, like his gas pistol, was gone.

"You did well, tree mother," said the young man, speaking in Artorian. "Your wasps found us two new pilgrims, pulled them from the forest."

Brown blinked in what he took to be evening light. He was in a circular clearing, the ground barren and stony, the jungle making a circumferential wall. There were a few wasps overhead, but he ignored them, for in the centre of the clearing was the tree.

The roots exposed, it seemed to squat on a pile of boulders, looking like massive legs or tentacles, spreading across the stone. The trunk was a gigantic wooden pillar, its tangled limbs supporting the soaring green umbrella of leaves. Dangling from the outer branches were thousands of small green oval pods—the seeds.

Brown blinked, his vision becoming clearer. There was something strange about the bark.

"Do you see it?" he asked Alice.

She gave a sharp nod. "Yes."

There were human shapes in the tree's surface, in the trunk and larger limbs, as if they'd been carved, but Brown could see that they were

not carvings. They were moving, slowly, tortured forms with outstretched arms and open mouths.

The young man with the hoongar knelt, his face close to Brown's, as the old woman continued to laugh. There were others in the clearing as well, maybe a dozen figures looking benign in their wool caps and tunics, but all armed with sharp hoongar blades.

"We know you came for our tree," the young man said, looking at Alice. "We found your friends, the ones you sent into the jungle. They are in there."

He pointed at the tree with his hoongar.

"What did you do to them?" said Alice.

The young man grinned.

"The tree brings you to the edge of death. You know of the poison? It will make you see, give you visions, dreams as you would say. If you can survive, it will grant you knowledge and let you go free. If you can't, you will become part of it, and feed it. Like your friends."

He again pointed at the tree. Brown looked at the human shapes and felt his skin crawl. This was an abomination.

"I'm sorry," he said to Alice. "I had no idea."

Two of the men came forward and took hold of Alice's thin arms, hoisting her to her feet. She made no effort to resist but just gaped at the tree as the old woman laughed some more. Two giant wasps buzzed as they circled her head.

"Stop!" Brown roared, but as he tried to get to his feet, he felt the cold edge of the young man's hoongar against his neck.

"Let the tree judge her," the man said.

"I want this," Alice murmured. "I want the knowledge of the tree."

Brown watched in dismay as she allowed herself to be dragged forward, up the jumble of boulders to a dark cavity between the massive roots. When they threw her in, she dropped out of sight without a sound.

"Now we wait for the tree's answer," the young man whispered in Brown's ear.

With a groaning, splintering sound, the bark at the base of the trunk began to shiver and pulse. A shape appeared, a slender hand, an arm, pushing out of the bark, and then a face, contorted in agony. Brown knew that face.

The figure of Alice, groaning and popping, flowed upward until it came to the base of one of the lower limbs, and there it stopped.

"She has failed," said the young man.

Brown could not tear his eyes from the horror of the tree's surface, at the shape of Alice.

"No," he said.

Two of the others pulled him to his feet.

"At least cut my bonds!" he shouted as they dragged him along the hard ground. "At least give me a fighting chance!"

"You should not have come here," said the young man with the sad eyes. "The tree is a god, but do we need such gods in our lives? No. Those who are fool enough to seek it must face its wrath. The tree will judge you."

The gaping maw between the roots grew closer. Brown struggled, but could do nothing with his hands and feet bound, and then his captors lifted him and pushed him forward, into the darkness beneath the tree.

He did not cry out, but rolled onto his side, expecting to hit hard ground or become tangled in roots. Instead, he found himself in a forest glade of green grass and golden sunlight.

His hands and feet were free.

The vision, he thought. The poison is working and giving me a vision.

"There you are," said a harsh voice behind him.

He whirled, hand going to the hilt of a hoongar he found at his side.

The man who faced him was tall, handsome, with silver-gray hair and a mustache to match his smile. He was dressed in a well-tailored sack coat, silk cravat, and blue and white striped trousers. His walking stick was of dark wood.

"Father?" Brown said.

His father was ten years dead.

"Yes, my boy," said the cheerful figure, but then the smile vanished, replaced by a sneer. "And what have you to say? Explain yourself!"

Brown faltered, hands dropping to his sides.

"What do you mean? Explain what?"

"You resigned your commission, left the army, and what have you done? Nothing but a string of failures. The government sends you on one fool's errand after another because it knows you'll go. And look! Allowing yourself to fall victim to wasps, to be taken prisoner, to lose your companion, and not the first time. Bloody incompetence."

Brown took a step back as if struck. All the strength had gone out of him.

"And let's not forget that damned fool book you wrote," his father continued. "They treated it as a work of fiction, didn't they? You're the laughing stock of the Imperial Society!"

“But,” Brown stammered, “I seek truth. Father, I...”

This was wrong. His father had been a gentleman, kind and understanding, a humorous and carefree fellow who was nothing but encouraging. He would never say these things.

Brown looked into his father’s eyes. He saw nothing but darkness there, an absence of hope. He gasped.

“You aren’t my father!” he said.

His hand flew to the hoongar.

The thing that was not his father drew a slim sword from inside his walking stick and lunged. Brown stepped aside, striking with the hoongar at his opponent’s shoulder. The man screamed as the wide blade bit through his coat and into his flesh.

Brown wrenched the blade free and struck again. His opponent dropped to his knees, then fell onto his back.

With a howl of rage, Brown cast aside his hoongar and leapt onto the imposter, tearing at his clothes, tearing at his face. The skin peeled away in flakes and chunks, like bits of splintered wood.

Inside the man’s head was more darkness.

Brown fell into it, landing on something hard. Packed earth and stones.

His head cleared, and he saw that he was back in the clearing, on the rocks beneath the tree. He had crawled out of the cavity beneath the roots. Scattered around him were several of the green seed pods. His hands hurt, and he saw that his fingernails were cracked, his fingers lacerated and bloody.

Below him was the river. He had come out on the other side of the tree. The ropes that had tied his hands hung loose, and he threw them off and untied his ankles.

“You should have died,” said the young man with the sad eyes, coming around the great trunk, hopping from one root to another. The blade of his hoongar glinted in the evening light.

“The tree freed me,” Brown said. “I passed the test!”

“You must be strong,” the young man said. “But you still must die. No one can be permitted to tell of the tree.”

He raised his blade to strike.

Brown ducked and lunged, grabbing the young man’s ankle and giving it a sharp yank. The man fell backwards, landing hard on the root, the hoongar flying. With a cry, he rolled into the pit beneath the tree.

Brown stared after him, but the young man had disappeared.

“The tree will judge you,” Brown said.

Footsteps were approaching, the humming of wasps, and the old woman's laughter. Brown made a dash for the river. Behind him, he heard the bark begin to groan and crackle, but he did not look back.

#

Arnold was waiting at the agreed place, near the little crescent of sand. Brown had let the river take him, had found a log and latched on. Arnold fished him out of the water, and Brown collapsed onto the little steamer's deck, exhausted.

"Where's Doctor Rale?" said Arnold.

"With the rest of her team," Brown murmured. "I came seeking knowledge," he started to quote, but could not go on. For a moment, the full tragedy of it, the awfulness, struck him, and he lay on his back, taking deep breaths. But at last he rallied.

There were always risks. Alice had said that she had known and accepted them. He had to believe that.

"What about the tree?" Arnold said. "Did you find it? Did you get any seeds?"

Brown pushed himself up and leaned with his back against the wheelhouse. His clothes were dripping, and he started to unbutton his jacket.

"Wait, what's this?" he said.

There was something in his pocket, and he pulled it out and stared at it. It sat there in his palm, an impossible thing. He did not remember taking it, but somehow it had come back with him.

It was a single green oval pod, a single seed of the dreaming tree.

In addition to writing short science fiction, fantasy and horror, Harold R. Thompson is the author of the "Empire and Honor" series of historical adventure novels, which include Dudley's Fusiliers, Guns of Sevastopol and Sword of the Mogul.

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The Valley of Terzol

By JIM BREYFOGLE

Kat and Mangos have been hired to accompany the adventurer Andorholm Wallenooop to the ruins of Terzol in search of an ancient lost delivery! A thousand-year-old receipt offers a clue to fabulous reward or certain death in the Valley of Terzol!

Eight months after the fall of Alness.

“Do you think it’s poisonous?” Mangos asked, prodding the snake with the tip of his sword.

“Almost everything else in this jungle is, why not that?” Kat answered.

Mangos laughed. The snake coiled and hissed, its white mouth contrasting sharply with its vivid green and yellow skin. It had inch-long fangs that folded up as it drew back and closed its mouth.

“It’d make a nice belt,” Mangos said as he tapped the snake under the chin. The coil became a mass of frenzied movement, and there were three sharp “clacks” as it struck the sword. Mangos stepped back. The snake coiled and struck again, but Mangos twisted his sword, and the snake’s head hit the ground and rolled away while the body thrashed on the jungle floor.

Kat cut away some branches at the far side of the clearing and glanced over her shoulder at him. “You may as well bring it now.”

“Will you stop playing?” said a waspish voice. Andorholm Wallenooop stood up and wiped sweat from his face. “It’s like I brought a child.”

“If you’re ready to go,” said Mangos.

Andor snorted and jerked his head in a way that managed to say, ‘It wasn’t my idea to rest’ when, in fact, it had been. Mangos and Kat had to slow considerably so they wouldn’t outpace their employer.

Andor claimed to be an adventurer, but his skin was too pale, his hands too soft, and he cared about little inconveniences too much.

“I didn’t bring you to play with snakes,” said Andor peevishly. “I brought you to protect me.” He looked at Kat. “I’m not even sure why I brought you. I don’t even desire you.”

Mangos sucked in his breath. In less than a year since he and Kat met, they had become known as a clever and dangerous team. He knew little of Kat’s background, but he knew of her abilities. Andor was a fool to disparage her, but Kat merely looked at him, a slight flaring of her nostrils her only reaction.

“Had I known the Meerkat was a woman,” Andor went on, “I would have sought my bodyguards elsewhere.”

“Have a care, little man,” said Mangos. “Lest we return your money and leave you here.”

“Oh, I’ll keep you on,” Andor retorted. “I’ve come this far.”

“And how much further?” inquired Mangos, glad to change the subject. Kat still had not spoken.

Andor snorted. “You needn’t know.”

“We’ll know when we get there,” Mangos huffed.

Andor curled his lip. “I doubt you would recognize it even then.”

“We’re in the Terzol Valley,” said Kat, her arm raised to cut another branch. Mangos blinked.

Andor swiveled his head and looked at her for a long moment before speaking. “We are.”

“As Terzol is the heart of the world, so the Emperor’s house is the heart of Terzol,” she continued. It sounded like a quote. “He controlled religion, government, and commerce. We’re going to the Imperial Palace.”

Andor licked his lips. “That need not concern you,” he said.

“Terzol is—” started Mangos.

“Not a myth,” interjected Kat. She swung her machete and a branch fell to the ground. “Your people never had much commerce with them.”

“I never said it was a myth,” said Mangos, offended. He came from Arnelan, a narrow strip of land between the Western Sea and Callos Mountains. With fish, farm, and mines at hand, they needed little. Mangos only knew Terzol as an Empire months to the east that had fallen centuries before.

It wasn’t that he had anything against learning. He even planned to get some sometime. And, if he was completely honest, he was a little jealous of Kat’s knowledge. “I just wondered who said Terzol was the heart of the world.”

Kat did not answer. Mangos looked at Andor, but he didn’t answer either. He was used to Kat’s mysterious background. When they first met she looked so haggard he thought her an escaped slave. Later when he discovered she could fight, he revised his opinion to escaped gladiatrix. Still later, as she haggled over

supplies, he thought perhaps a merchant's guard. Now that he had seen her learning on several subjects, he admitted he didn't know what to think.

Kat beckoned with her machete, inviting Andor to precede her into the jungle.

"No," said Andor. "You go first." He glanced back the way they had come, a nervous habit that made Mangos wonder if he expected pursuit.

Kat stepped from the clearing back into the jungle.

Mangos watched her for a second before following. None could deny she was extremely beautiful. Yet he did not desire her, and it puzzled him. Since he didn't doubt his manhood, he suspected magic.

"What are you doing?" Mangos hissed. Kat was crouched over the sleeping Andor, both barely shadows under the protection of a leaning tree, several paces from the fire.

Kat didn't answer, and Mangos did not repeat his question. The long day's travel, a meal of roast snake, and a safe shelter had put Andor to sleep. His snores joined the symphony of insects to form the background noise of the jungle night. Mangos did not want to wake him.

Kat slipped back to the fire, not at all concerned.

