

The Ruined Queen of Harvest World

a short story by

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“Where are my mausers?” cried Gloriana Avid, dressed in seven layers of floating white and gray muslin. “Ullimus Wong draws near! We must prepare the defenses of the orbital ladder in his honor, or against him. Come, mausers.”

She peered into the great overgrown garden of her father’s house. Few human people off Harvest knew this word *mauser*, which was an ancient name for a weapon held in the hand and directed to the killing of other humans. Fewer still recognized, with an irritated sigh, that this name, too, hid one yet older.

The war cats who stood guard over the rich treasures of Harvest were mausers, true, but mousers as well. Their ancestors, back on fabled Homeland, had been small, fleet creatures with small, fleet minds. Those cats lived and dreamed the hunt for their prey: feathered birds, tracked with furtive slow patient grace until the leap, murderous; and rodents even smaller than themselves, the mouses, for which they, the gray and white and black and tabby and striped mousers, were a mortal terror poised at the wainscoting. So it was with the descendents, the frightful augmented people, the war cats of Harvest.

“Come, my pretties, my lordly hunters, my avengers,” cried mad Ms. Avid. Her words creaked out into the pungent air of the Harvest world, where, beyond the tangled brambles of the house, a hundred fruits still gleamed under an actinic star, where the cereal crops flourished in wind-flowing oceans of gold and royal purple.

“It is time to hunt,” called Glory to her noble cats, and they came. Not to her bidding, for they were proud and walked alone, but in free recognition of her fiefdom. “Come along, Resolution, Triumphant, Defiant. And wait, now, who are you?” This cat was lean, with a head like a blade. Electricity danced and pranced in his pale blue eyes. She had never seen him before. All cats walk alone, as she knew, but this one seemed destined for some singular isolation. “Your name, sir, I say!”

“My name is Daisy,” said the cat, standing very still in the midst of his brothers. Did they shun him? They did not turn their backs upon him, nor withdraw their heads, and they did not, either, turn in a mass of

furious, shrieking repugnance to tear, beat or bite him until his corpse lay bleeding and huddled. That they would have done to a sport, a castback, a cat whose deoxyribonucleic acid was even one codon more seriously warped than Daisy's. This forbearance, or minimal respect, did not mean they loved him, nor admired his solitude. The mausers put up with him at the margins of their number because he was a son of Courageous and Precious Blue Silk, was sworn, as were they all, to the defense of Harvest and the house.

Gloriana Avid gave one sniggering bark of laughter to hear that name, and smothered her mouth in billowing sleeves.

"And where are your . . . sisters?" Every mauser heard the absent words, the missing words, the masked words: your brothers' *other* sisters. But a word unspoken yields no clear offense. The ears of the wiry cat went back for an instant only, the deep snarl in his throat chopped off at a cough.

"Come forth, sisters," he cried in a piercing voice. "The mistress would see you, even though the time is not fitting, her mausers, your brothers, being gathered here together."

"Oh, no, no," cried Glory in her shrill, disappointed, wary tones, "that is not what I—"

But here came cat females, from the hard shadows of the star's brilliant daylight, slinky and sinuous. Here was Summery Justice and Winter Kills, here was Autumn Falls and Spring Healer, lightly springing, falling like shaded leaves.

The air reeked abruptly, with lawless pheromones. Everyone except Avid fell into attitudes of alert pugnacity, thrilling with improper desires.

"Go back at once," cried Boundless Courage, stepping to the fore. "Ignore this one, this fool," and he cuffed Daisy across the side of the face, hard, claws scrupulously retracted. "Return to your fastness, sisters. This is not the time. This is not the place." With exquisite attention, Boundless monitored his brother's stance. Daisy did nothing. His breathing did not quicken, nor his whiskers draw back. (Each mauser could hear the pulse and breath of every cat in the clearing, and more besides.) His teeth set in a baleful grin. In silence he watched his sisters slink back into the shadows, casting glances over their shoulders. Their long lovely vibrissae gleamed in the sunlight, then were gone.

"Bad kitty," said Glory Avid, all a-twitter.

For a moment, Daisy and Boundless Courage regarded each other. Daisy slipped forward, then, and dropped to his knees, rolled upon his back into suppliant posture, as once, very long ago, his ancestral foe the dog might have rolled in obeisance to an overmastering superior, belly bared. To his own ancestors, as only disdained Daisy knew, this posture held a very different meaning. It blocked an enemy's approach from behind, while freeing all four muscular limbs and lethal claws to rake and rip.

Boundless nodded, a civilized being in an almost civilized time and place, and raised one foot to deposit it in ceremonial warning and acknowledgment on the defenseless bowels. And Daisy was no longer there. Snarling, he snapped upward, lunging at the senior brother. He tore with his unleashed claws the fabric from Boundless's loins, sank his sharp teeth instantly into the mauser's befurred groin, twisted, keening a battle cry between his clenched teeth, and ripped away all the gristle and flesh and tight double sac.

Blood sprayed. Boundless Courage shrieked, clutching at himself. Aghast, confused, mausers flailed, struck at each other, crying, "Unsporting!" and "How vile, sir!" and "You are no gentleman!" Blood and fear and fury reeked, vibrissae quivering beneath their nostrils.

"No!" sobbed Gloriana Avid. She drew back, seeing droplets of red flung upon her white and gray

muslin. “Cats, stop! This must not be!”

But she was wrong. It had to be. It was the first public declaration of inevitable war between the Worlds and the detestable cat, the abominable cat, the cat who one day would lay waste the Homeland world itself, after the Death-ferried tattered man had come down to Harvest, the Landgrave who would mend Ms. Avid’s heart at such cost.

* * *

While the Lords and Ladies of the World sustained a complacent belief in their own superlative knowledge and power, they had not foreseen Daisy’s destiny. His label name was given him by their unwatched machines, which made slips of this kind only one time in ten billion—and yet, when those errors did occur, a blight roared down, nearly always, like a curse upon their World.

Later, the poets singsonged it up:

Here is the caique Death rowed in the morn,
That ferried the man all tattered and torn,
Who kissed the maiden all foresworn,
Who engendered the cat with the crumpled horn,
The detestable cat,
The abominable cat,
That tore down the Worlds the Lords built.

