

CIRSOVA™

Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense
Summer Special 2019

Halcyon
by
Caroline Furlong

Su-Ra-U
Edd Vick
Rev. Joe Kelly
Misha Burnett
Manny Frishberg
Schuyler Hernstrom



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Furlong/Su-Ra-U/Vick/Kelly/Burnett/Frishberg/Hernstrom

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Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and
Daring Suspense™

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***A Novella of Planetary
Romance***

Halcyon, by Caroline Furlong

***Thrilling Novelettes of Heroics
and Horrors***

The Ghost of Torreón, by Edd Vick and Manny Frishberg

The Bullet From Tomorrow, by Misha Burnett

The Star-God's Grave, by Schuyler Hernstrom

Bleed You Dry, by Su-Ra-U

The Last Fortune of Ali al'Ahmar, by Rev. Joe Kelly

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Ten Tales...

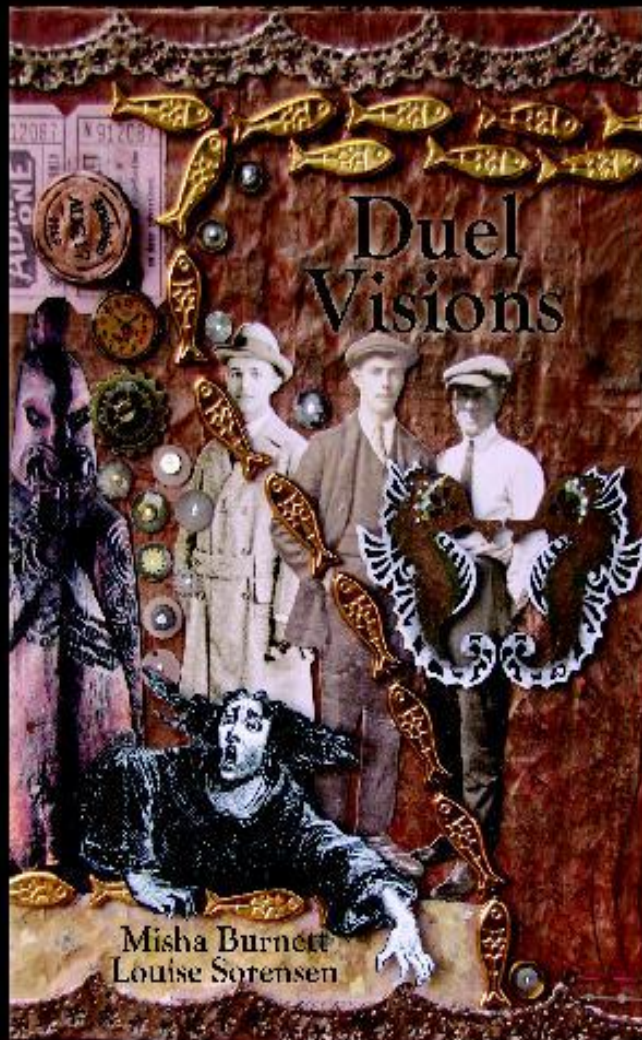
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We cordially invite you to share in our *Duel Visions*!



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The Ghost of Torreón

By EDD VICK and MANNY FRISHBERG

A strange experiment gone wrong has granted Professor Rigoberto “Beto” Caminante an extraordinary power—the ability to “ride” radio waves!

Pilar Quintero watched the scenery outside the train's window scroll past behind her mentor, Rigoberto Caminante. If she stared intently enough, she felt she could see the edges of the professor's profile blur very slightly.

Feeling her gaze, Beto glanced up from the cocoa he'd ordered. "You mustn't worry about me so much," he said. "My 'affliction' lessens the farther we get from civilization." He flicked his regard to the other passengers sharing their car. Pilar knew he wouldn't share their other reason for leaving Mexico's capital with strangers. "I will be pleased when we can settle down with my family and find a way to rid me of this curse."

"It is no curse," she whispered. "You rode the ether, *Maestro!* In trying to duplicate an experiment of Señor Tesla, you sent not just energy through the air, but yourself. *¡Es un milagro!*"

He scowled. "It is engineering, not a miracle." The shadow of a water tower passed their window. "Here we are," he said, setting the cocoa on the table between them and standing to reach a carpetbag and his hat down from the rack above his seat. "Muzquiz, and my tribe's territory. Do not speak of what happened to others in the tribe."

"Oh," said Pilar. "Are they superstitious?"

"No." A shadow of a smile touched Beto's lips. "They always told me I was accident-prone."

Pilar gathered her bags, refusing to let him help, and followed as Beto strode from the train. The scene that met them on the platform was disconcerting. Soldiers lined passengers up, roughly digging through their belongings. One of them restrained a sobbing child while another dumped the contents of her cloth bag on the floor.

A private carrying a slung rifle held up his hand. "*Alto.* Give me your names." They complied and waited while Beto's trunk was retrieved from the baggage car. Pilar helped the child load her toys and cookies back into her bag, earning a smile from the girl's mother. As she

straightened, she saw Beto's hands clenched behind his back. His jaw was just as tight. She touched his arm lightly. "Let it go," she murmured. "This is not the place to make a scene."

He visibly relaxed. "*Es verdad,*" he said just as quietly. True enough.

Pilar grew alarmed as a pair of *Federales* pawed through their trunk of radio equipment, setting aside a triode amplifier and a couple of rheostats. "But they are harmless," she said. "We need those."

It was Beto's turn to put a calming hand on his student's shoulder. He noted how much more polite the soldiers were to Pilar and him than to the poor Indians crowding around them. But the soldiers would react violently were they to press their advantage.

The discussion attracted a lanky young lieutenant. "What is your intent with these devices?" he asked, nudging a fragile tube with one booted foot, making Pilar wince.

"I am an experimenter," said Beto. "These are the necessary tools of my craft."

"We are dealing with a peasant uprising. We have been ordered to seize guns and ammunition, even knives." Behind him, the soldiers clutched their weapons more tightly.

"These are not weapons," said Beto. "Just radio equipment."

"Radio?" He crouched, touching a tube here, a tangle of wire there. For the longest of moments, it appeared the soldier would take all of their gear. Then he looked up with a smile. "So it is. I have dabbled a little with wireless telegraphy myself." He gestured to his men. "Put it back, gently."

To Beto he added, "Tell me, do you buy your crystals all through the mail or have you found a local source? Have you read the most recent *Modern Electrics* magazine from Mister Gernsback? We should compare notes."

By the time they managed to extricate themselves from the enthusiastic young man, it was early evening. Over dinner at the local hotel, Beto told Pilar that he felt more himself than he had in days. There were very few radio signals in the vicinity to disturb his peace. For her part, Pilar seemed restless and distracted. She asked how far the Kicapu villages were from town and whether they would be able to hire a car to take them there in the morning.

Beto smiled. He had not been back to his relatives' land since leaving for the American school in Oklahoma, but none of the people he'd seen on the broad dusty streets looked rich enough to own an automobile. Most were lucky to have a burro or a goat cart.

When he returned to the hotel after securing their ride, he knocked on her door. Pilar called for him to come in. She had opened the crate and distributed his electronic lab equipment all over the room. As he entered she set the antenna into its slot atop the transmitter and flipped the switch to turn it on.

Beto's teeth buzzed with the energy that suddenly coursed through the air. He'd noticed the same reaction whenever he came within the vicinity of a strong electric current. He assumed, radio waves being just one thin slice of the electromagnetic spectrum, that this effect was part of his newfound ability.

"Turn that damned thing off," he said, louder than he'd intended. "*Lo siento, chica,*" he said once she complied. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, and please forgive my language. But I do not want to wreck this hotel, too. Until we know precisely what happened to Paco, it behooves us to proceed with caution in our laboratory."

A dark cloud passed over Pilar's face at the mention of their dead coworker. A moment later, she dispatched it with a smile. "Do you mean that, Professor? *Our* laboratory?"

"*Por supuesto, Señorita Quintero,*" he said. "We are not at the university, and I am not your professor anymore. We are colleagues now,

no more, no less. And you should call me Dr. Caminante, or better yet, Beto. It's what everyone else here will be calling me."

"*Tío Beto*, then," she said, "if I'm supposed to be your niece."

"Only in town," he replied. "We'll need a different cover story once we get to the Kicapu village. Everybody knows my relatives, and you are a stranger. But they will accept you as my assistant. The Kicapu have different ideas about what women can do."

The next morning, the two researchers and their luggage, in the back of a cart pulled by a pair of nags, jounced along a badly rutted track between scrubland on one side and low hills on the other. Their driver pointed out the entrance to a lead mine far away on their left. When they reached the village, Pilar saw a few buildings, some ramshackle and some surprisingly modern, surrounded by dozens of low rounded dwellings Beto told her were wickiups. Threads of smoke wafted from fires set beside each one.

"My people are nomadic," he said. "In some places we live in houses, like that one, but wickiups are far easier to construct and easier to leave behind when we move on."

People emerged, mainly elders and children. When the weather permitted, most able-bodied men and women trekked over the border to *El Norte* for work. Decades before, they had been granted special passes by the United States government that allowed them to bypass border restrictions.

All the elders and the older children greeted Beto by name, clustering around and all talking at once. Four boys took the corners of their trunk and lugged it into a nearby multifamily house. The professor introduced Pilar as his assistant, and at a few knowing glances he rattled off a convoluted sentence in his native tongue that had them looking ashamed. A pair of elderly women patted her on the back.

As they were escorted to the longhouse, Beto whispered, "I said your family was in the revolution, and you don't know where they are."

“That is true. I haven’t been able to contact them since the Ten Tragic Days. Of course, we’ve been traveling ever since.” Pilar looked back along the road they’d come. “Beto? Where are the telegraph wires, the electric lines? There is no electricity here?”

“Ah,” he said. “But there are generators, and we have batteries.”

Rigoberto Caminante could hear radio waves, any that were powerful enough to be picked up on a receiver. He likened it to being in a crowded room where everyone was talking and playing discordant instruments at once. He hoped that, like someone in that room, he could learn to tune out the voices he didn’t want to hear.

He counted himself lucky he did not live in some *metropolis americana*, with hundreds of radio sources. During the daytime in Mexico City, he could concentrate more or less normally, but in the late afternoons, when people began returning home from work, the air lit up with amateur radio enthusiasts using their home-built shortwave transmitters. When the signals multiplied he got sick to his stomach, his head felt light, and his thinking fuzzy. His hands and feet shook like he was palsied, and he felt as if he were about to dissolve into the ether again.

Beto had decided to take a leave-of-absence from the new Autonomous University while coming to terms with what had happened to him. He needed to go somewhere far from civilization, with Paco to aid him in conducting more experiments and to help write up his notes into a paper. Then Paco obliterated most of his transmission equipment, and himself, just when the city was thrown into chaos in a coup d’etat.

As they unpacked their belongings, Beto told Pilar a story that had been much on his mind recently. It was about Nenemehkia, the Kicapu Thunder Gods.

“Though they walked the Earth as men and women, these beings were of the sky, riding on storm clouds and bringing the rains the Kicapu relied on to grow their crops and support their cattle,” he said.

“Grandfather Thunder and Grandmother Moon were there before the first people. But one time, long ago, the people forgot Grandfather Thunder.

“Unlike Grandmother Moon who is always in the sky, and so recalled and honored, he came out only on occasion. He grew angry at our forgetfulness, and he came from the west, calling out in a voice that shook the Earth. Furious, he shot lightning arrows at the people, burning houses and shattering trees, and the clouds cried tears of sorrow upon the Earth. Luckily, he never stayed in one place too long.

“At the sight of lightning, and the roar of the thunder, our people became frightened. Finally, Wiza’ka’a saw and came to help us.

““You have hurt and insulted your Grandfather Thunder. Grandfathers need to be remembered and honored like grandmothers. Grandfather Thunder is chief to the rains that water the Earth and make your crops grow,” he told them. “So, when you first hear Grandfather Thunder in the spring, telling you that winter has ended and that life is again coming to the Earth, burn tobacco and greet your grandfather with prayers.”

“From that time to this, Grandfather Thunder and our people have always been close. We listened to Wiza’ka’a, and we have always shown respect to Old Thunder and love him dearly. We always give thanks for his many gifts to all land and life upon Mother Earth. That is how my people say they gained a special relationship to the lightning.”

“Do people still believe those things?” Pilar looked at her teacher curiously.

“Do people still believe a God was born to a mortal woman? To a virgin, no less?”

She looked down, silent for a long minute, then raised her eyes to catch his. “You should not laugh at God like that.”

“What is a God that cannot take a joke? I prefer Wiza’ka’a. He may be a trickster, but he ends up helping his people, after all. And he has a sense of humor.”

Pilar stared at Beto with none of the respectful awe she had always had at the university.

“I’m sorry,” he said at length. “I should not mock the white men’s gods, just as you should not dismiss my ancestors’ stories so quickly as mere superstitions. After all, as Hamlet says, ‘*Hay más cosas en el cielo y en la tierra...*’”

“I know, ‘more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophies.’ I’ve read Shakespeare in English, Prof ... Beto.” It came with a hint of impudence he had not heard from her before.

Over the next two weeks they honed their skills at wiring, suffering many an abrasion. Testing the limits of Beto’s newfound ability to travel wirelessly, they found he could carry anything made of a conductor, like the money and keys he’d transported during the first accident. Unfortunately, his clothes would not follow him in and out of the aether, and he kept arriving naked at the receiver end of their experimental device.

Beto’s aunt gave the pair the use of a small house on the edge of her cornfield where they could work undisturbed, so the embarrassment was limited to the professor and his assistant. Beto’s cousin Ahanu had put up the one-room house—*shack, more like it*, Beto thought when he first saw it—when he was fighting with his brother, a feud that had ended several years before. But it was large enough to accommodate their equipment and the noisy kerosene generator set outside the window so the room would not fill with exhaust.

As long as they limited his transmissions to the few meters of the room they were in, he was fine, but when they extended the range, going out into the yard, Beto found he could not direct his movements very far before the signal spread too widely in every direction. He realized he had been outrageously lucky to escape the fire without disappearing into the aether. While he worked on the wave function equations, Pilar set out to solve the problem of his unfortunate habit of arriving in the nude. She

tried as many different kinds of fabric as she could find in the area—mostly cotton or wool, but they refused to budge. More than once she got a view that was not displeasing.

She had some success sending a piece of soggy cloth through the air but wetting down Dr. Caminante every time he wanted to transmit himself seemed undignified, not to mention impractical. One day she was repeating her experiments, expecting not much at this point, when she noticed a thin trail of smoke rising from a spot on the handkerchief she was trying to transport. It was the first time the radio waves had any effect on cloth. She shut down the transmitter and examined the square closely. One spot, smudged where she had used it to wipe her hands after building a fire, had been scorched.

Immediately Pilar grabbed a chunk of charcoal from the fire's edge and placed it in the path of the radio signal. She turned on the device and slowly raised the gain on the transmitter. When it reached the critical amplitude, the cold ember glowed briefly, then popped out of existence in front of her eyes, materializing on the opposite side of the room.

Excited, she dredged the handkerchief through the coals and rubbed the folded cloth against itself until it had taken on a smooth gray tone. This time, when she raised the gain on the transmitter, the square of cloth made the trip from one side to the other, undamaged.

“Bueno,” said Beto when she gave him the news. “I don't mind smelling a bit overcooked. It's better than arriving in the buff.”

Later the next day, a tube blew in the receiver while they were transporting Beto in what he called his “charcoal grey suit”. Without a clear destination, he again had the impression of his senses expanding in three dimensions as they had during the fire. He picked a direction parallel to the ground and flew. It felt as if he was only in the waves for a fraction of a second, but he reappeared more than a mile from the cabin. A startled coyote backed away from the corpse of a rabbit it had been eating, then turned tail and ran.

He trudged back to the laboratory, arriving to find a worried Pilar searching the area for him. When he described his journey, and how he had dropped out of the waves without a conscious effort, she performed a rapid set of calculations on the back of an envelope and said, “See, Beto? The power of the transmission decreases the farther you go.” She paused, looking up at the clear blue sky. “I was worried about you emerging out in space or somewhere underground. I am happy you did not. Also, we may be able to dispose of the receiving apparatus if we use a parabolic antenna.

“Soon we should be able to write up the paper describing your discovery.”

Beto ran a hand over the transmitter. “Perhaps we should not be too quick to let the news spread. Imagine soldiers transmitted from one country to another, and perhaps bombs as well. This equipment is simple enough to replicate. I would dislike it if our diagram were to fall into the hands of anarchists, or Germans.”

That evening, the excitable lieutenant from the railway station came to visit. Over a dinner of tortillas and beans, he babbled on about the latest experiments he’d read about, describing the crystal set he’d built that received signals from as far away as Houston, Texas. Almost as an afterthought, he told them he was being reassigned. “The rebels are attacking trains, capturing a lot of weapons we’ve been transporting. I go with my platoon to help bolster the defenses at the rail hub in Torreón.”

When the man left, Beto lit one of his rare cigars, sitting outside their hut. He heard a scraping sound and looked up to see his cousin Reilón—Spanish for “Smiley,” a fair translation of his Kicapu name—approaching on crutches. Beto welcomed his arrival, knowing that were it not for his broken leg, Smiley would be off working like the other men and women. They watched the swathe of stars spread over their heads, at first silently. Finally, Reilón spoke.

“You have that restless look about you, like when your father took a switch to you.”

“To be fair, I *had* set the wickiup on fire with my latest experiment.” Beto stretched his back, rocking his head to and fro, convinced he could almost distinguish one star from another by its radio signal. He wondered if anyone had considered studying them in spectra other than the visible.

“Speaking of experiments, how is your work here going?”

“Slowly. We’ve been going through vacuum tubes at an alarming rate. And I’m not sure we can get more. I’m afraid I’ve exhausted the supply in Muzquiz—what was left after that army lieutenant took what he needed.”

“If it hadn’t been for that lieutenant, there probably wouldn’t have been any electronics supplies in Muzquiz in the first place,” Pilar called from the shadows.

“She’s right, cousin,” Reilón said. “So, what will you do next?”

“We should go to Torreón,” Pilar’s voice came again. “A larger city will have a better supply.”

“You’re a madwoman,” Beto said with a smile on his face. Then, more seriously, “You heard what the *soldado* said. Villa’s troops are mounting an offensive on the city.”

“All the more reason to go,” she said. “We might be able to collect some useful information to pass along to the Constitutionals. Especially considering your great friendship with the lieutenant.”

“We came here to get away from the politics and fighting in the capital,” Beto said. “Not to mention the constant tumult from all the radio signals.”

“Maybe you can avoid the fight,” Pilar said, “but I choose not to.” She stepped out of the shadows and stood with her hands on her hips, the light of the campfire dancing in her dark, determined eyes. “My family never had much, but we had enough to get by. After Porfirio Díaz we never had enough to eat. And now we have Huerta.” She spat on the dusty ground for emphasis.

Beto sat quietly, thinking. Among the Kicapu, women often had the clearest views, and their arguments frequently carried the day, unlike among the *Mexicanos*. “It is our country, too,” he said at length.

“Which is why we must aid the rebels,” replied Pilar. “They will win in the end, and we can all get back to sowing and reaping. They must prevail. It is only right, and with your help you can ensure this.” After a moment, she added, “But nobody said you had to identify yourself.”

“An anonymous avenger?” Beto was amused. “Like the Scarlet Pimpernel?” He looked up once more into the star-strewn sky. “You are right, Pilar. We fight.” Even Reilón looked half-ready to join the battle, on crutches if need be.

In silence the next morning, Beto and Pilar busied themselves packing up the radio equipment for the trip to Torreón. Beto still felt uncomfortable about the choice he’d made by firelight, but in the harsh light of day he could not see a suitable alternative. For her part, Pilar seemed cheerful as she went about her work, almost happy to be heading into the lion’s den, as certain of her future there as Daniel had been.

They journeyed by train from Muzquiz to Torreón, accompanied by soldiers, peasants, journalists, and a surprising number of Americans concerned about keeping oil flowing north. In the railyards, they saw weapons and ammunition being unloaded from car after car. Torreón was at the junction of two railroads, and shipments were being offloaded from Mexico City in the south as well as from points east. They even found the tiny tramline from Lerdo carrying supplies and foodstuffs for the garrison. Ambulances and horse-drawn wagons brought the injured and the dead from fighting somewhere to the west.

“The army presence here is huge,” said Pilar. “I did not think there were this many guns in all of Mexico.”

Beto winced, barely listening. Radio signals darted here and there, obviously in use experimentally in this larger city as well as by the army. The electric pulses carried by the telegraph wires buzzed in his head like a swarm of mosquitoes, and the overhead cables for the tramlines buzzed

in his teeth. He hoped he'd be able to concentrate enough to do some good.

“Let's see if we can find a room, *sobrina*.”

“Oh, so I'm your niece again?” she said. “Yes, *Tío*.”

Army officials had commandeered all the best hotel rooms for themselves and their favored men. Americans, Germans, and other foreigners had chosen from what was left, while the journalists had rented the last lodgings available. Beto and Pilar, like peasants visiting in hopes of work or fleeing war zones, had to make do with common rooms rented from townspeople. They were lucky to find one to share with only six other people. A curtain down the middle of the room was all that separated the men from the women.

That left the problem of their equipment. When they went back to the station to reclaim their luggage, Pilar grabbed the professor by the sleeve and led him around to a narrow alley. “Where are we going to set up the lab? We can't even leave our blankets in that room unattended. Not to mention having no access to electricity. We can't operate on batteries forever.”

“I will go see that lieutenant. He will know how to treat the equipment.” He gave Pilar a sly smile. “Besides, who better to guard our property against the thieving masses than the Federal army?”

She returned his smile. “Perhaps he can even help us procure the parts we need.”

“He seemed an eager student. Maybe too eager, I fear.”

“You mean...?”

“He will be curious, he's bound to ask a lot of questions, and he'll most likely want to participate. To help out.”

“Then I suppose he will just have to become my friend, too. A little distraction, a little misdirection. Isn't that the purpose of a magician's assistant?”

Beto swallowed hard. He felt a shudder go through his spine. He still felt responsible for her. She really should be more sheltered, more protected, not only from dangers, such as the one he was leading her into, but for her own virtue. Pilar's face reflected hard determination and excitement. He swallowed again and said nothing.

"Nonsense! I will not have you living in a hovel with peasants," exclaimed Lieutenant Aguilar when they appeared at the post. "I have a suite at the Hotel Excepcional. You shall be my guests for so long as you stay in Torreón."

"That is most kind of you," said Beto. "But—"

"Nothing is too good for my friends, not to mention a distinguished university professor," said Lt. Aguilar. "Or for his beautiful and equally distinguished niece." Beto saw the daggers flying from Pilar's eyes at that, but he accepted the lieutenant's offer before she could say anything rash.

"¡*Bueno!* Then it is decided." The lieutenant dashed off a note. "Give this to the clerk at the front desk, and he will provide you with a key." He glanced at Pilar. "We are lucky there are two bedrooms. My servant will remove himself to the sitting room. I trust you do not mind sharing a room with me, Beto."

"Ah... not at all. Many thanks, Lieutenant Aguilar."

"Vincenzo, *por favor.*" He bowed to Pilar, and this time, it was Beto's eyes that flashed anger. Fortunately, the self-absorbed officer's attention was focused elsewhere.

After they installed their belongings and the radio equipment in the hotel room, Pilar sat in a plush chair near the doors opening onto the suite's balcony, winding fine copper wire onto a glass rod.

"Damn that man," Beto fumed. "How will we ever get the privacy for our experiments, much less to plan for our, well, our mission?"

"I am as impatient as you. Let us hope the fine lieutenant and his valet are too busy to interfere much." She held up the rod. "The next

transmission, we have you hold onto an insulator like this and see if you can carry it.”

The pair spent the rest of the afternoon setting up and performing experiments with different insulators and conductive attachments. They used very little energy, just enough to transport Beto across the room. It appeared that the insulators traveled easily enough if they were nearly completely covered, even by Beto’s hands, but if too much area was exposed, they failed to be caught up in the waves.

That evening, after dinner, the pair took a walk to get away from the prying lieutenant’s persistent questions. They had been cautioned not to go anywhere sensitive, which only served to make Pilar more anxious to look at the warehouses abutting the railyard. From a hundred yards away, they could see how well guarded the buildings were. They stood, watching the patrol. The soldiers looked alert, even nervous.

“I do not see us getting in there unseen,” said Beto. “See how each guard can see two others?”

“I agree. We may have to chalk this night up to reconnaissance only.” She looked down at the small battery-operated transmitter she carried. “This could get you in there, but you would face the same problem getting out.”

For the next few days, Beto and Pilar worked to determine exactly what his range was in his waveform. By the week’s end, they had assembled a table that combined transmission power with frequency and gave a predicted distance for each set.

In the evenings, Beto and Pilar dined with Lt. Aguilar and discussed the progress they were making with the phantom experiments they had created for his benefit. Vincenzo took a great deal of interest in the results she showed him, though Beto wondered how much of the man’s attention was directed at the experiments and how much was an excuse to engage Pilar in conversation. More and more often, he found himself interrupting their discussion, even when he had little of substance to add. Pilar asked him bluntly one night, why?

“I don’t trust that man,” he said. “He clearly has interests other than just our research in mind.”

Pilar laughed out loud. “Wasn’t that part of the plan all along, *Tío*? To make Vincenzo more interested in me so he would be less intent on discovering what we are doing?” She placed an exaggerated emphasis on the word ‘Uncle’, as if he needed a reminder of their cover story.

“That man is dangerous,” was all he said.

“I have been dealing with dangerous men since I was thirteen,” Pilar replied. “At least, *that* kind of danger is one I am entirely too familiar with. And I can handle myself, *Tío Beto*.” This time she called him uncle with affection, rather than annoyance. At least that was how he preferred to hear it.

“Now,” she said, “we need a plan. We know how to send you specified distances from the portable transmitter and in what direction. How can we best use your ability?”

“I propose we wrap a battery and transmitter, and see if I can carry them so I have a second transmitter to return me.”

Pilar perused the table they’d concocted. “We don’t have an upper limit on how much you can carry yet, so we should also determine that. *Bueno*. It remains to see where you can do the most good... or perhaps I should say the most ill.”

“The train yards again?”

She nodded. At the sound of a key in the door, she calmly covered some of their paperwork with more innocuous documents. As the lieutenant entered, followed by his valet, she yawned, gathered up the papers, and wished them all a good night.

A week later, Beto appeared inside a dim, dusty warehouse. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air, and he repressed a sneeze before carefully setting the foil-wrapped radio transmitter he carried on the

wooden floor. He looked around, relaxing slightly when he saw no guards. As they'd surmised through their surveillance, all were outside. While they did patrol the inside of the warehouse, it was rare.

The building was several hundred feet long and at least fifty wide. In the wan light that filtered through the high, dingy windows, he saw row upon row of boxes, most marked with the names of German arms manufacturers. Picking an open box at random, he found a dozen German Mauser rifles sitting in their bed of shavings. He briefly considered taking a stack of them before realizing their wooden stocks were too large for the foil from the transmitter to cover. Moving on, he found a cache of ammunition. It was a small pile of boxes; likely there were more stacks widely spaced for safety in case of fire. The amount of weaponry in just this one warehouse chilled him. Taking the city would be a monumental undertaking for the rebel forces. Well, he would help them.

Picking up a box of ammunition, he staggered with its weight over to his transmitter. It must have weighed well over forty pounds, barely within his transmission carrying capacity. He set it down.

A door halfway down the long wall scraped open. Beto froze. Footsteps entered; someone whistled "*La Cucaracha.*" *It must be a soldier making his rounds.*

Beto knelt. Slowly, trying to minimize noise, he pulled the foil away from the transmitter and its battery. He and Pilar had been careful to use no parts that the lieutenant would recognize. Pilar had suggested they attach a small time bomb to the transmitter to destroy it, but Beto had refused. He'd been leery of hurting the guards, while remaining aware of the fact that by stealing weapons for the rebellion he would ultimately be endangering soldiers. The irony was not lost on him.

Beto wrapped the box of ammunition in the metal foil. He winced every time it crinkled. Then he turned on the radio transmitter, carefully tuning it and, with a pocket compass, aligning its small parabolic antenna with where the hotel should be.

The whistling soldier approached.

The carrier wave tugged at Beto. He knew he had to get the box off the ground for it to accompany him. He stood, bent, lifted.

“*¡Alto!*”

Beto didn't even need to turn his head to see the soldier. Goggling at him across the stack of rifle boxes, the young private brought his rifle to bear. “*¡No te muevas!*” he commanded.

Beto jumped astride the airwaves. He knew immediately that something was wrong. He felt a buffeting sensation, and reappeared above a deserted city street, dropping several feet, face first, onto the dirt. A tremendous explosion pummeled his eardrums. Stunned, he lay there for a moment before rolling over.

Something under him crackled. He realized it was the foil, flattened, obviously no longer covering the box of ammunition.

Beto sat up. People emerged from a nearby house, exclaiming at the explosion. He quickly stood, trying to look as innocent as they. A glow lit the southern sky.

“*¡Fuego!*” One said it, and others took up the cry. Fire was an ever-present danger in a town where wood-frame buildings were common.

People rushed toward the glow. Flames licked the sky and more explosions followed, lighting the air with sparks like a thousand falling stars. Acrid smoke filled the streets. Voices choking back panicked reactions floated on the smoke, competing vainly against the roar of the fires.

Another explosion came as the fire found another cache of ammunition. A fire truck raced past. Beto stood all in a shadow, veiled in misery. Now there were two dead, thanks to his experimentation, Paco and this nameless guard, probably the son of a poor farmer, who had the bad luck to cross Beto's path. *How many more would there be?* he asked himself. The irony of that question, in the face of massacres and political assassinations, and the mass slaughter that modern war was becoming,

lifted his spirit from beneath the dirt for a second. A new explosion rang in his ears as he blacked out.

Beto awoke in the lieutenant's bed. Pilar and two soldiers stood around him. He recognized the pair as part of Vincenzo's personal detachment. That and Pilar's smile reassured him that he was not under suspicion.

"What happened, *sobrina*?"

"There was an explosion in one of the ammunition depots," she said. "You went off for an evening constitutional and you wandered to within a few blocks of the armory. One of the blasts knocked you unconscious. Corporal Escalante, here, recognized you and had you evacuated immediately to the lieutenant's care."

"*Mucho gusto, Corporal*," Beto said. He tried to raise his hand in a salute, but a sharp pain shooting up his arm convinced him to forgo the gesture. "And, *muchas gracias*."

He looked at Pilar, and she shook her head and popped her fingers straight out quickly, then entwined again in front of her. The portable transmitter had been blown apart or damaged beyond recognition in the fire. There was no evidence to make people suspicious.

In a day, Beto was moving around normally again, if with a slight limp on his right side and a constant ringing in his ears. In another two, the ringing was gone, along with the weakness in his arm. Pilar had not been idle during his recuperation. She had wired together a breadboard and only lacked a dozen or so tubes and capacitors to be able to test it.

They went together to the lieutenant's office, carrying a list of electronics parts they would need to complete another transmitter, plus several that they had no particular need for, to obscure their real intent from the curious army officer.

Vincenzo scoured the list, frowning. "We are at war, you know. The forces of Villa's Army of the North are massing for an attack any day

now. How can I justify giving you these resources?”

Beto started to turn, but Pilar moved in the opposite direction. “A resourceful officer can find a way to accomplish many things, is that not so, Vincenzo?” Beto’s skin shrank, watching the way she looked across the desk at Aguilar. He felt his face redden and he swallowed hard to make his breath slow. “My uncle is on the verge of some very important discoveries,” she said, leaning forward. “It could even have benefits for the war effort, and you would be the hero of Torreón.”

Vincenzo puffed his chest out at that and gave Pilar a smile that grabbed Beto at the pit of his stomach. “I will see what can be done,” he said, folding the list and tucking it into a pocket of his uniform.

“I would be *ever* so grateful,” Pilar called out as Beto pulled her by the arm toward the office door.

“I will count on it, *señorita*.”

Beto shoved the door to behind them. He waited until they were back in their rooms before confronting her.

“You were too forward with the lieutenant.” He longed to slam the door, but instead shut it slowly, deliberately, his back to her.

“We need those parts.” She crossed to the window. “We agreed I would play up to him.”

“*We* did no such thing,” he said, turning. “You made that decision by yourself.”

“Are you speaking as my teacher, or as my uncle?”

“Neither.” Beto crossed the space between them. Before he could go on, she turned, looking up at him with large, dark eyes. He gulped. “I do not want you to debase yourself,” he whispered.

She swayed toward him. “Because—?”

Beto looked anywhere but at her. Damn it, why was there no explosion, no key in the door, no cataclysmic interruption? He settled on

closing his eyes. “Because I love you,” he said.

She settled into him. “That took you long enough,” she teased. Then, “I love you, too.”

Opening his eyes once more, Beto found himself studying her face, as if it were an alien landscape. How had he not noticed this mole, that slight difference in brown from one eye to the other?

She tilted her head back. “Are you going to kiss me,” she asked, “or do I have to come up there?”

They kissed.

And that was when a key grated in the lock. Leaping apart, they turned as Lieutenant Aguilar bustled in.

“Sorry to intrude,” he said, obviously preoccupied. “Just looking for—ah, here it is.” He picked up his gun belt, inspected the pistol he pulled from a nearby drawer, and buckled it on. On his way back out, he paused and turned. “I must ask you to take care where you wander, both of you. We are on alert.”

Beto glanced toward the window. “What has happened?”

“That *hijo de puta* Villa is not far. He just took Avilés, a town not far from here, and slaughtered half the brave soldiers defending it.” He ran a finger under the edge of the gun belt, then looked to Pilar. “I would advise you to quit Torreón if you can find a way out soon. I fear Villa will turn his attention our way soon, and rumor has his forces at more than twice ours. They will not be gentle with civilians.”

Pilar and Beto exchanged glances. Without the lieutenant’s help, they had no chance of procuring the vacuum tubes and other devices they would need to build another portable transmitter. That seemed a distant possibility, even if they could generate a reasonable-sounding excuse for ignoring his advice.

Pilar crossed the room to Lt. Aguilar and looked into his eyes. “You are so brave, Señor. Please don’t ask me to abandon you. A woman may

not be as strong as a man, but our hearts beat as fiercely in our breasts.” As if to emphasize the last word, she placed her hand gently on his chest.

Beto gritted his teeth. His first inclination was to play the shocked uncle and demand that she attend to her sense of decorum. But watching Vincenzo’s face soften as Pilar’s touch melted his resolve, he knew, as much as he hated it, she had protected them yet again.

“You know,” he said to Vincenzo, sounding almost apologetic, “they pretend to be the weaker sex, but when a woman has set her mind on a course of action, a hurricane will not blow her off of it. So, we will stay to help defend the city. I fear that I am no fighter, however. I can fire a rifle if I must, but I have never even taken down a game animal, let alone a man.”

“We can best serve by continuing with my uncle’s work on portable wireless transmissions,” Pilar said, right on cue. “If we can make them work, the army could direct its operations with greater efficiency.” She directed a half-smile at Vincenzo.

“There is little hope of getting such supplies from Mexico City at this stage,” Vincenzo said, “let alone from El Norte. As it happens, I do have a few things put aside for my own research.” He turned to Beto. “*Por supuesto*, I am not as far along in my experiments as you, *Catedrático*. And not nearly as knowledgeable in this field. I am just an amateur, a hobbyist. If my stores can be of help in creating something to bring the rebels to heel, it would be unpatriotic to deny you whatever you might need.” He bowed to Pilar and kissed her hand. “I will have them brought to you.”

“Would you care to help in assembling the apparatus?” she asked.

“My responsibilities will keep me occupied for all but a little time, but I would be pleased to assist whenever and wherever I can.”

She is a devil-woman, Beto thought. I’m just glad she’s on my side. Or rather, that I am on hers.

The next few days were spent scrounging more parts and assembling the new transmitter. During a break, they wandered the city. Soldiers were drilling in the town square, putting on a show for the citizenry. There had been three unsuccessful attempts to take Torreón earlier in the summer, so they remained optimistic. Pilar, though, was struck by how young the enlisted men were. “They should be working their family’s fields,” she said. “Not preparing for war.”

“That can be said of any army,” Beto replied. “You are not regretting our decision to aid the rebellion, are you?”

“Never.” Taking the lead, she directed their steps toward the railyards. “But I would prefer finding a way to spare as many lives as possible. If there were a way to scare off the Federals, or to make them surrender...?”

He let her question hang between them as he surveyed the warehouse his first foray had destroyed. Little remained but a foundation, and three nearby houses had been gutted as well.

Pilar’s gaze was not on the warehouse. With their dearth of supplies, they would not be able to make more transmitters. Whatever they planned next would have to be decisive. Having Beto kill the general and a few of his top officers would suffice, but he was much too squeamish. Truth be told, that was part of why she loved Beto.

He could carry the city’s defense plan to Villa, but she doubted the revolutionary would trust a random stranger appearing out of the air. *Beto might wind up dead.* She threaded her arm through his. “And I would rather you stayed alive,” she said.

“What brings that to mind?”

“Just considering our plan.”

“We have one?”

“Yes,” she said. “You will be a ghost.”

Villa's army attacked the next day. While many townspeople viewed the skirmish as fine entertainment and watched from rooftops, Lieutenant Aguilar demanded that Pilar stay within the hotel's thick walls. Charmingly, he commended her to the care of her uncle.

"He's growing on me. I do so hope he isn't killed," Pilar said after Vincenzo left. She walked to the table where their main transmitter sat. "Come, let us put you on the air."

Beto wrapped their precious portable transmitter in wire mesh while she warmed up their transmitter.

"Ready?" she said, consulting the tables she had been calculating at night, then carefully adjusting the equipment's parabolic dish.

Beto nodded. He stepped in front of the dish and vaulted into the aether. As the signal spread, it attenuated, finally dropping him a dozen feet short of his goal. Silently commending his colleague's math skills, he dashed to where the 2-8-0 steam locomotive sat at the head of a short line of cars. As they'd seen from the rooftop, it was lightly attended but maintained a head of steam, ready to pull out at a moment's notice.

Beto flattened himself against the side of the locomotive as a pair of guards passed down its other side, then lifted his head enough to see that its cab was empty. Clambering aboard, he set the transmitter down and scanned the array of controls and instruments. He'd studied diagrams of engines in some of his early classes, but never had he seen one in three dimensions. He pushed the Johnson bar forward into full gear, opened the cylinder cocks, released the brakes, and yanked the throttle bar toward him.

The engine surged forward, coming up short to tug at the cars it towed. Beto heard yells from down the line. The train started to move.

Now for the dangerous part of the operation. Sitting so his head didn't show in the cab's window. Beto lifted the transmitter onto his lap and flipped switches to warm it up. He adjusted its antenna as well as he could. A tree moved past as the engine sped up. Not far ahead was a sharp turn; trains always slowed to a crawl when going through it. This

one would not. The sound of running feet came from outside. "Come on," he muttered.

A hand clutched at the edge of the doorframe. Beto kicked at it, causing the man to drop back with a startled yell.

Gunfire sounded, and bullets pinged off the metal of the cab. One slug ricocheted around the cabin, whining past Beto's ear. Pursing his lips, he looked down at the radio transmitter, almost surprised to see it was ready. He threw the switch.

Cold washed over him, then he was skidding across the hotel roof, tumbling end over end toward the edge. With inches to spare he slowed, then stopped, panting.

He looked up to see a line of gawkers faced the other way, watching the locomotive explode amid plumes of rising smoke. A few had turned at the sound of his entrance to see him lying, one leg hanging over the edge.

"Sorry," he said. "I, ah, stumbled." Cradled in his lap was the transmitter, none the worse for his tumble, a couple of its tubes blown in his journey. He carried it back to their rooms, wincing at the abrasions on his bum.

Pilar opened the door when he knocked and stared, first at him, then at the transmitter.

"I have made two discoveries," said Beto. "One, it is possible to carry the portable transmitter back with me."

Nodding, Pilar took the transmitter to their worktable. "And the second?"

He lowered himself gingerly into a chair, saying, "Do not transmit from a moving vehicle. I hadn't accounted for the momentum being conserved."

Pilar laughed but then put on a serious face. "I think you're right. In the future, only transmit yourself from a stationary location."

It was too late for more reconnoitering by the time Beto cleaned up and changed his clothes. Pilar announced she was going to visit the lieutenant, which Beto objected to, citing the lateness of the hour.

“Well, then, *Tío*, maybe it’s time for you to go to bed. I keep telling you, I’m a big girl.” She came closer, responding to the sour look on his face. “Seriously Beto,” she said, stroking his cheek with her hand, “I’ve handled more formidable men than Señor Aguilar.”

She laughed again, then turned serious. “Beto, we need to know how they are taking the train derailment—Vincenzo is not a stupid man, and neither is General Murguia. They are bound to know there is a saboteur afoot. And after your remarkable entrance on the roof this evening, we have to be sure that suspicion is directed elsewhere.”

“I still don’t like it,” he muttered.

“Of course not, *querido*. I wouldn’t be happy if you did. But I’m not letting that stop me, either.”

Beto shook his head. *A she-devil, indeed*, he thought. “Take care,” he said to the closing door.

The first fading of the midnight blackness brought the sound of Pilar turning her key in the door lock as quietly as she could and the shush of the door rubbing softly against the floorboards. The floor creaked as she took one gingerly step after the other. Silent, he worried about what she might have allowed in the service of the constitution. He was afraid that what she found out would be so important he could not condemn her, whatever she had done.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Pilar sipped her coffee, staring at Beto, who only glared back at her. “You can put your mind at ease, *Tío*,” she said at last. “Vincenzo was a perfect gentleman, as I told you he always is.

“Vincenzo says, after the recent Constitutionalist victory in Avilés, desertions have taken a toll on their forces. Even the commanding generals are said to have made escape plans of their own.” She pulled a

piece of paper from her blouse and unfolded it on the table. “Beto, he had a map on his desk. It shows the placement of the artillery and of El Niño, the *Federales*’ big cannon. I copied it while Vincenzo was picking out a wine for us.” She smiled. “I told you I knew how to handle him.”

A moment later the door slammed back against the wall. Lt. Aguilar and four of his men entered, all with hands conspicuously near their gun butts.

“Take them,” said the lieutenant. “We will try them and execute them as soon as we drive back the Villistas.”

“What? Execute?” Beto did not have to feign confusion. “What do you mean by this?”

“I’ve received reports today.” He avoided looking at Pilar. “You thought your bomb had killed that guard, eh?” Aguilar slammed a hand down on their work table as one of the soldiers hauled Pilar roughly out of her chair. The other advanced on Beto. “Unfortunately for you, he regained consciousness. He’s lost both his legs, but he was able to describe you readily enough. Though he swore you had been blown to bits in the explosion.”

The soldier roughly shoved Beto over his chair and hauled his hands behind his back to snap on a pair of swing cuffs. When Pilar tried to protest, a soldier slapped her so hard her head sagged.

“Also, you were seen on the roof of this very hotel just after our train was sabotaged. You were carrying radio equipment, I expect so you could keep in touch with the saboteur. I suppose you felt very smart, telling me your wireless could help the war effort. You just did not say on which side.” He picked up the map Pilar had copied, glanced at it, then crumpled it. “I was a fool.”