Mangos frowned. She held a small brass scroll tube with shards of wax still clinging to grooves at one end. She worried out the wooden stopper to retrieve the scroll inside. Carefully unrolling the yellowed and flaked parchment, she turned it so it would better catch the light.

"You're reading his papers!" Mangos said.

"I got bored," said Kat with a little shrug. "Besides, he stole this from someone else."

"What if he wakes up?" But Mangos couldn't contain his curiosity. "What is it?"

"An old receipt and instructions for delivery. Very old, very fragile. My guess is the merchandise was never picked up, and Andor wants it."

“In Terzol?” Mangos flinched at the volume of his voice. He spoke more softly. “Is he mad?”

“A little, maybe,” Kat replied. “But it was stored in the Palace-Temple, well protected, and could only be removed with a certain key. There is an impression on the paper where it wrapped around a seal. Again a guess, but the seal is probably the key needed to unlock a vault containing the merchandise. If the vault was hidden or strong enough, it might not have been looted.”

“He has the seal?”

“I put it back around his neck this morning,” Kat said; Mangos couldn’t help looking at her in amazement. “What? I just wanted to look at it. It’s very nice work; an antiques dealer would pay good silver for it.”

Mangos thought a moment, glanced at Andor to ensure he still slept. “So what is this merchandise?”

“It doesn’t say.”

Mangos sat back, disappointed.

“But consider,” Kat continued, “it was so valuable they would not name it in writing, and the Terzoli would not take responsibility to ship it. It is so valuable that somebody paid in full without delivery. No,” she added before he could ask. “It doesn’t say who paid, or how much.” She rerolled the parchment and slid it back into its brass tube.

“Fools doing business,” muttered Mangos.

“Fools because the Terzoli civil war made it too dangerous to fetch their merchandise.” Kat smiled a smile that made her look a little feral. “Maybe somebody believed it was lost, maybe somebody died, but it was forgotten until our friend here found the receipt and key. And that,” she said in a tone that suggested this was the important part, “answers why an accountant hired bodyguards to travel to Terzol.”

“An accountant? How do you know he was an accountant?”

Kat laid a finger on her lips to indicate he should be quiet. She returned to Andor’s side. Something in the night howled, and Andor stirred, his snoring interrupted. Kat froze. After a second, she slid the tube back into his pack and returned to the fire.

“He has ink stains on his fingers. He could be an archivist,” she said as she sat down again, “but he doesn’t seem the sort.”

“If you would stop looking behind us and look ahead, you might see we have a problem,” Mangos said to Andor.

A group of men, all carrying sticks, formed a half circle, blocking their way. They guarded a squalid village of branch and leaf huts, arranged around a muddy clearing. Only one building was of stone, a small structure against a hill with roots crawling over and in it. Grey stone people peered between the roots, part of elaborate carvings on the walls.

“We’re going that way,” said Andor, pointing through the village.

The center man, apparently the leader, spoke angrily and waved his stick. Mud-covered children watched the confrontation. The small children clung to their mother’s legs while the older ones stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Mangos and Kat.

“Do you realize,” said Andor, “I don’t understand a word they’re saying?”

“They’re talking too fast,” replied Kat. “You see the leader’s helmet? That’s old—imperial Terzol, I’d guess. The stone building too.”

The center man, the largest of what Mangos now counted was a dozen men, wore a conical bronze helmet large enough to rest on his shoulders. He peered out the arched opening in front like a bird peering from a birdhouse. He had a spearhead tied to his club and wore strips of something cut to resemble greaves, pauldrons, and bracers.

He shouted angrily and gestured to the jungle behind them.

Mangos shook his head. “We’re not going back.”

Just then, a little boy, maybe six years old, ran out from behind his mother and kicked Mangos. Mangos caught the boy by the hair and lifted him off the ground. He started to scream and kick, but Mangos held him at arm’s length. The villagers cried out.

“Yours?” Mangos asked, raised the boy a little.

The boy’s mother wailed, raising her arms in supplication and falling to her knees. One of the men took a step forward and shook

his club, shouting unknown threats. Mangos shook the boy a little and said, "Now we have something to talk about."

The boy started to cry and the man with the club waved it again.

"I think," said Kat, "you have his son."

"You'll get us all killed!" cried Andor.

Mangos drew his sword and bared his teeth. "If everybody on one side dies, it won't be us."

Andor spoke, haltingly, stumbling over unfamiliar words. The villagers clearly struggled to understand him.

"What are you saying?" Mangos demanded.

Andor didn't answer but kept talking to the villagers.

"He is begging them not to kill us," said Kat. "At least I think that's what he thinks he's saying. I wouldn't use the same phrasing, but I can only read Terzoli, I can't speak it."

"We don't need to speak Terzoli!" shouted Mangos. He dropped the boy, who scrambled into his mother's arms. "Is there a man here who dares face me?"

"Don't antagonize them!" squawked Andor.

"Careful," Kat said.

One of the men lifted a short, straight stick to his mouth and blew. There was a little buzz, a flash of steel, and a clank as Kat knocked a dart from the air with her sword. Two more men lifted their blowguns.

Mangos roared and charged. The villagers scattered. Kat and Andor followed, and the three dashed into the jungle.

"Bluff and misdirection and brute force," Mangos said as they pushed through the undergrowth. He glared at Andor, "works better than begging."

The village was long behind them with no sign of pursuit when dark clouds rolled across the sky. Kat and Mangos noticed and took out their cloaks. Andor didn't notice; instead he kept looking behind them.

The rain rolled after the clouds. One moment, it was overcast; the next, rain fell in sheets. Andor hastily pulled out his own cloak.

Mangos carefully turned so Andor couldn't see his smile.

“Cursed rain!” grumbled Andor. “Why does it happen now?” He sighed, the sigh of long suffering that made Mangos want to strangle him.

“Tell me of Terzol,” Mangos said as they worked their way through the sodden jungle. Conversation would distract him from the fact the rain had found the seam between his cloak and hood and now trickled down his back.

“Why?” Andor snorted. “You don’t need to know to do your job.”

“Terzol controlled this whole valley,” said Kat. “It was all cultivated, with a half-dozen cities and an extensive canal network.”

Mangos wiped the sweat from his face. “You’d never know. Those trees look hundreds of years old.”

“They probably are. The empire fell three hundred fifty years ago. Civil War.”

“Let me guess,” Mangos said. “Armies back and forth, crops don’t get planted, trade disappears. Famine, fire, and a great stillness come over the land.”

“And then the jungle covers it all,” Kat said. “Although you told the tale without the high drama of treachery and tragedy.” He heard her laughter over the dripping water from the jungle’s canopy. “Ruins litter the Terzol valley,” she continued. “Ruins of an empire that tore itself apart, fighting itself back into savagery, back to primitives huddling amongst the bones of their ancestors’ greatness.”

“You didn’t make that up,” said Andor. “That is from Teritum of Alomar’s *History of Terzol*.”

“Hmmm,” Kat noted in agreement. “Maybe you’re an archivist after all.”

Mangos and Kat stepped out from under the canopy to the edge of the canal. They faced a hundred yards of rain-splashed water. On the far side, rising over the jungle, was the top of a great building, small in the distance, but visible by its height.

“We could swim,” said Kat.

“Eh.” Mangos didn’t like the idea but didn’t want to admit it.

“You can swim, can’t you?”

“Of course,” replied Mangos, but he wondered if he could swim that distance and how they would get their gear across.

The sound of Andor panting interrupted further conversation. They fell silent to watch him approach the canal. The sight seemed to strike him a physical blow. His mouth opened and closed, his eyes bulged in his pale and sweaty face. He struggled to speak. "I'm not swimming that."

"Do you have a better idea?" Kat sounded angry.

Mangos shaded his eyes and looked down the canal. "We could try the bridge."

It had been a grand bridge. It once spanned the canal in three arches, two short on each side with a long center span that barges could pass beneath. Much of the marble remained, though rust bled from the joints.

A long ramp rose out of the jungle to form the abutment and lessen the incline of the road as it rose toward the top of the bridge. The first arch still stood, crossing a quarter of the canal. The center arch had fallen; it was visible under the cloudy yellow-green water. The footings for another support poked out of the water, bits of the spandrels still clinging to it, but nothing more. The last arch had also fallen, and bits of it stuck above the water, forming stepping-stones to the far side.

Upon reaching the bridge, Mangos ran his hand over the stained marble. "The re-enforcing rods are likely rusted away," he said. "They sometimes used iron cages filled with crushed rock to fill the abutments and spandrels. It was cheaper and easier than moving larger stones from the quarry."

Kat looked at him incredulously; clearly amazed he would know that, perhaps even surprised he would know the terms. "I did not know that," she said.

"My father was a mason," he said, feeling his skin redden as he blushed. "He once worked on a bridge." He changed the subject: "I think if we get to the other support, we can jump from stone to stone to the far side."

"And just how are we supposed to get there?" demanded Andor. "I told you I'm not swimming."

"If we can wedge a branch with a rope tied to it on that support, someone can pull themselves across."

“That would be me,” volunteered Kat. “I’m the lightest and not afraid of water.” Her smirk told Mangos she suspected why he didn’t want to swim.

It took Mangos a dozen tries before he lodged a stick on the broken support. He pulled the rope tight and tied it to the abutment.

Kat pulled on the rope. “This ought to work.” She slid off the edge of the bridge and started to cross, moving first one hand than the other. Her weight caused the rope to stretch and sag.

“A little lower and I may as well be swimming,” she said between breaths.

As her feet dipped near the water, dozens of fish rose to the surface, making ripples as they circled below her.

“I don’t think you want to do that,” Mangos called. “Swim, I mean.”

Kat kept moving forward, dropping even lower as she neared the midpoint. A fish leapt from the water, missed her, and splashed back. More fish started to leap, and she swayed to avoid them.

“They’re—oh!” she exclaimed as a fish narrowly missed her, but bit her cape and hung, thrashing but unable to extract its teeth from the cloth. “They have large teeth.”

“Hold tight, I’ll raise the rope!” Mangos called. He grabbed the rope and began to pull it. At the far end the stones shifted. Kat dropped, jerked to a stop.

“Don’t!” she shouted.

He stopped, unable to pull or let go while the fish kept jumping. Kat gyrated wildly as she tried to pull herself across the canal.

A huge shape, perhaps twenty feet long, swam into view just beneath the surface. It had a blunt snout, four stubby legs, and a long tail. “Not good,” Mangos said, “Not at all good.” The crocodile rose, its broad back breaking the surface, and swam under Kat.

The fish ignored the crocodile and kept leaping at Kat. She hung no more than a foot above the water.

The stone shifted again and Kat dropped a few more inches.

The crocodile opened its mouth, four feet long and full of teeth. It closed it with a snap, and Kat let out a surprised cry. The crocodile turned toward the far bank then circled back.

Kat stopped struggling, lifted her feet higher, and watched it pass directly beneath her.

The stone shifted.

Kat let go.

“No!” cried Mangos. His heart seemed to stop.

Kat dropped onto the crocodile’s back, ran its length and sprang into a shallow dive. She knifed into the water; the fish darted away and immediately swarmed back. The crocodile twisted around, its great tail driving it in pursuit.

Mangos could only swear, over and over, as his heart hammered. He prepared to dive in, stopped, tried again—couldn’t do it.

Kat breached the water at the ruined support, pulled herself up, clothes in tatters, blood trickling through the holes. She climbed as her life depended on it, ignoring the jumping fish.

The crocodile erupted after her, teeth flashing, tail thrashing, beating the water to foam as it tried to scale the support.

And then Kat was crouched on the top, dripping water and blood, watching the crocodile scabble uselessly. A fish flopped at her side, still caught on her cape.

Mangos let out his breath, and it seemed his heart started to beat again. “That,” he called, “is why I don’t like swimming!”

Kat began to laugh. The crocodile stopped trying to climb the support and swam around it, opening and closing its mouth.

“At least it’ll be easy to tie off the rope securely,” she said, still grinning. “Then you can cross safely enough.”

“Only after the crocodile leaves,” said Andor. Mangos had forgotten all about him. “I’m not crossing until it leaves.”

Nothing remained of the main gates of Terzol City but blackened rubble. They had been contested beyond their destruction; even the form of gates and towers had been destroyed. A partially cleared path allowed the victorious attackers, and centuries later them, to pass.

The wall slithered up to the ruined gates. It would be easy to think it useless, shaded as it was by the trees that rose high above it. Or maybe it was that much of the wall had been reduced to rubble,

or that time and weather had failed to erase the mark of fire. Yet the wall still served as a boundary, and in places it still had grandeur; twelve yards high where it stood unbroken, banded in grey and purple stone. It must have been grand, Mangos thought as they passed into Terzol the city.