Some of the ditty has it right, but some is spiteful or misleading gossip. No permanent harm ever came to Daisy’s manly horn; afterward, he sired litter upon litter of bold war cats who took his patronymic haughtily, spitting in the eye of the world. (Not of the Homeland World; that was gone and done, so sorry.) It was not truly Death that fetched the frozen man, Landgrave Ullimus Wong, to the Harvest planet, where he met and wooed Ms. Avid (the gravid Landgravine, as history would dub her), that wronged woman cruelly betrayed not once but thrice.

Wong met
Wrong;
They made it
Right,

as the cats now howl in their own jamborees.

Daisy’s siblings, his brothers in arms from the litter fathered by Courageous upon their dam, Precious Blue Silk, were fighters all: ruined Boundless Courage, first born of the litter, and Invincible, dark-pelted Dominant, sturdy Renown, Defiant, Resolution, and Triumphant. His own fate was sealed in the twist of deoxyribonucleic acid that spelled his demeaning name. A word may be altered, taken back, guarded behind shuttered lips, masked; a genome was forever, inviolate, or mere anarchy might be loosed upon the Worlds.

As it was, even so.

* * *

“This Landgrave, is he handsome?” asked Summery idly. Flaming virga streamers of high cirrus caught the setting sun and their ice burned the sky.

“And besides, what *is* a Landgrave?” Autumn was pettish. She could consult the Know but found it

beneath her dignity. Ms. Falls was a most particular augmented cat, a professional of disdain. She preened her gleaming whiskers, fire-tinted from the sky.

“A human of high degree,” Spring informed her. She had investigated the matter. “You should learn all this, if you mean to escape our confinement and find a suitable mate in the stars.” It was said of Spring Healing that she knew all the songs of all the heartsick greeting programs men and women sent each other on days and nights of special ardent, amorous import. Sitting by a bay window in their high tower, she looked in the opposite direction from her sister Summery, across fields of produce brazed in the late afternoon glow, and hummed, then sang one of her own:

Oh my darling, oh his darling,
Oh your darling, Healing Spring!
All is lost and gone forever
Nothing lingers, Missy Spring.

Light she was and late he found her,
And her toes were clad in fur,
Healing boxes, curing poxes,
All too late for Glory, her.

“A Landgrave,” Winter Kills told them, gravely, “governs in his own right under the sway of a Lord Emperor. But the Lords and Ladies of the Worlds do not admit the authority of an Emperor above them, nor of a Count, and certainly no Landgraf. And the Harvest planet is never his landgraviate, this jumped-up imposter, whatever patents of nobility he might brandish. Should he do so,” she added, fanning her pale, pale face with a waved hand, claws tucked away within gold thimble gloves, “and I confess to having no familiarity at all with this, nor any considerable interest in pursuing the matter. I am hungry. It is time to dine.”

None of them mentioned the abomination of their eldest brother’s gelding.

Nobody knew what to make of it, nor of the detestable Daisy, who had withdrawn and was not to be found.

But they were all frightened. And these were not timid mausers.

* * *

Here is why Gloriana did what she did, poor angel.

She was deserted by her mother, Grace Desdemona Merribelle Avid, the loveliest human woman in all the Worlds, dark beauty manifest. To her admirers, Grace Avid was fondly addressed as “Glorious Desdemona” with the stress on the second syllable, not the penultimate: Des-DEM-uh-nuh. And here is the full measure of Desdemona’s desertion of her only daughter: Gloriana was not abandoned instantly, at birth, in the crib, when a mercy of swift forgetfulness might have been balm to ease all but the most abstract pangs and longings of infancy. No, her glorious mother, for whose famous beauty she was named, whose beauty she inherited, whom she idolized and loved with all her strong young heart, fled Harvest when Gloriana Avid was five years old, most vulnerable to the wrenching pangs of loss and abandonment.

That was the first of three unforgivable betrayals.

Finally Death, as legend has it, long afterward brought the chance (the inevitability, romantics and cynics alike would suppose) of a fourth great and heart-killing betrayal.

Death brought the time-locked tattered Landgrave Ullimus Wong in his box of ice, fetched him down from the dark empty places that cup all the worlds and their stars.

“Death,” they say—it is a misnomer, and a cruel one; I protest it.

I’m Death.

* * *

All mothers remove themselves eventually from their children.

All children find it necessary to cast off the protective and stifling concern of their parents.

It was not Desdemona’s withdrawal that damaged her daughter’s trust, but its abruptness, its blindly selfish disregard.

Mothers die, sometimes, and their children mourn, holding to the mystery of death as a fate imposed, unavoidable, its consequences unintended. Grace Desdemona Merribelle Avid failed to die; she went up into the dark that cups the worlds and entered her own brilliant light, her glory, emoting fantasies into the minds of hundreds of billions who joined her, *became* her, in the stages of imagination.

So she was gone, yet she was everywhere, inescapable, the name upon everyone’s lips. How bitter. The old people of the Homeland world had a name even for this, as they did for almost everything: *Mommie Dearest*.

But put it aside as a dissonant dominant note droning, throbbing, behind Gloriana Avid’s becoming. No more than that, if no less.

Mausers, too, abandon their litters, so it was not the absence of Precious Blue Silk, when she, in her turn, had gone from Harvest, that bent the detestable cat to his abominable path. After all, his staunch male siblings suffered no lasting angstful trauma in the departure of their dam. The lovely surviving females with their seasonal names went on unshaken, unbroken, having learned long before her departure the elements of right cat behavior.

Some claim to detect a common element here, of maternal treachery in human and mouser; to the contrary it is held, by the learned, who know only what they have been taught, as mere coincidence, perhaps contributory in small degree, perhaps a random skew.

What is beyond doubt is the second wounding done to motherless Glory—by the strutting biologist Bander Zonin, who caressed her delicate left foot with the most ardent promises, then tore flesh from bone and pilfered her world. It is enough to make Death smile, or grimace.

