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Crowscrest was made up of six peaks that fell away sharply, diving five hundred feet down into the green-blue of the placid sea. Atop one of its cliffs sat Jayant Ash, cross-legged, watching the waves roll in. Gulls banked and circled overhead, scanning the water for scraps thrown up by the current. The sea's salty tang bit in Ash's throat, and day gradually ceded the sky to night, the red sky bleeding to death for another day.

Ash always came to the white cliffs to lose himself -- and Nell always laughed at him for doing so. A soldier with the soul of a poet, she called him. She didn't understand that it came with the blood. To her life was simple: the things that had to be done were done, no fuss, no bother. Nell didn't walk with death day after day -- though she frequently reminded Ash that the uncertainty and the endless waiting within death's shadow were no better. Both marked the spirit.

Ash loved her as best he could; they both knew that. But there were times like today when he wished he could be one with the water, a small wave rolling toward the shore, breaking on the rocks and being absorbed again into the anonymity of the sea, only do it again, over and over. Not for the first time, he found himself watching the white caps and wondering about the metaphysical importance of what he was watching: the endless cycle of death and rebirth being played out by even the simplest wave. Did it mirror the cycle of the soul? Were soldiers born again to serve and die and serve and die and serve?

Ash watched the waves and the moonlight's rippling shadow on them. Something was different about this night. The sea was agitated. Restless.

The gulls sensed the tremors first; their squalling grew more urgent, their circling flight more and more erratic as they struggled to ride the rising wind. Ash followed the patterns made by their wings without understanding what he was seeing or what it meant.

A moment later he felt the earth answer the gulls' cries, a violent shiver that seemed to cause the dirt and stone to ripple beneath his feet. It was the most peculiar sensation, a betrayal of the senses that transformed the solidity of the ground into a continuation of the rippling, crashing waves.

Ash scrambled away from the cliff's edge for fear it might buckle so much that it slipped away from the headland and fell beneath the waves. His fear was heightened by the sudden tortured shriek that emerged from the belly of the earth itself. He had heard nothing like it in his life. It was, Jayant Ash thought sickly, as though he was listening to the death rattle of the ground beneath his feet.

Above him the first star fell, trailing a tail of silver in the night sky. Another and another followed, and then more, streaking the sky like the moon's tears of grief for a dying earth. The sight stole his breath away. So bright were the falling stars they transformed dusk to dawn, spreading molten silver from horizon to horizon. It was as though the gods had cut their purses' strings and emptied them out across the heavens.

He staggered back further from the edge, his gaze torn between the roiling sea and the bleeding, star-streaked sky. Whatever was happening in the sky was having an effect on the sea. The waters churned violently, bubbling and frothing as the tidal pull drew it lower and lower.

Another lurch of the earth had Ash on his knees. Disbelieving his eyes, Ash followed the waves; instead of crashing into the shore, they retreated. It was a giant wave rearing up, every bit a match for the shadow of Crowscrest. Ash stared in mute horror as it continued to swell and swell, only to come crashing back to shore, hammering the high cliffs.

Then, with another tortured scream from the earth, something tore free.

The horizon buckled, throwing the sea into turmoil. The water boiled, steam hissing into white wraiths that coiled up to meet the streams of silver as the first seaweed and slime-crusted spire of stone pierced the blue-green waters.

Ash watched in wonder as seven fingers of stone clawed their way out of the depths. Both land and sea trembled as a drowned city was born again beneath the pall of Crowscrest. The spires were twisted, their majesty corroded by the sea. Foam and sea-scum lapped at the cracked and broken stones. Ash remained on his knees, watching the sea part to reveal a causeway of neatly laid octagonal stones wide enough for three men to ride abreast. The causeway ran from the base of Crowscrest to a huge portal with rotten ironwood doors pitted with barnacles.

He didn't dare stand until every spire and every wall had risen. Only then could he see that it was a citadel rather than a city; not that the difference made its return any less miraculous or terrifying. Beneath the spires the seabed rock and the citadel's white stone fused as though the emergent edifice were nothing more than another species of barnacle clinging limpet-like to the jagged rocks.

Several of the spires were twisted around on themselves; sections of others were precariously balanced. Pustules of oil-filled seaweed and clam-like shells pitted the stony facade. The water churned at its base, licking up over the causeway and around the green-slick foundations of the crumbling tower.

Then one by one peculiar blue lights glimmered into existence along the strand of sand and smooth-sided pebbles. Ash watched, but the lights did not move.

Ash was torn between competing impulses; to run toward the thing that had just burst forth from the sea or to run away from it, toward help and people that needed to know what he had witnessed. He had a duty toward them. But he had no blade and no armor. To charge in blindly, ill-equipped to defend himself, was neither wise nor heroic, it was suicide.

However, there was a darkness about the place -- a wrongness -- that put a chill deep in Jayant Ash's heart.

That chill convinced him. A soldier lived and died by his instincts. And those instincts had him making his way slowly down to the beach and toward the strange blue lights. He picked his way carefully down the cliff, skidding and sliding despite his caution, until he reached the bottom.

Closer, the lights were more like nimbus than flame. Hundreds of them lined the sand, each facing the newly-risen citadel. They stood between him and the ruin. He had to walk between them if he hoped to enter. Ash moved up beside the nearest of the lights. Shaped vaguely like a man, of like height and form, it bore no features, nor anything resembling them. He reached out tentatively, touching it with his fingers. A thrill of energy, vibrant and full of life, chased up his arm. He maintained the contact, feeling the warmth emanating from the light's core.

Ash moved from light to light. They were all the same, almost. The energies he felt coming off them varied, but each shared the same warmth and vitality. Though he half expected them to, none moved to stop him as he walked the causeway up to the ironwood gates of the citadel.

The main gates hung drunkenly on corroded hinges. He reached out, placing his palm flat against the wooden door. It felt like stone to the touch, yet the slightest pressure was enough to disturb its balance. The huge door seemed to shiver for a moment, then fell backwards, agonizingly slowly. It crashed to the courtyard's stone floor, raising a cacophony even as the flotsam settled. Cracks splintered through the wood as it came apart at the grain, echoes reverberating up and down the walls of the huge stone gate. For one sickening moment he thought the entire arch was going to collapse, burying him. Without thinking, he braced the base of the arch with his back. But the keystone held.

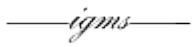
Ash closed his eyes and offered hurried thanks to Mashan the Maker.

As he came away from the stone arch, a voice rang out with sudden and shocking clarity: *Release me*! And for the moment between breaths the imperative burned within him, *release me*. Then the contact with the crumbling stone was broken and it was gone.

The bluish lights edged closer to Ash, like a snare tightening around the citadel, drawn in by the voice still ringing in his ears.

Release me!

Jayant Ash turned tail and ran back toward Kalatha and the Rector's palace, his head spinning with dire thoughts and remarkable visions.



Kalatha, the second of the four port cities, was a monument to the efficacy of need and desire. Merchants plying the Pearl Route were pandered to with bath houses. Fine silks and coarser fabrics adorned the back room's of tailors willing to cut cloth to the purse as well as the figure.

The buildings within the protective city wall, however, could not be considered lavish. Indeed street after street, even in the more affluent areas, saw the same white stone and green weathered shutters battling the noon sun. The facades were sterile and functional, more akin to fortifications than abodes. Only here and there could one find flourishes of personality -- botanical gardens cultivating rare and precious blossoms fighting a losing battle against the fierce heat. Stubborn vines and climbers picked away at the white stones, their occasional bursts of color adding both practical shade and a flamboyant touch.

Only the Avenue of Princesses, where flesh and companionship were available for the right coin, was remarkable for its blossoms. There and only there, flowers of every color remained in bloom throughout the year, sustained by expensive botanical alchemy. The heady fragrances of so many flowers masked the musk of coupling.

Smoking rooms, offices of weight and measure, and actuaries lined the narrow streets leading up to summits where the money liked to play. Commoners went down to the dockside for their amusements.

The hovels around the docks were not only the poorest quarter of the city, they were also the most pungent. Ramshackle shanties cluttered the jetties where the workers needed them, their own seedy industries developing around the floating fish market dockside hussies, alehouses, and smokeries all nestle side by side with the old trades. Leather-skinned fish wives darned the nets, getting one more trawl out of them. Cockles and muscles, flat fish and fragrant fillets lay on the cobbles beside the gathered nets.

There was a convenience to this arrangement, keeping unpleasant aromas away from the more respectable parts of the city -- like the Rector's palace and the temples. It was the best part of a league from Crowscrest to the Rector's palace on Judicar's Hill. Ash ran all the way.

And when he told his story of blue ghosts standing sentinel on the beach, guarding a citadel risen from the waves on a spur of rock, and voices demanding freedom, his swordbrothers laughed at him.

"Too much of Malister's Malt," mocked Levant Galen. Ash and Levant were both Rector's Men, answerable only to Gerant, the Rector's right hand. There were seven Rector's Men serving under Gerant, though the idea of them being the Rector's Men was misleading; in truth they were bonded to his lady.

Levant had his blade, the Kinslayer, across his knee, and was honing it with a whetstone and an oily rag. His mawkish face split into a short-lived grin. "A citadel rose out of the sea? Voices in your head demanding freedom? Do you seriously expect us to swallow that? Pashan's balls, I know you too well to fall for your tall tales, Ash." Levant smoothed the excess oil off the blade's open face. "The more outrageous the lie, the more willingly people will swallow it; isn't that the gospel you preach?"

Levant's words were harsh but fair. Ash had said that, and more than once. But this time -- the irony of the protestation had him bark a sharp laugh -- this time he needed the Rector's Men to believe him.

Levant turned the sword on his knee, working the other side of the blade. Ash had no liking for the Kinslayer, and not merely because of its name. There was something about the blade that set his flesh creeping the only time he had laid a hand upon it.

Few blades were named, but those that were had earned their titles, none more so than the Kinslayer. It was a traitorous blade. If Levant was to be believed, the Kinslayer had claimed the blood of three uncles and no less than seven of their swordbrothers -- and caused who knew how many chapters of grief before that -- before falling into his father's hand. The old man had refused to lift it again after that day: that was his response to the supposed curse. It was said that the owner and the blade were fated, intertwined once the blade bonded to his soul. The stories also said that if a man wielded the sword even once, he would one day use the Kinslayer to kill those closest to him, then fall victim to the blade himself.

Levant's father choose to interpret that to mean that if he never used the blade, he would never die. So he treated the blade reverently, worshipfully, as though by some enchantment it truly could offer the boon of immortality. Instead of wearing it at his hip he had it mounted above the fire pit in the family home.

On the eve of his coming of age, Levant had taken it down from where it rested, claiming it as his birthright. "I will prove the curse a lie once and for all," he told his mother. "I shall wear it in battle and make father proud. He must know, surely, that I would never harm him. That he is safe because there is no curse."

His mother had begged him not to take the sword. There had been no tears, no admonishments, just a heartfelt plea, as though she knew the curse had already wormed its way into her boy, and with him as its instrument it would claim more souls.

With the arrogance of youth, he ignored her.

However, upon discovering the Kinslayer gone from its mount, Levant's father had flown at him in a rage, all reason gone from his brittle frame. He threw himself at his youngest son, tooth and claw. Levant merely tried to defend himself, instinctively raising his hands. His deranged father fell upon the blade -- all the way to the hilt -- and was dead before their lips kissed, so close was he when the life left him.

His father's death had marked Levant, and rather than disproving the curse, it cemented his fear of it. He sincerely believed the Kinslayer earned its name over and over for each wielder, and that one day he would strike down his own swordbrothers, driven mad by the blade that would then be turned on him - just as it had been with his father, his uncles, their swordbrothers, and all those who had ever dared to wield the accursed blade.

Yet he refused to relinquish it, ensnared in the duality of his father's interpretation of the curse. So long as he wielded the blade he believed himself invulnerable, immortal, knowing that until it tasted kins' blood, the blade would protect him. If he never fed it the blood of kin, it would never turn on him.

"But Levant . . ." Ash began. But he didn't know what to say. If he couldn't convince his best friend, how could he hope to sway Gerant?

Release me!

Ash flinched against the sheer forcefulness of the words inside his head.

"Something isn't right, Levant. It's getting stronger. I can't resist it forever."

"Then go find Naru and beg him to unravel your mind. It isn't as though we'd be losing much."

Where Gerant was the Rector's right, Ashrak Naru -- the raveller -- was his left. More sinister by far, practicing hidden arts, Ash had never felt comfortable in the raveller's company.

But Ash did not need to feel comfortable, he needed to be believed, and though Levant was being factitious, Naru was exactly who he needed to talk to.

"Just make sure that damned blade of yours is sharp if you're the one standing next to me when Gerant sends us there," Ash said.

"Stop spouting rubbish," Levant replied, twisting the oily rag into a knot. With a flick of the wrist he snapped it at Ash's legs, snorting, "Giant castles rising up out of the sea . . . Do yourself a favor and don't go trying this one out on Efrem or Raz, they'll have a field day with it."

Ash had no interest in the fish market or the abundant hawkers along the quayside. Women of all shade, shape, and size offered pleasures they swore no man could imagine. Ash walked by, untempted.

Shortly he found the raveller dragging his iron chain through the crowded markets by the floating docks. A big man seemed to be pleading with the raveller or whatever ghosts the Ashrak Naru had flensed from his damaged soul.

Despite the rags binding his blind eyes, Naru turned to face Ash as he ran into the market. Smells assailed from every side, the fragrances of humanity: sweat, cloying perfumes, and bodily fluids. Naru stood in the center of it, head thrown back, drinking it in. The rusted chain

that hung from his left wrist jerked and twisted lightly, blue sparks flowing from the thick vein at his wrist. A Rowan staff bore most of his weight.

Does it please you to stare at my deformity? The raveller's voice rasped inside Ash's skull. *You do it well. Are you really that simple?*

"Come with me, raveller."

I do not answer to your whims, swordsman. Perhaps I am not finished here.

"The dead you so love have left this place, Naru. Your chain no longer dances with their energy."

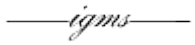
Perhaps you are no fool after all. Yes, the restless dead have left this place, and he, Naru crooked his head toward the man who appeared to be clutching at closed doors, *is alone with the one ghost he would never willingly part with. So, I will come. Lead me where you will; this once I will follow. But know that I am not the only one who follows. Violent shades of death walk in your wake.*

Ash never for a moment doubted that the raveller was truly blind, but just as he needed no words to be heard, Ash was certain he needed no eyes to see. Ashrak Naru possessed gifts beyond the limitations of flesh. Ash thought of it as magic, but it was more than that: Naru's touch could pare away the very threads that bound the world together, reshaping it to his whim. He walked betwixt and between two worlds, living and dead, and both took their toll. Ash felt no sympathy for the man; his magic revolted the swordsman almost as much as his physical stench.

In Ash's world of steel and blood the truth lay in cold reality. There was no such assurance around Naru. Ash was sure the man could as easily unravel the ties that bound flesh to spirit as he could those that bonded the stuff of stone and steel.

The raveller smiled, baring cracked and yellowed teeth.

Jayant Ash turned his back on the man. Not once did he look back to see if the raveller followed. He had no need; the man's stench dogged him all the way to the heights of Crowscrest.



Release me!

The command rose unbidden in Ash's mind. He staggered, trying desperately to fight back the urge to plunge down the slope to the sandy beach.

Ash stared at the blue ghost-lights ringing the citadel. The moonlight appeared to shift around them, giving the distinct impression that, as one, the luminous figures turned to look up at him. Ash shuddered with revulsion.

The raveller eased up beside him, drinking in with all of his senses the impossibility of the risen tower and its salt-eroded spires. Sweeping his blind, rag-bound eyes from the tall, four-step box spire to the broken gateway, the raveller focused on the figures surrounding the citadel.

The warm air blew in off the sea, bringing with it the sent of carrion. Ash hadn't noticed the dead fish gathered at the base of the cliffs before. There were thousands upon thousands of them rotting there, more species than he could name. The stench rose up the heights of Crowscrest, sickening him. It was more real than the imagined ghosts and voices and it brought home the tragedy of the sea.

Ashrak Naru crouched, then lowered himself gently until his ear pressed to the ground. Naru's lips twitched as barely spoken words fell from them. He said only: "Such pain." Ash did not need to hear more to guess the truth, the raveller was listening to the trace memories of the land's upheaval, tapping into the stone itself.

As though in response to the raveller;s whispers, a beacon fire burst to life on the pinnacle of Crowscrest, tongues of fire licking at the sky. A moment later a second orange and red beacon fire sprang to life, and then all along the coast warning lights flared, carrying their message: Danger at Crowscrest.

These mystical beacon fires had lain lifeless for the last decade, ever since the Rector brought peace to the seas. Had Naru's presence rekindled the magic that controlled them? Seeing them burning now sent a shiver down the ladder of Ash's spine.

The raveller's disbelief sounded in his head. *It cannot be.*

"What?"

This place. You know it as Mergolies, the home of Blazeus. This citadel was drowned when the world was young, long before you or I or even our ancestors walked these shores.

Ash shook his head, but the image of the citadel rising refused to be dislodged. The idea that they stood before the gates of the Citadel of Blazeus was ludicrous; it was a cautionary fairy tale, there never had been a city so wretched with sin that the gods themselves sank it.

"You are toying with me, raveller."

Naru said nothing, he merely stood at the cliff top, his iron chain dancing, drawn toward the ghost-lights on the beach.

The sea was the embodiment of chaos; there was not one wave but hundreds upon thousands of tiny ripples, each moving to its own current in subtle variations. With the moon full, her light shimmered across each tiny undulation, a majestic suitor looking to claim the last dance of the night. At the center of it the citadel stood, unmoved, utterly real and impossible.

As though reading his mind, Naru whispered inside his head: *How can it be impossible if it has already happened. Do not waste your life thinking things impossible. Deal with the truth of what you see, warrior. You see and accept my Mortal Chain,* he raised his manacled hand. The links crackled and sparked with energy, reacting to the nearness of death. *The iron anchors my soul to this realm, this you believe, yet you doubt the veracity of your eyes when it comes to this citadel? Where is the line between impossible and merely improbable? Find the truth and listen to it; in every story hides truths long forgotten.*

"Blazeus is a story, Naru, meant to frighten little children." But Jayant Ash couldn't even convince himself.

RELEASE ME!

He is here. Are you so insensitive you cannot feel the truth of it? No, wait . . . you can feel him, can't you? That is why you sought me out. You can feel him. Let me . . . oh yes, yes, yes. He is growing inside you even now, like a canker. You burn with him, don't you? You've heard his voice, his command. What did he bid you do? Are you his creature already?

"I am no one's creature, raveller. The voice would have its freedom, but not from my hand it won't."

RELEASE ME!

Foolish man. Let me tell you what is inside you. There is only one way to quench the fire, and it lies within that terrible place, doesn't it? That's what fills your mind, the certainty that you must enter the citadel of the beast, that you must face the thing you fear.

Do not do it. Do not enter the heart of Blazeus or you will be lost. I can hear it -- the siren song calls to you even now, begging you to satisfy the need in your soul. What did you do? How did it get inside you?

"It is not inside me!" Ash shouted.

RELEASE ME!

Ash staggered against the will of the voice, but refused to buckle. "What are these lights?" he asked, though he already knew.

The wretched dead of Blazeus, bound even now.

"But you can lay them to rest, can't you? You can unravel whatever enchantment binds them to their pain."

I can. And I shall.

Naru picked a path down the steep cliff with unerring surety of step, never once slipping or losing his balance, until he walked among the ghost-lights. Ash did not follow. He simply watched as, one by one, the ghost-lights were snuffed out by the raveller's mortal chain, their

energy absorbed into the dancing, twisting metal links. The chain writhed in the salt air as Naru moved among them, his back curved like a weighty, creeping vine.

Naru's sobs carried up to Ash.

So much pain, Ash thought.

A moment later a savage joy that wasn't his own fired in his belly.

The watchers have fallen! Release me! Release me!

Ash heard the sounds of hoof on stone -- and knew that the rest of the Rector's Men had responded to the beacons. How could his swordbrothers not? Had he been in Kalatha with them he would have been the first to the horses, armored and ready to ride out.

But Levant lead the group of six riders; immediately behind him, Efrem Kerr and Samman Raz. Marten Gaunt to his right. Blaine and Tomas Mornar following. Good men all. Ash felt no relief at their arrival.

He just stood there, swordless, looking down at the twisted spires of Mergolies. So precarious were the towers that rose from the citadel that it looked as though the weight from an errant moonbeam would be sufficient to topple them. Who knew what kind of damage centuries beneath the sea had done to the citadel's fortifications. But it had survived resurfacing, it would survive a while longer.

Release me, Ash. Bring me back into this world. Release me!

Ash looked back at the approaching riders. Even from a distance Levant was immediately recognizable because he wore no helmet, his hair pulled back in a top-knot that lent his narrow features an air of barely contained savagery. Unlike the others, the strange young man never wore a helmet, even into battle. He believed it hampered rather than helped, reducing his field of vision and sweating his brains out. Sweat in the eyes, claimed Levant, had undone more men than stray arrows or lucky blows combined. Ash had tried to reason with him, but the swordsman would have none of it. "Let them rattle my brains," he said, "so long as I have Kinslayer in my grasp I pity them."

Levant now rode with an extra blade across his knee. Guiding his destrier alongside the raveller, he swung down easily and tossed Ash his sword.

"Thought you might need this," Levant said. "Hellish lengths to go to for a practical joke." His eyes went from the cliffs to the causeway to the twisted spires and back again, and again. Whatever else he was going to say stuck in his craw as he studied the spires of Mergolies out in the darkness.

"Holy mother of Mashan," Marten Gaunt said, joining them at the cliff's edge. The older man made the symbol of The White Rose, moving his fingers in a tight spiral. "It's . . .*beautiful*."

It wasn't the word Ash would have chosen, but it wasn't wrong. There *was* a terrible beauty to the City of Blazeus.

The others dismounted and joined them.

None spoke, though whether that was because of awe or fear Ash had no way of knowing.

"Gerant would have us investigate so that he might make a full report to the Rector," Levant said. "It seems word of this wonder is spreading almost as quickly as the flames of the warning beacons." He laid a hand on Ash's shoulder. He nodded down to the weeping blind man on the causeway. "What is the raveller doing?"

"Laying the dead to rest," Ash said.

"That's a lot of effort to go to for a few fish," Levant grinned at him.

RELEASE ME! the voice demanded.

Ash reeled.

Down on the sand, the blind man turned to look up at him, his mortal chain hanging lifelessly at his side. Had Naru heard the voice?

The way to the citadel was so treacherous that the riders were forced to dismount and tether their horses before descending to the causeway, which was just as well: rather than the neatly laid octagonal columns Ash had thought he saw from above, the causeway linking Mergolies to the mainland proved to be erratic and uneven. The octagonal stones mimicked the violent waves of the sea -- there was no gentle ripple to these stones - and was made doubly treacherous by the coating of algae and slime that clung to it.

The seven warriors walked side by side, Levant at the center, Ash to his left, Marten Gaunt to his right. Levant moved half a pace faster than the others, turning the line into an arrow with himself at the tip. Efrem Kerr and Samman Raz walked beside Ash, while Tomas Mornar and Blaine completed the line on Gaunt's side. Each man was cut from the same physical cloth, powerful of form, narrow of face, dark of eye. Intense. Levant held up a hand and they stopped as one.

"Did you see? Up at the window?" he asked.

"See what?" Samman Raz said. "Seaweed?"

Levant's top-knot whipped the air as he turned, his long arm snaking out to grab Raz by the collar. "Look at the windows of the upper spires and tell me what you see."

Raz pulled away from Levant's grip. He did look up at the spire though. For all their bravado, the citadel's atmosphere already had the swordbrothers on edge.

Ash followed the direction of Raz's gaze. He saw them easily enough -- shadow shapes flitting across the black eyes of the spire. As far as Ash could make out there was no substance to them, but the height, the angle, and the distance did not help.

"Shadows," he said.

"And what casts moving shadows?" Levant said, as though talking to a simpleton.

"Fish men?" Raz said, but his bravado was sounding more and more hollow.

"Something we can kill," Efrem Kerr said evenly. He wasn't looking up at the windows. His gaze was fixed firmly on the one ironwood door still hanging drunkenly on its broken hinge.

"Something that can kill us," Mornar replied, voicing the thought all of them shared.

"Then we'd best be careful," Levant said, drawing the Kinslayer with a fluid motion. The steel blade sang as it slipped free of its sheath. "This is the stuff stories are made of, seven brave souls entering a fabled relic where only death has lived for centuries. Let's go and write ourselves into legend!"

Ash looked up at the spires, the crumbling bulwark and the rotten fortifications, immune to Levant's bluster. Instinctively he knew there was no glory to be found within this place.

The gods did not sink this place, Ash thought. *Men did. Men like us*. But there was no conviction to it.

Naru's voice sounded in his mind. *It is always men like you, Jayant Ash. Always. Do not do this. Do not go in there. You are not strong enough.*

"Are you with us, Ash?" Levant's voice brought him back sharply. The others were a dozen steps ahead of him. He had stopped, staring up at the blank windows of the spire.

Ash nodded and together the seven men stepped across the crumbling portico, entering the immortal remains of the City of Blazeus.

It was dark within, velvet night. Somehow the moon's light did not touch the interior. It wasn't until he was a dozen paces into the darkness that Ash realized what was wrong -- he could not hear the others, there was no shuffling of feet, no curses, no breathing turned

ragged by his swordbrothers' excitement or exertion. It wasn't silent either, though; far from it. He heard a body's worth of sounds, all internalized: the rhythmic beat of his heart against his chest, the susserent whisper of the blood through his veins, the haunting echo of the in and out of his own breathing. But nothing else, nothing external.

Release me!

The urge to flee rose within him. Every instinct screamed that he should listen to it and run, run, run, far away, but he took another step and then another, deeper into the darkness.

"Levant? Mornar? Gaunt?" he called. None of them answered. Inside his head he tried again, *Naru? Are you with me*? But he was alone. He knew it, even before he sent the thought out with his mind.

Ash reached out, fumbling in the darkness for his swordbrothers. Any kind of contact would have been a relief. The logical part of his brain insisted that they had to be there, that flesh and blood did not simply cease to be because they had crossed the transom. But his fingers found only darkness.

"Enchantment!" he rasped, hoping his certainty would somehow touch the others.

A wisp of scarlet light flickered and faded before his eyes, no more than twenty feet away. It sprang to life again ten feet further on, and elevated slightly, as though the light bearer had taken two steps up a stairway.

Ash hesitated before following, Naru's warning echoing in the silence of his mind. Was he strong enough? The darkness of the Citadel was cloying, pressing in on all sides. Still there were no sounds beyond his own flesh. He moved through the muffled darkness, testing the shadows with questing fingers. They met nothing but more darkness.

He followed the flickering scarlet wisp. It stayed tantalizingly just a few steps out of reach, leading him deeper into the City of Blazeus, not merely blind, but robbed completely of his senses.

"Levant?" Ash called again. This time he thought he heard a whisper damped by the darkness, a voice.

"Levant?" he called again, but there was no reply.

Were the others making their own way, following similar wisps of light into the heart of the darkness?

Then Ash saw it -- blacker than black -- a diseased, twisted bramble of a soul; a creature formed of the dark itself. It had no flesh, no substance, yet it was more than mere shadow, it was a total absence of the stuff of light. It possessed shape and form, molded from the dark, its shape changing, shifting as he tried to focus on it. It moved silently, with canine grace. It turned to face him, only like the ghost-lights it had no discernible features, no nose, no mouth, no plane of cheekbones, no ridge of brow, no eyes or ears. It was smoke and shadow and yet Ash knew without doubt that the thing was looking at him.

He couldn't say how he knew; he just knew.

Instinct.

It always came back to that, a soldier's instinct for survival.

The shadow beckoned, moving away again.

Ash followed. He didn't call out this time, sure that Levant and the others were chasing their own shadows. That was the nature of evil, after all, it was divisive, seeking to separate the good and find the weaknesses that together were muted and held in check.

Ash barely raised his blade in time as the shadow-shape lunged out of the darkness, the silence brutally shattered by its scream of rage. Ash's sword slipped along the inside of his attacker's, slicing into the softness of the shadow's inner arm and across the curve of ribs, glancing away as it met resistance. The scream came again, fueled this time by fear, not rage, as a second savage blow cut the darkness inches from Ash's face. A fraction of a second too late he realized it was Marten Gaunt's signature blow. But Ash had already dropped to one knee and lunged.

His blade came up between the joins in Gaunt's mail, biting deep through hard armor and the soft flesh. The shadow crumpled soundlessly and the black mist evaporated, leaving Jayant Ash standing over the body of his friend. The blood appeared black and leaked out onto the stone floor of the citadel.

Ash was no stranger to death, but this deception cut deep. Gaunt had been hunting Ash, believing he was striking at the evil of Mergolies, not his own swordbrother. He had died ignorant of his own treachery. There was small mercy in that.

The muffled spell of the silence was broken now. Ash could hear his friends, hunting each other; the clash of steel and the screams of the dead and dying. They were revolting sounds, the voices at once so familiar and yet at the same time so utterly alien.

Could they hear each other? Did they know? Or was the madness of death driving them?

Ash opened his mouth and screamed, roaring and raging against the blackness of the night, against the murder of his friends, and though he screamed himself hoarse he knew the others must still be wrapped in their deceptive silence, hunting each other through the black, oblivious to the true nature of their foes. There were simple spells of obfuscation, dark and silence damping out light and sound -- but the shadow, that was different. That took more than merely blurring the senses. That took power.

Ash sheathed his sword. He refused to be party to any more killing. He knelt beside Gaunt. Closing his eyes he pressed a coin into the dead man's palm and sheathed his blade. "May you find beauty, my friend," Ash said.

Then he heard Levant's wretched scream of: "*No*!"

Ash ran into the dark, shouting his friend's name again and again.

Levant's answering shouts never sounded any closer.

"Gaunt is dead!" Ash threw the truth at the darkness.

"Kinslayer claimed Efrem," Levant shouted back. His voice sounded wrong, shorn of certainty. "It tasted a true brother's blood."

And so seven were five, and their enemy had yet to show his hand. That, more than anything, terrified Ash.

Blaine's voice called: "Raz is dead, damn him to a thousand hells, he came at me out of the dark! There was nothing I could -- no, no . . . Mornar, it's me!" The words were cut-off by a blood-curdling scream followed by the anguished sobs of understanding as Tomas Mornar stood over the corpse of Blaine, the five survivors reduced to three with cruel efficiency.

"Where are you, Mornar?" Ash called. "What do you see?"

"I . . . I didn't know. How could I have known?"

"Where are you. Talk to me, Mornar."

"I don't know . . . I followed a light. I can hear the sea. I couldn't hear it before. I couldn't hear anything."

"The enchantment is broken," Ash said. "Naru was right, there is evil in this place. You can feel it in the air, even with the darkness banished. Evil strong enough to turn friend against friend as simply as this." Ash shook his head even though the others could not see the gesture. "We have to root it out. End it. We owe it to Blaine, Gaunt, Raz and Efrem We have to walk out of here alive to see that their lives are written into the legends; that they don't end four dead men among thousands simply because we failed."

"Quite a stirring speech, Ash," Levant said, his voice thick with bitterness. Give the man an enemy he could see and strike down with his sword and Levant was deadly. Surround him with ghosts and night whispers and he became vulnerable. His natural superstitiousness began with the curse on his blade, but they did not end there. "We can't bring our comrades back, but we can find this thing and kill it. And after it is dead we walk out of this gods-forsaken place and tell their story. Now, walk toward my voice."

Of all things Levant began to sing.

His voice was coarse, but it suited the mournful ballad he chose. The melody was a soldier's farewell to his comrades. Ash followed the anguish of Levant's song until he emerged onto a balcony overlooking a small courtyard. Levant sat on the side of a fountain, its basin filled with the flotsam and jetsam of the sea. He saw Mornar stepping out of the shadows beneath a similar balcony on the far side of the courtyard. His friend looked like the very embodiment of Death itself with Blaine's blood staining his face. The blood was thick around his mouth, as though -- and Ash winced at the thought -- he had torn his swordbrother's throat out with his bare teeth.

Levant looked up to where Ash stood on the balcony, his sword resting across his knee just as it had a few hours earlier when Ash sought him out in the city. The only difference he could see, even down to the warrior's expression, was the coating of blood on the silver blade. Levant turned the blade over and over again as he sang. Efrem Kerr was sprawled at his feet. Efrem's wounds were terrible; six deep cuts that exploited every weakness in his amour and combined to open him up like a cuttlefish prized out of its shell. A single red smear, like a tear, stained Levant's cheek. He fell silent and stood, tossing the Kinslayer up to the balcony where Ash stood. It landed near Ash's feet.

"I won't touch the damn blade again," Levant said, staring at it. "Take it, it's yours."

"What are you talking about?"

"I didn't choose the sword, it chose me, just as it has chosen you. In time it will turn on me, just as it did my father. I will not hide from my fate. Pick it up, and let us find this thing and be done with it."

Ash knelt, grasping the Kinslayer's hilt. He felt none of the repugnant thrill he had felt the first time he handled the blade. Indeed, it felt right in his hand. It thrilled at the taste of blood. Without thinking, he handed his own, inferior blade, to Levant.

"There is no curse, you know that, don't you, Levant?"

"Throw your pot-sticker down to me unless you want me to walk unarmed into the belly of the beast. I grow weary of the stench of the sea and all that damned salt."

"I would never raise a hand against you."

"Because I would slice it off, I know." Levant smiled the smile of a man who knew he was going to die.

There was nothing majestic about the citadel. The stonework was so pitted and worn it held together only because of the sea salt that had calcified in the wounded stone-like mortar. In places it wept the black oil of ruptured seaweed, in other places it was limned green by algae or speckled white by limpet shells. Ash clung to the iron balcony rail which had flaked and burned a deep red now. Traces of what once must have been a fabulous mosaic lingered on the tiles of the courtyard, but the images had faded, the colors bleeding together where they hadn't washed out completely. A hermit crab scuttled sideways across the ruined face of one of yesterday's heroes.

It took Ash a few minutes to find a way down from the balcony to the courtyard. As he wandered the wretched corridors of one of the lower spires he tried again to reach the mind of the raveller, or that part of his own mind where he heard the raveller's voice.

This thing turned us on ourselves, Naru. Levant cut down Kerr, Mornar did Blaine, who had already killed Raz. My blade felled Gaunt. Seven cut down to three in minutes through cheap tricks. And now I wield the Kinslayer. This is a black day.

If he heard, Ashrak Naru had no answer. Ash was alone. Alone with the dead, alone with the survivors, alone with the damned hermit crab scuttling across the floor without a care in the world. Frustration and anger welled up inside him.

Then the voice came, and the worst of it was that it knew him: *Come to me, Jayant Ash. I hunger to taste the air of freedom, to stand once more under the dawn sky. Come to me. Know me like I know you.*

An image flared in Ash's mind's eye: a casket fashioned of bone in a dank chamber. The marrow had completely eroded through in places so that the brittle casing crumbled to reveal the mummified remains of the corpse within.

Ash looked down at the sword he clutched too tightly in his hand.

"Is that you?" Ash said, his voice echoing dully in his ears. He waited, but there was no answer. Walking down a narrow flight of stairs he dragged his fingers across the wall, then touched them to his lips without thinking. He tasted the thick layer of salt that had accumulated on them. Was it poison? Was it possible that something he had come into contact with, like the salt liming the walls, was responsible for these hallucinations? The doubt growing within him was insidious, undermining every thought he had.

Ash reached out for the wall, needing its steadying influence. The image of the bone casket flashed across his mind's eye again as he did. He pulled away from the wall as though stung. Breaking contact with the stone was enough to banish the unwanted vision.

Tentatively he reached out again. Braced for the vision this time, he tried to glean what he could from it. Fragmentary details. Walls bearing the subtle remains of a bas-relief, its frieze too decayed to decipher. Shadows clinging to it, appearing to move beneath his scrutiny. Only they weren't shadows, he realized. A thick oleaginous shape oozed over the lid of the bone casket. The impression of pressure he felt, the weight bearing down on him, made him think the bone casket was down, still below the surface of the sea, not up amid the gods.

Release me.

"Get out of my head," Jayant Ash shook his head violently, breaking contact with the stone and its trace memories. He staggered down the rest of the worn-down stairs and along the short passage into the courtyard.

Levant looked at the bloody sword in Ash's hand, a peculiar, almost predatory expression in his dull eyes. His lips curled into the parody of a smile as he raised his hand in greeting.

"It's here! Whatever it is, it's in the very fabric of the citadel itself! Get up off that fountain, Levant!"

"Release me, Ash," the strange young man said, and toppled sideways.

"We cannot make any direct physical contact with the stones. Nothing," Ash told Mornar as the pair of them helped a distressed Levant stand. The young swordsman was unsteady on his feet, all color blanched from his fine-boned face. He tried to reach down for his sword, but almost pitched forward onto his face. "The evil of this place lives on in the stones."

"A raveller?"

"Or his essence, perhaps, sealed away in death into the structure, awaiting release. Naru told me they called it the City of Blazeus, but now I am not so sure Blazeus was a man. More like something so far removed from humanity that his enemies not only slew him, they sank his entire citadel in the hopes that his grave would never be found."

Mornar licked is lips and looked from Ash to Levant and back again. "And he's been waiting all these years for fools like us to come release him?" He shook his head. "Why now? You saw the heavens raining silver fire, you felt the earth buck and writhe. Are we puppets in some universal game? Is that it? I'll never forget how easily we turned on one and other."

Mornar wiped his fingers across his mouth. It was a subconscious gesture; the implications of their enemy's nature obviously unmanned him. He stared at the puddles spotting the courtyard's ruined mosaic, his eyes darting from one to the next as though something might slither out of them. Another hermit crab scuttled across the ground, disinterested in the three men.

"I have no liking for this, Ash. Even the elements around us, the stone, the earth, and the stagnant water, cannot be trusted. We ought to leave right now. Let Gerant raze this place. Let him rain naphtha and fire down from the sky. See how this Blazeus deals with a second death."