What war started in the city, the jungle finished. Trees grew around and through the structures. Their roots pushed apart walls and wrapped up buildings. Grasses sprouted in a thin layer of soil that partially covered the streets. All was peaceful in the shade of the tall trees.

“We have seen you safely to Terzol,” Mangos said.

“There is no safety in Terzol,” came a voice. They turned to see a man crouched on top of one of the pillars. “Even now.”

Andor turned very pale. “Why are you here? I have done nothing.”

“Nothing but steal from the Bursa,” said the man.

“The Bursa?” Mangos demanded in shock. “You stole from the Bursa?” He had heard of him—merchant prince, king of thieves, the most powerful man in Alomar after the true Prince.

“No!” Andor exclaimed. “I didn’t! Only a scroll. Worthless, not even in the records. It had fallen behind the paneling.”

“Ah,” the man mused. “The Bursa was right. He didn’t know what you took, only that you must have taken something.”

Andor closed his mouth, his eyes popping from his face as he realized he had just confessed.

“Nobody,” said the man, now talking to Mangos and Kat, “quits the Bursa and hires bodyguards unless they have done something... wrong.” He sprang off the pillar, landing lightly. With a sword in one hand and a long knife in the other, he advanced on Andor. “Now I will recover this scroll and set an example of you.” Andor sank to his knees in fear.

Kat stepped forward. “We can’t let you do that.”

“We can’t?” said Mangos. “He’s a treacherous little bastard. We *should* have fed him to the crocodile.”

Kat’s eyes never left the assassin. “If we’re that particular about clients, we’ll have few.”

“Admirable,” said the man. “But do you know who I am?”

“I think so,” replied Kat. “The Hand of Bursa, though I’d not thought to see you outside of Alomar.”

“This took me further than I expected. Our little bird flew very far indeed. But the Bursa does not tolerate theft, no matter how small.”

The Hand of Bursa moved, and Mangos blinked, for it seemed he had not moved so much as disappeared and reappeared next to Kat. Steel clashed. Mangos blinked again, for he had not seen Kat draw her blades, but nonetheless she had two.

He drew his own sword but waited for an opening.

Kat and the Hand fought in style—fluid, graceful, their blades whispering when they met and slid. Neither seemed to have weight, and both used their feet as weapons. They locked blades; the Hand swept Kat’s feet from under her, and they rolled together, long knives flashing.

Mangos stopped, unable to attack as they changed positions so quickly.

They both rose, each bleeding, Kat from a nick under her chin, the Hand from a cut on his arm.

“Almost had you there,” the Hand said.

“Almost.”

“My turn,” said Mangos and jumped forward. The Hand met his attack with his sword, swung in with his knife. Mangos drew back and swung low, trying to use his sword’s longer reach to his advantage. Again the Hand parried and drove in. Surprised, Mangos clubbed him with the hilt of his sword and kicked away. The Hand grunted and shook his head.

Kat moved in to engage the Hand, and the fight swirled away, past Andor who seemed rooted on his knees, staring at those who fought over his life.

“Faster,” Mangos said aloud. He and Kat attacked, driving the Hand back. They could not hurt him, but they drove him away from Andor, back toward the jungle. He gave ground, further, further back. He seemed a touch slower, perhaps still feeling Mangos’ blow. A couple more exchanges, Mangos thought, and we’ll have him.

The Hand dove and rolled, and attacked Mangos. Mangos gave a step, and the Hand was past him.

“No!” shouted Kat, but she bumped into Mangos, and the Hand was between them and Andor.

Andor looked up, eyes wide, hands at his side as the Hand leapt over him. He lifted his head to watch, and the Hand slashed down, slicing his neck. Blood showered the paving stones. He fell backwards, landing on his pack with a heavy thud, and then rolled onto his side where he twitched as blood spurted from his neck.

Kat and Mangos stopped. There was nothing they could do now.

The Hand stood over Andor. “No need to fight now? Good.” He cut the straps on Andor’s pack and flipped open the flap with his knife. His eyes did not leave Kat and Mangos as he rummaged through the pack until he found what he wanted. He pulled out the brass tube, now crushed by Andor falling on it.

“He was a bastard,” Kat said.

Prying off the top, the Hand looked in. He started to laugh. “Ironic.” He poured flakes and dust from the flattened tube – all that remained of the receipt. “Did he ever tell you what he sought?”

“No,” Mangos answered. Kat shook her head.

“No, he probably didn’t. He’s not going to steal from Bursa and share with you.” He dropped the tube. It bounced twice and came to rest in Andor’s blood. “You can take your pay from his body.” He bent to wipe his blade on Andor’s shirt and slid it back into its sheath. “Terzol has been picked clean for centuries. He should have known it wasn’t worth the risk.”

“Not if the Bursa would send you halfway across the world to protect his reputation,” Kat remarked, a hint of irony in her voice.

“Just so,” said the Hand, inclining his head as he accepted the compliment. “Good day. And good day it is, for you live to see the end of it.” He turned to leave but paused. “Andor chose well for bodyguards, but early, I think. Time. With time and experience, you will be formidable.” He nodded before disappearing into the jungle.

Mangos let out his breath with a loud ‘whoosh.’ “That didn’t go well.”

“I don’t like failing in a commission,” said Kat.

“We can hardly be blamed, by the gods of Eastwarn! The Hand of Bursa!” He nudged Andor with his foot. “You made powerful enemies.”

“Shall we see why?” Kat raised an eyebrow.

Andor never told them where they went, but that didn't mean they didn't know. Mangos started to chuckle. He pulled the chain from around Andor's dead neck and tossed it to Kat. “We shall.”

The square could hold thousands, tens of thousands. Mangos couldn't even imagine how many people it would take to pack such a place. The jungle had taken the city and invaded the buildings to either side, but the palace remained untouched. A dozen leopard statues flanked the broad steps to the portico, steps that rose fifty feet to columns that rose fifty more.

Wide terraces surrounded each level so that each was smaller than the one below and the whole building formed a pyramid. At the top, seemingly brushing the clouds, was the broken and vacant home of the god-emperors.

The emptiness made Terzol seem even larger, grander—too large for people.

Kat climbed the broad stone steps. The leopards looked down at her. Leopards, Mangos realized, who had looked down on the pageantry of emperors and treachery of generals. Leopards who had seen the wealth of an empire and the silence of centuries.

Kat wore that grandeur and sadness like a crown, as if she understood it and it was part of her. For a moment she was the Queen of a desolate country. Mangos shook his head to clear the image.

It took a day of searching through dark corridors that still stank of old fire and death, listening to their footsteps echo in empty halls, and picking through broken statues and the last rotting remains of furnishings. Finally, they stood outside a metal door leaning against its frame, one hinge broken and the other twisted by the door's weight. Kat ran her hand down the dented surface. “Here,” she said, pausing to rub over a word barely discernable beneath a layer of red rust. “Mercantile vault.”

She bent to pick up a battered lantern, lit it, and set it in an oddly-shaped mirrored box. Light bounced around the room, striking other mirrors and reflecting back and forth to illuminate a long chamber.

Broken pottery and chests littered the floor. Here and there a statue, masterfully carved, lay in pieces. Four heavy pillars obscured their view.

As they entered, their feet crushed shards of mirrors, broken glass from plates and vases, and shattered bones.

“It’s been looted.” Mangos stopped, looked and saw shadows on the far wall. “There.”

They found six small vaults, each with a leopard’s head snarling, black steel and cold, on the door. Four doors, a handspan thick and contoured to match the frame of the vault, were open. The vaults were empty.

Mangos squatted down to look at the lower of the two closed doors. “There is no keyhole.” He reached inside the leopard’s mouth. A faint noise, a creak of old metal, and he snatched his hand back just as the leopard bit down. The metal jaws clashed and relaxed, returning to their original position.

“That could—” He stopped as a thought crossed his mind. He peered under the metal fangs. Small holes in each. “Poison. Likely dried up, but you never know.”

“Here,” Kat said, handing him Andor’s seal.

“Thanks,” said Mangos. In the back of the leopard’s mouth he could see an impression. It did not match the seal. “What if it belongs to a vault that’s already open?”

Kat did not answer, and Mangos moved over to the other closed vault. The seal and impression matched. He grinned and then sobered as he lifted the seal near the leopard’s mouth. “I really hope this works.”

He pressed the seal into the back of the leopard’s mouth. They could hear the sound of weights and counterweights tripping within the wall. Somewhere stone slid on stone.

The door swung open. The vault was a hollow in the wall four feet deep. Pushed to the back was a small leather bag, nicely filled.

All they need do was reach past a hole, as wide as the hollow and equally long, but of a depth Mangos could not tell. He wiggled his fingers and reached toward the hole.

“That would be foolish,” Kat said.

There came a heavy rasping sound, as if called by Kat's words, and Mangos drew back his hand. The sound grew louder, and he could tell it came from the hole in the vault. A blunt nose appeared, poking up, and long tongue flicked out. A snake pushed up, out, and seemed to flow from the vault.

Mangos and Kat leapt back and drew their swords. The snake was pale green and yellow, and Mangos could not tell its length yet but he judged its width to be two feet. The snake lifted its head, fully as large as Mangos'. Its tongue flicked out as if tasting his smell on the air.

"I wouldn't count on its poison having dried up," said Kat.

It turned toward her voice and the light shone on its cloudy eyes. It flicked its tongue out. They could see more than twenty feet of snake and still it pulled itself out of the vault.

It struck.

Kat twisted as the snake shot by, curved, and she jumped to avoid its coils. She landed on its back, tumbled off and rolled, the snake striking just behind her.

"Why doesn't anything attack you first?" she complained. The snake struck again.

Mangos reversed his grip on his sword and plunged it into the snake. It thrashed, ripping the sword from his grip. Red blood welled around the sword and ran down its scales.

The snake raced away, taking Mangos' sword with it. He drew his long knife and drove it into the snake, edge toward its back. Bracing himself, he let the snake cut itself open as it rushed past. His teeth rattled as the knife bounced along the snake's ribs.

The tail whipped around, jarring him and knocking him back. It caught him again and knocked him over. Before he could rise a coil flopped on top of him. His breath left him but he struggled to free himself as the snake coursed over him.

It thrashed again; he didn't know what Kat did, but he rolled free. He knew he needed to get to the head. He couldn't kill the snake by beating its tail.

With a crash of broken glass, the room dimmed. The snake had knocked over several of the mirrors that lit the room. It reared its head and paused.

Silence. Mangos moved and it turned toward him.

“Make no noise,” said Kat, hidden from view. “It’s blind!”

The snake turned and struck at her voice. It vanished behind a pillar, and when it drew back, Kat was riding it, clinging just behind its head. She drew back her sword, thrust at its eye as it whipped back and forth. She missed, lost her grip and flew off, the snake after her before she struck the floor.

It scooped her in its coils, lifted her and opened its mouth to strike or eat.

Mangos grabbed its head. “If you let me attack first, this wouldn’t happen,” he grunted as he pulled back, his muscles straining. Kat couldn’t answer, her face was red and arms were pinned to her body.

Mangos slipped down the snake, reached up, and grabbed a fang; it felt smooth and cool in his hand as he pulled himself up. He reached around with his knife and slid it into the snake’s eye.

The snake went berserk and threw him off as it became a frenzied mass of coils. He pulled Kat free and they stumbled across the room to watch the snake convulse and die.

Kat lay against the wall and stretched her legs out in front of her, panting. Her hair stuck to her sweaty face. She closed her eyes. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “Just need to get my breath back.”

When the snake no more than twitched, Mangos returned to the vault, stretched his hand all the way to the back, and drew out the pouch. He carried it back to Kat, sat on the ground beside her and worried at the drawstrings. He tipped it over and shook eight large gems out onto the dirty floor.

Leopard eye emeralds—so pure it looked like the green elliptical inclusion floated. Legends said they were formed by moonbeams captured when the world was formed. Mangos felt himself smiling like a fool. Kat stared at the emeralds spread before her like a fortune-teller trying to read the future in the bones.

“I think,” said Mangos, “I’ll sell mine. I can live like a king, drinking Ambraisen wine in the most pleasurable company. And I’ll have a sword made, a hand-and-a-half sword with one of the emeralds set in the hilt.” He stretched, enjoying fantasizing. “And I’ll buy a copy of Teritum’s *History of Terzol*.”

Kat reached out to place a finger on a gem. She moved it aside and another that matched it exactly. "These two will be made into earrings. This one," she moved a larger stone next to the first two "will make a necklace."

