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Henry and the Prince of Cats

by
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John Gradoville
Caroline Furlong



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William Huggins
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AN UNUSUAL ADVENTURE
by JD Cowan



Something moved across my peripheral vision. For the instant my eyes caught it, I saw that it was big, man-sized at least.

I belatedly realized that the figure, whatever it was, seemed to be loping along on four legs. The injured cat in my arms hissed and yowled again, as if in sudden fear.

Something crunched with a heavy tread on the loose dirt behind me, and the air filled with the roar of a hungry cougar. You hear that blood-curdling cry once in a movie or at the zoo, and it stays with you for the rest of your life.

The wildly thrashing cat slipped out of my grasp when I spun around. I didn't look down to pick it back up. That sound I heard, the thing that stood before me poised to pounce, was not a mountain lion.

I told you I couldn't remember everything that happened in the fight, but I can paint you a picture of this thing and not leave out a single detail, from the sickly yellow color of the saliva that dripped from its bear-trap mouth to the mottled, grey folds of its wrinkled skin. Its whiskered, blunt-snouted skull towered more than a foot above my head. The thing stood up on two legs, though the legs were jointed in the wrong direction for a man, like the hind paws of a quadruped. The creature was mostly hairless with scattered patches of matted fur, like it had mange. Maybe it resembled a Sphinx cat, but only if Sphinx were seven feet tall with the jaws of a jaguar and long, human fingers. Let's call a spade a spade and get it out of the way: I was staring down a werecat.

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Battle Beyond the Continuum

By DARREN GOOSSENS

Rex Funnel and Paul Aglet have travelled across time and space, testing their new continuon flux drive—and found themselves in the midst of a planetary conflict!

1: Cruising the Small Magellanic Cloud

“**T**he odds of finding intelligent life on a short trip like this must be literally astronomical—ten to the ten to the ten to one, I should think,” said Rex Funnel.

“Rocket projectiles incoming!” yelled Paul Aglet, pointing at the image-o-scope.

Rex gripped the yoke in his mighty hands and threw the Sikorsky S-38 to port. Stanchions groaned in protest, and for a moment Paul thought the top wing would shear off, taking the engines with it.

The missiles thundered past, their sound lost in the airless depths of space.

Rex mopped his brow with his trademark red handkerchief. “Well spotted, Ace. Where’d they come from?”

Paul examined the memory of the image-o-scope, flicking through the electrolytically engraved plates. “They came from some kind of ship—a big one—and I can trace its trajectory. It came from over there!” He pointed to a blue-white star twenty degrees above the airplane’s equator and forty-three and a half to starboard.

Rex swept the yoke to the right. “Let’s see who’s shooting at us—what’s our ETA?”

Paul noted the apparent brightness of the star against the chart of standards and set the keys on the navitron. At length he pulled the lever and watched the tumblers spin. One by one they stopped.

“Two and a half light-years. Could take us a long time.”

Rex nodded sagely. “Now that we’ve lost most of our velocity, I’d say at least fifteen minutes. . .”

The two men looked at each other. This was meant to be nothing more than a proving flight, testing Rex’s continuon flux drive. But

already they had passed out of the Milky Way and into the Smaller Magellanic Cloud. The flimsy paper tape feeding through the DeadReckoner (TM) (a product of Funnel Industries) was their only link with Earth. They had no business approaching a hostile planet, risking the only continuous flux drive in existence, risking humanity's chance to dominate the galaxies. They had no need to speak to each other. The decision was made.

Rex pushed the throttles and sped towards the blue star. The continuous flux generator fed the continuous manipulate-a-tron, which bent space itself and hurled the fragments rearwards at inconceivable velocities. Twin trails of violet light fanned out behind, like scorch marks on the face of the void. They approached the maximum theoretical velocity of the *Passenger Pigeon of Space*—almost a quarter of infinity.

“Switch on the distortion field,” commanded Rex. “That’ll keep us safe from these charlies.”

Paul went to a fuse box and patch panel near the navigator's position and pressed a series of buttons and switches. Humming filled the craft.

“Do you think the airframe is up to it?” said Paul as he slid into the copilot's chair and squinted through the canopy.

Each star now looked like a line drawn on the surface of a glass sphere, with the *Pigeon* at the center. The distortion field, combined with their immense velocity, turned the universe into a webwork of intersecting filaments of light.

“Ease the strain, champ,” smiled Rex, teeth dazzling. “The continuous field does all the work.” He turned to his long-time right-hand man. “You know seventy-three per cent as well as I do that it's the manipulate-a-tron back there that matters. As long as we're directly controlling the fundamental particles of the space-time continuum, those I call 'continuons,' we don't need to worry about conventional mechanics!”

Paul frowned and nodded. “It's a neat theory.”

“‘Theory’?” chuckled Rex, sweeping his arm around in a gesture that encompassed the whole flying boat. “Here we are, two hundred thousand light-years from home. That's not just theory, it's real engineering.” He smiled and punched Paul on the arm. “That, and your ability to fit this Sikorsky with my field generator.”

Paul looked at the crisscrossing lines of light that curved past like racing cars coming over a hill and vanishing around a curve. Rex had shown that everything was nothing but an aspect of the universal continuum flux. Mass was but a distortion in the continuum flux density, gravity merely the propagation of that distortion. A ray of light was an excitation that traveled through the continuum matrix, magnetism an excitation of differing 'polarization'. Rex had unified general relativity and quantum mechanics by making each a different aspect of the continuum field, a different kind of excitation of the same underlying system. And he had gained mastery over space, for if a man could control the continuons, he could separate gravity from mass, he could overcome the properties that limited laggard light to a paltry 983571056.43045 feet per second, he could distort the continuum flux such that anything hurled their way would flow around them, like a jet of water fired at a cannon ball. The weft of space was their impregnable plastic poncho. Mastery over time itself was, for Rex Funnel, nothing but a matter of . . . time?

Paul shook his head in wonder. Paul Aglet could, if he chose, call himself a genius. Who but a genius could have taken Rex's blueprints and put them to work? Yet even Paul could not say he really understood continuum theory any more than a bee understood food chemistry.

"Now, how about a sausage?" said Rex.

Paul ducked his head as he took the catwalk to the galley. He hunted through their provisions. Something struck him as odd. He called out: "Half a loaf of bread and another four sausages have gone missing. These continuons seem to be doing something to the refrigerator."

Rex laughed, a booming sound that rattled the viewports. "What, you think the continuum flux drive is making your sausages vanish?"

"Well, *something* is doing it!"

Rex shook his head. "Maybe you're—"

A sudden lurch stopped him short. Paul braced himself against the galley, glad he had not ignited the burner.

"What off Earth was *that*," spluttered Paul. "Aren't we impregnable?"

Rex's jaw set. "It's a big universe. Maybe we're not Robinson Crusoe in having continuum technology. Hang on!"

2: Evasive Action

Paul strapped himself into the copilot's chair.

As Rex threw the *Pigeon* into a sharp turn, Paul was glad of the artificial gravity. He'd been Rex's mechanic in his tilt at the 1931 Schneider trophy—unsuccessful due to a legal challenge against Rex's use of collapsible pontoons—and was all too familiar with getting thrown about in airplanes. The feeling in the *Pigeon* was not quite the same. The continuum manipulate-a-tron induced the floor of the craft to emit a high dose of gravitons so that the floor always felt like down.

All the time, the network of nodes and lines remained visible, tumbling and swirling outside the windows. Somewhere, on the other side of the continuum bubble that should have made them invulnerable, lurked their attacker. Paul checked the ammunition belts for the twin forward-firing Brownings. Despite Rex's reassurances, the groaning of the airframe worried him.

Then, a crash, followed by an unearthly yowl, came from the rear of the plane. Lastly, he heard: "My petticoat!"

He knew that voice! Paul unclipped himself and, hand over hand, made his way into the rearmost recesses of the craft, in amongst the crates of tinned sausages and dehydrated potato. He lurched first one way and then another, stopping his progress only when he spotted (1) a T-strap with a three-inch Louis heel adorning a foot at the end of a shapely calf and (2) a shaggy puppy.

"Melony?" he yelled over the shrill hum of the generator and the twanging of stressed metal.

A sharp turn threw him off his feet, and he crawled towards her along the spinal catwalk of the Sikorsky. He found her cradling Punnet, her Maltese terrier, in one arm, and pulling at a trapped leg with the other.

"Hi, honey," she said brightly.

Paul's mouth fell open. "How did you—"

She pointed at the toppled crate of bully beef. He hefted it up, tightening the webbing that should have held it in place.

He helped her to her feet. She looked at him. As always at the sight of those wide brown eyes flanking the pert, upturned nose, his heart melted into unpolymerized sesquiterpene in his chest.

She smiled between dimples. “Doc Hickey helped sneak us on board.”

Paul shook his head and clucked. “I shouldda known. You’ve got ole Doc in your pocket. And, hell, me too. Do you fancy a sausage later?”

He clasped her to him, and they kissed.

A lurch threw them sideways into the dehydrated potato and left them clinging to the webbing.

“Some settling of contents may occur!” Rex yelled from the cockpit.

The note of the generator changed.

Trouble.

“Life jackets are under your seats; please review the emergency exits.”

Paul noted a grim tone in Rex’s voice. He and Melony crabbed their way forward. Paul found her one of the spare jackets and made her put it on over her fawn-colored dress.

“Ow!” She repositioned her gold-plated brooch. She winked at him. “Try it now. Just adjust me where you need to.”

Paul strapped her into the navigator’s position. Only then did he make his own way to the copilot’s seat. Punnet would have to fend for himself – and by the smell, the little dog’s stomach wasn’t fending too well. Paul frowned. One thing was certain—no way would Rex be cleaning out the scuppers. . .

3: Bovrell

Paul wound down the distortion field as they neared the planet’s surface. The darkness of space flooded in through the ports. A bright puce beam of energy whirred past the *Pigeon*. And yet Paul could not help but gasp at the sight—a blue-green planet, shrouded in white lace, seemingly all water and cloud. And a ring, silver in the light of its sun. *Like Earth, viewed from above the Pacific Ocean, and with Saturn’s rings to boot!* thought Paul.

They continued to drop. Rex cut the artificial gravity. A final burst from the continuon flux motors slowed them to around two hundred miles per hour. He pushed the grouped starter buttons, and the Pratt & Whitney radials crashed into life. The Sikorsky shook from their uncouth acoustics and continued to plummet planetward. Their enemy did not seem equally able to maneuver deep within the atmosphere,

and the weapons fire ceased. A 1928 Sikorsky had some advantages over the latest in alien technology.

Some.

One last blast of energy, diffused and weakened by the atmosphere, coursed down towards them. The flying boat lurched as one engine lost power. The radials were mounted in push/pull pairs in pods between the Sikorsky's biplane wings. Standard S-38s came with two 9-cylinder Wasps, but the extra weight of the continuous flux generator—very apparent in conventional flight—needed more power, so Paul had fitted an extra pair. Three were more than enough to—

“We’ve lost both port engines,” ground out Rex. “And with the continuous field manipulate-a-tron—and some unexpected mass, I gotta say—we’re too heavy to make altitude. Look for a good place to land, Ace, or throw your fiancée out the airlock.”

Paul scanned the scene below. Water everywhere—and they could land on that. But somewhere to make camp, rest, and repair the *Pigeon*, even a tiny island, seemed but a distant hope. Then a call came from behind them:

“What’s that thingy in front of you, honey bunny?”

Melony pointed at the image-o-scope.

Paul slapped himself in the side of the head and bent to the tele-image-o-scope eyepiece. He scanned the horizon, picking up emissions on all possible real frequencies and a wide range of imaginary ones.

“There seems to be a battle fleet, surface ships, to the . . . well I guess I’ll call it north.” Paul lifted his eyes from the ‘scope. “They’re like no Dreadnoughts I’ve ever seen. They seem to be firing magenta energy beams at a nearby island!”

“Sounds like friends of our assailants—any other land?”

“A tiny island—hardly bigger than the car park at your factory—is all. It’s well treed. Should be apples. Not too close to that fleet. . . head west southwest.”

After a few minutes, Rex said: “There! I see it. . . temperature is rising in our two engines, better put ‘er down.”

They splashed into the water and drew up to a pebbled beach. Rex drove the flying boat up onto the scree.

The three of them were standing on the rocks, watching Punnet devour the last of the still-raw sausages, when a voice said:

“Uglikk nock ban! Ipgo ponk!”

They turned around to see a big man with cobalt-blue skin and, unmistakably, a gun. The tip of the barrel glowed with a green light, and the stock was replete with arcane buttons and switches.

“Frenggh wan tannat zee!”

He gestured with the weapon. He wore blotchy green army fatigues. As he moved, Paul could see that the pattern on the clothes changed, chameleon-like.

“Now look here, sport,” said Rex, slowly moving his hand towards the buttoned holster on his belt.

Rex, of course, was a dead-eye shot with a pistol, having been West Coast Stochastic Penguin-Shaped-Target Champion three years running. But again the gun jerked, and reluctantly Rex raised his hands. Paul had not gone for his sidearm.

Keeping the weapon trained on the Earthlings, the man moved towards the *Pigeon*. As his boots crunched across the pebbles to the plane, Paul at last realized just how big the man was. His head reached engine height—he must have been at least ten feet tall! He turned one of the propellers with a couple of his fingers. Paul hoped Rex had cut the engine electrics. This fellow might not like it if he accidentally pull-started one of them.

The man nodded thoughtfully, then smiled and burst out laughing. He slung the gun diagonally across his back and approached Rex. Rex held out his hand as for a handshake, but the big man merely laughed indulgently and patted him on the head.

“Agt,” he said. “Agt.” And made a beckoning gesture.

Rex did not move but pointed at the airplane.

The blue man waved them away from the craft and took a small device out of his pocket. He pointed it at the *Pigeon*, and for a wild moment, Paul thought he was going to destroy her. With a click, a gossamer net flew out of the device. It settled over the *Pigeon* like a giant dewy cobweb, sparkled for a moment, then vanished. The *Pigeon* was invisible!

“Must be great for hunting,” approved Rex. “But it looks like we’ve landed on a world at war.”

“Duh,” said Melony.

Rex pretended not to hear her. “That’ll give us plenty of chances to show what Earth men are made of!”

The blue man beckoned them to follow and walked through the tree line.

They marched through light scrub reminiscent of tea tree and mondo grass. Paul said: “Rex—that camouflage device—do you think they have continuon technology?”

Rex rubbed his permanent five o’clock shadow. “I don’t think that trick needs it, amigo. Nothing more complicated than a network of tiny lenses and electric lamps, I’d say. No evidence of continuon manipulation—advanced Heisenbergian Physics with overtones of Schrödingerian, perhaps.” He cocked his head, and his eyes focused on some far distant vision. “Back home, quantum physics hasn’t revolutionized our lives yet, but one day it will let us exploit Earth’s resources at tremendous speed! No doubt by the twenty-first century something as crude and makeshift as the automobile will be long superseded.”

“And continuon physics?”

Rex’s laugh boomed out. “The *Pigeon* is evidence enough of what *that* can do!”

The blue man held out his camouflage device and pressed a button. His own vehicle, a shining bubble whose surface rippled with the metallic colors of interference fringes, appeared. A hole grew in the side of it, and they all stepped in, Melony with Punnet in her arms. The dog’s bone-shaped name tag jingled on his collar. The blue giant touched a series of ghostly buttons, nothing more than shaded patches of light on the inner wall of the craft. The bubble descended into the ground and soon the walls of a close-fitting tunnel accelerated past them in a blur. After speaking a few words, seemingly to the air, he opened and closed his hand in front of his mouth.

Rex scratched his head.

“I think he wants us to talk,” said Melony.

“Well, that’s not too hard,” Paul said. “‘Let those who are in favor with their stars, Of public honor and proud titles boast’. . . I forget the rest. Uh. Peter Peeper poked a pick at pickled pikers. . . Four score and seven years ago we held these truths to be self-evident. . .”

Melony laughed. She and Paul talked, Punnet yapped continuously, and the blue man pushed more buttons.

Rex frowned. “Why should he want us to speak?”

“Maybe he’s got some kind of translation machine,” said Paul. “And it needs to hear us talk.”

Rex’s frown deepened. “The inherent complexity of language prohibits the construction of a generalized translation machine. The recent papers by Ümklapp prove beyond doubt that decoding a language purely from a sample of its phonemes is prospectively impossible.”

“Welcome to Bovrell!” grinned the blue man. The translated words leapt from a device in the console of the bubble ship.

4: Princess Klathray

“**M**y name is Yclept. You are guests of the Pithian Empire, on the planet Bovrell.”

“Rex,” said Rex. “Rex Funnel. And this is Paul Aglet. And Melony.”

“Punnet! Punnet! Punnet!” yapped the device. “Bovrell sausages!”

Yclept laughed at Rex’s astonishment. He patted the dog. “I like your animal.”

Punnet wagged his tail so hard he almost levered himself out of Melony’s arms.

The ship shot out of its tunnel and into an enormous, brightly lit cavern. They found themselves at what looked like a bus stop of the future. A row of Pithian officers awaited them.

Yclept’s face grew serious. “I am sorry, my new friends, but it is a grim time for Pithia. We are locked in a do-or-die war with the B’nk’jret Republic, fighting to keep Bovrell safe for imperial autocracy.”

“A worthy cause!” said Rex.

Yclept nodded. “And until we know you better, you must be without freedom. I am sorry. I have selected my best lieutenant to be your guardian.” He turned to the leader of the squad of Pithian troops. “Boxart—see them to cellblock 9B.”

Huge arms, thicker than Rex’s torso and hard as duralumin, locked each of them in a pythonic grip, while others confiscated Rex’s automatic and Paul’s revolver.

Rex fumed. “We have done nothing!” He struggled, but even his powerful deltoids, triceps, and biceps brachii were no match for the sheer size of the Bovrellians.

Yclept gestured with open hands. “And yet you made it to ground in your tiny, flimsy vessel, surviving against a B’nk’jret star-battle-bubble-

ship. You must have some secrets.”

“Maybe they don’t have continuons,” whispered Paul.

Rex hissed him to silence. “Shtum, chum. If they want our help, they’ll have to ask more nicely than *this!*” He looked at Yclept. “Do you expect me to talk?”

“Mr. Funnel, I expect it is difficult to stop you.”

The opening in the bubble ship sucked itself closed, and as it did so, the translation effect ceased. Yclept said something to their escort, and they were taken away in a large, hovering vehicle.

Rex paced back and forth, sipping from his glass of single malt whiskey. He dropped into the nearest armchair and set it for ‘massage’. “This is intolerable!”

Melony selected a candy from the sideboard. “I’ve been in worse prisons.”

Rex arched an eyebrow. “Have you? Does Paul know?”

“He knows everything about me, Remy.” She winked, and Rex looked away, annoyed.

Paul, in a white robe, came out of the bathroom.

“Not bad,” he said. “Seven kinds of soap.”

“Is that your idea of advanced technology?” sniffed Rex. The door slid open. Rex shot to his feet. “We demand—”

“The Princess will see you now,” said Yclept, wearing a metallic uniform covered in arcane insignia. On a sash sat a crystalline dodecahedron, from which his voice emanated. He inspected Paul. “I’ll give you five minutes.” He looked at Rex. “You might want to change your shirt.”

Rex looked down to see a whiskey stain on his clothes. He refused to change.

Paul vanished into his room, to return a few seconds later wearing a locally-made suit of a lightweight blue fabric.

“Here I come!” yapped Yclept’s machine on behalf of Punnet. The puppy leapt into Melony’s waiting arms.

“Follow me,” said Yclept.

They fell into step behind the big man. Two more Bovrellians, one of them Boxart, followed, weapons at the ready. They came to another cavern, an aircraft hangar judging by the endless ranks of sleek blue and polished-steel craft, each the size of a Zeppelin. The air smelled

like kerosene, grease, and benzene, and Paul felt at home. Amidst the behemoths sat the prosaic little *Pigeon*, scuffed, dented, almost lost. The little biplane flying boat would have fitted inside the bridge of any one of the mighty Bovrellian ships.

Yclept turned to them. "What is the secret of this craft?"

"Ask Pratt or Whitney," snapped Rex.

"We can dismantle this craft into nothing but atoms and aether if need be to find its secrets, but we would rather—" He stopped. Judging by the man's slack jaw, glazed eyes, and bulging trousers, Rex was not listening. "I see the Princess has arrived," finished Yclept without enthusiasm. He moved to one side.

Princess Klathray approached. As she came nearer, Rex's eyes bugged out even further. Melony dug Paul in the ribs and pointed to the veins in Rex's neck. Paul whispered, "I know," and they continued to watch the scene unfold.

She was eight feet tall, slender yet voluptuous, and wore high boots, a short skirt, and a form-fitting, low-cut blouse of some diaphanous silvery fabric. She had dark green eyes and sky-blue skin. A waterfall of golden hair ran down her back. Nothing but her carriage indicated her regal status, save for a small jeweled insignia on the left breast of her blouse.

"We'll be glad to help," murmured Rex, looking closely at the insignia. "What do you need to know, Princess?"

The Princess whispered something to one of the bodyguards behind her. He gestured, and a small building rose out of the floor between the rows of aircraft.

"Come," she said. "We have much to discuss."

The Princess and her minder, plus Yclept and Boxart, joined Rex, Paul, Melony and Punnet in the privacy of the comfortably appointed little room. It was bare but for a cluster of chairs, four large and three small, and a basket.

Immediately upon taking the largest and highest chair, the Princess said: "Mr. Funnel, my empire is at war. The B'nk'jret Republic possesses weapons and ships we cannot duplicate. Will you help us?"

Not quite drooling, Rex nodded.

Paul said: "We met one of their ships out in space. Do you not have space travel?"

“Only as far as our moons, or what is left of them. B’nk’jret recently gained the power to go further.”

She crossed her legs. Rex’s whole head rose and fell.

He managed to say: “They have a crude version of continuon technology.”

She sat forward. Rex was poised to fall into her cleavage. “Continuon?”

Paul said: “Yes. Space-time is really a continuon matrix. Rex developed the means of manipulating the continuon field.” He put a hand on Rex’s shoulder and dragged him upright. “*Didn’t you, Rex?*”

Rex’s cockiness returned. “That’s right. The *Pigeon* is fitted with my Continuon Field Manipulate-a-tron, patent pending! Gives us a space drive, an impregnable shield, unlimited energy, and a valuable source of protein. Why, I—”

The Princess held up a hand. “I see.”

“‘Impregnable’?” said Yclept. “Yet you plummeted to the ground.”

Rex brushed that off. “How big are these Brick. . . Bank. . . um. . . enemy ships? As big as yours?”

Yclept spoke: “Bigger. What you see are our aerial battleships, the last of our fleet. The B’nk’jret star-battle-bubble-ships are an order of magnitude larger.”

“One of your orders of magnitude or one of ours?” said Rex.

Yclept blinked; Rex did not notice. His eyes had not left parts of the Princess.

“Clearly, they don’t have the advantages of miniaturization that my micro-size thermionic valves and ferrite cores make possible,” said Rex, suavely. “Particularly the hexadecatode.”

“Hexadecatode?” said Yclept.

“If a diode is useful and a triode is crucial, a hexadecatode has to be even better,” said Rex as if that explained everything.

“Will you show us this ‘continuon technology’?” said the Princess. “And your hexa-dec-a-trode?”

Rex finally looked her in the eye. “I think we can come to an arrangement.”

Boxart reddened—for a Pithian that meant turning a gruesome shade of purple—but the Princess merely raised an eyebrow and hushed him with an open hand.

"I think we've heard enough," she said and departed with her minder.

Yclept then said: "You will be returned to your quarters, and we will soon discuss how we are to proceed."

Boxart sprang from his seat and aimed a huge finger at Rex's chest. "You take too many liberties, little man," he growled in a voice like a rock slide. "Be careful."

"Easy, big fella," said Rex without rising.

"Rex, Boxart is my right arm, my eyes and ears," said Yclept. "Please show him appropriate respect."

Boxart glowered at Rex. Rex gave him a little smile.

They filed out of the room. Punnet leapt from his basket and zigzagged through Melony's legs then trotted at her heels.

"I'm glad that's over," she whispered to Paul.

"That princess too much competition?"

She smacked him on the shoulder. "She's not in my class, honey. I'd like to see her sing, do the Charleston on a piano, *and* collect tips with her toes all at the same time."

He squeezed her hand. "And it wasn't just with your toes. You're some gal."

She kicked him playfully in the shin. "And don't you forget it, sugar."

5: The Continuum Bomb

Rex put his slide rule, a Huet MG 240C Circular, on top of his Burroughs Duodecillion and gave the big gray box on the bench an affectionate slap.

"There it is, sport, the continuum bomb."

Yclept had installed them in another huge room, apparently beneath some other obscure island to which they had traveled by underground bubble-ship, and supplied them with every tool and machine they had asked for. The *Pigeon* was parked in one corner. Paul, with some help from Boxart, had been repairing the overheated radials.

"You've been building a *bomb*?" said Paul. "I thought it was a kind of manipulate-a-tron."

Rex grinned. "It is. It manipulates a helluva lot of continuons all at once and feeds the energy back into decorrelating more continuons. It prevents them from correlating with their neighbors. So any property that requires continuum coherence will fail."

Shocked, Paul drew back from the bench. “But that includes. . .”

“You bet it does.” Rex’s eyes shone. “*The Very Forces That Hold Time And Space Together!*”

It looked like a military-issue washing machine. Paul walked around the bench. The continuum bomb was three feet high and two in each other dimension. One side showed a series of dials and winking lights, and another nothing but a perforated ventilation panel. Knobs and switches decorated the top.

Rex went on: “I’ve calculated the range of the explosion. I’ve narrowed it down to between ten to the two and ten to the four miles.”

Paul stopped pacing. His eyebrows wrinkled. “Ten to the four miles? That’s bigger than the diameter of the Earth!”

Rex smiled insouciantly. “We’re not on Earth.”

Paul whistled.

“I’m assuming minimal propagation,” said Rex. He looked sharply at Paul.

“Meaning?”

Rex sighed. “Well, the continuum decoherence *might* propagate throughout the matrix.”

“Meaning?”

“You know damn well what it means, buckeroo. All space, time, matter, and diaphanous silvery fabric would cease to exist.”

Paul’s hands came up as if fending off an invisible foe. “Destroy it! But carefully!”

“It’s all right, don’t worry, we’ll be fine. We’ll be inside the *Pigeon* with the distortion field on. The decoherence can’t hurt us.”

“What about the rest of the universe?”

Rex cupped his chin. “Nothing’s perfect. But nothing *really* catastrophic will happen. It’s at least three-to-one against. And it would be a shame to build the bomb and not try it out.”

“Rex—I’d follow you to hell and back. But this time you’ve gone too far.”

Rex placed both hands on the bench and stared into the middle distance—the lab was big enough to allow that. “They said that to Columbus, Einstein, Hörbiger and Lysenko.”

“Except they didn’t call them Rex,” said Paul.

The joke fell flat.

“Sport, I’ll be disappointed if you’re not with me. I need your help.” Rex patted the bomb again. “This thing’s delicate. We can’t drop this baby from the *Pigeon* like we do normal bombs.”

“What? We have to *carry* it into enemy territory?”

Paul had a vision of himself, Rex, Yclept, and Boxart toting a sedan chair across a muddy battlefield, skirting barbed wire, dodging shells and somehow leaping over trenches. The chair was much higher at one end than the other.

“It’s not a problem. I’ve already told the Princess we’ll sort it out for her.”

“I see. Good on us.”

6: “How hard can it be?”

Paul had to admit Rex’s logic was sound—though his premises were not. Yes, the *Pigeon* had the continuous distortion field which *might* allow her to remain hidden (depending on the quality of the B’nk’jret’s ground-based sensors), yes, she could carry the bomb deep into B’nk’jret territory, and yes, she could use the distortion field to protect herself.

And, yes, only Rex and Paul were able to fly her.

But all this was predicated on there *being* a blast.

“Everybody strapped in?” called Rex over his shoulder.

Boxart and Yclept answered in the affirmative. Paul caught Rex’s eye and gave him a troubled thumbs-up.

“We sure are,” said Melony.

Rex’s jaw tightened; he did not want her along, but there was no known force that could stop her.

“Go, go, go!” yapped Punnet. Boxart and Yclept were both equipped with translators.

Rex’s frown deepened.

As the great clamshell doors began to open, blue twilight spilled into the hold of the vast Pithian aerial battleship. It had carried them halfway around Bovrell, but dared go no closer to the B’nk’jret Spaceforce HQ.

Rex fired up the engines, and the *Pigeon* slid down the rail, gathering speed. They shot out into the half-light. A stomach-flipping drop was followed by the growl of four engines. Their propellers clawed at the air, and the *Pigeon* swooped, leveling off mere feet

above the waves. The battleship receded, leaving them alone, a fleck of argent skipping between whitecaps and the deepening darkness. Boxart had suggested that rather than use the continuous distortion shield—which, because it limited their ability to observe the exterior universe, came with the risk of accidentally flying *inside* Bovrell—they simply fly low over the waves. The radio ranging equipment developed by the B'nk'jret apparently did not work well for objects near the ground, and the *Pigeon* was far smaller than any Pithian aerial warship.

Boxart examined his wrist-screen. “Head north for ten or eleven grons.”

Rex looked quizzically.

Yclept turned a couple of knurled knobs on the translator.

“About fifty miles, sorry,” the translator’s version of Boxart’s gravelly voice said. “Then we will be within twenty miles of the B'nk'jret Spaceforce HQ, close enough to be sure.”

The *Pigeon* swept across the ocean, lit fitfully by the light of the shards of Bovrell’s broken moons and by the blue-white glow of the rings that crossed the planet’s sky like a giant monochrome rainbow.

Some time later, Boxart leaned forward and indicated a low island to starboard, barely visible in the distance. “There is a lagoon on the south side. Our spies tell us it is uninhabited, unwatched.”

Boxart stood up and, bent double, squeezed past Melony and Punnet and made his way to the head. Paul wondered how the Pithian could squeeze into a pressed-steel box that barely admitted Rex or himself.

“Bone, bone, bone!” yapped Punnet, leaping from Melony’s arms and pawing Boxart’s trousers.

“Punnet! Here, sweetie-pie!” Melony clapped, and he sprang at her. She caught him like a tight end taking a rocket pass from the quarterback. “No bones until we’re finished our mission, Punnety-wunnety!”

Rex gritted his teeth. “Hold on to your lunch—we’ve got scenery!”

He threw the *Pigeon* into a short climb, cleared the black shadows of great conifer-like trees, then shoved the stick forward. The sudden drop saw Paul bang his head against the cockpit canopy while his stomach climbed into his throat. Yclept and Boxart groaned. A smooth

logarithmic curve saw them kiss the water. Rex slid the craft onto a beach.

