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**The Year's Best Australian  
Science Fiction and Fantasy  
(Volume Two)**

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&  
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## **Contents**

### *Introduction*

### *Running*

Martin Livings

### *Matricide*

Lucy Sussex

### *The Passing of the Minotaurs*

Rjurik Davidson

### *Dreaming With the Angels*

Jack Dann

### *Johnny Cash*

Ben Peek

### *The Red Priest's Homecoming*

Dirk Flinthart

### *Once Giants Roamed the Earth*

Rosleen Love

### *Fresh Young Widow*

Kaaron Warren

### *Watch*

Stephen Dedman

### *Riding the Crocodile*

Greg Egan

### *Skein Dogs*

Leanne Frahm

### *Leviathan*

Simon Brown

### *Publications*

### *Collections*

## Anthologies

### Recommended Reading: 2005

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## Introduction

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elcome to the second annual edition of *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Before discussing the year in Australian SF, fantasy and horror short stories, we'd like to take a moment to discuss what this book is about.

Short fiction in the speculative genres of fantasy, horror and SF, by Australian writers is published around the world. Publications range from major newspapers, magazines and websites, to anthologies and collections from major publishers, through to the active, vocal and often quite innovative small press market, with its own range of magazines, anthologies, collections and websites. Some of this fiction is visible in the mass market in Australia, the vast majority is not. Overseas, larger populations make niche publishing of genre fiction into the mass market financially viable. Locally, an increasing number of writers, editors and publishers are cutting their teeth and learning their trade in a flourishing small press industry made possible by the world wide web and new, economical, short print run publishing technology - a grass roots phenomenon repeated in most cultures around the world.

The purpose of this book is to collect the best of that fiction, small press and otherwise, into one volume.

For the book, we consider stories published anywhere in the world either by Australian authors or by authors resident in Australia. For last year's volume, we read nearly four hundred stories totalling a million and a quarter words. For this volume, calendar year of 2005, we read about five hundred stories totalling just over a million words. But we aren't mind readers. If you've published a story in the science fiction, fantasy, horror, magic realism, or urban gothic genres, or any story which involves fantastical elements, please send it to us. You'll find submission details on our website: <http://www.tabula-rasa.info/MirrorDanse/>.

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We make no claim to have considered all the novels published by Australians in 2005, yet the following

attracted our attention for various reasons.

*The Ghost Writer*, by John Harwood (Vintage, Random House), was first published in 2004. In 2005, this literary, atmospheric ghost story won the International Horror Guild Award for best first novel.

*Geodesica Ascent*, by Sean Williams with Shane Dix (Voyager, Harper Collins), proves that space opera with big ideas can still provoke, entertain, and generate a sense of wonder.

*Spotted Lily*, by Anna Tambour (Prime), is a quirky, modern day fantasy in which the Devil drops in on a Sydney university student.

*The Prisoner: The Prisoner's Dilemma*, by Jonathan Blum and Rupert Booth (Powys Media), is a TV series tie-in novel. The theme of cultural upheaval, political paranoia and manipulation of public perceptions is as relevant today as it was in the Vietnamese war era when the TV series first aired.

*The Chronicles of Kydan 2: Rival's Son*, by Simon Brown (Tor, Pan Macmillan Aust), is the second volume of a fantasy series of war and political ambition.

*Magic or Madness*, by Justine Larbalestier (Penguin), is a smart, urban young adult fantasy in which magic is both a curse and a gift and there are no easy alternatives for its users.

*Uglies*, by Scott Westerfield (Simon Pulse), the first in a three volume young adult science fiction series, is set in a world where everyone becomes beautiful, for a price, and saying no is the most dangerous choice of all.

This is by no means representative of all published work. For a more balanced view, the following novels won Aurealis Awards for the year of 2005:

Gold Aurealis: *Alyzon Whitestarr*, by Isobelle Carmody (Penguin)

Science Fiction: *Eclipse*, by K. A. Bedford (Edge)

Fantasy: *The Bridei Chronicles 2: The Blade of Fortrieu*, by Juliet Marillier (Pan Macmillan)

Young Adult: *Alyzon Whitestarr*, by Isobelle Carmody (Penguin)

Childrens: *Drowned Wednesday*, by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin).

The following novels received nominations for the Ditmar Award for best Australian novel of 2005:

*Magic or Madness*, by Justine Larbalestier (Razorbill, Penguin)

*Drowned Wednesday*, by Garth Nix (Allen & Unwin)

*Midnighters 2: Touching Darkness*, by Scott Westerfeld (Eos)

*Peeps*, by Scott Westerfeld (Razorbill, Penguin)

*Uglies*, by Scott Westerfeld (Simon Pulse, Simon & Schuster)

*Geodesica Ascent*, by Sean Williams with Shane Dix, (Voyager, Harper Collins).

Outside of these recommendations, a number of SF news and reviews websites are available. Try these:

<http://www.asif.dreamhosters.com/>

<http://www.australianhorror.com/>

<http://members.optushorne.com.au/aussfbull/>

<http://www.eincit.com/>

<http://www.locusmag.com/>

<http://www.thealienonline.net/>

<http://www.sfsite.com/>

<http://www.sfcrownsnest.com/>.

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In 2005, the number of anthologies and collections more than tripled over 2004's figure, to seventeen. Again, independent presses and internet publishing dominated. While the number of stories rose, the combined length fell. Flash fiction again dominated the numbers, but not the quality, with too many stories reinventing the tropes of the past, or taking on the form of political fable. While it is comforting to see so much grass roots concern about the political state of the nation, the preaching tone of many stories is an easy answer which helps neither narrative nor message.

Another trend we noticed is the willingness of some small press publications to learn, and take responsibility for style, layout, proofreading, and other procedural aspects of publishing. The converse is sadly also true.

More high fantasy was published in 2005, and the kind of hard SF that bends your mind around the wonder of the universe has also made a return. Slipstream, or 'New Weird', fiction still dominated small press markets.

Details of all publications can be found in the appendix.

Before we discuss the best of the short fiction, we'd like to take a moment to lament the passing of *SciFiction*, the Ellen Datlow edited fiction component of media news website [SciFi.com](http://SciFi.com). *SciFiction* lasted for many years as an important, and the world's highest paying, market for short SF. Its archives are still available and are highly recommended as one of the most significant online repositories of SF.

Of the local websites, *Shadowed Realms* posted six issues, featuring a range of fiction from Australia and around the world, including stories by Robert Hood, Terry Dowling, Poppy Brite and Lee Battersby. The same team were responsible for one of the more welcome publications of the year. *ShadowBox* is a

cd of seventy-odd horror flash fiction pieces, mostly from Australia, all but one illustrated by Shane Jiraiya Cummings. The presentation is attractive, the artwork is disturbing when it needs to be, and always complements the fiction. Profits go to charity, and to help support the emerging Australian Horror Writers Association.

The other main web publication, *Ticonderoga Online* posted four issues of fiction and articles, including stories by Deborah Biancotti and Cat Sparks listed in our recommended reading, and *Antipodean SF*, published by the indefatigable Ion Newcombe, posted a dozen issues.

Only one collection, Garth Nix's *Across the Wall*, came from a major publishing house (Allen & Unwin) in Australia. *Across the Wall* is a strong collection of mostly reprinted fantasy stories. The lead novella, 'Nicholas Sayre and the Creature in the Case' won the Aurealis Awards mentioned above. Bill's personal favourite of the collection is 'Hope Chest' reprinted from Sharyn November's *Firebirds* anthology of 2003.

Jack Dann's *The Fiction Factory* (Golden Gryphon) is a collection of collaborative efforts between Dann and a host of other writers. In other venues, Dann has been pursuing an America that did not, quite, exist, with a series of alternate world stories exploring the death of the American dream postwar in the late 1950s and 1960s. These stories feature iconic personalities of the time; a collection is forthcoming.

Kaaron Warren published her first collection, *The Grinding House*, through CSFG Publishing. A number of stories have been nominated for awards, and the book is always thoughtful, imaginative and viscerally emotional.

Lucy Sussex published *A Tour Guide in Utopia* (MirrorDanse), a retrospective of her last fifteen years as a writer; Chuck McKenzie published his first collection of edgy SF and horror humour *Confessions of a Pod Person* (MirrorDanse). As publisher of the above two volumes, Bill declares his interest here. *The Traveling Tide*, by Rosaleen Love, is the fifth in Aqueduct Press' 'Conversation Pieces' series of feminist SF. Other collections were *Journeys*, by Steve Duffy, and *Retribution and other Reactions*, by Derek Smith (Equilibrium).

Of the magazines, the rapidly improving *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* most reliably met its schedule, keeping faith with readers, writers, advertisers, reviewers, booksellers, and distributors with five issues. The long-running *Aurealis* published a single massive issue with a number of strong stories early in 2005, but was quiet for the remainder of the year. Of the smaller magazines, *Borderlands* published two strong issues, *Fables and Reflections* one, and the horror magazine *Dark Animus* two. [Sf-envision.com](http://Sf-envision.com) was a single volume publication of the En Vision workshop in Brisbane. All include a mix of fiction, reviews and articles.

The standout anthology of the year was the well conceived and thought out *Daikaiju! Giant Monster*



*Tales*, edited by Robert Hood and Robin Pen for the independent Agog! Press. This is a glorious celebration of the giant monster - giant as in Godzilla, or Mothra, or... you get the idea, and it succeeds in showing the frailty of humanity, yet also humanity's strengths of spirit, attitude and adventure.

Small press anthologies include: *Robots and Time*, edited by Robert Stephenson and Shane Jiraiya Cummings, a theme anthology of mostly reprinted stories from Altair Books. *The Devil in Brisbane*, edited by Zoran Zivkovic for Prime Books, is a theme anthology where writers do deals with the devil in Brisbane. A number of stories, read individually, stand on their own, but the whole is held back by the limited nature of the concept. Other anthologies were *The CSFG Gastronicon*, a collection of recipes and flash fiction edited by Stuart Barrow for CSFG Publishing, and *Mitch? Four: Slow Dancing in Quicksand*, edited by Mitch.

The single anthology from a major publisher was *Kids' Night In 2* (Penguin), edited by Jessica Adams and a host of others. Stories came from both the United Kingdom and Australia, including strong pieces by Jackie French and Glenda Millard; royalties go to the War Child charity.

There you have it, a quick look at the field in Australia in 2005.

Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt

Sydney, 2006.

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### Running

MARTIN LIVINGS

Perth-based writer Martin Livings has had over thirty short stories published in such magazines as *Eidolon*, *Aurealis*, *Borderlands*, *Fables and Reflections*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and *Shadowed Realms*, and anthologies such as *AustrAlien Absurdities*, *Agog!*, *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Stories*, *Robots and Time* and *Outcast*. His work has been nominated for both the Aurealis and Ditmar awards, and his first novel, *Carnies*, is due to be published by Lothian Books in June, 2006.

About 'Running', the author writes: "This story was written specifically for the *Daikaiju!* anthology, and

was inspired by the landscapes of Mauritius, a perfect setting for a giant monster story. I thought that most stories of this nature would probably involve fear of the creatures, and I wanted to do something a little different, show a kind of detached fascination and respect for them, the way surfers treat giant waves or climbers mountains.”

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he three of us sit on the beach, keeping a keen watch over the Indian Ocean; the waters are grey, of course, reflecting the grey skies above. I’ve seen photos of Mauritius before, with clear azure skies and crystalline oceans, the sand a brilliant white beneath a blazing sun, but those days aren’t as common as the advertising would lead you to believe, even when there isn’t a major storm brewing off the coast. The gusting winds and occasional smatterings of rain are deceptively subtle reminders that Tropical Cyclone Katrina is on its way, sweeping in low across the ocean, a wall of foul weather rising from the sea to the clouds. But it isn’t the cyclone we’re waiting for, watching for, rather something which is travelling with it, behind it, inside it. Something far more destructive, and far more attractive.

I glance over to my left, where Belinda sits with her long legs stretched out on the pale sand. She’s a statuesque woman in her mid-thirties or so, judging by her background at least. We must look a little like reflections in a funhouse mirror; her hair is cropped short the same as mine, and we’re dressed in similar clothes - black motorcycle leathers with boots and gauntlets. Mine are brand new though, virgin-smooth, untested, while hers show signs of previous use, previous runs: patches repairing tears, edges frayed, the leather as rough as sun-aged skin. I know what to wear from reading about it, seeing videos; she’s simply wearing what she’s always worn. That thought alone makes me feel very humble.

I look away from Belinda, to my right. Ryuichi is there, sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, wearing only a tank top and shorts, his feet dirty and bare. He looks very old to my eyes, though I know he’s only in his sixties; his bare limbs are wrinkled and sunken, but wiry and muscled beneath the sagging skin. His worn face is placid; he barely seems to be breathing, as if meditating. I wonder if he’s asleep. Sitting here next to Ryuichi makes me feel like a baby in the presence of a god; he’s a genuine legend in the field, arguably the first runner, and easily the oldest still participating. When I’d heard he was heading here, I knew I had to come as well. It was probably the only chance I’d have to meet the great man. If the next run didn’t kill him, old age eventually would.

As if he feels my gaze, he opens an eye and looks at me. A smile flitters across his lips like a blown leaf. I blush and looked away, further to my right, behind us. There’s a grassy area back there, set up with umbrellas and chairs for those who simply wanted to enjoy the views of the ocean without getting their feet sandy, lined with palm trees that are swaying quite violently in the growing wind. A Japanese film crew is there, frantically setting up cameras and barking incomprehensible orders to one another. They are understandably excited, of course. In their own way, they’re as eager as we are, perhaps even more so. Beyond them, framed against the dramatic green-coated mountains that jut out at random points throughout the island, the seaside town of Flic en Flac is hunkered down, low and spread out, almost as

if it knows what's coming. Its inhabitants certainly do; most have fled into the ocean in rough fishing vessels, or travelled by any means available into the centre of the island, hoping to avoid the worst of the damage. And not from the cyclone; they'd withstood hundreds of those over the years. No, they're running from something else entirely.

Running from, running to, running with. One way or another, we all run, sooner or later.

I'd been incredibly lucky to get a flight here earlier in the day, an eight-hour stint from Melbourne, arriving at Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport just shy of noon. The plane had been virtually empty, only the flight staff and myself. It was the first time I'd ever flown, and in other circumstances I might have enjoyed the experience. But I never even looked out of my window, instead using the hours of bumpy flight to re-read everything I'd brought with me in my carry-on luggage, the books that covered sixty-odd years of history, theory and practice. I didn't even notice that we'd landed; the stewardess had to call me three times before I looked up from my studies. We'd disembarked quickly, heading into the airport, were whisked through customs, then I'd walked calmly through the doors that open into the airport proper, into chaos. Hundreds of people trying desperately to get seats on flights out of the country, screaming children, natives shouting in French and Creole, angry and frightened. I'd never seen anything like it. Luckily Belinda had been there to meet me, holding a sign high over her head with my name on it. She'd freed me from the jostling crowd, and taken me to the deserted town, the quiet beach. To the man who would lead us in our run.

"How long?" Belinda asks, her voice barely louder than the wind around us. I turn to her in reflex, ready to answer that I don't know, but realize a moment later that she isn't addressing me, of course she isn't. Why would she? How could I possibly know?

"Soon," Ryuichi replies calmly.

"Can you see it?" I ask, nerves making my voice crack a little. "Where?"

The old man smiles slightly. "Right there," he says, pointing to the shore, not twenty metres from our feet.

I look, but don't see anything, just water licking the sand like a cat drinking. I hear Belinda take a surprised breath, so I know she's figured it out. I feel stupid and young. Again.

"The tide," she whispers, and I see it. The waters are receding visibly, pulling away from the beach, leaving seaweed and tiny panicked sand crabs exposed to the open air. I see this happening, and in my mind I picture the implications, extending into the ocean, towards the horizon. A dip here means that there's a bulge out there somewhere, a bulge that's headed our way at a rate of knots. The thought both

thrills and terrifies me.

*Soon*, Ryuichi had said, and he knows about these things. Soon, then. The waiting is nearly over. It's almost time to run.

I get to my feet and stretch, my leathers cracking along with my joints, both stiff from disuse. Belinda does the same, almost a foot taller than me. She catches my eye and winks, grinning.

"Ready, kid?"

I nod, trying to smile back, though my guts are telling me forcefully that I'm not ready, not by a long shot. I need more time. Minutes, hours, days. Years. I won't admit it though, not in this company. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and I'm not going to let it escape me, no matter how scared I might be. I've prepared as well as I possibly can, given the circumstances; I've worked out religiously for years to increase my fitness to its optimum, studied hundreds of videos and written accounts of previous runs, even learnt to surf to get a feel for the general dynamics, though nothing can really simulate the real thing with any degree of accuracy. If I'm not ready now, I never will be. I nod again, more forcefully this time, mainly to myself.

Belinda speaks again to Ryuichi, who's limberly getting to his feet, showing no sign of discomfort or difficulty. I hope I'll be as fit as he is when I'm his age. Hell, I wish I was that fit now. "Where should we start?" she asks, almost reverently.

The old man thinks for a moment, rubbing his stubbled chin with his fingers. Then he turns and points behind us, past the picnic area where the film crew are still frenetically preparing their equipment, active and noisy as a bag of popcorn in a microwave. "On the street, back there. By the shops." He seems to be visualizing it in his head, seeing the patterns of possibility, imagining the unimaginable. "Yes, right there should be fine. Yes." His Japanese accent is faint, eroded by decades of globetrotting, but still there. I guess you never really lose your heritage, even if you lose pretty much everything else.

Belinda nods. "Okay, let's do it."

We walk up the beach, Belinda and I leaving deep imprints of our boots in the sands, Ryuichi barely leaving a trace of his passing. As we reach the grass, Ryuichi veers away from us for a moment, crossing to the film crew. They all fall silent as he approaches them, looking at him with a peculiar mixture of pity and awe. Mainly awe, I like to think. He says a few words softly in Japanese, and the crew members look out towards the ocean suddenly. Ryuichi turns away from them, and the film crew's chaotic bustle returns and redoubles, as they grab their equipment and begin to retreat with an air of relaxed panic. I

look out to the ocean as well; it's a reflex, I can't stop myself, any more than I could stop myself from flinching if someone faked a punch at my nose.

Is part of the horizon raised now? I can't tell, not really, but I suspect it is. The other half of the wave is approaching, the peak that matches the dip that's pulling the ocean back behind us. I turn away, concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Focus on the moment, that's the advice Ryuichi himself had written in his book, *Life on the Run*, a combination autobiography and instruction manual. I've read it at least a dozen times. I'm always amazed by how he could talk about his life with such candour, especially about his childhood, about the loss of his family and his first run. The *first* run.

"There," Belinda says, pointing back, excitement making her voice tremble a little. "Here it comes."

I look back over my shoulder again and look at the ocean. Yes, it's definitely there, cresting the waves. My stomach lurches at the sight of it, even though I'd already seen it in news reports as helicopters followed its path through the shallower waters a few days earlier. It's faint and blurred, seen through a curtain of distant rain, but it's there alright. Somehow the sight of it makes it abruptly real, makes everything real. My heart pounds so hard it hurts, and the breath drives out of me like I've been sucker-punched in the stomach.

They say that everything looks smaller on television, somehow, even with other objects to offer perspective. I've never paid much attention to that until now. The thing is huge, rising from the waters, still only visible from its massive shoulders up. Even through the distant rains offshore, I can see the long, curved spines that run along the length of its head, from its snout up its face and beyond, looking incongruously like a mohawk haircut. Its eyes are shaded by a heavy brow, but I can make out a faint red glow there, like a campfire deep in a cave. Its mouth is closed for the moment, a fact for which I'm profoundly grateful. Its neck is almost nonexistent, its head joining straight up to a barrel chest, only a little of which is visible yet. Its skin is rough, covered with oddly shaped scales that fit together like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. Each one must be the size of a car, and I can already see dozens, hundreds of them. At the point where it emerges from the sea, the water is bubbling and roiling like an overexcited Jacuzzi. It must be doing forty, fifty nautical miles an hour, pushing up massive amounts of water as it goes. Pushing it towards us.

I'm frozen in my tracks, a pillar of salt in the shape of a man who foolishly looked back.

Belinda's gloved hand touches my shoulder. "C'mon!" she hisses, and I'm restored to life in a heartbeat, my limbs suddenly obeying my commands again. I turn away from the ocean once more, concentrate on moving. Belinda and Ryuichi are still walking calmly, and I attempt to do the same. *Dead man walking*, I find myself thinking, imagining myself on death row in prison, heading for my own execution. But it's not that at all. Not dead man walking, *Live man running*.

I watch Ryuichi's back, remembering the story in his book about his experience in Nagasaki. It was a matter of days after America had dropped the second atomic bomb on the city, setting a tiny sun ablaze over its streets, levelling it in a matter of moments. Some of his family had lived there, an uncle and aunt, and his parents had gone looking for them amongst the rubble, blissfully ignorant of the dangers of radiation. They'd brought their child with them, only three years old, holding his hand tightly and trying not to let him see the twisted figures amongst the debris, arms curled by the intense heat, fists raised. The pugilist stance, it was called, a classic indicator of death by burning. Ryuichi had broken free of his parents and went to play, the ruined landscape a gigantic playground in his three-year-old eyes.

Then it had appeared, the first one seen in modern history. Until that day, we'd believed them to be legends, dragons and wyrms of myth. Figments of superstitious imaginations, primitive fears manifesting in exaggerated tales of giants beasts. We'd been comfortable in our modern, clinical, rational world. Safe from monsters.

Until that day, when the first *daikaiju* appeared, a hundred metres tall, crashing through what was left of Nagasaki, flattening what remained. It resembled a gigantic lizard raised on its hind legs, though its face was more ape-like in shape, and it had jagged plates lining its back like a stegosaurus. Later on, they would give it a name that became legend, a combination of the Japanese words for 'gorilla' and 'whale', in an effort to describe something that was, in essence, indescribable. But on that day, in Nagasaki, nobody thought about what it was, or what to call it. They were too busy. Busy running. Busy dying.

Ryuichi saw his parents crushed beneath one enormous foot, mercifully vanishing into its shadow an instant before the impact. It was headed towards him, as unmindful of the child as we are of the insects we crush as we walk here and there. Moving with deceptive slowness, each step like walking through water, but crossing twenty or thirty metres each time. It approached like an avalanche, like a tidal wave.

The boy turned and ran.

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We step off the grassed area, the hard leather soles of my boots clumping on the rough black bitumen. The road here is uneven and crude, but better than many of the roads we'd driven on earlier in the day to get here. One had been barely more than gravel, a long stretch of straight but hilly road, blocked off at one end with a gate that would have been manned any other day. Today it had been deserted, and we'd opened the gate ourselves, granted ourselves access.

On this day, the island of Mauritius virtually belongs to us. At least for the moment. But in a few minutes, I suspect that ownership will be transferred to the gargantuan creature ploughing towards us through the Indian Ocean. Another glimpse over my shoulder reveals more details as it grows nearer; its shoulders are clear of the waters now, and instead of arms there are maybe half a dozen enormous tentacles on

each side, whipping around in slow motion. They must be as long as the creature is high, at least a hundred metres, possibly more. And it continues to rise from the sea, as it pushes a wall of water in our direction. I hope Ryuichi has calculated this correctly; otherwise our run could be over before it's even begun.

After the first appearance of the *daikaiju* at Nagasaki, encounters grew more and more common. At first only one would appear at a time, then two or three, coming together as if drawn to one another, battling amongst the cities and towns of men. The devastation was staggering; thousands killed in a matter of minutes, then they would retreat once more, into the mountains and valleys, oceans and lakes, and not be seen again. Expeditions were sent after them, armed with everything from prayers to nukes, but there was no trace of them. They appeared when they chose, and disappeared just as readily. And on those occasions when we had the chance to organize a military response while they were still there, we found that weapons had little or no effect on them, apart from enraging them even further. Slowly but surely, mankind began to adapt: setting up early detection systems, preparing evacuation plans and drills, organizing shelters. Humans are pretty flexible, really. We just learned to run. Mostly away, but not entirely. To begin with, a few film studios realized the amazing potential in these giant monsters, and risked life and limb to capture their rampages on celluloid. These *daikaiju* films found instant popularity in their home country of Japan, and over the decades they gained a cult following overseas as well. It was the thrill of the danger, without the actual danger accompanying it.

But for some, that wasn't enough. Some wanted the real thing.

We walk a little while longer, passing a few touristy shops on either side of us, until we reach an intersection. Here the road joins a larger road, on one corner of which is a decent-sized grocery store, not dissimilar to the ones back home, apart from the unfamiliar name, 'Cora'. Beyond this road, the area becomes more residential, ramshackle houses mingling with newer tourist villas. A lot of the older buildings look like they've been added to repeatedly over the years, mixing styles and materials, never quite finished. I read once that the native Mauritians often extended their houses piecemeal as the money was available, resulting in an architectural style I'd categorize as 'hodgepodge'. Here, at this intersection, Ryuichi stops.

He nods. "This will do." He looks back over his shoulder, and I do the same. The film crew has vanished, presumably retreating to a safe distance, safer than ours at any rate. All I can see is the beach, and the ocean, and the monster. It's almost clear of the water now, its hindquarters splitting into four enormous legs, like roman columns covered in barnacles, and I realize that it looks a little like a centaur at this point. I can hear its passage, a dull roar like an airplane heard from a distance, and something else below that - a deep hum that I can't identify. The wind is picking up, but I don't think it's the cyclone yet, just the rush of air that the creature is pushing in front of itself.

Then the wave at its feet hits the beach and explodes, spraying water high into the air, and for a moment I can't see it anymore. My heart feels like it's trying to smash its way through my ribs, as the deep guttural crashing of water fills my ears. I'm certain we're going to be engulfed, swept away by the agitated sea, crushed against the rough walls of some Mauritian house before getting sucked back across the grass and

sand and towed out to sea, pulled underwater to a tropical ocean grave. I can see it in my mind, clear as a photograph, clear as a premonition.

It doesn't happen, of course. The wave gurgles across the grassed area, foaming like detergent, and then washes weakly around our feet. It barely passes our ankles. I look over at Belinda, recognize a hint of the same fear that I'd just experienced, though she covers it up with a thin, tight smile. Ryuichi, on the other hand, looks as relaxed as a yogi.

"Get ready," he murmurs.

Then there is the first tremor, a minor earthquake, and I know without looking that the creature has reached the land. The sand on the beach is muffling its massive footfalls for the moment, but that won't last long. Soon it will hit solid earth, not that far behind us. Soon we'll start to run. My first run. I've dreamt of this almost my entire life, and now that it's actually happening, I'm having trouble believing it's real.

The road beneath my feet lurches, almost tipping me over, and I yelp once, surprised. It's real alright. "Be ready!" Ryuichi calls, bending his knees and touching his spread fingers against the rough bitumen. I do likewise, though it's harder to bend in these damn leather pants. I'm starting to think Ryuichi had the right idea. After all, if something goes wrong, I might as well be naked for all the protection these leathers will offer me. I close my eyes, feeling the vibrations in the street beneath me, trying to see what is happening in my mind. See the centaurine behemoth galloping towards me, each step covering hundreds of feet, each footstep crashing into the ground, sending plumes of dust into the air, and pushing dirt forward, forward, until...

"Now!" Ryuichi cries, but I'm already moving, as the ground beneath me rises sharply. It feels like being in an elevator, my weight suddenly increasing. I spring up and begin to run.

We all run, one way or another.

Ryuichi was the first. In his late teens, a little younger than I am, he travelled to the site of a *daikaiju* encounter. It was an enormous pig, but with a mane like a lion and tusks the size of city buses, and it was ravaging a small city in the south of Japan. He sought it out, while everyone else was fleeing. He remembered the sensations as a small child, his experiences then, and somewhere inside those terrifying memories he found something wonderful. Watching footage of subsequent monster attacks over the years that followed, he barely saw the creatures themselves, majestic and huge, towering above the buildings like gods. No, what he saw was the ground that supported them, and what it did beneath their weight, their power. How it reacted. How it *flowed*.



That day, that young man did the unthinkable, the unbelievable. And since then, a small group of crazed enthusiasts have followed, quite literally, in his footsteps, seeking adventure or adrenalin or even some kind of enlightenment at the pounding feet of these monsters. Most everyone else ran away from them, and the maniacal film crews ran to them. But we don't run away, or run to.

We run *with* them.

This is the most bizarre feeling I've ever experienced, a surreal dislocation. It's a little like riding an escalator, being pushed upwards and forwards, but the speed of the journey varies wildly. It's less smooth than surfing, but the sensation isn't completely dissimilar to that nonetheless. As I run, the road begins to fracture and break beneath my feet, pulling off in different directions. I don't have time to think; I step hurriedly from the chunk of bitumen I'm riding onto another in front of me, then another, each one falling by the wayside as I pass it. Somewhere behind me, I can hear the creature, its breath hot and wet on the back of my neck like a tropical breeze. Droplets of water splatter on my shoulders, and I hope it's the cyclone catching up with us, rather than monster slobber. That would be kind of disgusting.

I catch sight of Belinda on my left. She's running like Hermes himself, winged heels masked by knee-high leather boots. I'm momentarily hypnotised by the fluidity of her run, moving from platelet to platelet like a gymnast, never pausing, never faltering. Never stopping. When you're running, as the old saying goes, he who hesitates is lost. I can't see Ryuichi; I don't know whether he's behind or in front of us. I hope he's okay.

The piece of road I'm riding lurches suddenly to one side, and my balance begins to falter. A burst of cold fear splashes up my back, and I react without thinking, quickly shifting my weight and leaping forward, leaving the crumbling bitumen behind me. I hear it collapse, crashing into a thousand pieces of rubble, and I realize how close I was to joining it. I have to concentrate, stay focused. Live man running, or dead man falling. It's up to me and God to decide which one I am. And the monster, of course.

To my right, I can see the town begin to fade, or what's left of it at any rate. Flic en Flac has been shaken, flipped upwards on a wave of rock, and then dropped back down in its wake. What remains looks more like a rubbish dump than a seaside tourist town, wreckage and debris spread surprisingly evenly across the ground. Beyond the town, we begin to enter more rural surroundings, huge expanses of sugarcane stretching for miles ahead of us. I hope that the creature sticks to the roads, where the solid ground will help us keep our footing, stay ahead of it, like riding a stormfront. But I know I can't rely on that. I've seen footage of runners getting caught in a tidal wave of soft earth, feet stuck in the sucking mud, dragging like ploughs, until they're finally pulled beneath the monster's feet and crushed into the dirt, just messy smears left in its wake. This is an extreme sport, often a death sport. But I feel I have to do it anyway, despite the risks. You're never as alive as when you're close to death.

The rock I'm running on begins to list to one side, the left, and I realize that the creature is turning slightly. I don't need to see it to know this; I can picture the shockwave of earth, imagine its alignment. I know

that the front of the wave will always angle away from the direction it's moving, whilst it veers off to the sides the further around you go. I'm still travelling forward, but I'm leaning left, so my position on the wave is too far to the left of the *daikaiju*'s path. I'll have to sidestep in order to continue running. Of course, I could always allow myself to slip off the wave on this side, ride the ever-decreasing ripples of rock back down to ground level, and end the run here and now. It's a tricky manoeuvre, but hardly impossible.

Ah, the hell with that. I didn't wait this long and come this far to wimp out now.

I start stepping across, my legs pumping, my breath burning my lungs. I'm starting to tire, I have to admit, and it's only been a matter of minutes. Running is incredibly demanding both physically and mentally, and it's starting to take its toll. I ignore the fatigue though, ignore the pain, and continue to run, cutting across the creature's path. This is where it could go horribly wrong; a miscalculation, a misstep, and I could end up beneath the feet of the beast, monster toe-jam. I can see it to my right now, from the corner of my eye, its breath steaming in the air around its maw, tentacles flailing like an underwater anemone. Its legs swinging back and forth, so slowly, so deadly. The ground is rising higher and higher beneath my feet the closer I get to it. Alarm bells ring in my head.

Turn.

Turn.

*Turn!*

I turn left and redouble my efforts, trying to get some distance between myself and the monster. My legs are steel springs, my arms pistons in a perfect engine, my brain a supercomputer. I focus utterly on what's in front of me, striding from rock to rock. I am a legend, a superman, a godling. Invulnerable. Invincible.

A noise to my left catches my attention. I glance across and see Belinda stumble, crying out as she rolls from her platform, head-sized chunks of rock and soil tumbling with her as she vanishes, her yelps of pain cut off suddenly. I watch the spot for a moment longer, horrified. Frozen.

I'm just a man. Barely more than a boy. Flesh and blood, same as Belinda. Less. Vulnerable.

I'm going to die here.

“Go!” a voice behind me screams, and without thinking I obey. My legs work independently, pushing me forward, and after a few stumbling staccato seconds I find my rhythm again. The ground underneath my feet is softening, long broken stalks of sugarcane whipping past me like slalom flags, and I have to dodge left and right to avoid being hit in the face. But it’s still solid enough to support my weight, thank heaven.

“Thought we lost you for a second there,” the voice calls out again, and I glance to my right. Ryuichi is there, further back, closer to the creature, but running almost casually, not a worry in the world. I can’t understand his attitude to the monster at his heels, despite reading his memoirs. If my family had been killed by a monster, I’d hate them, fear them, keep the hell away from them. Instead, Ryuichi seeks them out, not to try to hurt or kill them, but to share an experience with them. To run with them. It makes no sense to me.

“Belinda?” I call back to him, legs moving automatically, boots slapping the mud beneath them fast and loud enough to sound like a drum beat, or a heart beat. Life signs.

He nods in an exaggerated fashion, almost theatrically. “She’ll be fine,” he yells, barely audible over the rumble and roar of the beast’s rough progress.

I relax a little, relieved both for her and for myself by proxy. I’ve seen videos of runners doing what she’d done; it’s similar to a surfer’s ignominious exit from a particularly large wave, painful and dangerous but not often fatal. She’ll be battered and bruised, perhaps even a little broken, but she’ll live. I hope that’s the truth, at any rate. We believe what we need to believe, in order to keep going.

The wind whistles through my buzz-cut hair, my eyes watering a little. I’m keeping a close eye on the ground just in front of my feet now, stepping left and right, back and forward, depending on where the heaving earth carries me. And always I’m acutely aware of the massive presence behind me driving me on, and the smaller one to my side sharing the experience. I wonder for the thousandth time why Ryuichi does this. In his book, he spoke of his reasons, but they were masked by rhetorical questions, so there were no easy answers. The one that’s always puzzled me was simple - six ordinary words – but the old Japanese man seemed to find something more in them, a philosophy that I didn’t understand.

His question was, *Why are there no daikaiju fossils?*

Ryuichi is waving to me, grinning. I wave back with a smile. He continues to wave, more animatedly than before, and with sudden dread I realize that he’s not smiling, he’s grimacing. And he’s not waving, he’s gesturing. Gesturing ahead at something. I raise my eyes from the undulating soil at my feet, knowing it is dangerous to do so, but suspecting that it would be even more dangerous not to.

I'm right. Worse luck.

We're headed directly for a mountain. Mauritian mountains aren't like the gentle slopes back home, where you often barely notice the incline as you climb. No, they are acute lumps of stone, easily taller than they are wide, jutting defiantly at the sky. The one in front of us looks suspiciously like a pudgy finger carved in rock, covered by a thick blanket of dark green vegetation. It must be four or five hundred metres high, dwarfing even the behemoth at our heels. For a moment I'm caught in its majesty, its beauty, its grandeur. Then I snap out of it, and see it for what it really is.

A wall. A huge stone wall. And we're hurtling towards it.

I look left and right, hoping for a way off the earthwave before we hit, but both Ryuichi and I have been too skilful in our placement; we're right at the tip of the arrowhead, which is aimed directly for the centre of the mountain. Even if we skipped to the sides, we'd still be smashed against it. I look to Ryuichi for some kind of comfort, some hope, but his posture doesn't offer much of either. He's almost back-peddalling, as close to panic as I've ever seen him, in all the years of watching the movies of him running. Between us, we've had a deadly combination of inexperience and overconfidence. *He who hesitates is lost*, they say, but they also say *look before you leap*. And *pride cometh before the fall*.

I look back over my shoulder, fear falling away from me as if caught in the slipstream. The creature continues to advance, not slowing at all, perhaps not even noticing the mountain. I still can't see its eyes, just the dull red glow from beneath its brow, but I suspect that even if I could, I'd see nothing there, no intelligence, no will. Looking at it this close, it's somehow less monstrous, less bestial than from afar, or on a television screen for that matter, stripped of dramatic music and editing.

...no fossils...

Turning back, I see Ryuichi signalling me again. I'm not certain what he's trying to tell me, so rather than attempting to interpret his motions, I pay attention to his actions. He's allowing himself to fall back, closer to the creature, and this time he appears to be doing it on purpose. I blink a few times, trying to both clear my eyes of tears and to comprehend what he's doing.

Then the penny drops. The closer we are to the creature's feet, the more force will be behind us when it hits the mountain. Too far forward and we'll be dashed against the rock. Too far back and we'll be caught between it and the monster. But if we get it just right...

Goldilocks never played for such high stakes.

I slow the pace of my run, feeling the earth under my boots start to jerk and wobble more violently as I do so. We're closer to this moving epicentre now, and the Brownian motion of the ground becomes more pronounced and chaotic.

I just hope we have time before...

The outskirts of the wave ahead of us crash into the mountain, sending a wall of dirt into the sky. Like a wave breaking on rocks, the soil is scattered into a million directions, raining down on us in large sodden clumps. I have to dodge desperately in order to keep my footing on the ground, which is starting to tilt upwards, rising ominously. I look over at Ryuichi one last time. He gives me a thumbs up signal. I return it, though I wish I were as confident as he is. I hear the monster behind us bellow, just once, as if thwarted by this gigantic rocky finger in its way. I can sympathise.

Then we hit, and I'm flying.

At first the ground is still beneath my feet, pressing them hard as it accelerates into the sky carrying me along with it, rising on a column of soil and sugarcane. Then it falls away, and I'm running in thin air. The gap between me and my footing widens, ten metres, twenty, fifty. In front of me, the vegetation cloaking the mountain speeds past my eyes. It's impossible to judge how close I am to it. Too close, I'd wager. Any moment now, it'll slap me hard in the face, and then I'll be scraped along it like an insect hitting a sloped windscreen, leaving a long smear behind me as I'm sanded into oblivion on the rough shrubs.

Suddenly, the mountain is gone, and all I can see is grey cloudy sky, and distant vistas of fields and roads below me. I realize I was right about how useless my leathers really are.

My stomach turns over, and I realize I've stopped ascending, gravity finally taking a firm grip on my ankles. And slowly, almost reluctantly, I begin to free fall. I don't even think to scream; the sensation is both exhilarating and terrifying, and between the two emotions I'm struck completely dumb. My muscles have gone dead, arms and legs flapping in the wind like a paper doll's. I look down and see the mountain again, the finger pointing up at me. Now it doesn't look defiant. It looks accusing. *You, it's saying, you human, you proud, stupid human. This is what happens. Icarus flies too high, Pandora opens the box. Now reap what you have sown.*

Then there's an impact, a tumbling, and everything goes green, then grey, then black.

I'm not certain how long I'm out. It can't be long, maybe a few seconds. Still, for a short time I'm floating in the dark, warm and safe and numb. It's bliss. Then there's water splashing on my face, and I come to. I'm sprawled in the bushes on my back, bent in an uncomfortable position, a warm barrage of huge raindrops splattering on my forehead and cheeks, running into my nose and mouth, choking me a little. I try to sit up, but a sharp pain in my back persuades me to stay put for the moment. Instead, I raise my head and look down at myself.

It's nowhere near as bad as it could have been, I have to admit. My leathers are looking torn and tattered, and there's a reasonable amount of blood coming from a dozen or so minor wounds that I can make out, but I seem to be pretty intact, no obviously broken bones. I turn my head painfully to the side, and see that the shrubs I've landed on cushioned my fall quite effectively. All in all, it could have gone much worse for me. I'm alive.

"Ryuichi," I croak, then again, louder this time. "Ryuichi?"

There's no answer. I try to sit up again, this time ignoring the sharp recommendations of my bruised coccyx, and manage to reach a sitting position without fainting, though my head is spinning like the clouds above me. They catch my eye for a moment, and I look upwards. We're in the midst of the cyclone now, though I've landed in a shallow depression in the peak of the mountain so I'm shielded from the worst of the winds. But over my head, Katrina vents her fury, the clouds streaming in enormous circles across the sky. It looks like we're almost in the storm's eye.

"Ryuichi?" I call again, and look around carefully for the old Japanese man, my idol, my hero, my teacher *in absentia*.

I see him, maybe ten or fifteen metres away from my position. He's landed in the vegetation as well, though he landed face down. Unfortunately, the tree hasn't saved him; it's bare of leaves, a jagged lightning bolt of wood standing upright on the top of the mountain. He isn't moving, and I know he never will again, not of his own volition. The branch he's impaled on, through the chest and out of his back, is a darker shade than the rest of the tree, and I realize it's Ryuichi's blood staining it almost black. Blood also streams from the old man's mouth, pooling on the ground beneath him. He has that posture, that near-indefinable body language that speaks of death; I've seen pictures of corpses, and of unconscious people, and there's something about the dead that silently screams out, tells you that the person, perhaps the soul if it exists, is no longer present. Something has departed.

Ryuichi's life has ended, his long and tumultuous life. I feel tears burn the corners of my eyes, but I blink them away, determined not to cry. This was exactly how he always said he wanted to die, in books and interviews. You really are never as alive as when you're close to death. And before he died, he truly lived.

I feel a burst of hot, moist air against my back, through the rips and tears in my leathers, and I turn my head and look up. And up. And up.

I almost forgot about the *daikaiju*. How strange is that?

I'm not afraid, not anymore. If I die here, then this is where I die. I'll be proud to share a grave with the grand master. But somehow I don't think that's going to happen; the monster isn't even looking in my direction. It's raised up, its tentacles stretched to the skies, like a footballer about to take a mark, or an evangelist beseeching the Almighty. And it's so *still* - just a slight waving of its serpentine arms in the gale force winds that must be whipping around them. It's as if it's waiting for something. I look up as well, follow its gaze.

And then I see it. Right above the mountain, hovering like a halo. At the centre of the storm, the point around which the angry grey clouds rotate, I can see it, just barely through the rain that's pouring into my face.

The eye of the cyclone. It's the purest blue I've ever seen.

A tiny hole in the clouds has formed there, opened up by the tremendous forces unleashed by the storm. It's fragile, and fleeting, but it's there. Then the eye blinks, once, twice, then closes for good. I'm blinking back tears and raindrops, wiping my own eyes desperately, hoping to catch sight of it again. But it's gone. It takes me a while to accept this. Once I do, I lower my eyes again.

The creature is gone as well.

I clamber to my feet, my knees trembling violently under my own weight. I stagger to the edge of the mountain, where the *daikaiju* had been just moments before, and look over, but there's no sign of it, apart from the enormous trail of destruction it has left in its wake. I see that now, from high above, and find it hard to believe that I'd been riding that wave. Running with the monster.

*Why are there no monster fossils?* There must be a thousand answers to that one, from biodegradable skeletons to ancient animals predating the fossil record. But standing here on shaky legs, hundreds of metres above the torn fields, I can only think of one that seems plausible to me, and I suspect it's what Ryuichi believed as well.

These creatures, these *daikaiju*, leave no fossils because they're not animals, not even alive as such. They're forces of nature, like the cyclone that still roars around me, or an avalanche that swallows a

dozen daring skiers whole. Ryuichi couldn't hate the monster for killing his parents, any more than he could hate a flood or a drought. Some people might, but not him. All he could do was try to understand it, get close to it. Run with it.

Down below, picking its way through the torn earth, I can see a figure limping, tiny as an insect. I can make out black clothing and short hair. It's Belinda, making her way painfully towards me. Behind her, driving up in the distance in some kind of open-topped four-wheel drive, comes the film crew, cameras still pointed my way despite the lack of a *kaiju* to film, *dai* or otherwise. Belinda waves to me, and I wave back tiredly, leaning on the rocks on the edge of the mountain, ignoring the wind and rain. We'll do this again, she and I, and perhaps others will join us, new blood to replace the old that's been spilled.

I smile at this thought, finally understanding Ryuichi's attitude, his serenity. I don't know if I'll ever be as sanguine as he was, but at least I'm on the path now. To be a part of something like this, something so magnificent, that was enough, and it will continue to be enough.

We all run, one way or another.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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## **Matricide**

LUCY SUSSEX

Lucy Sussex was born in the South Island of New Zealand. She has published editions of Victorian writers; and four anthologies, including *She's Fantastical* (1995), shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. Her award-winning fiction includes five books for younger readers and one adult novel, *The Scarlet Rider* (1996). She has written two short story collections, *My Lady Tongue* and *A Tour Guide in Utopia* (Mirrordanse, 2005), with a third, *Absolute Uncertainty*, forthcoming from Aqueduct Press (Seattle). Currently she reviews weekly for the *Age* and *West Australian* newspapers. 'Matricide' was recommended reading from *Locus* 2005.

About this story, Sussex says: "There's not much invented. The dolls mentioned exist - and are very disturbing. So does the rare condition of Molar Pregnancy, and the associated choriocarcinoma, possibly



among the most traumatic of cancers. My editor, Ellen Datlow, asked me if Sylvie was going to survive. Well, ninety-five percent of choriocarcinoma patients do.”

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T

here is an afterlife ...

And it appears to be an international airport terminal. How strangely suitable, she thinks, given the time I spent in such places. Charles de Gaulle, Heathrow, LAX she knows, but this terminal is not so immediately familiar. It is typical, though: computer screens, garish carpet, travelers crowding the departure lounges. Departing for where? she wonders. Some other terminal, some afterlife Paris, Athens, Rome?

An announcement comes over the loudspeaker in a string of translated languages. She catches in each the word Changi. Singapore, she thinks. They named it after a prison ... again appropriate. No heaven, she thinks, but hell—I’ve felt that often enough, stumbling jet-lagged off a plane—or even purgatory? She stares at the fellow travelers, but they seem just like any tired passenger encountered in life. Young girls in high fashion, older women in tracksuits, parents pushing strollers, little children running across the carpet. Suddenly she glimpses a woman oddly familiar, seen through the glass of a departure waiting room: middle-sized, between youth and middle age, thin, hair cut conveniently but modishly short, her clothes chic, but comfortable for traveling. Then she realizes the woman is not seen through the glass but darkly reflected *in* it.

How I used to be, she thinks, with a pang of pleased vanity. Well, better that than the wreck of what I am now. Or the vomitbucket of a few months ago. She moves on, becoming aware that she is not so much stepping as gliding across the concourse. Ghosts walk, she recalls, the thought summoning the memory of a television program, chilling when seen in childhood. Involuntarily she glances down to see her feet, clad in modish, all-purpose (from city walking to boardroom) boots, which are firmly planted on the black plastic of a conveyer belt.

She relaxes and lets the belt transport her past the departure lounges, into the gift-shop section. At the end of the belt she steps off, into walls of duty-free Hermès, cigars, Scotch whisky. Then she stops. Behind one glass shop window is a woman, familiar, older, also stylishly but comfortably dressed. And, she notices, just on the legal edge of air travel, to judge from the bulge beneath her Pregnancy Survival Kit black frock.

As it is the afterlife, she can do now what she wouldn’t in real life, satisfy an inappropriate curiosity.

“Excuse me?”

The woman looks up from a display of little Chinese dolls.

“Excuse me, but you were the judge ...”

She thinks: Judge Judy I called her at the time; it was Judge Judith something.

Judge Judy gazes at her, head slightly on one side, as if sorting through a mental card file.

“I was the defendant in a case you presided over. In New York. I was sued: *Tenenbaum v. Lester*. I’m Lester, Sylvie Lester.”

“Oh, yes,” says the judge. “The case over that ridiculous doll. The hallucination in wax. It made me feel ill just to look at it.” She frowns faintly, remembering. “I was only just pregnant at the time.”

“You threw the case out. I was so glad, I wanted to thank you.”

“No thanks necessary.”

“And to say I’m sorry about you and the baby ...”

“Sorry?”

That faint frown has returned to Judge Judy’s face.

Now I’ve put my foot in it, Sylvie thinks, but nonetheless can’t stop the words.

“Sorry, because you’re both dead ... like I am; otherwise we wouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” says the judge. She gestures at the passing passengers, singling out a group of depressed-looking Middle Eastern men. “Do you think that’s Mohammed Atta and his merry men? And, just disembarking, the planeloads of their victims?”

“No, it doesn’t exactly look like him.”

“Of course it isn’t. *I’m* very much alive, and so is my child. So are you, Ms. Lester, for the moment. What happens next is up to you; it always is. We can’t pick our beginnings”—with a downward glance—“but we should try and control our endings. Life’s that way. And now excuse me, I have to buy a present.”

And with a wave of her hand, Sylvie is dismissed, out of the judge’s sight, out of the gift shop, out of the airport concourse. She curls up fetally, eyes closed in a personal darkness. We can’t control our beginnings, she quotes to herself, but we can control our endings. Yet where in the Sylvie-story do I begin? It’d make a novel in full, and somehow I don’t think I’ve got enough time. Choose scenes, fast backward. Pause.

Maybe it begins with Miles ...

Immediately she has the sense of wind in her hair, the indefinable scent of imminent, looming snow, overlaid with coffee and Gauloises. She uncurls into a Paris side street, the outdoor settings of a café, coffee and frites on the table in front of them. She looks up, smiles despite her jet lag.

“At last!” he says, lifting his coffee cup. Miles, a big, amiable bear of a man she’d met in a language course. He was polishing his French before his move to Paris: to my dream life, he had said. Why she was doing the course, she couldn’t recall. But they’d gotten on, found a common ground in the arts, their conversation, even in French, a pleasant exchange. They had parted with a kiss on both cheeks,

French-style, an invitation: "If you're in Paris, get in touch."

With an implication, a possible double meaning, double entendre.

On the flight from Singapore she hadn't slept well; she could just fall into bed at this point. But whose? That point remains to be negotiated. Miles met her at Charles de Gaulle, took her into town, deposited her bags at the hotel. It's her first time in Paris and despite her tiredness, the boulevards, the rows of Baron Hauptmann's terraces, the style of the Ile de France fascinates. They've spent the morning wandering around, seeing sights, Miles's Paris.

"What is your dream life?"

He answers unhesitatingly. "A studio apartment in a building so full of history the similes fail me. Writing my books. Being a consultant on various art and museum projects, even a film. Just being here."

"I can see why."

He nods, staring back into her face. And so the day passes. Without a word being spoken, just the pressure of her gloved hand on the woollen sleeve of his greatcoat, after dinner they go back not to her hotel but to his apartment. If a pass has been made, she has caught it. And so she falls into his bed, to sleep profoundly, the bulk of his body keeping a chaste distance, on that night at least.

