

JANUARY 2011

# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION

**Kristine Kathryn  
Rusch  
Killer Advice**

**Elizabeth Bear  
Chris Beckett  
Steve Rasnic Tem**

**It's Time to Vote in Our  
25th Annual Reader's  
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## Departments

Saturday, January 1, 2011

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### **EDITORIAL: MARTIN GARDNER**

*Sheila Williams*

There were many reasons to be thrilled when I landed a job at Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. The first and most obvious was the chance to work along side Isaac Asimov—a man I'd admired since my childhood. A second, very important reason that I was doing my little happy dance, was that I would...

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### **THE BACKWARD BANANA**

*Martin Gardner*

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### **REFLECTIONS: THE RUIN**

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### **ON THE NET: WARNING: THE INTERNETS MAY**

# **BE HAZARDS TO YOUR HEALTH!**

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---nope--- Whenever a new and revolutionary information technology appears, naysayers always swarm. Television? Yes. Radio? Check. Newspapers? Right. Gutenberg and his printing press? Absolutely. Scrolls? Yes, even handwritten manuscripts—the primordial book technology at the foundation of our world...

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## **NEXT ISSUE**

**FEBRUARY ISSUE** Our February issue is crammed full of ground-breaking and evocative tales. Paul McAuley's February's cover story is a profoundly moving coming-of-age tale about "The Choice" two young men have to make in a future that is not too far from our own time, yet utterly alien from today's...

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## **ON BOOKS**

*Paul Di Filippo*

City Lover In June 2007, humanity passed a landmark in its history: for the first time more people lived in cities than otherwise. The city is one of the most significant, useful, and complex "inventions" in the annals of our species. It's a technology we literally inhabit, and as such, like water...

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## **TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD**

What a milestone! It hardly seems possible that we could be celebrating our Twenty-fifth Readers' Award, but that's what the calendar says. Seems like it was only yesterday that we started it! Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a...

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## **SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR**

*Erwin S. Strauss*

A last burst of activity before the holiday lull. Good bets for Asimovians are WindyCon, SFContario, and PhilCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and...

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**Novelette**

## EDITORIAL: MARTIN GARDNER

*Sheila Williams*

There were many reasons to be thrilled when I landed a job at Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. The first and most obvious was the chance to work along side Isaac Asimov—a man I'd admired since my childhood. A second, very important reason that I was doing my little happy dance, was that I would also get the chance to work with another childhood idol—Martin Gardner.

I'd first fallen down the rabbit hole and into Martin Gardner's wonderful work with *The Annotated Alice*. In middle school and high school, I read and reread his notes about Alice, both in *Wonderland* and through the looking glass, and I've continued to dip into that book in all its various editions ever since. As a teenager, I avidly turned to Gardner's Mathematical Games column in *Scientific American* as soon as the magazine arrived in our mailbox. I'm sure it was an early exposure to his work in SA that led to my own life-long love of logic and math games. On some level, these essays may even have contributed to my decision to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis. In one of life's circuitous routes, it was a fellow grad student who introduced me to Gardner's famous pseudoscience debunking *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. Once I got to know Martin, I

subscribed to the *Skeptical Enquirer*, both because I found it an intriguing journal and because I wanted to keep up with his Notes of a Fringe Watcher column.

“The Doctor’s Dilemma” appeared in the inaugural issue of *Asimov’s*. It was introduced briefly as “the first in a series of SF puzzles that Mr. Gardner has promised us.” The series of puzzles took the form of short science fiction stories and lasted for more than nine years and one hundred and eleven columns. I was lucky enough to work on nearly half of them and I edited a little sixty-four page booklet of his puzzles that was used as a premium by our circulation department. The columns took us “Around the Solar System,” escorted us along “The Road to Mandalay,” and introduced us to “The Jinn from Hyperspace.” They included correspondence with Paul Dirac and explored errors in William Goldman’s *Lord of the Flies*. The columns could be challenging to run because they were often accompanied by complex images and because we had to find space at the bottom of several stories for all the solutions. They were a lot of fun, though, and I enjoyed working closely with Martin and shepherding the puzzles through the production process. I was very disappointed when he called one spring day to let me know that he intended to retire from his duties as our columnist once “Thang the Planet Eater” appeared in our November 1986 issue.

It was a very active retirement that saw the publication of at least thirty-five books. One of the last, *The Jinn from Hyperspace: And Other Scribblings—both Serious and*

Whimsical (2007), showed that the little puzzle pieces in Asimov's were not lying fallow.

Martin continued to write essays and books right up until his death last May at the age of ninety-five. His passing occurred just a month after the loss of Asimov's first editor, George H. Scithers. Both men deserve thanks for the magazine's firm foundation.

I decided that a good way to memorialize Martin was to reprint one of his puzzles from the pages of Asimov's. Now you have the chance to turn time back to July 1980 and see how ably you can resolve the puzzles presented in "The Backward Bannana."

**Next Article**



# THE BACKWARD BANANA

*Martin Gardner*



Backward, turn backward, O time, in your flight.

Make me a child again just for tonight!

—Elizabeth Akers Allen

Professor N.A. Gilligan and his assistants, Bianca Zaccaria and Duane Renaud, had been working for years on a device they hoped could reverse time inside a small region of space. Their method is much too technical to put in laymen's language,

but essentially it involves a reversal of the spin of Penrose twistors—mathematical structures that underlie quarks. Twistors had been proposed in the mid-twentieth century by the British mathematical physicist Roger Penrose, and their existence was confirmed in 1991 by a series of ingenious experiments.