“All ashore who’s goin’ ashore!” he called.

They waded through ankle-deep water. The engine note spun down, revealing the slap of water against the sand and rocks, and the sigh of the night breeze in the branches of the great, spear-like trees. Paul stood with Rex, Yclept, and Melony, tasting the salty air. Boxart clambered from the side-door of the *Pigeon*, a big, dark shadow made even bigger by the steel case in his arms. He placed it on the sand between a pair of dunes, and with a click, panels fell away on two sides, and the top came loose, revealing the continuon bomb, its dials glowing a soft green in the night.

Rex knelt before it.

Paul said: “This is our last chance to recons—”

Without looking away from the clicking tumblers (crouched before the bomb, Rex looked more like a safe-cracker than the serious physicist he was), Rex held up a hand. “Stow it, Paul.”

His tone brooked no argument. Paul tried to recall the last time Rex had used his name.

Yclept said: “Please, we have no time for—”

Behind them, Melony was following Punnet, who was slinking after Boxart. The blocky Pithian had crossed the beach and reached the top of a small rise that lay just beyond the first cluster of trees. Punnet’s sneaking induced Melony to try the same, and she tottered after him, creeping from tree trunk to tree trunk. Each stood eight feet across and gave ample cover. She came to the same crest, but about thirty feet to the side of Boxart, who held something to his face, one bulging end near his mouth, the other covering his ear. In silhouette, the device reminded her rather of . . . a dog bone.

She had to tell Paul. She turned to run. A hand the size of a dinner plate slapped over her mouth, and another grabbed her across the chest. Punnet barked, and she heard a surprised curse in . . . no, not in Pithian.

Melony had been grabbed across the chest by men of all sizes. She drove a three-inch Louis heel into Boxart’s instep. He howled, and his grip slackened just enough for her to strike out. He was tall. In this case, it was *not* an advantage—it brought his groin to elbow height. He writhed backwards. She broke from his grip and ran towards the

beach. Punnet withdrew his teeth from the Bovrellian's calf and charged after her. Paul met her near the top of the dune.

"Boxart—he's some kind of spy for the Blurk . . . Benji . . . other guys!"

They skittered down the face of the dune.

"We've got company!" panted Paul. "Boxart has betrayed us."

Yclept's blue skin showed little detail in the pale light, but his voice revealed his anger. "Never. Hold your tongue, #refusal to translate#."

With an electric crackle, a bolt of lightning scorched the sand three feet away. They hit the ground, finding some protection in the valley between dunes. Yclept and Paul crawled to the crest and peered into the gloom.

"Boxart! Where are you?" bellowed the blue giant.

"We have you surrounded," called Boxart in tones gruff even for him.

Yclept's jaw set. He blinked away a moment of grief and sprayed a burst of ravening blood-colored light into the trees. Somebody howled.

Rex stood up. The bomb ticked. "That should do it! Now, what's going on?" He looked up to see Paul, Yclept, and Punnet at the crest of the dune.

"We'll have to withdraw. With the bomb," explained Paul, eyes on the trees. "We can't give them a chance to reverse-engineer it. Yclept can grab the bomb and—"

"No!" said Rex. "It's primed and delicate. Don't even look at it too hard—"

"Step back from the bomb, or we'll shoot!" called out Boxart.

Yclept's booming voice replied. "One shot can trigger the bomb! Hold fire!"

"Rex," said Melony. "Can you disarm it?"

He put his hands on his hips. "Rex Funnel never takes a backward step. We have four minutes."

She looked at him in astonishment. "You mean it can't be disarmed?"

"I can try to dismantle the primer, but I might set it off."

Melony rolled her eyes.

Shots sizzled out. Paul tried to locate Boxart *via* the direction of the sound, but could not. Punnet's ears, however, swiveled and pointed to a tree beside a rounded boulder. Yclept hit the rock with a burst of

crimson hell that vitrified the surface instantly. In the light of the rings, it shone like a sheet of ice.

Rex said: "Hold them off for a minute or two and get ready to make a dash for the *Pigeon*. Yclept—get ready to grab the bomb. I'm going to dismantle the timer."

The sounds of Rex turning screws and prying at brass cogs carried loudly in the unnatural silence. Even the lap of the waves seemed subdued, as if the universe knew its very substance was at risk.

"A few seconds," grunted Rex. "Ow!" He looked accusingly at the burred edge of a brass bracket. "On my mark. Paul, covering fire. Yclept—grab the bomb and go. Throw me your weapon on the way—"

"You don't know how to use it."

Rex waved that away. "How hard can it be? Melony . . . try to keep out of the way."

She pulled a silver-plated automatic from a place where, surely, nothing could have been hidden, and said: "You're the boss, Mr. Funnel."

Rex frowned. He said: "That's *Doctor* Funnel. Now, five, four, three, two, one, mark!"

7: Click

Paul fired, his .38 Webley-Fosbery self-cocking automatic revolver booming out in loud reports that echoed off the tree trunks. Yclept ran down the dune in a crouch, handed Rex his weapon, and hefted the bomb, *sans* case. A shot spat up the sand near his feet, and a second fizzed into his calf. He bellowed like a bull in pain and staggered, but he did not drop the bomb. Melony glimpsed the muzzle flash and squeezed off three rounds just to keep the B'nk'jret agents busy. Protecting Yclept's back, she shepherded him to the waiting *Pigeon*, his grunting and panting growing stronger with every step, as did the odor of burnt flesh. Meanwhile, Paul retreated across the floor of the depression.

Rex fumbled with Yclept's weapon. Paul reached across and drew Rex's pistol.

"Pardon me, Rex," he muttered. One gun in each hand, he fired once left and once right and once at the top of the dune.

Rex grinned wolfishly. "Just like our trip to Versailles, eh?"

He adjusted something on the breach of Yclept's weapon. It made a satisfying clunk, and he aimed it into the trees. He planned to slice through the trunks and let the treetops fall amongst Boxart and his allies. He depressed a stud. The gun disassembled itself and a dozen angular components thudded softly into the sand.

They raced for the *Pigeon*, shots cracking out behind them, the sand shifting beneath their feet. Melony had the pilot's access door open, and they dove through it and into their seats. Rex hit the four starter buttons, and the Pratt & Whitneys coughed—and died.

"Boxart!" cursed Rex. "What did he do?"

Bolts of electricity punched into the *Pigeon's* thin metal skin. Paul twisted from his seat and rushed past Melony and a pale blue Yclept, edged around the bomb, and went to the fuse board. He had built it to mate the continuon generator to the Sikorsky's electrics. He saw three empty slots where there should have been fuses. He cast wildly about for replacements. A poke in the ribs stopped his frantic searching and he turned to see Melony looking up at him over the back of her seat. She was smiling. With some effort he focused on the objects in her palm; a bobby pin, a brooch, and a dog-bone-shaped metal plate with "Punnet" engraved on it.

He rammed the bits into the fuse holders and yelled: "Now!"

The engines roared into life, coughing out plumes of black smoke and unburnt fuel. The *Pigeon* scraped off the beach. Paul could see shafts of silver moon- and ring-light, let in by holes in the skin of the plane. They angled across the interior like ghostly stanchions.

The *Pigeon* gathered speed. A sudden climb threw Paul sideways, and they were away. No sooner had the plane leveled out than he heard Rex yell.

"Bogeys on the image-o-scope!"

"Wipe it down!" he called back.

Paul slipped into the copilot's chair. Rex pointed to the teardrop shapes on the pearlescent screen of the image-o-scope. "They're too big and fast for us. There's only one thing to do. You've got the helm. Head for the rendezvous point."

Rex clambered aft and knelt in front of the bomb. Paul watched as the teardrops came closer.

"We can shunt in the distortion field," Paul suggested.

"Their buddies out in space got us though that last time," said Rex.

“If the field is bomb-proof,” said Melony, yelling to be heard over the engine noise, “how could they have. . . ?”

“They must have focused their version of a manipulate-a-tron onto the continuons in our distortion field. The bomb doesn’t work that way,” said Rex defensively.

“They’re within five miles,” said Paul, “It’s too dark to get them on old Mark Number 1 Eyeball, but at the current closing rate they’ll be here—” The *Pigeon* rocked as Paul threw it into an evasive roll. “Now!”

Rex grunted as the bomb slid and pinned him against a bulkhead. All Melony could see of him was an arm clutching a screwdriver. Rex blinked, then looked in dismay at the bomb and the bits of timer scattered all over the hold.

“Okay,” he yelled to Paul over the screaming engine note, “I’m going to trigger it manually.”

Melony looked aghast. “What, ‘kill *and* be killed’?”

Rex found time to look peeved. “No. The primer will take approximately five-point-five-three-two seconds to trigger the unconstrained-feedback manipulate-a-tron. Plenty of time. But,” his jaw tightened. “I’ll need your help.”

She unbuckled her harness and squeezed past the now unconscious Yclept. Rex pointed to the fuse board.

“When I say ‘now’, hit the green Bakelite buttons and pull down that knife switch. Don’t worry if it arcs and sparks. It’s perfectly safe—it’s completely scientific.”

She stationed herself in front of the panel. The plane jagged to port, but Rex kept the bomb upright.

He bellowed: “Give me fifteen seconds on the straight and narrow!”

Paul made a thumbs-up.

Rex threw open the starboard cargo door, letting the night and the freezing slipstream cascade into the hold. He slid the bomb across the floor and balanced it on the edge of the drop. He gripped it in his corded right hand and tenderly inserted his patented Funnel-head screwdriver into a slot in the front panel, a slot that would have been hidden had the timer been attached. He pushed.

Click.

8: Boom

he plane banked, throwing the bomb back onto the deck. A beam of pure puce energy seared past, mere feet away. Rex could taste the burning of the very air as its atoms were ripped asunder. He grabbed at the bomb and hurled it through the hatch, feeling sharp metal edges slice along his fingers. He screamed inarticulately at Melony. She hit buttons, she threw the switch. The world outside lit up, orange, then yellow, then a violet that climbed into invisibility. Rex felt it burning his face and then—

The distortion field closed around them. Rex slumped onto the metal decking.

Paul switched to continuon flux drive and cut the now-useless radials. A cascade of sparks arced from the fuse board as the bobby pin burned out with a flare of yellow and the sharp tang of ozone. The airplane flashed back into normal space, but into a place unlike any they had ever seen before—a great void above a boiling ocean. Stunned, it took Paul a few seconds to restart the motors—with the help of a screwdriver Melony jammed in to replace the bobby pin.

Below them, a vast bite had been taken out of the world, though ocean and sky were rushing in to fill it up. It was as though a moon had been torn from the body of the planet. The tiny *Pigeon* struggled away from the hundred-mile-wide storm, straining to climb into clear air.

His face blistered, his hands lacerated by a dozen cuts, his jaw bruised and swollen, Rex Funnel levered himself up and rested for a moment on his elbows.

“Ha ha ha boom!” he said, and passed out.

9: Heroes

From the back seat of Pithia’s equivalent of his Pierce-Arrow Model 53 V-12, Rex waved to the crowd, his arm around his new fiancée. Princess Klathray looked more bemused than betrothed but, as Rex had lovingly said, “a deal’s a deal.”

Paul and Melony rode in the car behind, with Punnet leaping back and forth between them, his tail wagging so fast it hummed like a ruler twanged on the edge of a desk.

“Rex Funnel married.” Paul shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day.” He looked at Melony. “What are you smiling about?”

She looked guilty. “Her enemy’s entire space fleet wiped out. Four of the biggest enemy bases and half their territory destroyed. She’s got the whole planet in her hand now.”

“And?”

“Marrying Rex? I still think she’s coming out behind.”

Later, as the Victory on Bovrell Day celebrations got into full swing, Rex and Paul finally got a moment to themselves. They stood at one end of the courtyard of Princess Klathray’s palace, in the shade of a towering punch bowl. Each held a quart of cyan-colored lager in his right hand. The odor of the stuff, fruity, rich, cloying, was intoxicating.

“I’m staying,” said Rex. “Why don’t you—both—stay too? We’ll be kings here, Paul. You figuratively, but me literally.”

“We’re going home,” said Paul.

“I guess Melony wants—”

“We *both* want to go home. Are you sure you don’t? The DeadReckoner in the *Pigeon* is our only link to home. We’re galaxies away from Earth. You’ll never see it again.”

“I’ll find a way.” He drank deeply. “Rex Funnel always finds a way.”

They looked across the six-foot-wide flagstones to where the Princess was speaking to Yclept and Melony.

“You’re really going to stay here, marry her, and become a king?” Paul sipped tentatively at his drink. It tasted like a mix of Budweiser, cardamom, and kerosene.

“It seems like the logical outcome of this sort of adventure.”

“She’s two feet taller than you.”

“You’ve seen me in the showers after football practice.”

Paul thought about Rex—in the laboratory. The genius who had invented the continuous field manipulate-a-tron, the image-o-scope, the self-replicating howitzer and 68-proof lemonade: What would he achieve with the knowledge and resources of an entire empire behind him? Paul suspected he had not seen the last of Rex Funnel. He also suspected keeping the man as far away from Earth as possible was no bad thing. He glanced at Melony, who motioned with her head. Holding up their steins in greeting, Paul and Rex joined her and the Princess.

Yclept had not quite returned to his deep, burnished blue color, but seemed cheerful enough despite his bandaged leg.

“I hear you are staying with us,” he said.

Rex nodded. The Princess smiled. "We have much to do," she said. "Subjugating the Republicists."

Yclept looked to Melony and Paul. "But I hear you are going."

Paul nodded. "Yes. We'll stay a while first, to see a little more of Bovrell. Perhaps we'll visit the rings or take a look at the shards of your moons."

"The poor moons," Yclept shook his head nostalgically. "This war has done so much harm."

"Sausages, sausages, sausages!" yapped Punnet.

They all laughed heartily and the celebrations went on long into the night.

Darren is an editor and former physicist. This is his first appearance in Cirsova, and he's particularly pleased that it is with this story, because it's a personal favourite.

Ascension Star

By JOHN GRADOVILLE

Free trader Remi Gavilan's world is turned upside down when he crosses paths with a pleasure girl...the same day the Jinlinton royal family is systematically murdered!

I was walking along Sirin-Serla in Jinlinton City when I saw a large Gudbant hauling a very pretty girl along on a neuro-leash.

Not that unusual, I'll admit, but I stopped to look, because, well, she was a very beautiful girl. And naked. Did I mention that?

Well, almost naked. She had on small red canvas shoes. The Gudbant was not wearing much more, a loincloth and trunks combo and a spiked knuckleduster on the right fist. I heard her cry out as the Gudbant tugged her along and the neuro-leash around her waist flashed pretty blue-white sparks in several places.

Painful, neuro-leashes. They target human nerve clusters with a pain that spikes through the nervous system. I had felt one, in a prison quarry on Sheybol, digging out star-marble. I was there for a crime that I hadn't committed, along with some other free traders. The overseer thought it was funny to tag me. When we made a break for freedom, I made sure to stop off at his hut. I wrapped the neuro-leash around his neck and set it to full power. As he lay paralysed with the pain and those electric-blue flashes sparked away, I opened him from crotch to throat with his own knife. I often wonder how long the charge on that neuro-leash lasted. Those sparks are pretty.

As I watched from the relative safety of the other side of the street, a local saw me and grunted,

"House girl delivery."

Meaning she was a prostitute being delivered somewhere by the Gudbant.

There was a definite sneer in his tone. Good old-fashioned Jinlinton cynicism.

Not that I minded so much. Jinlinton City was one of the few free ports still open to free traders like me. Me being Remi Gavilan, captain

of the Diamond Dancer, space frigate, registered out of Rigel Hub. And since the Hub's reactor went critical and took out the hub and ship registry both, there were none to say otherwise.

Jinlinton was a monarchy, and pretty loose. Bribes were plentiful, and laws were few. The Royal Family presided over a stable state. So Jinlinton City was happily and cynically taking our money. And that was good. We free traders get a bad rep; words like pirates, smugglers, thieves, get bandied about. It was good to have a place to land, lay low.

We needed it. Our last job had been delivering jemma-crystal blaster barrels to Harrigan's World. Light, impervious to heat and, for us, a nice compact cargo with a very high return on investment. The only problem was that Harrigan's World was in the middle of a very brutal civil war, and both sides were under embargo by the Katolian Empire. Hell, we only wanted to break one side of the embargo. So we got paid and then had to get out. The Katolians had ball-of-twine orbital patrols with some big ships playing guard dog. It came down to slickness and speed, and they just weren't as fast as us. But my guess was that they made us as a free trader. And that's the problem—for free traders, the ground is shrinking under our feet.

Serin-Serla is the luxury goods street/precinct at the heart of Jinlinton city. It is a theme park idea of a series of Italian renaissance streets and an African bazaar all jumbled together and lined with high-end shops. I was there to buy a new jacket from one of their expensive tailors. I am of Gascon heritage; we dress well—it's genetic. Looking good is one of many things we do well. But my mood was spoilt. I was feeling bad about the girl on the leash.

So I crossed the street, and I heard the girl whimper again. As I hit the pavement, I should have turned left. Somehow I found myself turning right in the direction the Gudbant had taken. Well, you know what they say about Gascons, hot-tempered, proud, impetuous. It looked like killing Gudbants might have to be added to that list.

I started to tail the Gudbant. It wasn't difficult. Gudbants are vaguely humanoid in an ape-like fashion, with about the same intelligence and big. Big is around eight feet tall, broad barrel-chested, grey leathery hide, long arms. They have long protruding canines on both the upper and lower jaw. A big flat head and narrow brow, piggy little eyes, flat

nostrils. Think big troll with a slobber problem. The one ahead kinda stood out amongst the human pedestrians.

I did a mental inventory. Hand-blaster on my right hip, rapier on my left. Spare magazine in a boot pocket. All legal in Jinlinton City. Free port and few laws, gotta be prepared.

Still, even in Jinlinton, killing a Gudbant and stealing a woman in broad daylight on the main street was a bit too bold, even for me. The Royal Family were tolerant enough, but the Royal Guard were blaster-lovers from way back. Also, the classy lux shops mostly had a guard or two. Carita, the planet we were on, had mostly been settled by refugee ships from Earth's Eritrea. Proud, good-looking people and tough bastards to boot. I had to get the Gudbant somewhere quiet.

Then it came to me. Off to my left was a series of little streets, no more than alleys. Some of them held little bijou shops, but mostly they were alleys for dumping rubbish, back doors to supply rooms, and staff entrances. Not far ahead, Sirin-Serla opened out into a vast, round plaza before continuing on. It was always packed with tourists and rubberneckers. Ahead, I could make out several rings of flame about twenty-five feet up in the air. Soon, some acro-show-off in an anti-grav belt would be flying through those rings in return for money and applause.

Pushing through the crowded plaza with a slave on a leash would be tough, even for a Gudbant.

If he had even a smidgen of low cunning, he would turn off into an alley and work up-street on a parallel street. I could intercept him in the alley.

I ran to the next alley and sprinted down it. I then ran parallel with the intent of ambushing the Gudbant ahead. I just had to pick the right alley.

While I ran, it occurred to me that there was something odd about all of this. Gudbants do not work for humans, but for the triple-accursed Deeleen. The Deeleen were a slim, aristocratic alien race, fine scales and hairless heads, who raised the hairs on my neck. Every time. They were supercilious, devious, cruel. Gudbants worked for them and would rarely be charged with something as mundane as picking up a prostitute. Then it occurred to me that whatever a Deeleen wanted to do to a human female would be a damn sight worse than the attentions of a human male.

I ran faster.

I ran past more shops on the parallel street. There were two alleys ahead. Trusting to luck, I turned into the first one. It was as I'd thought, mostly service doors. The alley pitched slightly uphill, with ochre sandstone walls to either side.

The Gudbant was just descending into the alley via a short flight of stone steps, woman in tow.

I sprang forward, cross-drawing my blaster with my left hand. The Gudbant saw me and started to growl.

I levelled the blaster, and the Gudbant lunged at me. Fuck, he was fast! He swung hard with his right, and his knuckleduster hit my left hand as I fired. The blaster spun off, landing some ten feet away. It might as well have been a mile.

I had underestimated the monster's reflexes. I drew my rapier in a nanosecond. As he lunged at me again, I plunged it deep into his body. He howled, but damn it! Did not fall! I had struck for the heart but had pierced him through the upper chest. We closed, and I hugged his right arm with my left. If he got the knuckleduster free, he would pound me to meatloaf. We staggered around, grappling each other. He dropped the neuro-leash and clubbed my back with his left. My mobility was limited, but I sawed my rapier up and down in the wound. He howled but still fought fiercely. My head was ducked into his armpit, which stunk. At least I had pierced a lung; his every breath sprayed bloody spittle over my head and back.

My grip was slipping. As soon as his right arm was free, I was a dead man.

Suddenly there was the short barking roar of the blaster. The Gudbant jerked and fell to my left.

The woman stood there, holding my blaster. She had fired it into the Gudbant's short ribs. There was not much left of the Gudbant's left side. Heart and guts fried crispy.

She was panting—shock maybe. Had to give her credit for courage, killing that thing.

She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

Tall, maybe 5'7" to my 6'2". Slim, copper-coloured, a body of curves and silky skin. High cheekbones and a slim jaw in a truly beautiful face. And those eyes, a deep lucent green. All set off by a tawny mane of long, leonine hair.

I managed to get my gaze up to her eye level. She was starting to focus. It had only been four or five seconds. Like I said, courage.

I spoke first,

“We have to leave here. Can you go back to your escort house?”

She frowned,

“Escort House...”

“You are a pleasure girl, right?” There was no time for diplomacy.

“Pleasure... Yes! We must go.”

She suddenly kneeled by a big bag of rubbish outside a nearby tailoring studio, with pieces of cloth hanging out of it and started rummaging inside.

“What are you doing?”

“Clothes,” came from knee-height.

She pulled out a tan piece of cloth, maybe five feet long and two wide. She held it out to me.

“Cut me a line across the middle but leave some fabric to either side.”

I wiped my rapier on the Gudbant’s loincloth. It smelled horrific, of badly-cooked meat. I slit the cloth, and the woman shrugged it over her head, making a rough poncho. I grabbed the neuro-leash, set it to off, and made it into a belt around her waist. It was the sexiest poncho I ever saw.

“I know a place,” she said.

I stopped looking at her bare legs and nodded. Fast recovery, us Gascons.

We ran back to the parallel street. I grabbed her.

“You are my bundle of fun, and we are heading off for an intimate cultural interchange.”

She stage-giggled and leaned into me. Put her mouth to my ear and said,

“Stop the first grav-taxi.”

I waved at one; it descended gently to the curb. As we got in, it sounded like all hell had broken loose. The crowd back in the plaza started yelling and screaming. Looking back down the long street, I saw a metal flash in the distance that could only be a troop carrier. Slightly ahead of them were big-eye drones.

The woman yelled at the driver who flew away at speed. Leaning over his shoulder, she shouted directions in Tigrinya, the local

language.

I couldn't see how we were going to outfox the Guard. They were going to run every grav-taxi to ground, if indeed it was us they were after. Back at Sirin-Serla plaza, it sounded like the world was ending.

Suddenly the grav-taxi dropped from the sky. My hand went to my blaster, but it was the driver aiming for a tiny underpass, down a pitch-black tunnel. He drove without lights.

The girl looked at me, lit only by the nav console in front.

"My name is Faden."

"I am Remi."

"Remi, thank you, I..."

The driver interrupted her, said something which I figured meant here we are.

We stepped out, she spoke to the driver, and he left. Without payment. Things were getting very odd.

We weren't at a House of Pleasure.

It was a very plush villa.

Or at least it had been.

As we rounded the curtain wall, the villa was in darkness. As we approached the broken door, the stink of high-explosives filled the air. Broken glass crunched underfoot as I walked into the lobby.

Faden touched a wall-panel, and low emergency lights lit our way. Masonry had been blasted out of walls, bodies lay everywhere. Most seemed to be house guards or servants, judging by the livery, but there were several that were clearly heavily armed mercs. And judging by the smell, the battle had not long been over, maybe an hour.

We walked into what had once been, a main lounge. I heard a moan and saw a man sitting upright against a wall.

He looked at me. Faden said,

"Help him stand."

I stood him up. Older man, sixty-five or seventy, white hair and beard a startling contrast to his coppery-dark skin.

His left arm was a burnt, shrivelled mess. There was a blaster wound on his right hip. Someone had got in close with a knife and opened the left side of his face. The left eye was gone.

To still be alive, he had to be made of stone.

He looked at Faden.

"Milady..."

Quickly she stopped him,

“Just Faden, Jemel. Where are they?”

“Lord Kidane and his wife are dead.”

She looked as though she wanted to die. She whispered.

“Tesfay?”

“They took him, Faden.”

She turned to me.

“I cannot grieve now. This place is not safe, give me a few minutes.”

She ran off.

Jemel stooped in a slow, painful bend and picked up a fallen hand-blaster. He walked into the big room and leaned back heavily against a wall.

Faden was back in minutes.

She was wearing black leggings, ankle boots, a dark collarless shirt, and a jerkin.

And then we were out of minutes.

The sound of a small air cruiser filled the room. Looking out down the corridor into the open lobby, I saw it land in the courtyard and two mercs jump out.

I hissed at Faden,

“Can you turn on the corridor lights from here?”

She held up a house-remote and nodded.

“Do it when I say.”

The old man, Jemel, looked at me. I motioned him to the side of the entrance into the room. I took position behind a large chair.

The mercs walked into the lobby, blaster rifles at half-port.

I breathed the word,

“Now.”

Corridor lights went full. I reached over the chair and shot the lead merc through the head. The second one was quicker; he took a knee and began to pepper my vicinity with blasts.

Jemel stepped out of cover and methodically started firing into the merc. The merc fired back. They both fell.

Silence.

Faden ran to him, grabbed his hand. He had time to look at her and was gone. She hugged him.

I pulled her up.

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

My turn.

“I know a place.”

We ran towards the cruiser.

Paco looked at us.

“You look terrible.”

“Well, the world has gone to hell.” I meant it.

“More than you know. The King and some of the Royal Family have been assassinated.”

“What!? How!?”

“Hard to tell right now, the nets are nothing but speculation. The Jinlinton state broadcaster has nothing, other than the King is dead.”

Paco looked us over.

“Come.”

Paco led us from his scummy office into the even scummier bar and up two flights of stairs. Paco and I go way back; we crewed together. I have a long scar on my left tricep from a vibroblade that was meant for him. His idea of a quieter life was to become a fence, bar owner, and fixer. He had a hand in most things that went on under the radar in Jinlinton City.

He opened the door to a small room. Clean, a bed with an assortment of men and women’s clothes on it, a small room off.

Paco waved a hand,

“The bathroom has a shower. Clean up and get some rest. I’ll send some food up and come back in a couple of hours.” He closed the door.

Faden looked about ready to break. I smiled, she smiled back. Both half-hearted, but it was something.

She had Jemel’s blood all over her. I stank of Gudbant.

I looked at the bathroom. She said,

“Go first, you smell pretty bad.”

The bathroom was small, old but serviceable. It had an upright glass shower-cubicle with the Jinlinton Royal Family crest embedded in the glass in metallic green-gold. Vulgar as hell, but I guess Paco had got it cheap. A water shower too. I figure the Jinlinton underworld didn’t run to UV-flash showers.

I had a head full of questions. Even the little I knew about Faden did not gel. The situation had too many unknowns. I needed to stop running long enough to figure it out.

I was showering when I heard the door. Still too much adrenalin from fighting and running, I spun around instantly.

Faden was naked. If I had thought her beautiful before, she was impossibly beautiful now.

She walked into the shower cubicle, and the water hit her. We were face to face in the spray.

Without a word, she took the washcloth from me and began to wash my chest. She looked at me.

“You saved my life, I don’t...”

She started to cry, I held her. She sobbed, big heavy sobs and a wailing noise.

Out of the sobbing, she said,

“Please hold me.”

It was the easiest command I have ever been given.

Slowly she stopped sobbing, began to breathe more easily.

She lifted her head, kissed me under my left eye, on the cheekbone. Whispered “Thank you.”

Then she kissed me on the lips.

That was different. It sent hot sparks down to my groin.

I looked in those magical green eyes. We both wanted more.

We wrestled into another kiss. And another. Somehow we got to the bed in a tangle of arms and legs.

That intimate cultural interchange I mentioned earlier? It was fantastic. The best. Ever.

Later we were lying on the bed, face to face. Call me a cad, but I needed answers, great sex or no.

“The old man, Jemel, he called you Milady?”

She was quick.

“I was a courtesan there for a while, a mistress to Lord Kidane. It was a courtesy title.”

“Why does a Gudbant kidnap a courtesan?”

“I don’t know.” I saw her eyes flicker away for a moment. That might be a lie. “The Gudbant turned up at the House with a holo-cube with

the Royal seal. There was a ten-second holo of the Chancellor ordering the House-Mistress to turn me over to the Gudbant.”

“Again, why?” I tried to hold her eyes with mine.

“I don’t know.” For a second time, her eyes flickered off.

I tried another tack,

“How long have you been a courtesan?” It sounded better than Pleasure Girl.

She shrugged,

“A while. And you, you are a Space Pirate.”

I gave her my easy insincere smile,

“I prefer the title *Free Trader*.”

She pursed her lips,

“Have you never wanted something better?”

I gave a very short laugh,

“Becoming a Space Pirate is not something you decide to do, you fall into it, and there is no career path upwards. Believe it or not, Paco running this bar is considered a successful retirement in our business.”

Just then there was a knock. It was Paco, with a hand-holo.

“You had better see this.” He handed me the holo and left.

A pre-set started scrolling: a holo of an old Earth newspaper, so a mainstream media construct.

First item was the King’s assassination. The second was about the murder of most of the Royal Family.

The third was the shocker. It was about two suspects wanted for the murders.

The first one was me. Oh, it was a crap picture, musta been taken by one of the Big-Eyes as I clambered into the grav-taxi. But recognisably me.

The second was a much better picture of Faden in a gown that must have cost at least 10,000 Katolian gold. She was shown as Faden Kelati, Pleasure Girl.

She said,

“They could have at least said Courtesan,” but I could see she was shaking.

I scrolled back to the second article.

“Whoever did this was looking for a clean sweep. I understand killing the men, but why the women?”

“Because though only a king may rule, the line of succession can be invoked by female members of the Royal Family.” Faden spat angrily.

I was not really sure what that meant. I pointed,
“Look at this.”

It was a piece about how the Chancellor was working with the Deeleen delegation to ensure an orderly return to a stable government.

“Deeleen! The King never did trust them! They did this!”