The soldiers escorted Beto and Pilar to the stockade on the army base and shoved them into separate cells. One soldier extended his boot as the other guard shoved Beto roughly into the cell. He sprawled on the rough concrete floor.

“That’s for Julio.” The slam of the door sounded very final.

The walls were stone, with a bucket in the corner whose smell advertised its use. There was no sink, no window, and only a rough straw mattress on the floor. The door was very secure. The army patently did not feel it had to be accommodating to prisoners. Beto dragged himself to the bed and flopped onto his back, feeling sorry for himself. Outside he could hear the sounds of the battle through a small window in the hallway. He hated the war, hated Aguilar and his men, hated the experiments that had gotten him into this imbecilic mess in the first place. And it was all the fault of that damned laboratory accident!

Poor Pilar. What terror she must be feeling at this reversal in their fortunes. The lieutenant had intimated there would be no doubt about the sentence. They were going to die. Worse, he had finally mustered up the courage to admit his love to Pilar. What timing!

Beto recalled a book he had read in the boarding school in the US: “No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first—verdict afterward.” Perhaps he could admit his guilt in such a way as to spare Pilar? It was worth considering.

Radio broadcasts swirled around him, mocking his lack of a transmitter. With one, it would be simple to escape.

After two days of lying in a pit of self-pity, Beto roused himself on the third morning, determined. If he was fated to die in the coming days, audacity had nothing to argue against it. Maybe, if some of those signals were strong enough—

As he tried to concentrate, radio waves battered his mind. First a string of Morse from one direction, then one from another, a voice from here, a reply from there. It was at the quietest times they plagued him the most, like a ringing in his ears.

Beto focused on the energy being transmitted through the air, tuning out the messages being sent and received to listen for the clear, barely wavering tones of the carrier waves, letting his body find its own harmonic wave. The walls of the cell began to glow and shimmer with

the same eerie false light he had first seen in the laboratory accident. The bars of the door gleamed like the filament in a vacuum tube, then dissolved into pure light. An instant later Beto crouched in the empty hallway outside his cell, naked.

A guard came around the corner, and Beto punched him in the stomach. The soldier gasped and doubled over, dropping his rifle. Beto grabbed the gun and hit the guard in the back of the head with the rifle stock. The guard crumpled, and Beto hoped he had not killed the poor boy. He put on the guard's clothes and found Pilar in her cell.

"Come with me, *querida*," he whispered, unlocking the door.

"Is that you, Beto? How do you think we'll get past all the guards?" she asked him. She had obviously been considering just that. Then, "How did you escape? I heard some commotion but ..."

"I jumped onto a passing radio wave."

"You can do that? Without a transmitter?"

"Well, I didn't get very far. And it took a very strong signal, one coming from close at hand." He smiled. "I believe we may have Vincenzo to thank, once again."

"I'll be sure to show him my gratitude later," she said. "But, for now, I'm too heavy to fly with you on the radio signals. Besides, from what Vincenzo was telling me, and what we could hear from in here, I would say the stockade is the safest place to be in this town. For the moment, no one is shooting at us." Pilar leaned over and kissed Beto on the cheek.

"You are very gallant to come to rescue me first, and believe me, I will not forget it. But right now, you have a more important mission. Do you remember I showed you where they are keeping El Niño? You have to get to that cannon and do something, or Villa's forces will be torn to shreds by it."

Beto sighed and nodded. She was right, again. He dropped the keys at her feet and concentrated on the radio signals he had been studiously ignoring, feeling a particularly powerful signal and taking the leap into

its stream, praying silently to Wiza'ka'a, thanking the god for letting him ride the lightning.

He reappeared on top of the church, the tallest spot in town, clutching its cross. Embarrassingly, he was again naked. More disconcerting, it was becoming a normal feeling. He must at least start always wearing treated underwear....

Screams came from below as he scanned the horizon. There would be stories about the naked demon on the church spire, he just knew it. Turning, he peered some more, and—yes! There was the train, to the east of town. The three-inch cannon, El Niño, was mounted on its flat car, with the next car carrying its projectiles, followed by the engine ready to push it where needed.

More screams came as he felt for a radio wave that could carry him in the correct direction. There wasn't one.

Frowning, Beto closed his eyes and concentrated. There were the usual chattering channels, mostly Morse, mostly very weak. And here was Lt. Aguilar's signal, strong and steady but over ninety degrees in the wrong direction. It was the only one even remotely powerful enough to ride, and he certainly couldn't remain up here. He would have to find somewhere to get to ground, find clothes, and proceed to the cannon.

Even as he prepared to jump into the ether, the signal cut off. No! The lieutenant had finished his transmission, stranding Beto. Someone below shushed the screamer and yelled something indistinct, most likely a demand that he either go back to hell or climb down. Just as he was about to try the latter, another signal at least as strong as Aguilar's started. It was facing the right direction, and he suspected it was a response to the lieutenant. Beto briefly wished he'd paid attention to the actual message rather than concentrating on the carrier wave, but then he jumped aboard the new signal while he could.

It would be wrong to say he actually saw, but in some way he sensed what passed below him. He was improving with practice. The town flew by at the speed of light, and he tacked across the beam, like swimming

along the crest of a wave. A moment later he dropped back out, appearing over the cannon's tender, then dropping into the carefully stacked missiles. They clattered every which way.

"Ow," said Beto. For a long moment he lay very still, bruised and, frankly, just starting to sunburn.

"Who is there?" said a voice from outside the tender. "Identify yourself!"

"Get away," yelled Beto. "I am the Ghost of Torreón, come to blow up this ammunition!"

After a long moment, running footsteps pattered away. Glad to be dealing with a cowardly soldier for once, Beto stayed lying down, and pulled one of the shells into his arms. He swallowed hard. There was a hell of a lot more gunpowder surrounding him than in the box he'd tried so innocently to transport back in the warehouse.

Then another idea struck him. The city was being attacked from three sides but the defenders far outclassed the raw recruits of the Constitutionalist forces, or so Vincenzo had boasted repeatedly. If he could fire the cannon at the city's battlements, he might be able to open a breach in the defensive line to allow Villa's forces to come through. Unfortunately, Beto had never fired anything larger than a hunting rifle and had only the most rudimentary idea of how to aim a large gun like this.

Rising, Beto peeked out of the tender. The gunners were also gone, at least for the moment. Explosions from other artillery ringed the area in choking smoke through which soldiers passed in all directions like fish in murky waters. He wouldn't be alone for long. He darted to the cannon, carrying the shell he'd selected. At least here he was partially concealed behind the gun's shield.

Come on, man, he scolded himself. *You are an engineer. This is nothing more than a trigonometry problem.* Still, he did not know what the load of the shells were, or how far they could fly; there were too many factors to consider to make accurate calculations. The best he could manage was a

reasonable guess. He did some quick estimating in his head and cranked the wheel to change the cannon's elevation, another to rotate it in the direction toward where most of the gunfire had been sounding.

He struggled with the weight of the explosive shell but finally got it loaded and the gun ready to fire. Then he waited, testing the air for radio signals. For a staggeringly long minute, only the incessant tapping of distant telegraph buttons impinged on his awareness, then, a sharp, clear signal, emanating from nearby—presumably Gen. Castro, the *Federales'* artillery commander, seeking orders. He took advantage of the moment, firing off the cannon as he dissolved into the charged air.

Instantly insubstantial, he did not hear the big gun go off or see the shell fall helplessly short of his target, blasting a crater in one of the army's defensive positions.

Beto reappeared just outside the stockade building. Soldiers ran about in a panicked frenzy, barely noticing the soot-covered naked man pressing himself against a wall to avoid being run over. He slipped in the open door and made his way back to the cells. With a quick word to Pilar, he went back into his own cell and pulled the door shut behind him.

Over the next hour, the noise made it clear that the tide of battle had turned decisively. Shouts of scared soldiers replaced the disciplined shooting of the previous days.

Pilar shouted to Beto across the way: "We should do something to help."

"The battle is won. What more should we do?"

"We can save some of these men. Most of them are just as poor as our families, the common soldiers are no more at fault for the actions of Huerta than the common people ever are for the evils of the leaders. Go to Lt. Aguilar, convince him to surrender peacefully so his men may yet survive."

“You know I’ve never trusted him. And he’s the one who put us here, remember.”

“Whatever you think of him, he is an honorable man. And I told you, *querido*, that I would show him my appreciation, somehow.”

Beto wanted to argue with her, but he was coming to expect that arguing with Pilar would never end to his advantage. He latched onto a carrier wave and disappeared once again.

He materialized in the empty lobby of the hotel where he, Pilar, and Lt. Aguilar had been staying. Listening for telltale footsteps, he made his way to his own room and put on his treated clothes. Doing what Pilar wanted, convincing the lieutenant to give up and save his troops, would be hard enough without appearing naked. As he pulled on his pants, he could sense the threads of a half-dozen different radio signals: a wireless enthusiast prattling about a D. W. Griffith flicker-show he’d seen in Dallas. Another speaking in what sounded like French. Someone reading a list of numbers, likely some sort of code; all of them nearly too faint to make out. Then, a single, strong carrier beam overtook the rest. One of the beleaguered battalions reported that the defenses had been breached and the *Villistas* would soon be in control of the city. Interrupting and overwhelming that signal came one from extremely close by. He could hear Vincenzo clearly above the static-y background voices.

“Marcos, I ask you to tell my family that I love them and that I do not expect to survive the day. General Castro accidentally shelled our own position. It has proved to be a death blow for our defenses. All my commanding officers have now abandoned us in Torreón. I cannot do likewise; it would be cowardly. At least under my command, they may retain some semblance of order.”

Beto smiled grimly, climbing the stairs to the roof, where he found the door blocked from the other side. The lieutenant had not wanted to be interrupted while sending a message for posterity. He could not fault the man—Pilar had judged him rightly. He knocked on the door.

“Lt. Aguilar,” he called, “Vincenzo.”

“How did you get here, Dr. Caminante? No matter, I have no time for traitors.”

Beto concentrated for a moment and passed through the door on a fleeting radio wave.

“The city is lost, Vincenzo. Even Gen. Murguia has abandoned his post, and the Constitutionalist army is pouring in as we speak.”

The lieutenant faced away from him, microphone forgotten at his side as he stared out at multiple columns of smoke. “Then we have no honorable choice than to fight to the end. You know what those *cabrones* do to their captives.”

“My people, the Kicapu near Muzquiz, have favored Gen. Villa for some time. I believe I can help. If you surrender before they advance on you and offer them the weapons in the storerooms here as spoils of war, I believe they will treat your men fairly. For yourself, as an officer, I can make no guarantees.”

Aguilar turned to look at Beto for a long moment, then he scanned the empty rooftop and the still-blocked door with a nonplussed expression. He had brought no soldiers with him. There weren't even any civilians left to witness the conversation—they'd all left or gotten under cover. Finally, he looked out over the city, toward the rapidly decaying defenses, and beyond to where Villa's straightforward, overwhelming assault was inevitable.

The face he turned back to Beto was difficult to read. “They are my men now,” he said. “And for the most part, they are brave. I hardly know why they fight save at the command of *hijos de putas* that call themselves their ‘superiors’.” He straightened and saluted Beto. “I hereby surrender my forces to you, Rigoberto Caminante. I'm sorry, but I don't know your rank.”

“I— What? No!” For the briefest of moments, Beto imagined the furor in both camps if the government forces surrendered to a Kicapu. “You'll have to capitulate to Gen. Villa, not—” *a murderous saboteur? A false-faced backstabbing friend?* “Not me,” he said at length.

“*Bueno*. I am a little short of messengers to send announcing my surrender. You shall have to carry it.”

“My thought exactly,” said Beto. “Perhaps you could warm up your radio?”

“My wireless?” Lieutenant Aguilar put a hand atop the radio. “Villa’s forces are not so equipped. They would hear nothing.”

“Trust me,” said Beto. “They will hear plenty. Just turn on your transmitter and give me a token of your surrender, something made of metal.”

The uncomprehending officer pulled his ceremonial sword from the scabbard at his belt. He looked at it for a long moment with hooded eyes, then broke it across his knee with surprising vehemence. He handed the pieces to Beto. When the transmitter was humming and the vacuum tubes fully lit, Beto stepped up to the table it sat on.

“*Mírame*, Vincenzo. Watch this.” And he jumped into the radio transmission, blending himself into its frequency and flying off at the speed of light.

He tumbled out of the air half a kilometer behind the new battle lines and was immediately surrounded by angry, suspicious volunteer soldiers. One of them raised a rifle butt to smack Beto, but a voice stopped him in mid-swing.

“Idiot. How often do you see a man simply appear in the middle of our camp, and carrying a broken sword? Even if he is a spy—especially if he is a spy, he’s a lot more good to us with his wits about him than after you’ve knocked any thoughts out of his head.” The common soldiers lowered their guns but stayed in place, cutting off his movement in any direction—not that Beto had any desire to move. He lay there in the churned-up mud and looked up at his savior.

Reilón stood, legs spread far apart, wearing a pair of new boots; the broad smile on his face reflecting his name. “Beto, *hermano*, how kind of you to visit.” He helped his cousin up and escorted him to a tent where

he could scrape some of the muck off his suit before seeing the general. Soon enough, Reilón clapped him on the shoulder. “Come, now you look better than most recruits in Villa’s army. It’s time you met him.” Retrieving the precious pieces of the sword from the table on which he’d set them, Beto went to meet the general.

A circle of tired men squatted around a small fire, eating. They had been on the attack night and day for more than fifty hours. One of them cracked a joke too low for Beto to hear then turned to him, rising to his feet and wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

The commander of the *División del Norte*, General Francisco “Pancho” Villa was taller than any of his men, taller than Beto, and the crossed bandoliers of long-rifle ammunition on his chest added to the sense of intimidation. Despite the joke he had just told, Villa was not smiling.

“You have something for me?” he growled.

“Torreón surrenders to you, General,” he said, holding the broken blade out. “This is Lieutenant Vincenzo Aguilar’s sword. The commanders have abandoned their posts and left the common soldiers to their fates.” At the general’s skeptical stare, he continued. “I was a guest of Lieutenant Aguilar, then his prisoner after I blew up a munitions depot.” Beto decided to skip over the awkward details. “The lieutenant is left in charge of the chaos. He thought, as a spy, I could carry his message to you. Fortunately, I came upon my brother.” Beside him, Reilón smiled sheepishly.

“Tell me, how is it you came to tumble among my men?” Several of his men snickered nastily. “Are you able to move about unseen, like the Invisible Man of H. G. Wells?” The sense of menace grew. Beto stood before a killer, and leader of killers. He longed to escape, to give himself up to the aether. But if he fled, Reilón would likely pay for it with his life. And if he did not explain, somehow, whoever had been on sentry duty was likely to face some difficult questions. Not to mention the soldiers back in Torreón, who would probably face slaughter if they were forced to defend the town. Reilón stirred uneasily as two men circled behind them.

Beto drew himself up. “General, I am a Kicapu, sir, but I am also a university professor, a scientist working on electricity and radio. Are you familiar with the work of Nikola Tesla? Just before the Ten Tragic Days, I was attempting an experiment following his theories about transmitting electric power and an accident—”

Villa snorted, giving Beto a long look before dismissing him with a wave. “I believe you. You may have your life. Now, fly away and tell your lieutenant to muster his troops and prepare to march them out.”

Beto drew a deeper breath than any he’d drawn in the last several minutes. He sensed the air, but there were no telltale shudders of wireless signals around here. Certainly nothing strong enough to carry him back to the city. He was still debating whether to bow or salute when the general turned away to squat and reach for a cup of coffee. Reilón tugged on Beto’s sleeve, and they walked away as quickly as they dared.

“We are still being followed.” Reilón made the slightest of gestures with his head. “Those two *soldados* are behind us, likely sent to see how you disappear. Villa doubtless would love to have an army of invisible flying men.”

“I’ll be disappointing them,” Beto said. “Can you find me a horse?” Just then a jolt from the blue set his teeth on edge. He felt the carrier wave’s strength before he heard, or rather felt, the Morse signal. “Ride this home, *mi corazón*, if you can ‘swim’ against the stream.” He was always underestimating that woman.

It was almost dinnertime when a worried Pilar met Beto and Reilón in the hotel’s dining room. The Constitutionalist forces had taken charge of the city and began putting out the many fires burning throughout the town. After three days of a siege, there were few choices left on the menu. Villa’s troops had “liberated” most of what had been left behind.

“I’ve been thinking,” Pilar said when they were seated, “you can’t keep showing up places without your clothes, and that ‘suit’ of yours leaves dust all over the place. I recalled the silvery gowns the film

actresses wear. If we plate some fabric with silver, I can sew you a costume.”

“Yes, a costume,” Reilón said. “But you’ll need to make him a mask. Like a *Luchador*.”

“A mask?” she said.

“A mysterious *hombre* can be an everyman. If it becomes known that the mysterious hero is a Kicapu, there could be reprisals.”

Turning back to Beto, he said, “You can teach me how you ride the lightning, and I will teach others. We will be unbeatable.”

Pilar turned to her soon-to-be brother-in-law. “We have a great deal more work to do.” She dropped her voice to a bare whisper, “It was less of a discovery than an accident. A terrible one that killed one of my fellow students.” She began to tear up and Beto squeezed her hand.

“I do not know if I am that much of a hero,” said Beto. “After all, I’m a scientist, not a soldier. Certainly not a spy!” He took Pilar’s hand in his. “And neither are you. It is my duty,” he said, “to continue my—our research. Come with me, back to Mexico City, or to *El Norte* where it is safer and there are more supplies. We will perfect our technique, learn how to use it for peaceful purposes.”

“And you’ll need a name to go with the costume,” Reilón added. “You could call yourself ‘Wiza’ka’a.’”

Pilar slipped her hand out of his, but let it lay nearby. “Beto, *querido*,” she said. “The world is on fire. It deserves your aid.”

“My first duty,” he said slowly, “is to science. I am no fighter, Pilar, my successes in this battle were as much due to accident as to design. You did not see those men standing with Pancho Villa. Most of them fight for money, and a few for glory, and I hope only a few for the love of spilling blood. Yes, we are patriots, but a true lover of Mexico would pursue peace, not war.”

“It’s been tried,” she growled. “Have you forgotten the Ten Tragic Days already? Your way failed.”

“Then it should be tried again, and again.”

“You have a remarkable ability, Beto. You cannot just lock it up in a closet. *We* cannot. Do you not see? All Mexico is at war. Tensions rise everywhere. You cannot run away from the revolution. Your brother will not. And neither can we.” She drew her hand all the way back, put it in her lap, and looked up at him with fierce eyes. “Will you join the revolution, or not?”

He did not like the way she looked at him at that moment. She was a formidable woman—a force of nature and a heroine in her own right. He wanted to live up to whatever she saw in him. Finally, he nodded. “I will join. But first, we need to replenish our supply of radio equipment. That will best be done in the United States.”

“Agreed,” she said, looking to Reilón, who nodded eagerly. “We build more equipment, then return so you may become a hero.”

“Well, if I am to fight against the evils of the world, I would at least prefer something more professorial, more scientific for a nickname.”

“¿*Catedrático Radiotelegraphico?*” Pilar could barely get it out for laughing. She looked thoughtful for a moment. “¿*Cómo se dice en inglés?*”

Beto stared at the pattern woven into the linen napkin. “Professor Wireless?”

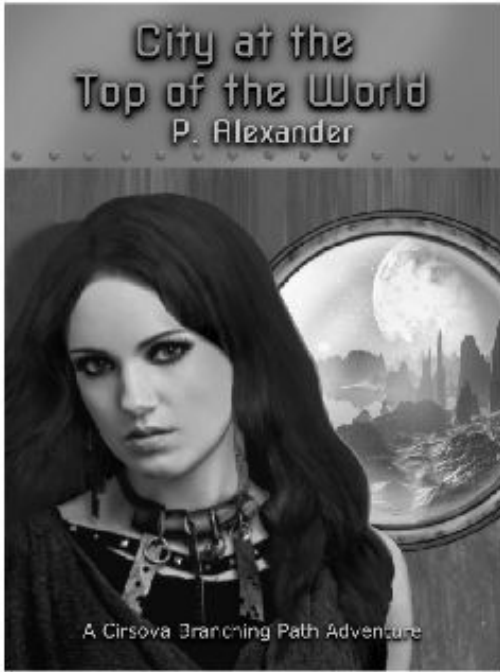
“Doctor Wireless,” Reilón said excitedly. “Or Doc.”

“I will be this Doc Wireless, but only when I must, when it matters.”

They went up to Lieutenant Aguilar’s suite, where Beto packed a single bag. He sifted through the clutter of burned-out tubes, empty solder spools, and breadboards. “Not much here of use,” he said. “We’ll get more north of the border.”

He pulled the door quietly closed behind them.

One's a bookseller, and the other's a journalist. Together, they're writers! Edd Vick and Manny Frishberg live in (Edd) and near (Manny) Seattle. Their SF, fantasy, and crime stories have appeared in many anthologies and magazines, including the Alternative Truths series and Analog. Find them at eddvick.com and mannyfrishberg.com



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The Bullet From Tomorrow

By MISHA BURNETT

A mysterious visitor claiming to be from the future has a simple job for Private Investigator Butch Norton: sabotage an airplane to prevent World War III!

Miss August 1965 did not approve of drinking in the afternoon.

You could tell from the way she hefted her wrench, and the wrinkle in her nose, next to that artful little smudge of grease. She was probably a Baptist gal, from one of those flat square states like Nebraska, full of corn-fed inhibitions that even the hellfire baptism of this modern day Gomorrah, Los Angeles, could not entirely erase.

She had other things to say about the way I conducted my affairs, glaring down at me from the Seigel's Garage calendar. She thought it was a shame that I was just lounging in my office on a weekday, with my feet on my desk, instead of out pounding the pavement drumming up work. She opined that Benjamin Franklin would not approve of the hours I kept, which could be called irregular.

She also had some unkind things to say about my tie and its disreputable knot, but I drew the line at that. I refuse to be lectured on my lack of fashion sense by a girl who wears ankle strap wedgies and cut-off dungarees on a factory floor. That's just not safe, and if she didn't lay off about my appearance, I would find a shop steward and report her.

Right after I finished my drink.

I looked away from Miss August and out the window at the cracked stucco of the Chinese grocery store next door. She probably wasn't a bad girl, all things considered. A touch judgmental, but easy enough on the eyes, if you were the kind of man who liked girls, I supposed. I wasn't, but if the fine young men at Seigel's Garage wanted to save me the cost of buying my own calendar, who was I to object?

I might need to write down an important appointment one day. Anything's possible, right?

I didn't care what Miss August thought. I was flush. Okay, maybe not "private drive off Laurel Canyon" flush, but "booze money for a couple of months in the bank, with enough left over for non-essentials like rent and food" flush. I was comfortable.

I was getting steady work hunting deadbeats for some folks who offered easy credit terms with no money down. I had this office, and a little stucco box to sleep in a couple of blocks away. I had an eight-year-old Buick that ran pretty good, and what was more important in this town, a safe place to park it that didn't cost a fortune. I had an open tab at a friendly little private club where I could count on a game of pool every night and some easy companionship when I was in the mood.

Life was good.

So, naturally, it was at that moment that the man from the future barged into my office and got me mixed up in a crazy caper to save the world.

Let me explain—not that an explanation will help.

There I was, enjoying the fresh hot smog from the window and considering going home for a shower when I heard the elevator stop on my floor. That's fairly unusual because my office is on the mezzanine level and there are only two other suites, and one of them is vacant. My only neighbor is a greasy mail-order outfit that sells marriage manuals and courses on personal fitness. Every morning Mac—that's not his name, but since he won't talk to me I've got to call him something—comes up with a trolley full of orders, and every afternoon he takes the same trolley loaded down with books wrapped in plain brown paper down to the post office on the ground floor.

So either the sheriff's office was finally getting around to dragging Mac off in handcuffs, or someone was coming to see me.

I considered taking my feet off the desk, but that's not the kind of decision one makes lightly, and the door opened while I was still mulling it over.

The man who came through the door was built like Tarzan's big brother—tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped. He moved with a bodybuilder's arrogance but was dressed in a suit that looked like it had been tailored for somebody else. Somebody smaller, whom the tailor

didn't like very much. It was brown, with a brown shirt and a brown tie. All in all, he gave the impression of a very lost tree.

"You must help me," he said seriously. His accent was strange. I worked with Korean civilians during the war, and I would have bet he'd grown up speaking a toned language, but he didn't look the slightest bit Oriental. His features were Caucasian, his hair long and muddy blonde, and what I could see of his skin was tanned a beach-bum bronze.

I swung my feet off my desk and in the process knocked off my glass. Nothing in it but amber-coated ice cubes at this point, but it didn't exactly make for a professional first impression.

I figured that picking it up would just draw attention to it, so instead I waved my visitor to a seat.

He ignored the offer, instead, he just stood there. Loomed, really. In my line of work, I meet a lot of tough guys, and I get loomed over a lot. This guy was aces, though, really first class. If there was an Olympic Looming Team, he'd have been a shoo-in.

"You are Butch Norton." With his accent, I wasn't sure if it was a question, so I nodded.

"And you are?" I asked.

"I am Seven."

My eyebrow raised all by itself. "Seven, huh? Funny, you look a lot older than that."

That made him frown. He had thick lips. You don't usually see white men with lips like that. "It is my family name."

"Does it mean there are six more just like you at home?" I prompted.

Comprehension dawned on his face. "Yes, it sounds like the numeral. No, it is just my name. It does not imply a number. I believe it was shortened from a Slavic surname."

“All right, uh, Mr. Seven, what seems to be the problem?” I tried to be polite.

For an answer, he pulled a newspaper out of an inside jacket pocket and dropped it on my desk.

It was the LA Times, and the headline screamed 200 FEARED DEAD IN AIR DISASTER AS RIOTS HAMPER RESCUE WORKERS. Under that was a black and white photograph that took up a third of the page.

I studied the picture. A lot of smoke, and under it a block of what might have been LA. There were pieces of what could have once been an airplane scattered around.

I looked at the date. August 13th, 1965. Friday the 13th. I looked up at the Seigal Garage girl on my wall. She insisted that today was Tuesday the 10th.

Cute. I scanned the story. Evidently, on Thursday—the day after tomorrow—a jetliner bound for Chicago lost control just as it was leaving the runway at LA International and dropped into a residential neighborhood. The story said that the fires were still active and they were evacuating the whole area. Rioters had spread the fires and attacked rescue workers. Governor Brown was urging calm while calling up the National Guard.

I checked the rest of the paper. It felt like newsprint, and when I rubbed the page with my thumb, it didn't smear. Not freshly printed, then. It wasn't the whole paper, but one full page. I unfolded it, and the creases were old, like it had been in his pocket for days. On the back was a full-page ad from Alpha Beta. Inside there was the usual fluff. My horoscope advised me to avoid making financial decisions. I resolved to keep that in mind.

Maybe someone with access to a printing press could have faked it, but that photograph on the front bothered me. It looked real, and somebody would have had to set the photo into type. That's not something you can

do with a mimeograph machine. If this was a hoax, it was a really expensive one.

I set the paper back down on my desk.

“Care to explain this?” I asked.

He leaned down to meet my eyes. His were very blue. “It is your newspaper from several days hence. It details an event which I very much wish to prevent from happening.”

I looked back down.

““The DC-8 held 115 passengers,” I read aloud, “and as many as a hundred other lives may have been lost from the explosion and fires when the aircraft struck a heavily populated section of Inglewood.’ Yeah, that would be worth preventing. But where did you get a newspaper from the future?”

“In the future,” he said, as if it were obvious. “Your future. My past. We bought this newspaper on the day it was printed. This coming Friday. I needed it to convince you that what I say is true.”

I folded it carefully, following the creases he’d already made, and handed it back. “Okay, suppose I were convinced. I’m not an airport cop. Why tell me?”

“We fear that the authorities would not act on the basis of this information. Instead, we feel that it would be more certain to simply disable the craft to prevent it from taking off.” He stuck the paper back in his pocket, still standing. Looming.

I leaned back in my chair to get away from the intensity of those eyes. I wished he’d sit down. Preferably in some other office. “Again, why tell me? Sabotaging aircraft is not my line of work. In fact, I have an obligation to inform the proper authorities if I have any knowledge regarding the commission of a crime. You’ve told me that you’re planning on breaking the law. If I don’t drop a dime on you, I could lose my license and possibly do some jail time, if you go through with it.”

“I do not believe that you will report me,” he said. It might have been meant as a threat, I couldn’t tell. He certainly looked like he could break me in half with his hands if he wanted.

“Why not?” I asked, keeping my voice reasonable. I had a .38 in my bottom desk drawer. I could probably get it out before he could come across the desk at me, but I would have felt a lot surer of it if he’d just sit down.

He reached into the other side of his jacket, and I got ready to drop to the floor, but what he came out with wasn’t a gun. It was a little cloth bag, thick black fabric. He undid the drawstring and dumped the contents on my desk.

It looked like a little pile of crushed ice.

“Take them,” he suggested.

I frowned and took a pencil from the mug on my desk. I poked the glittering pile. Not ice. I glanced back up into Tarzan’s baby blues. “I suppose you expect me to believe these are diamonds?”

“They are,” he said.

I looked back down. I was no jeweler. If they were real diamonds and not cut glass, I was looking at a hell of a lot of money. Probably more than I usually made in a couple of years. The problem was that I had no idea how to sell them even if they were real. Heck, even just trying to get them checked out could probably land me in hot water.

I shook my head. “I don’t know your game, mister, but I think it’s time you left. There’s a phone booth in the lobby and about ten pages of PIs in the yellow pages. Try someone else.”

He just looked down at me. All of a sudden he didn’t look threatening. Despite his size he looked very lost and alone. “Please,” he said. “You must help.”

I looked back up at him. Everything about him was off, a little bit strange. That suit, for example, it was cut all wrong, the lapels too wide,

the tie too skinny. And who wears a shirt the same color as the suit? With the jacket, shirt, and tie the same color brown, it looked like a uniform, but it wasn't. His hair, his accent, the joke shop newspaper, that bag of phony diamonds—it had to be some kind of gag, but I was damned if I could see the point. People who run scams build a story that makes sense; the whole trick turns on getting people to believe them.

I took a deep breath and came to a decision. Probably a bad decision.

“Sit down,” I said. “Explain to me what’s going on here, and we’ll see.”

He sat back in the visitor’s chair—carefully, as if he was scared it was going to break under him.

“I was sent here—” he began, but I held up a hand to stop him. I bent over and retrieved my glass from the floor. Then I opened my bottom desk drawer and got out the bottle and my spare glass, poured us each a heavy slug. The ice I’d picked up from the downstairs diner this morning was mostly all melted, but I found a couple of cubes and gave us each one.

I picked up my drink, sipped it, then waved him to continue.

“I was sent here to change history,” he said, then paused.

I nodded.

He looked down at his hands in his lap. “I was born in your future. Four thousand years from now. In my time we are dying.” He looked up. “The human race, I mean, not just my nation. Less than twenty percent of my generation is fertile. It was the war, the atomic war and then the wars that followed, fighting over what was left. Now there are too few of us even to fight each other.”

I mulled that over. It was crazy, sure, but I wanted to see how it was put together. “And stopping that plane wreck fixes things how?” I asked him.

He leaned forward, fixing me with those intense blue eyes. Crazy eyes. “This is where it begins. With the riots. From all over they come, to fight in the streets, to shoot policemen and even to shoot the ones who are

trying to stop the fires. Then when the aircraft comes down, this city burns.”

“Riots caused by the plane crash?” I prompted. I was trying to get the sequence of events.

He shook his head. “The riots begin tomorrow in a place called Watts. A resident is arrested by a policeman. He resists, and others join the fight. Soon the whole city is fighting so that there is no one to stop the fires when the aircraft crashes.”

Watts, huh? All summer long the tension had been getting worse. There were neighborhoods I didn’t go into, and Watts topped the list. A white man looking into windows in a neighborhood like that was asking to get jumped. I nodded slowly, then said, “I’ll buy that. Tomorrow, huh? It still doesn’t add up to an atomic war, unless the LAPD really overspent their budget this year.”

“The atomic weapons are at El Toro Marine Air Station,” he said, pronouncing the words as if he’d memorized them phonetically.

“In Orange County? That’s a fair piece from Inglewood,” I pointed out.

“The soldiers at the base are mobilized to fight the riots. The base is left almost empty, and rioters take a weapon. They will detonate it by accident on August 15th. The United States responds by launching missiles at the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union fires back. By the end of the week, the war is over, and six hundred million people will have died.”

Was that possible? As crazy as the country had become, I could see it happening the way he described it. But that still didn’t mean I had to buy his *Man From The Future* act. But there was something definitely off-kilter about his whole performance. If he wasn’t from the future, where the Hell was he from? Hollywood? A good actor could pull this off, but why? Just to try to con me into fencing those diamonds? There had to be easier ways to do that.

And there was that damned newspaper. To stall for time, I dug a pack of Luckies out of my desk and hunted up a match. He sat and watched

me, looking a little bit confused.

“Okay,” I said after I had lit my cigarette and given him my best James Dean glower through the puff of smoke, “Let’s pretend for a second that I believe this whole time machine nonsense and that you really are from one million years A.D.”

“Sixty-one seventeen, in your calendar,” he corrected me.

I waved that off. “So you need a native guide, right? Someone who knows the territory, who knows things that aren’t in the history books.”

He nodded. “Precisely so. Our records of your time are incomplete.”

“Why me?” I shot at him. “We still haven’t answered that question.”

He seemed uncomfortable. “Your background is suitable,” he said slowly. “You were trained in aircraft operation during the war.”

I tried to keep it off my face, but that bothered me. If he knew what I’d done in the war, he hadn’t just taken my name from the phone book. “I was a flight line grunt. So were a couple of thousand other guys. Try again.”

“You are a resourceful and competent man,” he said.

“I’m no Audie Murphy,” I shot back. “This job you want done, breaking into the airport and disabling a jet, it’s gonna need some muscle, right? Why not grab some real hero type, some mercenary commando? You found me just fine; I’m sure you could find someone else who could sweep the floor with me.”

He thought this over. “There are risks associated with traveling to the past. Things that happen may have unforeseen repercussions in my time. It was necessary for us to attempt to minimize the effects, should the worst happen.”

That took me a minute to decode. Then it hit me. “So I’m expendable, is that it? If I take a stray bullet, it’s not going to matter to the future?”

“I will do everything in my power—” he began.

I cut him off. I was getting steamed. “My life has no impact on the world, is that what you’re saying? Or is it just that I’m gonna get hit by a bus next week sometime?”

“Friend Norton, you may live many more years,” he said with calm assurance. “But you will die without fathering a child.”

Oh. That took the wind out of my sails. I sat back and sighed. “I got it. Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

Technically, I suppose, it could happen, but if the past was any indication, he was probably right. The mercifully few attempts that I had made hadn’t worked out well for anyone involved. No joy with gals meant no little baby Nortons running around. If this stunt got me offed, then at least Godzilla there didn’t have to worry about all my descendants suddenly going poof when he got back to his own time.

I must have looked sour, because he started saying, “I did not mean to upset you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I growled at him.

I looked at the diamonds spilled across my desk and up to the big galoot sitting uncomfortably in my office chair, and quite suddenly I could buy it. In fact, I had bought it.

This “Mr. Seven” character really was from the 62nd Century. And he really did go back in time to save the world. And that meant that I was going to have to do something to help him, because left to his own devices this clown wouldn’t stay out of jail long enough to do anything.

Damn. And it had been such a quiet day up until now.

I sighed. “Okay, first off, pick that up.” I pointed to the diamonds. “I’m going to have to figure out if there’s even a way to sell them safely, and that’s going to take time. For now, we’ll stash that bag in my safe.”

Carefully he started sweeping the stones back into the bag.

“Next...” I looked him over and sighed. “We have got to get you some new clothes. That suit stands out like a sore thumb.”

He paused to look down at himself, then over at me, confusion on his face.

“Trust me,” I said. “That’s not what you want to wear to try to sneak onto a runway. Now, Seven—hang on, do you have a first name?”

“Arniza,” he said.

“Arniza Seven. That’s your name?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Ernie,” I decided. “You’re Ernie. Ernie Sutcliffe. You’re Australian. We met in Korea, during the war, and you’ve been living in Hong Kong ever since. You want to become a US citizen, so you contacted me. Anybody asks you any details, tell them you don’t want to talk about it. We’ll let them draw their own conclusions.”

Arnie nodded uncertainly.

I sighed. “We can’t tell people you’re from the future, right? So we need a cover story that’s plausible and gives you a reason to stay under the radar. People are going to figure that you’re on the lam from the Australian government, but nobody is going to give a damn.”

He nodded again, with more comprehension. “Thank you.”

“Thank me when we get you back home,” I suggested. “Remember—Ernie Sutcliffe, you’re from Australia, and if anyone asks for ID tell them you left your wallet in your hotel. Got it?”

“Ernie Sutcliffe, from Australia,” he repeated, stumbling over the names. “My wallet has been left in my hotel room.”

He was hopeless.

“Just... try not to talk at all, okay?” I sighed. “Okay, let’s have that bag.”

He handed it over, and I got up, moved my desk chair and got into my floor safe. I had a friend of mine put it in; the landlord doesn't know it's there. I keep some cash in there and a few files that I don't want to leave in my file cabinet. Pictures, mostly. I put the bag away and got out a grand in small bills. I figured I might need it.

With both of us standing, my eyes were on the level of his chin. That was disconcerting. I'm a big man, and I'm not used to having to look up to meet another man's eyes. It took me a moment to rerail my train of thought. Right.

"Okay, that suit is going to have to go," I started.

He glanced down at the parking-lot-wide expanse of his chest with a frown. "My clothing was made by—"

"—someone who was working from old pictures, right? Black and white pictures, maybe?" I finished for him. "Trust me, it's conspicuous."

He fingered the knot of his tie like a stripper about to yank it off and toss it at me.

"Come on," I told him. "Let's get you some colorful native garb."

The freeway was a mess, of course, with the usual mix of locals driving like escaped mental patients and tourists who weren't exactly sure what that big round thing on the dashboard was for. Ernie turned white and tried to sink into the passenger seat of my Buick.

"Don't have cars in the future?" I asked him.

"Not like this," he admitted.

Vernon's Big & Tall in Hollywood was able to accommodate the gorilla and gave him a chance to practice being Ernie Sutcliffe from Australia.

He was going to need a lot of practice.

"Okay," I said, surveying the result. He didn't have an off-the-rack body, but we couldn't take the time for tailoring. "Next stop, LAX."

“The aircraft is not there yet,” he pointed out.

“Look, Ernie,” I said, “We’re going to need to get onto the flight line, and that means we’re going to need to look like we belong. Now, maybe I could bluff my way into the employee’s locker room, but we can’t count on finding something that will fit you. So I’m going to have to get some pictures of the uniforms they wear so I can get them made.”

“You can have uniforms made?” Ernie asked.

“Yeah,” I grimaced, thinking it over. “I know a guy. He’ll help us.” Or else, I added to myself.

I got us to one of the parking lots in one piece, which I think surprised Ernie. I got my old camera out of the trunk, and we started the hike to the terminal.

Los Angeles International Airport. The front porch of the Pacific Rim. The new Orient Express, delivering the Mysterious East at 500 knots, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Ernie’s eyes were showing too much white, like a horse about to bolt.

“Relax,” I told him. “I know it’s overwhelming, but it all makes sense. Somehow. To somebody.”

It occurred to me that, from what he’d told me of the future, there were probably more people in LA right now than there were in the whole world in his time.

And they said the population explosion was going to kill us off.

“Look,” I pointed. “That architectural mistake there that looks like a big spider? That’s where we’re headed. Walk where I walk—the raised part of the road is called a sidewalk, and it’s for pedestrian traffic. Up there is a place where we can get across the road.”

He nodded uncertainly, but seemed less panicked.

Then several jets passed directly overhead, and I had to wait for a lull in the air traffic to speak again. I walked quickly, and Ernie kept pace with me.

When things grew quieter I said, “I’m going to find an observation platform that overlooks the runway. What I want you to do is to stand there like I’m taking your picture, but I’ll really be shooting the ground crews. Then we’ll need to see if we can map out a route to where this aircraft is likely to be in two days. Do you have the flight number?”

He gave it to me.

“I’ll see what I can get out of the ticket office. I’ll say we’re taking your old grandma on that flight, and she’s on a walker and we want to know where to bring her in that’ll be close to the right gate.”

Again, Ernie nodded.

He stuck close to me as we entered the terminal. It was funny to think of such a mountain of a man so timid in a crowd. No, timid wasn’t the word. He walked through the terminal like a soldier on patrol, expecting an ambush. I’d seen shell-shock during the war, men whose senses had been filed down to hair-triggers from living with too much danger for too long.

They didn’t like crowds, either.

We found an observation deck, and I took half a roll of pictures. Just tourists, a couple of Australians on vacation in the City of the Angels. Ernie even managed to smile for some of them.

Then I chatted up the ticket counter girl, and she let me pick her brain in exchange for some bright smiles and empty compliments.

Hey, I never said I couldn’t flirt with girls. It can be very useful in my line of work.

Then it was time to get Ernie and my film out of there. There was a drugstore on my way home that I used for developing, they never asked questions, and the clerk would bump me to the front of the line in exchange for a reasonable tip.

While the lab was working, I took Ernie across the street to a diner.

Over meatloaf and green bean casserole he asked me, “Can we do it?”

I thought it over. The job wasn't any less crazy than when he'd first proposed it, but after taking a look at the airport, I thought it might be possible.

"Yeah," I admitted. "Better than even odds we end up in a cell answering some hard questions from federal agents, but if all that matters is keeping that jet on the ground, we can do it."

"That is all that matters," he said. Then, "Friend Norton, I will not ask you to go with me. The risk is great."

"You can't do it without me," I told him firmly.

He started to object, and I spoke over him. "You don't know enough, and I don't have time to teach you. Not in two days. I can get you to that plane, if you follow my lead and do just what I tell you. You've got no chance on your own."

He nodded solemnly. "Thank you."

I shrugged that off. "I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing to stop an atomic war. I live here, remember?"

"I meant thank you for believing me," he said.

"I don't have any choice," I said slowly. "I keep going over it in my head, and as crazy as your story is, every other explanation I can come up with is worse."

I finished my dinner and dropped a couple of bucks on the table to cover it.

"Let's go. My pictures should be ready." I got up.

They were, and I paged through them on the way to the car, picking out the ones that showed the flight crew's uniforms most clearly. Then I sat in the car and lit a cigarette. The sun was just setting, somewhere past the concrete canyons out over the Pacific ocean.

Time to go. It would be full dark by the time we got to Dick's Paris Cabaret. Guys like Sammie only came out at night.

“Back up to Tinseltown,” I muttered.

Ernie nodded as if he understood me.

For a moment I considered dropping Ernie off at a diner or a drugstore to wait while I went into Dick’s to find Sammie by myself. But, no, that wouldn’t work.