"What of that one?" Mangos said, indicating the last emerald.

"This one," she rested her finger on her last stone and gently pushed it away from her, "will help buy an army."

As you may know, this is Cirsova's 4th Mongoose & Meerkat story, and their next adventure is in our Fall issue. Here to talk a little about the series is its author, Jim Breyfogle:

Well, here we are, at the beginning, after a manner of speaking. The Valley of Terzol was the first Mongoose & Meerkat story I wrote.

When I started, I just wanted a great story. It didn't take long for the idea to go from writing one story to writing a whole series. Then I wondered if the sum of the stories might be greater than the individual tales. So I wrote stories, and stories, and stories within stories and it turned out The Valley of Terzol wasn't the first one after all.

I wanted a world that would let me tip my hat to past writers while trying something different. A world where the heroes have some rough edges and power is its own rule. Where you win, you lose, and you survive. Where little things may not be so little.

I wanted a world that exists beyond the stories. You might ask 'what is a Hafizi guard doing with an Alnessi merchant (Sword of the Mongoose, Cirsova #10)?' Celzez has his own reasons, his own goals. It may not be soon, but Mangos will have a chance to find out what they are.

The world doesn't stop just because we aren't watching. Don't be surprised if Mangos learns to read between stories. He did say he wanted to.

But let's not give too much away. Mangos doesn't know, or doesn't care, about a lot of things. He's along for the adventure, just like the rest of us, and what he doesn't know he may just learn.

I hope the first few stories have whetted your appetite for the dangerous road ahead. Mangos and Kat are gaining experience and getting better, and it's a good thing. They're going to need all the skill, the resources, and the luck they can scrape together.

Thanks to Cirsova and all you readers who have come this far. The stories were wicked fun to write, and I hope they're fun to read. Stick around. Even authors have their favorites, and the best is yet to come.

*Cheers,
Jim Breyfogle*

The Elephant Idol

By XAVIER LASTRA

The blind thief Auger sneaks into the opera house to steal a trinket that the lovely Trännen von Fitzburg received from a lovestruck foreigner! The gift-box's riddle and its giver's suicide engulf Augur—and the opera house—in a world of darkness!

The caves beneath Stridan had once been used to test the fortitude, dedication, and resilience of the cenobites that had established the small community. Guided through its dizzyingly confusing corridors and squeezes by one of the Exarchs of their order, they would reach the main cave, where they were abandoned for a week. Then, in the absolute blackness and stillness below Stridan, the isolated novice either achieved enlightenment, went mad, or died.

But as Stridan grew into a prosperous city, the order shifted its priorities, and the ritual soon became honorary and voluntary, then a symbolic once-in-a-year event lasting only for an hour, and finally used only to punish dissidents. It had also become increasingly hard to be alone with one's mind in those caves when the rumblings of the bustling city above breezed in and broke any illusion of underworld isolation. Sound propagated strangely inside that natural labyrinth, and from time to time one could hear the braying of a mule or the distant shouting of shrill fishmongers. So lately the only ones who used the caves, and usually just its outer ranges, were criminals, prostitutes, and the victims of both.

The place was not fit for surface-dwellers and those still sighted. But that was not much of a problem for the thief Auger, for he was blind and had been so for most of his life.

That evening, with larceny in mind, Auger walked through the passages that had driven many insane with the natural gait of a morning stroll. He had been there many times, mapping out its many deadends and pitfalls, first for fun and later for profit, so he knew his way around quite well. He occasionally waved and probed his surroundings with two long peacock feathers, testing the surrounding walls, feeling their faint scraping against the rough walls, making sure he was on the right path. As he did so, he made odd, apparently random clicking noises with his tongue and the back of the throat, leaning forward and backward near a wall as he focused on how the sound came back to him. It was a skill he had discovered when he was a street child, when he realized he could get a general feeling of nearby structures or even the layout of an enclosed space by how his 'clucking' sounded and rebounded—quite a profitable skill for someone who later joined a circus as a 'mind reader,' blind knife-thrower, and escape artist.

Auger halted when he felt the clucking echoing back to him broken and distorted, the sign for the bifurcating path he was looking for. He sensed his way ahead with the feathers and then with his fingers until he felt a bump he had first noticed a month ago. No animals lived in the deep caves, nothing ever disturbed even its tiniest feature, and as far as he knew, no erosion had ever taken place there, so he trusted what his fingers remembered like other men trusted their sight—if not more.

Auger took the right path, where his clucking took a ‘faster’ quality, more high-pitched and narrower, which seemed appropriate as the path was becoming a squeeze as it went upwards. Although he knew his goal was just eleven meters away, it took him almost as many minutes to reach the other end. The final two paces of the path were painfully narrow and, even more dangerously, the walls were unstable from a cave collapse a long time ago. He had to slip through, bending down at a precise height and angle, while checking and rechecking where each of his limbs was and what were they doing so they didn’t bump into anything. But they did not. He finally squeezed through and reached the end of the passage, where he allowed himself to breathe noisily, grateful for being in a space where at least he could move his neck without risking a head injury.

Overhead was the old creaky trapdoor from which clung the equally shoddy ladder. Auger didn’t know how old the secret entrance was, although he assumed nobody working at the opera house knew it was there. And if someone did and they checked it out, they would only see a dark pit ending in an unstable path, too narrow to be called even that. A useless oddity, they would think, but not useless for Auger.

The thief climbed the ladder and pushed up the trapdoor, not worrying about making too much noise because he knew the room on the other side would be empty. It was small, without windows, littered with old theater equipment, a few cobwebs (but not many since there was not much even for spiders to prey on), and his backpack, which he had left during his last nocturnal visit, when he had cased the building and memorized its layout.

He put on the clothes from the backpack, as well as a few tools he would need—a small brass key attached to a cord, a pocket knife, two thick gloves in case he needed to handle something dangerous,

and a pair of lock picks. The clothes weren't of the best quality, but they would pass a quick glance from the other guests, marking him as one of them, although perhaps not one of the most prosperous. And if he looked a bit shabby or unkempt, that was nothing a sudden fit of drunken gait wouldn't explain. As a final touch, he tucked the two peacock plumes in his hat. He was ready.

Auger gently tapped a wall until he found the panel he was looking for; then, slowly, he pried it open. It led to a storeroom, and although there probably was something of interest there to steal, he had a better goal in mind. He left the room and stepped into the corridor with the self-confidence of someone who knows he has the right to be wherever he happens to be.

He curtly nodded to the gentle pacing of a woman passing by. Judging by her brief, initial hesitation, hurried pace to go on, her flat-but-light shoes, and the lack of perfume and clinking sounds of bracelets or other ornaments as she nodded and saluted him with a generic "Good evening, sir," she had to be a servant girl, and probably a new one.

"Where is Miss Fitzburg's dressing room, young girl?" Auger asked her. "This place is maddeningly large!"

He knew the answer, but he wanted to be sure (and he felt loquacious anyway).

The girl's shoes rubbed on the floor as she whirled around. "It's, well... I mean, it's no secret, but I believe she doesn't want to be disturbed."

"I won't disturb her. I just want to leave her a note. I'm her greatest fan."

"Ah," she said, with a clear note of sadness and resignation in her voice. She had clearly heard that many times before and was past any jealousy. "It's over there," she said, and her garments brushed against each other and her skin as she moved one of her arms, probably to point him the way. "Follow this hallway and take a left, then it's the third door."

She had barely finished her explanation and she was already on her way, not interested in talking to another of Trännen von Fitzburg's mawkish adorers. Auger followed the hallway while casually caressing the wall to his left with one of the feathers and whistling a cheery tune (not in any way as useful as clucking, but less conspicuous).

Auger turned left and followed the wall, counting the doors until he reached the third one and listened in. At first, he only heard the distant rumbling of the public as it got ready for the exclusive and private show, but soon, from the other side of the door, he heard steps approaching and two voices arguing. He quickly thought about the layout of the place, to where two singers would likely go, and then he went back to the first door, where he coolly leaned on the wall beside it and fanned himself with his hat as he puffed. The door to Ms. Fitzburg's dressing room opened, and a woman and a man came out. The woman had a commanding and gorgeous voice, and the thief had to restrain himself to not turn in her direction. The two stopped their conversation briefly as soon as they stepped out, then someone locked the door, and they resumed their talk and went away in the opposite direction, toward the backstage.

"So that's Tränen von Fitzburg," the thief murmured, slightly impressed. The man, he assumed, had to be her lover and fellow prima Danner Flasche, also famous for being a dashing young man.

Auger prided himself in being able to 'see' anybody almost as well as if he had working eyes, but there was still no way for him to hear or feel at a distance if a woman was beautiful. Sure, he could work around that limitation (usually just by paying attention to how the sighted people reacted to the present woman) and he could readily distinguish the happy women from the sad ones (and not just by their voices), the skinny ones from the heftier, the poor from the wealthy, the angry from the mellow, and he was sure he could distinguish the prudes from the floozies just by the way they walked; but this time, he was convinced this woman had to be superbly beautiful. Nobody with that voice, that self-confidence, and that imperious but elegant gait could be anything but gorgeous. Maybe he wouldn't go as far as poor Ebiserasmus, the latest broken heart in her wake, but Auger could imagine himself falling for someone like her.

But he was there to rob her, not to fall in love with her, so he brushed those thoughts aside and set about his task.

Unlocking the door was straightforward; it had a common lock Auger had seen dozens of times. Once inside he began clucking and pulled out the two feathers to get a feel of the place. Small room, probably no windows, and the ceiling buzzed with the sound those new electric lights made when on. He knew levers or switches

controlled those things, so he checked the walls until he found something that looked like one. He pulled the small thing down and the buzzing disappeared. He felt much better, less naked.

With that nuisance taken care of, he kept mapping out the place going in circles towards the center of the room, one feather to his left and the other in front of him. He felt a rugged surface from an object on the wall, casing the perfect smoothness of a glass; below, a desk. A dressing table, certainly, littered with all manner of beauty products and objects for which he had no name or understanding. There was a small jewelry box, too, which he immediately cleaned out. An aromatic smell, like that of cinnamon, followed by the tang of something singed told him the feather had found a candle. It was still tall, with no drippings of wax yet around or at its base.

Then he felt a wardrobe, and then another, and another, followed by a dressing screen, two mannequins with clothes on, and, before reaching the door again, a bed. It was unmade and still warm. No sign of the Elephant Idol yet.

At least that was what people had called the object. Auger had never seen an elephant, and nobody he knew had, and he wasn't sure what it was. Apparently, it was an animal, and the idol was carved to resemble one. It had been a gift of the late lovestruck Ebiseramus, ambassador from one of the remote and dark theocracies of the East, to the uncaring Trännen von Fitzburg, Stridan's opera star, whose glamorous love affairs were as known as her inevitable and dramatic breakups. According to the descriptions he had heard, the animal was four-footed but thick like a pig, not slender like a horse or a dog, with comically large ears and, or so some people claimed, an even longer snout. The idol was made of wood, but what made it worth a fortune were the two impressive rubies it had for eyes. Auger would rather have the entire piece, but if he could not, the rubies would be enough.

Ebiserasmus' 'gift' had come inside an intricate metal box, whose key he possessed, and that he would part with it only when she reciprocated his love. That never happened, and von Fitzburg's lover, Donner Flasche, humiliated (and punched) the desperate man at a party while the Miss Fitzburg just looked on. The next day, they found the ambassador dead, hanged with a message written in his own blood beside him. *The box may be yours, but the key will be mine*

forever. You could have reached for it within me, but you did not. Only when you truly love me will my gift open for you.

Auger kept inspecting the room and finally found a low table in the center. On top lay what had to be the box with the idol inside, and around it, all manner of tools from the failed attempts at opening it. The thief pulled out the key and smiled wickedly.

Getting hold of it had been one of the proudest moments of his career. While others ransacked the ambassador's room, knocked his servants around, or came up with complicated answers to what they presumed was the cryptic puzzle written in blood, Auger took a more literal approach. He followed the body to the cold, underground warehouse the local sawbones called a morgue, and there he impersonated Ebiserasmus' nonexistent personal doctor (who hailed from an even more obscure, unpronounceable land) and cut open the deceased body in front of a few nauseous students, the local butcher-cum-executioner who moonlighted as a coroner, and curious onlookers from the city's nobility.

"Always make sure to check the pipes," he had told them in the most outrageous accent he could come up with as he groped inside the man's abdomen, squeezing the intestines. "All manner of poisonous pills and toxins may be lodged there. One cannot rule out poison-induced mental derangement, leading to humoral imbalance and suicide! That's very common where I'm from."