I nodded,

“Bastards. And no friend to Free Traders.”

There was another knock at the door.

An hour later, I was sitting in Paco’s office, feeling both better and worse.

Better because Paco had found two very capable members of my crew. DD, or Double-Delta as the crew called him, was my navigator. They called him that because they swore he could plot two courses simultaneously. And Traven, my XO, who was as steady as a rock.

Traven spoke first,

“Captain, this city is locked down, we have to get off this rock.”

DD shook his head,

“Gonna be tough. They know the Dancer is on the pad. We are up against a real Space Navy. Even if we manage to launch, they will be on us in minutes.”

Traven coughed. I was shocked. For the first time ever, he looked unsure.

“Captain, there is also this.”

He threw up an info-holo.

Another picture of Faden. The text scrolling under it said, “Faden Kelati, murderer and traitor, twenty-sixth in line to the throne, wanted for regicide.”

It took me a second. Faden was looking at the ground.

I swore angrily.

“You were never Kidane’s courtesan, were you?”

She looked at me hopelessly,

“I was a courtesan, but no, Kidane was my grand-uncle.”

I looked at Traven,

“How many dead in the line of succession?”

“Twenty-five, Captain.”

I looked at Faden; she looked like she was going to cry again.

“I thought you were going to turn me in for the reward,” and hung her head.

It hit me like a hammer-blow. Next in line to the throne. We were the biggest target on the planet.

Traven moved the scroll.

The reward. More money than I knew existed. I could buy a fleet of Diamond Dancers.

Still, the Captain makes the decisions, right?

Right.

I looked at her.

“My crew and I will save you or die trying.”

I took her hand, her eyes bored into me. I knew they would keep me to my oath.

There was one hitch, it was a lot of money. For any man. I turned to Paco,

“Are you in?”

He looked at me,

“You saved my life when the Borsalino priest-killers wanted me dead. I can pay you back now.”

Traven simply said,

“Captain, how?”

“We fly quick.”

DD looked worried.

Next morning the four of us were at the edge of the landing pad waiting for the signal. We were all in mechanic’s coveralls, Faden with her hair tied back. Yimmy, our pilot, and the rest of our crew were already onboard. We were waiting for Paco’s bribe money to go through and Pad Security to go dark.

I turned to her and smiled,

“Something better, eh?”

She tried to smile,

“Well, maybe...” suddenly, her face changed,

“Wait! There is a way! Or at least a chance! How far do you have to fly to be beyond Carita Orbital Jurisdiction?”

Easy question.

“Five thousand miles.”

“How long to hit that limit?” she asked excitedly.

Well, it would not be our first hot getaway.

“About three and a quarter minutes.”

DD did the head-shake again,

“They can still run us down.”

Faden turned to him,

“DD, once we are in real space, can you keep us alive for five minutes?”

He frowned at both the “DD” and the “real space” but nodded,

“Yes.”

She turned to me.

“Do you trust me? I cannot tell you the plan, but it is our only chance!”

I swallowed. Hard.

“Yes.”

“I need to give a couple of orders, okay?”

“Yes.”

She turned to Traven.

“We need to stream holovideo from space, both wide and narrow beam. Above all else, we must get the Troubadours.”

Traven nodded,

“Easy.”

I was puzzled. Troubadours were the heroes of our modern age. Part muck-rakers, story-tellers, and crazy people, they had huge followings, and the most famous of them wielded great power. When they broadcast, there was no way to stop them. But holo-vid space chases were old-hat. Even the senile mainstream media did not broadcast them anymore.

Paco’s signal wand blinked. We ran.

Bless Yimmy, he lifted even as we jumped our crash couches. Near-far radar gave off multiple threat alerts, but we flew. In what seemed like seconds Yimmy announced Carita Orbital Limit.

Everyone moved at once. DD ran to the cockpit; he was going to plot on the fly for Yimmy, literally. All he had to do was evade the Carita Space navy for five minutes. Easy, right?

Traven ran Faden and me into the crew room, the largest room on the Dancer.

Lido, our third mate, was already there with our high-scan holo-vid gear. We were weightless now, and Faden turned to me.

“We are in Space. You are the law and the only legal officer of justice in a million miles. Marry us!”

“What!?”

“Space law!—it will be a legal marriage, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then marry us, we are running out of time!”

Traven thumbed-up Lido and the recording light on the Cam-arm went on.

Dolan, our first mate, handed me two rings.

Hell! They were the rings that Lido had bought back on Riga when he fell in love with a Holo-vid stripper. They were the oldest joke on the ship!

Faden tugged my arm urgently.

I looked at her, said;

“Faden, will you marry me?”

She said,

“I, Faden Kelati, marry Remi Gavilan, Master of the Diamond Dancer.”

I said,

“Take this ring to confirm our marriage.”

She put the ring on and kissed me.

Not quite Shakespeare, but good enough. I swear that Lido was tearing up. A crying pirate! I was going to space the skinny little bastard if we got out of this alive.

Traven spoke into his mike. I felt the Dancer slow, and DD spoke:

“I have surrendered to the Caritan Space Force.”

I returned to the cockpit. There were numerous vessels with target lock on us. They ordered us to land.

The Space Force wanted us to land at an out-of-the-way military airport. I had a better idea. I told Faden.

She roared with laughter and kissed me hard on the mouth.

“I love you so much,” she said and turned to Traven,

“Tell the Troubadours.”

The comm-link exploded with commands as Yimmy diverted over Jinlantan City, but as I calmly pointed out, shooting down a space

frigate over a heavily populated city was a recipe for disaster, especially when we were still transmitting real-time holo-vid from the Dancer.

So I landed in Sirin-Serla plaza. It seemed appropriate. I have a weird sense of humour....

The Palace Guard had managed to clear the centre of the plaza. The crowds were enormous, held back by the Guard.

Traven was watching the ground scans.

“Katerina is here.”

“Who?”

“The most famous Troubadour on Carita. She’s broadcasting a ballad, The Love Song of Faden and Remi.”

Astonishment has no words.

The ramp banged down, the crowd noise was deafening. Faden and I walked out, hand in hand.

The commander of the Palace Guard walked forward, in full battle armour.

“Surrender and be judged!”

Loud. Synched into the Plaza audio.

Behind the commander, three platoons of Palace Guards drew down on us.

Faden drew herself up to her full height.

“I am Faden of House Kelati, heiress to the throne of Jinlinton! I claim my throne as Queen Faden!”

The crowd roared.

“I invoke the rule of succession, and I present my husband, King Remi the First! Of the House of Gavilan!” Faden turned to me and bowed.

Rule. Of. Succession.

So that was what that was. King Remi.

I was struggling to breathe while trying to look composed. The noise from the crowd was at insane levels.

The commander was close now. He looked nonplussed.

A funny thing happened.

I heard my crew, all seventeen of them, walk down the ramp. At the risk of twisting my head off, I stole a quick look back. They were all

armed. Facing off against the best military on Jinlinton.

Even Lido, who I would not have trusted with a kitchen knife.

It was pathetic; they would be slaughtered, but they were there for us. I tried not to tear up. It wasn't the time, and besides, if I did, I wouldn't feel right about spacing Lido.

The second funny thing happened. The commander of the Guard was so close that I could see his eyes. He looked at my crew. He knew nothing about me, but he understood loyalty better than any man. I could see it in those eyes.

What the hell, I thought, it can't get any worse. And if it did, Faden would still be alive and still be Queen. Uh, Queen-elect? What the hell.

I took one step forward.

"I, King Remi the First, demand the allegiance of the Guard!"

A silent second. Then the commander knelt.

The crowd went wild—well, wilder.

I looked at Faden, tears of happiness were rolling down her face. Not sure about mine....

"Something better, eh?"

She laughed and nodded,

"Something better."

We kissed, turned, and waved to our wildly cheering subjects. Something better indeed.

John Gradoville is a long-time SF writer and a huge Leigh Brackett fan. He writes about Space Pirates and reckless but lucky adventurers. His stories are being published for the first time in Cirsova, with "Ascension Star."

Why Did You Leave Your Last Employer?

By BRIAN M. MILTON

George may have found his dream job—keeping bees for the eccentric Dr. Rotstein! But what is the aim of the doctor’s experiments? Why does the honey taste strange?!

“I want something more, something bigger.” George paused for a moment before continuing his answer. “I’m looking for a change in my life. I’ve worked in offices for twenty years now, and more and more, I find myself longing for some physical exercise. The opportunity to get away from a desk and move around. So when I saw your advert, the opportunity to combine that escape from an office environment with my beekeeping hobby, I jumped at the chance. I have no complaints with my current employer, but I couldn’t pass up this opportunity.”

The man opposite nodded, his poorly brushed hair wobbling above his head in a way George found very distracting. Despite the man’s stained lab coat and unplaceable, wandering middle-European accent, George struggled not to make assumptions about his interviewer. But the job description was everything he wanted, so he put that to the back of his mind and listened to the next question.

“Very good, Mr. McNeil. You say in your application that you have kept bees for five years. This is as a hobby, *ja?*”

“Yes. Always been fascinated by them. They’re so different from us humans, their lifecycle is so alien. The individual barely matters, but as a colony, they can thrive, reproduce, and defend themselves almost like a single organism. I never tire of watching and learning about it.”

“This is good. A healthy scientific curiosity will be of great benefit in this job, Mr. McNeil. I feel that you would be ideal for this role, provided you are comfortable with living here at all times. The nature of my experiments means that I could be requiring your assistance at

almost any time of the day or night. I am aware this is anti-social, but you would be well recompensed. Would you still be interested in the position?"

George looked around him at the wood-paneled room with its shabby leather chairs and bookcases higgledy-piggledy with books, then out the window at the rolling lawn in desperate need of a mow. It was a significant improvement over his one-bedroom flat crammed with bee equipment and hives on the roof. "Live here? Would I be able to bring my own hives?"

"But of course. More genetic diversity will be benefiting my experiments."

"In that case, Doctor Rotstein, I accept."

Two weeks later, George moved in. The Doctor's house was isolated in a valley far from the city, and he had to arrange a friend to drive a van full of his possessions there, but it was ideal for bees. Rolling heather-clad hills stretched away behind the house, climbing to gorse strewn moorland, and the fields to the front appeared to be occupied by nothing more polluting than cows. No sickly oilseed rape to ruin the honey and no single-crop fields soaked in pesticides. There was even a small deciduous wood to the west which broke up the prevailing wind. George could not think of anywhere better. The Doctor gave him space by the wood for his personal apiary and a small suite of rooms above some old stables with plenty of space for spare bee equipment alongside a self-contained small flat. The flat even came furnished with an oddball assortment of burst sofas, creaking beds, mix and match cutlery, and even a cow-shaped milk jug. Not that he spent much time there once he discovered the Doctor's apiary.

"You must come and see my facilities right away. I am needing your inputs on any improvements to them."

"I've only just got here, Doctor. Can I at least unpack?"

"Yes, yes, after you see my laboratory. Come, come." Doctor Rotstein impatiently led the way across the garden and round to the back of the house where George stopped in wonder. On the back of the crumbling Georgian grandeur of the main house was a large extension apparently made entirely of wood. Huge sloped slats faced out over the garden, the wood gleaming golden in the sunshine. He

could just make out a pitched roof on top, towering over him, but not a single window.

“What on earth is this, Doctor? The extension looks like a giant, four-storey hive. As if someone just changed the units on a drawing of a normal one.”

A look of embarrassment flashed across the Doctor’s face before he continued. “I am planning for the future. For the moment, you will only need the shelter at the back.” He led George to an open area at the back of the building, enclosed on three sides and big enough to hold three large cars. There was a roll-up door at the back and benches to either side covered in beekeeping equipment. George was forced to breathe through his mouth as the smell of fresh cedar overwhelmed his nose. In the middle stood five hives, out of one of which several bees came and went.

“This shall be your starting hive. I did acquire it from a local farmer. Everything you will be needing is here, but do not have the hesitation to ask for more. No expense is to be spared to achieve my goal. *Alles Gut?*”

George looked around. “I don’t think I’ll need anything for quite some time, Doctor.” George took down a suit from a peg on the wall. “Shall I take a look at them now? Might as well see what you’ve got.” The Doctor nodded eagerly, and George pulled on the protective suit.

The work went well for the first two years. George managed the increasing number of bees, keeping them disease-free and splitting the hives until his work area was full. Then he started building new hives in the garden. Doctor Rotstein did not interfere in the work, only occasionally taking small numbers of drones away and the odd spare queen. This gave George plenty of time to mind his own bees and also to explore the local area. In year three, things changed.

“Good morning, George. How are the bees today?”

“Working hard as usual, Doctor.”

“Have there been any size differentials in the new colonies?”

“Size differentials?”

“Yes, have there been any larger bees in the latest batch? I have been performing some experiments upon some of the drones and now that I have released them into the group, I was hoping to see a result.”

“Experiments on the drones? Bees are very sensitive to the environment, Doctor. They can die off very quickly if you upset them. I’m really enjoying this job, but I’m not sure I could stay if you were doing something to the bees.”

“Oh, I am sure they will not be dying. I am just encouraging them to grow a bit. You know, allow them to carry more nectar and make more honey.” The Doctor paused, a faraway look in his eyes that George knew meant the scientist was thinking. Sometimes the Doctor could be left in these thoughts for hours, and George would have to drape a blanket round him or put a hat on his head, but this time he was mercifully quick. “*Ja*, more of the honey, that is what we are needing.”

“Doctor, we have piles of honey. Do we really need any more? It’s not like we sell it?”

“I have been thinking that we ought to. It will help to increase your wages and will be getting some vital feedbacks from the public. In the future, it will be important to understand the dietary options when I move to Phase Four. Yes, yes, that sounds good. Can we be doing that?”

George paused. Doctor Rotstein had shown no interest in honey before now and certainly did not seem to want for money. Where had this sudden interest come from? But George had heard the mention of increased wages. “I suppose we could. We do have plenty already. I’d need a van and a budget for jars and advertising. Would probably go round any local farmer’s markets.”

“That is decided then. Good.”

George got his budget for honey sales and soon spent every weekend travelling to markets all over the country. He found he enjoyed these markets, chatting to shoppers and other sellers and getting the chance to wax lyrical about the bees. Doctor Rotstein only ever talked of chemical formulae and growth ratio, and it was refreshing to talk to people who at least appeared to appreciate his geeky bee enthusiasm. He never made a vast amount of money—there was something about the taste that wasn’t quite right—but he could afford to sell the honey so cheaply it still went, making space for the new honey that the bees kept producing. Not that they produced as much. George tried to bring this up with Doctor Rotstein, but the Doctor only appeared to be interested in the size of the bees and did

not care that the larger they became, the more they ate, and the less this left for honey sales.

He also had little time for George's worries about aggressiveness and simply laughed at George's addition of metal plates to his beekeeping suit.

“Congratulations, George, today is marking five years since you came to work for me, and the experiment has been a huge success so far.”

“Is it really five years? I wouldn't call it a success. Honey yield is barely above where we were three years ago, yet we have double the number of hives.”

Doctor Rotstein waved dismissively. “Fee! I would not want them to be producing too much; I need to be able to control them via their food until I can find a more elegant method. It is their size you should be proud of.”

“I don't want to question your experiments, Doctor, but I have been meaning to have a word with you about that. If they keep growing the way they are, they won't fit into the hives. I've had to reduce the number of frames and increase the openings as it is.”

“No need to be worrying about that, my dear George. I planned for this. You can now be using the rest of the apiary.” Doctor Rotstein moved to the rear wall and pulled the lever. The shutter raised to reveal a room filled with prepared frames, all significantly larger than normal. “From now on, they may use this. Plenty of space for them to grow, and other rooms can be opened as they expand in size and number. There is an entrance through my laboratory for you to inspect and remove the frames.” Rotstein pointed to the glass wall on the far side of the room. “It will be most fascinating to watch them grow under my experiments and so much easier to apply my serums. Now the work is really beginning.”

George peered through the glass to the rows of test tubes and large machines on the other side. He'd studiously ignored what Doctor Rotstein had been doing for as long as he could, but this was taking it all to a new level. “I'm not happy with this, Doctor. Bees are the size they are for a reason. Beekeeping is about understanding and working with nature, not changing it.”

“Ach, Igor, sorry, George, you worry too much. It is the most natural thing in the world. Experimentation is how evolution works, is it not? Random changes that are then tested in the cauldron of nature, red in tooth and claw, with the weak, poor choices falling away. I am simply introducing a few more random changes, no?”

“But you don’t know what the outcome could be. You’ve still not read that book on bee behaviour I gave you, and you confused honey and bumble bees again last week. Do you really know enough to do these experiments? We had enough trouble with that giant bluebottle the other week.”

The Doctor visibly bristled, pulling his head back as if slapped and jutting out his chin. “I will remind you that I have ze doctorate from Nuremburg, and have been doing zese chemical experiments for many years before you were employed.”

George held his hands up. He enjoyed the rest of this job too much to risk losing it over an argument about the Doctor’s experiments. George was sure they would come to nothing in the end, hoping the Doctor would stop before he harmed too many bees. “Okay, I’m sorry, I know you have more education than me when it comes to Chemistry. I just worry for the health of the bees.”

“Ach, my dear George, they will be fine. Science will see to that.”

George hopped across the grass, pulling on his suit and trying to keep his pyjamas out of the zip as he did it up. The bellows of a cow dragged him onwards as he rushed into the back field where he’d built the larger hives. The Doctor’s usual attention to detail meant there was only space for two colonies in the giant hive that was the house extension. George kept the largest bees in there, but all the other colonies needed space too, and so he found himself making ever-larger hives each spring. The field was chaos. The cow had clearly forced its way through the hedge at the back and, from the hoof prints, George surmised it had blundered around for some time before eventually rubbing itself up against a hive. The new hives he’d built were considerably bigger to accommodate the increased size of the bees, but they still came apart for inspections. As the cow had found out.

George took a breath and stepped into the maelstrom of angry bees around the hive. In the moonlight, the bees zoomed around him,

passing across the light like angry bats and bouncing off him. The closer he got to the disturbed hive, the more bees that zoomed up to him, hitting him with enough force to make him stagger, and occasionally trying to sting him. They had now grown to six inches in length, and even just having them land on him caused George issues.

Eventually, through the blizzard of bees and flickering moonlight, George saw the damage. Half of the hive, including one of the two brood boxes, lay on the grass, frames and bees spilled all over the ground. Two of the frames had been smashed by hooves, and many bees lay dead. George hefted up the boxes and replaced them on the hive. Bees continued to hammer into him as he flicked his torch around on the ground, eventually spotting the yellow mark he'd made on the Queen the year before.

As he finished, he saw Doctor Rotstein. The scientist was shining a torch onto the cow as it bellowed in pain, and he appeared to be giggling. "Hello, Doctor. I'll re-queen this hive in the morning, but until then, they'll be very aggressive, so I wouldn't get too close."

The Doctor clapped his hands together. If George could have seen inside the netting of the mask, he felt sure the Doctor would have been grinning. "Oh, Igor, this is perfect. So much aggression. *Wunderbar!*"

"Not so great for this poor cow or all the dead bees, Doctor. Can you help me with this poor beast, see if we can encourage her back out and into her field?"

The Doctor waved a hand. "Not now, I have to write this up. It is all so perfect." The Doctor hurried back to the house. George shook his head in despair and then looked at the cow. How was he going to get it out of the garden?

The sun blazed down from a clear blue sky as George made his way through the thigh-high grass on the lawn towards the council van. The ear defenders he wore were sweaty and uncomfortable but, as he looked at the two council workers sheltering in their van, he felt it was a price worth paying. He waved cheerily through the windscreen at the couple and then waited for them to get out of the vehicle. She was a smaller lady very formally dressed in a skirt, waistcoat, and jacket with the council logo and "Noise Abatement Team" embroidered on the pocket. He was older and appeared to have less enthusiasm

for the formalities, having ditched his jacket and tie and rolled up his sleeves to better accommodate the summer heat. She scowled at George and mimed that he should take off his ear defenders, which George reluctantly did. He winced as the cascade of booming pops invaded his ears.

“Good to see I won’t have to explain to you how loud the noise is, Mr. Rotstein,” she bellowed. George felt that if her face had not already been red from the heat, it would very quickly turn red from her shouting. “Now, will you stop it, or do we have to get official about this?” She flipped open a folder she was carrying and lifted a pen over a form.

George tried to keep his voice as low as he could while still being heard.

“Firstly, Miss,” he squinted at the badge on her lapel, glinting in the sun, “er, Jenny, firstly I’m not Rotstein, I just work for him. He’s gone travelling, he finds the noise ruins his concentration.”

“But you are responsible for the property at the moment?”

“Well, I suppose, but I can’t do anything about the noise, that’s the bees.”

“Bees? Bees go buzz, any child knows that. They do not make a racket that you can hear from half a mile away.”

“At this time they do, it’s a mating flight.”

George did not think it possible, but the female council worker turned more scarlet and gaped. Her associate gave her a look and then spoke.

“Careful now. That sort of thing could be considered harassment by some. We only came here to give you a friendly warning about the noise levels. It’d be best to keep a civil tongue in your head.”

George took a step back, holding his hands up. “No offence meant, it’s just what the bees do. I think they’re coming to the end now, definitely getting quieter, but if you want me to explain, I’m afraid I’ll have to talk about such things.”

The male council worker pulled out his phone. “There are rules, and you are breaking any number of them. You’ll be telling this story to a policeman if you’re not careful.”

Jenny put her hand on his arm. “Let’s not be hasty, John. The noise is less now, and we should hear him out.”

John looked again at Jenny, this time with a level of surprise that George found amusing.

George paused for a second as a final fusillade of bangs fell into silence. “I recommend you Google honey bee mating flights when you get back to the office. It’s not a pleasant experience for the male drone, as at the end he leaves his, er,” George looked between the two members of his audience. John was still holding his phone, primed to call for help while Jenny was looking at him with an eagerness George found worrying. “Leaves his, er, bits behind. The Queen keeps them from many drones and then uses them to fertilise eggs throughout her life. But doing this kills the drone as he quite literally pops and then drops dead. Even in normal bees, this makes an audible noise, but with our, err, larger strain, the pop is much louder. But don’t worry, I’m not expecting many more mating flights this year, so there shouldn’t be any more complaints.”

Jenny stepped forward, her face once again flushed. “It kills him? Really? Well, I never, isn’t nature wonderful.” She turned back to the council van and opened the driver-side door as her co-worker watched, bemused.

“What about the noise? We should issue a ticket.”

“Noise? Pop?” she shook her head, “Oh no, the noise has stopped. Besides, I want to get back and look this up. Kills the males, eh?” Jenny got in and closed the door, starting the engine as John quickly jumped in the passenger seat. George stepped back and waved cheerily as they drove off and then turned towards the back of the house.

“Suppose I’d better get round and see if they damaged anything this time when they fell.”

George staggered to the door as he pulled on his chainmail bee-keeping suit. He had found his homemade plate suit difficult to move in and so was currently trying out a chainmail version he had made from kits sold to re-enactors. It was much more flexible, but he worried it wouldn’t keep out the stings so well, even with the extra padding he had added underneath. Not so much from the size—they were too big to fit through the rings—but from the force that would be trying to drive through the armour. The largest bees were now so big they could no longer fly and only survived on the fondant and

supplements George supplied them, but they were also much more aggressive and always seemed to regard him as a threat.

In the main hive foyer, George found the Doctor standing over the corpse of a giant bee, five feet long, a sword standing proud from its abdomen. He scooped ichor from inside the wound and smeared it across his face, saying something George could not hear over the din of ever louder buzzing.

“What have you done?” George yelled at his employer.

“The next stage! Now I am moving to Phase Four. I have killed the Queen, and now I will be taking her place. Soon my enemies will tremble before my Giant Bee Army! The name of Viktor Rotstein will be known throughout the world!”

“What? Why did you do that? With the Queen dead, they’ll be furious. They’re grumpy enough at the best of times.”

“I have defeated the Queen. Her hive will be turning to me as the rightful heir by combat. They will now follow my every whim.”

“No they won’t, they’re bees.”

“If there are being two queens in a hive, one kills the other, and the hive does follow them. I have observed this myself. Therefore, logically, I am the new Queen.”

“You fool, they only follow her because she gives out pheromones. I’ve told you for years to do more research on their behaviour. Size isn’t everything. You’ve enlarged these bees, but they still work by pheromones, which you can’t produce. They’ll make another Queen who can. Don’t you remember when that cow knocked over a hive? They didn’t start following the cow around.”

“Well, *ja*, I do know that. That cow incident was very informative, no? That is why I have soaked this bee suit in my new PH09 pheromone solution. They will think I’m the Queen.”

The colour drained from George’s face. “You soaked that suit?”

“*Ja*.”

“That suit, that you left hanging in the equipment room yesterday?”

“*Ja*. What is your point?”

“That suit that I washed along with mine yesterday afternoon? Oh no, Doctor, you must leave now!”

“I cannot. I am so close to my goal. It was a good soaking, I am sure it will be fine.”

The din from the bees through the wall grew louder still, almost drowning out the Doctor's answer. Dents appeared all over the walls as the bees hammered against them and then a sting smashed through the far door, its barb catching as it sprayed poison into the room.

George turned and ran as fast as his armour would allow out into the garden. His last sight was of Doctor Rotstein waving a sword in the face of a four-foot-long worker bee as it made its way into the room, crawling on the floor, and readying its sting to strike.

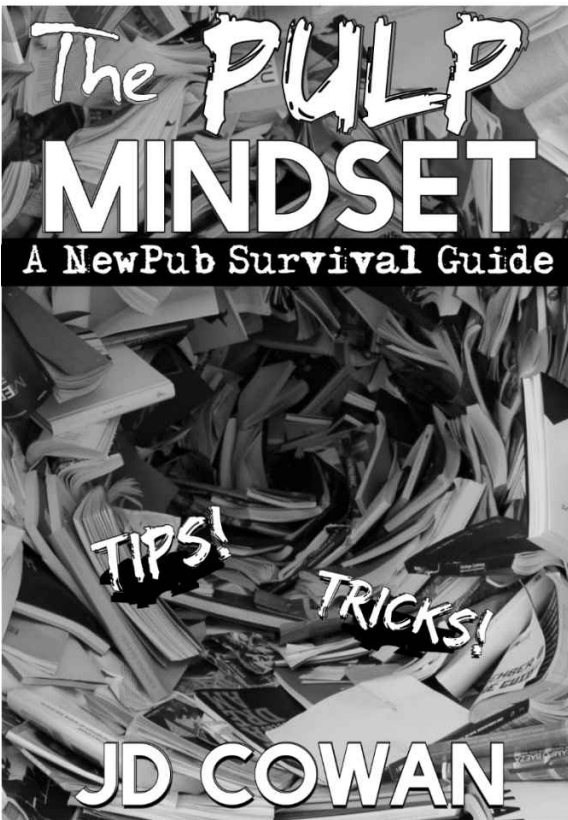
George looked around him at the sleek glass meeting room and the open-plan office beyond, full of the gentle hum of office drones, then back at the question. "Why did you leave your last employer?"

George picked up the pen and wrote "The work became too big for me."

Brian lives on the edge of Glasgow with a beekeeper and has at no point considered encouraging their bees to get larger. He recently appeared in a charity anthology he encourages you to look at here <http://flotationdevicebook.co.uk/> and can be found on Twitter @munchkinstein

Want to be a
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A Judgment of Lestrel

By WILLIAM HUGGINS

Penne has spent his Re-Gen-enhanced lives going on one bender after another—his last chance to break the cycle may be the incomparable world of Lestrel!

Penne woke from colored dreams, the red-green warp and weft of an interior aurora, to the unforgiving slap of an Inspector's brittle hand. He resisted, wishing to return to his visions. His eyes opened, fuzzy, then cleared unwillingly at another, harder slap. A Threllian voice spat orders, and the cold shock of an injection hit his left shoulder.

"Fool," the Inspector hissed—this, their fourth encounter in six months, and even through the slits of its face, Penne could sense its disgust. He sat up, pain in his lower right side boding nothing good. He groaned. All the windows unshielded—the sharp light cut his eyes like blades, the sun reflecting the ice of Threll's frozen surface without mercy.

"Another." The syringe popped against his right shoulder this time. He looked down and saw Melene's lovely face, cold body, eyes that would never open again. *Ah, Melene.* He couldn't count the days passed since they went under that last time. *Too long.* He rubbed his eyes. Turning, taking in the suite, he saw the obvious cause: empty vidliq capsules spread around the room.

Threllian vidliqs, the best. *Too damn good. Irresistible.* The aurora pulsed behind his eyes, luring him back to sleep and its visions. He tried to lie down again.

The Inspector hissed again, drawing his attention. Huge, it towered over the bed, intimidating. Strong hands grabbed Penne's shoulders and shook him. "Go down again, and you will not come back. Perhaps time for you to leave, Henlander."

The frustration in the Inspector's tone showed it knew it had no legal recourse against Penne. *Frustration and fear.* Only one thing could frighten a legendary Inspector of Threll. *Father.* His father's influence

and ruthlessness would make sure none of this followed him—again. *Though I have never left a body behind before.* That thought sent a spark of fear through him. Much as he wanted to lay back, he thought the Inspector might have a point. He stood unsteadily, realizing with a shock he was naked. He stepped toward the nearby closet, nearly falling, and dressed as swiftly as shaking hands would let him. He caught a breath, feeling faint, then stuffed essentials into a shoulder-carry. He had a hard time holding himself up. His body ached everywhere. His mouth was dry, his thirst incredible. The Inspector pressed a water bottle into one hand and something else into the pocket of his shirt as he led him to the door. Penne stumbled with exhaustion. A bot appeared to prop him up, and he reached for it like a lifeline.

“Safe journey, Henlander. I do not expect to see you again on Threll.”

Penne shook his head firmly, then let the bot lead him away.

On the shuttle to the starflyer, he sat shivering in withdrawal, drinking all the water the bots could bring him. At some point, remembering, he reached a shaking hand into his pocket and found a palm-sized thick piece of paper in his father’s precise handwriting: the code to his cryocabin and his next destination. His father didn’t always determine where his travels would take him, but this time he had. Penne considered it, surprised: Lestrel, a world famed for colors.

Odd choice, so much color, after Threll’s pallor. But Penne never claimed to understand his father’s whims—no doubt some cruelty underlying whatever potential benefit the journey might bring.