As her head hits his feather pillow in its cool linen cover, the images of Paris slowly fade. They are replaced by something closer in time, something painful: a doctor's surgery in Brooklyn. A vial of yellow liquid, as yellow as the good French wine she drank with Miles, sits on the table. Beside it, a sensor slowly turns a lurid pink.

"It was just a one-night stand," she says.

Or rather a succession of one-night stands, every time I flew into Paris ... To the studio apartment, a small space, monastic in its simplicity, the furnishings of good quality, from china to towels, but austere and plain. Everything is functional, no thing extraneous or frivolous. And this from an expert on the beaux arts! She intuits it is a reaction to the collections and collectors he associates with on a daily basis, other people's frippery ...

"Maybe. But my dream life is stripped down to essentials," was all he said. "Paris is an expensive place."

She compares her succession of rooms in share houses, her flats here and there, full of mess, valuable or otherwise. Working for Sotheby's, then as a freelance, setting up her own business, meant she was forever discovering arty bits and pieces imminently about to appreciate in value or that she just had to have. Riots of fabrics, and rugs, paintings and photos, cushions and objets d'art, pouffes and feathers, bric-a-brac and unalloyed kitsch. Completely unlike the decor chez Miles. There is no place for her here, she thinks, except as a brief visitor, a one night's guest.

"A one-night stand," she repeats firmly.

The Brooklyn doctor very slightly purses her lips. In answer Sylvie feels first a twinge, then a rush, of nausea. She turns away from that scene, into the blackness behind her eyelids again. No, she thinks, I'm going too fast, slow down.

She opens her eyes, to see the terminal again. A man clears his throat behind her. "You're Sylvie Lester?"

In answer she reaches for her card carrier, of antique jet, and withdraws the card. *Sylvie Lester, Dealer and Location Service, Antiques, Fine Arts and Collectables.*

"Then you're my date."

He looks—there is no other way of saying this—like some sort of Samoan Goth. Dark crinkly hair, a mid-Pacific face offset by small round shades, black as night, that resemble eyeholes in a skull. The clothes are very expensive but worn like a *Thunderbird* puppet's. They don't fit, and neither does he, in this life or any other.

"Mr. Ween," she recalls.

"Call me D.C. Remember I wanted to buy you a drink, as a grateful client?"

"You're trying to kill me," she says.

He stares at her, impassive. "Not just yet. This is the only time we met, remember, outside the Internet."

Behind him the terminal swirls in her vision, changes slightly, imperceptibly, the colorful plaques of tourist advertisements now showing images of Jazz Festivals, Mardi Gras, the voices around them suddenly dripping Southern U.S. honey.

"This is Baton Rouge," she said. "Or New Orleans. And I'd been asked to give a speech at some antique collector's fair."

"Of which I could only make one afternoon. So I said, let's meet at the airport."

He leads the way through the crowd, people eddying as if preferring not to touch or be near him, to a elevator doorway.

"The VIP lounge. I'm a member."

"Of course."

They disembark at the top floor of the terminal, a big, gilded room looking over the expanse of tarmac, the planes taxiing, circling, landing, regular as some clockwork toy. He chooses a window table, and they sit against a backdrop of metallic, stormbringing sky. As a waitress takes drinks orders, flakes of snow blow past outside, some briefly attaching themselves to the glass before an ephemeral melting. This isn't Baton Rouge, she thinks. Not exactly. But what or where it is, I don't know.

Two margaritas arrive, and, as she sips, he gestures sideways with his head.

"See the guy over there, the corner table?"

She follows his gaze, sees a mop of graying hair, thick glasses, a vaguely familiar face.

“That’s Stephen King. My man, my kind of dude.”

“He looks like a college professor,” she says. A brutal one. Well, that’s what they have to be these days to survive, that’s what Miles said ... At the thought the scene wavers and dims slightly, as if something is trying to return her to Paris and Miles. No, not so fast, she tells herself. You want to be back there, that’s obvious, but don’t rush. Otherwise you’ll miss something important.

“A great man,” D.C. continues. “To reach into the world’s psyche and extract a can of worms, bring out what scares folks most and rub it in their faces.”

He’s a good client; she’s not about to tell him he’s mixing his metaphors.

“I’m more intrigued by his sheer grip on narrative,” she says. “To keep on reading, when it’s four A.M. on some red-eye shuttle and you’re totally grossed out. That’s ability.”

“I still say it’s the scary stuff that makes him powerful. Guess we’ll have to agree to differ.” He sips from the margarita glass, spraying salt. “Hey, what scares you?”

The way the question is asked, the sly sneaking out of left field, does something to her it shouldn’t, brings back a memory so compelling she can’t confess it, especially to a stranger and client. She had been nine or ten, impressionable. Idly she had been watching a television program, a fifteen-minute filler before the news. The topic was famous ghosts, and this week’s episode was a historic haunted hall in England. It had burnt down, and witnesses saw two figures walking out of the flames. The commentator said: “One had the form of a young woman, the other was a shapeless thing.”

The memory still made her want to shudder, at what the “shapeless thing” might have been. It was suggestive of so much, once you let your imagination play with it, as children will: like pulling a scab off a wound, horrified, hurting, but unable to stop.

“You tell me what scares you first,” she counters.

“I could ... but I won’t.”

The creepiness she first perceived as an affectation in her client now seems genuine, in much the same way as does Stephen King. If it really *is* Stephen King, she thinks. Isn’t he a reformed alcoholic, not seen in bars at all? As if reading her thoughts, Ween lifts his glass in the direction of the novelist—and for a moment it seems that King lifts his glass of Coke in response, a returned salute.

“A very powerful dude. You ever hear about the guy in the car who ran into King when he was jogging? Near killed him. And guess what, he’s dead now. You can’t tell me that’s an accident, anything less than a revenge. There are dark forces out there, just ready for payback, for an injury to the guy who let them walk free among us.”

His tone is admiring, and now she has had quite enough of this weird exchange. “You should be writing horror yourself.” She drains the dregs of the margarita, stands. “And now I have a plane to catch.”

Without looking up, he says: “You haven’t, not here ...”

And as she turns to go, he adds, a faint, parting shot: “Unless the plane catches you.”

She steps out of the VIP lounge, aware as she does that there is some commotion behind her, people craning, staring out the windows. She walks on, not wanting to look back, not at Ween and his implied threat. Outside she looks for the elevator. She finds it but merely opens the door on a very plush Ladies, marble-topped tables, hibiscus in the vases, gilt-rimmed mirrors ...

In which she sees herself as she was a few months ago: hair lifeless, skin white and crepey, even green in tinge. At the sight, the nausea rises again, and she rushes for the nearest receptacle, luckily not the flower vase, but—unhygenically—the basin.

As she holds onto the taps, washing away the regurgitated margarita, somebody comes into the room behind her. She looks up into the mirror and sees her Brooklyn doctor.

“I know they call it morning sickness, but this is morning, noon, and night sickness!”

“It goes with the territory sometimes,” the doctor says. “Pregnancy hormones, being overproduced. Unpleasant, but nothing to worry about, unless ...”

She walks up behind Sylvie, takes the skirt of her pleated Miyake pullover dress (asymmetric, no crush, go anywhere), and pulls it tight. Revealed is a bulge, not the extent of Judge Judy’s, but more than just stomach flab, girly jelly-belly.

“Elsewhere I’m thin,” Sylvie says helplessly. “And I used to be thin there too.”

“When *did* you last have your period?”

“I told you, I don’t notice such things, but I definitely last had intercourse two months ago. On the fourteenth of July, the French holiday.”

“And before that?”

I will not say “I only have sex in Paris,” she decides. “Um, March.”

The doctor releases the skirt, runs her hand over the bulge clinically, a noncaress.

“You look more than two months. Either you’re hopeless with dates, or it’s a multiple birth ...”

At that Sylvie dry-retchs into the basin.

“Or ...” The doctor trails into silence, releasing her.

“Sorry,” Sylvie mutters to the porcelain.

“It goes with the territory. But Ms. Lester, I’m sending you off for a scan, an ultrasound. If it is more than one fetus, then you need to think hard about your options. You told me you hadn’t decided what to do yet.”

“I have now.” Of all things, it was the memory of a Paris shop, the delectable, tiny bébé things displayed in the window, suddenly now terribly covetable, in all their frills and lace, unexpectedly necessary. If that’s a reason, she thinks, it’s a bad one. But it is a deciding reason nonetheless.

“I’ll take that as a yes?”

Sylvie nods, the motion setting off the nausea again.

“It’s hard enough with one, on your own. Can’t the father help?”

“Him?” She laughs without humor. “He’s got a perfect life.”

“Wife?”

“No, life. No room in it for a child.”

Or me, being around all the time, she thinks. She starts to cry, and the bathroom blurs around her. In the time it takes to collect herself, wipe the tears away, she finds herself no longer in the bathroom but the elevator. The doors open at the ground floor, and she steps into ... chaos. People are running down the concourse, their screaming near drowned out by the wails of fire engines. Speeding toward the terminal is a taxiing plane, too fast to stop. She stares at the narrow window where a pilot should be but sees nothing, a void. The plane screeches across tarmac, its nose cone hitting the glass of an observation window, shattering it.

And then, for that brief moment, time is slowed. She sees the glass shatter, and through the gap comes cold wind and eddies of snowfall. I could run, she thinks, save myself ... if I want to.

The plane slams into the terminal in a shower of glass and snow, the wheels rucking up carpet and demolishing the departure lounge chairs. The wings strike the side of the terminal, and they concertina, breaking off in chunks.

It’s like my body, she thinks, a plane wreck, hit by a plane, hit by Miles, even if unintentionally. Still her feet in their smart boots remain planted on the floor as if she has no flight reflex, no sense of fear.

The plane bursts into flame. And in the center of that fire, as she smells the acrid gasoline-plastic smell, coughs at the billowing black smoke, she sees something she recognizes: an ovoid shape, grotesque and pretty, like a hallucination in wax.

That is where it really begins, she thinks. It all started with that doll, when my life started to go pear-shaped. The day I went to Miles’s, as usual, after a flight from Bali. I unpacked my suitcases there and then on his polished wood floor to show off the weird and wonderful things I had found for my clients. And as I sat there, bubble wrap and dirty washing strewn around me, the thought struck me that every time I saw him I got more fond of him, his accepting my dropping in with minimal notice, uncomplaining as I temporarily took over his life. And I liked his laugh so much, his concocting divine meals from things he just happened to have in his fridge, like mini zucchini and goat cheese, his being the perfect gentleman, particularly in the bedroom ...

But did he like me *because* I wasn’t there all the time?

“I have something for you,” he says. “Or for one of your clients. Though I can’t imagine who would want it.”

She pauses in her unpacking. “But Miles, you don’t collect; you say you haven’t the space.”

“I don’t. But as I was passing through a flea market, in a town where I’d stopped to buy Doyenne du Comice, the queen of pears, I saw this little doyenette, weird though she is.”

He hands her a cardboard box tied with string, which she unties like a child at a birthday party. Underneath is a layer of aromatic wood shavings, which she lifts to reveal a monstrosity. An egg made of papier-mâché, with breaking through the shell the limbs and head of, not a chick, but a baby doll.

“I think it must have been some Easter gift,” he says.

The cracks in the shell are realistically etched; the doll’s chubby limbs are moulded in translucent, flesh-colored wax. Impossibly blue china eyes stare up at her from a wax face surmounted by a tuft of curly blond hair and a lacy bonnet.

“Originally confectionary inside,” he says. “The head comes off”—and he demonstrates. Revealed is an empty void, with a fusty, vaguely sickly smell, as if of antique sweetmeats.

“I’m impressed,” she says after a moment. “That is really, truly, deeply grotesque.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“I had a doll collector on my books, but Kewpie only. And I can’t think of anyone else among the clients. Maybe I’ll invite bids, like with eBay. I’ve got an intern back in New York, it’d give her something to do ... just put it on the website.”

She has a brand-new mobile phone, with digital software, in her luggage. She locates it, positions the doll on Miles’s scrubbed wood table, takes a photo. Eat your heart out, Anne Geddes, she thinks, as the image wends its electronic way across the oceans.

Hours later, in bed, the mobile rings.

“Did you have to get Chinese Revolutionary Opera as your ringtone?” Miles murmurs into the pillow.

“The mobile’s duty-free; I haven’t had time to customize it.”

She sits up in bed to talk, in the dark.

“Who was that?” he asks, as she ends the call.

“A Mrs. Lotte Tenenbaum. I think she must have bribed the intern to give her my mobile number.”

“The name is horribly familiar. And I mean horribly. Let me waken my brain cells.” He switches on the light, slaps his broad brow theatrically. “Oh dear! Sylvie, what obscure collecting universe have you been inhabiting? Mrs. Tenenbaum’s famous, indeed notorious in some circles.”

“She wants the doll. She says her family used to own it.”

“She says that about a lot of things. Her family lost everything in the Holocaust. Including her sanity. She’s old, very rich, and trouble. I refuse to sell this doll to her.”

“But ...”



“I’m the vendor, and I insist on my right to refuse objectionable offers.”

She stares at him. “But I practically said yes ...”

“I overheard, and you didn’t. You had a tone in your voice: well, if she wants to make out on the first date, what will she do afterward? Like the shrewd businesswoman you are. And if she wants it so badly, who else might?”

A silence, broken by the sound of a car in the street below, then the phone again.

“I’ll kill that intern,” she says. “Or sack her. Whatever comes first.”

Again, after the conversation she reports to Miles, the prospective vendor of the merchandise, being businesslike even if stark naked. “That was D. C. Ween.”

“What sort of a name is that? Deceased Ween! Like Halloween without the hallow?”

“What obscure collecting universe have you been inhabiting?” she echoes. “It’s a stage name. You ever hear of D. C. Ween and the All-Hallows Band? You ever hear them? Particularly unlistenable death metal, but sold millions. He’s retired now but still reacting against what must have been the fundamentalist upbringing from hell. Very selective, will pay anything for the right stuff, if it’s horrific: mortuary memorabilia, mojos, voodoo. He too wants the doll ...”

“No doubt to stick pins in it.”

“You may not be so wrong there.” She thinks uncomfortably of D.C.’s most recent purchase: some handmade voodoo dolls, in a crude wooden boat, found washed up on a Mexican beach.

“Well, he can’t have it either. I refuse to let this doll, grotesque though it is, get into the wrong hands.”

“You’re making things very difficult for me,” she sighs.

And what eventuates is their very first row. It arrives in stages, as does their cooling. Each time she’d arrive in Paris, she’d update Miles on the trouble he’d caused her. Never anger a client, that was one of her rules, and Miles had got two clients murderously mad with her, expressed in their own insane ways.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Take it. Open it.”

He cocks one eyebrow at her but takes the heavy paper envelope, sealed with red wax. The seal is a grinning skull, and, with an expression of distaste, he slips a thumb under the flap, cracking the skull from crown to bony chin.

“It’s a hatpin. Nineteenth century, from the look of it. And dirty ...”

“The tip is crusted with blood. I had the last one analyzed.”

“The last one?”

“It’s the latest in a series, sent via FedEx, security express, vampire bat if he could.”

He looks obtuse, and she nearly yells at him: “D.C.! It’s from D. C. Ween!”

“How childish of him,” Miles merely says.

Next time she comes armed with a tape from her answering machine. Not content with losing the law case, Lotte Tenenbaum kept calling, somehow locating the mobile numbers, even when changed, the unlisted New York number.

“It’s Yiddish,” she says. “And I’ve had it translated. Read it!”

He reads the transcript, hands it back to her. ““May an umbrella enter your belly and open up!”” That’s a classic Yiddish curse. She’s said worse to several dealers or curators of my acquaintance.”

“Do you have to be so calm and collected all the time?”

“I’m not getting myself flustered about it, if that’s what you mean. If you are, then you should go and get an intervention order.”

“It’s your FAULT!”

“No, it’s theirs, for thinking the answer to their personal problems lies in possessions. Even if that is how you make your living.”

That does it; her temper bolts away from her, as if running for freedom down the streets and alleys of inner-city Paris. She says things in the heat of the moment, to be remembered and regretted later, like a cold-collation revenge. He gets storm-sullen in response. Slamming the door she goes out for a walk alone, amid the happy French families celebrating the national holiday. She returns in the dark, foot- and heartsore, with the stars out. The apartment is dark, and she can see his hulking silhouette by the open window. Inside, she hears him, pauses. In response he takes her by the hand.

Yet even sorting things out in bed resolves only the physical tension and not the emotional. She hasn’t been back to Paris since; she doesn’t know what Miles did with the doll, she didn’t ask. Maybe he locked it up in some Parisian safe-deposit box.

But now here it is; in the center of the flame, the exploding aircraft, beginning to burn, baby, burn. So this is all about you, she thinks. A doll that two rather strange people want desperately but that everyone else thinks weird. You made Judge Judy feel nauseous, but not me. When I was pregnant I didn’t think of you once. Perhaps I should have, because what happened was even more grotesque than you, Easter dolly.

Snow is drifting still into the terminal, despite the fire. It settles on a green-tinged screen beside the table where she lies now, legs drawn up in a technological rape, the scanner coated with gel and inserted, revealing her most secret places.

Where’s the baby? she thinks. Instead she says: “That looks like snow.”

“It isn’t,” says the scanner technician, a statuesque black woman. Then: “Honey ... I’m really sorry.”

“It’s not a baby.” It’s a statement, no question in her voice.

“What you see as snow is called a mole.”

“Mole?” A snow mole?

“A hydatidiform mole. It’s rare, but it happens. A sperm cell hit an egg that was defective, without a nucleus. You got the symptoms of pregnancy but no fetus.”

All she can think to say is: “Why me? Why me?”—as if it were something personal.

“There’s risk factors, like being Asian, which you’re not, age, nutrition . . .”

She thinks: I’m not young; I know I don’t eat properly, except in Paris.

“... but understand, honey, it’s not your fault. You gotta understand that, whatever happens. Because the snow on the scanner is placental cells, developing uncontrollably.”

“It sounds like a tumor,” she says dully.

“It can be. You need a D&C, dilation and curettage. ASAP.”

In pre-op, she finds herself on a production line, women entering in day clothes, then being sent to cubicles, where they changed, to emerge identical in white hospital gowns, white bathrobes that are one size, oversize, paper mob caps on head, paper booties on their feet. And suddenly she starts to cry, for something she has lost but never really had, no time even to buy pretty French baby clothes, no time to plan, no time to think of a potential now lost. And the crying continues as they lift her onto the hospital trolley, wheel her into the operating theatre. She is nearly hysterical as the anesthetist lifts her hand, strokes it clinically to reveal the vein, pricks her with the poisoned needle.

“Are you still there?” says a nurse.

She clenches her fists, answers through sobs: “Yes, unfortunately.”

A nurse strokes her cheek, a professional sympathy. Then blackness. She wakes later in a room full of curtained beds, for a moment forgetful, then with consciousness coming the memory: of waking up the day after an exam failed; of a boyfriend dumping her; of her nonexistent child. And she rips the drip from the back of her hand.

Nurses and later counselors come and talk to her, the sounds of their voices like water over smooth river stones. She coils around her internal void, slowly beginning to shift from depression into anger.

A counselor: “Do you think of the baby as an angel?”

“I most certainly do not!”

She gets discharged; she heads back to her apartment and her lonely art-deco bed. Next morning she gets up, goes to her computer terminal, then the office. The following day she is out of the city, heading across the airways to do what she does best, finding things (and in the process losing herself?). She is back briefly then jets down to the Southern Hemisphere, more searching. At some point an airline clerk

offers her a flight through Paris, but she refuses. Would Miles really want me to land on him with the ultimate sob story? she wonders. When a man expresses his tenderness with sex, what happens when that is temporarily forbidden by medical interdict? The nights and days blur across time zones, she knows she eventually stops bleeding but can't pinpoint just when. She just keeps on working, traveling increasingly frantically she realizes ...

Until even she has to stop, to come back and find a series of phone messages, urgent demands, this time from her Brooklyn doctor.

"I told you that you were to come back for tests!"

Yes, she did, Sylvie thinks. "You also said complications were rare." But I couldn't stand the thought of coming here, to this surgery with all its implicit reminders. And so I left, not really caring about anything much.

"But not impossible. Well, since you're here, we'll check your beta-HCG."

"That's the pregnancy hormone," she recalls.

"And if it's still there, so is the mole."

"But how?" Hadn't it been removed?

"Metastasized—traveling though your system."

"That sounds like cancer," she says.

"It is."

After the test, the doctor's face says it all.

"Do you have someone to care for you?"

Maybe, she thinks, then shakes her head. If I couldn't even tell Miles I was pregnant, how can I tell him what's happened now?

She closes her eyes again, in sudden fear. Darkness returns behind her eyelids, bringing with it the smell, not of a doctor's office, but an aviation disaster. And I'm a gynecological disaster, she thinks. I thought I had a baby, but I never did; my egg was addled, empty in its core. My child transformed into a monster, and now it's trying to kill me. What's the word, the child killing the mother? Matricide.

She opens her eyes to a stinging reminder: the acrid chemicals smoking out the terminal. Her feet move now, taking one step, then another, toward the burning plane. The doll is at the center of the flame, as if on a stake. It started with you, she thinks. My clients cursing me, and as if they really had power, the worst thing in my life occurred. And I'm still paying for it now, with chemotherapy. My life—such as it is—is measured in hospitals and drugs, my business and my body have gone to hell. Which is where I could go too, just now.

The heat is intense, and the doll is succumbing to it, the lace cap flaming in little points, the mohair wig frizzing, the papier-mâché smoldering, the chubby wax limbs deforming, the pretty face melting, with only

the embedded glass eyes keeping their shape. One falls out, revealing darkness. The doll is becoming something shapeless ... which seems to advance toward her.

“No!” She reaches through the flames, the pleated polyester of her Miyake smoldering in the heat, and takes hold of what remains of the doll. The hot wax burns but she doesn’t let go. Her hands move, cupping, caressing the wax, which almost seems to squirm between her fingers. In her grip the wax loses its formlessness and takes shape: not the doll as was, the weird Easter baby, but a ball. She molds it slightly at both ends, and there she has it: an egg. She presses it to her, the fabrics of her ruined clothes falling away. The wax shape presses into the flesh of her belly. She pushes hard, and slowly it sinks in, the flesh closing and flattening over it. Now it is just an egg, an unfulfilled potential, hidden inside her.

Someone grabs her arm, yells at her. Now she is running, in the grasp of a fireman, as fire trucks converge, fill the terminal with white chemical foam.

He releases her, pointing to a line of waiting ambulances, shouting: “Lady, life’s that way!”

She flees through the terminal, now empty except for disaster crews. Well, almost empty: slumped in a departure lounge she finds two figures, side by side: an old, withered woman with bitter, hawklike features, and a man in black, his dark glasses askew to reveal unexpectedly milquetoast eyes. Her former vengeful clients, she realizes.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m sorry for what happened to you, Mrs. Tenenbaum. And whatever it was that turned you into an aficionado of evil, D.C. But the universe is like that. Look what it did to me—not even in your most vindictive dreams could you have expected such a revenge. So we’re quits.”

Neither moves nor responds. Are they dead, overcome by fumes? She suddenly couldn’t care in the least. All she sees is the word flashing on the departure screens: Paris. She could just go through those gates, step onto the waiting plane, and within hours be stepping into Miles’s little apartment again. She can almost ... no, she *can* see him now, televised on the screen. He sits at his table, a half bottle of wine and the remains of a baguette beside his piles of books and papers. For the first time, she realizes that his perfect life is actually rather lonely.

She reaches into the pocket of her ruined Miyake, brings out her mobile. As she activates it, the same image of Miles appears on its miniature screen. She presses buttons, summoning his oh-so-familiar Paris number. And as she does, the terminal fades. There is just a pool of light around her, night in her New York apartment, where she lies on her art-deco bed, surrounded by medications and her once-prized collectables, a sickly stick of a woman suddenly at the point where she has to ask for help, or else.

She presses the final button, to dial a small apartment in the Rive Gauche. And she waits for Miles to reply.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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## The Passing of the Minotaurs

RJURIK DAVIDSON

Rjurik Davidson is a writer, teacher and activist. Over the years he has worked as a kitchen-hand, salesperson, cook, telemarketer, musician, writer, tutor and lecturer. He has travelled widely, driven the Nullabor Plain (with the longest stretch of straight road in the world) too many times to remember, and lived in Perth, Los Angeles and Paris. He speaks crippled French with a perfect accent, which causes all sorts of mix-ups. He lived with Indonesian democracy activists in 1999, shortly after the fall of Soeharto and travelled overland through Java during rioting. Rjurik has published short stories, essays and reviews. He has written a PhD titled, *Paradise, of the Reborn Sun: Science Fiction and American Radicalism in the Sixties*. Rjurik can be found at: <http://rjurik.davidson@blogspot.com>

About this story, Rjurik has these comments “I wrote ‘The Passing of the Minotaurs’ during the Clarion South Writers Workshop 2005, with Scott Westerfeld as tutor. Many thanks go to the Clarion tutors (especially Scott), organizers and students for their help with the story.”

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or the first time in ten years the minotaurs came to the city of Caeli-Amur from the winding road that led through the foothills to the north. There were three hundred or more of them. From the city they appeared as tiny figures - refugees perhaps. But as they approached, the size of their massive bodies, the magnificence of their horned bull-heads, the shape of their serrated short-swords, became apparent. The minotaurs had come for the Festival of the Bull. When the week was over, they would descend from the white cliffs on which the city perched and board the ships that would carry them out over the sunken city and home to their Island of Aya.

The citizens of the city watched the minotaurs silently, from their balconies or the city's white walls. Some of the elderly leaned toward each other and whispered: “So few? There are so few of them.” Many of the children, especially from the factory districts, ran out to meet the magnificent creatures, laughing and calling to them until they drew close and the power and size of the minotaurs quietened them. Gliders swung out over the creatures and watched them from above, safe on the cool currents of air that swept in from the sea. Finally, when the minotaurs arrived at the city, some, who still held to the old ways, fell onto their knees in supplication. The minotaurs were still worshipped as gods by a few, though to harm them was considered a crime by all.

The orderly line broke apart when the minotaurs entered the city and spread out like tributaries into a delta: some climbed their way down to the water-palaces and steam-baths that ran along the peninsula at the north side of Caeli-Amur, others caught the sooty street-trams through the windy streets along the cliffs. Others took the cable car that ran from the massive machine-tower near the piers to the top of the cliffs. Those minotaurs seeking knowledge found their way to Caeli-Amur's famous cafes, where the philosopher-assassins debated in the afternoon, drinking coffee and eating fruit. By nightfall, the minotaurs could be found in the liquor palaces and beer halls.

In one such drinking tavern, long after the sun had descended over the mountains to the west, Kata eyed a group of minotaurs. They dominated the place, which was little more than a hot and dirty hall with a bar along one wall. The men sat frightened and quiet along the walls or in the corners, or slinked past the minotaurs, hoping not to brush against them. Minotaurs were quick to anger, especially when they were filled with beer or hot liquor. Kata knew she would have to approach; she needed two of them. But first things first, she thought, as she took a drink of the bitter liquid from the flask at her waist. She kept her face still, though she wanted to grimace. The medicine tasted earthy and pungent, like dirt and ul-tree roots mixed together.

She watched and scratched distractedly at the metal sheaths that rubbed against her skin beneath her shirt. Realizing what she was doing, she stopped. The shirt was dark and loose, and she wore a skirt that reached her knees. Together they showed off her shoulder-length hair, which was black as the minotaurs' eyes. Beneath her clothes Kata was lithe but unusually muscular; she was an athlete, of sorts.

A group of four minotaurs sat laughing at the front of the room, telling each other jokes about labyrinths and reminiscing about the Numerian Wars. She remembered the Festival of the Bull a decade earlier, when she was living on the streets after her mother's death, but had forgotten the sheer physical *presence* of the minotaurs. Their shoulders and chests were like the statues of Caeli-Amur's heroes that stood in the water-parks to the south of the city, where waterfalls and canals cut their way through light woods and the statues were seven, eight feet of white marble, muscles sculpted beneath their stone cloaks. But it was the minotaurs' heads, those most valuable of trophies, that emanated majesty: the flaring nostrils, the wiry and scented hide, and most especially, the deep and dark eyes, mesmerizing and inhuman. Kata was afraid to look into the eyes, but she would have to.

To one side along the bar sat a slightly smaller minotaur with a dark hide. He did not speak but seemed to be brooding.

That one, she thought.

She slid down the bar and stood next to him.

"Why are you watching us?" he asked.

She could not look him in the eye; she felt guilty. “How far is it to Aya, across the sea?”

“Five days, if the wind is good.”

“Why don’t you use steamers? You could be sure to arrive in time.”

“Tradition. Anyway, I do not trust steamers. What if they break on the open sea? What if those wheels along their sides fall off? Give me the wind any day. It cannot be conquered but offers its gifts freely. It is a trusty partner, at times.”

She looked up into his left eye and then away from its glistening darkness. Its inky magnificence horrified her.

“What have you here, Aemilius?” The booming voice came from another minotaur. She forced herself to look up at the massive head towering over her. She held his eye for a moment before looking away.

“You know,” he said, stepping toward her so his chest came close to her face, “there was a time when a minotaur could stay wherever he liked during the Festival of the Bull.”

The smaller one sat impassively. “Those days are gone, Cyriacus.”

Kata stood up and placed her hand against Cyriacus’s chest, which was like a solid wall close to her face. His presence was magnetic, his strength palpable. She pushed against him. He didn’t move. She pushed harder, and he took a step backward. “It’s rude to stand so close to someone you do not know,” she said.

Cyriacus laughed and turned. “Hey, Dexion. We have a spirited one here.”

Aemilius leaned into her and said, “It is not wise to play with minotaurs. They are unpredictable and dangerous.”

“I can hold my own,” she replied. He nodded, turned, and walked away, leaving her with Cyriacus.



“Have a drink,” the minotaur said, handing her his own tankard.

She took a swig of the liquor, which burned her throat. She held back the cough. “Anlusian hot-wine,” she said, feeling her lips and mouth burn with the spices, the vapour rushing into her nose, making her eyes water.

“Yes. These new liquors fire the belly and the mind.”

“I live close to here,” she said. “I have more wine there, and it is free.”

He stood close to her again, and she felt the heat of his breath on her face. She forced herself to look up into his deep black eyes and put her hand against his chest again. This time she did not push him away.

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They climbed up the stairs that ran along the side of the house, Cyriacus behind her. The key rattled in the lock, and the door swung open into her first-floor room. Kata lit the lamp by the door. It was her windowless parlour, a kitchen off to one side. More stairs led up to her bedroom and a balcony that overlooked the northern parts of the city.

Kata walked over to the table and leaned against it. Cyriacus slammed the door behind him - it shuddered on its hinges. He strode toward her, grasped her by the waist, lifted her like a doll, and sat her on the table, leaning in so she could smell the hot spices of the Anlusian wine and his hide, scented with pungent ginger and clove perfume. She touched the side of his face, feeling the thick and wiry hair. But still she could not look him in the eyes. Quickly she took her hands from his face so she would be ready.

Cyriacus stepped in and pulled her closer by the hips, so their bodies were hard against each other, Kata’s legs splayed around his trunklike thighs, her skirt riding up her legs. She placed her hands on the table behind her as he slowly and carefully unbuttoned her shirt. He looked down to see the waistband that held the sheaths behind her back.

“What?” he said, laughing. “A knife belt? What would a little -”

But Kata had already drawn both long-daggers. She plunged them into his ribs. Cyriacus let out a deafening roar and threw the table away from him. Kata flew through the air backward, the table rolling and spinning beneath her. She struck the wall and fell to the ground, the table crashing against her shins. She felt no pain yet, just the rush of adrenalin.

Cyriacus stared down at the two daggers, his head shifting from left to right in disbelief. Only the handles were visible, one jutting from each side. Blood coursed in deep red streams down his waist and onto his thighs. He snorted, looked up at her and said, "You've killed me."

Kata struggled to her feet and stared back at him. She was horrified by the scene: everything was wrong. Though she had killed before, it had always been in the wars between the Houses. She had felled three men with her knives, watching them collapse in seconds before her. It was war and she felt no remorse. Now she could hardly bear the sight of this magnificent creature at the end of its life.

Astonishingly, Cyriacus came at her. She turned and ran to the stairs that led up to her bedroom, thumping footsteps close behind her. She pushed herself, taking the steps three at a time, her breath loud in her ears. If she could make it to her bedside table she might stand a chance.

She burst into the room and dived across the bed, reaching for her bolt-thrower on the small table. From the corner of her eye she saw him charge into the room. She turned, raised the bulky weapon and fired a bolt. Blood spurted from his abdomen like pollen from an open flower.

He staggered back and came at her again. She threw open the doors and ran onto the balcony, reloading the thrower. No man could withstand such physical punishment, yet Cyriacus still came at her, massive and godlike. She heard the final click of the thrower and raised it, but it was too late. He was on her, his force crushing her against the balcony wall. A cry escaped her lips. So, she thought, this is how it ends - I was wrong to commit this blasphemy.

His breath steamed from his nostrils; his long, thick tongue lolled from his mouth. "I will crack your neck like a rabbit's," he said, grasping the top of her head in one huge hand. "I will take you with me, woman, to the land of light."

"Please," she said, her voice broken.

Cyriacus looked at her in puzzlement, blinked slowly, his hands losing their strength, and crashed to the floor like a cliff into the sea.

\* \* \* \*

Kata left him there, changed her clothes, and walked out into the night. She cut through the factory district, full of dirt and grime, the smoke from the underground machines pumping out even at night. She had grown up in these streets, after her mother had died, running with the urchin gangs, selling trinkets, stealing, doing odds and ends for House Technis, running messages, setting up robberies and murder. Finally, she joined the long ranks of dispossessed philosopher-assassins who lived moment to moment in Caeli-Amur, debating in the cafes in the afternoon, lounging in the liquor halls in the evening, convinced they were free but forever at the beck and call of the Houses.

When she lived on the streets, Kata had been a pinch-faced girl, scrawny but sly. She had never forgotten her mother's last words, as she lay in the factory infirmary, her face a splotchy red-white, the contagion eating away at her insides: "Do whatever you must to survive, Kata. The gods know there's nothing else to do." And then blood had come to mother's lips and dribbled down her chin, her chest had thrust itself forward unnaturally, an awful odour was loosed in the room, and she had died. The next day Kata was on the street. She cried that first day - never again. Now she had one more minotaur to kill and she would be free.

Now Kata climbed to the complex of palaces and administration buildings and found Officiate Rude, a wiry little half-Anlusian administrator of House Technis. Things were set in motion. Rude accompanied her with two workmen back to the house in the carriage that would secretly carry away the minotaur. She took them to the balcony but avoided the sight of the minotaur's body.

Rude took a sharp intake of breath and ran his hands through his fire red hair, speckled slightly with white. "Majestical," he said. "Fascinating. I should have liked to have talked to him..." Like most Anlusians, he had a youthful visage for someone so late in life: it was his quick and energetic movements, his lithe and boyish body. "I didn't think you would do it."

"I told you I would," said Kata.

"I knew you were hard, but even so."

She stole a glance at the creature. It lay at odd angles against the balcony wall.

"Get to work," Rude ordered.

The workmen opened their cases and took from them mechanical saws and jagged knives with wicked

blades.

“And be careful of the horns. They’re the most valuable pieces. And the hide.”

“You people...” Kata said.

“Remember, you asked for this job,” Rude said, looking away from the minotaur.

Kata could not bear the high whine of the saw or the wet thump of the minotaur’s flesh, so she walked down the stairs.

As Rude followed her, he called back: “Don’t damage the eyes. Our thaumaturgists need those eyes for their preparations. Don’t get anything in the eyes.” He followed Kata into the room and said, “One more, Kata, and your debt will be repaid. Think about that. Think about how hard you’ve worked. Just one more minotaur.”

“Even if I repay the debt, I’ll never be free of you. None of us ever will. It doesn’t matter which House, you’re all the same.”

Rude threw his head back and laughed. “Kata, remember, without us you’d still be on the street. Remember who this building belongs to.”

From above, she could still hear the sickening sound of meat and bone being cut to pieces. When they left, she suddenly felt her legs and back. She looked down at her blood-covered shins, pieces of skin scraped into ridges near her ankles. The adrenalin had long ago left her and now all she could feel was pain.

\* \* \* \*

Two nights later, Kara watched the Sun Parade, celebrating the moment four hundred years earlier when the sun had broken through the fog and Saliras’s forces had been routed by the minotaurs and the Caeli-Amurians together. The parade descended from the top of the cliffs toward the public square by the piers. Figures walked with hideous masks: distorted faces that looked as if they had melted in great heat, goats with gigantic eyes and too-thin faces, and, of course, bulls. Others played thin, high-pitched flutes or circular drums that fit beneath their arms and could be squeezed to change the note. All were

dressed outrageously in oranges, reds, yellows. Crowds watched from the side of the road, clapping at the leering masks. Scattered among them were the minotaurs.

Kata glanced at the crowd. On the other side of the road stood the smaller and darker minotaur she had met at the bar. She emptied the acrid medicine from her flask, gagging as she swallowed it. It was the last of the preparation. When she had finished the job, she would be able to afford more. She had spent most of her remaining money at the markets, buying deadly herbs. From these she had prepared poison, mixing it with the flagon of wine, which she then placed in her cupboard. She could not risk another fight: who would have believed anyone could be as strong as Cyriacus, to take so much physical punishment?

She had enough poison for ten men. That should be enough.

She scuttled gingerly through a break in the parade. Her shins were still scabby and bruised.

“Hello,” she said to the minotaur.

“Ah,” he said, “the woman who can hold her own. And did you?”

She smiled. His eyes did not seem so terrible this time; they seemed to be laughing. “I always hold my own.”

“I see. I’m Aemilius.”

“Kata,” she said. “You’re not marching in the parade.”

He shrugged and looked to the sky. “Look at the moon. Can you see Aya’s handprints, side by side, from when he threw it into the sky?”

“It’s bright, isn’t it?”

“So bright that on a clear and calm night like this, you can see the sunken city through the crystal water.”

“No.” Kata frowned in disbelief.

“I swear. Would you like to see?”

She hesitated. She should take this chance. It was falling into her lap. “Yes.”

They marched together up to the great steam towers, full of the thumping and clattering that powered the cable car from the top of the cliff to the pier. There were too many people on the streets, and the walk would have been a long one. They stepped into the cable car, which filled with white-haired people with pointy beards or shawls or aging, curved backs.

As they swung over the city, looking at the parade winding below like a cascade of lights, Kata noticed the passengers in the carriage kept away from Aemilius. She recognized their wide-eyed apprehension.

“You realize the effect you have on those around you,” she whispered to him.

“Of course.” Aemilius did not look about, to do so would be undignified.

“You have a strange bearing; you hold yourself apart somehow.”

“And you,” he said. “You do also.”

She looked away from him, down at the street-trams caught in the traffic below. She could think of nothing more to say.

They reached the quay, with its nine piers jutting into a glassy, silent ocean, the moon hovering above, lighting a section of it in one silvery molten band. Aemilius paid a boatman and took a rowboat.

“It’s too far,” she said. “We need a steamer.”

“It’s not too far. Get in.”

She hesitated, then stepped onto the dark wooden planks of the boat.

Aemilius rowed away from the city, over the glassy ocean, the oars making satisfying creaks against the wooden oarlocks and subtle splashes as they entered the water. They were silent as they left the city far behind; they could still hear the laughter and the pipes and drums of the festival floating over the water.

“Look,” said Aemilius after some time.

Kata peered over the edge of the boat and put her hand to her chest in astonishment. “You can see it, you can really see it.”

Beneath them the sunken city shimmered silvery white. Buildings and boulevards came suddenly into focus and then blurred again as the water moved quietly beneath them.

“The entire city was once white marble,” said Aemilius. “I walked those streets when I was young. I watched white-caparisoned horses pull crow black carriages. I watched street-officers lighting gas lamps on hot summer nights as lovers drifted through the wide streets.”

“How old are you?” asked Kata.

“Five hundred and twelve.”

Kata drew a long, quiet breath. So old. Eventually she said, “There is a sadness about you.”

“Look,” he said. “Can you see something moving down there? They say there are still sea-serpents with heads like houses, bodies big as Nimerian caravans.”

“There are,” she said. “I’ve seen them. They come closer to land during the winter.” She caught a glimpse of something snaking its way through the sunken city’s streets. It seemed to warp in and out of existence. A chill ran down her spine. Should it surface, their rowboat would capsize and the serpent would swallow them whole.

“Perhaps we should head back,” she said.

\* \* \* \*

Again, Kata led a minotaur up the cobblestoned alleyway to her house. Again the creature came in without encouragement, looking around her parlour with interest. He stopped at the bookshelf with the few philosophical classics she could afford: Marka’s *Unintentional Action* and Ugesio’s *Morality and Madness*, the two most popular texts.

“You taught yourself philosophy?” he said.

“A little.”

“This book *Unintentional Action*, what does it argue?”

“Ah, one of the new philosophers. Marka argues we only have the illusion of choice, the illusion of free will. He says that we are controlled by our past, by our surroundings, that we are forced into certain actions.” The streets where Kata lived as a child, the death of her mother, flashed into her mind, as did her desperate and ongoing desire to escape them, to escape the memory of them.

“And what do you think?” Aemilius asked.

“I think he’s right. We are all forced to do things we’d rather not, to compromise.”

“But is it not possible that our very knowledge of those forces allows us *some* measure of freedom?”

Kata closed her eyes. “I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t even know where I am.”

“The ancients said that everything has its place,” said Aemilius. “Everything finds its place.”

“Those days have passed.”



“Perhaps.”

“Would you like a drink?” She felt a knot in her stomach and tried to swallow, her throat dry with fear. Nausea began to build up in her body. Her little finger twitched for a moment and was still. Oh no, she thought, not now. She fought the rising sickness back.

“Yes,” he said.

She walked to her small kitchen, took the flagon of wine, two cups, and placed them on the bench. She stared at them.

“You have no windows in this room?”

“It’s hemmed in on all sides. Above, there is a balcony.”

“It is a sparse house. Not much comfort here.”

“As much comfort as I need. I fought for this place. I struggled for it. Even now it is not yet mine.” She stared at the flagon. She should pour the cups, but she could not. Nausea rose again in her body. Oh no, she thought. Quickly. She unstopped the flagon but set it down again on the bench before she dropped it. Her legs gave way beneath her and her body shook violently, as if her legs and arms were driven by an engine. She gurgled as the fit came on. Aemilius was above her, grasping her shoulder.

“Kata, can you hear me?” He grasped her hand. “Squeeze my hand. Try to squeeze my hand.”

Though her body shook and spasmed, she was aware of his presence above her. He held her hand and her shoulder and he comforted her. Though his voice faded away, as if down a long corridor, she was not entirely alone.

When the fit was over, she felt as if she had been wrung like a *wet* piece of clothing, twisted and distorted and empty. Aemilius carried her upstairs to her bed and laid her down.

“You will be all right now,” he said. “But you must sleep.”

Kata closed her eyes and opened them again. Aemilius was sniffing the air and looking around curiously.

Exhausted, Kata closed her eyes again. She drifted off to the sight of him sitting above her, his deep eyes impassive, occasionally closing as he looked down on her. When she woke he was gone.

Rudé let himself in during the afternoon, as she lay on her cushions in the corner of the room, still exhausted from the fit. It took her a day to recover, at least, and now that she had run out of the preparation that eased her condition, her body would remain tired and drawn.

“This is my house,” she said to Rudé, lifting her head with effort. “You can’t just come in here.”

“But I can,” he said, holding up his key, straightening his sharp-lined clothes. “And I will.”

“I need money, for medicine.”

“Do you now? The agreement was *two* minotaurs. Not one.”

“I need an advance.”

“I see. Well, don’t ever claim that House Technis is not generous, that it doesn’t look after its own.” He carefully placed a pile of ten florens on the table, stacked like a little tower. “By the end of the Festival, yes?”

“Yes.”

There was a knock on the door. Rudé, his wiry little body always full of quick movements, darted against the wall for protection. Officiates lived always in fear, even though the vicious war between House Arbor and House Technis had recently fallen into a lull. They worked at the most vulnerable level, out on the streets, meeting their agents and assassins face to face. They were powerful enough to be targeted, but not high enough in the house hierarchy to warrant protection.

“Get the door,” Rudé said, pulling out a long-knife from underneath his jacket.

Kata pushed herself to her feet and wearily opened the door. Aemilius stood towering behind it.

“Come in.”

“I came to see if you were feeling better.”

“I am, thank you.”

“Well, look,” said Rudé, smiling slightly, the knife hidden. “A minotaur. Fantastic... Let me see. But you’re a little small for a minotaur, aren’t you?”

“Is greatness measured by size?” asked Aemilius.

Rudé approached Aemilius, looking even smaller as he came close to the minotaur. “Incredible.”

“A friend of yours?” Aemilius asked Kata.

“Oh,” said Rudé, “I’ve known Kata since she was just a girl. “I’ve seen her... grow up.”

Aemilius nodded, as if thinking.

“I’d better go,” said Rudé, grinning quickly. “There are things to do! But I should very much like to see you again, minotaur. I should very much like to talk to you.”

“Perhaps you shall,” said Aemilius as Rudé closed the door behind him. “Strange,” he said to Kata, “is he a New-Man, with all that quick energy?”

“He is half-Anlusian,” said Kata, swaying slightly on her feet. “You can see it in his actions, his movements... his ambition.”

“I have never been to Anlusia, but I should very much like to see it. They say the New-Men are voracious, insatiable, that they take everything they can and destroy it to rebuild it. They say their city is constantly growing, constantly changing.”

“But is that any way to live? Isn’t that just distracting yourself from who you are, by concentrating solely on what you do, what you have?” She pursed her lips and thought of the time she’d spent on the streets, of her desire to own her house.

“Of course. And for that reason I should like to see it. To watch the New-Men build their technical wonders, only to throw them away.”

Kata shuffled to the kitchen. The flagon was where she left it. “Would you like some wine? We didn’t have a chance last night.”

“No. I have someone to meet. Thank you, though.”

Kata breathed a sigh of relief. She was not well enough today. She returned the flagon to the cupboard and walked him to the door.

“Rest,” Aemilius said.

“I will.”

She closed the door behind him and collapsed onto the cushions in the corner. She would kill him, or perhaps another minotaur, tomorrow. But even as she thought it, her mind was filled with doubt.

\* \* \* \*

Kata bought her medicine the next day at the market, with the money Rudé had given her. As she drank the preparation, she felt strength grow in her limbs.

She searched for a minotaur, but every time she found one, something stood in her way. First there were

too many of them, gathered in the steam baths on the northern peninsula of the city, with no way of isolating one. Another simply ignored her when she approached him in a cafe. A third, telling stories of the Numerian Wars and Saliras's assault on the city, was surrounded by wide-eyed young women, their hands reaching out to touch him. Yet others laughed and played games with sticks and bone dice with old men and women. The citizens had grown more comfortable with the presence of the minotaurs.

With each failure she felt the sickly feeling of dread creeping into her. Desperation made everything seem out of focus. Her eyes flittered from one person to another.

Slowly she made her way up the white cliffs on foot. Finally she scaled the winding stairs that hugged the cliff like a mountain-goat trail, doubling back on itself dangerously, at places so steep as to be almost a ladder. Eventually she reached the Artists' Square, jutting from the cliff like a great sandy disc. Painters with their easels were dotted between tables where men with braided hair and spectacles drank green tea. There she found Aemilius playing chess with another minotaur.

Kata sat next to them and looked over the city below. It was beautiful, despite the smoke that rose constantly from the factories. The city was silent; only the sound of the artists' voices could be heard, rustling on the wind.

"This is Kata, Dexion," said Aemilius.

"You have a new friend already?" said Dexion, whose hair was light and sandy. His hands were smooth and young.

"I do," said Aemilius, looking at Kata.

"You old ones, you never surprise me with your cunning," said Dexion.

"No," said Aemilius, "nothing like that."

"Oh no. Nothing like that," said Dexion, laughing also. "Actually, I remember seeing her with Cyriacus. You know, no one's seen him in days. There are rumours... rumours of abductions, of a black market."

"Rumours don't stand for the truth. He'll be around," said Aemilius, looking across to Kata.

Kata felt her stomach tense but kept her face impassive.

Dexion nodded and said, "I'll leave you two to your... friendship then."

"But our game?"

"Next time."

"You're only leaving because I have the upper hand."

But Dexion was already walking away across the square, looking around happily.

"The city is beautiful from the square," she said.

"Look at the smoke though, poisoning the air."

"I grew up on the streets around those factories. I learned to love the dirty alleyways, the grime-covered walls."

"Yes," he said, "there's energy in the new technologies. Many possibilities. Many choices."

They sat in the afternoon sun, watching the painters around them try to capture the scene just so, in their very own ways, and talked. Aemilius had been born on Aya. Like all minotaurs he had burst forth from rock full of mighty rage, clamouring for knowledge and adventure. He had sailed on sleek longboats, travelled the deserts of Numeria, studied now-lost texts such as Sumi's *Necromancy and Agency* in the ancient library of the sunken city.

Kata tried to keep the conversation focussed on Aemilius, but eventually he asked her about herself.

"My mother died of the contagion when I was a child," she replied. "She had worked the factories for

House Technis. I remember her hands were knobbly from the spinning wheels. When you held one, you could feel the calluses and where there had been breaks. But you know what the Cajiun philosophers say, ‘One must pass straight through pain - to attempt to avoid it is to warp your life, to cripple yourself.’”

“It intrigues me that you would know such philosophy. I thought it was out of fashion,” said Aemilius.

“It is, among the House philosophers. But many of the philosopher-assassins still contemplate it. Many, who still live in the margins, or who, like me, grew up on the streets.”

He looked over at her curiously before taking her hand in his own rough fingers. “And you have raised yourself up. Look at you now: a real citizen of the city, free, capable.”

“Come,” she said, “let’s go.”

She took him back down the staircase, the wind picking up to buffet away their talk. And then down through the streets that grew in size, where children laughed and ran barefoot between houses and old men sat silently on stools by the front doors of their square, blocklike cottages.

Kata led him ultimately to her house. She took him inside and walked to the kitchen. She opened the cupboard door and glanced at the flagon. She left it there and walked back out of the kitchen. Aemilius stood before her, majestic. She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. It did not ripple with muscles as Cyriacus’s had, but his body was powerful nonetheless. Kata leaned in and rested her head against his chest, reaching up to touch his hairy face, the bristles wiry and oiled beneath her hand. The smell of sweat and perfume intoxicated her, and she felt calm as his arms closed in around her. She closed her eyes and felt his chest rising and falling beneath her cheek. Pushing back, she looked up into his onyx eyes, noticing for the first time the soft and dark eyelashes that interlaced beautifully as he blinked.

“Come upstairs,” she said.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have to leave at the end of the week.”

“I don’t care. Come upstairs.” She turned and pulled him by the hand. He came, hesitantly, behind her, as if she were leading a child into the dark.