Gilligan's device was slightly larger than a washing machine. A compartment at the top, supercooled and surrounded by a powerful Penrose force field, was designed to hold any physical object the experimenters intended to time-reverse. On the side of the machine were twenty levers, their positions numbered 1 through 20. Pulling up on a lever closed a position, pushing down opened it.

"At last we are ready for a test," said Gilligan, his eyes gleaming. "Let's first use a small organic object, say a lemon. If we succeed, we'll try to time-reverse a watermelon. Then maybe a mouse."

"No lemons, no melon," said Bianca, "but we do have a banana in the refrigerator."

"Banana it is," said Gilligan.

Bianca fetched the ripe yellow banana. She carefully placed it inside the compartment and closed the lid.

"Are all positions closed?" asked Gilligan.

"No, it is open on one position—position two," said Duane. "Shall I close two?"

"Not yet," said Gilligan, walking around the machine to

inspect the row of levers. He pushed down lever seven, adjusted several dials, then pressed a button that turned on the machine. It began to hum.

Gilligan hooked a finger under lever seven while Duane kept a finger below level two. "Pull up if I pull up," said Gilligan.

Gilligan waited a few minutes before he slowly raised his lever. Duane did the same. "Bianca, as I move these levers," said Duane, "I'm so excited my hand is shaking."

Bianca raised the lid for a quick peek. The banana had already turned green.

The hum grew steadily louder, then suddenly there was an explosive sound, like a tiny thunderclap, inside the compartment. When Bianca opened it again, the banana was gone.

"By Albert, we've done it!" shouted Gilligan.

The three physicists broke open a bottle of wine, drank several toasts, sang a chorus of "Yes, We Have No Bananas," then went to Gilligan's office to prepare their report on the great experiment.

Did you notice that in the above episode the names of all three scientists are palindromes? That is, the order of the letters in each name is the same when the letters are taken in the reverse direction.

Concealed in the text are three other palindromic word sequences that spell the same backward. One contains just four

words, one contains six, and one contains seven. If you can't find them, turn to page 35.

---FIRST SOLUTION TO THE BACKWARD BANANA---

The palindromic sequences are:

NO LEMONS, NO MELON.

PULL UP IF I PULL UP.

NO, IT IS OPEN ON ONE POSITION.

Now focus your mind vigorously on this paragraph and on all its words. What's so unusual about it? Don't just zip through it quickly. Go through it slowly. Tax your brain as much as you can.

If you fail to see what is so remarkable about the above paragraph, you'll find the answer at the end of "Killer Advice".

---SECOND SOLUTION TO THE BACKWARD BANANA---

-

The paragraph contains every letter of the alphabet except "e," the last letter of "time."

Now go back and study the original narrative. Somewhere in the text is a block of letters which taken forward spell the last name of a top science fiction author who has written about time travel. There may be spaces between letters, as for example in the word "fat" that is hidden in the second sentence of this paragraph. After you find the last name, look for another sequence of letters in the narrative which taken backward spell the same author's first name. What is the full name?

---THIRD SOLUTION TO THE BACKWARD BANANA---

The author is Isaac Asimov. Both names are in the sequence of capitalized letters in the sentence that starts: “BianCA, AS I MOVE these levers, . . .”

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# REFLECTIONS: THE RUIN

*Robert Silverberg*

Many great works of science fiction, from Wells's *The Time Machine* onward, have attempted to portray the far future, and in reading them we look backward by the brilliant light of those distant epochs to see our own era, outlined with the vividness that surrounds something very strange, something utterly unfamiliar. Viewing the ruins of our own culture through the eyes of the denizens of the future creates a powerful effect. Thus the famous final shot of *Planet of the Apes*, the Statue of Liberty buried neck-deep in the sands of what we had thought was an alien world. Thus the glimpses of our own long-vanished era (and later eras, also long-vanished) in such books as William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*, Brian Aldiss's *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, and Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, and such stories as Cordwainer Smith's "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard," John W. Campbell's "Twilight," Robert Moore Williams's "Robots Return," and Poul Anderson's "Epilogue," to name just a few out of a great many.

My own best shot at achieving the time-displacement parallax effect was the 1971 novel *Son of Man*, in which my bewildered protagonist, wandering through the world of some billions of years from now, comes upon the ruins of an ancient building, "a columned edifice in the classical style, gray and

stolid and self-assured, fitted by style and grandeur to have been the supreme museum of Earth. . . . A scaly green lichen clings to the roughnesses of the wall, creating patterns of choked color, continents sprouting on the ancient stone. Weeds have begun to straggle across the portico. The door is gone, but, staring through it, he sees only darkness within the building.” Five huge dinosaur-like beasts, remote descendants of mankind, occupy a courtyard behind the shattered columns. What he experiences is the parallax of time, the measure of the distortion and shifting that the eons impose on the past. One of the finest things science fiction can do is show us the great span of time under the auspices of eternity, the succession of the ages, the great arch of history shading into almost unknowable prehistory at one end and the utterly unknowable future at the other.