Eventually, he had felt a small hard object at the beginning of the man's small intestine. He had cut it open and had surreptitiously picked the little key.

Now in the singer's dressing room, Auger felt the metal box and found the lock. He inserted the key and turned it just a bit, but not enough to unlock the contraption. He took a few steps aside, and from there he pulled the attached string. The lock sang a sweet, metallic click, followed by other deeper sounds all around the box. No traps apparently. Putting on gloves, he tested the box and found that its upper face was now a lid that could be lifted. He did so and didn't waste an instant to lunge his hands inside. When they emerged, he held the elephant idol, and if smiles could cast light, the room would have been as bright as high noon in desert.

Auger caressed the multifaceted eyes, the beautiful rubies, his path to wealth, luxury, and early, well-deserved retirement. They were

so smooth, so small, yet so priceless.

The thief felt exultant, jubilant, joyous, and... sick. The nauseous feeling came to him with abnormal speed and without any reasonable explanation. And then he heard Him, a thundering voice preceded by a sudden chilling drop in temperature.

“Whore! Harpy from Hell!” A male voice shouted, with the solidity of someone speaking right in front of you, although Auger knew there was nobody with him. *“You lying, cheating whore! You have opened the box, yet here I, Ebiserasmus, lie in death, alone and still unloved by you. I gave you a second chance. You could have left the box unopened, yet you have desecrated my body to satiate your greed. You will rot and be forced to lie beside me for all eternity. And may you loathe every second of it as I destroy everything you love.”*

As the voice whispered hate-filled curses in strange tongues, Auger heard the faint rumble of the distant public and... trumpets? And then the screaming started, but as soon as it hit a feverish pitch, it faded, along with Ebiserasmus’ dim ramblings. It was all gone, silence once more, and the thief was still clutching the idol.

“What was that...” the thief stammered.

Auger had learned to trust his body and his trained senses. They perceived even the tiniest change around him, and now his body told him he was alone once more, but not safe, and something still felt wrong. The silence around him felt oppressive and unnatural. His uneasiness increased due to a strange smell and something else that verged on the edge of his awareness, but he was unable to put into words his indistinct but unsettling sensations. He finally had to shoo them off and gave up. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter, for he had the idol. He might have triggered something when he picked it up, and he had heard of artificers who could engrave sounds, music, and voice into some kind of sheets and then recreate them using strange machinery, sounding just as if they had just been produced. So for all he knew, what he had heard was just that, a message left to scare whoever triggered it when lifting up the idol. He had to admit to himself, however, that the voice had felt unerringly real, and those screams from the auditorium had sent a chill down his...

“Ah,” the thief said as the realization sank in.

It was colder now, and slightly damper, as if it wasn’t the early hours in the evening anymore. He now realized that was one of the

things that had been bothering him. And that smell was, in fact, the lack of a particular smell that should have been there. He tiptoed up to the dressing table and, wary of what he feared he would find, touched the candle. It wasn't there, or rather, it wasn't there anymore, for only a few inches of the now unlit candle remained—the rest was a lump of wax. He groped and fanned with his feather all about him and soon found (and stumbled over) other disturbing anomalies. The room had been ransacked, if not trashed. Someone really angry had smashed the dressing glass in, and many clothes, most of them torn, lay on the floor. He also discovered patches of a moss-like growth on the floor and walls.

Auger held the idol in front of him, as if watching it, although he felt he was the one being observed.

“What have you done?” he whispered at it. “And most importantly,” he added, thinking about the candle and the changes all around him, “when did all of this happen?”

His previous affection for the object vanished, and without giving it a second thought, he whipped out the pocket knife and pulled out the two rubies. Following the example of Ebiserasmus, he swallowed them. Then, filled with a sudden revulsion for the thing, he let the idol drop to the ground. When he realized the stupidity of what he had done, it was already too late. The wooden idol banged on the hard floor, booming and echoing painfully loud. He stood in the silence for a while, but then, coming from outside the room, whose door he now realized was not closed anymore, he heard steps approach carefully yet purposefully.

The strange steps made big and splashy sounds. It seemed like the person was barefooted but had abnormally big feet—but the interval between them was regular and normal nonetheless. And what was that strange dragging noise that followed the footsteps? To Auger, that made no sense, unless the person was dragging a heavy cloth by the waist—or had a tail. The absurd thought made him smile despite the imminent danger. Then the approaching individual let out a long, animal hiss.

Auger scrambled up onto a wardrobe. Luckily, the top of the closet was not cluttered with objects, and he squeezed in relative silence into the space between its top and the ceiling. There he waited, increasingly anxious, as questions accosted his mind. How

dark was the room? He thought it was dark since he didn't hear the buzzing of the electric lights, but he couldn't be sure. Was the thing outside carrying a source of light? Would it even need one? The footsteps became louder.

The ajar door opened slowly with a thud, pushed not by a hand but by a wooden instrument, perhaps a stick. Three tentative steps followed; he heard no rubbing of clothes, but he could just make out a leathery sound as it moved around. A jingling click-clack, coming from some object it carried, followed the creature's movements. The thing hissed again and snuffled through its powerful nostril, then sniffed and growled. The same wooden sound returned, but now against the floor—definitely a stick of some kind—with a faint, raspy sound as the creature's hand clutched at it and slid slightly downwards; most likely the thing was leaning on it. The beast made small steps and dragged its feet, looking this way and that as it inspected the room. Then it snarled a cry that, in spite of its inhuman, violent quality, reminded the thief of a surprised child's 'Ohhh.' The thief froze in place, but the thing went in the other direction.

The man-creature carelessly dropped the staff, which clattered with a final metallic accent on its opposite end (a spear, perhaps?). Its tail now dragged longer on the floor and lashed around in excitement. Its knees popped, its coriaceous back stretched, and the hard nails of one of its hands scratched a moss-covered patch on the floor. The previous, weak jingling, which he now saw came from its other hand, kept singing but lowering until it seemed to land on the floor, where it finally stopped. Whatever had been dangling from its hand was now on the ground. The creature sniffed and purred, talking to itself in what once might have been a human language. A wooden object rattled as it rolled on the floor, and from its position, its unique pitch, and the beast's excitement, Auger knew the creature had found the idol.

"Found the 'lephan me dids, yassss," it said, its speech somewhat understandable in spite of its gurgling, animal quality. "Me be happiest. Master be happies too. Me feeds well tonight." Then it scratched some part of its body and sniffed around. "Hmmm, from where dids it came?" it asked.

Well, Auger thought, at least he's not as stupid as he sounds.

The beastman shifted on his feet and moved his head. "Needs light," it said, and Auger froze in place and began to pray silently.

The metallic sound that had puzzled Auger before came once more, but briefly, followed by the sound of a latch, and a tingling creak. The unmistakable sound of a match being struck told the thief the rest of the story. The thing closed the small creaky door of what he assumed was a hand-held lamp of some kind and then began inspecting the room as he talked nonsense to himself. A paralyzing dread grabbed the thief, but he noticed that the creature had at least not picked up his staff or spear.

The creature checked out the room, poking around, carelessly stepping on all manner of objects, and opening the wardrobes. It finally stopped just below the thief's hiding place, which was barely two feet above its head. The thief held his breath. It was so close, Auger was sure he could feel the creature's heat, the nervous popping of its powerful jaw, and its fast, rough breathing and musty smell. Then it shouted in surprise, upwards towards him, and the lamp it was carrying hit the ground. The thief let his breath out as he rolled out of his hideout and down onto the creature's head, sending both sprawling to the ground.

Auger scampered away from the shouting beast and shot off to where he remembered the thing's spear had fallen. He found it, but not in the way he had hoped. The wiry thief stepped on it, sending it rolling forwards, and he fell face first onto the floor. The thief saw flashes of pain crossing before him as he hit the ground and broke two teeth. But with the beast already rushing for him, he suppressed the pain with some heavy swearing, quickly reached out for the spear, grabbed it, twisted his entire body to flip over, and thrust the weapon toward the source of the approaching raging cries.

Auger felt something hit the head of the spear, but something surprisingly lightweight. The shouts stopped instantly; then his attacker fell on him. Its weight crushed him, and its claws were scraping him—but it was dead. He struggled to push the bleeding body away. Although he feared what he might discover, he groped around and felt it. And indeed, despite its tail and rough skin, it was quite human-like. He touched the face but instantly drew back his hand when he found the sticky, pouring wound in its jaw that had pierced his mouth and then the skull. Thinking it would be a less nauseating experience, he felt around the upper half of the face, but what he discovered was even worse, for it was, undoubtedly, the face

of a person. Aside from a few abnormal growths, the man probably would have passed as a normal man.

His next discovery, although not as grisly, was more significant and informative, for he found the creature was still wearing some manner of clothing. Not much, and it was ripped and soiled, but the threads of a trouser still clung to one leg, and a torn, now sleeveless shirt covered some parts of his chest. The quality of the fabric was excellent despite its bad condition, and the tears didn't seem natural, due to time and wear, but done on purpose, as if its wearer had wanted the clothes torn and broken. A wild hypothesis about the identity of the humanoid struck him, but it was too outrageous, too out of his experience and too bizarre in its implications, so he dismissed it and focused his attention back to the present.

Auger stood still and listened. He felt and heard his rushing pulse, the throbbing beating of his heart, the sweat making the spear slippery, and a vein in his head ready to burst, but he heard nothing to indicate that someone, or something, had noticed the struggle. All was silent once more, and it was time to get out. Whatever was going in the opera house, it was not his problem, which, right now, was to leave the building immediately. He didn't bother picking up the idol; he already had the rubies, and he felt a sudden, powerful apprehension for the object that in some way had to be related to this madness.

Auger left the room and went to the right, following the short path that had led him there just a few minutes ago in his own reckoning, which he now couldn't completely trust. It should have been easy: get to the storeroom, down the hatch, and then follow the path through the caves, which now felt very welcoming. He ignored all the warnings his body was sending him. But when he got near the storeroom, he felt it so clearly he couldn't ignore it anymore. The walls were alive.

The echo of his footsteps came back to him wrong, his own clucking distorted, and as he held out his hand to where he thought the door should have been, he felt a small but significant increase in temperature. He listened attentively and managed to make out a gooey, slimy sound emanating from all around him, but mostly from the nearest wall. He prodded the wall with the spear and dry-heaved in disgust and horror when the point didn't meet anything hard but something soft, almost flesh-like, until it reached what, he knew, was bone. He prodded more, and every time the feeling changed,

sometimes even on the same spot. The walls were not only alive but moving. His prodding became more aggressive and anxious as he blindly tried to find the door that would get him out of there, but it was nowhere to be found.

The horrifying gravity and impossibility of his current situation finally dawned on him, and the thief staggered, only to step into a puddle of something viscous—an ice-cold excretion covering (or perhaps seeping from) a bed of fleshy bulbs. The slime began to crawl up his leg, and flying bugs buzzed and darted about him, prickling him and making his hearing almost useless. He quickly withdrew the foot, and with a repulsive sucking sound, the sticky substance fell off and returned to its place. He stepped back, and the bugs left him alone.

Auger had been blind for most of his life, but he didn't live in a world of complete darkness. His mind, his inner eye, had always been filled with a myriad of images and conjured constructs, made up by combining what he remembered of the outside world during his sighted days as a child and what his honed senses perceived. His mind was filled with acoustic and haptic maps and mnemonics made of fantastic stories to help him navigate the world around him, but now he was utterly lost. He didn't know where he was or where to go, and his memories failed to give him an answer. All around and within him was nothing.

The thief bent down, hands on his tights and breathing hard and shallow. He whimpered a stifled grunt of frustration and fear. He stood like that for a while, surrounded by the living walls and the buzzing of bugs. His breathing eventually slowed and returned to normal. He felt a bug land on his right forearm, disturbing his raised hairs therein. With a swift swat, he squashed it with the fingers of the opposite hand. Then he gently and deliberately reduced its minuscule remains into a bloody cream by rubbing his forefinger and thumb together. It felt surprisingly good. He sighed and stood upright then shouted a cry of brute defiance against whatever could hear him. He listened attentively, and above the buzzing around him, he made out a ticking noise, like that from the pendulum of a wall clock. It was a strange noise, but this was a strange place. Unable to think of anything else to do, he followed that sound.

As he walked, looking for the source of the sound, he kept comparing where he was with his mental map of the place, but he

gave up after turning two corners that shouldn't have been there. A peal of distant, disembodied laughter, tilting like the sound of chimes, mocked his attempts at orienting himself and trusting his memory.