Dick’s started life as a Turkish tea room. Rumor had it that the place was designed by the same guy who built Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, but if so, he’d been having an off day. From the outside, it was all dark wood and curlicue doodads, like an antique sideboard. A neon sign covered most of the front wall announcing “Dick’s Parisian Cabaret,” with the apostrophe and the dots over the “i”’s martini glasses, the whole thing blinking a garish red. A second neon sign featured a chorus girl shaking her hips from side to side.

The epitome of that restrained taste and dignity for which West Hollywood is justly famed.

I parked around the corner and locked my car. Ernie followed me up the sidewalk looking nervously from side to side like he was searching for landmines.

The bruiser on the door wore garters on his bulging arms and an absurd little bowler perched on his head. He gave Ernie a cold glare as I paid the cover.

The inside was even darker than the outside, except for the stage, where a chorus line—half in suits, half in little pastel dresses—was butchering “A Secretary Is Not A Toy.”

There was a bar along one wall, a scattering of little round tables across the floor. This early on a weeknight most of them were empty.

I led Ernie to the bar. The bartender, a guy I knew slightly named Jules, looked up past me to Ernie and stared, pouring two fingers of watered gin on the floor before he recovered.

“Hey, Jules,” I said. “I need to talk to Sammie. Is he around?”

Jules forced his eyes back to me and nodded, then pointed to a table near the stage.

He was sitting alone, a round soft silhouette in the footlights. I nodded to Jules and turned to head that way.

“Hey!” Jules said. “Two drink minimum.”

I dropped a bill on the bar. “Four whiskeys. Give ’em to someone who’s had all his shots.”

As we crossed the floor, the secretaries left the stage and were replaced by three figures in kimonos who started warbling “Three Little Maids From School Are We” in falsetto. Even the piano player was wincing.

Sammie was dressed in a green velvet suit that made him look like Toad, of Toad Hall. He was watching the show with a critical eye, a pad and paper on the table in front of him. I took a chair and turned it around, sitting with my hands resting on the back. A moment later, Ernie pulled another chair over and sat down, carefully.

“Butchie,” Sammie said, smiling his greasy, false smile up at me. Then his eyes went past me to Ernie, and his smile turned genuine. “Who’s your friend?”

“A buddy of mine from the war,” I said. “Look, we need a job done, and I’ll pay to get it done fast.”

Sammie was still looking at Ernie. “Hi there,” he grinned, “war buddy.”

Ernie smiled back uncertainly.

I snapped my fingers to get Sammie’s attention, which he reluctantly gave me. I pulled the pictures from my jacket pocket and slid them across the table. “I need a couple of uniforms like these, and I need them by Thursday.”

Sammie narrowed his eyes then looked down at the pictures. He didn’t pick them up. “What are these from?” he asked. “The airport?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“These are black and white, honey,” Sammie said. “I’d need to know a color.”

“Navy blue,” I said.

He paged through the pictures. “Thursday?” he said absently. “Not a chance. I am *much* too busy.”

“How much would it cost to make you unbusy?” I asked.

He looked up to me, his eyes calculating. “You want to tell me what this is about?”

“No,” I said.

“Well,” he sighed theatrically. “Looks like bad news to me. You know me, baby, I make it a point never to get involved in anything... nefarious.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Right.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “You know my situation. I cannot afford to be mixed up with any of your secret agent bullshit.”

“You won’t be mixed up in it,” I assured him. “If something goes south, your name will never come up. All you know is that I paid you handsomely to make two navy blue jumpsuits.”

He sighed again and rolled his eyes like a silent movie heroine. Then he looked at the pictures again. “Thursday, huh? Well, maybe. Gonna have to pull an all-nighter.”

I waited.

His eyes went to Ernie. “How about you, war buddy? You planning anything nefarious?”

“My business is entirely lawful,” Ernie said before I could get a word in.

Sammie rolled his eyes again. “Oh, *that’s* convincing.”

I shot Ernie a look. He ignored it.

“Please, sir,” Ernie said to Sammie. “This is very important.”

Sammie gave him a hard look, “Where are you from, stranger?”

“Australia,” Ernie said.

“Uh-huh,” Sammie frowned, clearly not believing it. Then he seemed to come to a conclusion and picked up the photos. “I never could resist a pretty face. Meet me backstage after the next number. I’ll get some measurements.”

He stood and fixed me with a sharp look. “And you, Mister Man, are going to owe me a big one.”

I nodded.

“And a c-note. Each. In cash. In advance.”

I nodded again, and he minced away to the backstage door.

The little maids bowed and trotted off stage, to be replaced by a pair in gingham dresses who started up with “I Cain’t Say No.” Well, they might have been able to say “no,” but they definitely couldn’t sing it. I gritted my teeth to wait it out.

Ernie seemed to be watching the performance with enjoyment, nodding his head to the music. For a moment I considered the idea that he wasn’t from the future, but from some other planet altogether.

At last it was over, and I went around to the side of the stage to the door labeled “NO admittance during performances.” I ignored the sign and went in. Sammie was there with a little notebook and a tape. He got my measurements quickly, without fuss, then turned his attention to Ernie.

“Oh, my,” he said, wrapping the tape around his chest. “Now, listen, buddy, if you stay in Hollywood, we have got to get you into pictures. I know people. Seriously, honey, stay in touch; I’ll introduce you.”

I pressed two hundred dollars into Sammie’s moist hand. “He’s leaving by the weekend,” I said sharply.

“Oh, what a shame,” Sammie said.

“When can we get them?” I asked.

“Ohhh...” Sammie chewed his lip. “Tomorrow night. Right here. Say, oh, nineish?”

“We’ll be here,” I promised him, then I took Ernie and left. Time to go home, get a hot shower, a stiff drink, and a good night’s sleep.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a motel?” I asked Ernie, once we were in the car.

“No,” he said simply. Of course not.

“You can sleep on my couch,” I told him.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The street where I live is lined by two-story stucco cubes in smog-stained pastels, like the toy block collection of an untidy giant. Palm trees are scattered irregularly along the curb, trunks scarred at fender level, innocent bystanders that had been caught in innumerable parking place disputes.

My cube is turquoise. It’s hollow, like all the others, with an inner courtyard dominated by a swimming pool and a scattering of deck chairs, mostly broken. I live on the second floor, up a flight of concrete stairs and halfway around the upper deck.

Down at pool level, a handful of potential starlets clustered, unwinding after their shifts as carhops and hostesses by sharing a gallon of red wine and horror stories about casting couches. One of them waved, and I waved back, and I could see sly looks and stifled giggles. They knew me well enough to jump to the wrong conclusion about my house guest.

Home again.

One room with the proportions of a shoe box, with one door leading to a bedroom exactly half the size of the main room and another leading to a

bathroom small enough to use the mirror over the sink to shave in the shower. One end of the main room had a California kitchen—counter-top range and refrigerator, no oven. I wasn't much of a cook, grilled cheese sandwiches and eggs over easy were about the extent of my menu. No one cooks in LA, anyway, we survive on paper-wrapped parcels eaten in our cars.

I'd filled my space with a couch and a couple of chairs, non-matching, all bought at thrift stores. I had the regulation television and stereo. Across one wall were my movie posters—*North By Northwest*, *Dr. No*, and *The Searchers*. Real movie posters, too. Lobby three sheets, supplied by a buddy of mine who manages a chain of theaters. The last one's signed, too, by the Duke himself.

I saw Ernie gazing around the box, and I tried to imagine how it must look to his eyes. How did people live in the future?

I pointed. "Bathroom through there." Then I thought of something, "You do know how to use a bathroom, right?"

"Yes, Norton, I do," he said. Was there a trace of amusement in his reply? His expressions were still too tough to read.

He went into the bathroom, and I went to the kitchen nook to build a pair of drinks. I made his fairly weak. Maybe they didn't drink in the future? Suddenly I realized how much I didn't know about him.

I heard the toilet flush and a moment later Ernie came out of the bathroom. I held out the glass to him. "Do your people drink alcohol?" I asked.

He took it. "Yes, we do," he said and took a sip. He smiled and added, "After a day like today, we might even have two."

I smiled back and took a drink of my own. I took one of the chairs and let him have the couch. It all felt suddenly... awkward. A minute ago I'd had a thousand questions I wanted to ask him, and now I couldn't think of a thing to say.

He spoke first. "Is it acceptable to remove the tie now?"

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I said. I undid my own and slid it off, folded it and stuck it in my jacket pocket.

He fumbled with the knot of his, managed to remove it, messing up his collar in the process. He undid the first two buttons of his shirt, rubbed his neck. “I am unused to such constrictions. It feels uncomfortable to me.”

I took a long drink. His not wearing a tie could feel uncomfortable to me, if I let it. His skin was smooth and bronzed, almost glowing with health. I kept my eyes off that little triangle of exposed chest. Mostly.

“So,” I said quickly, “you got a girl in the future?”

“I have no children,” he said.

“I didn’t mean a child,” I explained. “A wife, I meant. A woman.”

“Oh,” he said quietly. Then he was silent for a long moment. Just as I was about to change the subject he added, “In my time I am not permitted to marry. I carry too many defective genes. If it were not so I would not have been selected for this mission.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“That situation is among many that I have come here to change,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

“How was the transit accomplished?” Ernie asked. “I understand it only vaguely, and your language lacks many necessary words. But the short answer is that objects have energy that is dependent upon their location in space—you understand that?”

I didn’t. “How so?” I asked.

For an answer he raised his hand with the glass in it to above his head. “Energy of potential,” he said. “This glass has more energy than when it was lower.”

“But that’s just gravity, right?” I said.

He let the glass drop. Then quick as a snake he caught with his other hand, two feet lower down. It was a slick move, he didn't spill a drop. "Gravity has a time component. Gravitation force is measured in distance divided by time multiplied by itself."

Thirty-two feet per second squared, I remembered from some long-ago physics class. "Okay.." I said tentatively.

"Objects have a certain energy because of their position in time," he said, then drained the glass. "This has less energy than it did a minute ago. Entropy decreases energy. It is the arrow of time."

I finished my own drink and held out my hand for his. "Refill?" I asked.

He handed it over. "Please."

As I headed to the kitchen nook and the whiskey I mused, "So... they gave you a bunch of energy and it made you go back in time?"

He nodded, "Yes, just as I used energy to move the glass in space, increasing the gravitation potential energy."

I mixed drinks, giving each a generous measure of booze before pouring the soda. "They just hook you up to a generator or what?"

He laughed. "More complicated than that. The energy was delivered in phased waves of dark-wave radiation. It required much power, many tons of active isotopes."

I returned with the drinks, handed him one. He was bunched up on one end of the couch so I took the other. There was plenty of room between us.

"Many tons?" I asked.

"Friend Norton, my time will not be able to send a second traveler," he said seriously. "I must not fail."

"You won't," I assured him.

He sighed deeply. "I know that I am asking much of you."

I thought about it and took another drink while I was thinking. “How sure are you,” I asked at last, “that this is really going to make a difference?”

“We know how the war begins,” he said. “We have lost much over the years, but that much has been preserved.”

“But you can’t know that something else won’t set off a new war. A different war than the one you were sent back to stop.” I waved at the window. Outside the lights of Los Angeles twinkled like fallen stars. “This is a crazy time. Anything could happen out there.”

“I have to hope,” Ernie said softly. “I had two brothers. Neither of them lived to see his tenth birthday. My home is in the place you call Siberia today. When the wind is from the south, the farmers pick what they can, before it is ripe, and the next day they burn what is left. The man who invented the process that sent me here has no eyes, and the top of his skull is so soft that he must wear a steel cap to protect his brain. We are dying, friend Norton, and we have been dying for a thousand years. We have no art, no literature, no culture, save what we have scavenged from the ruins of the past. All that we know is the struggle to survive. This world deserves more. Men deserve more. I have been given a chance to give them that. I will do whatever it takes to accomplish my mission.”

He drained his glass then and held it out to me. “Kill me or give me another drink. You can’t change my mind.”

I took the glass. I gave him another drink. While I was at it, I built another one for me.

“Okay, then,” I said as I settled back down. “Tomorrow you can lie low here. I’ve got a couple of things to do around town. Tomorrow night we’ll get the jumpsuits. The plane we want is coming in from Sacramento and should be on the ground by three in the afternoon. It’s scheduled to leave for Chicago at eight P.M., so we’ve got five hours to make sure it doesn’t take off.”

He nodded. “I am prepared for that. I have studied similar aircraft that we have located in the wastelands.”

“Well, at Kunsan I mostly worked on F-86s, but, heck, a jet engine’s a jet engine, right?” I mused. “They’re sensitive. Shouldn’t be hard to ground a DC-8.”

“Yes,” he yawned hugely, then added. “It has been a very long day for me, friend Norton. I must sleep.”

“Sure, sure,” I said. I fetched him some spare blankets from the bedroom. He’d taken off his coat and shirt by the time I returned. Bad genes or no, he had a torso that the local Atlases at Gold’s Gym would kill for. I tried not to stare. He took the blankets with a nod.

“I’m going to bed, then,” I said. “See you in the morning.”

Then I took my drink and went into my bedroom and tightly shut the door. I undressed and slipped between cold sheets, and I didn’t think about my houseguest.

Much.

The morning came greasy and gray, the sun reluctantly clearing the rooftops of Compton to dazzle my window through dusty Venetian blinds. I needed to piss and then coffee and cheap diner food.

Ernie was up and dressed and frowning into my copy of *Naked Lunch*. I waved at him on my way to the bathroom. Bladder relieved, I joined him on the couch in my pajama bottoms.

“I do not understand this book at all,” he admitted.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s not the kind of book you understand. It’s a book you leave on the coffee table so people know how hip you are.”

His frown deepened.

“Half a sec while I get some clothes on,” I said. “Then let’s get some breakfast.”

I dressed, brushed my teeth, decided that I could go another day without shaving. Then I headed out the door with Ernie in my wake. We hit Ruby's a couple of blocks away for coffee and omelets. After that I walked him back to my place, showed him how to work the television and stereo, told him to help himself to any food he could find that wasn't growing mold, and headed off to work.

I wrote up a couple of reports, with invoices to go with them, and delivered them to clients. Along the way, I stopped by a jeweler I'd done work for in the past and made some guarded inquiries about how a private individual might go about unloading a large quantity of diamonds. I gave him the impression that I was trying to track down a jewel thief by working backwards from the buyers and ended up with the names of a few shops that my man thought would be willing to take merchandise without provenance at a steep discount.

By then it was lunch, so I picked up a sack of burgers and went back home. Ernie was sitting on the couch, listening to the stereo with a concerned expression. After a moment I recognized the album, Charles Mingus, *The Black Saint And The Sinner Lady*.

"You like jazz?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure," he said. "It's difficult to follow."

"Yeah," I agreed, "That's what I like about it." I sorted burgers, handed him half.

He unwrapped one carefully, watching me to see what I would do. Even more than a newspaper from the day after tomorrow and a bag of diamonds, that convinced me that he really was from some far distant time. The man had never seen a hamburger before.

I demonstrated how to eat them by polishing mine off quickly, then I headed back out. I talked to a couple of the shady jewelers and decided on one to follow up on later. Setting up a deal like that takes patience.

By then it was getting onto dinner time, and I decided on Chinese. I figured that I'd give Ernie the entire LA culinary experience before he

went back home to Tomorrowland.

Ernie ate with chopsticks like he'd grown up with them, which he might have. I turned on the television. I like having it on when I eat. The Virginian was on, a rerun I'd seen before. Doug McClure was hoodwinked by a lady with a pretty face and had to go after her to recover some money she'd taken—money that wasn't his. It was a cautionary tale about the danger of helping attractive strangers, and I felt for the guy, even though I knew it was going to turn out all right in the end.

Ernie was frowning at the screen. “How long ago was this filmed?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Sometime in the spring, I guess. I don't know their shooting schedule.”

“It is an area more primitive than this?”

I got what he was asking, “Oh, no, that's not real. The show is set in the past, and they make sets and costumes for it.”

“Ah,” Ernie nodded and smiled. “Of course. Historical fiction. Odd, it never occurred to me that people in *my* past would tell stories about *their* past.”

We watched the rest of the show together, and Ernie applauded when it ended.

Sammie insisted on fitting the jumpsuits, which involved a lot of groping, particularly of Ernie. He didn't seem to mind, or even notice, which I think annoyed Sammie. For my part, I was used to ignoring fat old queens with roaming fingers. For me, the really unpleasant part was having to listen to his stage show mangling “They Call The Wind Maria” and “How Lovely to Be a Woman.”

There are no words.

The outfits did fit, and they looked damned authentic. Sammie really was a wizard with fabric, for all of his faults.

We stopped for dinner at a Hollywood drive-in and let car hops in hot pants and roller skates provide us with chili dogs and shakes. They were blaring KHJ too loud for conversation. Probably for the best—we'd run out of things to say. Tomorrow, I was going to do what was either the stupidest or the bravest thing I'd ever done. Probably both.

Ernie sat in my passenger seat, slowly chewing his food and watching the car hops buzzing by, not like he was checking out their long legs and tight rears, but more like a man at the zoo, studying exotic animals in cages. I tried to imagine what my world must look like through his eyes.

Crowded, active... alive. Hollywood was a parade of hopeful monsters, all looking for the main chance, riding V-8 carousel horses and chasing after the brass ring. Everybody in LA was *striving* for something, money, fame, the next hit, the next fix, the next screw...

“Look,” I said as we pulled out of the drive-in, “I’m sorry about Sammie. I know he comes on strong, and I wish I could have gone to someone else, but for what we needed he was the only guy.”

Ernie was looking out the window, and for a moment I thought he hadn't heard me. Then, softly, he asked, “That man Sammie wanted to have sex with me, is that right?”

I found myself blushing, glad that Ernie was looking the other way. “Yeah... he did.”

Another pause. Then, with an edge of bitterness, “He would have been disappointed.”

I turned on the radio and we didn't talk the rest of the way back home.

I built us a couple of drinks and pulled out a slick printed flier I had picked up on our field trip to the airport. One side was all ads—hotels, restaurants, nightclubs—and the other had a map of the airport itself. It was a tourist map with little more than the location of the parking lots and a list of which airlines used which terminals. I spread it out on the coffee table and pointed.

“We’ll park here,” I pointed. “It’s not ideal for getting out in a hurry, but if they’re chasing us, they’ll catch us no matter what. Either we get away clean, or we don’t get away.”

Ernie nodded seriously.

“One of the employee lots would be better, but you can’t get in without a sticker,” I went on. “They might check IDs, too. I’m not sure. I haven’t really had enough time to case this caper. We’ll have to improvise.”

I ran my finger over the map, from the lot through the doors into the terminal and stopped about halfway to the gate we wanted. “There’s a men’s room around there. We’ll go in as passengers, come out as ground crew. After that, it’s a matter of keeping our heads down and looking like we belong there.”

Ernie nodded again. Inwardly I had my doubts. The man was too damned big to keep his head down, and he didn’t look like he belonged anywhere. Although, I considered, that might work in our favor. If the airport cops were after him, it might mean that it would be easier for me to fly under the radar. Something to consider.

I traced the route to the flight line. “I watched the crew going in and out of these doors here, and I didn’t see anyone checking IDs. There’s no way the airport cops can know every employee’s face—there’s just too many of them.”

“The crowding there was... extraordinary,” Ernie admitted.

“Exactly,” I said. “The idea is to get lost in the crowd.” I pointed. “The plane we want should be around here.”

I frowned at the map. The whole back section was a blank space. “We’ll need to get into the maintenance area for tools—we don’t want to bring anything in with us.”

“I am prepared to disable the aircraft,” Ernie said softly. “I just need you to get me close to it.”

I raised my eyes to his face. His eyes were wide, calm, and very blue.

“For this moment, I have trained my entire life,” he said. He reached across the table to rest his hand on my arm. His palm was rough with callouses, the weight of his touch comforting and warm. It was like being touched by my father, before the cancer took his strength and his life. “Get me within sight of the proper airplane, then you must leave me to it. I came here to save your life, not to destroy it.”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah, well, we’ll just see what happens, okay? Maybe we can both get away clean. You never know.”

“Yes, friend Norton, we will see.” He was humoring me, I could tell. “It is a shame. If we succeed, no one will ever know what we have done.”

The feel of his hand on my arm was making it hard to think. I could feel his strength, the coiled steel of his muscles. I was used to being the strong one, the tough guy. I liked my boys pretty and soft—musicians, actors, writers, working as waiters and shop clerks, always needing just a little help, just until their ship came in.

Ernie’s hand was like a chunk of sun-warmed sandstone. I could imagine crawling into the circle of those massive arms and curling up like a cat in his lap. It wasn’t a sexual desire—although it could be, with just the slightest sign from him—it was a need for comfort. It had been so long since I let myself feel small and lost that I had forgotten I could.

The moment stretched, uncomfortably intimate. I pulled my arm back—well, I tried. His grip was like a steel manacle. He leaned forward.

“Friend Norton, I may not have time to say this tomorrow. Thank you. Millions of people will owe their lives to you, but they will never thank you. They will never know who you are. I do. For all of them, all the people who will not die in fire, all the children who will be born whole in the years to come. Thank you.”

I licked my lips, and my tongue felt as dry as sandpaper. “You’re welcome,” I managed to croak.

He released my arm. I pulled it back, feeling the warmth of his hand lingering. I took a breath. My heart was hammering in my chest. “Let’s

turn in, okay?” I said. “We want to be rested for your big day, huh?”

He nodded.

I went into my bedroom and closed the door. Got into bed. Tried to relax. I wanted another drink, but I didn’t trust myself to walk past the couch where Ernie was curled up to get to the kitchen.

At long last, I slept.

The sun was turning the smog into orange marmalade when I got out of bed the next morning. Ernie was sitting on the couch, dressed, alert. His suit was getting ruffled, but we were going to play the part of airline passengers, so that was okay. I got showered and dressed, and we went out in search of breakfast.

Minutes dragged. I didn’t want to show up too early to the airport—the longer we were there, the more chance that the whole scheme would unravel. To kill time, I went by the office and checked my mail, called into my service for messages. There were a couple of checks in my mailbox, so I swung by the bank to deposit them, wondering if I’d ever get a chance to spend the money.

When I got back to the car, Ernie said, softly, almost hesitantly, “Would we have time to go to a beach?”

“Sure,” I said, a bit puzzled. “The plane won’t be on the ground for hours.”

Ernie looked out the window. In a small voice, he said, “I have never seen the ocean.”

I started the car. “Santa Monica, coming right up.”

We walked the pier, and Ernie leaned against the rail and stared out to sea. His face was impassive, but I could see tears on his cheeks. I left him to it and got us some caramel popcorn and funnel cakes. When I got back, he was under control again, his face dry, smiling gently.

“Thank you,” he said.

We still had time to kill, so we did the boardwalk. Ernie watched a baseball pitch game for a while, then stepped up and broke four bottles in a row with a frightening display of power and accuracy.

“You play baseball?” I asked him quietly as he collected a set of shot glasses decorated with mermaids and anchors.

He glanced at me with a grin. “No,” he admitted. “I am good at throwing things, however.”

The sun was hot and the breeze off the ocean felt like heaven. In our suits we stood out among the bathing suits and muscle shirts. The tourists looked at us funny, and the local hustlers made us for cops and faded into the woodwork. Pitchmen changed their tone when they saw us coming, sanitizing their usual line. Ernie took it all in with an almost childlike sense of wonder.

I could have walked with him all day. I would have gladly watched the surfers and beach bunnies until the sun sank into the waves and then found some dive for fresh crabs and cheap beer.

But we had work to do.

At just before three we pulled into the airport lot, paying outrageously for the privilege. The roar of planes coming in to land was almost continuous. I wondered which one was our target.

We each carried a suitcase, empty except for the jumpsuits that Sammie had made for us. Ernie stayed close to me, still clearly overwhelmed by the noise and confusion, but he looked more like a tourist from someplace quiet and less like a whipped dog.

I found us an observation platform, and we stood and watched the planes take off and land and scurry around the flight line in cheerful chaos, just like any other tourists, until I spotted the tail numbers we needed. I nodded to Ernie. He took a deep breath and nodded back.

We changed in the stalls in the men’s room, putting the coveralls on over our suits. I carried both of the suitcases out of there, and as we

passed a luggage carousel, I set them on it. With any luck, they would end up in unclaimed baggage and never be connected to today's events.

Then I led Ernie down a staircase and through a door marked Airport Employees Only. No one moved to stop us. Beyond the door was a maze of corridors and small shabby rooms. I just kept walking, doing my best to look like I knew exactly where I was headed.

We passed people in uniforms, flight attendants, pilots, other jumpsuits like ours. Aside from the occasional wave, no one paid attention to us. Inside, I was as tense as a piano wire, but I had done enough undercover work to keep an easy smile on my face. Just a guy doing his job.

We found a door leading to bright sunlight and open tarmac. The noise of dozens of jet engines was a sonic wall that we had to push through. Compared to the military order of the 8th Flight Wing, the civilian airport was a madhouse, jets heading in all directions like shoppers looking for a parking place at a Labor Day white sale. It took me a moment to get oriented and find the jet we wanted. It was being fueled. I looked back to Ernie.

He wasn't there.

I cursed and scanned the crowd of uniforms. He was a head taller than average, he should be easy to spot—

—*there*. His oversized frame was moving quickly, not quite running, towards a baggage truck. It was a long low vehicle, like a golf cart towing a half dozen open-topped trailers, that was sitting close to a nearby jetway. Yelling would have been a waste of breath, so I broke into a jog after him. Idiot.

Thirty seconds on the ground and the job had already gone south. What the Hell was Ernie trying to pull?

Ernie reached the baggage truck before I reached him. It was empty, evidently waiting for luggage to be offloaded. He vaulted into the seat and was rumbling off towards the refueling truck. I changed direction to intercept.

“What are you doing?” I shouted at him.

“Out of the way!” he shouted back. *“Go back to your home.”*

Like Hell I would. I jumped and swung up into the seat beside him. *“We’re doing this together, remember?”*

“Not anymore!”

And he threw me off the cart. One-handed. He just reached out and yanked, and I was in the air. I managed to cover my head with my arms before I hit. I lay there for a long moment, my wind knocked out of me and the roaring of jet engines filling my head. Then I rolled over to see what happened next.

Top speed of the luggage truck wasn’t more than a brisk jog, but Ernie had it running full out, straight towards the fuel wagon. The ground crew was just noticing the onrushing vehicle as Ernie bailed, a graceful dive that ended with him rolling back onto his feet, already in motion away from the inevitable collision. I was still trying to get to my feet when he got to me, reached down, and hauled me to my feet without breaking stride.

“I told you to go!” he shouted.

I just gasped for breath. He was pulling me along with him, and it was all I could do to keep my feet under me.

The air was suddenly heavy with the smell of jet fuel. It was a smell I remembered well. I ducked my head instinctively. If that went up...

It did. Not an explosion—jet fuel doesn’t explode. But it can burn damned fast, and spread out across sun-baked asphalt was pretty much the perfect combustion conditions. The scent in the air turned smoky, and I felt the heat growing behind us like a second sun had risen.

I glanced over my shoulder. Smoke was billowing out across the runway now, thick and black and reeking of kerosene. That DC-8 wasn’t going anywhere.

I had my breath back and was able to run. Everyone else was running, too, most of us away from the fire; a few brave souls headed towards it. I silently wished them luck.

We went into the shadow of a jetway. No one was looking in our direction for the moment; everyone's attention was drawn to the burning aircraft. I stopped dead. For a moment Ernie kept dragging me, then he stopped, too. I pulled off my jumpsuit and tossed it into the shadows. Ernie caught on and did the same.

His suit was rumpled, but not so rumpled as to draw attention to him. I looked down at myself and adjusted my own clothing as best I could. Then I looked around. There was a ladder up to the end of the jetway proper, to allow crew to use it when no plane was docked. I headed that way and Ernie followed.

The girl who was supposed to be watching the passengers was at the window, watching the fire instead, so we made it to the terminal without anyone shouting us down or getting in our way. I was starting to think we might actually get through this crazy caper in one piece.

I slowed to a walk as we joined the crowd of gawkers on the observation deck. Ernie turned to stare at the plane. It was fully engulfed now, and the fire crew was just getting everything that would move clear of the area. There wasn't much else they could do. In the war, I'd seen planes go up like that. Under the fuselage the tarmac would be molten.

I slapped Ernie on the shoulder. It was like hitting a brick wall.

"Mission accomplished, big guy," I said softly. "Let's get out of here."

He just stood there dumbly, staring like he couldn't believe his eyes. After a long moment he nodded slowly and turned away. He followed me through the terminal and out to the parking lot, stumbling like a sleepwalker.

"You did it," I said, heading towards my car. "Now how do we get you home?"

"Home?" he repeated the word like he'd never heard it before.

“Yeah.” I unlocked my car. “You know, back to six thousand A.D?”

He looked down at me and shook his head. “I have no home. Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I was born into a world formed by the atomic war,” he said.

“Right,” I agreed. I paused to shake out a cigarette and a match, “You explained all that. Everybody dying from radiation. We fixed it, right?”

“That world is gone now,” Ernie spoke slowly, like he was explaining something obvious to an idiot. “I was never born.”

The match burned my thumb and I dropped it, cursing. Then I sucked on my burned thumb and around it I said, “But... you’re right there.”

He nodded slowly. “I should not be.”

I blinked at him. “Wait. You expected that once we changed things so the war didn’t happen, you’d... what? Just disappear?”

“Our scientists thought that was the most likely result,” he agreed.

I tried to wrap my head around that. “So... you went back in time expecting to die? This was a suicide mission?”

“Yes, friend Norton,” he said solemnly. “I judged my life was expendable.”

“But you didn’t disappear,” I said. “And you can’t go back home, because the home you came from isn’t there anymore?”

“Exactly.” He looked glum.

“Wait...” Reasoning this out was hard. “There’s still a year sixty-whatever, right? But it’s different now. Better. Don’t you want to go back there? See how things turned out?”

“How would I get there?” he asked softly. “We only built the machine that sent me here because we had great need of it. It was the labor of a

century. We sent men into the wastes to harvest the radioactives. A better world would not have made such a device. They would not need it.”

“I...” this was hurting my head. If there was no machine, then he was right, he shouldn’t be here. But if he weren’t here, then the machine would need to be made because things would be bad, and they’d need him to change them.

“They would not want me,” Ernie went on bitterly. “I have no place in that world. Whatever it became, it is not my home.”

He looked so depressed that I risked breaking my hand to clap him on the shoulder again. “Cheer up, buddy. We’ve got a whole city full of people who don’t fit in anywhere. You’ll like it here.”

I waved my hand to indicate the smog-shrouded bowl of freeways beyond the airport.

“Welcome to Los Angeles.”

Misha Burnett is a self-educated and self-published author who draws upon his professional background in the security and maintenance fields to bring a solid sense of reality to his fantastic tales. He is the creator of The Book Of Lost Doors series of novels; Catskinners’ Book, Cannibal Hearts, The Worms Of Heaven, and Gingerbread Wolves, available on Amazon. Duel Visions, his new short fiction anthology with Louise Sorensen is out now from Cirsova Publishing.



The Illustrated Stark
70th Anniversary Edition
by Leigh Brackett

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The Star-God's Grave

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

*A young sorcerer's apprentice steals a starship from his master...
only to be pressed into the service of a pair of space hussars to
undertake a perilous quest!*

The shrill wail of the alarm bird echoed within the damp confines of the barrack's stone walls. Tunkal was up first, having had a restless night. Across the cold floor he shuffled, wincing and cursing. Reaching into a niche underneath the creature's small alcove, the young man removed a vial from its velvet case and loaded an eye dropper with the nectar contained therein. The bird ceased its caterwauling only when the dropper was raised to its beak. After it had drunk its fill, the creature cooed appreciatively. Tunkal gave its red feathers a pat and returned to his bunk to prepare for the day.

Like those of the other apprentices, his worldly belongings were stored in a wooden chest at the foot of his cot. From it he drew his robes, maroon trimmed in black. He laid them on his bunk and smoothed the thick fabric, wary of wrinkles and ever irritated at the faint scent of cedar which clung to the garment.

The apprentices took their turns standing under the fount of cold water in the washroom. Tunkal stood for a moment under the torrent and then stepped aside to wash. The soap was caustic and unpleasant—all he could afford on his meager allowance. Next to him, Dallis whistled as he washed with a bar infused with lavender, a part of his monthly care package. Properly scrubbed, the apprentices took turns rinsing in the chill flow.

The company was unusually silent, so Dallis attempted levity with a tug at Tunkal's necklace. The youth clutched at the leather thong around his thin neck, and all who watched did the same—a reflex.

Dallis affected the gait of an elderly man and spoke in a rasping soprano, "Grim Tunkal! You must be vigilant! A wizard without his crystals is merely a literate man, defenseless against the perils of a hostile galaxy, at the mercy of any cretin bearing a sharpened stick!"

The imitation of their master brought laughter finally to the company. Dallis's grin contrasted with Tunkal's frown, ever-present on his dour face, high cheekbones underneath sunken eyes, hair thinning though only nineteen solar years of age.

Dallis laid a hand on his bony shoulder.

"Just a bit of fun, Tunkal, I meant no harm. And just so you know, if today you are selected for promotion, I will be the first to congratulate you.

You have mastered four crystals. You are punctual and hard working. You deserve it.”

Tunkal managed a smile even as he shook his head.

“I don’t know. I have been passed over twice.”

A commotion at the window ended the conversation. The younger apprentices stood on tiptoes to see as the company crowded around.

“Gorgeous!” exclaimed Munj, a youth remarkable for remaining portly though he ate the same diet as his fellow apprentices.

The yacht floated past, a vessel grown with great skill from prize bixbite. The vessel’s simplicity described the minimalist elegance currently in vogue among wizards and members of the aristocracy that deigned to care about such things as space travel. Its four sides tapered gradually to a sharp point, a pyramid laid on its side. No doors or windows ruined its smooth planes, faintly shimmering in the weak light of Tau Ceti.

Tunkal joined the throng marveling at the vessel’s simple beauty. “It must have taken years to grow.”

Dallis smiled. “Four years, in fact.”

“How do you know?”

“My father had it made. It is a gift for our master.”

Tunkal’s frown deepened.

The ceremony to raise Dallis to the level of Apprentice 1st Order was a simple one. The master bade Dallis step forward and intoned on the solemn nature of the position and Dallis’s eminent suitability. Then he added a crystal to the young man’s necklace—a square of white quartz, a stone imbued with energies related to various endeavors: the finding of missing objects, the making of furniture, and the creation of explosive force.

The event was a mix of joy and lingering sadness, as the former Apprentice 1st Order had only been dead for three days.

After the ceremony, the master pulled Tunkal aside. The young man kept his head bowed appropriately though his fists were clenched within the long sleeves of his robe.

“You are a good student, Tunkal. Were your connections better, I would imagine you would be going far in this world. As an orphan you naturally lack any backing—not in the Order and certainly not at court. So you must adjust your expectations to reality. It is a difficult thing for young men to do. But the alternative is worse. I remember my tutor, Galzimontok. In his one-hundred-and-seventies, he went through a phase studying the effects of various crystals upon dormant genes. He had the goal of assembling a menagerie of dangerous creatures in order to impress the Duchess Caroline Impinga, a woman whose beauty was only equaled by her love of the macabre. For use as base stock, he ensnared a wolf on a world orbiting far Cancri. The poor creature fought against its collar with such persistence that a wound opened, eventually killing the wretched beast.” The wizard fixed his small eyes onto his pupil. “Do not be like that wolf, young Tunkal.”

His reminiscing continued. “In the end, Galzimontok won her over by constructing a bedchamber nestled within a rhombus of clear glass. The vessel was lowered into a large tank full of aquatic predators. The pair made love amidst the cloudy red spectacle of the beasts feeding upon convicted murderers.” The master shook his head at the memory.

“The whole thing was in such horrible taste that I resolved to poison the old man at the first opportunity after the completion of my studies.”

Tunkal stared at his master. The old man smiled down for a moment then cocked his head.

“What were we talking about, my boy?”

“You were telling me not to chafe against the bonds fate has imposed.”

“Ah yes, platinum advice.” The wizard stroked his beard as he eyed the young man. He continued, “I find myself wishing to reward your patience. Shall I tutor you in an additional discipline? Perhaps one above your grade? We don’t have to tell the board. It will be our secret. What do you say?”

“Thank you, master. I wish to study post-formation reds, with an emphasis on telekinetics.”

“Excellent. It is, in fact, not a challenging field, however practical. The only reason lower grades aren’t instructed in that discipline is to keep young apprentices from the temptation of stealing a ship and flying willy-nilly across the galaxy. The course will last a month. See me in the west laboratory tomorrow and we will begin.”

“Thank you, master.”

Tunkal applied himself to the discipline with single-minded zeal, earning praise from the master. After a month, he could manipulate red crystals with ease, sending them through space at will.

The following evening he stole the yacht.

His fingers worked the control crystals with nervous enthusiasm, setting the vessel on a course for the galaxy’s rim. The asteroid upon which sat the wizard’s jutting towers receded in the distance as the pyramid of red crystal gained speed. Tunkal dropped a shard of aquamarine into a slot, and the ship was swallowed by a burst of brilliance, a rainbow of swirling colors emanating from the sharp point of the ship’s bow. The ship was now freed of its bonds to the material universe, hurtling through null space at incomprehensible speeds. The course was set, and the former apprentice could relax the mental discipline needed to steer the vessel.

Tunkal leaned back in the hard chair and inspected Dallis’s square of quartz, stolen from his necklace in the dead of night. He fed himself with a parcel of sweets taken from the fair youth’s care package and pondered his situation.

Desperation and impetuosity had conspired to make him an outlaw. He would journey outside the space governed by the Empire and make his fortune in the lawless lands beyond. His young heart was a frothing cauldron of competing emotions—fear, excitement, and a determination unchecked by experience or common sense. Despite himself, he nodded off at the controls and slept a dreamless sleep.

Jun Tette was a stocky man with poor posture, careworn from years plying the spaceways in his freighter, *Regret*. With narrowed eyes, he regarded the pair addressing him across the table. To his left was a hulking red-haired man. Half a dozen weapons hung from his belt and crossbelts, the accouterment of life outside the Empress's law. To his right was a thin man, athletic and graceful, bearing faint traces of the Eld in his fine features. A shiny blonde braid hung down his back.

The thin man continued, "It isn't that far into Lord Molker's space, my dear Jun. A simple taxi ride is all we need, in and out. When would you ever get such an offer? A few weeks' transit, a dip down to the surface, perhaps a refreshing nap as me and Thuf retrieve an object, then away back into the void and voilà! We are prepared to offer twenty percent! This artifact we seek, well, I don't wish to say too much, but it is the stuff of legend! The take is such that you may even retire! Think, my good man! You can finally rest! Those horrible bags under your eyes, your unhealthy pallor, the unsightly bulge at your waist atop those thin legs, atrophied from a life sitting in the pilot's chair, all these will be a thing of the past as you rest at the shores of a green sea, sipping wine and recuperating. A worthy reward for a lifetime plying space!"

Jun spoke through clenched teeth: "Two things. Firstly, Lord Molker's space is vast and uncharted. Legend populates it with a thousand savage worlds hosting all manner of creatures cast from nightmare. Any voyage into his space is suicide. Secondly, my legs are perfectly proportionate to my body. Good day, sirs."

The freighter captain left the bar on heavy steps, slamming the door behind him.

The warrior Thuf sighed. "The good captain is an umbrageous man. Perhaps in the future you might avoid insulting prospective partners."

"I am sure I don't know what you are talking about."

The two sipped their ale from oversized clay mugs. Near the hearth, an Ixxinni placed a decaphone to his spiracles and blew a mournful tune. The notes drifted through the smoky interior as a few gave their voice to the song. The lyrics described a common tragedy, a woman waiting in vain for the return of a spacefaring lover who had lost his life. Thuf was at the verge

of growing maudlin when a patron shouted for something more cheerful. The Ixxinni made a clicking sound in irritation.

The hulking fighter leaned back in his chair and spoke.

“Mouve, my dear friend, let us take stock of the situation. In the last two weeks, we have spoken with no less than fifteen pilots. None are willing to go into Molker’s space. I think the project must be abandoned. Perhaps it is for the best. Just the two of us robbing the grave of a star-god, deep within the Dark Lord’s realm? Jun was right. It is suicide.”

The muscles at Mouve’s jaw twitched. “I shall not give it up! Since released from the Empress’s service we’ve had barely more than a crust between us. We drink here on credit. And only this face of mine, these chiseled good looks, have thus far saved us from starvation. We need this! The two of us are the last that’s left of the battalion. To see so many of our friends dead so that we may become indigent? We owe their memories better!”

“Well, it wasn’t my idea to pool our severance and bet on the dogs.”

Mouve affected a wounded look. “It was a sure thing! I had it on oath from Monetti!”

“Which head?”

“The left one.”

Thuf sighed. “And there was the problem. The left one is a notorious liar.”

“He assured me he always told the truth and the other one was the liar.”

Thuf’s scarred hands clenched into fists, and he breathed deep. He opened his mouth to speak but abandoned the effort at the last moment, shaking his head.

Mouve made an impatient gesture and stood, making for the back of the bar. A moment later he stood in the humid gloom of the filthy bathroom, admiring his fine features in a cracked mirror.

A shape hovered behind, a man in robes. An arm reached up.

Mouve spun, knocking the arm aside as he drew a dagger and lunged forward. His free hand grasped his assailant's neck as the blade stood poised to strike.

Before him stood a gangly youth of dour mien, now gasping for air and pleading for mercy. His hands were raised in supplication. Mouve relaxed his grip.

“What do you mean by sneaking up on me like that?”

“Nothing, sir! I apologize. I am new here. I only wished to inquire where pilots may secure work. I asked outside but no one would answer.”

Mouve smiled as he sheathed his dagger.

“Well, friend. It is a good thing we met. Here on Made's World, many people follow a very elastic moral code. Someone might have attempted to take advantage of you. But now you are under the protection of Mouve Llansal! Come sit with me and my friend and I will let you in on a very exciting opportunity.”

After introductions, the three sat huddled around the table. In desperation, Mouve made a snap decision to tell the young man everything. Perhaps his vagueness had been off-putting during his many failed attempts to recruit a pilot.

“So a few weeks ago I found myself enjoying a tryst with the Lady Ulgoun Kagginov. Do you know of her?”

Tunkal shook his head no.

“She is a regular at court and a woman of robust health and large appetites. Her generosity is famous among young, handsome officers of limited means. She typically favors the company of hussars; no further proof of her good taste is necessary. Her husband is Admiral of the Imperial Fleet Amos Zaster. He is an imposing figure but apparently unable or simply uninterested in the demanding task of dousing the roaring fires of his wife's ample passions. It was a marriage of political purpose from what I understand.”

The young man's eyes lit up. "I know of him! His fleet is the finest in the universe, supervised by the Wizard Kalimsis, an expert in conglomerates, blues, and spontaneous formations. I have read some of his works."

Mouve looked to Thuf. "See there? Our young friend is an expert, a widely read wizard!"

"Apprentice, technically."

"Now, now, Tunkal. We are at the limit of the Empire and its boards. Here you are a wizard by virtue of mastery of crystals, not because some group of old men bestows you a diploma. It is liberating, is it not? Where was I?"