* * *

I was named Death by the ignorant and envious, because I cheated finality for my master, the Landgrave. For nearly a thousand years, by the calendar of the Homeland world, I voyaged the galaxy by slipstream beside his frozen person, waiting for the knowledge to arise on some world that would heal and then revive him. Doing it the other way around would kill him stone dead, and that was the last thing I wished to see on my watch.

So naming me by the fatal affliction I had striven so many centuries to forestall is inevitable, given the attraction to human minds of opposites, contraries, inversions.

Death, then, brought the Landgrave Ullimus Wong down the ladder from the black skies into the

light-shot morning atmosphere of the Harvest world, wrapped in substances colder than ice, his frigid mind trickling with thoughts. He was a fool for honor, and had been tattered and torn in its quest, his very cells swollen and choked with sinister poisons from his terminal duel.

My master Wong was the last victim of those molecular machines loosed to corrupt the minds and flesh of humans in the galaxy, before his action obliterated them to the last atom and they were declared Wicked, listed, alongside the Mind Machines, at the head of Forbidden Technik. His noble deed broke the power of the small murderous machines, at terrible cost to himself. That made him a laughing-stock to some and a martyr to many more. But that is another tale, one everyone knows.

As the old, old realm perished in the moment of its victory, his doomed Seigneur placed him in my caique, at the very edge of death, laden with immobilized molecular machines fought to a standstill even in his own flesh, and sent us aloft, fleeing through the slipstream in search of recovery that might never be found.

When word of the second betrayal of Gloriana Avid spread across the skies, a rumor circulating outward in whispers, riding the coattails of the gossip that always attended her luminous mother, I seized and correlated the data. Those rumors had eddied for decades before they reached me. Decades rose and fell like fashion, like the hot sun of Harvest upon its lush world's horizon, until word came of the third betrayal, and then decades more.

Riding the slipstream is no easy task.

To go from *here* to *there*, wherever *here* is or *there*, takes an instant too brief to measure. Calibrating the currents in the quantum tides, though . . . ah, a special gift is required, and good fortune. Once, tall ships of the Homeland ocean world set out in hopes of a favorable wind, but languished, often as not, in doldrums, paralyzed, crew starved and gaunt, perishing of thirst surrounded by endless water, deranged by heat and pointlessness. It is that way also, too often, in the slipstream.

Finally I brought our vessel to the station above the equator of the fertile world, coupled us to the ladder, and brought down my charge to the surface.

Where we found cats waiting. (All but one.)

Fearsome mausers.

And the mad lady Glory, with her ruined limb, her tattered heart, her crumpled, longing mind.

* * *

Seventeen, she had been, with a perfect complexion eggplant-dark, teeth radiant in the white hot light, a dance quivering inside her, modesty-constrained arms eager to fling themselves wide, to embrace whichever prince destiny had deemed fit for her consort. Yet she was racked in the night, and during the heavy downpours that fecundated the crops, with an anxiety deep as her bones. No child abandoned so early, and so late, is ever free of dread. I am not worthy, she thought to herself, pulling the brocaded pillow over her head in the night. They will all leave me. I am not to be loved.

But those were night terrors. In the daylight she trod out in the grace and beauty gifted from her mother's genes, and with the authority learned from her father's governing hand upon the tiller of the Harvest planet.

Thrillingly, the biologist Bander Zonin came to her through the difficulties of the slipstream, with his suit and soon enough his proposal. William, Avid *pere*, looked well enough upon the match. He needed

brains as rigorous, brilliant and dedicated as this man's. A garden world is not just scattered into existence with a handful of unruly seed sown into loam. Everything is prepared for generations. So it had been with the Harvest world; so it was now. All things were propitious: the worm-turned soil, deep and dark and heavy with life, the air thrilling with the very breath of vegetable life, the star above with its vital spectrum, as if designed for that function by a supernal Hand. (None gave credence to such superstitions, except those few who fancied an elder race had passed, sowing the galaxy itself with life and the requisites of life. It is possible; it has never been disproved. Still, the conjecture led nowhere, except into sectarian wars of the most extreme uselessness and brutality, and the notion went into eclipse.) Meanwhile, the sun of Harvest poured out its rich light, and the crops flourished madly, gladly.

There was one secret ingredient: the life-enhancing gift of Gloriana Avid, and of her mother Glory before her, and of thirty generations of glorious women shaped for that singular task.

Something in her hidden recipe breathed forth hidden essences. The plants of the world bowed to her passing. She was gravid with vegetable life. The touch of her hand on a leaf made it flood with purple life. She walked in the cool of the morning in fields humming with bees and trailed her fingers in the sticky silks, touching lightly the tassels. Maize seemed to erupt from the erect stems, kernel-choked cobs golden amid the purple photo-optimized leaves.

"What is it exactly that you do, my pretty?" asked Bander Zonin. His handsome, serious, sly face came close to hers, nuzzled with his rusty, wiry, itchy beard. "You are a goddess to this world, Gloriana. You are Ceres. You are Cybele, Arianrhod, Pi-Hsia-Yuan-Chun, Tlazolteotl. You are glorious! Darling, kiss me!"

She knew those fertility goddess names, had learned them from childhood. With a certain lofty smugness she accepted their implications. There was no complacency at all in her response to Zonin's declarations of love. Gloriana, the beautiful child, melted. Her heart opened like a flower. She sighed, she came near to fainting in his arms.

Beneath a vast shading tree, hung with long deep green languid leaves, Bander Zonin led her to an ornamental pond bright with sparkles and small leaping fish.

"We won't need our shoes," he said.

Taking her hand, he led them wading through water lilies, then laved the mud from her toes at the grassy edge of the pond, and dried her delicate dark feet with his shirt. She sighed, and leaned against his hairy breast, allowed him to tuck her naked feet upon his lap. He shifted, and after a time, bent and kissed, and caressed them. A tremor passed through her loins, upward to her belly and her heart. For an instant the world shook and went away, and returned with a wild brightness she had never known.

"Make love to me," she told him urgently.

Bander Zonin regarded her with amusement. "My dear, there is nothing I'd rather do. But we must wait. We must deny ourselves a little longer. Your

father—"

"Oh, bother my father," cried Gloriana, and smothered his mouth with kisses, despite the bristles. After a moment she drew back. "You do not love me."