\* \* \* \*

They lay the next morning in her bed, watching the light as it slowly shifted in intensity across the wall. In the afternoon, when he left to buy fruit from the markets, she locked the cupboard that held her bolt-thrower. When he returned, they ate the fruit naked at the table.

“Look at this,” he said, running his fingers along the roughened edge of the table that had been scraped when she’d killed Cyriacus.

“Scraped when I brought it through the door.”

“I hope you didn’t fall and give yourself those bruises,” he said.

“No. Those came from Cyriacus.”

“Ha!” He threw his head back.

“What?”

“I knew. I smelled his blood on the balcony. What happened?”

“We fought. I struck him and he left.”

“He left? Just like that? Don’t lie to me. I know what he tried to do. The young minotaurs, they let pain make their decisions for them.”



“It’s not what you think. He didn’t...”

“I’m sorry for whatever happened. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

She crossed her arms and clenched her teeth.

Aemilius reached over and placed his hand over hers. “You are distant.”

“To be close to someone is... dangerous.”

After he left, Kata lay on the cushions and cried, cursing House Technis and their hold over her. She had volunteered so readily, a chance to cancel all her debts at once. But now... She had to kill another minotaur. It was sacrilege, of course, which is why they had agents like her do it.

She could not fail. She had two days.

\* \* \* \*

Kata sat in the almost-barren room before a polished redwood desk. She looked out of the window to the hanging gardens with their red round fruit, their tinkling waterfalls and marble fountains. Soft purple flowers floated on the breeze. She smelled pollen and overripe fruit.

The door opened and Rudé entered. He sat in the red leather chair behind the desk. “Well?”

“I want to change the agreement.”

“We can’t. We have customers waiting for the different parts of the body. And the House’s thaumaturgists are waiting for the eyes, the liver and kidney, and the skin.”

“Perhaps you could get someone else to do it.”

“Yes. I suppose we could. But it’s a bit late now. Anyway, I’ve already given you an advance.”

“That was hardly worth the price of the first minotaur.”

“Yes, but let’s see. You still owe us for half the house. Now, we could repossess that... but you don’t want to go back on the street, do you? Anyway, look at it this way, Kata: it’s time for you to show some loyalty. Loyalty will get you far in this world.”

She rose to her feet and leaned over the desk at him. “Everyone finds their proper place, you know, Rudé. One day you’ll find yours.”

“Fine,” he said, as if Kata had not spoken at all. “I’ll come to collect the body at the end of the Festival tomorrow night. I trust you’ll be obliging.”

\* \* \* \*

Kata met Aemilius in *Lataza*, a tiny coffeehouse specializing in exotic fruits, nestled dangerously high on the south side of the cliffs where white houses and eateries piled upon each other like children’s blocks. The coffee there was dark and imported, the cigars rolled across the sea in Ambibia, and the owner a wasted old man called Pezhi who coughed up blackened phlegm between bouts of wheezy laughter. Nearing death, Pezhi found everything hilarious.

When Kata and Aemilius entered, Pezhi was talking to a fat philosopher-assassin with a shaved head and two bolt-throwers dangling from the back of his belt. Another couple played chess in one corner, their backs against the wall. Kata took Aemilius out onto the tiny, semicircular balcony where a small table allowed them to look over the city and the sea. Kata looked at the peninsula with its steam baths and liquor palaces on the far side of the piers. She would not look at Aemilius.

“I shall not see you again,” she said.

“I see.”

Pezhi stepped out onto the balcony holding a tray. He placed the coffees on the table. “Waterberry pastries?”

“No.”

Pezhi nodded, laughed to himself about something, and left them alone.

Eventually Kata said, “You’re leaving the day after tomorrow. You’ll sail across the sea to Aya. That’s that.”

“I see.”

“Is that all you can say? ‘I see’? What about me? Why are you so...?”

He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them again and reached out to her. “You don’t have to feel alone.”

“Oh, but I do,” she said. “I do have to feel alone.”

He lifted her up in both hands and held her close to him. She could hear his heart beating in his chest, and felt the warmth radiating into her cheek.

“Look over there,” he said. “Can you see how the colour of the sea changes as it passes over the sunken city? There are many who still lie on those marble streets, with skeletal horses and crumbling carriages around them. They are the only ones who should feel alone. But we - you and I - we are alive.”

“Come back with me,” she said. “Come back to my house and never leave. Never go to Aya.”

Later, when he was asleep in her bed, she watched as his eyes moved beneath their lids in sleep. Sometimes he groaned and half-lifted an arm, as if there was something to fend off in his dreams. She did not sleep that night, but lay awake thinking of how they would spend their last day together. And what she would tell Rudé.

Perhaps there was a chance to convince Aemilius to stay; they would not have to live in Caeli-Amur. They could escape the city and find somewhere quiet. But in her heart she knew it to be a dream, for he

was a child of Aya. But she would struggle for it, just as she had for everything in her life.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning she left him asleep and walked the streets alone. She wandered through the factory quarter, breathing the soot and grime that rose from those square grey buildings or from the chimneys that led from the underground factories.

When Kata returned to her house she found Aemilius and Rudé sitting at the table eating olives and melon. Three flagons of wine stood on the table before them. She stood in the doorway, aghast.

“We’ve brought sustenance,” said Aemilius.

“Ah,” said Rudé, “the woman of secrets returns. I must say, I expected I’d find a minotaur here, but I thought you might be here also.” Rudé grinned, his teeth red with wine.

Kata walked to the table and looked at the flagons. They were empty. “Yes,” said Aemilius, “I brought Anlusian hot-wine also.”

She breathed out.

“So,” said Rudé, rubbing his stomach gently. “We’ll have to find some more work for you, as you’ve clearly failed at your last task.”

“Are you in an enterprise together?” asked Aemilius, throwing a slice of green melon into his mouth.

Kata turned away from them and saw the empty cupboard.

“What’s the matter?” asked Aemilius.

Thinking the question was directed at him, Rudé, who was now looking white, said, “That hot-wine doesn’t agree with me. I think I need some air.”

“I’ll show you the balcony,” said Kata, leading him toward the stairs.

“I know where it is.”

“Even so.”

She led him up the stairs; he doubled over when he reached the balcony. “Oh,” he groaned. “That wine. The one we took from your cupboard, was it...”

Before he could finish speaking, Rudé dropped to his knees on the balcony and vomit came streaming and red from his mouth, dribbling down his shirt, onto the floor.

“The wine, did you drink it all?” she asked.

“We shared it,” he said. “Why?” He slumped onto his side.

“It was poisoned.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Help me.” Rudé fell forward onto his hands, breathing quickly and shallowly, drool coming in long lines from his mouth.

“No. There is nothing that can be done.”

“You bitch. You filthy...”

She leaned in over him: “You’re nothing, Rudé.”

“I fought to be where I am. Like you, I struggled.”

“No, you did exactly what the House wanted. You’re an appendage.”

Only a gurgle came from his white-frothed lips.

She ran back to the stairs, descended as quickly as she could, and found Aemilius standing by the table, steadying himself with one hand.

“No,” she said.

“What?”

She stood there, the room between them, looking at his massive presence.

“You,” he said. “You didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So it’s true, you murdered Cyriacus.” He staggered backward, unsteady on his feet. “I would have done... whatever I could. I would have... helped you.”

“You wouldn’t have. You would have left for Aya with the others. You would have sailed off, leaving me here, alone.”

There was froth around his mouth, and his magnificent eyes had lost their edge. They were clouded, as if a white substance were billowing into them.

He collapsed to the floor, his legs, once so powerful, at awkward angles beneath him. “I fought in the

Numerian wars. I defended Caeli-Amur when Saliras's fleet of a thousand ships appeared from the winter's fog."

She sat next to him. "It wasn't meant to be this way. If only you hadn't drunk the wine."

He snarled, a sudden burst of energy lighting his face. "This is how the city repays me. There is no justice."

She took his massive head in her lap and looked down on him. "I'm sorry." She refused to cry.

He looked up at her, his words slurring as he spoke. "The New-Men will take this city, break it down and rebuild it. Then you'll know what it's like to be overtaken, to be... obsolete." Finally he lost consciousness, dying quietly in her arms.

\* \* \* \*

"You shall have to pay for Rudé's death, you know," said the new Officiate, another grey, middle-aged man with a cold, efficient manner. "There must be payment."

She closed her eyes and tried to block out the sound of the saw as they cut up Aemilius. Still, she did not cry. In her heart she knew it was time to leave Caeli-Amur -

- she had struggled enough.

When the men from House Technis were gone, Kata stood on the balcony, watching over Caeli-Amur. She stood there, motionless. The night stars shone down over the water until dawn broke over the horizon and the sea changed from blue to green with little crests of white.

In the morning the minotaurs stepped their way down to the piers, one by one, their hulking bodies small against the ships. The citizens of the city watched them leave, these godlike creatures, powerful and mysterious. The children were solemn this time, knowing the minotaurs would not return for ten more years. And next time there would be fewer still. The elderly nodded their heads and said to each other: "So, they're off again." Others were unsure what to feel. When the last of the minotaurs embarked, the ships hoisted their sails and made their way over the sunken city and out to sea.

[<<Contents>>](#)

\* \* \* \*

## **Dreaming With the Angels**

JACK DANN

Jack Dann is a multiple-award winning author who has written or edited over seventy books, including the international bestseller *The Memory Cathedral*; *The Man Who Melted*; *The Silent*, a novel of the Civil War; *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*; and a number of short story collections: *Timetipping*, *Jubilee*, *Visitations*, *The Fiction Factory*, and the forthcoming *Promised Land*, a companion volume to *The Rebel*. Dann lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea and ‘commutes’ back and forth to Los Angeles and New York.

About this story, Dann writes, “‘Dreaming With the Angels’ is part of my James Dean alternate history sequence of stories and a novel (*The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*). It is an alternate America as seen through the eyes of such icons as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Jack and Bobby Kennedy, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac. I have been experimenting with writing science fiction as mainstream. All the characters in this story are real, but the events are ever so slightly skewed. My hope is that this technique might give new insights into our culture... and our icons.”

\* \* \* \*

M

y adopted daughter.”

That’s what Sigmund Freud used to call Dr. Marianne Kris, who now sat in her upholstered tub chair and listened to Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn sat stiffly on a large, comfortable couch opposite Dr. Kris and cried softly, daubing her eyes with the tissues provided on the little table beside her. She wore high-heels, an aqua skirt and a blue-green square-shouldered jacket, and no make-up; her face looked washed-out, pale as her fingers fidgeting on her knees. She had shadows under her eyes, and her famous blond hair had broken ends.



It's lipstick, Dr. Kris thought. Without it, she's just an ordinary girl, an average, mildly pretty face. *Tabula rasa. Tabu. Taboo*. She noted her stray thoughts, which were distractions. She hated distractions. She prided herself on what she called her focus and noticed the wretched shaving cuts all over Marilyn's legs. She scribbled 'scratches' in a small, leather notepad resting on her lap. The scratches could be indicative of something carried over from childhood. Dr. Kris believed that the problems and dislocations of the child necessarily and absolutely explained the adult. Inexplicably, she thought of her husband. She exhaled and tried to focus, but Ernst had died exactly five weeks ago, and she was still numb, in deep mourning. Yet she would not, could not, turn down a client as famous as Marilyn Monroe. Nor would Ernst have wanted her to.

But why would the scratches remind her of Ernst... ?

She focused.

"Why are you crying, Marilyn?"

"Because I'm upset."

Dr. Kris waited for her to continue, but Marilyn just shook her head and rummaged in her handbag for her sunglasses.

"Why are you putting on your sunglasses? It's not bright in here."

"My eyes hurt." She shifted around on the couch, but wouldn't lean back.

Marilyn looked white, white as porcelain, Dr. Kris thought. White and needy and exposed. No, not exposed. That's the trick, that's her trick. Not exposed. Hiding, guarded, disguised, vulnerable, but beneath it all... She had the sudden thought that Ernst was drowning, yes, he's dead, *oye, Gott*, and you, you are alive, dangerously alive and bloated, bloated sex goddess, fish goddess, shark child, lamb. Focus. Dr. Kris noted that Marilyn was becoming a little overweight.

"Do you have something to tell me?"

“Yes,” Marilyn whispered and leaned forward, cowed, a little girl about to be punished.

“Well?”

“I think I’m pregnant, I think I’ve been pregnant for three weeks.” She heaved a sigh. “Maybe two. My breasts are so sore, they’re too sore to even touch, and I’ve never in my life had that, and they ache, all the time, and I have cramps and since Monday a little staining, but the staining and cramps are increasing by the minute. I didn’t eat anything all day yesterday, and last night...”

“Yes, go on. It’s all right.”

“Last night I took four whole amytal sleeping pills, that’s probably the equivalent of eight little ones, but I just couldn’t sleep, I can’t sleep, you know that, and with all the aching and everything...” She shook her head, as though shaking off a bad thought. “Could I have killed it by taking all that amytal on an empty stomach? I took some sherry, too. What should I do? If it’s still alive, I want to keep it, but I don’t think it’s alive.” Then she started crying like a child who had thrown a tantrum; her breath was irregular, gasping. “It’s dead, I know it. I’ve killed it. Like everything.”

“What do you mean ‘Like everything’?”

Marilyn didn’t respond.

“Why do you think it might be dead?”

She didn’t look up. “Because it feels... inert. Dead.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I will.”

“Are you afraid to see a doctor?”

“Why would I be afraid of that?”

“Because you might find out you aren’t pregnant.”

“I know I am,” Marilyn said, looking at Dr. Kris now, as if she had just found her strength or, as Dr. Kris noted, her role... role as actress as mother, *gottenyu*, what a mother. Dr. Kris prayed for focus and objectivity. She didn’t believe in God, not even now in her time of mourning and need. She was a socialist, an atheist, a Jew, and she would look directly, unflinchingly, into the darkness the bleakness the nothingness with the courage Ernst gave her. There was no God, only Nazis... even now, especially now.

“Why do you want to be pregnant?”

“I am pregnant.”

“Why do you want a baby?”

“Because that’s all there is. That’s everything. That’s what I want most of all, more than anything else, but maybe God is trying to tell me something, that’s what I’m afraid of. I’d probably make a kooky mother.” She turned away from Dr. Kris; her head lowered, she looked around the room, as though searching for a safe, protected place. “I’d love my baby to death. Arthur wants a baby, too, I know that, but I’m afraid he might change his mind. Maybe he could lose his enthusiasm. He told me that I’m a movie star, but that’s... nothing.”

“Do you really believe that?” Dr. Kris asked, wondering what a brilliant playwright such as Arthur Miller could possibly see in Marilyn Monroe; she didn’t even have superficial beauty.

“Yes no, I don’t know what I believe, except I want to give Arthur this baby.”

Dr. Kris nodded and waited.

“Do you think it’s dead?”

“You will have to see your doctor. You must see your doctor.” After a pause - “Are you frightened that the baby is dead or that you may not be pregnant?”

“I would not want anything dead,” Marilyn said in a low voice. “Not animals or anything. Arthur wants a child as much as I do. He said it would be my crown of a thousand diamonds. I want to be a good wife to Poppy.”

“Poppy?”

“Arthur.”

“Why would you call him that?”

Marilyn shook her head. “It’s not what you think. It’s just what I call him sometimes.”

Dr. Kris nodded. Even without being able to see Marilyn’s eyes, she could sense the quick shift of personality. “And what does he call you?”

Marilyn grinned, relaxing. “Sometimes he calls me Penny Dreadful.”

Waiting and wondering why Marilyn was wearing two wristwatches and a locket with the face of a small clock.

Marilyn fidgeted.

“Why are you wearing two watches and that pendant?”

She grinned. “To make sure time doesn’t get away from me.”

“Why would it?”

She shrugged. “It always does, probably because I can’t sleep, and -”

“And...?”

“The pills probably.”

“Could it be you don’t want to be where you’re supposed to?”

Marilyn laughed. “Yeah, probably. I don’t want to be anywhere.”

“Is that why you put the sunglasses on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me what you think.”

“I already told you, my eyes hurt.”

“Do sunglasses make you think of anything, perhaps something from your past? Just tell me whatever comes to mind.”

“Oh, shit. Not that again.”

Dr. Kris smiled at Marilyn. “If you wish, we can just sit here and talk about nothing consequential, nothing that will help you.” After a pause, she asked, “Are you going to visit the Strasbergs for your acting lesson?”

Lee and Paula Strasberg ran the Actors Studio on West 44th Street. Their apartment was just down the hall from Dr. Kris.

Marilyn nodded.

“Perhaps you can talk to them. What did you tell me last time? Something Mr. Strasberg told you?”

“He said I have to begin facing my problems in life and work. But he mostly meant questions of how or why I can act, of which I’m not sure.”

Dr. Kris nodded and waited.

“But I don’t want to get into the same shit I did with my last analyst, all that shit about how did I feel about this, why did I think my mother did that. Not where was I going, but where had I been. But I know where I’ve been. I don’t want to go round in circles like I did before. Everything’s new for me now. New York. New car. New husband. New apartment. New company and... and nobody’s going to control me anymore like everybody does, nobody. You can’t trust anybody. You can’t depend on anybody,” and then Marilyn closed her eyes and began shaking her hands violently up and down, as if she were shaking them dry. Then she seemed to relax and said, “There, that’s better.”

“Is that something Lee Strasberg taught you?”

Marilyn nodded. It’s the way I prepare to do a scene. I shake off everything. It helps me slip into the character.”

“And what character are you in now?”

Marilyn laughed. “Me. A calmer me. You see? It works. Okay, sunglasses.” She took them off with a flourish and dropped them into her bag. “My mother...”

“Yes...?”

“My mother wore sunglasses when she used to visit me at Aunt Ida’s. Aunt Ida wasn’t my aunt, but she took care of me, and wanted to adopt me, but my mother wouldn’t allow it.”

“Would you have wanted to be adopted?”

“I already had a mother.” After a pause, she continued, “And once I saw her take off the sunglasses in Aunt Ida’s bedroom and her right eye - I remember that even though I was a kid - her right eye was bruised all black and blue and closed up.”

“What happened?”

Marilyn shrugged. “She got hit.”

“Who would have done that?”

“Anybody. Could have even been my grandmother, who went crazy and had to be put away in a mental hospital. Everybody in my family goes crazy. My grandmother. My grandfather. And my mother. She’s incarcerated. What a word, huh? Paranoid schizophrenia. We’re all fucking crazy. I remember when I was a baby, my grandmother put a pillow over my face and tried to kill me.”

“You remember that?”

Marilyn looked wary and nodded.

“What stopped her?”

“Changed her mind, I guess. Got sane again.” Marilyn laughed. “Maybe it would’ve been better if she’d done it. Would’ve saved me all these doctor bills. There, that’s enough about the past. Does that make everything clear? Does that help us get through the day? Does that explain everything?”

Dr. Kris refrained from explaining yet again that Marilyn’s childhood was the key to understanding herself as an adult. “You seem angry. Why is that?”

“I’m not angry. I’m sick with worry.”

“That’s understandable.”

“No, because when I’m not talking about the past, you don’t understand shit.” Marilyn looked surprised and giggled. “I’m sorry.”

“Accepted.”

“Would it offend you if I told you that I think you’re a cold bitch?”

“No, Marilyn. Is this part of the new-you role after shaking your hands?”

“Yeah, I suppose it is. One of them.”

“Do you want to talk any further about your worries? About the baby? About what I don’t understand?”

Marilyn giggled. “Are you going to kick me out?”

“No, we still have time.”

“I mean not continue seeing me as a patient.” Marilyn leaned forward, looking suddenly needy and vulnerable.

“We’ve just started, Marilyn. A few weeks in psychotherapy is mere… foreplay.”

Marilyn nodded. “That’s funny, Dr. Kris.”

“It was meant to be. Now, tell me again what’s worrying you.”

“You’re probably right. I’m probably angry… and worried. I’m angry that everyone wants control.”



“So you said.”

Marilyn didn't continue. She just stared down at her light blue shoes.

Dr. Kris suppressed a smile, for the phrase 'out of gas' came to mind. Where had she heard that? she wondered, then focused. “Who wants control?”

“Everybody. Arthur, he wants me to get rid of Milton Greene - he's my business partner and dear friend - and he wants to move his own asshole friends into MMP.”

“MMP?”

“My production company. Arthur resents Milton, and it's Milton's fault, too; he's always putting Arthur down. 'Go write your little play, this isn't your business.' Milton's a shit, a complete shit, but he's a genius, too, and he loves me, and...”

“And what?”

“And he's the only one I could trust. I couldn't trust his bitch of a wife, although I care about her because there's a good side to her, she'll take care of people, but then she'll use it against you, but Milton isn't like that, but he wants Arthur out of everything, and he wants to be the pig producer and -”

“Pig?”

“I meant big. It's all the goddamn Dilantin that fucked him up. I shouldn't talk, but he... he did it to himself.”

“Is he an epileptic? Dilantin should help control his seizures. Perhaps he needs to be re-evaluated.”

“No, he's not epileptic, or diabetic, or anything else. He was using it to counteract all the Nembutal he was taking, and he heard somewhere that it gives you energy. Makes the electrical impulses in the brain go faster, or something. So he was taking it all the time.”

“Do you use it?”

“I tried it, but it didn’t help me sleep. Made me sick.” She laughed. “Thank God, huh.” She continued. “So I’ll have to go along with Arthur and hurt Milton. That’s always the way, isn’t it? No matter what you do, no matter how careful you try to be, you hurt everybody. So there goes Milton, who I trust, and here comes Arthur who should mind his own business. His own agent told him that. She said he ought to stay out of my career, and I ought to stay out of his. Which is fine with me.”

“Don’t you trust Arthur?”

Marilyn shook her head. There were no wafting strands of stray hair; she had probably sprayed it... and it was just a bit greasy. “He’s my husband.”

Waiting.

“He’s as jealous as my last husband, only more stuck-up and intellectual about it.” She paused, then spoke almost in a whisper. “He thought I was some kind of angel, but then he guessed he was wrong.”

“Are you talking about his diary that you found?”

Marilyn nodded. “He doesn’t want to stay with me. He thinks I’m sucking out all his creativity. He thinks I’m a whore.”

“But you’re not sure he really wrote all that, are you.”

Marilyn shrugged. “I read it.”

“Yes, but you told me you weren’t entirely sure. You suggested that you were under a lot of stress making that picture with Olivier and -”

“So call me a liar. I don’t know what I read. Only how it hurt me.”

Dr. Kris nodded. It was time for an expression of empathy.

“Do you think you’re a whore?”

“I don’t think about it like that.”

“How do you think about it?”

“I guess I don’t.

Change subject.

“What about the Strasbergs? Do you trust them?”

“Arthur despises them. He thinks they’re charlatans. So does Milton.”

“And you?”

“Lee can be very bad. He’s jealous of everybody. He hates film and film actors, for all he’s their guru. But I need him. Arthur was furious about the money for Lee and Paula to come to England to help me through the film with Olivier. It was a lot of money... But I couldn’t do it without Paula. Not with Olivier, who’s a condescending sonovabitch bastard. I thought he was the most important actor in the world. I thought I could learn everything from him.”

“Do you trust them?”

“It doesn’t matter who I trust. They teach me. Arthur teaches me. And Paula, Paula protects me. I couldn’t have got through *Prince and the Showgirl* without her. I need something to hold on to. God, I hate England. I’ll never make another film there, not for love or money. The only thing I liked was Windsor Park and Sybil Thorndike, who was kind to me. She was the only one. I bought Arthur a Jaguar when we were there, did I tell you that? And I met the Queen of England. Did I tell you that?”

Dr. Kris shook her head.

“Well, I did.”

Waiting...

“I’m not going to work,” Marilyn said. “I’m going to have this baby. I’m going to be a good wife to Arthur, make everything cozy, cook for him - all the food he likes, Jewish food like *cholent*. I make a really good *cholent*. You know what that is, right?”

Dr. Kris nodded. She could almost smell Sabbath beef and barley stew, as pungent, rich, and mysterious as childhood. Nostalgia and grief overwhelmed her, and she thought of the ocean, swimming in the ocean with Ernst... and the sharks, cold and dangerous as dreams, there they were, always there.

“I’m going to be a good stepmother to his children, and a good mother to his child.” She looked down at her stomach, as if to check its distension. “What do you think?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“What do you think about what I just told you? About having a baby and everything.”

“If you’re pregnant, it could be a very good thing... for both you and your husband.”

“Will it matter if it’s his?” Marilyn asked almost in a whisper, as if she were talking to herself, musing. Or, perhaps, pleading.

“Do you think it might be someone else’s?” *Gottenyu*. This woman would do anything...

Marilyn nodded.

“Do you want to talk about this?”

She shrugged. “It could be Milton’s. I couldn’t let everything... I couldn’t be cold to him. Arthur was killing him. I couldn’t take myself away from Milton. He only needed me a little bit.”

Dr. Kris nodded. “All right, perhaps -”

“It could have been someone else, too, a senator I know, who came to England to see me. In secret. It was only one night. Or Joe.”

“Joe?”

“DiMaggio.” She snapped at the therapist. “My ex-husband. He’s never been right since the divorce. I can’t help how I feel about him. He loves me, he’s always loved me, and he deserves better than what I gave him. I feel sorry for him, but...” She shrugged, as if sloughing off the memory of Joe DiMaggio, and said, “It *could* be Jimmy’s baby.”

“And who is Jimmy?” Dr. Kris asked.

Marilyn answered in a soft, little girl voice. “James Dean. He’s my best friend. I only trust Jimmy.”

Dr. Kris sighed - *James Dean. What next?* - but softly. Marilyn didn’t hear her.

“Do you think it matters who’s the father?” Marilyn asked.

“What do you think?”

“I think no matter whose it is, it will be Arthur’s. But you know what?”

“What.”

The grandfather clock between the east windows bonged ten times. Westminster chimes.

“I hope it’s Jimmy’s.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be Arthur’s, no matter what, like I told you, but if it was Jimmy’s, it would be more mine.”

Dr. Kris finally took a note, and Marilyn looked up at her expectantly. Now she was radiant as a new bride a new mother a child, and as blond and hopeful as the morning sun warming the cold emptiness of the therapist’s apartment.

\* \* \* \*

Marilyn’s apartment on the thirteenth floor of 444 East Fifty-Seventh Street was a freeze-frame snowstorm, a glacier: walls and ceilings painted chalk white, a mirrored living room expanding her life into cocaine infinities. Living room, dining room, bath room, bedroom, empty, achingly white cold white lactescent white stone white bed... white Franklin baby grand piano - her mother’s; ivory chess pieces adrift, suspended on snow white and slush-white squares; eggshell chairs, pearl sofa, frosted draperies and lily soft shag carpet; white motes of down in the air, snow... blond visions behind dark glasses. But shadows were everywhere, impurities, objects, dark, discordant discolorations: books with garish and pastel covers piled on tables and chairs and scattered on the floor, gilt framed photographs of Abraham Lincoln hanging all in a row, the muddy ribbon of the East River seen through a living room window.

Down the hall was Arthur’s study, a smoky, wood-panelled, masculine cave of a room. A man’s room. Marilyn and her decorator John Moore had designed it.

Arthur was away in the country, and Marilyn was home in bed.

On the cross-legged night table beside her were tissues, a long-necked decanter of Portuguese sherry, a water tumbler and half-filled glass, a thin book of poetry by Robert Frost, her diary, a phone, and scattered plastic vials of pastel pills.

Marilyn had just overdosed on Dexamyl, amytal, and Phenobarbital because the sonovabitch bastard

gynaecologist had told her she wasn't pregnant. False alarm. But he was a liar, a sonovabitch bastard of a liar. She felt the pills take hold. She was cold and hollow and numb inside. The air whooshed in her ears. The clocks and watches and pendants ticked, counting her out, tick, tock, ticking fucking tocking, and she reached for the faux ivory French phone and dialled Nick Ray's number. Nick knew Jimmy. He was Jimmy's director. He would get a message to Jimmy. Jimmy had left her. How could he do that? She needed him right the fuck now because Arthur needed to be alone in Amagansett, Long Island to get his creative self back. She had a good head for numbers, one, two, three, she would dial all the numbers in the world.

A voice as faraway as childhood answered the phone.

Maybe it was Nick. Maybe it wasn't. She told him to get a message to Jimmy, *"I love him, tell him that, you know how much I love him, and I'm sorry that everything is over, but that's the best thing for everybody, and tell him that I'm -"*

Asleep, dreaming with the angels, floating through Phenobarbital clouds of poetry. She tried to reach for her diary and a pen, but her arm weighed a thousand pounds and her hand was a white, squashed spider. A poem had come to her, full and rich and finished, and if she didn't write it down, she'd forget it. She had to tell Robert Frost, *oh how I love Robert Frost*, and she remembered hours spent with the poet, but right now minutes might be hours, or maybe she had it backwards, and hours were minutes, minutes seconds, and she would fall asleep and die without writing down her poem. The words, so cold and profound...

Robert...

*From time to time*

*I make it rhyme,*

*but don't hold that kind*

*of thing*

*against*

*me -*

*Oh well, what the hell,*

*so it won't sell.*

*What I want to tell -*

*is what's on my mind:*

*'taint Dishes,*

*'taint Wishes,  
it's thoughts  
flinging by  
before I die -  
and to think  
in ink.*

She giggled and mumbled, "Robert, Robert, don't let me die..."

"Jimmy, Arthur, Milton bye bye bye."

[<<Contents>>](#)

\* \* \* \*

### **Johnny Cash**

BEN PEEK

Ben Peek is a Sydney based author. He's published fiction, poetry and criticism. His short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy One*, *Leviathan 4: Cities*, and *Forever Shores*, as well as the magazines *Aurealis*, *Full Unit Hookup*, and *Ticonderoga Online*. His dystopian novel *Black Sheep* will be published in 2006 by Prime Books. He keeps a blog at <http://benpeek.livejournal.com/>

About 'Johnny Cash', he writes, "A few years back I bought the *Complete Short Stories of JG Ballard*. It's about twelve thousand pages long. Over the years I've made my way through it while using it to crush children and animals when necessary. I discovered the form for 'Johnny Cash' in one of the stories in the book called 'Answers to a Questionnaire' and, basically, I wanted to use the form. Hence this story. Ballard used 100 answers, and I used 50, which I thought made the result tighter, but check out both and see for yourself."



\* \* \* \*

- 1) Benjamin Li.
- 2) 12/8/56.
- 3) China.
- 4) Between Seattle and Beijing.
- 5) Divorced, two children, one dog, seven tropical fish.
- 6) I ran the Occult Research Division of BrandyCorp.
- 7) Eight years.
- 8) Before that I was primarily a freelance contractor, but I spent seven years in the employment of the Reagan Administration and, later, three in Fox Networks.
- 9) Nick Carlton was the owner of BrandyCorp.
- 10) I reported to the managing director, Amanda Tae.
- 11) I had very little contact with Mr. Carlton, but it was obvious that he was a magician. I do not know what god or goddess he took his power from, if any.
- 12) No. I watched Ronald Reagan cut the living heart out of a thirteen-year-old girl to feed an Astoteele demon at dinner. By the end of the night, the president had formed a pact with the demon's family to ensure that a low-grade hypnotic suggestion would be projected through his voice whenever it was electronically played. In comparison, no, I did not have any moral objection to Mr. Carlton.

- 13) BrandyCorp did not sanction any religion.
- 14) Supposed Son of God.
- 15) Well, three days after I dissected him, he did not rise.
- 16) Why would I want to eat the flesh of a fake messiah? Don't be stupid.
- 17) John Doe (he refused to give his real name) was still alive when he was brought to me. He had a broken leg, and bruises from the plastic bullets that had been used to incapacitate him. Otherwise, he was a healthy thirty-two-year-old Caucasian male.
- 18) Angry. We had stopped him from attending a sold-out faith healing event in Florida that had been organized by the Republicans.
- 19) Mr. Carlton did visit him. Twice, in fact.
- 20) Their first conversation was about Johnny Cash. They shared a cigarette through the bars of Doe's cell and discussed the line in the song 'The Man in Black' about Jesus, love, and charity, and how Mr. Carlton thought it was out of place in a song he otherwise agreed with. But yet, Carlton said, flicking tobacco off his fingers, Cash still wore the black.
- 21) A second conversation took place a week later. It was private and ended with Mr. Carlton ordering Doe's execution.
- 22) I can only speculate on what they spoke about.
- 23) Lethal injection.
- 24) Before his death, John Doe said quietly, "I have done so much wrong."
- 25) The demon attacks began shortly after that. Employees of BrandyCorp were issued with

various talismans: chicken feet charms, demon-touched crosses, braids made from the hair of murder victims, and hands of glory.

26) A memo from Mr. Carlton on the 19th was the last I heard from him, but Amanda Tae claimed to be in contact with him until the end.

27) The memo talked primarily about the goals of the Republican Administration, but also made a reference to the Johnny Cash music that was being piped into the building. I believe it was Cash's entire oeuvre, including the rare live covers, and on continual repeat. I read the memo while listening to Johnny Cash sing 'Wanted Man'.

28) Amanda Tae instructed us to stay away from Texas and Washington.

29) No. She sent me to Texas.

30) It was the 20th of May, around two weeks before Reagan's death.

31) Empty. There wasn't a soul there.

32) I was sent to deal with the previously mentioned Astoteele demon family. The family was well kept and living in a fortified compound. Two days later, with only three fingers remaining on my left hand, an empty bag of charms, every spell I knew exhausted, and favours owing to a swamp witch, the demons were killed. Not banished, but killed. Every black ounce of their family removed from every plane of existence. The result was that for the first time since Reagan, a president spoke to the country without hypnotic suggestion in his voice.

33) Redemption.

34) The White House retaliated by killing Ronald Reagan.

35) It wasn't a very subtle reaction. The Reagan funeral procession was so heavy handed that my eight-year-old son in Beijing could taste the blood sacrifices tied to the body and coffin. Still, it stopped a nation from paying too much attention to what the President said, and the fact that everyone in Texas was dead. The funeral speeches from the remaining living presidents were meant to ensure that the new hypnotic spell would be as strong as that provided by the Astoteele demon.

36) I did not know that Mr. Carlton planned to visit the coffin, but in hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised.

37) Initially, there were no spells. He used a grenade.

38) At the time I was enchanting chicken feet and listening to Johnny Cash's 'Ring of Fire'.

39) On that video was the last I saw of Mr. Carlton.

40) No.

41) I do not know where he is, but I doubt he is dead. When the guards rushed him, you could see him smiling. He lifted those silver pistols, began firing, and smiled. In my experience, no man dies smiling.

42) The guns were the spell.

43) The two pistols are more important than anything else. That's all you ever hear about in press releases or news reports. There is no mention of a body. Just those American guns, speaking to an American audience.

44) No.

45) It was only a matter of time until BrandyCorp's defences were broken. Amanda Tae and I had been organizing the slow evacuation of the staff since my return from Texas. We replaced workers and families with flesh replicas, though the replicas were only good for six weeks after being taken from their plastic wrapping. They decompose like real flesh, eventually.

46) Amanda Tae and I would be the last to leave. Captain of the ship, that sort of thing, though to be honest, there was more to it. A loyalty. However, we planned to have the remaining staff out within three days, but then midweek our defences broke. The walls cracked. The smell of rotting flesh grew. Johnny Cash stopped singing.

- 47) I told you: Redemption.
- 48) I knew the girl that Reagan crouched over.
- 49) It's an election year. Mr. Carlton was, I think, one of those men who believed in the people. You listen to enough Johnny Cash and you begin to see that.
- 50) There was no success in the end. We failed.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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### **The Red Priest's Homecoming**

DIRK FLINTHART

In the wake of a chequered career in the public service and elsewhere, Dirk Flinthart now lives relatively quietly in Tasmania with his three children, his long-suffering wife, and a variety of animals. These days, he works mostly in speculative fiction, with short stories in horror, sf and fantasy appearing in a range of Australian publications. Like any good writer, his interests are way too numerous to list, but he's currently active in martial arts, photography, Irish music - and excessively extensive house renovations. He is not a fictional character, no matter what John Birmingham may say about it."

About this story, Dirk writes: "I got started reading fantasy and SF when I was a kid, and my early favourites included many in the 'heroic fantasy' tradition, like Fritz Leiber, C.L Moore, Michael Moorcock, Roger Zelazny and yes, even Robert Howard. Faced by the current avalanche of Tolkien-derived five-volume trilogies of generic Save-The-World-From-The-Evil-Overlord stuff, I decided to have a go at creating my own larger-than-life hero. It seems to have worked. There will be more Red Priest stories."

\* \* \* \*

# I

n the dark of the alleyway, Antonio Dellaforte paused and glanced behind him yet again. Not once in all the long, circuitous walk back from his tryst with the lovely Alegrezza Scarpano had he seen anything suspicious, or out of place - and yet, the hairs on the back of his neck prickled as he peered into the shadows.

Still nothing.

With a tense laugh at himself, Antonio vaulted to the top of a rain barrel, straightened, and swung his weight onto the terracotta tiles that roofed the stables. A quick scramble up the steeply pitched surface, then a simple lift of the body, and Antonio was up and over the tiny balcony under the window of his own room.

A last look over his shoulder revealed a man standing in the mouth of the alley that Antonio had just left - a strange, scarlet-clad figure with the biretta of a prince of the Church, and the hafts of twin swords protruding above his shoulders. Even as Antonio watched, the man in red lifted his head and seemed to gaze up at him. For an instant, they locked eyes across the distance, and Antonio felt an uncanny chill. Then the stranger turned away and vanished into the crowded square beyond.

Had he been following Antonio? Or was he merely another of the myriads of wildly costumed revellers of Carnevale?

Thoughts of Carnevale brought Antonio to his senses with a jolt. The masquerade! He was late already. Any more delay and his grandmother would flay him!

Cursing softly, Antonio tore off his outer clothing. The simple domino mask he had worn was good enough for the streets of Venezia, but hardly acceptable for the only son of the Dellaforte family at their own Grand Masque. He struggled into the costume that his grandmother had chosen for him, an infernally complex construction of shining satin and watered silk braced with leather, brass and whalebone. Not until the last of the pieces was buckled into place did he look into the mirror of silvered glass and groan.

He was a fish. The reason was obvious enough: the three salmon of the Dellaforte arms. Nevertheless, he was still just a fish. For just an instant, he considered wearing formal black, with a black leather domino. Understated amongst the gaudy costumes sure to fill the ballroom, perhaps he might generate an air of mystery and maturity. At least he wouldn't look like a fish.

On the other hand, Luciana Dellaforte herself had ordered the costume. Antonio sighed, and lowered his

head.

Resigned to his fate, he detoured past the kitchens on the way to the grand ballroom, acquiring a tray of fine pastries and a bottle of the sweet French wine his grandmother favoured. Thus prepared, he made his way to the high balcony where he knew she would be waiting.

Like a box at the theatre, the balcony had been purpose-designed for watching what went on below. Though the grand ballroom was all of a splendour with hundreds of lanterns of vivid Murano glass, the balcony itself lay in shadow. All but invisible to the revellers below, a watcher from the balcony could easily make out individuals, read lips, sometimes even hear entire conversations. For a moment, Antonio let himself enjoy the spectacle. Musicians filled the air with the sweet sound of flutes, viols and drums. In one corner, a performer in parti-coloured tights juggled flaming sticks, pausing now and again to puff firebursts into the air from his lips. In the centre of the floor, dozens of couples danced a stately pavane, brilliantly coloured costumes turning and swaying to the rhythm of the music. Scores of others clustered around tables that groaned with wines and cordials of France and Spain and spiced foods from the fabled Indies and the Orient, or simply toasted one another with the largesse of the Dellaforte. Altogether, more than a hundred of the richest and most powerful of the Republic of Venezia revelled at the Carnevale Masque of the Dellaforte.

“Tonio.” At the rail of the balcony stood Luciana Dellaforte. Though her voice was soft, it carried perfectly, even over the music and hubbub. “How pleasant to find you here.”

Antonio bowed carefully, keeping the tray level. Now was not the time to spill anything. “Grandmother,” he said. “Your favourites, I think.”

“Please, Tonio,” said Luciana with a smile. She poured a measure of wine, which gave Antonio some little hope that her temper might be softened. “You have seventeen years now. It makes me feel old to have a young man calling me ‘grandmother’. I believe you can pronounce ‘Luciana’, can you not?”

Certainly, she did not look the part of a grandmother. Her black velvet gown clung to an elegantly curved body the envy of women half her age, and her fine, dark hair was still soft and lustrous. If there were lines upon her face, they were well earned, as she often said, and her skin was supple and smooth as a milkmaid’s. Antonio knew his grandmother took pride in the fact that men’s heads still turned for her - and also that she used her looks the way an assassin used the stiletto. Therefore, he lifted the tray and inclined his head, saying: “I will try to remember, Luciana. It is hard to change the habits of a life overnight, I fear.”

She raised a goblet of fine glass to lips no less red than the wine she sipped, and allowed herself to peer over the railing once more. “An excellent vantage point,” said Luciana. Then she shook her head. “Such expense! Tell me, Tonio - what do you think of all this money we are spending tonight? Money spent

today is money which tomorrow might have been yours, no?"

Her tone was light, but Antonio feared the depths that lay beneath. Clearly, she had not yet forgiven him his late arrival; even less would she forgive him ignorance. "Grandmother," he said, then stopped as she raised a warning finger. "Luciana. It is not yet for me to say how the family will spend its money. Nonetheless, I understand what we are doing here tonight."

Luciana looked back over her shoulder, pinning him with a cat-green stare. "Do you really, Tonio? Enlighten me."

Greatly daring, he leaned on the ornamented railing next to her. "We are close to gaining a seat on the Council of Ten. For this, we need the support of others, both of the Ten and elsewhere. Yet the easiest way to lose such support is to show that it is needed. Therefore, we spend money to show our power and position, and to buy friends for our cause."

Once again, his grandmother stared at him, unblinking behind her black velvet domino. "Your father is ill, Tonio," she said at last. "I am no longer young. It is true we have powerful allies and clever advisors, yes. But we have enemies, too. Therefore, more is needed, Tonio. Behind the power and the money, directing the advisors, satisfying the allies and destroying the enemies, there must be a Dellaforte with a strong will and a sharp mind. There," she stabbed out with a finger, indicating a man disguised as the bronze giant Tantalus. "There is Pascal Colonna. Is he our friend?"

"No, grandmother," said Antonio. "He loathes our family for the fleet he lost to us."

"Yet soon he will vote us a place on the Council of Ten, in exchange for certain concessions in turmeric and cardamom. Does that not make him our friend?"

He stiffened with contempt. "No."

"Indeed," said Luciana. "Him, there -" she pointed to a man dressed in blue and green, carrying the trident of Neptune, King of the Sea. "Admiral D'Agenzia of the fleet. Is he our friend?"

Antonio frowned. What was she asking? Surely the answers she sought were obvious. Nervously, he licked his lips and tried to compose a reply. "From my youngest days, I have heard the story of how Pietro D'Agenzia gave my grandfather his first command. You yourself have told me that the money for our first ship came from the D'Agenzia coffers. I have sat upon his knee, and played at soldiers with his grandsons. If Pietro D'Agenzia is not our friend, then we have no friends."



“Closer still to wisdom.” She took another sip of wine and dabbed absently at the corner of her full mouth. “Only the poor can afford the luxury of friendship, Tonio. We are rich. We do not have friends. There are people whose interests align with ours, and people who oppose our interests, and some who have not yet declared themselves. That is all. Consider: the Bishop Calanza, there. Do you see him?”

“Dressed as a Saracen?” Assuming, of course, the gaily coloured robes and extravagantly pointed helmet were intended to convey a Saracen. Antonio had never heard of a Saracen as fat as Rambaldo Calanza, but perhaps it was possible.

“Calanza would be our enemy, if he could.” Luciana smiled then, a wide, slow smile that made her look almost predatory in the shifting light. “To do that, however, he would first need to discover the whereabouts of a certain young catamite, and his keeper. So long as I know where to find those two and Calanza does not, his interests align with ours. Do you see?”

“I think I do.” In fact, Antonio saw something rather different in the maelstrom of colour below - a flash of scarlet? It was hard to be certain, with so many coloured lanterns. He blinked, and focussed his eyes again.

“You say this,” said Luciana. “But I think you have much to learn, Tonio. Does it occur to you to wonder why I know of the catamite at all? Or where he might have come from? Or how much all this may have cost? What kind of favours we may owe? Yes, and what of the Doge himself, there,” she pointed, “in the cloth-of-gold costume that our house had the honour of purchasing for this occasion?”

“Please, Luciana,” Antonio interrupted, with courage he had not been certain that he owned. “I am sorry to cut short your words, but I have seen something...” Cautiously, he moved back from the railing and pointed with a finger into the crowd by the trestles. “Who is that person?” said Antonio. “What is his name, and how does he come to be here?”

“That is -” Luciana frowned, her fine brows drawing together. She leaned out slightly, and tilted her head so that her darkly gleaming tresses fell softly over one white shoulder. “I believe that is... no. Your eyes are younger than mine, Antonio. Tell me what you see.”

“I see a man clad head to toe in a scarlet robe like a cassock, with a scarlet biretta upon his head, and two swords slung crosswise upon his back.” He glanced at Luciana, and was startled to see her eyes narrowed to green slits.

“Who dares?” hissed his grandmother. “Who dares bring that costume into my house?”

“Grandmother?” Antonio took a half-step back, and craned his neck to peer over the railing.

“Go and find the Byzantine, Antonio,” said Luciana. Her gaze never left the man in scarlet, who stood quietly in the shadow of a doorway, munching a pastry. “Tell him we have an uninvited guest who is to be removed without disturbing the masque. And Tonio,” her voice was silky again, but Antonio shuddered inwardly. “Tell the Byzantine that I do not expect this person to return.”

Antonio hesitated. Phraxas - the Byzantine, to Luciana - was head of the Dellaforte house guard, and likewise in charge of providing security to Dellaforte interests wherever they might be. A smiling, friendly little Greek man, he took his job very seriously indeed. Luciana’s unequivocal message could only result in a scarlet-clad corpse surfacing in one of Venezia’s less frequented canals in a week or so. With a momentary pang, Antonio quieted his conscience. He offered a silent bow to his grandmother, and went in search of Phraxas the Byzantine.

Dressed incongruously as a brown velvet mouse and nibbling pistachios from Persia, Phraxas lounged with apparent ease, next to a niche with a marble of St Martin, the Dellaforte patron. He nodded curtly in reply to the message from Luciana.

“I wondered how long the Old One would tolerate such a thing,” he said. Phraxas always referred to Luciana as ‘the Old One’. He was the only person in the household who could get away with it. “He came by the side entrance not ten minutes gone. Go you and watch, boy, that he does not slip away. I will bring Grigori and the Florentine. When you see my sign, go and make conversation with this person. I will come upon him from behind, and he will suffer a spell of fainting, eh?” He grinned wickedly from behind his mouse mask, his gold tooth glinting.

“A moment, Phraxas,” said Antonio. “I do not know this man, I think, although perhaps I recall something about his costume. He poses as the infamous condottiere known as the Red Priest, does he not? What is it about him that angers grandmother so?”

The little Byzantine regarded him with glittering eyes. “Truly, you do not know?” At Antonio’s shrug, he continued. “It is a double jest, of the poorest taste. The costume itself, with the biretta - the man apes a prince of your Church, which is bad enough. But the scarlet robe and the two swords across the back: these are worse. You have guessed aright: he dresses as the heretic called the Red Priest, a mercenary soldier. But this Red Priest: he goes by the name of Deilaforte!” He grinned again, delighted by Antonio’s gasp of surprise. “Insult upon insult, eh? And in the very Deilaforte Palazzo, on the night that the Doge is to announce a vacancy on the Council of Ten. Such shame! Such embarrassment! It is a wonder the Old One does not wish to tear the skin from his bones with her teeth!”

With that, the Byzantine slid quietly away, leaving Antonio to study the scarlet renegade.

He seemed no more than a man of middling height, of somewhat light build. His black hair was bound in a short braid that curled at its ends, and what could be seen of his skin beneath the scarlet domino was a light golden colour, fine and smooth. The scarlet robe had seen hard wear, although it had once been brocaded, and quite fine. Unlike most of the gaudy costumes in the ballroom, this fellow had tried to dress himself as closely as possible after a true man of arms.

Out of the corner of his eye, Antonio saw the Byzantine mouse, accompanied by a large, shaggy lion and a knight-at-arms in armour of silvered silk. Quickly, he filled two goblets with wine, and lifted them high to catch the eye of the man in red. The stranger, now leaning comfortably with his back in the corner made by the descending grand stair, raised his own glass in reply.

Antonio paused. What now? In the place where the stranger now stood, the Byzantine could not approach unseen. Yet Luciana Deilaforte had been most specific in her instructions, and Antonio knew what would befall him if he allowed the masquerade to be disturbed against her wishes. Smiling widely behind his salmon-mask, he waved one arm in a friendly come-hither fashion. The stranger in red smiled just as widely, and signalled likewise.

Exasperated, Antonio lifted his mask and called. "Well met, stranger," he said, pitching his voice to carry through the music and laughter. "Come and share a cup!"

Whatever the other might have said, Antonio could not make it out, for quite abruptly, his free arm was seized, and a girlish voice cried: "A fine! A fine for Antonio Dellaforte, unmasked before the hour is called!" The cry was quickly taken up by those nearby, and Antonio groaned. A dozen willing hands emptied a nearby table, and Antonio was unceremoniously urged to climb aboard. Feeling utterly foolish in his clumsy, garish costume, Antonio mounted the table and danced a country jig to a tune obligingly provided by the musicians. Amidst the laughter and applause, there was nothing to be gained by resisting churlishly. He could only hope that the Byzantine and his cohorts could resolve the matter without him.

At last, the good-natured crowd agreed that Antonio had redeemed himself, and he was allowed to rejoin the masqued revellers. Yet where was the man in scarlet? And likewise, the Byzantine and his mismatched companions? A flash of red amongst the dancers caught his eye. The music had changed to a sprightly roundel, and partnering his own sister Zaneta in her mermaid costume of green and silver was the stranger in red.

His mouth a grim line, Antonio scanned the ballroom. There was no trace of Phraxas. Try as he might, he couldn't even make out his grandmother in the darkened eyrie of the balcony. After a momentary agony

of uncertainty, he shook his head. Let the Byzantine fare as he may. Antonio would wait for the music to end, and assert the privilege of a host and brother in seeking a dance. At the very least, it would keep Zaneta clear of the stranger and give the Byzantine room to move.

He had not kept track of the time, however. As the music ended and he closed on the pair, the cry went up: "Midnight! Midnight and the unmasking! The masquerade is ended!"

Immediately, servants lit the great whale-oil lanterns and the myriad tall, white candelabra. The rainbow of coloured lamplight gave way to a glittering luminescence that penetrated to the darkest corners of the great room, revealing all. Peals of laughter rang out as masques were abandoned and identities disclosed at last.