But we don't need to turn to science fiction to get that frisson of awe and even terror that comes from contemplating the slow, inexorable impact of time. Our world is full of the ruined relics left behind by epochs past. The Forum and Colosseum in Rome, the Acropolis in Athens, the temples and pyramids of Egypt, the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro in Pakistan, the Mayan pyramids of Chichen Itza, the city of Petra in the Jordanian desert (that “rose-red city half as old as Time”) all stir the imagination to an appreciation of the power of time in the same way that a strongly realized work of science fiction can do. These ruins have, of course, generated many a poem or novel or painting. The eleventh-century Persian poet

Omar Khayyam, who had the fifteen-hundred-year-old ruins of Persia's greatest age close at hand, put it this way:

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:  
And Bahram, that great Hunter—the Wild Ass  
Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.

A second poem that comes quickly to mind is Shelley's "Ozymandias," which speaks of a vast fallen statue in the Egyptian desert:

I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies. . . .

And Shelley gives us, with savage irony, the inscription on the pedestal:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

There is another and much more obscure poem that provides me with an even stronger sense of one age succeeding another, generating its force for me because it is



the work of a poet of one ancient vanished society writing about an even earlier one already all but unknown in the poet's time. The displacement effect thus provided verges on something only the best science fiction has achieved for me. This is the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon poem we call in modern English "The Ruin," a work that has come down to us only because it was collected in an eleventh-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book, which is our main source for what remains of early English poetry.

The Exeter Book is something of a ruin itself. The front cover was once used as a cutting board, and even as a beer mat. The last fourteen pages are marred by a large diagonal burn, apparently done by a branding iron and damaging much of the text. "The Ruin" is on one of the damaged pages, and so it is partly unintelligible, but what remains is one of the great works of Old English verse.

The poet is writing about a ruined city that the Romans had left behind when they abandoned their conquered province of Britain about three hundred years earlier, just as the first Saxon invaders were arriving. Most authorities consider the city to be Aquae Sulis, on the site of what is now the city of Bath, where Roman ruins can still be seen today. It is a masterly depiction of time's ruination; but what gives me the true science fictional shiver is its view of the vanished Romans as a quasi-mythical race of giants:

These walls are wondrous. Destiny destroyed them.

The courtyards and battlements are smashed. The work of the giants is crumbling.

Its roofs are breaking and falling; its towers collapse.

Plundered are those walls with grated doors, their mortar white with frost.

Its battered ramparts are shorn away and ruined, eaten away by Time. Earth's fist and grasp

Holds mason and man, all decayed, departed. . . .

The poet tells us that for "a hundred generations" men held sway here, the red wall standing "while kingdom followed kingdom in the land," and he gives us a picture of radiant drinking-halls, lavish baths and pools, joyous revelry. But then came mighty Fate, bringing sudden change.

Wide-wasting was the battle where the great walls fell.

Plague-laden days upon the city came; Death snatched away that mighty host of men. . . .

There in the olden time full many a lord,

Clad in gleaming battle-armor, gazed upon his silver treasure and his jewels,

A radiant city in a kingdom wide.

There stood the courts of stone, and the hot surging stream that carried water to the baths, the heart of the place. . . .

And the poem trails off in the wreckage of the manuscript:

The hot streams ran to the ringed tank. . . .

Where the baths were. . . .

Then is. . . .

. . . that is a noble thing. . . .

. . . the castle. . . the city. . . .

There it ends. The Romans, those departed giants of a misty, all but forgotten age, are gone, but their shattered city remains, a mere vestige of a great civilization that this poet of the simpler Anglo-Saxon culture can scarcely imagine. It is the same effect that we get today when reading some novel of a post-apocalyptic future in which only the stumps and scattered fragments of the structures of our civilization survive, stirring awe in the few wandering people of that future age, who speculate on the identities and purposes of the unknown ancient builders. The chief difference is that the ruins of this poem are real ones, not the work of some fantasist; the similarity arises because the Anglo-Saxon poet saw them through the eyes of a mythmaker, even as a modern writer of science fiction or fantasy would do. To him, the ancients were giants, their empire a radiant one, their treasure immense, and kingdom followed kingdom for a hundred generations until, suddenly, astonishingly, the whole great city was brought to ruin and its very name lost to memory. What we take away from "The Ruin" is the knowledge that everything is transient. The present perpetually devours the future and transforms it into the past. The poem, once read, can never be forgotten: its unknown author has given us a potent view of the succession of ages.

And SF, now and then, offers us the same long perspective that shows us our own era through the eyes of our remote descendants, and we shiver in a kind of pleasurable fright as the shock of recognition sweeps through us.

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# ON THE NET: WARNING:THE INTERNETS MAY BE HAZARDS TO YOUR HEALTH!

*James Patrick Kelly*

---nope---

Whenever a new and revolutionary information technology appears, naysayers always swarm. Television? Yes. Radio? Check. Newspapers? Right. Gutenberg and his printing press? Absolutely. Scrolls? Yes, even handwritten manuscripts—the primordial book technology at the foundation of our world culture—had critics. Consider this:

... for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

The speaker here is none other than Socrates, as imagined by Plato and translated by Benjamin Jowett. His dialogue  
Phaedrus

<<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>> was written in 360 B.C.E.

Now I have to admit that Socrates ... er ... Plato has a point here. I read Phaedrus in an Intro to Philosophy course back when I was in college, but I make no claim to remembering it. I found this quote by typing “Plato worries about books” into Google. Thus, when I casually namecheck two of the greatest philosophers of the ancient world, I fulfill Socrates’ prophecy: “... they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”

Wait a minute . . . tiresome?