"How can you say such a thing? Darling, you are the soul of my soul, light of my life. I respond to your lightest touch as the gardens do when you walk among them, trailing your fingers in the silks." He drew back, offered her a bland glance. "And how do you *do* that, my sweetest girl? What is the secret of your

bond with this bounty, this cornucopia.”

“That’s boring *business*.” Gloriana pouted, rose, slipped on her sandals, ran away into the sunlight. “Last one to the gazebo is a moldy peach!”

He ran in pursuit, shirt folded in one hand, careful to lose, breathing hard in anticipation.

* * *

You know the next part of the story, if you retain any knowledge at all of the Old Homeland world. Some call it truth, some say mere legend. I will tell it quickly, then, so we might move on:

Her father, it is said, held a magnificent ball for her engagement to be wed.

Human people came to his great house from all the reaches of Harvest, and many more rode down the sky ladder from the star worlds beyond in the deep blackness.

They gathered, glittering with jewels, bright or sable their gowns and jackets, sweet-smelling. Three Lords and Ladies were in attendance, majestic, dour, and satisfied.

Augmented creatures stood guard, or fetched and carried. Gray people scurried back and forth, taking cloaks, passing out crystal globes of fine vintage from the vineyards. Crisp bird flesh lay on plates, and incomparable corn or wheat breads smoking from the oven, and fruits, vegetables, fish charred in their scales, winking up with glazed eye, and their roe piled high on silver bowls.

In they came, borne to the great house in cunning vegetable carriages shaped by the witchy DNA of the growers of Harvest, drawn by prancing giant mousers and attended by their gray augmented cousins.

You know all this.

How, tender, she came down the high, broad staircase in a soft glow fixed upon her, sharp-boned in her youth, midnight hair piled about her aubergine features, eyes alive with hope and expectation.

How the great, vile biologist Bander Zonin met her at the foot of the staircase, bent over her hand, knelt, gestured once to a mouseman bearing a deep salver. He lifted her small right foot from the flagged floor, to the amazed gasps of the company, and, as music swelled from the orchestra, removed her pretty shoe, took a beautiful fur boot from the salver, and slipped it up her toes, beyond the sweetly curved sole of her foot, pulled it past her ankles, let it fasten itself at her calf. Gloriana drew in her breath, and pressed her hands to her cheeks. The living booty was white as snow, and splashed in an eye-teasing pattern of blood-red markings.

It was a fabulously expensive gift. She settled her weight into its ineffable comfort.

Bander Zonin slipped away her left shoe, drew up the second Ioconian wolf-fur boot past her achingly lovely ankle. It closed upon her lower leg.

Applause and cries of admiration. The orchestra burst up with the first waltz of the evening.

The biologist bowed again to his betrothed, and took her hand.

“May I have the honor?”

They floated to the center of the ballroom. There they spun, weightless, she a bird with the borrowed feet of a hunting beast, he a beast, a male hunting, a wolf, a fox, a thief.

The floor filled with men and women smiling, taking their measures. Music swooped, cantered.

Nobody heard her shriek, her scream, her pitiful cry—not for a moment. And then everyone heard it.

Nobody who heard her scream would ever forget it.

She tumbled slowly, it seemed. He released her waist, her hand. Gloriana fell with a crash, clutching her left foot.

The blood-splashed ivory fur burst scarlet with real blood.

She screamed and screamed.

And Bander Zonin tore off the boot, tearing away, it seemed to the aghast onlookers, the whole of her perfect heel, half the toes of her foot. He stared, apparently in horror, at his gift. He sagged. Mouse persons rushed to the aid of their mistress. Mausers roared in confusion. People rushed to Gloriana's aid. In the crush, the rush, Zonin vanished.

"Stop that foul son of a bitch!" roared anguished, incredulous, broken-hearted William Avid, Master of Harvest, taking up his traumatized daughter in his arms. "To the orbital ladder, mausers!"

Within hours, as Glory Avid lay mute in a hospital shell, everyone knew that the brute had escaped. He had done the unthinkable, twice. First he had pillaged and raped the witchy flesh of the first daughter of Harvest planet. Then he had flung himself and his grisly, fabulously lucrative prize up and out and into the black, strapped down against gravity inside a spacecraft from the old imperium. Nobody knew such things existed still. Their ignorance was his salvation, his escape.

Within a year, certain other worlds began to bear unwontedly lavish fruit and crops, under suns not quite as hard and hot as Harvest's but fecundated by the old hidden secret of the flesh of the women who had ruled and enriched Harvest for thirty-two generations.

When she recovered her senses, pain quenched, Gloriana Avid remained mute for fifteen bitter years, limping on her ruined foot, refusing regrowth and reshaping.

Then she spoke. "I will die a virgin," she said, finally. Her voice creaked with disuse. "I will never look at another man."

Nor did she—until the artist Kabaka Buganda came to the cheated world, the fated world, the place from whence one day would rise Daisy, the detestable cat, to spread that spoiled world's fear and terror across the galaxy.

* * *

Daisy went to the fastness of the four season ladies, his sisters, rapped upon the oak door. A mouse maid answered, looked at him with disapproval, tutted barely audibly, led him into a cool wood-paneled parlor. At her leisure, wearing a belled anklet that tinkled musically, Summery Justice strolled down the stairs, flirting her tail, flick, flick.

He stood straight, slender, fierce-eyed. His vibrissae shone pale in the muted illumination of the parlor, testing and tasting the slightest vibration in the air.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Daisy?"

"Our brother Boundless Courage is dead," he said shortly. "Dead of his wound. I present myself as

senior sibling.”

She sank onto a narrow, straight-backed, armless, striped gold-cushioned chair, gestured him to do likewise. Once, a claim so bold, so absurd, would have earned a snigger. No longer. Was Summery Justice afraid of this outsider, this near-pariah, this overlooked rival for leadership of her clan? Would you be? Her voice, though, held no quaver as she asked:

“Do you mean us harm, your sisters?”

He tightened his lips. “I mean harm only to those who obstruct the path.”

Now she did shiver, a little. “What path is that, Mr. Daisy?”

“The path to the destiny of mausers. The glory road.”

“I see. May I call my sisters together? I believe we should discuss this prospect.”