Without the foolish biretta or his scarlet domino, the stranger was a striking young man with the golden brown skin of Cathay, and a strong, fine nose. He declined a kiss from Zaneta, preferring instead to bow over her slender white hand. As he righted himself, his startlingly dark eyes, only slightly tilted after the fashion of the Easterners, lighted upon Antonio pushing through the happy crowd, and he smiled brilliantly.

"Aha, cousin," said the man in scarlet. "Well met at last!" He kept Zaneta's hand in his own, and she nodded gravely to Antonio.

"Cousin?" said Antonio. He glanced quickly about, but there was no sign of the Byzantine, nor any other who might help.

A movement from the man in red brought Antonio's attention back. For the moment, he must needs play the host. One day, he would have to manage the fortunes of the Dellaforte family for himself. No doubt he could deal with the matter before him. "Your pardon, Signore," he continued. "I believe you are mistaken. I am Antonio Dellaforte, son of that Jacopo Dellaforte who hosts this gathering."

"I know," said the stranger, regarding Antonio closely. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. You have the family look about you, I think."

Antonio smiled carefully, for he saw that many of the guests had contrived to be near this scarlet-clad stranger for the unmasking. They waited for Antonio to reveal his identity to the public. "I know you not, Signore," he said easily. "How is it you know this family look of the Dellaforte?"

The stranger nodded. "Forgive me," he said. "I have yet to introduce myself. " He turned slightly, and

raised his voice so that it could be heard over the hubbub in the crowded ballroom. "I am the man they call the Red Priest," he said. Instantly, the assembled guests grew silent. "I am Tomaso Dellaforte, son of Niccolo Dellaforte who went to Cathay nearly thirty years ago, and I have come home." He swept a deep bow, releasing Zaneta who instinctively moved to her brother's side.

Suddenly the babble started once again, redoubled in its intensity.

There was a ringing in Antonio's ears, and he cursed the youthful flush he felt in his cheeks. Doubtless he gaped like the fish whose costume he wore. Worse, though he knew how callow he must look, he could find no way to recover. The audacity of the man! Despite the command of the Doge himself that there should be no duelling in Carnevale, Antonio found his hand upon the hilt of his sword, his pulse racing. For a moment, he hung upon the very edge of fury - and then by a miracle, his grandmother was there, cool and elegant with her sharp eyes and her quick wit. With her hand upon his shoulder, Antonio felt himself relax. Luciana Dellaforte would know how to deal with this supposed Red Priest.

"Tomaso Dellaforte," she said, in her quiet but penetrating voice. She nodded slowly, her raven-dark hair moving about her face like silk. "It is a good name. It is a name my Nico might have chosen."

"It is the name he chose, grandmother," said the Red Priest, and his quaintly accented tones were stainlessly polite. "But he was not your Nico. You and everyone else called him 'Colo'." He smiled, then, a very natural-seeming expression, and took Luciana Dellaforte's hand in his own. "He called me Tomaso, for your father," he said. "Even as Jacopo was to name his first son Antonio, for my grandfather, your husband."

Luciana withdrew her hand swiftly, yet with grace. Her voice was still calm and friendly, but there was a light in her eyes that Antonio knew only too well. "You know the family histories, I see. Doubtless you have seen the letters we sent to Niccolo," she said.

"Both of them," said the Red Priest, and there was a hardness in his eyes that matched hers. "He treasured them. One arrived before I was born. I remember the other. He made himself wait two full days before he opened it, so that I could be there when he read it. I was only nine. I did not truly understand what Venezia meant to my father; only that it made him happy to speak of it, and so I listened."

Antonio glanced about. The cluster of onlookers surrounding them had become a true circle, with himself, Zaneta, Luciana and this so-called cousin near the centre. People stared openly, and whispered to one another behind their hands. Despite his grandmother's presence, Antonio felt his ears begin to burn. "Enough of this," he burst out. "Who put you up to this? Who paid you for these lies? Was it Colonna gold that brought you here? I will kill them, I swear it. I will call them into the street and slaughter them like pigs!" Spittle burst from his mouth with those last words, and Antonio realized to his utter

mortification that the room had fallen silent.

The Red Priest shot him a look of innocence. "Calm yourself, cousin," he urged. "I have spoken only the truth. Would you care to see the documents? My father - your uncle - married well in Cathay. My mother was daughter to the Great Khan. I have with me the scroll that attests to her lineage, another which confirms the marriage, and still another marking my own birth." He paused, and shrugged. "The Yuan Court of the Great Khan is somewhat obsessive about such things. They have been known to issue official scrolls to mark the loss of a royal tooth."

"Marriage?" Luciana pounced. "Without the sanction of the Church, what marriage can there be?"

"Exactly as my father felt," agreed the Red Priest without hesitation. "Fortunately, in the year of Our Lord twelve-ninety-four, two years before my father arrived, Father Giovanni da Montecorvino was dispatched by His Holiness Nicholas IV to convert the folk of Cathay. It was Gianni - I knew him thus in my childhood - who confirmed my mother in the True Faith. Likewise it was he who carried out the ceremony for my mother and my father, and it is his seal, with the very authority of the Pope himself, which attests to my birth. My father planned carefully against our return to Venezia," he said. Then the skin around his eyes tightened very slightly, and his voice softened. "I am sorry he could not see this day. He spoke often of his home here, and his family."

There was a pause. Luciana stared imperiously at the young man in scarlet, who lifted his chin almost imperceptibly. For a moment, Antonio felt a crackling, sparking sensation from the very air between the two, and his hackles lifted. At his side, Zaneta shrank back.

Then Luciana drew a deep breath. She looked about her, noting the fascinated onlookers, and she narrowed her eyes. "Where is my 'Colo now?"

"Alas," said the Red Priest, his voice cold as the wind from the steppes. "Niccolo Dellaforte, your eldest son and my father, is dead these fourteen years. By law of primogeniture, therefore, the estates of the Dellaforte fall to myself." He spoke without inflection, but so clearly and boldly that his words carried to the farthest corners of the grand ballroom, and in their wake the noise of the crowd redoubled.

"Out!" cried Luciana in a terrible voice. "All of you, be gone. I declare the masquerade ended." With a visible effort, she mastered herself. "Jacopo Dellaforte, master of the Dellaforte fortunes, thanks you all for your kind attendance, and hopes that we will see you again in the near future. Wine and food will be served in the courtyard. The musicians will follow, and play until dawn." She whirled, and confronted the Red Priest once more. "Not you," she snapped. "I have much to say to you."

“Unfortunately,” said the Red Priest with a savage grin, “I have pressing engagements elsewhere. Your hospitality has been magnificent. I will certainly call upon you tomorrow, if it suits.” He bowed deeply, with a flourish of gloved hands.

“It does not,” said Luciana. Her brows lowered, and she fixed the Red Priest with a poisonous glare. “You will remain.”

The young man looked about, dismissing with a single, contemptuous glance the Dellaforte retainers who were herding the crowd of revellers through the great doors. “You mean to imprison me,” he said lightly. “Perhaps you should reconsider. I am, after all, a properly invited guest. It would reflect poorly upon the hospitality of the Dellaforte. Certainly, it would not impress those who are even now considering you for a position on the Council of Ten.” From a pocket somewhere under his scarlet robe, he produced an elaborate parchment, complete with the Dellaforte seal.

Antonio started. He had written those invitations himself, and he was absolutely certain that he had written none to a ‘Tomaso Dellaforte, called the Red Priest’ - and yet there it was, in his own handwriting. “How did you come by this?” he demanded.

The Red Priest affected a slight shrug. “As any guest. A messenger brought it, and when I saw what it was, I decided the time had come for a long-delayed family reunion. Now I choose to take my leave. Until the morrow!” He inclined his head ever so slightly, and spun to join the retreating crowd.

Antonio’s hand fell to the hilt of his sword, yet even as it did so he felt his grandmother’s smooth, soft hand fall upon his arm.

“No,” said Luciana softly. “He has the right of it. For good or ill, he is a guest here. We will see what the morrow brings, Tonio.” She shook her head slowly. “To think that my ‘Colo fathered such a one.’”

“You don’t believe his story, grandmother!” Antonio stepped back, and shook off her hand. “He is an adventurer, a brigand seeking notoriety. My uncle’s disappearance is common knowledge. This is nothing more than lies and extortion.”

“No,” said Luciana Dellaforte, and there was a faraway look in her dark eyes. “You never knew my ‘Colo, but a mother never forgets. Even a generation gone, I know my son, Tonio.’”

From one of the exits, a liveried Dellaforte guard approached, and bowed to Luciana. “Lady,” he said in a low voice, without raising his head. “The Byzantine has been found with his neck broken at the bottom

of the stairs to the wine cellar, shattered glass and wine all about him. It is thought that he drank too deeply, and fell down the steps.”

“Phraxas!” cried Antonio. This time, his grandmother’s hand fell upon his shoulder, but he shook it off and stalked away, hot fury stinging his eyes. If only he had chosen to look for the Byzantine, instead of playing chaperone upon his sister. “He was not drunk, grandmother. I know this! The red-handed bastard has a confederate in the house.” Or worse, he realized. Perhaps the Red Priest fell upon Phraxas unawares while Antonio played the fool, dancing for the crowd upon a tabletop. He gave a great groan. “Ahh, Phraxas, my friend. I will finish this for you. Upon my name, I swear it.”

“Antonio,” said Luciana warningly. “This is not for you.”

He whirled. “Oh, I know my place, grandmother,” he stressed the title sardonically. “Little fish Antonio the obedient; that’s me. You needn’t fear for me, grandmother. I go to pay my respects to my dead friend Phraxas. I would never even dream of seeking retribution for him, no matter how cruelly murdered.” At least, he thought, as he turned and strode into the darkness of the inner house, not while I am dressed after the family coat of arms...

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Antonio Dellaforte clung to the shadows on the Via Canale. Ahead, his quarry moved in a swirl of scarlet among the throngs of late-night Carnevale revellers. Though it had taken time and coin to find him, it was no task at all to follow an enemy so bold as to dress head-to-toe in the red of fresh-spilled blood. Nonetheless young Antonio moved with care. The Red Priest was a notorious villain, come but lately from the scene of a murder. He would be wary.

Down the crooked street went the Red Priest, threading the crowds purposefully at such a pace that Antonio had to move swiftly to keep him in sight. In a flash of red, he turned down a darkened side street. By the time Antonio reached the corner, the Red Priest was gone, vanished into the gloom.

For a moment, Antonio vacillated. Perhaps he should turn back? After all, Venezia was not so large that a man such as the Red Priest could hide for long from a determined search. Indeed, the man had promised he would return to the Palazzo Dellaforte on the morrow. That promise, offered with careless insouciance in the very face of the armed Dellaforte retainers, burned in Antonio’s memory, urging him against his better judgment down the dark and narrow side street. Balling his fists, he hesitated. Then, with a deep breath he clapped his hand to the hilt of his sword and strode into the darkness.

Just five paces later, something struck him stingingly across the nose. Blinking, Antonio staggered. A grip



of forged steel seized his hand and twisted. Unable to resist, Antonio lunged forward to prevent his wrist snapping, only to have his invisible assailant reverse the twist with brutal force. Desperate to save his arm, Antonio leapt up and backwards. His enemy yanked the trapped wrist, and Antonio smashed to the cobbles on his back. His teeth came together sharply, and hot blood filled his mouth. Then the grip on his wrist turned yet again, and Antonio flopped onto his belly like a stranded fish, the pinioned arm bending agonizingly up behind his back. A hard knee descended between his shoulder blades, holding the much-abused arm in place while a strong hand gripped his hair and yanked Antonio's head backwards. Cold steel kissed his throat.

Then it stopped.

"Ho. It's only you," said an all-too-familiar voice. The grip on Antonio's hair relaxed, and he banged his already stinging nose on the stones of the street. "Get up, boy," said the Red Priest.

Fury clouding his vision, Antonio scrambled to his feet, and yanked at his sword. Instantly, something hard and blunt smashed into his forearm, paralysing his fingers with jagged shards of pain. "Dio mio!" swore the young man, clutching the injury with his other hand. "You are a devil!"

"You're not the first to say so, cousin," replied the Red Priest. "Have no fear. I use not magic, but knowledge and skill. Be grateful. You will have the use of your hand again in an hour or so. Had I chosen, I could have snapped your arm in a dozen places when I threw you to the ground."

"Do not dare to call me cousin," cried Antonio, blinking back tears of rage. "You lie! You are an infamous liar. You are a heretic and a renegade, a traitor and a black liar. You are no Dellaforte, nor ever could be."

There was a sudden swirl in the darkness, nothing more. Then Antonio found himself pinioned against a wall of brick, two razor-keen blades crossed against his throat. He closed his eyes, and swallowed.

"Heretic, yes," said the Red Priest, and at last, there was a hint of emotion in his voice - a quivering, as of barely suppressed rage. "Renegade; that too. Traitor to some, though none that have earned my respect. But liar?" With a ringing whisper, the swords vanished. "Never. All that I said to our grandmother in the ballroom was true. Every word, boy. Niccolo Dellaforte, your uncle, was my father." He took a step back.

Cautiously, Antonio rubbed at his throat. Finding no blood, he breathed a little easier.

“Listen to me,” continued the Red Priest. “When our grandfather for whom you are named died, the family had many debts. It was... decided that Jacopo would stay and work as best he could to manage what was left. Meanwhile, my father was to follow in the steps of the Polo family, and make the journey to Cathay to seek a fortune such as Marco Polo brought home.”

Antonio’s eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. He made out the cloaked shape of the Red Priest, backed against the opposite wall of the alley. Though he had lowered his swords, they were still naked in his hands, pointing in opposite directions along the dark and noisome little byway. Did he expect some kind of trouble?

As if reading Antonio’s very mind, the Red Priest broke off his narrative. “This is no place to talk, boy,” he said. “I am expecting unwelcome company. Go home. We can talk on the morrow.”

Stubbornly, Antonio shook his aching head. “I will not. I care nothing for all your documents and seals. I will not accept that you are my uncle’s son, and I will not let you steal away what my father has built in the years since Niccolo Dellaforte ran off. You may have the best of me in the filthy dark, renegade, but I am no mere Greekling you can push down the stairs. I am the scion of the Dellaforte, and I swear to you matters will be different when we meet on the field of honour.”

From the darkness there came a low chuckle. “The field of honour,” said the Red Priest. “Why is it that men always speak of honour when they talk of killing? Forget everything you have heard, little cousin. An honourable killing takes a life as surely as any other murder. I will not meet you, and I will not play by the rules of your duello. Yes, I killed your Byzantine, and it was desperate work in the dark, for whatever you may think, he was quick with his knife. Yet it was he who sought my life, not I who looked to kill him, and I would have let him live, if I could.”

He paused a moment, then drew a deep breath, and continued. “If you come against me, for the memory of my father I will not kill you, but I promise you will wish that I had. Now go home, Antonio Dellaforte. And know this: I want nothing of your father’s fortune. Not a ducat, not a boat, not a brick. Nothing.”

“But you said - You invoked the laws of primogeniture!” Antonio could not believe what he heard. Perhaps thirty years ago the Dellaforte family had more debt than fortune. But under Jacopo’s careful management, the family holdings had grown steadily. Now the Dellaforte were amongst the wealthiest families of Venezia, on the very brink of a seat on the all-powerful Council of Ten. To an adventurer and a mercenary like the Red Priest, such a fortune must be an impossibly tempting target. At the very least, Antonio was certain that his tormentor expected a considerable bribe to drop his claims and disappear.

“Eh? Oh, for -” The Red Priest stopped. “Walk with me, then, cousin. We will talk as we go. I like not this dark corner, and I will be much easier when I am once more amongst friends.” Without sheathing his blades, he turned and strode into the darkness, forcing Antonio to hurry in his wake. “I spoke of

primogeniture, yes. My father was the elder. By the laws of La Serenissima, I may lay claim to the Dellaforte fortunes, if I choose. Yet did you hear me say I so chose?"

Stumbling along in the piss-stinking blackness where the Red Priest glided noiselessly, Antonio was forced to admit he had heard no such thing. "Yet if you choose to make no claim, why have you come?" he said plaintively. "You appeared at the ball uninvited, in your famous garb of scarlet. You unmasked at midnight with the rest, and immediately announced yourself as Tomaso Dellaforte, son of the long-lost Niccolo. You must have known you would be seen by the cream of Venezia."

"It is all one to me," said the Red Priest, without looking back. "I was invited. I chose to come." As they emerged from the darkness of the alleyway into a torch lit courtyard, he swung about and faced his young cousin. "Now, will you go?" He gestured at a heavy door set in the stone wall. "Beyond that door is another courtyard, which backs onto the inn where I am staying. If you come with me through that door, I cannot let you return until I have resolved... certain matters." He cocked his head, and Antonio felt the pressure of his gaze, though he could not pierce the shadows that wrapped the other's face.

"I don't understand." Antonio frowned. He shifted his weight, and flexed his arm carefully. There was some feeling in his fingers again, and he could almost curl his hand into a fist, though the effort sent heavy pulses shooting up to his shoulder. Whatever else this Red Priest had done, he had spoken truly about the damage to the arm. Likewise, there was no denying that he could have not only snapped the arm, but slit Antonio's very throat in that dark place, and none would have been the wiser. Perhaps, Antonio thought grudgingly, there was more to this renegade than the stories gave out.

"Make your choice, boy," said the Red Priest. "I cannot tarry here."

Antonio gritted his teeth. "I will come with you. I have many questions, and I would have the answers before they are the gossip of all Venezia."

The Red Priest watched him for a moment more, then shrugged. "As you will," he said, and turned. "Follow."

He knocked twice against the door, hesitated a slow heartbeat, then knocked three times more. At once, the door opened a crack.

"It is I," said the Red Priest. "I bring my cousin Antonio. Open swiftly, and let us enter."

The door swung wide, and the Red Priest slipped through, with Antonio on his heels.

The courtyard beyond was smaller than the previous one, and the walls were higher. It was well lit with bright lanterns, and a dozen fresh, unlit torches were spaced evenly around the walls. In the centre of the courtyard, a rough wooden table was flanked by two simple benches. A single door on the opposite side of the courtyard was closed. Antonio thought he caught a hint of movement atop one of the walls, but when he looked, there was no-one to be seen.

“What news, Pio?” The Red Priest spoke to the man who had opened the door, and who now closed it with a heavy bar of dark wood.

“Nothing of note, signore,” said Pio. He was a tall, broad man, with steel at his hip and the look of a soldier about him. “You may rest. I will send wine, and food. The others are in place, as you commanded. It would take twenty men to force this yard.”

The Red Priest shook his head. “I expect but one. Tell the others to be on their guard. Shoot first. We can pay a wergild later, if we must.”

The man called Pio saluted roughly, and vanished through the far door.

“Shoot first,” said Antonio, as they settled themselves opposite one another at the table. “Who is it you expect?”

Tomaso Dellaforte smiled, at which Antonio suppressed a shudder. Despite the Red Priest’s youth and undeniable good looks, in his black eyes there lurked a deep coldness untouched by the thin smile on his lips. “You really have no idea?”

“I am no more a liar than you claim to be,” said Antonio. “I am astounded and confused by this night’s events, and I hope for answers from you. Whatever mysteries you pursue, I know naught of them.”

The Red Priest regarded him with those piercing, dark eyes. “Let it be so, then,” he said at last. “What would you have of me, cousin?”

Antonio threw his hands in the air. “Where to begin?” he said. “What happened to my uncle? How is it you have only now come to Venezia, though your infamy is known from the Aegean to the far isles of Albion? When did you return from Cathay? Where is your mother? What do you want with us?”

Across the table eyebrows lifted, and this time there was a genuine warmth to the smile. “A host of questions! Here,” said the Red Priest, and took a jug proffered by the returned Pio, along with a large platter of spiced meats and pickles. “I will pour us both a drink, and we will talk. But you must promise me this, cousin.” He caught Pio by the sleeve, and held him witness. “If this visitor I am expecting comes while we are together, you must move to the farthest corner of the courtyard and stay there, on your life. If you move even a step from that corner, you will be killed, yes, by my orders. It is a dangerous thing I must do here, Antonio Dellaforte, and since I cannot be sure you are not ranged against me, I must be certain you are contained. Do you understand?”

Antonio nodded.

“Good,” said the Red Priest, releasing Pio’s sleeve. “Go now, Pio. Bar the door and guard it. Tell the others what I have said, and remind them that under no circumstances are they to enter this courtyard. They must shoot first, and shoot straight, but they must not stand and fight if our quarry comes against them.”

Wordlessly, Pio took his leave and the Red Priest returned his full attention to Antonio. “Which of your questions shall I answer first?”

“I think I had better know who it is you expect,” said Antonio quietly. “All these precautions against but one man?”

The Red Priest watched him silently, then poured two goblets of dark wine. Antonio noted that his cousin barely half-filled his own drink, though he raised the cup and tasted it with evidence of enjoyment.

“Have you heard tell of an assassin who stalks the nights of Venezia?” said the Red Priest at last.

Antonio shrugged. “Who hasn’t? Venezia is infamous for her killers. Our city is the very home of the stiletto. The stories I have heard of the Red Priest led me to believe you would not fear some bravo with a knife.”

The man in scarlet stroked his chin. “The stories of the Red Priest are told because I am still alive, despite the efforts of many who wish it otherwise. This is because I take precautions as I see fit. Your next question, please.”

The man's secrecy was infuriating, though hardly surprising to one raised upon the convoluted intrigues of the merchant families of Venezia. Antonio sighed, and slouched back on his bench seat. "Tell me about my uncle," he said at last. "Your father."

A faraway look came into the Red Priest's black eyes, and he took a long draught from his goblet before he answered. "I saw little of him, in truth. I know he won through to Cathay in the year twelve ninety-six, in good health and bearing certain letters in the hopes of breaking into the trade for silk, among other things. The Great Khan Yuan Chengzong, recalling the service of the Polos to his predecessor, the Khan Kublai, was well-disposed to the folk of our city, and my father was received graciously. A position was made for him, and he set out to serve the Khan to the best of his ability. He must have succeeded, for the Khan gave one of his own daughters in marriage to my father.

"For the first ten years of my life, I was raised in the great walled city of the Khans. At first, my mother and the women of the palace had care of me, and of this, I recall but little. When I was three years of age, however, a fever took my mother. My father was busy with the work of the Khan, which often took him to far corners of the empire, and so the responsibility for my upbringing was passed to an order of monks native to Cathay. The monks of Xao-lin taught me to read, to write, and to figure. I also learned of them matters of lore, of philosophy, and considerable of physical skill. When my father came for me again, I was eight years old, and he pronounced himself so pleased with the work of the monks that I remained in their tutelage for the next two years, although I lived in my father's house for that time. I came to know him then - a proud man, with a quick mind and a swift wit, but with a deep sadness under the skin. He longed for his homeland, and for the family he left behind."

Once again, the Red Priest paused, and for a moment, closed his eyes. "The second letter from Venezia came not long before my tenth birthday. It spoke of improvement in the family fortunes, but a need for further investment. There were papers for my father to sign. I know he was not altogether happy about this, for he spent many nights in discussion with various of the Khan's court. In the end, it was decided that he and I would make a journey to Venezia, where he would apply himself to the Dellaforte affairs for a time, and leave me to complete my education when he returned to the empire of the Khan. Sadly, our caravan was waylaid by slavers in Turkestan. My father was slain, and I was taken captive, along with several others." His voice was empty of expression.

"Some time later we were rescued, and most of my father's documents were recovered, but by then my destiny had already taken me on a road that turned away from Venezia and the Dellaforte clan." He looked at Antonio, and his expression was merely sad. "I suppose that tells you little of my father. It is strange. Though he is long dead, I still find it hard to speak of him."

The Red Priest's words touched a chord somewhere inside Antonio. Names like Turkestan and Cathay resonated with a kind of haunting romance for him - a sense of sadness, knowing that as the only son of the Dellaforte clan, his place would be here, in Venezia, at the heart of things. What would it be like to travel? To seek the ends of the earth after fortune and adventure, in the manner of his uncle Niccolo, whom he would never know? There would be nothing like that for Antonio Dellaforte: he would come into the estate of manhood in the centre of a great financial web, and become a spider like his father, and

like Luciana before.

Antonio exhaled a soft sigh, and lifted his cup. "To the fallen," he offered.

The Red Priest raised his cup in return. "To the fallen."

There was a soft, heavy thump behind him, and Antonio turned. Something round, like a loaf of bread, rolled across the flagstones, a dark trail unfurling behind it. The thing came to a stop near Antonio's feet, and with a shock, he realized he was looking at a man's head. "Dio mio!" he crossed himself hurriedly, and leapt to his feet, clawing at his sword with his still-throbbing hand.

Instantly, the Red Priest was beside him, murmuring, "He is here." He glanced briefly at the bloodied head, and looked back up to the top of the wall. "Ah, Gunnar," he said. "I told you not to face him with steel. He was not for you."

Another wet thump came, this time from behind the two Dellaforte, and a second head rolled into the centre of the courtyard.

"Pu khai!" snarled the Red Priest. "So fast! He has killed Skouros too!" He rounded on Antonio. "It seems I am forced to trust you, cousin," he said, his gaze unwavering as still another head bounced across the slate stones of the yard. "Get a lantern. Take it to one of the torches. At my signal, use the lantern to light the torch. Do nothing else."

A fourth head fell upon the stones, and the Red Priest closed his eyes briefly. "By the Buddha," he said softly. "He has the speed of a snake. Hurry." He shoved Antonio, who stumbled, and fell to his knees.

When he rose to his feet again, another man stood at the far end of the courtyard. How had he come in? The door was still closed and barred.

"Hurry, fool," said the Red Priest. "He doesn't want you. Get away, and remember what I told you!" He leapt atop the heavy table, his two swords appearing like a conjurer's trick in his hands. As quickly as he could, Antonio scuttled to the farthest corner of the courtyard, and took a lantern from the wall.

"Tomaso Dellaforte," said the new arrival, in a calmly conversational tone. He was of middle height, and dressed all in grey and black, so that the shadows clung to him oddly. In one hand he carried a long

sword, and in the other, a wicked dagger that oozed darkly.

“I am he,” acknowledged Tomaso. “Did you kill those men who guarded the rooftop?”

“I am Grimaldi,” said the other man. “I killed those men. Now I will kill you.”

In his corner, Antonio’s blood thickened and slowed in his veins. Grimaldi! A legendary name, the stuff of impossible whispers. Grimaldi, who could turn to shadow and vanish in the blink of an eye. Grimaldi, who never missed his mark. Grimaldi, who could not be killed. What had this Red Priest done to bring the prince of assassins down upon him? Antonio’s hand trembled as he unshielded the flame of the lantern, and made to touch it to a nearby torch.

“Not yet,” said the Red Priest softly, and Antonio did not know whether he spoke to the assassin, or to his cousin. Then Grimaldi moved, and the lantern dropped from Antonio’s still-clumsy fingers to smash on the flags at his feet.

The assassin came on in a terrifying rush, faster than a man should run. There was something wrong, somehow, with the way he moved - swift and scuttling, like a gigantic wolf spider racing down upon its prey. He did not pause as he neared the table, but sprang headlong, blades upthrust. In the same heartbeat, the Red Priest leapt straight up, tucking his legs under him in a somersault that cleared Grimaldi’s weapons by a handsbreadth. Almost at the same time, the two landed on opposite sides of the table.

“Now!” cried the Red Priest. He spun and dived under the table even as Grimaldi jumped with impossible strength into a backwards tumble which carried him clean over the tabletop. Fumbling, cursing, Antonio yanked the torch free of its sconce and plunged it into the pool of flaming oil before him. The torch caught briefly, guttered, then flared up.

Antonio raised it high above his head. “Now what?” he called desperately.

Grimaldi and the Red Priest crouched on opposite sides of the table, regarding each other warily. Then the assassin’s teeth gleamed in a parody of a grin. With that same uncanny speed, he sheathed his dagger and seized the heavy table with one hand. In a single, careless gesture, he flung it aside like so much matchwood. With nothing now between them, the Red Priest fell back a pace, weapons at the ready.

The torch above Antonio’s head hissed like an enraged snake, and flared with blindingly white light. Involuntarily, Antonio turned away to shield his gaze. He heard a thump, and a cry of pain. As the torch



sputtered back to near-normal, Antonio saw that the Red Priest now stood behind Grimaldi in a peculiar, fluid crouch.

On the ground in front of the assassin lay a grey-sleeved arm, hand twitching like a great spider.

“Ah,” said Grimaldi, almost pleasantly. Then in a blur, he whirled and drove at Tomaso Dellaforte with his remaining blade.

Though the assassin had but one arm to the Red Priest’s two, the unbelievable speed of his attack kept his opponent desperately on the defensive, falling back before a blinding, snarling storm of steel. So swift were the assassin’s movements that Antonio gaped, unable to accept the evidence of his eyes.

Though the Red Priest was every bit as quick and as deadly as the stories said, he could not match the inhuman speed and strength of the prince of assassins. Only the fact that Grimaldi had lost an arm kept Tomaso Dellaforte alive beneath that terrible rain. Twice, thrice, a handful of times he was touched, blood flowing freely from minor wounds at shoulder and thigh, and still the furious attack continued unabated. His breath whistling between his teeth, Tomaso Dellaforte struggled to keep his attacker at bay with liquid, elegant skill almost as startling as Grimaldi’s speed and strength.

With bated breath, Antonio waited to see which of the two would falter first. Then he caught himself. The Red Priest was a renegade and a heretic, and his very existence posed a terrible threat to the Dellaforte family and fortunes. Yet this Grimaldi, with his inhuman power, was something worse. He could no more leave Tomaso Dellaforte at the mercy of this terrible thing than he could abandon his own father. Gathering his strength, he took up the torch in his good left hand and flung it as best he could at the assassin’s head.

In a casual stroke, Grimaldi’s sword whipped out and deflected the torch to the ground. Yet in that instant, Tomaso Dellaforte struck. His timing and reflexes perfect, Grimaldi slid sideways and parried - with the arm that ended in a stump. The Red Priest’s blade licked out and opened a terrible wound to Grimaldi’s belly. It yawned and glistened as the assassin staggered back, and ropes of shining intestine bulged over his grey tunic.

Grimaldi fell to his knees. Dropping his sword, he clawed with his remaining hand at something beneath his short cloak. The Red Priest’s eyes widened, and he struck again, severing the assassin’s remaining arm at the elbow. Dark blood dripped, with an unclean slowness, to the flags.

Antonio made his way on unsteady feet towards his cousin. Tomaso raised a warning hand, not taking his eyes from the mortally wounded Grimaldi for an instant. “Stay,” he panted. “He is dangerous yet.” With

surgical deftness, he slashed once more, cutting free a section of Grimaldi's cloak. As the assassin watched, the Red Priest plucked forth a small phial of blackened silver. Observing Grimaldi closely, he uncorked the phial and sniffed once, then blinked. He put the cork back in place, and backed away from Grimaldi, sword still raised.

Both arms severed, his bowels spilled across his knees, the prince of assassins snarled like a beast, white teeth flashing in the lantern light.

Antonio started. "Do you see?" he cried. "His teeth - like the teeth of a wolf!"

"Aye," said the Red Priest. "Or a bat." He held out the phial for Antonio to take. "What do you smell?"

The cork came free easily, and Antonio's stomach churned. "Blood," he said. "Blood and corruption. This is a foul thing."

"Oh, it is that," said the Red Priest, and Grimaldi snarled once again, more weakly this time. "At last, I believe I understand. Do not touch the contents. Give it back to me, and fetch another lantern."

By the time Antonio had done as requested, the assassin lay in a pool of dark, stagnant blood, his hate-filled eyes locked on those of the Red Priest.

Tomaso spilled lamp oil onto the stones, watching the flames rear and leap. Then, with a cruel smile, he tipped the silver phial so that a little of the fluid inside fell into the flames, where it hissed and sputtered vilely.

Grimaldi cried out in wordless anguish.

"Yes," said the Red Priest, and the dance of the flames cast eerie shadows upon his strange, impassive face. "If I gave it to you, if you could drink it, then you could heal yourself, could you not? How did you come by this stuff, Grimaldi? Who gave it to you? Tell me, and I may yet leave you enough that you can live."

On the flags, the mutilated assassin writhed and mewled horribly, his lips skinning back from those unsettling teeth. Shuddering, Antonio averted his gaze.

There was another hiss, and the stench of burning carrion redoubled. "Not much left, Grimaldi," said the Red Priest softly. "You are badly wounded. I know you cannot die in the night's embrace - but what will happen when the sun climbs over the walls? Tell me what I want to know. There is still enough that you can heal yourself to crawl away and recover." Another hiss.

"Malik!" It was a tormented cry, as though torn from the assassin by steel pincers. "Malik of Acre makes it for me. Now give it to me. Give it to me, Tomaso Dellaforte, and let me go."

Wordlessly, the Red Priest held the phial above Grimaldi's head, tipping it so that the dark fluid rushed to the neck. Greedily, Grimaldi tilted back his head and opened his mouth. "Yes, yes," he gurgled. "Pour it for me. Pour it into my mouth."

The Red Priest's sword flashed once, and Grimaldi's head rolled away over the stones, mouth still working. "That was for Gunnar," said the Red Priest. "And for Skouros, and Rosen, and Graves." He turned to Antonio. "Buddha," he exclaimed. "You look white as a ghost, boy. Sit! We'll call for more wine, and send someone to find out who this Malik may be."

"No," said Antonio. "No! You don't understand!" Staggering across the courtyard, he pummelled at the door through which Pio had gone. "Open," he cried. "Open for the love of God!" He turned back to his cousin, still standing over the body of the dead assassin. "Malik the astrologer is our grandmother's advisor! Luciana is in danger! We must go to her at once!"

Closing his eyes, the Red Priest spat a single crude word.

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They burst into the inn at a run, not stopping even to dress Tomaso's wounds. The Red Priest paused long enough to seize a scarlet cloak that hung against the wall and cast it over his shoulders, concealing his torn clothes. Briefly, he barked some kind of message to a small circle of men in a language Antonio did not understand, and swept past them to the front door with his cousin at his heels.

"You must have questions," said the Red Priest when they were in the street, moving quickly through the thinning crowds. It was well after midnight now, and even the Carnevale revellers of Venice were growing weary, sated with food and music, and pleasures less wholesome. "I will answer what I can. First, know this: I am no sorcerer. The torch was not magic," he said, sidestepping a slow circle of dancers, their costumes askew, masques forgotten. "It was *al-kimiya*, a kind of learning from Araby.

There is a metal, light and soft, which burns with the light that you saw. It is not easy to prepare, but I learned the way of it from a Persian sage, and I make it my business to have some with me at all times. Once alight, it will burn even underwater like the Greek Fire of old."

"You knew of this Grimaldi, then?" puffed Antonio, struggling to keep up. What sort of man was this Red Priest, that he could fight a titanic struggle and then stride like an athlete through the streets without rest?

"Not precisely. I knew of an assassin, very dangerous. I chose to make myself known to him, and hoped to meet him on prepared ground, as you saw. I did not expect such a thing as Grimaldi. It is fortunate you were with me, cousin. I doubt I could have prevailed without aid." The Red Priest swept over the cobbles, his gliding step methodically eating the distance, his cloak flaring behind him.

"What do... what did you mean about making yourself known to him?"

Tomaso cast a sharp glance over his shoulder at his cousin. "The Dellaforte fortunes have been good, no? A string of luck: enemies perishing, business rivals withdrawing, inconvenient ships disappearing at sea..."

Panting, and clutching surreptitiously at a sharp pain in his side, Antonio thought about this. "Fortune is just so. It comes like the tide, rising now, falling later."

"The Dellaforte tide has risen very high indeed, of late," said the Red Priest. "Others have noticed this. Some have wondered if more than simple fortune is at work."

There was a roaring in Antonio's ears, and his face was hot. "You came to Venezia to serve our enemies? You, who call yourself a Dellaforte?"

"I serve only myself and God," said the Red Priest, without turning. His voice was hard. "I have had no blood family since the death of my father."

Antonio found a burst of speed. He seized the Red Priest by the shoulder and forced him to turn, staring into those bleak, dark eyes looking for something - he didn't know what, exactly. "It was your father who left us behind," said Antonio. "You could have come back to us, even without him."

For just an instant, there was a trace of something almost like anger, deep in those wells of darkness, a

flash of something hot and sharp, and then it was gone, covered by the inscrutable masque of the Red Priest. "My father was sent," said the Red Priest. "By his beloved family. Did you not hear our grandmother in the ballroom? How she questioned my patrimony? Had I not the legal proof of my claims, she would have ordered me killed on the spot. Welcome home, Tomaso Dellaforte." He looked away into the darkness, and shook off Antonio's grasp.

"Surely you did not think the Dellaforte commanded this assassin?" protested Antonio, but he spoke to the other man's rapidly receding back. Grimly, he hurried after, still trying to reason with this man who claimed to be his cousin. "You could not - did not plan..." He faltered, hearing his own voice in his mind: Malik the astrologer is our grandmother's advisor...

The thoughts that filled Antonio's head to bursting were too painful and complex to articulate. Besides, what would this grim, vermilion spectre care for Antonio's fears? This Red Priest, whose very name was a byword for bloodshed and battle, come uncountable leagues to the land that might have been his home: what did he want? He spoke of patrimony and primogeniture, but claimed no interest in the family fortunes. He slew the unspeakable Grimaldi without hesitation, but was it simply Grimaiddi's master that now he sought, or did he pursue a darker agenda?

Was he friend or foe to the Dellaforte of Venezia? There was no way to know, Antonio realized bleakly. All he could do was stay close to the man, and hope somehow to shape the outcome towards his family's interests. And yet - was he even certain of those any more? How much influence did this Malik have?

Antonio tried to remember what he knew of the astrologer. A tall, cadaverously spare man, he spoke the Venetian tongue with a thick accent. He claimed to be Persian, and brought letters of recommendation from grandees of the Holy Lands. Over a year ago, Luciana had sought an astrologer, claiming a need for guidance. At the time, Antonio had thought it simply another affectation. Astrologers were much in fashion with the great houses of Venezia, as well as Firenze and even Rome. Malik had arrived with a huge baggage train, and promptly taken over a suite of rooms in the Palazzo Dellaforte, claiming that he needed space for his observations and experiments. Certainly, Luciana paid heed to him - but no more so than to Phraxas the Byzantine, or even to old Ezra who kept the books and figured the family wealth. Yet Antonio had to acknowledge it was true. Since the arrival of the astrologer, good luck followed the Dellaforte's every move, and ill fortune plagued their enemies. Still, wasn't that what you engaged an astrologer for? Confused and no little part angry, Antonio hurried in the wake of the Red Priest.

On the far side of the Plaza del Corragio, the grand edifice of the Palazzo Dellaforte rose boldly from the stones, its pink-and-white brickwork gleaming in the light of the torches that guttered around the square. Almost all the revellers and partygoers were gone now, leaving only a few drunkards sleeping here and there. No lights showed at the windows, and even the great door was closed, half-hidden in the shadowed portico. The Red Priest hung back out of sight as Antonio hammered on the oaken portals.

“Open,” he cried, and the doors swung inward, revealing two guardsmen with halberds in hand.

“Antonio Dellaforte,” he identified himself, and turned, indicating the man in scarlet. “My guest, Tomaso Dellaforte, the Red Priest.”

One of the guards, a giant of a man named Giapetto of Padua, shook his head. “He may not enter, signore,” he said apologetically. “Orders.”

“I am the Dellaforte heir,” Antonio flared. “Mine are the orders you follow, and I say that where I go, this man follows.”

Giapetto glanced at his partner, a new man whose name Antonio did not know. Then he shook his head again, very slowly, and lowered his weapon as a bar across the doorway.

“Antonio, we have not the time for this,” said the Red Priest calmly. “Malik will be expecting news from his creature. Who can say what he will do when no word comes?”

Anguished, Antonio turned back to Giapetto. “Please,” he raised an imploring hand. “Please -”

There was a flash of scarlet. Though he could not swear it, Antonio thought he saw the Red Priest touch the throat of the giant Paduan, whose eyes bulged horribly. Then his face turned purple, and he sank slowly to his knees as the young man watched. Somehow, the other man was already down, lying face down on the tiled floor, and Tomaso Dellaforte was striding through the open doorway into the hall beyond.

“Ward my back, cousin,” said the Red Priest. “We move swiftly.”

“Wait,” called Antonio, stooping to examine Giapetto and the other. “Wait!”

The man in scarlet did not wait. Torn between two duties, Antonio hesitated. Then, with a curse, he turned back to the fallen men. To his surprise, both still lived and breathed, though they were senseless as the marble tiles upon which they lay. Urgently, Antonio slammed shut the great doors, and slipped the bar into position. Then he flicked his cloak back over his shoulders, laid a hand on the hilt of his blade, and set off in pursuit of the Red Priest, and a reckoning.

With the advantage of moving on his home ground, Antonio caught the intruder near the door to the bedchamber of Jacopo Dellaforte. His teeth set, he seized the Red Priest by the arm and spun him around. "What are you doing?" he whispered in the stillness of the darkened corridor. "This is my father's room!"

Silently, the Red Priest turned his arm in Antonio's grasp. His other hand seized Antonio's elbow and applied pressure. Yelping, Antonio writhed away, and discovered that yet again, his arm was locked painfully behind his back. Steely fingers tangled in his hair and yanked his head back. He breathed loudly through his nose, stilled by the fierce pain in his neck and his shoulder.

"Listen very carefully," came the hatefully calm voice in his ear. "I tell you now, plainly, what you have refused so far to understand. Someone inside your family has been directing the actions of the creature Grimaldi for over a year. I followed you first, because you were the easiest to reach, but you are an innocent. I have reason to think your sister equally blameless, which leaves only your father, and your grandmother. Your father is ill, I know, but still he commands the family fortunes. Therefore I come to him."

Deftly, the Red Priest unloosed Antonio's hair, and used the trapped arm to spin him across the corridor, releasing him against the opposite wall. He lifted his chin, and stood in a fighting crouch before Antonio, his open hands belying their deadliness. "You saw Grimaldi. You know what manner of thing he was. You saw the phial that made him so. You heard him name the man who supplied that phial. Make your choice, Antonio Dellaforte. Make it now. Your family? Or the good God who forbids such vileness as Grimaldi and the stuff that gave him his Hell-spawned strength."

Antonio struggled for words, for the reasoned denial that would set the lie to everything this Red Priest said, but his voice failed. All he could call to mind was the vision of the thing that had been Grimaldi. That such a thing might come of the Dellaforte - impossible! Yet Malik of Acre lived here, under the very roof of his family home.

Inside him, something gave way. Trembling, Antonio covered his face with his hands. "How?" he groaned. "How do you know so much? How can you do this? How can I make such a choice?"

"Find the strength, little cousin," said the Red Priest, and for just a moment his voice was gentle. "I made my choice many years ago." He turned away from Antonio and sprang high, planting one foot against the wall to push off and give him speed in his rush for Jacopo's door. One step he took, then whirled and lashed out with his heel, striking the heavy oak door accurately at the lock, which tore free of the frame so that the door flew open and smashed against the wall within.

Where were the family retainers? Saving only the guards at the door, Antonio had seen none. Why hadn't the sound of the door breaking brought them running?

"Look," said the Red Priest in a voice like fire in the wind. A grip of Damascene steel sank into Antonio's shoulder, and he was dragged forcibly around to face the open doorway. "Look within," said the Red Priest. "See what has become of your precious family."

Beyond lay a nightmare. Upon his bed of fine linens, Jacopo Dellaforte sprawled, naked and pale. One arm hung over the edge of the bed, and on the floor below Luciana Dellaforte crouched, like a vile beast. Her fine, raven hair fell about her shoulders in lank strings, and her full lips were stained a rich, dark red with blood that oozed from a raw wound on the inside of Jacopo's arm. At the sight of the Red Priest, she gave an animal growl and scuttled beneath the high bed, into the shadows.

"Fetch her out," said the Red Priest, shoving Antonio forward. "I will see to your father." He vaulted lightly to the bed, careful to avoid the space below, and knelt over Jacopo Dellaforte's limp body.

Horried, Antonio stumbled into the room. "What is... what is wrong? Why is my father so pale?"

"Beware, you fool," snapped Tomaso Dellaforte, not looking up from his work. "Old as she is, if she takes you unawares she may yet make an escape and warn our quarry." He put his ear to Jacopo's chest and listened.

"I don't understand," said Antonio plaintively. "Please, help me." He peered beneath the bed, where his grandmother lurked like a monstrous, deformed cat in the darkest corner. She hissed at him, and he jerked back.

"Idiot," said the Red Priest. He tore a strip from a linen sheet and carefully bound the wound on his uncle's arm. "Our grandmother is more than threescore winters. Yet her hair is black as midnight, and her skin as soft and smooth as that of your sister. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"The di Carnuto - her family. She says they were long-lived." Antonio floundered. He had never thought about his grandmother's appearance. She had always looked that way, as long as he could remember. It wasn't strange; it was just... it was simply the way things were. She was his grandmother, and she was still beautiful. He looked back under the bed. "Grandmother? Please - please don't do this. He means no harm. I promise you. Grandmother?"

In the darkness under the bed, something moved.



“Grandmother? It is I. Antonio, son of Jacopo.” He put his hand out gently, palm upwards, reaching for the grandmother he had loved all his life.

Something seized his hand in a grip of iron and yanked him bodily forward. He cracked his head on the heavy wooden frame of the bed, tasting blood. The grip redoubled and a terrible strength dragged him under the bed, head swimming, lights popping behind his eyelids. “Jesu, Jesu,” he screamed thickly, spitting warm liquid.

A guttural growl answered him, and a white-hot pain lanced through his forearm. As if from a great distance, Antonio Dellaforte heard himself squealing like a pig at the slaughterhouse, felt himself struggling, flailing weakly against an inexorable power that pulled him in, gurgling and growling as it sated itself on his blood.

Then there was a shriek, cut off as suddenly as a door slamming. The grip on his arm vanished. Whimpering, he scrambled out from beneath the bed into the lantern-light, clutching his torn and bleeding arm to his chest. On the opposite side of the bed, a blood-red shape rose up, and Antonio scuttled backwards until he came up against the wall.

The Red Priest dropped Luciana Dellaforte unceremoniously onto the bed, and stared at her, his lip curling. “She is not dead,” he said. Tearing more strips of sheet, he bound the woman hand and foot, swaddling her in strong linen as a spider cocoons a fly. “Perhaps better if she was. She is like Grimaldi, save that for Luciana, the potion brings youth and beauty, the envy of all women. As it did to Grimaldi, it has also brought changes. Already, she has begun to feed, and upon her own son.” He looked up at Antonio, his black eyes twin windows onto damnation. “Are you ready to show me this Malik?”

Staring at the blood-drinking creature that had taken the place of his grandmother, Antonio nodded. There was nothing left in him with which to fight.

Malik of Acre, astrologer to the Dellaforte, lived in a suite of rooms on the eastern wing of the palazzo. At the top of the stairwell, at the entrance to the corridor which gave on Malik’s suite, the Red Priest stopped. “Three doors,” he said. “And another stair at the opposite end. Too many exits, Antonio. We will need help to trap this rat in his bolthole.”

“What of the household guard?” His wounded arm bound, Antonio was steady on his feet once more. Behind his eyes, though, there lurked the terrible vision of his grandmother feeding on the blood of his father, and somewhere deep within he felt the first, faint pricklings of a strange, fey mood that he thought was madness.

“Dismissed by our grandmother, I presume,” said the Red Priest. “Possibly out searching for me, or even you. The orders would have been a pretext to ensure Grimaldi could come and go unheralded. We can look for no help from that quarter.” He seemed completely assured that Antonio was now entirely of one mind with him - or was it merely that he acted a part? Antonio had no way of telling any more, even if it mattered. Events were unfolding far too quickly.

From a pouch at his hip, the Red Priest extracted a peculiar wax taper, which he lit from a wall lantern, and held up before a window on the stair. “Watch,” he said, “but be ready to shield your eyes. This is an art of the country of my birth.”

The Red Priest elbowed the window wide, and held the burning taper outside in the chill night air. Within moments, the flame leapt to a fierce, hissing white light that suddenly turned scarlet and showered sparks. Tomaso Dellaforte waved the brilliant flare back and forth three times, slowly, then threw the still-burning taper into the alley below.

“Now what?” said Antonio. His arm throbbed horribly, but the bitter ache in his heart was by far the worse.

“Now we wait,” said the Red Priest.

Minutes later, five black-clad men entered the stairwell, and climbed to the landing where Antonio waited with the Red Priest. How had they come past the barred doors?

“Kill them all,” said one of the men, to Antonio’s alarm. The newcomers were heavily armed not only with swords and knives, but with the wicked crossbows outlawed by the Pope himself for their devilish power.

“God will know his own,” recited the Red Priest smoothly, in countersignature. “I am he.” He gestured down the corridor. “Three doors. I will enter the first. Nothing and no-one emerges except me. If I do not come out within the hour, burn the house and all within it. Use holy water over the ashes - and be sure it is blessed by a true priest, not that fat fool of a bishop.”

“No!” Antonio pulled himself to his full height. He pushed in front of the man who had spoken, and addressed him urgently. “I know not what you expect to find in there, but you will not burn this house in which I was born, with my family inside.”

The black-clad man glanced past Antonio to the Red Priest, who regarded Antonio with empty eyes. "They follow my orders, cousin. That is all you need know. They will do as I say, and if you seek to stay them, they will kill you in an instant." He lifted his shoulders slightly. "Not my preferred choice, you understand - but I will not permit what lies beyond those doors to escape, no matter what the price."

Antonio looked from the face of the Red Priest to the utterly impassive mien of the man in black. No mercy lay in either gaze, though perhaps there was compassion in the stance of the man in scarlet. By now, Antonio knew well that his cousin made no idle threats. Whatever lay within the chambers of Malik the Astrologer, it had already turned at least two people into creatures of night and horror. He thought momentarily of his sister Zaneta, and then of the red-eyed, predatory madness in Luciana Dellaforte's face as she crouched under the bed in her son's room, his blood upon her lips.

The Red Priest was right. Such things must be prevented, no matter the cost.

Antonio squared his shoulders. "I too will enter Malik's chambers. If my house and my family are at stake, you cannot deny me that." He paused, hearing his voice tremble. When he had control of himself, he continued. "In any case, you will have to kill me to keep me out."

Those dark eyes watched him a moment longer. Then the Red Priest nodded, and strode up the corridor. As the men in black took their places with alarmingly professional speed, he grasped the handle of the first door to the chambers of the Astrologer, and shot a glance at his cousin.

Antonio nodded, and clasped his sword-hilt for strength. "Let us keep him waiting no longer," he said.

The Red Priest grinned mirthlessly, and flung the door wide.

The rooms of Malik of Acre were dark, save for a handful of candles scattered here and there. Behind Antonio, the Red Priest closed the door. "Split up," he said softly. "Follow my lead." Before Antonio could respond, he was gone, vanished into the shadows.

"Stay where you are," said a deep, powerful voice.