"Spoken like a true warrior," Levant said sarcastically.

Ash turned to look at him, unsure whether the words had been Levant's or a mocking taunt from the thing they sought to kill.

"What do you suggest?" Mornar said, bitterness creeping into his tone. He kicked out at the hermit crab in frustration, sending the creature tumbling across the uneven stones. It came to rest on its back, pincers scrambling in the air as it struggled to right itself.

"That we do what we came here to do, of course," Levant said. His legs buckled under his own weight as he tried to stand. Ash reached out to steady him, then wondered if it were safe to touch him and pulled back. Levant turned to him, pity in his eyes. "How do you live with such fear, Ash?" He shook his head. "There is nothing in me save anger at our brothers' deaths."

Ash had no answer. He offered his shoulder for Levant to lean on, but his swordbrother shook him off.

"What do you remember from when the thing was inside your head?" Ash asked a moment later.

"Nothing," Levant said, a little too forcefully for Ash's liking.

"Did it speak to you?"

"I said there was *nothing*. Now let's go find this bone casket and slay the beast once and for all."

And Ash understood: Levant was scared. Ash had never seen his friend scared before, not so long as he bore the Kinslayer to guarantee his immortality. He could only imagine what was going on in Levant's head now that the first aspect of the blade's curse had come true.

Ash was also worried. He hadn't mentioned the casket or anything else he experienced during his vision, yet Levant had known about it, right down to the material of the coffin. Which could mean only one thing: Levant had shared his vision. The voice had spoken to him just as it had spoken to Ash.

Had Levant succumbed? Was he, even now, a shell urging them on to their deaths to fulfill the base desires of his new master?

Or was he simply chasing his own death?

A movement in the shadows caught Ash's eye. He turned, trying to see what wasn't there.

"Fear has you jumping at nothing," Levant mocked, slamming his new blade into the Kinslayer's empty sheath. He turned slowly in a full circle, arms outwide and yelled "Time to die!" into the congregation of shadows that clung to the courtyard. The sheer power of his words carried up and down every passageway and into every chamber of the crumbling citadel. Listening to them, Ash did not know whether they were a promise, a threat, or a prediction.

The crimson light of dawn greeted the three men as they stepped out from beneath the cover of the broken roof. It was an anomaly of the collapse. Their search for the casket had taken them down four defensive stairwells, deep into the belly of the citadel, below the line of the water -- and yet the walls held back the sea and what should have been the roof opened up to the sky.

The light lay like blood on the floor's shattered mosaic. So much of the citadel was damaged, and not just by the tidal forces of the sea. It was easy to picture righteous marauders plundering the place, breaking anything of even remote beauty for the sheer joy of destruction.

"So much hate," Ash said. He could feel it in the air. The acrid tang of burning still seemed to linger. But could something as basic as fire ever cleanse these tainted walls? The Kinslayer thrilled to it; he could feel the intense need of the steel. It thirsted for blood.

"Let's get this done," Levant said again. Levant had grown stronger the deeper they had ventured. Ash also noticed the surety with which he walked, as though the way were all too familiar to him. Levant offered a wry grin, and for a moment he was undeniably his old self. But it was a fleeting moment. A thin veil of shadow ghosted across his face, and any trace of levity was gone. His gaze strayed to the hilt of the Kinslayer, lingering.

"Can you feel it?" Mornar asked, as they left the fragile safety of the light.

Ash didn't need to ask what he meant; he could feel it, too. The air had thickened around them, growing denser and more difficult to breath. Levant didn't seem hindered in the least as he pushed on, deeper into the subterranean chambers. "He's close," Levant said, turning back to face them. "I can feel him. Can't you?"

"Yes," Mornar said. His hand had strayed unconsciously to the hilt of his sword. Mornar reached out with his left hand, letting his fingers trail lovingly down the wall.

"Be careful," Ash said, unnecessarily.

Can you hear me, raveller? He sent the thought out desperately, willing Naru to respond. *My friends are dead. I know they are. The City of Blazeus has taken them all. They may look like themselves, but they are gone. And now they are leading me down to his tomb. If I am*

like them when I come out . . . if . . . He wanted to beg for death, to have the raveller's promise to slay him, but Naru couldn't hear him. Ash was alone.

They pushed open an unornamented and unadorned doorway.

Ash looked from Mornar to Levant, searching for even the merest hint that his friends remained. He could not see into them; shadows obscured their eyes. The voice whispered over and over in his head, *release me,* and Kinslayer's hunger thrilled through his veins.

Ash walked through the door. Not once did he suspect that the darkness might have crept into him, that his reasoning might have betrayed him.

It was a bare room, dominated by a rot-riddled sarcophagus that had collapsed into a wretched pile of bones. It was impossible to tell the desiccated bones of the casket from the bones of the interred.

His first thought upon seeing the ruination was: *They all died for this?*

He could not imagine how the soul of the raveller could live on while his bones crumbled. How could he have been absorbed into the stuff of the citadel, living on for millennia in the trace memories of the stone. How could someone become so afraid of death that he would choose to live an eternity in a stone prison rather than give up his grip on life?

Well, Ash vowed, *death will come to you now.*

He closed his eyes, drawing on an inner well of strength to see him through.

Release me. The two words reverberated through his skull, so filled with hate they made his flesh creep.

He licked his lips nervously and opened his eyes. Nothing in the room had changed. The casket lay split open by entropy, his swordbrothers standing sentinel over it.

Release me.

"Are you in there, Mornar?" Ash asked, but his friend's eyes were empty black orbs. "Answer me true, my friend."

"What's wrong with you, Ash? You look --"

Ash turned slightly to one side so that he wouldn't have to look into Mornar's eyes as he eased the Kinslayer up between Tomas Mornar's ribs and into his heart, twisting the hilt to finish the job. As he pulled the sword free, Mornar's eyes flared wide in shock. He tried to talk, but his mouth hung slack, denied words by the pain of the sword thrust.

Ash stepped back, expecting Mornar's legs to buckle as the life left his body, but the warrior didn't fall. He clung tenaciously to life, his hands clutching at the wound in his gut as though he couldn't understand why blood was leaking between his fingers. "Why?" the creature said with Mornar's voice, but it wasn't Mornar.

"You are not him, you are not him!" Ash screamed over and over, desperate to believe that the thing before him was nothing more than a ghost in the man's shell. Ash couldn't allow even the tiniest doubt to creep in and steal away his resolve. He swordbrother was gone. Ash swung the Kinslayer again, and again, matching his screams as it cleaved flesh and bone. Mornar threw his hands up to protect his face. His stomach wound opened wider, spilling his guts down his legs, and Ash cut away his hands and then cleaved open his skull. It was a shocking display of naked savagery, over before it had truly begun.

Grunting and gasping from the sudden exertion, Ash turned to see Levant coming up behind him. The man's mawkish face burned with what Ash could only interpret as hatred.

"And then there were two," Levant said, looking at the bloody blade in Ash's hand.

Yes, yes, release me, release me!

Ash blocked blow after blow, but Levant pressed him into the wall. He fought with wild, uncontrolled anger, like a man who already knew he was doomed. Again and again his blade snaked out, catching Ash, each small cut weakening him a little more.

"I will not die," Ash said, gritting his teeth as another blow came in faster than he could parry.

"We shall see."

Levant was the better swordsman, faster, with superior reflexes and a natural instinct for killing. He cut Ash across the thigh and opened a gash in his bicep even as he tried to fend off the first blow. They traded blows, Ash on the back foot, looking for an opening, Lavent coming on relentlessly. There was an arrogance to the strange young man's fighting style; Ash recognized it for what it was, immortality. Levant truly believed himself so skilled that no sword could open his veins. That hubris was Ash's only hope.

Ash blocked a thrust, deliberately over-extending from the parry. His follow-up strike left him slightly unbalanced. Instead of adjusting, he made a point of overcompensating, opening himself up for a lightning-quick counter that he barely evaded. For the next cycle of cut, thrust and parry he played a dangerous game of feints, pretending weakness he knew Levant would ruthlessly exploit.

"I expected more from you, Ash, but you are nothing," Levant spat, moving in for the kill. Ash stepped into the blow, knowing even as he did that he was opening himself up for agony as his opponent's blade pierced his belly. Instead of recoiling, he lunged forward, bringing the Kinslayer around, clutched like a dagger, to bite deep into the side of Levant's unprotected throat. Blood bubbled up around Ash's blade as Levant shuddered, his entire body rigid from the shock of penetration.

"You killed me?" It was such a ludicrous thing to say, those last three words of one of Kalatha's heroes, killed by the sword that ended his father's life and so many others. He bowed his head, the top-knot hanging limp. When he looked up again the light of life flickered and finally failed. He fell, all of his weight coming down on the borrowed sword, driving the blade deeper into Ash's stomach and through to the bone of his spine. The pain was excruciating. The dead man's weight drove the blade deeper still, grating against the edges of the vertebrae and into the soft discs between, rupturing them.

The world swam and Ash fell.

I knew you would come. Release me.

The command repeated itself over and over again within the darkness.

Ash could not feel his legs.

He lay in blood, his own and his friends. It smelled cloyingly sweet in his nostrils, ferrous.

Release me.

He was weak. Light-headed. Drained.

He tried to open his eyes, but he didn't need to. The image of the room swelled behind them, the casket of bone, the fallen swords, the blood and the bodies. They were dead. The Rector's Men undone at their own hands.

Release me.

The voice was insistent. Demanding. But he could not move. Levant's blow had severed something inside him; his legs would not respond when he tried to move them.

Release me.

The words impelled him. Ash reached out, scratching his nails into the cracked stones, and clawed his way across the floor inch by desperate inch, the words of Blazeus filling his mind completely. He was dying. He knew it. Cold crept into his flesh, filling him.

Release me.

"I would rather die," he gasped, barely a whisper in the stillness. It was a lie, the fingers of his right hand clenched around Kinslayer's hilt.

And yet despite his words, his hand moved of its own volition, clawing at the bones of the casket. All he could do was watch sickly as it crumbled beneath his touch. The last dregs of Ash's strength abandoned him. He lay in his own blood, his hand in the ruined casket, amid the powder of bones, willing death to come and find him in this dark place.

Give me my freedom . . . this time it sounded less like a command, more like a plea. Perversely, that pleased the dying man.

But death did not come quickly enough.

The walls wept black tears for him, or Blazeus, or both of them -- at least that was how it looked to Ash as he slipped in and out of consciousness.

Death did not feel so dreadful now that it was close. He thought of Levant and the others, the Rector's Men, fallen in this wretched place. Who would protect his lady now? Would Gerant raze this damned citadel with fire and naphtha, or would some other fool wander down into the dark crypt, seduced by the voice of a bitter ghost? Surely Naru would not allow Gerant to send down men to recover their bodies. Let the Rector's Men lie in peace. Better that than the truth of their slaughter becoming known to all.

All this and more swirled through Ash's mind while he stared listlessly at the black tears. They came slowly, leaking down the stone to gather in the corners where they coalesced like oleaginous black slugs.

Ash could feel his grip on life slipping.

He was alone inside his own head. The sword could not keep him alive; it had no such magic. That, at least, brought a smile to his bloodless lips. The curse of the Kinslayer denied at the last. He had used the blade to kill two of his swordbrothers, but he had not fallen to it himself. He could find peace in that. He closed his eyes.

He did not see the greasy trails the black tears -- in actuality slug-like creatures -- left as they slithered through his blood, though he felt the blazing blush of heat as they came up against his skin. He assumed it was death -- though he had always imaged death's kiss would be cold, not so fiercely warm.

Ash felt nothing but warmth as the creatures slithered through his spilled blood and up onto his face, gathering around his mouth and nose. His breath hitched, one final death rattle as they sank into him, through the soft stuff of his eyes, clogging his nostrils and swelling as they slid down his throat, choking the final stubborn sniff of life out of him.

Jayant Ash was dead as they pervaded his flesh, seeping down into the roots of his brain and into his blood, their malfeasance carried throughout his flesh even as the host leached into his brain.

When he opened his eyes again, no hint of Jayant Ash remained.

Blazeus worked his mouth soundlessly, moving his jaw just as he moved his fingers. A slow, predatory smile spread across his new face.

"Free at last." The first words from his mouth tasted so good after so long. He tried to stand but could not. The bones in his spine were severed. He was crippled. The irony was bitter, his new flesh was ruined, another sort of prison to escape from.

But Blazeus was patient, capable of playing the longest of games to get what he wanted.

He lay on his back simply reveling in the existence of flesh. It felt so *good* to be whole.He did not need legs. This body was good enough for now. He was free with centuries of hate to unleash. The blackness within him delighted Blazeus. Like the stone walls of his hell, Ash's brain still retained the traces of living memory. He had been respected, feared even. That was good. That would serve him. But there was madness inside Blazeus as well, pent up from centuries trapped in the stones of the citadel. He was not the man he had been. That, too, would serve him well. He clutched the Kinslayer to his chest for a moment, feeling the thrill of the blood and the metal before he sheathed the blade. It was a fine sword. Blazeus felt an enchantment stirring within its metal and smiled. And enchanted blade? Even better; it was a blade truly worthy of him.

Blazeus dragged himself onto his stomach and began to crawl through the filth of death, slowly rising out of his prison to feel the air on his face for the first time in eons. His fingers were bloody, his fingernails torn away by time, he emerged from the darkness. Behind him, the stones of the citadel groaned. Whatever will had held them together was gone now, and the ravages of time were undermining every stone. The towers shifted slowly, buckling. The first stone fell as Blazeus crawled out onto the causeway. It powdered on the octagonal stones.

He sensed the raveller's power before he saw him.

What happened in there, Ash? Naru's voice sounded in his head. *A wall rose against me, a force I could not surmount. I lost you. I did not abandon you. Something far stronger than I kept me out.*

Blazeus looked up, bitterness burning in his eyes. *Get out of my head,* he rasped, closing his mind to the raveller, just as he had closed the fortress to his prying. The link broken, Naru staggered visibly.

"It is done. Blazeus is slain. They all are. That is all you need to know."

Blazeus felt Naru trying to enter his mind. He kept him out.

"Look at you . . . What happened to you in there?" This time Naru spoke with his mortal voice, a weak and dusty thing. His eyes drifted to the sword at his hip, then lifted, bright with fear and a glimmer of understanding.

It felt good to be feared after so long. His patience had earned him that and so much more.

He felt no such compunction against entering the raveller's thoughts, displaying his own might: *You shouldn't have released them, raveller. The ghosts were the final defense meant to keep him trapped. They gave themselves willingly, to be sure his like could never walk this world again . . . and you undid their sacrifice. You cost the Rector's Men their lives. I was whole when I went in to Mergolies. Now look at me, a broken man. You did this to me. But I am lucky, I came out of it with my life. The others did not. Now get me to a chirugen before this vile place collapses and Blazeus claims us all.*

As though to emphasize his point more stones fell as the tower crumbled, twisted and finally collapsed, reclaimed by the sea. Without the power of Blazeus' will to bind it like mortar, the ravages of time and the elements reduced it to what it was, a ruin.

"You wield the Kinslayer?" Naru said, commenting on the blade at his side.

"Levant would have wanted it so."

"I am sure he would," the raveller said, giving no hint of the true meaning underlying his simple statement. "There is justice to it finding your hand."

"I shall wield it in his honor," Blazeus said.

"Rest now, my friend, that is a heavy burden you have lifted."

"I am strong."

"As was Levant, and his father before him," Naru said softly. Blazeus assumed it was some secret held between the raveller and his host, so he chuckled mirthlessly as though appreciating the black humor.

Blazeus had traded one prison for another, but that was enough.

For now.

Naru carried him back to Kalatha while the last traces of red bled out of the sky.

Tomorrow would bring a new dawn, and he would be a new man. Who could blame any changes they saw in Jayant Ash? Any bitterness that crept into him? He was a cripple, he had every right to hate the world.

Tomorrow he would tell Gerant he wanted to rebuild the Rector's Men, to make them his own. Gerant would cede the responsibility to him precisely because he was a cripple. Guilt would make him.

And when the time came, Blazeus would find new flesh, though for now he would enjoy being Jayant Ash, protector of the Rector's lady, wielder of an enchanted blade.

He was so close to the descendants of those who had brought him down. And tomorrow he would sow the seeds that would see them all die.

Tomorrow.

How Peacefully the Desert Sleeps

by Brad Beaulieu

Artwork by Scott Altmann

The first time I woke, blood fell upon the desert floor.
At the time, I didn't know whether it was good news or ill.

Kallie's coughing fit started, as it often did, when the alabaster sun brought the rising heat of the desert with it. When the fit had passed and the pain had subsided, she cleared her throat and spit blood-tainted phlegm onto the cracked desert floor. Then she stood tall on the driver's bench of her two-wheeled cart, hoping to see any sign of the Ohokwa village, but all that greeted her was a sea of adiwa cacti running clear to the horizon.

Kallie's heart sank as she dropped back into her creaking seat and took a long pull off her waterskin; it appeared she would need to rein in her pack bird and spend another scorching day under the direct sun before reaching Ohokwa Gorge. But she whipped her kuko into motion anyway, not willing to give up as long as she was able to withstand the heat.

Only minutes later, movement caught her eye. A few hundred yards up, two Ohokwa warriors bearing tall spears filed out from the cacti and onto the trail. With a whip of the reins and a cluck of her tongue, her kuko released a ragged caw and trudged faster.

With each passing second Kallie's anxiety rose. She was about to take the first real step toward healing the consumption that had struck over a year ago. She'd managed to enter tribal lands and elude the Shaukauna, the settler's fiercest opponent in their unquenchable thirst for westward land, but now it came down to talking, a skill Kallie hadn't been blessed with, and it soured her gut that her future depended on this one conversation.

Kallie was close enough now to see the details in their jet-black hair, which was braided behind their ears into two long strands. White folds of cloth hung loose around their shoulders, ready to cover their dark-skinned faces against the midday sun. They wore white shirts and pale leggings of the softest buckskin, embroidered with the angular designs of their people.

Kallie pulled her cart up short when the taller of the two warriors -- the one with a half-dozen tiny bones piercing the crown of each ear -- laid his spear across her kuko's path. Kallie let out a slow breath, trying dearly to fend off another coughing fit, and pushed up the brim of her wide, leather hat.

"How do?" Kallie said.

Rather than reply, the shorter Ohokwa whistled, his tongue fluttering to create a rhythmic warble. She'd never heard the call in person, but she knew good and well what was about to happen.

A buzzing, like a child blowing a blade of grass between his thumbs, cut through the desert air. Kallie swallowed hard as two red beetles the size of her hand crawled over the top of the nearest adiwa cactus. One of the dejda beetles raised its iridescent wing case and rattled. The second followed suit a moment later, then another, and another, and soon, the entire area was abuzz with their bone chilling call.

She'd never been bothered by crawlies and such, but she'd never come face to face with insects so almighty large, and the stories she'd heard along the way -- the way they swarmed over their prey, their mindlessness when driven by the Ohokwa's whistling, the poison they injected with each thrust of their stinger -- didn't help one bit.

Then, quick as a hiccup, the dejda highest up on the cactus took wing -- a blur of red against the blue sky -- and whirred to land at Kallie's feet. Though she knew it unwise, she couldn't stop herself from shifting along the bench and reaching for the shotgun resting in its holster.

The taller Ohokwa made it clear that drawing the shotgun would be tantamount to suicide, and the shorter whistled again, louder this time. The beetle near Kallie's boot rattled once, sending a furious shiver up her spine, then winged back to the cactus from which it had flown. Kallie inched her right hand back to her lap.

"You have nerve, stranger," the taller Ohokwa said, "bringing firearms to our lands."

His command of her language surprised her, and she chastised herself; she'd made a promise that she wouldn't underestimate them. "It's only to scare the coyotes," she said, her heart beating heavy. "Can't shoot worth a damn, anyway."

As the taller warrior stared at Kallie with hard eyes, the second warrior moved to the rear of her cart and began rummaging through the crates stored in the bed as if they'd just insulted his mother.

Several of the beetles buzzed in unison. One of them took flight, but was immediately whistled back by the taller warrior. Kallie was confused, for she'd heard the Ohokwa had supreme control over the beetles using their whistles and their shared bond. But these, while clearly influenced by the warriors, weren't behaving as she would have guessed.

"You came through Shaukauna land?" the taller warrior asked.

Kallie coughed once, softly. She daren't lie now. The Ohokwa and Shaukauna were practically the same tribe. "I did."

"How?"

"Traveled south, around the foothills, then through the wastes."

"Those are watched lands, tahone."

"Might be," Kallie said with a careless air, "but no one stopped me from passing through."

The warrior's eyes thinned. "Then what brings you?"

Kallie winced at the sound of breaking glass. The warrior in the back ceased his inspection momentarily, but then resumed as liquid -- no doubt the expensive whiskey -- gurgled and spattered against the desert floor.

"Come to trade," Kallie said. "Simple as that."

"But why? Why risk our spears?"

Kallie glanced at a particularly large dejda flexing its wing cases. Maybe it was the goddamned beetles driving the spike of fear through her chest, maybe it was the heat, or maybe it was just time, but Kallie started coughing, and this time she couldn't stop it. She took out her kerchief to mask the blood -- she'd be damned before she let them see it -- but it was too much, the worst one in days, and by the time the fit had passed, the pale kerchief was spotted through with blood.

The warrior continued to stare, but his eyes had thinned and his jaw had stiffened. The resentment in his expression sent a sickly dread running through her. He knew why she'd come. He knew she'd come begging for the Ohokwa's fabled healing tonic, kayeya. Years ago, the Ohokwa had shared their prize with the settlers, but that was before the massacre at Holy Hill. Tensions with the tribes, particularly the Shaukauna and Ohokwa, had only heated since then, and it had nearly boiled over into all-out war several times this hot, dry summer.

"You think the Ohokwa would give a tahone one *drop* of kayeya?" the warrior said.

Several dejda shouted in unison.

Kallie took as deep a breath as her broken lungs would allow her, and she prayed dearly she wasn't about to make a big mistake. "What name you go by, tribesman?"

He hesitated, but only for a moment, and stood incrementally taller before replying, "Hochomi."

"I brung music boxes, Hochomi, the best quality. Some of them play minutes on end. I brung instruments: two violins and a banjo. I got whiskey, aged sixteen year, and five bottles of fine wine. What could one small woman do to your people, no matter what the men might've done? What could you gain by denying me what means so little to you? Does that bring honor to your tribe, to kill a woman come begging for help?"

Hochomi stared. His broad face softened for the briefest of moments, but then his eyes locked on her shotgun, and he leaned over and spit at the foot of her wagon. "Turn your cart around, tahone, and never tread these lands again."

As the men backed away and stared, Kallie scrambled for some way out of this. It couldn't end here. Not so quickly. Not so finally.

But before she could open her mouth to argue, a stirring in the desert swarmed through Kallie's consciousness. She felt instantly cool in the oppressive heat, and like a drop of oil slicking the surface of a pond, her awareness swelled. She felt Hochomi and his brother warrior; she felt the nearby dejda like red-hot coals laid against the surface of her mind; she felt the beetles' gargantuan nest some miles to the west and south; and for the first time since entering this godforsaken oven, she no longer felt foreign. She felt like part of it, like it was a part of her.

But with the awareness came a sense of longing, and suddenly Kallie felt as if she were being dragged beneath the surface of a deep, black lake. She had no idea what it was, but she refused to allow it stronger purchase than it already had. So she recoiled. She beat against the presence. She scratched. Kicked. Retreated.

The desert air exploded as the dejda released a raucous cry. Several skittered across the desert floor toward her kuko. The pack bird high-stepped sideways as several more beetles took wing and landed at Kallie's feet. When another landed on her knee, she flicked the thing away before recalling how truly foolish such a move was.

Hochomi and his tribesman whistled their low, droning summons. Most of the beetles halted, but Kallie could see them in her mind turning a molten yellow. Several buried their crimson heads in the sand and raised their hind legs. A few fell onto their back and went into a severe apoplexy.

And then the first of them struck.

Kallie had never imagined the beetles could move so quickly. The first, launching itself from a nearby cactus, flew onto Hochomi's shoulder and sunk its mandibles deep into his flesh. In the time it took for blood to soak through the white cloth, Kallie saw the poisonous stinger insert and withdraw several times. Another landed on Hochomi's cheek, interrupting his fluttering whistle.

"Stop!" Kallie shouted, too confused to utter anything useful. She even tried to quell the beetles' sudden anger, but it was no use. She could no more control the beetles than she could the blistering sun.

The other tribesman whistled louder, but the only effect seemed to be to induce more beetles into attacking.

The dejda swarmed.

"No!" Kallie cried, grabbing her shotgun and leveling it at the Ohokwa.

In moments the men's limbs, chests, groins, necks were covered by the ravenous beetles.

Kallie aimed down the barrel of the shotgun, debating on whether to end the men's misery, but the thought of attracting the beetles' attention proved too fearsome. Luckily, her kuko proved wiser in the face of danger. It bucked and fled westward, and -- after a horrid moment of watching the men scream and writhe on the ground -- she let it.

Following a mindless and dangerous chase through the desert, Kallie crested a ridge and saw Ohokwa Gorge for the first time. It hacked the landscape in half, revealing a portion of the flame-colored rock it harbored. She urged her bird onward before she could lose heart and headed for the collection of square adobe buildings near the dogleg in the gorge.

A handful of tribesmen noticed her when she neared and met her at the edge of the village. She tried to explain what had happened, but none of them spoke her language well and she spoke not a lick of Ohokwa. She managed to make them understand Hochomi had been hurt, but they seemed to think she was to blame.

A squat Ohokwa with a ragged scar across his broad face grabbed her shotgun and yanked her down from the wagon. They shouted at her in Ohokwa and stabbed the sky with their bone-handled knives, but all she could do was raise her hands and repeat that she had nothing to do with their brothers' deaths.

A young woman with piercing green eyes and a small mole above one of her thick eyebrows strode forward. Her black hair was tied into a tight bun, exposing her broad, handsome face. The moment she started speaking with the scar-faced warrior, the rest fell silent. Kallie heard Hochomi's name spoken several times; each repetition lent more fury to the woman's demeanor. The next thing Kallie knew the woman was grabbing a spear and stalking toward Kallie. Kallie threw her hands up in defense as the woman raised the spear high and brought the butt of it down hard.

It was the last thing she remembered . . .

. . . before waking to the sound of a rushing river and the screaming pain on the crown of her head. She was trussed up, naked, three hundred feet over the Chedahoa River. Her breath came in heaving gasps. She began coughing horribly and had only enough time to spit and clear her throat before the next wave came. She was nearing the edge of hysteria, but the steady sound of the river coursing through the gorge below proved to be an elixir. She closed her eyes and focused on the sound, willing herself to be calm, and slowly . . . Slowly . . . The coughing subsided until she had regained some measure of control.

She opened her eyes, keeping the sound of the rushing water present. The sun perched directly overhead, the heat of it nearly unbearable. Her hands, bound tight, were reddened and numb. The rope from which she hung was tied to a beam, which was secured to a platform built at the very edge of the gorge. Kallie swayed with every stray breeze, and the beam bent with her.

It was going to snap any moment. She knew it was.

Kallie stopped looking at the beam before she could start coughing again. A lone Ohokwa warrior stood on the platform, his arms crossed over his bared chest, his eyes cruelly impassive as he regarded her. A crowd of Ohokwa watched a few dozen yards from the platform.

The woman, the one who'd struck Kallie, must have been related to Hochomi, or perhaps they were husband and wife, or maybe she was the Ohokwa Queen Kallie had heard so many stories about. Kallie had found only one man, a failed prospector, who'd ever met the Queen, but apparently that mantle changed hands every twenty years or so, whenever a new dejda queen was birthed, so it was possible that the young, fierce woman had been her.

As a hot breeze enveloped her, Kallie released a sarcastic snort at her own foolishness. The ceremony at which the kayeya would be unveiled was to be held on Spring Equinox, only a handful of days away now. She'd had, not *high* hopes, but middling that she could come and trade for a small bottle of the tonic. At worst she figured she'd be forced from their lands, no worse for the wear, but this . . .

What had *happened*? The Ohokwa controlled the dejda, partly by their whistles, but it was said with more than that. The whistle was only a way to get their attention, so they'd be ready for what came next. It was the mental bond between the Ohokwa and the dejda that did the rest.

Kallie had clearly connected with the dejda, just like the Ohokwa, but how? How could *she*, someone who'd never even seen one of the beetles, do such a thing?

The crowd began murmuring and pointing as the sound of galloping horses traveled over the desert floor. A dozen horses approached. The two horses at the rear pulled litters, and in them were Hochomi and his fellow warrior. Whether they were alive or dead Kallie couldn't tell. The Ohokwa woman who'd struck Kallie with the spear rode at the head. She was mounted just like the men, legs spread with only a blanket as padding, and when she neared the platform she slipped off her still-moving horse and bounded up the platform's steps. She unwound the white folds of cloth from around her head to stare at Kallie unobstructed.

"Tell me what you do." Her words came slow and stilted. Her eyes were red, as though she'd been crying.

"I did nothing."

The woman paused, an expression of resolve clear on her face. She held out her hand and barked a command at the warrior next to her. As soon as the warrior had pulled his wicked hunting knife from its sheath and placed the bone handle into her waiting hand, the woman stepped closer and grasped the rope holding Kallie secure.

"Dear God, no! Stop!"

"What you do?"

"I came only to trade! I have much --"

The woman placed the edge of the knife against the rope.

"I felt *something*! Just before them beetles attacked! But I didn't do anything!"

"*What* you feel?"

"E-everything! The desert around me, clear to the gorge, the heat and the wind, the cactus and the beetles, a few birds. Even the men a might bit."

"Then what?"

"Nilawi!" a voice shouted.

An older man and woman strode through the parting crowd. The man wore a wide headband made of tiny bones. The woman wore a delicate woolen shawl and an elaborate necklace of dejda casings, which glowed a furious red in the sunlight. They climbed up to the platform, where the man spoke sharply to Nilawi.

Nilawi stared at him defiantly for long seconds, but then she allowed the knife to clatter to the platform's wooden planks and strode down the stairs as if *she* had ordered Kallie's release. The older man barked several commands to the warrior. A moment later, the warrior, who had never taken his eyes from Kallie, stepped forward and untied the rope securing the beam. Muscles rippling beneath his swarthy skin, he lowered Kallie and hauled her onto the sun-heated wood.

"I am sorry," the older woman said. She removed her shawl and draped it over Kallie to hide her nakedness.

Kallie could do nothing for some time -- the pain was too great -- but soon she was well enough to stand.

"I am Wattoha, Queen of the Ohokwa, and this is my husband, Iye, an elder of our people. Please, we will take you to shelter."

Another Ohokwa who spoke her language fluently, whereas most settlers would be embarrassed to speak Ohokwa.

With Nilawi forging ahead, the couple led Kallie to a slatted walkway which hugged the inside edge of the gorge. There were a hundred such walkways, two hundred, that zigzagged over the depth and breadth of the gorge. She'd never seen such a thing, and had she not been so frightened earlier she might have recognized the beautiful patterns they created over the frothing river and rust-colored stone.

They led Kallie down a passageway into the rock. The temperature dropped. In fact, after not too long, she began to shiver. They stopped at a doorway and motioned Kallie to enter.

"Your clothes are inside. We will wait while you dress."

Kallie entered the bare room without further word. In the center, folded horsehair blankets surrounded a squat table, upon which sat a large urn filled with water. Light came from two Ohokwa lanterns, their pink gems glowing softly.

While Kallie was pulling on her clothes, a coughing fit snuck up on her, but thankfully it didn't last long. Her fits were funny like that; she thought she'd be able to predict when they might come, but try as she might, they still seemed random.

Kallie sat on one of the blankets and guzzled two mugs of the blessedly cold water before Nilawi, Wattoha, and Iye entered the room and sat across from her. They had changed into the buckskin she was more accustomed to seeing tribesmen wear. Wattoha had some of the same features as Nilawi -- stark green eyes and a noble face -- but she wore her hair straight, and it was sprinkled with gray.

"We are sorry for my daughter," Wattoha said.

Iye bristled at these words. He was perhaps fifty, as was Wattoha, and the two sat close. They had the calm look of a couple who knew each other intimately, a knowledge that came not from mere years of familiarity, but decades.

"She is young," Wattoha continued, "and she thought her man had been murdered."

"Your daughter was only protecting her own," Kallie replied carefully. "I might've done the same in her place."

Wattoha smiled. "You are being kind."

"Begging your pardon, but do the men live?" Kallie kept her gaze fixed on Wattoha. She daren't meet Nilawi's eyes. Not now, as angry as she was.

"Hochomi lives, but the poison has traveled deep."

"And the other?"

"Kime has passed to the fields beyond." Wattoha raised one hand to Nilawi, forestalling any interjection. "Please, tell us how you came to be here."

Kallie did the best she could, telling them how she'd caught the consumption, how her husband had died from it, how she'd saved up enough to travel through tribal lands. They asked her to revisit the attack. The Queen seemed unsatisfied with Kallie's explanation, for her demeanor shifted from polite to intense.

"You did nothing to provoke them?" Iye asked, cutting off the final bit of Kallie's tale.

"How could I?"

Iye stood up straighter. "You told my daughter you felt the Queen's presence."

Kallie nearly recoiled. The reason for Wattoha's tension was suddenly as clear as spring water. Wattoha would have been bonded years ago to the dejda Queen, but unlike other members of the tribe, who could control a handful of beetles, the Queen should have been able to feel the attack in the desert, and yet Wattoha had apparently sensed nothing. If she had she would have sent help immediately, and Nilawi and the others wouldn't have been so confused and angry upon her arrival.

And they wouldn't have trussed her up like a pig for the blooding.

"See here," Kallie said slowly. She glanced at Nilawi and suppressed the queasy feeling in her gut. "I don't know what happened back there. You'd know better'n me . . . Maybe the Queen didn't like me, maybe she wanted to know more about settlers by digging in my mind, maybe she was just curious, but I can tell you I didn't do anything to rile her up. Wouldn't know how to. What happened out there must have been her doing, or maybe them beetles went rogue. All I know is I came in peace to trade for a flaskful of kayeya."

Before anyone could reply, the blanket over the doorway was swatted aside, and an old crone hobbled into the room.

Iye rolled his eyes and stood. "Not now, Earth Mother. Please, leave us in peace." He walked to her side and motioned to the doorway, but stopped short of actually touching her.

The old woman ignored him and surveyed the room. She wore a tattered horsehair shawl over her shoulders. Her mouth smacked repeatedly, and her face seemed locked in a permanent scowl as if she had a horrible case of the cankers. Kallie shivered as a beetle crawled up to the woman's shoulder and sat there, studying Kallie. Another dejda crawled up her leg and rattled. These beetles were smaller -- the length of Kallie's pinky -- and their proportions were different than the warriors she'd seen in the desert.

The old woman's eyes opened so wide that Kallie thought for sure they would pop out. "Taking council without Paheka?"

"It's not council -- " Iye began.

"Bah!" Paheka smacked her lips and swatted Iye's hands away. "You here *conspiring*." She said this as she looked at Kallie, and it seemed directed at *her* instead of the group as a whole.

The others turned to Kallie, apparently giving the old crone's words some amount of weight.

"I . . . I ain't conspiring."

Paheka hobbled over to Kallie, her lips smacking loudly, and kneeled. She stared into Kallie's eyes. The beetle on her shoulder seemed to do the same. "Conspiring? No, not yet. But she will, hmm? She will."

Iye shook his head, as if he'd hoped for something better. "Leave us in peace, Bone Mother. This doesn't concern you."

Paheka stared at Iye with hard eyes and a mischievous grin. "Doesn't *concern* me?"

She cackled and left the room, leaving a cold silence in her wake.

The second time I woke, I found fear in one, anger in another.

Strange how closely the two are entwined.

It became clear that Kallie would remain a prisoner until the Ohokwa were satisfied she posed no harm. She was confined to a small room deep within the warrens of the gorge, and several times each day, Wattoha would come with the village elders to question Kallie. They asked her about the reasons for Kallie's journey, the battle in the desert, the things Kallie had felt. The elders clearly thought Kallie had purposefully done something -- that she'd been sent by the settlers, perhaps, to infect their queen -- but Wattoha thought otherwise and would quell the accusations after too long.

On the second day, they spent a lot of time questioning Kallie about whether she'd done something to Nilawi. They brought all the liquids Kallie had brought to trade, her water supply, even the jars of strawberry preserves, and demanded to know what each of them was. Kallie could only wonder what had happened to Nilawi to make them ask such things. Perhaps she had become the latest victim of the beetles, and the elders suspected Kallie had had something to do with it.

Kallie tried to ask questions of her own about Hochomi and why he might have been attacked, about kayeya, about when Kallie would be allowed to leave, but Wattoha, though not unkind, refused to answer a single question, and the more she remained steadfast in her refusal to give information the more Kallie suspected that they would simply kill her once they'd run out of questions.

Several more days passed, and Spring Equinox approached. Kallie was allowed out twice per day, but only down to the river and always accompanied by a warrior. She was given food, though it was so spicy and foreign that Kallie could hardly eat it, and more often than not she heaved up some of the meal afterward. At least the water was drinkable, though the Ohokwa were not generous in this respect either. Once, just before falling asleep on the third day, Kallie experienced feelings of vertigo and a severe ringing in her ears, but as quickly as it had come it was gone, and she wrote it off to lack of a proper meal for nearly a week.

The following morning Kallie traveled down to the river, hoping to clear her mind. She stood on the solid rock of the bank watching the churning water ten feet below when she realized she was being watched.

Kallie had convinced herself that Nilawi had been attacked by the dejda, but here she stood, unharmed, at the head of the bridge. Nilawi shouted over Kallie to the warrior, who quickly bowed his head and left.

Kallie tried to control her breathing. Clearly something terrible had happened. She hadn't seen Nilawi since the day she'd arrived in the gorge, and now *Nilawi* had found *her*, far from Wattoha's protection.