---generational smarts---

Of course, I did read Phaedrus once upon a time and I happen to remember who Socrates and Plato were and what they believed—at least in general. So I knew enough to ask the right question to find a citation that makes me look more intelligent than I really am. But perhaps that is the new definition of intelligence in the age of the internet. If one knows the broad outline of human knowledge, then might it not be best to offload the messy details from your memory to Google’s servers, or even to discover them on an as-needed basis?

Welcome to the world of the net evangelists. All kinds of claims have been made about how the children of the net—why not call them the Google Generation?—have an intellectual leg up on their grandparents, the Baby Boomers <[babyboomers.com](http://babyboomers.com)> and their progenitors, the Silent

Generation <[jamesrbrett.com/TheSilentGeneration/index.htm](http://jamesrbrett.com/TheSilentGeneration/index.htm)>, the Greatest Generation <[trinity.edu/mkearl/socpsy01/music/gi%20social%20identity.htm](http://trinity.edu/mkearl/socpsy01/music/gi%20social%20identity.htm)>, and the Lost Generation <[home.earthlink.net/~generationwatch/gw\\_lostweb.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~generationwatch/gw_lostweb.html)>.

Some argue that the ability of the Google Generation to exploit the multiplicity of tools that the internet provides makes them the first true citizens of the Digital Age. Multitasking gets the jobs done!

The evangelists point to a number of studies to back up their claims that the internet is changing the world for good and forever. Perhaps the most obvious is the Flynn Effect <[pespmc1.vub.ac.be/FLYNNEFF.html](http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/FLYNNEFF.html)>. In 1980, New Zealand political scientist James Flynn published a study comparing IQ test scores for different populations over the past sixty years. Although his results differed from country to country, he documented a generational increase in IQ as measured by standard intelligence tests ranging from three to twenty-five points. While there have been many explanations offered for this puzzling data, one that is often heard is that this Flynn Effect coincides with the advent of our information-rich media culture, of which the internet is the latest and most important iteration. Just last year, the always thought-provoking Pew Internet and American Life Project <[pewinternet.org](http://pewinternet.org)> conducted a survey of 895 technology stakeholders and critics. These experts were asked to predict the Future of the Internet <[pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Future-of-the-Internet-IV/Part-1Google.aspx?r=1](http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Future-of-the-Internet-IV/Part-1Google.aspx?r=1)>. Almost three quarters of those polled

agreed with the statement “By 2020, people’s use of the Internet has enhanced human intelligence; as people are allowed unprecedented access to more information they become smarter and make better choices.” Sixty-five percent agreed with this statement: “. . . by 2020 it will be clear that the Internet has enhanced and improved reading, writing, and the rendering of knowledge.”

As I type this, one of the best known net evangelists has a new book out that describes the coming digital age. In 2008 Clay Shirky <[shirky.com](http://shirky.com)> (hey Clay, how about an update?) published the influential *Here Comes Everybody* <[mymindonbooks.com/?p=541](http://mymindonbooks.com/?p=541)>, in which he discussed how the revolution in social networking will change the way we live. He writes, “We now have communications tools which are flexible enough to match our social capabilities, and we are now witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that take advantage of that change.” One of his insights that I particularly like is something that SF writers have known all along. “Communication tools don’t get socially interesting until they get technologically boring. The invention of a tool doesn’t create change: it has to have been round long enough that most of society is using it.” While an invention story may glitter at first, it is the extrapolation of the impact of that invention that is the guiding light of SF.

Now comes Shirky’s *Cognitive Surplus* <[wired.com/magazine/2010/05/ff\\_pink\\_shirky](http://wired.com/magazine/2010/05/ff_pink_shirky)>, in which he makes the case that as we wean ourselves away from the passivity of the TV media environment to the interactivity of the



net, society as a whole will gain a kind of cognitive surplus. And since we now have the tools of social networking, we will be able to bring more of our collective brain power to bear on creativity, problem-solving, and social change. You can watch Shirky make a wry and ingenious analogy between the social impacts of gin and teevee in the keynote address <[youtube.com/watch?v=AyoNHll-QLQ](http://youtube.com/watch?v=AyoNHll-QLQ)> he gave at the Web 2.0 Expo in 2008. A lot of what he says makes sense to me.

---or not---

A lot of what Clay Shirky says also makes sense to one Nicolas Carr <[rougtype.com](http://rougtype.com)>, and it scares him. A lot. It was perhaps poetic justice that Carr's new book, *The Shallows* <[theshallowsbook.com/nicholascarr/The\\_Shallows.html](http://theshallowsbook.com/nicholascarr/The_Shallows.html)>, came out simultaneously with *Cognitive Surplus*. It provides a welcome check to Shirky's unbridled enthusiasm for the cyber-revolution. You might remember Carr from his notorious 2008 polemic in the *Atlantic* "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" <[theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868](http://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868)>. With this piece, Carr stuck a stick into the digital hornet's nest; the angry buzzing continues unabated with the publication of his new book. Here he expands on his argument and cites, chapter and verse, research that indicates that the internet is having a profound effect not only on our culture, but also on the very structure of our brains.

To understand Carr's thesis we need to see how our view of the brain has changed over time. When you were in school, you were probably taught that the adult brain was pretty much

immutable. All the growth and change it was capable of supposedly happened during your childhood. By time you were a teen, your brain had assumed the form it would keep for the rest of your life—hardened like concrete, as it were. The only change possible was degenerative; you would gradually lose mental capacity as you aged.