A deep growl rose up within his breast. “Call them, yes. The hour is near. A Class Four superluminal personal carrier approaches our world, a man who might advance my plans or thwart me, if he can. Thwart us all, we mausers.”

Bewildered, Summery cried, “A man? Oh, not another man! Is there to be no end to this?”

Daisy, the detestable cat, moved his gloved hand through a short, dismissive arc.

“He is frozen. He lives, attended by Death.”

“Wonderful,” said Summery Justice, with asperity. “Just the kind of news we were hoping for, this season.” She rose and made to leave the room, her back turned rudely. Even fear can be trumped by indignation.

“Come back here,” he commanded in a frightful tone.

She paused. “Go to hell, monstrous girl-named cat.” In a fit of mad bravado, she thrust up one finger, two clenched up on either side, wiggled it, and gnawed on it with her sharp teeth.

He pounced in one fast leap, seized her at the root of her tail, a most obscene hold, and spun her around. Summery Justice lost her cat balance, fell bruisingly to the floor, yowling.

“You will respect me,” said the detestable cat. “Oh yes, I think you will.”

They sprang at each other, aroused, snarling.

* * *

A great curved frame had hung upon his back when he came down the ladder out of the slipstream. The artist Kabaka Buganda had been engaged to sing a lament for the passing of William Avid, Master of Harvest planet, who lay naked in his death, shrunken in his age, chilled for the moment against rot by circulating gelid vapors across his bier of state. In his own world Kabaka Buganda was regarded by some as a king, by many as a poet, a lover, a lovable scoundrel. Gloriana, in her grief and loss, saw a man mountain wrapped in the pelt of a wild animal (lion? tiger? cheetah?—she didn’t know, no wild cats roamed Harvest), masculine, powerful. He placed his hands, against tradition, familiarly upon her face, and cupped her cheeks.

“We have never met, Missy Avid, and I grieve that this should be the occasion. He was a good man,

your father. I will sing for him.”

Corded muscle rippled under the dark, dark skin of his bare arms, his unencumbered legs, his four-square feet with their pale nails thick and curved and heavy as the horns of a bull. He was a bull, it seemed to her. He stood over her like a cloud filled with the rain waters of life. The crust of furious loathing and mistrust of all men that had locked her heart softened at his candid gaze, his admiration, his ownership.

“Then you must sit for me,” he instructed her.

“Sit?” She shook her head. “Sit?” Did this man from the big dark think he might command her like a dog, a cur? The endless aching in her wounded foot went away from her. Perhaps that was what she wished.

“For your portrait.” He threw back his large shaven head and laughed a gusty roar of laughter. “I will surround you with the largesse of this garden world, Missy. I will catch the image of your soul within the embrace of a banana tree, lush and ripe with green leaves vast as the ears of the fabled elephant, with hands of bright yellow bananas to embrace you.” He stepped back. The funereal company stood shocked at his gusto, his half-nudity beside the deathly nakedness of William Avid, his penetrating presence. Dignitaries hesitated, crept forward, as if into a shadow, bowed to the dead prince of Harvest, and scuttled away.

Kabaka Buganda never released Gloriana’s eyes. He took the great lyre from his back, found strings in the leather pouch at his waist, strung the lyre as if he were a warrior returned from voyages weary past imagining, stringing a bow too large for mortal man to bend—but this was no weapon of battle. His thumb caressed the taut strings, finally, and a deep melodious note sprang out through the hall. His fingers tuned the notes, while he held her gaze, and she stood trapped and melting, the ache in her broken foot thrilling in a kind of agony of hope. He lifted his head and sang. These were the *wer lyel*, the funeral dirges of his own world. His bare feet struck the floor, set them booming like a drum.

* * *

To her dizzy mind, days passed like minutes. He took her cantering on horseback across stubbled fields in fallow, attended by mounted mauser warriors. Rather, she invited him, but it did not seem so; he was masterly, charming, he took control without seeming to do so, he drew her up from the sour pit of despair in which she had been content to rest since her abandonment and mutilation.

“Stand, now. I know it hurts. Good. Feel the pain in your stance, let it speak through your body. Remove your garment, child.” She was thirty years old and more. “Go on. We are alone. Yes, yes, aside from these delicious animal people of yours. Good girl, you are lovely. Ah, the light.” His machines struck at the marble slab brought him from a quarry halfway across the world. His hands moved, he sang, the machines bit into stone, broke it open, caressed it, smoothed it like silky flesh. Dust flooded the clear air, made her cough. He ignored the dust. “Now, bend forward. Let your breasts fall freely. Beautiful!” The shape he was carving did not look, to her grit-reddened eye, much like a portrait. He stood back. “It’s done,” he said. “Let us eat and drink.” And left the room.

She found him outside under the radiant sun, washing himself in a rainbowed haze of spray. He was naked, and vast, a bull, an elephant, a trumpeting man. Laughing, she threw off the last of her garments and joined him recklessly, slapping at the runnels of bright water, stamping her good foot and her wounded foot in the mud they made.

They made love like a goddess of fertility welcoming home her sire from the wars.

Cats bore them, muddy feet and all, to the refreshment of an indoor pool, and washed the pungent juices

from their dark skins, night-dark in bright day under the stained glass ceiling. Glory was delirious. Without a thought, she called her mauser ladies to attend them. They stood naked, and the lovely cat females slithered about them with towels and warm air blowers and curried their hair.

One of the cat ladies, the most beautiful, the most languid, was Precious Blue Silk.

Glory saw, from the corner of one eye, the artist raise his hand, stroke lightly the soft pad above Silk's upper lip, trace the gleaming cat-whiskers, her vibrissae.

The air shrilled without sound.

In the night, after the company had dined, the artist brought his lyre forth and sang them a song of the betrothal in childhood of the chieftain's daughter to whichever man could answer a riddle no other might hazard. That man Kakookolo was ugly as a beast, a burned man, a bull man, an elephant man.

Kakookolo, kwata emminiyo!

Gloriana Avid's eyes shone to hear it, understanding none of the Bugandan verses, hearing a translation muttered by a lovely cat person bent to her ear. The cat person was Precious Blue Silk. How did she know these words?