Auger resigned himself to follow the whims of whatever mad logic ruled the place. After a while, when he began to think he was just going in circles as he tried to locate the ticking sound, he bumped into a table, but one that stuck out of the wall to his left. He felt about and found a chair above it, also attached to the wall, and although he smelled it first, his fingers fumbled onto the dry, flake-like texture of a charred body. He immediately pulled back the hand, but not before sloughing off bits of the burned crust. Hesitantly, he prodded it with the spear and found that some chunks of flesh were missing. The cuts were smooth and clean, most likely done after the body had been burned. Auger ran away from the repulsive scene, towards the now much closer ticking sound.

He found it ten or so meters away, in the same corridor—a tall clock against an otherwise bare wall, but there were many strange things about it. What he thought was the base of the clock began at knee-height, but its dial was there too, and the numbers were all wrong—the number six was up and the twelve below. He couldn't reach the top of the clock, but the ticking sound didn't come from there but from just about the height of his navel. Carefully he reached out and gently poked the rod of the pendulum. He slid his finger downwards, hoping to find the pendulum but found nothing, just the rest of the casing. He moved the finger upwards and found the bob, swinging in spite of being upside down. The entire clock was upside down. For some reason, this abnormality made him feel nauseous, and he brusquely stopped the ticking by gripping the pendulum. Something clicked from within the clock's case, and it shook, and then, with a faint creak, moved outwards, revealing an opening. The dread from his encounter with the burned man still haunted him, so he quickly stepped inside.

He walked first on soft grass, but then he clumsily stepped on gravel. Someone, or something, stirred on the same ground, not too far away from where he was, making the unmistakable sounds of being woken up from sleep.

"Who be there?" said the voice, a voice not unlike that of the previous beastman, but somehow 'fatter,' which conjured in the thief's

mind the image of a giant and dumpy talking toad. “Ah!” it cried when it saw him. “You be not one of us!”

The thing approached on short, wobbly legs.

“I be one of you,” Auger said, improvising a silly accent. “What else could I be? See? Here be my spear, gifted by the master,” he said, for he remembered the other creature to have said something about a ‘master.’

“Gah!” the creature shouted. “Master no gives gifts to us! You be spy!”

Auger sighed. “Ah, well, at least I tried,” he said in his normal voice. He lifted his spear and threw it toward the source of the voice.

A revolting thrusting sound followed, and then the body fell to the ground, where it gurgled and faintly moaned for a short while.

Auger moved up to the body and finally found it when he stepped on one of its legs: a naked, hairy thing ending in a hoof. There, he cast his eyes down, and for a short while he felt an odd moral stirring from within, a pang of guilt that didn’t appear so much for what he had done but due to his lack of apprehension, for how easy it had been to kill those two humanoids. He stood there, ‘watching’ the body, waiting for some moral insight, but nothing came to him. He drew a smile and then retrieved the spear.

“What the eyes don’t see, the heart can’t feel,” he whispered and then chuckled to himself.

It was uncommon for someone or something to sneak up on him, so when a woman’s voice rang from perhaps ten paces to his right and near ground-level, the thief almost jumped.

“Who are you?” she had asked. It took him a few seconds, but he finally recognized the voice despite its now huskier, exhausted quality.

“Ah, Miss Fitzburg,” Auger said, “I’m happy to see you are alive, although I wonder how?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said, and the thief heard the rustling of her dress as she moved, the grating of her hands and feet against the gravel as she got up with considerable effort and painful grunts. She took two weak steps toward him and then stopped. Two solid thwacks followed, the sound she made as she clutched or leaned against something hard. “Let me look at you. Come closer.”

He did as ordered and walked a safe distance.

“You are blind, aren’t you?” she asked. There was a hint of admiration in her voice.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he replied, smiling.

“It actually isn’t. Well, I’m in a cage, that’s how I’m still alive, but not for much longer,” she said, and Auger heard her hands weakly slide down some hard, rough surface, the bars most likely. Then she sat down again or, in fact, let herself fall to the ground. “It’s not even a good cage. Like everything here, it’s twisted, rotten, or perverted. A strong man might be able to break free by forcing this door open, but well, I’m in no state to do much. I can hardly hold my weight.”

“I’ll check the body of the beast for a key,” Auger said, and at the word ‘beast,’ Trännen whimpered a sad, pained chuckle.

“Yes, I believe James has a key; he had been my loyal guardian in his previous life, and still is—was—in his new one.”

“James? You knew him?”

“The... beast you have killed was a good friend, like all the other monsters that crawl within this madhouse. Spectators, friends... family. You are lucky your blindness spares you the sight of what they have become and what surrounds you,” she said, and then fell silent to let him work.

Auger thought about the hissing man he had killed in her dressing room. For a moment he had thought that the remains of the torn clothes were like those of the posh spectators, the ones he had wanted to imitate with his own disguise. He had been too quick to dismiss that idea.

“Well, here it is,” Auger said after poking around and finding the keyring on James’ belt. He walked up to the cage and fumbled about a bit until he found the lock. “You are free.”

Trännen von Fitzburg laughed at that. “A noble, but futile deed. Give me your hand, please; I’m weak, and a gentleman should always help a lady.”

He helped her, but started and as soon as he touched her dry, bony hands and felt her tiny, emaciated wrist.

“Now you see,” she said. “Come on, I will let you see more of me....”

Auger slid his hand upwards, feeling her atrophied arms that felt like bony sticks, no thicker near the shoulder than at the wrists. They loosely filled a jacket that was now too big. She didn’t protest either

when he slipped his hands under her finely brocaded shirt and touched the body that once had made men go mad with desire but was now cracked skin covering brittle bones. Her chest, once bountiful, was now flat, just thin skin stretched over her protruding ribs; her lips, broken and dried of all life and joy; her cheeks, sunken; her hair was split and dirty, rough like hay.

“How long...”

“Five weeks,” she said and coughed. “I apologize. It hurts to speak... At first, I was fed, force-fed in fact, although I dread to think what manner of meat I ate. Then, for whatever reason, he stopped feeding me. He wants me to die, to wither away, to join him.”

“Ebiserasmus...”

“Yes.” She then laughed, a sharp, throaty laugh. “He likes me like this, you know. I guess I remind him of his current form. Every night, at midnight, when the horns that signal the start of the opera blare, he calls for me, and they drag me to his coffin, where I lie with him until sunrise. But one day I will waste away, and I will lie with him forever.”

“Don’t talk, please. Let’s leave this place together.”

“There is no escape. I can assure you we are not in Stridan anymore. Or even in our world. If you could see, you would look up towards the sky, and see through the skylight impossible constellations, arranged like the faces of demons. There’s no sun here, either, but we can see in the eternal twilight. But I will humor you... whoever you may be—ally, foe, or phantom of my imagination. I will lead the way, and you...”

In the distance, a gong called, and the faint glimpse of hope in the singer’s voice vanished.

“It is near midnight, and the master will call for me soon,” she said as the gong kept counting the hours. “No reason to wait for his lackeys; I will go and surrender myself. Perhaps, with some luck, I will die tonight. And as for you, whoever you are, I—I am sorry I dragged you here.”

“No-no-no!” Auger shouted, out of fear and a sudden pang of guilt. He knew he could have grabbed her—she weighed as much as a child—but then what? “It’s my fault! This has all been my fault!” He shouted at her. He didn’t believe that was true, but he didn’t care.

She halted her march, but she didn’t react with anger as he had hoped. “I do not think so. But, in any event, I forgive you,” Trännén

said, her words empty and without meaning. She kept on walking and then began to sing.

“Stupid woman,” the thief mumbled bitterly.

Her voice was now his cynosure through the darkness. Auger followed her lugubrious chants through the haunted corridors. She sang of adolescent, tragic love, of their families plotting their separation, of his death in war, of how she drowned herself in despair. Corny, the thief thought, but he had to admit she had a beautiful voice, even in her current state.

The floor changed, and Auger’s feet felt a carpet. Tränen’s voice, now barely a whisper, didn’t echo anymore. He clucked a hard, voiceless sound that did not come back to him. They weren’t in a corridor anymore. A nearby gong was struck again; unusual trumpets, with a sound more organic and vocal than musical, blared all above and around them.

“My love, you have come, and all by yourself!” the loud voice of a man said, at least thirty paces from where they were.

It was not a natural or healthy voice. It resembled Ebiserasmus’, or at least the voice Auger had heard when he had lifted the elephant idol, but it was dry, cracked, and ancient.

“And who is it that accompanies you?” The voice said. It may have tried to sound amused, but it came out like a death rattle. “How did you get here? It matters not. Do you wish to join my crucified orchestra?” He asked, and then laughed for a while.

Auger didn’t answer or stop. He zeroed in on the voice and bore down on it, ignoring its prattle. He came across the opera singer and gently pushed her bony frame aside. He didn’t understand what the voice meant by ‘crucified orchestra,’ but he remembered what von Fitzburg had said about his blindness shielding him from the horrors all around.

“Are you deaf, blind, or both?” the voice asked. It waited a few seconds for an answer that did not come. “I see. Well, kill him,” he ordered to something.

That stopped the thief in his tracks. Aside from the strange ‘orchestra,’ he had heard nobody else in there. He readied himself. Something dropped to his right, a soft, agile drop, almost silent. The enemy unsheathed a sword and played with it for a while, cutting the air in front. No boasting, shouting, or even a grunt accompanied the

thing's movements. Auger was only able to make out a weak but constant, almost relaxed, breathing. The next thing he heard was a lunging step, but five paces closer from where he thought the creature should have been. He barely had enough time to step back and avoid the whistling edge of the blade grazing his face. He quickly counterattacked, sending the spear forward, but hit nothing but air. He stepped back again and frantically thrust the spear in a deadly cone in front of him. The thing, clearly away and safe from his blind attacks, giggled like a shy girl covering its mouth.

Auger shouted in frustration and walked backward as he kept thrusting blindly. Unlike the other creatures he had met, this thing seemed female, and it tittered once more. Auger, looking erratically around, tottered. He stumbled over something and began to fall ungraciously. He bent backward and flapped one arm like a moulinet as one of its legs lifted up, trying to maintain his balance. Now the thing laughed, a childish but corrupted laughter that became louder and less repressed as the thief's plight grew worse. It was still a weak sound, but it was loud enough.

As if a spring had suddenly gone off inside of him, Auger lunged forward with his other leg. His back and flapping arm sprang forward. His spear shot off toward the source of the laughter, which had time enough only to seethe with panic before being silenced forever.

It was now time for Auger to burst into victorious laughter, and as he panted and laughed, he retrieved his spear from the twitching body of the thing, a disturbingly small and thin body.

"Trännen!" he shouted. "Where are you? Stop moping around and guide me to Ebiserasmus!"

There was no answer. Nothing was making a sound.

"Trännen!" he shouted again, louder.

"I'm here. Come," she said. Her voice was dead and toneless but with the brittle accent of someone ready to burst into tears.

"Yes, come here!" Ebiserasmus announced joyously. His voice came almost from the same spot as Trännen's.

Auger skulked forward and found a few steps. One, two, three, then a wooden floor—a stage of some kind?

"Trännen, we have won," the thief said, and he heard her stifle a whine. "Is Ebiserasmus' with you?"

“Yes,” she said, now openly crying. She was close, perhaps four meters away.

“Listen to me. The last time I saw him, he was a corpse, and I cut him open. I don’t know what is holding him up, but he is just a rotting body. Point me to him, and I’ll finish him.”

Prepotent Ebirasmus laughed. “I’m holding and caressing her, as lovers do,” he snarled. “And you are the reason my guts stick out? You are a dreadful surgeon.”

“Trännen, get away from him, please.”

“She can’t, you malformed imbecile. First, because my talons are ready to rip her throat open, and second, because she doesn’t want to—she’s broken, and I guess I can thank you for that.”

Auger readied his spear. “What is he talking about?” he asked.

Von Fitzburg didn’t answer, but the ghoul did. “Most of the people inside the building died when the cursed was triggered, your doing I suppose, but a few survived. You have met them already. At least James, who guarded Trännen. And you surely found beautiful Danner Flasche, burned to crisps and cut for meat. Yes, do not try to hide it. But, you see, despite her public life, my love cherished her privacy a lot, so I am sure that, like almost everyone else, you did not know Miss Fitzburg is a mother. She had a young daughter out of wedlock that in public she presented as her niece to avoid the public embarrassment...”

Auger felt a shard of his soul break off and shatter, shredding the rest of his being—wounds that he already knew would never heal. He had to make an inhuman effort not to drop the spear and not to turn around to gaze at the little body he had left behind.