But in the 1970s, the neuroscientist Michael Merzenich <[merzenich.positscience.com/?page\\_id=145](http://merzenich.positscience.com/?page_id=145)> began a series of historic experiments on monkeys that seemed to indicate that primate brains remained plastic throughout adulthood—plastic as in capable of profound change. First he created detailed maps of the monkeys' brains. Then he began to isolate nerves to see how their brains would react. When he amputated one of the monkey's fingers, the brain map for that finger disappeared over time and the maps for the adjacent fingers grew into its space. He also bound two of the monkey's fingers together. After several months of using the two fingers as one, the maps of the individual fingers merged into one. Merzenich's findings were later tested on humans: when people with webbed fingers had them surgically separated, two distinct maps developed for the newly separated fingers. But brain plasticity doesn't only arise from trauma: Merzenich found that the brain maps of monkeys' faces changed every few weeks. When he first began publishing, his findings were scorned by mainstream science. "I received hostile treatment," he said. "... It was as if I just made it up." In the years since, however, Merzenich has been vindicated and the ability of the adult human brain to reorganize itself has been well documented.

Which brings us—briefly—back to Carr; we'll give him his due in the next installment. But the crux of his argument is this: “. . . if, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the internet.” While I do not necessarily agree with all of his reservations about this state of affairs, I believe that he has a point when he writes, “the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use . . . since the book.”

---exit---

And here is where we return to the heartland of our genre. Because isn't this what the cyberpunks were going on about back in the eighties before there was a world wide web? Remember that those were early days, before the Mac, before mice or hard disks. Windows had not yet opened and MS-DOS ruled the earth. When William Gibson published *Neuromancer* <[wsu.edu/~brians/science\\_fiction/neuromancer.html](http://wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/neuromancer.html)>, there were just over a thousand internet hosts.

Like all savvy SF writers, the cyber-punks skipped the invention stories and went right to the impact of technology stories. To them cyberspace was not just a literary conceit or a collection of cool gadgets; it was a new way of thinking and living. Was anyone surprised when Timothy Leary <[leary.com](http://leary.com)> became one of the first public figures not closely associated with science fiction to hail the coming of cyberpunk? Leary once

said that the internet was the LSD of the nineties. A clever aphorism, but it doesn't go quite far enough, since the effects of acid on the brain are fleeting, whereas the effects of the internet can potentially last a lifetime.

But imagine the famous commercial recast: This is your brain. This is your brain on Facebook.

Any questions?

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## NEXT ISSUE

### FEBRUARY ISSUE

Our February issue is crammed full of ground-breaking and evocative tales. Paul McAuley's February's cover story is a profoundly moving coming-of-age tale about "The Choice" two young men have to make in a future that is not too far from our own time, yet utterly alien from today's world. The art for this unforgettable novella is by Paul Youll. The far future, and all its attendant weirdnesses, comes roaring "Out of the Dream Closet" in David Ira Cleary's endlessly inventive new novelette. You'll have to move fast to keep up with all the ideas piling into this remarkable story.

### ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Have your passport ready for the next stop in February's around-the-world tour. Sara Genge delivers a severe interpretation of "Waster Mercy" in the harsh desert of a future France. Tim McDaniel's previous tales for us have been amusing short shorts. "Brother Sleep" strikes a different tone as a group of Thai college students begin to discover how gene tweaking will affect their future. The United States is barely recognizable in best-selling author Jeff Carlson's hard-hitting "Planet of the Sealies." Aliette de Bodard steps across cultures and off planet to reveal how uncompromising Aztec rituals could

affect space travel and “Shipbirth” in an alternate reality. In the year that marks the fortieth anniversary of Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg’s collaborations, this dynamic duo’s latest endeavor examines just how disposable our possessions and our lives can be when it’s “The Eve of Beyond.”

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg’s “Reflections” inspects “A Relic of Antiquity”; Peter Heck contributes “On Books”; plus we’ll have an array of poetry and other features you’re sure to enjoy. Look for our February issue on sale at newsstands on December 21, 2010. Or you can subscribe to Asimov’s—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We’re also available on Amazon.com’s Kindle and Barnes and Noble’s Nook!

## COMING SOON

new stories by Norman Spinrad, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Jack Skillingstead, Neal Barrett, jr., Robert Reed, John Kessel, Nancy Fulda, Carol Emshwiller, Ian Creasey, Nick Mamatas, Alan DeNiro, Michael Swanwick, Nick Wolven, William Preston, Rudy Rucker, Esther M. Friesner, Christopher Barzak and many others!

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# ON BOOKS

*Paul Di Filippo*

## City Lover

In June 2007, humanity passed a landmark in its history: for the first time more people lived in cities than otherwise. The city is one of the most significant, useful, and complex “inventions” in the annals of our species. It’s a technology we literally inhabit, and as such, like water to a fish, goes invisible too often. Whether the development of cities can be conclusively put down to the ease and variety of sexual congress the urban scene affords—a theory first proposed by Chip Delany in his *Neveryon* tales, and a notion at the center of the book under discussion below—the city as organism and as a tool of humanity will figure largely in our future.

A recent anthology edited by John Scalzi, *METAtropolis* (whose title, fittingly enough, my errant eye always twists to *MEATropolis*), focused on the speculative future of urban life. But now comes a more lyrical, single-author story collection that looks at cities in a more fantastical, rather than sober stefnal light: Brendan Connell’s *Metrophilias* (Better Non Sequitur, trade paper, \$12.00, 102 pages, ISBN: 978-0974323572).