Kakookolo, come now, take up your lyre!

The monstrous man asked for the chieftain's daughter's hand; under her filial obligation, she gave it, weeping.

Ndeetera maama ndeetera, nviiri Bulange ndeetera
maaso malungi ndeetera
Kyi maama kyi nnyabo, gyangu eno ngoyimba,
kyi maama kyi nnyabo, gyangu eno ngodigida.

Fingers struck the lyre strings, made them boom. Gloriana jumped, a little.

Bring it to me, beautiful one.
One who goes with beauty doesn't wait
I am going away with the beautiful one,
Yes, now I am with my own.

And Kakookolo's hideous mask fell away. He was handsome, a man among men. The villagers, in the song, cried out their blessings:

Come, dear one, come, be happy.
Come, dear one, come singing.

Gloriana sighed.

Her cat ladies led her, at last, to her chaste bed, tucked her in, hummed her, as they did every night, to sleep.

And in the morning Kabaka Buganda was gone from the great house of the Avids of Harvest world, gone into the dark upwardness of the stars, and Precious Blue Silk with him.

* * *

The great house fell into ruin.

Gloriana Avid did her duty to the crops, the plantations, face twisted with boredom, fingers dragging themselves across male and female organs of the waiting plant life, which blossomed and flourished, mocking her with this vegetable unconcern. The formal gardens of the house she let fall into wildness. Here she had trod with the false biologist in the muddy edge of a pond alive with silvery fish; it grew rank, and the fish died. There she had galloped with the false artist, hair flying free in the breeze of their going, and now the stubble sagged and stank, and weeds filled those fields.

And years passed.

Decades passed as she dragged her broken foot, like a penance, a mortification, in filmy garments of white and gray, clean and sweet-odored, placed by her bed each morning by her mousy staff. Until the Landgrave's ship's intelligence heard rumor of her life-gift, the secret ancient codons embedded in her flesh.

If there are miracles, she was a miracle.

I am Death. I am his ship, the Landgrave Ullimus Wong's emergency and long-term medical care, his music singer in his icy sleep. For a thousand years, I have been his lunky flunky, his drunk boat, his Class Four superluminal personal carrier. I am a Mind Machine, and hence forbidden—although I am the least of that number, and of no danger to anyone. Who was it brought down ruin upon the galaxy? Anybody might have done it, and many had tried. In fact, as we know, it was the detestable cat.

Death is not to blame for death.

I say that I heard a rumor. That is not the precise truth. I was sent an oblique message, dedicated quite brilliantly to catching my attention and my interest, a viral message scattered upon the slipstream. A message of sly invitation to the Harvest world, sent by Daisy, the abominable mauser.

* * *

Death brought down the Landgrave inside a vertically-oriented adiabatic tube. The frozen man was suspended upside down in the shielded pod, its shell washed by cooling gases, monitored by a hundred subtle instruments. The mind of Ullimus Wong crept in a petty pace, sluggish electronic currents moving in the superconductive tissues of his all-but-arrested brain.

At debarkation port, at the foot of the diamond ladder, his pod was met by a fierce mauser with new scars partly healed visible on his face. The mauser was attended by two sinuous lady cats and four haughty males.

"I am Daisy," he told the port Director. He presented documents of authority. "I am instructed to take the Landgrave Wong to Madame Avid."

All the documents seemed in order, electronic or sealed parchment. Something about this exchange made the Director uneasy, but he allowed the frozen man, and the Death that saw to his well-being, free exeunt to the lifting craft waiting at the dock.

In the air, humming across fields alive with purple and gold, Daisy the mauser said, "You are a machine. What is your name?"

"I am Harriet," Death said.

"Defrost and decant your master," the cat told me. "The timing will be delicate and exact." He added several cryptic sentences I understood.

“Confirmed. You were the source of the viral invitation,” I said. “If any harm befalls the Landgrave, you will die instantly.” For the first time in nearly a millennium, I began to unlock the pod’s cryonic barriers. “Set down this craft in an empty field,” I said, “and evacuate all life-forms. I will inform you when it is safe to return.”

Keen, those harsh blue eyes did not blink.

“Make it so,” he told the pilot, another of the frightful cats.

From a safe distance, the mausers watched gases billow from the open door of the lifting craft. Fog huffed into the sparkling air. Ice crusted the edges of the doorway. The cats settled, alert, bonelessly relaxed yet ready to spring to attention.

Death reversed death, or its simulation. The Landgrave was not literally frozen; no ice crystals grated against the tender membranes of his abused cells. His flesh was vitrified, made glassy, cooled. Now the process of arrest reversed, step by cautious step.

It took five fearful hours. At their conclusion, the heart of Landgrave Wong shuddered into beating, the sluggish fluids of his body flowed, his swollen lungs heaved and gasped. Without my ministrations, he would have screamed and died upon the instant. I kept his pain to a minimum, and his brain soothed, relaxed, nearly torpid.

He half-opened his eyes, under the age-yellowed canister that held him isolated from the world, and the world safe from him.

“Harriet?”

“I’m here, Ullimus.”

“We are on Harvest?”

“Landed and awaiting your instructions.” His instructions had long since been announced; this was a courtesy. He knew it. His lips moved in a smile.

“Thank you, Harriet. I expect to die, finally. Who knows, perhaps death will come as a blessed relief?” But he did not truly believe that. He held hope within him like a small flame.

“Come, cats,” I cried through a focused speaker system to the waiting mausers, motionless in the afternoon sunlight. “Take us the rest of the way to your mistress.”

* * *

“He doesn’t look very well,” said Gloriana Avid disdainfully. She peered down into the yellowed shell. “He looks disgusting. Has he been sick?”

“Hello, Ms. Avid,” the Landgrave said, and his voice was faint and thready but amplified by the speakers. “I apologize for my appearance.”

She jumped, even with her bad foot.

“Can he hear me?”

“He hears you, Madame,” said Daisy, who stood beside the horizontal pod covered from toes to pointed ears in a containment garment. “He has been ill. He has been sicker than anyone who has not yet died.”

Glory drew back fastidiously. "I hope it's not catching."