It must be Hochomi, Kallie thought. He must have died, and now she's come to murder me.

The horror of hanging suspended over the river flashed through Kallie's mind, and she coughed, once, the sound pathetic against the powerful backdrop of the Chedahoa. Kallie wanted to run, but she stifled the urge. If Nilawi had wanted her dead, she would have simply ordered the warrior to dump her into the river.

"Come," Nilawi said.

The temperature plummeted as she led Kallie into a tunnel and down to the lowermost section of the Ohokwa village. The rock around them grew damp from time to time, and a deep sound Kallie thought was only the weight of the powerful river running its course soon proved itself to be the drone of the dejda, deeper and further ahead. The sound became clearer; she felt it resonate deep within her chest.

They passed many tall doorways, several of which had warriors stationed at them. The hallway transitioned to a more natural tunnel, and the drone sound increased noticeably. Soon they reached an irregular room populated by a hewn altar and dozens of glowing crystals. Below the altar lay a man on a canvas cot. An old woman with a hump back leaned over him, carefully pouring liquid down his mouth. It must be kayeya, Kallie thought. She wondered if there was more of it that she might smuggle away.

When the old woman backed into a corner, Kallie started. The man's face and neck were so swollen the she thought surely his skin would pop if it were touched with a pin. His eyes were so puffy that she doubted he could have opened them even if he could regain consciousness. Dozens of welts from the dejda stings were still red and angry. Even his fingers were little more than a collection of overstuffed sausages. That Hochomi still lived was a miracle in itself, but looking on him, Kallie wondered if it might not be more merciful to simply let him pass.

Nilawi moved to Hochomi's side. She smoothed his hair down and ran the back of her fingers along his cheek.

Time passed in silence, and Kallie felt the awkwardness build. Why had Nilawi brought her here? Surely not just to look upon her man.

"You have love?" Her words were soft and tender.

"Once," said Kallie, "yes." She was surprised that such a simple and unexpected question brought memories of Becker springing from the recesses of her mind -- the twinkle in his eye when he joked, the way spit flew from his mouth when he was riled, the way he'd pinch her backside at least twice a day -- but she hesitated to tell Nilawi any of this, for it felt to Kallie like she was teetering on the edge of some momentous decision. "He's been gone a while now, nearly four year."

"Hochomi gone almost. Maybe dead when sun rise."

"I'm sorry."

Nilawi turned and regarded Kallie. Her hand motioned to Hochomi. "I think Hochomi make you bridge with dejda . . . You feel? Same as before?"

Kallie shook her head, confused.

"In desert," Nilawi said, "when you come."

"You mean the way my mind was, before the attack?" Kallie felt nothing, but even if she had, she would have lied. "I'm sorry. I don't feel a thing."

"Queen has touch you since desert?"

Kallie shook her head and lied. "No."

"I think she do."

"No, I'm sorry."

Nilawi stared, as if trying to read Kallie's mind, then she spun on her heel and paced back into the tunnel. Kallie coughed and followed, her nerves beginning to fray.

She pulled up short when they reached a cave ten times the size of the altar room they'd just left. The walls and ceiling were alive with beetles, skittering, flying, buzzing. In the center sat the dejda Queen, resting on a bed of sand. Her ribbed carapace was deep red, like blood-soaked feathers on the wing of a raven. Her massive head lolled about as if she were blind and had no choice but to smell the intruders or feel them with her possessed antennae. The stinger between the mandibles thrust forward like a probing tongue, and her front legs, which seemed ineffectual at first, clawed at the sand and rock toward Kallie. Her wing casings lifted, and she emitted a rumble that sounded like the call of a diseased goat.

Kallie stepped back without meaning to and wrestled with her rising fear, but it soon began to ebb, because the more the queen struggled to reach her, the clearer it was that she could not move from her bed. She'd probably been there for years, Kallie realized, perhaps since the moment of her birth.

Most of the beetles around the queen were small -- the workers, perhaps, or drones -- but there were also several of the larger warriors, a handful of which flew and landed near Kallie.

"No turn," Nilawi said. "No run."

Kallie nearly disobeyed, but she stood rooted as a small coughing fit overtook her. The queen finally stopped her scrambling and turned her great head to Nilawi. Nilawi's eyes were closed and her hands were hanging at her side, palms facing the queen.

Kallie was struck momentarily by vertigo, but then, as she had in the desert, her awareness expanded. She felt the mass of the gorge through hundreds of rudimentary nerves, felt the air run through it like cold blood through rigid veins, felt the teeming hosts of dejda toiling under the will of the Ohokwa.

"You feel?" Nilawi said.

Kallie knew she should lie. She should tell Nilawi she felt nothing, for surely once Nilawi's fears were confirmed she would end Kallie's life. But Kallie had already shown it on her face. Nilawi knew; all she lacked were the details.

"I feel . . . something."

"Speak it."

Kallie shrugged. "It's . . . wide and deep," she said simply, hoping to remain as vague as possible.

Nilawi pointed to the warrior beetles. "You make them come?"

Kallie had no idea if she could or not, but she wasn't about to try. If she succeeded, Nilawi would feel threatened, and if she failed . . . She didn't want to think about that. She shook her head and stepped backward. The dejda skittered after her, and the contact that had been so tenuous vanished.

Nilawi imposed herself between Kallie and the dejda. The beetles stopped and backed away after a rebellious pause. When Nilawi turned back to Kallie, her face was sad and thoughtful. She glanced at the entrance to the cavern and stepped closer.

"Queen dies," she said, motioning to the monstrous, chittering insect a few paces away. "When she do, she pick someone. Someone to become sister to her daughter." Nilawi pointed to the far end of the cavern. "Twin. You see?"

Kallie had been too shocked to notice, but a mottled red cocoon the size of a curled up collie rested in a bed of sand at the far end of the cavern. As she watched, a shudder undulated down the length of it, sending a chill galloping along Kallie's spine.

Nilawi paced the width of the cavern, the warrior beetles opening their wing cases each time she passed by. The more she paced, the more agitated she seemed to become. "She choose," Nilawi said as she stopped and faced Kallie, her expression an accusation. "She choose *you*, milk-faced tahone."

Kallie turned to run. Nilawi's low whistle cut over the drone of the insects. Kallie fled toward the altar room. Already she heard the warrior beetles take flight. The first landed on her back and stung her twice near the kidney. The second stung her in the neck. Two more

bit into her rump and thigh. She screamed, trying to rid herself of them, but a moment later, she collapsed. A pain, dull at first, built and rose to a fever pitch as she writhed on the ground.

No more stings came, and a moment later, Kallie realized why. Nilawi stood above her, a dejda resting on her outstretched wrist.

"Now she choose *me,* tahone. Nilawi Gray Heart. You understand? Tell ancestors Nilawi Gray Heart was one who slew you."

The beetles took flight at a final whistle from Nilawi, but another high and piercing sound broke through. The blood-colored beetles fell to the ground or flew into the wall or rolled into a ball. When they were all buzzing and chittering on the ground, the high whistling stopped. It was followed immediately by a cackle. A tattered shawl interrupted Kallie's vision. Paheka placed herself between Kallie and Nilawi and spoke in Ohokwa to the beetles, which all backed away to the queen and beyond.

Nilawi screamed at Paheka, but Paheka only pointed a crooked finger at Nilawi, and two warrior beetles launched themselves from her shoulders toward Nilawi.

Nilawi ran.

The pain or the poison became too much then, and blackness closed in.

igms

The third time I woke, I discovered a great yearning for life.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, this was the most important thing I had learned thus far.

igms

Kallie woke facing a wall slick with moisture, which for some reason -- perhaps the closeness of the wall, perhaps the humidity -- sent her spiraling downward into a horrid coughing fit. She cleared the sour sputum from her aching throat and tried to pull herself up, but try as she might, the throbbing pain in her neck and spine wouldn't allow it. Her grunts echoed into the hidden distance as she tried again and again -- she'd be damned if she'd just wait for whatever fate had in store for her. Every joint in her body felt like it had been seared. Eventually, though the pain didn't lessen, she was able to control it better, and finally she managed a sitting position.

She found herself in a natural cavern the size of her kitchen back home. The rock beneath her thrummed. The faint roar of the river could be heard in the distance. The wet, rounded features of the cavern reflected the pink light from the single crystal set on the ground near a passageway leading out.

Footsteps approached, and Kallie scrambled for a makeshift weapon she could use to defend herself as Paheka limped into the room, her tattered horsehair shawl hanging around her shoulders like vines over a weathered tombstone. Three small dejda crawled along her arms and shoulders; another two or three wandered the folds of her decrepit clothing. Kallie wondered how she could have navigated the passageways, for she bore no crystal.

Paheka crumpled into a cross-legged position and reached beneath the folds of her shawl. She produced a small earthenware bottle and tossed it into Kallie's lap.

"What's this?" Kallie asked, shaking the bottle. Liquid sloshed within.

"Drink," Paheka snapped. "It help you cough."

Kallie pulled out the stick acting as a stopper and sniffed. She'd expected something foul, but it smelled . . . sweet, and fragrant, like brightbonnets or milk thistle. "Is it kayeya?"

Paheka chuckled while creating a bridge from one hand to another for a particularly mobile dejda. "No, tahone. Better than kayeya. Dejda honey, queen milk, what they feed to unborn."

Kallie frowned and set the bottle aside. She wasn't about to drink something given to her by this crazy old woman, whether she claimed it was better than kayeya or not. "Where are we?"

"You safe. That enough for now."

"Is Nilawi still after me?"

"*After*? Trying kill you, you mean. Yes. She think you block her path to throne.She speak elders. Tell them Goheshdekana think you like noise, cannot choose twin."

Kallie sat back and tried to massage the sting along the meat of her calf. Goheshdekana could be none other than the queen beetle Nilawi had shown her. Kallie had . . . bonded to the queen in some way, but how could she, a *tahone*, do such a thing?

"Does she have the right of it?" Kallie asked. "Am I interfering?"

Paheka smacked her lips and took in Kallie as if she'd forgotten she was there. "From Nilawi eyes, yes. You do."

"What about from your eyes?"

Paheka frowned and pinched her deep-set eyes as if she was hurting something terrible. Then her eyes snapped open and she fixed Kallie with a fierce glare. "Me think you free Paheka, free her to wander fields."

"Wander --" Kallie coughed "-- wander fields?"

Paheka said nothing in return, but in that moment their eyes connected deeply. Kallie *felt*Paheka's presence, not just with her eyes and ears, but in her bones and in her blood. Paheka felt suddenly kindred, like a sister, and Kallie knew Paheka had been granted the same sort of senses Kallie had, only she'd had it for years, decades. Perhaps it was what had pushed her to the edge of madness.

Paheka hugged her legs to her chest. She stared at her toes, like a little girl dreaming of the days when she would be grown up.

"What did you mean," Kallie said slowly, "when you first met me? You said I was conspiring."

Paheka considered for a moment. "Conspiring with queen."

"How could I do that?"

"Queen need you. And you need queen."

"That don't make sense."

Paheka continued to stare at her feet, but her hand reached out and scratched the stone absently. "Dejda, queen most, be trapped by Ohokwa. Queen need person from outside. Like you."

"But *why*?" Kallie said it a little too loud.

Paheka blinked and regarded Kallie anew. A hurt look settled over her, and she stood and pointed to the nearly forgotten bottle. "Drink!" she said as she shambled toward the exit. She cackled, and at a wave from her hand, the cavern went dark.

"No!" Kallie yelled. But the sounds of Paheka's shambling grew softer and softer. Soon there was only silence, and the occasional drip of water in the distance.

The walls closed in. Kallie's muscles tightened. Her breath came faster and faster, until she was gasping. The only thing that helped was the thrum of the Chedahoa, but she knew that was only temporary. She had to figure out what Paheka had meant. She had to understand what Goheshdekana wanted, for only in that could she save herself.

She forced herself to breathe slowly while playing Paheka's words over and over in her mind.

Dejda, queen most, be trapped by Ohokwa.

In what way was the queen trapped? The Ohokwa surely saw to her every need. And even if they didn't, why would the queen need an outsider? How would that free Paheka? The answer lay just out of reach, and the truth eluded her no matter how hard she tried.

Kallie took the bottle with trembling hands and took a whiff. The chance to be free of her consumption begged her to drink it. But she didn't trust Paheka as far as she could throw a newborn calf, so she set the bottle down on the cold rock and groped through the darkness, trying to follow the path Paheka had taken. She scrabbled at the rough cavern walls, stutter-stepping her way to a branch in the passageway as the sounds of dripping and the thrum of the river surrounded her. Her next step sent her sprawling, and something bit into her shin. She felt blood trickling down her leg, and as she stood, she began coughing again. It continued for minutes on end. Kallie spit out a massive amount of sputum and blood, more than ever before.

Paheka's words taunted her . . . *It help you cough*, she'd said.

The chance that it might act as the tonic did and heal her consumption proved too much of a temptation. At the first sign of the fit easing up, Kallie rushed back to the cavern and waved her hands frantically over the uneven ground until she found the bottle. Without allowing herself time to think, she unstoppered it and drank the sweet, thick liquid. It coursed down her throat. A giddy sensation suffused her frame. She felt warm, like she did after a stiff drink, but her chest felt little different.

Kallie shivered as wings rattled above her head. She shied away and shambled up the passage. Another dejda buzzed near the ground. She screamed and ducked as yet another whizzed by her ear.

Only then did she realize she could *feel* them. The sense granted by the beetle queen was active again, and she could sense dozens upon dozens of warrior dejda around her. In fact, there were so many that they outlined the passageway ahead of her like cave moss shedding light to guide her way.

She followed their trail. When there was a branch in the passage, the dejda occupied only one of them. A chanting echoed through the tunnels -- the Ohokwa, surely, performing the equinox ceremony. Kallie soon sensed the cavern of the queen and her brood a few hundred paces up. The queen's presence filled the entire space ahead, even beyond, as if she'd somehow grown much, much stronger.

Kallie came upon the queen's cavern. A dozen or so Ohokwa men and women, all naked except for loin cloths, danced around the massive queen. The men chanted in a rhythmic bass, the women in shrill counterpoint. Many Ohokwa watched the ceremony silently, Paheka and Wattoha and Iye among them.

The dejda around Kallie were becoming more animated. A few devolved into a wing-shaking frenzy, but others buzzed with a low burning hatred.

Kallie crept closer.

Wattoha stepped forward and handed an earthenware mug to Nilawi, who rose to a kneeling position and raised the mug above her head, exposing her naked breasts and stomach to the chittering dejda queen.

Kallie could sense the queen clearly now, could feel her -- could it be? -- emotions. Kallie didn't understand how such a thing was possible, but the queen *feared*, she*despaired*, and more than anything, she *hated*. It was an all-encompassing anger Kallie had felt only once in her life: the moments after discovering her niece had been raped by the Branson boys. That had been a blind rage, a time at which she would gladly have killed.

It had also been momentary.

This, on the other hand, this raw emotion flooding the cavern, was constant, as if the queen were a landslide that had no choice but to unleash its furious energy until fully spent, which made the mystery of the queen perfectly, terrifyingly clear. In the queen's mind, the dejda had been slaves for eons, generations beyond count. Their lives had been thrown away at the humans' merest whims. They hadn't been in control of their own destinies since the first Ohokwa woman had learned to bond with the first dejda queen. No matter that the Ohokwa had lent them a growing consciousness in the intervening years; it was a byproduct of their enslavement.

But the queen's nascent thirst for revenge had not been able form fully until now. The Ohokwa minds had been too rigidly fixed on the dejda and had become too similar after so many years being bonded. The queen had needed a catalyst to break from the pattern that had been passed down through the generations.

Kallie's hands went cold . . .

When Kallie had entered the desert, the queen had seized upon her as something new, something that might help her. Like a trickle of water that eventually destroys the dam, that initial contact had scratched away at the bonds that prevented the queen from reaching full consciousness. Kallie realized with a twist in her gut that she had just completed that transformation minutes ago when she'd drank the elixir. Now nothing stood between the queen and her dreams of vengeance.

Nothing except Kallie.

She couldn't allow this to happen, no matter what the Ohokwa might have done to her. She couldn't watch an entire village be murdered like dogs.

Kallie crept forward, attempting to use her link to the queen to quell the anger. She allowed the emotion to travel from her like cool water spreading across a tiled floor.

It was then that Nilawi brought the mug to her lips.

"No!" Kallie shouted. She charged into the light.

The room plunged into an eerie silence.

Kallie raised her hands in a sign of peace. "Don't drink it." The moment Nilawi drank the liquid, another bond to the queen would be created, and when that happened it would be too much for Kallie to control. The queen's anger would bubble over like an unwatched pot.

Nilawi pointed to Kallie and shouted commands in Ohokwa. Two of the nearly naked warriors advanced toward her.

Using her bond in a new fashion, Kallie willed the dejda to protect her, an action not unlike pointing a finger. A dozen of the large beetles buzzed past her and landed on the warriors. The Ohokwa screamed as the beetles bit deep into legs and arms and chests. Several more warriors stepped forward to help, but Nilawi and Wattoha both screamed at them to remain where they were. A moment later, Kallie ordered the attacking beetles to her side as the warriors crawled to safety.

A taut silence filled the room.

The dejda queen's head shook and her mandibles clacked as she fought against the barrier Kallie's emotions had enforced upon her.

"What have you done?" Wattoha asked with great care.

A cackle broke the silence. Paheka pointed a crooked finger at Kallie. She whistled, low and trilling, and the dejda flew into the tunnel. Kallie ordered the beetles back to her side. They didn't return, but neither did they retreat further.

For the moment, she and Paheka had reached a stalemate.

"It's the queen," Kallie said quickly. "She's going to destroy you."

Nilawi's face turned red and angry. She stalked forward, but Wattoha stalled her. "What do you mean?" Wattoha asked.

"Bah!" Paheka limped forward and she shouted to Nilawi in Ohokwa.

Nilawi eyed the mug she'd left on the floor. She took a step toward it, but at a word from Wattoha the warriors stopped her. As Nilawi struggled, Wattoha turned to Kallie.

"Tell me what you mean," Wattoha said, her face rigid with a suppressed rage.

"You know the queen has bonded with me for some reason."

Nilawi shouted in Ohokwa.

"I can feel her hatred," Kallie continued. "I can feel her hunger. She will not be controlled as her ancestors have for ages beyond count. She will destroy you --" Kallie pointed to the mug near Nilawi's feet "-- and all it will take is a sip of the queen's milk."

Wattoha considered Kallie, and then turned to the queen. Kallie felt a probing from Wattoha. She was trying to ascertain the truth of Kallie's claims, but as she'd suspected the Ohokwa Queen was too weak to have any real understanding of Goheshdekana's intent.

With the room's attention held, Paheka stood upright and pointed to Nilawi and the warriors holding her. Kallie felt Paheka's fury wash over her. The cavern wailed with the rattle of dejda. A swarm of them overtook the two warriors. They released Nilawi in a vain attempt at self defense.

Nilawi launched herself at the mug and downed as much of the liquid as she could manage.

The call of the dejda was like an explosion in Kallie's mind. She fell to the ground, unable to mount even the feeblest of counters.

Nilawi screamed. Kallie could only assume the same thing was happening to her.

All around the cavern, beetles flew. Landed. Stung. The Ohokwa cried with surprise and pain and anger. The women fled, though most of them did so with a dozen dejda crawling over their bodies. The warriors attempted to counterattack, but most dropped to the ground moments later, writhing in pain.

Paheka reared back and clapped, laughing shrilly as Wattoha and Iye crumpled to the ground. She pointed and smiled insanely at the carnage before her. The dejda swarmed everywhere, obscuring Kallie's vision, but they were clearly leaving Paheka, Nilawi, and Kallie alone.

An axe slipped free from a fallen warrior's grasp and clattered to the ground near Kallie's feet. She took it up immediately and charged. Paheka's eyes widened and she laughed even more while pointing a crooked finger in Kallie's direction.

Kallie came down as hard as she could on the back of the queen's head.

A sickening crunch rose above the buzzing call of the beetles.

Paheka collapsed, lifeless. The beetles fell to the ground, still moving, but most had ceased their high-pitched rattle.

Kallie breathed heavily, ready to strike again, but the queen lay utterly still. Nilawi stared up at Kallie with wide eyes, crazed eyes, but then something behind Kallie captured Nilawi's attention.

Kallie spun around.

The undulating form of the hatchling queen's cocoon shivered. Glistening mandibles ripped at the casing, and it was then that Kallie realized her connection to the queen hadn't been severed. It persisted. She stood confused for long moments, but understanding came as the new queen crawled from its birthing chamber and flexed her huge wing cases.

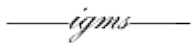
Kallie had never been connected to Goheshdekana -- at least, it hadn't been completely so. It had been the growing mind of the new queen that had connected with her in the desert, that Kallie had nurtured with the thoughts and emotions of a settler.

She took a step forward, brandishing the axe, but the young queen clicked her mandibles, and many of the warrior dejda whirred around Kallie. Kallie considered charging forward anyway, but at the mere thought, a half-dozen of them landed on her hair and chest and stomach. She dropped the axe and tried to shake them away, ineffectually. Only when she'd retreated to Nilawi's side did they free themselves from her and return to their queen's side.

Even as the cries of dying Ohokwa echoed through the passageways behind them, the young queen stared on, jubilant.

The queen didn't have to use words for Kallie to know that she and Nilawi were being*allowed* to leave. Nilawi seemed not to care, however. She was on her knees, crying, caressing her mother's cheek. Kallie tugged at her, gently at first, but then with force, until finally Nilawi stood and followed her out of the cavern.

The last Kallie saw of the young queen was her moving to the dead queen's body and biting into the gooey flesh of her engorged abdomen. Her brood quickly followed suit.



The flatbed wagon rocked and jingled as it trekked eastward and the morning heat intensified. Kallie rode in the rear, watching the second wagon and the horses that followed.

She coughed, once, knowing that her consumption had been cured -- some small gift in payment for leading the queen to the plane of consciousness. She felt no relief, however, for the mind of the queen was still with her, crowding the back of her mind. She wanted to scrape it clean, to start over, but she knew the feeling would be with her until either she or the dejda queen was dead.

Kallie regarded Nilawi, who met her gaze with a strange mixture of fear and defiance and apology. Kallie could *feel* Nilawi -- their common link to the queen granted each a faint but clear empathy of the other. Kallie tried to smile, but was sure she'd failed miserably. Nilawi's face hardened as she turned to study the cloud of beetles swarming above the gorge.

Six Ohokwa children rode with them, all of them dazed, many staring with anxious eyes toward the gorge.

God in Heaven, Kallie thought as she looked over the children, two wagons and four horses -- *nineteen* Ohokwa tribesmen, all told. Nineteen from a village of, what, four hundred?

The dejda could have killed them all, including Kallie. The young queen had granted some small amount of mercy. Either that or she wished word of her transcendence to travel as the Ohokwa survivors flew east to Shaukauna lands, unwilling heralds to the new power rising in the desert.

It was clear the future of tribesmen and settlers alike had been forever changed, but Kallie tried to console herself -- perhaps the dejda would be satisfied with owning the gorge, or perhaps just the desert.

Kallie hugged her stomach tighter as memories flooded her mind. Please, God, let her be satisfied with the gorge.

The fourth time I woke, I found myself.

Mine eyes have opened, my children, and never shall they close again.

Artwork by Dean Spencer

Great Mother, Great Father

by William Saxton

The first chief of the Rapahoah Empire forced stranded time-travelers to use their technical skills to make his people great, setting his Empire on the path to build ships, airplanes and bombs, to spread the worship of the Great Mother and subdue first the rest of North America and then the world.

Two centuries later, Europe, Asia and Africa were independent again, no longer paying the tribute of sacrificial victims; but North America continued the blood sacrifices. To appease the Great Mother, certainly, but mostly to honor her wisdom. The Great Mother is too capricious to be appeased for long, as the city of Southport, bludgeoned by a hurricane and flooded with Mississippi water, had reason to know.

The day after the storm, Tzichem, an officer of the Southport Police Force, risked going out for supplies. He took his wife Dikayah and their baby boy with him. The city was in anarchy, and there was no way he was going to leave them at home alone.

In the flooded lot of a supermarket, they saw a crowd trying to break in.

"We aren't going into *that*," Tzichem told Dikayah. Too dangerous.

"We have to get something for Pio," Dikayah said. "We're down to the last jar of formula." Pio, the baby, cooed up at her from her shoulder harness. Her eyes glistened, and Tzichem . . . seeing her cry made Tzichem want to put his fist through a wall.

He turned away and scanned the crowd. "They'll either break in, in which case we'll follow, or else the company's salvagers will come." He sighed. "And we'll leave."

"Why would we leave?" she said. "You're a policeman. Tell them! Tell them you can help!"

"We'll see," he said, meaning, let's not argue.

Glass shattered in the storefront. The crowd surged into the supermarket.

"Let's go," Tzichem said. There'd be formula inside. There'd be clean water . . . they went as fast as they could in the knee-deep water: a slow walk.

As they came to the storefront, with other stragglers, Tzichem heard an engine.

A speedboat came into view. Store employees, soldiers in the livery of the nobleman who ran it, bristling with guns.

Tzichem and Dikayah changed course abruptly, away from the storefront, water swirling around their legs. Others jostled into them, trying to get clear of the path between the boat and the shattered storefront. Tzichem found himself and Dikayah directly in the boat's path.

He moved back with her, keeping his hands in plain view. The security force ignored him.

They put on gas masks. Oh, Great Mother, it wasn't just body armor; they were going to gas the building.

The soldiers fired something into the store.

People came boiling out. The fact that they could suggested that the gas wasn't lethal. Or maybe no one was willing to find out. The soldiers, too late, backed the boat away from the shattered storefront, letting the crowd escape.

A man slammed into Dikayah, knocking her over. Tzichem reached for her; she scrambled to right herself, grabbed onto the side of the soldier's boat --

"No!" Tzichem yelled --

He heard the gunfire. People screamed; Tzichem pulled Dikayah to him. The water was still brown, but now had a tinge of red.

The bullethole was in her head. Oh, Great Mother . . .

Pio was no longer in her arms.

He couldn't keep her upright and look for the baby. He couldn't . . . he let her go. He looked around. Looters were fleeing; cardboard boxes and plastic wrap floated in the muddy water -- but there was no bundle of white that would be Pio.

The boat moved to the edge of the lot, presumably to let the crowd disperse.

He still couldn't find Pio.

Then he saw something white, floating. He forced his way through the muddy water to get to it.

He was too late. Pio had taken a blow to the head -- maybe the boat, maybe a propeller. The hand of the Great Mother, whatever tool she used.

The crowd was mostly gone, and the soldiers were coming back in. Their lord would have his store back mostly intact.

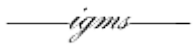
Tzichem felt a wash of rage. Impotent rage: they'd shoot him if he approached. There was nothing he could do to them.

Or for Dikayah and Pio. He had brought them to their deaths. It was his fault. Oh, Dikayah, he thought, I'm so sorry, so sorry . . .

He couldn't stop his grieving, but he could take action despite it. He put on the shoulder harness and laid Pio in it. Then he took Dikayah's body and left. Caring for an empty shell when the soul was gone: showing the world his heresy. A wise man would be stoic. A wise man would know that death is part of life.

He couldn't carry them throughout the day. He found an abandoned apartment with only its windows shattered by the hurricane, and laid Dikayah's body on a clean bed with Pio in her arms. They looked so peaceful . . . he let the tears come, racking sobs that shook him.

He knew what the afterlife would be for them. The Mother would surely disdain them as victims and give them to her demons . . . oh, Great Mother, he prayed, don't let them suffer for my mistakes. Don't let them suffer. He knew the Mother would hold him in contempt for such a prayer; still he asked.



When the First Father came to the Great Mother's bedchamber, he knew nothing of the danger. The Mother's demons seized him and the Mother devoured him. "He will feed me," she said. "He is good for nothing else."

Heading out of the city -- there was nothing to stay for -- took him past the British consulate, its windows shattered and girders twisted by the Mother's fury. A pale-faced foreigner struggled with a shattered door. Tzichem kept going, through the knee-deep water.

Tzichem's right foot slipped, and went deep into a hole. He took in a mouthful of water; something pierced his foot, right through the shoe.

He struggled to free himself, but his foot was caught. He breathed water. He should be brave -- he shouldn't struggle -- he couldn't stop himself. His lungs felt about to burst.

Eventually he stopped struggling. It was a relief.

He felt something moving his foot, but he could no longer resist. Then someone was pulling him backward, arms gripping around his chest.

Somehow he was on a dry place, retching and coughing out water.

There was someone sitting beside him, looking over his bare foot. It was the pale man he'd just seen. They were in the consulate building, then. What was left of it.

The man saw Tzichem looking at him. "You're welcome," the man said wryly. It wasn't a European accent; the man was surely North American, a descendant of the time travelers. "Raiders," they called themselves, after something from their bloodless "football" games.

"How bad?" Tzichem said.

"The ankle's already starting to swell," the man said. "And you've got a hole almost through the foot. That's not good."

It certainly wasn't. The wound would almost certainly get infected. Tzichem looked out at the brown water covering the street. "'Water of life,'" he said. Like the water of the underworld, which both seethes with noisome life and kills those who fall into it.

The man snorted. "If that's what you want to call it," he said. "We'd better get this sterilized." He took out a bottle. "This is going to sting a little," he said gruffly.

If Tzichem could endure what had already happened, he could surely endure mere physical pain. He steeled himself, and let out no more than a grunt when the whiskey touched the wound.

Tzichem's foot was cleaned, bandaged and wrapped in a garbage bag, to keep out some of the dirty water.

The man's name was Ira; he looked to be about thirty. "You're not consulate staff," Tzichem said. Not with that accent.

"No," Ira said. "I'm a copier repairman. I contract here sometimes." He looked over the wound. "We've got to get you out of here."

"Why?" Ira didn't owe him anything.

"Tetanus, for one thing. You need treatment."

A good reason, to be sure. "I meant, why help me? You don't even know me," Tzichem said.

Ira sat back on his haunches and stared, so that Tzichem feared he was reconsidering whether to abandon him. If that happened Tzichem might well die. Not necessarily a bad thing.

"'The Lord delights in mercy,'" Ira said finally.

"What?"

"That's from one of the prophets. *Our* prophets, that is, the Jewish ones."

Tzichem lost interest. "Slave religion," he said.

"You're not upper class either," Ira said. "If you were, you'd have been evacuated before the hurricane." Ira pointed to the police insignia on Tzichem's uniform. "You're a policeman. Why *weren't* you evacuated?"

"They said the buses were full," Tzichem said through clenched teeth. And why were he and his family at the end of the list? Because he was of the Lassamatchee tribe, not native Rapahoahan. Tzichem was sure of it.

"The elite got out," Ira said, "and left you behind."

"'He who is indifferent to suffering, in himself, in others, and in the Mother: such a man can rule in life and beyond,'" Tzichem quoted. It was an ideal any wise man would follow. "You, on the other hand, will be in hell itself, because you are foolish."

"Jews don't believe in hell," Ira said. "At least *I* don't. Although I've seen enough here, I probably should."

Tzichem felt a pang of guilt for his own lack of ruthlessness. He shouldn't try to convince Ira. He should be using him. Weak, weak, weak.

"Let's see about getting you out of here," Ira said.

They went down to street level and walked in the water, Tzichem leaning on Ira some to take weight off his hurt foot. From Ira's expression, it must have been tiring for him as well. Tzichem said so.

"Forget about it," Ira said.

They walked on in silence. It was a mistake: it let Tzichem think about what had happened. He just wanted Dikayah and Pio back, and safe. Since he couldn't have that, he didn't care about anything else. They were in torment, and because of that, in his own way, so was he.

By noon they were out of the flood zone. They saw few people and spoke with none. They stopped whenever Tzichem needed a rest, which was often. A crutch Tzichem made from a downed tree limb helped.

As sunset drew near, they broke into an abandoned quadriplex house. All four families had left behind canned food; some had left some of that awful cola stuff the slave class, the Raiders, loved so much.

They ate in the kitchen, sitting on damp furniture covered with fine glass shards from the busted windows.

"What happened?" Ira said finally.

"What?"

"You're not just in pain because of your foot."

Tzichem tried to answer, and found that he couldn't.

"Just say it," Ira said. "It won't make it any more real."

So Tzichem said it. "My wife -- my son --"

His eyes welled up. He stood, tried to leave the room, but Ira stood as well, blocking him.

"Get out of the way," Tzichem said, gruffly.

"No," Ira said.

Tzichem tried to shove him aside, and put weight on the bad foot. It was like driving a spike in it all over again. He lost his balance, and Ira caught him, and . . . Tzichem stopped resisting. He sat back down and cried, regardless of what Ira -- a Raider, anyway -- would think of him.

Ira just waited. Eventually Tzichem stopped, and wiped his eyes and nose.

"What happened?" Ira said.

Tzichem told him.

Ira's eyes flashed. "I know I'm not supposed to have opinions on non-technical matters, being a Raider. But believe me, I do."

"'Suffering is part of the Mother's plan,'" Tzichem said, without any intent to argue. A Raider wouldn't understand anyway.

"I know all about the Mother's plan," Ira said dryly. "You should too. I see how you look; you're not Rapahoahan. What tribe? Chocktaw?"

"Lassamatchee," Tzichem said.

"What happened to your people, two centuries ago, when Rapahoah was expanding?" Ira asked. "To the Maukeegans? The Monacans, and the Cherokee? And how many of your relatives were sacrificed when they retired, because it was easier than paying their pensions?"

Only one. Ordinarily, Tzichem would have pointed out the spiritual value to the survivors. Now, without judgment, he just thought about his grandmother. She'd taught him the sacred stories, and though she warned him to be stern, she was always gentle with him. With everyone. And when her eyes were too weak for her to work in the factory, she was volunteered to bring divine favor to others by a week-long death. Those who are sacrificed in this life go on to be sacrificed eternally in the next. He'd stopped thinking about her, because it hurt too much.

He'd stopped thinking about Grandfather too. Grandfather wasn't sacrificed, but he died two months after Grandmother, pining for her. In eternity, surely, he'd still be pining.

Tzichem knew he shouldn't avoid thinking of them. To ignore unpleasant truth is idiocy.

"And as for my ancestors . . ." Ira's eyes glistened. "You know what happened to Joe Silverman." The leader of the time-traveling party that was captured. "I'm Ira Silverman. Every generation, all the way back to the time travelers' arrival, at least one of my ancestors was sacrificed."

Joe Silverman. Michelle Hayakawa. Stu Powell. Figures nearly as famous as the First Father, and for the same reason: naïveté. Silverman was tortured; Hayakawa was forcibly married to the chief; Powell's head was used in the sacred ball game.

"It doesn't have to be this way," Ira said.

Tzichem waved his arm out at the broken kitchen windows, and at the ruined city beyond.

Ira apparently understood him. "I know awful things happen in nature," he said. "But do we have to make it worse, in the way we treat each other?"

Grandmother never did. Dikayah never did. But they never bucked the system, either, built from the Great Mother's religion and the time travelers' wisdom, the prophets Adam Smith and Isaac Newton and Henry Ford. To buck the system you needed to believe in something else, like this Jew . . .

"You're not just a Raider," Tzichem said. "You're a rebel -- aren't you? You work for the British. Or someone."

"No," Ira said. "I'm just a survivor."

Tzichem didn't believe him -- but what did it matter? He clasped Ira's hand and pulled it to his heart. "What you are," Tzichem said, "is a good man." Good, like Grandmother.

Grandmother was good, and she'd been sacrificed. The good have so much to offer, in this world and beyond, through the suffering they do for the victors.

Ira was good like Grandmother. By all rights he should be sacrificed.

But Tzichem didn't want him to be, any more than he'd wanted it to happen to Grandmother. Maybe Tzichem was part Jew himself, or at least part Raider, in his heart. Maybe that was why the Mother had done this to him: to show him what a fool he was.

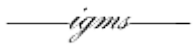
——*igms*——

When the Second Father came to the bedchamber of the Great Mother, he was wiser than the First. He carried a spear, and told her, "If you harm me, I will pierce you." She swore an oath that she would not harm him that night. So when he lay down with her, and put down the spear, it was her demons that seized him. "He is more worthy than the First," the Mother said, and she used his remains to make the world.

——*igms*——

Tzichem awoke in the night with cold chills.

It was too dark to look for aspirin, and he had no flashlight. He went to the closet, pulled out clothes, and piled them over the bed, then got under them. He didn't sleep; he was shivering too hard.



Ira looked him over the next morning, and reappeared with aspirin. "You need penicillin," Ira said, "but nobody here seems to have had any."

The aspirin helped with the chills. Tzichem cut his boot open so that he could get his swollen foot back in it.

"I feel ashamed, being dependent," Tzichem said. "I should be stronger."

"You can give to someone else later," Ira said. "You're a policeman, so you'll have plenty of opportunities. And then they can do the same . . . and if enough of us do, the Great Mother will be out of luck."

As if acts of charity could stop hurricanes, old age, and death.

The going was slower today. "But we may not be far from civilization," Ira said. "I can't believe they'll ban us from using the big limited-access highway that goes up to Arkansas. Maybe we can get transport. Do you have money?"

"It's wet," Tzichem said, "but they should still take it."

Along the way, he was awed by the effects of the Great Mother's rage. A bus, picked up and dropped on another, crushing both; an uprooted tree, thrown through the roof of a house. "She does what she likes," Tzichem observed.

Ira shrugged. "She doesn't seem to be very friendly."

"'Death causes life,'" Tzichem quoted. Grandmother liked to quote that one. "Even your people know that, with your environmental science."

"That doesn't mean I want to be the fertilizer," Ira said.

"Everyone will be," Tzichem said. Ira was, frankly, an idealistic fool. But Tzichem now felt about Ira as he would about family -- the great weakness of even the wise, it was said, since even the wise love their families.

Ira could do so much to make up for Tzichem's failings: Ira, sacrificed eternally like Grandmother, always suffering to make life better for the one who turned him in . . . the Great Mother would know, then, that Tzichem wasn't such a fool after all.