*Metrophilias* consists of thirty-six micro-fictions or prose poems, each bearing a city name as title, with table of contents arranged alphabetically. (Some letters of the alphabet get extra entries.) The shared theme of all the highly varied pieces is the



distinctive types of lovers to be found in each locale.

Here are some standouts.

In “Athens,” the lust of certain citizens turns toward old statues.

In “Edinburgh,” a man falls in love with a single letter of the alphabet.

“London” gives us a fellow who consorts with spirits only.

One unlikely portion of the female anatomy becomes a fetish in “Oslo.”

“Peking” discloses a man’s surreal love for ceramics.

And finally, in “Zurich,” the true amatory powers of scent are shown.

Connell’s assured writing might call to mind such fellow-travelers as Jeff VanderMeer, Darren Speegle, Clark Ashton Smith, and even Italo Calvino. His deftness at packing so much into such short pieces is admirable. And the book’s organizing conceit is quite clever and well-played. Reading this book is somehow equivalent to listening to U2’s panoramic “Beautiful Day.”

I eagerly anticipate, as should you, the 2012 publication of Connell’s related book from PS Publishing, *The Metanatural Adventures of Dr. Black*.

Up the Infinite Corridor

Some years ago, James Stoddard wrote two great novels that I absolutely loved: *The High House* (1998) and *The False*

House (2000). He's had a few swell short stories in print since, but no subsequent book appearances, a sad fact I attribute to the lackluster, short-sighted state of the publishing industry, and perhaps just slightly to the quirky nature of Stoddard's books. For, you see, his fantasy debut and its sequel were not your standard Tolkienesque quest tale. They involved a mysterious, eternal structure bigger on the inside than the outside, in which a host of archetypes and quirky humans dwelled. John Wright's *War of the Dreaming* duology had a cousinly feel. Full of allusions to past milestone fantasies, the books moved at their own enigmatic pace and contained a wealth of wonders.

Now, proving that no good trope lies fallow for long, comes *The World House* (Angry Robot, mass-market paper, £7.99, 411 pages, ISBN 978-0-00-734504-5), by Guy Adams. It's a uniquely different interpretation of the riff, not the same feat Stoddard performed—essentially stefnal, in fact—and I just hope that Adams fares better commercially with his approach than his predecessor did.

Adams starts cleverly by grounding us in the known world with sharply delineated characters just deep enough for empathizing with, all in some sort of peril. Among them we have Miles, a ne'er-do-well antiques dealer with a gambling problem, in debt to a vengeful loan shark; Sophie, an adolescent autistic girl; Penelope, a flapper whose boyfriend is secretly a homicidal sex maniac; Tom and Elise, two dissipated jazzboes; and Pablo, a poor young Spanish laborer. Each of them, at a moment of danger, gets their hands on a mysterious Chinese

box that serves as a gateway to the World House, and is propelled to that strange, non-coterminous venue willy nilly. There they meet other castaway humans, and the deadly bizarreness of their new environment becomes painfully intimate.

Adams employs muscular vivid prose that works equally well at depicting the reality we know and the irreality of the World House, where a seemingly normal bedroom door can lead to arctic wastes or an entire sea (a sea that dissolves the bather in bliss if one is not careful). His sentences and plotting and action scenes are assured and straightforwardly utilitarian, offering fast-paced thrills, while at the same time there's plenty of room for startling and even poetic figures of speech. Consider this description of a monster:

"There was something of both amphibian and human ancestry to it. Its skin was off-white, like a glass of milk on sixty cigarettes a day. The eyes were much bigger than any eyes have a right to be, rolling around in sockets that held them as fast as holes in mud grip a stray foot . . . The teeth looked no more solid than gristle or single grains from a sieved rice pudding."

Adams's World House is not the numinously flavored Gormenghast that Stoddard created. Rather, it resembles a couple of Marvel Comics venues—the Mojoverse and Arcade's Murderworld. It has elements of the deadly labyrinths in Budrys's *Rogue Moon* (1960) and Silverberg's *The Man in the Maze* (1969). Its feature of blending people from different eras

recalls Farmer's Riverworld series, as well as the World of Tiers. And finally, of course, it's a more savage version of Carroll's Wonderland, that's been run through some sort of deranged E. Nesbit/C. S. Lewis filter. (One character even references Narnia in conversation.)

Ultimately, the science fictional explanation for the existence and nature of the World House comes to displace the fantasy aspect, and the reader realizes that all along Guy Adams has been brilliantly expounding on a Big Dumb Object in the manner of Clarke's Rama! Nice fakeout, sir!

The sequel to this fine book, *Restoration*, is due out in the middle of 2011. Take out a mortgage now.

### Seaside Haunts

Impressed by various reviews of Carlos Ruiz Zafón's two novels for adults—*The Shadow of the Wind* (2004) and *The Angel's Game* (2009)—I purchased those books on my own. (And for a professional reviewer, used to getting free books galore, such an outlay is a real mark of interest!) You can guess, of course, that I have still not had a chance to read them. Highly frustrating!

So when I learned that Zafón had a YA novel about to be published, I ordered that one too off Amazon, and resolved to make it my entry point into his oeuvre. My only regret was that I would be reading his work out of chronological order.

Well, imagine my surprise when I opened *The Prince of Mist* (Little, Brown, hardcover, \$17.99, 214 pages, ISBN 978-

0316-04477-6) and discovered in the author's foreword that his first four books, previously untranslated, were YA novels, and that this one was his debut, from 1993. So now, by starting here, I would indeed be reading him in chronological order.