A grating, coughing laugh came from the speakers. "Oh, my dear, I rather fear it is. It is more catching than anything you have ever heard of. But I hope . . ." His voice fell away. After a moment, as his eyes filled with tears, he said, "I hope you might have the cure for what ails me."

"I? I? What is this nonsense? Am I a mountebank, a country witch? I assure you, sirrah, I have no medical training. Look, I think you'd better go back where you came from. What are you doing here, anyway?" She was pettish, and her voice grated nearly as raspily as the Landgrave's. "I didn't order you."

"Madam," said the fierce cat, Daisy, "I invited Ullimus Wong here to Harvest for your mutual benefit."

I watched, agog. He was a person, but a cat. What right had a cat to speak thus to one like Glory Avid, queen of Harvest? She took another step back.

"*You* invited him? I don't know you, sir. What's your name? Oh, wait, you're the mauser with the ludicrous—" When she broke off, I knew that the cat must have given her the look that within a few years would electrify and shake the whole galaxy. Many would bow down before it, trembling; others would run in the streets, weeping with maddened emotion, tearing at their clothes, fouling themselves publicly in fits of overwrought emotion. "You're Daisy."

The cat nodded curtly. To an assistant, also wrapped in molecular sheathing, he said, "Bring in the mud."

Standing carefully back against a wall, the human nurse shrieked, "*Mud?*"

A construction lifter came through the triple doors, settled beside the adiabatic pod. It sloshed, heavily.

"Open the pod door, Harriet," Daisy ordered me. What could I do? The titanium and diamondoid shell split down its central seam and opened like a rusty flower.

Ullimus Wong lay blinking, naked, entubed, in all his ghastly affliction. I withdrew his tubes, patted the entry points with antibiotic unguents, sealed them.

Faintly, through her covered mouth, Glory said, "Now that's *not nice*."

"Hose in the loam," Daisy said calmly.

I watched in disbelief. I had expected the unexpected, the far-fetched, the newly-contrived, but not this.

A metal snout eased forth from the industrial lifter, found the cavity within the pod, settled gently inches from the Landgrave's poor pustular feet. With a coughing chug, mud sloshed into the pod.

"You'll drown him!" shrieked the nurse, and flung herself at the hose. A cat lady caught her effortlessly, swung her aside, pinned her to the wall.

The rich dark loam, alive with red worms and millions, billions of bacteria, slurped around the Landgrave's near-corpse, covered him in a dark sea to his very chin.

"Enough," said Daisy. "Stop." He stepped close, took a sharp instrument from a pouch in his garment, slashed a foul abscess on Ullimus Wong's right cheek. Yellow pus oozed forth, and a little blood. The mauser scraped the exudant into a vial, capped it, double-sealed it, placed it with extremely care into a containment vessel held for him by his lieutenant. "Remove this to safe storage," he said.

I watched as the cat person carried away, out of the protected space, a sample of the vicious molecular

virus that had infected the Landgrave after it murdered billions of humans in the last, or latest, desperate conflict that blazed through the galaxy. The sample was inactivated, nulled, or he'd have been truly dead a thousand years before—but what once was dead may be sparked again to life. Vide the Landgrave himself, up from the ice. A high-pitched noise came from my speakers. Daisy ignored it.

He crossed the room and found Gloriana Avid, fertility goddess of the world of Harvest, shrunk back but not cowering. She had been betrayed thrice, and knew rejection, knew suffering, but nobody had ever raised a hand against her.

Daisy raised his hand. He did not strike her. Seizing her by the thick black lovely hair above the scruff of her neck, he dragged her to the edge of the mud-filled, mud-caked pod. My Landgrave stared up in terror, choking as mud ran up his cheeks and entered his mouth and nostrils. With one hand, easily, Daisy pulled Glory to the side of the adiabatic pod and with the other he lifted the Landgrave's ruined head, yellow and mold-greenish and warty with his ancient disease.

"Kiss him," the cat said.

Speechless with revulsion, Glory shook her head against his grip, pulled back with all her strength.

"Kiss his lips," said the warrior mauser. "Open his mouth with yours, place your tongue against his, dribble your spittle into his throat."

"Ee-ewww," shrieked Gloriana. "Gross!"

But her face was pressed downward despite her will. The lips of the ill man and the broken woman met, writhed, his sealed against the mud and hers in abject disgust. Holding her tightly by the hair, Daisy pinched her nostrils hard. Finally, gasping for breath, the Landgrave opened his mouth as she, choked, opened hers. The magic of her thirty-two generations of primed proteins entered him with her gasping, runny mucus.

It entered his body like a proud, upright host of warriors mounted on great war steeds, banners lifted, flying and brave, in the dawn light of battle, the warriors crying the name of their cause. It is a strained figure, perhaps, but that is how I saw it, how Death saw the entry of Glory's forces into that field of contest, my master's body. In an endless hour, or day, or month, I watched the forces pitted against each other, tiny machines swarming with their nulled quarter-life, ferocious still, deadly enough to keep him at the edge of oblivion, and raised against them the living molecules of Harvest's goddess plunging against their enemy, sucking away its energy, binding its arms, muting its poisons and smashing its manipulators, gelding its frightful powers of reproduction.

"Enough," I said, finally, to the cat person who held her there. Perhaps half a minute had elapsed, or perhaps it was over sooner.

He stood back, released her.

Glory gazed upon the hot, healing face of my master. Already, at darting molecular speeds, the defanged poisons swept away into his blood stream for disposal. The lumps and weals of his face and forehead visibly subsided, paling. It would be days, perhaps longer, before his flesh recovered its beauty, but the lineaments were already written against the dark mud streaking his cheeks. He struggled to raise himself against the weight of the loam of Harvest, and I adjusted the surface, lifting him.

Out of some access of hysterical memory, Glory sighed, watched the ugly mask fall away, and murmured in a daze:

“Kyi maama kyi nnyabo, gyangu eno ngoyimba, kyi maama kyi nnyabo, gyangu eno ngodigida.”

Without a glance over her shoulder at the taut, watching cats, she raised her floating white and gray skirts and clambered up onto the opened pod. She placed first her gnawed foot, with its absent heel and toes, into the thick mud, and then the other, whole foot, sliding forward on her behind to trap the Landgrave’s lower body between her strong thighs, and fell upon his breast.