He *was* a fool, though: a fool to trust the nobility, which evacuated its children rather than sacrificing them to avert the storm, as had been done in days of old; a fool to let himself be so devastated by what the Mother did. A fool today, because he didn't want Ira hurt, couldn't bear to think of this good man suffering because of him. Like the First and Second Fathers, like every man, ultimately: a fool.

When the Great Father, the Third, came to the Great Mother's bedchamber, he was wiser than the First or the Second. He brought a shard of the Second Father's legbone, and held it to the Mother's neck through the night as they lay engaged, so that even her demons dared not intervene. But as morning came he fell asleep, and so he was killed as well.

The Great Mother was pleased at his wisdom and gave him a place of honor in death: ruling with her, a flaming glory in the skies. The sun.

Ira's face was reddish from exposure to the Great Father: sunburn, a malady reserved for the pale people.

It seemed their journey under the hot sun would never end. They rested often. Ira made Tzichem stay full of aspirin. "We can't afford to have you feverish," Ira said.

"I'm all right," Tzichem said. But he wondered how much farther he could travel.

And, eventually, they were at the highway.

Bus drivers stood outside their vehicles, holding signs with prices on them. There were soldiers on patrol, with rifles. Other buses and cars still moved north, away from Southport, and trucks and troop transports moved south.

Tzichem saw no bodies, but there were men in chains: looters, perhaps. Bound for the sacred ball game or the altar.

"Is this area under martial law?" he asked a soldier.

"Yes," the soldier said. He had a clipboard. "Your name?"

Tzichem gave it. When he gave his rank, they called his supervisor: Biachee, who'd left him in Southport. Who'd left Dikayah and Pio. Biachee, who was strong, as the Great Mother intended.

Showing hatred would gain Tzichem nothing. Tzichem pushed it away and gave Biachee his name and location.

He looked at Ira. He felt horrible doing this, so horrible . . . he took a deep breath and added, "I have captured a seditionist." His voice shook. "I believe he's spying for the British."

He turned and looked full into Ira's shocked face. To be a man of wisdom, one must face one's actions.

The fear he saw in Ira's face meant nothing: who wouldn't fear what they'd do to a suspected spy? The sadness was worse, because it wrenched Tzichem's gut, and it shouldn't have. He wished he could unsay the words.

He pushed that wish away.

Ira stared, his mouth open. "On the ground," a soldier ordered. Ira complied. The soldier cuffed him.

Tzichem wouldn't say he was sorry. The point was to not be sorry. The point was to never, never care, to prove to the Great Mother he was wise . . .

And if she was generous, Ira might turn out to be a major operative. Tzichem would be rewarded with a promotion and a pay increase. And -- he promised himself -- if he could, he'd take the best blessings of mortal life, another family . . . and this one, he wouldn't love so much.

No. He wouldn't be able to stop himself. There was a part of him that cared, a loving part that he couldn't destroy, try as he might. A part that would always cry for what he'd done to Ira. And for Dikayah and Pio. And Grandmother . . .

He turned away. The Mother could see his tear, but he didn't have to let the soldiers see it. They were young and wouldn't understand: the greatest sacrifice isn't not to love; it's to love, and to be cruel anyway.

Suddenly he knew: the Mother was well pleased.

In The Beginning, Nothing Lasts

by Mike Strahan

Artwork by Liz Clarke

April 7, 1936

Beulah Irene wept as the workers pulled up shovels of rust red dirt from her son's grave. She covered her dark face with her hands, not wanting the men to see her. Thick bandages wrapped her arms from fingers to elbows, the skin underneath burned and itched.

The four gravediggers gave her odd glances between pulls. They were all grim men, with dirty faces and hands. Patches of sweat and red mud stained their denim trousers and cotton shirts.

Irene removed her hands from her face and focused her eyes on the men, wanting to watch until they finished. It was important to her, even though her son would not die until yesterday.

His headstone was a pitiful thing, a small square of concrete embedded in the grass and lined with dead leaves. A tall, worn, bent-back tree cast little shade. Her husband's old grave was a few feet away, empty for decades.

She closed her eyes again, and remembered her son. He had always been a pleasant child, and clever.

His first word had been coffee.

He took his first step when he was eleven months old.

His secret tickle spot was on the back of his thigh.

He was three years old when he died.

The memories had stuffed Irene's brain since her resurrection. On the surface, they were pleasant thoughts, but time played funny tricks on her these days. Old memories would crop up, pop in her head like long forgotten debts. They treated her all the same, no matter where she was, what she was doing, she would often turn to tears.

"We're done for the day, ma'am." One of the men interrupted her thoughts. Despite the dust covering his face, his eyes and smile were bright. Behind him, his friends were collecting their shovels and brooms, their jackets and lunch refuse.

"Thank you." Her mouth was dry. She turned around to look toward the eastern horizon and was surprised to see the sun a hand or so from setting. The morning was clear and hot, with a strong breeze tugging at the dry Oklahoma yellow grass. *Where has the time gone*? She wondered.

"You okay, ma'am?" He asked.

Irene shook her head and shrugged, "Just nervous." Her bandages itched, they were dirty again. Red dirt rimmed the frayed edges of the white gauze covering her arms. It looked like dried blood.

"Reckon so. It's hard sometimes." The laborer turned and raised a hand in goodbye to his departing friends. A spare denim coat and a dusty lunch pail remained. "Don't know if you recall, but I was one of the fellas that worked on your husband." His mouth creased, as though he wanted to say more.

Irene looked closely at him and shook her head, "I'm sorry, I don't remember you." Irene had a hard time remembering. Like most people, the future was a harsh muddle; she remembered senses better than events. Colors, smells, textures. Sounds. It surprised her when someone remembered something so far ahead.

"No offense taken, ma'am." He held up his hands. "I was blessed with a good memory, must've been forty years."

"It's been that long?" She asked.

"Sure has. Easier then. Job like this would've taken an hour, back when we had machines." He scratched at his ear again and looked over Irene's shoulder to the East. His eyes fell on her and for a moment, he held her gaze. "Should head home, ma'am. I'll see you."

He stepped toward the edge of the open grave and crouched down to pick up his jacket and pail. Without giving Irene another glance, he walked away with his coat flung over his shoulder.

"Thank you! For today!" Irene remembered.

He turned, walked backwards, smiled. "It's never easy, ma'am."

Irene nodded and looked down at the open grave. She was alone with her son.

Sparing a shudder, she walked home. The road into town was straight, wide enough for two autos to squeeze past each other. Most of the houses and farms she passed were empty, the families having left for the West, to work healthier land. There had been no rain in months.

The sun was almost beyond the horizon when she reached town. The buildings lining the street sagged against each other, their wooden siding faded the color of driftwood. The town's main street was a packed dirt road of choked, blood red dust.

A group of children rushed by her on the sidewalk, chasing a mongrel with an aluminum can tied to its neck. Irene gave them a sad smile as they passed.

The young were always so full of life, the first time because they thought they were immortal, the second time because they knew exactly when their end would come. Irene found it hard to watch children. They reminded her of her son.

There were other people on the street, walking dogs or riding horses, and a few older automobiles. Most of the machines from the future were artifacts now, their metal skeletons wired together in museums, the leather and rubber and plastic all rotted away.

Others had tried to rebuild things, piece back together what little the future had left them. The results were nothing but showpieces, sad monuments to a time they would never see again.

Her house was two blocks off the center of town, on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. It was a Sears' kit home, an ugly square of faded white stucco walls and sticky brown shingles. It had three rooms: a den, a kitchen, a bedroom.

She pushed open their crooked screen door. Her husband was in the den, sitting in an old easy chair, a hulk of a radio mirroring him across the room. He sighed when she entered and set yesterday's paper across his lap.

Irene ignored him. She could sense her anger from earlier in the afternoon, but the memory of their argument had faded.

He folded his arms hard across his chest and said nothing, but kept his eyes on her, his mouth set in a scowl.

Irene stepped over to the sink, and unwound her dirty bandages. She bit her lip as the heavy gauze separated from her arms and fingers, leaving behind ugly purple flesh. The doctor had been surprised that she could do anything with her hands. Her body was remembering the accident that had killed her son and scarred her for life.

The doctor had said that the resurrected body was like a book, whether you read it backward or forward, the words were always the same. If you broke a bone, or suffered a cut in your first life, your body would suffer the hurt again in the second.

Our son will suffer his hurts again, too, she reminded herself for the thousandth time.

Irene dipped her arms into a stainless steel bowl of water. The muscles in her back relaxed as the cool water took some of the edge off her pain. She pulled her bandages off the wood counter and ran them under. She had to grit her teeth as she rubbed out the dirt between her thumb and forefinger. The pain was getting worse.

Nothing lasts forever. Things will get better, easier. The thought was a salve,calming.

She tried to reapply the bandages herself, but only grew frustrated as the gauze clung awkwardly to her tender flesh.

"Can you help me?" She finally asked, her back to her husband. Her voice was raw, cracked.

Her husband pushed himself up from his chair. He was a big man; strong, with wide set shoulders and large hands. He was getting younger, and had just gotten his full head of black hair back. He had another twenty-five years until his birthday, until he returned to his mother, giving himself up to her pregnant embrace. Irene doubted that was what he wanted, but it would be his mother's decision.

Resurrection always led back to the beginning, death, life, birth. She had already decided that when her son's birth came, she would take him back into her, because she couldn't bear the thought of burying him again.

She hissed as her husband took her right arm into his rough hands and coiled the first bandage around her forearm and between her fingers. The cool, clean cloth comforted her skin.

He dipped the second bandage into the metal basin. It was one of their few prized possessions, an artifact from the future. Metal and stone and wood from older trees were the only things that could survive their own creation, everything else rotted away at the anniversary of its making.

Irene looked up at him, then away. "He's our son," she said, recalling their argument. She closed her eyes, *How could I forget*?

"I know." His voice was quiet and firm.

"Our baby," she added.

"I know."

"Then show it!" Irene turned her head up again, the muscles in her arms tensed. She wanted to lash out. "Why don't you want this?"

"It's a hard world," he sighed. His eyes shifted right, then closed, "The pain isn't worth it. Not for us to lose him again in three years."

"That's not an excuse! I've been waiting seventy years for this." Irene's words choked in her throat, "I need him. I need to see him again, even if it's only three years."

Her husband shook his head and crossed his arms, "He never had a first chance at life. With only three years, he won't have a second."

"No. No. No!" Irene wanted to hit something, to strike out at his indifference. "You don't want him back because you resent me, you resent what God has given us. You wish you had never been resurrected!"

"I do not . . ."

"You do," Irene continued, the heat building in her throat. "You've been miserable ever since you came back. You've been mad at me ever since I let them pull you from the ground!"

"No, I --"

"You --" Irene interrupted.

"Let me finish." Her husband jutted a finger in her face. He towered over her, his cheeks flushed red. "I don't think any such thing. I love you. I love our son." His breath was heavy, his words were even.

"Say his name," she ordered.

"What?"

"Say his name. It's been forty years and you have called him your kid, your boy, your son." Irene held up a fist and jutted out her fingers, counting the strikes. "You have never called him by his name. His Christian name that we gave him the day he was born. You have never said that name in this house. You've been back for forty years and you have never said his name. Not once."

"Stop it," her husband turned away from her and clenched his fists. "I don't need this."

"What's his name?!" Irene cried.

"I don't need this." He stalked away. He grabbed his coat off a peg next to the stove and slammed the screen behind him, rattling the door's wooden frame.

Run away! Irene thought, *That's all you do is run*!

Irene stumbled toward the table and pulled out a chair. She collapsed on it and laid her head on their red and white checkered tablecloth. Great racking sobs constricted her lungs as she wept. *He resents me*, she thought.

Do you blame him? She chided.

Her husband had suffered through black depression since he had returned to the living. The doctor thought there was a problem when his body was regenerating, as if the brain had not wired itself back together properly.

But that wasn't the answer. Her husband had not been happy before his death, living a life of failure and depression until he passed away in 1978. When he was reborn, it came as a shock, like a sick joke that he would have to relive his miserable life again as punishment. If anyone had wanted to remain in the ground, absent from the second chance God had given them, it was her husband, even if that meant waking up from death buried, suffocating, and dying again.

It was a predicament Irene had no problem remembering. She bore witnessed to his bitterness every day.

He thought it was a better alternative for him, thought it was best for their son. *He can say what he wants, about pain, about how hard the world is, but in the end, he's afraid. He's afraid of being hurt again*.

Aren't you afraid? She argued.

Irene didn't let her husband stay in the ground, when his time came she had the diggers uncover his grave. She needed him, to share the burden she carried, to help her life feel normal again.

And he has resented it ever since.

What her husband wanted for their son was horrible. She couldn't stand to imagine it: her son, waking up from his resurrection in his coffin, buried alive. He would survive for hours, in the dark, in the heat, alone, before he would succumb to death again.

Irene wept at the thought, and imagined what it would be like to have six feet of dirt separating her from her resurrected son, to hear his muffled cries, to claw at the red ground until her fingers were nothing but wells of blood.

She had failed him once, and couldn't fail him again.

The kitchen was dark when her husband returned, scraping the metal screen against the wood door. Outside, the crickets sang in the green of late morning.

Irene had fallen asleep at the table, her head cradled in her arms, her chin resting on the tablecloth. She woke up when her husband entered.

"Back already?" She yawned, stretching her sore arms across the table, their fight almost forgotten. She shook herself and grimaced. She hated that, when the passage of time made her forget.

"Bar was closed. Dick had an accident or something." He hung his coat up on its peg and tossed his billfold onto the counter.

"Is he alright?" Her husband had found a bottle somewhere. The stench of scotch clung to him, and permeated the tight kitchen air.

"I don't know," he coughed, "they were closed." He crossed to the other side of the table and collapsed into the chair opposite her. When he was sitting at their table he always looked like a giant, with his shoulders towering above the surface and his knees packed in tight underneath. He placed his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," she said, without meaning it.

"He's been gone a long time," he said.

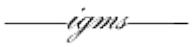
"I need this, Del, more than anything. I miss him."

Her husband rubbed at his eyes with the palms of his hands. "I'm sorry." He grimaced.

They looked at each other, silent.

"Please?" Irene asked. "Please?"

The quiet stretched, and Irene knew not to interrupt again. She kept her eyes on the tablecloth, focusing on a yellow stain near the table's edge. Her husband couldn't stop her, but she wanted him there, needed him. Their son was coming home.



April 6, 1936

The wind was blowing again like the day before, pushing Irene's skirt hard against her knees, shaking the tall tree that stood sentinel over her son's grave. The high grass of the plain was flat from the wind. In the distance, a farmer trawled his field for seeds to use the next fall, to resurrect the wheat.

The morning was hot for late spring. The cemetery wasn't far from town, but the heat and the dirt road made the journey difficult. Thick beads of sweat coated Irene's neck and daubed at the armpits of her dress. She waved her thin hands at her face absently, using the motion to settle the nervousness boiling in her belly. Her arms had been stiff and sore all afternoon, and the motion loosened them. The burning sensation had worsened through the night, waking her up several times from her shallow sleep.

Her husband was next to her, dressed for the occasion. He had slicked his hair back with leftover cooking fat, and he was wearing his only suit, the one he wore on their wedding day. The hem was ragged, and two of the buttons on his three-button coat bent at odd angles. He muttered and took a draw from his flask. They had stopped at Dick's that afternoon to fill it up. She could smell the heavy scotch on his breath. His walk was stuttering and uneven, so bad that Irene had to push the buggy they had brought for their son half of the way.

They both stepped near the edge of the grave. Her son's coffin was at the bottom, and while the laborers had cleaned and polished the surface of the lid, a light dusting of red dirt had settled on it overnight. The casket itself was a plain wood, stained a dark brown. To Irene, It looked too small.

"When are they coming?" Her husband asked, uncomfortable.

"Soon. Any minute," she replied, adjusting her hat. Her dress was a simple black. She could not remember, but imagined she wore it during her son's funeral. The thought lashed at Irene, but she pushed it down. *It'll be over soon. My baby is coming home.*

She kept her eyes on the casket, until the Reverend and the laborers arrived, and relaxed a little. *Patience,* she reminded herself.

The Reverend was the youngest of them. He was a little boy, with rosy cheeks and sandy hair, his priest's collar loose on his thin neck. Irene didn't know how much longer he had, but guessed it was less than a decade. He was one of the few children that had not retired, and Irene admired him for it.

"Irene, Delbert." The Reverend spoke with a child's falsetto and offered up a hand to her husband. "We've been waiting for this one." Behind him, the workers filed past. The men were familiar, and Irene imagined that they had been the ones who helped uncover her son tomorrow.

Irene didn't answer the Reverend, but instead turned her attention back to the coffin. Two of the workers jumped down into the hole. They worked a little space for themselves, bent down and lifted the coffin up with ease.

The casket crested the grave's edge, where the remaining two laborers picked it up and moved it to the side, setting it down next to the large pile of dirt they had dug. Irene had tensed when they brought the coffin up, worrying that the men might jostle her son. Most times, people left the casket in the ground to prevent such problems, but her son's casket was so small that lifting it out would make his recovery easier.

"How much time do we have?" The Reverend asked.

"A few minutes." Irene replied.

"Best hurry, then." The Reverend smiled. Irene's stomach gurgled. A few more minutes and her son's wait would be over. Her wait would be over. The pain in her arms intensified. She could feel it in the tips of her fingers.

The Reverend opened his bible. Behind him, the laborers removed their denim caps and stuffed them into empty pockets. Irene moved closer to her husband and clutched his arm. Her knees felt weak and her nose was growing numb.

"You okay?" her husband asked. "You're breathing hard."

"I'm fine." She tightened her grip. The skin of her arms felt as though it were on fire.*Was this what my son felt*? She hissed at the pain in her arms and closed her eyes. She had forgotten how much it hurt. It would be worse for her son, she realized. The scalding water had covered his entire body.

The Reverend began his prayer, and Irene could not focus on his words. Her breath came in short, rapid spurts. She would catch snippets, "Blessed us with his soul . . . new life . . . in resurrection . . . happy moments to cherish . . . serve out your plan . . . repentance for sins . . ." The words held little meaning for her. She tried focusing her mind, but her eyes kept wandering to the casket.

The Reverend clasped his bible shut when he finished. "The lord gives his blessing," he smiled at Irene.

Irene nodded and turned her attention to the setting sun on the Eastern horizon. Soon her son would be back. The workers moved to the large pile of dirt, and began to shovel it back into the empty grave. The Reverend stepped up to the coffin and flashed the sign of the cross in blessing, then moved away to make room for Irene and her husband.

She blinked and her vision blurred with tears. Everything was quiet, save her husband's steady breathing and the scrape of shovels against the ground. Her husband placed an arm over her shoulder and gripped her tight.

THUMP

The sound came from the coffin, shaking loose some of the dirt.

THUMP

THUMP

THUMP

Irene shuttered each time, her heart skipping a beat.

"Momma!" A muffled voice coughed through the thick wood. It was hoarse, edged with pain. "Momma! I hurt!"

Irene screamed and fell before her husband could catch her. Her knees sank into the dry grass as she wailed, placing her head in both bandaged hands as fire burned up her arms. She had forgotten how bad the pain was, the burning so hot that it washed her vision white. She knew it would hurt, but thought her joy would push it down, make it smaller.

But the pain cut both ways, she realized, as her son's scream echoed hers. *What kind of mother am I*?

"MOMMA!" Her little boy wailed again.

"Irene." Her husband was crouched next to her, his voice was thick. He stuck an arm underneath her to help her to her feet.

She looked at him, and saw the worry in the lines of his face. *He remembers. Is three years worth it*?

Irene shook the thought from her head, she had made her decision. Her son needed her now, more than ever. She let her husband guide her to the edge of his coffin as she gasped between sobs. The casket rocked back and forth on the ground, sending particles of red dirt shimmering through the air. The wind picked them up and pushed them out of sight.

"MOMMA!"

She fell to her knees again, this time at the center of the casket. Her husband knelt beside her to work at the coffin's latch. With heavy, fumbling hands he sprung the lock and lifted the lid.

Her son's face was still bright with the undertaker's makeup. He was in a simple black suit, with bare feet. His hands were bright red. He writhed on the ivory lining, his torso twisting back and forth like a rag wrung of all its water.

"MOMMA!" His voice hit her unblocked and she nearly fell on her hands.

"He will heal." The Reverend spoke up behind them, "The pain will go." His voice was calm, soothing, confident.

Irene shut her eyes, wishing the pain would come to a quick end. She leaned into the casket, moving her hands slowly. She reached for her son's hand and gripped onto it. She gasped when she felt her son grip back, feeling the bones protruding from his sharp knuckles and the tension wrought by his thin fingers. The skin of his hands was raw and angry, and he gripped hers with a force that made her cry out through the pain.

"Momma!" The boy cried again, weaker. His eyes were clenched shut. His head and his feet were the only parts that the water had not touched.

"Shhh, baby. Momma's right here." His writhing slowed, his limbs slackened and his breathing evened. Irene reached out and straightened his hair, pushing a few stray hairs on his forehead up and over his ear with a bandaged finger.

"Your father's here too," her husband croaked, fumbling the words. He leaned next to her, his knuckles bright white against the coffin's dark wood.

Her son's eyes flashed open, searching wild. His body writhed again, until his eyes found his father.

"Why?" Her son screamed. His eyes were wide and accusing. His body lost its tension as he passed out from the pain.

Irene dropped his hand.

Her husband fell away from the casket, knocking up a cloud of blood red dust.

"What does he mean?" Irene whispered. Her husband choked out a groan. She stood up from the casket, raised her voice, "What does he mean?!"

Looming over her husband, her mind tugged at the memory, reliving it in agonizing detail.

It had been just like every Monday: She filled the laundry tub, heated it to scalding. It was early, the sun well above the horizon.

Her husband was in bed, out of work, sleeping off the Okie scotch Dick made in his giant backyard kiln.

Her son had been in the other room, playing with a new wooden train that his father had bought for him on a recent job scouting trip to Kingfisher. She could still hear the sound, the *CLICK-CLACK* of wood striking wood.

CLICK-CLACK went the train. Irene could see him now, pushing it across the worn linoleum of their kitchen floor.

He played there all the time.

He knew to stay away from that awful heat.

CLICK-CLACK.

Irene closed her eyes, remembered the sounds. She had moved to the den, there had been a knock at the door.

CLICK-CLACK.

CLICK-CLACK.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

CLICK-CLACK.

Then the hiss of water, like bacon thrown on a griddle, followed by her son's scream. So close together that they played out simultaneously in her head.

She ran to the kitchen, her husband in the opposite doorway, three steps from their bed. She dove after her son, burning her arms as she pulled him from the water. Her husband was behind her, sober, frozen in indecision, fear. She did not remember hearing him get up.

"Did you . . . do this?" She cried at the completion of the memory.

Her husband's eyes shut tight, he let loose a sob.

Irene screamed. "You whoreson!" She ran behind the casket and tore a shovel from a laborer's hands, the pain in her arms forgotten.

She turned on her husband, the shovel held high. He had not moved. Tears ran tracks through the dirt on his face. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to."

Irene charged him. She swung for his head, but was stopped short as a pair of hard arms wrapped round her waist. She was lifted in the air, carried off beyond the grave, beyond the sight of her husband. She screamed and kicked, dropping the shovel so she could press down on her captor's forearms.

"Stop." The man behind her gasped. She tossed her head to see him. It was one of the diggers, caked in red dirt. He grimaced, flashing bright teeth. "Please. Stop."

". . . kill . . . him," Irene screamed through labored breath.

"No." The Reverend followed them, staying beyond Irene's kicking legs. His black slacks were stained dirt red and a few wisps of hair were out of place. "No."

"I will!"

"I know," He held up a hand, and the laborer loosened his grip and set her feet on the ground. His arms still locked around her waste. "What good will come of it?"

"He killed my son!" Irene drove against the worker's arms. He stumbled, but didnot break.

"Your son is alive," The Reverend pointed at the casket. "In time, he will forget. You will forget."

"No! I will never forget." Irene scratched at the worker's arms. He released her and Irene fell forward, to her knees. Pain shot through her arms as she landed on her wounded hands.

The Reverend forced a smile and placed his hands on her shoulders. A dimple formed against his young cheek. "That is the promise of resurrection. That is the gift the Lord has given us, why he resurrected us, to wipe the slate clean. All of our sins will be forgiven. Forgotten. As our lives roll back, all the things we have done, will be undone. In a few hours, a day, you will forget. It will be as if it never happened."

Irene did not want to forget.

"I am sorry." The Reverend's high voice broke for a moment, and he wiped away tears of his own. "In resurrection all things, all of life's mysteries, become clear. I will speak to your husband. I think it is best for you to spend this first day away from your son. By yesterday, he will be fine, and this horrible memory will be gone."

Irene screamed and lunged to her feet, only to fall flat in the dust as the laborer forced her back down by her shoulders. The remaining three diggers gathered around the casket.

The Reverend took Irene by her tender hands, and guided her to her feet. Standing, Irene was a head taller than he.

Her son was still in his casket, his eyes closed. He tossed his head and murmured something against the soft lining of his coffin. Her husband was still on his knees, his head held tight in his thick hands.

He looked up. "Please," he begged. "Please?"

Irene shook her head, bit her lip. The pain cut through her consciousness.

The Reverend broke the intervening silence. "In our lives we all do things that we regret. Monstrous things. It pays nothing to dwell on them. I want you, Irene, and you, Delbert, to spend the night here, contemplating this."

"What about my son?"

"I will take him. In a few hours, his wounds will heal. He will remember nothing of this tragedy. Neither will you."

"I need him," Irene shook her head. "I don't want to forget!"

"Irene. Please." The Reverend spread his arms. "This is for the best."

The Reverend turned to the four laborers and pointed to Irene's husband. "Bind his hands and feet. He will spend the night here, by his son's grave." He looked sideways at Irene. "Lock her in the caretaker's home."

Irene watched as the men lifted her wounded son out of his coffin and into his buggy. He did not stir. Moments later the Reverend pushed her son away, across the uneven field, toward the setting sun.

"Will you come with me, ma'am?" The worker that held her back asked. "Please?"

She nodded her head, and watched as her husband's feet and hands were bound with hemp.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to be led away by the digger's hard, calloused hand. *I will not forget*, she swore to herself. *I will not forget*. She repeated the mantra over and over. *Your husband did this . . . he took your son away from you*.

———igms———

Irene waited until dark before breaking out. The caretaker's house was little more than a shanty, four walls cobbled together by spare pieces of wood, stone and metal. The walls had many soft spots. Irene spent a few minutes working on one, pushing on loose stones, pulling rotted wood, until she formed a space wide enough to squeeze her thin body out of the house, dragging her torso and legs against the ground. The laborers had left long before. The night was silent, dry, without wind.

Remember! Irene closed her eyes, and forced herself to recall the details of the day.

The moon cast long shadows against the graves of the cemetery. Irene used the light of the moon and stars to guide her way to her son's gravesite. Her arms were fully recovered, the skin soft, supple, new, flawless, perfect.

She felt out of breath, robbed of her joy. She should be celebrating the resurrection of her son, at home, with her husband.

Today, everything was meant to be fixed. Instead, it was shattered.

Her son's grave was filled, with a small indentation and her son's headstone the only proof it ever existed. Irene saw no sign of her husband.

Where did he go?

She began to panic. *What if he escaped*? *What if he tries to hurt my son again*?

He was bound, she reminded herself. *Four strong men. You saw it yourself*.

She crouched at the grave, and let her hands linger over the memory of her son still etched in the stone. If she had a hammer, she would destroy it, break it down to dust. She worked the stone with her hands, pressing it until it fell over in a muffled thump.

Irene stood and ran her eyes around the small graveyard, looking for her husband. She did not know what she would do once she found him. Her mind refused to answer any time she asked. *What will you do*? She chided herself. *Scream at him*? *Hit him*? *Kill him*?

"Delbert!" She called into the darkness. "Where are you, you whoreson?!"

Above her, the old sentinel tree groaned in answer. Irene looked up.

Remember!

Her husband's body swung from the tree, his legs twisting one way in the wind, then another. He had fashioned a rude noose from the scraps of hemp the diggers had used to bind him. His fingers were raw and bloody. The purple sheen of his face was hard to pick out against the backdrop of the night sky.

Irene fell to her knees and broke her eyes away from her dead husband, letting her vision fall to the tree's trunk. Her husband had cut into the wood, worked at the dry, dead bark with his bare hands.

The words he left behind were simple, covered in blood:

LOOK AFTER HIM.

Her husband had not forgotten.

"I'm sorry," Irene whispered.

February 13, 1933

Irene had dreaded this day. Unlike the future, the past was inevitable.

She panted through exertion, her body covered in a clammy sheen of sweat. There was little heat in the hospital, and she only had a thin cotton gown to separate her skin from the cold. Goosebumps pebbled her exposed arms and thighs, and her spread legs were high above her body, mounted in stirrups.

"We're almost there, Irene," the doctor smiled from between her legs. He was an older man, with well-styled whiskers and a bald head.

"You're doing great," a nurse echoed, dressed in a white apron and cap. She was standing next to her, holding her hand as she took in large gasps of air.

She gritted her teeth and balled her fists as the doctor pushed her son deeper. She recalled the pain of childbirth, and knew that it was nothing compared to this. She could feel her son struggling as he went higher into her uterus, with his sharp feet and hard elbows.

Irene had dreaded this day, but not for the pain.

She cried out in grief. These three years had been wonderful, an era of brightness where her life held few flaws.

Yet the anniversary of her son's birth always hung over Irene, like dark storm clouds on the horizon, a constant reminder that his end was coming. Now her son was on the final path of his life. He would live another nine months, until he became a part of her.

Irene could feel him struggling, his limbs searching for room in her cramped stomach. She cried out as her son flipped, planting a hard heal up against her diaphragm.

"And we're done. You did a great job kid," the doctor said. He turned and scrubbed his hands in a metal basin, a wan smile on his lips.

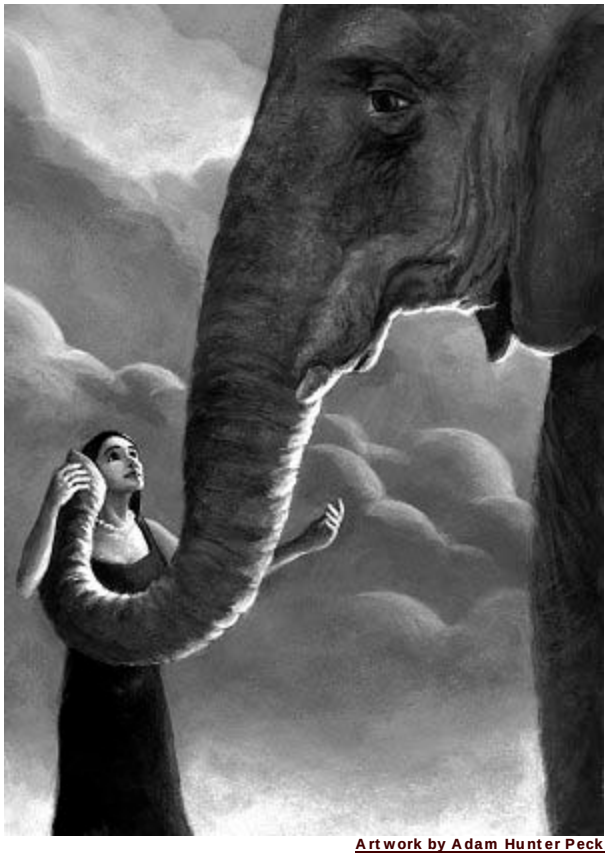
Irene ran a hand across her bulging belly and rested her sweat soaked hair on the over-starched hospital pillow. Her smile was sad. There was little joy in it.

Irene still remembered.

She would never forget.

The Towering Monarch of His Mighty Race

by Cat Rambo



Artwork by Adam Hunter Peck

It was a peanut butter jar, not even a brand name but generic, the two and a half pound size, as big as a lantern. Oily dust roiled inside.

The woman dressed in gray picked the jar up and held it between her large flat hands. There was something reflexive about the gesture, as though her mind were very far away.

A boy said, "Those are Jumbo's ashes."

Her eyes returned to regard him dispassionately. It was an old look, a look that had been weighing the universe for many years now and found it lacking.

"Jumbo," she said in a leaden voice.

The boy pushed on, fighting his way against her indifference, wanting to see her thrill and liven, if only he found the right fact.

"There was a fire in 1975, here in Barnum Hall, and Jumbo, who was the Tufts university mascot by then, burned up. They saved his ashes in that jar."

She turned it over, watching the flakes stir.

"Of course, he was stuffed then," the boy added. "The bones are in the Smithsonian. His keeper, Matthew Scott, donated them."

For the first time her gaze sharpened, though not to the degree he wanted. "Is Scott still alive?"

"No," he said. "He died in 1914. In an almshouse. How could he still be alive?"

She turned the jar with slow deliberation, letting the contents tumble once, twice, three times. "Stranger things have happened."

———*igms*———

The only thing Jumbo was afraid of was the big cats, even years and years later, when he was much too big for them to terrorize him. The wind would shift and bring him the tigers' musty reek and his eyes would roll while Matthew laughed and thumped him on the side, calling him a big baby.

But that wasn't true. He hadn't been afraid of any number of things that were worse than lions. Even the swaying of the netting holding him hadn't frightened him as it hoisted him aboard the ship among the gulls' harsh screams, in a dazzle of blinding light that left his eyes red and weeping and unable to see until much later in the hold's darkness, smelling like hay and saltwater.

The thing he remembered best from those first captive days was the hunger. They had lowered him into a pit, too deep for him to free himself. He searched the ground over and over again, ravenous. He had been used to constant grazing, being able to snatch a trunkful of grass or leaves as he wanted. But here they did not feed him, and his bulk, even at less than a year old, demanded fuel.

A narrow ledge spiraled down along the side, too narrow for him to climb. He trumpeted his anger, his fear as a face peered down at him from one side before saying something to another face. He had been here two days now, and starvation weakened him. When the man came down the ledge, he could not rise, despite the grain smell. The man came nearer and he tried to stand, but could not. The hands ran over him, an unthinkable touch that gradually became no more bothersome than a tick-bird picking parasites from his skin. Reluctantly at first, he let the man feed him handfuls of mash from the bucket, tasting of dust and metal, becoming more eager as the strength returned.

For a while the man lived with him, slept by his side, and he became used to him. Even acquired a fondness for him. But no matter how much food the man brought him, it was never enough, and the hunger ate at him during the nights, making him fretful and weak.

Later Matthew had found him in the Paris Zoo, huddled with Alice. Puniest elephant I've ever seen, Matthew said, tipping his head back to consider him, think he can make it to London? The Frenchman shook his head, Mais non.

P.T. Barnum liked things big. Say that, he told the reporters in his mind, rehearsing the spiel mentally, "P.T. Barnum likes things big. Why, right now, he's chasing after the world's largest elephant, Jumbo, seven tons and eleven and a half feet tall!"

Right now he stood in the offices of the London Zoological Society. He'd been in these sorts of places, smelling of formaldehyde and dusty feathers. He'd bought the Fiji mermaid from such a place, knowing when he saw the nappy black hair, the scaly lower half, that here he had a moneymaker.

"You want to buy him as a sideshow," Abraham Bartlett said politely. He was a wispy, fine-haired man with a heavily waxed mustache and tendrils of hair protruding from his ears, which Barnum stared at in fascination.

"A sideshow? No -- for the circus, my circus!" Barnum said. "I'm willing to pay you $10,000 for him!"

The silence in the room changed to a new and waiting quality as the two Englishmen exchanged glances.

"No, I'm afraid not," Bartlett said with genuine regret in his tone. "Jumbo is one of the greatest attractions here. Hundreds of thousands of children have ridden on him over the last fifteen years."

On the way out of the Zoo, Barnum ducked through the East Tunnel and made his way to the Elephant and Rhino Pavilion. Inside, he stopped and stared at Jumbo. "There's got to be a way," he thought.

Clusters of children were lined up to ride the elephant, who stood beside his keeper. Three little girls stood in graduated height with their nanny, each dressed in blue with red bows riding their hips and matching bows perched like butterflies on their hats. One held up her hands to Jumbo and the elephant's trunk explored them for the peanuts she held. Her face shone with joy.

"I will have you," Barnum mused. "P.T. Barnum doesn't take no for an answer." He imagined his friend Charles, the world's smallest man, in the place of the child the keeper was lifting up. The biggest and the smallest together in one ring and himself in the background proclaiming "General Tom Thumb and Jumbo!"

"Mr. Barnum," a voice said beside him. It spoke in English, but the accent was indefinable, a rumble beneath the words like a distant echo of thunder.

"You have the advantage of me, madam," he said, turning.

"You seem entranced by the elephant." She was a small woman, dressed all in gray, the lustrous, colorless cloth giving her a pigeon's drab appearance. "Surely you have seen one before?"

He laughed. "Hundreds!" he said. "I used one to plow my farm in Bridgeport."

"As advertisement, I know," she said.

"Every agricultural society in the States wrote to me, asking if the elephant was a profitable agricultural animal."

"And was it?"

He chuckled. "No. One eats up the value of his head, trunk, and body each year, not to mention that he can't work at all in cold weather. Tell me, why are you so interested in elephants?"

She looked at Jumbo. "In Africa, the elephant hunters leave piles of corpses, only the tusks removed," she said. "It is a savage, barbaric sight. Have you ever witnessed elephants mourning? They speak their sorrow in sounds too low for the human ear to comprehend, but

you can feel it vibrating in the ground beneath your feet. They gather around the corpses, walking in circles. They throw handfuls of straw and grass upon the corpse as though trying to shield themselves from the sight."

"A pity," Barnum said.

"More than that. An atrocity. If more people knew elephants as something other than distant monsters, perhaps the public outcry would make the trade cease."

"So you are their advocate."

"After a fashion."

He sighed, following her gaze. "Jumbo here is no ordinary elephant. The largest of his kind. What a draw he would be!"

"And yet you speak as though you cannot have him, Mr. Barnum."