Another bot appeared to help hustle him from shuttle to cryocabin, one to a side, for he was far too weak to stand now. *Pushed too far this time.* Penne, who loved to flirt with self-destruction, because he could—yet here he was dying, no doubt of it. He felt the burgeoning pain from within, organs shutting down. He would’ve ridden the vidliqs to the end if the Inspector hadn’t woken him. The bots stripped his clothing and helped him into the coffin-like space he would occupy to Lestrel. They hit keys, and memory foam began to extrude. Needles tapped arteries as the lid closed. Penne slid into cryosleep exhausted, quivering, detoxifying from months of vidliq abuse. *Lucky to be alive.* System overload—a body could only take so much. During the four-month transit from Threll to Lestrel, his father’s ReGen process—the

source of father's incredible power and wealth, so expensive for all those so desperate to cling to their youth, their chance at immortality, but gratis for the prodigal son—would cycle stem cells, replace organs, recalibrate muscles twice daily, flush amino cleanses and three liquid squares per ship cycle.

For all his faults, he thought as he went under, he wasn't yet ready to die—and knew whatever their issues, or his crimes, father would never let him.

Penne woke refreshed, born again—ReGen, his inheritance, always his father's son no matter his sins, even though he had not seen his father in three regenerations. He knew father tracked his travels—Threll proved that. He stretched languidly. The bots opened the cryocabin's cover, and he stepped onto the cold floor of the starflyer. They brought fresh clothes and helped him dress.

He walked to the lounge and asked for a vidliq, but the tender said no; even in orbit, Lestrel's rules governed. Penne felt annoyed, as he had an hour to burn before the shuttle departed. Disappointed, he took a plate of food from the dispenser and walked to the nearest viewport. Below, Lestrel pulsed with a multi-hued glow, as if bathed by a tinted solar wind. Famous for colors, true, but Lestrel had another unexpected distinction, one no doubt on his father's mind after Penne's misadventures on Threll: alcohol or any mood-altering substance was banned from the surface and orbit. Lestrel produced no indigenous narcotics, so one had to experience the world through the six natural senses, unaltered. Lestrel-kind took this ban seriously: breaking the rule meant immediate expulsion.

Doubtful father would take kindly to me getting tossed from another world so soon.

In his life, since childhood, Penne never experienced any world without some kind of chemical alteration, whether the tame buzz of alcohol or the more powerful stimulants. He grew up in father's brothels, the original source of the wealth that enabled the financing of ReGen, which helped father to cross the line from mere wealth to unbridled power—the kind of power that moved stars when necessary. By the time of his majority, Penne's experimentation with every level and variety of pleasure and drug crossed such a dangerous line that his father needed to send him to ReGen to save his life the first time.

For several regenerations, he lived more responsibly, enjoying the possibilities of multiple worlds and only undergoing ReGen when his potency began to decline.

But Threllian vidliqs took him places he never imagined. On such a pale, featureless world like Threll, he could understand why the colors of a vidliq emerged so necessarily. But for him—those capsules were things to watch out for. *Nearly lost myself*. And here he was on the starflyer immediately asking for one after waking. *Fool. Poor form*. Had he learned nothing? He thought briefly of Melene, poor Melene, but she was gone, and he was here.

Ah, Melene. Such pleasure.

He let any regrets fade. He thought living clean might limit his opportunities on Lestrel, though word of its beauty spread far and wide even to ears such as his. Yet from the shuttle's entrance to the atmosphere to his first step on Lestrel's soil, he realized he might be wrong. For on the ground, he felt he had never seen anything like the Lestrel's explosive array of color.

Not even in a vidliq.

He wandered the nameless city where the shuttle dropped him for two days, eating, observing, resting. From what he learned during transit's echotraining, nothing on Lestrel had a name. Even the planet's moniker existed only for starfarers and wanderers like him who needed reference points to manage reality. On Lestrel, the inhabitants, like the colors, flowed constantly, unfixed to any place.

On his third day, he found a café suspended from cables high in a forest canopy. A plaque at the entrance claimed in fourteen languages that he dined three hundred meters above the forest floor. Without a roof or any shielding, sound carried freely. He gazed awestruck from his vantage at the disk's unshielded rim while eating vegetables and fruits of eight colors. Around him, the trees separated and combined as the wind moved the great branches, trending to lime and pine and fern and emerald and on, a tapestry blending into the carob and tawny and umber tones of the trunks. From the branches sprung a wide diversity of life, avian, furry, a blazing riot of color, like a rainbow diffracted into a hundred varying hues.

As he ate, he experienced *umami*, that sixth sense Lestrel claimed to express utterly. True, he had been tube-fed during transit, so most anything would have supplied a welcome change, but this...he closed

his eyes—sugars and starches pulled pure joy from his mouth. He laughed.

“Our food pleases you, then?” a lilted voice asked.

Backlit against the cerulean sky, a shadow moved, wearing an azure cloak, hard to discern at the sun’s angle. She shifted and came into clearer focus: thin arms bare to the shoulders, taloned feet, similar short claws on her six-fingered hands, a slight head with sharp ears and brown, fine hair. Her skin the lightest hue of blue, coated in pale golden fur. Her eyes deep umber, like some of the trees, lit with humor and intelligence. She was alien, stunning.

He realized she waited for an answer.

“For my part, yes. Delicious. Unexpected.”

She sat, uninvited. Penne liked that. “Do you seek out every newcomer to Lestrel?”

“No. I saw you exit the spinner from the spaceport. I have watched you for two days.”

He pushed the plate toward her, offering.

She shook her head. “I have eaten. You need sustenance. You have been in transit?”

He nodded.

“Where from?”

“Where am I from, or where am I coming from?”

The tick of a smile. “Both.”

“I will tell you. But first, our names. I am Penne.”

She smiled, revealing small pointed teeth. “You may call me Esmin.”

“Very well then, Esmin. I am from Henland. My last stop was Threll.”

She barked what might have been a laugh. “From Threll to Lestrel. Madness. You could not have made a greater change.”

“So I have heard.”

“And Henland.” She scratched her chin with a claw. With interest, Penne watched it extend and contract. “You are far from home.”

“I never called Henland home.”

She considered that. “Many come to Lestrel to seek out newness. There is that here. You must be a man of means.”

“And what makes you think that?”

She pointed an extended claw at him. “There is no easy way to get to Lestrel. We like it that way. Plus, you wear wealth like another skin. A tree’s bark always betrays it, as we say.” She placed both hands in

her lap, smiled. "I will show you my world, if you'll allow me, Penne perhaps-not-of-Henland. You'll see more with me than you could on your own."

"You are rich, then, too?"

"Oh, Penne. We are all of Lestrel rich." She cocked her head, regarding him. "And you are handsome enough, in your way."

"As you are beautiful enough, in your way."

She barked another laugh. "So. Travel with me. Let me show you Lestrel."

Always impulsive, intrigued by newness, he found her a temptation not to be resisted. He attempted a casual shrug. "Doubtless, I *will* learn more from you than I could on my own."

Her eyes bored into him. "Oh, Penne of Henland, you will see and learn much more than you can imagine."

She owned a teardrop-shaped floater that sat in a lot nearby. The forest around them seethed with sounds, such a shock from Threll's and the starflyer's silence. As they walked to Esmin's ship, Penne asked questions the echotraining hadn't covered. Esmin answered, sometimes briefly, other times longer. She said little as they fastened belts. Her fingers tapped switches, some needing her extended claws to trip them. She saw him watch her and smiled. "Safety precautions."

"I can imagine," he said, reclining as restraints seized him.

The teardrop vibrated with power. "Where would you like to go first?"

"Somewhere I would not discover on my own."

"My favorite spot, then," she half-purred, and the teardrop rose and sped across the treetops. Penne prepared himself for hard *g*, but the craft moved smoothly. Esmin chuckled. "Rest, Penne, rest. Our ride will be gentle."

For an undetermined time, he slept. He dreamt, and in the dream's clutches found himself at the edge of a cliff that fell into unimaginable depths. He felt cold all through. He stood on a wall, leaning into the void, a frigid wind rising from below and holding him up. Then the wind ceased, and as he fell forward, he heard a voice shouting his name—

Penne woke to Esmin shaking him, claws gripping his shoulder, almost enough to break through the skin. Her dark eyes showed

concern. "Are you well, Penne? You shouted in your sleep."

He shifted, embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. Such...an odd dream."

She smiled, sharp teeth glinting. "No shame, Penne. Transit is hard. Rest again if you will."

He shook his head. *Not until that dream is well behind me.* He looked out the windscreen and gasped. The forest was gone, replaced by land split and broken into dark reds, crimson and rust and maroon, burnt stone flushed with iron oxides like an infusion of blood. The teardrop fell swiftly toward a distant rim and settled. Esmin tapped a control. The panel behind them slid open, revealing a bedroom with a small kitchenette. She slid effortlessly through, crossed and opened a cupboard exposing shelves of multi-hued bottles. She took one colored light blue, cradled it over a svelte forearm, and brought it back, exiting the door on her side of the teardrop. Penne followed.

Alone in the vastness, the canyons broke apart around them, bright reds contrasting with cotton clouds and the cerulean blue of sky. The air breathed pure, the wind just light enough to nudge their hair. Creatures moved in the air around them, but over all, a gentle silence reigned. Esmin uncapped the small bottle and sipped, passed it to him. He looked a query at her.

"Pasclan water. Lestrel's best. We may go to its source, in time. If you please me." He sipped, and the water hit him in a rush, cool and lightly carbonated. He went to sip again, but she took the bottle and set it on the stone by his feet.

"I am still thirsty," he said.

She barked her odd laugh. "As am I. The water will wait. I have seen your bark, Penne. Now you will see mine."

They spent a week in the canyons, exploring, learning one another, then flew half a continent away, to a great sea. For a month, they roamed pink-sand beaches and ate what life crawled from the water. Esmin's diminutive kitchen held spices Penne never imagined. He was enraptured, seduced, entwined by the act of love two or three times a day. Esmin flew them to islands and other places far remote, austere. Weeks would pass without seeing anyone else.

They visited cities at times—one built in a verdant canyon, its cliffs lined with nests of great emerald flying creatures that cavorted in the air with ear-piercing screams; another whose striking glass buildings

reached high enough to touch the clouds. Between the urban centers lay vast wildernesses, undeveloped, unpeopled. They spent days there sometimes with nothing but the wind through tall grasses to bother them. In one of Lestrel's many nameless cities, one set over a broad plain near a jade sea, the citizens played vibrant, colored games, some involving entire blocks. One that became Penne's favorite involved moving large bubbles with the help of the sea breezes through a complex invisible maze where the changing colors would guide the players in the proper direction. Some games were so involved they lasted entire days, with the players sleeping in the open cityscape overnight to hold their spots.

Months spent with Esmin and Penne found himself surprised: to have loved through lifetimes, so many worlds and partners, to find himself still laughing, still energized, still engaged with Esmin on every level—he blamed it on the lack of alcohol or drugs, or something inherent in Lestrel's freshness. Though he did notice there were other beauties to Lestrel than the places Esmin showed him, and often those other beauties would smile back at him. He would curse himself in those moments, for Esmin showed him such kindness, and he must not let himself be tempted—though in truth, at the core of him, he was.

My bark will not betray me. Not this time.

Esmin took him next to the far south, through a vast jungle replete with animals that split the color spectrum, birds and reptiles of all hues, some virtually transparent. They ate fruits so sweet they exploded in their mouths, leaving syrup around their lips and cheeks that they took great joy in licking away. Penne found the jungle in many ways the most pleasant part of his journey yet and wanted to stay longer, to climb trees and swim and explore. But from there, Esmin flew them into a deep basin, half of it covered in a freshwater lake that glowed indigo from its depths, lit by something far below. At its far side rose a massive, fractured cliff, beyond which a city dropped into a system of tunnels that dwindled into darkness.

They parked the teardrop, and Esmin took his hand, guiding him, seeming to know this place well. Glittering stones lined the tunnels. Their lodging, a cavern shaped not unlike Esmin's teardrop, arced back into a deep, soft bed just off the floor with a bright blue bowl near it. Two stone cups sat next to it and Esmin filled them and they drank. Not as good as Pasclan, but the water still had an electric buzz Penne

liked. Energy coursed through him. Crystals in the ceiling lighted the gloom.

They wandered the city for days, walking to openings in the cliff and looking down into the seemingly depthless abyss, strolling through corridors lit with a dozen colors of glowstones. They spent hours in their room immersed with one another, then took to the corridors again to dine on the most unusual food Penne had experienced yet. And one evening, after a supper of incandescent bites of unidentifiable but delicious origin, Esmin led him by hand deep into the tunnels, down and down further than they had yet gone until they arrived at a steel door twice Penne's height. A well-coiffed attendant in a radiant pink tophat and suit took their fee. She reached into a cubby at her side and handed them parkas, gloves, hats. After laughingly helping one another clumsily put them on, they stepped through the door into a frozen world.

The cavern curved back and to the right, stretching well beyond his sight. Esmin took his hand and kissed it, and he looked at her in wonder as they entered the frigid space. Their breath misted before them. Throughout the room's windings stood ice statues of stunning craftsmanship and beauty, all of them lit from within, refracting twisting auroras that blazed through the spectrum, dazzling.

"What are these?" Penne asked in awe. They reminded him of the internal lights from Threllian vidliqs, though he kept the thought to himself. He did not want to think of Threll, not with all the beauty here—he wanted to focus on the light, not the darkness he left behind.

"*Desc'illi'ii'Lestril'i* of the *Asi'ri*," Esmin trilled, the beautiful foreign sounds sensual on her tongue. "It translates as Judgment of Lestrel."

He reached out to touch the closest one, but Esmin slapped his hand. She pushed him gently back, her look frightened, eyes wide. "Do not touch these things, Penne. Ever."

"Why?"

She put her hands to his face. "Promise me you will not."

Her concern touched him. "I will not. I'll most likely never see one again." He took one of her hands and kissed it. "You said *Asi'ri*?"

"Lestrel's oldest people."

"Yours are not the oldest here?"

Esmin barked a laugh. "Oh, no, Penne, no. Mine are only a few hundred thousand years here. The *Asi'ri*—millions of years longer.

This is their world. Mine came here from a dying star. The *Asi'ri* were kind enough to take us in, though they like to keep to themselves.”

Penne tried to imagine what millions of years of culture would be like. He thought his multiple lifelines through ReGen were long, but against this...they were nothing. He looked at the sculptures and knew he was looking at time, deep time—time as art. “I would like to visit people who can create such things as this.”

“Truly.” She canted her head, considering. “Very well, then. Perhaps that is wise. The *Asi'ri* bottle the Pasclan, and we need more. We can go directly to the source.”

Penne embraced her, and they walked the cavern looking at the statues for hours.

After, they spent the night entwined, sleeping off and on. In the morning, they gathered their few belongings and retrieved the teardrop. Esmin said the journey would be long: they would have to fly towards the upper pole, crossing most of Lestrel. The autopilot let them sleep and rest and love.

Penne still spent a great deal of time in his seat at the teardrop's front, watching the world unfold below them. They crossed a wide stretch of blue sea dotted with pink and peach coral islands until they struck land again. For three days, they traveled over plains with great herds of wandering animals trailed by predators—he watched several successful kills, rapt. And then the mountains began: rising peaks of deep browns, mottled grays, bright iron reds scattered among blue stone blending into white-capped peaks, with sapphire rivers and lakes pouring down into the full richness of Lestrel's forests.

The mountains filled their view for four days. Then one morning without any warning, Esmin tapped a key, and the teardrop fell into a gentle descent. Penne saw a small, walled village emerge from the wilderness as they drew closer. The village sat against the edge of a four-thousand-meter cliff with a powder-blue waterfall passing to its left. *Pasclan, has to be*. Esmin alit on a ledge, and they took a narrow path along the sheer drop to a steel gate reminiscent of the frozen room's door. Esmin rang a bell. The door opened and a cloaked warder, tall and lean, bowed and wordlessly offered them passage. Esmin bowed and walked through. Penne followed, also bowing.

“We will stay only tonight. I will negotiate the Pasclan tomorrow. Be cautious. The *Asi'ri* have limited tolerance for visitors and none for

conversation.”

Penne chuckled. “They don’t speak?”

“As I told you, they keep mostly to themselves. We are here only to see this place and get more Pasclan.”

Penne found her manner strange. She seemed guarded, weary. She pointed ahead with a hand, and they walked a cobblestoned street, uphill, Penne struggling some in the thin air. As he walked, he found himself surprised by the dullness of the village. Lestrel was famed for its colors, and for good reason—but the village lacked any distinctive shade other than a dull blue-gray, the streets and stone houses all the same, cold and inhospitable. Penne felt a gloom settle over him, the first since he came to Lestrel.

At a junction Esmin turned right, but Penne caught a glance of something to the left and stepped that way.

“Follow me,” Esmin said.

“One moment.” He took a few steps down, drawn. As he moved forward, he realized he was walking to the cliff’s rim. A dais peaked at the edge, providing a vista. Penne mounted. When he looked out, he gasped.

“Penne!”

He turned and ran back to Esmin, heart pounding. His breath came in gasps, and not just from the thin air. She grabbed his hand. “That is not a place for you to go. Stay from there.” She put her hands to his face again. “Promise me.”

“Esmin—”

“My love, promise me, please.”

He kissed her. “Yes. Yes. I promise.”

Yet much as he enjoyed Lestrel, and wished for more of the Pasclan, for the first time, he wondered if it had been wise to come here. For the view over the wall had been the same one as in his dream.

Esmin led them to a small shelter near the village’s center with the same dull-colored rock walls and flooring as everything in the village. It contained only two stone chairs and a simple bed with a thin mattress and a gray blanket. A curved crystal lamp gave off enough light to see in the plain space.

Esmin took his face in her hands and kissed him. "I fear for you," she said. "Stay with me. Stay." She led him to the bed where they undressed and made long, quiet love. They held one another until Esmin fell asleep.

Penne lay on the bed for a time. He felt anxious, and sleep would not come. He moved restlessly, holding Esmin's sleeping form. Finally, giving up on sleep, he rose gingerly, extracting himself from Esmin's thin arms. He dressed, then stepped into the chill night air. This was Lestrel's high summer, and already the air was frigid. He could see his breath misting in the thin air. He could only imagine what the snowy months were like. *No doubt frozen, like Threll.*

Threll.

He wandered, trying to walk away from those thoughts. But the mood clung like a dark shadow. Without clouds or moon, the cold stars lit his way dimly.

The village appeared empty. The streets connected in quarters, and he walked the entirety of the village in less than an hour, seeing no one. Try as he might, he could not shake the black mood, the tension tightening his shoulders. He stood at a junction, rolling his neck slowly to loosen the tautness. He was not ready to return to Esmin. He thought to go back to the cliff view in spite of his promise when he noticed sudden movement to his right—a tall, lean figure walking away from him. On impulse, he followed, running to keep the figure in view. On a long street he watched the figure turn into a small lane between stone homes on the village's far side. An *Asi'ri*—it had to be. His heart quickened. He followed, passing from the alley's shadow into an open space beyond, encountering a path paved with large round stones. His feet seemed so small on them. The path led to a boundary wall where a gate stood open.

Curious, he stepped through. Up the hill to his right stood two figures, taller and leaner than Esmin, silhouetted against the dark sky. *Asi'ri*. He moved purposefully up the short hill, trying to be quiet though his breath came hard. The figures seemed not to notice him, their gaze focused beyond, toward the deeper mountains. As he got closer, he noticed they wore nothing. They were so thin they might be sticks, their forms so frail as to break at a thought.

When he topped the hill, winded, he saw one of the ice sculptures before him. He fought to catch his breath, sucking deep gulps of the

thin air. The sculpture sat dark, without the unusual fire he'd seen in the caverns of the underground city. The surface reflected the depths of the night sky, the reflections of stars muted on its surface. He looked up—the *Asi'ri* still faced away. He knew he had made a promise to Esmin but could not resist. Impulsively he reached out a raised finger to touch the distorted piece of ice.

Immediately something seized him, pressing his body tightly against the sculpture. An icy chill enswathed him, and warmth flooded out of him like blood, a wound to the soul. Or so it felt. *Pain, such pain!* He tried to pull back but could not extricate himself. Turning his head slightly, he noticed the two *Asi'ri* at his sides, thin faces implacable, slender arms and hands possessing incredible strength.

The cold moved to the center of him. Near to losing consciousness, he thought his senses lied as he noticed the ice come to life in an aurora of green and red, twining and untwining.

“Enough,” someone behind him said. The *Asi'ri* released him and Penne collapsed. When he rolled over to see who spoke, he wasn't sure what surprised him more—the voice, or the bright colors washing over his father's face.

Penne woke, shivering, and noticed he was wrapped in furs—so tired and cold, frozen to his core. The furs trapped little warmth. He shed heat like dead skin. Weariness hit him like a cold fist, and he closed his eyes and drifted.

Some time later a hand brushed his cheek and Penne looked up into the face of his father, so young and clean, fresh from his own ReGen. Penne tried to speak, but no words would come from his dry throat.

His father pulled back the hand, adjusted the furs. “Your bark betrayed you, as I knew it would.” He shook his head. “Threll...Threll was the limit, damn you. Everything I gave you, Penne, all those lives, for you to be...this? No. All you could have done. All you could have been. You've learned nothing, not in any of those lifetimes.” He exhaled a cloud of vapor into the icy air, and shook his head. “But this is a fitting enough end for you. Lestrel made her judgment. Your colors will live on, perhaps as an example to others.”

Beyond his father's hip, Penne noticed Esmin. Her face betrayed the deep sadness within her—again, Penne had let someone down,

ignoring the only request she ever asked of him. *Who knows what she hoped for us.* He shook, with rage and cold and not a little fear.

“The sculptures are fatal, son. The warmth leaves you—I can feel it. This place...like the sculptures, this is a judgment. You have a choice: to pass over the edge on your own, or to be helped.”

“No!” Esmin screamed, and Penne saw her lunge forward and suddenly be restrained by the same two *Asi’ri* who had pinned him to the sculpture. He wanted to shout her name, to shout at them to let her go, but words died in his dry throat. The *Asi’ri* pulled Esmin effortlessly back toward the village.

To die here. All those worlds, all those lives, all that pleasure—*Esmin!*—all he had seen and done, only to die here.

To truly die—no ReGen, no fresh start, nothing to save him. For he was sure beyond a doubt now that his father played no game. This was the end.

“I do not think you have the heart. You could at least give yourself some dignity at the end.”

Shame burned through him. Though he fought them, tears slipped from his eyes. *Esmin!* He could feel himself fading, from the center to the edges. Turning to his side, he realized his father or the *Asi’ri* placed him on the edge of the wall over the abyss, just as in his dream. He shook with fear. A braver man might roll over the edge—Penne knew to his core he was not that man.

“I will save you the trouble. Be at peace, son.”

And gently, almost kindly, his father rolled him over the edge. As he fell and the cold descent took his breath away, Penne found himself thinking about Melene. *Odd.* The wind grew, and the drop took his breath away. Falling, before he passed from consciousness for the last time, he wondered if, like him, Melene marveled that a life so full of color could end in darkening shades of ash and gray.

William Huggins lives, works, writes, and explores the desert southwest with his wife, daughter, son, and three crazed rescue dogs. Time in wild spaces fuels his imagination. His short fiction and essays have appeared in multiple print and digital media. His novella, Ghosts, is available in paper or ebook from Owl House Books, and his next book, Regenesiis, will be released in Fall 2021.

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Henry and the Prince of Cats

By DAN WOLFGANG

A strange incident has left his master dead! With his newfound intelligence, Henry, a Scottish Terrier, sets out to solve the mystery of what happened to all the humans!

Henry smelled something foul from where he sat on the porch and growled. The sun peeked above the treetops as he stared into the distance. Sometime later, the door opened behind him, and his master sat on a large wooden chair beside him. On his lap was a plate of bacon and eggs, and while usually such a feast would tempt him, Henry couldn't take his eyes off the sky.

"You seem awfully focused today, boy. Is something out there?" The master petted Henry on the head, then scratched behind his ears. A warm feeling washed over Henry, and he sighed and wagged his fluffy tail. He lay down and closed his eyes.

A sudden shriek woke him from his slumber. The master held his head in his lap, gripping his forehead. He jerked his head far back, screaming. As Henry stared up at his master, a horrible odor assaulted his nostrils and sent him into a barking frenzy.

Henry leaped off the porch and ran circles on the lawn. It felt like a hundred knives were puncturing his skull and his head would soon burst. His teeth sunk into a nearby hose, but no matter how hard he pulled, no water would come.

Back into the house he ran. His water bowl was still empty, the sink and bathtub likewise. As he dashed about the house, all he could think about was the pain and how he could end it.

Finally, he rammed into a stool by the bathroom door, and something crashed onto his head. His skull ached even more, but he noticed water dripping over him. Among shards formed a small puddle. He bent down and lapped the water up. Once he had had his fill, he collapsed in what remained and fell asleep again, head still throbbing.

When he awoke, the sunlight pouring through the bathroom window had turned a soft orange. Henry felt a touch of hunger, but his bowl of food remained empty. His master lay limp in the chair on the porch, so Henry returned inside to feed himself. He didn't know when his master would awaken.

The bag of dog food sat above the cupboard, brushing the ceiling. Henry put his forepaws on the counter and stared. The black terrier crouched, then leaped. Henry's legs scurried as he tried to push himself onto the counter, but he fell back onto the floor.

Pain coursed through his back, and he yelped. He scrambled back onto his feet and tried again, only to come crashing back down on the floor. As he lay there, he glanced at the table behind him. He got back up, went over to the nearest chair beside it, and pushed it to the counter. Then he vaulted over it and onto the counter. His teeth sunk into the bag of dog food, and he pulled it back down as he landed on the floor.

Dog food spilled out onto the hardwood in front of him. As he chewed the dried bits and pieces, he wondered how he knew to move the chair for a boost. And how had he been able to land solidly on the floor, instead of collapsing on his back again? He still pored over these thoughts as he finished up the last spilled bites. Somehow, he knew better than to devour the entire bag, tempting though it was.

A hiss by the front door stole his attention. He trotted to the open doorway and saw a black feline sitting on the doormat. "Greetings," the animal said. The deep voice reminded Henry of those old samurai films the master liked to watch.

"Who are you?" Henry gasped. They were talking with the same speech as the master. But how did he ever learn to talk like that?

"I am Prince William," the cat said, "leader of the Kingdom of Nyaah. And you are?"

"I am Henry. I'm waiting for the master to wake up from his nap."

"You mean him?" Prince William looked up to the side. "He's never going to wake up, Henry." Prince William scratched the wooden deck, and behind him, several more cats appeared. They swarmed the master.

Henry barked at them, but they paid his noise no mind. He jumped at them, but Prince William leaped in front of him and intercepted his

attack. The two collapsed together on the deck. Henry flailed his legs about, but Prince William avoided all his strikes.

He got back on his paws and bolted up the back of the chair. He bit into one of the cat's tails. The feline shrieked. One of the cats scratched Henry's cheek. A rush of pain ran across the wound. He barked and let go of the tail. He tried to bite another, but the cat pushed him off the chair.

Henry fell to the wooden deck below. His body ached from the beating, and his face stung from the cat scratch. As he got back on his paws, the felines were carrying the master off the porch. Prince William followed them onto the driveway.

"Where are you taking master?" Henry asked.

"We will be dealing with him shortly," Prince William said.

Henry growled and tackled Prince William. His teeth sunk into the cat's leg, which prompted a snarl. Henry let go and leaped back just before Prince William's claw would've slashed his eye.

Prince William's eyes traveled to the nearby garden hose lying on the grass. He snatched it in his teeth, then ran circles around Henry. The hose coiled around the black terrier's body in several directions until he was unable to move. His struggles to break free only ensnared him tighter.

Prince William scoffed and rejoined the other cats walking down the road. Henry growled again. He tried biting through the hose, but its thick lining made it difficult to tear. By the time he freed himself, Prince William and his minions were gone.

Henry searched the streets for hours, but couldn't find any sign of Prince William. Soon, the sky grew dark, but the street lamps never turned on. The only light came from the stars above. At this time of evening, he usually curled up on the couch beside the master to watch television. The thought made him pick up his pace.

He came to an intersection in the road and waited to see if anyone would come, but not one car drove by. After a while, he glanced back at the general store behind him and decided to look inside, hoping to find some clue leading to his master. The interior of the store was pitch black, just like every other building he had seen. He fumbled around until he saw the faint outline of a light switch and pushed it with his nose.

When the lights turned on, he barked, and a bark answered his. Henry peered around the counter. A yellow Lab with a light blue bow on her head walked toward him. Henry panted as she approached, and his tail wagged.

“Welcome to Ma ’n Pa’s,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“You can talk like master?” Henry asked.

“Yes, I realized a few hours ago when a bird flew by the window, begging for food.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any customers here, or anywhere in town at all, for that matter.”

Her gaze fell to the floor. “Yes, today was a slow day. My master lay down in the back room and hasn’t woken up since.”

“My master fell asleep on the porch earlier today as well. Just now a herd of cats carried him away. I’ve been looking everywhere for him. Any chance you saw them pass by?”

“No, I was in the back, waiting for my master to awaken.”

“I see.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“Maybe when he does wake up, he can help us find my master.”

“He might be able to help, yes.” A pause. “So what should we do in the meantime?”

“Well, have you had anything to eat today?”

She shook her head. “Not since breakfast this morning. Why?”

Henry raised an eyebrow and turned to the larger part of the store. He followed a smell to a shelf full of various pet foods. As he looked up at the shelf, he saw that the bags of dog food were stored high up on the top. Staring at it reminded him of the many times he had fallen that day, and he decided against trying to climb the shelves.

On the shelf right in front of him, however, there was a tin can with a picture of a terrier on it. The can didn’t produce any smell, but somehow he knew that it contained food. He had memories of his owner opening tin cans like it and pouring food out from them.

He pulled a can off of the shelf and chewed on it, though his teeth didn’t even cause a dent in the foul-tasting metal. He spat it out, where it rolled into another shelf and bounced off a bag of potato chips. The thought of eating food for masters came, but a voice inside his head warned against it. His master often told him of bad dogs who died from eating the wrong type of master food.

The Labrador stepped toward him then. As the can rolled back, he saw a tab on the lid, and his eyes widened. He set it back upright with his mouth, then dug his tongue under the tab and through the loop. It took several tries, but eventually he pulled the tab up enough to get under it. Then he pulled it with his teeth, careful to hold on with his hind legs.

He ripped the lid off the can of dog food and crashed into the shelf behind him. Tin cans rained down on his head. He shook his head and sat up in the mess. A dull ache washed over his head, but he ignored it.

“You opened it!” the Lab said.

“Why, it was easy, madam.” He stepped out of the mess. “Say, I never did get your name.”

“I’m Mabel. And you are?”

“My name is Henry. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mabel.”

“Now that we’ve got the formalities out of the way, let’s eat.” She stepped toward the open can, but Henry stopped her.

“Hold on a moment. I think there’s something we need to do first.”

“Say grace?”