Antonio stopped reflexively, but from near the shadows of a huge, floor-length drape that hung askew over a collection of peculiar statue, came the voice of the Red Priest. "I know what you have done, Malik of Acre," said Tomaso Dellaforte. "Where is your creature?"

The astrologer laughed, and now Antonio could see his tall, lean shape at the far end of the suite. “You have seen my assassin, yes? And perhaps your grandmother too? You know only the slightest of my whims. I have powers that can blast your soul, little priest.”

“What have you done to my grandmother?” Something burned inside Antonio, and he strode forwards towards the astrologer, his wounds and fears forgotten.

“Stay!” snapped Malik, and now Antonio could see the bottle he held on high, tilted over a strange, dark casque of metal at his feet. “One step more and I feed the creature within. If it breaks loose, you will certainly die, and perhaps much of Venezia with you, for it will take all my strength to master it again.”

“You never mastered it at all, did you? It was bound, trapped, starving when you found it.” The Red Priest’s voice was soft, but penetrating. “You know almost nothing of what you have there. You feed it blood, and you take blood from it to make your little magicks, but you fear it terribly, and you never feed it more than a few drops.” Antonio could no longer locate the Red Priest in the darkness. By some trick, his voice seemed to come from all about.

“What does a priest know of these things?” Malik laughed again, but less convincingly. His gaze flickered back and forth, and the bottle shook in his grasp, Antonio saw. There was a strange, guttural noise from within the casque.

“I am no priest,” said Tomaso Dellaforte. “Not as you know it. But for a time, I was a Knight of the Temple. You of all people should be familiar with the knowledge the Order carried, Malik of Acre.”

“Impossible,” snapped Malik, though his voice trembled. “The Templars were broken and banished. Their leaders were killed. Their knowledge is destroyed.”

“Knowledge may be lost, but never destroyed,” said the voice of the Red Priest. Antonio was certain now that his cousin was closing in, using the shadows and the flickering candlelight to conceal his approach amongst the jumble of furnishings and oddments that filled the suite of rooms. To distract the astrologer, he spoke up.

“My grandmother,” he shouted. “You didn’t answer me, Malik.”

“I did nothing to her,” said the astrologer, glaring towards Antonio. “She asked me to give her what every woman wants. I gave her the means, and she took it gladly. She took what I made for her and used it as only she could, and the Dellaforte grew rich. You grew rich, young Antonio. And I can do

more for you.” His harshly accented voice grew sly and soft. “I have the power. Women, Antonio - I can give you any woman you desire. I can give you strength such as no man possesses. Speed and power and vitality; all of these. With time, as I learn more, perhaps even immortality. Do you see?” His eyes were bright in the candlelight, and his chest heaved beneath his white robes. “The Dellaforte can rule all Venezia, and with my guidance, Venezia can become the new Rome. We can reunite the world beneath our banner. An army of soldiers like Grimaldi! An immortal emperor, guided by the wisdom of the ages. I can give you all of these things, Antonio. Help me deal with this man who tries to steal your birthright, and together we can bring about a new age!”

Dizzied by Malik’s visions, Antonio shook his head. “I see no new age,” he said. “Only madness.”

In the uncertain light, the astrologer’s cadaverous face seemed to writhe. “I see,” he said. “That is your final answer?”

Though the words were different, it was the same choice the Red Priest had posed outside Jacopo Dellaforte’s room. This time, Antonio knew his own heart. “Ask a thousand times, sorcerer,” he said heavily. “I will always say nay. There is a price for such power as you offer, and I will not pay it.”

“So be it,” said Malik, and turned the bottle in his hand.

“No!” Like a bolt of light, one of the Red Priest’s swords transfixing Malik’s arm even as he poured dark fluid over the casque. With a cry, the astrologer dropped the bottle which bounced away across the floor. Yet the damage was done; perhaps a cupful of the stuff trickled through the elaborate scrollwork of the metal sarcophagus to drip upon the thing that lay within.

“Take the sorcerer, Antonio,” shouted the Red Priest, springing from the shadow of a bookshelf. “The thing in the casque is mine alone!”

Antonio charged forward, only to be stopped in his tracks by a nightmare stolen from the works of Dante himself. There was a sound - a noise like a scream, like the tearing of silk, like the sizzle of lightning that cleaves the air before the thunder - and the great casque shattered into a hundred fragments. In its place stood a creature. Its form was human, but no-one could mistake it for a man. Unnaturally tall, skeletally lean, its clawed arms hung below its knees. Upon its long skull, great webbed and pointed ears streamed back from oversized jaws and a maw filled by thousands of needle-sharp fangs. Its huge, triangular eyes glittered, flat and black as a basilisk’s gaze in the candlelight.

“Take them,” howled Malik, pointing at the Red Priest. “Take them and destroy them!”

His dagger in his left hand, Antonio flung himself at the sorcerer, hoping desperately that Tomaso Dellaforte had some kind of answer for the abomination from the casque.

Before Antonio had taken two paces, the thing lowered its head and snarled, a noise eerily like the snarl of Grimaldi earlier, but a thousand times more dreadful. It lurched sideways, and one arm lashed out, seizing Malik by the throat. The astrologer's eyes bulged, and he gurgled, hammering with clenched fists at the great hand upon his neck. Contemptuously, the thing placed its other hand atop Malik's shaven head and twisted.

There was a crackling noise, and the astrologer's body capered in a ghastly dance. The thing twisted once more, and Malik's head came loose in its grasp. It flung the head away and raised the body by its shoulders, as a thirsty man might raise a bottle of rare vintage to his lips.

"Now!" cried the Red Priest, leaping upon the back of the thing. "Strike now, while it drinks!" In his hand was a long, dark dagger which he plunged into the flesh of the thing, striking over and over again, seeking a vital place.

The thing roared and squealed, dropping its prey and shaking the Red Priest from its back as a dog shakes water from its coat. The smell of it was unspeakable, like grave-dust and carrion and old blood. It was not so fast as Grimaldi, nor so graceful, but the power of the thing - the raw, awful power of it radiated like terror. Antonio's breath caught in his throat. Closing his eyes, he thrust with his dagger, feeling the point turn against the beast's leathery hide and the cabled muscle beneath. Something struck his head, and again he saw bright lights as he fell away, felt the warm blood pouring from his torn scalp.

The stench redoubled, driving the air from Antonio's lungs with its pungency. Like the breath of the very grave, it was rank and foul and cold. Struggling to regain control over his body that had turned into some broken child's toy, a puppet with severed strings, Antonio managed to open his eyes. Looming over him was a shape too ghastly to imagine - licking. With a cold, rasping, hideously prehensile tongue, it licked at the blood flowing from his wounded head, lapping like a thirsty dog, drinking from his very life. He thrust at the thing, hammered at it with his hands, pushed with all his strength, but he might as well have struggled against a colossus of living stone.

Cold. It was so terribly cold.

And behind it. A dagger raised high.

Desperately, Antonio clutched the thing that was killing him, holding it close, trying to keep it from seeing the Red Priest. If it wanted his blood, let it feed - so long as it didn't look up.

The dagger fell. Upon Antonio's body, the great, cold figure jerked. And the dagger rose. And fell.

A scream of inhuman rage buffeted Antonio, tearing at his very mind, but still he clung grimly, with all that remained, hoping somehow to hamper the thing. If he could just hold it long enough -

The dagger rose again, and fell. Again.

Again.

Until the world went away.

Antonio opened his eyes. In the dim candlelight, he made out the bruised and battered face of Tomaso Dellaforte, the Red Priest. Swollen, bleeding lips stretched in an ugly parody of a smile. "You live," said the Red Priest. "I feared otherwise."

Antonio could only cough weakly. A small bottle was pressed to his lips, and he tasted something sweet and fiery.

"A cordial," said the Red Priest. "It will help. For a while."

With the help of the nearby drapes, Antonio pulled himself to his knees, though the rooms swam in his vision. "You must go," he said. "My house. My family. They must not be burned."

Tomaso Dellaforte, also kneeling, looked at Antonio.

"Your father will live, I think," he said. "I cannot say what will happen to Luciana. She is very old. Without Malik's potions to sustain her, she will lose her stolen youth. I do not know if she can survive." He dabbed at the side of Antonio's head with a ragged piece of cloth, and Antonio winced at the lance of pain that went through him.

“Better a clean death,” said Antonio. He wiped his mouth with a torn sleeve, uncertain whether to be pleased that he still had something to bleed with. “The creature. What happened?”

The Red Priest showed him a dagger of strange design, like an iron nail perhaps nine inches in length, with a simple cross-piece to form a hilt. The point of the dagger oozed something blackish. “The creature is dead. There is a virtue in this dagger which gives it power over such things, when used properly.”

Antonio sagged back against the wall, and closed his eyes, feeling all the different places on his body that hurt. At last, he opened his eyes again and nodded, waving at the door. “Do what you must,” he said.

Somehow, the Red Priest rose and limped to the door, throwing it open so that light streamed in from the corridor beyond. Then he too leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. There was a long moment of silence. Then, past the silent men-at-arms in the corridor strode a single figure resplendent in cloth of gold, followed by an even dozen soldiers in golden livery. Under the eyes of their leader, the soldiers set about opening the heavy drapes to admit the first, faint rays of dawn. Too stunned to speak, Antonio slid sideways, then sat down. He struggled up again until he could rest on one knee and bow his head.

“My lord Doge,” he stammered. Of a sudden, many things became clear - the Red Priest’s invitation; his astonishing intelligence of the Dellaforte family and its doings; the source of the heavily armed men at his command.

The Red Priest did not kneel.

“Rise, Antonio Dellaforte,” said the Doge of Venezia softly, without looking. “Renegade,” he said to the Red Priest. “Have you done as I commanded?”

Tomaso Dellaforte pulled himself upright and stood clear of the wall, raising his chin and linking his hands behind his back like a general reviewing his troops. “Malik of Acre brought with him from some forgotten desert tomb a creature of Hell. Binding it with silver and iron, he fed it human blood, and bled it in turn to make his foul potions. To Luciana Dellaforte he gave back her youth and her beauty. To the gutter bravo Grimaldi, he gave invincible speed, strength, and endurance. Luciana used her woman’s ways to carry out the Dellaforte ends, and where other means were needed, the assassin Grimaldi was available. Malik thought he controlled both, knowing he could withhold the potions at any time, but he did not reckon with what they became as their humanity receded before the black blood of the thing from the tomb. Grimaldi began to kill for the love of killing, and Luciana began to feed upon the blood and strength of her own son.” Glancing fleetingly at Antonio, he went on. “Antonio and his sister Zaneta knew nothing of this. I believe Jacopo Dellaforte was equally ignorant.”



The Doge nodded, his iron-grey hair falling in immaculate ringlets upon his shoulders. "Malik and his creature?"

"Both dead," asserted the Red Priest flatly. "Malik unleashed it, and it killed him in its hunger. Weakened by its long imprisonment, it sought to feed, but Antonio and I harried it, and at last it fell. Finally, and forever. And my men?"

"They are in good health," said the Doge, after a pause. His fierce, dark eyes regarded the Red Priest with clear hostility. "Take this." He handed a small stone seal to Tomaso Dellaforte, who looked at it curiously. "When I receive a letter from Firenze sealed with that mark, your men will be released. Until then, they remain my... guests."

The Red Priest's face seemed hard as jade in the grey light of dawn. "This is not as we agreed."

"It is as I require," said the Doge in a voice even harder than the Red Priest's visage. He lifted his chin, and signalled two of his men to stand on either side of him, weapons at the ready. "You have proven yourself a most dangerous man, Tomaso Dellaforte. You have no reason now to be in my city, and I will not be easy until I am certain you are well gone."

"Not so," said Antonio Dellaforte, surprising himself with the strength of his own voice. With the revelation of the Doge's part in the night's work, there came a new clarity in his thoughts. There were debts that he would repay.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Antonio grasped one of Malik's heavy drapes and pulled himself to his feet, tottering uncertainly. He could still feel blood flowing from the wound in his scalp, but appearances were the least of his concerns. He took a deep breath to combat the dizziness of rising, and tried to speak boldly, as befit the scion of a great house. "You have done your family a great service today, Tomaso Dellaforte." Keeping his eyes on the Doge, who watched impassively, Antonio stretched out a hand to the Red Priest's shoulder, consciously mimicking his grandmother's gesture. "Until my father recovers his strength, I speak for the Dellaforte of Venezia, and I say you are welcome here at your whim." Without turning, he sharpened his voice. "I will give my own guarantee to the Doge as surety for your behaviour, for I know you as the most courageous and honourable of men, despite the tales of fools. Naturally the Dellaforte guarantee will be enough to free your men. Will it not, my lord Doge?"

The older man frowned, and considered Antonio thoughtfully. "Five thousand ducats if this one or his men cause trouble."

Antonio met the Doge's stare contemptuously. "Ten times that sum," he said.

The Doge's eyes widened. He nodded, and with a sign to his men, he left.

At last, Antonio turned and held the Red Priest's gaze with his own. Then, with a single, heartfelt movement, he stepped forward and put his arm around his cousin's neck. "Many thanks, cousin," he whispered, and hugged him close.

For a moment, the Red Priest stood stiff and unyielding. Then, tentatively, he put his hands on his cousin's shoulders and returned the embrace. When the two men stepped back from one another, Antonio was startled to see the Red Priest's black eyes were bright with tears. Wordlessly, the man in scarlet fumbled beneath his robe, and brought forth a golden ring hung like a locket upon a neck-chain.

"I have a gift for you," he said, and broke the chain with a quick twist of his hand. He dropped the ring into Antonio's outstretched palm, and folded the hand over it. "My father bore this with him to Cathay. I took it from the body of the Turkestani who killed him. It is the signet ring of our family."

Wonderingly, Antonio opened his hand. The heavy ring was still beautiful, though much of the enamelling upon the three salmon of the Dellaforte arms was worn away. "This came to you from your father," he said at last. "You are the eldest. It belongs with you."

A gentle smile touched the Red Priest's lips. "No," he said. "I have no need of it - and now it is in much better hands than mine." This time, it was Tomaso Dellaforte who embraced his cousin. "Fare thee well, cousin," he whispered, and turned on his heel.

Slipping the golden ring over his finger, Antonio Dellaforte watched his cousin, the notorious Red Priest, vanish from the room.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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**Once Giants Roamed the Earth**

ROSALEEN LOVE

Rosaleen Love is an Australian writer who writes about science and the rest of life. Her short fiction has been collected in *The Traveling Tide* (2005) Aqueduct Press, Seattle, and in two books published by the Women's Press, UK: *The Total Devotion Machine* (1989) and *Evolution Annie* (1993). Her nonfiction includes *Reefscape. Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*, Joseph Henry Press, 2001. She is a research associate at Latrobe and Monash Universities, Melbourne.

"I consider this story to be one of my personal best. I was exhilarated by the challenge laid down by Robert Hood and Robin Pen, the editors of the *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales* anthology in which this story first appeared. The editors wanted stories about biologically impossible creatures with a political mission (or at least that's how I read the specifications). Just my kind of story. The story also springs from my interest in Indigenous sea rights and my book, *Reefscape*. The story won the Open Short Story section of the City of Boroondarah Literary Awards for 2004. It also jointly won the 2005 Aurealis Award for fantasy short story."

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T

he sea murmurs on the rocks. Last night, there was no murmur. There were no rocks. The thing was out there, lying there, and when it stirred, the waters moved up and over and under, and the thing was there, underneath, near the surface. It's gone today.

If Kai goes to the jetty and jumps into the water, he'll be in way over his head.

The thing that came yesterday has gone away today.

It will come back.

Kai knows. He's heard this story before. It's a story from the old people.

They're here today, the government people, to talk to the old people about sea rights and land rights, but their talk is just hot air. Kai knows better. That mob, they own this land, from here to the horizon. Sea, land, doesn't matter. What's under the water, in the bay, it's land, right? Happens for now to be covered by sea.

For the moment.

Wasn't always like that, in the time before this time; won't always be like that, in the time to come. What is sea was once land, what is now land was once sea.

The gods walked on the earth. They came to a place they liked, and there they settled. They turned into land, the gods, and look, you can see, there, how across the bay, that island, a god lay down, and stretched out, and there you can see the curve of his back, and in those rocks you can see where he set down his fishing net. And that's his canoe: must've got wrecked, like, just a bit, and he said, No worries. I like it here, the bay, the sea-grasses, the mangroves. It's a good place. It's home.

Sea rights. That's what it's about. From these shores to the horizon, who owns what.

Last night, Kai stepped out. He walked out on the water. He's not going to tell them today, that mob from the government. They wouldn't know how to listen, so hung up on their rights are they, on their legal rights. Who owns what, from the shore to the horizon, and the land that's there, under the water? They reckon, no one. Others know better.

Last night, when Kai walked on the water, the sea sloshed round his ankles. His feet gripped what lay beneath, firm enough to give him rubbery passage, though his toes had to dig down deep.

Kai was there, when the sea rose and flooded the jetty and swept the men away, and their dog.

It was the dog that saved the fishermen, that's for sure, Chippie, the old red mongrel who came to after the flood, and found himself standing on top of the ocean, far from shore, far enough, in a different enough place, to make an old dog yelp himself silly. They came to, the men, Kurt and Eddie, with Chippie howling, and lights from the shore beaming out, and the rescue party turning up, their boats impossible to launch on the rubbery sea until they, too, the rescuers, learned not to fear, but to step out on sea as on land, in the knowledge that what was under the water would sustain them for the duration. The rescuers came in the moonlight, over the sea, to where the three men flopped round on top of the water, there to save them, three Jonahs from the belly of the deep.

Old Wally was in a bad way, but Kurt and Eddie, they were big men, and they came to and gave Wally the kiss of life, that's what brought him back, as Chippie barked his head off, and Wally woke to curse his rescuers, but he's not too sorry, not today.

They took Wally off to the hospital, just to be sure. At the time, his story made no sense.

The Government man is back today, with something he wants the old people to look at. He's brought the drum from the museum and the museum people with their video cameras. They want the old people to tell the old stories. The old people are happy to oblige. They like the old stories, but better still, they like to turn the old stories into new stories.

The people gathered under the trees and passed the drum around carefully, whispering. On the rim of the drum they traced here the marks of the sun as it shimmers on calm noon water, there the glimmer of the full moon on the place where salt water meets fresh. The story is told in the marks. The story is told in the music. The story is told in the dance. Today there is no music, no dance. The story will be told, but not fully.

Kai's there, at the meeting place, with the old people, to help fill in the silence with words, to make the museum guys feel good about their meeting.

"You bang that drum," they murmured, the old people, one to another, "Trouble comes looking for you. Big time."

Kai was there, the go-between, the interpreter, to tell the museum guy that the drum was played on special occasions, to summon the creatures of the deep. Maika, they said, it's her drum, and Maika is from the old times. Maika, she travelled south with her mate, and as she travelled, she created all the land along the coast, and all the people, all the families, all the creatures of the shore.

Someone's given that drum a bash, they reckon, the old people. They whisper their agreement. That's what happened yesterday. Those fellas in the museum, they packed the drum to bring it up here, and some smart-arse played the fool and thumped it, and that's why it happened. The fishermen, and Chippie. That's the drum of Maika, who travelled down this coast and created the bays, the rocks, the headlands, the islands. She travelled south, and now she's on the move again. She's come here, and she's mad. That storm - her breath - made the clouds. That flood tide - her spirit - frothed the salt spray. That land under the sea, it's her resting place, a place for which they have a name and the government lot do not.

Maika is moving now. She's moving because she's heard about them fellas, she's heard about the new laws that say sea places are owned by everyone and no-one. Maika doesn't like that, so that is what she is saying, that is what all this means. Them fellas on the jetty last night, who were swept away into the water, they could have drowned. But they were saved - that time. Maika, she did that.

Not like she'll change her ways, not for the government people and their laws that are not her laws. Their laws will wash away in the salt and the spray.

The old folks, they knew. That night, last night, they weren't down by the sea, not like those men who got swept away. The old people stayed up high, on the cliffs, and made their fire. They looked out over the sea and the islands, and inland to the place where the fresh water comes down from the hills and swirls into the salt of the sea.

In the museum, they take good care of the drum. They smear it with oil and turn up the air-conditioning. The old people used to make a new drum when the old one fell apart. This drum is the last drum and must be kept away from the coast, away from the shacks of the old people, which do not have climate-control and adjustable lighting. Fair enough. The drum can stay where it is. The old people stay where they are.

Maika came that night, then went away again. She swept the men on the jetty into the sea, and then she gave them back again. That was Maika's will.

\* \* \* \*

So much has happened since, but as to cause and effect, questions still hang in the air. Maika came back, and this time she stayed.

Maika returned and filled the whole bay. She settled, and as she came to rest, she threw fish high out of the sea and they rained down far inland. Maika lay down in this place, like a god, and look, you can see her eight arms, how they plug up the rivers that used to flow down to the sea. Shells lie where they fell, pushed into high mounds, heaped in waves on the former shore. The sea now pounds on reefs far, far away.

Maika settled and stayed. Where once the rocks were exposed at high tide, now Maika covers them with her white, translucent flesh. Her body stretches to the distant headland. The jetty stands, uprooted, across the giant's back.

Each day the flesh becomes firmer and darker, until you can walk across to the other side of the bay. The children bounce over, *boing boing boing*, but the old people are more respectful and watch where they put their feet. Some places are slippery, where water still lies, and salt encrusts the high plateau.

Maika is changing from one state of being into another, from god to land. At night, she glows with

phosphorescent light. If you climb the cliffs, you can see the new night-lights, stretching west far inland along ancient river beds, glowing east from here to the horizon.

Ant, spider, crab, and starfish find new habitats. The turtles that once swam to graze the sea grass meadows must give this place a miss, now that the sea meadows are history.

The jetty juts out over land. Its foundations are not firm.

Maika roamed the seas. She came to a place she liked and lay down and became land.

The old sea markers are gone, but that is the way of the sea. Once there were roads in the sea, and the old people slipped their canoes along tidal currents through mangrove flats.

The sky signs remain, but the sea signs are gone. Headlands become hills, beaches lie stranded far from the sea, swamps are born anew in the places where Maika stretched out her arms, as fresh water forces new paths.

The smell of the sea has left this place. Soon the real estate fellas will come. Maika has changed from god to land and back to god again, in their way of looking at it, at their gods of what is bought and what is sold. What was once sea has become land, and public rights to the sea will not prevail. Their mob still owns this, from the ancient shore to the horizon. Land, sea, doesn't matter. Now they know it, the government mob and their lawyers. Now they come north with papers to be signed.

Sea rights become land rights, and land rights may be sold. See these papers, note their promise of great riches. Sign here, at this place.

The old people say they never learned the ways of signing papers. Sorry.

The matter of sovereignty will be solved. One day, a new city will be built.

They will drill canals through to the distant sea, and beside the canals the land will be carved into lots. Mansions will rise, each with its personal jetty, though the foundations will have to be drilled deep and piles pushed into the bedrock far beneath. New roads will lead to the city. Development will bring its own rewards.

Maika came, and stayed, but only for now. Her time here will pass, and one day she will arise and move on somewhere else. They will call it earthquake and tsunami. The mansions will crumble to dust and the canals yield up their niche inhabitants, the crocodiles and bull-nose sharks, to lie in the air, surprised, and for the moment lost for evolutionary inspiration.

Maika will rise and slide out of the bay, just as once she entered it. Her arms will curl in toward her belly, drawn from the buried beds of fossil rivers. Her eyes will open, and her gaze will be fixed on the ocean depths, where the fumaroles smoke and the hydrothermal trenches guard the magma sheath beneath.

One day, Maika will have had enough. She will call to the deep, to her mother, and her mother will call to her, "Come." What is sea will once more become land; what is land will become sea. Maika will say, our time has come, my mother, my sisters. The gods will walk over the waters, but where they make their home anew, they will choose to change it to suit themselves, and the oceans will rise, and rise, and the land will build up, but this time beneath the sea, and no one will own the sea, from here to the horizon. No one will own the land.

All will be sea, and the gods will, once more, come rightly into their own.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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### **Fresh Young Widow**

KAARON WARREN

Kaaron Warren lives in Canberra with her family. She has been writing horror, SF and fantasy since she was five, and won an Aurealis Award in 1998 for her story, 'A Positive'. Her short story collection *The Grinding House* received four Ditmar nominations and is shortlisted for the inaugural Australian Shadows award. Prime Books will release a North American edition called *The Glass Woman* in 2006.

About 'The Fresh Young Widow', Kaaron writes: "Images of the bog people have disturbed me since I was a child. Those grey, transformed faces of executed people, their stomach contents preserved over



hundreds of years. The image came to me of a woman lovingly covering a body with clay, and this seemed a good starting point for a story inspired by my childhood fear.”

\* \* \* \*

T

he fresh young widow washed her husband’s body. She dipped her cloth into cloudy water and rubbed at him, cleaning the pores, washing away dried blood, picking at it with her long, strong fingernails. She closed her eyes as she touched his body but he was so cold she couldn’t imagine him alive. She laid her head on his belly and let her tears wet him.

There was a gentle knock at the door.

“Maria, they are wondering if you will see someone. An old woman who walked here eight days from Baristone. She thought the penance would help.”

The widow put down her sponge. “Connie, I am washing my husband.”

“I’m so sorry, Maria. But they told me to ask. She had a son with her. He’s very distressed.”

At this the widow walked to the door and opened it. Connie stepped inside, her head bowed.

The widow said, “Did he find his beloved husband knifed to the bone? Did he hold him as he bled to death? Did he wait for last words and hear none?”

“No, Maria.”

The widow patted at her wild and unbrushed hair, tried to straighten her filthy clothes.

“Oh, Maria,” Connie said. “Oh, Maria.”

The sympathy was too much to bear and the widow sank to the floor, weeping great painful sobs. When she quieted, exhausted, Connie said, "I'm so sorry about your husband. We all are. It should never have happened. Why do they even let the tourists in?" Connie began to cry. Maria felt so old around Connie, though the difference was just two years.

The widow knew most girls in the town had loved Brin. He had been funny, handsome and flirtatious. She knew he kissed them, sometimes. Nothing more.

He liked to kiss.

"I'm going to finish with my husband, now," the widow said. She felt no strength in her voice. "Tell the son I may be able to get to his mother. Tell him the stories are not true. There will be no clay walk. No great resurrection. Dead is dead. All there will be is a monument to her. Okay?"

The young girl said, "Okay."

Maria said, "This is new for me, too, Connie. I'm sure we'll get used to each other."

Connie nodded. She placed a box just inside the door. The widow knew it would contain offerings, bribes, and she felt a childish sense of anticipation.

She had three buckets of clay ready, collected as the sun rose. Soft and slippery. She took up a handful and squeezed, loving the squelch between her fingers. The fresh young widow worked the clay. Picked out stones and sticks, any small impurities. She dropped handfuls of clay into a large bucket of water, where small motes drifted to the top. These she skimmed off. She sifted the sludge through her fingers and when it was silky smooth she poured it onto a long flat sieve outside. Cloudy water dripped onto the ground and she left the clay to dry. When it was no longer sticky to the touch she could work it, kneading it until the smoothness of it satisfied her.

Then her real work began.

She added three of her fingernail clippings, a link from his mother's chain, and a pinch of coriander, his favourite spice. She rubbed her fingers together and sniffed them, the smell evoking such an intense memory she smiled. She and Brin had been married only a few days, just returned from their honeymoon in the city, where everything was delivered on the asking; food, drinks, books. She was tired, exhausted, and so was he. He had enjoyed lovers before. She had not. Her learning with the clay was so intense not much else filtered through. She had friends but not close ones. She was popular without people really

knowing her.

It had made her blush, returning from her honeymoon to all the attention. All the assumed knowledge. Everybody had smiled at her, nodded.

“How did you go?” her mother said, arriving at their home dusty, clay-smeared, her hair clumpy.

Maria nodded, too embarrassed to speak. Her mother had laughed. “You poor young thing. It’s all a bit terrifying, isn’t it? What’s he cooking you tonight? What are you cooking her tonight?” Her new husband came out of the bathroom, rubbing at his hair.

“Amazing how you forget about the clay when you’re away,” he said.

Her mother said, “What’s for dinner?”

“Oh,” he said. “Yes. Aha, can’t you smell it?”

The two women sniffed. A rich, rough smell.

“It’s my specialty. Ground Nut Stew.”

He led his wife into the kitchen and ground some spice for her to sniff. She coughed.

“It’s strong. But the flavour is so good. Beef, potatoes, ground nuts, cinnamon. You’ll love it. I hope you’ll love it.”

He kissed her, and she tasted onion.

“He’s a good boy,” her mother said later. “He understands. Just like your father. We have a little work to do before dinner.”

“It’s ready now,” Brin said. “Can’t we eat first?”

Her mother shrugged. “I guess the dead don’t travel so fast we can’t catch them,” she said. “I’ll leave you to your meal.”

“Stay, Mum, eat with us. We’ll call Dad and eat together,” Maria said, holding her mother’s arm.

“What about your parents, Brin?” her mother said.

“They’ll come tomorrow,” Brin said. “Go call your husband!”

They had eaten together, a happy meal. The men talked, the women, too, but Maria and her mother had thoughts behind their words, thoughts of what lay ahead.

After dinner the women walked to the workshop. It was a large, bright room, angled to let in the morning sun, but not the afternoon sun, so it never got too hot. The floor was slate, easily wiped clean but still ingrained with the red clay they worked with.

They had worked in silence, each intent on the process of covering the body in a way which was beautiful yet would not crack. This was an elderly woman, a resident long gone away but come home to die. Many of them did that.

After a while Maria had realized she was doing most of the work. She rested back on her heels and looked at her mother rocking by the door.

“Are you all right? Tired?” Maria said. Her mother had smiled. “I am, a little.” The clay slip filled the small lines in her face, exaggerating them, making her look older and more tired than she really was. “But, mostly, I like to watch you. You’re very skilled for one so young.”

“You were young and skilled once,” Maria said. Her mother had nodded and looked away.

“Your marriage has got me thinking,” she said. “Thinking about now, rather than when.”

“I’m not good with riddles, Mum,” Maria said. She worked a piece of clay and smoothed it over the belly of the woman.

“What I mean to say is, I’m feeling some resentment about this job. This... placement. I’m feeling I need to get away, see the world.”

“And Dad?”

“I’ll take him, too,” she said. She rubbed at her face. “What do you think?”

“It’s not a good job to do resentfully,” Maria said. “I know we don’t choose it, but I accept it. You go. Let me be the Clay-Maker. It will be okay.”

Her mother had fallen to her knees beside her.

“Thank you. Thank you. You kind and beautiful girl.”

Her parents had left the next day. They were gone three weeks when Brin was killed.

Maria wiped away the tears brought from remembering that time, dropped a pinch of spice into the clay, then began to cover her husband.

First his toes, feet. The ankles were tough; too bumpy. The shins, knees and thighs. The room was cold to stop the clay drying too quickly.

She covered his genitals, his belly, his back, slapping on the clay and smoothing it, shaping it.

She sat with him, not eating or drinking, until the first layer dried. This needed patience. Each layer needed to dry before more clay was placed on top, or the whole thing would sink, sag, slump. She felt like sagging herself, her weariness was so great.

Then her parents arrived to be with her. Maria never found out who contacted them, or how.

“Maria, my poor darling,” her mother said, pushing her way into the workshop. “We came as soon as we heard.” Her father hovered in the doorway, his face grey, shocked. Both of them had aged.

“Dad,” she said, and he held her while she cried.

“I should never have left you,” her mother said.

“This has nothing to do with you leaving. But I’m glad you’re back.”

“We came to comfort you, but also we need to talk. I have something so important to tell you. Let’s go sit by the wall.”

Maria and her mother walked together to the clay wall. “I know where I want us to sit. I remember where everybody is,” her mother said. She trailed her fingers over the clay faces then stopped. “Here,” she said. They sat down.

“You will need to act. I wish this talk could have waited many years, but this chance can’t be missed, as terrible as it is. It is better to make the child with someone you love.”

“So who was I born of? Someone you loved more than Dad?”

Her mother said, “No. No. You were born of my mother. She stands behind this clay man.” She waved her arm. Maria looked. The man frowned slightly at her, his features a little askew. “He wasn’t a very nice man,” her mother said. “He bit people.” Maria saw his clay teeth, larger than life, like a rabbit’s. She closed her eyes and listened to her mother’s words.

\* \* \* \*

Maria walked her mother to the house. It was not the biggest house in the town; that belonged to the Chief Mason. The Clay-maker lived in a modest but beautiful home, paved with baked clay tiles, walls of pale terracotta. Beautiful furnishings, gifts from the people of the town.

Maria felt a little dazed. She was not old enough for this information, this task. Yet the task was hers.

“Have some lunch first. Fill yourself,” her mother said. “No. He’s waited long enough. I must get to him,” Maria said. She walked slowly to the workshop, though, stopping to talk along the way to anyone she saw, accepting their condolences, asking after them. She wondered if her face looked different, now she knew.

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Brin grew fuller, thicker. Maria wondered if she could get him through the door, he was so large. She built him into a giant. She built the image of a girl on the clay case; vagina, breasts. Then she smoothed it away.

Knocking came. It was the masons. “Is he ready, Maria? Ready for the Kiln?”

“Not yet. Wait,” Maria called out. She fashioned Brin a penis and she made love to her clay man. She sent his seed back to him, kissed his clay lips. She felt the dryness of the clay in her throat, and she coughed and choked as the masons entered. They did not flinch at her appearance. They knew she did not wash, did not change clothes, for the time it took to do her clay work.

For all her hard work, an impurity in the clay gave his face a scowl she had not intended. A downturned mouth she tried to fix but couldn’t.

The masons stared in silence at his face.

“I told you we needed to find his killer,” the oldest mason said. “You said no violence for violence, but look at his face.”

The masons muttered together. There was a clamour at the door. The other mourners.

Two masons lifted the clay man so it appeared he walked, aided, between them.

They carried him outside. The widow staggered into step behind them, tears waterfaling from her eyes. She didn’t sob; she was beyond noise.

The wailing around her began. His mother collapsed at his feet. She kissed them, huge sloppy kisses that left small damp patches on his clay toes. She rose, her lips dusty.

“It’s wrong, so wrong,” she wailed. Her husband and friends supported her so she walked almost like her clay son did.

The widow felt intense pain in her shoulders, her fingers. She had worked feverishly on her husband, making the clay warm between her fast fingers, giving it blood warmth. They carried Brin to the Kiln, a tin shed outside the walls, set amongst the burning sand. Here he would stand in the searing heat until his clay case baked hard. Here her work would be tested; a single flaw and the case could crack open.

\* \* \* \*

As the time came, people gathered by the Kiln. There was a sigh as Brin was brought forth. The case was perfect, uncracked.

The procession marched through the streets of the town to the wall. The wall rose just a little higher than the tallest mason, so if he stood up on his toes he could peer over it. It was broad, though, thick with clay people. Solid with clay. There were no gaps. These were filled by the masons as they appeared. The clay changed little in its shading, testimony to the unchanging environment of the town.

Maria was very proud of the wall. There, two more masons waited with cement.

They placed her husband Brin next to the doctor’s wife, in the wall two weeks now. Maria could not help noticing how perfect her work was; no cracks in the clay woman, and the expression captured perfectly her kindly nature.

“It should be that tourist here instead,” Brin’s mother shouted. “He should be the dead one, not my son.”

“But then Brin would have been a murderer,” Maria thought. She held her mother-in-law tight and closed her eyes, resting for a moment.

“Into the wall we cement thy physical being,” the Chief Mason said. “May your soul be free to roam until



the great clay walk. May your body stay safe within the wall, an empty vessel awaiting your return.

“May your physical being keep this town safe from outsiders and repel evil from within us all.

“May we serve you and you serve us until the time of the great clay walk.”

Maria collapsed at Brin’s feet, clutching her belly.

“May the seed you planted within me grow, my love. I love you so much. I had so much more time for you.” The snot ran down her chin, tears down her cheeks. She felt she was masked with her own fluids.

There were murmurings around her, high-pitched murmurings of hope and excitement. “A baby! A baby! There has not been a baby born here for two years!” They were almost as barren as the clay.

Connie stood staring, a fixed smile on her face. “Congratulations,” she said.

“It’s all right, Connie. You can care for both of us. You will be with me for life.” Although the widow had deliberately misunderstood, Connie still smiled. “Your place is safe,” the widow said.

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The Chief Mason and the youngest mason came to her. The Chief Mason said, “I can tell you, Maria, that we are outraged by your husband’s murder. He was a great man. A good mason.” His eyes shifted there and the widow knew he was lying. Her husband had not been a good mason. He didn’t have the seriousness for it, the rock-solid dedication needed to build. He was too funny, too rebellious. He liked being the husband of the Clay-Maker. It gave him many privileges and he could shock the others so easily. The Clay-Maker’s husband merely had to laugh loudly to be noticed.

“Thank you,” she said. She swallowed. “Can you tell me how? What? All people tell me is the tragedy of it, the waste. I want to know what he did.”

“It wasn’t his fault. He was a funny man. He liked a joke. And the tourist was being disrespectful. He was drunk, and he poked and squeezed at the girls, joked about them being full of clay until he made Connie cry. Brin told him to leave her or he would turn to clay. He called the tourist some names, some

cruel names,” the Chief Mason said.

“He had a sharp tongue,” Maria said.

The youngest mason blushed, and Maria wondered if images had popped into his head of the widow and her husband’s sharp tongue. He stammered, “None of us expected the tourist to do what he did. He was skinny, you know? And pathetic. A bully. Brin turned away, we thought it was over, but the tourist leapt on him. Brin was down before we could react. Then we took him to the doctor’s and fetched you.”

The tears ran down her cheeks and drooled saltily into her mouth.

“Thank you,” she said. “And the tourist? Where is he?”

“We’ll find him,” said the Chief Mason. “We’ll find the killer and bring him back. Then perhaps Brin will smile as he watches over us.”

Maria nodded. “You know what you will be sacrificing in leaving this place?”

“We do. We are prepared to age a little to see our brother at peace.”

“You are good men,” Maria said. She allowed herself to be held by the Chief Mason.

They were gone for over a week.

\* \* \* \*

The clay had changed little over the last hundred years. The statues circled the town, staring in, watching the people. Her husband was part of the third row. He stood in front of a child, dead twenty years. The widow’s mother was the clay-maker then.

The fresh young widow went to him at night, when all others were asleep.

She fell to her knees, weeping. Then she took a small hammer from her backpack.

She tapped hard at his belly, and the clay cracked. A sighing sound emerged. She lifted out the pieces and reached inside. A baby girl was in there, gasping for air. She cried with a dry throat. The widow lifted her out and wiped clay dust from her face. Cleared her nostrils. The widow tucked her into the folds of her skirt.

Then she reached into her backpack and pulled out things to fill the clay case with; a dead cat, a sack of flour, some stones. She sealed the case again with new, wet clay.

Then she bundled the baby up and took her home, walking over the rough ground. There was the smell of paint in the air. The ground was green, freshly painted for the newly arrived batch of tourists. The ground was too full of clay for grass to grow. Visitors were advised to bring their own drinking water. The stuff in the town was so full of clay you needed to be born to it or your insides would clog up and you'd be constipated for a week. Washing water was the same; showers were red tinged and gritty. A good rough facial scrub people paid good money for elsewhere.

\* \* \* \*

Maria washed her baby in warm, soapy water and placed the baby into a cardboard box for a bed. Then the grieving son from Baristone arrived.

"Are you busy?" he said. He was an idiot, thick-faced and stupid.

"I'm always busy. Always someone to attend to." She was desperate to lie down and sleep beside her baby.

"I promised my mother I would do this," he said. "She died at the wall. Once she'd seen it. She died right there. I wish we had come sooner. You all look so youthful here. Glowing."

"You should never promise anything which relies on other people."

He hung his head.

“Come with me to collect the clay then. You’re lucky; no locals are waiting. My husband is in the wall, now.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said.

“Not sorry enough to leave me alone.”

Maria strapped her baby onto her back. There was a growing hubbub as she walked, “She’s had the baby, there’s the baby, when did she have the baby?” Her mother had told her not to worry about deception and to forget about trying to fool the people into believing the child had been born naturally. It was part of the mystique of the Clay-Makers. Let the people guess at the process. Let it add to their respect of the Clay-Makers.

She took some of the children with her to search for the clay. It was an adventure for them, outside the walls, and she could send them out clay-hunting on their own, once they knew how.

“We look near river beds, even ones no longer running. Look for puddles; clay holds water so water is an indicator.”

One of the children shouted, “Here?” Maria walked over. It was gritty there, and pale. Not perfect, but she saved the best stuff for the locals. This stuff would do for the woman. “Good,” she said. She scrabbled with her fingers until she had a palm-sized lump.

“To test it, we roll it into a coil and tie a knot in it. This is good clay - no cracks or breaks when we tie it. Not too much sand or gravel. Well done!” The child blushed with pleasure and the others rushed to impress, too, digging hard and vying to carry the most clay.

They took it back to her workshop. “I will need to prepare the clay,” Maria said to the son. “Come back tomorrow.”

He was there at dawn.

Maria was awake. “What have you brought to add?” she asked.

The son had a small paper bag. “Some of my father’s ashes. A clip of my baby hair. And this is a scrap of material from my sister’s wedding dress.”

She nodded. “That’s good. That’s nice. All right. You sit over there. This will take some time.”

He sat in the comfy chair while the widow knelt on the floor and stripped the mother naked. She washed the old woman carefully, treating her as she had her own husband.

The water left a fine sheen of clay on the woman’s skin.

The widow mixed the clay with the things the son had given her, kneading, squeezing, squelching.

She layered the woman, took care with her face. She scraped the clay off her fingers into the little opaque pots lined up on her bench. When she had filled twenty and the son had gone out for air, she called out, “Connie! Connie! Some pots!” Connie was still nervous in the workshop. It was so new to her. The Chief Mason had ensured there was no time Maria was alone; he moved Connie in the moment Brin died. “It’s all right. Come in. Wipe the pots clean then get them ready for boxing.”

While Maria worked, Connie cleaned the pots, found their lids, put stickers on them.

“Is it really magical cream?” Connie said. She rubbed clay between her fingertips.

Maria shrugged. “They say so. Glowing reports from the women who use it. They pay a fortune for it.”

“My dad says we should start a factory and make heaps more,” Connie said, packing the pots into a small box. “He says we’ll all be rich if we sell more.”

“We’re rich enough,” Maria said. She scraped her fingers off into the next pot. “It’s the rare nature of it that makes it worthwhile. You tell your Dad to not be so greedy, like a pig in the mud.”

Connie giggled.

Maria worked the clay gently around the woman's face, smoothing the large pores, filling the nostrils. Then the smell of something cooking made her stomach rumble.

"Brin? What are you cooking?" Maria said, and she jumped up, wiped her hands and walked to the kitchen. She pushed open the door, smiling.

Connie stood at the bench, chopping vegetables. She said, "I found a recipe book, and I'm making something from it. It looks very nice." Maria stared at her. For a moment, just a moment, she had forgotten. Just for a moment, Brin was alive again. Maria sat down and cried.

"I can make something else, if you like," Connie said. Suddenly she seemed too wise to be so young. Her eyes filled with tears. "I miss him," she said. "I'm sorry Maria, but I miss him. He made us all laugh so."

"You more than most, I think, Connie. That's one reason you were chosen to be my cook. My helper. You were a good choice to take his place."

"Some of the younger men thought it might be them." Maria smiled. The thought stopped her tears. "I'm not ready for a new husband yet. Not nearly ready."

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Connie said, blushing.

"But we know what proximity does, don't we, Connie?"

Connie shook her head. "No, Maria."

"No. It's alright, cook what you were cooking, Connie. Eating his food is a good idea." Brin's food was always grainy, gritty. Three weeks of dinners. Twenty-one meals he cooked for her.

\* \* \* \*

The son slept, to her relief. His gaze was very intense. Her child slept, too, growing so quickly she

wondered the son didn't run in fright.

Connie whispered at the door, "Are you okay? I'm sorry about the recipe book."

Maria smiled. "Come in, Connie. It's okay. It just made me think of him."

Connie hugged her. "We have an order for four dozen jars."

Maria nodded. "Good. I'll do the rest this afternoon."

"Payment in advance," Connie said. "We've got lots of goodies arriving soon. A feast is planned."

"Bring me a plate," Maria said. "I'm not quite up to celebrations yet."

"No. I'm sorry. It's not a celebration, really. A welcome back for the men returned."

\* \* \* \*

Three masons came to her workshop. "We have the tourist who killed your husband," the youngest mason said. It was not until he spoke she realized who he was. The men had aged dramatically. Far more than she had envisioned.

Maria felt a chill. "You have made a great sacrifice in leaving the walls of our town," she said. "Thank you. I have a woman here ready for the Kiln. Can you keep him till she's done?"

"Yes. We'll keep him."

They took the woman from Baristone to the Kiln.

"There's so much waiting," the son said.

“This gives us time to say goodbye,” Maria said. “We can’t rush it.

“You can eat now. Join the celebration while you wait.” She led him to where the others had gathered in the Chief Mason’s house. Connie paid the delivery man, who brought the food, wine, clothing, all the things ordered for the celebration. He arrived with his smell of the city, his big, loud truck and his air of superiority. He took the money and said, “I know you must like it here, and it brings in the tourists, but those statues give me the creeps.”

“Is anywhere else better?” Connie asked.

\* \* \* \*

When the old woman was done, Maria led the son to the wall, the procession following behind them. The son coughed, his throat dry from the clay dust. “How do you breathe with all this dust?” he said.

“We get used to it,” Maria said, though she wondered as she spoke if it was normal to feel the air in your lungs, to be aware of the tight filling of the chest with every inhalation.

Maybe other people didn’t feel that.

The son said, “Oh, my god, all those faces staring at us. It feels like they’re watching everything. Who was the first one covered? How did it start?”

“Many hundreds of years ago, one of the great men of the town disappeared. It was thought he’d left for the city but there was no word. Three years later, when it hadn’t rained for most of that time, someone noticed a clay face in the dry creek bed.

“They dug it up. It was our missing man. Set solid.

“No one wanted to crack him open and nobody wanted to bury him like that, so while they decided they placed him upright on the town’s limits. Already strange statues stood there, placed before local memory began. A woman died before they decided what to do. Her husband said she was just as important, so he had her covered in clay and set beside the man. They clayed the cracks to keep the statues standing,



then an old man died, then a child, and already the wall was emerging.”

She left the son trailing his fingers across his mother’s face in the wall and went home to her baby.

\* \* \* \*

They brought her the killer. Every centimetre was bruised or cut. His hair was all pulled out; his cheekbones shattered; his genitals cut and scabby; his shoulderbone exposed and his ears sliced to the skull.

They stood there silently, all of them, presenting her with their great gift. The man could not stand. He whispered, “Help me.” Maria bent to him and stroked his hair back from his forehead. She looked into his face and said, “Take him to the Kiln.” The masons nodded.

It took five days for the man to die. After the third day all they could hear was a scrabbling noise, like a mouse trying to break through into a food cupboard.

The masons carried him to Maria.

“Thank you,” she said. “Would anyone like to stay to honour this man into the clay?” They all backed away.

She stripped him naked. He was blackened. His fingers, the ones that held the knife that killed her husband, were all broken.

She didn’t wash him clean. She walked outside the wall, through the gateway made of brick. It was her wall, her family’s wall. They had made it. And she was so proud of it. It was raining a little and tears ran from the eyes of the clay people. Rain pooled like piss at their feet. But the clay stayed firm. The mix of cement, gravel and a little fatty soap kept it strong.

Her buckets were light as she walked past the wall. The flowers in their pots were blooming, sending their perfume to her like a generous gift from a stranger.

She swung the buckets. She couldn’t help it. Her step bounced, lifted by the warm air like a balloon. She

started to skip, the exuberance of the day filling her with lightness.

She passed the masons, resting on this day with nothing to do but repairs. The people believed the wall kept them safe from all evil. And there had never been a calamity. Evil still occurred but it was blamed on external things, or a crack in the wall.

They were always finding cracks in the wall.

“Good to see you looking happy,” the Chief Mason said. “You’re like a young girl, bouncing along like that.”

“She is a young girl,” the oldest mason said. He was a friend of her father’s. “A young girl with heavy responsibilities.” She looked at him to see if he was serving her notice to behave, but he was smiling. “It’s good to see you happy,” he said. “Here, have some cheese. It’s a good one. Imported.”

She sat and ate the cheese with them, laughing at their teasing. It felt good to be teased, to laugh.

\* \* \* \*

There was good rich clay around the sewerage plant. She never used it because it stank. It reeked of waste, and she would never use it for good people. She collected three bucketsful for the murderer. The smell made her retch. She carried the buckets back with her nose pressed against her shoulder.

In all her career, she had never been disrespectful. Maria added nothing to the clay. He didn’t even deserve her piss. She didn’t prepare the clay as she usually did. Let the small rocks dent his flesh. Let the sticks scratch at him. The baby had awoken and sat up, watching her. They grow so fast, she thought. She gave the baby a piece of good clay, not the foul stuff she was using on the murderer.

The baby ate it. The widow laughed, tears coming. “Funny baby,” she said, but the sight of it brought the taste of clay to her mouth, and she thought of her clay husband’s kiss.

Maria’s mouth felt so dry she could barely close it. Water quenched her thirst, but she had a sudden, intense desire for strawberries. She washed her hands and carried the baby over to the farming district. Here, they carted in dirt from outside, fertile dirt, rich and loamy. They piled it into large flat boxes, like giant’s bed bases, and they raised these off the ground, as if the clay would suck out all the nutrients like

leeches do.

Beautiful things grew there, tended by talented farmers. Greens, reds, oranges, food which nourished you even by looking at it. Here they kept the clay wetted down, not wanting dust to land on the produce. Things seemed more in focus.

“Maria, Maria, my dear girl. My poor dear, darling, little girl.” The farmer held her in a bear hug from which she struggled to be released. The baby squirmed between them.

“No woman should be a widow so young,” he said. “It’s wrong. It’s against nature.”

“It is,” she said. His sympathy made her cry, and she was caught up again in the bear hug.

“What will make you feel better? Anything. It’s yours.”

“Just some strawberries,” she said. “Do you have any?”

He winked. “Wait’ll you see them.” He plucked a dozen, deep, dark red, dripping with juice.

She sunk her teeth in, unable to wait. The sweetness brought a bitter thought. Brin. Brin loved strawberries. He would have loved these. The baby clutched at her and Maria fed her a strawberry. The baby cooed in delight.

\* \* \* \*

Back in the workshop, she gave the baby another piece of clay. The baby squeezed it, gurgled, played with it happily. She was already sitting up, getting ready to crawl. Maria thought of her own easy tiredness, her deep weariness, and wondered if this rapid growth did not leave time to build endurance.

She covered the killer with one layer. Then another. She built feet where his head was, a leering idiot face at the feet. Let him spend forever on his head.

If it should be these clay people were resurrected, she liked the idea of him heading down into the dirt.