The warrior spoke, "Lady Ulgoun Kagginov."

"Ah yes. Insatiable! So there we were in her private suite. I was at the bar refreshing myself, replacing lost fluids after a strenuous few hours. The Lady lounged on the bed, talkative as ever. While the imps daubed sweat from her brow, she began to spin a tale concerning a dear friend, one Lieutenant Willy Werman of our Imperial Highness's Navy. Poor Willy had recently gone missing. His ship had gone off course, finding itself deep in Lord Molker's realm. The green officer had landed on some Godforsaken world of purple sky and windswept dunes and has not been heard from since. But in his last communiqué, Willy claimed to have found the corpse of a star-god!"

Tunkal's eyes widened. "It has been centuries since one has been found. Was the soul crystal intact?"

Mouve shook his head. "We don't know. No one knows. Dear Willy said nothing of venturing within. He said very little at all except professions of undying love and pleas for help. Rather naïve, really. It is not as if the Lady would ask the Admiral for assistance in such an indelicate matter. From what I gather Willy was not the brightest star in the sky. The letter's composition was abominable. As a boy, I was penning better metaphors to the nun that taught multiplication at gymnasium. That woman stole my innocence, God bless her. I think I first caught her eye during an athletic event. We were running—"

Thuf coughed. "Mouve, please. The matter at hand..."

“Ah, yes. Well, you have the gist of it, my friend. We have the report of the location of the remains of a star-god. We will fly there and retrieve the soul crystal. We need a fast ship and a skilled pilot.” Mouve fixed the young apprentice with a confident stare and continued, “I think you are our man.”

Tunkal nodded his head. “Yes, thank you!”

Thuf raised both his hands, a habitual gesture that meant he believed he had something important to say. The warrior’s icy blue eyes narrowed as his brow furrowed menacingly. “Boy, are you ready to face danger? Death? Do you see this scar, boy?”

Tunkal’s eyes traced the long line of pale that slid down the length of the burly warrior’s face. He nodded yes.

“It’s from my arena days, long before I entered Her Highness’s service. Daily, my soul felt the brush of chill fingers. Death and I are old friends.”

The apprentice grew pale, though his face betrayed no emotion.

Mouve admonished his friend. “Brother Thuf! Let’s not put a fear in this young man. Our errand won’t be so dire.”

Thuf scoffed, “What about the aforementioned creatures of nightmare?”

“Oh, I expect nothing more than some exotic local fauna. At the worst, perhaps an emaciated phung or a ghaut made irritable by lack of sleep.”

“Hmmpf. Well then, young man, are you interested?”

Tunkal nodded. The three swore oaths, and the compact was sealed. Tunkal would ferry them to the location whereupon the trio would venture into the ancient fastness of the star-god’s remains. The young apprentice would provide whatever support he could with his ill-understood magicks while the two veterans would meet foes head-on with saber and pistol. The pair made a great show of their generosity, granting the young apprentice an entire seven percent of the take.

On the dusty field outside Made’s Tavern, the two ex-soldiers found themselves speechless. The yacht before them gleamed in the afternoon light of G678.09002, known locally as Mina’s Star. Mouve ran his hands

along its flawless exterior, starting at its sharp point, caressing its lines until they rose beyond his reach.

“Mother of God. If I had known this was in your possession, I would have simply robbed you, young Tunkal.”

The young man wore an expression of alarm.

The lithe fighter continued. “Not to worry now, young wizard. Oaths have been sworn.”

Thuf grunted, “Your comment was poorly thought out. We could not pilot this craft even if it did come into our possession.”

“Yes, of course not.”

The vessel’s clean lines concealed a cramped interior. Tunkal sat in the pilot’s chamber, accessible to the cabin by an opening so small as to necessitate walking on all fours. Within the cabin, Mouve and Thuf made themselves as comfortable as possible. A sofa of utilitarian design sat atop a floor of hardwood panels. One cabinet sat taking up space in the corner opposite the door which opened only on Tunkal’s mental command. A small door behind and to the left of the sofa led to the head. Their equipment and sparse luggage were stowed under and around the sofa. Mouve expressed anxiety as the apprentice entered the cabin, stooping to inspect the cabinet.

“On larger vessels there is typically an airlock. It gives one a sense of safety.”

Tunkal replied, “Once sealed the cabin can only be opened by a specific sequence enacted by myself. There is no danger of a breach or accident which would expose pilot or passengers to the void. As a matter of fact, larger vessels are much more prone to leaks and failures.”

Mouve scratched his smooth chin. “A hypothetical situation; what if while underway you were struck down by an undiagnosed heart ailment? Neither myself nor gentle Thuf have the slightest knowledge of crystal theory. The regiments are ferried around the galaxy on vast ships with numberless crew, thus there was no need to concern ourselves with the vessel’s operation.”

Tunkal smiled. "I suppose, in that case, the vessel becomes your tomb. Oxygen will hold out as long as the recombiners in the cabinet are functioning, another few years, perhaps, based on their age. The dials can be set to dispense a nutritional paste, thus avoiding starvation. Removing a particular crystal at the helm will drop the vessel from null space. There is a chance you might materialize within a star or asteroid. But even if you re-enter reality safely, you will not be able to guide the vessel to harbor."

Mouve ran his hands over the smooth walls, testing. He spoke, "I suppose we would eventually go mad."

"This is typical." Tunkal suddenly let loose a wracking cough, clutching his chest as he did so, free hand steadying him against the red wall. The fair man regarded the scene with eyes wide with creeping fear.

The apprentice smiled, suddenly back in perfect health.

Mouve punched Thuf on the arm. "Did you see that? He makes sport of my well-founded anxieties!"

The warrior was nonplussed. "Have we left yet? There is no window."

Tunkal replied they would leave shortly. He wriggled his way into the pilot's area and began manipulating the crystal controls. Mouve related the last known position of Willy Werman as the ship rose from the dusty ground. A bass hum throbbed through the hard material. The sharp point of the vessel turned skyward, and the red pyramid left the thin atmosphere of Made's World. Tunkal grimaced with the mental exertion of steering the ship as it fought against gravity. In the cabin, Mouve and Thuf fought over possession of the sofa.

Tunkal shouted back.

"A vessel such as this is controlled by a complicated mental discipline, arranged and organized by this panel before me. A tranquil environment makes my work all the more easy."

The two ex-soldiers made themselves comfortable without further disturbance.

The journey took three weeks. Thuf and Mouve played cards incessantly, only breaking to sleep or occasionally read. The hulking warrior thumbed through a well-worn anthology of verse while his lean comrade stretched languidly, a dog-eared romantic novel, profusely illustrated, held before him as he mouthed the words, stopping periodically to explain a lurid twist to his fellows. Thuf eventually began to pester Tunkal regarding the techniques by which wizards manipulated and controlled crystals. The young man could expound on the topic at length.

“The first thing to understand is that all matter and energy are in constant motion at specific frequencies. To make maximum use of this fact takes a lifetime of work and study. It begins before puberty when young apprentices undergo a series of procedures to awaken the dormant telekinetic abilities of the pituitary gland. Next, a course of rigorous mental discipline is undertaken which grants nascent wizards gain the ability to stimulate or modify the frequencies of matter. Crystals, in their natural forms, are the most susceptible to these forces. They may also be grown purposefully to further enhance their capacity for manipulation. The crystals around my neck are typical examples, artificially grown for purity and receptiveness. The potential is limitless. The greatest wizards have been able to raise entire cities from the force of their minds. Though truth be told, the Grand Order, the governing body of wizards, has become ossified of late, falling prey to internal politics and a rigorous conservatism.”

Tunkal bent low and craned his neck to view into the cabin. Thuf and Mouve slept soundly amidst a mess of playing cards, weapons, and bandoliers.

Tunkal’s announcement that the planet lay below was greeted with throaty cheers from the two ex-solidiers. Thuf managed to cram most of his heavy frame into the pilot chamber to see the planet below, the last known location of Lieutenant Willy Werman. Greenish seas between gray polar ice dominated the surface. The sole continent visible from their vantage point stretched wide across the equatorial region, tapering to an archipelago that trailed south into the ice. The landmass was largely desert, fringed by areas of vegetation around the coastal areas. Laying lengthwise along it were the remains of a humanoid form, a thousand miles long. The

head was oblong, half submerged in the sands. Ribs jutted from the surface to poke up into the planet's mesosphere. Arms and legs lay largely straight, long hands folded across the empty expanse of the torso.

Thuf's bass voice filled the cramped compartment. "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Tunkal was speechless. The heavysset man continued. "He must be dead, now, twenty thousand years. Looks rather peaceful, wouldn't you say?"

Tunkal nodded.

The warrior craned his thick neck to address Mouve, "You simply must see this. He's lying there like my uncle in the drawing room before we put him in the grave."

"I would like nothing more than to see this wonder of the universe if you would simply move your impossible bulk!"

After his hazel eyes had drunk their fill, Mouve discussed strategy with Thuf as they switched places again. The soul crystal was reputed to lie in the base of the skull. They would descend slowly, surveying the area for a place of easy entry. Tunkal brought the yacht down in slow circles. Thuf's hot breath filled the small compartment as his small eyes strained at the pane of quartz upon which was displayed the world outside.

"There!"

A yawning hole became visible on the southern side of the skull. It was several dozen miles in diameter with jagged edges. Within, the great fragments of bone were collapsed inward, apparent victims of their own weight.

Tunkal cocked his head, brows creased with sudden confusion.

The warrior inquired, "What is it?"

"You don't hear that?" Tunkal's eyes grew glassy. "A song. Very faint. Very beautiful."

"My boy, these ears were present at the Battle of Moleno when the Empress's batteries of star cannons unleashed their fury on the forces of the

rebel Hlati. I am lucky I hear anything.”

Tunkal seemed not to hear. His face went slack. His hands seemed to lose their dexterity as they worked the controls.

The craft tipped violently, pitching Thuf’s bulk forward.

Mouve screamed from the cabin as the descent robbed him of weight. He twisted in the air as he yelled. “What is happening?”

“I think the boy’s gone off! His mind is gone!”

“Do something!”

In the awkward press of the chamber, Thuf shook the apprentice violently. But he was beyond reach.

His mind was consumed by a particular sensation, a feeling linked to a particular memory. During rare festival days, Tunkal and his fellow apprentices had been granted short liberty. There was only one place to go, the small port that served the looming tower in which they and their master lived and pursued their craft. Under its silver dome were a few dozen shops and taverns that served the small army of tradesmen, cooks, and laborers that met the tower’s needs. The port typically saw a few vessels a week, craft laden with goods headed for outside the empire, explorers, or bounty hunters. One liberty Tunkal worked up the courage to patronize a tavern with a mild reputation, a place laboriously named Saint Nicolas’s Home of Brief Respite. There at “Nic’s” he spent a portion of his savings on a pint of ale and slice of sweet bread and jam. The maid, a vivacious young woman whose bright smile and mischievous eyes inspired more than a few apprentices to try their hand at verse, inquired after his maudlin mood. Tunkal’s composure collapsed and he murmured a nonsensical reply. From his mumbling, the young woman somehow interpreted that Tunkal had admitted that it was his birthday. By way of a gift, the maid bent and kissed his cheek.

Her scent, the soft touch of her lips, the warmth of her breath, sensations like these flooded his mind. Beneath him yawned the great hole in the skull. Within its blackness nested an abundance of such sensations, of this he was sure.

The ship fell like a stone toward the hole in the star-god's skull.

"Young man!"

Tunkal did not answer. Thuf puffed out his cheeks.

"This gives me no pleasure!"

His big hand cuffed the young man about the ears. Tunkal stiffened in his seat suddenly. He massaged the side of his head and shot a wounded look at Thuf.

"What'd you do that for?"

"Regain control!"

The young man saw the display with a start. His hands shot over the panel's crystals, and the craft jerked to a halt.

Mouve stood, smoothing his braid as he inquired, "What was all that about?"

Tunkal shook his head. "I don't know. I felt a mad urge to drop the vessel into the hole."

Thuf eyed the apprentice and spoke next, "But you are fully in control now, no?"

"Yes."

"I suggest you put us down."

Mouve wondered aloud, "I wonder that we now know what marooned poor Willy."

Tunkal sniffed and began a slow descent into the skull of the star-god. A stark ray of light from the local sun illuminated the path down. The hole swallowed the ship and the quartz flickered as it adjusted to the darkness. The interior ringing the empty middle revealed itself a riot of bizarre vegetation. Great purple stalks, something between a tree and a vine, twisted upwards in coiling lengths. They wore crowns of maroon leaves around which flitted leathery beasts with four thin wings. They were so

many gnats in the distance but Tunkal's stomach grew sour as he realized they must be larger than the ship in actuality. As the craft descended broad plateaus of bone fragment stretched across the empty center below, dotted with dunes of sand deposited there by millennia of desert wind.

Thuf remarked, "A desert within the jungle, within the skull, within the desert." He looked to Tunkal and continued, "Get us as close to the center as you can."

The young wizard nodded. He guided the craft towards the base of a small range of jagged white hills, fragments of shattered skull knifing upwards from the dunes.

"Another quarter of an hour at this speed."

The big man slapped the wizard's shoulder.

Mouve shouted from the couch, "Time for one more game!"

He shuffled the cards as Thuf made his way back.

With a long sigh, Tunkal disengaged his mind from the mental posture required to pilot. He massaged his temples for a moment and then concentrated again to open the side door. Thuf and Mouve made to exit at once, tumbling onto the sandy ground with exclamations of relief. The pair stood and stretched, groaning.

"I feel as if my entire musculature has completely atrophied. My joints creak like an old man's."

Thuf nodded in agreement. "I do not relish the thought of our return journey."

"Nor do I."

Tunkal exited the craft and walked the length of the ship, bending to rub his thighs as he did so. Up close the skull was simply an expanse of light tan reaching skyward.

To his left stretched endless dunes, caps trailing tendrils of sand carried aloft by a warm wind.

After they had stretched all they could, the two ex-soldiers arrayed themselves in the tools of their chosen trade. Thuf slipped his bandoliers over his shaggy head, wide belts of leather festooned with charges for the heavy pistol that hung from his hip. He shoved a tomahawk into his wide belt opposite his saber's ornate scabbard.

Mouve wore coiled line over his lithe torso, clothed in a short jacket of faded navy, decorated with heaps of gold braid. His pistol dangled from a sling, a smaller weapon than his partner's but boasting a stock to improve accuracy. Around his waist were a half dozen pouches. His sabretache hung low against his thigh, sheathed in breeches of leather dyed crimson. Canteens were topped off from the yacht's cabinet and sabers were inspected before Thuf adjudged the party ready to proceed. Tunkal looked to his companions in their panoply and felt suddenly underdressed in his robes.

Mouve regarded his reflection on the ship's smooth hull as he stood *contrapposto*.

"Whether in formal dress or arrayed for war, I cut a fine figure. What did the old poets say? 'Weapons are the ornament of man.' Or something to that effect." He turned to smile at his companions, a grin slipping from his face as he regarded Tunkal. He addressed the youth, "My young friend, you look a bit peaked suddenly. Are you ill?"

"No, I am fine."

Thuf's gruff voice expressed concern. "Indeed, he is as pale as a ghost. What troubles the young master?"

Tunkal stared at the ground. "Nothing. It is simply that I suddenly wonder what peril lies within. Seeing you two kitted out so brings a sense of impending danger."

Mouve gestured, a flourish as he spoke, a wave of hand and arm that seemed to encompass the entirety of man's mortal condition. "Whatever will happen will happen. And besides, young man, you travel with two of the greatest soldiers to have ever lived. Gentle Thuf has eased scores of men into the next life, and I have fought a time or two, myself."

The young apprentice nodded, smooth face stern as he marshaled his courage. The fair fighter continued.

“Also know that if you fall, Thuf, and I will be marooned. So rest assured, beyond the typical considerations of honor and loyalty, we have a powerful incentive to keep you alive. If you don’t make it out, no one will. If such be our fate, then so be it.”

Thuf grunted in agreement. He took in the opening with a forlorn glance as he said to no one in particular, “No one can hurry me down to Hades before my time, but if a man’s hour is come, be he brave or be he coward, there is no escape for him when he has once been born.”

The dunes drank the gruff bass of his voice. No echoes sounded despite the wide expanse.

Tunkal massaged his forehead. “The soul crystal must be as powerful as I have heard. I can already sense it though we must be a fair distance from the base of the skull.”

The trio walked along the hill’s base. The cave, a gap between two shards, came upon them suddenly. Mouve’s perfect features became furrowed with concentration as a sense of impending danger gripped him. He displayed a hand signal to Thuf, and the big warrior dropped to one knee, pistol at the ready. Tunkal craned his neck to see, curiosity and fear locked in a bitter battle inside his mind.

Mouve lowered into a crouch and peaked around the edge, straining to pierce the gloom within. The fair hair on his forearms stood straight as his sense of nearing peril became palpable. He shifted back, obeying a sudden impulse.

A shot rang out, shattering the ominous silence.

Mouve let out an oath as he leaned against the bone. Another shot sounded, then another. The rounds impacted against far dunes, tiny explosions of heat and sand.

“Did you see that, Brother Thuf? Blessed Mother Mary gave me a touch of prescience, thus I was able to evade the attacks.”

“I think the dark interior of the skull and its ominous opening were warnings enough.”

“I find your skepticism disheartening. Don’t hold your breath waiting for intercession on your own behalf.”

The silence was deafening after the sharp reports. Thuf cocked his head, squinting in concentration.

“Upon reflection, I do believe those shots were from a standard issue concussive pistol.”

“I believe you are correct.” Mouve looked past Thuf to regard the young apprentice with an upraised eyebrow. The young man stood facing the skull, robes gathered up around his waist. “Good Lord. Tunkal, what are you doing?”

“Relieving myself. The shots...I suddenly had the need.”

A voice rang out from within the skull.

“I hear voices! Who is there? Are you humanoid? Name yourself!”

Mouve’s pleasant baritone answered, “Mouve Llansal and Thuf Kowalski, recently of the Empress’s Hussars, now independent agents, traveling with Tunkal the Wizard, master of crystals and star-pilot. To whom am I speaking?”

“Lieutenant William Werman Vom Kühlungsborn, heir to his most Serene Highness Baron Gunthan of Alpha Artu.”

The bedraggled young officer sipped greedily at the proffered tea. He itched his short beard as he spoke, eyeing the dunes constantly as the party stood outside the yacht.

“All I could salvage from my vessel before the sands consumed it was a cabinet and a box of shells. I have been surviving on water and paste this whole time, just waiting for the recombiners to give out. The landing was rough. As we neared the surface the wizard was seized by some paroxysm and attempted to fly the vessel right into a cave mouth up yonder, to the north. I cuffed him hard, and we wound up in the dunes. He broke his neck

in the landing, and Boffe, my aide, was lost in the sands. Everything in the cabinet was cracked. It is a miracle it still works. I managed to get one message out before the vocquois shattered.” Tears welled in his reddened eyes. “But my darling MuMu has sent help. My love, my lady, she has sent deliverance!”

Thuf addressed Mouve, “Is he referring to that lady with whom you had the tryst?”

Werman’s eyes narrowed. Mouve forced a smile as he replied, “I am sure you are confused, dear, dim Thuf.”

He next met the lieutenant’s eyes. “Indeed, the Lady Ulgoun Kagginov enjoined us to come to your rescue. You are safe and will return home, shortly.”

The officer replied, “Thank God.” He spared the dunes his glance to let it fall upon Mouve. He continued, “Do tell, how do you know the Lady? I do not recall seeing you at court or at any reception, or ball or recital. Oh, and by the by, it would be proper if you addressed me as ‘my lord’.”

Mouve filled his cheeks with air then exhaled slowly, eyes fixed on the ground. He was silent a moment before his smile returned and he replied. “Yes! I recall now, my lord. The good Lady inquired of my former Colonel, asking for a few volunteers. She wanted men of good repute but currently unengaged, without responsibility, thus able to handle a delicate matter. Naturally, my Colonel recommended Thuf and I, recently cashiered. The arrangement was handled through intermediaries; I never laid eyes on the good Lady herself, my lord.”

The officer regarded Mouve with a haughty expression and spoke, his words accented with the elegant confidence of one raised at court. “I would think not with regards to your relative station.”

Mouve’s back stiffened, “Here we must disagree, my lord. As a hussar, I was twice mentioned in dispatches for gallantry on the field of battle. And though my father was an artisan, my godfather was a Prince of the House of Ranulf. I would not be out of place at a reception, or at any occasion, as a matter of fact.”

Werman finished his tea and handed the cup to Thuf before continuing, “That is very nice. Your father and mother must stroll Ranulf’s unpaved roads with their heads held high. Indeed, what you say is true. Sometimes those of wretched birth can find a place at court after meritorious service.”

Color rose in Mouve’s cheeks. “Yes, indeed. And further, at times the good ladies at court may crave the companionship of men of dynamic disposition, those less bound to tradition. I think at times they long for the sort of primal virility absent in so many of our well-born betters. At least, so I have heard.”

“Now that you mention it, I recall my underlings reading popular novels that concern such assignations, among other things. I must confess, I do find the grotesque tastes of the plebian to be morbidly fascinating.” The officer’s tired eyes took in the lines of the yacht. “But perhaps we should continue this discussion while underway. As you can imagine, I am eager to leave. Night will come in a few hours.”

Tunkal spoke, “What happens at night?”

The aristocrat gestured upwards, to the ring of purple jungle that grew in jumbled terraces around the edge of the desert. “When the sun sets, the flying things are emboldened to hunt the desert. Without my pistol and the shelter of the shards I would have been supper for them.” His knuckles were white as he clutched the pearl handle of his sidearm in its ornate holster.

Mouve spoke, “Be that as it may, I must ask forbearance from my lord. Since we are here, it suddenly occurs to me that we might explore the skull of this fallen star-god. Does my memory serve me correctly? We might find the soul crystal, no? It is worth a bit of a delay, I should think.”

The lieutenant adopted an imperious tone, incongruous with his disheveled appearance. “Now, listen here you nameless scroungers! My store of patience is completely exhausted. I wish to leave at once. During my stay here I explored the skull briefly and found no crystal. Regardless, we will leave presently.”

Thuf sighed. “I also grow impatient. Tunkal, open the door.”

A rectangle of empty space appeared in the hull. Thuf stepped forward and grabbed the officer’s elbow. “We won’t be but a moment, my lord. Just

recline on yonder sofa until we return.” The once gladiator lifted the officer like he was a small child.

“Unhand me! And you, pilot, get in there and take us aloft!” His shrill cries ceased abruptly as the hull resealed itself at Tunkal’s mental command.

Thuf wondered aloud, “Is he secure in there? Can he not just open the door?”

The wizard shook his head no. “He is a naval officer, not a wizard. Naval vessels are constructed in such a way that mundane functions are automated. If aristocrats could directly manipulate crystals, then the natural order of the Estates would be completely upended.”

Mouve made a noise of irritation. “While I am happy the sanctity of the social order is sound, this represents an annoying wrinkle in our plans. Whatever happens in the skull, we will tell the young officer that we didn’t find anything. I will toss the crystal in a well before I cut that fool in.”

Thuf grunted, “Indeed.”

Presently the three stood at the opening. Above them the bone wall of the skull shot upwards into a sky tinged purple. Before them was yawning blackness. The former soldiers produced torches, cylinders of brass mesh that contained low-grade growths of cheap lumicite. Tunkal caused the square of quartz at his neck to glow. Once past the thick bone, the crack opened into a chamber of uneven walls formed by a porous, purplish-white substance, hard and brittle, of unknown provenance.

The young wizard essayed a theory. “This must be the fossilized remains of what served as the brain.”

“What explains these passages?”

In every direction passages of different diameter led off into the unknown.

“Vessels for blood?”

Close against the wall of bone sat a cabinet and uniform coat.

“There must be where Werman slept. A far cry from the quarters occupied by young officers of the aristocracy.” Mouve kicked an empty ammunition can, disturbing some of the spent brass scattered over the sandy floor. Tunkal took up the ammunition can, dusting it off and checking the lid as Mouve watched him.

The young wizard spoke, “We’ll need this for the crystal. It isn’t good to go around holding such an object in your bare hands. If its powers are not exaggerated, then all sorts of things might happen after prolonged exposure.”

Mouve sniffed, “Do you mean something like a curing of minor ailments, or perhaps growing an inch or two taller?”

Tunkal shrugged.

Thuf stood before the largest of the openings.

“So, we expect to find the crystal near the base of the skull, correct?”

Tunkal peered around the warrior’s broadness. He replied, “Yes, if my readings are to be believed. It is difficult to estimate from the ground, but I believe we need to proceed down and to the right, or west, more accurately. If these channels are the remains of a vascular system, then it would seem that we should proceed always to the larger channel, heading for the torso which would bring us through the neck first and thus passing the base of the skull. It is difficult to reckon the scale of this fallen monster. We are fortunate the great hole in the skull enabled us to land so close. With luck this journey will take a few hours. Otherwise, a few days.”

Thuf nodded. He looked to Mouve. “Do you concur?”

“Certainly. I didn’t really understand it, but I am eager to get moving. The sun sets, and I do not wish to meet whatever gave Willy such a fright. Surely in the labyrinth of the star-god’s remains there is less peril.”

Thuf snorted.

The trio entered the channel.

Thuf took the lead, stooped low in the narrow tunnels, saber held out against whatever danger waited around the many sinuous bends and dips. The porous walls were uneven, bulging here and there, floor and ceiling the same, so the trio walked without rhythm, picking their way down the gently sloping tunnels. At each branch, Tunkal picked the route most likely to lead to larger passages. His instincts were soon validated as the tunnels became larger and larger. Eventually Thuf could stand at his full height. Presently the trio stood in a passage wide enough so they could stand abreast. Moisture dripped from the ceiling above, pooling at their feet. The liquid was tinged purple and gave off an acrid odor.

The gruff warrior slapped the wizard's back. "You were right. We appear to be heading in the right direction."

Tunkal frowned, shaking his head. "I am not sure."

Mouve wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Why not?"

"I do not feel the presence of the crystal."

The ex-hussar's handsome face was tinged with sudden worry. "Have we gone in the wrong direction?"

The young wizard threw up his hands. "I suppose we have. The crystal is supposed to lie at the base of the skull. Our route, as best as I can tell, will take us there. In general, we need to move deeper and to the west. We have been, of this I am sure. But I sense the crystal less than when we began."

Thuf inquired, "Do you think the officer had it?"

Mouve shouted his anger, voice reverberating within the brittle passage. "Son of a bitch. Lieutenant Willy Werman vom Something Something. That ridiculous court creature has the crystal. My God, how could I have been so stupid!"

The big warrior shrugged. "Well, he can't have gone anywhere, so we needn't worry overmuch. He played his little joke on us, and now we will return to the surface, get the crystal from him and be on our way. If he gives us any trouble, we will feed him to the desert."

The trio began the return journey. Tunkal now walked in the lead. Mouve bent to wipe the purplish sludge from his boots as the young wizard proceeded around a bend. There was the sudden sound of running feet then the world was upended. Mouve picked himself up, extricating himself from the tangle of Tunkal's limbs.

The young wizard sputtered, "Something ahead, it tried to kill me...."

"What is it?"

"Don't know. Humanoid in shape, but hunched, sort of scuttling. Maybe more than one."

Before Mouve could prod for more information Thuf darted around the corner, saber ready and pistol drawn, eyes gleaming. He entered a larger chamber, room for perhaps three abreast. At the other end, glittering eyes shown through the dank dimness, rising like a frothing tide toward him.

"Thuf! Wait!" Mouve swore an oath as he drew his sabre and rushed to catch up with his friend. He turned to Tunkal, "Now would be the time for you to dazzle your new friends with a display of what you learned at that school."

The lithe fighter made it around the bend in time to see Thuf hurling himself at a cluster of creatures brandishing clubs and short axes of roughly-shaped flint. They stood at around five feet, thick trunks sheathed in oily chitin. Their many limbs terminated in broad paddles, the underside of which boasted three digits. Agitated, they made a chittering sound as they rushed to meet Thuf's charge. The hulking ex-gladiator fired his weapon at point blank, the report nearly shattering the ears within the confines of the passage. The heavy ball sailed through a pair of foes, impacting with a sickening crack. His saber met those that clambered over their fallen comrades. His heavy arm propelled the blade deep, cleaving from shoulder to groin. He fought in grim silence, a butcher at his work.

But then the big man yelled in frustration. His blade was stuck fast. Enemies crowded around the warrior, a tableau of intermittent light and black shadow as the rays from his crystal torch jerked from foe to foe.

Mouve entered the fray. His blade separated head from shoulder then thrust deep into the back of another. Foes continued to pour in through the

passage, surrounding Thuf completely. Clubs battered the big man to the floor as the new arrivals formed a phalanx in the confines of the passage to face Mouve. Artfully he parried again and again, taking whatever chance he could to strike out, less and less as more flint blades came against his steel. He shouted back.

“Tunkal!”

The young wizard stood at the entrance to the chamber with mouth open, expression of shock writ across his smooth face. He watched as Mouve danced, parrying, ducking, lashing out whenever he saw an opening. And there deeper in the passage was Thuf. A cut on the head had made his face a mask of bloody rage. He had managed to get back to his feet and now made weapons of his foes, lifting one and hurling it into the mass of its comrades, dashing another against the passage wall, roaring in anger when a flint blade found his back. He loosed the tomahawk from his belt and struck with a viper’s speed, swinging the wicked axe in great arcs. He struck in all directions, precision gone now that the only source of light in the cave was Tunkal’s glowing crystal.

But the numbers were telling. Any moment now Mouve would slip or make a critical misjudgment, and his foes would swarm over him. Any moment Thuf would drown in a sea of black plate and rough blade.

Time had seemed to slow for the young wizard. In odd clarity, he realized that very little of what he had learned was of any application here. Spells of a martial nature were reserved for those of much higher level than he. He fingered the crystals around his neck as his mind raced, leaping from spell to spell. The square of quartz was smooth in his grip. Thuf cried out in pain, again. There was no more time to ponder, action was needed. He would have to trust to his natural talent, working in broad concepts.

The wizard held the crystal as he cleared his mind. A series of mental sequences were enacted in a fraction of a second. He raised his left hand, palm toward the center of the melee, the cluster of insect men between Thuf and Mouve. Tunkal intoned the final sequence. The force of his will vibrated in tune with the crystal in his hand, sending a wave of energy forward, heralded by a great bass throb that hurt the ears and turned the stomach.

The blast knocked them all down, and those foes at the center of the explosion were blown to bits. Pieces of the hard shells were lodged in both ceiling and floor. Those further away were stunned. Thuf stood first, eyes glassy but still enraged. He struck down at those insect men struggling to get to their feet. Mouve was unconscious but so were the foes that had engaged him. Tunkal, now beaming with martial pride, rushed forward to take the heavy saber from Mouve's limp hand. The young wizard hacked clumsily down at the pile of enemies at Mouve's feet, striking those unconscious, dead, or near dead, without discrimination.

Thuf's rage ebbed after the last enemy was still. He stepped over the ruin of bodies to regard Mouve as Tunkal leaned against the saber, breathing hard.

The young wizard smiled up at Thuf. "That's the last of them! I used a spell! In battle!"

"Indeed. So that explosion your doing?"

"Yes. It was the first time I tried that particular sequence." Tunkal regarded the cracks running through the passage. "The effect was a little more robust than I had anticipated."

Thuf grunted. His glance followed the young apprentice's. The cracks were deep at the explosion's center, thinning as they snaked up walls and even into the ceiling.

The big man stomped his boot down twice on the floor. He pondered aloud, "I wonder if it is safe here now."

There was a cracking sound, then a tumbling sensation. Their torches spun in the air as they fell, painting the walls of the pit in stark streaks of momentary bright, chaotic and disorienting.

Mouve woke to blackness. He was afloat in the void, his own breath loud in his ears.

"Oh no. Limbo. God, hear my prayers, let me repent and leave this place! Thank you for not sending me to perdition!"

“You are not in Limbo. Firstly, Limbo is reserved for unbaptized infants, or so I have heard. You must be thinking of Purgatory. Secondly, you are not dead.”

“Thuf! God be praised! What are you saying?”

Mouve twisted in the gloom, desperate to see his friend, see anything in the blackness. His efforts were rewarded with a mouthful of thick, bitter tasting liquid. He thrashed about until his head broke the surface, gasping.

“Make yourself still and you will float back to the surface, you ridiculous man!”

Mouve thrashed around a moment then seemed to get the hang of it.

He spoke, “I don’t suppose you or the wizard know where we are or what is happening?”

The young apprentice’s voice, both dour and youthful at once, sounded in the gloom, “I believe we have fallen through into an extremely large vessel, or perhaps a reservoir of sorts. A moment...”

His quartz glowed, revealing a great cavity of unknown dimension, borders falling outside the reach of the eerie light. The lake of viscous fluid upon which they floated was purple under the light, fading to black.

Thuf sighed. “I suppose we should just pick a direction and begin paddling.”

Mouve’s face frowned in frustration. “I can barely hear you—what?”

The wizard interjected, “Wait, an island!” He pointed to the far distance.

There, a long beam of sunlight shone from a hole in the high ceiling. The light streaked down in diffuse rays, finally losing its battle with the dark just as it alit over a strange mound.

The trio made their way as best they could, paddling and kicking, frequently slipping beneath the surface to emerge again, sputtering oaths that echoed in the vast chamber.

Tunkal’s light revealed the mound to be a jumble of hard edges, cracked crystals of all description. With some difficulty, he pulled himself into a

niche between two jutting formations where the liquid met the mound. He leaned back and tried to catch his breath, wet robes as heavy as armor on his thin frame.

Mouve pulled himself up beside the apprentice. He let out a sigh and complained in a voice overloud.

“Mother of God! That liquid is something! Were we swimming in the blood of a star-god? What a thought!”

Tunkal shook his head. “I don’t know. Perhaps blood is too simple an explanation. The star-gods are the things of ancient dreams.”

Mouve moved his head to the side and back, tapping his ears.

“What? I can’t hear anything.”

Thuf lay panting on a smooth outcropping. A look of alarm spread out on his wide face. He dug through his pouches. Relief washed over him as he realized his book was untouched by the liquid, safe in its leather case.

Tunkal grabbed Mouve’s sleeve, “There is something up there!”

“What?”

A voice came from above, sensual, a sound out of time. It came like a cool mist flowing down the wreckage of the mound. Its pitch was decidedly feminine. Beneath its pleasing delicacy throbbed an undercurrent of strange power.

The voice spoke, sibilant tones that reverberated gently through the entire body, “Why have you come here?”

The sound of it seemed to wrap itself around Tunkal’s soul, a python’s grasp sheathed in warm silk.

The young wizard answered before he could think. “We seek the soul crystal.” His voice bore a strange bass echo. He realized Thuf had replied at nearly the same moment.

Mouve’s eyebrow arched in confusion. “The soul crystal? What did you say?”

The voice continued. “The soul crystal. So many have come in search of it. What is it understood to be now? I have heard so many versions over the long years.”

Tunkal swallowed and replied, “It is the nodule through which the star-god’s energies were directed. Within its molecules resonate traces of the monster’s incalculable power.”

“Star-god. Such a primitive, grotesque way to describe them. I watched as they strode the galaxies so long ago. I know what they called each other. I know their names. I would speak them, but you could not hear. Come closer.”

Warmth and contentment washed over Tunkal’s body. He found he desired to hear the voice again, wishing to be immersed in its sensuality. Movement distracted him. Thuf was scaling the slope, picking his way along the broken terrain. His eyes were glazed and his movements were clumsy; for all appearances he was drunk. Tunkal stood, suddenly fearful that Thuf would reach the peak before him.

Mouve looked on. “Who are you talking to? Hey!”

Thuf and Tunkal scrambled toward the peak. Despite their enthusiasm, it was slow going, picking their way up a slope of jumbled angles and slick surfaces. Each handhold sent tremors up Tunkal’s arms; these fragments were apparently crystals themselves, the debris of a thousand crashed ships.

The ex-hussar strained liquid from his long braid as he watched his companions. He shouted, voice loud in his own ears. “What in God’s name are you two doing? Is it a race?” His tone became strident as he swore. He began picking his way up the slope. His body was stiff from his exertions, and the slick liquid coating him made climbing the smooth crystals all the more difficult. He pondered the mound.

“Are these crashed vessels? Must be hundreds of them!”

In the dark of a crevice his hand found something, a different texture, light and organic. He pulled the thing into the dim light.

A skull. Time had turned the flesh into a few scraps of damp leather. A few wisps of hair remained on the scalp. Mouve let loose an oath and tossed

the thing aside. It clattered down the mound until finally splashing into the purple lake.

He looked up. His friends were nearly at the top.

“Wait, you idiots!”

Tunkal’s soul soared. Somehow she was there. The woman from Nic’s. She sat upon a throne of jumbled crystal and regarded him with a warm smile. She was exactly how he remembered her. Dark hair tumbled down over smooth shoulders tinted warm olive, bare in her peasant’s dress. Everything about her suggested an intoxicating abundance. Tunkal longed to wrap his arms around her full hips. Her blue eyes stared deeply into his.

“Hello, Tunkal.”

The young wizard stumbled forward.

She spoke again, voice like warm water from the bath, enveloping the young man in a sensuous mist. “Do you wish to kiss me?”

“I do.”

She beckoned him forward. Tunkal made his way awkwardly over the wrecks toward the throne. Thuf stood stock still, eyes glassy and unfocused.

Mouve clambered up with some difficulty. He found more skulls and other bones, each new discovery met with another gasp.

Atop the mound, he was greeted by a strange spectacle.

His big friend stood motionless while the wizard kneeled before the makeshift throne. The young man was still in the grasp of a creature of nightmare. Dozens of segmented legs sprouted from an oily, eel like body dotted with short, black hairs. Its face was a mass of bluish tentacles which engulfed the young man’s head. Pulsing energies danced down the tentacles as the thing twitched with pleasure.

Mouve made a sound, something between a scream and a yell, and drew his dagger. He made for the monster, but an iron grip encircled his wrist.

He looked at Thuf and his stomach sank. The big warrior's eyes betrayed his bewitchment. Mouve wrenched himself from the grasp.

“Now, Thuf, I know you can hear me in there...”

The big warrior lunged at his friend. Mouve scrambled underneath the great arms, moving awkwardly across the terrain of hard angles.

“It's me! Your dear friend! Barracks, battlefield, brothel and bar, we have been beside each other for a decade!”

Mouve spun away a hair too slowly, and a hand closed around his shoulder, grasping his wool jacket and epaulette. The big man bore down and Mouve found himself on his back. He fought desperately yet still checked his blows, having not the heart to brain his friend. Thuf simply attempted to hold him still, preserving him for the grim kiss of the thing on the throne. Mouve's frustration grew. He was in the corpse of an impossibly large alien, on a mound of greasy wreckage. He was about to be killed by some bizarre creature, and his own boon companion was aiding in the murder. The young wizard was likely near death. A wave of guilt washed over Mouve, and his anger bubbled forth.

“To hell with you, you big oaf! Ten years in your company! Utterly tiresome! Ten years of you telling me not to spend all my money! Ten years of listening to you drone on about the arena! Like you were the only man to ever face death! Ten years of listening to you quote those inane, pointless poems!”

There was a flicker across Thuf's meaty features. Sudden clarity came to his eyes, followed by anger. He raised his fist as his deep voice bellowed in the cavernous depths.

““Those inane poems' are masterful works of literature that have survived through the millennia. Through war, through epochal shifts of human history, through mankind's spread into the stars, those poems endure!”

Mouve grinned, “Thuf! You are back!”

Thuf stood still a moment, looking about in confusion. His head turned to the throne where Tunkal still knelt.

“My God!” Thuf lunged toward the throne as Mouve scrambled to his feet. The once gladiator hesitated a moment, hands in the air. His face screwed up with determination, and he grabbed the vile siren, ripping it from the young man’s face and dashing it to the ground. There was a horrible screeching sound that called up waves of terror, welling up from deep within the soul. The sound ceased as the pair crushed the creature to pulp under their boots. Panting, they stood to regard Tunkal. The young man was a bundle of damp robe and pale limb on the uneven ground. Mouve knelt beside him and put a hand to his forehead.

“Young wizard, how fare you?”

A weak voice answered, “Where did she go?”

The two men looked at each other.

Thuf bent and scooped up the young man in his great arms and placed him on the throne.

“She’s gone, my young friend. How do you feel?”

“Weak.”

“I’m sure your strength will return soon.”

The young man asked for water. Thuf’s canteen was gone, but Mouve still had his. He lifted the metal spout to Tunkal’s lips. The big warrior sat down with a sigh. From a crevice he drew forth another skull and regarded it with a wistful expression.

“Voices sweet, from far and near, Ever singing in his ear, Here is rest and peace for thee!”

Mouve sat next to Thuf, as the young wizard rested. Before them yawned the dim cavity. They discussed strategies for leaving. Thuf postulated that outside their view were numerous channels leading back to the circulatory system. Mouve tapped his head, removing the last of the viscous fluid from his ears, and expressed doubt about the lengthy swim that might be necessary to find a channel.

“We could fly out.”

The pair turned to regard Tunkal.

Mouve spoke, "What do you mean, young man?"

"We are sitting upon a mound of crashed ships. We need only to find a bixbite or some other red, and there is a chance I could pilot the craft out, through the opening above."

The two ex-hussars looked at each other.

Thuf shrugged. "It is certainly better than my plan."

Under Tunkal's instruction, the three set to work. They were to scour the mound in search of a vessel of red crystal. Tunkal was yet weak but soldiered on.

"In this dim, weird light I am having difficulties."

Tunkal waved off Mouve's comment and called the pair to him. He stood on a jutting ledge near the base of the mound. His hand lay on the surface of the ledge.

"I feel it. Stand back."

The young wizard stepped from the ledge. He grasped his necklace and with the other hand began a series of complicated gestures, a ritual to focus his thoughts with inhuman precision. Thuf and Mouve scurried up the mound.

Minutes passed as sweat rolled down from the young man's forehead. He swayed slightly, and the ex-hussars stood, thinking to catch him. But the young man's spine stiffened and there was a sudden, crashing lurch.

The vessel hovered free. It was a rectangular slab, perhaps thirty feet long and fifteen feet at its highest point. With a wave of his hand, Tunkal caused the cockpit to open, revealing a single seat formed from the hard crystal.

Thuf spoke, "A one-man scout."

Tunkal nodded. "I'll leave the cockpit open, and you two can hold on as best you can."

Mouve wondered aloud. “Would it be best for you to rest a bit before we take off?”

The ship quivered in the air a bit. Tunkal shook his head no.

“This vessel is riven with fissures. It takes effort to merely keep it afloat and still. I’m afraid if I stop I won’t be able to get it aloft again.”

“Fair enough.” Mouve and Thuf climbed to the top of the craft as Tunkal settled himself in the cockpit. He looked with consternation at the controls. He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled.

“Hold fast.”

His smooth, bony hands worked the controls. The vessel shot up with a gut-wrenching lurch.

Thuf yelled, “The hole! To the right!”