“Trännen,” he said after a few seconds of silence. “I am sorry. You understand? I am sorry. For everything. Do you forgive me?”

It had been a toneless, almost casual question, but they both knew its implications. And unlike the last time, her answer came strong.

“Yes. I forgive you,” she said, not crying anymore, her voice almost the same she had once had before.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ebiserasmus’ began to say something. Auger didn’t listen to him. He lunged forward and shouted a deafening cry of anger, pain, and revenge. The blind thief pierced the hearts of the two bodies, one alive

but close to death, the other dead but shadowing life. He pulled out the bloodied weapon and the two bodies slumped to the floor.

Silence. Then, around him, the crucified musicians bellowed and announced the death of their tormentor. Then they sang one last time and fell free, released, crashing into the floor as whatever structure had been holding them faltered, as did reality itself. Walls wailed, the ground shifted and quaked, the air froze and burned at the same time. Auger's body felt as if it was being stretched out by an invisible torturer, his throat choked by an ethereal, taloned hand, and he heard the last, desperate cry of revenge from Ebiserasmus. The thief fell to the floor, gasping for air that wasn't there.

And then, as swift as it had begun, it all stopped. And as soon as he gasped and he felt the unspoiled air, the thief knew he was back home. Groping blindly, he finally found the spear and propped himself up. Then he tapped around until he found them.

On the floor, in the center of the stage, lay three lifeless bodies. Gently and with reverence, he handled them. One was a woman in a beautiful, brocaded dress. Her skin was soft and youthful, her lips full, and her hair lush. She was holding a girl in her arms. They both smiled serenely. The remaining corpse was a shriveled carcass, contorted in a painful rictus and desiccated. His stomach had been carved open, and his chest emptied out. Where the heart should have been there was only the charred remains of the elephant idol.

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

Thune's Vision

A collection of stories
by Schuyler Hernstrom



Moonshot

By MICHAEL WIESENBERG

The Government wants to put a barn on the Moon—why?! To prove that the United States is capable of landing a barn on the Moon, of course! But the question is, whose barn are they going to send and can they send it to the moon on budget?!

It started in Congress, but the first I hear of it, I see these important-looking fellows out by my cow barn. Next thing I know, they walk up to the house and there's the Junior Senator of Wisconsin a-knockin' at my door. He introduces these scientists from NASA and they tell me they want to buy my barn so they can send it to the moon.

Well, I'm not so sure about that. The barn's been in my family over one hundred years, and I'm kind of attached to it, but they offer me a good price, enough to retire on.

Well, okay, they can have my barn. But only to rent, and then I want it back when they're through with it. And I tell them they got to keep me fully posted on all details of the project.

They agree to my conditions, and we all shake hands on it.

They pick a man from the publicity department of NASA to explain everything to me that happens. Wilson is his name. First or last, I never do find out. "Just call me Wilson," he says.

I could never remember all the stuff he tells me, so he gives me a miniature recorder that I can stick in my shirt pocket. Voice-operated, solar-powered, and able to focus on just one voice, or any number that you care to teach it to respond to. Won't be on the market for years. Cost them ten thousand dollars.

"Wilson," I say, "why does the government want to put my barn on the moon?"

"It happened like this," says Wilson. "A few weeks ago the head of the White House's Budget Bureau appeared before Congress with the President's recommendations for the coming fiscal year.

"The Junior Senator from Wisconsin, who also happens to be the head of the Senate Appropriations Committee, asked him, 'Why does NASA want an *extra* billion? Seems to me like they're getting plenty now.'

"The head of the Budget Bureau explained that NASA wanted to replace the shuttle booster with a bigger rocket, the Minerva.

"'Why,' the Senator wanted to know, 'do we need a bigger rocket? The shuttle booster appears to have done an adequate job so far, and if that's not big enough for your purposes, we can pull the Saturn V out of mothballs; it was quite capable of putting several Apollos on the moon.'

“The head of the Budget Bureau called upon the Deputy Director of NASA to explain. The Deputy Director is a politician, however, not a scientist, and he doesn’t know much about rockets, so he called upon a Senior Scientist to justify Minerva to Congress. Now this Senior Scientist has a habit of reducing complex facts to simple metaphors and analogies to make them more easily understood by laymen.

“‘First of all,’ said the Senior Scientist, ‘the Saturn V is obsolete. It would be cheaper, since new rocket technologies have begun to appear, to start development of a new platform than to try to build on the Saturn V. Second, we have to compete with the Russians, who have been developing in secret their Eneqira II, whose predecessor we used to call “G,” also known as “Webb’s Giant.” Its payload is perhaps 20% greater than that of the Saturn V, and the Russians are probably developing it for manned interplanetary probes. However, the Minerva would be so much more powerful than either the Saturn V or Eneqira II—or the Atlas V, for that matter—that it could get us to the planets in a big way. It could send whole colonies to the moon or Mars.’

“‘Just how powerful is this rocket, sir?’ asked the Senator.

“‘Why, it’s powerful enough to...to...to put a barn on the moon!’

“‘A *barn* sir? A *cow barn*?’ Here was something the Senator from Wisconsin could identify with.

“‘Well, yes...’

“‘And how much would it cost to develop one prototype of this remarkable rocket?’

“‘That would take \$500 million,’ answered the Senior Scientist, ‘but we need \$30 billion for the whole 10-year project, with a final goal of establishing colonies on the planets.’

“And then the Senator addressed the whole Congress. ‘So that we do not have to report back to our constituents that we voted \$30 billion for an unproven project, I am going to propose that the scientists demonstrate to us the effectiveness of their rocket by having it do just what they say it can do. “Powerful enough to put a barn on the moon,” they tell us. I suggest for our final vote that we give them a temporary appropriation of half a billion dollars, to be increased to \$30 billion over the next 10 years dependent on their

proving to us that this new vehicle *is* indeed capable of putting a barn on the moon. It so happens that, being from Wisconsin, and having been raised on a farm, I know a good deal about cow barns. I suggest that we find a suitable barn in the northern part of my State, where are found many of the finest examples of this rapidly vanishing form of American architecture, and the remaining nine-point-five billion dollars be contingent on this structure's being safely deposited on the surface of our neighbor to the...er... um, above us.'

"And that," says Wilson, "is how the United States government decided to put a cow barn on the moon. Yours was chosen because of its solid construction and nearness to a navigable river."

My barn is 90 feet long and 45 feet wide and 33 feet high, with a silo attached to the back end. My great-great-grandfather built it in 1872 shortly after arriving in this area from Pennsylvania. The walls are mostly stone, in the Pennsylvania Dutch style. The roof is round and bulging, so that it looks as if a huge cylinder was split lengthwise and laid on its side on the stone walls.

The next day, those government fellows are out there by the barn. They've dug out the foundation and put it up on jacks, so now what they've got is a barn sitting in a big hole. Wilson tells me they'll put it on wheels so they can move it to Cape Canaveral from my farm, which is in the northwest part of Wisconsin.

The rats leave, naturally. Rounding them all up causes those scientists considerable trouble, but they feel they have to do it after I tell them all cow barns have rats. They call catching the rats Operation Bluebell. Now why they don't just call it Operation Catching the Rats, I don't know. They catch just over one thousand rats, at a cost of about \$100 a rat. I could do it for them for \$1 a rat, and be ashamed to be charging the government so much. I wouldn't have to do any work, either. I'd just pay some of the local kids a quarter apiece for as many rats as they could catch.

Don't have to worry about the flies. They just naturally stay with the cows. There's a few hanging around my house that I wouldn't mind donating to the project if those scientists don't feel they have enough.

They got to dig a long ramp down to the barn so they can get it out of the hole. And they don't just haul it by house-moving truck

from my farm near Prescott all the way to the Cape. Those trucks don't go but two miles per hour with a load, and that would take months. And they'd have to go on back roads all the way because of the traffic problems that would result from a barn spreading all the way across a four-lane highway. Overhead wires are generally 18 feet above the road, and the barn is nearly twice that height. Trees and telephone poles by the sides of narrow country roads would have to go.

On the fourth day, they build a road from the barn to the Mississippi, just a few miles.

I don't know how you move a barn that Wilson tells me weighs over 70 tons. It's sitting on a framework of steel beams on maybe a hundred hydraulic jacks. They attach 12 wheel assemblies to three tracks, each a hundred feet long, that run the length of the barn.

The barn is lowered gently till the wheels rest on railroad ties that were laid beneath. Now a huge diesel truck pulls the barn up the long ramp. Damn thing looks like a big old house trailer.

The truck pulls the barn to the river and backs it from a new-built pier onto a barge. Then they lash each wheel in place with heavy chains. A tugboat pulls the barge. I go along to keep my cows company. Wilson goes along to explain stuff to me. From Prescott it's smooth sailing, as they say, all the way to New Orleans.

From New Orleans, the barge goes into the Gulf of Mexico, around the Florida Keys, and up the coast to the Kennedy Space Center.

A week later, a truck hauls the barn from the Space Center dock to the biggest damn building I've ever seen. Hell, it's bigger'n any *hill* in north-west Wisconsin.

"This is one of the world's largest buildings," says Wilson, "the one the astronauts call the 'VAB,' the Vehicle Assembly Building. This building is eight acres in area, 129,428,000 cubic feet in volume, 525 feet high. If it didn't have its own special climate-conditioning, there would be rain in the VAB."

That's what he tells me. I keep hoping for a small indoor electrical storm, just as a demonstration, but they never do turn off that air conditioning.

“Now,” Wilson tells me, “they have put your barn into a quartz crystal shell and given it a heat-resistant skin. The silo at the end has been converted into an air and water recycling plant. Compressors, dehumidifiers, oxygen and water tanks fill the space where you stored your silage. A device that operates much like a giant flush toilet will flood the floor of the barn once daily to remove the accumulation of manure. The huge storage batteries that operate all the machinery are out of sight in the upper lofts, connected to solar cells on the roof. They will be energized by the brilliant sunshine of space and the month-long lunar day. The batteries will keep the automatic milking machines running and carry feed by conveyor belt to each cow.

“These systems can operate for up to one month, at which point the cows will have used up all the air and water that can be recycled.

“Do you see that large box on a shelf in the corner of the barn? It contains the rats. A small pipe automatically drips water in an inner trough, while a conveyor belt drops small kernels of grain onto a mesh-covered hole at the top.”

I see a word stenciled on one side of the box: “Bluebell.”

“Those giant cranes that are just now lifting your barn are operated by men 45 stories above the floor. Watch them place it on top of the fourth stage of the rocket. That’s 100 tons of barn and life support equipment, and they stack it as gently as a child would a toy block.”

As I lean back to see my barn, Wilson says, “Do you know that these launch preparations are top secret?”

“Sure,” I say.

“I’ve just received an intelligence report that the American branch of the Russian Secret Service has reported to its superiors that the United States is about to launch a cow barn into outer space. Didn’t you give an interview yesterday to a reporter with a Russian accent?”

“I didn’t know he was Russian. He told me he was an Englishman, and he showed me his Rooters press card. All them foreigners sound the same to me.”

“Well, it may turn out all right, after all. I’m told that as a result of this report, the entire American branch of the Russian Secret Service

has been recalled and reassigned to Siberia. Today the Russian delegation to the UN did not show up, the Embassy in Washington was closed, and so was the Consulate in San Francisco. I was a little bothered by satellite pictures I saw of a large barn-like structure being hauled across land to the Baikonur Space Center, but I think we'll be on the moon before they even get theirs to the launch pad."

The day before the big day, we're in the VAB, and Wilson tells me I got quite a sight to see because they're fixin' to move the rocket to the launch pad.

"Wilson," I say, "you folks are the doggondest for movin' things! Why can't everything be done in one place?"

I don't think he hears me, because he just goes on, a mile a minute, telling me all about what's happening.

"That rocket is over 400 feet high. It sits on a mobile launcher, a 20-foot-thick platform 160 feet by 135 feet. Next to the rocket stands its umbilical tower, 20 feet higher than the rocket. Hoses and wires connect the two. The whole platform rests on 22-foot steel columns.

"Now here it comes!" He was pretty excited. "This is the world's second-largest vehicle, a transporter crawler. (Only the Bagger 28, or Excavator 288, a bucket-wheel excavator or mobile strip mining machine, is larger). It's driven by eight steel-link treads. See, it's easing beneath the mobile launcher. That bed is 131 by 114 feet and can be raised from 20 feet to 26 feet, lifting the 14 million pounds of launcher, tower, and rocket from the floor of the VAB. As it moves out of the door at one-fifth miles per hour, 16 hydraulic lifters maintain the bed's levelness. With this load, the crawler has a maximum speed of 1.1 miles per hour."