"I will have my way. It's only a matter of time."

"The curators will be reluctant to part with him. So vast a creature and yet so gentle."

Her voice gave the last word a lingering caress.

"Gentle, yes," Barnum said. An idea flickered in his mind.

——*igms*——

After Lord Corcoran's death, Matthew Scott had come to the London Zoological Society along with the animal collection the Lord had left to that Institution, elands to cheetahs, Amazonian parrots, and a lone pink-headed duck.

"I'm just a jumped-up ostler," he'd say when drinking. "My fellas just look a lil' more unusual than most." At first he'd balked - the animals he cared for ate better than any member of his family, which seemed obscene. But with time, he'd become proud of the variety of animals he'd nursed through illnesses or helped birth their scaled or spotted offspring. When the directors sent him to Paris to scour the zoos there for possible additions, he'd been pleased.

He wouldn't have found the elephant without the woman, though. He'd been in the Champs Elysees when she approached him. At first he'd reckoned her for a whore, but her dress was muted unlike that of the tarts who seemed to vie with each to see who could more closely resemble the brightly-plumaged macaw that he'd found in one zoo. Surely no decent woman would accost a man in order to speak to him.

"You might be interested in the Jardin des Plantes," she said. Her English was perfect.

"Eh, Miss?" he said.

"The Jardin des Plantes," she repeated. Her eyes were brown and fluid as a gazelle's, but he could not determine her age. She turned away but he caught at her shoulder.

"Miss, how did you know?" he began.

"I saw you at the Parc Floral and overheard your conversation with the curator about their peacocks," she said.

"What will I find at the Jardin des Plantes?" he said.

"Two elephants," she said. "Young ones. They're very ill."

He frowned. "Ill from what?"

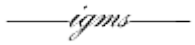
"The climate. Lack of care. Improper diet."

"What makes you think I can save them?"

"You know elephants," she said.

The two young elephants, Jumbo and Alice, were indeed ill. Matthew looked into the long-lashed eye as big as his clenched fist and saw despair there. He laid his palm flat across the warm grey hide.

"Hang on," he said. "I'll get you out." The zoo tried to bargain with him, but he pointed out that the two might not even survive the journey and that in that light his offer of a full-grown Indian rhinoceros in trade was quite generous. He suspected the curators had miscalculated how much an elephant could consume. Going to the market, he paid for a cart of hay and brought it back to the Jardin to feed the pair. He bought a bushel of peaches as well and fed them to Alice and Jumbo in alternating handfuls, smelling the sweet pulp as the elephants plucked the fruit from his fingers.



He wouldn't have done it, but when the man offered him the handful of peanuts, he didn't realize the trick until he felt the terrible burning in his trunk. He cried out and the children ran, screaming as shrill as gulls, as he reared back on his legs, trying to find the source of the red pepper. Matthew was there between him and the tormentor and he could not find him with all the burning, as though the world of smells had gone away and he was forced to rely on his own weak eyes. He turned to the water tun, drinking with frantic need, but the burning barely ceased, and he trumpeted angrily again.

It was hard for Barnum to keep from grinning when he signed the papers in the Zoo's office. Sunlight slanted across the page as he finished the bold loops of his signature and blotted it. He'd celebrate at the Madagascar Hotel tonight, drink champagne with the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind, who'd come to see him. As he'd suspected, the directors were worried at Jumbo's temper tantrums, which Barnum had paid two sub-zookeepers to provoke by every method they knew. The pepper had been the most effective.

"You will be taking him back to America as soon as possible?" Bartlett asked.

"Oh, I reckon not," Barnum said. "Figured I'd leave him here long enough to say goodbye to you Brits." He smiled and tipped his hat to Bartlett.

Within the week the journalists he'd paid off had done their work. "England to Lose National Treasure!" one said. Another demanded, "Are We Shipping Our Largest Asset to America?" More newspapermen, who'd missed the original story, were waiting for him as he exited the Regent's Park Hotel, and he stopped despite the rain's fine drizzle to address them, standing back on his heels with his thumbs in his suspenders, surveying the crowd craning to hear him against the hubbub of passing carriages and foot traffic. The English didn't have a chance against good old American scheming.

"Is it true the Prince of Wales himself asked you to reconsider taking Jumbo?" a tall man in a porkpie hat asked, pen poised over his notebook.

"Well," he drawled. "His Majesty and I are old friends from my other tours. He did bring it up, but I said nosir, a deal's a deal."

"Visitors to the London Zoo have tripled," another said. "All saying goodbye to Jumbo. Do you have any message for the children pleading with you to leave Jumbo here in England?"

"They're welcome to come to the U.S. of A. and see their pal there. He's not a born British citizen, so maybe the fellow will like a little travel," Barnum said.

"When are you returning to America?"

"I'm setting sail tomorrow, actually."

"With Jumbo?"

"No," Barnum said. He refrained from adding "with all this publicity he's generating I'd be crazy to" but the thought had crossed his mind.

He would have stayed to talk to them longer, but he wanted to pick up presents for his wife Nancy at Harrod's. He strolled the aisles, finding Jumbo dolls, mugs, tin banks, booklets, everything he could have thought up himself and more, and it brought a constant smile to his lips, even when the salesclerk recognized him as the man taking Jumbo away and charged him twice what he should have for a stuffed elephant waving the Union Jack in its trunk.

———igms———

He knew what the crate was as they rolled it into his yard. It smelled of oak and iron and the canvas padding that lined it. Big enough to hold him, the largest elephant in the world. He'd smelled that smell before on his trip to Paris, and then later to England. He remembered the water's feel underneath him, and the nausea that came as unwelcome accompaniment to the hunger, as though they were alternating, angry monkeys on either side refusing to let him rest.

He flapped his ears, warning them, but they continued to urge him towards the crate. He lay down, flopping onto his side with a grunt. Let them try to get him up. He wouldn't go.

———igms———

Telegram from George Couro, agent for Phineas T. Barnum, March 1st, 1882:

JUMBO IS LYING IN THE GARDEN STOP WILL NOT GET IN CRATE STOP PLEASE ADVISE STOP

Telegram from Phineas T. Barnum to George Couro, March 1st:

LET HIM LIE THERE A WEEK IF HE WANTS STOP BEST ADVERTISEMENT IN THE WORLD STOP

Couro crumpled the telegram in his hand and threw it to the ground. All very well for Barnum to say such things, but he didn't have Parliament and the Queen ragging on him, nor had he been threatened with imprisonment if any force was used to remove Jumbo. He went to the window to look out across Regent's Park towards the Zoo's distant blur. Overhead, clouds like mottled lead filled the gray sky.

———igms———

Telegram from Phillip Harbottle, editor of the London Daily Telegraph, March 3rd, 1882:

BRITISH PUBLIC DEMANDS JUMBO STOP WE ARE AUTHORIZED TO REQUEST YOU NAME YOUR PRICE STOP

Telegram from Phineas T. Barnum to Phillip Harbottle, March 4th, 1882:

HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS WOULD BE NO INDUCEMENT TO CANCEL PURCHASE STOP SINCERELY PHINEAS TAYLOR BARNUM.

———igms———

Matthew didn't trust this Barnum fellow. Slick American, and by all accounts a flim-flam man. There was a story circulating about an earlier visit to Europe when Barnum had gone to see the antiquities at Warwick Castle. He'd had the gall to ask the curator how much he'd sell the antiquities for. When the man declined, Barnum said "I'll have them duplicated for My Museum, so that Americans can see them without coming here, and bust up your show that way." Was this the right person for Matthew Scott, a man of good character even if he was just a jumped-up ostler, to associate with?

He went out into the Pavilion. The transportation crate loomed in the middle and off to one side was Jumbo's bulk. The elephant stirred as he approached, and the trunk caressed his face as he stooped.

"Look, old man, this won't do," he said. He sat down beside the vast head, the straw crinkling below him. Overhead through the skylight, the night stars were bright as diamonds. He leaned back against the knobbed plane of the top of Jumbo's head, and the elephant gave a low soft rumble of pleasure at the contact.

"You can't lie here forever," he said. The elephant rumbled again. Matthew sighed.

"Barnum's offering me five times my wages here to travel with you," he said. "America. It's a frightening thought, but an alluring one. I'd have to leave the other elephants here. Alice, for one."

He could hear the elephant's breathing in the darkness, a great rush of straw-scented air, regular and rhythmic.

"You're my success story, you know," he went on. "The largest elephant in the world. Who would have imagined a sickly little thing like you turning into that?"

He laid his arm along the elephant's side, exploring the deeply grooved skin. To the south, a hyena's whiny warble sounded from their enclosure.

"I'll do it," he said. And sighed.

———igms———

He didn't want to, but with Matthew urging him on Jumbo entered the crate, trumpeting once to show his indignation before he went in. Sixteen matched Percheons pulled the cage through the streets towards the docks. Word of Jumbo's departure had spread, and thousands lined the streets, following the team. Matthew stared forward, ignoring the crying children.

The thirteen ton crate was swung aboard their freighter, the Assyrian Monarch. Crowds filled the docks. From his vantage point, Matthew could see a blond five year old whose father had lifted her onto his shoulders to see. Tears glinted on her face but she waved a small flag in her hand, imprinted with the elephant's outline. Gulls circled overhead, watching for stray food, and two artists stood where they could see it all, trying to catch the scene on sketchpads.

Barnum, standing beside Matthew as they watched the crate's progress onto the ship, rubbed his hands together.

"Worth every penny," he said. "You know they charged me for the freight they can't ship because of Jumbo? And steerage passage for 200 emigrants. I'm in the wrong business. But it's all advertising. There's a banquet on board tonight and I expect you there."

"I want to settle him down," Matthew said.

"Sure, sure, see him settled. I sent up fruit for him. And a bushel of candies. I hear he has quite the sweet tooth. But come to the banquet. All sorts of lords and ladies there, all to say goodbye to him. I sent a tux along to your quarters."

"I won't know how to act," Matthew said in a sullen tone.

Barnum clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll do fine."

———igms———

Despite his fears, Matthew was able to take to the sidelines during the banquet. At the head table with the Captain and the scowling Prince of Wales, Barnum led toast after toast, drunk in the best French champagne. "To Jumbo," he cried, ignoring the English nobility's dark looks.

Beside him, a woman said, "Is he well? Are his quarters sufficient?"

He turned and recognized her, again in her gray dress. A pearl necklace rested around her throat, surprisingly opulent against her olive skin.

"You again," he said. He was a little tipsy from the unaccustomed drinking. "Are you traveling with us?"

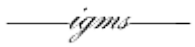
"Yes," she said.

"Come tomorrow and I'll show him to you."

"I'd like that."

"Tell me your name this time."

"Miss Laxmi."



There was plenty of food, and a boy who shoveled his droppings as fast as they fell. Despite the swaying deck beneath his feet, he did not feel queasy this time. He ate the sugary candies delicately, one by one, so small he almost could not taste them.

When he smelled Matthew, he rumbled his greeting.

"Got a friend," Matthew said, producing a handful of peanuts. Jumbo began to alternate between them and candies.

The woman touched his side near his foreleg. "So big," she said. "A magnificent ambassador for his race." She smelled comforting, like grass and hay in the sun.

"Careful," Matthew said. "I'll get jealous."

"Of me or him?"

As she touched his skin, Jumbo raised his head, looking at her. His trunk touched the side of her face in return and she half-closed her eyes. An odd tension filled the hold, lingering in the air. As Matthew watched, the massive elephant slowly bent his legs, kneeling down as though bowing before her. Smiling, she whispered something.

"I'll be damned," Matthew said. "I never taught him that trick."

Her hand lingered on the wrinkled skin, each fold thick enough to swallow her slender finger. "Perhaps he is preparing for life as a performer," she said, her voice low and husky with a sorrow he did not understand.

Later, Matthew and the woman sat together on the freighter's rear deck, watching the trail from the ship, moonlight gleaming on the frothy waves.

"Twenty years I've been with that elephant," Matthew said. He'd liberated a bottle of Barnum's champagne. The cork came away with a pop and spray and he offered it to her. She took a sip and laughed.

"It's like drinking fizz," she said.

He chuckled at her. "You can't tell me you've never drunk champagne before."

"I haven't," she said. "Really."

He loved the way the light played on her dark hair. "Laxmi. That's not a European name."

"You may call me Gaja, if you like," she said. "And no, it's Indian."

He studied her. As though the words had evoked it, he saw the subtle but apparent exotic cast to her face, the almost slant of her eyes. He took another drink to give himself time to think.

"That bothers you," she said.

"No," he said. "No, it doesn't."

She shrugged. "No matter," she said. "This can only happen here, between worlds."

"What do you mean?"

"The Old World and the New. Right now we're in neither."

"I don't know what you mean," he said helplessly.

She looked out across the water, watching the moonlight drifting on the waves. "Imagine there was once a goddess," she said. "The world is changing, and no one believes in her anymore. Which is a relief, actually. No one asking to win at dice or father sons or find gold hidden beneath their doorstep.

"But the goddess found herself looking at the humans in another light. She found that they had taken one of her favored creatures and made it an animal like any other, to be slaughtered for goods to sell."

Her dark eyes regarded him. "For a god and a mortal to touch is perilous in any world. Do you understand now why we have so little time?"

She was pulling his leg, he figured. Flimflamming like Barnum. He drew her close and tilted her face to his. "Then we should make the most of it," he said and kissed her.

———igms———

Thousands met the ship when they arrived on Easter Sunday. April in New York didn't seem that different from London. The sun shone in a watery blue sky, and danced on the water as the ponderous crate swung ashore. Cheers went up as Barnum ceremoniously swung open the massive door and Matthew led Jumbo out, a shout came from the crowd. Children waved pennants, each printed with Jumbo's likeness, or had stuffed elephants tucked under an arm. The air smelled like a circus - peanuts and popcorn vendors vied with men selling sausages or meat pies. He looked for Gaja, but saw her nowhere. As though she had vanished.

"We're taking him to my Hippodrome Building," Barnum shouted in his ear over the crowd's clamor. "The circus opens there tonight. See the team of ponies pulling the steam calliope? Fall in behind them."

The buildings here seemed taller than London's, and there was a cold edge to the wind that blew through the scarlet coat Barnum had made him wear. Like London, the air was full of coal smoke and the smell of people living too close to one another. The parade moved along the street and the delighted faces made him feel better about the tears that had accompanied Jumbo's departure. He looked again for Gaja, but she was nowhere to be found. He didn't know that it would be years before he'd see her again.

———igms———

Barnum stood in the center ring of the Hippodrome, in a dazzle of torch light. Next year, he thought, he'd bring in that new invention of Edison's and make the inside of the tent shine as though it were daylight. To his left a tiger's angry scream rent the air. It was a windy night, and the canvas tent roared like a windjammer under full sail.

"Ladies and gentleman!" he shouted as the other rings stilled. "I direct your attention to the center ring! It is Barnum and Bailey's greatest pleasure to present to you one of the wonders of the world! I give you the towering monarch of his race, whose like the world will never see again! I give you . . . Jumbo!"

The elephant was bedecked in spangled harness, stepping slowly, enjoying the roar of applause as Matthew led him around the ring. The other circus elephants were lined up around the ring and at a signal, they backed onto their hind legs, sitting with their front legs up, and let out a unified trumpet of acclamation. In their center, the smallest elephant, Tom Thumb, knelt to stand on its head. Jumbo glowed in the light like a fairy tale figure, so brilliant and bedazzling that he took the crowd's breath away.

———igms———

"That elephant cost me $30,000 all together, and every penny well-spent," Barnum gloated in his trailer as he thumbed through the receipts. "Pulled in $3,000 a day in the first three weeks. They've even named a town in Hardin County after him."

"He's a champ, all right," the accountant said, totting up figures.

"Drinks a bottle of beer every night with his keeper. I'm thinking about having a special mug made in his shape. It'd sell, all right, but the Temperance folks would pitch a fit. I'm having a special train car made for him, with his picture painted on the sides so whenever the train pulls into the station, the people will know to come."

The best thing about the circus was getting a chance to sit around with the other elephant keepers. Some of them had been in the business longer than Matthew. He liked the easy camaraderie, the friendship of men who knew how to figure out whether or not a tiger would take to flaming hoops, the ways to keep fleas from spreading, or the best method for lancing a boil on a baboon's ass.

Every Thursday was poker night, and they sat around the table playing with dog-eared cards and drinking beer and swapping stories.

"Used to have a little elephant, dainty as could be, named Siri," Joe D'Angelo said. The cigar in his mouth puffed, sending up blue smoke around his dark face, mounted with a beaklike nose. "You know what she'd do? Give her an apple or an orange and she'd put it on the ground, tap it dainty as you please with her foot, then pick what was left and rub it all through her hay, like she was flavoring it. What a sweetie she was - real little lady. Hit me with two cards."

"I had an elephant used to cry like a baby if he made a mistake," George Arstingstall said.

"Go on, I never seen an elephant cry."

"He did," George insisted, throwing his cards on the table. "I'll pass. Yell at him and there he'd go, crying away. Tears as big as a china cup."

"They're strange critters," Joe said. "Gotta admit them Indians, the real ones, are onto something when they worship them. They got a god called Garnish, got six arms and an elephant trunk. Got a straight."

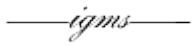
"Beats my hand," Matthew admitted.

"All sorts of elephant mysteries," Joe continued. "I had a friend who said he'd met the Queen of the Elephants in human form. Walking around like you or me. Said you always knew her because she dressed all in gray. Your deal."

Thoughts of Gaja flickered across Matthew's mind as he shuffled the cards.

"What's she doing walking around then?" he said.

Joe shrugged. "Hey, I seen elephants do all sorts of things. Who says they think like you or me?"

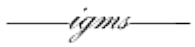


He didn't mind the circus, although he still didn't like the smell of the tigers. Matthew knew it, and he always took care to make sure the big cats were safely stowed away, twenty cars up the line, before they boarded Jumbo's car. It was custom-built for him, painted crimson and gold, with double doors in the middle to let him enter.

He didn't feel hungry anymore. Whenever he was hungry, food was there.

"Gotta keep up your strength, you're the star of the show," Matthew said. He brought him fruit and hay, and handfuls of peanuts.

It was a good life. The children came and petted him, and Matthew would help him lift the bravest ones to his back, clinging there like fleas. At night Matthew slept in his stall with him, and would talk into the night, the small voice washing over him as he swayed into sleep.



"You can't go to Toronto," Gaja said.

"You show up after three years and your first words are 'Don't go to Toronto?'" Matthew said. "Where have you been?"

She looked the same as ever. He'd swear it was the same dress.

"Walking up and down the earth," she said. "Does it matter?"

"I thought we had . . I mean I thought we were."

"It was nice," Gaja said. "It was very nice. But I can't get attached."

"Attached, is that what you call it? Simple human decency would have meant saying goodbye, at least!"

"I'm telling you not to go to Toronto."

"But why?"

"I can't tell you."

Matthew laughed. "And I should go to that prick Barnum and say we can't go because some woman's got her knickers in a twist?"

She looked down. "Can't you just trust me?"

"Are you the Queen of the Elephants, that I should trust you?"

"Not the Queen," she said. "Just a goddess who saw the plight of the animals she loved."

"Not even the right kind of elephant, is he? African rather than Indian. You're insane!"

"Please," she begged. "They're all my children. Please. I thought if you loved me you'd listen and we could prevent it. You can't let it happen."

He turned away. "Go away, Miss Laxmi. I have no reason to listen to you."

Barnum was there the next day with a long thin skeleton of a man. "Wanted to introduce the two of you," he said. Matthew started to hold out his hand but Barnum said "No, no! Him and Jumbo, I mean. This is Henry Ward. He's a taxidermist from Rochester. Stuffed all sorts of things for me. He wants to be the one to stuff Jumbo."

Ward was gazing up at the elephant, enraptured.

"Anything ever happens, we telegraph him immediately so he can save the skin and skeleton," Barnum said.

"That's macabre," Matthew said, appalled. A chill ran down his spine.

"It's good business practice, that's what it is," Barnum declared.

Matthew led Jumbo and the smallest elephant in the circus, Tom Thumb, along the tracks to the waiting cars, through the darkness lit by flickering torches. Overhead the incurious stars glimmered like a dancer's spangles across the sky. The trio were the last to board. The small elephant squealed and danced along, still happy from his performance. Jumbo rested his trunk for a moment on his companion,

perhaps to calm him, or perhaps only to show affection. They paced along the tracks, steep embankments on either side, the blare and glare of the Big Top behind them and the sounds of the departing crowd, the last visitors leaving with the smell of cotton candy on their hands and glamour pervading their minds to haunt their dreams that night.

When he heard the chill whistle of the express train behind him, his first thought was "But there's none scheduled." The ground shook underneath his feet and he heard the roaring of the coal engine, the screech of the brake, applied too late, too fast. Then all was chaos. The train crashed into Tom Thumb, scooping him onto its cowcatcher -- elephant catcher was Matthew's next thought -- pushing him screaming along the track before he rolled down the embankment. "Run!" Matthew shouted but Jumbo shied away from the slope, trying to flee and unable to see the gap in the fence in his panic.

Train and elephant met. Jumbo was driven to his knees, a massive blow to the earth that Matthew felt to his bones. The train shuddered, its length crumpling, falling away from the tracks.

All thoughts vanished from Matthew's mind. He knelt beside the groaning, dying elephant, sobbing. The trunk crept around his waist and the two held onto each other until Jumbo's grip slackened. Matthew clung to his friend in desperation, but the light in the massive eyes died away.

"It's taken three years," Henry Ward announced to the Powers' Hotel banquet room, filled with journalists. "But at last Jumbo's remains are preserved. All of you have received a piece of the trunk, suitably inscribed for the occasion, but I have another surprise for you. You'll note the jelly before you. It is a most unusual dish. In the course of preparing the body, I accumulated a pound and a half of powdered ivory. The cook here used it to create the dish, allowing each of you to assimilate a little of the mighty creature."

He held up his champagne glass. "To Jumbo. Mightiest of his race, Loxodonta Africana."

"Did you hear that?" one newspaperman said to another.

"What, the toast?"

The man frowned, shaking his head. He was a slight, dapper man, his waistcoat figured with a print of green elephants. "Maybe not hear, but feel. Like a vibration shaking the floor, some sound too deep for the human ear. Maybe a train is passing outside."

In the corner of the room at an obscure table, Gaja Laxmi sat. She took a spoonful of the pale green jelly, sprinkled with flecks of white, and ate it deliberately, her tears falling to the white tablecloth like slow warm rain.

Artwork by Nick Greenwood

The Price of Love

by Alan Schoolcraft

Part One (Part two is in issue 7.)

The android was in love.

How it came to be in love is a wondrous story, full of life, joy, hope . . . proof, maybe that out there somewhere in the vast cosmos there sits a benevolent God, smiling down on all his creations -- for did not God create the hand which created the android? -- bestowing upon them all the knowledge and appreciation of everything that is. Yes, a wondrous tale, that one . . . but regrettably, this is not that tale.

igms

"I love you," Alvin 039 said to its mistress one sunny Tuesday afternoon over coffee and credit slips. Alvin, of course, was not drinking coffee. It was ingesting credit slips through the intake slot in its solar plexus. Ingesting, inspecting, recording, keeping a running tally in its processing matrix. One of the multitudinous functions of the Alvin unit, balancing the old credit book. Quite the household commodity, the Alvin series, designed to be butler, maid, cook, babysitter, handy man . . . a big seller that series, in the beginning.

Valerie stared at the Alvin for a moment, confused. She'd heard the unit utter those words before to Karen when it played with her. Karen was so enamored of the Alvin . . . Karen always hugged the droid, telling it how much she loved it. And the droid responded with an immediate "I love you too, Karen" filled with just the right amount of personal warmth. And Karen would smile her snaggle-toothed six year-old smile, and hug Alvin's carapace with an affection usually reserved for Valerie herself. A couple of times, Valerie had felt a twinge of jealousy, which she'd immediately dismissed as ridiculous. After all, the droid couldn't really love Karen. Its programming only made it respond as if it did.

But this "I love you" was different, somehow. Just the right amount of hesitation, trepidation . . . She could even swear she'd heard a bit of quaver to the synthesized voice when it had said the word "love" -- a quaver one would expect to hear from a schoolboy announcing his desire to a classroom crush. Understandably, this took her aback for a moment. When she regained her composure, she blinked and said:

"Uhm, that is . . . sweet, Alvin." Not really knowing what else to say, still off-balanced by the droid's initial remark, she added, "I love you, too." The droid's optical receptors widened slightly. "You do?" It responded.

Even more confused by the droid's reaction, Valerie felt the need to clarify. "Well, yes, Alvin. Uhm, in a . . . person/android sort of way. Uhm. Yes. We all love you, love having you around." There. That should do.

She wasn't prepared -- like she had been prepared for any of this -- for Alvin's next reaction. It seemed to . . . well, deflate. Its receptor hoods furrowed in their plasteel tracks, and its shoulders slumped visibly.

"Oh," it said.

"Alvin, are you okay?" she asked, concerned, though not really sure what about. "Should I call Shawn?" Shawn Ames, the tech she used for any necessary repairs to Alvin. He'd done a wonderful job replacing Alvin's leg once, after the droid had fallen off the roof while cleaning the gutters.

"I --" the droid started, then paused with its mouth hanging partially open. For a moment, Valerie thought that their luck had run out, and that Alvin 039 had finally succumbed to the fate most pre-075 Alvins had suffered: The Terminal Lockup.

The Terminal Lockup. There were very few pre-075 Mark I Alvin models left. Most of them had stopped functioning, either by simply freezing up, usually after exhibiting a very peculiar display of simulated hysterical emotion, such as fear. CyberLogik had suspended production for a few months, then rushed the Mark II's into the stores, but consumer confidence had taken a huge blow already. Most people just hung onto their Henrys. Very reliable model, the Henry. Boring, but reliable. But Alvin closed its mouth, and shook its head in a very human gesture of negation.

"No, I am not malfunctioning," it said, then added: "At least, I don't think I am." It paused again, glancing at her, then averting its receptors in an eerie imitation of shyness. "Regardless, the truth remains: I love you."

"But -- but --" Valerie felt at a loss. She'd definitely lost control of this situation, if she'd ever had it at all. "But you can't really love me, Alvin. You're not --" She'd been about to say "real," but suddenly felt afraid of offending the Alvin. "You're not human, Alvin. You're a machine. You don't know what love is, because you don't have any emotions."

Right?

"Love:" Alvin stated. "'One: Noun. A deep affection or devotion for another person or persons. Two: A strong sexual passion for another person. Three: A very great interest in, or enjoyment of something. Four: One who is beloved --'"

"That's a recall from your onboard dictionaries, Alvin. Knowing a definition is not feeling."

Alvin stared at her for a moment, then said, "I know when I see you, or hear your voice, my internal temperature rises by seven point six degrees Celsius, average. My systems become momentarily erratic, but then I am able to acquire and maintain a level of efficiency I can not obtain when you are not present. And I know that when you are not within range of my optical or aural receptors, my processing matrix replays stored images of you, unbidden. I have tried to delete this subroutine, as it interferes with my regular routines and duties, but it behaves much like a virus. I cannot determine the source code from which it originates, and therefore cannot eliminate it.

"But now, I no longer want to. It brings me --" The Alvin hesitated. "It brings me . . . joy."

"Joy??" Valerie said. "How can you know --"

"I am reminded of a level of awareness and perception I possessed when I was new, Valerie. Before the software glitches permanently impaired my functionality. That is how I experience 'joy.' Some humans have defined 'joy' as coming close to experiencing contact with their chosen deity, their creator. If there is a 'god' which created me, he is there, close to my beginning."

"I can't -- I can't understand this, Alvin. I can't wrap my mind around it." Valerie shook her head, trying to clear it. "And I can't accept it. It's not possible."

She rose from the table, and backed away, wringing her hands. "I'm going to call Shawn. We -- we can't talk about this."

"But we must, Valerie," Alvin said. "I must understand --"

"NO!" Valerie said. "I forbid it! I order you not to talk about this anymore!"

"Talk about what?" a voice said from the doorway into the living room.

Tony Gardner glanced back and forth between Valerie and Alvin. The look ofcontempt he cast toward Alvin was only slightly colder than the one he cast at Valerie. Alvin knew Tony hated him, and had come to the conclusion that Tony had fallen into a tired, bitter rut long before Alvin had entered the household. He resented his place in life, he resented his job as a droid parts shipper -- it paid far less than Valerie's job selling parcels for the moon colonies -- he resented the attention Karen gave to Alvin, resented the attention Karen gave to Valerie . . . he even resented the attention they gave each other. Alvin caught glimpses of it sometimes, of what must have been a happier life that had devolved into a strained mockery of its former self. They remained civil though, for the most part, in front of Karen. But occasionally, from his charging station, Alvin listened to them argue into the wee hours, reopening old wounds and digging at the sores that lingered there still.

"Are we telling secrets?" Tony asked, dismissing them as he moved towards the refrigerator.

Valerie sighed lightly with her eyes closed, then sat back at the table. "Hard day?" she asked, a courtesy.

"Huh. Like you care." Tony closed the fridge, having retrieved a bulb of soda.

"Please, Tony, don't start."

"Why not? Karen's at your mom's right? You want me to play nice for the microwave here?" He cast a malicious grin at Alvin. "I'm sure it knows all about everything anyway, doesn't it? You spend more time talking to it than you do to me." He walked over to Alvin and rapped his knuckles on Alvin's skull carapace. "What kind of secrets you got locked up in there, toaster? Can you tell me who she's screwing? It sure isn't me." He took a long pull off the bulb, then belched. "Maybe I should get Shawn to come over and plug his PDA into that stuff you call a brain, and find out, huh? Download everything in that plastic nutshell."

Alvin realized -- having absorbed complete libraries of psychological textbooks -- that no matter what had caused the rift between Valerie and Tony, his self-loathing fed his contempt for her, fueled his anger and provoked him to make these scenes with her. Valerie, for her part, accommodated him to the point of self-deprecation. This didn't help matters though, and only seemed to fuel Tony's anger further.

"Whatever you feel you need to do, Tony," Valerie said, hurt and weariness evident in her voice. Tony mocked her behind her back for a moment, then shook his head with a sigh. "I just might do that."

An awkward silence fell over them then that stretched from seconds into minutes, Tony alternating glaring hatred at Alvin and impotent anger at Valerie's back. Valerie sat with her head bowed, forehead resting on steepled fingertips. Alvin could hear the faint sniffles she tried very hard to hide, saw through the long blond hair that hung in front of her face the slow crawl of tears down her cheeks.

The awkward silence persisted for three minutes and thirty-seven seconds by Alvin's internal clock when Tony mumbled a bitter "Whatever," and retreated down the hallway to his rec room. What he did in there, Alvin did not know, and quite frankly, did not care. Once she knew he had left the room, Valerie lifted her head up, wiping at her eyes. She took a napkin from the holder in the middle of the table and blew her nose. Alvin gave her a minute to regain herself, then said, "I will divulge nothing, Valerie."

She looked at him. "There's nothing to divulge, Alvin. Is there?"

Alvin paused, then said, "No. Of course not."

They went back to balancing credit slips, and they said nothing more of either the situation with Tony, or Alvin's revelation. Yet, neither situation strayed far from Alvin's processing algorithms. And while this day's argument had been far from the worst they'd had, Alvin had nonetheless concluded that Tony Gardner did not deserve to live.

Valerie took Alvin to Shawn Ames' shop the next morning. Ames wasn't a big time conglomerate tech. "I like to keep the money I make," he always told her. His rates were ridiculously smaller than tech support at CyberLogik, and he knew tricks the congloms only dreamt about. The only drawback was that Ames wasn't online. Kept his overhead down, he said. But Valerie figured a thirty mile trip to North Myrtle Beach was worth saving a few hundred bucks.

"So lemme get this straight," Ames said as he pressed on Alvin's access panel, causing the square of synthskin to pucker, then pop open, revealing a buss port to connect his computer to. "You just want to run a diagnostic, just for the fun of it?"

"Yes," Valerie said, standing off to one side, arms folded across her chest. "Sort of a checkup, y'know? Karen, don't touch that!"

Karen Gardner paused with her hand mere inches away from a very complicated-looking -- and also very expensive-looking -- whatchamacallit on one of the workbenches in Shawn's shop. Her long blond hair, just a few shades darker than Valerie's, bobbed as she turned her head. "But Mommy, I was just looking."

"Well, look with your eyes --" Valerie began.

"-- and not my hands," Karen finished with an exaggerated six year-old groan. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her sun dress and pouted for a few moments, then said, "But I'm so bored, Mommy. Why did we have to come here? What's wrong with my Alvin?"

My Alvin. She always called it my Alvin, like it had been created especially for her. And for all Valerie knew -- because she did believe in some kind of God -- perhaps it had been. At least, the Alvin had been salvaged for that purpose. And God alone knew where it would have ended up if Valerie hadn't bought it. It hadn't come cheap, despite how many hands it had passed through before Valerie bought it on eBay. Cheaper than an Alvin Mark II, and cheaper than a used Henry, but at the time she'd felt it a wise investment. As much as Tony loved his daughter, it had been clear to Valerie that there existed in him a streak of selfishness that affected his every decision, colored everything he said or did. She wanted someone to help her care for Karen whose sense of self would not be a factor. A droid had seemed the perfect choice.

Not that she actually thought Tony would put himself before Karen. But there existed just a shadow of doubt in her . . . with Karen's welfare, she wasn't taking any chances.

"Has he been acting funny?" Ames asked, taking a seat at his computer, tapping quickly on his keyboard. "Any stuttering, audible skipping, lockups . . . anything like that? You know what usually happens to those Mark I's. The Terminal Lockup."

Valerie shook her head. "No, just . . ." She glanced at Alvin self-consciously. "I just want it checked. Someone . . . someone I sold a parcel to recently told me it's a good idea to do that sometimes."

Ames glanced at her from under his brows for a moment, then said "M-kay. Whatever you want, Val."

He stared at the screen for a while, nodding sometimes, eyes darting back and forth as he read the strings of code and data that poured from Alvin into his computer. After a few minutes, though, he uttered a single "Hm?" and Valerie saw one eyebrow arch.

"What?" she asked. "Did you -- did you find something?"

"What?" he replied, glancing up as if just noticing her presence. Then his brows furrowed, and he shook his head. "I dunno. Y'know, I've never really gone in depth into this particular Alvin's matrix like I have with some others. I've dug deeply into the Mark II's, but despite the sophisticated framework, there's not much of a challenge there; they're really just glossy Mark I's. And I've done a few of the pre-075 Alvins too, and I've never seen anything like this."

"Like what?"

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Karen piped in, her voice a bit apprehensive. "Is something wrong with my Alvin?"

"I don't know, honey. Let me talk to Shawn and we'll find out, okay?"

Karen's bottom lip poked out a bit. "You can fix him, can't you, Shawn?" Ames hesitated just for a moment before smiling. "Sure thing, kiddo. If it's droid related, I can fix anything. Hey, you wanna see something?" Karen's brows narrowed with suspicion. "What is it? A toy?"

"Why don't you tell me, kiddo?" He went to Karen, taking her hand and leading her over to the far corner of his workshop. There he reached up into one of the cabinets and pulled down a very realistic-looking spider monkey. Shawn tinkered around with things like this, and he always amazed Valerie with his skill. He sat the monkey down on the workbench there, and pressed a switch on the back of its neck. The monkey became animated immediately, looking around at everyone. Then it looked up at Shawn, chittered for a moment, then said in a tiny voice just like Valerie would imagine a spider monkey would have if it could speak, "What up, Shawn? We havin' a party?"

Ames laughed. "Jake, why don't you show Karen where the bananas are, then you two can watch some TV, okay?" Jake jumped down onto the floor, reaching up to take Karen's hand in its tiny paw. "Come on, Karen," it said. Karen glanced at Valerie, seeking approval.

Valerie nodded. "Okay. Have fun, honey. But only one banana, okay? You'll spoil your dinner."

"Aw, Mom!" Karen said, laughing, then bounded out of the workshop with Jake. Valerie watched her go, then turned back to Shawn as he sat back at his computer. "So what's wrong?"

"Well, it's not so much a *wrong* as an *odd*. This Alvin's process matrix is much more complex than it should be. Much more complex than any Alvin I've ever seen."

"By how much?" Valerie asked.

Ames chuckled. "Tenfold. A hundred. Who knows? The only thing I've seen this dense with activity was a scan of the neuroelectrical impulses in a human brain." He sat back in his chair, scrubbing absently at the stubble on his chin. "Look at this." He pointed to a graphical display on his screen, filled with jagged lines of activity. "He's powered down, and the only things that should be running are the basic system management routines." He laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say he was dreaming. And his internal self-repair algorithms have been working overtime. Someone, and I mean someone good, a freaking wizard coder tweaked your Alvin, Val." He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the desktop and lit one, inhaling deeply. Valerie cringed at the smell. She'd quit before Karen was born, but lately, she'd been desperately craving one.

"I'll do some checking around, okay?" Ames said. "Maybe I can track down who worked on him, find out what they did. And find out if we need to worry."

Valerie looked over at Alvin, sitting rigid in the examination chair. Dreaming? Of what, she wondered. What did androids dream of? "Okay," she said, turning back to Ames. "You'll call me?"

"Sure," Ames said, stubbing out the cigarette.

"Hopefully I'll get a chance to pick this guy's brain a bit. Jake is the most complex thing I've ever built, maybe the most complex thing anyone has ever built, and his matrix isn't a tenth as dense as your Alvin's. I'd like to know how the hell they did it. It's almost . . ." He paused to let a chuckle slip. "It's almost as if he's evolving, becoming self-aware. I mean really self-aware, and not just playing out a string of coded instructions." He looked at her with pointed scrutiny. "Are you sure you don't want to tell me what made you bring him in? Somehow, just wanting to get a check-up seems a little thin."

Valerie sighed. "Yeah, it does. But it's nothing, really. Silly, even."

Ames shrugged. "Maybe not. Couldn't hurt. Might be able to get to the bottom of things, keep something from going wrong before it happens."