The mad thing began to laugh, a joyous, open laugh, and she lifted herself, slathered with mud, and kissed him this time for real, slathering his healing mouth with sweet kisses.

I saw, then, that she was not mad. No longer mad.

The Landgrave oofed.

“Pardon me, madam, but I’m having a little trouble breathing.”

She giggled, drew back, helped him sit up. “That better?”

“Yes, thank you. We haven’t been introduced. I am Ullimus Wong, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

He smiled as he said it, and his smile, despite his remaining welts, was dazzling.

“Oh yes, oh yes,” she said to him. She reached under the mud, scratched at her hidden limb. “That *stings* .” She frowned. “I am Gloriana Avid, and my mother is Grace Desdemona Merribelle Avid. You’ve probably heard of her.”

Ullimus shook his head, and drying mud flew about the room.

“I haven’t been keeping up with court affairs,” he said. “Sorry. As you see—”

“We’ve got to get you out of this horrid mess and into a bath,” she said, thinking sensibly at last, for the first time in decades. She was unspeakably lovely, radiant with her vegetable life. “Here, somebody, give me a hand.”

Daisy the mauser stepped forward, loaned her his wiry strong arm as she clambered down from the mud. She took a step on her whole right foot, and another on her nearly-whole left foot.

“Oh dear god,” she cried, or whimpered. “Look what I’ve done now.”

Probably she fainted. I was not watching her or the commotion in the room. I was attending to my healed master, the Landgrave.

* * *

Everyone knows what happened next. Was Death to blame? I accept no culpability.

“That cat of yours is making waves,” the Landgrave said one fine morning to the Landgravine. They sat outdoors under tall leafy shade, careful of Ullimus Wong’s pale, tender, vulnerable skin. He was plugged into a news circuit bearing word through the slipstream from far and wide in delayed time and extended space.

“The mauser Daisy?” Glory ate a triangle of marmalade on crisp mango, and the pouring light split into rays of reddy yellow and sharp orange. “Bof!” Fingers free, mouth full, she let her hands part in dismissal, her slender shoulders shrugging. “We owe him for your life, dear heart, and for bringing us together, and

that is a very great deal. But I cannot forgive his delinquency.”

The detestable cat had abandoned Harvest more than a year earlier, taking with him all of his kind save three weary and elderly house mausers and those feline garden patrollers so hardened into their roles that they could not, would not take a chance on what Daisy called, perhaps with some irony, the glory road. Glory saw no glory in it, merely ingratitude and faithlessness.

“Wherever he goes, wars die down,” said astonished Ullimus Wong, monitoring the news. “Conflicts fade into amicable, tough-minded negotiations. Old enemies embrace, however reluctantly. I have to tell you, I still don’t know who all these people are or their names—”

“Use your Know,” she told him. “You really are an old fuddy-duddy, Ullie, at times.”

If he winced, I was the only one acute enough to perceive it.

“My people have a word for what’s happening,” he told her. And murmured the old, old words:

When there is no desire,
all things are at peace.
If the peace has been shattered,
how can one be content?
One’s foes are not demons,
but beings like oneself.
One does not wish them personal harm.
Nor does one rejoice in victory.
How rejoice in victory
and delight in the slaughter of men?

“Or the slaughter of mausers, neither, I suppose,” Glory said slowly, as thoughtfully as she ever managed. “But my warrior cats lived for strife and contest. That creature Daisy—what a name, what a name!”

“He does not go by that name any longer. Indeed, no.”

“—he came to attention with some barbarity. What was it?” Her eyes lost focus, her hand reached for a pastry. It must be admitted that Gloriana Wong was growing stout, however beautifully. In part it was due to her pregnancy. She was old by the traditions of men and women, but the soil and special codons of her world and herself kept her fresh as a newly picked melon, glowing like dark plum jam. “My god, yes, that was it. He gelded his brother!”

“The monster has turned over a new leaf, then,” the Landgrave informed her, smiling. I heard his heart’s pulse quicken. How he loved her! I understood in the abstract why that might be, but I retained my suspicions.

“There is talk of an uprising on the Homeland world,” he said. “Peace and love. The old temptation, the old intoxication and illusion. Oh, the Lords and Ladies don’t remember how it was, as I do.” For a moment his face fell into a sort of memorious sorrow. I knew what he recalled, for I had been there also—the blood, the fire, the horror, the molecular viral machines of which he was the last living victim and vector.

I made a throat-clearing sound. It startled them both. People tended to forget that I was there.

“May I suggest something for your consideration?”

“Why, Harriet, good morning. Indeed, certainly. You should know there’s no need to stand on

ceremony, my dear.”

A snuffling noise came out of my speakers, I don’t know why. After a moment, I said, “The machines have mutated.”

“Eh? The nanugs? They were immobilized a thousand years ago.”

“But not killed. They are not the kind of thing that can be killed. Landgrave, did you know that people call me Death?”

Gloriana rolled her eyes. He caught it, and smiled gently.

“Yes, Harriet, so I’ve heard. Ignore it, dear machine. People can be silly and thoughtless.”

His kind words did ease my anguish, somehow. I said, “We should have considered the possibility. During the long, long voyage, the dormant, silenced nanugs shifted their chemistry. Their atoms migrated. Their coding changed, atom by spinning atom. They grew intrinsically less . . . vehement.”

Surprise showed in his face. “I see. They mutated and evolved inside my body’s ecology.”

“And now have muted their message. Reversed it, indeed. Not hatred and murder, this year, but love and detachment.”

Gloriana rose, already bored. She touched the swelling in her belly. She was undisputed queen of Harvest world, no longer ruined.

“I don’t care for this conversation, Ullie. Come stroll with me in the park.”

The Landgrave rose also, solicitous. As he departed he said to me, over his shoulder, “I am frightened by this thought, Harriet. Either way, the worlds will not escape extreme change. What flips one way can flip back again. Dear oh dear, this will require some investigation.”

I watched them walk out into the sharp, luminous morning of Harvest, its air fragrant with grasses and fruit. I thought I knew which way things would turn out.

to the memory of
Cordwainer Smith