“No. Well, yes, that’s one thing, but not what I meant.”

“What then?”

“Hold on.” Henry ran through the store, searching for... something, though he wasn’t entirely sure what. Then he saw it and stopped. He went over to the bag of paper plates, tore it open, and took one out, then he brought back to Mabel. After placing it on the floor, he took the can and held it upside down over the plate. The dog food slipped out and landed on the plate with a splat.

“I figure we should at least try to keep the same manner and cleanliness of our masters. Somehow, we’ve learned to speak like them. The fact that I could open the can at all shows that we’ve gained some of their intellect too.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest. It’s also entirely possible that I’m wrong, and it’s merely a coincidence that these events happened at the same time.”

Mabel didn’t respond; instead, she started eating the dog food. Henry sat and watched her as her tail began to wag. His began to wag

as well, and he started panting again. Once she finished eating, he ate what remained. As he tried to lick the last few bits off the plate, they heard a noise.

Henry looked up. The window above the shelf was wide open. There was a scratching sound within the store, and it was slowly growing louder. Prince William appeared from the aisle.

“Don’t mind me. I’m just here to pick up some more cat food.” Then he stopped and turned to look at Henry. “Oh, it’s you.”

Henry bent down to the floor and growled at him. “Tell me what you did to master, or I’ll skin you alive!”

Prince William scoffed. “You won’t be seeing him any time soon, you mangy mongrel.” Then he leaped onto the nearby shelf.

Henry barked at him a few times. Prince William pushed a bag of chips off the shelf above Henry. It fell on his head and exploded, spilling junk food everywhere. Henry was stunned for a moment but shook it off.

He tried climbing up the shelves, but Prince William dropped another large bag on his head, and he fell off the platform. Powdery chips crunched under him as he scrambled to right himself again. As he stood, Prince William climbed to the top shelf and walked to the pet food.

Henry followed him up the shelves, which was easier without Prince William attacking him. He stood at the top for a time, shivering, for the floor seemed a million miles down. He traveled across the shelf, knocking everything he passed onto the floor. With each object’s crash, the sound caused him to wince. He began to slow his pace, but it didn’t stop him from knocking anything off the shelf.

Finally, he was close enough to Prince William to attack. He rushed at him, but Prince William pushed a large bag of dog food into his way. The heavy package collided with him, and he fell with it off the shelf to the floor below. Pain ran through his body from the impact.

Prince William, still on the shelf high above him, took a large bag with a cat on it in his mouth and dragged it toward the window he came in.

Henry rolled the bag of dog food off him. “What have you done with master?”

“Oh, him? We shall be disposing the body with the others shortly.”

“Others?”

“Yes, haven’t you figured it out by now? Everyone, including your precious master, is dead. We killed them.” He gave a maniacal laugh and took the bag out the window.

Henry just lay there for a time, whimpering. “Master. Dead. Everyone...”

After a long while, Henry finally picked himself up off the floor and looked around. The mess of broken bags from the fight still lay strewn about the floor. Mabel had left, so Henry went to search for her.

She wasn’t in any of the aisles, nor was she behind the store counter. The door she had entered the room from was now closed, and it opened for Henry with the prod of his nose. He found her lying on the floor by a cot, upon which her master lay.

Mabel sat up when she spotted him. “He’s not breathing, Henry. I feel so stupid for not realizing sooner that he died.”

“If you feel stupid, then I feel like a complete idiot. I should’ve known he wouldn’t recover after he started flailing around in his chair. I guess I only told myself he was sleeping to ignore reality.”

“But you’re not an idiot. Not really. What you just said was very smart, and the fact that you can talk at all is a miracle.”

“Yes, I haven’t figured out how I gained this ability, but I think that if I find Prince William’s kingdom, I might get some answers.”

“You’re going away?”

“I must find master to confirm with my own eyes that he’s gone. Besides, whatever Prince William is planning for this town can’t be good. He must be stopped.”

“I’m coming with you then.”

“No, you should stay here and keep an eye on the store. He didn’t pay you any mind during our fight, which means I’m the only one he has a problem with.”

“That’s because you fought back to save your master. Didn’t you hear him? He said that he was disposing of the bodies. His plan doesn’t have any malice toward your master. You just got in the way. Eventually, all the dead bodies are going to start stinking, and the flies will come, and—I’d rather not dwell on that part. He just wants them out of the way so they can take over the place.”

“Well, that still puts him at odds with me. If my master is gone, that means the house belongs to me, not some stray cat with a god

complex. I'm certainly not going to let him rule this town. If he really did kill all the masters, then there's no telling what he'll do to our kind."

"It's going to be very dangerous there. Are you sure you wouldn't like a little help stopping him?"

Henry thought for a moment. "Maybe. I don't know, Mabel. I really don't want you getting hurt like I have."

"How bad does it hurt, Henry? Have you broken any bones?"

"No, nothing hurts that bad. Though I've still got a couple cuts from the fight at my house that sting a little."

"Oh, I know what to do!" Mabel ran off into another room for a moment, then came back with a small box hanging from her mouth. She opened the box and took out a small clear bottle. The strange liquid stung when she poured it over Henry's cuts, but the pain subsided when she bandaged them.

"There! How's that feel now?"

"A little better. Thanks, Mabel!"

"It was no trouble." Her eyes trailed along the floor.

"Maybe you could come along to make sure I stay in one piece."

Her eyes perked up. "I can do that, sure."

"Great, let's be off then!"

Henry and Mabel set off down the road in search of Prince William's kingdom. The sky was still dark, but they felt wide awake, as they had slept through most of the day. Henry made a mental note to learn where the street lamps were controlled so he could turn on the street lights at night.

Some time into their walk, they spotted movement in the distance. A small animal with black fur ran across the road. Henry thought that it was Prince William, so he ran off after it with Mabel close behind. After a moment, the animal looked back at them, its yellow eyes glowing in the dark, and then it scampered off.

The two followed the cat to a large office building deeper in the town. The lights were on in the building, the first one they had seen with any sort of light coming from it. As the cat approached the door, Henry and Mabel hid behind a large bush. The doors opened automatically for the cat, who scanned the surroundings and ducked inside.

After a few seconds, they followed it into the building. Within, several cats were sitting on the front desk and the floor, staring at the

entrance.

Prince William leaped off the desk and stepped towards them. "Ah, our guests have arrived. We've been expecting you."

Henry stopped in front of Mabel. "You have?"

"What? You didn't think you came here undetected. My spies have been watching you and reporting back to me this whole time."

Henry growled.

"Get them!" Prince William shouted.

All the cats rushed at them at once. Henry stood his ground in front of Mabel as they ran at them. One tried to strike her, but he bit it in the forepaw before it could attack.

As he pulled on the leg, another sneaked up behind him and leaped onto his back. They both fell to the carpet floor below and tumbled across it. Henry bolted into the wall, plowed the cat's head into it. The shock traveled through its skull into Henry's head.

He held his head for a moment as the cat shrieked and ran off. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw them attacking Mabel. He got back on his paws in an instant and rushed to her. Three of them had climbed onto her, two attempting to bite her and one to scratch her side. Henry rammed into the scratching one and shoved it into the glass door.

The cat lay on its back, screeching in pain. When Henry turned back to Mabel, a feline was still on her back, scratching her. So he leaped at it and tackled it to the floor. Behind him, Mabel sank her teeth into the third cat's tail. It screamed and ran at her.

The cat below Henry clawed at his forepaw as he was distracted. The jolt of pain made him howl. Then he batted his paw against the cat's face, again and again. The move reminded him of an attack his master once made upon an armed street thief.

As he pummeled the cat, there was a yelp from behind. The cat lay there barely moving, so Henry glanced back to see a dozen cats swarming Mabel. His eyes went wide. He ran over to join the fight. He attacked feline after feline, but it seemed as though each that fell was replaced by two more. Soon, he was overwhelmed by their numbers. A rope appeared and tangled the two of them up, and the cats carried them off deeper into the office building.

Henry lay at the bottom of a dog cage in a room full of cardboard boxes.

HThe latch on the door taunted him as he stared. Mabel slept in the other cage beside him. She had taken more hits than he had during the fight, though he had tried to keep her from getting hurt.

He focused on the cage door directly in front of him. Its bars were far too close together for him to fit a paw through, but with a little contorting, his tongue squeezed between them. He brought it against the latch and moved it up and down. After a few tries, it caught the underside of the latch. He pushed his tongue to the base as a wedge between the latch and the rest of the cage. As he pushed further, it slowly came undone.

He pulled his tongue away, and the door swung open. Henry peered out of the cage and looked to the left and to the right, but didn't see anyone. He sneaked over to Mabel's cage and opened it as well.

She lay on the floor, asleep but still breathing. Despite his tongue aching from the escape, Henry began licking her wounds. As he did, she woke up and looked at him.

"You feeling well enough to keep going, Mabel?"

"Yes, I'm not too badly hurt. I'm just a little worried about getting our wounds treated soon."

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure we'll be out of here before they're infected."

She nodded. "We should be fine if we leave soon."

"Let's get going then."

The two walked through the room of boxes, eventually finding an open door. A white cat with black patches of fur stood on guard outside the room. Henry found an empty box and dropped it on top of the cat. It screeched, but he pulled the box inside before anyone could hear. Scratch marks ran across the floor as they dragged the box to the back of the room.

Mabel threw off the box, and Henry rammed into the cat before it could scramble away. The cat tumbled into the cage, and Mabel slammed the door shut and locked it. As they ran away, the cat cried and hissed behind them.

Out in the hall, they moved from room to room, careful to avoid any watchful feline eyes. In one room, there was a large machine that made Henry pause and stare. It had a large lever on front to the left, with several dials across it. Mabel tried to pull him away but to no

avail. It was a large metal box with a hole on both ends with small tables below them.

“So it really does work then,” Prince William said.

“What?” Henry turned. “That machine?”

“Machine? Oh, no. I already knew that worked. Why, I am living proof of that. I meant the virus that killed your owners and mutated you into intelligent life forms.”

Prince William pressed a button on the counter and spoke into the rod beside it. “Jasper, please come to the lab and take these two canines away for further testing.”

The words made Henry’s blood boil. Mabel slammed the door shut and leaned against it. Seconds later, they heard a scratching and meowing on the other side.

“I’ll hold the door,” Mabel said. “You take care of him!”

Henry nodded and leaped up onto the counter. He growled at the cat, then bolted at him, but Prince William stepped out of the way. Henry went skidding across the counter and slammed into the wall.

Henry heard laughter as his head throbbed. He clutched it with his paws until the pain went away. When he looked up, Prince William was beside him, clawing at his side. Henry tackled the cat. Prince William tried shifting toward the wall but didn’t dodge fast enough. The two of them tumbled across the counter and landed near the edge.

Prince William found himself slipping off the counter, so he spun around until he was on top of Henry. He bit into Henry’s ear, but the canine shoved him off and onto the floor. Prince William landed upright and ran back up the counter. Henry threw some of the pens and erasers at him, but all his projectiles missed.

Prince William dove at him with fore claws extended. The sharp nails dug into his flesh, and Henry howled in pain. He rolled off the counter with Prince William, onto the table below, and into the machine.

It was dark in the metal box, with only a little light coming from the holes on both ends. Prince William’s eyes glowed a bright yellow in the darkness. He scratched Henry’s back. Blood dripped from the wound. Henry crawled through the machine toward the opening.

He poked his head out into the light, which seemed hazy at first. When he could finally see, he looked down at Mabel, still trying to

keep the door closed. Behind him, Prince William still clawed at him, merely toying with him until his minions broke in.

As he looked down, he saw the lever out of the corner of his eye. An idea flashed in his head. He dropped to the floor, shoving the lever down on the way. The machine beeped and buzzed and whirled. He looked back to see several dials pointing to the left. Inside the box, Prince William screamed like he was being tortured.

When the machine finally calmed, Prince William stepped out onto the table. Henry prepared for another strike, but the feline only sat there licking itself. He stared at it for a few moments, before realizing that its mental state had returned to that of a normal animal. He glanced at the machine's dials again, but a bang on the door kept him from chasing the thought.

Henry ran back to the counter and jumped onto it. He pressed the same button Prince William had. "Now hear this, peons of Prince William. Your king has returned to a dumb animal, with the same mind as any other cat. Anyone who does not leave this building immediately will suffer the same fate."

The scratches against the door ceased, and Mabel relaxed against it. Then she looked up at Henry, and her eyes widened.

"Oh, you're hurt!"

Suddenly, he became acutely aware of all the wounds he had accumulated during the fight with Prince William. He wanted to lie down and wait for his body to heal, but he knew there was one more thing he had to do.

He dropped back down to the floor, went over to the machine, and ripped the plug out of the wall. Then he chewed through the cable so that it wouldn't be usable, at least for now. Mabel pulled him away once his task was done, took him out of the room, and out of the office.

After they had patched up their wounds and had time to rest, Henry went to find the master's body. Mabel stayed behind to bury her own master. He said goodbye and left.

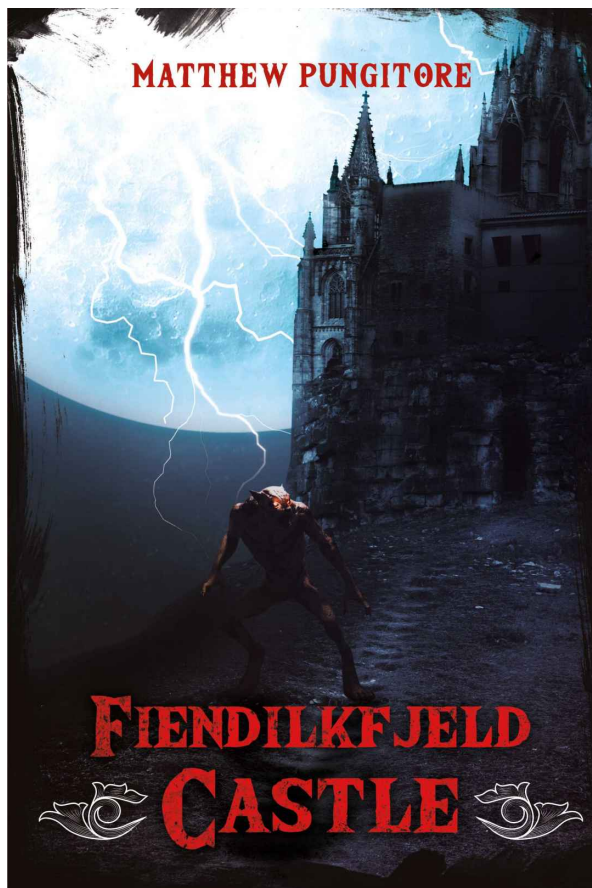
The cats hadn't returned to the office building when he arrived, so his search was rather quiet. When he finally found the master, he was lying in a closet among a couple of mops and brooms. Henry dragged

him out of the building by his feet. It was a long and tiring process, and he was glad the cats had left the master on the ground floor.

When they were finally outside, Henry dug a deep hole on the building's front lawn, careful not to get his bandages dirty. Once he was done, he jumped out of the hole, pushed the master in, and buried him. Then he stacked a pile of rocks on top of the grave and stared at them for a long while.

Now that all of the humans were dead, a power vacuum had formed on the Earth. Prince William had tried to claim the title of king, and Henry had stopped him, but there would be others. He realized then that his only course was to find other dogs and form a group that could lead the other animals. Only then could he ensure their freedom.

Dan Wolfgang is a writer and culture commentator who writes Animal Fables in the tradition of Aesop and Robert C. O'Brien. Henry and the Prince of Cats is his first appearance in Cirsova Magazine.





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Bad Luck Charm

By JAY BARNSON

Larry Colton has had quite the run of luck! He's got a good job and a new girlfriend he thinks is out of his league... Things are great, aside from a few strange nightmares!

Thursday the 12th of May began like most other mornings, with Larry Colton gasping for breath. The suffocating horror of his repeating nightmare retreated into the fog of his subconscious before he was fully awake. He never remembered what it was about, so he couldn't be sure it was exactly the same, but the vague residual fear melted in the dawn light that flooded his bedroom with a warm yellow glow.

Adrienne sat beside him, only slightly mussed from her night's sleep, and wrapped her arms around him. "Another nightmare, sweetheart?"

He nodded, self-conscious about the sheen of perspiration covering him. "Yeah. It's fine. I'm sorry I woke you up." He patted her arm. She squeezed him tighter. The moment was broken by the time advancing to 7:00 on the LED display of the alarm clock. The clock blasted the most annoying sound humans could manufacture that didn't involve fingernails on a chalkboard.

Larry clicked the alarm off and stumbled into the bathroom to take a shower. Adrienne got up and went downstairs to make breakfast. It was an old-fashioned system, but it worked. When she wasn't playing the homemaker, she spent three to six hours a day doing some kind of wizardry with financial markets that probably made her more money in a week than Larry made in a month.

That part never bothered him. It was that he didn't deserve her, and he knew it. She was almost too perfect. As he got ready for work, he wondered if that was where the nightmares came from. Perhaps his subconscious was warning him that he'd done something to cheat the system, and sooner or later the universe would correct the problem with one massive karmic boot to the butt.

He'd never experienced nightmares when he was with Emily. They'd struggled back then, but had it really been that bad? He couldn't remember what their big argument had been about, only that he'd been furious enough to call off the engagement.

Shaving in the mirror, he spotted the new gray hair, a tiny silver thread gleaming in a field of dark brown. At only twenty-six years old, he was too young for gray hair, wasn't he? One of his best friends from high school, Austin Thorpe, started going bald during his senior year. Maybe this was what he had to deal with instead? He set his razor down, with the left side of his face still plastered with shaving cream, and fiddled with his hair in the mirror until he got his fingers around the offending strand of gray. He yanked it free and dropped it into the sink, where it washed down the drain. Others might follow, but now he could preserve the illusion of normalcy for a little while longer.

A few minutes later, he descended the stairs, where he was met with the harmonious aromas of omelet and coffee. Adrienne had thrown her bathrobe over her nightclothes and had their breakfast already set at the table. "Feeling better, sweetie?"

"Lots. A shower and coffee is all I really need." Some days he felt no better rested in the morning than when he'd gone to bed. This felt like one of those days.

They sat down at the table and ate. He considered making a joke about a gray hair being an early Friday the Thirteenth present. It was the sort of dumb joke that would have earned an eye-roll from Emily but would offend Adrienne. Adrienne hated any references to anything supernatural. She felt that even joking about the supernatural gave it subconscious power over the mind.

Larry never considered himself superstitious, and he'd never had time for religion. He had no problem maintaining a reality-grounded household. That was one of the differences between him and Emily, who believed in ghosts and witchcraft and new age nonsense. That was one more reason he was so much happier with Adrienne.

"I hope a tuna fish sandwich is okay for lunch," she said. "I need to head to the store today."

"Tuna fish is great. I love tuna," he said. It was a white lie.

"Good! I'll be sure and buy more today."

And there was the karmic kick in the butt for lying. Was that still considered superstition?

They finished breakfast and went through the rest of their morning ritual. He promised to be home by 6:00, as usual. He poured the remaining coffee into his thermos and drove to the office, yawning several times on the way there.

A few hours later, Zach appeared at the doorway to Larry's windowed office. "Hey, it's lunchtime. Meet you in the break room?" Zach was about five years older than Larry, with short, curly hair, and a neatly trimmed beard. The two had become friends on Larry's first day, in spite of having very little in common beyond the job.

Larry nodded. "Just finishing this up. I'll be right behind you." He saved and closed up the account information, but he hesitated at his office door. The idea of tuna turned his stomach. It wasn't that he disliked it, and he appreciated Adrienne's efforts to get him to eat healthier. Maybe it was the nightmares, but he just wanted to go out by himself and eat a meatball sub. He hadn't done that in forever. Whatever the case, he was tired and irritable, and he just didn't feel like eating tuna. Adrienne never had to know.

Zach was already sitting alone at the table, chowing down on some kind of leftovers from a plastic container. Larry stepped to the doorway and waved. "Hey, Zach. I'm sorry, I just remembered some errands I need to get done during lunch today."

Zach looked almost guilty. He swallowed his bite and said, "Oh, hey, let me put this back in the fridge, and I'll tag along." He seemed oblivious to the awkwardness of the offer.

Suppressing a wince, Larry said, "No need. I'll see you in an hour."

Chip's Deli wasn't far from the IntelliSure office, and it felt like a beautiful day to walk. Emily used to work at Chip's back in school. It was where they'd first gotten to know each other. He hadn't been there since before they'd broken up. He hadn't been much of anywhere since they'd broken up. He'd met Adrienne and gotten the new job within days of leaving Emily, and life had gotten busy. Good, routine, and busy.

Today, feeling tired and listless and fed up with unremembered nightmares, he wanted something different. It would be nice just to indulge himself for an hour. Maybe all it took was a slight change in

the routine to quiet the nightmares. One night of uninterrupted rest might make all the difference.

He didn't see the homeless woman until she accosted him by name—his first name. "Larry! Larry, I've been looking for you." In spite of her ragged, crazed appearance, she wasn't old. There was something familiar about her. A nasty rash blemished one side of her face, and her hair was matted down with days of dirt and oils. Her mouth slowly opened, revealing teeth in bad need of dental work, like a meth-head. Her wild eyebrows shot up. "Don't you recognize me, Larry?"

"I don't," he said cautiously, taking a step back. "Were you a neighbor of my parents or something?" He reached for his wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill to offer her.

She stared at the money in disgust. "Is that what you see when you see me?"

He lowered his hand. "I'm sure you are a nice lady. But I can't stay and talk."

"Here!" she said, holding her hand out to him, a gleaming silver object in her fingers. "It's from my uncle. I've tried to get this to you for weeks, but you..." she trailed off, and thrust it at him.

He waved her off. "I really don't want anything of yours."

"You are having nightmares, aren't you?"

Too stunned by her comment, he let her thrust the item into his hand. "It's a... luck charm. Don't let anyone else see that you have it. Don't tell anyone you saw me."

She turned and staggered away from him before he could ask her any questions—foremost of which was how she knew about his nightmares. He only admitted them to Adrienne because he couldn't hide them from her when he woke up gasping or crying out. Unless she'd told someone else, there was no reason anyone should have known about them.

The object in his hand was made of tarnished silver, triangular and inscribed with strange runes and characters from some unfamiliar alphabet. The tiny inset stones were probably of some minor value as well. Even as a bizarre piece of costume jewelry, it would be worth the price of a couple of meals for the poor woman. Perhaps it was stolen and she didn't want to be caught with it? That would explain her worry about anyone seeing it.

He could always throw it away later. For now, he pocketed the strange silver triangle and continued to the Deli.

Larry didn't recognize the red-haired kid working the cash register, but Chip, the owner, came out of the kitchen area to greet him. Chip was in his mid-fifties, a retired Navy cook who kept himself in surprisingly good shape over the years. "Larry Colton! I haven't seen you around in a long time. I wasn't sure you were still in town."

Larry grinned. "Yep, still here. I work for IntelliSure now."

"Not sure I've heard of them."

Pointing out the window, Larry said, "It's that big building just around the corner. You should probably get a lot of them at lunchtime. You are the closest place to eat."

"Oh, well, not that I've noticed. Just in case, be sure to tell them about me. So how are you? And how's Emily?"

"I don't know. We broke up a few months back."

"Really? She came in asking if I'd seen you just a few days ago. I just thought... well, never mind. What can I get for you?"

A few minutes later, as he finished his meatball sub and waved goodbye to Chip, Larry decided that he definitely needed to get out more. As strange as his encounter with the homeless woman was, it was worth it just to shake up some of the monotony and get some fresh air. He fidgeted with the strange triangular trinket as he returned to the office. The silvery metal remained strangely cool in his hands, even as he developed a sweat in the warming late-spring heat.

Entering the IntelliSure building, he made his way past the rows of cubicles feeling somewhat triumphant. He'd broken the routine a little, in spite of the strangeness, and it felt good. He was halfway to his office before he noticed the silence.

The cubicle beside him was vacant. Not even a cheap rolling chair or carpet protector occupied the barren space. The next cubicle was the same. Aside from the soft hum of the climate control, the only sound on the floor came from Zach's office as he spoke with someone over the phone behind a partially closed door.

Larry jammed the silver trinket into his pocket and marched along the aisle of empty cubicles to Zach's door. He knocked twice before opening the door the rest of the way.

Zach spun in his leather swivel chair, looking a little like a child that had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I'll call you back," he

said on his cell-phone, and then hung up. To Larry, he asked, "How was lunch?"

"Weird," Larry answered. "And it's getting weirder. What's going on? Is this a joke?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Where did everybody go?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Zach said, looking over Larry's shoulder.

Larry turned. The cubicles were full, and the office was filled with the usual clatter of business getting done. Everything was exactly as it should be, except for the possibility that Larry was going crazy. He turned back to Zach and tried to cover. "People were just really quiet when I walked in. I, um..." He looked around. "I wondered if Margaret had given the customer service pool a stern talking to or something."

Zach nodded slowly. "Uh, yeah. She might have. I was on the phone, so I wasn't really paying attention."

Larry shrugged, trying to play it off. "I have to get back to work," he muttered, and returned to his office.

He sat down at his desk and stared at his computer for several minutes before doing anything productive. He was either going crazy, or someone was playing a joke on him. He didn't like either one. If it was a joke, where was the punchline? Perhaps the nightmares were getting out of hand, and he was struggling with exhaustion.

He checked his pocket. The silver triangle was still there, so he hadn't imagined that. He pulled it out and stared at it for a moment. The inscriptions still made no sense. The homeless woman handing it to him made no sense. Feeling defeated, he put the triangle back in his pocket and got back to work, something that absolutely made sense to him.

However, this time, it didn't. The interface was crude and wrong, like he was using an old beta of the software, and he couldn't tell if the fields were actually saving. After a few failed entries, everything seemed back to normal. Someone in the Information Technologies department at corporate HQ must have screwed up.

His work rarely consumed his entire attention, and his mind wandered more than usual this afternoon. A number of fantastic and, in many cases, impossible ideas popped into his head, all centering around the ugly but familiar woman he'd met on the street and the

triangular object in his pocket. Could she have coated it with some kind of drug that was causing him to hallucinate? Could he be looking into a grim possible world as a reminder of how dismal life could have been for him?

Zach stepped halfway into his office and leaned against the door frame. "Hey, Larry, you up for Milo's? It's Ladies' Night."

Larry checked the clock on his computer. It was almost 5:00. The day had flown by while he had been daydreaming. He snorted at Zach. "First off, we're not ladies. Secondly, I'm in a steady relationship and not looking right now."

Zach beat on his chest with his hand. "Come on, man. Think of your old pal, Zachary! I'm looking, and I need a wingman!"

Larry laughed and shook his head. "Maybe next week, dude. I've not been sleeping too well, and I promised Adrienne I'd be home by 6:00."

Zach sighed dramatically. "I get it, I get it. Next time, maybe." He waved and left.

Larry kept working for twenty more minutes, making certain he was appropriately caught up after a slightly extended lunch and fighting with buggy software. He wasn't usually one to stay late. Actually, he was never one to stay late. As he got up to leave, only Margaret's office still had the light on, but her door was closed.

He gently knocked on Margaret's door. He heard the frantic noises behind the door, and then Margaret opened the door part-way, as if hiding the contents of the office behind her. She was a dark-skinned woman, always dressed for success in charcoal or dark plum-colored pantsuits. She had her shoes off, leaving her about an inch shorter than she stood when pacing around the cubicles keeping the support crew busy.

"Can I help you, Mr. Colton?" she asked, her voice allowing Larry no opportunity to mistake her question as an offer to help.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm leaving. I think you are the last one here."

"I always am," she said, raising her chin.

"Okay. Sorry. I just wanted you to know. Have a good night."

She nodded slowly. "You too, Mr. Colton. Goodbye." She closed her office door. Her office was larger than anyone else's, including their mutual boss, the branch manager Elijah Kincaid. Then again, she was

about ten times more hands-on than Kincaid. Most days, Larry never saw his boss.

As he drove home, his thoughts were again on the amulet and the strangely familiar woman who had given it to him. What had she meant about the nightmares?

The song on the radio, a favorite when he was in high school, interrupted his thoughts. He hummed along until the nostalgia got to him. Just before turning onto the street that led to his nice, upper-middle-class neighborhood, he said, "Screw it," out loud. He broke with routine again and turned around. Rather than head to Milo's to join Zach, he drove to the Richard Street Lounge. Until six months ago, it had been an infrequent hang-out, but one where he'd occasionally run into old friends. His lunch at Chip's had made him feel nostalgic. He wanted to see old friends again.

The smell and ambiance of the lounge felt familiar, unlike Milo's. He took a seat at the bar and texted Adrienne to let her know he'd be late. He didn't say why. He didn't recognize the woman tending the bar, but he ordered a beer and stared at himself in the dim glass of the mirror behind her.

As she brought his drink to him, he recognized another face in the mirror. The man's bald spot was considerably larger, but the grin on his face was unmistakable. Larry turned as Austin Thorpe clapped him on the shoulder.

"Larry! It's been a while! You aren't single again, are you?"

Larry smiled back. "Nope, I just thought I'd drop by to see if the old gang had gotten into much trouble while I've been busy. I'm disappointed to see you haven't."

Austin took the stool beside him. "I haven't been around much either. Things have been a little crazy lately."

Larry chuckled. "That'd describe my day."

Austin ordered a beer. "So, what are you doing these days?"

"I've been working at IntelliSure for about six months now."

"Huh. I don't think I've heard about them. They good to work for?"

Larry shrugged. He and Austin had both struggled with low-paying jobs after college. "It keeps me pretty busy, but it's okay. How about you? What have you been up to?"

"This and that. I'm working part-time as a sales clerk while I get my Internet business off the ground. Things are starting to come along.

So how are things with you and... uh... I'm sorry, not Emily. I heard you got together with someone else."

"Adrienne. Things are great. Couldn't be better."

Austin cocked his head to the side. "Honestly great, or is that, like, a code?"

"Honestly great. We're doing really well. Job's doing great. I'm doing a lot better than I deserve..."

Austin snorted. "That shouldn't be too hard."

Larry laughed. "Yeah, you're right. I've been pretty lucky."

"I'm happy for you. Honestly. Hey, we ought to get together sometime, maybe watch a game together or something. You, me, Kevin, maybe Eric."

Larry nodded vigorously. "I'd like that. It'd be good to reconnect with everyone. It's been a long time."

Austin sighed, his face growing serious. "Hey, not to pry, but you haven't seen Emily lately, have you?"

Larry shook his head. "No. That's weird. You are the second person today who has asked me about her. I was kind of a jerk to her when we broke up. And then I met Adrienne the very next day, and we hit it off, which probably looked even worse. I doubt Emily wants anything to do with me."