She called to the mason waiting outside, "He's done."

The mason came in, wrinkling his nose. Politely, he said nothing. Maria laughed. "It's not me, you idiot. I used the sewerage clay for him."

The mason smiled. Maria didn't tell him the killer was upside down in his casing. They took the case to the Kiln and when he was done, the Chief Mason called the mourners.

This was a very different procession. There were jeers and snarls, no tears. There was laughter and chatter.

He was placed in the wall beside the woman from Baristone. "Good he's not next to my son," Maria's mother-in-law said. "Curse you on your clay walk."

There was a celebration afterwards, wine and beer, food and laughter. It was always like this after a procession, even a devastating one. Maria's mother said, "There is a certain satisfaction in what we do. It's like we have settled the answer of death. We've got it sorted out. It's comforting." People stopped to listen and Maria wondered if people would ever listen to her in the same way.

"But will it really happen?" Connie said. "The Great Clay Walk? The Resurrection?"

"It will be many generations away. You will all be safely in the wall, and many more beyond," Maria's mother said.

Connie shivered. "I don't know that I want to be awoken. It sounds terrifying."

Maria's mother smiled. "Frightening, yes. But for the chance at eternal life?"

"Here's to the Great Clay Walk," shouted the Chief Mason. "And here's to the clay, and the great Clay-Makers."

Maria watched them all, the clay dust in their pores, broad smiles on their faces, and she wondered which of them would be able to break free from their clay case on the day of the Great Clay Walk.

[<<Contents>>](#)

\* \* \* \*

## Watch

STEPHEN DEDMAN

Stephen Dedman is the author of the novels *The Art of Arrow Cutting* and *Shadows Bite*, and more than ninety published short stories. His most recent book is *Never Seen by Waking Eyes*, a collection of his horror fiction. He has won the Aurealis and Ditmar awards, and been nominated for the Bram Stoker Award, the British Science Fiction Association Award, the Sidewise Award, the Seiun Award, the Spectrum Award, and a sainthood. For a bibliography and news updates, check out <http://stephen-dedman.livejournal.com/>

This story was inspired by (i) an entry in *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*, (ii) spending too much time wondering what King Lear's wife or wives must have been like, and (iii) a deadline.

\* \* \* \*

T

he doctor looked at his Rolex, and waited for the vultures to return.

It was a futile gesture, born of habit: the watch said exactly the same thing as the other clocks in the room, including the one on the television screen that claimed to be sent direct from the Greenwich Observatory. Sixteen minutes to midnight, give or take a few seconds. A moment later, he heard a bell toll from the next room, the huge library that the women called the trophy room. A quarter to.

“What hour now?” he whispered, glancing at the ancient actor lying on the bed, his face barely visible

beneath the respirator and the electrodes of the EEG and other devices that the doctor tried not to think of as instruments of torture. There was no reply, so the doctor muttered the next few lines himself. "I think it lacks of twelve. No, it is struck. Indeed? Then I heard it not: then it draws near the season wherein the spirit held his wont to walk."

Still no reply; the only indication that the old man's spirit hadn't already walked was the sound of his laboured breathing and the gentler rhythm of the EEG display. The doctor looked at the TV screen, noticing movement at the back of the crowd as bobbies scuffled with an intoxicated and boisterous reveller. Happy fucking new year.

He turned his attention back to his patient, and friend, of forty years. Robert Dulac had been overly fond of his drink, consistently ignoring his doctor's advice that he cut back on it, and on the cigarettes. He'd mostly stayed off less legal drugs while he was in England, though he claimed to need them to endure the vicious madness of Hollywood. He hated needles, especially after his second wife's death, but his aquiline nose might have been designed for inhaling powders. And he'd continued to work long after Ken Foster had suggested he retire, returning to Stratford to play Cassius, then Claudius, then Prospero, until collapsing after a bravura performance as Lear at the Olivier. And now painkillers and other drugs were constantly flowing into his veins, keeping him in a dreamy stupor. "We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep," Foster murmured.

"Doctor Foster?"

Foster turned around as Dulac's eldest daughter, Rhiannon, walked in. He'd forbidden smoking in the house, so the two women disappeared out onto the balconies several times an hour. The weather outside was foul, and Rhiannon still seemed to be shivering. Her black dress was respectable enough for funeral wear, but too thin for the cold. Maybe, the doctor thought uncharitably, she'd been hoping that the old man would die in time for her to go to a party.

"He's still alive," said Foster, a little more harshly than he'd intended.

As if on cue, the middle daughter - Gwen - walked into the sick-room. "And there's still no sign of Cory," she said. "She should have been here half an hour ago."

"Maybe her plane was delayed," said Foster.

"I called the airport already. It got in before the worst of the storm hit. I don't think she's coming."

Foster glanced at Dulac, but the old man gave no sign of having heard.

“And even if she does get here, will he know?”

Foster didn't answer.

“The show must go on,” said Rhiannon, dryly. “Applaud loudly enough, and he'll come back for an encore.”

“Maybe it's not about him seeing her,” said Foster. “Maybe he wants to give her the chance to say goodbye to him.”

“Is that any excuse for torturing him like this?”

“It's what he asked for,” said Foster, and this time, the harshness in his voice was deliberate. “He wanted to give your sister time to get here, and he made me promise not to turn the machine off until tomorrow morning.”

Rhiannon snorted, and sat down in one of the antique Chippendale chairs. “Jesus,” she said. “He specified New Year's Day?”

The doctor shrugged, and looked at the digital clock on the TV screen: 11.51 pm. “Maybe he wanted to see in the new millennium,” he said.

“The millennium's got nothing to do with it,” said Rhiannon. “It's the ankou.”

“The what?”

“You know how superstitious he was,” she said. “Never lighting three on a match; never saying ‘Macbeth’ if he could help it; never wearing yellow, even in the seventies; all that crap. Well, the ankou's this ghost or whatever, that they believe in where he grew up. He told me about it when I was a kid.” She glanced at Gwen. “Scared the shit out of me, gave me nightmares for weeks, which is probably why Mum wouldn't let him tell you the same story.”

“Anyway, the ankou is sort of like the banshee, and sort of like the grim reaper. It comes to your house and screams or knocks or whatever when you’re about to die. It has long white hair and it can turn its head all the way around like that girl in *The Exorcist*, and it has two helpers, skeletons, who help carry the dead away to this cart it rides in.”

“Doesn’t sound all that scary to me,” said Gwen. “He played worse monsters in some of his movies, and he told us all about those.”

“I wasn’t finished,” said Rhiannon. “If you’re the last person to die in your parish that year, you become the ankou for a year, and you have to go around collecting the dead. And you know how much Dad hated bodies. He wouldn’t use a real skull when he played Hamlet - they had to buy a plastic one. He wouldn’t even go to funerals unless it was a closed casket, and even then...”

Foster was silent. He knew that Dulac had been conspicuously absent from the funeral of his first wife - Rhiannon and Gwen’s mother - but that had been several years after their very messy divorce. Margaret Dulac-Stuart had been a film editor turned sharp-tongued director, and Dulac had often said that their relationship should have been left on the cutting room floor where it had begun. He’d suspected aloud that neither of his elder daughters was his own, but Foster had pointed out that both had been cursed with the distinctive Dulac proboscis. Neither had it now, of course; Margaret had paid the best cosmetic surgeons in Hollywood to trim their noses down to more normal dimensions.

Alison, Dulac’s second wife and Corinna’s mother, had been very different - a moderately talented actress, barely half her husband’s age, she had been possessed of a delicate, almost elfin, beauty. She hadn’t lived long enough to lose that beauty, dying in L.A. of a drug overdose that had eventually been ruled accidental. Cory looked almost like a clone of her mother, except for her eyes: instead of being afflicted with her father’s nose, she’d inherited his dark green irises. Her father had notoriously doted on her, often at the expense of her less beautiful half-sisters, and she had grown up with her mother’s impulsive and wilful temperament - very different from the more careful Margaret and her daughters. Possibly the only things all the family members had ever had in common was a fondness for show business and a weakness for alcohol. Rhiannon and Gwen had followed their mother’s example by joining Alcoholics Anonymous, but Cory hadn’t. Rhiannon liked to say that her youngest sister thought that AA was a bra size.

“I’ll phone the airport again,” said Gwen, breaking the silence. “Maybe they’ll tell me whether she was on the plane. Or maybe she couldn’t hire a car, or find a taxi driver who’d come out here in this weather. I know I wouldn’t, if I had a choice.”

Rhiannon nodded, and Gwen walked out. The eldest sister looked at her father expressionlessly, then said softly, “He wouldn’t know whether she was here or not, or what the time was, would he?”



Foster didn't answer.

"If the stroke was as bad as you say..."

"There's some brain activity, and he'd be in pain - very severe pain - if we stopped the drugs. How much he remembers or recognizes... there's no way of being sure."

"Maybe he's lucky."

"I doubt he'd agree."

"I mean... if she doesn't turn up. He'll never know."

Foster shrugged.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters, doctor?" She didn't bother asking whether he had any children; Foster had never bothered hiding in the closet.

"One brother," said the doctor, looking at the EEG readout. "Why?"

"You were the elder?"

"Yes."

"What does your brother do?"

"He's a librarian. Why?"

"Were you the favourite child?"

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Do you know what’s in my father’s will?”

“No.”

“Do you think he’s left anything to us, or has it all gone to Cory?”

“I’d have no way of knowing. She’s younger, still single, still at school - in theory, anyway,” he conceded. “Maybe he thinks she needs more than you do.”

She smiled thinly. “You’re one of his oldest friends, and even you’re not going to pretend that he’s treated us fairly. She’s been his favourite since she was born. Maybe before that.”

Foster shrugged.

“You’re her doctor, too. You’d know if there was any truth to the rumours about the two of them...”

“There isn’t,” he said, sharply. “Did you start that story?”

“Me? Why would I do such a thing? Just because the two of them hated me?”

He yawned, and looked at his watch again. A minute before midnight. “Nice fairy story, but you left out the evil stepmother.”

Rhiannon stared at him as though he’d just slapped her, then gave him a crooked smile. “Okay. Alison never actually treated me badly, even after Cory was born. And yes, Mum could be a bitch sometimes, but you can’t say she wasn’t provoked. And at least she was honest. Is it right that a father should love one child more than the others, is it fair to any of them, just because they have different mothers, or one is prettier than the others, or -”

The clock in the library began to chime the hour. As if on cue, Gwen walked in, her expression bleak, her cell phone in her hand.

“Turn off the machine,” she said.

“It’s not—”

“There’s no reason to wait,” she snapped. “I just spoke to the hire car people. Then I spoke to the police. There’s been an accident. Cory wasn’t as sober as the clerk seems to have thought, and the weather...” She shook her head. “She isn’t going to make it. Let him die in peace. Turn the machine off.”

\* \* \* \*

Dulac heard the crunch of wheels on the wet gravel outside, and a resounding knock on the main door. He tried to sit up, but his body was too heavy and held down by all the incomprehensible medical apparatus; it was all he could do to open his eyes.

The ankou stood beside his bed, turning its head around completely to examine the other figures in the room. Two skeletons stood behind it, one on each side. Dulac broke into a wheezing laugh at the realization that at least he’d survived into the next year. Someone else would be King of the Dead, going from house to house in the parish to call for the -

The ankou turned her face to him, and he recognized the elfin features and dark green eyes, and screamed.

[<<Contents>>](#)

\* \* \* \*

**Riding the Crocodile**

GREG EGAN

Greg Egan was born in Perth, Australia, in 1961. He has a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from the University of Western Australia, and has worked as a computer programmer in medical research. Since 2002 he has been involved in the refugee rights movement, which seeks to end the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia.

He has published over fifty short stories, seven novels, and three collections of stories. His novella 'Oceanic' won the Hugo Award, the Japanese Seiun Award, the Locus Award, and the Asimov's Readers Award for best novella of 1998. His most recent book was *Schild's Ladder* (Gollancz, 2002).

About this story he says, "Riding the Crocodile' is set three hundred thousand years before the events of the novel I am currently writing, *Incandescence*."

\* \* \* \*

## 1

I

In their ten-thousand, three hundred and ninth year of marriage, Leila and Jasim began contemplating death. They had known love, raised children, and witnessed the flourishing generations of their offspring. They had travelled to a dozen worlds and lived among a thousand cultures. They had educated themselves many times over, proved theorems, and acquired and abandoned artistic sensibilities and skills. They had not lived in every conceivable manner, far from it, but what room would there be for the multitude if each individual tried to exhaust the permutations of existence? There were some experiences, they agreed, that everyone should try, and others that only a handful of people in all of time need bother with. They had no wish to give up their idiosyncrasies, no wish to uproot their personalities from the niches they had settled in long ago, let alone start cranking mechanically through some tedious enumeration of all the other people they might have been. They had been themselves, and for that they had done, more or less, enough.

Before dying, though, they wanted to attempt something grand and audacious. It was not that their lives were incomplete, in need of some final flourish of affirmation. If some unlikely calamity had robbed them of the chance to orchestrate this finale, the closest of their friends would never have remarked upon, let alone mourned, its absence. There was no aesthetic compulsion to be satisfied, no aching existential void to be filled. Nevertheless, it was what they both wanted, and once they had acknowledged this to each other their hearts were set on it.

Choosing the project was not a great burden; that task required nothing but patience. They knew they'd recognise it when it came to them. Every night before sleeping, Jasim would ask Leila, "Did you see it yet?"

"No. Did you?"

"Not yet."

Sometimes Leila would dream that she'd found it in her dreams, but the transcripts proved otherwise. Sometimes Jasim felt sure that it was lurking just below the surface of his thoughts, but when he dived down to check it was nothing but a trick of the light.

Years passed. They occupied themselves with simple pleasures: gardening, swimming in the surf, talking with their friends, catching up with their descendants. They had grown skilled at finding pastimes that could bear repetition. Still, were it not for the nameless adventure that awaited them they would have thrown a pair of dice each evening and agreed that two sixes would end it all.

One night, Leila stood alone in the garden, watching the sky. From their home world, Najib, they had travelled only to the nearest stars with inhabited worlds, each time losing just a few decades to the journey. They had chosen those limits so as not to alienate themselves from friends and family, and it had never felt like much of a constraint. True, the civilisation of the Amalgam wrapped the galaxy, and a committed traveller could spend two hundred thousand years circling back home, but what was to be gained by such an overblown odyssey? The dozen worlds of their neighbourhood held enough variety for any traveller, and whether more distant realms were filled with fresh novelties or endless repetition hardly seemed to matter. To have a goal, a destination, would be one thing, but to drown in the sheer plenitude of worlds for its own sake seemed utterly pointless.

A destination? Leila overlaid the sky with information, most of it by necessity millennia out of date. There were worlds with spectacular views of nebulae and star clusters, views that could be guaranteed still to be in existence if they travelled to see them, but would taking in such sights firsthand be so much better than immersion in the flawless images already available in Najib's library? To blink away ten thousand years just to wake beneath a cloud of green and violet gas, however lovely, seemed like a terrible anticlimax.

The stars tingled with self-aggrandisement, plaintively tugging at her attention. The architecture here, the rivers, the festivals! Even if these tourist attractions could survive the millennia, even if some were literally unique, there was nothing that struck her as a fitting prelude to death. If she and Jasim had formed some whimsical attachment, centuries before, to a world on the other side of the galaxy rumoured to hold great beauty or interest, and if they had talked long enough about chasing it down when they had nothing better to do, then keeping that promise might have been worth it, even if the journey led them to a world in

ruins. They had no such cherished destination, though, and it was too late to cultivate one now.

Leila's gaze followed a thinning in the advertising, taking her to the bulge of stars surrounding the galaxy's centre. The disk of the Milky Way belonged to the Amalgam, whose various ancestral species had effectively merged into a single civilisation, but the central bulge was inhabited by beings who had declined to do so much as communicate with those around them. All attempts to send probes into the bulge — let alone the kind of engineering spores needed to create the infrastructure for travel — had been gently but firmly rebuffed, with the intruders swatted straight back out again. The Aloof had maintained their silence and isolation since before the Amalgam itself had even existed.

The latest news on this subject was twenty thousand years old, but the status quo had held for close to a million years. If she and Jasim travelled to the innermost edge of the Amalgam's domain, the chances were exceptionally good that the Aloof would not have changed their ways in the meantime. In fact, it would be no disappointment at all if the Aloof had suddenly thrown open their borders: that unheralded thaw would itself be an extraordinary thing to witness. If the challenge remained, though, all the better.

She called Jasim to the garden and pointed out the richness of stars, unadorned with potted histories.

"We go where?" he asked.

"As close to the Aloof as we're able."

"And do what?"

"Try to observe them," she said. "Try to learn something about them. Try to make contact, in whatever way we can."

"You don't think that's been tried before?"

"A million times. Not so much lately, though. Maybe while the interest on our side has ebbed, they've been changing, growing more receptive."

"Or maybe not." Jasim smiled. He had appeared a little stunned by her proposal at first, but the idea seemed to be growing on him. "It's a hard, hard problem to throw ourselves against. But it's not futile. Not quite." He wrapped her hands in his. "Let's see how we feel in the morning."

In the morning, they were both convinced. They would camp at the gates of these elusive strangers, and try to rouse them from their indifference.

They summoned the family from every corner of Najib. There were some grandchildren and more distant descendants who had settled in other star systems, decades away at lightspeed, but they chose not to wait to call them home for this final farewell.

Two hundred people crowded the physical house and garden, while two hundred more confined themselves to the virtual wing. There was talk and food and music, like any other celebration, and Leila tried to undercut any edge of solemnity that she felt creeping in. As the night wore on, though, each time she kissed a child or grandchild, each time she embraced an old friend, she thought: this could be the last time, ever. There had to be a last time, she couldn't face ten thousand more years, but a part of her spat and struggled like a cornered animal at the thought of each warm touch fading to nothing.

As dawn approached, the party shifted entirely into the acorporeal. People took on fancy dress from myth or xenology, or just joked and played with their illusory bodies. It was all very calm and gentle, nothing like the surreal excesses she remembered from her youth, but Leila still felt a tinge of vertigo. When her son Khalid made his ears grow and spin, this amiable silliness carried a hard message: the machinery of the house had ripped her mind from her body, as seamlessly as ever, but this time she would never be returning to the same flesh.

Sunrise brought the first of the goodbyes. Leila forced herself to release each proffered hand, to unwrap her arms from around each non-existent body. She whispered to Jasim, "Are you going mad, too?"

"Of course."

Gradually the crowd thinned out. The wing grew quiet. Leila found herself pacing from room to room, as if she might yet chance upon someone who'd stayed behind, then she remembered urging the last of them to go, her children and friends tearfully retreating down the hall. She skirted inconsolable sadness, then lifted herself above it and went looking for Jasim.

He was waiting for her outside their room.

"Are you ready to sleep?" he asked her gently.

She said, “For an eon.”

\* \* \* \*

## 2

Leila woke in the same bed as she’d lain down in. Jasim was still sleeping beside her. The window showed dawn, but it was not the usual view of the cliffs and the ocean.

Leila had the house brief her. After twenty thousand years — travelling more or less at lightspeed, pausing only for a microsecond or two at various way-stations to be cleaned up and amplified — the package of information bearing the two of them had arrived safely at Nazdeek-be-Beegane. This world was not crowded, and it had been tweaked to render it compatible with a range of metabolic styles. The house had negotiated a site where they could live embodied in comfort if they wished.

Jasim stirred and opened his eyes. “Good morning. How are you feeling?”

“Older.”

“Really?”

Leila paused to consider this seriously. “No. Not even slightly. How about you?”

“I’m fine. I’m just wondering what’s out there.” He raised himself up to peer through the window. The house had been instantiated on a wide, empty plain, covered with low stalks of green and yellow vegetation. They could eat these plants, and the house had already started a spice garden while they slept. He stretched his shoulders. “Let’s go and make breakfast.”

They went downstairs, stepping into freshly minted bodies, then out into the garden. The air was still, the sun already warm. The house had tools prepared to help them with the harvest. It was the nature of travel that they had come empty-handed, and they had no relatives here, no fifteenth cousins, no friends of friends. It was the nature of the Amalgam that they were welcome nonetheless, and the machines that supervised this world on behalf of its inhabitants had done their best to provide for them.



“So this is the afterlife,” Jasim mused, scything the yellow stalks. “Very rustic.”

“Speak for yourself,” Leila retorted. “I’m not dead yet.” She put down her own scythe and bent to pluck one of the plants out by its roots.

The meal they made was filling but bland. Leila resisted the urge to tweak her perceptions of it; she preferred to face the challenge of working out decent recipes, which would make a useful counterpoint to the more daunting task they’d come here to attempt.

They spent the rest of the day just tramping around, exploring their immediate surroundings. The house had tapped into a nearby stream for water, and sunlight, stored, would provide all the power they needed. From some hills about an hour’s walk away they could see into a field with another building, but they decided to wait a little longer before introducing themselves to their neighbours. The air had a slightly odd smell, due to the range of components needed to support other metabolic styles, but it wasn’t too intrusive.

The onset of night took them by surprise. Even before the sun had set a smattering of stars began appearing in the east, and for a moment Leila thought that these white specks against the fading blue were some kind of exotic atmospheric phenomenon, perhaps small clouds forming in the stratosphere as the temperature dropped. When it became clear what was happening, she beckoned to Jasim to sit beside her on the bank of the stream and watch the stars of the bulge come out.

They’d come at a time when Nazdeek lay between its sun and the galactic centre. At dusk one half of the Aloof’s dazzling territory stretched from the eastern horizon to the zenith, with the stars’ slow march westward against a darkening sky only revealing more of their splendour.

“You think that was to die for?” Jasim joked as they walked back to the house.

“We could end this now, if you’re feeling unambitious.”

He squeezed her hand. “If this takes ten thousand years, I’m ready.”

It was a mild night, they could have slept outdoors, but the spectacle was too distracting. They stayed downstairs, in the physical wing. Leila watched the strange thicket of shadows cast by the furniture sliding across the walls. These neighbours never sleep, she thought. When we come knocking, they’ll ask what took us so long.

\* \* \* \*

### 3

Hundreds of observatories circled Nazdeek, built then abandoned by others who'd come on the same quest. When Leila saw the band of pristine space junk mapped out before her — orbits scrupulously maintained and swept clean by robot sentinels for eons — she felt as if she'd found the graves of their predecessors, stretching out in the field behind the house as far as the eye could see.

Nazdeek was prepared to offer them the resources to loft another package of instruments into the vacuum if they wished, but many of the abandoned observatories were perfectly functional, and most had been left in a compliant state, willing to take instructions from anyone.

Leila and Jasim sat in their living room and woke machine after machine from millennia of hibernation. Some, it turned out, had not been sleeping at all, but had been carrying on systematic observations, accumulating data long after their owners had lost interest.

In the crowded stellar precincts of the bulge, disruptive gravitational effects made planet formation rarer than it was in the disk, and orbits less stable. Nevertheless, planets had been found. A few thousand could be tracked from Nazdeek, and one observatory had been monitoring their atmospheric spectra for the last twelve millennia. In all of those worlds for all of those years, there were no signs of atmospheric composition departing from plausible, purely geochemical models. That meant no wild life, and no crude industries. It didn't prove that these worlds were uninhabited, but it suggested either that the Aloof went to great lengths to avoid leaving chemical fingerprints, or they lived in an entirely different fashion to any of the civilisations that had formed the Amalgam.

Of the eleven forms of biochemistry that had been found scattered around the galactic disk, all had given rise eventually to hundreds of species with general intelligence. Of the multitude of civilisations that had emerged from those roots, all contained cultures that had granted themselves the flexibility of living as software, but they also all contained cultures that persisted with corporeal existence. Leila would never have willingly given up either mode, herself, but while it was easy to imagine a subculture doing so, for a whole species it seemed extraordinary. In a sense, the intertwined civilisation of the Amalgam owed its existence to the fact that there was as much cultural variation within every species as there was between one species and another. In that explosion of diversity, overlapping interests were inevitable.

If the Aloof were the exception, and their material culture had shrunk to nothing but a few discreet processors — each with the energy needs of a gnat, scattered throughout a trillion cubic light years of dust and blazing stars — then finding them would be impossible.

Of course, that worst-case scenario couldn't quite be true. The sole reason the Aloof were assumed to exist at all was the fact that some component of their material culture was tossing back every probe that was sent into the bulge. However discreet that machinery was, it certainly couldn't be sparse: given that it had managed to track, intercept and reverse the trajectories of billions of individual probes that had been sent in along thousands of different routes, relativistic constraints on the information flow implied that the Aloof had some kind of presence at more or less every star at the edge of the bulge.

Leila and Jasim had Nazdeek brief them on the most recent attempts to enter the bulge, but even after forty thousand years the basic facts hadn't changed. There was no crisply delineated barrier marking the Aloof's territory, but at some point within a border region about fifty light years wide, every single probe that was sent in ceased to function. The signals from those carrying in-flight beacons or transmitters went dead without warning. A century or so later, they would appear again at almost the same point, travelling in the opposite direction: back to where they'd come from. Those that were retrieved and examined were found to be unharmed, but their data logs contained nothing from the missing decades.

Jasim said, "The Aloof could be dead and gone. They built the perfect fence, but now it's outlasted them. It's just guarding their ruins."

Leila rejected this emphatically. "No civilisation that's spread to more than one star system has ever vanished completely. Sometimes they've changed beyond recognition, but not one has ever died without descendants."

"That's a fact of history, but it's not a universal law," Jasim persisted. "If we're going to argue from the Amalgam all the time, we'll get nowhere. If the Aloof weren't exceptional, we wouldn't be here."

"That's true. But I won't accept that they're dead until I see some evidence."

"What would count as evidence? Apart from a million years of silence?"

Leila said, "Silence could mean anything. If they're really dead, we'll find something more, something definite."

"Such as?"

"If we see it, we'll know."

They began the project in earnest, reviewing data from the ancient observatories, stopping only to gather food, eat and sleep. They had resisted making detailed plans back on Najib, reasoning that any approach they mapped out in advance was likely to be rendered obsolete once they learned about the latest investigations. Now that they'd arrived and found the state of play utterly unchanged, Leila wished that they'd come armed with some clear options for dealing with the one situation they could have prepared for before they'd left.

In fact, though they might have felt like out-of-touch amateurs back on Najib, now that the Aloof had become their entire *raison d'être* it was far harder to relax and indulge in the kind of speculation that might actually bear fruit, given that every systematic approach had failed. Having come twenty thousand light years for this, they couldn't spend their time day-dreaming, turning the problem over in the backs of their minds while they surrendered to the rhythms of Nazdeek's rural idyll. So they studied everything that had been tried before, searching methodically for a new approach, hoping to see the old ideas with fresh eyes, hoping that — by chance if for no other reason — they might lack some crucial blind spot that had afflicted all of their predecessors.

After seven months without results or inspiration, it was Jasim who finally dragged them out of the rut. "We're getting nowhere," he said. "It's time to accept that, put all this aside, and go visit the neighbours."

Leila stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Go visit them? How? What makes you think that they're suddenly going to let us in?"

He said, "The neighbours. Remember? Over the hill. The ones who might actually want to talk to us."

\* \* \* \*

## 4

Their neighbours had published a précis stating that they welcomed social contact in principle, but might take a while to respond. Jasim sent them an invitation, asking if they'd like to join them in their house, and waited.

After just three days, a reply came back. The neighbours did not want to put them to the trouble of altering their own house physically, and preferred not to become acorporeal at present. Given the less stringent requirements of Leila and Jasim's own species when embodied, might they wish to come instead to the neighbours' house?

Leila said, “Why not?” They set a date and time.

The neighbours’ précis included all the biological and sociological details needed to prepare for the encounter. Their biochemistry was carbon-based and oxygen-breathing, but employed a different replicator to Leila and Jasim’s DNA. Their ancestral phenotype resembled a large furred snake, and when embodied they generally lived in nests of a hundred or so. The minds of the individuals were perfectly autonomous, but solitude was an alien and unsettling concept for them.

Leila and Jasim set out late in the morning, in order to arrive early in the afternoon. There were some low, heavy clouds in the sky, but it was not completely overcast, and Leila noticed that when the sun passed behind the clouds, she could discern some of the brightest stars from the edge of the bulge.

Jasim admonished her sternly, “Stop looking. This is our day off.”

The Snakes’ building was a large squat cylinder resembling a water tank, which turned out to be packed with something mossy and pungent. When they arrived at the entrance, three of their hosts were waiting to greet them, coiled on the ground near the mouth of a large tunnel emerging from the moss. Their bodies were almost as wide as their guests’, and some eight or ten metres long. Their heads bore two front-facing eyes, but their other sense organs were not prominent. Leila could make out their mouths, and knew from the briefing how many rows of teeth lay behind them, but the wide pink gashes stayed closed, almost lost in the grey fur.

The Snakes communicated with a low-frequency thumping, and their system of nomenclature was complex, so Leila just mentally tagged the three of them with randomly chosen, slightly exotic names — Tim, John and Sarah — and tweaked her translator so she’d recognise intuitively who was who, who was addressing her, and the significance of their gestures.

“Welcome to our home,” said Tim enthusiastically.

“Thank you for inviting us,” Jasim replied.

“We’ve had no visitors for quite some time,” explained Sarah. “So we really are delighted to meet you.”

“How long has it been?” Leila asked.

“Twenty years,” said Sarah.

“But we came here for the quiet life,” John added. “So we expected it would be a while.”

Leila pondered the idea of a clan of a hundred ever finding a quiet life, but then, perhaps unwelcome intrusions from outsiders were of a different nature to family dramas.

“Will you come into the nest?” Tim asked. “If you don’t wish to enter we won’t take offence, but everyone would like to see you, and some of us aren’t comfortable coming out into the open.”

Leila glanced at Jasim. He said privately, “We can push our vision to IR. And tweak ourselves to tolerate the smell.”

Leila agreed.

“Okay,” Jasim told Tim.

Tim slithered into the tunnel and vanished in a quick, elegant motion, then John motioned with his head for the guests to follow. Leila went first, propelling herself up the gentle slope with her knees and elbows. The plant the Snakes’ cultivated for the nest formed a cool, dry, resilient surface. She could see Tim ten metres or so ahead, like a giant glow-worm shining with body heat, slowing down now to let her catch up. She glanced back at Jasim, who looked even weirder than the Snakes now, his face and arms blotched with strange bands of radiance from the exertion.

After a few minutes, they came to a large chamber. The air was humid, but after the confines of the tunnel it felt cool and fresh. Tim led them towards the centre, where about a dozen other Snakes were already waiting to greet them. They circled the guests excitedly, thumping out a delighted welcome. Leila felt a surge of adrenaline; she knew that she and Jasim were in no danger, but the sheer size and energy of the creatures was overwhelming.

“Can you tell us why you’ve come to Nazdeek?” asked Sarah.

“Of course.” For a second or two Leila tried to maintain eye contact with her, but like all the other

Snakes she kept moving restlessly, a gesture that Leila's translator imbued with a sense of warmth and enthusiasm. As for lack of eye contact, the Snakes' own translators would understand perfectly that some aspects of ordinary, polite human behaviour became impractical under the circumstances, and would not mislabel her actions. "We're here to learn about the Aloof," she said.

"The Aloof?" At first Sarah just seemed perplexed, then Leila's translator hinted at a touch of irony. "But they offer us nothing."

Leila was tongue-tied for a moment. The implication was subtle but unmistakable. Citizens of the Amalgam had a protocol for dealing with each other's curiosity: they published a *précis*, which spelled out clearly any information that they wished people in general to know about them, and also specified what, if any, further inquiries would be welcome. However, a citizen was perfectly entitled to publish no *précis* at all and have that decision respected. When no information was published, and no invitation offered, you simply had no choice but to mind your own business.

"They offer us nothing as far as we can tell," she said, "but that might be a misunderstanding, a failure to communicate."

"They send back all the probes," Tim replied. "Do you really think we've misunderstood what that means?"

Jasim said, "It means that they don't want us physically intruding on their territory, putting our machines right next to their homes, but I'm not convinced that it proves that they have no desire to communicate whatsoever."

"We should leave them in peace," Tim insisted. "They've seen the probes, so they know we're here. If they want to make contact, they'll do it in their own time."

"Leave them in peace," echoed another Snake. A chorus of affirmation followed from others in the chamber.

Leila stood her ground. "We have no idea how many different species and cultures might be living in the bulge. *One of them* sends back the probes, but for all we know there could be a thousand others who don't yet even know that the Amalgam has tried to make contact."

This suggestion set off a series of arguments, some between guests and hosts, some between the Snakes themselves. All the while, the Snakes kept circling excitedly, while new ones entered the chamber to

witness the novel sight of these strangers.

When the clamour about the Aloof had quietened down enough for her to change the subject, Leila asked Sarah, “Why have you come to Nazdeek yourself?”

“It’s out of the way, off the main routes. We can think things over here, undisturbed.”

“But you could have the same amount of privacy anywhere. It’s all a matter of what you put in your précis.”

Sarah’s response was imbued with a tinge of amusement. “For us, it would be unimaginably rude to cut off all contact explicitly, by decree. Especially with others from our own ancestral species. To live a quiet life, we had to reduce the likelihood of encountering anyone who would seek us out. We had to make the effort of rendering ourselves physically remote, in order to reap the benefits.”

“Yet you’ve made Jasim and myself very welcome.”

“Of course. But that will be enough for the next twenty years.”

So much for resurrecting their social life. “What exactly is it that you’re pondering in this state of solitude?”

“The nature of reality. The uses of existence. The reasons to live, and the reasons not to.”

Leila felt the skin on her forearms tingle. She’d almost forgotten that she’d made an appointment with death, however uncertain the timing.

She explained how she and Jasim had made their decision to embark on a grand project before dying.

“That’s an interesting approach,” Sarah said. “I’ll have to give it some thought.” She paused, then added, “Though I’m not sure that you’ve solved the problem.”



“What do you mean?”

“Will it really be easier now to choose the right moment to give up your life? Haven’t you merely replaced one delicate judgement with an even more difficult one: deciding when you’ve exhausted the possibilities for contacting the Aloof?”

“You make it sound as if we have no chance of succeeding.” Leila was not afraid of the prospect of failure, but the suggestion that it was inevitable was something else entirely.

Sarah said, “We’ve been here on Nazdeek for fifteen thousand years. We don’t pay much attention to the world outside the nest, but even from this cloistered state we’ve seen many people break their backs against this rock.”

“So when will you accept that your own project is finished?” Leila countered. “If you still don’t have what you’re looking for after fifteen thousand years, when will you admit defeat?”

“I have no idea,” Sarah confessed. “I have no idea, any more than you do.”

\* \* \* \*

## 5

When the way forward first appeared, there was nothing to set it apart from a thousand false alarms that had come before it.

It was their seventeenth year on Nazdeek. They had launched their own observatory — armed with the latest refinements culled from around the galaxy — fifteen years before, and it had been confirming the null results of its predecessors ever since.

They had settled into an unhurried routine, systematically exploring the possibilities that observation hadn’t yet ruled out. Between the scenarios that were obviously stone cold dead — the presence of an energy-rich, risk-taking, extroverted civilisation in the bulge actively seeking contact by every means at its disposal — and the infinite number of possibilities that could never be distinguished at this distance from the absence of all life, and the absence of all machinery save one dumb but efficient gatekeeper, tantalising clues would bubble up out of the data now and then, only to fade into statistical insignificance

in the face of continued scrutiny.

Tens of billions of stars lying within the Aloof's territory could be discerned from Nazdeek, some of them evolving or violently interacting on a time scale of years or months. Black holes were flaying and swallowing their companions. Neutron stars and white dwarfs were stealing fresh fuel and flaring into novas. Star clusters were colliding and tearing each other apart. If you gathered data on this whole menagerie for long enough, you could expect to see almost anything. Leila would not have been surprised to wander into the garden at night and find a great welcome sign spelled out in the sky, before the fortuitous pattern of novas faded and the message dissolved into randomness again.

When their gamma ray telescope caught a glimmer of something odd — the nuclei of a certain isotope of fluorine decaying from an excited state, when there was no nearby source of the kind of radiation that could have put the nuclei into that state in the first place — it might have been just another random, unexplained fact to add to a vast pile. When the same glimmer was seen again, not far away, Leila reasoned that if a gas cloud enriched with fluorine could be affected at one location by an unseen radiation source, it should not be surprising if the same thing happened elsewhere in the same cloud.

It happened again. The three events lined up in space and time in a manner suggesting a short pulse of gamma rays in the form of a tightly focused beam, striking three different points in the gas cloud. Still, in the mountains of data they had acquired from their predecessors, coincidences far more compelling than this had occurred hundreds of thousands of times.

With the fourth flash, the balance of the numbers began to tip. The secondary gamma rays reaching Nazdeek gave only a weak and distorted impression of the original radiation, but all four flashes were consistent with a single, narrow beam. There were thousands of known gamma ray sources in the bulge, but the frequency of the radiation, the direction of the beam, and the time profile of the pulse did not fit with any of them.

The archives revealed a few dozen occasions when the same kind of emissions had been seen from fluorine nuclei under similar conditions. There had never been more than three connected events before, but one sequence had occurred along a path not far from the present one.

Leila sat by the stream and modelled the possibilities. If the beam was linking two objects in powered flight, prediction was impossible. If receiver and transmitter were mostly in free-fall, though, and only made corrections occasionally, the past and present data combined gave her a plausible forecast for the beam's future orientation.

Jasim looked into her simulation, a thought-bubble of stars and equations hovering above the water. "The whole path will lie out of bounds," he said.

“No kidding.” The Aloof’s territory was more or less spherical, which made it a convex set: you couldn’t get between any two points that lay inside it without entering the territory itself. “But look how much the beam spreads out. From the fluorine data, I’d say it could be tens of kilometres wide by the time it reaches the receiver.”

“So they might not catch it all? They might let some of the beam escape into the disk?” He sounded unpersuaded.

Leila said, “Look, if they really were doing everything possible to hide this, we would never have seen these blips in the first place.”

“Gas clouds with this much fluorine are extremely rare. They obviously picked a frequency that wouldn’t be scattered under ordinary circumstances.”

“Yes, but that’s just a matter of getting the signal through the local environment. We choose frequencies ourselves that won’t interact with any substance that’s likely to be present along the route, but no choice is perfect, and we just live with that. It seems to me that they’ve done the same thing. If they were fanatical purists, they’d communicate by completely different methods.”

“All right.” Jasim reached into the model. “So where can we go that’s in the line of sight?”

The short answer was: nowhere. If the beam was not blocked completely by its intended target it would spread out considerably as it made its way through the galactic disk, but it would not grow so wide that it would sweep across a single point where the Amalgam had any kind of outpost.

Leila said, “This is too good to miss. We need to get a decent observatory into its path.”

Jasim agreed. “And we need to do it before these nodes decide they’ve drifted too close to something dangerous, and switch on their engines for a course correction.”

They crunched through the possibilities. Wherever the Amalgam had an established presence, the infrastructure already on the ground could convert data into any kind of material object. Transmitting yourself to such a place, along with whatever you needed, was simplicity itself: lightspeed was the only real constraint. Excessive demands on the local resources might be denied, but modest requests were rarely rejected.

Far more difficult was building something new at a site with raw materials but no existing receiver; in that case, instead of pure data, you needed to send an engineering spore of some kind. If you were in a hurry, not only did you need to spend energy boosting the spore to relativistic velocities — a cost that snowballed due to the mass of protective shielding — you then had to waste much of the time you gained on a lengthy braking phase, or the spore would hit its target with enough energy to turn it into plasma. Interactions with the interstellar medium could be used to slow down the spore, avoiding the need to carry yet more mass to act as a propellant for braking, but the whole business was disgustingly inefficient.

Harder still was getting anything substantial to a given point in the vast empty space between the stars. With no raw materials to hand at the destination, everything had to be moved from somewhere else. The best starting point was usually to send an engineering spore into a cometary cloud, loosely bound gravitationally to its associated star, but not every such cloud was open to plunder, and everything took time, and obscene amounts of energy.

To arrange for an observatory to be delivered to the most accessible point along the beam's line of sight, travelling at the correct velocity, would take about fifteen thousand years all told. That assumed that the local cultures who owned the nearest facilities, and who had a right to veto the use of the raw materials, acceded immediately to their request.

“How long between course corrections?” Leila wondered. If the builders of this hypothetical network were efficient, the nodes could drift for a while in interstellar space without any problems, but in the bulge everything happened faster than in the disk, and the need to counter gravitational effects would come much sooner. There was no way to make a firm prediction, but they could easily have as little as eight or ten thousand years.

Leila struggled to reconcile herself to the reality. “We’ll try at this location, and if we’re lucky we might still catch something. If not, we’ll try again after the beam shifts.” Sending the first observatory chasing after the beam would be futile; even with the present free-fall motion of the nodes, the observation point would be moving at a substantial fraction of lightspeed relative to the local stars. Magnified by the enormous distances involved, a small change in direction down in the bulge could see the beam lurch thousands of light years sideways by the time it reached the disk.

Jasim said, “Wait.” He magnified the region around the projected path of the beam.

“What are you looking for?”

He asked the map, “Are there two outposts of the Amalgam lying on a straight line that intersects the beam?”

The map replied in a tone of mild incredulity. “No.”

“That was too much to hope for. Are there three lying on a plane that intersects the beam?”

The map said, “There are about ten-to-the-eighteen triples that meet that condition.”

Leila suddenly realised what it was he had in mind. She laughed and squeezed his arm. “You are completely insane!”

Jasim said, “Let me get the numbers right first, then you can mock me.” He rephrased his question to the map. “For how many of those triples would the beam pass between them, intersecting the triangle whose vertices they lie on?”

“About ten-to-the-sixth.”

“How close to us is the closest point of intersection of the beam with any of those triangles — if the distance in each case is measured via the worst of the three outposts, the one that makes the total path longest.”

“Seven thousand four hundred and twenty-six light years.”

Leila said, “Collision braking. With three components?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

*Better than twice as fast as the fastest conventional method?* “Nothing comes to mind. Let me think about it.”

Braking against the flimsy interstellar medium was a slow process. If you wanted to deliver a payload rapidly to a point that fortuitously lay somewhere on a straight line between two existing outposts, you could fire two separate packages from the two locations and let them “collide” when they met — or rather, let them brake against each other magnetically. If you arranged for the packages to have equal

and opposite momenta, they would come to a halt without any need to throw away reaction mass or clutch at passing molecules, and some of their kinetic energy could be recovered as electricity and stored for later use.

The aim and the timing had to be perfect. Relativistic packages did not make in-flight course corrections, and the data available at each launch site about the other's precise location was always a potentially imperfect prediction, not a rock-solid statement of fact. Even with the Amalgam's prodigious astrometric and computing resources, achieving millimetre alignments at thousand-light-year distances could not be guaranteed.

Now Jasim wanted to make three of these bullets meet, perform an elaborate electromagnetic dance, and end up with just the right velocity needed to keep tracking the moving target of the beam.

In the evening, back in the house, they sat together working through simulations. It was easy to find designs that would work if everything went perfectly, but they kept hunting for the most robust variation, the one that was most tolerant of small misalignments. With standard two-body collision braking, the usual solution was to have the first package, shaped like a cylinder, pass right through a hole in the second package. As it emerged from the other side and the two moved apart again, the magnetic fields were switched from repulsive to attractive. Several "bounces" followed, and in the process as much of the kinetic energy as possible was gradually converted into superconducting currents for storage, while the rest was dissipated as electromagnetic radiation. Having three objects meeting at an angle would not only make the timing and positioning more critical, it would destroy the simple, axial symmetry and introduce a greater risk of instability.

It was dawn before they settled on the optimal design, which effectively split the problem in two. First, package one, a sphere, would meet package two, a torus, threading the gap in the middle, then bouncing back and forth through it seventeen times. The plane of the torus would lie at an angle to its direction of flight, allowing the sphere to approach it head-on. When the two finally came to rest with respect to each other, they would still have a component of their velocity carrying them straight towards package three, a cylinder with an axial borehole.

Because the electromagnetic interactions were the same as the two-body case — self-centring, intrinsically stable — a small amount of misalignment at each of these encounters would not be fatal. The usual two-body case, though, didn't require the combined package, after all the bouncing and energy dissipation was completed, to be moving on a path so precisely determined that it could pass through yet another narrow hoop.

There were no guarantees, and in the end the result would be in other people's hands. They could send requests to the three outposts, asking for these objects to be launched at the necessary times on the necessary trajectories. The energy needs hovered on the edge of politeness, though, and it was possible that one or more of the requests would simply be refused.

Jasim waved the models away, and they stretched out on the carpet, side by side.

He said, “I never thought we’d get this far. Even if this is only a mirage, I never thought we’d find one worth chasing.”

Leila said, “I don’t know what I expected. Some kind of great folly: some long, exhausting, exhilarating struggle that felt like wandering through a jungle for years and ending up utterly lost.”

“And then what?”

“Surrender.”

Jasim was silent for a while. Leila could sense that he was brooding over something, but she didn’t press him.

He said, “Should we travel to this observatory ourselves, or wait here for the results?”

“We should go. Definitely! I don’t want to hang around here for fifteen thousand years, waiting. We can leave the Nazdeek observatories hunting for more beam fluorescence and broadcasting the results, so we’ll hear about them wherever we end up.”

“That makes sense.” Jasim hesitated, then added, “When we go, I don’t want to leave a back-up.”

“Ah.” They’d travelled from Najib leaving nothing of themselves behind: if their transmission had somehow failed to make it to Nazdeek, no stored copy of the data would ever have woken to resume their truncated lives. Travel within the Amalgam’s established network carried negligible risks, though. If they flung themselves towards the hypothetical location of this yet-to-be-assembled station in the middle of nowhere, it was entirely possible that they’d sail off to infinity without ever being instantiated again.

Leila said, “Are you tired of what we’re doing? Of what we’ve become?”

“It’s not that.”

“This one chance isn’t the be-all and end-all. Now that we know how to hunt for the beams, I’m sure we’ll find this one again after its shifts. We could find a thousand others, if we’re persistent.”

“I know that,” he said. “I don’t want to stop, I don’t want to end this. But I want to *risk* ending it. Just once. While that still means something.”

Leila sat up and rested her head on her knees. She could understand what he was feeling, but it still disturbed her.

Jasim said, “We’ve already achieved something extraordinary. No one’s found a clue like this in a million years. If we leave that to prosperity, it will be pursued to the end, we can be sure of that. But I desperately want to pursue it myself. With you.”

“And because you want that so badly, you need to face the chance of losing it?”

“Yes.”

It was one thing they had never tried. In their youth, they would never have knowingly risked death. They’d been too much in love, too eager for the life they’d yet to live; the stakes would have been unbearably high. In the twilight years, back on Najib, it would have been an easy thing to do, but an utterly insipid pleasure.

Jasim sat up and took her hand. “Have I hurt you with this?”

“No, no.” She shook her head pensively, trying to gather her thoughts. She didn’t want to hide her feelings, but she wanted to express them precisely, not blurt them out in a confusing rush. “I always thought we’d reach the end together, though. We’d come to some point in the jungle, look around, exchange a glance, and know that we’d arrived. Without even needing to say it aloud.”

Jasim drew her to him and held her. “All right, I’m sorry. Forget everything I said.”

Leila pushed him away, annoyed. “This isn’t something you can take back. If it’s the truth, it’s the truth. Just give me some time to decide what I want.”



They put it aside, and buried themselves in work: polishing the design for the new observatory, preparing the requests to send to the three outposts. One of the planets they would be petitioning belonged to the Snakes, so Leila and Jasim went to visit the nest for a second time, to seek advice on the best way to beg for this favour. Their neighbours seemed more excited just to see them again than they were at the news that a tiny rent had appeared in the Aloof's million-year-old cloak of discretion. When Leila gently pushed her on this point, Sarah said, "You're here, here and now, our guests in flesh and blood. I'm sure I'll be dead long before the Aloof are willing to do the same."

Leila thought: What kind of strange greed is it that I'm suffering from? I can be feted by creatures who rose up from the dust through a completely different molecule than my own ancestors. I can sit among them and discuss the philosophy of life and death. The Amalgam has already joined every willing participant in the galaxy into one vast conversation. And I want to go and eavesdrop on the Aloof? Just because they've played hard-to-get for a million years?

They dispatched requests for the three modules to be built and launched by their three as-yet unwitting collaborators, specifying the final countdown to the nanosecond but providing a ten-year period for the project to be debated. Leila felt optimistic; however blasé the Nazdeek nest had been, she suspected that no space-faring culture really could resist the chance to peek behind the veil.

They had thirty-six years to wait before they followed in the wake of their petitions; on top of the ten-year delay, the new observatory's modules would be travelling at a fraction of a percent below lightspeed, so they needed a head start.

No more tell-tale gamma ray flashes appeared from the bulge, but Leila hadn't expected any so soon. They had sent the news of their discovery to other worlds close to the Aloof's territory, so eventually a thousand other groups with different vantage points would be searching for the same kind of evidence and finding their own ways to interpret and exploit it. It hurt a little, scattering their hard-won revelation to the wind for anyone to use — perhaps even to beat them to some far greater prize — but they'd relied on the generosity of their predecessors from the moment they'd arrived on Nazdeek, and the sheer scale of the overall problem made it utterly perverse to cling selfishly to their own small triumph.

As the day of their departure finally arrived, Leila came to a decision. She understood Jasim's need to put everything at risk, and in a sense she shared it. If she had always imagined the two of them ending this together — struggling on, side by side, until the way forward was lost and the undergrowth closed in on them — then *that* was what she'd risk. She would take the flip side to his own wager.

When the house took their minds apart and sent them off to chase the beam, Leila left a copy of herself frozen on Nazdeek. If no word of their safe arrival reached it by the expected time, it would wake and carry on the search.

Alone.

\* \* \* \*

## 6

“Welcome to Trident. We’re honoured by the presence of our most distinguished guest.”

Jasim stood beside the bed, waving a triangular flag. Red, green and blue in the corners merged to white in the centre.

“How long have you been up?”

“About an hour,” he said. Leila frowned, and he added apologetically, “You were sleeping very deeply, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“I should be the one giving the welcome,” she said. “You’re the one who might never have woken.”

The bedroom window looked out into a dazzling field of stars. It was not a view facing the bulge — by now Leila could recognise the distinctive spectra of the region’s stars with ease — but even these disk stars were so crisp and bright that this was like no sky she had ever seen.

“Have you been downstairs?” she said.

“Not yet. I wanted us to decide on that together.” The house had no physical wing here; the tiny observatory had no spare mass for such frivolities as embodying them, let alone constructing architectural follies in the middle of interstellar space. “Downstairs” would be nothing but a scape that they were free to design at will.

“Everything worked,” she said, not quite believing it.

Jasim spread his arms. “We’re here, aren’t we?”