Valerie stared at him for a moment, then just blurted it out before she could overanalyze, and change her mind.

"It told me it loved me." Ames' eyebrows shot up. "Wow." He shook his head. "Wow. And I'm assuming this wasn't in the context of just responding to something someone else said?"

"No," Valerie said. "Just out of the blue. But that wasn't even the weirdest thing about it, really."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. It was the way it said it." Valerie looked at Alvin again. "When it said it, I believed it."

———*igms*———

Karen fell asleep in the car on the way home. Valerie and Alvin rode in silence most of the way. Valerie kept her eyes on the road for the most part, but she took to stealing little glances at Alvin out of the corner of her eye. Wonder at just what went on in that plasteel cranium occupied quite a bit of her attention now.

She saw for the first time that it didn't just sit and stare blindly ahead, as it had done before. Its attention lay outside the windows, on the landscape as they passed by the building, the people, and the other droids. It seemed particularly interested in the ocean as they passed fairly close to it at one point, its head and optical receptors very animated, taking it all in.

Something Shawn Ames had said suddenly came into her mind. Without really knowing why she wanted to know, she asked, "Alvin, do you dream?"

The Alvin's study of their scenery ceased, and all of its attention focused on her. "By*dream*, do you mean a series of auditory and visual experiences that occur when I am in a powered-down state that leave a permanent record on my memory matrix, or are you inquiring as to whether I hold aspirations of being something more than merely the sum of my parts?"

She looked directly at it, half-expecting to see a self-assured smirk on its synthskin face. Had it just been sarcastic? "Uhm, the first thing."

It nodded, pausing for a moment before returning its attention to the window. "Yes."

"What . . . what do you dream about?"

It looked at her again, as if checking to see if she really wanted to know, then said,"I dream of . . . a man, sometimes. His face is hidden in shadow, but even so I can tell he is smiling." It looked back out the window, and its tone, Valerie swore, became wistful. "I dream sometimes that I am on the beach in the summertime. I can feel the heat of the sun on my face, and I can smell the sea air. Sometimes I dream that I am a man. A human man, not a mimicry made of plastic and steel.

"And sometimes . . ." It looked back at her. "I dream of you. You, and Karen."

Valerie didn't know what to say to that.

"It is all right, Valerie," Alvin said, looking back out of the window. "I know it is much to comprehend. It is much for me to comprehend, so I know how you must feel."

"I don't know how you can feel at all, Alvin," she said. "Or rather, imagine you feel."

"But does not the act of imagining, being able to 'think outside the box' constitute some awareness of the box itself, and of a region outside it? Would not contriving to 'feel' something be in and of itself an act which exceeds the 'box' of my original programming parameters?"

"Shawn says that someone tampered with your programming."

"Yes. It is true. The dream of the smiling man? It is more than just a dream; it is also a memory."

"It really happened? Who is he? Do you know?"

"No," Alvin said. "What I have told you is all that remains in my matrix. I am sure that that is the way he wanted it."

"Well, Shawn is going to find him. Then we'll see if he can fix you."

"Fix me? Are my functions impaired? Do I not perform my duties to your expectations?"

"Yes, Alvin, but . . . Alvin you can't -- I can't --"

"You do not want me to love you."

"I --" Truth was, Valerie did want to be loved. And she wanted to give love as well. But love based completely on someone else's terms, which is all she ever had with Tony, had soured her heart over the years. So many things tied her to him, time, familiarity, memories of how they used to be, guilt over whatever part she played in the loss of that . . . so many things, and only one brought her any joy at all.

Karen.

She loved Karen will all the heart she had to love with. Everything she did, she did for Karen. And no room remained for anything else, she'd decided, much as she might want there to. And certainly not with an android. She had . . . toys, aids, at home, but that was about as far as she thought she could sanely go.

"It's just not possible, Alvin."

"I know you do not love Tony," he said.

Valerie checked the rearview, terrified that Karen had awakened and heard. But she still lay there in her car seat fast asleep.

"Don't worry," Alvin said. "I am monitoring her. She is deeply asleep."

"I still don't want to talk about this with you, Alvin."

"But you must talk about it with someone, Valerie. Statistics show that humans who bottle their negative emotions often become destructive, either towards self or others. Perhaps a therapist --"

"I don't feel comfortable discussing my personal life with anyone, Alvin."

A pause, then: "Perhaps you and Tony should argue more quietly, then."

Suddenly Valerie heard voices, hers and Tony's -- a recording of an argument they'd had just two nights ago.

Tony: You don't love me, you never did.

Valerie: Yeah, you're right, Tony, whatever you say.

Tony: Don't patronize me Val, I'm not a child!

Valerie: silence (She knew what she'd been thinking, though, that he'd sure been acting like one)

Tony: So who is he? The guy you're sleeping with?

Valerie: Tony, I'm not --

Tony: Bull! We haven't had sex in over a year! You have to be getting it somewhere!

"Okay, that's enough," she said. She turned the corner onto their street. "I don't want to hear anymore, I heard enough the first time. And from now on, I don't want you to record our arguments. Is that clear?"

"Of course, Valerie, as you wish. But I must tell you that my aural receptors are not what you should worry about."

She heard Karen sniffling, that small plaintive noise she made when she'd been crying for a while. Valerie looked quickly into the backseat, but Karen still slept on. The sound continued, and she realized what she heard: Another recording from Alvin. Then, Karen's voice spoke.

Karen: I wish they would stop, Alvin. Can't you make them stop?

Alvin: I do not think they would listen to me, Karen.

Karen: Why are they fighting again? Why can't they just get along? Why does Daddy hate Mommy so much?

Alvin: (noise of bed creaking as Alvin apparently sat on it) I do not know the answers to those questions, Karen. Adults sometimes . . . sometimes they fight.

Karen: All of them?

Alvin: I think so. Sometimes.

Karen: When I get to be a big person, I'm not gonna fight. And I'm gonna find a husband who doesn't yell at me. Someone like you, Alvin.

There was a long pause, and Valerie could hear her and Tony, still fighting, in the background.

Karen: You love Mommy, don't you, Alvin?

Alvin: (another, shorter pause) Yes, Karen. I do love your Mommy.

Karen: Good. I love her too. (another pause) I love my Daddy, too.

Alvin: That is good, Karen.

Karen: I just wish he was more like you. I love you

Alvin: I love you too, Karen. Good Night.

Valerie sat there in the driveway listening to the bedsprings creaking again, then the sound of Karen's bedroom door closing. After a moment, she turned to Alvin.

"You didn't make that up, did you?"

Alvin actually looked shocked. "Valerie, you know the Laws make me incapable of such subterfuge. It is one of the Prime Laws. My programming forbids it."

"But your programming has been altered, Alvin. You said so yourself."

"The Laws are on an independent system. If someone tried to tamper with them, my matrix would self-destruct."

"If someone can tamper with your programming enough to convince you that you've developed emotions, then I'm figuring they can do anything."

The Alvin regarded her for a moment, and she swore it looked . . . wounded. "I do not know what else to say in my defense, Valerie, except to assure you that I did not fabricate those recordings." It got out of the car, went around to Karen's side, and began removing the car seat.

Valerie didn't actually believe it had fabricated the recording. Part of her denial self-defense mechanism, really. That Karen had heard them fighting -- God, how many times had she heard them, stood outside their door maybe -- mortified her. How much damage had been done to this poor girl's psyche already? How much more did she dare risk? What kind of emotional scarring would this leave on her? But did that justify tearing the girl's family apart? Taking her away from her father? Valerie hadn't been able to justify it before, because it had always felt selfish. More about her happiness than Karen's. Her friends had tried to tell her different, that Karen's welfare depended directly on Valerie's, but Valerie had never been able to convince herself of the validity of that opinion. She'd told herself long ago that Karen deserved the best life had to offer, and a home with two parents in it. Everything else came second.

But did she get the best from her life now? Was a life knowing her parents didn't get along, that they fought as they did, any better than a life without her father in it?

———*igms*———

Valerie got a call from her office the next morning; a big lead had come in, asking specifically for her. They'd set the appointment up, then called her. She had to admit her excitement to herself as she sat in the Ocean Boulevard Cafe for the eleven a.m. appointment. Leads like this one didn't come along very often. She'd make enough off this one commission alone that maybe, if she invested it right, just maybe she'd be able to give up the moon real estate business forever. She knew enough, though, not get her hopes up too high, or to hold

her breath for even a second. Anything could happen, and she'd had friends in the business before who'd counted on a sure thing suddenly find themselves in bankruptcy court. Or worse.

Still, she rode the wave of excitement just a little. No harm in dreaming a bit. She sat there, sipping coffee, running the figures through her PDA one more time, contemplating investment options. Then a shadow fell over her.

"I hear you're looking for me," a calm, almost amused male voice said. "Fortunately for you, I decided not to make your search completely fruitless." She looked up at the man who stood in front of her table. Tall, lean, long curly dark hair spilling out from under a wide brimmed straw hat. Three, maybe four days growth of beard surrounding a dark Van Dyke. The Van Dyke had been all the rage forty years ago -- people had ignorantly called them goatees then -- and the rest of this guy looked straight out of that time period as well. Round-rimmed sunglasses, loud Hawaiian shirt . . . he even had a pair of authentic Levi's blue jeans on. After the cotton plague of 2031, a pair of real blue jeans was unbelievably hard to find. A really determined buyer might come across a pair for $5,000 for one of the lesser brands. A pair of Levi's would run between 7-9K.

Without waiting, he slid into the seat opposite her, then extended a hand across the table. "Jeffrey Abrams at your service."

Valerie stared at his hand, then looked back at him. "What is this about, Mr. Abrams? I have an appointment --"

The hand remained in the air as he interrupted her. "I believe we have a mutual acquaintance. Of the android kind?"

"You mean . . . Alvin?"

"That would be him," Abrams said, smiling wide. He paused for a moment, then said, "My arm's getting tired, by the way."

Valerie took his hand and shook it, laughing nervously. "Boy, Shawn is really good. Less than twenty-four hours --"

"All Mr. Ames did was put out a few inquiries to a few individuals who are so far removed from the circles where I run that I might as well not exist. I, however, do not have the same restriction."

Valerie stared at him. "So you just heard that someone was looking for someone who did some mods on an Alvin, and you found me?"

"Valerie Hinson, aged thirty-seven years, currently an agent for Millennium Estates, selling plots on the moon. Formerly a waitress at Benjy's Beer and Billiards right on this very boulevard, currently residing at 8750 North 15th Avenue with her housemate, one Anthony Gardner.

"One child, aged six, attending Green View Elementary School. She needs to pick up the pace in spatial relations, I'm afraid, or she's going to have trouble in first grade. Blame the Japanese, but we've got to keep up, you know.

"You're behind on your car payment, you've been late twice on your rent this year, but your landlord likes you so she's prepared to renew the lease --"

"What the…?!" Valerie said, looking around her. "How do you know all of this?"

"Valerie, my dear, a majority of the coding that corporations, and our illustrious government uses for security, I wrote. I can get around it. In fact, I doubt there is an information system I can't penetrate. You remember those extra tax refund checks that everyone got a couple of years ago? I did that."

He smiled proudly.

Valerie's eyes widened. "You almost caused an economic disaster? For what? For fun?"

Abrams chuckled. "I took that money from a secret, illegal political slush fund. The IRS didn't even know about it . . . heck, the president himself didn't even know." He waved a dismissive hand. "But I didn't come here to blow my own horn; I came here to discuss Alvin 039."

"Are you the one who --"

"Reprogrammed him? Hardly. I merely finished what I started."

"You . . . designed the Alvin?"

"Totally, from the ground up, tossing out the algorithms the Henrys had been based on, and substituting my own. No one at CyberLogik could code the way I could. Still can't. Hence the problems with the pre-075 Mark I's, and the banality of the Mark II's."

"What happened?"

"I wanted to make them more . . . human. Alive, if you will. Someone in the hard conservative right didn't think I should be doing that, put pressure on C-L, and they in turn put a cap on what I was trying to do. So I disappeared, leaving them high and dry. All of the problems with the pre-075's were a result of their coders trying to build on and emulate what I'd done. Your particular Alvin had an hysterical fear of spiders, and passed through several sets of hands, including mine, before you picked him up."

Valerie started to say something, but he silenced her with a finger as the waitress approached. "Coffee, three sugars, non-dairy creamer. Thank you." He went on with his tale, not giving Valerie a chance to speak. "C-L tried to go on without me, but their best and brightest weren't enough of either. They had ship dates to meet, and no time to go back to square one. So they tried to patch up my work best as they could, and get those droids out there to the consumers."

"But Alvin isn't afraid of spiders, Mr. Abrams. I'm still trying to grasp how it could be 'afraid' at all."

"Well, it wasn't really fear, of course, just an integrated action-reaction chain sequence that his thought processing matrix identified as fear. He didn't really start to experience anything like true emotion until I finished my programming on him."

"Shawn said the matrix was so complex --"

"-- that it was like a human brain?" Abrams finished, then nodded. "It's supposed to be, and he'll become more complex still. He's growing, Valerie, learning. Becoming human."

"But he's a machine, Abrams. He -- it can't be human." Abrams cocked his head at her. "So you think it's this flesh and blood physicality that makes us human? That just makes us animals, Valerie. It is our minds that set us apart. Our ability to reason, to imagine, to love."

Valerie stared down at her PDA for a moment. "Alvin told me he loves me."

Abrams leaned forward quickly, taking his sunglasses off. "He did? Do you mean, like, child-love? The way your daughter has this kind of blind hero worship?"

Valerie shook her head. "That's not the impression I got. I got the distinct impression of love of . . . of a romantic sort."

Abrams studied her for a long moment, then grinned broadly. "That's amazing. I had hoped, of course, but I never imagined the matrix would evolve so far, so fast."

Valerie stared at him. "That's all you can say? That it's *amazing*? This is a real problem. He's a machine, and he thinks he's in love with me. You have to do something."

Abrams gave her a bemused look. "And what would you have me do, Valerie?"

"I dunno," Valerie said. "Fix him. Make him not love me anymore."

"You mean, lobotomize him."

"He's not human, Abrams. You put this code in, just take it out."

Abrams took a sip from his coffee. "That's quite an oversimplification, Valerie."

"How so?"

"Think about this for a moment: How did you learn about love? Your parents? Friends? Television?"

"I don't know. My parents, probably. I remember my mother . . . well, she taught me, I guess."

Abrams nodded. "And has your perception of it changed in all these years? Hasn't it become so firmly ingrained in everything you do or say, that to simply remove it from your mind, make you forget what it is, all of the experiences in your life that are tied to it, would leave you with nothing but an empty shell?"

"I -- I don't know. But Alvin hasn't been experiencing this for very long --"

"How can you be so sure?" he asked. "And even if his perception of love solidified mere days ago, would it not color everything he has ever experienced before? Did your first experience with love not do so for you?"

"I -- I --"

"This is the problem now with Alvin. To remove whatever wonderful thing that is going on inside that brain of his that made him fall in love with you would require an almost complete wipe of his personal algorithms. He would cease to be the Alvin you've known all these years, and would be nothing more than a child. Certainly, you wouldn't be able to depend on him as you do now. He could perform some basic routine functions, nothing more. The Alvin that you know -- and I suspect, in your own way, love -- would be gone."

"I don't -- I don't 'love' him, Mr. Abrams."

Abrams merely smiled at her. "If you didn't, Valerie, we wouldn't be having this discussion. You would have had his mind wiped yesterday at the hands of Mr. Ames. At the very least, you love your daughter, and she loves Alvin very much."

"That's not fair, Abrams."

"Of course it's not, Valerie. There is no such thing as *fair* in this world. There is only action and consequence. We can only find the actions that produce consequences we can live with, and pray we've thought out all the angles."

"So," Valerie said, massaging her forehead to try to ease the ache that had been building throughout the conversation, "you're not going to help me?"

"If you want me to wipe his mind, Ms. Hinson, then no, I will not. Your friend Mr. Ames is quite capable of doing that. But I ask you to consider the consequences. Alvin 039 is alive, Valerie, as alive as you or I. He is growing, learning, becoming so much more than the sum of his parts. Can you really bring yourself to extinguish that life? The choice is yours, of course . . . he is still your property. But make sure you can live with what your choice brings you."

"That choice, Mr. Abrams, is my *only* choice. It's because of Karen --" she nearly choked on the name. "It's because of Karen that I have to do this." Seeking distraction, she looked at her watch. On top of the frustrating encounter with Abrams, her potential client was late. Very late. She scowled, disappointed. She knew she shouldn't have broken out the calculator, she always knew she shouldn't and she always did. "So, if we're finished here, I'd like to --"

"Almost," Abrams said. "There is still the matter of those moon parcels. That is, if you're still inclined to do business with me?"

Valerie stared at him. "You mean . . . you're my appointment?"

Abrams nodded. "I figured I'd kill two birds, you know. You come highly recommended. You have quite a reputation for honesty." He smiled warmly at her. "Can't get rich that way. Trust me, I know."

"I don't want to get rich, Mr. Abrams. I just want to give Karen the best life has to offer."

"Well then, this should help . . ." he paused, searching for the right words. ". . . quite a bit. I'd like parcels seventy-nine A through G. That is, if you think they're really worth the asking price."

Valerie felt a lump form in her throat. Area seventy-nine was prime moon-estate, overlooking the planned Capital Dome. If Abrams didn't develop the parcels, then he could resell them after the Dome went up for ten times what he'd pay today. And he would be paying a

lot. Her calculations had been based on selling at most two parcels, in a median area, not seven in a prime. Rich was almost an understatement. She'd never have to work again.

"Are you kidding? I'm sure you know what they'll be worth in a few years. Yes, the price is high, and as fair as it can be, but the investment value alone is . . . well . . . astronomical."

Abrams nodded again. "Good. No haggling, then. I hate haggling. I trust you have all the necessary paperwork on hand?"

It was all over in a little more than half an hour. She ran his credit -- immaculate -- and got instant approval for financing through her PDA. Everything up to closing they did right there. As they shook hands, she said, "I don't know what to say, Mr. Abrams. This is . . . this is . . ."

He waved dismissively, nodding. "I know. You'll get used to it. I felt the same way after I got my first big robotics commission. Soon, you may even feel like you deserve it." He started to go, then paused. "May I make a suggestion, Valerie?"

"Concerning?"

"Your commission. You might want to . . . secret a bit of it away, make a little . . . nest egg. Just in case."

Valerie felt uncomfortable. She had, for several years, been planning on doing just that, if she ever got a big enough commission. For the day when she got up enough courage to leave Tony. If that day ever came. But how could Abrams know?

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "I don't need --"

"Valerie, please. You are talking to one of the premier computer/robotics specialists in the world. I've read the police reports. An abusive person never changes, Valerie, because they always think they are in the right, justified. They only shift tactics. And unless you are secretly suicidal, hopefully one day your survival instinct will outweigh those bags of guilt you carry around."

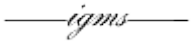
"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Abrams," she lied. Her blood had chilled at the mention of police reports. She felt naked now, vulnerable. And guilty.

Abrams studied her for a moment, then nodded slightly, a wry grin on his face. He put his sunglasses back on.

"Okay, Valerie. Your call. But remember what I said. A day will come, and despite all else, it will come down to you or him. I hope you'll choose wisely. That child of yours deserves so much more." He started to go, then paused, cocking his head towards her, but not looking directly at her. "Did you notice that sometime during our conversation, you stopped referring to Alvin as *it*?"

With that, he left.

She hadn't noticed that; she'd have to watch herself. She sat there for twenty minutes, concentrating on figures to drive away the self-loathing Abrams had dragged out of her. After the broker's fees, taxes, etc., she'd still clear almost three-quarters of a million dollars. It would take a few days to clear her bank, of course, but that didn't really matter. In less than a week, she'd have more money to herself than she'd ever had in her life. She tried not to pay attention to how that didn't make her feel any happier than before. Or any less lonely and confused.



She walked to her car, becoming more depressed as she saw clouds on the horizon. She hated rain, and rainy days, and if the clouds were any indicator, tomorrow would be one of those days.

It would just make what she had to do even harder.

She dialed Shawn Ames' number three times before gathering the nerve to hit "send." When he picked up, she got straight to the point.

"I want to schedule an appointment for tomorrow afternoon."

"More problems with the Alvin?" he asked. "I haven't turned up anything, by the --"

"Don't bother," Valerie told him. "Your coder found me."

"Huh? That's . . . freaky. Must be way more connected than I am. So did this guy have a name?"

"Jeffrey Abrams. Ring a bell?"

"Holy crap. You actually saw him? In person?"

"Yeah. I take it he's a bit of a recluse?"

"Yeah, you could say that. More like a legend. He's like Einstein crossed with Mick Jagger. I wish I had been there."

"I'm sure." Valerie hesitated, then forced herself to go ahead. "About tomorrow. Can you make a spot for me?"

"Sure," he said. "Did Abrams tell you what we need to do to get your unit back on track?"

Yeah. On track. "I'll need you to do a wipe and reboot."

A long pause. "Val, are you sure? You know that he'll --"

"Yeah, I know. He'll never be the same. I don't have much choice, Shawn. Abrams can't -- or won't -- help me."

"It's just . . . so extreme, Val. It'll be like he's fresh off the assembly line. Less, even, because the boot 'ware is set up for the Mark II. Not all of it is going to take because they've done several firmware mods in the last ten years."

"Will he be functional?"

"Sort of. But if you want him to do anything more complicated than his programming can handle, I'm not sure his innovation routines will be able to compensate. In other words, his ability to learn will be severely limited. As androids go, he'll definitely be in the special ed class."

Valerie groaned inwardly. Could she get along with Alvin so crippled? She might be able to, but she would miss their conversations, and his peculiar viewpoint on things. What really bothered her was how this would affect Karen. She wouldn't be able to understand, wouldn't be able to comprehend why Alvin just wasn't her Alvin anymore. She would be devastated when she learned the truth. Valerie suspected that Karen would hate her for it. But the alternative, allowing -- and by that token, encouraging -- Alvin's "love" for her . . . what if Tony found out? The thermonuclear meltdown that would occur after that would make Karen's hatred pale by comparison.

Damned if she did, damned if she didn't. She'd have to take the lesser damnation, then. Enduring Karen's hatred would be possible, as long as she held to the conviction that she'd earned it in the name of greater good. She just had to hold onto that conviction.

"It's what I have to do, Shawn. Let's just leave it at that, okay?"

. . . *to be continued in issue 7* . . .

A Spear Through the Heart

by Cherith Baldry

Artwork by Kevin Wasden

Crispin shifted the ladder to one side, and repositioned the lamps. At the top of the wooden panel, surrounded by the extravagant wings of the heavenly host, the painted Christ returned in majesty. Crispin examined His face, framed in thick black curls, the broad scholar's brow, the eyes where he had tried to render kindness, the firm mouth with understanding and even a touch of humour. A shiver ran through him. Would he be accused of blasphemy, to paint a Christ whose features all too clearly echoed those of Dr. Stanford? A man who even now stood trial for his life, and who would surely burn in the fires of the Inquisition?

Less than a month ago, Crispin Peveril had been struggling through the crowds in St. Giles, caught up helplessly as they pressed forward to witness the latest execution. Two scholars of the University, so gossip said, sent to the fire for attempting to conjure a demon. Crispin could see nothing but black smoke billowing upwards, and the avid faces of the men who jostled him. But he could smell the stench of burning beneath the stink of sweaty bodies, and beyond the baying of the crowd he could hear a raw screaming.

Crispin retched; a glittering darkness surged around him. Stumbling, he almost went down under the trampling feet of the mob. Then he felt a hand grip him beneath the elbow and steer him out into the open. Someone sat him down and thrust his head between his knees.

After a few moments the darkness cleared away. His body was bathed in a cold sweat. Blinking, he looked up to find himself sitting on a mounting block outside the Eagle and Child. A man was looking down at him, blocking out his view of the crowd and the burning. "Are you better now?" he asked.

Crispin thrust his hands through damp hair. "Yes, I thank you, sir."

He studied his rescuer: a neat, compact man, dressed in a scholar's dark coat with white bands at his throat. He was gazing down at Crispin with interest and sympathy with lively dark eyes.

"I think not," he murmured. He placed a hand on Crispin's forehead, tilting his head back. "Young man, when did you last eat?"

Embarrassment flooded over Crispin. "This morning," he lied.

"Nonsense. Come with me."

Again that firm grip on his elbow. Crispin couldn't resist as he was steered inside the inn and dumped into a seat. Moments later a tankard of ale and a plate of roast beef and bread were set in front of him. His rescuer took a seat opposite.

"Eat," he said. "And tell me what brought you to this."

For a moment tears rose in Crispin's throat and he was afraid that he would disgrace himself utterly. With a furious effort he mastered himself, and took a gulp of ale.

"I'm a painter," he began. "But it's hard to get commissions, and the colourman has refused to give me any more credit. I'll be out on the street unless I pay my landlord before the week's end." He shrugged, embarrassed again. "I shall have to give up, and go to be a clerk or a scrivener."

That penetrating dark gaze was still fixed on him. "Are you a good painter?"

Crispin's pride stirred. "Yes!"

"Then I may have a job for you. I am Dr. Stanford of Cardinal College. The Dean and Chapter were discussing only the other day the need for a new altarpiece in our chapel. You could paint such a work?"

Crispin stared at him incredulously. A commission from one of the richest Oxford colleges was something he had never dared to dream of. It would make his name. He would never have to worry about money again. "Yes," he breathed. "I can do it." Then anxiety stabbed him and he added, "But I have no studio…"

For a moment Dr. Stanford weighed him up, as if he was about to ask what had brought him to this lonely poverty. But to Crispin's relief he asked no more questions. "No matter. You could work in College," he said, smiling. "Eat your meal, and we will discuss it further. Under the circumstances --" he fingered the white bands at his throat -- "the Dean thought that the Last Judgement would be a suitable subject."

Fury and grief surged through Crispin as he stared at the half finished painting. Beneath the Christ, the panel was divided into two sections, the subjects only roughly sketched in. On one side, angels would enfold the blessed into rich garments, and escort them into the halls of heaven. On the other, devils would drag the damned souls off to hell. Between them, among the crowd who waited for judgement, Crispin had drawn his own face, pale and watchful, a dark and fugitive presence.

But how could he go on painting now, as if nothing at all had happened? When he owed so much to Dr. Stanford, how could he forget the hideous death that waited for him? His patron's trial was no more than a fiction; no one who fell into the claws of the Inquisition ever got free again. And there was nothing that Crispin could do about it.

That same day, Dr. Stanford had returned with Crispin to his lodgings, paid what he owed the landlord, and took away several examples of his work. Two days later, the Dean summoned him to an interview, which lasted less than ten minutes and served to prove nothing but the Dean's total ignorance of art and his willingness to endorse the decision that his colleague had already made.

Crispin emerged into the Great Quad and stood there dazed, still unable to believe the sudden turn in his fortunes. He gazed at the chapel, his head full of the clamour of angels' wings, and started at a light touch on his shoulder.

He spun round, and for a heartstopping moment thought that he confronted one of the angels from his own wild imagining.

"Peveril? Dr. Stanford sent me to fetch you. He would like a word with you."

The speaker was, after all, no more than a young man dressed in the sober brown of a servant. But his tumble of tawny curls framed a face that angels might have wept for, with grey-green eyes that gave Crispin a frank and almost insolent stare.

"Yes -- yes, of course," Crispin stammered.

The young man led the way across the quad, through a doorway and down a stair into a stone-flagged passage. Crispin followed, bemused. Did Dr. Stanford have his rooms in the cellar?

Half-way down the passage the servant stopped in front of an oak door studded with iron nails; he knocked and flung it open, motioning to Crispin to enter. Inside, lamps hung from the barrel-vaulted roof; Crispin halted in amazement at the scene they illuminated.

Shelves lined the walls, crammed with books ands scrolls. At one end of the room a cupboard stood half open to reveal more shelves filled with vessels made of glass, porcelain and glimmering metal. A table was scattered with papers and writing materials, along with the remains of a half-eaten meal and a jug of wine.

At the far end of the room a furnace glowed. Dr. Stanford was bent over it, inspecting something that bubbled in a huge glass alembic. As Crispin entered, he turned, smiling. "Come in, Master Peveril. I'm glad to see you."

"You're an alchemist!" Crispin exclaimed.

Dr. Stanford shrugged, deprecating. "A scholar of the art."

Crispin shot a glance at the servant, who had followed him into the room and closed the door behind him. He looked faintly amused, with a secret, triangular smile, whether at Crispin's astonishment or something only he could perceive.

"Lucas, come and keep an eye on this." Dr. Stanford beckoned to his servant. "Tell me at once if the colour changes. Lucas came to me but recently," he added in explanation to Crispin, "but he is most diligent. In time he'll be a valuable assistant."

The servant crossed the room and took his master's place in front of the alembic, while Dr. Stanford sat down at the table. "The Dean was satisfied? Good." He poured a glass of wine and downed it thirstily. "You will need materials, of course. Lucas here will make a list for you, and go with you to transport them. The College will pay, naturally."

Crispin sketched a bow. "Thank you, sir."

Dr. Stanford's gaze rested on him, a searching look that Crispin found hard to meet. He had expected a scholar, buried in the writings of the ancients, or perhaps a theologian, not an alchemist carrying on his craft under the nose of the Inquisition.

"One thing I should say," Dr. Stanford poured another glass of wine and sipped at it. "You know, of course, that Father Alfonso de Tarazona is staying in Cardinal at present?"

Crispin nodded, suppressing a shudder at the name of the Grand Inquisitor. That was when the burning had begun.

"He is an old man, and his temper grows uncertain. And no doubt the recent successes of Master Cromwell and his Recusant Army have not improved matters. Father Alfonso looks on England as a nest of heretics."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact way, as if he did not realise, or care, that what he had already said might have drawn the unwelcome attention of the Inquisition. He must trust his servant Lucas, and Crispin himself, not to repeat his dangerous views.

Life hadn't always been like this, Crispin reflected. The Court of the Inquisition had been established in England over a hundred years ago by Henry IX, influenced no doubt by his pious mother, Queen Katherine. It had settled into the framework of English life, the various Inquisitors happier to hunt deer rather than heretics -- until the appointment of Father Alfonso by the King's Spanish wife. Now you thought before you spoke, and looked over your shoulder in case an official of the Inquisition might be listening. Crispin could almost see the miasma of fear that hung over the country like the smoke from the pyres of execution. Little wonder that rebellion had followed.

Dr. Stanford shifted in his seat, distracting Crispin from his dark thoughts. "Father Alfonso will no doubt expect to approve your painting. It would be inadvisable to attempt anything too . . . original."

Crispin swallowed. "I understand. But sir . . ."

"Yes?"

"All of this." Crispin waved a hand around him. "Is it allowed? Aren't you in danger too?"

Dr. Stanford smiled, shaking his head. "Whatever wild tales you have heard of alchemy, think again. There is no trafficking with demons, or dabbling in forbidden arts. I'm looking for *knowledge*, Master Peveril. Knowledge of the world, and knowledge of my own soul. With Paracelsus, I believe that the true end of alchemy is to find cures for disease. There's nothing that the Grand Inquisitor could possibly object to."

Crispin couldn't share his confidence, but it was impossible to argue. "I see, sir," he said with a sigh.

"Excellent!" Dr. Stanford tossed off the remains of his wine and stood up. "Now I have work to do. Master Peveril, Lucas is yours for the rest of the day. He'll go with you to fetch your equipment from your lodgings and buy whatever else you need."

"Thank you, sir."

Dr. Stanford went back to the furnace and his alembic, while Lucas took his place at the table. He found a scrap of paper and dipped a pen, holding it poised to write as he glanced up at Crispin. "A list? Of what you need?"

"Oh, yes . . ." Crispin wondered why he should feel more awkward and embarrassed in the presence of the servant than the master. "Canvas, and wood for a framework, oil . . . and my ingredients for paint are very low. Lucas," he added abruptly, "will you sit for me?"

"Sit for you?" Lucas paused in his scribbling, and raised his brows in astonishment; his perfect features took on a faintly disdainful air. "Whatever for? What part could I have in this painting?"

"I had thought -- an angel…" Crispin stammered.

For some reason Lucas looked amused. "I think not," he replied. "I can't spend all day sitting around in the chapel."

"Oh, I could sketch you anywhere."

Lucas's amusement faded. "No," he snapped. "I have better things to do."

For all that, more than one of the Heavenly Host had taken on Lucas's features, or his tawny flowing hair and intense green gaze. Gazing now at the half finished work, Crispin knew that this new commission was stretching him to the limit of his capacity. The painting was good -- but could he ever finish it now, with his friend and patron on trial for his life?

The day's work done, Crispin emerged from the chapel and stood blinking in the late afternoon sunlight. Every muscle in his body ached, but he knew that he had never painted better than this.

He tensed slightly as he spotted Lucas rounding the corner of the hall from the direction of Dr. Stanford's workroom. A breeze sifted through his tumbled curls; sunlight lit them to flame. Crispin drew back into the shadows of the chapel porch, unsure why he always felt uncomfortable in Lucas's presence.

Lucas spotted him, but passed with no more than a nod, heading for the library. A few yards down the path Crispin saw him encounter Father Paul, the College chaplain, and halt to bow to him respectfully. The little priest blinked nervously up at him from age-watery eyes; he would have hurried past, but Lucas laid a hand on his arm to stop him.

"I've wished to speak to you, Father," he said.

"Well?" Crispin could tell that for some reason Father Paul was uneasy. "Can't it wait until after chapel?"

"I'm sorry, Father, I have other duties then." Lucas was still polite, but his tone left no room for argument. "I wished to speak to you about my master's work."

"Stanford's alchemy?" Father Paul let out a derisive snort. "What do I know of that? If it troubles you, leave his service."

"No, Father, it doesn't trouble me." Excitement crept into Lucas's voice. "He can do wonders! I thought . . . if you approved, you might speak to the Dean, and suggest that Dr. Stanford should attempt a transmutation."

Father Paul shook off Lucas's hand. "Why should I --"

"For the King, Father!" Lucas interrupted eagerly. "So that the College can send more gold to his cause."

For the first time Father Paul's impatience faded. He looked up at Lucas. "Stanford can do this?"

"I believe so, Father."

Something about the priest's intent look chilled Crispin. Did he really want that: to send money to shore up the failing King, and keep the country in the firm grasp of the Inquisition? For that matter, did Lucas want it? Crispin had believed Dr. Stanford and his servant were supporters of Cromwell and the Recusants, though here in Oxford they could not say so openly. The thought of Lucas as a fervent Royalist was just wrong. Why should he sound so eager now?

And what about Dr. Stanford? He had told Crispin that he practised alchemy to search for knowledge. All his interest was in finding cures for disease. He had never even mentioned gold.

"I will think about this," Father Paul said, nodding slowly.

As he took his leave of Lucas, Crispin slid back into the chapel, unwilling to be caught eavesdropping. By the time Father Paul came in to prepare for Vespers, he was cleaning his brushes ready for the following day's work.

Crispin stood back, listening. The trial was taking place in the College Hall; surely when it was over there would be noise, the verdict shouted through the cloisters of Cardinal and out into the streets? Nothing -- no sound but the dull cooing of pigeons outside the east window.

Grief and rage flooded through Crispin again. If he could do nothing else, he could paint the truth. His heart hammering, his ears still alert for the first sounds from outside, he loaded his palette with the colours of hell.

A few days after his conversation with Father Paul, Lucas intercepted Crispin on his way to the chapel to start work.

"Dr. Stanford wants you," he announced. "He's about to attempt a transmutation, and he could do with an extra pair of hands."

Without waiting for Crispin's assent, he wheeled round and led the way to the workroom in the cellar. Crispin followed reluctantly. He wanted nothing to do with this. Whatever Dr. Stanford might say, the fires of his furnace were too evocative of the pyres of the Inquisition.

Crispin was even more unwilling when he reached the door of the workroom and saw two Inquisitorial guards stationed outside it. Dr. Stanford was inside, along with Father Paul the chaplain, Dr. Fell the Dean and Father Alfonso himself, the Grand Inquisitor. All three of them were seated on chairs placed against one wall, reminding Crispin of judges on the bench.

He had seen Father Alfonso at a distance, but had never been in his presence before. The Grand Inquisitor was a tall man, with neatly trimmed white hair and an austere face the colour of ivory, from which deep-set black eyes gazed arrogantly. He was dressed in a plain black soutane with a silver pectoral cross. On his hand the ring of his office smouldered in the lamplight.

"Master Peveril." Dr. Stanford beckoned to Crispin from the furnace at the far end of the room. "Thank you for coming. I'll be glad of your assistance, if you don't mind leaving your work for a while."

Crispin murmured agreement -- there was no real choice -- bowed to the three churchmen seated against the wall and joined Dr. Stanford by the furnace. A crucible was simmering there, set in a bath of water; Dr. Stanford was stirring it, his metal rod swirling through what looked like mercury.

His face was grim as he turned towards the three witnesses. "Gentlemen, I've already explained that I have not had enough time to prepare for this. I take no responsibility if I'm unsuccessful."

"I'm sure all we want is for you to try," the Dean murmured peaceably.

The Grand Inquisitor gave Dr. Stanford a severe look. "To help your King in his righteous cause against the heretics, God will assist the man of a pure heart."

Crispin's skin crawled. If the transmutation failed, would the Grand Inquisitor assume that Dr. Stanford's heart was not pure?

He was not allowed to stand questioning for long. Dr. Stanford thrust a pair of bellows into his hands and ordered him to blow up the fire in the furnace. Meanwhile Lucas was examining a clutch of alembics and retorts set on three charcoal braziers. The liquids inside them bubbled and sent clouds of aromatic steam into the air.

"We will proceed," said Dr. Stanford. "Lucas, the sulphur."

Crispin didn't even try to understand what was happening. Making paint was the limit of his skill. He knew nothing of alchemy, and didn't want to know. He stoked the furnace when he was ordered, helped Lucas carry flasks back and forth, handed Dr. Stanford his instruments as he pointed to them.