Tunkal adjusted and the vessel shot through the hole. The rough walls were porous and uneven. The light above grew stronger. Here and there sand had collected in crevices; the desert inside the skull was just above.

They crested the edge and continued to rise, the desert now beneath them. The hole was soon gone to sight, hidden by a trick of the light. The airy interior of the skull was as before, sand underneath and strange jungle ringing the inside.

Thuf shouted, “There! The shards where we landed.”

Tunkal grimaced as he fought the controls. The vessel continued to rise. The air became chill as he worked. Finally, in frustration he removed the elevator crystal. The ship was still for a moment and then began to descend, momentum building.

Thuf lay back while Mouve clutched a rosary. Tunkal reseated the crystal, and with another lurch the craft leveled off and then began a slow, turning descent.

Thuf shouted above the wind. There, where they had left it, was the red yacht. The landing was awkward, sending the two ex-hussars rolling across the sand. The new vessel bounced once from a shard of bone and buried

itself a few inches in the hard ground near the hills' edge. Tunkal leaned back and let his mind rest.

Thuf and Mouve whooped at the miracle of survival.

“You comported yourself excellently, young man!”

Tunkal nodded at the comment and slid to the ground. Sudden pains attacked his temples. Mouve slapped his shoulder.

“All that exertion takes a toll, I imagine.”

Tunkal shook his head. “It does indeed. But there is something wrong.” He massaged his pale temples while his tired eyes scanned the surroundings. “Something very wrong.”

The two hussars tensed, scanning the sand and horizon with him. The landscape was becoming dyed in dark purples and warm crimson as the star that served as the world's sun dipped to the horizon. The desert wind danced across the tops of the dunes, a rustling, low whisper that unsettled Mouve.

“I see nothing.”

Thuf spoke, “Me either.” He turned to Tunkal. “Open the door of the yacht and let's be gone from this place.”

Mouve's handsome face was lined with anger. “I shall be giving that high born ponce a piece of my mind. Letting us look high and low and risk life and limb while he had the soul crystal. Galling!”

Tunkal waved his hand and the door of the yacht disappeared.

He screamed and fell backwards onto the sand. Pouring forth from the opening was a mass of flesh, an amorphous blob sprouting bloated tendrils. From somewhere near the center a mouth gaped, moaning, screaming, babbling unintelligibly.

“Mother Mary!” Mouve dived backwards as a coiling tentacle sought his waist. He reached for his saber only to realize it sat at the bottom of a pool of purple liquid deep in the depths of the star-god's skull. He brought his pistol around instead. The sharp reports echoed across the wastes as he fired

into the mass. The thing was a mockery of nature's slow deliberateness. It was flowing and changing even as they watched. A great eye appeared from a fresh slit, and Mouve fired again, screaming.

Thuf found himself aloft, wrapped in a tentacle as thick as he. The mass was growing, more and more spilling from the door. With difficulty, he pulled a dagger from his belt and hacked at the appendage. He sliced through the translucent skin, deep into the tissue underneath as the gaping maw howled in pain. Thuf kicked viciously as he was brought close. Rounds whipped past him as Mouve fired. The grip loosened and the big man was free, scrambling away. He scrambled underneath another tentacle. One slid past, a thick one, and he realized with a start that the young wizard was within its coils, wrapped nearly head-to-toe. Thuf swore and stabbed madly at the tentacle. With a squeal of pain, the thing released its grasp, and the big warrior dragged the young man away.

"Ideas?" Mouve shouted as he shoved thick rounds into the chambers of his smoking pistol.

Thuf shook his head. "Flee into the dunes. Pray that it will forget about us?"

"Off we go then." He grabbed Tunkal's other arm and the trio ran for the sands. Mouve turned to fire, once, twice, and swore.

"The damned thing follows us! What in God's name is it?"

Thuf's expression was grim. "It is Lieutenant Willy Werman. Exposure to the soul crystal in such confines as the crystal yacht is apparently quite deleterious."

The three stumbled on the shifting sands. They ran all out, lungs aching with the effort as their feet sank into the dunes. Above, the sky continued to darken. Thuf spied movement ahead. A dune was shifting, collapsing as if the bottom of it had been knocked out. Then another, and another, gathering speed as it turned toward the trio.

The big warrior pulled his friends short as a dune rose right before them. It emerged with a hissing shriek, a great worm sheathed in hard segments. The thing was colored a sickly mauve in the strange light. Rings of bristles wound around the edges of the segments. Spirals of yellow teeth the size of

daggers wound down its gullet, pointed inward so that no prey could crawl out.

With a speed that seemed impossible for its size, the worm struck, rearing back and flinging itself upon the three men.

Mouve leapt to the left, Thuf to the right. But Tunkal stood still, frozen with fear. The worm swallowed him up. It reared back, and Mouve watched with horror as the shape of Tunkal could be seen as it went down, down into the depths of the thing underneath the sand.

He yelled in anger and fired at the maw. He felt an arm around his waist, but it was no arm. The air left his body as a tentacle began to crush him, lifting him high. Below, Thuf stabbed ineffectively at the blob.

The worm struck again, and suddenly Mouve was thrown, landing awkwardly in the sand. By the time he got his bearings the worm was half done with the blob, taking it in, mouthful by mouthful.

Thuf screamed, "Tunkal!"

Mouve ran to his side.

"We lost the boy."

Tears welled in the corners of the big man's eyes.

"I know."

The worm finished its meal, finally silencing the shrieks of the blob. Its segments strained to accommodate the mass it had just swallowed. It was sluggish as it began to bury itself again, forcing its way back under the sands with a sinuous motion.

"What do we do?"

A mad gleam showed in the big man's eyes. "We'll cut him out!"

The two rushed forwards towards certain death. The worm, more than sated with its unexpected repast, ignored them. The last of it was disappearing beneath the sands as Thuf stabbed ineffectually at a segment.

"Dammit!"

A terrible noise erupted from under the sand. It reminded Mouve of a cannon, so loud as to make everything seem quiet, a sharp boom that reverberated through the body. The lithe warrior saw the sky, then the ground again, and realized that he was aloft, spinning in the air, thrown by some immense force.

He landed hard. It took moments to regain his wind, and he stood. Thuf groaned from nearby.

The dunes had parted. Where the worm had disappeared was now a crater, ringed with purple gore. At the center, amidst the smoking remains of the worm and the blob, sat Tunkal. He was drenched in ichor and bile but apparently uninjured. Mouve skidded down its slick sides. Tunkal's face was expressionless as he looked up at the lithe warrior.

"I managed that spell again."

"You did. Good job, my young friend."

Thuf ran into the crater and grabbed the young man's arm.

"On your feet. The dunes move all around us."

Mouve looked up. The big man was right. Here and there dunes were on the move, converging on this spot. He scanned the ground, hoping the soul crystal was somewhere at his feet, poking out from the scattered gore. No such luck.

The dunes were closing in. He heard the sands hissing as they moved.

"Damn you, Willy Werman!"

The three ran back to the yacht where the hard packed earth offered relative safety.

Tunkal was pale and weak from his trials but able to take the yacht aloft and away.

Mouve let out a powerful sigh as he laid on the couch. The cramped interior was filled with a cloying, fetid odor. Thuf sat in a corner. He removed a heavy boot and upended it, pouring purple liquid onto the floor.

Now that the party was relatively safe, his wounds from the fracas in the cave began to ache. He set about to clean and bind his numerous cuts and scrapes. Tunkal leaned back and let his mind rest as well as it could while in control of the craft. He was sore in a dozen places, and his ears still rang. His robes were damp with worm bile, and the tiny part of his mind that could wander thought only of a warm bath.

Mouve spoke, his pleasant baritone filling the small chamber. “While it’s true we did not secure the soul crystal, I feel gratified to be alive at the moment.”

Thuf held the end of a bandage in his teeth as he tied a dressing around his forearm, the act effortless with much practice. He spoke to no one in particular.

“A man my age should be settled with a family. My cousin has a farm on Silesia IV. Grows corn and keeps a herd of goats for cheese.”

Mouve raised one eyebrow.

“An admirable goal. Good, clean work away from danger. Responsibility and solidity. I imagine you could become a leader in the community. Raise many polite children.”

Thuf nodded his head, warming to the idea.

Mouve came to sit before him. “Just one problem.”

Thuf looked at him.

The lithe warrior continued. “You are stony broke. You need capital to start such a venture.”

“True.”

Mouve smiled. “This whole escapade has reminded me of something Ulkelrt, that crusty sergeant, used to talk about. A tomb full of riches deep in the jungles of Rett’s World out on the Far Rim.”

Thuf smiled and shook his head.

Tunkal shoved his head out the pilot’s chamber. His expression was dire as he massaged his temples and spoke with teeth clenched.

“I’m more exhausted than I have ever been! You two keep quiet a while or I’ll open the door and blow you out into goddamned space!”

The two wore wry smiles but became quiet. After a minute Mouve said in a soft voice, “After you’ve rested a bit, my young friend, we’ll make some new plans.”

Schuyler Hernstrom's work has appeared in LORE magazine, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, and here in Cirsova. Named for P. Schuyler Miller, a friend of his father's, he grew up in a house full of paperbacks with Frazetta and Jones covers. He is most proud of his Planetary Awards and also the comment, "He is seventy years late for his audience," that he received in a kind review. He can be reached at hernstroms@gmail.com.

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Bleed You Dry

By SU-RA-U

A simple news assignment—talk to the reprobate son of an aloof dying billionaire—leads one small-town reporter down a trail of death and madness!

I received this story in 2004 from a colleague whose former girlfriend had asked him to get it published. I replied that I had some contacts who might be able to get it published in a horror anthology, but when he said it was a work of nonfiction I didn't know what to do. I told him I couldn't help him and forgot the matter.

Last year, my husband and I were packing all of our belongings and throwing out any junk we didn't need as we got ready to move to a new city. I was cleaning out my study when I happened to find this manuscript under a large stack of papers at the bottom of a file cabinet. I emailed my now former colleague and asked him if he could speak to the author about giving me permission to post it on my blog. He said he had lost touch with her and I could do whatever I wanted with the story. I am taking a chance posting this but if the copyright holder requests that I take the story down, I will certainly comply with her request.

Prologue

I'm sure most of you don't have any issue with the end of winter, the onset of spring, or its steady progress into summer; what with the bees abuzzing and the birds atweeting; young lasses transitioning out of their parkas, boots, and scarves into attire more conducive to turning the heads of young men; the sweet, warm air filled with the scent of blooming flowers, freshly mowed grass, and smoky barbecues; and all those ample opportunities to laze around on a lawn chair with a glass of hard iced tea, or to hang out at the lake in a new bikini with your gal pals, or to make love among the cottontails, buttercups, and dandelions in a secluded field with a man whose back and shoulders are as muscular as his waist is lean.

I assume this is what the two sun-splashed seasons before the start of the “-ber” months mean to most people. I, on the other hand, absolutely dread this time of year.

My house is a prison. Going outside during the day is nerve-wracking, and at night it's deadly. I'm forced to stay indoors and freelance online or

through the mail, picking up the occasional writing job whose sole qualification seems to be the capacity to endure drudgery of the most mind-numbing sort. I usually end up getting stuck with some unbearable project like writing an instructional manual for a microwave or producing press releases about weight loss for a supplement manufacturer: jobs that pay the bills but are as pleasurable as using sandpaper to clean your ass.

On rare occasions I take a chance and go out to shop during the day, though I mostly order through the phone or on the Internet. But once the sun approaches the horizon, you couldn't force me to open the door even if Adonis was ringing the doorbell with a bottle of champagne, a box of chocolates, a ten-inch vibrator, and some fresh condoms in his hands.

Excuse me if at times my language is a tad vulgar. However, after a couple of years sleeping in the bathtub because I'm too terrified to rest on my own bed, suffering in the heat because I'm too paranoid to open the vents to let in some AC, and cutting myself off from family and friends out of concern for their safety—well, these things can be expected to make a person a wee bit stir crazy and, ergo, a tad vulgar.

Oh, yeah, and my love life is nonexistent.

Sure, I can joke about my situation. After all, the only thing I have right now to keep my spirits up is a little humor in a jugular vein. That last—should I say bloody—pun would have sounded a lot grimmer to your ears if you understood my situation, but then I'd have to tell you my story.

I

It was the end of August exactly two years ago. The days were still hot enough for short skirts and tank tops, but the heat thankfully melted away during the evenings, so the nights were pleasant enough to allow me to keep the windows open while I slept. It was the time of year when the autumn's nippy air would be making every effort to scale the walls of

our town, but the gates of summer, fortified by the mighty rays of the sun, were strong enough to keep the leaves green and the crickets chirping for a couple more weeks.

How I wished I had skipped work and been outside enjoying the weather that fateful day, but I was stuck sitting in my managing editor's office, waiting with dwindling patience as he put the final touches on the layout for tomorrow's front page. Grant, my editor, was the kind of supercilious prick who thought the words "Just give me a minute, honey" were enough to confer upon him the prerogative to waste my time.

I heard the clock ticking behind me as I stared at a photo on the window sill. A younger Grant—less rotund and bald—was standing next to Tip O'Neal in the Capitol building. Tip had a dumb grin on his face, while Grant's face looked like a Ziploc bag stuffed with Wonder Bread and slices of ham. Next to it was a picture of him with Newt Gingrich—proof Grant swung both ways—and except for the fact that Newt's teeth were whiter, both pictures looked the same.

After five minutes, as I was pondering the indiscretion, the faux pas, the blunder that could have resulted in the banishment of a Washington reporter to the *Malitowsa County Press*, a small-town rag on the opposite coast, Grant graciously deigned me worthy enough to stop playing with his keyboard and mouse and finally turn his attention towards me.

"So how are you, Faith?"

"Okay, Grant. And yourself?"

"Couldn't be better. By the way, you had a fine article about the Buddhist biker rally last week. Picked up by the AP, I saw."

"Yes, it was. Thanks for the compliment," I said, then leaned forward. "Now that we've gotten the formalities out of the way, Grant, can you tell me why the hell I'm sitting in your office?"

Grant furrowed his brows at my lack of office etiquette. A little too cocky, a little too flippant, I supposed, for his sense of decorum. But I

tolerated him and he put up with me, so you could say we got along.

“Well, Faith, I’ve got an assignment for you. I need you to go talk to someone,” he said, then cleared his throat and stretched back in his chair as I waited. He took a breath and said, “You see, I got a call from Jerry Mullins, and he wants...”

“Jerry Mullins? Dean Mullins’s son, right? That Jerry Mullins?”

“Yeah, that Jerry Mullins. He called me up today and wanted to speak to a reporter. Haven’t the foggiest idea what it’s about.” Grant put his hands up and shrugged his shoulders like a child who had been asked why he had eaten all the Twinkies before dinner. “He only says he’s got a story and wants someone to investigate it.”

“And I guess I’m the lucky soul.”

“Yeah, Faith. I thought you would be perfect.”

I felt like punching him and knocking loose a couple molars. I was silent for a moment so he would know I wasn’t pleased before I sarcastically said, “God, Grant. You really do hate me, don’t you?”

“Aw, c’mon, Faith.”

“No really. He’s a spoiled trust-fund brat,” I said as I peered into my two-faced editor’s eyes. “I heard he’s a junky, too. His father had to send some muscle to Marrakesh to pull him out of an opium den, and then to babysit that asshole all the way back home.”

“That was years ago, Faith. Look, this is not a request. I expect you to meet him. It’s an order. Okay?”

“An order? Do you want me to salute you too?” I said as I put my hand to my forehead.

“Come on, just calm down, okay. I know how you feel,” he said as he put a hand through the last follicles of hair still clinging to his Elmer Fudd head, “but just understand my situation. The fact is Mr. Mullins is on his last legs. The cancer’s eating away at him. When he goes, Jerry

becomes the majority shareholder in the company. I don't want to get on his bad side. Understand? Just do me a favor—do him a favor. Also, if he's happy, it could work to your advantage. He'll be your boss soon, you know."

He pushed a piece of paper across the table like a bank robber pushing a note that read "THIS IS A STICKUP" across the counter to a teller.

"It's his phone number. Just give him a call. Meet him. If he's got something of value, then write it up. If not, ignore it."

"And then he'll be pissed off with me. Not you, right?"

"That's the idea," Grant said with a sarcastic smirk.

I should have called him a son of a bitch and thrown the phone number in his face. I instead picked it up and walked out.

II

At that time in my life, doing a favor for my future boss was as important to me as knowing how to bake a cake would have been to Attila the Hun. For the last week, my life had revolved around working during the day and spending a good hour every night curled up drunk and crying in a bed that was fifty percent empty and a hundred percent lonely.

Six days earlier, I had called my boyfriend up and said, in the most tender manner any madly-in-love woman could, that I had to attend a meeting of the town planning board that night so, if he could forgive me, he would have to cook dinner for himself. The meeting was canceled, so I came home early, only to find the love of my life cooking with his secretary in our bed. I kicked him out and promised myself to never think about him again, but I found myself crying every night in an empty house, empty room, and empty bed, partially because I missed him and partially because I hated him.

After completing my ritual of tears that night, I went to bed early. However, I was tormented persistently throughout the night by a mosquito that had somehow snuck in through the mesh of one of my open windows. Three times I turned on the lights and searched for the evil critter unsuccessfully, yet each time the lights were turned off, the mosquito was back buzzing in my ear. I finally went to sleep, but I was disturbed by a weird and troubling dream that now I only partially remember.

In my dream, I was sitting in a café chatting with Jerry Mullins. However, Jerry was a giant mosquito, who for some reason was sipping a cappuccino, smoking a pipe, and wearing an ascot and derby hat.

“So what have you got to say?” I asked.

“Nothing really,” he replied (or should I say it replied).

“I just want to tell you,” I explained, “I’m not interested in your story.”

“Good. That’s as it should be.”

“What?” I asked.

“You should not be interested in my story. You’re wasting your time.”

I don’t remember the rest except that at some point in my dream I was swimming in a lake in the middle of a forest. I was basking in the tranquil silence of my surroundings when I thought I heard the sound of leaves rustling in the forest. The rustling grew louder, then gradually transformed into an irritating buzz. The volume kept increasing until it was everywhere. I was terrified that I was sinking, but not in a pool of water. Instead, I was drowning in a black, bottomless pool of hums and buzzes, and no one was there to save me.

When my eyes opened I realized the damned mosquito was flying right above my ear. My reflexive slap failed to kill the pest but succeeded in making my ear so sore I had to get up and put some ice on it. It was half past five in the morning. The sun was already up, and I had had only three hours of beauty rest. I felt like screaming at the top of my lungs.

III

Still a little groggy, I dialed Jerry up after I had brushed my teeth and watched one of the local morning shows. He said I should pick him up in about three hours, and when I asked where he hung up. I was in the middle of my shower when the phone started to ring. I ran to answer it with some shampoo still in my hair.

“What type of car do you drive?” Jerry whispered the moment I put the phone to my ear.

“A red Civic. Can you call me back in around...”

“I’m at a gas station on Maple and Fairfield. Across the road is a Food Mart. I’ll be waiting there. I’m wearing a gray track suit. Come soon.”

Before I could say “soon” wasn’t a possibility—after all, I was wet, naked, and had shampoo streaming down all four of my cheeks—the little shit hung up.

I finished my bath, dressed, and shoved some toast down my throat. Before I left, I called the city editor to inform him I had an appointment, so I wouldn’t be in until later in the afternoon. I made sure not to mention who my appointment was with.

I had reached the Food Mart and turned into the lot when a man’s head suddenly popped out from between two parked cars. He stared at me for a second then sprinted towards me. I was about to pull a can of pepper spray from my purse when I noticed the gray tracksuit. I unlocked the passenger side door instead.

He literally jumped into the passenger seat before slamming the car door behind him. “Go! Go!” was all he said as he scrunched down so low he was soon rolled up into a ball on the floor. I suspected he would have crawled into the glove box if he believed he could fit.

“Will you hurry up? Stop taking your own time. You want to get us killed?” he complained loudly.

I don't know which was stronger: my shock over his behavior or my annoyance over the tone of his voice. What I did know was that I wasn't about to be his chauffeur, so I kept the car locked in first gear as I made my way through the parking lot and turned onto the main road.

"Take me someplace we can sit and talk. Someplace far away, like on the other side of town," he commanded.

Jerry didn't seem to realize words like "far" or phrases like "the other side of town" were relative terms in a place like Hawthorne. Though it was technically a city, to those who passed through here it was nothing more than a glorified village. In ten minutes we were on the other side of town, and we would have arrived faster if we hadn't had the misfortune of catching a red light at each of the three signals along the way.

I stopped at a diner which I thought, and most people in town would agree, served the best pies in the state. After sitting down at a table in the back, I ordered a warm pecan pie with a cold glass of milk.

Jerry was happy with a glass of water. He sat for a good while silently strangling the perspiring glass with both his hands and taking the occasional sip to break the monotony. I noticed during our entire conversation he never raised the glass to his mouth to take a gulp. He instead tilted the glass, brought his head down, and only seemed to moisten his lips.

The poor guy looked completely out of it. His eyes were bloodshot and wary, his hair greasy and uncombed, and his clothes I guessed hadn't been changed in a week. The flecks of gray in his sideburns revealed he was in his late 30s or early 40s, though the lines on his face made him appear to be over half a century. A long stay in detox would have done him some good, though a bath and a shave would have been enough to make him presentable.

I was halfway through my pecan pie when Jerry finally took the effort to open his mouth.

"My father is dying, you know," he began.

I nodded my head and waited for him to continue.

“I’ve been told my father probably has a couple of days left, a week at most.”

“Shouldn’t you be by his side right now?”

“No,” he replied emphatically. “My old man’s as evil as they come; I mean pure demonic. I’ve been trying to escape his clutches for most of my adult life.”

I thought he would continue with some details, but he just sat staring blankly at his water. His hands were shaking ever so slightly. I got tired of watching the dust motes hover in the sunlight, so I decided to nudge the conversation forward.

“Do you expect him to disown you?”

“No. I’ve seen the will. And he can’t make any changes even if he wanted to. Right now... he’s just floating in a sea of morphine waiting to die. Anyway, in his own manner, you could say he always loved me.”

“I don’t mean to be presumptuous,” I said, “after all he’s your father, but ‘demonic’ and ‘love’, they’re not words that usually go together.”

He lifted his head up and looked me in the eye for the first time. “You really are innocent, aren’t you?”

The condescension in his voice almost made me get up and walk out. Maybe he’d be happier if I left him alone with his wise and all-knowing glass of water, I thought. There are certain people that rub me the wrong way, and Jerry came off as the type of fool I had little patience for.

“I have to get to the office. Okay? I don’t have a lot of time. Just tell me what you want. If it’s a hit piece on your father, I can tell you right now, it’s not going to happen, certainly not in our newspaper.”

“It’s not my father I want you to write about. It’s much, much bigger than him.” He leaned over and whispered, “My life is in danger. I don’t

have much time. If they find me talking to a journalist, we'll both be dead. This story has to be printed as soon as possible. It's just..."

He let out a sigh then slowly bent his head and took another sip of water. Every instinct I possessed told me to ditch him, but I decided my future boss deserved one more minute.

"Please, tell me what you want. It's getting late," I said.

"I'm sorry," he replied and seemed a little ashamed and almost human for the first time. "Your name is Faith, right? I think that's what Grant told me."

"Faith Brown."

"It's a nice name. As I said, I'm sorry. I know I've been acting rather strange. I know I've been beating around the bush. But it's not easy to speak, to even accept, the truth about your parents." He took another sip of water. "Have you heard of the Sanguine Lake Festival?"

"Yeah, of course," I said, getting tired of this conversation. "A get-together of the beautiful people: politicians, celebrities, the rich. A one percent gathering to eat, drink, and discuss how they can screw the rest of us over."

"My father was a regular attendee."

"I meant no offense."

"No offense taken. I'd be happy if what you said was the truth. I attended the festival one time with my father when I was thirteen. I saw things there that no one, especially not a young boy, should have ever been exposed to. It was just... It was just horrible.

"I suppressed everything really deep inside me. That's what I've been running away from for most of my life, all the things I saw that night. I've been in therapy for about a year now, and I've been able to recall some of what I..."

He fell silent. His eyes were hollow and lost, while his complexion had turned ashen. Suddenly his lips curled into a cynical sneer, the kind one could misinterpret as menacing or deranged, but that I felt was only a façade behind which a middle-aged man—who was still only a young boy on the inside—had devised in a futile attempt to conceal his fears.

“Go on. I’m listening,” I said.

He took a deep breath before starting.

“The eight families and their underlings, pretty much the whole Pyramid, they all congregate at Sanguine Lake Lodge on the first night of the festival. It’s by invitation only, of course. There, they... they...”

Come on, spit it out, I thought. The eight families, the Pyramid, I knew I was going to be hit by a doozy.

“They worship evil; they worship demonic powers. All manner of offerings are made on that night, especially to Baiqaala, the one who wallows in blood. They sacrifice humans and various other beasts then drink their blood.

“One person though is set aside specifically for Baiqaala to consume. They wish to appease him, to obtain his blessings. He’s the true source of their power, the reason they’ve been able to rule the world for so long, for 700 years. It’s a night of blood, orgies, drugs, alcohol, everything you can imagine. It’s absolutely evil. I want you to come and see it.”

I sat there for a second dumbfounded. It took all the self-control I possessed to keep from laughing in his face. It was not just what he said but how he said it. He had explained it so matter-of-factly, as if he had been describing something mundane and reasonable, something like a church picnic or the science behind the workings of the internal combustion engine.

Jerry must have noticed the skepticism on my face because he added, “Do you know where the word *sanguine* comes from? It comes from *sanguis* which is Latin for blood.”

“Sanguine also means optimistic.”

“I know, but the old Native American name for the lake was Blood Lake. That’s the real reason why it’s called Sanguine Lake. It’s one of the key centers of evil on this planet.”

Blood Lake? Evil? I had gone waterskiing on “Blood Lake” just this summer. I had lost my virginity in a secluded corner of the lake when I was sixteen. The lake, with its placid, temperate waters, was surrounded by an old-growth pine forest on all sides that made it perfect for a one-day outing or an overnight camping trip. Sanguine Lake was as sanguine as any lake could possibly be.

“What Native American language are you talking about? What tribe?”

“Well, I don’t remember that. But I remember my father telling me about it when I was thirteen.”

“Which you recalled in therapy during the last few months?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. I’m telling you the truth. I want you to attend with me and see for yourself. I have an extra invitation just for you.”

“This sounds rather,” I tried to search for a more polite word than stupid or insane, “unbelievable. I really don’t think our newspaper will print this.”

“Come see for yourself. Please. It will be in three nights during the full moon.”

I racked my brain to come up with some excuse to politely reject his offer.

“Sir, I...”

“Call me Jerry.”

“Okay, Jerry. What I don’t understand is that you’ll soon be the owner of a whole chain of newspapers, newspapers larger than the *Press*. Why don’t you get one of them to cover this?”

“Do you think I haven’t thought about this? We’re not dealing with some low-level crooks. These are the eight families. Their agents will find

out the moment I speak to any editor at a larger newspaper. But the *Malitowsa County Press* is a small paper. Also, the publisher just retired and a new one hasn't been appointed yet. Then there's Grant, an editor who's too dumb to know he shouldn't publish this." I chuckled at his accurate assessment. "The story can slip under the noses of the gatekeepers, and I know someone who'll ensure the AP picks it up.

"Faith, please, I am asking as a favor." There was that loaded word favor again. "Please report on the festival. It's just one night. If it's nothing, then you'll have some fun at a wild party. If it's true, then you'll have the story of a lifetime."

"But is it safe? I mean, even if nothing happens, I still don't think they'll appreciate an outsider crashing their private party?"

"You'll have me. I'm the reformed son and only heir of Dean Maxwell Mullins, Wall Street insider and owner of the largest newspaper chain in the country. And soon I'll be taking his place at the head of the Mullins Holding Company empire.

"You'll be safe. The only danger is that I'll be wearing a hidden camera, but no one will check me. No one would dare. And if they did, it's my responsibility. We'll be in and out before you know it."

I thought, for a man who a short while ago seemed almost incoherent, he could—when the need arose—be quite sly and persuasive. A wild party or the story of a lifetime, he had said. What did I have to lose?

"I don't know. I'll think about it. Give me some time."

"I need an answer now. I won't be talking to you on the phone again. It's safer that way. I would appreciate it if you told me 'yes' or 'no' now."

"I told you I don't know. Let me sleep on it. I'll tell you tomorrow. Is there some way I can get in touch with you?"

"You can't. It's not safe. Look, I'll give you an invitation. But you have to promise me that you will tell no one about this. Will you promise?"

“Yeah, okay.”

“Say it. I promise to keep this a secret.”

“Okay, I promise to keep it a secret.”

“In three nights, meet me here at around half-past six in the evening. Please be here. And if for some reason I’m not here, please go anyway. You won’t get a chance like this again.”

IV

I was determined to get some good sleep that night. I closed the curtains and kept the windows closed. I took a long bath and pleased myself in the soapy water. I concluded the night with a warm cup of milk.

I went to sleep immediately. I woke up one time during the night to pee and get a glass of water. As I was going back to my bed, I thought I heard a torrent of raindrops lashing the windowpanes. I ignored it and went back to sleep.

I woke up the next day fresh and alert. I was ecstatic when I remembered I hadn’t cried the previous night. The decision to crash a posh jamboree in the woods seemed to have cleared the cobwebs and musty air that had occupied my mind for the past week. I decided I would have some fun, eat and drink some expensive food, and hell maybe even find a wealthy, good-looking guy who required some companionship.

I, of course, didn’t take Jerry’s claims seriously. One didn’t need a PhD in psychology to figure out that Jerry had probably experienced some form of abuse at the hands of his father, and with his father now semiconscious on his deathbed, Jerry was left with no outlet for his pent up rage. His anger needed to be channeled in another direction, and thanks to the influence of some irresponsible psychiatry, it was flowing into a freakish conspiracy theory about a secret oligarchy that enjoyed drinking people’s blood—at “Blood Lake” no less.

I gathered from what I saw that Jerry was harmless, but if he turned out to be a little volatile, I was sure I could handle him. He was tall but lanky and didn't have the muscles to keep me from kicking him in his balls or reaching for the pepper spray in my purse. All the pathetic schmuck needed that night was a chaperone who could make sure he didn't cause a scene or make a fool of himself. Well, that's how I rationalized it; the truth was I only wanted to enjoy myself, and if Jerry got into any trouble, he could go to hell.

For the next two nights I followed the same schedule and slept peacefully. Yet, each time I awoke in the middle of the night, I heard the same tapping of raindrops against my windowpanes. And each morning when I went out, I noticed the streets were dry.

V

On the night of the festival, I arrived a few minutes late at the diner that served the great pies. I surveyed the parking lot and checked inside, but found Jerry was nowhere to be seen. I waited for an hour before deciding I had been stood up. However, I still had the invitation so I decided to go by myself, and if by chance I saw Jerry there, I had a stock of four-letter words he could expect to hear.

The drive to Sanguine Lake took 30 minutes, but another half-hour was wasted trying to find the entrance to the lodge. The lodge's expansive parking lot was filled with the kind of swanky rides that made me feel insignificant as I parked my tiny Civic beside them.

Sitting in my car, I removed my sneakers and put on some pumps, sprayed some repellent on my arms and legs, checked my makeup and hair in the rearview mirror, adjusted my cleavage, and after grabbing my purse, I knew I was ready to go.

I walked to the gate and showed the two security guards my invitation. It was when they unexpectedly asked to see some ID that I got worried. I handed them my DL and watched tensely as they took out a clipboard and started leafing through the pages. Finally, they found

my name and allowed me inside. I was relieved Jerry hadn't let me down and resolved to go easy on him if I happened to see him at the party.

One of the guards informed me that I should go to the open-air auditorium and that the festivities were already in progress. I walked along a trail that at regular intervals branched off in different directions, but signs placed along the way kept me on the right track.

Ancient redwoods towered over me and hid the receding sunlight from my eyes, and as I followed the trail, I passed a series of cabins that sat motionless and empty in the blackening shadows. The trail was lit by lanterns that hung from posts and had giant moths fluttering around their sickly, yellow glow.

Every time I looked over my shoulder I was unnerved that I saw no one else, which only reinforced the impression that I was all alone in a forest where night had already descended. I only had the echo of my footsteps on the gravel and the chirping of the crickets to keep me company.

Fifteen minutes passed before I heard the sound of people speaking and laughing, but it took another ten minutes for me to reach them. The partygoers had congregated in what I assumed was the location the guards had referred to as the open-air auditorium: a flat, circular clearing with a stage at one end. The entire area was surrounded by a wall of trees in front of which—even though the electric lighting was more than enough to illuminate the field—a series of torches had been placed such that they encircled the entire area.

Many of the attendees were seated and eating their dinners at one of the twenty round tables that had been placed across the field. The rest of the crowd were standing up and mingling with each other.

Three fat, middle-aged men in drag were eliciting guffaws and hoots from the audience as they romped around the stage shaking their hairy legs and singing a song by the Shangri-Las. This was followed by a rock singer from a previous generation warbling his hits as a young pick-up band provided accompaniment. A buxom blonde stood next to me, one

hand holding a drink and the other up in the air, swaying her hips with her eyes closed and regularly producing an obnoxious, shrill “woo” each time a new song started. I felt I was in a backwoods Vegas.

I grabbed a drink from a waiter carrying a tray of what I assumed was punch. It was bright red and had a fruity smell. I wanted to relax so I poured the drink down my gullet in one gulp. A smooth warmth spread from my stomach to the rest of my body. I felt I was floating. When I asked the waiter for the name of the drink, he only answered, “Be careful. It’s hellfire.” I grabbed another glass.

I made an effort to mix, but I received subtle hints from the attendees that they considered me a little too common for their tastes. These moneyed, inbred snobs seemed to possess some kind of radar that signaled to them every time one of us unpolished peasants entered their airspace.

The women—who I assumed either disapproved of my rustic accent or figured out my dress had been bought off a department store rack—acted as if I had a hump on my back and copious amounts of drool dripping from my mouth. A couple of creepy old men leered at my cleavage and tried to hit on me, while some other men who were closer to my age came off as aloof and self-absorbed. The only attractive man willing to socialize with me was a banker whose idea of an intimate conversation was to lecture me about the benefits of investing in the housing market.

Soon I was incredibly bored and started wishing for some human sacrifices to lighten up the evening. I walked to a table where the waiter with the punch tray was standing. When he saw me take another glass, he warned me that the “hellfire” in my hand was highly potent; one glass usually sufficed he advised. He offered me some hors d’oeuvres and a glass of champagne, but I ignored him and swallowed the elixir in one shot.

He was right, though—the drink had been stronger than I expected. The first two glasses had already made me woozy, but the third glass was different: it burned my mouth and throat as it went down, and in my gut

formed a giant fist which it unleashed, socking my head with a powerful right hook. I blasphemed out loud as I grabbed another glass and walked to the edge of the woods.

I was leaning up against a tree, slowly sinking into a drunken stupor when a voice right behind my head spoke. I jumped and in my inebriated state almost lost my balance.

“My, I didn’t startle you did I?”

I turned and saw a young man with a long, oval face, boyish features, and a chin that could drive a nail into a wall. He was wearing a cloak that went down to his knees, and his head was covered by a hood. He looked like a preppy Druid.

“So tell me your name,” he said.

“Ms. None-Of-Your-Business. What’s yours?”

“I’m your fairy godmother,” he replied with a grin. “The hour of the fairies will soon be upon us.”

“Of course, the hour of the fairies. That’s what we’ve all been waiting for,” I said with sarcasm on my mind but sincerity in my voice.

“So is this your first time?”

“No,” I lied.

“But I’ve never seen you here before.”

“That’s strange. I’ve never seen you here either.”

He looked at me suspiciously then smiled. “Show me your hand.”

I hesitated for a moment then held out my palm in the center of which he placed a small blue pill.

“What is it?” I asked.

His only response was to place another pill in my hand before walking away. I made a fist around the pills and held them by my side.

The nature of the pills at that moment was less of a concern than the nausea I had started to feel sloshing around in my stomach. The clearing, the attendees, the show on the stage, and the forest around me had gradually started to merge into a haze of formless objects and indistinct movements. When the blur in front of my eyes began to swing back and forth, I was forced to step back and lean on one of the trees for support. I closed my eyes tight and hoped that when I opened them, my head would have cleared up enough for me to walk to a restroom and wash my face.

Instead, I was confronted by a vision of my old boyfriend lying in bed blissfully satisfied by the side of a woman who wasn't me. This was followed by an image of me standing here: a lush leaning against a tree as she tried to maintain her dignity and balance; an outsider showing too much cleavage, smelling of repellant, and failing to fit in with the cool kids; a pathetic loser whose first act of independence had ended in utter disappointment.

My self-pity got the better of me. I popped the two blue pills in my mouth and washed it down with punch. I turned and walked into the woods.

I'm not sure what those pills were, but in a couple of minutes I was struck by the sudden intensity of my senses. I was blinded by the sheer clarity of the space around me and shocked by the luminous glow of the darkness itself. I realized I could, using the power of my will, turn down the volume of the music from the stage to an inaudible, ambient drone or increase it to an almost deafening roar, and if I so wished, hear the very silence that permeated the sounds that were entering my ears. I was able to smell the sap in the trees, the chlorophyll in the leaves and pine needles, the dirt kicked up by my feet, and even the very transformation of summer into autumn. My tongue could taste colors.

I walked leisurely under the light of the full moon, wandering further and further into the woods and away from the sounds of the celebration, until the party was completely inaudible. I came to the bottom of a hill, at the top of which I saw a flicker of lights shining from what I guessed

were campfires on the other side. As I climbed the hill, I began to hear grunts and moans interrupted sporadically by high-pitched laughter and shrieks.

As I neared the top, I got down on my knees and crawled the rest of the way. I peered over the edge and saw a mass of naked bodies lying around a blazing bonfire. The participants were tangled and twisted in a slithering mass as they engaged in an orgy of soulless excess and pain. Even more revolting was the sight of their bodies covered in their own waste: their own saliva, cum, excrement.

Two cloaked men soon arrived carrying a pig. They placed it on the ground and from their cloaks pulled out a knife and a jug. One of the men sliced the pig's throat. The pig released a loud squeal, and its legs kicked furiously for a few minutes before the twitching subsided into death.

The other cloaked man collected the blood that poured from the wound. He walked around the circle of flesh and began pouring the blood over the writhing bodies. Their play reached a fever pitch. One person filled his mouth with the pouring blood and spat it in the mouth of another. I placed my hand over my mouth and put my head down as my stomach violently turned.

When I looked up again, I saw something that made me stop breathing. The participants in the orgy and the two cloaked men were staring directly at me. Their dirty faces wore smiles stretching from one ear to the other and displaying teeth that were razor-sharp as they silently beckoned me to join them. What terrified me the most was not the looks on their faces or the acts they were performing; it was that I was tempted to climb down and take part.

I got up and quickly walked back down the hill. I was deeply disturbed by what I had seen, and the growing queasiness in my stomach made me want to get back to the clearing and its warm lights. I kept a brisk pace as I retraced my step, but came to a halt when I reached a bend in the path.

A naked woman had stepped out of the forest and was now standing motionless twenty yards in front of me. I suspected she might have come from another orgy since the top of her body was also drenched in pig's blood. A shaft of moonlight highlighted her body as she stared at me unemotionally. The only parts of her body in motion were her breasts, which were rapidly and rhythmically heaving up and down. I returned her glare and licked my dry lips.

She started to walk towards me, though the more appropriate term would have been "hobbled" or "lurched". She would lunge forward a few steps then stop before lunging forward again. At times she would be on the brink of falling over, but she would stretch out her arms and steady herself. I cautiously continued down the path and hoped that when I reached her, she would pass me by. However, when she was five yards from me, she balled up her hands and raised them to her chest.

"Help me," she begged with wide-open eyes and a cracked voice.

That was when I realized the blood that covered her body was her own. The shock made me shriek and take a couple of steps back. The top of her head had been hit with a blunt, heavy object that had created a deep gash running down the middle of her skull. The blood dripped down her face and breasts and had clotted in her blonde hair, causing it to resemble in the moonlight the color of dark chocolate.

"Help me," she repeated.

"I don't know," I mumbled and took another step back.

"I need to find Jerry. Where's Jerry," she said as tears started to flow from her eyes and mix with the dry blood on her cheeks. Without warning, she turned and looked behind her. When she looked back at me, her eyes were filled with terror.

"Run," she whispered and crashed into the trees to her right. I panicked and ran in the opposite direction. I had run a considerable distance when my foot tripped on a rock, and I fell forward. My chin hit the ground hard, and for a moment I was stunned. I opened my eyes and sat on the floor of the forest cupping my sore chin in my left hand.

I looked around and saw the black outlines of the trees and the moonbeams shining through openings in the forest canopy. Reason crept back into my mind, and I understood the mistake I had made. I would only be safe under the bright lights of the festival, not running helter-skelter through a dark forest late at night. I had to find a way somehow to the path I had been on and follow it back to the clearing.

I stumbled through the night vainly attempting to make my way out of the forest. Stray branches cut my face as if the trees were slapping me out of spite. My head was throbbing. The clarity I had experienced earlier was gradually sinking into a chemically-induced grogginess, while my feet felt like they were plodding through knee-high mud. At times I heard moans and laughter coming from different parts of the forest, and every once in a while I felt a tingling on the back of my neck as if someone were watching me.

After what I thought was half-an-hour, I came across an opening in the woods through which a halo of bright moonlight shone and seemed to be summoning me forward. I went through the opening and was relieved to find that I had at last reached a place I recognized. There before me in all its glory was Sanguine Lake.

The beach was deserted, and the lake was serene. The light of the full moon glistened across the surface and highlighted the ripples created by a breeze that skimmed the top of the waters. A thin, white fog sat atop the far end of the lake and drifted lazily as the wind nudged it along.

The muscles that had been tense since I first walked into the woods were now content to relax and unwind. My knees began to weaken and my thighs felt the relentless pull of gravity.

I sat down and examined my options. I decided the safest course of action would be to wait by the lake until the sun came up and then find my way back to the lodge and my car in the daylight. I would just sit here for a moment, I thought, before moving closer to the edge of the woods, where I believed I would be better hidden.

However, my limbs were weary, my head ached, and my eyelids kept drooping. What should have been a *moment* of sitting imperceptibly lengthened into a *short period* before finally becoming a *long time*. Without knowing when, I unconsciously—in a state that seemed almost trance-like—leaned back, put my head down on my purse, and went to sleep.

When I awoke, the moon had slid behind some clouds, and I was engulfed in pitch blackness. I wiped the spit that had dribbled from my mouth and twisted my neck to straighten out some of the kinks that had formed as I slept. I looked out into the darkness that had consumed the lake and breathed in the chill air of the night. All was tranquil and silent.

Yet I asked, why was I so agitated; why did I sense that something was out of place; why did I feel something was out of the ordinary. The unease I felt, which had been barely perceptible at first, was growing with each second that ticked by. My mind was steadily overtaken by the notion that while I was sleeping, a presence had formed in the thick soup of the night and occupied the lake and its environs. But why did I feel that way?