Austin took a sip of his beer. "I probably shouldn't say anything."

"About what?"

Austin chortled. "Well, I guess I already did. Look, it's none of my business, and it probably doesn't mean anything. But just between you and me, I don't think she's all that over you, man. Not yet. She was telling us just a few weeks ago that something bad had happened to you, and that she was trying to help."

"Huh," Larry grunted. "Well, nothing bad has happened to me, so tell her she doesn't have to worry. Not that she should, anyway. Things are going great right now. Really great."

Austin raised his beer, half smiling. "I'm glad to hear that. That's... great," he echoed.

"Great," Larry repeated. It was supposed to sound reassuring, but it seemed phonier each time they said it. He really needed some sleep.

He returned home a little after 7:30, and Adrienne was waiting for him with dinner. He looked at her sheepishly. "Hey, I'm sorry,

babe.”

She shook her head. “Sorry that you wanted to have a beer with your friends? Why should you be sorry about that?”

“How did you know?”

She leaned in close, her cheek nearly touching his, and made an exaggerated sniff. “You weren’t wearing beer-and-cigarette-smoke aftershave when you left this morning, so I took a wild guess.” She pulled back and smiled. “It’s fine. I got back late from the store anyway, so that gave me more time.”

He kissed her. “I’ll give you more advanced notice next time.”

She hesitated. “Of course. Next time. Let’s eat.”

The food was delicious, but by the end of the meal, he felt his eyelids droop. “Sorry, babe,” he said. “I guess I had a rougher night last night than I thought.”

She touched his arm. “It’s okay. You go on off to bed. I’ll take care of the dishes and be right up.”

“I should help clean up.”

“You need your sleep. Go on.”

He staggered up the stairs. He got ready for bed on auto-pilot, until he fished his keys and wallet out of his pants and rediscovered the silver triangle. He ran his finger across the deeply-etched symbols on both sides, a vague sense of unease battling his fatigue. He still had no clue what it was, but it had been a focal point of some unexplained events. The one thing he did know was that he didn’t want to explain it to Adrienne just yet, especially if that conversation turned to his bizarre hallucination at the office. She’d suggest therapy, and he was too tired for that discussion. He placed the trinket inside his wallet and set it beside his keys on the nightstand. He crawled into the covers and was quickly asleep.

His dreams that night were vivid, and he could remember parts of them when he awoke. He saw a terrible horned creature straddling his chest, sucking at his breath as he exhaled, ripping his oxygen from his lungs. He couldn’t even manage enough breath to scream, until he awoke to the sound of the screeching alarm clock.

He felt more tired than ever this morning. Thank goodness the weekend was coming up. The clock displayed the date. 5-13. “Lucky

Friday the thirteenth,” he mumbled before realizing that he’d referenced a taboo subject.

Adrienne was already up and dressed. She frowned. “Come on, Larry. Don’t even joke about that. There was a study that says even that level of acceptance causes your subconscious to…”

He raised his hands in surrender. “I know! Sorry. I think I was just looking for an excuse to stay home in bed.”

Her frown faded as she knelt down beside him on the bed and kissed him on the cheek. “Tomorrow! I promise I won’t wake you before noon if you don’t want. Personally, I think today will be an exciting day.”

He returned the kiss and rolled out of bed. “Why do you say that?”

“Just a feeling. Or maybe just optimism.”

Her energy was in almost completely inverse proportion to his own. “Now who’s being superstitious?”

She giggled. “I’m just being enthusiastic! You should, too. Now go get your shower. I’ll make breakfast!”

He lumbered into the shower, and it did make him feel better. He lingered under the stream of hot water quite a bit longer than was necessary, savoring the feeling and trying to wake up.

When he got a look at himself in the mirror as he shaved, he realized that he looked even worse than he felt. Dark bags of skin lay below his bloodshot eyes. Just how many drinks had he had at the Lounge, anyway? He thought he’d just had one. He didn’t have the killer hangover, at least not yet.

Another gray hair had appeared overnight. And a second one. He pulled them both. If this kept up, he’d be as bald as Austin by the end of the month.

He pulled on his pants and transferred his wallet and keys from the nightstand to his pocket without much thought. The trinket slipped out of the wallet and fell point-first on his bare foot before bouncing off onto the carpet. Larry grimaced, sucking air through his teeth as the pain subsided and the tiny bubble of blood appeared over the wound.

After applying an adhesive bandage to the tiny wound, he stared at the silver shape lying on the carpet. “I think you are a bad luck charm,” he said out loud, then mentally chastised himself for saying it. Maybe he really was going crazy. As if to prove his rationality to himself, he

picked up the trinket and dropped it into his pants pocket. It was just a little piece of junk, he told himself.

Running late, he hurriedly finished getting dressed. He raced downstairs in spite of the slight pain in the top of his right foot. He wolfed down the omelet, juice, and coffee, and kissed Adrienne goodbye.

He arrived ten minutes late. Margaret was nowhere to be seen, and the door to her office was closed. Otherwise, things seemed normal and bustling. Zach intercepted him on the way to his office.

“Heyas, Larry! Mr. Kincaid wanted to see you as soon as you got in.”

Larry glanced at the clock on the wall. “Did he say what it was about?”

Zach kept his face neutral. “Just go see him. He’s in his office.”

Larry could count on one hand the number of times he’d had a meeting with Eli Kincaid since he’d been hired six months ago. One hand? Maybe one finger. Kincaid was rail-thin, and his suit was pressed with creases sharp enough to cut bread. He had salt-and-pepper hair that was immaculately cut and styled. As Larry entered his office, he smiled warmly.

“Good morning, Larry,” he said, his voice radiating confidence but with a hint of rasp, as if he were getting over a cold.

“Good morning. Should I get the door?” Larry asked.

Kincaid hesitated, eyes fixated at the door for a moment, and then he answered, “Yes, please.”

Larry closed the door. Kincaid hadn’t invited him to take a seat. Larry acted casually, hands in his pockets. Too late, he realized that was probably too casual for professional behavior.

Kincaid cleared his throat. “Larry, we’ve been observing your performance these last several weeks.”

“We?”

Kincaid closed his mouth, looking a little irritated at being interrupted.

“Yes. Me. And, um, the partners. At headquarters.” He closed his eyes and paused before continuing. “We’ve been observing your performance these last several weeks. We wanted to inform you that we’re quite happy with you, and we’d like to offer you a promotion. It comes with a significant increase in pay.”

Larry couldn't hide his astonishment. It really was too good to be true. He fidgeted with the silver triangle in his pocket and asked, "What will be my new responsibilities? And what's the downside?"

Kincaid hesitated and closed his eyes again, as if trying to remember something. He repeated, "It, uh, comes with a significant increase in pay. However, it is located at our regional headquarters. We will pay your moving expenses, but we'd like you to start as soon as possible, on Monday."

"Move? That fast?" Larry motioned to the door. "What about training my replacement?"

"That won't be, uh, necessary. You see, they are closing this branch down."

That didn't make much sense. Larry stared in confusion, and Kincaid seemed to melt under Larry's gaze. The creases in Kincaid's suit seemed less distinct. A previously unnoticed price tag dangled off the suit coat. Kincaid's teeth were yellow, and two were missing. He was at least fifteen years older than he'd appeared moments ago, but those might have just been years of hard living. The fresh haircut was about the only thing real about the man. Larry staggered backwards, his back contacting the door.

"Are you okay?" Kincaid asked. "I know this is surprising news."

"I'm fine," Larry said, concealing his alarm at Kincaid's change of appearance. He relinquished the silver triangle and pulled his hand out of his pocket to reach for the door handle. "I'll have to talk to my girlfriend and... make plans."

Kincaid stood up. "Okay, Larry. It was nice to, um, talk to you. Again."

Larry opened the door and fled towards his office. To his shock, the cubicles were bare and silent, as they'd been the day before. After the space of several heartbeats, his vision seemed to clear, and they became filled. Everything was normal again.

Larry shook and stumbled into his office. He sat in his chair and held the silver triangle in his hand as he stared out his doorway at the cubicle across from him. The nameless twenty-something tech support person sat with a headset on, staring at her computer screen, nodding and speaking quietly to the person on the other line. Then, in the middle of bobbing her head up and down and tapping on her

keyboard, she faded from view. So did everyone else. The main floor of the office transformed into a ghost town.

Larry dropped the triangle on his desk as if it had grown teeth and bit him. It landed with a silvery clink. He continued to stare out the doorway at the vacant cubicle. After several seconds, the world seemed to fill in again. The ambient noise returned to the office, and the tech support woman reappeared.

Zach walked up to the doorway, grinning wide. "So, great news, huh, Larry? The two of us made the cut. Hey, what's wrong? You look like..." He glanced down at the triangle on Larry's desk, and picked it up. "What is this?"

"Be careful, Zach! It does something to you."

"What? It looks like somebody's craft project went bad." He turned it around to get a better look. As he did, his own image wavered and changed. His hair thinned, his belly grew, and old white burn scars appeared across the top of his hands.

Zach stared open-mouthed. "No. No!" He clutched the triangle to his chest. "Larry, pretend you never saw this. You never saw anything. Let everything go back to the way it was."

"Give me the... triangle." Larry needed a better name for it. Bad luck charm?

"No, you don't understand! She'll kill us!"

"Who? Margaret? Tell me what's going on!"

Zach took a step backwards, triangle still clutched to his chest. Larry stepped forward, pulled back his fist, and belted Zach in the gut. Zach doubled over, falling to the floor, dropping the triangle.

None of the office personnel reacted to the sudden display of violence. Larry snatched the triangle off the floor and marched to Margaret's office. He pushed the door open without notice.

For a moment, Margaret was on the phone, ignoring him as she stared at her computer in her seamless professional outfit. Except for her failure to react to his sudden appearance, everything seemed normal. As Larry looked more closely, trinket in hand, the entire scene dissolved around her. A sleeping bag appeared on the floor, along with bags of canned goods and stacks of clothing. The woman lived here.

Or rather, she used to. Margaret stared at the wall with a look of horror on her bloodless face through eyes that had not blinked in

many hours.

Behind him, Zach and Kincaid fled the building. Larry stared at the corpse for several seconds before turning away. The silent office building had become a tomb. With quick but deliberate strides, he left the building, got into his car, and drove home.

He paused in his driveway after getting out of his car, gripping the triangle firmly in his hand. He wasn't sure what he'd expected. His house looked exactly as it always had. Perhaps it lacked a bit of the warm glow he'd always imagined, and there were brown patches on the lawn he'd never noticed before. But, the house was real.

It terrified him now.

He approached the front door and took a deep breath, fighting the instinct to run. He had to know for sure. His life had turned around when he met Adrienne. It had become almost perfect with her. Maybe the little silver trinket lied to him. Maybe it was simply causing him new nightmares, rather than fixing the old ones. The nightmare of Margaret's corpse would haunt him for a long time. It was no lie. Something had killed her during the night.

There was no fleeing. Either Adrienne was in great danger, or she was the danger. He had to find out, either way.

She had her back to him as he came through the door. She stood beside the window, one hand parting the drapes, the other holding her cell phone to her ear. To the person on the phone, she said, "Yes, he just got here. I'll talk to him and let you know." She turned off the phone and turned to face him, as beautiful as always. If anything, she seemed more beautiful as he held the amulet. His relief was momentary. Her shadow didn't follow her movements correctly. It stretched into her, not content to color within the lines as she moved. It just sort of clung loosely to her, shimmering and shuddering.

"Hello, Larry," she said in a soothing voice. "Why are you home so early?"

His hand gripped the triangle more tightly, one end poking painfully into his palm. Somehow, the real pain was comforting. He eased his grip, more to prevent damaging the object than to reduce the pain.

"What the hell is going on, Adrienne?" His voice shook. He couldn't control it. He had no chance to bluff his way through anything this time.

“Oh, sweetie. Something has gone wrong, but we can fix it— together. I’m told you received a promotion at work...”

“The job is a lie. This is a lie. It’s all a lie.”

She paused, staring at him. Behind those beautiful blue eyes there was... nothing. Not love, not hate, not even anger. Her eyes looked at him like the dead eyes of a shark. If eyes were the window to the soul, she had none. Only shadow.

“I’m sorry, Larry. I created all this for you. I gave you this illusion to give you purpose. It was your dream job, your dream life. That’s what I do. I make your dreams come true. I bring them to life. Only Zach, Kincaid, and Margaret were real. I let them in on the dream too.”

“Why? Why do all this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I love you, Larry. I want you to be happy. It’s my gift to you. I’m sorry I deceived you. Please forgive me.” She held her hands up in a pleading gesture.

Maybe, given time and understanding, with a real woman without those dead shark-eyes and the creepy shadow, Larry might actually forgive her. If she was just a girl truly in love who tried to make his dreams come true, who wouldn’t forgive that? But he didn’t know what she was.

“Why did you kill Margaret?”

She didn’t hesitate. There was no guilt behind those eyes, either. “She was no longer part of our plans. She talked. She told someone what was really going on. All I ask is loyalty. That, and just a tiny bit of your life. It’s a small price to pay for making all your dreams come true, wouldn’t you say?”

Her shadow shimmered and flickered on the wall from the morning sunlight, even though she hadn’t moved. It didn’t match her too-perfect form. The arms were too large. The head was malformed. And there were horns.

“That was you!” Larry said. “In my nightmare, making it so I couldn’t breathe!”

Her shoulders slumped. “Yes.”

“I’m calling the police. Or somebody. I don’t know who, yet, but someone has to stop you.”

She frowned. “I’m so sorry, Larry. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I could have made you happy for years. Maybe not many years, but it would have been a happier life than many humans receive in their

decades. I need you. I need to siphon off just a tiny piece of your life each night. But now it's too late. I'll take my payment in full."

The shadow emerged from her body, dark and horrible, the stuff of nightmares. The stuff of all his nightmares these months he was with her. The thing enveloped his chest, forcing him to the ground. It began to inhale and never stopped. With the wheezing intake of breath, he felt himself weaken, and felt the ethereal yet entirely tangible coils around him constrict. He felt himself—his perception of himself—getting pulled from his body by the breath that never paused to exhale.

He struggled, but it felt like his body was moving by remote control. He could twitch, but do little else, except for his left hand. It still gripped the triangle, and it wasn't as paralyzed as the rest of him. With laggard movements, he thrust the charm into the liquid shadow that surrounded him.

The scream lasted only a fraction of a second, as did the flash of blinding light that filled the room, and the instant of molten pain in his left hand. When Larry's vision returned, he found that he was free and could stand again. He felt energized. The pain in his left hand had turned to a low throb, and the triangular scar in his palm resembled an old burn that had long healed over.

Adrienne collapsed onto the floor, and her attending shadow vanished. She breathed slowly, staring vacantly at the wall, as drool slowly dripped from the side of her mouth.

Larry backed away from the scene, out the door, and backed further from the house. He hated it now. He hated everything about it. He hated Adrienne. He doubted the vegetable on the floor of the living room had anything human left inside it, if it had ever had such a thing to begin with. It didn't matter.

He fled onto the lawn, and stood by his car, half expecting Adrienne to come marching out, shadow towering and ravenous around her. After several seconds, he made the emergency call.

After the emergency vehicles had left with the vegetable that had been the monster's puppet, after he'd given a watered-down statement to the police, he met with Emily. Emily, the beautiful young woman he had fallen in love with and wanted to marry, and had

treated so poorly under the monster's influence. "That was you who gave me the trinket, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "You didn't recognize me under the night hag's spell. I tried to give you the charm several times, but you never saw me. I don't know what was different about yesterday, but you finally saw me, and I could talk to you without her spies watching you."

"A night hag? Is that what Adrienne was?"

"According to my uncle, yes. They invade your subconscious and feed on you, but can make your waking life a dream. I wasn't sure until I talked to that woman who lived in that office building—Margaret—a month ago."

"Thank you. I didn't deserve your help."

A thin smile appeared on her lips. "Maybe not. But nobody deserves what she did to you. And it wasn't all your fault. You couldn't see clearly."

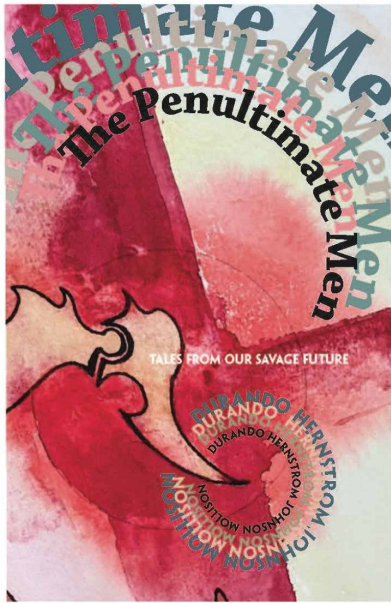
"Now I get to face reality," he said, staring at the house. It wasn't his home, not anymore.

"Is that so bad? My uncle says most people never want to leave the hag's spell."

He shook his head. "No. Reality isn't what I thought it was, anyway. It'll be refreshing."

Jay Barnson is the author of the "rural fantasy" Blood Creek novel series. By day he programs VR simulations, and by night he writes about imaginary worlds. You may have some luck tracking him in the real world at <https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B00TQOCLKI>.

Hide the horses. And put away the women. Here come...



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Death's Shadow

By CAROLINE FURLONG

Iraq War vet Matt Barnaby has been blessed—and cursed—by the ability to see the shadow of death, hanging about the auras of those around him!

Matt Barnaby bit back a tired sigh. He owed a debt that had to be repaid. This was the way it was to be done—at least until he was too old to do it anymore. This was the price of his life. If he ever walked away from that responsibility, there would be a penalty exacted from him somewhere down the line. He had a feeling that fee would be a hell of a lot higher than this one.

Still...he would have enjoyed just a little more peace and quiet before having to do it again.

He felt it as he began putting new pizzas on the buffet line. One minute, life pulsed with the happy buzz of twittering customers enjoying their meals. The next, those sounds were muted, as though Death himself had stepped into the room with his scythe in hand.

There was no warning, no premonition. He simply looked up. When he did, his eyes locked on to the young couple who had just entered the pizza parlor. They went to the cash register to pay for their meal, then took a table in the center of the restaurant.

She wore track pants, a jacket, and running shoes. Her hair, dyed blonde, was done up in a high ponytail. Across from her sat a man only a little younger than Matt. His track outfit appeared to be new and on its first use. It was close to his body, more so than the woman's, and had wrinkled badly around the cuffs. The true giveaway, though, was the price tag still dangling from the suit's waistband.

From the ragged gasps he inhaled, it appeared the male half of the party was unused to physical exertion. He looked like a lab technician or an errant bank teller. The woman was probably waiting for him to catch his breath before she suggested eating since neither of them had come to the buffet line yet.

All those details were peripheral, however. The main thing Matt noticed about the couple was the black coronas which surrounded them.

Something small and cold pattered down his spine. Coronas didn't have to be black. Matt had seen more than a few cream halos surrounding people who had later died of natural causes. It was rarer to find someone with a white nimbus, but he had seen a couple of those, too.

Those colors signaled impending, natural death, which no one could prevent. From what he could tell, they were also a sign that the person about to die hadn't committed too many sins during their life. At the least, those lights suggested the people had already made their peace with God and wouldn't land in Hell after they died.

Black coronas were another matter. They signified impending murder. And both the people he was looking at were enveloped in a black nimbus. It deadened the light and sound around them, contrasting harshly with their blithe chatter.

Forcing himself not to turn away, Matt noted that while the corona encircling the young man was dark, the one surrounding the woman was far more opaque, which suggested the man would be attacked first and therefore die quickly. It was more likely she would die later—probably after being raped.

His instinct was to run. If he ducked back into the kitchen, he could get to the phone, call the anonymous tip line for the police, and it would be someone else's problem. The woman and her boyfriend would survive the night, and he wouldn't have to do anything more than place a call.

Something held him in place, drawing out the seconds until he admitted the truth to himself. This was one of those cases that he *had* to take, despite the fact he really, really did *not* want to deal with it. It had been a full seven months since he had needed to interfere. The lack of activity had led him to hope he would have another month of peace before the call came again.

Pushing the thought away, he turned his mind back to the present. With a start, he saw that the woman's corona had darkened further in the last few seconds. Now it was clear that not only was she likely to be raped, it was probable that she would be killed in the act.

Looking at her smiling face, Matt felt a surge of hot anger well up in his chest. Willing his eyes to close, he took another deep breath and tried to focus on something else.

Finding his grip had tightened to a painful degree on the handle of the peel he had been using to shovel out the new pizzas, Matt seized on the feeling. With some effort, he was able to use the pain to push out the anger. After a moment, he was calm again.

Letting out his breath, he opened his eyes and relaxed his hold on the pizza peel. Then he looked for Murphy.

It didn't take him long to spot him. Tall and lanky, Bill Murphy towered over most of their employees. He wasn't hard to spot in a crowd, let alone at the cash register. Since Matt couldn't avoid freezing when he saw a person with a nimbus, Murphy had taken the job at the till. That made Matt's temporary inability to move less noticeable—and less embarrassing.

At the moment, Murphy was dealing with a new pair of customers. He seemed to be enjoying a conversation with the husband. They had probably found a common interest, most likely guns. Murphy hadn't found a wife yet, but he had found one hell of a hobby. As an instructor at the local range, he had more than enough opportunities to take his "favorite girls" out after closing time.

Setting down the peel, Matt beckoned one of their new employees to him. She left the kitchen and scampered over as he took his hair net off, allowing his black hair to fall free. Matt ran a hand through it self-consciously. It didn't hang to his shoulders, but it was still too long for his taste. He needed to have it trimmed. "I just remembered an appointment I have to keep. Take over, will you?"

"Yes sir," she said, smiling brightly. He managed to give her a small return grin before taking off his apron and going to join Murphy.

By the time he reached him, Murphy had finished chatting with the customer and was putting money in the till. The man and his wife headed for the buffet as Matt approached.

Murphy turned. One look at his face must have been all that was needed. "Going out, boss?" he asked cheerfully. The smile on his face didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah. I just got a call. Appointment I have to keep." Lowering his voice, Matt said, "That young couple over in the center aisle. Did they drive in?"

“Walked,” Murphy answered. “Girl’s into fitness, I think. From the way he was talking, I’d say the weenie with her is an office drone. They came in five minutes ago, jogging up from Pilar Avenue. She said something about walking straight on down to the docks. You could see the air go out of his tires when she suggested it, but he didn’t gainsay her.” He snorted. “If you have to let the woman lead you around by the nose, you’re setting a bad precedent, if you ask me.”

“I already did that—several years ago.” Matt grinned. “Thanks for repeating the advice. I think you’re going senile, old man.”

The other chuckled. Murphy was thirty-eight, five years older than Matt. He had a way to go yet before he was actually an old man. “You want me to tell Amy you’re going out?”

“Since I don’t know when I’ll be back, that wouldn’t hurt.” He slapped the other man on the shoulder. “Thanks, Murph. I owe you another one.”

A muscle in his friend’s jaw twitched. Murphy closed the lid over his left eye, which had been replaced with a prosthetic after an RPG attack had irreparably damaged the real one. “Don’t mention it, brother. Be careful.”

Matt nodded before turning and making his way toward the back of their mutual enterprise. Reaching the rear door, he took his baseball cap off the rack and jammed it on his head. Pulling his dark jacket off another hook, Matt slipped it on. A late autumn breeze bit his cheek as he pushed the back door open and stepped outside. He clenched his teeth against it and let the door close carefully. They’d been having trouble with it lately, and letting it slam shut made matters worse.

Walking around the left-hand side of the building, he paused at the corner. Doing his best to keep to the shadow, Matt leaned against the brick and settled in to wait.

There was an icy edge to the wind that seemed determined to gnaw at his exposed skin. Standing in the shade made it worse, especially since the outside of the restaurant was nowhere near as warm as the inside.

But the last thing Matt needed was for some passerby to notice him. They might remember him loitering nearby later on—or jump to an immediate and wrong conclusion and call the cops. Either reaction would bring an unhealthy amount of attention his way, something he didn’t want or need.

He shivered as the breeze whispered by again, trying to calculate the time. It wasn't always easy to know when a victim would leave his and Murphy's pizza parlor. A full buffet of pizzas, pasta, soup, and salad could keep people eating for up to an hour, maybe two. Some stayed even longer because they were talking rather than eating.

Judging by the tracksuits his two targets were wearing, not to mention the woman's desire to go all the way to the docks, he felt fairly confident they would not be in there very long. If the woman was that dedicated to living a healthy, fit lifestyle, then she would probably bypass the pizzas and desserts to go straight for the salad bar.

There was an outside chance she would take some soup, too, but it wasn't very likely from what he had seen. And if her boyfriend wasn't going to object to jogging all the way to the docks, he would eat the same things she would to keep her happy.

A disappointed snort escaped Matt. While he didn't like to prejudge people, he had to admit Murphy hadn't been far off the mark when he termed the male target a weenie. He looked like most of the geeks they had known growing up; adept with technology or science, but an absolute dummy when it came to real life.

Which meant this woman was either desperate to have a man in her life, or she wanted a relationship where she was the dominant partner. Both ideas tended to end in broken hearts and unhappy lives, but it didn't seem to stop people from trying them out. *One of the mysteries of the universe*, Matt reflected, *is that we seem to love hurting ourselves.*

Shoving the thoughts away, Matt tugged his hat brim a little lower and dug into his pockets. He pulled a set of gloves from his right-hand pocket and slipped them on. He had lost one from the previous pair seven months ago, so this set was new. They didn't fit as comfortably as the others had, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that they covered his hands.

For twenty minutes, Matt waited, listening carefully every time the doorbell jingled. As he did, he tried to keep his teeth from chattering.

At long last, after the bell gave tongue to its cheerful tune, two sets of footsteps began heading his way. Holding his breath, Matt listened to them approach. The woman was chatting up a storm about some celebrity, leaving no air for her date to say more than, "Mm-hmm," "Uh-huh," and "Oh, yeah!"

They passed him without even glancing in his direction. A small part of his mind noted that their coronas had darkened again. Silently, Matt stepped out of the alley, angling away from the street and falling in behind the woman, keeping her an easy distance ahead. She was the one with the most to lose if he failed. It only made sense to focus on her rather than the man beside her.

Following thus, he stepped forward into the shadow of her corona. In doing so, he left the weak autumn sunlight and the chill wind behind. He was now in the shadow of her death-to-be, darkening and narrowing his world in the space of an instant.

A hush fell over him. Although he could feel the wind rushing by, Matt couldn't hear it anymore. Cars, trucks, and buses whizzed past them. But no sound of engines, car horns, not even tires thrumming over the pavement reached his ears. Even the blithe prattle of his target was gone.

Entering a death shadow always did that to him. At this point, he was in a zone out of phase with the rest of the world. No one could see him following the chirpy couple as they walked down the street; no one could point him out or engage in a conversation with him. Matt might as well have been a ghost: invisible to all, but present nonetheless.

He shuddered inwardly. He had come close to being a ghost, a long time ago. That was why he could perceive death's shadow... and enter it. Yet another reason, if he needed one, to hate doing this.

They walked briskly and at an even pace. Matt watched the couple carefully, feeling his hands clench at his sides. The air in the shadow was neither cold nor hot, yet it was oppressive. Tension tightened his muscles and sharpened his focus, while the silence made him lick his lips.

On and on they went. Outside the shadow, time moved on. Inside of it, there was no sense of time, or even of movement. For all he could tell, Matt wasn't walking at all but floating across the ground, towed along by the woman's shadow. The idea alone gave him such a sense of unease that he didn't want to look down and see if his feet were moving.

What made it worse was that he felt like a spring someone had pushed down too far. Pressure—physical, tangible stress—built up around him, inside him. It was worse than anything Matt had ever

experienced in the Sandbox. Over there, waiting tore a man's guts out with fear, only to explode into action when the moment of combat finally arrived.

But this tension brought out something different in him. His automatic response here wasn't fear or mild anxiety. Instead, he felt only an overpowering urge to fight, to attack, to belt someone in the mouth and keep doing it until there was nothing left of whoever got in his way.

Pushing the feeling back, trying to force it away, only seemed to strengthen the black urge in his heart. Like a chained animal it pulled and tore at the restraints he tried to put on it, filling his mind and body with an energy he did not want while clouding his sense of control.

After what seemed like an eternity, a change came into their world, hitting Matt lightly in the chest. He had long ago realized that the sensation meant he was nearly upon his enemy. It also took his mind off the interior battle he had been waging and brought it back to the problem in front of him. *Not much longer*, he thought. *Not much farther*.

When it happened, it happened quickly. Off to the left, a shadow fell across the pair. A moment later, a hooded figure, all in black, hung suspended in the air on their left. A knife gleamed in his hand.

Once he sighted him, the spring inside Matt snapped. While everything around him moved in slow motion, he remained totally unhindered. The built-up tension, anger, and adrenaline surged out of him with the ferocity of floodwaters. The animal in his heart pointed him at the cowled assailant and lent wings to his feet.

His opponent never saw him coming. In the space of a breath, Matt had leapt out of the shadow and slammed into the would-be rapist hard enough to throw him into a wall. Power welled up in his body, sharpening his focus even further.

The man staggered away from the wall and shook his head. Caught off balance by Matt's sudden appearance, he grunted out a surprised curse. He lunged forward, trying to bring his knife to bear. Blood sang in Matt's ears as his right fist lashed out to jab the man in the stomach.

The other gasped and tried again to slash Matt's arms and face. But his aim was off, and the blow had weakened him. Even at half capacity, Matt could have avoided the haphazard swipe.

Instead, with the contempt of a tiger, he batted the little weapon away. He waited, standing still as the attacker recovered some of his strength. Matt smirked at him. *Be smart and quit while you're ahead.*

Either the man was telepathic, or the smirk was more annoying than he had thought. Snarling wordlessly, the man stepped toward him, one fist raised. *All right, but you asked for it.*

Dodging the punch easily, Matt threw his right into the man's stomach again. His next blow caught the would-be rapist and murderer in the side of the head, throwing him back a step. Then, his mind still surging with wrath, he stepped calmly, almost casually, inside the man's reach and started pummeling.

Somewhere behind him, the woman wailed and screamed. Matt paid no heed to the noise as his opponent tried time and again to get a clean shot at his head with his fists. When that failed, the man attempted to grapple with him.

It was a temptation to smile again. Matt's time spent in the death shadow had honed his senses to combat readiness, giving him ten times more strength and accuracy than this thug could ever hope to possess on his best day. He avoided the grip, then went on to block every counterblow the other could swing at him. *Like playing with a kid,* he thought.

The thought may as well have been a hammer blow to his head. As Matt threw a punch that would finish the man, it faltered midway through, nearly missing the murderer's face. Memory crashed through his concentration, shattering his cool focus and making him take a step back.