Sometimes it pays to procrastinate.

First off, I should say that this “new” work is translated by Lucia Graves, who was also entrusted with translating *The Shadow of the Wind*, and that her English version of Zafón's original Spanish is by turns playful and sober, lighthearted and grim, yet always lucid and engaging.

Zafón begins his tale with a situation that is at once urgently particular and yet timeless. He will continue this blend of the eternal and quotidian throughout the book. To my mind, this kind of portrayal of the human condition, which is at once rooted in the individual present circumstances of the characters and simultaneously in the ancient shared heritage of humanity, produces the best kind of fiction—think of John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981) as a great instance of this type of achievement.

In England, on the eve of the increased hostilities of WWII, paterfamilias Maximilian Carver informs his family—wife Angela, son Max (thirteen), daughters Alicia (fifteen) and Irina (eight)—that for safety's sake they will abandon their city lodgings and go to live in a small seaside town. Reluctantly, the family agrees.

Once in the unnamed, toylike village, they find much to like—including a slightly older boy named Roland, on whom Alicia

develops a crush—but also much to make them wary. Their house seems haunted, an overgrown garden features creepy sculptures that move when one's eyes are averted, and a sunken wreck just offshore radiates menace.

As the tale progresses in all its implacable fatedness, Max and Alicia come to learn the true secrets of the village, as revealed reluctantly by Roland's protective grandfather Victor. The three kids finds themselves facing an evil out of Victor's own childhood, the Prince of Mist, aka the Bradburyian Dr. Cain. Their victory over the evil fellow, in a bravura setpiece of a climax, will be only partial and painful.

Zafón conjures up an aura for his tale that is akin to that produced by the best classic horror writers—let's name M.R. James and Robert Aickman and Russell Kirk as touchstones. His themes involve the inescapable repercussions of bad decisions and the limits of one's ability to protect loved ones, and the wisdom of letting go. Weighty topics for even an adult novel, yet perfectly realized here in a manner that will be instantly apprehendable by any savvy youngster.

I can only hope that we see imminent English-language editions of Zafón's other three YA books, so I can continue my own education in his work.

### The Curious Doings at Melstone House

We seem to be enjoying a house-themed streak of novels this column. First came Adams's *World House*, then the haunted cottage in Zafón's novel. And now, in Diana Wynne

Jones's *Enchanted Glass* (Greenwillow Books, hardcover, \$16.99, 292 pages, ISBN 978-0-06-1866684-5), we get Melstone House, a pleasantly dilapidated country home that is a haven for magic and magicians.

Before detailing the curious doings at Melstone House, let me call to your attention a trilogy of hilarious memoirs by one Beverley Nichols, beginning with *Merry Hall* (1951). These books chronicle in droll and arch manner how Mr. Nichols acquired the shabby mansion of his dreams, only to find himself at the mercy of servants, workmen, and neighbors. They will repay your attention, especially in their handsome new editions generally available.

Now, keep Nichols in mind, because I'm pretty sure Diana Wynne Jones did—as witness the MH initials shared with *Merry Hall* and *Melstone House*!

Professor Andrew Brandon Hope has come into his inheritance, the aforementioned Melstone House, upon the death of his beloved grandfather, Jocelyn Brandon. Now, Jocelyn was a wizard of some power and repute, and Andrew has a few amateur skills in that department himself. But he's more concerned with gaining the liberty to pursue his academic studies upon his early retirement, due to this bequest. But Andrew does not reckon with the fact that his grandfather is hereditarily responsible for the thaumaturgical upkeep on a certain "field-of-care." And that the responsibility for maintaining the queer zone of enchanted influence surrounding Melstone House has fallen to an unprepared Andrew.

This basic plot engine is surrounded by an apparatus of joyful screwball complexity, propelled mainly by an assortment of eccentric characters. Besides Andrew's incorrigible servants, Mr. and Mrs. Stock (not related), we get leprechaun-resembling Tarquin; his beautiful computer-friendly daughter Stashe; a weredog who answers to Rolf; and a rural doofus named Shaun and his "counterpart," the giant named Groil. But the key spanner in the works, destroying any chance of peace and quiet for Andrew, is a runaway boy who shows up on his doorstep.

Aidan Cain, all of twelve, is an enigma to himself and others. Without any relatives upon the death of his grandmother, Adela (note the parallel with Andrew's case), he finds himself pursued by occult beings called Stalkers. His own tiny magics are insufficient to protect himself, and he places his fate in Andrew's hands. The reveal of Aidan's identity, far from solving matters, only clarifies and heightens the immense stakes involved.

And we have not yet even spoken of the officious, demanding, and scary Mr. Brown, and the nebulous claim he has on Melstone House.

In the grand tradition of Thorne Smith, Tom Holt, and Wallace & Gromit, this novel is larded with non-sequiturs, absurd personality tics, surreal misunderstandings, and quintessentially British humor. But despite—or perhaps because of—the abidingly silly nature of the protagonists and their doings, the reader—at least this one did—will come to



embrace Andrew and company whole-heartedly, and invest much feeling in the outcome of their actions.

The sprightly lightheartedness of this novel is a testament to the true magic that inheres in her own art.