Then in a flash I understood everything. I listened; I listened carefully; I strained to listen with all the willpower I possessed. Yet, I heard nothing; there was no sound. Where were the crickets, the frogs, the birds of the night? Where was the whistling of the wind, the lapping of the waters on the shore, the presence of a recognizable reality?

I peered out into the blackness that lay in front of me, trying to see something, anything that would either reassure me or give me reason to run. I saw only blackness. Yet I spotted something in that blackness, or perhaps something made of the blackness itself, that sent a cold jolt down my spine. The blackness was not as it should be, stagnant and uniform. It was in motion. It swirled and shifted; it rose and descended; it expanded and contracted. It was alive.

Then I heard the buzzing.

I turned and crawled to the edge of the forest. I grabbed a tree and lifted myself up. I walked into the forest knowing that I had to find the path and return to the clearing. However, without the moon I was blind. I put my hands up and tried to feel my way through the forest, but I would still unexpectedly run into a tree or trip on a root.

There was one solution, but I was afraid it would put me in more danger by making me a marked target. Yet I understood I had no other choice. I reached into my purse and pulled out a lighter. Flick, flick, flick, went the lighter, the sound echoing through the stillness before the gas ignited and produced a flame.

I could see well enough to walk forward. I only needed to find the path, but I wasn't sure how long that would take. I was surprised when I came across it in only a few minutes.

I hurried down the path, with my hand covering the flame to keep it from blowing out. The darkness was churning all around me and relentlessly trying to pierce the bubble of light that protected me, while the knocking of my heels on the hardened dirt under my feet sounded monstrous in the deathly quiet that had settled over the forest. I warily scanned the woods on either side of me, intensely afraid I would see something ghoulish or unnatural. I made it around the bend in the path where I had earlier seen the naked woman. That was where I stopped.

I could see ahead of me the entrance to the field. It seemed sun-like in its brilliance after the suffocating darkness of the woods. However, what had stopped me was not the light I saw but the sound I heard. The people who had gathered here tonight for the festival were all speaking in one voice, chanting in a language that sounded like a mixture of Hebrew, Latin, and an indescribable tongue full of otherworldly malevolence.

I walked into the clearing and for a moment was blinded by the brightness of the light that filled the air. It was only after my eyes had become accustomed to the light that the shocking truth of what this night represented was at last revealed to me.

Standing in the clearing, facing the stage, and chanting in an alien language were not men and women, but a countless variety of beasts. There were men with human bodies but the faces of goats, apes, and horses. Women had the faces of pigeons, sheep, and foxes. Giant, thick snakes were standing erect with their fangs shining in the light, and fat toads and snails almost as big as grizzlies were seated on chairs by the tables.

This assembly of monsters was staring at the stage where a tall, cloaked man stood. He was wearing an ivory mask that was expressionless except at the mouth, where one side was turned upward in a vicious sneer and on the other pointed downward in an exaggerated frown. The man, whom I presumed was the head priest, carried a wooden staff that he waved side to side as he led the congregation in the chanting.

However, I was not focused on him. My eyes were transfixed on a stone slab that stood a few yards to his left. A crimson sheet had been placed over the slab and covered an object that lay on top of it. I moved closer to the stage, drawn by whatever was concealed by the sheet—drawn because I had guessed what could be squirming and wriggling underneath in a desperate struggle to be free.

Without notice, the crowd became silent. The masked man lifted his staff high in the air and began chanting the name of the demon they had come to worship that night. The crowd joined in, and the air was filled with the syllables,

Bai-Qaa-La

It was repeated over and over.

Bai-Qaa-La

Bai-Qaa-La

Bai-Qaa-La...

Some of the beasts in the audience rang large bells or beat on handheld gongs in time with each syllable of the demon's name. Others began to

scream with wild passion as they succumbed to the madness of the ceremony. The combined noise was ear-shattering.

From the back, three men carried a cross onto the stage. I felt my sanity start to crumble as I saw crucified on the cross the dead body of the woman I had encountered in the woods. Her body had been lashed mercilessly and her tongue was hanging out. Her eyes were those of a person whose mind had been broken into a thousand pieces. I wondered if I could have ended up there, crucified in her place.

Flames exploded out of five massive urns that had been placed at the rear of the stage, bathing the priest, stone slab, and crucified woman in an unholy green light. And through the madness, I kept hearing the incessant chanting.

Bai-Qaa-La

Bai-Qaa-La

Bai-Qaa-La...

The priest proceeded to the stone slab and grabbed hold of the crimson sheet as the chanting grew louder and louder. My throat constricted and my stomach dropped as he pulled the sheet away and revealed Jerry naked and gagged on the slab. His eyes were delirious, and when the priest removed the gag, the volume of his hopeless screaming exceeded the clamor of the chanting. The chanting and screaming pleased the priest so much that he let out a loud laugh as he raised his arms and looked up at the sky.

I knew what he was looking at. I knew he was watching the blackness that had sprung up from the lake. I timidly looked skyward and beheld a black mass moving in from Sanguine Lake blotting out the clouds, the newly revealed moon, and the stars as it advanced towards the clearing. I observed in stark terror the swirling and shifting of the blackness as it descended towards the stage. The chanting, the gongs, the bells, the screaming, all climaxed in a wild and uncontrolled fury. My brain was drowning in an ocean of sound, fear, and claustrophobia as I witnessed the full power of what evil was capable of.

Hovering above the stage was a swarm of millions of mosquitoes. This was Baiqaala—one unified animal, one single consciousness—buzzing in anticipation as it considered the offering.

The buzzing became a howl as the swarm fell upon Jerry's body. He was still screaming when it encased him in a pulsing, rippling, thirsty cocoon of blood-sucking death.

Most innocent spectators at that instant would have succumbed, I'm sure, to insanity and waited meekly for their own death, but I was filled with such rage and disgust that I was driven towards action. I jumped on the stage and tried to disperse the swarm covering Jerry with my purse. I heard the priest behind me shout, "You dirty bitch," as he turned me around and stripped the purse from my hand. He tossed it away and placed both his hands on my throat.

I staggered back a few steps before finding my balance. My face was starting to turn blue and my lungs seemed ready to explode. I stomped his left foot with my right heel, then kned him in his groin. He tottered backward then fell off the stage into the audience. The exhilaration of being able to breathe was overpowered immediately by the sight of the millions of mosquitoes feasting on Jerry's body. I looked out over the audience and witnessed hundreds of eyes burning with hate. The words "kill her" wafted through the air, while other voices were saying, "Let Baiqaala have her. Baiqaala shall finish her."

I realized I had to flee. There was no way to defeat a swarm of mosquitoes just as there was no way to hold back the wind. I picked up my purse and was ready to run when I heard something jostling and clanging. It was only at that moment that I understood everything, recognized the true nature of my enemy, grasped its power and its weakness.

I felt a thrill in my heart when I reached into my purse. I had a weapon, and it was not a gun, or a knife, or even the pepper spray I always carried. I pulled out a can of mosquito repellent. I shook it and then, with my eyes closed and my hands over my nose and mouth, sprayed the swarm, sprayed the air, sprayed the stone slab and Jerry's

body with only one mad desire in my head: to send that motherfucker Baiqaala back to hell.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the mosquitoes had left Jerry's body, which was now only a pathetic sack of bloodless flesh rotting on the stone slab. The swarm was floating higher into the air as it dispersed. The remaining mosquitoes, in the final seconds before they scattered into the night, congealed into a face that still haunts my dreams. The face was round and flat, it possessed tusks and fangs, from its cheeks tentacles waved in the air, and its eyes looked down upon me in a rage that spoke of indescribable universes of torture and suffering. Then it was gone.

I don't remember much after that except that I blinded two men with pepper spray before jumping off the back of the stage and running into the woods. I also recall starting the ignition of my car and then at some point reaching Hawthorne's downtown. Except for that, everything else is a blur.

VI

The next day I found myself lying in my bed, still dressed in the clothes I had worn the previous night. When I sat up and opened my eyes, my hangover happily hit me in the head with a sledgehammer. Through half-closed eyes, I saw it was half past two in the afternoon.

I dragged myself into the bathroom and took a cold shower, sitting cross-legged in the tub most of the time while the water massaged my aching head. After drying myself, I went to the kitchen and prepared a cup of black coffee.

With the mug in my hand, I called Grant's personal line. When no one picked up, I called my friend Pam, the newspaper's receptionist, and asked if Grant was in.

"You haven't heard?" asked Pam in a hushed voice. "It's horrible. Grant and his wife were killed when their house burned down. It happened early this morning, right before dawn."

I didn't react when the mug fell from my hand and crashed on the floor. I only stood silently with my mouth open.

"Hello? Faith, are you there?"

The only words that came out of my mouth were, "Did they find any mosquitoes?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you okay, Faith? Look if you want to talk, I'm always..." I hung up the phone.

I expected to get a visit (a final visit) from someone associated with the Lake Sanguine Festival that day, but no one showed up. No one ever did.

I went to sleep early and woke up as usual in the middle of the night. Similar to the previous nights, I heard the sound of something tapping against my window, but this time I didn't presume it to be raindrops. I walked to the window and stood gazing at the curtains, waiting to build up my courage, waiting to hear if some other sound wasn't mixed in with the tapping. I grabbed the curtains and violently threw them back.

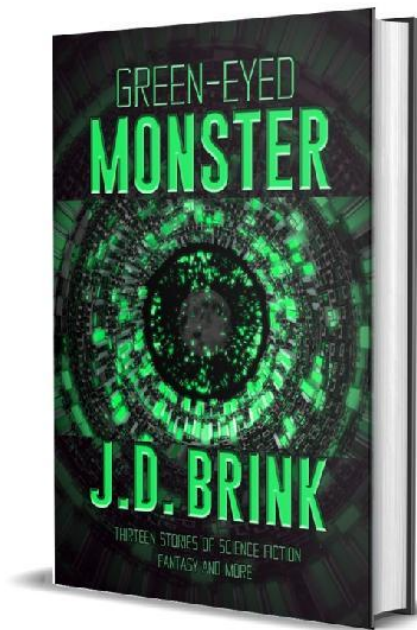
I beheld only blackness: a squirming, buzzing blackness. There before my eyes were a million mosquitoes crawling on the window pane, a million mosquitoes covering every inch of it, a million mosquitoes beating against it in an attempt to break the glass and enter my room, a million mosquitoes wanting only to taste my blood.

I slept in the bathtub for the first time that night. I sprayed repellent over my entire body, and just to be extra secure, I placed tape around the bathroom door and over the vents. The next day I called a contractor to board up all the windows and seal every crack in my house. The contractor also informed me no insects could enter my house through the air-conditioning, but I'm too paranoid to take any chances. Every day as the sun starts to set, I turn the AC off, close the vents, and bake in the humid heat of the spring and summer nights.

Perhaps I could have become accustomed to my life and found some semblance of normalcy in the safety of my home. But I knew there was always a chance I could end up outside during the night—the result of my own carelessness or some wicked, uncontrollable urge—and find myself at the mercy of the demon’s horde. Yet, even if I continued to be careful and always remained indoors when the sun set, I knew the swarm could someday discover a new crack or hole through which they could enter my home and overwhelm me as they bit me to death.

These fears will never fade away. That is because I am always haunted by Baiqaala’s words and his unquenchable thirst for vengeance. Every couple of weeks a mosquito somehow finds its way into my home. It seeks me out and approaches my ear as I sleep. It whispers to me in a high-pitched voice, and I wake up with the words still echoing in my ears. It whispers: “My master is waiting for you. He is always waiting for you. He is waiting to *bleed you dry*.”

[*Editor’s note: The author has chosen to remain anonymous and forgone inclusion of a biography.*]



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The Last Fortune of Ali al'Ahmar

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“This guy’s full of shit.”

Sudah gave Ardashir a nudge to shut him up, and the three korsans followed the merchant into the backroom of his store.

The Panji dwarv gave the three an obsequious grin, curly black mustache wrapping around his fat, lumpy nose and raising to show pearly white teeth.

“Please, sit, make yourselves comfortable! I will get some wine.”

He was a picture of servility, bowing low to the three and carrying the wine tray himself instead of calling for a servant. Or, by the looks of things, maybe he had no servants.

Sudah frowned a little as she took a seat. “So you know we’re korsans. And you’re not really interested in our load of silk, or we could’ve done the deal right on the wharf. So, what, you want us to kill somebody? Rob a rival, put the fear in him? What?”

The Panji waved dismissively, his back to the three as he retrieved a wine jug from a hidden compartment. “It is nothing so simple, I assure you. But let us have some wine first.” He turned to them with a sly smile. “I am sure you will not attempt to pilfer anything while my back is turned.”

Ardashir snorted. “Like I’d want to steal anything from this dump.” Sudah gave Ardashir a half-glare, half-smile that told him to shut the hell up a minute and give the guy a chance. Ardashir shrugged and sat back.

He had a point, though; the place really was a dump. The walls were bare plaster and the floor packed clay, no carpets, no tiles, not even wood flooring. The furniture, far from the polished and carved décor one would expect from a merchant’s house, was rough-hewn peasant ware. The Panji dwarv was wearing the only things of value in the room, a silk pagri, kurta and dhoti, not even a ring on his finger.

The grinning Panji brought the wine tray to the table and handed them each a brimming cup. There was Murguan, the Brahmuri navigator, dark and lanky. Ardashir was the quartermaster and ship's magician, a lightly-tanned, city-bred Hyrcanian, his apish brow and protruding mouth and jaw marking him a man of strong orcish blood. As for the captain, Sudah, she received an extra scraping bow and a smarmy introduction from the Panji.

“Sudah Albahar Alsabea. Sudah, the beautiful; Sudah, the fearless; daughter of Muhammad Jelani, the mighty Zuazi korsan, exceeded in his reputation in recent years only by none other than the most lovely Sudah, whom I am most proud to host within the humble walls of my abode.”

Sudah shifted uncomfortably in her seat and gave the Panji a steely glare. She was beginning to share Ardashir's distaste for the merchant. She didn't like flattery or bullshit. And she didn't like people calling her beautiful, even if they meant it in earnest. She had been beautiful once, when she was young. That was before the salt had forced her to cord her delicate hair into rough locks, before the endless hammering sun of the open sea had permanently burned her from a lovely bronze to the ruddy-brown of a snaggletoothed sailor. At least her teeth weren't falling out. Not yet, anyway.

The merchant misinterpreted her glare and bowed again. “My apologies. I give you such a flourishing introduction, and yet I myself have not had the courtesy to give my own name. I am Bajala, of the port of Bikaner, formerly a loyal citizen of the Sultan of Darwa. And I still consider myself as such, though recent circumstances have forced me to —”

“To be honest, Bajala, I don't give a damn about your recent circumstances.” The Panji fell politely silent and clasped his hands in front of his crotch as he gave Sudah a suitably apologetic look. She continued: “What I want to know is how you know who I am and what kind of business we absolutely had to do here instead of right on the dock.”

Bajala nodded. "Of course." He took a seat and sipped his wine, and setting the cup down, fixed Sudah with a deliberate and serious stare. Sitting at the table, Bajala cut a rather comical appearance that undercut his sudden airs of gravitas. The table and chairs were built for visitors of Sudah's size; the four and a half foot dwarf rested his elbows awkwardly on the table, like a child trying to sit with his parents a little too early. But looking in his eyes, Sudah could see a deadly seriousness that was cutting through the pompous bullshit and goofy appearance, and she gave him her attention once more.

"As you guessed, I brought you here because I wish to discuss with you a matter that is best not spoken of in public, 'round prying eyes and ears. But first, as to your question to my familiarity... well, to be honest, I am surprised you would think yourself someone who should go wholly unrecognised. You have garnered quite the reputation in the short years since your father's death.

"The giveaway, though, was in that load of silk in which I was interested. And I am truly interested, by the way, though perhaps not entirely for the usual reasons." Bajala gave a sly smile again as he paused to sip his wine. "That was quite the daring little robbery you performed, and the story has made swift travel through the wharfs and taverns round the Sea of Larwi in the past months."

Sudah frowned, her mouth a little pursed with anxiety. "You mean to tell me people are already talking about it in Zuazibar?"

Bajala smiled again. "In Unguja, at least, and I suspect much further by now, perhaps as far south as Simbullah. And why not? A whole baghlah's crew captured and hogtied, without a drop of blood spilled, a full load of Han silk spirited out of Monpur in the middle of the night and the admiral of the Raj's fleet searching in vain for a full month for a single sign of a trail." He raised his cup. "Truly, though piracy be a merchant's worst curse, even I have to salute such a magnificently performed act of thievery."

Sudah shifted again. She had to admit, the merchant's flattery was having its effect. Still, better to be on one's toes. She glanced at Ardashir,

then glanced back at the entrance. Ardashir nodded and, without a word, stood and walked through the door, a silent chant on his lips, a bit of Weirdfire flashing from his fingers.

Bajala seemed bemused by this. “I assure you, we will not be spied upon, but if your man wishes to sery, I have no objection.”

Sudah took a deep sip of wine before she spoke. “So you know about the heist. And unless I’m mistaken, you’re implying all the other merchants do too. But I should point out that, just because I have no bottom line to cover doesn’t mean there was no overhead.”

Bajala was already putting up his hand. “I assure you, that is not what this is about. As a matter of fact, I don’t intend on buying the silks at all. My plan is to act as an intermediary, to sell them to a friend of mine...”

Sudah’s brow was furrowed in bafflement, but Bajala put his hand up again to hold her questions. “...And, along with the money made from that sale, I intend to invest my entire savings into a venture which you and I will embark upon together.”

“Okay, wait, we’ve gotten way ahead of ourselves here. What venture? What are you talking about?”

The Panji leaned forward with all the stony seriousness he could muster. “I have obtained the location of the last fortune of Ali al’Ahmar!”

Sudah took a moment before she and Murguan burst out laughing. Bajala sat and sipped his wine, a smile on his face again.

Ardashir returned to the room, frowning. “What the hell’s so funny?”

Murguan was already standing to leave. “Hey, this guy just said he wants to go hunting Ali al’Ahmar’s treasure!”

Ardashir looked at the dwarf, dumbfounded. “Are you fucking kidding me? You dragged us off the dock to go play kid’s treasure hunter games?”

Bajala shook his head slowly. "I assure you, friend, it is no game."

Sudah was stifling her laughter with the last of the wine. "Okay, joke's over. Let's go."

Bajala leaped to his feet. "Wait! Before you go, allow me to show you the monies you will be forfeiting by walking out that door." He hurried over to the dresser containing the wine, shoved it aside with some effort and opened a hidden metal door with a key on his neck chain. Inside was a sizable chest, large enough to require two men to carry if it were filled with gold.

And when he opened it, it was indeed filled with sacks of gold and silver. Bajala waved to it, inviting them to take a look.

While Ardashir and Murguan examined the sacks, Sudah turned to Bajala. "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"I would not have revealed my treasury were I not."

"So what in the hell makes you so sure you know where Ali al'Ahmar's treasure is? I mean, it shouldn't even exist. The guy was kinda well known for blowing his money, and that's saying something for a korsan."

"It is this. If you would excuse me..." Bajala slipped past the other two and reached behind the chest to pull out a rolled-up parchment. At the sight of the old parchment, both men returned the sacks of money, and everyone followed Bajala to the table to examine it.

It was a map. A very well-drawn map, done with a cartographer's precision, of the Sea of Larwi. There was the Zuazi coast, the Horn of Zamora, Sabaea, the Sea of Fars, Hyrcania, and the island-continent of Shava. But it contained none of the usual myriad names lining the coasts. Instead, the map bore a large number of notes and specific place-names, all written in a chicken-scratch script that was barely legible.

Bajala tapped the map. "This is the original map which Ali al'Ahmar himself used to navigate his raids."

The story of how Bajala got the map was long and only interesting to himself. The details matched up with what Sudah could remember of al’Ahmar’s legend, but then they always do. She was too busy deciphering the scrawled notes to pay attention. They were mainly notes of names of fences or friendly rulers, a number of which were scratched out. Curses and threats of revenge were written next to many of them. Sudah noted that many of them seemed to correspond to parts of the legend as well; al’Ahmar had made a lot of enemies in his time, and those enemies seemed well-accounted for on the map. It might have been a forgery, but it was a damn good one.

Bajala had that smile on again. “I would call your attention to this note here.” He pointed to one next to an island circled in the Maladivaina, the vast archipelago to the west of Shava.

The note read, after some difficulty in deciphering: “To him who dares, come and take it.”

“Who cares if he’s nuts? It’s free money.”

Ardashir shook his head. “I really don’t feel like wandering around the Maladivaina for months looking for a treasure that probably doesn’t even exist.” He took a drink of palm wine and grimaced. “Fuckin’ hell.” But he still downed the rest of the gourd in one go and tossed it on the funduq room floor.

Nobody sold palm wine in Zuazibar. The Emirs and Sultans of the eastern Naambuni coast were a bit too publicly pious to tolerate the public sale of alcohol. But it just so happened that vendors all over Unguja would sell stoppered gourds of palm sap every morning. And if you happened to leave the gourd sitting in a hot room all day long, it would be fermented by the time the sun set.

Sudah shrugged. “We know where the island’s supposed to be. The other side of the map’s pretty clear about how to find it.” She stopped to take a swig. “So, we go to the island ring the map points out, we don’t

find an island with a big... rock, or whatever that thing's supposed to be, and we drop Bajala off wherever he wants."

Ardashir unstopped another gourd and blew out the somewhat nauseating fumes of fermentation. "You really think this guy's gonna be happy with that? If we get there—when we get there—and there's no island, he's gonna demand we keep searching." He took a big gulp and shook his head. "The Maladivaina's over a thousand miles long, and each island ring has dozens of little islands in it."

"So, he gets unreasonable, and we throw his ass overboard."

Ardashir raised his eyebrows. "You don't really think this guy would join a crew of korsans with nothing but a chestful of gold and no protection, do you?"

"What, you think he's got some people to protect him?"

Ardashir shook his head. "I don't think he needs protection. When I was scrying his shop... Sudah, the place was lousy with Weird. It was seeped into the wood, into the walls, into all his goods..."

Sudah grimaced. "Oh, hell..." She frowned. "But the guy didn't look sick at all. You make it sound like his hair should've been falling out."

"Right. I think he's a self-taught magician, one who probably has a powerful Weirdblood."

"That big nose of his..."

Ardashir nodded. "The dwarvic Weirdblood. So, maybe he knows enough to excise himself, or maybe his Weirdblood's kept him clean up until now; point is, the guy probably knows some potent tricks and spells, but he never learned the fundamentals. Or he's too damn reckless to care. Either way, that makes him dangerous, to himself and to us."

Sudah looked out the window. The sky was a deep lavender, growing blue-black out to sea. The offshore breeze cooled her face and rustled her locks. The streets were quiet and abandoned, but drunken chatter rose from inside buildings, and a number of the ships still lit with torches

showed tiny figures swilling bottles, jugs, and gourds. In the distance, Sudah heard a heavy splash, followed by swearing and the laughter of drunk sailors.

“So you don’t like it, is what you’re saying.”

Ardashir shrugged. “I like the idea. The execution, not so much.” He rubbed his chin. “If it were true, though... I wonder if al’Ahmar would have left behind some of his formulae...”

Sudah smirked. “Only you. Only you would see a giant pile of jewels and gold and wonder if there was an old book buried underneath it.”

Ardashir shrugged. “It’s the magic in life that makes it worth living.”

She gave him a pouting look. “Is that really all you want out of life?”

Ardashir fixed her with a smile. His hand found its way to her thigh. “Not everything.”

She pushed his hand away playfully and finished the gourd. “Well, for the moment, what I want out of life is to not wake up next to an exploded gourd and a bunch of rotten palm wine.” She picked up another gourd, unstopped it and took a long pull, and gave him a smile.

They were both rubbing their heads the next morning, squinting up at the bright morning sun.

“Yeah, let’s drink all the palm wine so it doesn’t go sour.”

Sudah sighed. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Murguan walked next to them, smiling. “It’s such a beautiful day, and you two do nothing but moan.” He raised his hands. “C’mon, let the morning air refresh you!”

Ardashir glared at the overly cheery navigator. “I’ll freshen you up.”

Murguan shook his head. “So irritable this morning! We should find some green coconuts.”

“Don’t talk to me about coconut.”

“Why? Some coconut water would do you—” The smile dropped from his face and he stuck out his arm. The other two almost ran him over, and the two burly crew members following almost did the same to them.

Murguan stood just beyond the corner, looking at Bajala’s shop. He backed up behind the corner. “Take a look.”

Sudah peeked her head around, holding her locks close so they wouldn’t swing into sight. A group of Zuazi men, all stocky and scar-marked, loitered around the storefront, glaring up and down the street. They were armed with Zuazi shortswords and bucklers and dressed in yellow padded silk jacks. At their head was a big man with a shaved head and glaring eyes, over six feet tall, pacing back and forth, scanning the streets carefully.

Ardashir glanced after her. “Well, shit.” He gave Sudah his told-you-so look. “I knew he was trouble.”

One of the crewmen spoke up: “So, what now? We go back to the ship?”

The other four looked to Sudah. She sighed. “Wanna put it to a vote?”

They did. She could tell by the apprehension in their eyes. It was their right, but nobody spoke up. They respected her; they would respect her decision.

She nodded. “Okay. Let’s check out the back.”

The five entered the back alleys round the other side of the block, took a wrong turn, backtracked, and managed to take another wrong turn. As they were backtracking again someone hissed at them from behind.

All five turned, swords halfway drawn, but it was Bajala. He had his apologetic look on. “I imagine you’ve seen my shop by now. I’m afraid

our plans have been complicated.”

Ardashir rolled his eyes and nodded. “Yeah, and I’m sure that in no way was it your fault, and these are purely evil men looking to take advantage of a poor innocent merchant. I got the story right, or did I miss some tearjerker details?”

Bajala folded his arms and glared back at Ardashir. “Are you still interested in this venture or not?”

Sudah put up a finger. “Just who are these guys?”

Bajala hesitated. Then he nodded. “I am in debt to them.”

“By how much?”

“It does not matter, with this lot, by how much. They are the kind of people who are not satisfied with a settled debt. There is always more interest to be paid off. Had I known this before, I would have never become involved with them, but of course, I was new in this city and did not know whom to trust.”

“So how many of ‘them’ are there?”

Bajala shook his head. “I do not know. Doubtless more are patrolling the city. But...” he put up a hand, “...I have explored the alleys of this town well in my spare time. I will be able to lead us unnoticed to the docks.”

Sudah eyeballed him. “You’re sure?”

Bajala nodded solemnly. “I know I can.”

Sudah sighed. “Well, hell. Let’s see who’s waiting out back of the store.”

There were only two men, as it turned out. Both were leaning by the back door, drinking Bajala’s wine, plainly unobserved by any of their fellows.

Both looked up blearily at the raggedy beggar who came shuffling around the alley corner. One waved at him. “Hey, grandpa. Get outta here.”

The beggar ignored them, chanting some inaudible hymn.

The two groaned and pushed themselves upright, loosening their shortswords in their scabbards. “I said beat it.” The old man still ignored them. “This is private business, old man, get outta—”

Sudah and Ardashir dropped down from the roof as one and slit both men’s throats. They gurgled out muffled screams, grabbing at throats slick with spurting blood. Sudah drew her sword and speared each through the heart for good measure.

Murguan threw off the rags, and the six slipped through the backdoor, looking and listening carefully. Ardashir had his hands out, scrying the building. He shook his head. “Can’t hear anyone inside.”

All five korsans picked up the heavy cabinet at once to keep from scraping on the floor, as the chubby Panji exhorted them to hurry, fiddling with his keys. He opened the door with ease and checked the chest. “God is with us. They haven’t taken anything.”

The next fifteen minutes were spent in confused shuffling, dodging down this alleyway, then that, past rotten curtains in doorways and worn, dusty carpets, past beggars who made far too much noise imploring them for money and grew louder at being told to be silent in the hope that the hurried strangers would panic and give money to shut them up. Ardashir had to grab one persistent man by the throat and throw him against a wall to shut him up, and when the man looked too much like he would run howling down the alley, Ardashir smashed his nose flat against his face and left him groaning and bleeding in the dust.

And when they made it to the docks at last, they were far from home free.

A collection of men, all wearing the same yellow silk jacks, patrolled the docks. At a shout, they came together in a line facing Sudah and the

rest of the crew. Two men stepped forward, the man in the lead holding a hand up.

“Halt, right there! We don’t want to harm you.”

“Don’t stop walking.” Sudah took up a determined stride.

The man in charge started talking fast. “The man you are working for is a thief. He has defrauded several merchants and is wanted by the Council for reparations. You do not want to work for this man.”

Sudah muttered under her breath, “Yeah, well, wouldn’t be the first time.” Her hand went to her sword hilt.

The toughs saw this, and as one they drew shortswords and grabbed bucklers. The head man shook his head, his eyes determined. “Don’t make us kill you.”

Sudah smiled, relishing what would come next. She waited until she was just about in stabbing range, then drew a four-foot long Mercian sidesword, the long skewering blade like a giant, flattened needle, her finger hooked around the quillon in the ring guard, ready to wield the slender-yet-heavy sword as handily as their little daggers.

The two men in front bulged their eyes in shock. Their grips tightened visibly.

Sudah lunged in for a feint, letting the head man’s buckler swing wildly to block the stab, then quick as a flash she went in for the stab and punched a foot of steel through the man’s throat. She had to pull back fast to avoid the swing of the other man’s sword. An instant later, Ardashir’s shamshir came down like a steel whip and severed the man’s arm below the elbow. He fell back screaming, blood spurting from the stump as the leader dropped to his knees, sword and buckler falling from his hands, and grabbed feebly at a throat covered in blood.

The rest of the gang hesitated. In less than three of an excited man’s heartbeats, their leader and his right-hand man were dead on the street. They stood, sword points quivering, unsure of what to do.

Then one of them screamed, his back split by another shamshir. The rest of Sudah's crew had snuck up from behind, and now they jumped the toughs from the back. Several more quickly fell, and the rest scattered. Sudah and the rest charged through the panicked goons, spearing and slashing any who stopped in their way too long. From behind them, they could hear a man roaring. Looking back, Sudah saw the man from Bajala's shop, hollering at his fleeing men: "Stop! Stop them! Idiots! You are more than they!"

A sheet of fire erupted in front of the reinforcements. The big guy slid to a halt just in time to avoid falling into the inferno out of nowhere. Several of his men were not so lucky. He swore angrily as he pulled screaming, burned thugs from the already dying flames.

Sudah had to stop and stare at Bajala, who was rubbing his hands and shaking his fingers furiously. The air reeked of the distinct miasma of a powerful magical discharge, the same smell as that produced by a lightning strike.

The Panji wasn't wearing any silver or copper, not even a gold ring. Using magic that powerful, without any metal to conduct the Weird away from your body... Sudah shook her head. Ardashir was right—Bajala was dangerous.

By the time the big Zuazi had regrouped his men, it was too late. Sudah's crew was piling back on the baghlah. The gangplank was drawn back, the sails were unfurled, and men manned the sides with recurved Tarkhur bows, arrows notched, ready to pin anyone looking a little too brave. The big man stood, stymied, frustrated and swearing at the boat and crew. His men had brought no bows of their own.

As the baghlah pulled away from the dock, Bajala came up to a still sweating Sudah. He nodded. "I believe I have made the right choice of crew."

A few days later they stopped at a port to buy a huge load of provisions and repair and replace their arms and padded armors, and they hit the open seas with most of Bajala's investment already spent. It would

be a straight shot to the Maladivaina. No stopping at any ports. Bajala insisted on that point, to avoid any possibility of rumor leaking out about their destination and intent, and Sudah and her crew agreed.

Sudah leaned on the railing, staring idly at the sea. There was still a certain beauty in an unbroken ocean, despite all the bad memories. On a bright, clear day like this, she could almost remember the excitement of a fourteen-year-old girl, going out to sea for the first time with the father she hadn't known until a few weeks previous. The dream of adventure and fortune, sailing the high seas alongside her dad, the best pirate there ever was.

But now all she could remember was the slow, bitter death the dream had died. That, and the few sweet memories she had held onto from the whole godawful eight-year-long tutelage with a man who had no concept of what being a father was.

She didn't notice Bajala until he was standing next to her. "She is beautiful, is she not?"

"Hm?" Sudah shook off the miasma of bad memories. "Oh, yeah. Sure."

Bajala frowned at her. "For one who lives upon the sea, you seem most unromantic about her."

Sudah glanced sideways at him. "Tell you a secret, Bajala. Not every sailor is too damn fond of the sea."

"Then why spend so much time upon her?"

"Because nobody can fuck with me out here." Sudah stared off at the horizon. "If there's a beauty I find in the sea, it's not the sea itself. It's in what it means to me. And even that's not exactly what I would call beautiful." She shook her head slowly. "It's still better than what I find on land."

"And what is it you find on land?"

Sudah folded her arms and faced Bajala. “Well, for one thing, I find dwarves who are too damn timid to get to the point and say what they wanted when they walked up here.”

Bajala gave her a contrite smile. “You are too perceptive for me. Or perhaps I have learned to be too polite for my own good. Whatever the case, yes, there is something I must discuss with you which had not come to mind earlier. It regards the jewels of the treasure we seek.”

“What about ’em?”

“Well, as you will probably have heard, or at least guessed, Ali al’Ahmar managed to thief many a royal treasure. Many of these, particularly the most valuable, have disappeared.”

“Yeah, because he pried out the gems and melted down the metal.”

Bajala pursed his lips. “Perhaps. But I suspect differently. I have a feeling that many of these lost jewels will turn up in his last horde, that he kept those which most struck his fancy and stroked his ego. And this presents us with a problem.

“Of the distribution of the silver and gold, I am sure we will have no issue. But in the matter of royal jewelry, interested parties might well take issue with our possession of such artifacts. Even were we to separate the gems from the metal, this would not only greatly reduce the value of either alone, but it would remain to us to conceal the source of a great many cut and polished gems, many of them famous in and of themselves. To this problem, I have a proposition.”

Sudah smiled and nodded. “You got a friend.”

“Friends, actually. A great deal in Shava, who—“

“Whoa, wait. I thought you weren’t exactly on good terms in Darwa.”

“In Darwa, yes, but we need not land in Shava itself. We have merely to sail to one of the ports in the Maladivaina. The islands, as I am sure you well know, are quite lawless.”

Sudah raised her eyebrows. “I know some friendly ports, but I don’t know of any I’d be okay sitting around in with a bunch of royal jewels in my hold.”

“I am sure with the riches we will find we will be able to buy a great deal of silence.”

“We’ll be buying a great deal of attention, is what we’ll be buying. People in port towns talk, Bajala.”

Bajala waved a dismissive hand. “Regardless, we will not have to wait long. These men I know, they are reliable and expedient. And they are most trustworthy.”

Yeah, Sudah thought, I’m sure that if they’re your friends they’re really trustworthy. She shook her head. The little bastard had a point. There were bound to be some big damn jewels in that horde, the kind of jewelry it wasn’t easy to explain away. And she didn’t know any real jewel fences. A korsan’s usual lot in piracy was a ship’s stolen goods; a real gold cache was a rare enough find. When it came to jewelry, she was at a loss.

She nodded slowly. “Okay. Okay, I can give you a month when we make port.” Bajala’s friends would take her for all they could. But it was better than dealing with someone who might take off with the jewels. And the rest of the horde, plus the cut of Bajala’s remaining funds, would be enough. Should be enough.

Bajala smiled. “Excellent.”

Sudah looked back out to sea, an uneasy feeling in her gut.

The map marked the island ring clearly, and the back showed a highlighted island in its center, the silhouette drawn from two different directions, each showing the highest point on the island to be what appeared to be a big bald rock dome.

It was easy enough to find.

Murguan called from the bow, waving excitedly, shaking his spying staff. The staff held a ring sight at one end, enchanted to magnify whatever you looked at. Ardashir reached the bow first and held the staff carefully, Murguan pointing at the horizon to guide him. “You see? The island almost dead ahead. Look carefully, you’ll see a big white spot in the middle.”

Ardashir nodded. “I’ll be damned.” He handed the staff off to Sudah.

There it was, a low-lying, forested island, with a white rock dome jutting out of the center. She grinned at Ardashir. “No way it’s gonna be there, huh?”

Ardashir gave her a look. “I never said the island wouldn’t be there.”

Sudah nodded, smirking. “Sure you didn’t.”

Ardashir growled a little and took the spying staff back. “Yeah, well, we still have to find the treasure. And that ain’t the smallest island.”

It wasn’t too small for the Maladivaina, but by any reasonable estimate, it was fairly small. The crescent-shaped island couldn’t have been more than a couple square miles in size, with a lagoon stretching off in the opposite direction of their approach. They anchored a good distance offshore, the seas of the Maladivaina being often dangerously shallow, and rowed ashore. Even so, the crewmen found that they had to get out and drag the boats the last thirty yards or so to shore.

Sudah stood on the shore, hands on her hips, staring at the strange, pearly-white rock dome in the center of the island. She turned to Bajala, standing beside her, and smiled. “Now this is what I call beauty.”

Bajala nodded. “Still, it will pale in comparison to what the island holds in secret.”

Sudah shrugged. “Yeah, I’m sure it will. Still a hell of a view.”

Bajala pursed his lips. “Incidentally, I would like to do a bit of brief exploring while your men unpack.”

Sudah eyeballed him. She glanced at Ardashir, who was eavesdropping, watching Bajala's back warily.

Bajala smiled. "Come now. Do you expect me to simply magic away hundreds of pounds of treasure?"

"Just don't get lost."

Bajala turned and began walking towards the giant rock. "Of course."

Bajala wished he knew of a spell of teleportation. He had heard of such spells, always in a book from someone who had heard of them from a distant traveler. Even if they did exist, the amount of energy needed to power such a spell would have required a gigantic sacrifice.

Well, there were other ways of making treasure disappear. Ways that didn't require any magic but that of the mind.

Bajala cursed to himself as he pushed through the jungle island foliage. These damn korsans were clever. They would not have been his first choice had he been given sufficient time. He would have much preferred a crew that was dumb enough not to demand money down, and further payment if the treasure were nowhere to be found, one that did not insist on deadlines for his plans. But, then, he had been in a hurry. One has to make do with what one is handed in life.

There would still be ways to fleece the korsans. With only a month given to him in port, he would have just a couple of days at most to work with after his friends arrived. But it should be enough. Not nearly as long as he wanted, and not enough time to spirit away all the treasure as he had planned. But they stood to make much by the royal jewelry. Again, provided Sudah didn't panic and insist the jewelry be destroyed to obscure its origins.

"Damnably clever bitch," Bajala snarled to himself again.

A few more moments pushing and he arrived at the white rock.

Bajala frowned. It looked like no rock he had ever seen. Up close, it resembled an enormous, lumpy, pitted egg. Parts bulged out like huge bubbles from the central dome, striated at the top, like big blisters or membranous sacs. And the surface of the thing was... soft?

Bajala approached the rock carefully, frowning in confusion. He touched the surface, then drew his hand back in revulsion. It was as though the surface was covered in a moist, warm skin.

And then something breathed on his shoulder.

Bajala turned. He screamed for a moment before a white, hairy hand was clapped over his face and he was hauled up by his head into the air.

Everyone froze and stared into the forest. Ardashir was the first to speak. “What the fuck was that?!”

“I think our Panji friend just found his fate in the jungle; Kranu protect his soul.” Murguan kissed his thumb and forefinger and stuck it up at the heavens.

Sudah had her sword out. “Ardashir, you stay with the crew. Murguan, come with me.” She was already walking into the jungle. Murguan had to hurry to catch up.

He had his khanda out and was ready to start slashing through the vegetation, but Sudah held her hand up. “I don’t think we should make too much noise.”

Murguan frowned. “You don’t think there’s something out there? I think it’s much more likely the man fell down a pit.”

“Maybe. But al’Ahmar was a demonist.”

“Surely his magic would have faded away by now.”

Sudah shrugged. “Probably so, but that scream put me on edge. Let’s try to stay quiet until we find out what happened.”

Progress was slow. The island trees were too short to create a proper canopy, and the forest floor was thick with saplings and bushes, ferns, vines and creepers, and strange flowers with huge blooms twice the width of a man's torso. Cream-white with violet centers, they gave off a smell of decay that had a strange cloying sweetness to it. The bell of the blooms was the source of the rotting smell; they held large amounts of thick-looking purple-brown water that was loaded with drowned insects and the remains of small lizards. Sudah and Murguan gave them a wide berth when they could.

After some time, they found a break in the vegetation that ringed the strange rock. Sudah and Murguan stared for a moment at the strange white dome. Then Murguan grabbed Sudah and pulled her down into cover. Not daring to speak, he pointed at what he saw.

At first glance, it was a huge ape of some sort. Its hair was the same creamy white as the flowers and the dome. But its hands were an unnatural violet color, the same as the blooms. Bright purple gums held huge, sharp fangs, and the veins and irises of its eyes were the same violet color as well.

And Sudah was sure that no ape had ever walked this earth whose head stuck out of its chest.

It was a devil. A creature not of this world, summoned by demonism, transported in ethereal form by the Weird which acts as a river between worlds, and given material form again here, on Earth, all for a specific purpose. That purpose being, in this case, to guard Ali al'Ahmar's treasure.

The ape devil was carrying the struggling Panji under its arm. His screams were muffled by the thing's armpit. The devil was examining the forest where they had been standing, its eyes twitching this way and that, nostrils working furiously, head moving ever so slightly in its chest. Its mouth worked for a moment, then it turned back and resumed its walk around the dome.

Sudah and Murguan looked at each other. Sudah waved him on, wanting to follow the ape, but Murguan shook his head furiously. Clearly, he was all for going back but Sudah just rolled her eyes and began to creep through the jungle, following the ape along the dome. Murguan followed reluctantly, silent curses on his lips.

It wasn't long before the ape devil came to an opening in the dome. It looked like a gaping anus, a strange, slimy purple flesh lining its opening. Several other devils stood near the entrance, each of them pawing at Bajala, each time getting a fresh round of muffled screams from the terrified dwarf. Weirdfire licked his fingers briefly several times, but quickly fizzled out each time, and each time the devils sucked at their lips eagerly. One took to running its tongue along Bajala's fingers, drawing an especially loud and long scream from the dwarf.

Eventually, the group entered the dome. Murguan leaned over to whisper to Sudah: "I suppose now you'll want to follow them inside?"

She smiled back at him. "Not just yet."

Murguan shook his head. "I've had enough. Let's go back before one of these horrid things sees us."

“**Y**ou're sure they were devils?”

Murguan nodded firmly. "Them, the rock, and the flowers. Al'Ahmar must have created a whole devil's landscape for them to live in."

Ardashir glanced into the jungle. "Well, so much for old Bajala." He scratched his beard. "So were they suppressing his magic or what?"

"Perhaps. My guess is that they were able to absorb the Weird he was summoning, feeding on it somehow. Who knows? Whatever the method, the result is the same."

Ardashir shook his head. "Magic is useless. And I'll bet alchemy will be a tough go, too."

Sudah shrugged. "It's still worth a try."

Ardashir raised his eyebrows. "Yeah? You really feel like getting in close quarters with a giant demonic ape?"