For an instant, he was at home again, sitting on the living room floor. A little girl sat in front of him. Her legs were crossed so she would not disturb the small plastic animals and dolls scattered around her. Her red hair was a halo of glowing coals, while her electric smile gave way to beautiful, innocent laughter.

With the memory, his anger broke. Blinking as a man roused from a nightmare, Matt saw his opponent leaning up against a brick wall blackened by years of soot. He held his side while his breath rattled between his teeth. Blood trickled down one side of his head.

Cold horror seeped into Matt, and he shuddered. The other man saw it and mistook it as a sign of weakness. With a half-hearted lunge, he swung at him—

Matt dropped him with a quick, nonlethal blow he had learned in the Marines. As the man's body fell, he glanced over his shoulder, making sure that the hat's brim hid his face as he did.

Both the people he had followed were on the ground. The woman was on her knees beside a dumpster, her screams having died down to terror-stricken sobs. Her makeup, ruined by her tears, ran in runnels down her cheeks.

Matt feared at first that the woman's date, splayed out on his back in the middle of the pavement, was dead. But when he saw his even breathing, he realized the other man had fainted at some point during the encounter.

He almost laughed. But the urge died as the woman's sobs rose in another plaintive wail. A sense of overpowering shame filled him. He had let the monster out—again—to save her, and it had nearly cost him.

Again.

Turning, he made tracks down the alley, his mind and body numb. His trot quickly became a run. Looking for a familiar landmark, Matt realized they had gone all the way to the docks, just as the woman hoped.

Glancing up at the sky, he saw it gilded by sunset. Pink streaks blushed where the sunlight still touched the sky, while darker belts of purple wreathed the rosy bands. Twilight had come upon the world while he had been in the shadow of death.

Instead of easing his guilt, the awe inspired by the beauty made Matt feel worse. Ducking his head, he began weaving aimlessly in and out of the warehouses on the docks to confuse any witnesses who might have seen the fight.

When he was far enough away from the battle, he ripped his hat off and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. That was when he remembered the gloves he still wore. Stripping them off, he shoved them into the other pocket, then checked his hands. They had streaks of blood on them. He paused long enough to wash them off in water that had collected in the lid of a barrel overnight.

Red bands swirled in the water, transporting his mind back to that day ten years ago—the day Murphy had lost his eye. The day Matt had died.

Normally, a regular patrol put him on edge. When things became routine in Iraq, they invariably turned deadly. Routine fostered complacency, which bred contempt. Not the kind where you scoffed at death and danger, just the kind where you didn't think about the possibility of their appearance as often as you should. The enemy always liked to strike when you were in that frame of mind because it meant you weren't paying attention.

Matt had allowed himself to be lulled into complacency by the routine that day. For once it had felt like everything would go smoothly. He had even traded jokes with Murphy, jokes he normally would have saved for the base.

Then the world had exploded in sound, fury, and dirt, leaving Matt staring at a far different sky than the one above him tonight.

When he called for a report, he had not heard a response, mostly because his ears had not recovered from the sound of the RPG blast. And when he had tried to move, liquid fire had burned through every particle of his upper body. Whether or not he screamed, he couldn't say. He was pretty sure that he tried real hard to scream, though.

His memory of the medevac and the trip to the hospital was spotty. But he clearly recalled being declared dead what seemed like years after the blast, though he still felt attached to his body. The fact that he hadn't been breathing had only registered later.

There was no way to define in words what had happened next. Matt didn't remember seeing a light or hearing anyone talk, but he *did* feel as if someone had suddenly jumpstarted him. He had begun breathing again, ironically scaring the life out of the surgeon and the nurses.

To give them proper credit, their shock had not interfered with their duty. They had recovered quickly enough to stabilize him and patch him up, sending him stateside hours later to recover more fully.

Shaking the water off his hands, Matt stepped away from the barrel and began walking again. The air had chilled even more, and he was forced to stuff his hands in his pant pockets to keep them from freezing as his mind continued its track down memory lane. It had taken him a year to get back on his feet. At the end of that time, he met and started dating Amy.

An involuntary wince twisted Matt's mouth. Amy had been the first one he had seen with a death shadow. At the time, he hadn't realized that was what it was, or what he was doing. It had all been instinctive;

recognizing the danger, preparing for it, and acting once the threat appeared. Only after the fight had ended, when he had been forced to explain how he knew what was going to happen, had he realized that something was out of the ordinary.

Unlike the woman at the docks tonight, Amy hadn't fallen apart when her would-be rapist attacked. She had done the smart thing and gone for the .38 she carried in her purse. Because Matt had gotten to the monster before she could, there had been no need for her to fire it.

But there had been a need for her to call his name—at least three times—to bring him out of the rage-induced fog which was the result of his traveling in her shadow.

Matt shook his head. He had thought at first that the rage was due to his love for Amy. The idea of anyone hurting her had set his blood boiling even before they married.

He hadn't been totally wrong. Certainly, the fury he had experienced today didn't compare to what he had felt that day. Even so, what he had felt this time was still enough to send him skating dangerously close to murder, despite his experiences during the last ten years.

Matt felt his shoulders clench as he remembered just how close he had come to killing the man tonight. Stopping on the sidewalk, he looked up at the sky. It had darkened further; the Renaissance gold, pink, and purple had given way to the regular navy blue/black. Because of the streetlights, the stars weren't particularly visible, though a couple could still be perceived if he looked hard enough.

Why, God? he asked silently. Why do You keep letting this happen? Is this what You sent me back for? I thought You said vengeance was Yours alone. There's nothing in there about sending people like me to kill a murderer in a blind fit of rage. Why? Why does this keep happening to me?

No voice answered his unspoken cry. No angel appeared immediately with a message directly from God. But as Matt lowered his eyes to street level again, he saw that his directionless wandering had brought him to Our Lady of the Angels, the church he and his family regularly attended.

After a quick glance at the empty streets, he checked his watch. It was almost eight o'clock. Father Patton always closed and locked the church at six in the evenings, which meant Matt wouldn't be able to get inside. Looking around at the rectory attached to the old church,

he didn't see any lights on. Either Father Patton had gone to bed early—which wasn't likely—or he had gone out for some reason.

Matt's eye went back to the old church's façade. He couldn't get in, and he couldn't stay around to wait for the priest to return. Amy was probably beginning to worry about him. If he stayed out too much longer, she might send Murphy to look for him.

At the same time, though, something seemed to draw him toward the church. Reluctantly, then with an easier step, Matt walked to the front of the building and climbed the few stairs to the large wooden doors. He seemed to remember stories about people down the ages stopping at church doors when they needed guidance or just wanted a moment to speak to God. Since he couldn't get inside, this seemed like a good way to split the difference. On instinct, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against the old wood of the doors.

It was cool to the touch. Matt realized that he'd worked up a sweat after leaving the docks. Caught in the maelstrom of residual anger and shame, with his hands in his pockets, he had forgotten the chill in the air.

The old wood had retained the cold, of course, along with the stones around it. Heat leached out of him to warm the door. Matt leaned into the wood, grateful for its solidity, its stillness.

He stayed that way for a while, just relaxing, allowing the last of the emotions stirred up by traveling in the death's shadow to fade. Around him the night was still, calm, a soothing balm of silence after the turmoil he had endured.

Although he didn't want to, his mind began automatically reviewing the fight and the events leading up to it. It was a masochistic habit he had yet to conquer. He flashed back to the moment he saw the couple in the restaurant, remembering how he had first seen them.

Thinking back, Matt frowned. He could clearly recall everything about the woman; her face, dress, and identifying characteristics were perfectly preserved in his mind. But the picture of her boyfriend wouldn't come clear. It remained foggy and vague, despite his best efforts to bring it into focus.

That wasn't right. He had undergone enough training—before and during his deployments overseas—that he ought to be able to recall every detail pertinent to the man's appearance as well as the

woman's. No matter how hard he tried, though, the image of the man who had passed out in the alley remained dim and formless.

Likewise, he found that he could not recall any identifying marks about the man he had fought. He thought for sure the hood had fallen from the other's head during the confrontation, and there had been blood on his gloves. That meant he had hit the assailant's face—hard. Yet he couldn't remember what he looked like.

Shutting his eyes, Matt went back over his memories of the last few near-murder cases he had handled personally. He was disturbed to find that he could not recall any clear details of the assailants' attire or physical appearance. But he *could* remember every single one of the women he had shadowed over the last three years with near photographic accuracy.

He especially remembered the two little girls—eight-year-old twins—whom he had shadowed in a Target store seven months ago. *That* job had nearly gotten him caught, as their attacker had tried to jump them in the women's bathroom, meaning he had been forced to dodge the surveillance cameras when he came out....

With the force of a car suddenly slamming on the brakes at sixty miles an hour, Matt's brain screeched to a halt. He replayed the memories again, just to be sure, then reached back further to the ten-year mark and pulled up those images. It was a bit of a fight to make them all come clear, but in a little while they were there.

It was as though he had been looking at a hidden picture puzzle one way, only to see its real form pointed out to him. Aside from a few young boys, all the people he had ever shadowed were women or young girls. That had been the case today as well; it wasn't the man's shadow he had slipped into—it was the woman's.

Matt opened his eyes as comprehension smacked him in the forehead. He had been looking at this the wrong way for ten years. The anger he experienced when he entered a death's shadow—it wasn't wrath. It wasn't insane, animal rage, or a thirst for blood and death. What he had been experiencing for the last ten years was righteous anger. Because he hadn't recognized it for what it was, he had been fighting it, and that led him to skate far too close to wrath for anyone's comfort.

A feeling of lightness, as though a burden had been lifted off him, settled on Matt's shoulders. Standing away from the door, he brushed

it lightly with his left hand. "Thank you."

Fifteen minutes later, he knocked on his own front door. Amy opened it at once, her blue eyes filled with worry. Even with her curling red hair tied back in a ponytail and flour on her apron, she looked gorgeous. She eyed him for a long minute, trying to gauge his mood.

Matt leaned forward and kissed her on the lips. "I'm home. Did Murph call?"

"Yes, he did," she said. He saw her tension begin to melt away as she spoke. "I've been cooking while I waited for you to come home."

He sniffed experimentally. "Christmas cookies? It's not even December."

"Blame our son," she retorted, patting her stomach lightly. "He asked for them."

"Maybe *she* did. After all, we still don't know whether it's a boy or a girl." He stepped inside, and she closed the door.

"Oh, trust me, it's a boy. Mary didn't send me near as many cravings when I carried her."

"Well, maybe that's because she inherited my lack of a sweet tooth." He shrugged off the jacket. "I'm going to need to buy a new set of gloves. This last one was a little messy. I thought it best to ditch them before I came home. Where's Mary?"

"Upstairs already, but I can hear that Toby Keith song playing, so she's not asleep yet." Amy took the jacket from him automatically, her eyes trained on his face. "You look happier than you normally do after you come home from a job. Especially a messy one. Did something happen?"

"Nothing *happened*, exactly." He leaned down to give her another kiss. "I'll tell you all about it after I say goodnight to Mary. It's past her bedtime, and until I go up there, she won't go to sleep."

"While you're there, please shut her music player off. I like *American Soldier* as much as she does, just not on a loop."

"She's been playing it that long?"

Amy nodded, absently folding the jacket in her hands. "Do you want me to wash this?"

"That might not hurt. I haven't checked to see if it's—you know."

His wife nodded again, her eyes never leaving his face. "I love you."

"I love you, too." He smiled.

An answering smile crinkled her nose, making her prettier than ever. She turned to take the jacket to the laundry room while Matt went in the opposite direction, scaling the stairs to the second floor quietly. The door to Mary's room was ajar when he reached it. He peeked inside.

Mary lay snuggled under her covers, her red hair splayed out on the pillow. Her eyes were closed and her breathing even. How she could sleep with Toby Keith's *American Soldier* blaring from the small CD player on her bedside table was a mystery Matt didn't think he would ever be able to solve.

Stepping softly into the room, he shut the device off. By some miracle of childhood instinct, the abrupt lack of sound made his daughter groan and roll over. Her eyes opened. "Daddy?"

"Hey, Mary girl," he whispered, sitting down on the bed. "Sorry I missed dinner. I had to do some work that couldn't wait."

"Soldier work?" she asked. At five years old, she couldn't pronounce the *l* in *soldier*, so it came out sounding like *soger*.

Matt shrugged. "Well, kinda," he said, reaching up to push a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "It's all taken care of now, though. I'm gonna go downstairs and grab a snack with Mom, but I came up to say goodnight first."

An angelic smile lit her face. "Knew you would," she said. "Always do."

"I always do, and I always will," he promised. Leaning down, he kissed her forehead. "Get some sleep. Okay?"

"Kay," she muttered back, her eyelids already half-closed. In another minute, she was asleep again.

Brushing her cheek lightly with one finger, Matt remembered the image that had popped into his mind during the fight at the docks. He didn't get to play with Mary often, but the times he did were some of his most precious memories. It was moments like those that he lived for.

And it was moments like those which he fought for. No man deserved to lose his daughter, especially not to monsters like the one he had met today. He had been sent back not only to protect those girls but his own. Each assailant he brought down was one less monster who might someday try to hurt Mary.

He smiled. That was a worthy cause if he had ever heard one.

Giving her another, lighter kiss, Matt stood up carefully and crept out of the room. Leaving her door slightly open, he went down the stairs two at a time to have a late dinner with Amy.

Caroline Furlong is a sci-fi/fantasy author living in Virginia, USA. Her novelette Halcyon was the cover story in Cirsova Magazine's 2019 Summer issue. She has been published in DAOWen Publications' Unbound Anthology: Goodbye, Earth, and some of her poetry appeared in Organic Ink, Vol. 2, by Dragon Soul Press. Her stories were also featured in Planetary Anthology: Luna and Planetary Anthology: Uranus. Articles by Caroline have appeared at The Everyman Commentary, Tuscany Bay Books' blog, and The Mind at War. More information may be found at her website, www.carolinefurlong.wordpress.com.



The Meeting

By LIVIU SURUGIU

[translation by RALUCA BALASA]

Two star-crossed lovers, doomed by their strange malady to never meet, must share their thoughts and feelings by the letters they hide within their asylum chambers!

The asylum at Bre ȕ cu,
Transylvania

May 19, 1969

I was born without my permission, and I will die the same way. I'm a girl, and I've been here since I can remember. In the asylum.

My attention increases proportionally with distance. The farther I get from myself, the clearer things seem, but as soon as I return, I get lost.

The body is a necessary evil, the mind a useless good.

I don't remember anything about my parents. And I think they don't, either, about their daughter.

Almost every morning, I cross the park into a rotting forest. More than half of it is a peat bog, with trees thrown to the ground, melting like the lines of a story in their own ink. I come to the other side of the forest, and the dawn catches me there, alone, a black outline against the red disc of the sun, many kilometres toward infinity's edge.

I always stop by the barbed wire fence. Not far off I can see a watchtower. Sometimes I hear the sentries' dogs, but I never see them. The doctor says there's a military base there.

I don't go that far every morning. It starts at the beginning of every fourth week. First the heat, then the cold. And I become chilled. Darkness comes upon me. Then something ugly and inexplicable roars within me.

surprise awaited me today in the doctor's office: an old gypsy with flowing skirts and old gold coins around her neck.

A "Narcisa is a fortune teller," the doctor said and turned to her. "You say you can guess the future?"

"I'd be even better if others didn't keep changing it," replied the woman. She approached me, opened my palm, and touched my scar.

"It's not hereditary," I said with a smile. "It's only mine."

"Nothing is only yours," she answered, searching me with eyes wide, green, and liquid. "The love you will find," she sighed, "is impossible. The Lord will not grant it to you."

She gifted me a bouquet of daffodils, then disappeared from the room as though she'd never been.

But something else preoccupied me—it preoccupies me still. The scar on my palm. I realized that I don't remember how long I've had it. Perhaps I was too young. Or maybe my memory...? Obviously, I'm not a patient here for no reason. Could this be why I'm in the asylum? It's the only explanation for why I don't remember.

From now on, I'll have a way to keep track. The diary of a young madwoman.

May 20

The doctor gestures toward the photograph thrown onto the cold crystal of his desk. It's a photo of me, and I suddenly feel chilled, as though it were actually me lying there.

"What do you feel?"

"I've never seen myself except in the mirror until now," I said. "And I think the other mirror, the one in the inner eye, cancels out a part of the first's reflection. So even now, I don't see myself whole. It's as if something is still hidden from me."

"Have you thought any more about my proposal? About writing."

"I don't want to keep a diary," I lied. "I don't like writing."

I'm re-reading my first page and discovering how vivid yesterday's sensations still are. Really, it was about time. To write a memoir in your old age, when memory starts to fade, seems a great waste... of time.

Through this diary-testament I leave my most precious asset, my brain, as an inheritance to whoever will lend me his body.

May 22

But *is* it the 22nd of May?

How can I know what world I find myself in? I'm surrounded by crazy people! I congratulate myself for the side-room of the attic where I live.

My room is austere. A nearly empty wardrobe, a wrought-iron bed. On the nightstand, my mirror is guarded by three lipsticks and a blush—the only things here that have anything to do with me.

Facing my door is another door. A heavy lock has guarded it for as long as I can remember.

I must continue my diary and send it to the Institute for Psychological Disorders to get a second opinion and find out if I'm being kept here for a reason.

My head hurts. In fact, tomorrow....

The doctor says it doesn't matter how many lives we live, because we only ever remember one. Memories are investments in the years deposited into the bank of life; unfortunately, they don't cover the inflation rate.

May 23

Again I feel ill. *That* sort of illness. I could barely climb the stairs to my room. I'm feverish. I'm cold. It will come soon.

I need to write everything down, right up to the last moment. The doctor's cloak dangles off a hook in his office wall. That means it'll rain tomorrow.

I move a few chairs. I tilt the icon a little; behind it I've hidden the photograph. Should I leave the window open? No, I'm afraid to; in any case, I won't lock it anymore. Maybe it'll be of some use.

My hands are frozen. I can barely write.

I need to hide the diary.

At least three more lines. What did I see in my last moments? God! The door! When I came in, the second door didn't have its lock anymore. And it was ajar! I have to see, to make notes, so that I can remember.

Such darkness...

Andrei's Diary

May 24

As usual, I don't know how they brought me upstairs. They shaved me, washed me, and laid me in bed. Like death, only the opposite: an exhumation.

The gloom was spreading outside when I opened my eyes, and somewhere in the distance, a drawn-out rumble sounded.

The doctor wasn't late. "Andrei! How do you feel?"

"Just like every other time I rise from the coffin. It's quite something, being more powerful than death every month. Even Jesus himself can't do that more than once a year. Doctor, you don't look twenty-eight days older at all."

"I can't wait to hear about your latest visions, Andrei."

May 25

I could have ignored the lightning, even though it pierced the curtain thinner than my eyelids, but the thunder grew difficult to bear. Even so, gradually, I was ready to fall asleep. What intervened was the feeling that I heard something else.

The sound wasn't coming from outside the building, nor from the hallway. It was somewhere in the middle. It seemed the same as the noise made by my window. But who would leave a window open in the middle of a storm? And where would they have gone? No one leaves the asylum, anytime, anywhere.

A single room remained empty all the time. The adjacent room.

I entered the hallway and looked through the keyhole. I let out a shout, covered just in time by a clap of thunder. A large, hazel eye peered curiously from the other side.

It was the reflection of my own iris in a keyring.

I had never before been curious enough to do this. I'd seen enough vacant rooms without patients in them, so why couldn't I see an empty room with patients?

In any case, why was there a key on the inside? And who had opened the window? A new gust of wind slammed the shutter against the wall. Then, I don't know why, but I decided my next move.

I climbed onto the roof through the bathroom window. In two steps, I stood above the mysterious room. The most difficult part would be lowering myself beneath the eaves.

Lightning bathed the asylum in a flashing blue aura. The rain beat me violently. The clouds fruitlessly wiped at the moon's stained face. Through their wisps, it looked like the eye of a cataract patient struggling to see me between the gargoyles. The giant evergreens swayed beneath me like waves on a dark green ocean. Along the walls stretched wisps of steam like reverse waterfalls. Standing on the tile-covered roof, rain beating down, I saw brick walls losing their roots among the cliffs.

A nearby bolt of lightning struck the building, sending sparks from the gutters and awakening the toll of a bell from its depths. More out of fear than anything else, I jumped inside.

Everything smelled of daffodils. Beside the vase, in front of the mirror on the nightstand—lipstick, bottles of nail polish, make-up, a hairbrush. There were blond hairs in the brush. Excess lipstick had been wiped on a napkin.

I opened the wardrobe. Female uniforms, all the same size and colour, with shoes and slippers.

The same model of wrought-iron bed, likewise the candelabra above the green rug decorated with white flowers. The lightbulb was new, its filament golden, one of those brought most recently.

I felt something—a mystery, a disturbing secret. For as long as I've known, that room has been locked. I'd imagined it a sort of wasteland, full of spider webs. But it was inhabited.

And whoever lived there had left recently.

She could have been there for years. For years I'd looked at her ever-locked door. For years, her eyes had met the lock on my own door.

"Good God!" I exclaimed in the night of the storm. "An undead—like me!"

June 1

Five nights in a row, I went there. I fumbled, I disguised myself, I laughed. Luckily for me, those on the levels below are crazy anyway.

On the final night, however...

The icon—the only thing in the room I hadn't dared to touch—didn't line up with the markings on the walls. I wanted to straighten it, and

that's when the photograph fell, as if God himself had put it into my arms.

Just one name: Gena.

I stared at it, unable to believe what was happening. Something I'd never felt before, something I didn't even know I was hiding within myself.

In a single moment, my cells burned enough oxygen for a year, nearly suffocating me. When I revived, my body was still trembling. Love had detached from me and now regarded me sadly, standing right before me. It had become its own entity.

I'm afraid to write what I haven't yet spoken: I'm in love. Yes, love! I feel an ancestral desire for unity; I feel our souls commanding our bodies to meet. It's an attraction beyond any explanation, and for a moment I had the feeling I was thinking for us both.

I'm afraid—but it has begun.

June 2

I feel as though I'm going mad. I'm restless, I wander too much, I sleep too little. I have her photo with me and I stare at it all the time. How beautiful she is!

God, I'm in love!

The doctor's always asking me if I'm all right. Just today, he visited me in the attic. Does he suspect something? That I'm in love? But he can't suspect with whom.

June 16

Every day I long for the lock to disappear from her door, to see her returning home. How many times I jumped toward the door thinking I heard noises from down the hall! But the years that have passed leave no room for doubt. Her life is opposite mine, my death opposite hers. Not even for a moment do our cycles overlap.

We will never meet, not even for a second.

Even if she loved me, what good would it do? Love is only a remnant from the era of barter. It's the most backward commodity—you can't buy it with money. Its true value is given only through exchange.

June 19

I could have written her. How could I have not thought of this before? I could have written her every day, and maybe she would have replied daily. With a small effort I could have pretended that everything was normal, except that the mailman delivers every letter four weeks late.

June 20

The days have passed between heaven and hell. The end comes again. Already I burn like the fires of hell. Already my feet are cold.

This is the first time I'm sorry I'm dying. I'd like to live a little longer, to await her by the door, to see her coming home.

"Your photograph is in my room, still behind the icon. This is me – a little unshaven, because that's what the doctor wants.

I would have liked for us to meet.

Take care of my key.

Andrei"

I tucked the photo behind the icon, then returned to my room.

I must hide these pages.

I feel sick, I can barely move – I'm like an icicle. The time has come to give myself over to Doctor Repanu.

Gena's Diary

June 21

Normally I would have written *May 24*, but the calendar in the doctor's office can no longer deceive me. And tomorrow, when I'm stronger, I'll confront Doctor Repanu for the first time.

The icon seemed straightened, as if specifically placed to draw my attention. The photograph... I gave a yell. To see a photograph growing a beard! He photographed himself, naturally, by the ambulance that comes to the gates of the asylum, with the same trees in the background, the same walls.

Stepping into his room, something inexplicable came over me. For a moment, my controversial memory seemed to want to go beyond its edges, like turbulent waters that distort your reflection.

I found the diary in the nightstand's drawer. So this was how I'd walked into the life of a young romantic in love with his own writing. A

writing that grew in time with him, sadder and more sentimental from one line to the next. I took it all like a knife to the heart. My entire being shuddered.

“God! I die every month. I’m alive for twenty-eight days and dead for the next twenty-eight days!”

June 22

Now I understand why the doctor cuts my nails and hair. So I don’t wake up with my nails overgrown like a corpse’s.

“Gena. Some phenomena aren’t known. Maybe it isn’t good for us to know them.”

“Doctor Repanu, the phenomenon I wish to know is myself.”

“You say the water in the vase has grown green and dried overnight, leaving a dozen circles.”

“Not overnight! In twenty-eight days. The flowers have rotted. But I... why don’t I rot?”

The story with the daffodils allowed me to avoid mentioning Andrei. I was trying not to think about him, but the more I forced myself not to, the more he invaded my mind.

“I must tell you the truth, Gena. In fact, it’s about time you found out. Indeed, you are not always alive. But also not always dead.”

“Half my life I’ve been dead! Half my life has passed un-lived!”

“Gena...”

“All this time you were a fake after all, Dr. Repanu.”

“No, Gena,” he said sadly. “I’m not a fake. I’m only pretending to be one.”

The first day of correspondence

June 23

Ever-Distant Stranger,

To begin with, I need to tell you that I found your diary.

Oh! Would you believe that I didn’t know anything until now? Not about you, not about me.

I ripped out ten pages; with all this rewriting, it’s as if it’s no longer mine at all.

I’m still too shaken up, but I promise to return.

Gena

July 21

Gena,

I've never written anyone except myself until now. I'm glad you found the diary. From now on, you will always see it there, though it won't contain anything except banalities for Doctor Repanu. I hope we'll continue this correspondence.

Andrei

The second day

June 24

Dear Andrei,

Has it ever happened that you forget something and return to exactly the same place in order to remember? When the Earth itself passes through the same place, will we remember everything? And what, truly, is each person's place? Should I have been born here, or somewhere in the United States? And you? Where are you?

Are we who we were supposed to be? And *why* are we, why do we exist?

A final question: will you write me back?

Oh! I cannot continue. It's like throwing a bottle into the ocean.

July 22

Gena,

I wrote you first, though it's true that I hid the diary's last pages. I hope you have more courage than I did. I'm here. I'm waiting for you.

The third day of correspondence

June 25

Indeed, you did write first, on the back of your photograph. You wrote that you would have wanted us to meet. This idea gives me courage, though I don't know how it would be possible.

You'll find the next letter underneath the rug, beneath the fourth flower. I'll write you one every day, and I beg you to read them chronologically. You can reply in the same manner... that is, I'd be happy if you did. The rug awaits you. But promise me you won't come back to change something, and that you won't read ahead. Don't cheat, okay? In this way, it's like we're writing each other every day.

Until tomorrow,

Gena

July 23

Gena,

These letters are a miracle! I'm happy that we can at least write to each other. But will it be enough? Won't we always long for more?

How has everything happened this way? How can it be that we're born and we die in the same world, so many times, without even being able to meet?

With love, the same

The fourth day

June 26

Dear Andrei,

My diary is below the threshold; I feel obliged to let you read it. I want us to be honest with each other. It's the only way for us to get to know one another.

If you look out the window when the moon reigns supreme over the forest, you'll see smoky towers creaking with attics full of skeletons and mysteries. Sometimes the wind lashes painfully and beats against the wood, neither alive nor dead, moaning in the night. Other times the forest falls silent, but then Ron, the giant German shepherd raised by the old gatekeeper who resembles him so, howls sadly into the night.

I'm the only person he'll allow to pet him. Andrei, I want you to touch him. I want to know if he'll let you.

July 24

Pity your diary is so short! You almost got me thinking, though there's not quite that much mystery here: when you read these lines, I will be in a sort of incubator somewhere nearby. Maybe our coffins are neighbours, or maybe we take turns using the same coffin.

We live in the same world—unfortunately, not in the same time.

Ron, the German shepherd, was my only friend. I never left to walk through the woods without him. Unfortunately, this, too, "we will find out" in a month: Ron is dead. And barely then "we'll discover" how you managed to escape with your life from the cursed forest.

The fifth day of correspondence

June 27

Something has changed. My heart beats differently, faster, for both me and for you. I search for you always. I know you were here, that you will be here again and, afterwards, so will I. *You will never meet*, the walls say. *We shall meet, but certainly not you!* laugh the mountains. *Never together*, whispers the forest.

But I am certain we shall meet.

July 25

This morning on the other side of the gate, I saw a dark-skinned gypsy, like a remnant of the lost night. I immediately thought of Narcisa from your diary, and I rushed down to meet her. She was still there, as if she was waiting for me. I extended my hand to her through the wrought-iron gate.

She almost shuddered when she saw my palm, though my lifeline isn't even broken.

Then she ran.

The sixth day

June 28

My dear,

Read the letters only in turn. This is the only way we can respect "*our souls commanding our bodies to meet.*"

Kisses,
Gena

July 26

You found the hidden pages!

Now you know: I love you. I've always loved you, Gena. I searched for you, and I couldn't find you. I found you, and I can't touch you...

The seventh day of correspondence

July 1

I was lying in bed with my hands behind my head, staring fixedly at the ceiling, when all of a sudden I very clearly heard a voice:

"Good morning, Gena!"

"Good morning, Andrei!"

"I love you, Gena!"

"How long I've waited for you to say that, face-to-face."

I love you, Andrei. I stand before the mirror looking at my face, when, in fact, I see yours. I dream of you with my eyes open. I love your eyes, as black as a long-awaited night; your long poet's hair; your adolescent's beard. Don't you dare shave—you might cut yourself, and that would hurt me.

Kisses.

July 29

God, Gena, I actually felt your kiss. You're terrible with this game that has bewitched me; I almost lived it!

Jesus, we're two corpses in love with one another and two living beings who will never meet.

The eighth day

July 2

I've never ventured this far. Ron keeps on barking, with one paw ahead as if he were stepping there for the first time.

The mysterious ponds whispered before me. White wisps slid over them. A heavy dampness poured onto the trees, and the giant ferns drooped to the earth. Long, straight tendrils hung over the swamp and disappeared into the mist, like inverted candles still smouldering...

July 30

I like how you said: *"a heavy dampness poured onto the trees... hung over the swamp and disappeared into the mist, like inverted candles still smouldering"*.

What if we write a love story together? In fact, let's do it. We'll write a very sad one.

The ninth day

July 3

I can't tell you too much right now. I'm very confused, I don't know anything for sure, but I feel like something bad is going to happen. As if someone wants to separate us—more than that.