I can hardly see the giant machine moving. I walk beside it for a while, but the sun's too hot for me. It takes seven hours to move the rocket three miles to launch pad 39B.

On the day of the launch, Wilson treats me to breakfast at 4 a.m. at Lem's Lox and Solid Propellant Space Center Eatery. I read on the menu that I should "blast off with a Moonshot, order hotcakes that soar to an apogee of perfection, and splash down with coffee," which I do. Wilson has Translunar Omelet with Space Sticks on the side and Reconstituted Coffee. That's some menu and I ask Wilson

to get me one to keep as a souvenir. Then a Space Shuttle Bus transports us to the VIP grandstand.

From a distance of four miles, the rocket looks to me like a pile of beer cans. Ten of those big malt liquor cans on the bottom, 40 of the little seven-ounce cans balanced on them, then five more, then another long skinny one with four wings folded neatly against its sides. On top of the whole thing sets a transparent football with my barn inside. Powerful floodlights make the beer can sculpture gleam in that heavy darkness that comes just before dawn.

While we wait for the blastoff, Wilson explains to me about the rocket.

“Minerva,” he says, “stands for Multiple Integrated Nuclear Engines for Rocket Vehicle Application.

“Its first stage has 10 F-1 chemical rocket engines that burn kerosene and liquid oxygen, also known as LOX.

“The second stage, which can only be fired in the upper atmosphere because of radiation fallout danger, has a cluster of 40 nuclear engines. A neutron chain reaction blasts heated hydrogen gas from a nozzle at the end of each engine.

“The third stage consists of five nuclear engines.

“We are particularly proud of the fourth stage, which is a plasma drive engine. Those lattice-work wings unfold in space to act as giant sails. The rocket uses no fuel; instead it sails on the solar wind, also called plasma.” He writes down equations and diagrams for me.

“Wilson, it’s no use. That’s completely beyond me. I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

We wait in the VIP stands. It’s very hot and humid here in Florida before dawn. I think I like Wisconsin better. Wilson points out famous people to me: the senator from this area of Florida and the governor, the defense secretary, the head of the National Security Council, the highest-ranking officer in the navy, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Canadian circus entrepreneur who bought his own passage on the Russian space shuttle for \$2 million, and that comedian who goes to every war zone to entertain the troops. He tells me there are some 200 Representatives here, 40 Senators, 25 Governors, 100 mayors, 80 foreign ambassadors, and a bunch of

movie and sports stars. Outside the stands are a large collection of space-shot groupies.

“T MINUS TWO MINUTES AND COUNTING.” An amplified voice booms over our heads.

The floodlights go out just as the sun rises. Mist appears at the base of the rocket and becomes hot pink in the dawn sun. The heat becomes overpowering.

“WE HAVE LIFTOFF.”

The pink mist becomes boiling orange clouds.

“That’s a flame-deflector trench you see that almost splits the launching pad in half,” says Wilson. “And do you see that water flowing down the umbilical tower? That’s for heat dissipation.”

The sculpture trembles. I hope the automatic milking machines are running in the barn. It’s time to milk those cows. Their udders will get mighty heavy if they aren’t emptied, because Wilson says that at liftoff the acceleration makes everything weigh a lot more.

Thunder that I can almost touch shakes the stands.

Slowly, slowly Minerva rises. Her base is hidden by the billowing orange smoke. Ten million pounds balance like a broomstick on the end of a juggler’s nose. The heavy load seems ready to fall back at any moment. It seems to rise even slower than it crawled to the pad. Suddenly I realize that I am looking up to see it and I have to hold my hand to shade my eyes from the hot blue-white sky.

“Go! Go! Go!” the Very Important Persons and the groupies are screaming.

Wilson tries to whisper in my ear, but I cannot hear him. He shouts, but all I can hear is that twisting, tearing roar. Wilson taps out on his phone a message for me to see. I read: “The rocket is 40 miles up and traveling 6,000 miles per hour. Here the first stage drops off. For 6 minutes the second stage fires till a speed of 15,000 miles per hour is achieved, and then it too falls away and the third stage ignites to accelerate the vehicle to 16,500 miles per hour and loft it into a nearly circular earth orbit at an altitude of 115 miles.”

For the next four and a half hours my barn will orbit the earth three times in what Wilson calls a “parking orbit.” “This is,” he says, “an orbit from which at the right moment an extraterrestrial probe can be flung.” A reporter next to me has just finished a story on his tablet.

He puts a headline on his story. "The Herd Shot Round the World," it reads.

"Now," says Wilson, five hours later, "at precisely the right moment the third stage fires again and for just long enough to put the space-barn into a trajectory toward the moon. This is called 'translunar injection.'"

I tell him they could just as easily have called it "shooting the rocket to the moon."

"The fourth stage is now taking over. The wings are deployed..."

"What does 'deployed' mean?" I ask.

"Spread out."

"Well, why don't you say that?"

He looks at me funny, but continues, "At this point, the plasma engine pushes the vehicle to 24,300 miles per hour at 190 miles altitude and it too shuts down but does not separate. During the 'translunar coast' the football spirals along its long axis to provide centrifugal gravity. After three days of coasting, precise braking from the plasma engine will put the craft into lunar orbit, where the giant transparent football will separate from the fourth stage by the firing of explosive bolts."

"Explosive bolts" puts me in mind of something I learned years ago in high school about mythology. I have a vision of Zeus hurling spears of lightning that explode when they hit the earth. I don't tell this to Wilson. He has very little imagination for a PR man.

Three days later, Wilson says, "The football is firing its own rockets to put it into a 'decaying orbit' that spirals right down to the surface of the moon. At about 500 feet on-board computers operate 32 reaction control thrusters so that the vehicle hovers like a helicopter and slowly floats to a preselected site on the moon. Ten footpads lower from the craft's underside, each selecting its own height such that the barn is perfectly level."

The cow barn has jumped onto the moon, and there it sets. Automatic television cameras and microphones switch on in the hayloft. From the monitors we watch at the Launch Control Center, I hear a sound that makes me homesick:

"MMMMMMMMmmmmmmuhhhhhhhhh."

"That's wonderful," I say. "Now how do you bring it back?"

“That, of course, we can’t do until Congress votes us the rest of the funds. However, we are confident that with the unqualified success of this mission we should have the funds allocated during the next fiscal year.”

A year or more before they can even get the money. And those life support systems will operate only one month...

Five days have passed and I’m back on my farm. If those politicians can’t figure a way to get the money, looks like I’ll have to do it. I’ve already come up with a plan. It took them \$500 million to get the barn to the moon. They should be able to get it back for about half that. After all, the life support system is already in place, and that plasma drive is there, too. I’ve got the neighborhood kids out catching rats. I figure they can get a million rats in a week or less. A few hundred kids, a few hundred rats each per day, adds up pretty quick. I asked the kids if they’d be willing to work on consignment, explained how their government needed those rats, and when I got paid, I’d give them half a buck each. Kid’s willing to work, the kid can make a few thousand bucks. I plan to tell the scientists I’ll supply them with rats for as many launches as they want. And they’ll only have to pay 50 bucks each. They should be pleased to save all that money. And if they don’t go for it, why I’ll just look up that Russian reporter...

*Michael Wiesenber*g was a professional poker player for 10 years, and a technical writer in Silicon Valley for much of his career, the while contributing fiction and nonfiction to various publications. His books “Canadian Crosswords: From British Columbia to Maple Syrup to Rock Music and More,” “The Official Dictionary of Poker,” and others are available on Amazon.

Notes From the Nest

We're going to have to cram the editorial column into this tiny space at the end of the issue, since space is at a premium!

Wow, what an exciting issue, huh?

While we'd love to share the awesome story of how we ended up with our hands on an Edgar Rice Burroughs Tarzan story, we just don't have the space here, so you'll have to check out our website, or if you have a minute to swing by The Comic Book Store in Little Rock or Collector's Edition in North Little Rock, you can ask Michael yourself.

Be sure to check out Misha Burnett & Louise Sorensen's new anthology, *Duel Visions*, that we published last month!

Also, this Spring and Summer we're finally releasing *The Illustrated Stark*, a 70th Anniversary editions of Leigh Brackett's Planet Stories tales, *Queen of the Martian Catacombs*, *The Enchantress of Venus*, and *Black Amazon of Mars*, all fully illustrated by Star Two and with forewords by Nathan Housley, Jeffro Johnson, and Liana Kerzner. First volume comes out at the end of next month, as will a special coffee table omnibus edition.

We've got several more great stories lined up for you in our Summer special, including the return of Schuyler Hernstrom to our pages.

We'd tell you more, but we've run out of room! See you next issue!

P. Alexander, Ed.

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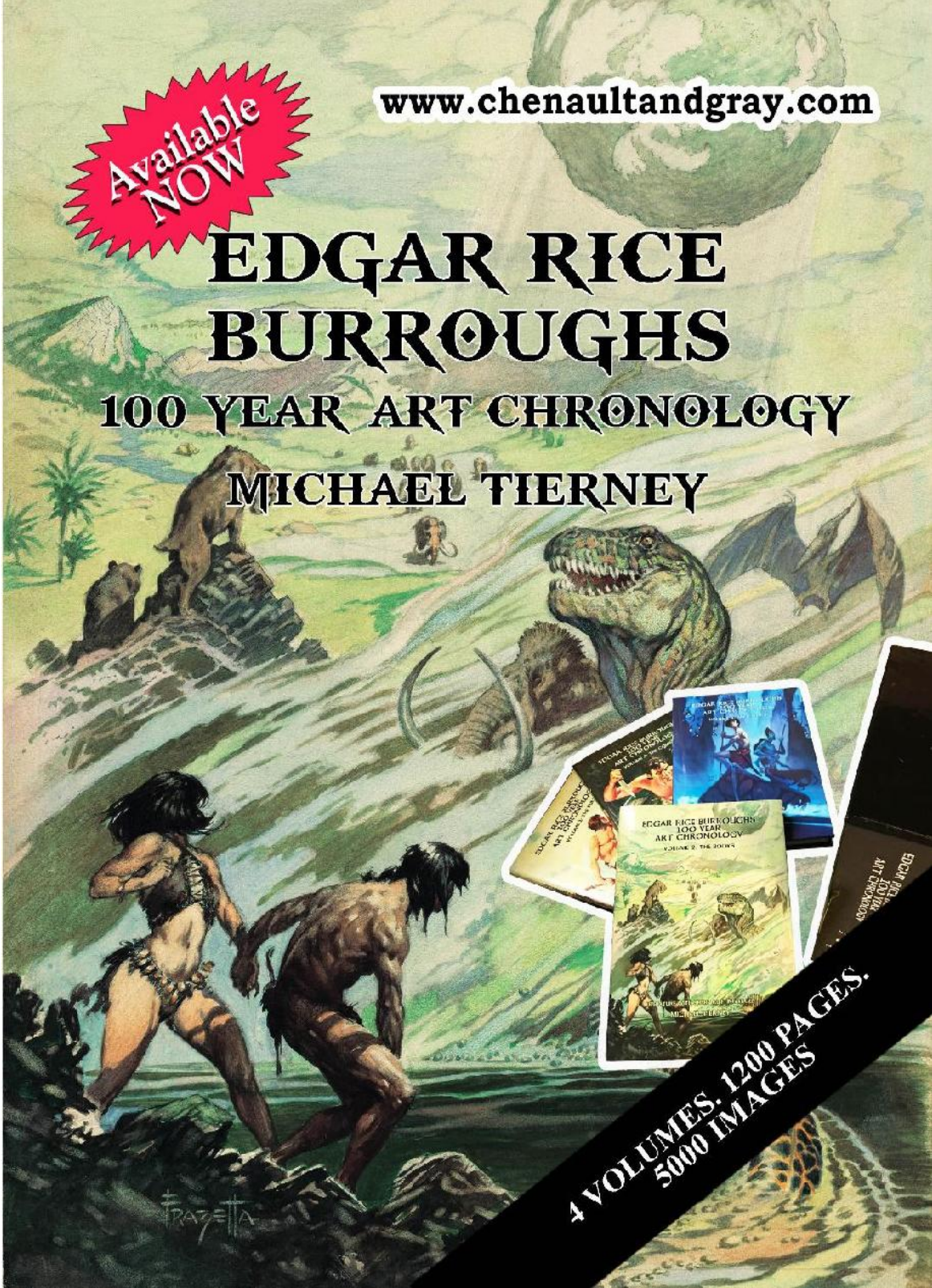
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