Sudah smiled. "Not particularly. Actually, I was thinking we could use alchemy to distract them somehow. Get them away from that big rock thing."

"You mean like a rocket show?"

"Exactly! You have anything that would do the trick?"

Ardashir nodded slowly. "I've got some explosives, yeah. I can head to one end of the island and set a delayed fuse."

Sudah grinned. "Perfect. We'll slip up to the entrance while you're getting ready."

Murguan held up his hands. "Whoa, everyone wait a moment. We're really going for the treasure?"

"Well, why not?" Ardashir asked.

"Because we've already got the man's gold! Why don't we just take off and be happy with what we have?"

Sudah took Murguan by the shoulders. "Murguan. Think for a second. There's got to be at least a hundred pounds of treasure in that dome."

"You don't know that! You don't know if there's anything in there!"

Sudah smiled. "Oh, I know. I feel it in my gut."

Ardashir was grinning. "And I trust her instincts."

Murguan shook his head. "You two lose your heads at the smell of gold. I'm calling a vote."

Sudah nodded. "All right. Who's in favor of looking for the treasure?" All but six of the crew raised their hands. "All opposed?" This time only Murguan raised his hand. Those formerly opposed politely declined to

vote after seeing the overwhelming majority. Murguan sighed and lowered his hand.

Sudah smiled. “The ayes have it.”

Murguan was still shaking his head as he squatted in the bush, sweating with the others, legs cramping and waiting for Ardashir’s distraction.

It came as a series of deep booms that vibrated the air. The reaction it drew from the ape devils was quick: several dashed on their knuckles to the entrance of the dome, snarling, barking and hooting. They searched the air for the source of the sound. Another round of booms drew their attention to a spot on the other side of the dome. They growled to each other, perhaps in some rude language, and the pack began knuckle-running around the dome followed by many others flowing from inside. There were several dozen of the beasts; Sudah guessed there was at least one for every member of her crew.

Just as the last of the devils tromped into the jungle, Ardashir reappeared, reeking of black powder, pouring sweat from the hurried dash back from the island end. His shamshir was out, and he had an eager look in his eye. “Let’s go.”

Sudah led the group carefully to the strange, anus-like entrance. She paused a moment, listening carefully. “Ardashir. Can you scry this thing?”

Ardashir tried for a moment, the Weirdfire sputtering on his fingers. “Goddamnit. This thing soaks up Weird like a sponge.”

“Well, *alea iacta est*. Let’s go.”

The crew followed Sudah in a line, each one stepping carefully, trying to follow her footsteps as best as possible. The inside of the dome was repulsive. It was the same creamy white, streaked with veins and splotches of the unnatural violet. The shape of the tunnel was much like the ribbed organ tract of a living thing. In fact, Sudah was sure by now that the dome was alive. It bore the humid air of a man’s breath, and all

the surfaces were covered in something that passed for mucus, a sticky, half-dry substance that crackled at her boots.

Murguan wrinkled his nose. “The air in here is going to make us all sick,” he whispered.

Ardashir shook his head and whispered back. “Transmission of disease by miasmas is a western folk tale. Disease is a living thing, you can detect it with magic.”

“Oh, yeah? And can you use magic right now to scry for disease?”

Ardashir grinned at him. “I guess we’ll just have to take the chance.”

Murguan shuddered. “We’re going to be coughing our lungs up from some devils’ plague when we get back.”

Sudah stopped to hiss at him. “Oh, lay off it, Murguan.”

Many smaller branches led off from the main... hall, or throat, or colon, or whatever the hell this thing was, but the main path took a gently turning but generally straight direction right into the heart of the dome. They soon came to a fork in the road, where the tunnel split off in each direction into a circular path. At the split of the path was an opening to a huge round chamber: the heart of the thing.

Sudah took a look inside and grimaced. The walls and floor were all covered in thick violet veins, all twitching and pulsing ever so slightly. Ringing the sides were things like giant venus flytraps, huge fanged mouths that hung open, wet with more mysterious fluids. Each bore a sort of throat that trailed along the floor to the center of the chamber.

And in the center of the chamber lay the biggest pile of gold and jewelry they had ever seen.

Behind Sudah, several of the men whooped and were then quickly hushed by the others. Sudah’s crew pressed to see past her shoulders. Ardashir was among them, though his interest was not entirely in the gold: “Where’s our friend?”

Sudah looked around, then stopped at a nearby mouth. “There he is.”

Bajala was already dead. Most of his body was stuffed into one of the mouths. The thing was slowly working at him like a snake crushing its food from the inside with its muscles. Brownish fluids oozed from around his body, his skin already covered with the stuff, his features growing indistinct like he was already half-digested.

Ardashir shook his head. “Can’t say I’ll miss him.”

Sudah sighed, then turned back with a smile. “Well, shall we?”

Several men stepped forward with empty chests and shovels, and Sudah took the lead into the chamber. But as soon as they walked into the central chamber, they realized they had made a mistake. The veins started twitching under their feet, squirming like half-buried snakes. The crew had difficulty keeping their feet. Sudah grimaced with disgust as she walked up to the treasure, but it wasn’t the squirming floor that stopped everyone cold.

There was a stone sitting in front of it, half-buried in the living floor. On it was etched a message, in Ali al’Ahmar’s chicken-scratch scrawl.

TO YOU WHO READS THIS, CONGRATULATIONS. YOU ARE DEAD. ENJOY YOUR ONE LOOK AT THE TREASURE BECAUSE YOU WILL NEVER LIVE TO SPEND IT. I HOPE YOU LIKE MY PETS. I KNOW THEY WILL LIKE YOU.

And then, from a long distance away, they heard a bellowing roar.

“Uh-oh.”

There was a mad scramble for the exit, followed by groans and howls of dismay from the men at the back. Sudah, Ardashir, and Murguan pushed through to see what the holdup was.

The exit, the anus-thing, was closed. Covering it was a tightly clenched membrane. A few good hard stabs from Sudah’s backsword produced not so much as a scratch on the thing.

Ardashir scratched his head. “Well, shit.”

Murguan looked like he was about to chastise his friends, but a look of hope lit his face. “The mouths!” He yanked out a lodestone. “Maybe we can poison the thing!”

Another mad dash into the squirming room, Murguan swore, “You fuckers! Open up!”

The mouths clamped shut as soon as the lodestone came near them. The mouth holding Bajala squeezed his head and arms right off as it closed, and the squishy, half-melted extremities landed with loud wet plops on the veiny floor. Murguan feebly scratched his fingernails on the flesh of the mouths. “Sudah! Use your sword to pry one open!”

Sudah shook her head. “It’s no use. You know that thing would just snap my sword in half.”

Murguan’s hands dropped to his side and he moaned. “We’re all going to die in here! These infernal mouth things are going to digest us alive!”

There was a prickly silence in the chamber. The only sound was the quivering veins, and the clinking of the treasure as it lightly vibrated under the movement.

Sudah frowned. The top of the treasure... it was moving more than the rest... and the throats led under the horde—

Her eyes went wide. “Get your shovels! Clear off the top of the horde!” Everyone stared at her in confusion. “Goddamnit, the treasure’s covering something—we might be able to kill this thing! Move your asses! Clear the top!”

The crew was shocked into quick action by the only vague hope they could grab onto. Sudah led the others in a furious dig at the top, hurling aside pounds of gold and priceless royal jewels in their mad scramble to reach the bottom.

Ardashir was sweating as he shoveled with his hands. “What about the devils? You think this will stop them?”

“Who the fuck knows? Just keep digging!” Sudah threw treasure aside wildly with a flat shovel one-handed, her sword out and ready in her other.

The treasure on top was positively jiggling now, and Sudah swore the veins at the bottom were twitching even more.

From down the hall came a cracking noise—the anus opening up. And it was followed by the pounding of knuckles and feet down the hall.

Something bright and purple and gelatinous peeked out from under the treasure.

The devils were getting closer, angry howls filling the hall. The thing, whatever it was, was clearer now, a membrane covering a jelly-like thing that quivered, Sudah thought, with fear. She grabbed her sidesword in both hands and raised it up.

The first ape-devil burst out of the entrance, clawed hands up, bellowing a roar that filled the chamber.

Sudah plunged her blade down.

The devil’s roar turned into a shriek that was repeated all down the corridor. Sudah jabbed deeper, twisting and turning the blade, and the thing fell to the floor, clutching its chest at the sides of its head. Noxious smelling purple goop spurting from whatever was buried under the treasure and Sudah could feel it deflate under her feet.

At last, the devil’s cries turned to whines, and then to silence as the thing lay limp on the floor, still alive, but seemingly mindless.

Sudah withdrew her sword. “Somebody hand me a rag.” Her request was quickly fulfilled, and she cleaned her hands and blade of the horrible purple crap. She looked up, gazed over her crew, and grinned. “Well, where were we?”

Then something burning hot grazed her shoulder.

She stared at the steaming drip of white flesh. It was followed by another, and another. Everyone was looking up now.

“Oh, SHIT!”

The ceiling was boiling up and melting.

All around them the walls and floor were beginning to melt as well. The ape-devil’s flesh steamed and sloughed off its bones in a sizzling mess that burned one man’s exposed foot.

Nobody needed to say a word. Everyone ran for the exit as one.

The mad dash was impeded by the increasingly melted and caustic floor. Boots stuck as if in mud and were left behind, much to the discomfort of their wearers, who howled as boiling devil’s flesh burned their feet. A huge slough of melted flesh caught two men who were left behind, shrieking in pain as it burned them alive. Sudah stopped once to stab both men through what she hoped were their hearts.

She was the last out, ducking another giant sheet of boiling, burning flesh as she leaped out of the anus and bounded into the jungle. The crew slowed and stopped to watch as the whole devil rock collapsed and melted like foaming bubbles in a pot of boiling-over water when the lid is removed. The fumes were overwhelming, and several of the crew had to sit down from the dizziness. Those who had scalded feet or had bits of the stuff land on exposed skin gingerly wiped and scraped away the still simmering devil flesh, finding exposed and bleeding flesh underneath. Sudah busied herself furiously scrubbing the stuff off her sword before it could harm the steel, a process helped by the stuff’s disturbing propensity to react to the blood on the blade.

When at last the bubbling and hissing stopped they were left with an impenetrable mass of a creamy-white substance that was completely impossible to dig through. The stuff was like some sort of horrible plaque, tougher than rock or even steel.

Murguan nodded slowly. “Ali al’Ahmar was a vindictive man. Even if you managed to beat his trick, he had one last fuck-you up his sleeve.”

He waved at the spot where the treasure probably lay. “Beat me at my own game, will you? To hell with you, I’ll bury you all under devil puke.”

Ardashir was picking at a drop of the stuff that had dribbled onto his silk jack. It wasn’t about to come off without removing a layer or two of silk. “Shit.” He gave up and satisfied himself with removing a bit of the stuff from under his fingernails. “Well, so much for all that.”

Sudah shook her head, grinning. “Wait a minute. To hell with the treasure. We still got the leftovers in Bajala’s cash box, don’t we?”

Murguan smiled at her, giving her an I-told-you-so look. “Indeed we do. And what do you propose we do with it?”

“I say we find a port in the Maladivaina and get drunk ’til it’s all gone.”

There were no nays.

Rev. Joe Kelly gets his divine inspiration from Wild Turkey, heavy metal, and a bunch of old paperbacks and copies of “Street & Smith’s Unknown.” He appears for the first time in Cirsova.



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Halcyon

By CAROLINE FURLONG

An interstellar war has spilled onto the planet Halcyon, where humanity finds an unexpected ally in their fight against an alien race and their sinister masters!

I

The sky overhead was a steel grey, a welcome change of scenery from the black mud of the pit.

Shivering in the rags that the Gorgons had left him, the captive stared at the sky, his mind blank of all thought. Somewhere nearby, he heard a moan. Rock crunched and mud squelched as a Gorgon, its apelike frame obscuring the sky temporarily, passed him by. The alien did not even bother to look down at the prisoner.

Once again, the sky was all that could be seen. The captive stared at it with dull eyes of the same grey shade. How long he had been in the prison pit, he did not know. Nor did he know what sun would break through those clouds or when. Time and place had no meaning; life here consisted of pain, cold, and hunger.

Originally the pit had been a small, bleak ravine of black rock. The surrounding escarpment had been hewn into a fortress set in the crook of two hills. It was an open-air prison where the Gorgons could look down from the walls and laugh at their human captives. It was remote and utterly stark—the perfect place for a prison camp.

Again he heard a groan. It held a female tenor. Some part of his mind stirred, as it occasionally did in this place of blank existence. The prisoners here had not been taken only from the front lines of battle, his weak memory reminded him. Humans did not send their women into battle in this century, but he well knew that there were women in the pit with him and the other soldiers.

The sound of heavy boots creaking reached his ears, and he shivered again. They were coming.

Slowly, he turned his head.

A squad of Gorgons walked along the path that wound past the weak prisoners. They had surrounded one of their Scientists in a protection detail. Tall and thin, the Scientist's head was completely bald. The

Scientists were not of the Gorgon race. What species they were and why the Gorgons followed them, the humans could not discern.

The unit paused beside the captive, and he saw the sharp, narrow eyes of the Scientist sweep over him and onto the other prisoners. Abruptly, the Scientist nodded and gave a sharp order in a strange tongue.

The lead Gorgon grunted a reply and stepped forward. He bent over a figure lying just ahead of the captive. A chain clanked and clattered onto the rocks.

Then the air was torn by a woman's horrified scream. Suddenly roused from his malaise, the captive rolled over onto his back and tried to kick the Gorgon. But his own chained ankle and lack of strength meant that he could not reach. He saw the ape stand up, a stick-thin woman in his arms. She flailed at it but, even if she had been well and strong, she could have done no more harm to it than a fly. She screamed again.

From the ground further up the line, lying against a wall, another woman rose to her knees and lashed out at the Gorgon. Something in her hand flashed and the Gorgon bellowed in pain. Beside him, the captive heard the Scientist laugh.

The angered Gorgon turned and struck the defiant woman. She fell back into the mud with a small cry.

Rage now roared through him like a flood. Grabbing a nearby rock the size of his fist, the captive rolled entirely onto his other side and hurled it at the Scientist.

The alien's low laughter turned to a shriek of pain as the stone clipped the back of its bald head. One Gorgon reached for him as he started to fall, while another stepped forward and began lashing the captive.

The captive was so numb with cold and hunger that he did not bother to cry out as pain lanced up his ribs, then his face. The beating continued until his head rang, and soon he lost consciousness. When next he opened his eyes, rain was pelting his face and a rivulet of water was lapping across his mouth.

He opened his mouth and swallowed several mouthfuls of the water, not caring if it was clean or not. Water in the pit was precious and never lasted.

After a few minutes he realized, to his mild surprise, that the water did not slacken. He also noticed—dimly at first, then with more awareness—that the rain was coming down harder.

Perhaps the water had refreshed him more than he thought, because with this realization came sudden fear. With the rain coming down this hard, there was the possibility that it could flood the pit.

As he thought on this, the rain began to fall harder. Fear surged into him. This rain was unnatural and, more to the point, dangerous. He spurred his weary, battered body into action and looked around. He noticed that up on the walls surrounding the pit, the Gorgons were as distressed as ants when their colony was disturbed. They ran about pell-mell, calling to each other in their roaring language. They had realized the same thing he had then.

Careful not to draw attention to himself, the captive inched toward where the woman the Scientist had chosen had lain earlier. His impression of impending danger gained strength, and he began searching for a way to free himself.

Once he could go no further because of the chain attached to his ankle, he rolled over completely, ignoring the pain that raced up his side from the movement. The taken woman's chain was useless, but what lay near his face caught his attention. There was a spike that the Gorgons used to secure the chain to the floor of the pit.

Had this been the weapon that the other woman had used on the Gorgon? He could not be sure, but that feeling of advancing peril increased, and he reached out and grasped the iron spike.

Getting into a position to reach his chain was a lifetime of agony due to the beating he had received earlier, but after some work, he was able to pry the clasp of his chain open. He kept the improvised tool and looked about him.

The woman who had attacked the Gorgon lay sprawled in the mud not far away. Knowing that any overt movement on his part would attract attention, but still driven to work as speedily as possible by that growing fear, he crept forward until he lay beside her.

As soon as he touched her, she tried to kick him.

He ducked.

“Shh!” he hissed. It was a sound known only to his own kind, one that no alien that humanity knew of could convincingly feign.

She quieted at his admonition but did not relax. He carefully worked at her chain until, with a squeak, he broke it. She pulled her leg toward her as soon as it was free, rubbing her ankle where the clasp had bitten into it. He crawled closer to her.

Though her hair was wild and matted and she was as caked with mud as he, he could see that she was still a beautiful woman. She eyed him as he lay down within an inch of her, wariness in her glance.

He worked the spike free from her chain and held it out to her. “Can you free some of the others, the way I freed you?” he whispered hoarsely. Lack of use had made his voice sound like a rusty gate.

For a long moment, she stared at him, a spark of life stirring in her green eyes. She took the spike from him and nodded once. He nodded back. “Move slowly, they’ll notice if you run.”

Again, her answer was a single nod.

Slowly, he backed up. Mimicking him, she wormed her way forward. Both of them watched the guards, and both were careful to work the other prisoners free as quietly as possible. Soon, many chains lay empty in the mud. Their former wearers moved little, trying to keep up the impression that they were still held, but also trying to think of a way to escape.

The captive looked around, keeping as low to the ground as he could. That inner sense was now screaming that danger was upon them, that

they must run now or be destroyed. Yet he hesitated. To run would gain the guards' attention.

Ahead of him, the woman he had freed darted forward. She stopped beneath an outcropping of rock. Looking back, she motioned him and the others forward.

One at a time, then in twos and finally in threes, the prisoners crept toward the far end of the pit, releasing more captives as they went. It was painfully slow progress.

Suddenly, a Gorgon shout of alarm rang through the ravine. The captive started, believing that they had been discovered—

But the roar of onrushing water told him otherwise. "*Run!*"

As if they had practiced the maneuver, the entire community of captives bolted as a unit. But they were weak, had had little to no food or water for a long time. Despite the impetus of fear, they were soon overtaken by the rushing waters.

II

The first thing the captive noticed was that he was warm and wet. If it were not for the latter, he would have gladly lain in that warmth for a long time. But the feeling of water brought with it unpleasant memories of being tumbled about in a raging river, and so he quickly opened his eyes and jumped up.

To his surprise, it was rather easy, his ribs giving very little protest as he got to his feet to escape the thoughts of drowning. Looking around, he saw that he stood on a river bank near a forest. To the right and left on the near horizon, there were towering blue mountains. Bright, mid-morning sun danced across the water. A warm breeze ruffled his hair.

Curiosity stirred, and he looked into the water at his reflection. The flood had washed most of the mud from him, and he noticed, with some surprise, that while his brown hair was rather too long for his taste, he

was remarkably beardless. Maybe he was too young to grow one, he thought, rubbing his chin. That, or he was of a people not naturally inclined to grow a beard. He was also surprised that the Gorgon's earlier beating had not noticeably damaged his face.

The thought of his whipping brought the recent events at the Gorgon prison pit back to his mind. Abandoning his reflection, he began scanning the river bank. Not far from him lay a woman. He walked over to her. Reaching down, he turned her over to find that she was the same woman he had freed in the pit.

His touch awoke her almost as fast as the water had roused him. She tried to pull away from him and stopped with a small whimper, her hand going to her shoulder. A sharp stone had sliced into it, causing a bloody wound.

"Shh, it's all right!" Reaching for the remnants of his shirt, he tore off a part of one of his sleeves, wet it in the river, and cleaned the cut. Tearing off another piece, he bandaged the wound.

The water had washed most of the mud off of her as well. He now saw that her hair was the color of polished copper and that she would have been a naturally slender woman even if lack of food had not made her so thin.

She had been studying him as he worked. Now she spoke. "The others?"

Her voice, like his, was little more than a croak.

"You're the only one I've seen so far." He tugged the rag tight across the wound, making her hiss in pain. "I'm sorry. We're near a forest that seems to be thickly treed. If we don't find anyone else, I think that we should head for it. Stay as close to the river as we can so that we have water, but so that we can use the woods as cover if we need to."

She nodded, and he helped her to sit up. It was amazing that she had suffered only that one cut. The way they must have been tossed about, she should have been in worse condition.

But by rights, he should have been as well.

Scouring the riverside, they found no one. Not one other ragged captive was to be discovered. Calling out may have proved that they were not alone, but since they could not know how near they were to the enemy, they remained silent. After drinking as much water as they could and wrapping their rags more closely to their bodies, they ventured into the woods.

They said very little as they stumbled through the undergrowth. Mostly they exchanged warnings about treacherous footing. All the while, hunger gnawed at them. By midday, however, they came upon some brush with berries hanging from it. Small, hummingbird-sized avians flittered around these, and the two starved humans, deciding to trust in the creatures' instincts, plundered the bushes for themselves.

The captive had finished his latest handful of berries when his companion spoke. "Who are you?"

He stopped. She watched him, licking her fingers, as much to satisfy her still-great hunger as to clean them of the juice. Although he tried, he could not remember more than a few shadows of his life beyond his days of grubbing about in the pit. "I don't remember."

She slowed her work, one finger still in her mouth. Concern flashed in her green eyes. "I'm not sure I do, either. I think," she paused, looking out at the river in the sunlight, "that I was taken from a science ship, but I can't remember what kind, where it was going, or anything else about it."

"I was on the front lines." He, too, looked toward the river. He could not bring that time into focus, but he had a slim idea that it had been little better in many ways than the pit.

He frowned. One of the little birds flitted past him, a blue streak against the green of the grass. Had there been any sunlight in his life? he wondered briefly.

"Thank you for helping me and for helping the others."

He looked at her. A smile crossed her face, briefly making it even more beautiful, despite the horror of the pit. He shrugged, a small smile coming to his own lips. “Why shouldn’t I have helped?”

“Would many of the others have done it?”

He lapsed into thought. She had a point. He looked back at her. “Would you?”

She paused in picking more berries. Then she nodded, once. “Yes. No one deserved to stay in that hell or to be left for whatever torment the Scientists cook up for those they take.”

It was his turn to nod once in response. On many a night in the pit, unearthly screams had echoed from the Gorgons’ quarters. The shrieks had been terrible, almost demonic in their cries of anguish. They and the other prisoners had all shivered in the mud; rage mixed with horror and fear, wondering what was happening and at the same time praying that they would die before they could be chosen next.

As they had thus cowered and the cries ranged up and down the sonic scale, the Gorgons had laughed and jeered at them. His fist clenched. They would pay for whatever atrocities they had committed against the taken captives.

They passed the rest of their meager lunch in silence. Then, gathering up more of the berries and wrapping them in rags torn from their remaining clothing, they went on again. As night fell, they stopped beneath the trees, an easy distance from the river and finished the small fruit. In the morning, the captive thought drowsily, he could catch a small animal, perhaps even one of those small birds they had earlier encountered. That seemed a shame to him since the little birds were so beautiful and sang so sweetly. Still, neither beauty nor singing would keep him and his companion from starvation. If all they could catch was those birds, then that was what they would have to do.

III

When dawn broke the next morning, the strange sun's shining face was not what woke the two weary escapees. A ground-rattling roar abruptly shook the land as the sun climbed the sky. The man jumped to his feet, looking about for the source of the noise. The woman was not far behind him.

The roar sounded again, some ways inland from where they stood. Trees rocked wildly, and a flock of birds rose from the area, shrieking and cawing.

“What should we do?!” the woman asked.

Without answering, or even really thinking, he dove into the brush. She followed. Brambles clawed at their rags, and branches smacked their already abused bodies. In a few moments, they stood at the edge of a clearing filled with bedlam.

A contingent of Gorgons was there, gyrating out of the reach of a large, scaled creature that they were evidently trying to capture. The creature threw back its head and roared another challenge, the light gleaming off of its silver scales. It was taller and larger than a Terran elephant, scaled from its spiked tail to its serpentine head, which had two antelope-type horns projecting from the back of the skull. The beast flapped its two wings angrily, planted its forelegs on top of one Gorgon and swung its tail with the ease of an unconcerned cat into three more. The spikes protruding from that tail impaled the Gorgons, killing them instantly. Whipping its head to the side, the creature spat a burst of flame at another of the aliens, who ran into the trees and collapsed.

The woman gripped her companion fearfully. “What is it?”

“A Water Drake!”

She looked up at the man. His eyes were fastened on the winged creature, which so resembled the dragons described in old Terran lore as to be indistinguishable from them. There was a bright fascination in his

eyes which she had not seen before. The expression made him handsome and almost wiped away the deprivations of the Gorgon pit.

She turned back to the battle as, with a last roar of rage, the Drake let loose a final blast of flame, finishing the Gorgons who remained standing. It reared onto its hind legs, splaying the fore ones wide in the air. At the same time, it spread its huge wings. This made it appear twice its original size, and the effect was terrifying. As the creature roared its victory, the woman clung harder to her companion, shivering as her ears rang with the sound.

As the echoes rebounded and died away, the man gently touched his companion's arm. Realizing that she had shut her eyes in her fear, she opened them and looked up into his. The light in their clear grey depths made her slacken her hold, though she did not release him.

A rattle of scales made them look back into the clearing. The Water Drake surveyed its handiwork. As it did, the triumph it had previously displayed drained away, to be replaced with what the woman thought was sadness. It looked down at its spiked tail. Several of the spines were soaked with blue Gorgon blood. With drooping head, it gazed at them for a long moment. Then it rolled the spikes in the rent soil to remove the alien blood. When they were sufficiently clean, it laid the spines flat to its tail again. They fit so snugly against its scales that they might never have been there.

Now the Drake turned toward the river. And in doing so, it caught sight of them!

The woman gasped as the Drake pulled back its head, surprise in its round blue eyes. Suddenly, though she wanted to run, her body would not obey her command. A strangled noise in her companion's throat led her to guess that he was similarly restricted.

The Drake held them in its gaze, eyes burning with a demand she resisted meeting with all her will. Still it pressed her, and her strength wavered...

Behind them she heard a shrill whistling sound, growing louder by the minute. Then, through the trees, from the direction of the river, came a whirling orb of water.

The sphere spun directly into the clawed foretalon the Drake stretched out to it. Holding the globe beneath its snout, the Drake continued to eye them.

Slowly, the woman's eyes were drawn to the spinning orb. At first she resisted, but it was no use; her body was too weak to reinforce her will any longer.

What she saw reflected in the strange ball was her own past: first as a happy girl in the farm fields of Spica's one habitable world, then as a student in university, and next as a biologist. Finally—and most painfully—she saw her capture and imprisonment on this strange world replayed in detail. All the while, she was aware that the Drake saw what passed through the orb as well.

Once finished with her, the Drake turned its eyes on her companion. Still unable to move, she somehow sensed that he also fought from revealing himself to the creature and likewise lost to the other's stronger will. She saw mere flashes of his history in the orb: a boy hunting amid high desert mesas, a medic in the stellar navy. Then the ball became dark, and she guessed that, until their combined escape, he had no recollection of what had passed in his life before he was taken to the pit.

So...

She felt her eyes widen. Though she had heard the voice, a male voice, it had not issued from the Drake's mouth. It had echoed within her mind.

So, the enemy does THIS to sentient beings! And on OUR world!

The Drake's deadly tail lashed against the ground, further dismembering one of the fallen Gorgons. The sphere still spinning above its claw slowed, then collapsed, spraying the ground with sparkling drops of water.

The Queen must know of this. The Drake seemed to be thinking to himself more than them now. Then his eyes, which had slit pupils like a cat's, came to rest on the two humans again. Something moved in them, and sudden warmth touched the minds of both humans. Sighing deeply, they realized that they could move again.

Come, said the Drake. *Your testimony will be needed. And you are in sore need of rest.*

Whether some part of his will still commanded them or whether the compassion that had just seeped into their minds from him touched them, neither could say. They just meekly followed the Drake back to the riverbank.

Once there, he stopped and focused on some point in the middle of the running water. It began to bubble and roil. Then the water rose slowly skyward like a fountain.

The water coalesced and grew round until it faced them with the smoothness of a mirror on a wall. It was large enough to accommodate not only the two humans but the Drake as well. Inside it, they saw, not a reflection of themselves, but a meadow filled with green grass and colorful flowers.

In hindsight, she thought they should have asked where they were going. Perhaps, if they had not been so utterly fatigued, they would have. But their exhaustion was so all-consuming that they merely did as they were bid when the Drake wordlessly suggested that they cross the threshold of that portal into a twilight sanctuary.

Under the Drake's direction, they ascended a small rise crowned by a copse of trees. There, fatigue overcame them and they lay down side by side beneath the trees. The last thing she saw before sleep took her was the Drake seating himself nearby, his eyes alert and his face like stone.

A bright light woke him. He rolled his head to avoid the feeling of blindness. He was comfortable, warm, and he did not want to move much.

Something small, though, scratched lightly at his cheek. He rolled his head away again, but this brought it back into the light. He turned away for the third time and, growing annoyed, opened his eyes.

A small mammal of Chihuahuan proportions crouched before him. It had blue eyes that were nearly too large for its head. Its pink tongue lolled out of its mouth, and its ears, which were equally too large in proportion to its tennis ball head, perked up when it found him awake. “Do you mind?” he asked it, half-irritated by the creature’s waking him and half-amused by its odd appearance.

The creature barked. The sound was like a high-pitched voice crying out *Pip! Pip!* It bounced to its feet and charged away into a pile of clothes, vanishing into the folds of a shirt-like garment. A moment later it sat up, one sleeve lying across its head between its ludicrously large ears. *Pip! Pip!*, it cried, wagging a straw-thin tail.

“You want me to get changed, is that it?” he asked, laughing. Standing up, he noticed a pool nearby. Shedding his rags, he cleaned off and put on the clothes, where the animal remained until he came for them.

As he changed, the memory came back to him. But this time it came back far stronger and clearer than it had before. He remembered the escape from the pit, the conversation by the river, the Drake’s battle in the clearing, and the strange interrogation to which he and his companion had been subjected.

He frowned when he lost track of what had happened after entering the portal. The rest of that was a blur of soothing warmth and rest. He must have eaten during that time, but he could not remember if he had for certain. Also, he remembered someone of loosely Drake proportions checking on him from time to time, asking him questions that he no longer recalled. If he had answered them, he could not recall that either.

In a sense, this was disturbing to him. But whatever calming spells this place held continued to grip him. He finished tugging on the shirt, which fit comfortably, and the uneasy realizations flitted to the back of his mind.

Looking at his reflection in the pool once again, he studied himself.

His hair was still too long, and he had, now of all times, a slight amount of stubble on his chin. The shirt and leggings reminded him of the hunting clothes he had known in his youth and felt as if they were made of leather, but they may have been made of something else. They were a deep brown, which would give him an advantage in that he could easily blend in with the woodland surroundings, should he be cautious enough. But just as he thought of that, he felt a vague assurance that he would not need to do that in this place.

His ribs, he noted, no longer pained him. He appeared to have lost the half-starved look he knew he had carried with him from the pit as well. That confirmed that he had eaten during his time in this paradise.

Bending down on one knee, he stroked the small mammal between its huge ears while it curiously sniffed his new boots. "Albert Martin, Corpsman. Assigned to the frigate *Hornet*," he murmured. He took a deep breath then let it out slowly as he realized that his memory had come back in full. "Doesn't take much to make a man forget, does it, Pip?"

The animal made a purring noise in the back of its throat and pushed its head against his hand, forgetting his boots for the moment. Apparently, it liked and accepted the moniker of Pip. And it seemed to enjoy the affection, on top of that. Corpsman Albert Martin went from rubbing its head to scratching its chin. The purring increased. "Can you take me to see my friend?"

Pip pulled back and barked. Turning, it trotted off confidently, wagging its tail in high spirits. It seemed sure that he would follow it. Albert Martin rose and followed.

He had awoken in a glade of trees that fell away on either side into an open field. A small stream raced by his path. Rising to his left was a small knoll. More of those little indigo birds he and his companion had encountered earlier darted through the trees as he passed. Many of the trees were in bloom and had fruit hanging from them.

As he picked a round, apple-shaped fruit from one of the trees, Martin's attention turned upward. He paused. The sun shone above this small slice of paradise. But it was distorted—by water!

Looking around, he realized that the surrounding landscape, including the knoll, was beneath the surface of what may have been a lake, perhaps even a sea or an ocean. Ahead of him, the field of grass that spread out from the glade ran on until it met some invisible wall. Beyond that unseen barrier was a series of ravines made of white rock and sand that twisted away into the horizon. Most of them were dark, but here and there sunlight dappled the rock, showing its true color. They were fairly deep underwater, it would seem.

What kept the water back, he was not sure. Only when he saw a large aquatic creature, physically similar to a humpback whale, swimming by a mere hundred yards ahead of him accidentally hit its tail on some invisible, hard substance, could he form a theory.

This island, he mused, must have been something like his people's space stations, but situated beneath water instead of in the vacuum of space. The Drakes had found some substance which resembled glass but which had to be much stronger to cover this space, and then grown the vegetation which he had just been admiring on the dome-freed land.

Idly, he bit into the fruit he had picked while he thought, finding it tasted almost like a Terran pear. Pip barked at him impatiently, and he started walking again.

As he walked behind his small guide, he heard a sound that resembled a hundred small bells ringing in unison rise into the air. A voice, sweet and clear, matched the sound with words he recognized as coming from a fellow human. Pip, who had gone silent when the first sound rose out of

the air, broke into a run, and Martin jogged to keep up with him, dropping the fruit as he rounded the knoll.

As Pip disappeared around the small hill, Martin slowed his pace. Coming around carefully, he did not at all disturb the two he saw before him.

Stretched out on the grass a few yards away lay a Water Wyvern, a creature related to the Water Drakes of this world. Her red-purple scales flashed in the distorted sunlight. She was easily the match of any great bear in size, though he well knew that she could have outmatched one in strength. Her great green eyes, with the same slit pupils as the Drake's, were on the much smaller figure who sat cross-legged before her.

It was his fellow prisoner, but she was greatly changed. At first, he could not help but wonder if he had stumbled on some picture from a fairy tale.

Her copper hair held back in a braid and wearing a white dress that resembled silk, but may here have been something else entirely, she looked every inch as if she were an elf queen out of story. Life in the pit may never have touched her; she sat so at her ease, white and whole. Her face was lit with happiness as she sang with the Wyvern in a language Martin did not recognize, though he doubted that it was either Wyvern or Drake.

But as quickly as the duet had begun, so did it spiral to its end. When they had finished, silence reigned. It was the silence, he thought abruptly, of healing.

The Wyvern's eyes turned to him as the thought occurred to him. He believed he read in her eyes that she had heard his thought somehow—and approved of it.

Pip's high, ecstatic barks then shattered the silence, and the Wyvern broke their united gaze. Martin's traveling companion turned and, with a small cry, jumped to her feet.

He nodded to her and then made a small bow to the Wyvern. “To the mistress of this wonderland, I give greeting and thanks for this rest from our trials.” He had long practiced those words as a boy, in different forms, to his uncle’s never-ending delight.

The Wyvern dipped her head in acknowledgment of his salutation. “Gratitude is unnecessary, Albert Martin, kinsman of the wanderer Thaddeus Martin. You have lain here for a relatively small amount of time—a week by your people’s reckoning. Despite that, you have regained your strength quickly. Forgive our not waking you sooner, but Siobhan and I lost track of time.”

A smile split his lips. “After many hours of pain, it was a welcome respite. But you speak my tongue.”

The Wyvern dipped her head again, her eyes gleaming brightly. “I am called Sarken, Healer, and I was among those who held counsel with your kinsman before he left. We had not expected to see humans again for some time yet, but we still practiced your language, for the time when you would return. We did not look for you to come in the chains of *Yeggesh*, barbarians, however.”

“Nor did we.”

She nodded. Then she raised her head, her eyes becoming unfocused. When they refocused, she raised herself to her feet and spread her wings. “Wait here. Your rescuer has arrived, and I must speak with him.” With that, she took off and glided over the knoll, dipping out of sight when she had passed over it.

He looked at Siobhan. She looked back at him shyly. “I was singing in Gaelic, my people’s language. Normally Coalition citizens do not discuss their ancestral homes, but on Connaught, the world of Spica, we spoke that ancient tongue.”

He smiled at her. “At New Mesa, we often recalled our history in America. I can understand.”

Siobhan tilted her head, studying him closely. “She said that you had kin who came to this world before the Gorgon War.”

Martin nodded. “My uncle was a System Surveyor. When my father died, he came back to live with my mother and me on New Mesa.” Martin looked about, trying to take in the scene all at once. “This world—he called it Halcyon—was the last one he charted. Although colonizing worlds that are already inhabited by sentient life is against the law, he thought that he could at least get a science crew based here.”

“And he was hoping to be part of that crew?”

Martin looked back at her and smiled. She smiled as well. He nodded, his eyes again roving over the edenic space. “He learned that the Water Drakes and Wyverns need water to survive. They can live on land for a few hours, sometimes days if they’re near a river. But there was a lot that neither race would tell him.” He gestured to the invisible wall on their right, the wall that kept the ocean back, as an example. “But what he did see, he wanted to know more of. I think they didn’t tell him a lot because they weren’t sure they could explain it in a way that he and the other Surveyors would understand.”

“I can’t blame them.” She laughed and threw her braid to one side. “It would take years, perhaps a lifetime, to understand this one—what did you call it—wonderland? If they have this *one*,” she smiled, “how many others do they have?”

V

“M any.”

The two humans turned. Walking up from behind them was the same silver Drake they had met nearly a week before. The air stirred as Sarken landed beside him, folding her wings neatly to her sides. In comparison to him, she appeared shrunken, somehow smaller than before.

But at the same time, one could see that she was older, perhaps wiser than the Drake she stood beside. “As Corpsman Albert Martin has told you, Siobhan Kelly,” the Drake went on, “my race needs water to survive. Because of that,” he paused, groping for words in their language that would accurately describe his species’ gifts. “Because of that, we have some—control over it. And we can use it to focus, or enhance, other talents we possess.”

“Such as telepathy,” Siobhan said, fingering a fold in her dress. But her eyes were on the Drake.

The Drake bowed his head. “I ask pardon for that intrusion. My kind does not do it lightly, but I was still in the throes of battle-rage.”

“Intrusion or no, it was, I believe, more beneficial than harmful,” Martin returned, tilting his head to one side and momentarily closing his eyes in the salute of one equal to another, for he judged that he and this Drake would be accounted as such by their species. “In the hands of the *Yeggesh*,” he did his best to pronounce the word as Sarken had moments ago and managed it—barely—“one can forget oneself, for they treat others of sentience as though they had none. Such management over a long period of time...” His expression darkened for a moment. “It is hard to overcome quickly in dangerous situations, when it may be necessary.”

The Drake nodded. “Indeed.”

Sarken now spoke, her demeanor sober. “Others from the prison camp have been found and taken to a separate place. Many were the worse for their capture, in both body and mind, and a few have only just begun to truly recover.”

“Why were they taken elsewhere?” asked Siobhan.

“My skills are many and great,” Sarken answered. “But I am one *mallonan*, one matron, as you would say. I cannot focus on so many who have been so hurt in the necessary amount of time to heal them properly. Thus they were given to the care of others while I focused on you.”

Martin nodded. “For that, we are in your debt. Can you tell us of what passes at the Gorgon camp?”

The Drake’s eyes flashed, and his talons dug into the soil. Sarken remained immobile, but in her eyes moved sorrow.

“The flood from which you escaped was our doing,” the Drake explained slowly. “We had learned of these *Yeggesh* but not that they held captive humans. When they killed and desecrated the body of one of our scouts, we decided to retaliate. Had we known they held your people, we would have been more careful, planned for your rescue and their destruction at the same time, but we did not.

“As it is, we thought to destroy their citadel, but it has held better than we wished. It still stands.”

“But...you knew the Gorgons were here before the scout was killed.” Siobhan stared at him, her fingers tightening on her skirt. Likewise, Martin felt his hands clenching at his sides. A nasty suspicion slithered into the back of his mind, reinforced by memories of the pit and stories he now recalled being whispered among the men at the front lines of the war.

It was Sarken who answered her. “We were unaware of the Gorgons, as you name these *Yeggesh*, for some time. No starship had been observed near any of our domiciles. But almost a year ago, our scouts on a foray into the mainland encountered...creatures we knew were not of our world. They were unlike the Gorgons and Scientists; we found them, wandering and maddened, in the wilderness.”

“Things that were against nature,” the Drake added, his tail snapping as it swished from side to side in anger.

Martin turned to Siobhan and saw her eyes on him. Horror and rage warred in her green eyes, but rising between the two was also a great sadness. “Experiments of the Scientists, doubtless ‘made’ from among the captives in the pit.” The words came from between his teeth, and he barely stayed the urge to spit in anger.

Sarken closed her eyes, her whole posture emanating sadness. Martin felt a small body press against his leg. Looking down, he saw Pip leaning against him, shivering and whimpering.

“We sought out the place where these had come from,” the Drake went on, his anger subsiding somewhat. His tail scraped the ground, however, showing that the feeling was still on him. “When we discovered the camp of *Yeggesh*, we raised a storm, and that enlarged the river that runs past the citadel. We hoped that we could bury the—,” he used another word from his own language, a word that was impossible for any human to imitate. Pondering the tone with which it was used, Marin decided it was not a word usually acceptable in polite company. “But we failed.”

“No.” Martin shook his head. “The Gorgons may still hold the pit, but they are without prisoners, whereas you,” he met the Drake’s gaze squarely, “have gained allies.”

Sarken opened her eyes and looked at him. Her glance was piercing, but Martin turned his head and held her gaze. The Gorgons had ravaged members of his race, all but murdered them, if what the Drake had said and what the rumors he remembered were true. He would face the Gorgons and, more importantly, the Scientists they answered to, and make them pay for their crimes.

Slowly, the Wyvern nodded her approval. “But you are one, Healer,” she admonished him. “And you cannot have the help of Siobhan in this matter. You are given to battle as well as healing, but her talent is seeing those that are lost, and with us she must remain. Otherwise, those that are now broken may not be fully healed.”

He nodded. Sarken knew that he had no intention of taking Siobhan into battle, out of long-held customs. But she had something else to say, or so he suspected.

“I don’t think I quite understand,” Siobhan said, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“There are a few among the rescued who should be ready for battle soon,” the Drake began.

“No,” Siobhan stopped him with an upraised hand. “I do not understand what Sarken means about me, or why she adds such meaning to the word ‘healer.’ You are a corpsman,” she added, turning to Martin, “but she makes it sound as if there is something more to it than that.”

“There may be.” He did not look at her but instead looked back at Sarken.

The Wyvern smiled. “You say I confuse you, Siobhan? But do you not already feel the difference?”

“Our water has many natural properties in it that yours appears to lack,” she went on, glancing at the ocean outside her domed area. “When you drank it, your bodies absorbed some of those properties. And it would appear that they have changed you. Your shoulder was injured in the flood, yet after he bound it, you noticed no pain from it. Is that not so?”

Siobhan studied the grass, her hand knotted into the skirt of her dress. Slowly, she nodded.

“And in your captivity, Albert Martin,” Sarken turned back to him, “your body had been abused. Yet by the time you reached my home, many of the injuries had already vanished.”