They watched a reconstruction of the first two modules coming together. The timing and the trajectories were as near to perfect as they could have hoped for, and the superconducting magnets had been constructed to a standard of purity and homogeneity that made the magnetic embrace look like an idealised simulation. By the time the two had locked together, the third module was just minutes away. Some untraceable discrepancy between reality and prediction in the transfer of momentum to radiation had the composite moving at a tiny angle away from its expected course, but when it met the third module the magnetic fields still meshed in a stable configuration, and there was energy to spare to nudge the final assembly precisely into step with the predicted swinging of the Aloof’s beam.

The Amalgam had lived up to its promise: three worlds full of beings they had never met, who owed them nothing, who did not even share their molecular ancestry, had each diverted enough energy to light up all their cities for a decade, and followed the instructions of strangers down to the atom, down to the nanosecond, in order to make this work.

What happened now was entirely in the hands of the Aloof.

Trident had been functioning for about a month before its designers had arrived to take up occupancy. So far, it had not yet observed any gamma ray signals spilling out of the bulge. The particular pulse that Leila and Jasim had seen triggering fluorescence would be long gone, of course, but the usefulness of their present location was predicated on three assumptions: the Aloof would use the same route for many other bursts of data; some of the radiation carrying that data would slip past the intended receiver; and the two nodes of the network would have continued in free fall long enough for the spilt data to be arriving here still, along the same predictable path.

Without those three extra components, delivered by their least reliable partners, Trident would be worthless.

“Downstairs,” Leila said. “Maybe a kind of porch with glass walls?”

“Sounds fine to me.”

She conjured up a plan of the house and sketched some ideas, then they went down to try them out at full scale.

\* \* \* \*

They had been into orbit around Najib, and they had travelled embodied to its three beautiful, barren sibling worlds, but they had never been in interstellar space before. Or at least, they had never been conscious of it.

They were still not truly embodied, but you didn't need flesh and blood to feel the vacuum around you; to be awake and plugged-in to an honest depiction of your surroundings was enough. The nearest of Trident's contributor worlds was six hundred light years away. The distance to Najib was unthinkable. Leila paced around the porch, looking out at the stars, vertiginous in her virtual body, unsteady in the phoney gravity.

It had been twenty-eight thousand years since they'd left Najib. All her children and grandchildren had almost certainly chosen death, long ago. No messages had been sent after them to Nazdeek; Leila had asked for that silence, fearing that it would be unbearably painful to hear news, day after day, to which she could give no meaningful reply, about events in which she could never participate. Now she regretted that. She wanted to read the lives of her grandchildren, as she might the biography of an ancestor. She wanted to know how things had ended up, like the time traveller she was.

A second month of observation passed, with nothing. A data feed reaching them from Nazdeek was equally silent. For any new hint of the beam's location to reach Nazdeek, and then the report of that to reach Trident, would take thousands of years longer than the direct passage of the beam itself, so if Nazdeek saw evidence that the beam was "still" on course, that would be old news about a pulse they had not been here to intercept. However, if Nazdeek reported that the beam had shifted, at least that would put them out of their misery immediately, and tell them that Trident had been built too late.

Jasim made a vegetable garden on the porch and grew exotic food in the starlight. Leila played along, and ate beside him; it was a harmless game. They could have painted anything at all around the house: any planet they'd visited, drawn from their memories, any imaginary world. If this small pretence was enough to keep them sane and anchored to reality, so be it.

Now and then, Leila felt the strangest of the many pangs of isolation Trident induced: here, the knowledge of the galaxy was no longer at her fingertips. Their descriptions as travellers had encoded their vast personal memories, declarative and episodic, and their luggage had included prodigious libraries, but she was used to having so much more. Every civilised planet held a storehouse of information that was simply too bulky to fit into Trident, along with a constant feed of exabytes of news flooding in from other worlds. Wherever you were in the galaxy, some news was old news, some cherished theories long discredited, some facts hopelessly out of date. Here, though, Leila knew, there were billions of rigorously established truths — the results of hundreds of millennia of thought, experiment, and observation — that had slipped out of her reach. Questions that any other child of the Amalgam could expect to have answered instantly would take twelve hundred years to receive a reply.

No such questions actually came into her mind, but there were still moments when the mere fact of it was enough to make her feel unbearably rootless, cut adrift not only from her past and her people, but from civilisation itself.

\* \* \* \*

Trident shouted: "Data!"

Leila was half-way through recording a postcard to the Nazdeek Snakes. Jasim was on the porch watering his plants. Leila turned to see him walking through the wall, commanding the bricks to part like a gauze curtain.

They stood side by side, watching the analysis emerge.

A pulse of gamma rays of the expected frequency, from precisely the right location, had just washed over Trident. The beam was greatly attenuated by distance, not to mention having had most of its energy intercepted by its rightful owner, but more than enough had slipped past and reached them for Trident to make sense of the nature of the pulse.

It was, unmistakably, modulated with information. There were precisely repeated phase shifts in the radiation that were unimaginable in any natural gamma ray source, and which would have been pointless in any artificial beam produced for any purpose besides communication.

The pulse had been three seconds long, carrying about ten-to-the-twenty-fourth bits of data. The bulk of this appeared to be random, but that did not rule out meaningful content, it simply implied efficient encryption. The Amalgam's network sent encrypted data via robust classical channels like this, while sending the keys needed to decode it by a second, quantum channel. Leila had never expected to get hold of unencrypted data, laying bare the secrets of the Aloof in an instant. To have clear evidence that someone in the bulge was talking to someone else, and to have pinned down part of the pathway connecting them, was vindication enough.

There was more, though. Between the messages themselves, Trident had identified brief, orderly, unencrypted sequences. Everything was guesswork to a degree, but with such a huge slab of data statistical measures were powerful indicators. Part of the data looked like routing information, addresses for the messages as they were carried through the network. Another part looked like information about the nodes' current and future trajectories. If Trident really had cracked that, they could work out where to position its successor. In fact, if they placed the successor close enough to the bulge, they could probably keep that one observatory constantly inside the spill from the beam.

Jasim couldn't resist playing devil's advocate. "You know, this could just be one part of whatever throws the probes back in our faces, talking to another part. The Aloof themselves could still be dead, while their security system keeps humming with paranoid gossip."

Leila said blithely, "Hypothesise away. I'm not taking the bait."

She turned to embrace him, and they kissed. She said, "I've forgotten how to celebrate. What happens now?"

He moved his fingertips gently along her arm. Leila opened up the scape, creating a fourth spatial dimension. She took his hand, kissed it, and placed it against her beating heart. Their bodies reconfigured, nerve-endings crowding every surface, inside and out.

Jasim climbed inside her, and she inside him, the topology of the scape changing to wrap them together in a mutual embrace. Everything vanished from their lives but pleasure, triumph, and each other's presence, as close as it could ever be.

\* \* \* \*

## 7

"Are you here for the Listening Party?"

The chitinous heptapod, who'd been wandering the crowded street with a food cart dispensing largesse at random, offered Leila a plate of snacks tailored to her and Jasim's preferences. She accepted it, then paused to let Tassef, the planet they'd just set foot on, brief her as to the meaning of this phrase. People, Tassef explained, had travelled to this world from throughout the region in order to witness a special event. Some fifteen thousand years before, a burst of data from the Aloof's network had been picked up by a nearby observatory. In isolation, these bursts meant very little; however, the locals were hopeful that at least one of several proposed observatories near Massa, on the opposite side of the bulge, would have seen spillage including many of the same data packets, forty thousand years before. If any such observations had in fact taken place, news of their precise contents should now, finally, be about to reach Tassef by the longer, disk-based routes of the Amalgam's own network. Once the two observations could be compared, it would become clear which messages from the earlier Eavesdropping session had made their way to the part of the Aloof's network that could be sampled from Tassef. The comparison would advance the project of mapping all the symbolic addresses seen in the data onto actual physical

locations.

Leila said, “That’s not why we came, but now we know, we’re even more pleased to be here.”

The heptapod emitted a chirp that Leila understood as a gracious welcome, then pushed its way back into the throng.

Jasim said, “Remember when you told me that everyone would get bored with the Aloof while we were still in transit?”

“I said that would happen eventually. If not this trip, the next one.”

“Yes, but you said it five journeys ago.”

Leila scowled, preparing to correct him, but then she checked and he was right.

They hadn’t expected Tassef to be so crowded when they’d chosen it as their destination, some ten thousand years before. The planet had given them a small room in this city, Shalouf, and imposed a thousand-year limit on their presence if they wished to remain embodied without adopting local citizenship. More than a billion visitors had arrived over the last fifty years, anticipating the news of the observations from Massa, but unable to predict the precise time it would reach Tassef because the details of the observatories’ trajectories had still been in transit.

She confessed, “I never thought a billion people would arrange their travel plans around this jigsaw puzzle.”

“Travel plans?” Jasim laughed. “We chose to have our own deaths revolve around the very same thing.”

“Yes, but we’re just weird.”

Jasim gestured at the crowded street. “I don’t think we can compete on that score.”

They wandered through the city, drinking in the decades-long-carnival atmosphere. There were people of every phenotype Leila had encountered before, and more: bipeds, quadrupeds, hexapods, heptapods, walking, shuffling, crawling, scuttling, or soaring high above the street on feathered, scaled or membranous wings. Some were encased in their preferred atmospheres; others, like Leila and Jasim, had chosen instead to be embodied in ersatz flesh that didn't follow every ancestral chemical dictate. Physics and geometry tied evolution's hands, and many attempts to solve the same problems had converged on similar answers, but the galaxy's different replicators still managed their idiosyncratic twists. When Leila let her translator sample the cacophony of voices and signals at random, she felt as if the whole disk, the whole Amalgam, had converged on this tiny metropolis.

In fact, most of the travellers had come just a few hundred light years to be here. She and Jasim had chosen to keep their role in the history of Eavesdropping out of their précis, and Leila caught herself with a rather smug sense of walking among the crowd like some unacknowledged sage, bemused by the late-blooming, and no doubt superficial, interest of the masses. On reflection, though, any sense of superior knowledge was hard to justify, when most of these people would have grown up steeped in developments that she was only belatedly catching up with. A new generation of observatories had been designed while she and Jasim were in transit, based on "strong bullets": specially designed femtomachines, clusters of protons and neutrons stable only for trillionths of a second, launched at ultra-relativistic speeds so great that time dilation enabled them to survive long enough to collide with other components and merge into tiny, short-lived gamma-ray observatories. The basic trick that had built Trident had gone from a one-off gamble into a miniaturised, mass-produced phenomenon, with literally billions of strong bullets being fired continuously from thousands of planets around the inner disk.

Femtomachines themselves were old hat, but it had taken the technical challenges of Eavesdropping to motivate someone into squeezing a few more tricks out of them. Historians had always understood that in the long run, technological progress was a horizontal asymptote: once people had more or less everything they wanted that was physically possible, every incremental change would take exponentially longer to achieve, with diminishing returns and ever less reason to bother. The Amalgam would probably spend an eon inching its way closer to the flatline, but this was proof that shifts of circumstance alone could still trigger a modest renaissance or two, without the need for any radical scientific discovery or even a genuinely new technology.

They stopped to rest in a square, beside a small fountain gushing aromatic hydrocarbons. The Tassef locals, quadrupeds with slick, rubbery hides, played in the sticky black spray then licked each other clean.

Jasim shaded his eyes from the sun. He said, "We've had our autumn child, and we've seen its grandchildren prosper. I'm not sure what's left."

"No." Leila was in no rush to die, but they'd sampled fifty thousand years of their discovery's consequences. They'd followed in the wake of the news of the gamma ray signals as it circled the inner disk, spending less than a century conscious as they sped from world to world. At first they'd been hunting for some vital new role to play, but they'd slowly come to accept that the avalanche they'd



triggered had out-raced them. Physical and logical maps of the Aloof's network were being constructed, as fast as the laws of physics allowed. Billions of people on thousands of planets, scattered around the inner rim of the Amalgam's territory, were sharing their observations to help piece together the living skeleton of their elusive neighbours. When that project was complete it would not be the end of anything, but it could mark the start of a long hiatus. The encrypted, classical data would never yield anything more than traffic routes; no amount of ingenuity could extract its content. The quantum keys that could unlock it, assuming the Aloof even used such things, would be absolutely immune to theft, duplication, or surreptitious sampling. One day, there would be another breakthrough, and everything would change again, but did they want to wait a hundreds thousand years, a million, just to see what came next?

The solicitous heptapods — not locals, but visitors from a world thirty light years away who had nonetheless taken on some kind of innate duty of hospitality — seemed to show up whenever anyone was hungry. Leila tried to draw this second one into conversation, but it politely excused itself to rush off and feed someone else.

Leila said, "Maybe this is it. We'll wait for the news from Massa, then celebrate for a while, then finish it."

Jasim took her hand. "That feels right to me. I'm not certain, but I don't think I'll ever be."

"Are you tired?" she said. "Bored?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I feel *satisfied*. With what we've done, what we've seen. And I don't want to dilute that. I don't want to hang around forever, watching it fade, until we start to feel the way we did on Najib all over again."

"No."

They sat in the square until dusk, and watched the stars of the bulge come out. They'd seen this dazzling jewelled hub from every possible angle now, but Leila never grew tired of the sight.

Jasim gave an amused, exasperated sigh. "That beautiful, maddening, unreachable place. I think the whole Amalgam will be dead and gone without anyone setting foot inside it."

Leila felt a sudden surge of irritation, which deepened into a sense of revulsion. "It's a place, like any other place! Stars, gas, dust, planets. It's not some metaphysical realm. It's not even far away. Our own home world is twenty times more distant."

“Our own home world doesn’t have an impregnable fence around it. If we really wanted to, we could go back there.”

Leila was defiant. “If we really wanted to, we could enter the bulge.”

Jasim laughed. “Have you read something in those messages that you didn’t tell me about? How to say ‘open sesame’ to the gatekeepers?”

Leila stood, and summoned a map of the Aloof’s network to superimpose across their vision, criss-crossing the sky with slender cones of violet light. One cone appeared head-on, as a tiny circle: the beam whose spillage came close to Tassef. She put her hand on Jasim’s shoulder, and zoomed in on that circle. It opened up before them like a beckoning tunnel.

She said, “We know where this beam is coming from. We don’t know for certain that the traffic between these particular nodes runs in both directions, but we’ve found plenty of examples where it does. If we aim a signal from here, back along the path of the spillage, and we make it wide enough, then we won’t just hit the sending node. We’ll hit the receiver as well.”

Jasim was silent.

“We know the data format,” she continued. “We know the routing information. We can address the data packets to a node on the other side of the bulge, one where the spillage comes out at Massa.”

Jasim said, “What makes you think they’ll accept the packets?”

“There’s nothing in the format we don’t understand, nothing we can’t write for ourselves.”

“Nothing in the unencrypted part. If there’s an authorisation, even a checksum, in the encrypted part, then any packet without that will be tossed away as noise.”

“That’s true,” she conceded.

“Do you really want to do this?” he said. Her hand was still on his shoulder, she could feel his body growing tense.

“Absolutely.”

“We mail ourselves from here to Massa, as unencrypted, classical data that anyone can read, anyone can copy, anyone can alter or corrupt?”

“A moment ago you said they’d throw us away as noise.”

“That’s the least of our worries.”

“Maybe.”

Jasim shuddered, his body almost convulsing. He let out a string of obscenities, then made a choking sound. “What’s wrong with you? Is this some kind of test? If I call your bluff, will you admit that you’re joking?”

Leila shook her head. “And no, it’s not revenge for what you did on the way to Trident. This is our chance. *This* is what we were waiting to do — not the Eavesdropping, that’s nothing! The bulge is right here in front of us. The Aloof are in there, somewhere. We can’t force them to engage with us, but we can get closer to them than anyone has ever been before.”

“If we go in this way, they could do anything to us.”

“They’re not barbarians. They haven’t made war on us. Even the engineering spores come back unharmed.”

“If we infest their network, that’s worse than an engineering spore.”

“‘Infest’! None of these routes are crowded. A few exabytes passing through is nothing.”

“You have no idea how they’ll react.”

“No,” she confessed. “I don’t. But I’m ready to find out.”

Jasim stood. “We could send a test message first. Then go to Massa and see if it arrived safely.”

“We could do that,” Leila conceded. “That would be a sensible plan.”

“So you agree?” Jasim gave her a wary, frozen smile. “We’ll send a test message. Send an encyclopedia. Send greetings in some universal language.”

“Fine. We’ll send all of those things first. But I’m not waiting more than one day after that. I’m not going to Massa the long way. I’m taking the short-cut, I’m going through the bulge.”

\* \* \* \*

## 8

The Amalgam had been so generous to Leila, and local interest in the Aloof so intense, that she had almost forgotten that she was not, in fact, entitled to a limitless and unconditional flow of resources, to be employed to any end that involved her obsession.

When she asked Tassef for the means to build a high-powered gamma-ray transmitter to aim into the bulge, it interrogated her for an hour, then replied that the matter would require a prolonged and extensive consultation. It was, she realised, no use protesting that compared to hosting a billion guests for a couple of centuries, the cost of this was nothing. The sticking point was not the energy use, or any other equally microscopic consequence for the comfort and amenity of the Tassef locals. The issue was whether her proposed actions might be seen as unwelcome and offensive by the Aloof, and whether that affront might in turn provoke some kind of retribution.

Countless probes and spores had been gently and patiently returned from the bulge unharmed, but they’d come blundering in at less than lightspeed. A flash of gamma rays could not be intercepted and returned before it struck its chosen target. Though it seemed to Leila that it would be a trivial matter for the network to choose to reject the data, it was not unreasonable to suppose that the Aloof’s sensibilities might differ on this point from her own.

Jasim had left Shalouf for a city on the other side of the planet. Leila's feelings about this were mixed; it was always painful when they separated, but the reminder that they were not irrevocably welded together also brought an undeniable sense of space and freedom. She loved him beyond measure, but that was not the final word on every question. She was not certain that she would not relent in the end, and die quietly beside him when the news came through from Massa; there were moments when it seemed utterly perverse, masochistic and self-aggrandising to flee from that calm, dignified end for the sake of trying to cap their modest revolution with a new and spectacularly dangerous folly. Nor though, was she certain that Jasim would not change his own mind, and take her hand while they plunged off this cliff together.

When the months dragged on with no decision on her request, no news from Massa and no overtures from her husband, Leila became an orator, travelling from city to city promoting her scheme to blaze a trail through the heart of the bulge. Her words and image were conveyed into virtual fora, but her physical presence was a way to draw attention to her cause, and Listening Party pilgrims and Tassefi alike packed the meeting places when she came. She mastered the locals' language and style, but left it inflected with some suitably alien mannerisms. The fact that a rumour had arisen that she was one of the First Eavesdroppers did no harm to her attendance figures.

When she reached the city of Jasim's self-imposed exile, she searched the audience for him in vain. As she walked out into the night a sense of panic gripped her. She felt no fear for herself, but the thought of him dying here alone was unbearable.

She sat in the street, weeping. How had it come to this? They had been prepared for a glorious failure, prepared to be broken by the Aloof's unyielding silence, and instead the fruits of their labour had swept through the disk, reinvigorating a thousand cultures. How could the taste of success be so bitter?

Leila imagined calling out to Jasim, finding him, holding him again, repairing their wounds.

A splinter of steel remained inside her, though. She looked up into the blazing sky. The Aloof were there, waiting, daring her to stand before them. To come this far, then step back from the edge for the comfort of a familiar embrace, would diminish her. She would not retreat.

\* \* \* \*

The news arrived from Massa: forty thousand years before, the spillage from the far side of the bulge had been caught in time. Vast swathes of the data matched the observations that Tassef had been holding in anticipation of this moment, for the last fifteen thousand years.

There was more: reports of other correlations from other observatories followed within minutes. As the message from Massa had been relayed around the inner disk, a cascade of similar matches with other stores of data had been found.

By seeing where packets dropped out of the stream, their abstract addresses became concrete, physical locations within the bulge. As Leila stood in Shalouf's main square in the dusk, absorbing the reports, the Aloof's network was growing more solid, less ethereal, by the minute.

The streets around her were erupting with signs of elation: polyglot shouts, chirps and buzzes, celebratory scents and vivid pigmentation changes. Bursts of luminescence spread across the square. Even the relentlessly sober heptapods had abandoned their food carts to lie on their backs, spinning with delight. Leila wheeled around, drinking it in, commanding her translator to punch the meaning of every disparate gesture and sound deep into her brain, unifying the kaleidoscope into a single emotional charge.

As the stars of the bulge came out, Tassef offered an overlay for everyone to share, with the newly mapped routes shining like golden highways. From all around her, Leila picked up the signals of those who were joining the view: people of every civilisation, every species, every replicator were seeing the Aloof's secret roads painted across the sky.

Leila walked through the streets of Shalouf, feeling Jasim's absence sharply, but too familiar with that pain to be overcome by it. If the joy of this moment was muted, every celebration would be blighted in the same way, now. She could not expect anything else. She would grow inured to it.

Tassef spoke to her.

"The citizens have reached a decision. They will grant your request."

"I'm grateful."

"There is a condition. The transmitter must be built at least twenty light-years away, either in interstellar space, or in the circumstellar region of an uninhabited system."

"I understand." This way, in the event that the Aloof felt threatened to the point of provoking destructive retribution, Tassef would survive an act of violence, at least on a stellar scale, directed against the transmitter itself.

“We advise you to prepare your final plans for the hardware, and submit them when you’re sure they will fulfil your purpose.”

“Of course.”

Leila went back to her room, and reviewed the plans she had already drafted. She had anticipated the Tassefi wanting a considerable safety margin, so she had worked out the energy budgets for detailed scenarios involving engineering spores and forty-seven different cometary clouds that fell within Tassef’s jurisdiction. It took just seconds to identify the best one that met the required conditions, and she lodged it without hesitation.

Out on the streets, the Listening Party continued. For the billion pilgrims, this was enough: they would go home, return to their grandchildren, and die happy in the knowledge that they had finally seen something new in the world. Leila envied them; there’d been a time when that would have been enough for her, too.

She left her room and rejoined the celebration, talking, laughing, dancing with strangers, letting herself grow giddy with the moment. When the sun came up, she made her way home, stepping lightly over the sleeping bodies that filled the street.

\* \* \* \*

The engineering spores were the latest generation: strong bullets launched at close to lightspeed that shed their momentum by diving through the heart of a star, and then rebuilding themselves at atomic density as they decayed in the stellar atmosphere. In effect, the dying femtomachines constructed nanomachines bearing the same blueprints as they’d carried within themselves at nuclear densities, and which then continued out to the cometary cloud to replicate and commence the real work of mining raw materials and building the gamma ray transmitter.

Leila contemplated following in their wake, sending herself as a signal to be picked up by the as-yet-unbuilt transmitter. It would not have been as big a gamble as Jasim’s with Trident; the strong bullets had already been used successfully this way in hundreds of similar stars.

In the end, she chose to wait on Tassef for a signal that the transmitter had been successfully constructed, and had tested, aligned and calibrated itself. If she was going to march blindly into the bulge, it would be absurd to stumble and fall prematurely, before she even reached the precipice.

When the day came, some ten thousand people gathered in the centre of Shalouf to bid the traveller a

safe journey. Leila would have preferred to slip away quietly, but after all her lobbying she had surrendered her privacy, and the Tassefi seemed to feel that she owed them this last splash of colour and ceremony.

Forty-six years after the Listening Party, most of the pilgrims had returned to their homes, but of the few hundred who had lingered in Shalouf nearly all had showed up for this curious footnote to the main event. Leila wasn't sure that anyone here believed the Aloof's network would do more than bounce her straight back into the disk, but the affection these well-wishers expressed seemed genuine. Someone had even gone to the trouble of digging up a phrase in the oldest known surviving language of her ancestral species: *safar bekheyr*, may your journey be blessed. They had written it across the sky in an ancient script that she'd last seen eighty thousand years before, and it had been spread among the crowd phonetically so that everyone she met could offer her this hopeful farewell as she passed.

Tassef, the insentient delegate of all the planet's citizens, addressed the crowd with some sombre ceremonial blather. Leila's mind wandered, settling on the observation that she was probably partaking in a public execution. No matter. She had said goodbye to her friends and family long ago. When she stepped through the ceremonial gate, which had been smeared with a tarry mess that the Tassefi considered the height of beauty, she would close her eyes and recall her last night on Najib, letting the intervening millennia collapse into a dream. Everyone chose death in the end, and no one's exit was perfect. Better to rely on your own flawed judgements, better to make your own ungainly mess of it, than live in the days when nature would simply take you at random.

As Tassef fell silent, a familiar voice rose up from the crowd.

"Are you still resolved to do this foolish thing?"

Leila glared down at her husband. "Yes, I am."

"You won't reconsider?"

"No."

"Then I'm coming with you."

Jasim pushed his way through the startled audience, and climbed onto the stage.



Leila spoke to him privately. “You’re embarrassing us both.”

He replied the same way. “Don’t be petty. I know I’ve hurt you, but the blame lies with both of us.”

“Why are you doing this? You’ve made your own wishes very plain.”

“Do you think I can watch you walk into danger, and not walk beside you?”

“You were ready to die if Trident failed. You were ready to leave me behind then.”

“Once I spoke my mind on that you gave me no choice. You insisted.” He took her hand. “You know I only stayed away from you all this time because I hoped it would dissuade you. I failed. So now I’m here.”

Leila’s heart softened. “You’re serious? You’ll come with me?”

Jasim said, “Whatever they do to you, let them do it to us both.”

Leila had no argument to make against this, no residue of anger, no false solicitousness. She had always wanted him beside her at the end, and she would not refuse him now.

She spoke to Tassef. “One more passenger. Is that acceptable?” The energy budget allowed for a thousand years of test transmissions to follow in her wake; Jasim would just be a minor blip of extra data.

“It’s acceptable.” Tassef proceeded to explain the change to the assembled crowd, and to the onlookers scattered across the planet.

Jasim said, “We’ll interweave the data from both of us into a single packet. I don’t want to end up at Massa and find they’ve sent you to Jahnom by mistake.”

“All right.” Leila arranged the necessary changes. None of the Eavesdroppers yet knew that they were coming, and no message sent the long way could warn them in time, but the data they sent into the bulge

would be prefaced by instructions that anyone in the Amalgam would find clear and unambiguous, asking that their descriptions only be embodied if they were picked up at Massa. If they were found in other spillage along the way, they didn't want to be embodied multiple times. And if they did not emerge at Massa at all, so be it.

Tassef's second speech came to an end. Leila looked down at the crowd one last time, and let her irritation with the whole bombastic ceremony dissipate into amusement. If she had been among the sane, she might easily have turned up herself to watch a couple of ancient fools try to step onto the imaginary road in the sky, and wish them *safar bekheyr*.

She squeezed Jasim's hand, and they walked towards the gate.

\* \* \* \*

## 9

Leila's fingers came together, her hand empty. She felt as if she was falling, but nothing in sight appeared to be moving. Then again, all she could see was a distant backdrop, its scale and proximity impossible to judge: thousands of fierce blue stars against the blackness of space.

She looked around for Jasim, but she was utterly alone. She could see no vehicle or other machine that might have disgorged her into this emptiness. There was not even a planet below her, or a single brightest star to which she might be bound. Absurdly, she was breathing. Every other cue told her that she was drifting through vacuum, probably through interstellar space. Her lungs kept filling and emptying, though. The air, and her skin, felt neither hot nor cold.

Someone or something had embodied her, or was running her as software. She was not on Massa, she was sure of that; she had never visited that world, but nowhere in the Amalgam would a guest be treated like this. Not even one who arrived unannounced in data spilling out from the bulge.

Leila said, "Are you listening to me? Do you understand me?" She could hear her own voice, flat and without resonance. The acoustics made perfect sense in a vast, empty, windless place, if not an airless one.

Anywhere in the Amalgam, you *knew* whether you were embodied or not; it was the nature of all bodies, real or virtual, that declarative knowledge of every detail was there for the asking. Here, when Leila tried

to summon the same information, her mind remained blank. It was like the strange absence she'd felt on Trident, when she'd been cut off from the repositories of civilisation, but here the amputation had reached all the way inside her.

She inhaled deeply, but there was no noticeable scent at all, not even the whiff of her own body odour that she would have expected, whether she was wearing her ancestral phenotype or any of the forms of ersatz flesh that she adopted when the environment demanded it. She pinched the skin of her forearm; it felt more like her original skin than any of the substitutes she'd ever worn. They might have fashioned this body out of something both remarkably lifelike and chemically inert, and placed her in a vast, transparent container of air, but she was beginning to pick up a strong stench of ersatz physics. Air and skin alike, she suspected, were made of bits, not atoms.

*So where was Jasim?* Were they running him too, in a separate scape? She called out his name, trying not to make the exploratory cry sound plaintive. She understood all too well now why he'd tried so hard to keep her from this place, and why he'd been unable to face staying behind: the thought that the Aloof might be doing something unspeakable to his defenceless consciousness, in some place she couldn't hope to reach or see, was like a white hot blade pressed to her heart. All she could do was try to shut off the panic and talk down the possibility. *All right, he's alone here, but so am I, and it's not that bad.* She would put her faith in symmetry; if they had not abused her, why would they have harmed Jasim?

She forced herself to be calm. The Aloof had taken the trouble to grant her consciousness, but she couldn't expect the level of amenity she was accustomed to. For a start, it would be perfectly reasonable if her hosts were unable or unwilling to plug her into any data source equivalent to the Amalgam's libraries, and perhaps the absence of somatic knowledge was not much different. Rather than deliberately fooling her about her body, maybe they had looked at the relevant data channels and decided that *anything* they fed into them would be misleading. Understanding her transmitted description well enough to bring her to consciousness was one thing, but it didn't guarantee that they knew how to translate the technical details of their instantiation of her into her own language.

And if this ignorance-plus-honesty excuse was too sanguine to swallow, it wasn't hard to think of the Aloof as being pathologically secretive without actually being malicious. If they wanted to keep quiet about the way they'd brought her to life lest it reveal something about themselves, that too was understandable. They need not be doing it for the sake of tormenting her.

Leila surveyed the sky around her, and felt a jolt of recognition. She'd memorised the positions of the nearest stars to the target node where her transmission would first be sent, and now a matching pattern stood out against the background in a collection of distinctive constellations. She was being shown the sky from that node. This didn't prove anything about her actual location, but the simplest explanation was that the Aloof had instantiated her here, rather than sending her on through the network. The stars were in the positions she'd predicted for her time of arrival, so if this was the reality, there had been little delay in choosing how to deal with the intruder. No thousand-year-long deliberations, no passing of the news to a distant decision-maker. Either the Aloof themselves were present here, or the machinery of the node was so sophisticated that they might as well have been. She could not have been woken by accident; it had to

have been a deliberate act. It made her wonder if the Aloof had been expecting something like this for millennia.

“What now?” she asked. Her hosts remained silent. “Toss me back to Tassef?” The probes with their reversed trajectories bore no record of their experience; perhaps the Aloof wouldn’t incorporate these new memories into her description before returning her. She spread her arms imploringly. “If you’re going to erase this memory, why not speak to me first? I’m in your hands completely, you can send me to the grave with your secrets. Why wake me at all, if you don’t want to talk?”

In the silence that followed, Leila had no trouble imagining one answer: to study her. It was a mathematical certainty that some questions about her behaviour could never be answered simply by examining her static description; the only reliable way to predict what she’d do in any given scenario was to wake her and confront her with it. They might, of course, have chosen to wake her any number of times before, without granting her memories of the previous instantiations. She experienced a moment of sheer existential vertigo: this could be the thousandth, the billionth, in a vast series of experiments, as her captors permuted dozens of variables to catalogue her responses.

The vertigo passed. Anything was possible, but she preferred to entertain more pleasant hypotheses.

“I came here to talk,” she said. “I understand that you don’t want us sending in machinery, but there must be something we can discuss, something we can learn from each other. In the disk, every time two space-faring civilisations met, they found they had something in common. Some mutual interests, some mutual benefits.”

At the sound of her own earnest speech dissipating into the virtual air around her, Leila started laughing. The arguments she’d been putting for centuries to Jasim, to her friends on Najib, to the Snakes on Nazdeek, seemed ridiculous now, embarrassing. How could she face the Aloof and claim that she had anything to offer them that they had not considered, and rejected, hundreds of thousands of years before? The Amalgam had never tried to keep its nature hidden. The Aloof would have watched them, studied them from afar, and consciously chosen isolation. To come here and list the advantages of contact as if they’d never crossed her hosts’ minds was simply insulting.

Leila fell silent. If she had lost faith in her role as cultural envoy, at least she’d proved to her own satisfaction that there was something in here smarter than the sling-shot fence the probes had encountered. The Aloof had not embraced her, but the whole endeavour had not been in vain. To wake in the bulge, even to silence, was far more than she’d ever had the right to hope for.

She said, “Please, just bring me my husband now, then we’ll leave you in peace.”

This entreaty was met in the same way as all the others. Leila resisted speculating again about experimental variables. She did not believe that a million-year-old civilisation was interested in testing her tolerance to isolation, robbing her of her companion and seeing how long she took to attempt suicide. The Aloof did not take orders from her; fine. If she was neither an experimental subject to be robbed of her sanity, nor a valued guest whose every wish was granted, there had to be some other relationship between them that she had yet to fathom. She had to be conscious for a reason.

She searched the sky for a hint of the node itself, or any other feature she might have missed, but she might as well have been living inside a star map, albeit one shorn of the usual annotations. The Milky Way, the plane of stars that bisected the sky, was hidden by the thicker clouds of gas and dust here, but Leila had her bearings; she knew which way led deeper into the bulge, and which way led back out to the disk.

She contemplated Tassef's distant sun with mixed emotions, as a sailor might look back on the last sight of land. As the yearning for that familiar place welled up, a cylinder of violet light appeared around her, encircling the direction of her gaze. For the first time, Leila felt her weightlessness interrupted: a gentle acceleration was carrying her forward along the imaginary beam.

"No! Wait!" She closed her eyes and curled into a ball. The acceleration halted, and when she opened her eyes the tunnel of light was gone.

She let herself float limply, paying no attention to anything in the sky, waiting to see what happened if she kept her mind free of any desire for travel.

After an hour like this, the phenomenon had not recurred. Leila turned her gaze in the opposite direction, into the bulge. She cleared her mind of all timidity and nostalgia, and imagined the thrill of rushing deeper into this violent, spectacular, alien territory. At first there was no response from the scape, but then she focused her attention sharply in the direction of a second node, the one she'd hoped her transmission would be forwarded to from the first, on its way through the galactic core.

The same violet light, the same motion. This time, Leila waited a few heartbeats longer before she broke the spell.

Unless this was some pointlessly sadistic game, the Aloof were offering her a clear choice. She could return to Tassef, return to the Amalgam. She could announce that she'd put a toe in these mysterious waters, and lived to tell the tale. Or she could dive into the bulge, as deep as she'd ever imagined, and see where the network took her.

“No promises?” she asked. “No guarantee I’ll come out the other side? No intimations of contact, to tempt me further?” She was thinking aloud, she did not expect answers. Her hosts, she was beginning to conclude, viewed strangers through the prism of a strong, but very sharply delineated, sense of obligation. They sent back the insentient probes to their owners, scrupulously intact. They had woken this intruder to give her the choice: did she really want to go where her transmission suggested, or had she wandered in here like a lost child who just needed to find the way home? They would do her no harm, and send her on no journey without her consent, but those were the limits of their duty of care. They did not owe her any account of themselves. She would get no greeting, no hospitality, no conversation.

“What about Jasim? Will you give me a chance to consult with him?” She waited, picturing his face, willing his presence, hoping they might read her mind if her words were beyond them. If they could decode a yearning towards a point in the sky, surely this wish for companionship was not too difficult to comprehend? She tried variations, dwelling on the abstract structure of their intertwined data in the transmission, hoping this might clarify the object of her desire if his physical appearance meant nothing to them.

She remained alone.

The stars that surrounded her spelt out the only choices on offer. If she wanted to be with Jasim once more before she died, she had to make the same decision as he did.

Symmetry demanded that he faced the same dilemma.

*How would he be thinking?* He might be tempted to retreat back to the safety of Tassef, but he’d reconciled with her in Shalouf for the sole purpose of following her into danger. He would understand that she’d want to go deeper, would want to push all the way through to Massa, opening up the short-cut through the core, proving it safe for future travellers.

Would he understand, too, that she’d feel a pang of guilt at this presumptuous line of thought, and that she’d contemplate making a sacrifice of her own? He had braved the unknown for her, and they had reaped the reward already: they had come closer to the Aloof than anyone in history. Why couldn’t that be enough? For all Leila knew, her hosts might not even wake her again before Massa. What would she be giving up if she turned back now?

More to the point, what would Jasim expect of her? That she’d march on relentlessly, following her obsession to the end, or that she’d put her love for him first?

The possibilities multiplied in an infinite regress. They knew each other as well as two people could, but

they didn't carry each other's minds inside them.

Leila drifted through the limbo of stars, wondering if Jasim had already made his decision. Having seen that the Aloof were not the torturers he'd feared, had he already set out for Tassef, satisfied that she faced no real peril at their hands? Or had he reasoned that their experience at this single node meant nothing? This was not the Amalgam, the culture could be a thousand times more fractured.

This cycle of guesses and doubts led nowhere. If she tried to pursue it to the end she'd be paralysed. There were no guarantees; she could only choose the least worst case. If she returned to Tassef, only to find that Jasim had gone on alone through the bulge, it would be unbearable: she would have lost him for nothing. If that happened, she could try to follow him, returning to the bulge immediately, but she would already be centuries behind him.

If she went on to Massa, and it was Jasim who retreated, at least she'd know that he'd ended up in safety. She'd know, too, that he had not been desperately afraid for her, that the Aloof's benign indifference at this first node had been enough to persuade him that they'd do her no harm.

That was her answer: she had to continue, all the way to Massa. With the hope, but no promise, that Jasim would have thought the same way.

The decision made, she lingered in the scape. Not from any second thoughts, but from a reluctance to give up lightly the opportunity she'd fought so hard to attain. She didn't know if any member of the Aloof was watching and listening to her, reading her thoughts, examining her desires. Perhaps they were so indifferent and incurious that they'd delegated everything to insentient software, and merely instructed their machines to baby-sit her while she made up her mind where she wanted to go. She still had to make one last attempt to reach them, or she would never die in peace.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "Maybe you've watched us for the last million years, and seen that we have nothing to offer you. Maybe our technology is backwards, our philosophy naïve, our customs bizarre, our manners appalling. If that's true, though, if we're so far beneath you, you could at least point us in the right direction. Offer us some kind of argument as to why we should change."

Silence.

Leila said, "All right. Forgive my impertinence. I have to tell you honestly, though, that we won't be the last to bother you. The Amalgam is full of people who will keep trying to find ways to reach you. This is going to go on for another million years, until we believe that we understand you. If that offends you, don't judge us too harshly. We can't help it. It's who we are."

She closed her eyes, trying to assure herself that there was nothing she'd regret having left unsaid.

“Thank you for granting us safe passage,” she added, “if that’s what you’re offering. I hope my people can return the favour one day, if there’s anywhere you want to go.”

She opened her eyes and sought out her destination: deeper into the network, on towards the core.

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## 10

The mountains outside the town of Astraahat started with a gentle slope that promised an easy journey, but gradually grew steeper. Similarly, the vegetation was low and sparse in the foothills, but became steadily thicker and taller the higher up the slope you went.

Jasim said, “Enough.” He stopped and leant on his climbing stick.

“One more hour?” Leila pleaded.

He considered this. “Half an hour resting, then half an hour walking?”

“One hour resting, then one hour walking.”

He laughed wearily. “All right. One of each.”

The two of them hacked away at the undergrowth until there was a place to sit.

Jasim poured water from the canteen into her hands, and she splashed her face clean.



They sat in silence for a while, listening to the sounds of the unfamiliar wildlife. Under the forest canopy it was almost twilight, and when Leila looked up into the small patch of sky above them she could see the stars of the bulge, like tiny, pale, translucent beads.

At times it felt like a dream, but the experience never really left her. The Aloof had woken her at every node, shown her the view, given her a choice. She had seen a thousand spectacles, from one side of the core to the other: cannibalistic novae, dazzling clusters of newborn stars, twin white dwarfs on the verge of collision. She had seen the black hole at the galaxy's centre, its accretion disk glowing with X-rays, slowly tearing stars apart.

It might have been an elaborate lie, a plausible simulation, but every detail accessible from disk-based observatories confirmed what she had witnessed. If anything had been changed, or hidden from her, it must have been small. Perhaps the artifacts of the Aloof themselves had been painted out of the view, though Leila thought it was just as likely that the marks they'd left on their territory were so subtle, anyway, that there'd been nothing to conceal.

Jasim said sharply, "Where are you?"

She lowered her gaze and replied mildly, "I'm here, with you. I'm just remembering."

When they'd woken on Massa, surrounded by delirious, cheering Eavesdroppers, they'd been asked: *What happened in there? What did you see?* Leila didn't know why she'd kept her mouth shut and turned to her husband before replying, instead of letting every detail come tumbling out immediately. Perhaps she just hadn't known where to begin.

For whatever reason, it was Jasim who had answered first. "Nothing. We stepped through the gate on Tassef, and now here we are. On the other side of the bulge."

For almost a month, she'd flatly refused to believe him. *Nothing? You saw nothing?* It had to be a lie, a joke. It had to be some kind of revenge.

That was not in his nature, and she knew it. Still, she'd clung to that explanation for as long as she could, until it became impossible to believe any longer, and she'd asked for his forgiveness.

Six months later, another traveller had spilled out of the bulge. One of the die-hard Listening Party pilgrims had followed in their wake and taken the short cut. Like Jasim, this heptapod had seen nothing, experienced nothing.

Leila had struggled to imagine why she might have been singled out. So much for her theory that the Aloof felt morally obliged to check that each passenger on their network knew what they were doing, unless they'd decided that her actions were enough to demonstrate that intruders from the disk, considered generically, were making an informed choice. Could just one sample of a working, conscious version of their neighbours really be enough for them to conclude that they understood everything they needed to know? Could this capriciousness, instead, have been part of a strategy to lure in more visitors, with the enticing possibility that each one might, with luck, witness something far beyond all those who'd preceded them? Or had it been part of a scheme to discourage intruders by clouding the experience with uncertainty? The simplest act of discouragement would have been to discard all unwelcome transmissions, and the most effective incentive would have been to offer a few plain words of welcome, but then, the Aloof would not have been the Aloof if they'd followed such reasonable dictates.

Jasim said, "You know what I think. You wanted to wake so badly, they couldn't refuse you. They could tell I didn't care as much. It was as simple as that."

"What about the heptapod? It went in alone. It wasn't just tagging along to watch over someone else."

He shrugged. "Maybe it acted on the spur of the moment. They all seem unhealthily keen to me, whatever they're doing. Maybe the Aloof could discern its mood more clearly."

Leila said, "I don't believe a word of that."

Jasim spread his hands in a gesture of acceptance. "I'm sure you could change my mind in five minutes, if I let you. But if we walked back down this hill and waited for the next traveller from the bulge, and the next, until the reason some of them received the grand tour and some didn't finally became plain, there would still be another question, and another. Even if I wanted to live for ten thousand years more, I'd rather move on to something else. And in this last hour ..." He trailed off.

Leila said, "I know. You're right."

She sat, listening to the strange chirps and buzzes emitted by creatures she knew nothing about. She could have absorbed every recorded fact about them in an instant, but she didn't care, she didn't need to know.

Someone else would come after them, to understand the Aloof, or advance that great, unruly, frustrating endeavour by the next increment. She and Jasim had made a start, that was enough. What they'd done

was more than she could ever have imagined, back on Najib. Now, though, was the time to stop, while they were still themselves: enlarged by the experience, but not disfigured beyond recognition.

They finished their water, drinking the last drops. They left the canteen behind. Jasim took her hand and they climbed together, struggling up the slope side by side.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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### **Skein Dogs**

LEANNE FRAHM

Leanne Frahm lives with her husband in Slade Point, on the northern Queensland coast. She has had published around thirty stories in Australian, American and French magazines and anthologies, and five of her short stories appeared in a collection entitled *Borderline*, from MirrorDanse Books in 1996. She had been nominated several times for the Ditmar Award for short fiction and won it twice, and also won the Aurealis Award for best science fiction short fiction in 1996, with 'Borderline', the title story of the above collection. 'Skein Dogs' is her first published story for several years.

About this story, Leanne says "It is really an attempt to immortalize the two best dogs I ever owned - who became my children when my human ones had flown the nest. Kimball did indeed die as Jayjay does, and Missie had (very expensive!) knee reconstructions before she went too. The story is a tribute to them, and I hope they've found it satisfactory."

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O

ne evening Jayjay laughed and for the first time blood-tinged mucous trickled from her nostril. Laughing isn't easy even for Skein dogs with modified larynxes, but Jayjay could laugh - it might have had something to do with the Bull Terrier in her and its clownish inheritance. The sound came out as a chortling grunt, and this time the pressure must have started the tumour bleeding. I grabbed a tissue and wiped it quickly, before she could lick it. She looked at me, and at the red-stained tissue, and turned

away to pad over to her hammock without a word.

Emma didn't notice. She was already curled up on the blankets in her hammock for the night, watching the news on TV, and had mumbled some sort of political comment that Jayjay caught. I missed it, but Jayjay must have thought it funny. Emma didn't often make jokes; descended from the Blue Heelers with all their sly pragmatism, she didn't have much of a sense of humour. Jayjay and Emma were an odd couple to be sharing a room and a carer - Jayjay extroverted and impulsive, Emma quiet and calculating - but we all got on together.

That night, after laughing and bleeding, Jayjay flopped down on her hammock next to Emma's and put her head on her paws, staring at the flickering light of the TV. Emma glanced at her, saw the reddish moisture on her pale muzzle that I'd failed to completely wipe away, and looked away.

I watched them silently from the eating area, where I was cleaning away the remains of our meal, and wondered if they understood the concept of irony. The very process that allowed Jayjay to laugh and Emma to joke would eventually kill them. I wiped a plate with sudden savage motions and looked out at the night falling with tropical swiftness. Mostly all I could see were the crowding buildings of the Institute complex, but in a patch of deepening night sky a flock of flying-foxes flapped soundlessly out to its feeding grounds. I stared after them for some minutes, and sighed for Jayjay and Emma.

It's well-known that human-canine gene splicing for intelligence enhancement carries with it a tangled cancer gene that can't be unravelled. Jayjay and Emma knew it and both of them, (officially Skein Canine JJ18(B) and Skein Canine MA24(B)), were by then already victims of it.

We managed to ignore it most of the time. Jayjay's cancer was growing above her palate in the nasal passages and sinuses. It had already eaten into the cartilage, and would eventually erode the thin layer of bone between it and her brain. Emma had two major tumours wrapped around the knees of her back legs, so that she could neither quite straighten them nor quite bend them, and she hobbled briskly around the Institute with a peculiar dragging gait like an ominous arthritic shadow.

Finished, the last plate put away, I walked over to the sleeping area and sat on my cot, next to Jayjay's hammock. Her thinning white pelt gleamed in the screen's reflections, highlighting the hills and valleys of her already gaunt ribs and spine. She and Emma stared straight ahead, but I don't think either of them saw a thing.

It was Mustafa Skein who first succeeded in giving human intelligence to dogs. It was a sort of landmark in the science of genetics, but it turned out to be much more than that. People suddenly found there was a new world to be explored in the canine brain, a world of differing sensory perceptions and psychic abilities that they had previously only speculated about. More and more species were Skeined as quickly as possible and an entire science developed. But the gift of intelligence is sometimes a two-edged

sword...

I sighed again. The Institute is good to its Skein animals because it suits them, and new ones are expensive. In practical terms, Jayjay and Emma were useful as long as their pain was controlled. Jayjay lost her sense of smell in the early stages of her cancer, so worked mainly with the psychic researchers, and Emma was with the sensory department.

I was getting on then, (and more so now, I suppose), and retired from active duty, but the Institute continued to employ me as a carer. I enjoyed it then, and still do, but there were, and are, difficult times. Like this one...

I tried to think of something to say to break the dogs' pensive mood. The news broadcast went on and on, sombre and sincere, like every other television news I had ever seen. "Would you like to watch something else?" I tried.

Jayjay shook her head without raising it from her paws.

"I would," said Emma hopefully.

"No," Jayjay grunted, and Emma glared at her. Jayjay was alpha dog in their two-wolf pack - maybe it was a three-wolf pack, because somehow I always seemed to give her her own way too. "I want to talk."

"All right," I said, pressing Off on the TV remote.

Emma made her feelings known by lurching from her hammock and staggering off to use the flush tray in the cleanup room. Jayjay got up too, and padded over to me. She laid her head on my knee. "There's something I want to do." She curled her upper lip into a smile, rounded her big brown eyes and laid her ears back. She knew I was always a sucker for that look. "I would really, really..." she began.

I scruffed her under the ear. "Really what?" I prompted.

"Really, really like to watch *Making Millions*," muttered Emma, sidling back into the room. "I know all the answers."

Jayjay swung her head towards her and her curled lip tightened. I noticed a dark red clot oozing towards her mouth and wiped it quickly. "Go on," I said.

She raised her muzzle to my face, her tail waving slowly from side to side. "I would really, really like to go outside."

"Into the courtyard?" I said.

"No. Outside. Outside the Institute."

Emma sat down awkwardly with her hind legs splayed straight out and cocked her head to one side, looking at Jayjay with astonishment. I was surprised too, and didn't answer straight away.

Jayjay sensed my puzzlement. "Only for a little while," she went on. "Just for a walk. Like in the courtyard, only - outside."

"But we never have..." I started. Then, "I mean, why?"

Jayjay's hoarse voice took on an edge I didn't recognize. "Didn't some human once say, 'Because it's there'? As sound a reason as any. Besides..."

"Besides what?" said Emma before I could.

"I'm dying," Jayjay said in her blunt Bull Terrier way. "So humour me." She turned and went back to jump onto her hammock and looked away from us, into the dark where the TV was just a blacker square of nothingness.

Emma looked at me, the look as direct and deep and desolate as time. I shrugged and nodded. "I'll see what I can do," and it was my turn to mutter.

\* \* \* \*

I got both permission and directions from the Institute to visit a small fenced area of bushland at the very back of the Institute's land, a space earmarked for further expansion. The permission came with an uncertain "I don't see that it can do any harm" and the directions with a scribbled map on a scrap of paper. I have to admit that both surprised me, but I happy to take advantage of them, I thought for the dogs' sake.

I'd driven the little buggies that the staff used to negotiate the paths around the Institute before, but Jayjay and Emma had never been in one, and I wondered if they might be nervous at first.

I was wrong.

"Faster, faster!" yipped Emma, balancing with her front feet on the side of the buggy and her weight thrust forward. Her tongue lolled out, her black ears flapped like flags, and her bright liquid eyes were radiant with excitement. The few people we passed stared after us. Jayjay sat quietly beside me, her nose up, scenting vainly at the warm afternoon air. Her eyes squinted against the mild breeze our slow speed created and her ears were so close to her head they had practically disappeared. Every now and then she would move her head over and delicately lick me on my cheek, just one lick, then back to the wind.