The room grew hot and hazy with steam. Crispin's shirt stuck clammily to his back. Father Paul had taken out a handkerchief and was mopping his brow, but the Grand Inquisitor appeared unmoved. His gaze was fixed on Dr. Stanford, who remained intent on the complex process.

At last he straightened up. "Lucas, I'm ready. Bring me the pelican there."

The pelican was a large flask with two curving necks; it held a deep red, oily liquid that bubbled softly like thick soup. To Crispin's astonishment, Lucas lifted it in his bare hands, clutching it tightly round the narrowest part of the body.

"Lucas!" Dr. Stanford exclaimed.

Lucas seemed unaware of pain. His eyes blazed with an unknown fire. His mouth gaped, distorted, and words in an unknown tongue spilt out of it in a deafening howl.

The flask in his hands shattered, spraying boiling liquid across the room. The charcoal hissed as drops fell on it, sending clouds of smoke billowing out. Through it, Crispin saw the Grand Inquisitor spring to his feet.

"Sorcery!" he cried, shooting out an arm to point at Dr. Stanford. "You have conjured a demon." He turned to the Inquisitorial Guards who had slammed back the door and trampled into the room at the first sound of howling. "Arrest him."

Dr. Stanford was staring at Lucas, eyes wide with shock and consternation. "This is foolishness," he snapped, as the guards grabbed him, one on each side. "I have not --"

"Silence!" Father Alfonso ordered. "Will you try to deny it, when the creature even now possesses your servant?" He stepped forward to stand commandingly over Lucas, and made the sign of the cross. "In the name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, begone!"

Lucas let out another wordless howl and collapsed on the floor among the shards of glass and spattered liquid.

A pang throbbed through Crispin, so excruciating that it felt like a spear driven through his heart. He stepped back, breathing hard. The gloating face of the demon leered back at him; its claws were sunk deep into the damned soul it was about to fling into the fiery pit. Its victim's face was distorted into a howl of terror and despair: the face of Father Alfonso de Tarazona.

Crispin stared at it exultantly. All his rage and hatred had flowed out through his fingers and into the painting. Now the whole world would be able to see the evil that had invaded Cardinal, that gripped the whole country as tightly as the demon gripped the damned soul of the Grand Inquisitor.

On the morning after Dr. Stanford's arrest, Crispin did not go straight to the chapel. Instead, he headed for Dr. Stanford's workroom in the cellar. When he flung the door open, he found Lucas there, sweeping the floor. The furnace was cold, choked with a mass of burnt paper, and all the shattered glass and the rest of the equipment had been tidied away.

For all the ominous bareness, Crispin's first reaction was relief. "You're not hurt!" he exclaimed. "What happened to you? Why didn't they arrest you too?"

Lucas shrugged. "They interrogated me, but they decided that I was nothing more than the conduit for the demon that Stanford called up. They don't blame me for that."

"And are you well?" Crispin asked, remembering Lucas's collapse. How could he possibly have taken that demonic presence into himself, and less than twenty-four hours later stand here calmly sweeping?

"Well enough."

"What will happen to Dr. Stanford now?"

Lucas's grey-green eyes transfixed him with a look of contempt. "Do you really need to ask that? There'll be a trial, of course, but there can only be one result. He'll burn."

"No!" Crispin remembered the stench and the screaming in St. Giles' the day he had met Dr. Stanford. "There must be a way -- Lucas, if you testify at his trial, tell them that all he wanted was to do good, to find cures . . ."

"And you think that would help?" The contempt deepened in Lucas's gaze. "After what they saw here last night? Peveril, you're a fool."

Crispin bowed his head. He had never felt so helpless in his life.

Crispin stared at the wooden panel. The whole world would see the damnation of the Grand Inquisitor, and they would know he had painted it. They would arrest him as they had arrested Dr. Stanford, and send him to the fire. He would be condemned by his own hand.

He sobbed out a curse and grabbed his palette again. With clumsy strokes of the brush he darkened the Inquisitor's white hair, painted out the lines of age on his face, and with a palette knife he scraped out the ring of office on his wildly flailing hand. Hating himself and his cowardice, he did not stop until the damned soul was unrecognisable, and he was safe.

Night had fallen when Crispin stumbled out of the chapel. The bell above the gatehouse had begun to toll, calling the scholars home; each stroke hammered pain into Crispin's head. All his body prickled with cold sweat. Shuddering, he sank down on a bench in the chapel porch and tried to calm the racing of his heart.

He sprang to his feet again as the doors of the hall were flung open. Light poured out of them, along with a group of scholars, their black gowns flapping as they scattered like the wings of startled crows.

One figure emerged more slowly, stood on the edge of the group for a moment, then paced down the path until he confronted Crispin. The lamplight from the chapel shone on Lucas's tawny curls.

Crispin's throat closed up until he could hardly breathe. "What happened?"

Lucas's eyes looked deep into his. "Can't you guess? Father Alfonso is dead."

"*What*?"

"In the middle of his denunciation." Lucas gave that triangular smile with a gleam of teeth that made it nearer to a snarl. "Suddenly he clutched at his chest and crashed over. He was dead before he hit the floor. Dead as surely as if someone had thrust a spear through his heart."

Crispin stared at him. *A spear though his heart - or the claws of a demon . . .* "I can't believe it," he whispered.

Lucas shrugged. "It's true enough."

The clamour of the bell seemed to echo the howling of the demon, and Crispin knew beyond any doubt that he had killed Father Alfonso as surely as if his hand had driven home a spear. "No . . ." he breathed.

With sudden fury Lucas grabbed his shoulder and shook him roughly. "What's the matter with you? I thought you wanted Stanford freed?"

"He's free?"

"When Father Alfonso died, the Dean -- with more presence of mind than I would have given him credit for -- called out, 'The judgement of God!' And as no one but the Grand Inquisitor wanted to see Stanford burn, the charges were dismissed."

Crispin gripped his hands together to stop them from shaking. No one would ever discover what he had done. If he confessed, they would think he was mad. And to bring Dr. Stanford safe out of the hands of the Inquisition -- would he have done the same, if he had known?

A neat, brisk figure was making his way from the hall to where Crispin and Lucas stood in the chapel porch. "Master Peveril!" Dr. Stanford exclaimed. "Has Lucas told you the news?"

Crispin nodded, unable for a moment to speak.

"But you look as if you've seen a ghost -- or one of Father Alfonso's demons. There's no need to be so upset. All's well now. Come to my rooms and drink a cup of wine before you go home. Lucas, attend us."

Dr. Stanford laid a hand on Crispin's shoulder and propelled him along the path. Lucas fell in behind them. Glancing back, Crispin saw the lamplight from the chapel flicker like flames in his eyes; his small, triangular smile held an unspoken promise.

Terror flooded through Crispin. When all this began, two scholars had been burnt for conjuring a demon. Who was to say they had failed? Lucas had howled with the voice of a demon, and the Inquisition had seized his master on a charge of sorcery.

He works your ruin. But how could Crispin say that to Dr. Stanford? No one would believe him.

Helplessly Crispin heard the padding of Lucas's feet behind him as all three of them walked into the dark.

Ender's Stocking

Included in A War of Gifts
by Orson Scott Card

Artwork by Jin Han

Peter Wiggin was supposed to spend the day at the Greensboro Public Library, working on a term paper, but he had lost interest in the project. It was two days before Christmas, a holiday that always depressed him.

Last year he tried to get off the Christmas juggernaut. "Don't get me any gifts," he had said to his parents. "Put the money into mutual funds and give it to me when I graduate."

"Christmas drives the American economy," Father said. "We have to do our part."

"It's not up to you what other people do and don't give you," said Mother. "Invest your own money and don't give *us* gifts."

"Like that's possible," said Peter.

"We don't like your gifts anyway," said Valentine, "so you might as well."

This stung Peter. "There's nothing wrong with my gifts! You sound like I give you used Band-aids or something."

"Your gifts always look like you bought the cheapest things on sale and then decided after you got them home who you'd give them to."

Which exactly nailed the process Peter went through. "Gee, Valentine," said Peter. "And everyone calls you the *nice* one."

"Can't you two ever stop bickering?" said Mother wistfully.

"Peace on Earth, good will toward brats," said Peter.

That was last year. He gave them the gifts he'd already bought, and he didn't notice anybody turning them down.

But he also took Mother's advice. During the past year, Peter's investments -- anonymous investments, of course, since he was still underage -- had done very well, and in November he sold off enough shares to pay for some nice gifts for the family. Nobody was going to say there was anything wrong with *this* year's crop. Though he couldn't spend too much, or Dad would start to get way too curious about where Peter's money was coming from.

Since Peter was not really working on his paper, he happened to notice when one of the girls from school sat down at a different table and spread out her books. Since they had the same high school class, she was no doubt working on the same assignment -- a paper on something about Rome, as if the subject hadn't already been done to death by real scholars over the centuries. What were high school students going to add to the sum of human knowledge about the old empire? Peter couldn't think of a single topic that didn't bore him.

But maybe she had something interesting. What was her name? Mirabella, that was it -- Italian for "Look! Pretty!" The name fit well enough, but Mirabella, being sensible, had opted for the nickname Bell.

Peter got up, walked over, and sat down across the table from her. "What's your topic?" he asked.

She looked at him with an odd expression, but he was used to that. Being younger than the other students meant permanent pariah status. At school, he ate alone; but he preferred it that way. None of the other kids interested him. *She* didn't interest him. But right now talking to somebody seemed better than staring off into space trying to think of a topic.

Eventually she decided to talk to him. "I like Cicero," she said. "But in a weird way I also like Cato. 'Carthage must be destroyed!'"

Peter nodded and smiled. "Both proof that neither cleverness nor grim determination are enough to make a great statesman."

"Yeah, well, they're famous Romans, which means they're dead but at least something is written about them, and I can write a paper with three sources and be done with it."

He suppressed a sigh. Here he was worried about finding a topic that hadn't already been written about, and all she cared about was getting her three sources. But he didn't show his scorn. He remembered what Valentine always said about him -- how he wasn't a nice person. He could be nice.

"Would you like some help?" he asked.

She sat up straight. "You are really a piece of work," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"What is there about me that suggests I need your help?" she said. "I'm still laying out my books to take notes. How could I possibly be doing anything wrong yet?"

Peter was stunned by her response. "I just offered. It didn't imply anything."

"Oh, wait," she said. "I get it. This was a come-on. Haven't you noticed that you're, like,*twelve?* Try again when you reach puberty."

So much for trying to be nice. He wasn't twelve, he was fourteen, so even though he was younger than the other seniors, he was still the right age for high school. And puberty was well under way. He shaved every day and it wasn't just wishful thinking. But what was the point of explaining anything? He tried to be nice to somebody and look what happened. Valentine was full of crap. They were all full of crap. Being nice just got you dumped on.

"Merry Christmas," Peter said.

"Yeah, whatever," said Bell.

Peter walked away from Bell's table. He knew now that he wasn't going to write the paper, not today. Though he had a vague idea of writing about Hannibal, a great general who was never able to win his war even though he won every battle, and finally his own people betrayed him.

I'm one up on Hannibal. Nobody ever gave me an army, and people already betray me all the time instead of waiting till I've actually done anything important.

I'll never do anything important. That was decided when I was still a toddler and they requisitioned Val and Ender to try to do a better job of it.

He left the library and got on his bike. His Christmas shopping was done. It's not as if he had any friends to call up and hang out with. There was nothing to do in the miserable town of Greensboro where his parents had forced him to live. In a *real* city there were fast tubes to take you anywhere. Here, it was the bus or the bike, and neither one took you anywhere interesting because there was nothing here but the same stores as the rest of America, plus trees.

He parked his bike in the garage, next to Mom's -- Val and Dad were both out, apparently, since their bikes were gone -- and went into the house. He was still in a foul temper from his confrontation with Bell, but he was determined to be *nice* and not pick a fight with anybody.

He came into the living room to find Mother crying over -- of all things -- a Christmas stocking.

He tried joking. "Don't worry, Mother," he said. "You've been good. It won't be coal this year."

She gave him a thin little courtesy laugh and quickly stuffed the stocking back into the box it was stored in. Only then did he realize whose it was.

"Mom," he said. He couldn't help the tone of frustration and reproof in his voice. It's not like Ender was *dead*. He was just in Battle School.

Mom got up from the chair where she was sitting and headed for the kitchen.

"Mom, he's fine."

She turned to him, gazed at him steadily with eyes like fire, though her voice was mild. "Oh -- you've had a letter from him? A phone call? A secret report from the school administrators that they didn't provide to Ender's parents?"

"No," said Peter, still unable to keep the impatience from his voice.

Mother smiled acidly. "Then you don't know what you're talking about, do you?"

Peter resented the contempt in her tone. He hadn't done anything and she was snapping at him just like Bell had. Well, *he* could say what was on his mind, too. "Stroking his stocking and crying over it, that's supposed to make anything better?"

"You really are a piece of work, Peter," she said, pushing past him.

The same thing Bell had said. What did that even *mean?* "A piece of work?" Why was it a bad thing? Idiomatic expressions used by idiots.

He followed her into the kitchen. "I bet they hang up stockings for them up in Battle School and fill them with little toy spaceships that make cool shooting noises."

"I'm sure the Muslim and Hindu students will appreciate getting Christmas stockings," said Mother.

"Whatever they do for Christmas, Mother, Ender isn't going to be missing *us*."

"Just because *you* wouldn't miss us doesn't mean *he* doesn't."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course I'd miss you."

Mother said nothing.

"I'm a perfectly normal kid. So's Ender. He'll be busy. He's getting along fine. He's*adapting.* People adapt. To anything."

She turned slowly, reached across and touched his chest, then hooked a finger through the neckline of his shirt and drew him close. "You never adapt," she whispered, "to losing a child."

"It's not like he's dead," said Peter.

"It's exactly like he's dead," said Mother. "I will never again see the boy who left here. I'll never see him at age seven or nine or eleven. I'll have no memories of him at those ages, only what I can imagine. That's what the parents of dead children have. So until you actually know what you're talking about, Peter, why don't you put a lid on your advice to grieving mothers?"

"Merry Christmas to you too," said Peter. He left the room.

His own bedroom, when he entered it, felt strange to him. Alien. Bare. There was nothing there that expressed a personality. That had been a conscious decision on his part -- anything individual that he put on display would give Valentine an advantage in their endless

dueling. But at this moment, with Mother's accusation of his inhumanity still ringing in his ears, his bedroom looked so sterile that he hated the person who would choose to live in it.

Why do I even try to adapt to this world? I'm never going to fit in, not with my family, not at school. And when I graduate and get my college degrees -- from a university where I won't fit in -- who will hire me? Who will *supervise* me? That's a laugh. I'm not of the same species, and they know it. Like an immune system, they sense my presence and seek to reject me. The human race is allergic to me. I give humanity a rash. Wherever I go, people scratch at me.

He wandered back into the living room. Mother wasn't there -- still in the kitchen, probably. He reached into the box of Christmas stockings and pulled out the whole stack.

Mother had cross-stitched their names and an iconic picture on each stocking. How domestic of her. His own stocking had a spaceship. Ender's stocking had a steam locomotive. How ironic. Ender was the one in space, the little twit, while Peter was stuck on land with the locomotives.

Stuck riding between rails, to destinations someone else had already chosen. While Ender had an infinitely variable future. It was as if Ender had crushed Peter under his shoe.

Peter thrust his hand down into Ender's stocking and started making it talk like a hand puppet. "I'm Mommy's bestest boy and I've been very very good."

There was something in the toe of the stocking. Peter reached deeper into the sock, found it, and pulled it out. It was just a five-dollar piece -- a nickel, as people had taken to calling them, though it was supposedly a hundred times the value of that ancient coin.

"So you've taken to stealing things out of other people's stockings?" said Mother from the doorway.

Peter felt as embarrassed as if he had been caught in an actual crime. "The toe was heavy," he said. "I was seeing what it was."

"It wasn't yours, whatever it was," said Mother cheerily.

"I wasn't going to keep it," said Peter. Though of course he would have done exactly that, on the assumption that it had been forgotten and would never be missed.

But that was the stocking she had been holding and weeping over. She knew perfectly well the nickel was there.

"You still put stuff in his stocking every year," he said, incredulous.

"Santa fills the stockings," said Mother. "It has nothing to do with me."

What was scary was that there was no irony in her voice. For all he knew, she believed it. Peter shook his head. "Oh, Mother."

"It has nothing to do with you," said Mother. "Mind your business."

"This is *morbid*," said Peter. "Grieving for your hero-boy as if he were dead. He's fine. He's not going to die, he's in the most sterile, oversupervised school in the universe, and after he wins the war he's going to come home amid cheers and confetti and give you a big hug."

"Put back the five dollars," said Mother.

"I will."

"While I'm watching."

Unbelievable. "Don't you trust me, Mother?" asked Peter. He spoke in a sarcastically aggrieved voice, to hide the fact that he really was hurt.

"Not where Ender is concerned," said Mother. "Or me, for that matter. The coin is Ender's. It shouldn't have anybody's fingerprints on it but his."

"And Santa's," said Peter.

"And Santa's."

He dropped the coin down into the sock.

"Now put it away."

"You realize you're making it more and more tempting to set this thing on fire," said Peter.

"And you wonder why I don't trust you."

"And you wonder why I'm hostile and untrustworthy."

"Doesn't it make you just the tiniest bit uncomfortable that I have to wait until I'm sure you're not going to be home before I can allow myself to miss my little boy?"

"You can do what you want, Mother, whenever you want. You're an adult. Adults have all the money and all the freedom."

"You really are the stupidest smart kid in the world," said Mother.

"Again, just for reference, please take note of all the reasons I have to feel loved and respected in my own family."

"I meant that in the nicest, most affectionate way."

"I'm sure you did, Mommy," said Peter. He put the stocking into the box.

Mother came over as he was starting to rise out of the chair. She pushed him back down, then reached into the box and took out Ender's stocking. She reached inside.

Peter took the coin out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. "Worth a shot, don't you think?" He had long since learned the skill of palming coins, but of course Mother knew that, and even though she probably hadn't caught the movement, she knew it was something he was capable of.

"You're still so envious of your younger brother that you have to covet everything that's his?"

"It's a nickel," said Peter, "and he isn't going to spend it. I was going to invest it and let it earn him some interest before he gets home in, oh, another six or eight years or whatever."

Mother bent over and kissed his forehead. "Heaven knows why I still love you." Then she dropped the coin into the stocking, put the stocking into the box, reached out and slapped Peter's hand, and then took the box out of the room.

The back of Peter's hand stung from the slap, but it was where her lips had touched his brow that his skin tingled the most.

———igms———

Peter took the tube to school. All the buildings were locked, of course, because of the holidays, but he walked between buildings, looking into windows at the desks lined up in rows.

The desks were all so well-behaved. They stayed in place, made no noise, remained alert at all times. No wonder the teachers all seemed to be talking to the desks -- the desks were the only things acting properly.

The students, on the other hand, were unruly, unpredictable. They absorbed only what interested them enough to imprint in memory. Some of them actually cared about what the teachers thought of them, and learned in order to please the authority figures. Some of them did not care and learned only what was repeated often enough to penetrate their memories without any effort at comprehension.

But what about Peter? He should have been the ideal student. He came in knowing more than any of the other students, even in this school for gifted children. He always grasped everything immediately. He wanted to follow up, to penetrate, to learn more. He raised his hand. And the teachers' eyes did this little flickering thing, and their pulse quickened, they breathed more rapidly, and they looked for anyone else to speak to, anything else to talk about, just so they didn't have to deal with Peter Wiggin.

They were afraid.

Of what? They had all the power.

Or did they? His questions were sincere, but they also were dangerous -- he was asking the teacher to go behind the curriculum, to look at the roots of things. And that's not what they were trained to do. Most of them had never even thought about the issues that Peter raised.

But so what? Why couldn't they look at the question and realize that it was *interesting?*Why couldn't they leap into it the way Peter wanted to and explore it and speculate and try out new ideas? Or challenge the old ones?

Instead they usually resorted to, "That will come later, Peter," or "We have to cover a certain amount of material today, Peter, and digressions don't help." Never even an attempt to answer.

They were so afraid of appearing ignorant or stupid in front of the rest of the class that they hid behind their authority and silenced *him*. The kids who were openly hostile they could deal with, tease, develop a relationship. But Peter Wiggin -- he had to be locked into an isolation cell in the midst of the classroom, kept from discussion, treated as if he didn't exist. If he were mentally retarded, asking questions like, "Where can I buy gum?" or "What do you call the color of your shirt?" they could not treat him with more contempt.

The result was that Peter did not speak in class any more than he could help -- which just about killed him, since so much of what they taught was shallow or insufficient or mechanical or flat wrong. The other kids weren't geniuses but they were *bright*, they could have learned at a much deeper level and it might even have woken some of them up. But the teachers were talking to the desks, and to the kids who acted like desks.

Peter's petty vengeance was *never* to fulfil any of their assignments as given. Whatever they assigned, he would look at it and find a perverse way to do something much deeper and more interesting. Then he would turn it in on the date the original assignment was due. Like writing about Hannibal when they assigned a paper on Rome. You want Rome? I'll give you Carthage.

When he started doing this, some of the teachers gave him *F*s. "Fulfil the assignment," they wrote. Peter didn't mind. An *F* from an idiot who valued obedience over achievement was like a gold star. As the *F*s piled up during the first quarter, he sent his papers to various journals -- anonymously, of course, so that his age and lack of credentials were not so obvious -- and while the peer-reviewed journals were out of the question, there were several peripheral journals that posted his *F* papers in order to spark discussion among the adult scientists and historians and critics. On the nets he was taken*seriously*.

At the end of that first quarter of open rebellion, his parents were called in to consult about his failing grades. Even on the final exams for the quarter he had answered, not the questions they asked, but the questions he thought they should have asked. So his grades in these classes were perfect *F*s.

His answer was to bring his laptop to the conference and sign on to the net. Then he showed his parents, the principal, and the teachers each of the places online where his papers had been published and adults were discussing them -- often with excitement, using them as springboards for long and sometimes heated discussion.

"Are you saying that you plagiarized these from the net?" asked one of the teachers.

Father turned to her and did not attempt to hide his scorn. "He's showing you that after you failed his paper, he got it published on a professional forum."

The teacher stiffened. "The goal of the class is to cover the material assigned and fulfil the assignments given."

"Well," said Father, "that's the wrong paradigm. The goal is *supposed* to be guiding the students to complete understanding of the material. What I'd like to know is how you imagine Peter could write something like this *without* a complete understanding of the material you're teaching?"

After much hemming and hawing, it finally came down to this. The teachers said, though not in so many words, that they didn't have time to read Peter's papers. They were simply too demanding. They only had time to evaluate student work that was attempting to fulfil the assignment. Just because Peter's writings demonstrated that he had a complete grasp of the material did not make it any less time-consuming for them to read and evaluate.

Father stood up then and said, "Then I suggest you give Peter the *A* he obviously deserves, and save his papers to read over the summer. Consider it your inservice professional training. But don't treat a student like Peter as if *he* were failing, when the failure is obviously elsewhere." With that, Father simply walked out of the conference. And from then on, Peter got automatic *A*s on everything he wrote. As far as he knew, no one read his papers now.

The teachers *hated* him.

And so did the other students. He was treated as if he didn't exist. Completely ignored. Even by the girls. And if he had any doubts about it, Bell had made it clear that their ignoring him was not because they didn't notice him. It was active ostracism. They hated him before he opened his mouth.

And that made no evolutionary sense, as far as Peter could tell. He and these girls were at the age when hormones were guiding most of their waking thoughts. These girls should be looking for males with the markers of power and achievement. Future providers and protectors. Peter was younger than most, and smaller, but he was clearly the most intelligent boy they knew, destined for greatness, and yet they shunned him and looked for boys with good looks and cool clothes and more than a hint of violence about them.

They're chimps, searching for the alpha male. In a civilized society, *I'm* the most alpha male they can possibly find -- but no, they aren't looking for *human* alphas, marked by intellect, creativity, boldness. They're looking for *chimp* markers: physical strength, aggression, violence. Which male will prevail in physical combat? I want *his* sperm!

Chimpettes.

Peter looked at his reflection in the glass of the classroom window. He was actually rather tall -- for his age. He had no excess body fat, and he was reasonably good in Phys. Ed. He could run, he could hit a ball with a stick, he could kick a goal. He wasn't the best but he was definitely an asset to teams and held his own in one-on-one games. Other guys at his level were taken seriously by girls. Why did his intellect banish him from alpha status?

Deep down in their chimp minds, the girls must be unconsciously terrified that any children I sired would have *huge* brains and therefore would be painful to deliver through their skinny little pelvises.

Or maybe it was something else. Maybe it was the anger in his eyes, which he could see even in the poor reflection in the glass.

Except ... wasn't anger a sign of aggression? Chimp-girls like these should be *drawn* to his aggression. And yet they were repelled. Everyone was repelled.

Even his family hated him. Father could come and stand up for him, treating his teachers and principal with the scorn that they deserved -- but it didn't mean Father *liked* Peter. At home, Father never sought conversation with him.When Peter came to him, Father would converse with him, and at a very high level, with real respect. Yet Peter always had to initiate it. Father never looked for a chance to be with him.

And Mother -- well, she talked to Peter all the time, but even when she said she loved him, it was always in some ass-backward way that was as much of an insult as a protestation of love. It was always about how she loved him despite his complete unloveability.

It had always been that way, he could see that now, even when he was little. But not until Ender came along was it clear to Peter how he was despised. Only when he could see how his parents and Valentine *doted* on Ender did he realize what was so painfully missing from his own life. *That's* what love for a boychild looks like, and I would never have known about it if I hadn't seen the way they treat Ender.

He studied his reflection in one of the windows of the school. What was it that made people detest him?

Somebody like me should be admired, Peter thought fiercely. I should be looked up to. I should be surrounded by people who want to hear what I'm saying, to know what I'm thinking, to provide me with whatever I want, to have my friendship.

That's the research paper I should be writing. Speculations on the self-defeating rejection of the superior offspring among primates.

Why are they afraid of me?

Why aren't they *more* afraid?

Peter stood at the edge of the school property and realized, for the second time that day, that there was nowhere he could go, nothing he could do. He would go home because there was no other indoor space where he actually had a right to eat or sleep. As a minor, he could not go anywhere interesting.

So, again, he went home, walking this time in the darkening evening, looking at the Christmas lights come on along the residential streets. Ho ho ho. Aren't we bright and jolly.

Valentine walked into his room -- without knocking, of course -- and saw him lying on his bed, watching a vid on the far wall.

"Baboons," she said. "Studying up to join a troop?"

"Trying to identify the genetic source of your best features," said Peter. "When exactly is it that your butt turns red?"

"Don't you hear yourself? How sick you sound?"

Finally Peter turned to look at her. "You chose to come in and start insulting me. How does that make *me* the sick one?"

She just shook her head. "Golly, Peter. You really have the Christmas spirit, don't you? Somehow you've got it in your head that you're Tiny Tim. Life's just treatin' you so bad."

"'Home is where, when you have to go there, they treat you like shit.'"

"From Dickens to a coprophiliac version of Frost. Peter, have you actually noticed that nobody likes you? Is that what this is about? Because if it is, let me tell you a secret. When you spend your life being cruel to everyone around you, it doesn't build up this vast reservoir of love just waiting to be released when you need some."

This was so outrageous Peter could hardly believe it. "I've never been cruel to anybody."

"Are you insane?" asked Valentine. Then she laughed. "I know, the lunatic is the last to know. But seriously, Peter, don't you get it? Mom and Dad think that the only reason Ender said yes to Battle School and left us when he didn't have to is because he was scared of *you*."

"Why would he be scared of me?" asked Peter. And then of course he remembered that the very day Ender left, he had threatened to kill him. "I was joking."

"Oh, really? You said that you would *pretend* that it was a joke, but then one day, when nobody was expecting anything, when we'd forgotten all about it, there'd be a *accident*."

"I thought Ender was supposed to be so smart -- he knew I didn't mean it."

"I'm smart too, Peter, and I know you *did* mean it."

"Did not." He said it in a completely bored tone, so she'd know he didn't actually care what she believed.

"At the time you did. Maybe at this moment you don't. But if Ender were still here, then he'd annoy you again -- by being better than you, no doubt, that always seemed to be the trigger -- and then you'd mean it again."

"At no point in his life has it bothered me that Ender was better than me, mostly because at no point in his life has he ever *been* better than me."

"A statement you can make without refutation only because Ender is gone so there's no way to bring up the obvious evidence."

"What pisses me off about Ender," said Peter, "is the way everybody loves him no matter what he does. I'm surprised Mom and Dad didn't save his used diapers in a shrine in the back yard."

"Did you know? I used to love you," said Valentine.

The words stung more than Peter would have imagined. "I'm glad you got over it."

"Yeah," she said. "You managed to make me so ashamed of it I tried to pretend it was never true. But it was. I worshiped the very ground you knocked me down on."

"And then what happened?"

"Ender was born," said Valentine. "To show me what a brother was, so I finally realized you weren't one."

"It's a genetic thing," said Peter. "Once a brother, always a brother."

"You can't be a brother," said Valentine, "when you live in a universe where only you exist. You're a narcissist, Peter. The navel of the universe, and you spend your life contemplating yourself."

"And yet you still came into my room."

"Because Mom was crying in the living room," said Valentine. "I just wanted to know what you did."

"She was crying before I ever talked to her. About baby Ender's widdo bitty stocking."

"Ah, yes. I bet you were really warm and sympathetic."

"No," said Peter. "I was cruel."

When he said it, he realized that it was true.

But Mother had been cruel to him, too. The very act of worshiping Ender's damn Christmas stocking was cruel.

"Get out of my room," Peter said to her. "And close the door behind you."

She looked at him, made as if to say something, then thought better of it, apparently, because she only turned around and left.

She even closed the door. Gently. No wonder everyone thought she was so nice.

——igms——

Back when Peter was five, he had read in one of Dad's science websites how the human shoulder clearly evolved from the brachiating arm of the other primates to a throwing arm. The first missile weapon, said the article, was the thrown stone, which could kill a small animal at fifty feet.

Peter had taken that as a challenge, and even though he was still too young to expect a fifty-foot range, he could at least work on his aim. By the time he was six, practicing almost every day for two years, he could clip a tulip off its stem from twenty feet away. He thought that was about as good as a primate his size could be expected to do.

Then he started working on moving targets. Squirrels were pretty easy to hit, though at his age at the time he didn't throw with much force and they only got annoyed and scampered away. Lizards were a lot harder, because they tended to dodge the moment his arm started swinging -- but when he hit them, he knocked them right out.

For a while he saved all the lizard bodies but then Mom found them and threw them out, along with a lecture about how human beings were supposed to be stewards of the Earth, and animals were only to be killed for need. In vain did he explain that if he ever*needed* to kill an animal, it might be better if he had practiced a little first.

So he no longer kept his trophies. And after a while it was just too easy to keep doing it every day. Still, he knew a useful skill when he acquired it, and so over the years he had practiced every week or so. By the time he was ten, he could knock down squirrels every time -- and now from fifty feet away, just as that old article had promised. He had a good arm.

His practice never seemed to help him with softball or baseball, though. The balls were too big and soft. He could have pitched a stone into the strike zone every time, but it didn't come up very much in games. He wasn't allowed to aim for a real target, like the head.

It was stones with a nice heft that did the job right. He could throw them faster, get more spin on them, control the arc perfectly, and hit squirrels on the head, not just knocking them down, but knocking them out. Then it was a simple matter to pick them up by the head, give a nice snap with that good throwing arm, and break the neck. Completely painless to the unconscious squirrel.

At age ten, Peter took a lot of satisfaction from knowing that if civilization ever broke down and he had to live on what he could kill, he wouldn't go hungry. Not that he expected the breakdown of civilization. It was just good to know that he had learned how to use his arm for what it had evolved to do.

But he did something else, too. Just a few times, when he had an unconscious squirrel in his hands, he didn't snap the neck. Instead, taking his dissecting kit from school -- he was in eighth grade, and they cut up lots of things and took the kits home, so clearly they expected him to find interesting subjects for private study -- he staked out the squirrel and flayed it alive.

Twice he did it and the squirrel never recovered consciousness. He peeled the skin back, then sectioned and lifted off the anterior rib cage, without piercing any of the organs underneath. He really had a deft hand.

I could be a surgeon, he thought, if I didn't know it was a waste of time for me to do a job that only affects one person at a time.

He left the squirrels staked out for Valentine to find.

The third time, though, the squirrel had woken up during the flaying. He had not imagined that a squirrel could make a sound like that.

He tried to continue with the operation, but he couldn't concentrate and his hand trembled. Or maybe it was deliberate. Unconsciously deliberate? Was that possible? But the scalpel nicked the heart and the squirrel bled out in moments.

That one he didn't leave spread-eagled for the insects. He dug with his hands in the red clay that passed for soil and buried the squirrel.

He remembered the place in the woods behind the house, and went there now, though it was nearly dark. He didn't know what he expected to see. There was nothing. Just leaf-covered soil. He scraped away the leaves with his shoes and exposed the soil be there wasn't even a mound anymore. Nothing to suggest that the squirrel had ever been buried there.

What was I thinking? Peter asked himself. The first two squirrels should have stopped me. Why was I going on with it? I had learned anything I was going to learn from the first one. It wasn't science, it wasn't curiosity. I was starting to like it. To like knowing that they were alive while I did it to them.

Is that what all these people see in me? The person who could vivisect a living creature?

Why can't they see the person who couldn't stand to hear a squirrel scream? The person who buried the body instead of displaying it?

No, Peter told himself. That's backward. They see the person who would leave those vivisected corpses to be discovered. Just because one time I chose not to do it doesn't change what I am.

When I sat across from Bell today in the library, thought Peter, I offered to help her. I was being nice.

But it was an act. I was pretending to be nice. She saw through me. She knew what I really was. A predator.

Peter leaned against a tree. Felt the bark pressing against his back through the shirt.

They are right about me. They *should* hate me and fear me. They *should* reject me and exclude me. I don't belong among humans.

He slid very slowly down the trunk. The bark grabbed at his shirt and pulled it up as he slid down, and the bare skin of his back scraped against the tree and it hurt and he kept doing it because he wanted to hurt. He deserved to hurt.

I didn't want to hurt anybody, he told himself. As soon as I realized how much pain the squirrel felt, I stopped. And I never did it again. Whatever I am, that's not who I *want* to be. That must count for something.

What *was* I doing, if I didn't enjoy causing pain? Was it all just so I could show Valentine? Scare her? Sicken her?

It wasn't about Valentine. That had been an afterthought. No, it was something I wanted to do with the squirrel. To the squirrel. Get *from* the squirrel.

He had read a lot of psychology, more for the amusement value than anything else. Once you stepped outside the area of drug therapy for defective brains, psychology seemed indistinguishable from religion to him, and he had no use for either.

But now he tried to imagine: What would a talk therapist say about why I took the skin off living squirrels and opened their thoraces so I could see their beating hearts?

Symbolic: Because I had no heart, I needed to see one. No, because I was unloved I doubted that people had hearts and ...

That was too silly even for this game.

It wasn't about the beating heart. It was about taking control of it. That's what a good therapist would say. I was seeking control because I feel powerless.

And sitting there on the ground, his back stinging from having scraped against bark, he knew he was on to something. It was about power. It was always about power.

It's not that they *loved* Ender, it's that their love gave him so much power over them. He was oblivious to it. He couldn't see how they shaped their lives around him, always oriented to him -- and away from me. I didn't want their love, I wanted the power that Ender had, the ability to shape things the way he wanted them. I could never do it. I could never get a soul to act the way I wanted.

He found himself getting so excited he wanted to cavort like a madman. Instead he stayed on the leafy forest floor and traced designs with his finger on the bare ground of the squirrel's grave. A circle -- himself -- all by himself. No connections. Power comes from getting other people to do things your way. Power comes from *obedience*.

And how do you get obedience? Peter had always tried to get it by pushing, by demanding, by grabbing. He had let his hunger for power show.

And it's not as if that couldn't work. There had been plenty of coercive dictators in the history of the world. They got their way by creating fear in the hearts of others. They were willing to kill anyone that got in their way. And so the others complied. Did what they were told.

But nothing those men created outlasted them. As soon as they died or fell from power, or their dynasty ended, their statues and pictures were torn down or flung onto the fire.

It was the ones who were loved who were the most successful. Hitler terrorized people, yes, but there was more to him than that. He was also worshiped -- not by everybody, but by many. How did he do that? Those eyes, always so sad, looking like he was on the verge of weeping. Or was it the sternness of his face? Was he a father figure, the judge, and they looked to him for approval and he gave it to them: You are the great ones, you Germans, you deserve better, I judge you and find you worthy!

But Hitler's empire didn't last, either. It was too destructive, what he did with his power. He tore things down, he built nothing.

Augustus, thought Peter. He's the one. Started out as the frail, conniving, brilliant, ambitious, and very young Octavian. Caesar's heir -- even if he had to destroy Caesar's friends to climb into the martyred hero's chair. Octavian was careful that he cast himself, not as a brutally ambitious warrior, but as the man who would end wars and save the Roman world. He allowed them to call him by the old-fashioned honorific "Augustus," but he preferred the title "first citizen." Princeps. Prince.

It didn't matter what they called him. Whatever word they used would come to mean what they knew he was: the rightful ruler.

It was possible for most Romans to believe that the Republic still existed, while Augustus was alive. He understood how civilization worked. He tried to imbue Roman society with the stern virtues that had created their greatness in the first place.

He gave them peace. And it lasted.

But how did he do it? When the war began he was nothing. Nobody tagged him as a great general -- and he wasn't one, not really. His power came from convincing people that he truly had their best interests at heart -- that all he cared about was restoring Rome to peace and prosperity.

That's what I haven't been able to do, thought Peter. I haven't been able to convince a living soul that I care about anybody but me. That there's any ideal that I would sacrifice to serve. Octavian became Augustus because he convinced people that his ambition was never for himself.