Martin nodded, letting his eyes wander over the protected landscape. But he no longer saw it. “I wondered at that, and not long ago, I deduced that something had changed. That somehow, I could heal myself physically from injuries I had sustained, though it would take longer for some than others to be repaired.”

“Yes.” Sarken nodded. “But you did not suspect that this gift could be used on those in close proximity to you, such as Siobhan when you traveled together along the riverside.”

“And you,” Martin said, finally turning to Siobhan. Her green eyes were shadowed with the realization of what Sarken had said, and her hand had all but disappeared beneath the folds of her skirt. “When we

spoke first,” his glance flicked to the silent Drake, “your will to fight was stronger than mine, and you fought the longer of the two of us.”

Slowly, Siobhan nodded.

“Each of you has received a great gift, one that must be cultured and controlled,” Sarken said and watched them, her eyes as eager as a teacher who watches and waits for apt children to come to her for guidance. “Or the gifts will lead to destruction. The silence of my home,” she turned back to Martin, “you called it a healing silence. And so it is. I have imbued everything here—the trees, their fruits, the water, even the very air—with what is necessary for the restoration of the body and, to some degree, the mind. Only a healer would recognize that and respond to it as you did.”

“Yet Siobhan also can heal.” He saw her glance at him, the knotted hand at her side relaxing slightly, becoming visible again.

“Yes,” Sarken nodded eagerly. “But while your gift heals the body, hers heals the mind, if she so directs it. For any gift misused easily becomes a weapon, and gifts of healing so turned are the worst among these wastes.”

By now, Siobhan’s hand had further relaxed, but she still had not released her dress. Gently, Martin took her hand away from it into his own. She looked at him, her eyes wondering, but he had turned away toward the Wyvern and Drake.

“We are in your debt for this,” he repeated. “But time grows short, and the Gorgons still roam your world. More importantly, so do their masters. You spoke of our giving witness against the barbarians. When do we go to do that?” he asked.

“Immediately,” the Drake answered.

“Then before we leave, I would know your name.”

The Drake nodded solemnly. “I am Rafewing, of the line of Starwalker.”

Martin's eyebrow rose slightly. "That, when my kinsman was here," he said slowly, "was the Queen's line."

"And so it remains," Rafewing replied.

Martin nodded. Then he straightened and, taking Siobhan with him, followed Rafewing around the knoll, Pip once again trotting at his heels.

VI

The portals, Martin decided, were wholly strange. He sensed nothing when traveling through one except the idea of motion, and that, too, was dulled somehow. When they arrived at the Council's chamber, Rafewing stopped and addressed them.

"Few Councilors will use your tongue, and there are those who do not wish to take action against the *Yeggesh*." He paused. "They believe the... aliens' presence to be a storm we can weather, but many disagree. Without evidence, however, they cannot force action against the wishes of the rest."

Siobhan and Martin nodded. The situation of politics was much the same among any sapient species; not all could agree on an action that their race should take, though their reasons for bickering were often less than noble.

"When they speak, therefore," Rafewing continued, "they will speak as I did earlier, with their minds. To give testimony, you must remember what has passed in the camp so that they may see it. I will be standing with you since it was I who brought you here.

"Also, and most importantly," Rafewing looked Martin in the eye, "the Queen will be presiding over this Council. She will be at its center but set back from the other Councilors. Above all, do not raise your eyes to the center of the Council table. *No one* may look upon the Queen, except by her express leave."

"We understand."

Rafewing nodded and then turned in the direction of a small, white dome that stood in the middle of the garden. It was the first structure that they had seen, and so they studied it carefully. The material the Drakes had used appeared to be opaque, so that the dome seemed whitewashed. Neither human could detect a door.

The riddle was answered when, as soon as they were within twelve yards of the dome, a part of it opened, like an iris, to allow them to enter.

For a moment, both humans paused. Then, steeling themselves for what was to come, they walked slowly into the dome. Once inside, they heard the door whisper and click shut behind them.

The interior of the dome was high-ceilinged and brightly lit. Whether this was some trick of the Drakes' skill or the simple fact that the whiteness of the walls held a light of its own, neither knew. Even from the inside, the walls were opaque. Whatever passed outside could thus not be seen, and whatever happened inside could not be viewed from without.

Ahead of them was set a large table, or what would have been a table to humans. Here it may not have been the same. It was shaped in a half-circle, and seated side-by-side along each arm were several Drakes and two Wyverns. Another entered and sat beside the other two.

It was Sarken.

What stood at the head of the great table, neither human saw, remembering Rafewing's warning. But they were both under the impression that there was little room between that part of the table and the wall behind; the seat there was empty save for the near blinding brightness of the white wall it pressed against.

Near this seat, a green-scaled Drake with grey whiskers on his snout and a long, serpentine body rose to his feet. Martin recognized him as a Water Lung, one of the Drakes that inhabited the eastern waters of Halcyon. His uncle had dubbed this branch of the species as Lungs, after the Chinese dragons in Terran stories.

The Council is in session. Scout Rafewing, tell us of how you came to bring these humans to our domain, the Lung thought.

Rafewing bowed his head and raised it in acknowledgment of the order. In as much detail as he could, he retold the tale of his battle in the glen and of his rescue of the two humans who now stood beside him. Both humans sensed him hesitate when describing how he had interrogated them, but otherwise his delivery did not waver.

When Rafewing finished, there was a brief silence. Then, across the table from the green Lung, another rattled his blue scales. *This is but one camp. We have taken our payment for the lost scout Trakor. What need have we to further trouble ourselves with these Yeggesh?*

What need?! One of the Wyverns, a young female with purple scales, nearly shouted. Have you no honor or compassion, Sri-La? Mykil and I have tended other humans rescued from this camp. These two who stand before the Council, she gestured to Martin and Siobhan with one wing, stand here only because of mallonan Sarken's skill. The ones at the Healing Glen have been so abused they are barely more than animals of the land! Only recently did any show sign of thought and understanding. You would doom MORE of these sapient beings to THAT abominable fate?!

Peace, Thaliana, Sarken interjected calmly. The younger Wyvern had drawn breath to continue, but she immediately subsided at Sarken's words. However, Sri-La, the young one is correct. If we do not stop the Yeggesh here and now, when will we take action against them? You know what they did to Trakor's body, how they defiled it. You know what they have done to LIVING members of this race. If we stand by and do nothing, then we are aiding and abetting such atrocities. Sarken's eyes were fixed on the blue Lung, who squirmed under her intense scrutiny.

And, a golden-armored Drake along that side of the table put in hotly, what will these Yeggesh do when they have exhausted their interest in humans? We see what they do to these. We saw what they did to Trakor. When they are done heaping misery upon mankind, what will they force on US? Have you, Yerdal, Ithain, and Ondru, not considered that!?

A grey-scaled Drake, farther down the line from the green Lung, rose to his feet. Smoke shot from his nostrils and roiled across the tabletop. *You dare to insult members of this Council, Purndrang, son of Halefire?*

What insult has he given, Councilor Ondru? Rafewing broke in. He put one foot forward and lowered his head to near-level with the humans'. His wings lifted slightly, and fire lit his eyes. *He speaks truth. Trakor was nothing to these Yeggesh. They had no reason to kill him, since Trakor would give them none, with his back to them as he refreshed himself in the Flowing River. Yet they attacked and killed him, before tearing at his remains to take some and study them. Those who break a thing—or a sapient being—to understand its function are of the worst darkness. No matter the distaste one may have for battle, such vermin MUST be eradicated!*

Perhaps you are too close to this subject, scout Rafewing, suggested another Drake, a female with rosy scales the shade of clouds at dawn. *Trakor was a fellow scout, and you knew him from your days as a hatchling. Doubtless, his death was a blow to us all, but to you more than the rest.*

Ondru calmed as she spoke and settled back into his seat. There was an air of smug triumph in the motion that filled Martin with distaste. *Yes, Ithain, you are right. It would seem that scout Rafewing is not the proper choice for a guardian of the humans in these proceedings. The death of Trakor has upset him too much. It may be that we should remove him altogether from the testimonies.*

Rafewing's reaction was hot and fast. His pupils shrank to thin slits, his wings extended, and he opened his mouth in preparation for a roar.

Enough!

The green Lung's voice was not raised, but his tone choked the oncoming battle at once. Rafewing visibly struggled to hold his temper at bay; he reclosed his wings and mouth, but the fire of anger still smoldered in his eyes. Ondru flinched at the Lung's tone of voice and studied the tabletop closely.

Councilor Ondru, scout Rafewing is not here to answer for his views nor his personal ties. He is here to give testimony, as are the humans. The green

Lung glared balefully at his fellow councilor for a moment before raising himself to a half stand. He slammed his foreclaws heavily to the tabletop; the resulting boom brought all attention to him, with several Drake and Wyvern eyes glancing off of the seat behind him and to his left. *I, Jang-Yu, Councilor for the Inner Realms of the east, call on the humans Albert Martin and Siobhan Kelly to testify to the Council about their imprisonment.*

Martin glanced at Siobhan. She gave him a minute nod. Stepping forward, he recalled all he could of his imprisonment and the events following it, trying to relive the memories as much as he saw them. In the clearing where Rafewing had questioned him, the Drake's telepathy had so awakened his senses that he felt he was reliving his past at light speed.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Jang-Yu nodded to him. *Thank you, Albert Martin. Step forward, Siobhan Kelly.*

Martin backed up as she came forward. How she fared with her testimony, he could not tell, and the time seemed interminable until she was also thanked and allowed to step back. She appeared somewhat paler than before, and Martin longed to ask her how she felt. But the silence that followed her release was not to be broken by words. Still, a glance from her assured him that, though she was perhaps tired, she was well.

Do you still doubt, fellow Councilors, the male Wyvern, who had sage green scales, asked, that these Yeggesh must be destroyed?

The Councilors were silent. Siobhan reached out and brushed Martin's hand lightly with her own. *They fear! They do not wish to fight, but they cannot argue any longer with the other Councilors. They have the necessary cause for battle!*

Martin glanced at her, knowing it was her voice in his mind. He studied the postures of the assembled Drakes and Wyverns to see if they had heard her. It did not appear so. Most of the Drakes sat rigidly, but they stared at the four Councilors who would not agree to an attack.

They looked at neither Martin nor Siobhan. For their part, the four reluctant Councilors kept glancing from side to side, like trapped animals seeking a way of escape and finding none.

Yet trapped animals will still turn and fight before surrendering. Sri-La had just taken a breath, perhaps to spearhead another debate, when a melodic voice broke the silence:

It is enough. The Council will take a recess. When I summon you back, we will finish this.

Martin realized with a start that the voice belonged to the Drake Queen!

The other Councilors seemed nearly as surprised, save for Sarken, Mykil, and Jang-Yu, who left their places immediately and silently walked away. Thaliana followed them closely, as did Purndrang. The others did not tarry either, but Ondru and Sri-La walked far more stiffly than was necessary, as did Ithain and another Drake with scales so blue they were almost black.

Rafewing did not move but stood as if made from stone. Following his lead, both humans remained where they were as other iris doors opened and shut in a cascade of whispers ended by definitive clicks.

So...

Martin felt a tingle race up his spine. His uncle had said that few ever saw the Queen of the Water Drakes, let alone spoke to her. But here he was, and she was speaking to him, Siobhan, and Rafewing. *But to humans, outworlders...!*

So the Council will not act to help a species that they were willing, not so long ago, to strike an alliance with. For, Albert Martin, your kinsman did indeed propose an alliance before the coming of the Gorgons. I saw him but once. She paused as he started in shock. His uncle had never told him that he had had an audience with the Drake Queen. Nor had he mentioned that an alliance could be sought between their two races. *Do*

not be surprised, she admonished, amused. Few are allowed to tell that they have had words from or with me and my predecessors. It is our way.

But we stray from the path. He was a man who thirsted after knowledge, your kinsman. And as it thrills Sarken, it also pleases me greatly.

She paused to let her words sink in. Yet he was not wayward in his seeking, as the Gorgons' masters are. He was willing to leave nature as it was, and I was much pleased when he would admit that there were things he did not and could not know. Such seekers are rare and should be treasured by all. If all sought so, there would be less sorrow in the universe, of that I am sure.

The Queen sighed. Ondru is a seeker after power, as is Ithain. Yendral merely likes to stir the pot, as you say. Sri-La wishes after fame and flattery. Fools, they are, yet I pity them and allow them to remain on the Council in hopes that they will see their error and change.

But we must speak of other things now, she said briskly. Sarken and Mykil are certain that within the next two days you will have a force of your kind with which to stop the Gorgons. The number of near-ready warriors is but twenty, however. Can it be done?

Martin bowed low. "It can be done, Your Majesty, with careful leadership and favorable winds of fortune."

So... And can the forces of Halefire and my son Elan fight beside these twenty, Scout?

Rafewing bowed. "It can be done, O Queen, but..." The young Drake hesitated.

Speak your mind, grandson, the Queen ordered, her voice kind.

*Rafewing bowed lower still. "But I believe the way to win this battle is with the help of our allies. Beside us, they could be injured. But—*astride* us, if I may be so bold, they would be safer and have a greater advantage over the Gorgons."*

There was a long pause. Martin looked at the Drake standing beside him from the corner of his eye in awe. There were many stories from his native world of humans mounted on dragons, some more enjoyable than others. Perhaps Rafewing knew that the human beside him, after learning of the Water Drakes, had thoroughly mired himself in those books. Dreams he had had, as a young boy, of riding a Drake. They were dreams that had faded but never really left him as he grew and war raged across the galaxy.

And now, here was a Drake who proposed to make those dreams come true! The idea might even have come from his interrogation, for all that Martin knew.

So there are still seekers among my line. The Queen laughed. She seemed genuinely amused. We are a proud people, but let us not now be too proud. As you say, so it shall be, Rafewing, son of my daughter Uthmiel. Let the humans ride our soldiers, thereby bringing the alliance at last to fruition. Long have I wanted such an end to it!

Now, before I summon back the Council, I give you this command. Look at me!

Before he had time to think, Martin looked up. Too late his mind recalled the warning Rafewing had given before they entered the Council chamber. The Queen's tone had been too commanding to resist.

For a moment, Martin saw nothing but a blank, white wall. Then she moved, and he saw her at last.

The Queen was nearly impossible to distinguish from the wall behind her. She was far larger than Rafewing, even with her wings folded neatly along her spine. Like him, antelope-type spikes protruded from the back of her skull. Despite her regal appearance, one could see that she was much older than any Drake they had yet encountered, though perhaps she was only a little older than Jang-Yu.

But her eyes were what caught and held his attention. Bright blue with golden highlights, they laughed merrily at the startlement he felt. *Such is the way of my line! Our white scales make it impossible to visit the*

surface in the day, else we be scorched by the sun. Yet Starwalker, my ancestor, discovered that at night we could fly without fear. Rarely have I done that, especially of late, since I am old now and danger flies both afar and near. But, my friends, I would see the stars again. Therefore I charge you, soldiers both, to rid our world of these Gorgons and their dark Scientists, together. You are the first in this alliance, and all others shall follow your example.

As for you... The Queen now turned her eyes on Siobhan. I charge you to aid Sarken and the other Mallonans and Tonolins, as well as their students, to help those of your kind who are in such a desperate need of it. For they should see the stars again themselves; this I will not deny them. This too shall be a part of our alliance, and if your customs someday allow you to ride beside your males, let it be so.

Now let your eyes drop, for I must recall the Council and tell them my decision. They must not know what has passed between us, though some may guess the honor you have received.

Again, Martin did as he was bid without thought. The next instant, a roar shook the dome as the Queen recalled her Councilors to give them her pronouncement.

The closing of that Council passed Martin in a blur as he thought on the Queen's words. Humbly, he, Siobhan, and Rafewing bowed and left when bid.

VII

The next two days were a flurry of activity. Not only did Martin have to meet with the recovering soldiers to decide their command structure and plan of attack, but he also had to find them weapons. The Drakes had their talons, teeth, fire breath, and spiked tails, but no human, however fit and strong he was, had ever withstood a Gorgon in barehanded combat.

It was quickly discovered that, though the Drakes could fashion clothes for their new allies, the intricacies of rifles and pistols were beyond their current skill to manufacture, especially in a size that humans could manage. When the Drakes showed them a gun that they had built, it was little better than a sixteenth-century cannon. And it was nearly the same size as Rafewing, leaving the humans with nothing they could handle easily and efficiently in a fight.

But Martin and a fellow soldier, Frederic Vincent, decided that such a machine should not be wasted. Because the Drakes could fire it, they suggested that two Drakes man the cannon as a fixed weapon in the attack. That way, when the Lungs unleashed the river, they would have a better chance of reducing the Gorgon camp to rubble.

Since man-sized guns were out of the question, Vincent suggested they return to older human tools of war. "I'm a fair hand with any blade," he admitted cheerfully. "And if some of our friends here haven't got that experience and need instructions on how to use one, I'd be happy to show 'em."

"I have some skill with crossbows," another, older soldier named Hal Kingsley put in. "They're easy enough to operate, and I could certainly help to build them."

"Has anyone here ever used an actual bow?" asked Martin.

Two hands rose in answer. Martin nodded, then turned to Rafewing. "You know what a bow looks like, how it is built, correct?"

"Yes." Doubtless, Rafewing had learned of the bow when he scanned his mind, for Martin had used a bow during his hunts through the desert surrounding his New Mesa home while a boy. But the corpsman gave the young scout no time to dwell on the memory of his interrogation. "Then what we need is some of the strongest but most supple wood that you can get. The arrow shafts have to be made of similar wood. Gorgons have thick skin, and we don't want the shafts to break when the arrows strike their targets. You can handle the arrowheads, I'm sure."

"Indeed. And the string?"

“Leave that to me,” Martin replied.

Later that day, he met Siobhan at Sarken’s home while the Wyvern was away. She had exchanged the elfin dress for a riding outfit of emerald green. The clothes gave her the appearance now of a warrior maiden. And since she had let her hair hang loose, she looked like a Celtic queen out of legend, ready to mount a charger and ride into battle.

“Do you know if there are any plants here, or if there are creatures on Halcyon, that could supply us with material strong enough for bow strings?” he asked.

She thought for a moment. “Yes. But you will need more than animal sinews and plant fibers, will you not?”

He was silent for a long moment, afraid to answer her and also ask the question that must be asked. His father’s favorite bow, which Martin had often used after his death, had had some of his mother’s hair braided into the string. Over the years he found that it shot better than most of the other bows his father, and later he, himself, had owned. Yet to ask Siobhan for such a thing when they were but acquaintances.... It had the feel of romance to it, and he did not wish to force that obligation on her even by implication.

Siobhan saw his discomfort, though not its source. She smiled at him, then reached up and touched her red hair. “Several of the women have recovered their wits. I will talk to them about the matter. As for me,” she looked at him gravely, “I would strike back at our captors in some manner. If I can, therefore, be of help in this small way, then I shall do my utmost to that end.”

Martin bowed his head slightly. He was glad that she had answered him of her own free will and not because she felt duty-bound to give him her aid. “You are a brave woman, Siobhan Kelly. Those who wait for you on Connaught should be proud of you and rejoice at your return.”

She looked away from him suddenly. Pain marked her eyes, but it was an inward wound and not one he could heal by his new gift. “I have no one on Connaught, Albert Martin,” she said softly. “My mother was a

widow, and she died before I left the university. I have no one, and now...”

She raised her eyes to him, tears shining in them. “Now I am changed, not only by Halcyon’s water but by the Gorgons’ prison camp. None I knew on Connaught would recognize me, and I, in turn, would recognize them only as one who has seen horror and lived through it would. There is nothing for me there—nothing at all.”

She looked away again, her copper hair falling in a curtain across her face. Quietly, though she fought it, her body shook with small, silent sobs.

Martin gently pushed back her hair and lifted her chin, so that her face was raised to his again. “Those on New Mesa who await me also await a changed man. Suffering is a horrible thing, Siobhan, but it is also a way of gaining strength. With an alliance between our races, humans will be allowed to inhabit Halcyon, though they must perhaps submit to Drake law and customs. Those I knew on New Mesa may join me here.”

He looked away. “I too am changed by the pit, Siobhan. I cannot again walk the hunting trails I ran as a carefree child. My future, such as it is, is here. I would find not even moderate peace anywhere else in the galaxy. Not any such as the Drakeworld has given to me.”

“You speak as though the future were a lonely one for you.” Her tears had dried, and she looked at him with concern, her brows knit.

He nodded, then met her eyes. “And so it is, or would be, if I walked it alone.”

She stared into his eyes, surprised. They were grey as a clouded spring morning. They were the eyes that had calmed her in her terror and the eyes that had seen her retaliate against her captors despite the danger she faced in doing so. Slowly, she spoke. “Then it shall not be a lonely future, should the battle not turn against us.”

“Be that as it may,” he lowered his hand to grasp hers tenderly, “I will return for you.”

So they stood for a long time. Finally, he left to join the other soldiers. But not before he kissed her hand and reiterated his promise, with her giving her own.

VIII

At raindrops splattered against Martin's face. Despite his extra-heavy coat, which Siobhan had helped fashion for him, he shivered. Beneath him, Rafewing leveled out, as did the Drake commanders, Elan and Halefire. Spread out to their left and right, the entire front line of the first wave of Drakes did the same.

They were flying rather low, but despite that, the advancing Drakestorm made the air almost unbearably cold to exposed skin.

Martin turned in the new saddle that the Drakes had made for him to survey the other riders. Spread out in a V-shape behind him amidst the Drake armada, they also kept their faces hidden by the fur lining of their coats. But he could still see their eyes above the fur, narrowed against the chill air.

And narrowed, he knew, in fierce anticipation of the battle to come.

Behind them, in the absolute rear, three stout Drakes carried the cannon they had fashioned. It would take all of them to carry it, then land and position it. Two would fire it while the third spotted for them.

Martin turned back to face north and checked their heading. Below, the land spread out like a wrinkled carpet of dark green with mountains to the east and rolling, steep hills to the west. Ahead, the ground was dimpled with valleys and small canyons. Beyond that, the land fell away into open plains. A large river wound its way in that direction, often disappearing from sight into a cataract of rock and then reappearing in another until it came out in the plains. Rafewing had called it the Flowing River.

Suddenly, his eyes lit on a dark cleft in the ground, and his hand tightened on his bow. Yes, he had not been mistaken. It was the ravine

that had served as the prison pit.

Small lumps rose from the rim of the canyon; the Gorgons' barracks. Within a moment, he could pick out movement among the low parapets. They were slow, however; the Gorgons did not expect an attack.

He smiled grimly. That, of course, was why humans had always preferred dawn attacks. To come upon your enemy after a fretful night, when all was dark and impossible to see, would be expected. And so, when the enemy began to hope, at last, that their opponents would not seek battle, they would strike as dawn rose and catch the enemy unawares.

It was an ancient tactic, perhaps even among the Gorgons. And it rarely failed, especially when the enemy thought there was no one and nothing to fear.

Then Martin spotted something else. Squinting into the rapidly darkening sky caused by the upcoming Drakestorm, he tapped his heels lightly against Rafewing's scales. The Drake twisted his head to look back at him questioningly. *What is it?*

They have landed a Bug, a small starship, near the camp!

Rafewing's eyes hardened. *How deadly is it?*

It is a scout ship, Martin replied. It cannot carry more than three. Its weapons are not dangerous to our warships....

But here, Rafewing caught Martin's meaning, it may be a great danger to us.

Yes.

Rafewing turned and, with a slight twitch of his wings, came up beside Halefire. While he spoke with the red-scaled commander, Martin passed on by hand signs what he had seen to the other men.

Sir, one of them signed back, a young petty officer named Colin Wade, I may be wrong, but I think that the Bug is damaged.

Are you sure? Martin demanded.

I've studied Bugs, sir, Wade responded. *This one's nose isn't snubbed, it's ragged. That would only come from an encounter with one of our shock torpedoes.*

Sir, another man signed eagerly, *could one of our ships be near Halcyon?*

Possibly, Martin returned curtly, his mind occupied more with the problem the enemy scout ship still presented them. He relayed the petty officer's suggestion to Halefire.

If it bears that damage, perhaps it has more, the Drake said thoughtfully. *Scout Flarewire!*

Wade's Drake partner, with scales the color of a midnight sky, flew up beside Rafewing. *Commander?* she asked stiffly.

Can you get close enough to the Yeggesh ship to see if it has more damage than it appears to have at this distance?

I can, by going through the trees. What of you? She asked this last of Wade.

"Yes, ma'am," the younger man replied softly. Then he winced. Martin could not suppress a small smile. Wade was one of the few soldiers who had not yet mastered the art of projecting his thoughts toward a Drake and was apt to answer with his mouth instead of his mind.

Then scout ahead, but do not engage the Yeggesh. Halefire's voice carried the firm snap of an order.

Flarewire brought her wings to her sides and dove, aiming silently for their left. Wade matched her movement perfectly. While he may not have mastered mind speech, the boy had more than mastered riding. Perhaps he had had experience on another world which had helped him to become a Drake rider.

Is it possible?

Rafewing's question startled Martin. *Pardon?*

Is it possible, the Drake repeated, that more of your people have arrived here?

Martin thought for a moment. The wind picked up, its chill biting at his exposed skin. He tugged his collar up about his face a little more. *It IS within the realm of possibility, he admitted. But I do not think it will mean speedy help. The only way any of our ships would be able to destroy the camp would be by firebombing, and not all of our ships are capable of that.*

I see. Rafewing was silent for some moments. *What will you do if more of your people arrive on our world?*

I will ask for permission to stay. Even though there was an enormous difference between their species, Martin still caught the surprise in the Drake's eyes. *My homeworld will serve only as a reminder of what I was before the war, he explained slowly. Here...here I can be what I now am, someone else...someone new.*

And what is this someone new? Rafewing asked.

Martin's mind flashed back to his last meeting with Siobhan, when she had handed him the bow, her own hair a part of its string. He remembered the look in her eyes. *That remains to be seen. Today...* He paused. *Today I am here to destroy evil.*

Rafewing was silent again. Martin had the impression that, though he had not intruded into his mind as he had when they first met, the Drake had guessed where his thoughts had gone. *That is a good man, then, Albert Martin. I look forward to knowing him better.*

As do I. Martin found himself smiling again. It was a smile that turned grim as Flarewire and Wade returned to their ranks, Flarewire leading the report. *The Yeggesh ship is unable to fly, she reported rapidly. But its weapons are intact.*

I think, though, that we can take care of it with the cannon, Wade added in halting thought speech. *There is a place in the trees that is screened and safe, but which would give us an unobstructed line of fire into the camp. And on the Bug.*

Take the cannon there, ordered Elan, a Drake with the same silver scales as his nephew's. *And prepare to bombard the ship. When that is no longer a threat, turn the weapon on the camp.*

Understood, Commander. Flarewire darted to the back of the Drake convoy, hissing an eerie call. The three Drakes carrying the cannon dropped lower in the sky. Signing, Martin ordered Hal Kingsley and another soldier to accompany the group with Flarewire and Wade, while Rafewing told the Drakes they rode the same. The three guardians peeled off from the formation, following the cannon bearers. *It is almost time, Albert Martin.*

It is, Martin agreed, drawing an arrow from his quiver.

Elan gave a crackling hiss—and the battle began.

IX

Somewhere to the left, Martin heard a Drake roar in battle-fury. Beneath him, Rafewing sprayed five Gorgons with fire. They fell writhing to the ground. Nocking another arrow, Martin took careful aim at a Gorgon farther off and fired.

The shaft found its mark, and the Gorgon fell with a shriek.

Behind! Rafewing's warning cut with the sting of a whip.

Martin half-turned in the saddle, another arrow in the rest of his bow. He drew and fired, taking out a second alien that had been attempting to take up a sniper's position on top of a nearby barracks' roof.

The fighting was crowded, much like the street warfare Martin had witnessed on the partially colonized planets the Gorgons had targeted.

The Drakes' nimble flexibility, however, was an advantage that his race had not possessed in those battles. Twisting and turning with the speed of cobras, the Drakes would pick a target, or several of them, and loose a blast of fire. They were great marksmen, for they never missed. If the Gorgon was close enough, then they would use their claws. They had to

keep their spikes flattened to their tails. As it was, they risked striking each other. And to be struck by a Drake tail was the equivalent of being hit with an I-beam.

Martin noted, thankfully, they had not lost any riders.

Air screamed suddenly to his left. Martin heard a loud *boom*. A cloud of soil erupted skyward. The Drakes had turned the cannon on the camp. *They must have finished with the Bug!*

Indeed. He sensed surprise from Rafewing. *The cannon, as you call it, is a fearsome weapon. You say there were once many such on your homeworld of origin?*

Long centuries ago, Martin said and loosed an arrow as he answered. This time, his target had been a Scientist. The alien went down with a scream, clutching at the shaft that protruded from his chest. “For those you murdered, monster!” Martin reached for another shaft as he spoke.

Martin!

Martin had no time to see what hit him or to move out of its way. But Rafewing’s warning had come with an image as well as his name: a Scientist, wielding a dagger. The image showed him in mid-leap, already halfway to Martin’s perch in the saddle.

As the alien slammed into him, Martin remembered his combat training. He went limp, and he and the alien tumbled into the mud. Martin fell with his bow arm raised over his head. He heard the scrape of wood, felt the bow jerk in his hand, and knew it had been broken.

Stiffening, he threw the Scientist off. Scrambling to his feet, he pulled loose the sword he had carried with him into battle. Everything that Vincent had drilled into him as they practiced with their blades rushed to the fore of his mind. “The Scientists carry daggers. They’re short blades, meant for close fighting. If you run into one on the ground, don’t let him get in close. I’ve an idea they know how to use those things.”

Martin spared no time thinking of Rafewing. The Drake was already busy with another batch of Gorgons. Here and now he must survive on

his own.

The Scientist eyed Martin's long sword. He hissed something in his own tongue then said, "Primitive! You come on these beasts to destroy us? I doubt you know aught of bladework!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not; you obviously know my tongue."

Martin watched the Scientist's eyes. *Never watch your blade!* Vincent had snapped at one of the men in his group lessons. *Watch the other's eyes. They'll tell you when he'll strike. You watch your blade, and he'll have you skewered before you've taken half a step!*

The Scientist laughed. "Oh, yes, I know your tongue, *Human.*" He made the word a curse. "Ours was similar, once. Much of us was similar before we learned how much greater we could be."

"So?"

"Yes. And when we learned that, we broke the barriers that held us low. But, after a time, the world of our ancestors could no longer hold our greatness."

Martin flicked his blade, blocking the smaller knife that the Scientist had produced from his coat and thrown as he spoke. He was forced to take two hops backward as the Scientist, crouching low, attempted to bypass his sword. The alien hissed, his eyes glinting with fury. "Coward, you hold me at bay with this?! True warriors close the distance to do battle!"

"Perhaps," Martin said, watching the alien's glances. The other was not accustomed to this type of fighting. That in itself was an advantage which Martin might have a chance of exploiting. "True warriors also know their limits and do not exceed them. As do true scientists. Your world could no longer hold your grandeur?"

"No, and because of that, we had to expand!" A glance to the ground, and the alien charged. Martin turned and backed out of the way. The Scientist snarled as, coming to a half-stand, he found that Martin still had steel between them.

“Poetic, is it not?” The alien made a small gesture with his empty hand that Martin half-registered by sight. A cold smile moved across the Scientist’s face. “Humans enjoy poetry. You somehow escape your prison, only to return to it, and with what?” He gestured again, the movement contemptuous, at the sword in Martin’s hand. “Using primitive weapons, riding beasts? Were you not one of them a little while ago?”

Martin bit his tongue, and it was fortunate he did. For in that moment, the alien struck.

Martin’s blade was larger and therefore heavier. The Scientist had most certainly taken this into account. He had thought, though, that by needling Martin, by enraging him, he could get around the heavier blade in time to finish his opponent.

But Martin barely moved as something—instinct, precognition, or pre-programmed responses from Vincent’s training—told him the Scientist was about to charge at him.

The blade went home, and the alien gasped. From the corner of his eye, Martin saw the knife drop. “You know my tongue, but you do not know its proper use.” The calmness of his own voice surprised him.

The Scientist gasped harder, hatred in his eyes. It was a hatred that was fast fading into fear. “It is not *poetic* that I should return here,” Martin said, pulling the blade free with a twist. The Scientist crumpled to his knees. Martin went down on one knee before him, his eyes on the alien’s. “It is *ironic*.”

The Scientist gave one last, deep gasp before toppling face first into the mud. He did not get up.

Had the battle gone differently, Martin reflected, the Scientist would have stepped across his fallen body as though it were nothing but refuse. The thought of doing so himself was tempting.

Siobhan’s face hovered on the edge of his vision. “Ironic,” he murmured to himself. He stepped around the Scientist’s body.

“Martin!”

Martin turned at Rafewing’s call. “There are none of your kind left in this place,” he said quietly. “The flood is coming. We must leave!”

“I am ready.” Driving the wet blade into the ground, he pulled it loose and shook the dirt from it. Wiping it on the edge of his coat, Martin sheathed the sword. Then he remounted the Drake. Once his seat was secure, Rafewing leapt into the sky.

They were barely in the air when, above the sound of Rafewing’s pounding wings, Martin heard the roar of water.

“Yes,” he said. “Ironic.”

He watched, safely aboard Rafewing’s back, as a wall of raging water swept through the river valley into the ravine. Once there, it seemed to become angrier. It churned and boiled, roiling over rocks. Soon there was nothing visible but bubbling white foam.

“There will be nothing left of them, Albert Martin.”

“No,” Martin said quietly. “Nothing but a memory.”

Rafewing looked over his shoulder at him. Martin smiled at the Drake. “But even that will fade. It will simply take more time.”

They watched the water as it slowly drained from the ravine. Rocks that had not been present moments earlier rose sharply from the granite floor again.

A human shout went up from Martin’s left. Turning, he saw the sharp-eyed Petty Officer Wade pointing farther off to the left, up into the clouds. Looking in that direction Martin saw a large, looming shadow moving toward them.

“It’s one of ours, sir, one of ours!” Wade turned back and started to shout and wave.

Martin watched the shadow solidify. A grey-blue transport ship, small by military standards but larger than any of the Drakes, broke through

the clouds. As it came closer, Martin was able to see that its sharp, shark-finned features identified it as a Human Coalition transport. It would hold at least thirty men, along with the arms and ammunition they would need for any mission.

Still, though it was one of their ships, at this distance it was impossible to tell....

Beneath Wade, Flarewire roared in surprised delight. *Indeed! There are humans aboard!*

The men began shouting and cheering. Above their cries, Drakes roared joyfully.

The transport slowed as it neared them. Obviously, those aboard did not know quite what to make of the sight before them.

Martin waved and pointed to an open area nearby. Halefire, Elan, and Rafewing turned and dove in the direction he had indicated. With nothing else to guide them, the pilot of the transport did likewise.

X

Martin watched as Marine Captain Samuel Teague eyed him, Wade, Kingsley, Vincent, and Siobhan across a fold-out table which the transport's crew had put out for the meeting. "We followed a convoy of Gorgon transports to this sector." He studied each of them slowly.

He was a big, broad-shouldered man, with riot-red hair and blue eyes that missed little. His voice was soft, a noticeable contrast with his great stature. "We attacked, of course. Even with the war over, they couldn't be allowed to get out of our territory with our people and our goods. Flak was flying all over the place, so we had to track the surviving Bug that left the Mothership without actually following it. There was too much risk of getting hulled in the attempt. After a few minutes, Captain Harden's navigator registered it encountering a shock torpedo.

“With that damage, slight as it was, we knew that they wouldn’t be able to jump to hyperspace. So they would have to head for the only habitable planet in the system. When the vacuum had cleared a little, Harden sent my unit to check out the situation planetside. See if we could bring in any of the—” he paused, his eyes flicking to Siobhan and then back to the men. “Bring any of the enemy in for questioning. If they decided to make a fight of it, then we would have to take care of them.”

“So the war really is over?” Wade asked. “Sir?” he added quickly.

“Yes, Petty Officer, the war is over.” Teague watched Martin closely. “Except, it seems, in places like this,” he added.

“If the Gorgons and Scientists had a camp here, it is quite possible that they have others, sir,” Martin acknowledged the point. “It would perhaps be a good idea to search out other sectors to make certain they *are*, actually, empty.”

“May have to leave that to the System Surveyors,” Teague replied. “Navy’s tired out after all this fighting. Most of our veterans will be going home—or trying to find new ones. We’ll be getting re-crewed with boys out of the Academy. Things will be tight aboard ship for a while.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Speaking of going home, what about you and the other prisoners? The ones the Drakes have been able to rescue so far?”

“The matter seems more difficult than it truly is, sir,” Martin said, sensing Wade shift a little behind him. “Anyone who wishes to reenter life in the Coalition is free to leave Halcyon. Under the new alliance that the Drakes have proposed, any who desire to remain here may do so.”

“Just like that?” Teague asked.

“Yes, sir,” Martin responded. “The humans who remain can live wherever they choose on the land—the Drakes own the water, more or less. It is their natural habitat. They will have emissaries and scouts to

watch over human settlements to deal with natural predators, and men will be permitted to ride these Drakes, but that is the extent of it.”

“So...” Teague let the word hang in the air. Martin waited, feeling the question building behind the Marine’s calm tone. The Drakes would accept them. That he knew for sure. But would their own race accept those who had been so changed? That was the acid test, and Teague would be the first to ask it.

“So,” he said after the silence had stretched a bit. “So, just like that, the Drakes and human settlers will live side by side. No mingling of laws or affairs?”

“Not unless a Drake or a Human kills one or the other.” Martin raised one eyebrow slightly. “That, I think, is unlikely to happen—in the near future, at least.”

Teague nodded, but his eyes remained on Martin’s face. “Still seems to be an awfully tenuous agreement to me. I can think of plenty of men who wouldn’t abide by such a simple setup.”

One of the men behind Martin stirred. “So can I, sir,” Vincent said. “And that’s why I think it would be best to leave some of us here on Halcyon.”

Teague turned his probing gaze on the other man. “Are you volunteering, Lieutenant?”

“Why not, sir?” Vincent’s reply was soft with thought. “I haven’t got anyone waiting anywhere in the galaxy for me. And the idea of rejoining the Navy...” he trailed off.

“There’s something about this place,” Kingsley added. “Something in the air, I think, that makes this planet a—a place of healing. A lot of us have been hurt, Captain.” His voice carried the weight of old pain in it. “We’ve been hurt bad. That kind of hurt changes a man. Some bounce back.” There was a slap, and Wade grunted. Martin felt his mouth curve in a half smile before he could stop it.

“Some of us, like young Wade here,” Kingsley continued, “I’d bet three years’ pay and my pension that he could live here on Halcyon or out in the galaxy and be just fine. Maybe even go between both. But some of us can’t do that, sir. We’ll always be thinking that a stranger’s passing smile to us is full of pity, or that the whispers behind our backs are about how we survived a prison camp and might snap at a moment’s notice.”

“There is that.” Vincent’s voice had not lost its thoughtful lilt. “There is that, Captain, but there’s also this. One of the things that brought us to our senses was the need to survive—a mission if you will.

“Planets are opening up all over the place, that’s true. Planets where it’ll be hard to live; where a man has to strive with the local environment to master it. In some places, he’ll lose. In others, he’ll prosper....”

“What Vincent means, sir,” Martin said, “is that we have that frontier here right now. I know for a fact that Wade and a few others will be quite happy to go back with you to the *Horizon*.” He heard Wade shuffle a bit. The youngster had been more than a little afraid to tell Martin of his desire to return home, not realizing that Martin had already guessed as much and was glad that he did. “We need what happened here to spread as much by word of mouth as by written report. I have a feeling that Wade’s a wanderer at heart, and that he’ll prefer the space lanes to woods and streams.

“But we can’t leave this alliance. It’s too valuable. And, as Kingsley and Vincent have both mentioned, Halcyon has had a healing effect on a lot of us. In the space ways, on our homeworlds...there will be too much to remind us of what we once were, of how we once viewed life.

“That’s changed since our imprisonment, Captain.” Martin felt Siobhan’s hand slip into his as a wave of old pain washed through him. He had been forced to lie in mud in nothing but rags. He had nearly starved and almost died of thirst. He had watched men and women die of both the deprivations of the pit and for the idle amusement of the Gorgons. And he had heard them scream in agony from the barracks of

the Gorgons. His view of life had changed from his days aboard ship and before. It had changed a great deal.

“We would not fit in well with the humdrum of galactic life after such a long struggle for survival, Captain. Here, the struggle goes on. Here, we have found a world we can learn to love, as we did our homeworlds. Here we can fight for something. After fighting for so long, one has a hard time practicing any other trade.”

Teague said nothing for a long time. Finally, he nodded. “You have a point, Corpsman. You have a point.”

“I’ll take those who wish to return home back to the *Horizon* and speak to Captain Harden,” he added. “We may be able to leave a squad behind, or at least a communications device. That way you’ll be able to keep up with the news back home.”

“We would appreciate that, sir.”

Teague nodded, then cocked his head. “Still, it doesn’t seem to be adequate payment for what you’ve done. You sure there isn’t anything else we can do for you?”

Siobhan’s hand tightened on Martin’s, and they shared a discreet glance. “There is *one* thing that you could do, for two of us, at least.” Siobhan leaned into him, and Martin squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

Caroline Furlong is a sci-fi/fantasy writer who lives in Virginia, U.S.A. For more information, please visit her at www.carolinefurlong.wordpress.com.



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Notes From the Nest

Thank you for checking out our Summer Special—we hope you enjoyed it! This is something of an experiment for us; we get so many great novella- and novelette-length stories that it can be difficult to either build an issue around them or reject them outright in favor of shorter fare. So, we decided to dedicate an entire issue to longer stories. Did it work? Let us know what you thought in your Amazon reviews!

It's been a crazy busy 2019 for us, and we're not even halfway through. This year has seen the release of *Duel Visions*, an issue featuring a “lost” Tarzan story by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the *Illustrated Stark* (*Enchantress of Venus* just came out, and *Black Amazon of Mars* will be out at the end of the month). We've still got another full issue of *Cirsova* coming, plus all-new *Wild Stars* from Michael Tierney! I'm amazed I've been able to stay on top of all of it.

We're still trying to adjust to the changing business realities of Amazon's folding Createspace into its KDP service. While it hasn't been a disaster, it has been a headache. The biggest difference was that it made our existing subscription system unviable. IngramSpark has some nice features, but it's pricy. Despite the big numbers our relaunched issue 1 did, it netted us significantly less than previous issues. We'll figure it out, though, and we thank you for sticking with us while we do.

Don't forget, just because Amazon doesn't carry our hardcovers doesn't mean we don't offer them. You can get them direct from Lulu, and if you sign up for our mailing list, we'll let you know when they're available and send you the best coupon codes we can track down.

There's really not much else to say but “Thanks for coming along for the ride; we'll see you again in September!” Also, be sure to leave us reviews on Amazon—that's a way you can support us that doesn't cost you a dime; plus it'll let us know what kind of stories we need to be buying this fall. We can't exactly give you more Edgar Rice Burroughs every issue, so you need to let us know what's worth getting more of!

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