July 31

Gena,

This afternoon, the doctor came to inform me that tomorrow we'll be in Bucharest. He said it calmly, as if we weren't going there for the first time.

Five days later

July 8

Monday, on the fourth of July at dawn, I found out about our departure. The doctor gave me five minutes to get dressed and went downstairs.

And here we are—that which I'd been avoiding so much has happened.

Wanting to leave you a note, I entered your room. Just then the doctor returned. He called me, went into my room. Came back. God! For a moment, his shadow trickled underneath the door, passing by my feet.

I left as soon as I heard him climbing down the stairs, and in another moment I was downstairs too, suitcase and all.

5 August

Gena,

It's the middle of the night. I could barely wait for the right moment to enter your room and retrieve the last letter.

On my way back I had the impression that I'd find you for real. I missed you more and more. I realized that our closeness was much stronger than it seemed.

Of course, I found no letter beneath the fourth flower; I just read the letter dated *July eighth*.

Tomorrow you'll write me about Bucharest. There I rediscovered your perfume, the warmth that kept me on your track.

The eleventh day of correspondence

July 9

The feeling I had stepping into Little Paris was extraordinary. Choked with emotion, I clung to the doctor's arm, afraid to get lost in the crowd. I didn't understand anything of the word fragments passing by me, and I think I said, "Excuse me?" dozens of times. I didn't know if I should greet people or not. I was sweaty, and I wanted to scream.

Bucharest exceeded my expectations. The buildings were old, with eclectic architecture like I'd only ever seen in the doctor's wartime postcard collection. The glass windows doubled my confusion. I was startled every time I saw myself reflected between the hats, shoes, and expensive coats.

North Station had a foreign aura about it, like a maternity ward in which I'd just been born or a tomb to which I'd need to return.

"The count will arrive tonight at the Embassy," the doctor told me. "He's returning from Moscow especially for us."

"The Embassy? Count?"

"The Russian Embassy."

"I thought we were going to the hospital!"

"Gena, no hospital in the country can take care of your problem. We came here to get a visa."

That very night, I met him. I wasn't afraid of him. I accepted him immediately.

I saw the way he descended the spiral stairs, like a snail unwinding from its shell. He didn't look very Russian, but rather Oriental—a Maharaja. I would later learn that his father was from Kashmir, his mother from Tajikistan.

As he approached, I had the impression that we were travelling back in time together, somewhere on a spiral where we'd met before. He was tall, thin, with olive-toned skin and curly silver hair cut short. A thin nose, slightly hooked, his eyes large, black and almond-shaped, as if outlined in eyeliner. The count's mouth, a red triangle, seemed like something that had lived in symbiosis with his face for over half a century.

"Serghei Marevici Ulianov," he said, bowing deeply before me.

"Eugenia." I offered my hand, and the old man looking like a mummified young man, kissed it with a touch that made me shiver.

Not mummified. A sort of *Corpus Sanctus Incorruptus*, rather, with cheeks of wax and painted lips.

"You're a count?" I asked excitedly.

He answered with the voice of a man loved even by the stars.

And, indeed, so it was.

or Serghei Ulianov, the visa was no problem. We had to remain only a few days, for photos, the interview, and some other small formalities. A month later, everything was resolved.

In the days that followed we were hardly ever apart. We went to the Scala Theater, on a boat ride on Lake Herăstrău, a carriage ride in Cișmigiu Park, a drive on Victory Avenue and Magheru Boulevard. We visited museums, the art gallery, Kiseleff Road, where the Soviet Embassy is found, Antipa museum, the *Nicolae Iorga* Institute, Elisabeta palace... Bucharest bewitches me with its air and its aristocratic buildings, which have that beauty that only old and unchanged things can possess.

That evening we were to return to the Embassy, a real palace, where the VIP suite was at our disposal.

I couldn't believe I was a patient at an asylum. In fact, what exactly was I suffering from? Everyone gets infected with death sooner or later.

The chauffeur was driving, I sat drowsily in the front, and they were talking on the couches in the back. The city lights flew by us, the night's coolness getting stronger, it seemed, from the Dâmbovița river as we crossed it on its grand bridges. Downtown was noisy. Ballroom songs echoed on the wind, and people weren't in a hurry to get home.

"Youth is fleeting?" the doctor was saying. "How much more fleeting old age seems to be!"

"My friend," the count responded, "the more we age, the more surly and stingy we become, taking everything and giving nothing back, gathering whatever can be gathered and spending almost nothing. The less time we have to live, the less we live."

The car was the latest model of Mercedes, having first appeared just a year ago, in '68. I'd learned it had the nickname *Horse's snout*. The seats were cloaked in leather, the doors reinforced with rosewood. The rugs were so beautiful I wanted to hide my shoes beneath them, which had been getting increasingly tight on my feet.

"Death is, in any case, longer than life," the count said with a smile. "Even Methuselah has been dead for over a millennium."

I realized the subject wasn't the effect of aging. On the contrary, Doctor Repanu was reinforcing my conviction that he'd spent his entire life searching for death.

“The body is not what matters, my friend. The soul is everything. If souls don’t die, it means that neither are they born. Their number is always the same. But people have multiplied. That’s why they’re increasingly evil, because there are more and more people on earth without a soul.”

It happened on the last morning. Out on the terrace, I surprised the count as he wept over a flower.

“It’s not a flower. Also, it wasn’t a tear you thought you saw. Miss Gena, I’ve heard that you love plants.”

“In the absence of animals.”

“Do you know about the miniature Japanese trees?”

“Toy-trees! So this is...”

“A bonsai.”

I began to ramble, enthused. It was the first time I’d ever seen a bonsai. And, despite its smallness, I couldn’t yet see what lay beyond it. “I read that pine seeds are put in small pots, with only a little soil, to slow and reduce their growth. That their branches are tied, twisted, coiled. That they’re tortured, starved and parched until, after dozens of years, they remain forever miniature.”

Ulianov sighed. My youth and hastiness seemed to make him, in a way, happy and sad at once.

“A drop, a drop the size of a tear is all I offer it.”

He was trembling.

“My life is a bonsai. Closed in the vase of an ascetic life, toward the goal of aging twice as slowly.”

He offered me his arm, leading me toward a white wood pavilion adorned with red roses. In the Embassy’s park, the sunrise was more beautiful than anywhere else.

“I stayed here for a dream. I adjusted my pulse after its delayed arrival.”

I was certain that I found myself facing a political disclosure. In exactly two months, in the first week of August 1969, the tenth congress of the Romanian Communist Party would be happening in Bucharest. Could the count be a spy?

The red morning sun climbed quickly in the sky like another, larger rose above the pavilion.

“But now—finally! Now I can die, because I can live.”

A few hours later, the count announced that he would organize a grand ball that evening. With the invitation, he brought me a present: a box from which he pulled a dress. It was made of silk as black as night, floor-length with straps, the neck and back lined with silver stars.

“You can’t dress a daffodil in anything less than an evening gown.”

I went to the bedroom, put it on, then returned to see myself in the salon mirror and to thank the count. In its transparent waters he seemed, oddly, not twice as far but much closer. From the angle at which he stood, at a distance, he traced my figure as if it were an hourglass. “The present,” and he ‘touched’ my waist. “The past,” and he passed his palm, from afar, over my chest. “The future,” and he slowly lowered his gaze. “I beg you to schedule me for a dance,” he said, and bowed with his aristocratic elegance.

“You’ll be the first,” I assured him. I trembled. *You’ll be the first, ever.* I saw him again that evening.

From the first moment, I was already dizzy. I saw pompous uniforms as if through a fog, sparkling dresses rotating in the steps of a waltz, all reflected in marble like the salon mirror.

Suddenly, I felt as though something was erupting inside me. I became frightened.

When I told the doctor that I felt *that* sort of illness coming, he was downright speechless. He took me quickly from the room, up the stairs, and to the library on the upper floor. For minutes he studied my cheeks with a large magnifying glass, took my pulse, and listened to my heartbeat. Finally, he calmed down, and the episode passed.

The count appeared then, worried, carrying a glass of water on a tray.

“You spilled half of it on the way here,” I said with a smile. “In any case, it’s more than you give to your plants.”

“Please excuse me,” the doctor said. “I need to step out. I need air.”

The two of us remained alone in the library.

“Have you ever played the piano?” Serghei Ulianov approached and lifted the piano’s mahogany cover.

“The doctor had a harpsichord. Until I broke it.”

I sat on the bench and at once my fingers began wandering of their own accord over the ivory keys, picking out Grieg’s *Solveig Song*.

“Miss Gena, you were a pianist in a previous life.”

“I would have liked to be one in this life.”

“Many things should have been different now.”

He approached me, too close, and in such a bizarre way that he was beginning to scare me. I began trembling, but not from fear. Who was this man? How did I know him, and more importantly, why did I have the impression that he knew me?

“You were nine years old the first time I saw you, Gena. I was thirty, and you should have been, then, eighteen.” He sighed. “But time, ever an enemy, separated us. Your metabolism kept stopping, and you weren’t aging at the same rate that I was. So I imposed a hermit’s life upon myself, doing everything I could to wait for you.”

“Count Ulianov, I literally die every month!”

“In my heart, I too have died that many times.”

“Doctor Repanu wants me to seek treatment in Moscow.”

“It would be a mistake!” he nearly yelled.

“Excuse me?”

“Gena, I’ve waited for you for a lifetime—two, in fact.”

The count’s heart caught fire suddenly, like a too-dry field ignited by the sun, like an asteroid turning into a shooting star.

“I want you just as you are. You’re perfect to me, Gena. If in your living month you don’t want me around, and you want to have young friends, then in your dead month, you will be wholly mine.”

I felt ill then, felt a repulsion toward my own sex, and I began to shake again.

“Miss Gena! You misunderstand me. I wanted to say... I will keep vigil over your tomb.”

“I have a lover,” I said quickly. “I love him. Though I don’t know yet if he loves me back.”

The effect was unexpected. The count retreated suddenly into his bonsai body, drying again his heart which had begun beating too hard.

When the doctor returned, he found me alone.

I left the black dress in the palace and only then did I feel free.

The Embassy’s driver took us to the train station. By midnight we were on the train. Only the doctor and I sat in our compartment.

“Have you ever wondered about the fact that your cycle begins exactly when Andrei’s ends?”

I was confused. Actually, that’s an understatement.

“The cycles don’t intersect even for a moment. You will never meet.”

“Why? I understand that we’re talking about two cataleptic states, but why is it this way? Why are we so precisely separated?”

“You’re lucky you weren’t buried. All the other children died. The illness passed through cribs like a hurricane. But you two survived, and in you, the latent microbes have remained. Half in you, half in Andrei. They can’t multiply, but they also can’t die, and this measure was taken by the microbes themselves.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“This is why you two can only live taking turns; this is why you can’t approach one another. It’s what ties you together but, at the same time, what will keep you apart forever.”

Dawn neared, like a shroud unveiling a great mystery.

“However, if half-destroyed, the illness would disappear entirely.”

“What are you trying to say, Doctor?”

“You will never heal, unless through Andrei’s death. And he can’t return to normal unless you disappear. And even this can’t happen now. An intervention is necessary, a difficult one. That’s why we must go to Moscow.”

Outside, the light spread quickly. The landscapes whizzed past the train’s window, alternating, like our lives.

“I took care of you both as best I could. I taught you basic knowledge, I pursued your every talent and defect. I’ve loved you equally, though I knew that there would eventually remain only one. One of you has to die... for good. The time has come for you to choose.”

“This choice, Doctor Repanu, makes me think my relationship with Andrei isn’t a coincidence.”

“It is the way that it started. And, especially, how it evolved. Yes, I wanted to introduce you. But I never expected this. Choose, Gena.”

And I chose.

Now, when you read these lines, you too will have given your response.

August 6

Gena, my love!

What have we done? We’ve given one another our lives. The doctor is truly puzzled.

What can I say about the trip to Bucharest? Fantastic, though it felt like I'd seen everything before, either in photos or reality.

This time, the count was more reserved. He received us, however, with the same courtesies for obtaining the visa—forms, fingerprints, photographs. It's true, we went directly to the Majestic Hotel on Victory Avenue, and that cooled the relationship from the start. But, in the end, we still saw the palace like a snail shell in which the master wished to age slower. Whether by chance or not, the count organized another evening of waltzes.

Suddenly cordial again, he began to show me all the rooms. As we were climbing the stairs and crossing the hallways, there was less and less movement about. At one point, nothing could be heard at all; the count had closed the enormous mahogany doors behind us.

"Young Andrei, I understand you're suffering from repetitive cataleptic lethargy. Despite the fact that this is a very rare affliction, last month I encountered an identical case. Tell me, do you know Gena?"

"Gena?"

I was so surprised that I'd already halfway convinced him. And I was, suddenly, terribly jealous, if only because of the way your name sounded in his old yet still-beautiful mouth.

"Have you ever made contact with someone of this name?"

"I can swear that I have not."

"There's no need for that," he said, approaching the piano.

He truly did look like one of his bonsai trees, fruitless, barren, and doomed.

"She played this piano. Since then, I've kept it covered."

I stared at my hands, which all of a sudden seemed large, like anchors caught on the bottom of a soundless ocean, and I thought of your long, divine fingers, how they had touched those keys.

I was so frustrated by my lack of ability! I would have wanted to play as well, to continue, without interruption, a song started by you, a song whose final note had been preserved by the count underneath that expensive wood cover, like perfume in an old cask.

"You were not a pianist in a previous life."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Would you like to see her?"

I felt dumbfounded. Was it possible?

The count pulled the black curtain from the wall. There, in a silver frame covered with glass, it seemed that there lived, in the photograph, a fairy caught in her actual size.

“When I took her photo for the passport...” The count seemed to be speaking more to himself.

I recognized your golden hair with silver highlights, cut straight above the forehead and over the shoulders. Your eyes, much larger than mine... in their expansion, they diluted from black, becoming hazel like amber. Your nose a pyramid between the perfect hills of your cheeks, on a face pale as a desert. The oasis of your pink mouth stretched into a sad smile.

What were you thinking in that moment, immortalized into a photograph?

The count seemed to stiffen before your photo.

Two Embassy officials entered theatrically, holding in their arms a long, black silk dress with a hem lined with silver—your dress. “Mr. Ambassador, we’ve retrieved this after the iron case was broken—”

“There’s no longer any need!”

“We found Andrei’s fingerprints on the silver hem.”

“You’re dismissed. The plan fails.”

“Mr. Ulianov! But we have just...”

The count was no longer listening. We exited the room, and I left him stroking the evening dress like a madman, part of an evening that, for him, would never end.

On the train, the doctor managed to address me even more directly than he did you. “Andrei, do you believe that Gena loves you?”

“That’s what she wrote.”

“But that doesn’t mean much.”

“For me, it means everything.”

“Writing is nothing, Andrei. Though it remains, the feelings fade. Writing is the thought’s orphan child.”

“Interesting. I’ve never considered until now that a library is, in fact, an orphanage. Writing is all that ties me to life, Doctor. To Gena, to the world that I can never have. Writing is my life.”

The twelfth day of correspondence

July 10

Seeing the asylum from afar in the train, I thought that maybe, sometimes in life it would be enough to detach from yourself, just for a moment, in order to understand what you're truly searching for.

We are on opposite ends of the parchment on which this story is written. How can we twist it to glue the ends together, to make of our destinies a Moebius band? How can we meet?

"Doctor, I don't want him to die. And yet he wants me to live."

"Give it up, Gena! You should be the one to give up this impossible love."

"Not even in death."

"You've gone mad!"

"Then, finally, I've earned my place here!"

Alone from morning to evening, I don't speak to anyone but myself, and it's as if I'm writing to myself. I had to find out what disease I had; I had to find out that I'm not crazy, in order to go mad.

August 7

Gena,

Today, in a corner of the newspaper thrown upon the doctor's desk, I read that astronomers have discovered a black hole in space. It's thought that it is caused by a star that, while dying, collapsed on itself and acquired a gravity so large in a tiny volume that not even light can escape it.

I thought then of love. Love is the cruelest black hole, like that star in space: it wants everything and gives nothing in return.

The thirteenth day

July 13

This evening I discovered something terrifying.

God, Andrei, how can you be so at ease? The truth is that what seems insignificant in one life could be essential to another.

I ran after Ron, who wasn't allowed in the woodshed. To my amazement, there wasn't a single block of wood inside, and the wolf had disappeared through another door toward a long and empty corridor.

Thus I came to a room so large that my lantern's glow couldn't touch the walls. It was the inside of a church, with broken benches,

dust motes in the air, and icons covered with mold.

Yet in the middle, on a long table, lay a coffin—the only thing that had been dusted. Ron went to sniff it, then returned to me as if wanting to tell me something.

You! You were in there!

My heart hammered, as if *it* awaited me in the coffin, and only then would I truly hear it. I slowly lifted the lid...

Black tendrils jumped, hissing, into my face, and I screamed. They were just some hoses. Nothing else inside. You weren't in the coffin, Andrei!

The dog sniffed the empty coffin, looking at me, bewildered.

When I returned, I froze: the doctor! The way that my lantern's light fell on him, from bottom to top, he looked like an Inca mummy risen from its grave.

"Don't you dare approach that coffin again!" he said in a cold voice. "If he had been here, I would have lost you both."

"But where is he?" I demanded, emboldened.

"Undergoing a treatment that I'll also try on you. Now return to your room."

August 10

Gena,

I have to be more careful with you. My love, a man can't make a single move around here, not even dead! I know where my body was—but do you know where my mind was?

You think I haven't looked for you?

Concerning the treatment I was being prepared for then, I think I'll find out tomorrow.

Kisses,
Andrei

The fourteenth day

July 14

Andrei, the doctor told me today what he has in mind. A sort of speeding up of death, of shortening the death period, in order to disrupt at least one of our cycles.

He told me that if he doesn't succeed with me, he'll try it on you.

August 11

My love,

I know already, before reading your next letter, that you haven't succeeded. If it had been so, these letters, our written story would have already been put into action.

The fifteenth day

July 15

My love,

The treatment has failed. As if it were an ironic twist of fate, my body simply doesn't want to die, no matter how the doctor tried bringing me closer to the threshold between two worlds.

I'm exhausted. I can't write any more.

August 12

Love,

I'm heartbroken.

The Second Month of Correspondence:

Day one

August 16, 1969

Andrei,

If only you knew how happy your letters have made me! The fact that you wrote "at the same time" as I did gives me hope and makes me feel as if we were truly living in the same moment.

September 13, 1969

Gena,

I've driven the doctor mad with my questions.

I learned that you often swim in the lake in the woods, and so even though water scares me, I went there this afternoon. I even got in a little, disturbing the overturned mirror, millions of years old, trying to find there your belated reflection. The ripples seemed to come out of me, indifferent to the figure in the water. Whether it's me or you, for the lake in the forest it's all the same: the ripples would look the same.

Day two

August 17

Andrei,

I want you to be mine, and I, yours!

I want you.

September 14

And I, you! God...

August 20th was my birthday. How strange, to be dead on the day of your birth.

Did you know that time nearly stands still for the crew of a ship flying at light speed? If my coffin were put in such a pod programmed to return after a month, I'd wake at the same time as you.

Unfortunately, science hasn't gotten that far yet. But I think it will one day. The past lies in our bodies, the future in our minds.

If we lived in another era, we could have lived at the same time.

A few days later

August 26

It's true that forgetting is the result of time, and yet also its enemy, but without it, we wouldn't be able to orient ourselves in time. Old memories would mingle with new ones.

Do you think you'll forget me, Andrei? That you'll find another woman who will always wait for you and make you happy? I fear that this will happen. I'm selfish, and I want to keep you beside me at whatever cost.

I won't give up. In the end, I'll succeed in leaving my tomb early and coming to you.

I want you. I want you exactly as you are.

Now I understand the count. I want you even if you are dead.

September 23

I woke, sweating, in the middle of the night. The doctor was watching over me, and beside him, an assistant was taking my pulse. Another inspected my nails through a magnifying glass. In the dim light of a table lamp, their shadows strolled hideously across the opposite wall, as if they too kept watch over me.

"Doctor! What's happening?"

“The microbes. Gena is trying to wake in her coffin. We need to take care of you.”

“And who’s taking care of her?”

“Don’t think about that. Everything will be fine.”

All of a sudden, my face caught fire. It burned and stung something terrible, and I felt it stretching. I wanted to touch it, but I couldn’t lift my hands. I turned my head toward the mirror on the nightstand. It was covered.

“It’s protocol to do that when someone dies. Be calm. You will revive.”

“I’m not afraid. My only regret is that I won’t be here when Gena comes back to life.”

“It’s possible that she won’t revive at all. She’s merely trying. On the other hand, she wants to return here earlier so she can meet you. Don’t be upset.”

“How am I supposed to feel? I love her! One way or another, eventually we’ll meet.”

I want you, Gena. I want us to make a single body together. I feel this desire within me like a command.

Day five

September 2

Andrei,

Who do you think came to the asylum today? Who do you think barged without invitation into the doctor’s office?

“Serghei Marevici Ulianov!” The doctor stood from his armchair.

But the count hardly glanced at him. He was looking for me, and threw himself to his knees at my feet.

“I love you, beautiful Miss Gena! I love you!”

Two assistants came running, looking toward the doctor. He motioned for them to wait.

“Count! Can you tell me what’s happening?”

“But you... can’t you tell?”

Repanu gestured for the assistants to approach.

“Miss Gena!” Serghei began shouting, clinging to the door frame. “You don’t know the truth! Even now, you don’t know!”

He fought with the assistants’ arms, not with *them* but only with their arms, seeing them as independent beings, hitting them in his blind

and desperate attempt to escape.

“Gena!” He continued screaming as they dragged him out. “I love you even this way!” His voice echoed down the corridor. “You don’t realize! It’s much worse!”

“How odd,” I sighed. “The same words that make you so happy, at other times can make you feel sick. The same words.”

The doctor sat behind his desk, withdrew a hospital admission sheet, and began writing. “What a pity.” He paused. “Serghei Ulianov has gone mad.”

September 30

The count was discharged today, after a month of treatment. If I hadn’t read your letter first thing in the morning, I wouldn’t even have seen him. I was told he’d been moved to the wing for dangerous patients. I ran to the gate.

He’d just climbed into a black luxury car. Leaves from the birch trees across the road were beginning to fall, rusty, around him, as if they too were affected by the man caught in life’s autumn.

“Serghei Marevici! Count Serghei Marevici!”

The count paused with one foot in the car. Even from that distance, his unparalleled sorrow was evident.

“Goodbye, Miss Gena.” He gestured sadly toward me with his hand.

I wanted to call out, to tell him that it’s me, Andrei, but I let the matter go. The count was crazy.

Day eleven

September 9

Andrei!

A few moments ago, I thought I was going crazy. He said it! The doctor told me that we will meet! With the riskiest and yet the simplest treatment possible: injecting adrenalin directly into our hearts, mine so I will wake earlier and yours to help you fight death longer.

Good God! I can’t believe it.

October 7

“It’s my gift to you, Andrei. You will both receive it at the same time. It’s your meeting.”

Though I had already read your letter, my heart nearly leaped from my chest.

“You’ve convinced me. I’ve given up on Moscow because you don’t want to live without each other.”

I wasn’t able to articulate a single word.

“It’s possible that you’ll both die... or only one of you. The chances of you both surviving are minimal.”

Day twelve

September 10

“But there is a chance, isn’t there? There has to be. I want to see him if only for a moment, to touch him...”

“Gena! Two normal youths wouldn’t want each other this much.”

“But we’re not normal. This is the madhouse!”

October 8

Gena,

We will live or die together. Either way, our love has prevailed. Our story will remain immortal.

Day thirteen

September 11

Andrei,

I know that you will bear the brunt of this. I will or I won’t wake up earlier—not of my own will—yet you’ll fight death until the last moment in the hopes of surviving a little longer.

I love you, Andrei. I have from the beginning. I could love you even this way, from afar, but I want to offer you everything. If I don’t wake up, then when you leave here, take my memory with you. Don’t forget, Andrei, that we have shared the most sincere and pure love. Don’t forget.

October 9

It’s nighttime, and for the first time, I’m making the connection between ourselves and the full moon. The huge natural satellite floats on the sky between tips of branches. She, too, nears her final day. Tomorrow she completes her cycle, along with us. Does this celestial

body have any link to your life, and mine? She who raises the earth's crust tens of centimetres could take even the dead out of the ground.

I have never seen the full moon. I always died before her rising.

The last day

September 12

And if I'm not able to rise earlier? Wouldn't it be better for me to try now what you'll need to do in a month's time?

The day has passed; it's time. The assistant nurses have gathered around me, like angels that want to lend me their wings before my death.

The doctor's explaining what the injection will do to me in a month's time in the attempt to wake me earlier, but I'm no longer listening.

"I don't want to die, Doctor. I don't want to die anymore. What if I don't wake up in time?"

My voice becomes more and more pleading as I grow weaker.

"I don't want to die... I want to wait for him."

I should already be in the coffin by now. The doctor looks at me even now as I write.

"Your efforts are great, Gena. But they can't do anything but harm."

I'm writing verbatim everything I hear, every word, mine and the doctor's.

"Andrei can't wake as long as you're not... on the other side."

A strange fever grips me. My face begins to itch, my bones hurt, my skin is stretching.

"It has started!" the assistants shout. "While she's alive!"

What has started?

I see the doctor hurrying to take my pen away, even though I can still write.

So that I won't write. So I won't remember.

What?!

God, I understand! I...

October 10

Gena,

I still write you because, maybe, I'll be the one who will die.

I wouldn't have been able to read the last page of your letter if, in your stubbornness, you hadn't pressed so hard on the paper that it marked the following sheet. I withdrew the "negative" with the help of a

piece of coal, trying to figure out what you saw. But the doctor interrupted you in time.

What is this man hiding from us? What secret is he keeping?

I tremble on the edge of the bed. The doctor is delivering the injection. I warm up. I can write again.

“You should become a writer, Andrei. You’re still writing everything down?”

“So I don’t forget.”

“Interesting. Most write so they themselves are not forgotten.”

Together we walk into the asylum’s darkened courtyard, toward the fake woodshed. Upon entering the hidden chapel, the doctor squeezes my hand – then leaves me alone.

I enter the nave and turn toward the table where my throne lies waiting.

Beyond, in the altar, is your coffin. They’ve lifted the lid and the veil from your face. They’ve delivered the injection to your heart.

Another step.

The full moon shines through an unfinished window. I see it for the first time, realizing suddenly that I’ve already surpassed my time. A cold white beam cuts the air in half, separating the mirrors that guard my coffin. They are slightly tilted toward one another. One mirror for me, one for you – the doctor’s ingenious idea to let us see each other this way first.

I set the white paper onto the coffin. I watch how my fingers move of their own accord, and I write what my mind thinks about them.

I’m scared, but writing helps.

It feels as though my body has caught fire. I’m like a meteor entering an atmosphere that melts me and changes my shape... but how is it changing?

A shadow approaches me.

“Gena? I’ve succeeded! I’m here!”

An echo answers me... with the same voice? No, the words are different.

“I’ve succeeded, Andrei. I’m here.”

Jesus! Here she comes. She’s swathed in darkness still.

I turn toward the mirror.

"I love you, Gena!"

"I love you, Andrei!"

Thoughts run through my mind, casting a momentary glow upon me like flashes of lightning, only to leave me in darkness afterwards. My words, her words – the same but with different meanings.

To see a photograph growing a beard!

Something I didn't even know I was hiding within myself!

My heart beats for us both...

I look at my face in the mirror and, in fact, I see you.

Maybe you'll cut yourself, and that would hurt me.

You will never heal except through Andrei's death.

It seemed everything I saw in Bucharest, I'd seen before.

We found Andrei's fingerprints on the silver hem.

Sometimes, in life, it's good to detach from yourself if even for a moment.

The dog sniffed the empty coffin, looking at me, bewildered.

As if I were writing to myself.

I feel as though something foreign and heavy moves inside me.

We look like two dancing figures, held together tightly like a single body.

With love, the same... the same... the same.

The memories almost knock me over; I no longer know which are mine and which are hers. Memories... how did you say it? They're investments for the years deposited into the bank of life; unfortunately, they don't cover the inflation rate.

...Doctor, why can I so easily memorize others' faces, even if seen for only a moment, compared to mine, which I've been wearing all my life? Why don't I ever dream of my own image?

I love you, Gena!

I love you, Andrei!

Come!

Come...

Suddenly, he steps into the moonbeam. In the mirror to his right, he sees her left cheek. How beautiful she was! Her round breast swelled, her hair tumbled in golden waves, and her parted lips were full.

Then he turns, with difficulty, toward the mirror to see his left, where he sees the other cheek, the right cheek, from which his hair has not yet fallen and would never fall again.

October 10, 1969

AndroGena, the patient from level four, rooms forty-one and forty-two, passed away between the hours of 10:00pm and 11:00pm, from a heart attack doubled by a stroke. The body will be cremated.

Liviu Surugiu, a Romanian author and screenwriter, made his US debut in "Galaxy's Edge." He has twenty-seven awards (including the HBO Screenplay Contest, five awards abroad in USA, finalist Grand Prix du Court France), and has published in the US, France, Spain, Germany, Hungary, India, Ecuador and Estonia."

Notes From the Nest

Oh, man, we ran out of space!

Hopefully you enjoyed this issue. Be on the lookout for the Fall Special, coming out in a couple of months. Lots of Sword & Sorcery in that one. Bye for now!

“Alex” P. Alexander, Ed.

JOSE GARVEL IS A SCUMBAG.
BUT HE WANTS TO BE A BETTER PERSON.

THE DEGENERATE WRITER AND FORMER WARD OF STATE IS TRYING TO RECREATE
HIMSELF IN THE SLUMS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE. YET HIS PAST WON'T STOP
HAUNTING HIM.

THOSE VIOLENT MEMORIES OF HIS DARK NIGHTS ON THE ROAD. THE TORMENTED
FACES OF THOSE HE LEFT BEHIND. THE RELENTLESS NIGHTMARES OF THAT ANCIENT,
DEMON-STALKED VELDT WITH ITS COVENANT OF BLOOD AND ITS MASTER OF SHADOW,
DIRT, AND STARS.

HE MUST CONFRONT HIS OWN DARK TRUTH WHILE EXPLORING THE DEPTHS OF SEXUAL
DEPRAVITY AND OBSESSION IN FEAR CITY DURING ITS SUMMER OF SAM.

GARVEL MUST FIGHT TO SAVE THE WOMAN HE LOVES... WHILE RESCUING HIS OWN
SOUL FROM THE BLACK VELDT'S VILE KINGDOM.

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THE BLACK VELDT

THE BLACK VELDT

MICHAEL REYES

MICHAEL REYES