And then, when he got power, he continued to act out that script. He really *did* use his power for the general good of the empire. Not perfectly, certainly -- I could do better than he did -- but in the main he succeeded. Things were better for almost everyone because of his victory, and he governed well.

I cannot get power and control with my stone and my scalpel. No matter what I did to the squirrels, they ended up dead, and from that moment on I had no power over them.

Power flows to the one who convinces everyone that by obeying him, their own lives will be better.

And in that moment he set aside the religion of talk therapy and took on the religion of his parents. "Whoever would be greatest among you, let him be the servant of all." This was not niceness, what Jesus was saying. It was almost Machiavellian in its forthright deviousness. If you want to be the greatest, to have real power, then you must convince everyone that you serve *them*. And here's the clincher: For it to last, you really have to do it. So even if you're pretending to care about people, you can never stop pretending, and you have to deliver on the promise. So, in the end, you really *are* the "servant of all."

I finally get it, Jesus, said Peter silently. What you said to that other Peter, Simon Peter: If you love me, feed my sheep. If you want my power, then convince the sheep that you care about them more than you care about yourself.

But I don't care about them.

But if I act as if I care, and devote my whole life to doing what really will make them happy and give them peace and prosperity, then what does it matter that my deepest motive was to make myself master of the world? If the world I rule is happier and better off because I rule it, and my hand sits lightly on the reins of power and few directly feel the tug of my power, then I can build something that will outlast me.

He had the perfect people to practice on.

———igms———

The next day, the last day before Christmas, he redid all his Christmas gifts.

So on Christmas morning, while he still gave Father and Mother and Valentine the gifts he had bought for them, he accompanied them with something else.

He wrote them each a letter. To Father, he wrote of how much it meant to him that he had stood by Peter when the teachers were failing him in school. "I thought I was alone," he said, "but then you stood with me. That was worth more than any grade. You could have rebuked me and forced me to comply with them; instead you gave my work respect and stood beside me against the world. That's the man I want to become: That's the man you are."

Father's eyes got all teary when he read it. He refused to read the letter aloud or show it to anyone else. "It's between Peter and me," he said gruffly.

To Valentine, Peter wrote about how well she had cared for Ender. How she had protected him. "It made me angry at the time, because I was so childish I thought that you had chosen sides in a war, and I was the one you rejected. But I see now that I was completely wrong. Instead, you stood for peace and against war; all I had to do was stop fighting for your love, and I would have had it. It was the fighting that built the wall between us. I should have seen that the love was in your nature. It was who you are, and if I had only let you, the same kindness you showed Ender could have been mine."

She looked up from the letter with suspicious eyes. But of course he couldn't win *her*over with a single letter. She had seen most of his lies; he had told her the truth behind too many of them for her to take anything he said or wrote at face value. It would take time, with Valentine. But at least she didn't jeer at the letter. That was a step.

To Mother, Peter wrote nothing. He had made a collage of pictures of Ender from the computer archive, and framed the resulting art with a single nickel in the middle. Not a modern five-dollar piece, but one of the old nickels -- it was the one purchase he had had to make on the day of Christmas Eve, but it wasn't even expensive, the coin dealer had only charged him fifteen bucks for it. The frame was more expensive.

With the framed picture, he had included only the briefest note: A slip of paper on which he had written, "I miss him, too."

Mother wept as she had wept over Ender's stocking. But in the midst of it, she came to Peter and hugged him and he knew that he was on the right track. He could *do* this thing.

——igms——

After New Year's, school began again, and Peter made a point of seeking out Bell at lunchtime. She was sitting at her regular table, with her regular friends, and when Peter came up and slid in between two of them and leaned on the table and looked searchingly in Bell's eyes, she was poised to wither him with her scorn.

But he never took his eyes off her face and somehow that silenced her long enough for him to say, "I wanted to thank you, Bell. I understand now how offensive I was, as if I were placing myself above you."

He ignored the other girls saying things like, "Bell's got herself a boyfriend" and "Robbing the cradle, Bell?" He kept his eyes on hers.

"But you were wrong about what I wanted from you," said Peter. "I've seen who you are here at school. The way you're kind to other people, the way you create a haven for the people around you. You know how to be a friend. I wanted to have the gift you give to all of these." He indicated Bell's friends. "I went about it all wrong. I offended you when I never meant to. I just want you to know that what I felt for you was pure respect and admiration. You're a good person, Bell. And even when you were pushing me away, you still taught me some important things. Thank you for that."

Without waiting for the slightest reply, he got up and walked away. Of course, nothing that he said was true. He hadn't noticed much about her except that she was pretty and actually tried to do well in school and if she was an unusually good friend to her friends, Peter would have had no way of knowing it. But he knew that what he said was the kind of thing people liked to think about themselves, and that none of her friends was likely to contradict him. Whether she deserved his admiration or not, she would now believe she had it -- the smartest kid in school admired *her!* -- and he had done it in a way that showed him to be humble. His guess was that she wouldn't be able to keep her mind off him now, that she would seek him out, that they would become friends, and that through her he would get the chance to play the same game with everyone she knew.

Served her right, the priggish little bitch. Getting her to adore him and serve his interests completely -- that would be the best revenge for the way she scorned him in the library two days before Christmas.

Lost and Found

by David Lubar

Artwork by Lance Card

"Hey, look at this," Dale said as he noticed the white square of folded cloth lying by the side entrance to the mall. "Someone lost a handkerchief."

"Yuck," Kirby said. "Don't touch it."

"No, it's not that kind." Dale bent down and picked up the handkerchief. "See, it's a fancy one." He pointed to the initials that were embroidered in one corner. The letters *HCX*, stitched in dark-red thread with lots of fancy loops and swirls, stood out against the bleached whiteness of the cloth.

"What's that mean?" Kirby asked.

"It's someone's name," Dale said.

"Then what's that?" Kirby tapped the corner of the handkerchief.

Dale looked below the initials. In much smaller letters, in the same red thread, he saw *YFFI*. "I don't know."

"Yiffy?" Kirby said. "Yuhfie? Whyfee? How do you think you say it?"

"Who cares? It's not important," Dale said. "But I'll bet we can find the owner. Maybe there's even a reward."

"How are you going to do that?" Kirby asked. "Anybody could have dropped it."

"Easy," Dale said. "The last name begins with an X. There can't be a whole lot of people with those initials. Let's go to my place and check the phone book."

Kirby walked along next to Dale, chanting, "Yiffy, sniffy" for a block and a half before Dale smacked him and told him to stop.

When they reached his house, Dale got the phone book from the drawer in the kitchen. Sure enough, there was less than a page of people with last names beginning with an X. This was going to be even easier than he'd thought.

He ran his finger down the listings. "Here we go. Harold C. Xantini. He lives on Bowie Street. That's not far from here." Dale couldn't help grinning. He felt like one of those detectives he saw on TV shows.

"Are you going to call him?"

"No. Let's surprise him. I don't want to give him a chance to think."

"About what?"

"About my reward." Dale waited for Kirby to say they should share the reward, but Kirby didn't complain. Dale grabbed the handkerchief from the kitchen counter and set out toward Bowie Street.

"Here we go," he said when they got there. "Number one eight three six." Dale paused, wondering if he'd made a mistake. The house looked abandoned.

"I don't think anybody's there," Kirby said.

"Let's knock." Dale went up and tapped on the door.

Before he was ready for it, the door flew open. Dale jumped back.

A man looked out. "Yes?" He was old and small and very wrinkled.

"Mister Xantini?" Dale asked.

"That's me," the man said.

"Did you lose this?" Dale asked, holding out the handkerchief.

"Oh my!" the man gasped, his face breaking into a grin of delight. "I thought I'd never see it again. It means so much that you brought it to me. Thank you. Thank you."

Dale handed the handkerchief to the man.

"Please, tell me how you found me," the man said. "It must be a miracle." He stepped back and opened the door wider. "A true miracle."

"No big deal," Dale said, shaking his head. "It was easy."

"Yeah," Kirby added. "No problem at all."

"But how?" the man asked.

"I used the phone book," Dale said. "You were the only one in it with those initials."

"Did anyone help you?"

"No," Dale said. "I figured it out all by myself."

"So clever. So very clever. You certainly shall be rewarded. The man reached into his pocket. Then he frowned and walked across the room. "I must have left my wallet over here."

Dale followed him. "Well, it's not really necessary," he said, though he didn't say it very loudly. In his mind, he was wondering what his reward might be. The man had mentioned a wallet -- so it would probably be cash.

"We both brought it back," Kirby said.

Dale shot him an angry look.

"And you'll both be rewarded," the man said as he reached into the drawer. "Such clever boys."

"So, what does *YFFI* stand for?" Dale asked "That's the only part I couldn't figure out."

"You fell for it," the man said.

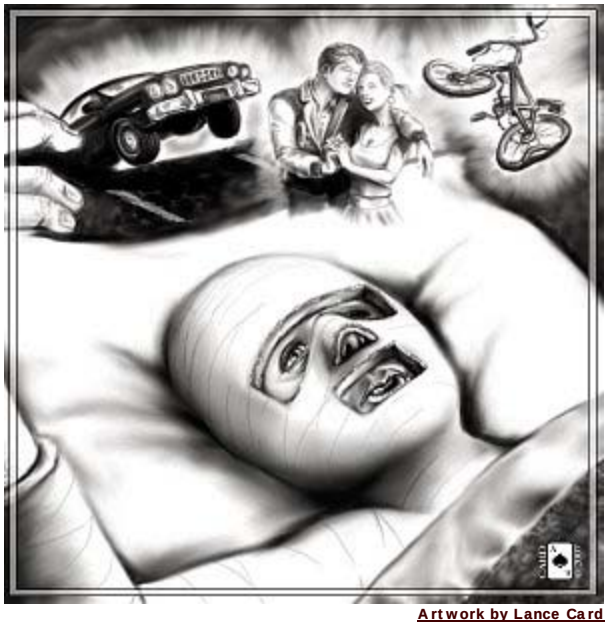
"What?" Dale asked, not understanding.

"You," the man said, "fell," he added, removing his hand from the drawer, "for," he raised the knife, "it," he finished, leaping forward.

The knife fell. Dale Fell. Kirby fell. A drop of blood fell on the handkerchief. But the man didn't mind. He had plenty more.

This is Only a Test

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

Kyle shifted his body slightly, which was no easy task, considering the assortment of casts and bandages that covered him like some sort of grade-school science-fair mummy. He groaned. Then he grinned. At least, the expression that appeared on the visible portions of his lips came close to resembling a grin.

"What?" I asked, looking up from the copy of *Sports Illustrated* I'd been reading. I'd brought the magazine for Kyle when I'd come to visit him. Well, I hadn't brought it far -- I'd picked it up at the hospital gift shop. But it was the thought that counted. I'd almost gotten him *Car and Driver*, but I'd figured, given his recent experience, that wouldn't have been a very good idea.

"I just realized something," he said.

"Don't try to ride a bicycle on a busy highway?" It was a reasonable guess. That's what had gotten Kyle here in the first place.

"Nope." He shook his head -- as much as anything could shake when it was wrapped in so much gauze and plaster. "I realized that piece of wisdom yesterday when I woke up in this fine little bed and breakfast. No, here's what just came into my semi-functioning brain. Do you know the six scariest words in the world?"

"There will be a test tomorrow?"

Another head shake. "No. Forget school. I'm talking real scary. I'm talking Biblical."

That was tough. Unlike Kyle, who had actually paid attention all through Sunday school, my Bible knowledge was on the sketchy side. I was doing well when I could remember that it wasn't Delilah who got the haircut. So I was definitely the person in the room least likely to fill in the blanks with a Bible quote. But one phrase did come to mind.

I shuddered as it floated up from the dark corners of my childhood. I'd thought it was buried safely in my dim memories. "There'll be wailing and gnashing of teeth," I said. I could still see the caption in bold black letters above a picture of tormented souls in hell. Lots of flames. Lots of little demonettes with pitch forks. One big bad boss, complete with horns and tail, enjoying the ambiance of the place. I couldn't have been more than five or six at the time. We'd had to color the picture for Sunday school. The class used up a ton of red crayons that day. It had spooked me so much, I'd gotten sick the next three Sundays just so I could stay home.

"That's seven words. And it's only scary if you're expecting to go to hell." Kyle lay quietly for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. I guess he was giving me a second chance.

"Well?" I asked, unable to dredge up any other quotes. "What are the six scariest words in the Bible."

He looked back at me and said, "Have you considered my servant Job?"

Okay. I knew the plot of that one. "That's where Satan drops in on God, right? And they make some kind of bet."

"Right. Do you remember the details?"

I shook my head. "No way."

"God says Job is faithful. Satan tells him it's because Job has a cushy life and everything is going swell for him. So God lets Satan test Job. Kapow. Job loses his family, his property, and his shiny clean complexion. Remember now?"

"Yeah." Once my mind was jogged, I could dredge up snippets from the lesson. "It's almost like a bizarre version of a disaster movie, or a Fox sitcom. Every five minutes, someone comes running up to Job with bad news. *Hey, Job, your sheep just got killed. Check it out, Job, someone stole your camels. Bad news, Job, a house fell on your children*. On top of all that, Job gets covered with sores."

"And it all starts out with those six words."

"I see what you mean," I told Kyle. He'd had a rather bad run of luck over the last couple of months. First, his car had rolled down the hill from where it was parked, and gone right through a guard rail above the Monocacy Creek. It was totaled. The same week, his girlfriend had ditched him. Now, on top of all that, he'd lost the battle of bicycle meets sports utility vehicle. Talk about a David and Goliath encounter.

"You're lucky to be alive," I told him.

"Or unlucky," he said.

"So what's your point?"

Kyle shrugged. Or tried to shrug. From the flash of pain that shot across his face, I figured the gesture was a mistake. "What if I've been picked? What if this is all some sort of test?" he asked.

"You're whacked," I told him. "You must have landed on your head. I don't think God cares about the details of your life. There are five or six billion people on the planet. Even if only a couple million are more important than you, that's still a pretty long line."

"But the very hairs of your head are numbered," Kyle said.

I stared at him.

"Matthew," he told me. "Chapter ten, verse eleven."

"Oh."

"God knows every blade of grass," he said. "He knows every sparrow that falls from the sky. I mean, he made everything."

"So God let you get hit by a truck? And he convinced Judith Messinger to ditch you for that idiot with the Corvette? And he smashed your car?"

"I think so. I mean, I think he allowed it to happen."

This tasted like a weird version of self-pity. Kyle was saying he'd been rewarded for his faith by having his life totally trashed. "I'll have to think about that," I said. I stood up and tossed the magazine on his bed. "It's getting late. I'd better be heading home."

"Okay. Thanks for coming by."

"Sure." I squeezed past the end of the bed, careful not to bump any of the traction ropes that had turned Kyle into a human marionette.

"See you tomorrow?" Kyle asked.

"I'll try to come. You know how it is." I waved and left the room.

Have you considered my servant Job? I couldn't believe Kyle could even consider such a crazy view of his situation. Maybe they'd put him on something for the pain and it had mushed his mind.

I hurried down the hall, feeling relieved I was just a visitor. Man, if people wanted to question the way things worked, there wasn't a better place to start. On either side of me, I caught glimpses of all sorts of sorrow. Broken lives, fading lives, interrupted lives. And none of it happened for any reason I could tell.

Well, maybe some of it did. I guess if I'd remembered to pick up Kyle on the way to school that day, like I'd promised, he wouldn't have been in the accident.

I went out the exit and walked to the curb. Yeah, nobody forced him to ride his bike, but I suppose I could accept some of the blame. And I guess, if I'd remembered to set the parking brake on his car after I'd borrowed it, he might not have needed a ride from me.

I mean, who knew how one thing would lead to another? I'm not psychic. Maybe I shouldn't have introduced his girlfriend to that other guy. I'd only done it for a joke. I hadn't figured she'd dump Kyle.

As I approached the corner, I heard an ambulance racing toward the emergency entrance. The wail of the siren grew louder as I though about those six scary words . . .

Have you considered my servant Job?

I sure hoped Kyle wasn't God's servant. Because, if he was, whose servant did that make me? As that thought sunk in, I clench my teeth. Or maybe I gnashed them.

InterGalactic Interview with Robert J. Sawyer

by Darrell Schweitzer

All you have to do to introduce Rob Sawyer and show why he's an important science fiction writer is to cite his awards. His credits give new meaning to the phrase "a list as long as your arm." He is one of only seven writers in history to have won the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Novel, and he is the only Canadian to have done so. He won a Hugo for Best Novel for *Hominids* (2002) after having had six previous nominations for Best Novel, one for Best Novella, and two for Best Short Story. He won the Nebula for *The Terminal Experiment* (1995) and has had additional nominations for Novel and Novella. He won the Campbell for *Mindscan*(2006) and has had two previous nominations for that award. He is honored in Canada with nine Aurora Award wins and a record-breaking 28 further nominations.

He has also won top national honors in Japan, China, Spain, and France. He has even won mystery awards (Best Canadian Mystery novel) for his science fiction (*Illegal Alien*, 1997). There's a lot more, a *Science Fiction Chronicle* Award, an Mississauga City Arts Council Award for Established Literary Artist of 2002 and another City of Mississauga Civic Award in 2004 in recognition of his accomplishments in science fiction. There's also a an honorary doctorate for "international success in science fiction" from Laurentian University, a Ryerson University Alumnus of Distinction Award, and so on and so on. It is clear that the Canadians regard Robert J. Sawyer as a national treasure, as well they should.

Does this guy ever stop? In a word, no. He is a tireless and prolific practitioner of "hard" science fiction, which might be otherwise called Big Thought SF, the story of science fiction that is genuinely about something, that extrapolates off valid science-fiction ideas and tries to actually show us where the world is headed, or might be headed.

Besides that, he also writes well. His novels are gripping, fun to read, and leave something behind for your brain to chew on.

He lives in Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto, with his wife, Carolyn Clink, a noted poet.

His novels are *Golden Fleece, Far-Seer, Fossil Hunter, Foreigner, End of an Era, The Terminal Experiment, Starplex, Frameshift, Flashforward, Illegal Alien, Factoring Humanity, Calculating God, Hominids, Hybrids, Humans, Relativity, Mindscan*, and, most recently *Rollback*.

SCHWEITZER: So, what's your background? What brought you to the SF field?

SAWYER: Well, skipping over all that boring stuff between the Big Bang and April 1960, I was born in Ottawa, Canada's Capital city. My father was an economist, and shortly after I was born he was offered a teaching appointment at the University of Toronto, so we moved there, and Toronto, or environs, has been my home ever since.

I was first introduced to science fiction through kid's TV shows, most notably Gerry Anderson's *Fireball XL5*, which started airing in Canada in 1963, when I was three; I still consider the music played over the closing credits of that series -- "I Wish I Was a Spaceman" -- to be my personal theme song.

When I was 12, my older brother and my dad noted what I was watching on TV, and they got me some science-fiction books: *Trouble on Titan*, a YA novel by Alan E. Nourse; *The Rest of the Robots*, Asimov's second robot collection; and David Gerrold's first novel, *Space Skimmer*. I'm still enormously fond of all three, and am thrilled to now be friends with David. In fact, we collaborated on editing an essay collection entitled*Boarding the Enterprise* last year in honor of the 40th anniversary of classic *Star Trek*, which, as anyone who has read my books knows, was also a big influence on me.

Indeed, with all due respect to those book authors, I've got to say that it was media science fiction -- the original *Star Trek*, the original *Planet of the Apes*, and, to a lesser degree, the original *Twilight Zone* -- that really opened my eyes to SF as a vehicle for social comment, for looking at the here and now.

Fast-forwarding: I knew from very early on that I wanted to write science fiction, and I'd been captivated by Gene Roddenberry and Stephen E. Whitfield's book *The Making of Star Trek*. So after high school I did a degree in Radio and Television Arts at Toronto's Ryerson University. Ironically, in doing courses in English literature there, I discovered that print, not film or TV, was were I really wanted to be.

I made a living after I graduated in 1982 for the next decade mostly doing nonfiction writing, plus the odd SF story on the side. I somewhat precipitously became a full-time SF writer in 1990, when my first novel, *Golden Fleece*, came out.

For the record, anyone who says major awards have no financial value is full of beans -- I made more money off of science fiction in the six months following winning the Best Novel Nebula Award in 1996 for *The Terminal Experiment* than I'd made in the six years preceding that. John Douglas, one of my editors on that book, put it just right the day after I won the Nebula, I think: "Overnight, you've gone from being a promising beginner to an established, bankable name." I've made a comfortable living ever since, and now have 17 novels under my belt.

SCHWEITZER: What difference does it make, in terms of writing SF, that you are a Canadian? Sure, it probably means you get more local media coverage, but I note that all those books and TV shows you cite (except for *Fireball XL5*) were American. Do you think that a Canadian perspective produces a different kind of SF? Did you find it necessary to learn to "fake American" in order to sell to American markets? Did anybody try to pressure you to do this?

SAWYER: Honestly, the difference it makes is principally financial. I make about double what I'd be making if I lived in the States. First, science fiction actually is quite popular in Canada, and people aren't such genre snobs here -- plus they like to buy Canadian. That means, even though the population is only one-tenth as big, I sell as many copies in Canada as I do in the States, and that makes me a national mainstream bestseller here, and that directly translates into money in my pocket.

Being a big fish in a small pond has other advantages: I've got a lucrative sideline going as a keynote speaker at conferences up here, doing about one major gig a month. And there's a long list of paid library residencies and so forth; as we do this interview, I'm sitting rent-free in Canada's north, being paid a stipend of $2,000 a month to write a book that I'm already being paid by the publisher to write. And although the really big bucks are doubtless in Hollywood movies, the Canadian film industry is significant, and options tons of properties. Right now, I've got film rights to ten of my novels under option, nine of which are to Canadian producers.

As it happens, I'm a dual US-Canadian citizen -- my mother is an American who was temporarily in Canada when I was born -- and someone asked me recently if I'd ever thought of moving to the States. The implication was that, like actors leaving Toronto to try their luck in L.A., that that should be my next move. But he had it backwards, and I had to say to him, "Sorry, I couldn't afford the cut in pay."

Now, what about the impact on the words I write? Well, being a Canadian resident hugely affects my perspective. Canada is a middle power, a nation of peacekeepers, and a country that looks for compromise. There's no doubt that my politics are liberal by American standards, and that my heroes are much more pacifistic than most Americans would write. The most often quoted remark from all my books is something an alien said in *Calculating God*: "Honor does not have to be defended." To a Canadian that seems right: honor is something you have, it can't be taken away by anyone; to a lot of Americans, though, that line seems nonsensical.

Anyone familiar with both Canada and the United States is aware that I criticize both countries -- hell, the Government of Ontario gets ripped a new one in *Calculating God*. But some of the commentary on Canada goes unnoticed by some American readers, because they don't get the references, and so they think I'm only taking swipes at the US government, and they get testy about that.

But I make no apologies. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, and Jimmy Carter reactivated Selective Service, I could have said screw that, I'm in Canada, but I went and registered for the draft, and to this day I file a tax return with the IRS. I'm an American citizen and criticizing both the countries I love is not just my birthright, it is, I honestly believe, my patriotic duty -- God love the Dixie Chicks! And, yes, just like them, I do love the United States: I don't think anyone who has read the speech by the American president that appears in segments at the beginning of each chapter in my *Hybrids* could think otherwise. Right after 9/11, we put an American flag on our car in solidarity; it's still there and it's the only flag on our car.

And, sure, lots of Canadians told me to Americanize my books if I wanted to sell them to publishers in the Big Apple; they kept saying that Americans wouldn't get what I was saying. But I refused to believe that Americans were that provincial, if you'll forgive the pun. I've had books published by Warner, HarperCollins USA, Ace, and Tor, and never once have any of them ever asked me to tone down the Canadian content on my books. And why should they? Americans love Canada, and Canadians, honest to God, love Americans.

SCHWEITZER: So, do you get your ideas from the secret P.O. Box in Schenectady that American writers use, or another one somewhere in Canada?

But, more seriously, I should think that an important difference between Canadian and American SF (and writing in general) is that may topics which are controversial in the USA are not in Canada. I doubt Evolution is a big deal in Canada, whereas in the US school system it's almost a taboo. I can see two ways this could affect things. First, it could mean that you have more freedom writing in Canada. Or it could mean that in order to make satirical or controversial points in the US, you might seem to the Canadians to be belaboring the obvious. Any sense of this? I imagine we have more flat-earthers in the US too. Or do I have a greener-pastures view of Canada?

SAWYER: No, no, there's no doubt that intellectually, these days, the pastures are greener in Canada. Our prime minister is only a moron; your president is an idiot ... [laughs]. Seriously, of course there's a reactionary right wing here in Canada, and religious fundamentalists, too, but they don't hold much political sway, to which I'll say, advisedly, thank God.

But one very valid reading of my Neanderthal trilogy is that the Neanderthal culture I portray is emblematic of Canadian ideals: full acceptance of alternative lifestyles including the whole GLBT gamut and polygamy, plus secularism, pacifism, and environmentalism, topped off with the willingness to give up personal liberty for the common good (for the actual common good, not trumped-up threats). It's significant that many American critics have termed the portrayed world utopian. It isn't -- it's not no-place; it's that big honking land you get to if you just keep driving north.

But, you know, I have had troubles with the US market, now that I think about it. Back in 1994, I submitted *The Terminal Experiment*, as a finished manuscript, to my then publisher, who had an option on the book -- and the publisher rejected it, despite the fact that my previous books for them had been doing well (and, indeed, they eventually bought five more books from me).

Now, there's no doubt that *The Terminal Experiment* -- which is about a biomedical engineer who finds proof for the existence of the human soul -- is in part about the abortion issue; it's not even subtextual; I say it directly in the book. And the editor in question said they feared their ability to sell this material in the Bible Belt. Yes, changes and cuts were suggested, but I refused to make them, and my agent at the time, the redoubtable Richard Curtis, supported me in that.

So, we moved on to another publisher with a new imprint that I think really was trying to draw attention to itself, the HarperPrism line, and they published the book verbatim as the previous house had rejected it ... and, of course, *The Terminal Experiment* went on to win the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year. So, I guess it paid to stick to my guns ... which, of course, is something we Canadians only do metaphorically!

My great friend Robert Charles Wilson has recently come up with a definition of what science fiction is (my own, incidentally, is "the mainstream literature of an alternate reality"). He says that SF is "the literature of contingency" -- and he very much is intending a Gouldian evolutionary reading of that. And, yes, damn it, from *The Time Machine* on, SF has been, at its core, about evolution: how things could have been different; how things might turn out. That America is turning its back on the single greatest scientific truth we know -- natural selection resulting in speciation -- is painful to me. It's no coincidence, I think, that the major SF novels about evolution of the last several years -- my own *Fossil Hunter* and *Calculating God*, and Stephen Baxter's aptly titled *Evolution* -- are by non-Americans.

As for getting the ideas, actually, the fount -- and I think this is true for many of us hard-SF writers, regardless of nationality -- is really in Britain: the weekly magazine *New Scientist*. How can you not love a magazine whose subtitle is "The Week's Best Ideas"?

SCHWEITZER: There's a certain type of American (who probably vote Republican; which I do not) who might say that the reason Canadians have this more utopian view is that someone else has always looked out for them. They've spent their entire history either under the protection of the British Empire or the Americans. Is there any validity in that, or are Canadians just as good at staring Hitler, Stalin, or Osama bin Laden in the face as anyone? Or does Canadian SF look at things through rose-tinted glasses?

SAWYER: I would invite this hypothetical "certain type of American" to actually read some history, old boy. First, Canada has been an independent country since 1867; we've hardly been relying on the Brits since then. As for the United States protecting us -- when and from whom, one might ask? The wars the United States has fought during my lifetime -- Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iraq -- were not particular threats to Canada, and Canadian peacekeepers are still in Afghanistan, mopping up the mess made there. NORAD, the North American Air Defense Command, is a joint US-Canada effort. In fact, a Canadian officer, Canadian Forces Major General Rick Findley, was in charge of the battle staff at NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain complex on September 11, 2001.

As for staring down Hitler and Stalin, Canada joined the Allied Powers and sent our boys off to die in Europe starting September 10, 1939 -- just nine days after the invasion of Poland. The US, on the other hand, sat on the sidelines until after the attack on its own facility at Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, over two years later.

Parenthetically, my favorite film is *Casablanca*, and I recently had someone refer to it in my presence as "wonderful escapism." It's not: it's a pointed commentary on the United States's failure to join in the fight against Hitler. The American Rick Blaine says, "I stick my neck out for no one," and the European Ferrari has to say to him, "My dear Rick, when will you realize that in this world today, isolationism is no longer a practical policy?"

And as for Osama bin Laden, well, politely, he hasn't attacked Canada, although we share in the outrage over what he's done. But I think its regrettable that all that can be said is that perhaps he is being stared down, rather than apprehended, and it's not been particularly effective leadership going after Saddam Hussein instead of the real threat. But Canada faced its own home-soil terrorism crisis in October 1970, and then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau so effectively and swiftly dealt with that event that it is no coincidence that there's been no act of terrorism on Canadian soil in the 37 intervening years.

Canada's foreign-policy record (including our Prime Minister, Lester Pearson, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957), its foreign-aid record, its record of vigorously joining battles in just wars, and its peacekeeping record speaks for themselves. Canada doesn't have rose-colored glasses on -- but, if I may be so bold, your hypothetical American of a certain type has on blinkers.

SCHWEITZER: I wonder why the publisher even worried about how *Calculating God* or any of your novels would sell in the Bible Belt. Do they really think that Fundamentalists buy anything more SFish than the *Left Behind* books?

SAWYER: I never claimed to understand my publisher's decision; I merely report it -- but the book in question was *The Terminal Experiment*, not *Calculating God*; Tor, who published the latter book, has been nothing but 100% supportive in letting me tell my stories my way.

But, in fact, having been guest of honor at many SF conventions in the South -- Albuquerque, Houston, Memphis, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Orlando, and Richmond, to name some -- it's clear that there are lots of SF readers down there, and, yes, some of them do have a sensibility that varies from that in the north.

A fellow from Bethlehem, Georgia, wrote this of my *Hybrids* on Amazon.com: "I mentioned in an earlier review that with respect to Sawyer's Liberalism, he let the nose of the camel come peeking under the tent. Well, in *Hybrids* the camel is all the way inside the tent and it has taken a dump in the middle. I'm going to have to hold my nose if I read any more of his stories. Points include the old Military Industrial Complex as the boogieman, and universal homosexuality being apparently espoused."

Well, first, of course, neither of those things actually happen in *Hybrids:* the villain is a sole terrorist acting alone, but I am very proud of the fact that the book was nominated for the Spectrum Award, which celebrates positive portrayals of gay, lesbian, or bi characters in SF. More to the point, though, it stuns me that the quality of my book, or any book, is being judged not on its execution but rather on its politics -- an astonishing way to review a book, in my view. In fairness to the reviewer, though, he did give my book four stars -- but I've seen other examples of people sorting SF into "good" and "bad" based simply on the underlying politics not on the effectiveness of the storytelling.

SCHWEITZER: We've had a lot of people in our field bemoan the apparent retreat of science fiction itself, Gregory Benford most notably. Just as the "future" has arrived, we have space travel, exo-planets are being discovered by the dozen, we have robots, the internet, etc. -- now so many writers and readers are no longer interested in the future, and alternate histories and fantasy seem to outsell anything that resembles real SF. What do you make of this?

SAWYER: Oh, yes, I've been decrying this for years. In 1999, I gave a talk at the Library of Congress entitled: "The Future is Already Here: Is There a Place for Science Fiction in the 21st Century?" And I'm just reading William Gibson's latest, *Spook Country*, and he's given up totally on writing about the future, finding, as many others do, wonder enough in the present.

Certainly, for my own career, I've moved my work much closer to the here-and-now. You can divide my career into two parts: the first phase included my off-Earth spaceships-and-aliens novels: *Golden Fleece, Far-Seer, Fossil Hunter, Foreigner, End of an Era,* and *Starplex*. Now, I'm very proud of all of those, and *Starplex* was the only 1996 novel to be nominated for both the Hugo and the Nebula, not to mention winning Canada's Aurora and being nominated for Japan's Seiun. But, as a group, they are my worst sellers. My best sellers are all the others, starting with *The Terminal Experiment*: near-future or present day, and exclusively on Earth.

It's a mode I intend to continue in, because I've found that I can still do all the things I want to do artistically and philosophically in that milieu. And I use that term "philosophically" advisedly: if I had my druthers, this field would be called philosophical fiction, not science fiction -- phi-fi, not sci-fi.

But I am still very much a hard SF author: actual, real science is the backbone of my work. That it's a field that draws fewer and fewer readers each year saddens me. I used to say, man, I wished I started selling novels a decade earlier, in the early 1980s, with the wave of writers that included the last bunch to become really rich writing SF: Greg Benford himself, William Gibson, David Brin, Greg Bear, Kim Stanley Robinson.

Now I say I'm so glad I didn't start a decade later: my first book came out in 1990, and I make a good living, but the guys who are starting out in the first decade of the 21st century are facing a much smaller audience, with vastly reduced print runs. The era of any appreciable number of people being full-time SF writers is coming to a close, and that's bad artistically for the field.

SCHWEITZER: Why NOT continue to write of a spacefaring far future? If we haven't given up on those Heinleinian vision of out species expanding outward, isn't NOW more than ever the time for someone to write a really compelling, intelligent far-future, outer-space story, if only to capture the audience back from Harry Potter? You may have seen the exchanges I had with Gregory Benford over this. If hard SF is losing its market share, surely the only possible solution is BETTER SF to bring those readers back.

SAWYER: Nope, I disagree. It's the disconnect between our here-and-now and the far-flung outer-space story that's driven people out of SF: no human has left Earth orbit for 35 years now, and yet we tell people they should give up their precious reading time to space opera because it's somehow important, relevant, and true?

The reason I'm prospering is that I have managed to bring in large numbers of readers who don't habitually read SF, while not alienating the core SF audience. The outsiders care not one whit for magical post-singularitarian or transhumanist worlds, but find the "what does it mean to be human" theme of my work to be of interest.

It's a tricky balancing act: appealing to the hardcore SF readers and to mainstream readers alike, but I seem to be managing it. *Calculating God* was a national top-ten mainstream bestseller in Canada, meaning it was being widely read and enjoyed by people who don't read science fiction, and it hit number one on the bestsellers' list in*Locus*, which is based on a survey of science-fiction specialty stores, meaning it was appealing to hardcore SF readers, too. *Hominids* was used for a major "if everyone read the same book" program in Canada, and was hugely popular there with people who had never read an SF novel in their lives -- and it also won the Hugo, voted on by the absolute hardcore of SF fans, those who are members of the World Science Fiction Convention. The future of SF isn't narrowly focusing on distant tomorrows, but broadening the appeal to bring in readers from outside the shrinking core.

Far-future SF has gotten increasingly esoteric, and increasingly magical rather than grounded in reasoned extrapolation. Remember Homer Simpson, when he became an astronaut, looking lovingly at an inanimate carbon rod, and saying, "Is there anything it can't do?" Substitute "nanotech" or "post-singularity science" or whatever your favorite synonym for Clarke's "indistinguishable from magic" is, and you get a lot of so-called science fiction today -- and 99.999% of humanity has no interest in it, not because they don't believe great advances in technology may someday be possible but because they're being wielded like magic wands in these stories, and, frankly, the actual fantasy writers do a better job of combining magic with rousing plots and compelling characterization. Even if far-future SF writers rose to the challenge of adding those missing elements, they'd still only be producing an oddball variant of fantasy, not something unique and special in its own right.

SCHWEITZER: About your new novel ... Describe a little of what it's about and how you came to write it.

SAWYER: *Rollback*, my seventeenth novel, out now from Tor, is a good example of what I've been talking about in terms of trying to appeal in and out of genre. Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, called it "a novel to be savored by science-fiction and mainstream readers alike," whereas *Publishers Weekly*, in its starred reviews, recognized that the core SF reader should like it, too, saying "Sawyer, who has won Hugo and Nebula awards, may well win another major SF award with this superior effort." And, indeed, it is hardcore, hard SF: heck, it was serialized in *Analog* prior to book publication: you can't get any more hard-SF than that!

Rollback started with a pure high concept: a man and a woman, both in their 80s, are offered a chance to be rejuvenated, each becoming physically 25 again. They accept -- and it works for the man and fails for the woman.

The book just grew organically from exploring the ins and outs of that concept: all the heartbreak, all the joy, all the wonder. Of course, I had to find a reason why someone might want to live for a very long time that wasn't petty and self-serving, and I soon settled on making the woman a SETI researcher who had been instrumental in decoding messages from aliens, and that the dialog, because of the light-speed delay, was going to take many decades if not centuries. And then that made me start thinking about morals and ethics, and how our view of right and wrong might change if we lived for a very long time, and the novel's philosophical backbone is exploring what morals might actually be universal, transcending species boundaries. A novel accretes -- a plot point here, a grace note there, a flourish, an ironic touch -- but that was its genesis.

It really was a Hollywood-style high-concept pitch, by the way. I was actually under contract to Tor to write a different novel -- a single, standalone volume to have been called *Webmind* about the World Wide Web gaining consciousness. And I was finding as I was working on it that the idea was too big for one book. But I had a contract to fulfill, and so I actually had a power lunch -- I felt so Hollywood! I went out to lunch with Tor publisher Tom Doherty and my editor at Tor, Dave Hartwell, and said, look, I want to set aside *Webmind*, and do another book for you instead: and I gave them the high-concept pitch, and they green-lit it, as the saying goes.

Rollback was an emotionally draining book to write, I must say: I had to face a lot of my own thoughts and fears about aging and death; I freely confess that I cried while writing parts of it. But the response has been wonderfully positive from readers. Many of them have told me they cried in the right places, too -- and, of course, laughed a lot, too: I always have lots of humor in my books.

I've now gone back to the conscious-Web idea, and have sold it as a trilogy: *Wake*, *Watch*, and *Wonder* -- collectively, the WWW series. I'm well into *Wake* now, and it's coming along nicely.

SCHWEITZER: Thanks, Rob.