The huge concrete buildings of the Institute gradually thinned out; eventually the path was bordered mostly with smaller aluminium-sided factories and block warehouses, with brownish grass and weedy looking plants fronting them. I saw an occasional stunted tree with gnarled branches and tired-looking leaves, and soon we were following a high metal fence. The path led to a gate in the fence and I climbed out of the buggy. Jayjay pushed her way past Emma to jump nimbly down from the seat and Emma crawled laboriously after her.

They waited prick-eared while I opened the gate, and we all went through.

Into a new world.

I stared around, and so did the dogs. We were in an open paddock tufted with clumps of tall bright green grasses that swayed with the gentle wind. Insects leapt and flew between the clumps, silently or with buzzing noises, or dragged colourful rounded bodies over the sand from which the grasses grew. The ground was dotted with the figures of several types of birds that moved and pecked at random with large hard beaks and fierce black eyes that I didn't trust. We stood still, and quiet. I'd been in the Institute for so long, the rawness of this place and its vague unpredictability left me breathless and uncertain. Emma and Jayjay must have felt the same. Only our eyes moved, taking in all of its unknowns and unknowings.

At the furthest end was a place of huge trees and underbrush so thick I couldn't see the metal fence beyond, though I was sure it was there. This small forest was even more imposing than the grassland we were standing in, more compelling. I looked up, into the deep blue of an unrestricted sky, where more sorts of birds were flying back and forth and round and round, and the sun was a white ball of brilliance that hurt my eyes.

"Well," I said finally, blinking. "Here we are. Do you want to walk around a bit?"

Neither of the dogs answered. They began to move instead, and I started off with them.

We walked in ever-widening circles through the paddock, close together at first, as if for comfort and protection, but gradually our paths diverged. A small striped lizard darted from a stand of grass and Jayjay ran after it, trying to corner it with her front paws, her rump in the air, her tail waving a frantic semaphore. Her mouth gaped and her tongue protruded between her sharp incisors. The lizard kept getting away, or maybe there was a family of lizards, and Jayjay leapt from one place to another, distracted by the liveliness of it all.

Emma limped along more slowly, unable to leap or dart, but with her nose glued steadfastly to the ground, inhaling scents she had never known before. She made her way around the grasses and bushes, and even stubbornly through them. I could smell the heat of the grass and a hundred other scents that I didn't know, and I wondered briefly and enviously how much more infinite were the messages that Emma sniffed out.

Suddenly Jayjay stopped and squatted, and I saw a trickle of urine dampen the sand under her. "Jayjay," I said sharply, surprised. "What are you doing?" I'd never seen any of the Institute's dogs use anything but the flush-trays.

Jayjay stood up and grinned. "I don't know," she panted, "but it feels good." She scratched at the grass wildly with her hind legs and Emma came over to sniff the wet patch, then she hunched over and added more liquid to the spot. Jayjay laughed loudly. "See?" she said. "It's fun. You do it too."

I rolled my eyes in disapproval and we continued, both dogs stopping to urinate time and time again until I began to wonder if the outside had given them bladder infections.

Emma disappeared into a bigger clump of bushes with coloured flowers that cascaded to the ground as she rustled through them. Jayjay was intent on finding more lizards in the sandy patches. I watched them both, enjoying their pleasure. Emma emerged from the flowering bushes with a wreath of tiny purple blossoms on her head above her glaring excited eyes, and I laughed out loud at the sight. And without



exactly meaning to, I found I was moving closer and closer to the stand of trees.

All at once I was in shade, and I stopped and looked up. I had passed through the thickest of the underbrush and now an umbrella of twisting branches and thick leaves reared overhead, shielding me from the glare of the sun. I was only twenty metres from the nearest tree. The ground was barer here, the trees drinking up the goodness out of the ground.

I shivered despite the heat, hardly noticing that Jayjay and Emma had finally joined me, panting from their exertions. We stared into the woods together. Thick trunks erupted from the earth like marble columns, but these columns were clothed in tatters of thin papery bark and grew out into winding boughs that wove intricate patterns of twigs and leaves above us. Birds smaller than those in the sky flew from branch to branch, diving and calling. A breeze blew a shower of dying leaves down around us, and the vegetable smell was strong and stirring.

We stood motionless for a long time, savouring the being of the place, until a movement far off near the base of one of the trees caught our attention. It was another lizard, but this one was huge, enormous, a titan of a lizard with yellow and cream stripes along its flanks, nearly as long as I am high. It moved with a slow high arching of its legs, and even at that distance I could see its feet ended in long curved claws. I felt the dogs tense, and put out a warning hand, glancing at them. Jayjay was all muscular alertness, ears pricked forward, but Emma was quivering, coiling tightly down into herself. Her head was jugged out and down and a fierce dark light shone in her eyes that I had never seen before. She made a harsh rattling noise from deep in her throat. "Emma," I cautioned, but I was too late. She sprang forward.

And ran. Emma *ran*.

Her wounded hind legs pumped up and down like freshly oiled pistons. Her body was low to the ground, serpentine, coat blacker than black in the shade. And unbelievably, she ran.

Jayjay, startled, leapt after her like a flash of white lightning, and I thumped clumsily over the ground as fast as I could after her. The dragon of a lizard heard us and reared its head, swinging it around in our direction. I saw a thin forked tongue flash from its lipless mouth and I felt a moment of terrified certainty that it would rear up and rip the oncoming Emma to pieces in no time at all.

Instead, it moved with surprising speed and agility to the tree and climbed it so rapidly that by the time Emma arrived, joined quickly by Jayjay and finally by me, the only sign of the lizard was a tail disappearing amidst the high foliage of the canopy.

I put out a hand to a nearby tree to steady myself and slumped over, gasping for breath. Jayjay and

Emma stood panting heavily with their heads down, tongues trailing, their sides bellowing. None of us could say a word for several minutes.

“Don’t ever,” I managed at last, “do that again.”

Jayjay eyed me between puffs and grinned, while Emma furtively licked froth from her lips and looked away. The shade cooled the heat of our running and we stood gazing around, now that we were in the small forest proper. I noticed the silence. The sounds of our rush through the trees had startled the birds and they were quiet. The peace of the place seeped into us. I felt the papery coolness of the tree bark under my palm and dug my fingers through it into the muscular heart of the trunk. It felt good. I looked up at the low thick branches. It would be so easy to climb this tree...

“Go on, do it.” Jayjay’s grin was wider and Emma raised her head to look into my face. *I did it*, that look said. *You can too*.

I stood back for a minute, considering. The giant lizard may have moved far away through the canopy, or it might be in hiding up there, waiting for me... Jayjay licked my hand encouragingly. I clenched my jaw, reached up and carefully clambered to the security of the lower branches. I stood in a fork and looked down at the dogs. Emma had slumped to the ground, but they both gazed up at me expectantly. “Go on!” Jayjay called. I looked up, at the maze of branches above, and suddenly felt a burst of exhilaration. I leapt for a higher branch, and then another, and another. I laughed out loud.

Jayjay started circling the tree, both dogs started barking. Emma’s bark was hoarse and low, Jayjay’s higher pitched and sharp. I called back at them, still laughing, and they barked louder. Jayjay leapt up the tree as if she would join me, ripping at the bark and shredding it into strips with her sharp teeth.

I climbed up and up. I felt the breeze stronger now, higher, felt it lift my hair, feather it out around me. Emma’s bark was a pulsing basso beat inside my head, and my fingers curled strongly on the rungs of my tree as I swung higher and higher. I forgot my fear of the giant lizard - let it come, I was strong, I was the tree conqueror! I shouted at the sky above and down at the leaping hysterically barking Jayjay with delight. Emma pulled herself forward with her front paws belly-down and howled. I climbed and roared. We drowned all the sounds of the earth with our noise as I came to the top of the tree and gazed out across my world.

The dogs stopped barking. I stopped shouting. Only the wind moaned as I swung lightly in the topmost branches, my breath catching in my throat. Rocking there, I felt a silent moment of timeless wonder - until I turned, and saw the tall buildings of the Institute raised up higher than the trees. I suddenly remembered what I was and where I was.

A Skein dog carer at the top of a high tree.

I suddenly felt foolish, with the bark rasping uncomfortably against my skin and insects humming in my face. I looked down.

Jayjay and Emma now lay quietly at the base of the tree, looking uneasily up at me, as if we had all shared the same thought at the same time. I was uncertain; climbing up seemed much easier than climbing down. Cautiously I started to feel my way down the tree. The branches swayed dangerously under my weight and twigs caught in my tangled hair and scraped my skin, but I managed, and with a final awkward jump, made it to the ground.

Jayjay got to her feet and licked me fervently. I smiled and said something inane, maybe “I think it’s time to go home.” I remember they both nodded, subdued. There was no talk, no conversation, between us, about what had happened.

Emma was completely lame. Jayjay and I had to help her to her feet and across the paddock to the gate and the waiting buggy. While we were doing that, I noticed an almost constant trickle of watery blood from Jayjay’s nose. I had nothing to wipe it with; she licked it impatiently from time to time.

\* \* \* \*

An official reprimand was waiting for me when I returned the buggy. This was after I’d taken the dogs to their room. We had made too much noise. It had carried on the wind to the rest of the Institute and disturbed the other Skein animals, disrupted them.

I apologized, without mentioning Jayjay hunting lizards or Emma running - or me, climbing the tree. We were sorry, we didn’t know what we were thinking of, of course it wouldn’t happen again... And it didn’t. Within a fortnight, Jayjay would die of a brain haemorrhage, and six months later Emma’s expanding tumours would cause her euthanasia. And I would move on to care for other Skein dogs.

But that evening, all that was in the future, and Jayjay and Emma and I were still wrapped in the mystery of the afternoon events. Or rather, Jayjay and I were. Emma had fallen asleep over her evening meal, and I’d carried her to her hammock where she lay snoring and twitching her feet in running dreams.

Jayjay sat with me while I cleaned the eating space. When I finished and sat down, she came over to me and put her head in my lap. I automatically wiped her nose.

“Thank you,” she said.

“What for?” I asked.

“For letting me be a dog again.”

I looked through the window at the nightly migration of the flying foxes, dark shapes across the map of stars. I ruffled the fur around her collar with its insignia, Skein Canine JJ18(B). “And thank you,” I said.

“What for?” she echoed, licking my wrist. My identity bracelet clinked under her rough warm tongue and I looked at it. Skein Orang Utan C12(F).

“For letting me be me again,” I said.

We petted each other far into the restless night.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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**Leviathan**

SIMON BROWN

Simon Brown’s latest book, *Rival’s Son*, the second book in the Chronicles of Kydan trilogy, was published by PanMacmillan Australia in 2005 and DAW in the US in early 2006. He has a collection of short stories called *Troy* coming out from Ticonderoga Publications in April 2006, and the last Kydan book, *Daughter of Independence*, coming out from PanMacmillan in July.

He lives on the New South Wales south coast with his wife Alison and children Edlyn and Fynn.

About 'Leviathan', he writes: "This story is a result of serendipity and the imagination of two men who like their monsters big and in rubber, Robert Hood and Robin Pen. Although 'Leviathan' did not end up being the type of story they could use, if not for them and their generous encouragement it would never have been written."

\* \* \* \*

L

ike all fish stories, this one's a whopper. Unlike all other fish stories, this one starts thirty-five thousand feet in the air.

\* \* \* \*

### **Gerard Francis McVitty**

Over the Pacific Ocean, a Boeing 707 en route to Honolulu from Sydney, just past the Gilbert Islands and a whisker short of the International Date Line, suddenly encountered the sort of engine trouble an engineer would call 'catastrophic'.

Not too many minutes later, bits of 707 and people and suitcases and loose clothing were floating down onto the ocean like confetti at a wedding. One of those bits comprised a large man's overcoat, puffed out like a parachute, and Gerard Francis McVitty, ten years old, hanging onto the coat's arms and tail for dear life.

Looking down between his feet, Gerard saw blue - dimpled, sun-reflecting - and precious little else.

Except.

Except for a splodge of something darker near his left ankle; he tugged experimentally on the overcoat with his right hand and the splodge shifted to between his feet. As Gerard descended it developed into a round island, green-topped and surrounded by rippling circles of waves.

He was saved.

It turned out to be a very wet island, and slippery as all out, but there was fresh water and what looked like figs and Gerard figured he could fix up a fishing rod, although he'd have to give some thought to making a hook; there were bits of metal from the 707 around, and he thought he could rig something from that. The island wasn't big as islands went, but at least it was solid land and he wasn't going to die from hunger or thirst, and as far as he could see he was the only big animal on it. He had been secretly worried about the possibility of tigers on his way down, but there was nothing more aggressive here than a couple of hungry mosquitoes.

He gave some thought to attracting any rescue craft that might come by; he was sure someone would send out search parties once the 707 didn't arrive in Honolulu. It was too wet to start a signal fire, and anyway he wasn't sure he knew how to start one without matches. He hit upon the idea of using palm leaves to spell 'HELP' on the fringe of the island.

But that could wait, for after his near miss with death and his exploration of his island, he was exhausted. He found a relatively dry, mossy spot near a shallow pool of rain water, and for a pillow used the overcoat that had saved his life. He felt warm and safe, and in no time was fast asleep.

When he woke what felt like many hours later, Gerard searched the island looking for palm leaves that had dropped to the ground, but he didn't find any. He figured they must have blown away. Then he tried climbing up one of the palm trees, but it was too slippery and rubbery and all he could do was clamber up to his height before sliding down. He wondered how else he might make a sign for any searchers, but didn't come up with any ideas. Then he remembered the overcoat. He searched the pockets and found a pocket knife on the end of a key chain. The biggest blade was no longer than his little finger, but it was better than nothing at all.

He picked the thinnest palm tree, steadied the trunk with one hand, and then started sawing away. Almost immediately the ground beneath him shook. Gerard figured it was an earthquake and dropped the knife to hold onto the palm tree with both hands, but both of his hands slipped right off as if they were greased and his head bounced off the trunk.

The earth stopped moving.

For a moment he didn't do anything. Then he remembered his head *bounced* off the trunk. He automatically felt his skull. It seemed hard enough, but there was blood on his hands.

Gerard panicked. He frantically wiped his head with his forearm to see where the blood was coming

from, but nothing rubbed off. He whipped off all his clothes and searched his body - the bits he could see - for any wound.

Nothing.

Drip. He looked up. The palm tree was bleeding. His little island lurched again. Gerard fell heavily, bouncing on the ground as if it was made from a trampoline. He opened his mouth automatically to say 'ouch' but he was so surprised nothing came out. He was scrabbling to his feet when the ground moved beneath him again, and he had the nauseating sensation of rising into the sky. He just had time to grasp onto the bleeding palm tree when the island tipped over and started sinking. His body slipped sideways and dangled precariously over the ocean, then he was in it, salty, caustic, gulping, drowning...

... and out again. He gasped, coughed for breath, then was underneath a second time. The surface of the ocean was above him, glittering bright, the sky refracted. Water flooded up his nose and he sneezed, drank more of the ocean...

... was dangling, legs kicking, in the sky. White water spumed over him and it stank.

The island leveled off and, miraculously still gripping the palm, he levered himself to his feet. He was moving.

In fact, the whole island was moving.

\* \* \* \*

**Diggety**

"You got a nickname?"

"Um," Gerard said.

The doctor smiled. "I thought all kids had nicknames these days." He used his hands to press the boy's stomach; Gerard was supposed to tell him if it hurt.

“Sometimes the kids at school call me Diggety.” There was a twinge in his stomach and he flinched.

The doctor progressed to his ribcage. “Diggety? Why do they call you that?”

“Hot diggety dog. I got sunburned at the swimming carnival.”

The doctor turned Gerard around and started pressing his back, especially along his spine. A couple of times the boy flinched.

“How long ago was that?”

“February.” Gerard said it like the doctor should have known. When else did schools hold their swimming carnivals?

“Did you win anything?”

“Got a ribbon for the relay. My house came second.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Gerard didn’t say anything, but didn’t understand why coming second was any good. He flinched more as the doctor explored his lower back.

“Okay, you can put your shirt on.”

As Gerard dressed the doctor turned to his parents and sighed. “I’d really like to get some X-rays.”

“Where do we go for them?” Mrs McVitty asked.



“The base hospital. I’ll give you a referral. Go as soon as you can, then come back here next week.”

The drive back to the family’s cattle station took longer than expected. A storm came out of the north - thunderheads the size of cities - and dumped the best part of the district’s annual rainfall in less than an hour. Gidgee Gidgee Creek flash-flooded and Gerard and his parents were stuck on the wrong side of the road.

“Mum’s gonna kill us,” Mr McVitty said. “She didn’t want to baby-sit the kids in the first place.”

“Nothin’ we can do about it,” Mrs McVitty said flatly, as if being killed by Gerard’s grandmother was a danger she faced every day.

An hour and a half later the rain had stopped but the creek was still up. Gerard’s parents were walking around the car, heads bent down in earnest talk they didn’t want their son to hear. Gerard stayed in the car, head resting against a side window. It was hot, and his clothes stuck to his skin, but he didn’t have the energy to get out.

They didn’t know it, but Gerard knew they were talking about him. They didn’t look at him at all, that’s how he could tell. Maybe when they looked at him they couldn’t forget how sick he was. Not that anybody would tell him he was sick. But he wasn’t stupid.

A couple of weeks later it felt like fire when he pissed, and when he tried to shit all he could do was bleed. Gerard was too embarrassed to tell his dad, so he told his mother when Mr McVitty left to do a boundary ride. She listened attentively, then looked out over the station, her big brown eyes narrowing for a second. Gerard saw his mother swallow once, twice, then heard her clear her throat.

“We’ve been kinda expecting it,” she said slowly, drawing out the words. “I’m sorry it hurts. I wished to God it didn’t, but there you go.”

She reached out suddenly and took Gerard’s hand in her own. “We’ll tell your dad when he gets back.” She cleared her throat again. “You go and play now.”

“Don’t feel like playing much,” Gerard said.

Mrs McVitty nodded. “Guess not.”

“What’s for tea tonight?”

“Corned beef. Same as always on Tuesday. Would you like something special?”

“We got any ice cream?”

“We’ll see about that. I gotta go to town later, so I might get some then.”

“What’s in town?”

“Your grandma,” Mrs McVitty said, almost disinterested. Then she smiled down at her son. “And ice cream, of course.”

\* \* \* \*

### **Gerard Francis McVitty**

The monster had a deep sing-song voice that seemed too thin and too high for something so big, and it came from its spout - what Gerard had first thought was a pool - and not its mouth. And when it spoke the water in the spout bubbled so it sounded like it was talking under water.

“Don’t go cutting me again or I’ll drown you.”

“I thought you were an island.”

“That’s my lure. I get sailors landing on me all the time, then I drown them and swallow them and eat their ship.”

Gerard, who had survived a thirty-five thousand foot drop from a busted 707 and was filled with so much cancer he was almost all tumor and no boy, found he was still afraid of dying. He did not want to

be eaten alive.

“I wouldn’t have landed on you if I’d known you were a...” Gerard thought, but couldn’t come up with the name. “You gotta be almost as big as a blue whale. I’ve seen pictures of them. They’re a hundred feet long.”

“No. Bigger than any whale. I’m Leviathan. I’m in the Bible. You read your Bible?”

“Don’t have one. Read my mum’s now and then. So you gonna eat me now?”

“Thinking about it. You very big? I can’t see you way up there.”

“I’m just a boy. I wouldn’t be bigger’n one of your teeth. I’m as little as a mouse.”

“If you slipped down a little so I could see you I could tell you if I was gonna eat you or not.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m not hungry or anything. I just want to see you. Climb down next to one of my eyes.”

“I don’t wanna. I like it up here just fine.”

“Well, alright,” Leviathan said, sort of easy.

But Gerard wasn’t trusting the monster, and it was just as well, because next second it was heaving and curving and Gerard was holding his breath again. He thought he was going to die this time for sure, but then he was gasping for air and water was running off Leviathan in waterfalls. He didn’t think he’d last another one, he was so tired and scared, but when he saw the blow hole spray hot steam in the air, and heard air getting sucked back in, he got an idea.

“So, slip down and show yourself,” Leviathan said, almost teasing.

“Still don’t think that’s a good idea,” Gerard said as casually as he could, and let go of the palm tree or whatever it was to collect a long piece of 707 with a flash of red kangaroo on it, then scrambled back to the tree.

“Well, okay. I hate to do it this way. I like swallowing my prey whole and quick so nothing suffers. But you had a choice.”

“I had a choice,” Gerard admitted.

“So,” Leviathan said, and started his dive again.

But this time Gerard was ready for him. As they went under, he used the metal to dig around in the pool until he found the actual blow hole in the bottom and wedged it open. They came up so fast Gerard thought they would launch into the sky, and the sound from the blow hole was a scream so high, so piercing, he could feel his brain go all fuzzy around the edges.

When the scream was finished, Leviathan sucked in a few acres of air and said, “We gotta talk about this.”

\* \* \* \*

## **Diggety**

It wasn’t just the hospital that convinced Gerard he was really sick - like so sick he might not be coming home; it was the way everyone smiled at him and told him he would be discharged in no time at all. That and the pain, which never really went away. He was getting morphine through a drip, and although it made bearable that small wafer of life still left to him, the pain lurked beneath like a shark under a wave.

The worst thing was the vomiting, especially when there was blood in the sputum, red traces of it in the phlegm. That was when he really wanted everyone to tell him he was going to be alright, but whenever it happened he could see the skin on his parents’ faces go as white as the bark on a dead gum tree.

His mum stayed by his bed almost the whole time, but his dad had to go home to look after the station

and his brothers and sisters. Grandma was not up to babysitting full time. His mum always bought him comic books: *Casper the Ghost*, and *Wendy the Witch*, and *Archie*, and best of all *Classics Illustrated*: Gerard's favourite was *Sinbad the Sailor*. He liked the look of the Arabian dhows with their fore-and-aft sails like white triangles, the garish brightness of tropical lands in seas too blue to be true, the rocs and whales and the sword fighting with saifs and tulwars...

But instead of white sails he had white sheets, instead of a steel sword he had a cold bedpan, and instead of the currents and tides of the Indian Ocean he had the currents and tides of pain that swirled through his little body in eddies and whirlpools.

A priest came to talk to him. Gerard first saw him talking with his parents, their voices low, the priest with one hand on his father's shoulder and another on his mother's. Then he sat down next to Gerard's bed and smiled in the way a lot of adults smiled at children, as if to prove they were not really adults at all but just kids with big hands.

"So, skipping school, eh?" The priest winked.

Gerard stared at him.

"My name is Father Walsh. I wanted to come in and see how you were going."

"Why?"

Walsh pursed his lips. "Because I look after Catholics who are staying in the hospital." He winked again. "You're part of my flock."

Gerard had a quick mental image of being a sheep.

"A good shepherd always looks after his flock," Walsh continued. "That is something our lord Jesus Christ taught us, through his example."

"Jesus will look after me?"

"He will," Walsh said with certainty.

“Will he make me get better?”

“He may. Or...” Walsh swallowed. “Or he may call you to him.”

Gerard knew what that meant, and in that moment knew why the priest was here. He glanced over Walsh’s shoulder and saw his parents looking at him like he was already half ghost. Somehow it made what he already knew was going to happen to him more than concrete; his sickness was becoming an execution. Suddenly anger swirled through him.

“I piss blood,” he said to the priest. “Will Jesus still love me?”

“Especially,” Walsh said softly.

And the anger ebbed away as quickly as it had come.

\* \* \* \*

## **Gerard Francis McVitty**

Despite saying he wanted to talk, Leviathan said nothing for a long time. Gerard shivered as he dried, and at first did not notice the wake. When he did he looked up, saw the sky setting ahead, and knew they were heading west. He was hungry and tired and still scared.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Sinbad’s Sea.”

“Where’s that?”

“A way. You going to let me see you, little mouse?”

“Haven’t changed my mind.”

“That thing in my blowhole is hurting. Take it out? Won’t dive if you do.”

“Won’t dive for sure if I leave it in,” Gerard said, more to himself. “Is there anything I can eat up here? I’m betting those figs aren’t real figs.”

“Why should I help you? If you starve to death you’ll just drop off one day and then I can eat you.”

“If I die that metal in your blowhole will never come out.”

“Don’t matter to me.”

Gerard snorted in disbelief. He was ten - hell, almost eleven! - and could play that game better than any monster. “Don’t matter to me, either,” he said nonchalantly, and meant it.

“I can float on the surface for years and years, my little mouse, and not worry about it.”

“Sure.” There was a long pause, and then Leviathan said,

“Mussels.”

Automatically, like he was playing Connections with his mum, Gerard said, “Bones.”

“No, not muscles. Mussels like shellfish. You eat shellfish?”

Gerard frowned. “I come from the middle of Australia. We don’t get much shellfish there.”

“Don’t know where Australia is, but if you look in the pool, you’ll see mussels and barnacles and things

stuck to my skin. Try and eat them.”

Gerard put his hand over the lip of the pool and felt under the rim. There were some hard shells there and he pulled one off. It looked like a stone mouth with a wispy beard.

“What do I do with it?”

“Open it and eat the animal inside.”

Gerard looked around for something to open it with. He regretted losing the pen knife, but he had been hanging on for dear life at the time and it was gone and there was nothing he could do about it. Then he remembered the metal plug in the blowhole, and he worked a part of the top of it loose, bending it this way and then that until he had a jagged piece about the size and shape of a carving knife. With some effort, and a cut finger, he opened the shellfish and, without looking too closely at the white soft thing inside, swallowed the contents in one gulp. It tasted fishy and gritty and slimy all the way down, and Gerard almost gagged, but his stomach liked having something inside it, and he quickly scavenged another one.

\* \* \* \*

## **Diggety**

He had never tasted piss, but Gerard reckoned the medicine he had to take every four hours would probably be close to it. It made his whole face screw up and his tongue hang out looking for relief. Afterwards he always got an orange cordial, double strength so it was real sweet, but even that did not get rid of the grungy-piss taste at the back of his throat. The taste lasted until he had a hot meal.

In the confined space he inhabited, with the repetitive routine that became for Gerard as predictable and boring as the hundreds of flat miles back on the station, that medicine was the only highlight in the whole day. He had been in the hospital so long that when his mum visited they had ran out of things to say. And his dad, on the rare occasion he made it in, uttered barely a half dozen words and stared at his son almost balefully, as if it was his fault he was sick, as if he had planned to get cancer all along; Gerard wanted to stare defiantly back at his dad, but it was like looking at car lights on high beam and he could not do it.

Other than the medicine, the only other bump in the routine happened once a week when Father Walsh came in. They played cards a lot, first it was whist, but then Walsh taught him how to play poker and



what a suicide king was and just how much fun you could have when jokers were wild. They used matchsticks for stakes.

“You gotta bet with poker, otherwise there’s no point and it’s just cards,” Walsh told Gerard. “Might as well stick with whist.”

Eventually the conversation would get off one-eyed jacks and onto cancer and dying and God. Gerard was getting the idea that all three were inextricably linked. You could not have cancer without God, and you could not have God without dying coming into it somewhere, and he wondered what role Walsh fulfilled in the whole deal.

“You been a priest your whole life?” he asked Walsh one day.

Walsh was studying his hand. “Not yet.”

“I mean, you go straight into it from school?”

Walsh shook his head. “I was a teacher first. Wasn’t enough for me.” He put some cards down and held up two fingers. Gerard passed him two from the top of the deck. “My mother said I should be a priest. So I thought about it and figured she was right. And here I am.” He grinned widely and lay down two pair. “Kings over tens.”

“And here I am,” Gerard said, smiling slyly, and lay down a full house. He won an awful lot of matches. “Does it make you closer to God?”

Walsh pursed his lips. “Not that I’ve noticed. But I rely on him a lot more than I used to. I’ve gotten to understand some of His ways.”

“What about dying. Gotten to understand that yet?”

Walsh paused in shuffling the cards. At first he did not meet Gerard’s gaze. “Well, not really. My mother died last year, and I reckon it was as hard for me as a priest as it would have been if I was a teacher. One thing I’ve learned, maybe, is that not everything has an answer, at least not an answer we want to hear.”

Gerard thought death was like one of those great summer storms that came every couple of years from the north, with huge dense banks of curving darkness, and no matter how long you looked it just seemed to stay where it was, but once you looked away it rushed in and next thing you know the wind's ripping off your tin roof and cattle are being blown over and the rain's so heavy it turns the whole plain into a river as wide as the state of Queensland. Gerard didn't want to be surprised like that by death, so he kept on staring at it, and it just stayed there on the horizon, coming no closer, as big as the sky.

\* \* \* \*

### **Gerard Francis McVitty**

Over the next few days, Gerard saw islands slide by as Leviathan made his way west. These were real islands, with people and beaches on them, and sometimes the people ran away when they saw Leviathan, and sometimes they just stood still and stared at the monster. The first time it happened Gerard called for help, but he did not know if anyone saw him - just a dot up near the blowhole - let alone heard him over the whooshing sound of the sea parting before them, white walls of water jetting up either side of Leviathan's maw.

"Cut your caterwauling," Leviathan told him. "It's hurting my ears."

Gerard shut up.

Leviathan must have been moving at close to fifty or sixty miles an hour, and the wind chaffed and burned Gerard's face if he stood up all the time, like he was sticking his head out of a car window. He found he could get quite comfortable sitting against one of the growths that looked like a palm tree and with his feet in the blowhole. Although the back of the beast was as wide and big as an island itself, at night Gerard tied himself to the tree with the overcoat he'd used as a parachute because he was afraid of slipping off.

"Do you always travel so close to land?" he asked Leviathan on the morning of the third day after he fell from the sky.

"Sure, it's how I navigate, but I'm usually underwater so nobody knows I'm around." The blowhole made a sound like a disappointing hiss. "But since that isn't possible right now, I'm forced to do it on the surface. No thanks to you, and no telling what will happen because of it."

Gerard found out soon enough. It was almost evening of the third day, and the sun was a bloated yellow balloon on the horizon, cool enough to look at, when a flash in the darkening sky to their left drew their attention. They saw a thin white line curve into the sky and then droop towards them. Without hesitation, Leviathan smashed his great tail in the ocean, sending up a waterspout over a hundred feet high, and shouted, “Hang on, little mouse!” and made a quick and violent turn to port.

Gerard didn’t hang on quite quick enough and his feet slipped out from underneath him. He slid about three yards before he could get up, and he scrambled for the overcoat, still tied to its palm tree, and held on to it for dear life.

If Gerard thought the monster was going fast before, it was nothing to the burst of speed it put on now. The sea rainbowed above him, drenching him. Fish smacked down next to him, flapping uselessly, some spilling into the blowhole. Gerard felt Leviathan surge above the surface of the ocean then splash back down with a huge crack that sounded like a cannon shot, then surge forward and up again.

“Food!” Leviathan shouted with glee, and Gerard pulled himself to his feet to see what it was Leviathan had sighted.

About halfway to the horizon was a grey ship, not much bigger than a ferry. It had a single gun near the bow which fired, pom-pom-pom, sending tracer overhead. The distance between them closed quicker than Gerard would have thought possible, and when it seemed they were about to collide Leviathan arched into the sky and came down, maw open, straight onto the ship. There was sound of twisting, crunching metal, flames shot out the side of Leviathan’s jaws and Gerard thought he heard the squeal of someone impaled on a giant tooth.

And then calm, absurd and sudden.

Gerard peered over the side and saw a slight oil slick, shiny blue, floating on the surface, and then they left it behind.

Leviathan’s stomach rumbled. “Delicious,” the monster said.

\* \* \* \*

**Diggety**

His mother came in smiling like she had good news, and she was holding her arms out straight.

“Wings,” she said.

Gerard smiled back. “Aeroplane.”

“Jet.”

“Boeing 707.”

She plumped down next to him on the bed and shook her arms out.

“Red Skelton,” he said.

Her mum looked confused. “What?”

“On television. He comes on stage shaking his arms and says, ‘I’ve just flown in from Albuquerque and boy! are my arms tired.’”

His mum laughed. “I’ve got good news.”

“I’m getting out of hospital and going home,” Gerard said, feeling hope rise in him like mercury in a thermometer.

For a fraction of a second, Gerard saw his mum’s face collapse, and underneath got a glimpse of all the sorrow in the world. Then it all came right, smile perfect, and she said, “Almost! You’re going to Disneyland.”

Gerard was still seeing the sorrow, though, and his brain did not understand the words.

“You hear that, sweetheart? You’re getting out of hospital and going to Disneyland!”

His brain caught up, and he said, vaguely, “But that’s in America.”

She put her arms out again and made pathetic engine sounds, and Gerard understood at last. “I’m going on a 707? All the way to America?”

His mother nodded. “There’s a group in Sydney who give very sick kids special favours. We asked if you could go to Disneyland, and they’re going to pay for you and me to go.”

“Wow.”

“But,” his mother said, straightening his bed clothes with one hand, “you have to get a bit better first. Just a bit, just enough to let you travel. Can you do that for me, honey?”

Gerard nodded eagerly. “Oh, yeah.”

\* \* \* \*

## **Gerard Francis McVitty**

Leviathan went after the big, round, red-hulled ships the most. They plumped like metal sausages in the sea, smoky, rusty, white-masted ships, and he would chase them down from astern then raise himself in the sky like a tidal wave and fall on them, smashing them, swallowing them, flipping people in the air with his tongue and gobbling them like cocktail frankfurters. Squishy sounds, rending metal sounds, explosions when the oil caught fire and whooshed up the monster’s sides, singing Gerard’s eyebrows. Then off again, fast as the wind, throwing the sea up in long curtains of glistening water.

“This is Sinbad’s Sea, little mouse,” Leviathan told him. “This is where the ocean is warmest, where the meat is sweetest, where the ships always travel the same lanes, following the coastlines that captains have been navigating for thousands of years.”

“Is that how old you are?”

“Older. I am as old as the sea. As long as sailors have existed, they’ve remembered me. I am their first nightmare, and sometimes their last one.” He laughed his funny, air-blowing laugh, almost a whistle. “I am adventure. Without me all sailors have to fear is storms and drowning, and that’s not enough. Imagination’s way too big for storms and drowning, and needs me to fill it up.”

Gerard felt cold suddenly. “You’re death,” he said.

“Nothing so fancy,” Leviathan said, his levity gone, and then more lightly, “Look, there’s an old-time dhow. See how the sail’s rigged? Arabs been using that kind of boat for three thousand years or more.”

“You going to eat it?”

“I’m Leviathan. What do you think?”

At night Leviathan would slow down. He didn’t have to rush through the sea to find ships because they had their lights on and he could see them from quite some distance. Then he would ease up and take them broadside, snapping the hull in two with one bite, then obliterating everything left with a smack of his giant tail. When the monster wasn’t rushing after food, Gerard would sometimes lay on his back and look at the stars, making sure one arm of the overcoat was tied to his leg, and another tied to one of the fake palm trees. He was still, and sure he always would be, afraid of slipping off and just disappearing into the sea, splash, and sinking so deep he would scrunch up like a prune. To while away the hours he would talk with the monster. Leviathan liked talking, because he didn’t get much chance to do it.

“How many stars can you count?” Leviathan asked once.

“I dunno. Too many to count. Must be millions.”

“Thousands of millions,” Leviathan said. “I’ve counted them. Sometimes, more in the past than now, I used to float on the surface at night, just like now, and do nothing but count the stars. My eyes are better than yours, so I can see in the abyss below, and I can see so far into space that sometimes I think there’s no end to it.”

“You’ve counted them all?”

“And named them. Every one. There’s Opal, blue and bright, above us right now. And over east is Pearl.

That red one we're heading towards is -"

"Ruby," Gerard said.

"Now how did you know that?"

"They're all gems. Must be more stars than gems, though."

"Oh, sure. Then I use words like Wind, and Gabriel, and -"

"Must be more stars than words," Gerard pointed out.

"Then I say Red Gabriel and Blue Sunfish. I'll never run out of words."

"What else do you see?"

"Remember Pearl?"

"Oh, yeah. Big white one in the east."

"Six planets. Two have life on them, and one of those has singing crabs, size of houses."

"Really?"

"You laying down?"

Gerard nodded, then remembered Leviathan could not see him. "Yup."

"Look real close at Pearl. Don't take your eyes off it. Then you'll see for yourself."

After an hour or two of staring, Gerard was surprised to learn that Leviathan was right.

\* \* \* \*

## **Diggety**

His dad came without his mum, but at first his vision was so blurred he couldn't be sure. Then he heard his dad's voice, kind of tight. "Does it hurt?"

To his surprise the pain wasn't too bad, and he said so, but vaguely because his attention was drawn to the spots of blackness that floated around his field of vision. He was surprised that when the spots came it was with a flash, like small explosions, but explosions of darkness, not light.

"Doctor says you're getting better soon," his dad went on, but Gerard knew he was lying.

He felt the bed lean when his dad sat down on it. His dad's big, rough callused hand rested on his chest, which was heaving up and down like a water pump with mud in the pipe. "Oh, Jesus, Gerard."

That brought Gerard up. His dad had never called him by his name before. It had always been 'mate' or 'son', or if he was in trouble 'you'. Never Gerard.

That's me, he thought. Gerard Francis McVitty.

He wanted to sit up, but did not have the strength. He settled for trying to move his arm, but there was a tube in it and the arm seemed to be as heavy as iron.

"Your mum's at mass," his dad said. "She's prayin' all day long for you. Wish I could, but she's doin' enough for the both of us."

"You don't have to go to mass to pray," Gerard said. "Father Walsh told me that. I pray all the time. I want to go to Disneyland. So I pray to get better. God listens."



“I guess it’s true.” His father’s face loomed over him. “How are you, Gerard? Really?”

\* \* \* \*

## **Gerard Francis McVitty**

“Tired.”

“What are you doing, little mouse?” Leviathan asked, munching the last, flat top bit of an aircraft carrier. Little jets screamed all around the air, looking for someplace to land. Sometimes they zoomed right over Leviathan, firing little bullets that bounced off his skin with a pneumatic phut-phut-phut sound. One bullet came so close to Gerard’s head it made his hair wave and he could smell something acrid and metal.

He was busy pulling the bit of airliner out of Leviathan’s blowhole.

“I’m tired of hanging on,” he said. “I’m tired of being afraid.”

The plug went “pop!” and air hissed after it. Gerard heard Leviathan sigh like a steam train coming to rest.

“You want to see me now?”

There was a long pause before Leviathan said, “I know what you look like, little mouse. We’ve been talking and talking for so long now, I can see you as clearly as Azhur’s Mako, way out near the end of the universe, a blue star as big as the solar system. I can see your face as clearly as I can see the snails at the bottom of the sea.”

Gerard didn’t care about blue stars or little snails. His eyes wanted to close. He undid the arm of the overcoat from around his leg and from around the palm tree and lay down not caring if he dropped into the ocean.

A great lethargy overtook him, like an enormous silence, and he could no longer hear his own breathing.

“Well, you sleep,” Leviathan said gently, “and I’ll just turn around and take you home.”

<<Contents>>

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**Publications**

Publications which actively publish original Australian science fiction, fantasy, horror and weird fiction are listed below. Check the websites or ask your local library about the books and magazines.

*Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. A bi-monthly magazine of local and international speculative fiction. ISSN 1446781X. Subscriptions from Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-Op Ltd, PO Box 495, Bentley WA 6982. <http://www.andromedaspacesways.com>.

*Antipodean SF*. A monthly ezine, featuring ten new flash fictions every issue. [www.antisf.com](http://www.antisf.com), or email the editor at: [editor@antisf.com](mailto:editor@antisf.com). Antipodean SF is archived in the National Library at the following address: [purl.nla.gov.au/NET/antisf/](http://purl.nla.gov.au/NET/antisf/).

*Aurealis*. Australia’s longest running speculative fiction magazine. ISSN 1035 1205, ISBN 095859418X. Can be ordered direct, or through your local bookshop. Subscriptions available from Chimaera Publications, PO Box 2164, Mt Waverley, Victoria 3149. <http://www.aurealis.sf.org.au>.

*Australian SF Forum*. A periodic ezine of new science fiction stories and articles, <http://www.ozscififorum.com/>.

*Borderlands*. New SF magazine from Western Australia. ISSN 1448224X. Subscriptions available from [subscriptions@borderlands.com.au](mailto:subscriptions@borderlands.com.au). <http://www.borderlands.com.au>.

*Dark Animus*. Irregular horror magazine. ISSN 14473747. Subscriptions from PO Box 750, Katoomba NSW 2780. <http://www.darkanimus.com>.

*Fables & Reflections*. Irregular magazine, fiction and some articles on the fantastic. ISSN 14461900. Subscriptions and sample copies from PO Box 979, Woden ACT 2606. <http://www.Fables~and-Reflections.net>.

*Infinitas newsletter*. A bookshop newsletter which includes the occasional short story. Infinitas Bookshop, Shop 22, 48-50 George St, Parramatta, NSW 2150. <http://www.infinitas.com.au/>.

*Orb: Speculative Fiction*. An annual magazine/anthology series. ISSN 14425580. Subscriptions available from Orb Publications, PO Box 1621, South Preston, Victoria 3072. [home.vicnet.net.au/~Orb](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~Orb).

*Shadowed Realms*. A quarterly ezine dedicated to short horror fiction. <http://www.shadowedrealms.com.au/>.

*Specusphere*. A website dedicated to exploring all aspects of speculative fiction in Australia. Publishes short fiction and articles, [http:// www. specusphere.com/](http://www.specusphere.com/).

*Ticonderoga Online*. An irregular ezine dedicated to original science fiction, fantasy and horror, <http://www.ticonderogaonline.org/>.

*Visions*. Website and occasional ezine, supported by Fantastic Queensland Inc. <http://www.fantasticqueensland.com>, and <http://www.visionwriters.org>.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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### **Collections**

We found mention of these collections published in 2005. (Addresses are given for independent presses, where known.)

Jack Dann, *The Fiction Factory*, Golden Gryphon Press, ISBN 1930846363.

Stephen Dedman, *Never Seen by Waking Eyes*, Infrapress, ISBN 0976654407.  
<http://www.writers.com/publishing/>. Prime Australia, ISBN 0809511738, [www.primebooks.net](http://www.primebooks.net).

Steve Duffy, *Journeys*, ISBN 0646448110. <http://www.steveduffy.info>. Kate Forsyth, *Radiance*, Altair Australia Books, <http://www.altair-australia.com/altair/altairbooks.html> (poetry).

Rosaleen Love, *The Traveling Tide*, Aqueduct Press, ISBN 0974655996. Aqueduct Press, PO Box 95787, Seattle, WA 98145-2787, USA. <http://www.aqueductpress.com>.

Chuck McKenzie, *Confessions of a Pod Person*, MirrorDanse Editions, ISBN 0975785214. MirrorDanse Books, PO Box 3542, Parramatta NSW 2124, Australia.  
<http://www.tabula-rasa.info/MirrorDanse/>.

Garth Nix, *Across the Wall*, Allen & Unwin, ISBN 1741147018.

Derek Smith, *Retribution and Other Reactions*, Equilibrium Books, ISBN 1920764682. Equilibrium Books, PO Box 853, Rockingham WA 6968, Australia, <http://www.equilibriumbooks.com>.

Lucy Sussex, *A Tour Guide in Utopia*, MirrorDanse Editions, ISBN 0975785206. MirrorDanse Books, PO Box 3542, Parramatta NSW 2124, Australia. <http://www.tabula-rasa.info/MirrorDanse/>.

Kaaron Warren, *The Grinding House*, CSFG Publishing, ISBN 0958139032. CSFG Publishing, PO Box 89, Latham ACT 2615, Australia. <http://www.csfg.org.au>.

[<<Contents>>](#)

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**Anthologies**

We found mention of these anthologies published in 2005. (Addresses are given for independent presses.)

Jessica Adams, et al (editors), *Kids' Night In 2*, Puffin, ISBN: 0143300164.

Stuart Barrow (editor), *The CSFG Gastronomicon*, CSFG Publishing, ISBN: 0958139040. CSFG Publishing, PO Box 89, Latham ACT 2615, Australia [www.csfg.org.au](http://www.csfg.org.au).

Angela Challis & Shane Jiraiya Cummings (editors), *Shadowbox*, Brimstone Press, <http://www.shadowedrealms.com.au/>.

Shane Jiraiya Cummings & Robert Stephenson (editors), *Robots and Time*, Altair Australia Books [www.altair-australia.com/altair/altairbooks.html](http://www.altair-australia.com/altair/altairbooks.html).

Robert Hood & Robin Pen (editors), *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*, Agog! Press ISBN: 0958056749. Agog! Press, PO Box U302, University of Wollongong NSW 2522, Australia.

Mitch (editor), *Mitch ?Four: Slow Dancing in Quicksand*, [ranthology.com](http://ranthology.com), ISBN 0958059411.

Zoran Zivkovic (editor), *The Devil in Brisbane*, Prime Books, ISBN: 0809550865. <http://www.primebooks.net>.

[<<Contents>>](#)

\* \* \* \*

### **Recommended Reading: 2005**

anonymous, 'New Friends and Stranger Companies', *Consensual a Trois*

Barnes, Chris, 'Big Day', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Barry Rosenberg, 'Out of the Shadows', *Specusphere*

Battersby, Lee, 'Gunslinger', *The Devil in Brisbane*

— 'Love Me Electric', *Consensual a Trois*

Biancotti, Deborah, 'Summa Seltzer Missive', *Ticonderoga 6*

Bishop, K. J., 'Between the Covers', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Blum, Jonathan, 'The Evil Little Mother and the Tragic Old Bat', *Wildthyme On Top*

Browne, Adam, 'The Heart of Saturday Night', *Lennox Ave*

Browne, Adam & Dixon, John, 'Ringcycle', *Aurealis 33-35*

Cain, James, 'Happy Birthday Pinko', *Fantastical Visions III*

— 'The Ride', *Dark Krypt*

Carroll, David, 'Footprint', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Cavanagh, Steven, 'Moving Dad', *Shadowed Realms 6*

Chan, Kylie, 'Child Support', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Coverdale, Tom, 'The Maker', *Southerly*

Crabtree, Deborah, 'There Is A Light', *Shadowbox*

Cummings, Shane Jiraiya, 'Revision is Murder', *Simulacrum 11*

Dann, Jack, 'Dharma Bums', *Postscripts 4*

Dann, Jack & Malzberg, Barry, 'The Starry Night', [www.scifi.com/scifiction](http://www.scifi.com/scifiction)

Dartnall, Terry, 'Ones and Zeroes', *Neverary*

— 'The Santa-Fe', *The Cafe Irreal*

Dedman, Stephen, 'Coup de Grace', *Borderlands 4*

— 'Realms of the Unreal', *Westerly 50*

— 'Static Song', *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine 18*

Dix, Shane, 'Dark Windows', *Aurealis 33-35*

Dowling, Terry, 'The Eye in Room 16', *Shadowed Realms 6*

Doyle, Aidan, 'On the Bones', *Borderlands 5*

Duffy, Steve, 'Harry's Bench', *Journeys*

— 'The Kindness of Strangers', *Journeys*

Flinthart, Dirk, 'Monochrome for Two', *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*  
20

Ford, Adam, 'Seven Dates That Were Ruined By Giant Monsters, Or Why I Really  
Need To Get Out of This City', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Fordham, Anthony, 'Aspect Hunter', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Geoffrey Maloney, 'The Dust Beneath Her Feet', *Aurealis* 33-35

Harland, Richard, 'The Empty Child', *Shadowed Realms* 6  
— 'The Greater Death of Saito Saku', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Hoge, Robert, 'And the Deep Blue Sea', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Ikin, Van, 'Quietly Dead, Quietly Buried', *Westerly* 50

Jamieson, Trent, 'Downpour', *Shadowed Realms* 7  
— 'Tumble', *Ideomancer* 4  
— 'Porcelain Salli', *Aurealis* 33-35

JB, 'Going Home', *ABC Radio Regional Production Fund Short Story Project*

Jones, Heather, 'Late Again', *NSWWC Flash Fiction*

Kelso, Sylvia, 'Slick', *Antipodes Vol 18, No 4*

Kemble, Gary, 'The House', *Borderlands* 4

Kerslake, Richard, 'Degrees of Separation', *Borderlands* 5

Lennox, Anne, 'Deep Water and Dust', *NSWWC Flash Fiction*

Livings, Martin, 'Killing Time', *Robots and Time*  
— 'Playtime', *Shadowbox*

Love, Penelope, 'The Unlawful Priest of Todesfall', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Love, Rosaleen, 'Wanderer 8', *The Plastic Book of Numbers*

Lynch, Chris, 'The Pluripotentiary', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Mancia, Tania, 'Requiescat in Pace', *NSWWC Flash Fiction*

Manton, Karen, 'Phoebe's Scar', *Best Australian Stories 2005*

McArthur, Maxine, 'Does the Spearmint Lose its Flavour on the Bedpost  
Overnight', *The CSFG Gastronomicon*

McKenzie, Chuck, 'All I Want for Christmas', *Confessions of a Pod Person*

— 'Like A Bug Underfoot', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Millard, Glenda, 'Brave of the Mincabu', *Kids' Night In 2*

Nix, Garth, 'Charlie Rabbit', *Kid's Night In*

Peek, Ben, 'The Glass Elephant's Prison', *Magistria, Realm of the Sorcerer* Pitchforth, Richard, 'Sharp', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Roberts, Vance, 'Old Soar', *Specusphere*

Sivakumar, Tharsan, 'Judging the Creator', *Antipodean SF 84*

Smith, Derek, 'Rectilinear', *Retribution*

Smith, Kellyanne, 'The Hungry Ghosts', *Antipodean SF 89*

Sparks, Cat, 'Historical Perspective', *Simulacrum 11*

— 'Macchiato Lane', *Ticonderoga 5*

Spencer, Beth, 'Pandora on the Eve of Destruction', *Specusphere*

Spurling, Richard, 'Grave', *From the Asylum*

— 'The Long Jog', *HorrorMasters 23*

Sullivan, Andrew, 'Notes Concerning Events at the Ray Harryhausen Memorial Home for Retired Actors', *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*

Tambour, Anna, 'The Emperor's Backscratcher', *Infinity Plus*

Tan, Shaun, 'The Water Buffalo', *Mitch? Four*

Triffit, Lyn, 'The Memory of Breathing', *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine 17*

Wajnberg, Adam, 'Man Bites Crab', *Mitch? Four*

Ward, Kyla, 'The Oracle of Brick and Bone', *Borderlands 5*

Wardle, Susan, 'Baby Time', *Antipodean SF 91*

Warren, Kaaron, 'Smoko', *The Grinding House*

— 'The Grinding House', *The Grinding House*

— 'The Smell of Mice', *The Grinding House*

Westwood, Kim, 'Haberdashery', *The Devil in Brisbane*

Whalley, Jo-Ann, 'The Seasonal Collector', *Borderlands 4*

Williams, Tess, 'How Green Was Their Love', *Borderlands 4*



[<<Contents>>](#)