And Her Shoes Were Number Nine

Fresh off her success with *Boneshaker* (2009), Cherie Priest maintains her heady steampunk momentum with *Clementine* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$25.00, 201 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-308-2). As you might suspect from its less-weighty title, which will inevitably invoke childhood memories of a silly ditty, *Clementine* is more of a romp—less fraught and dire—than its predecessor, despite being set in that exact same fictional universe. Consider it as the best episode of *The Wild, Wild West* never filmed.

We focus initially on two larger-than-life characters, veritable forces of nature, who will entertainingly and suspensefully split alternating chapters of the narrative until their paths finally cross. First comes Captain Croggon Beauregard Hainey, ex-slave and now a legendary sky-pirate. Hainey is in hot pursuit of his own stolen airship, the *Free Crow*, which a dastard named Felton Brink has stolen and rechristened *Clementine*. Brink is heading to Louisville, Kentucky, bearing a mysterious cargo, and Hainey wants revenge. (The secret of the cargo will tally with the re-naming of the ship, if you like clues.)

On Hainey's trail is Maria Isabella Boyd, a woman "nearly forty years old and two husbands down," in her own words. Not

that Boyd has ever relied overmuch on men. She's been a Confederate spy, an actress, and a general survival expert. Now, having been hired by Allan Pinkerton himself, she's a private detective/cop. She's leery of her first assignment, but determined to give it a go.

When Hainey and Boyd meet, it's a titanic dustup that ultimately settles down in strained cooperation. The rigors of their madcap odyssey will mellow that prickly relationship into respect and friendship, and leave each antagonist with a forced but genuine friendly feeling for their rival.

Priest's tale this time around benefits from a wider canvas. With *Boneshaker* being set exclusively in Seattle, and mostly in that city's walled ghetto, events got slightly claustrophobia-inducing, and we did not see as much of her alternate-history America as we might have wished. But *Clementine* remedies that small deficit, as our heroes go ricocheting around the West and Midwest, and we get a larger sense of the festering Civil War back East.

Priest exhibits a minute and juicy particularity about her imagined past, grounding us in tons of sensory details. We can feel the jouncing flight of the dirigibles, smell the booze-redolent cellars and cheap hotel rooms of the tale. When Boyd is sent on a long trip in an unprotected two-person airship, the *Flying Fish*, we shiver with her, and brace for the dangerous descent.

The *Flying Fish* is the proud creation of one Algernon Rice, another Pinkerton agent, and Rice's rich depiction and

coherent actions, despite his being basically a walk-on character, illustrate the care and ingenuity that Priest lavishes on even the most minor personages in her story. She's mastered the Dickensian trick of doing quirky-memorable-but-not-overbearingly-so.

With a woman and a black man—three black men, actually, given Hainey's two memorable sidekicks, Lamar and Simeon—at the center of her tale, Priest could have chosen to go all heavy-handed pot-of-message on us. But although both Boyd and Hainey do get off some good quips and ripostes refuting their alleged second-class status, the theme of equality remains objectified mainly in their actions, residing at a subtle, almost subliminal level. The thrilling tale is Priest's main concern here—as it rightly should be—as she lets adventures serve as enlightenment in a most admirable fashion.

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## **TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD**

What a milestone! It hardly seems possible that we could be celebrating our Twenty-fifth Readers' Award, but that's what the calendar says. Seems like it was only yesterday that we started it!

Please vote. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from you, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were your favorite stories from Asimov's Science Fiction last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover, you liked best in the year 2010. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of Asimov's (pp.109-111) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. By the way, we love to get comments about the stories and the magazine, so please free to include them with your ballot. Please note: unless you request otherwise, comments will be considered for publication with attribution in the editorial that accompanies the announcement of the Readers' Award Results.

Some cautions: Only material from 2010-dated issues of

Asimov's is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine Analog). Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 2011, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Asimov's Science Fiction, Dell Magazines, 267 Broadway, 4th Flr., New York, NY. 10007. You can also vote online at [asimovssf@dellmagazines.com](mailto:asimovssf@dellmagazines.com), but you must give us your physical mailing address as well. We will also post online ballots at our website, so please check us out at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com).

Remember, you—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be your vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!



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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

*Erwin S. Strauss*

A last burst of activity before the holiday lull. Good bets for Asimovians are WindyCon, SFContario, and PhilCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

## NOVEMBER 2010

12-14—WindyCon. For info, write: Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [windycon.org](http://windycon.org). (E-mail) [info@windycon.org](mailto:info@windycon.org). Con will be held in: Lombard (near Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Westin. Guests will include: Steven Barnes, Nene Thomas, Eric Flint. "The Lands of Faerie."

12-14—NovaCon. +44 0114281-1572. [novacon.org](http://novacon.org). Park Inn, Nottingham UK. Ian M. Banks. Long-time SF/fantasy con.

12-14—Anime USA. [animeusa.org](http://animeusa.org). Arlington (Crystal City)

VA (near Washington DC). Many guests. "Of, by, for otaku."

12-14—FaerieCon. [faeriecon.org](http://faeriecon.org). Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. J. Yolen, M. Hague, the Frouds. "Celebrating the Magical Life."

12-14—KollisionCon. [kollisioncon.com](http://kollisioncon.com). Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. Staples, Axelrod, Mercer. Anime and cosplay.

12-14—Dimensions. [tenthplanet.co.uk](http://tenthplanet.co.uk). Holiday Inn, Newcastle-on-Tyne UK. Paul McGann, Colin Baker, Mary Tamm. Dr. Who.

12-14—Chevron. [massiveevents.co.uk](http://massiveevents.co.uk). Park Inn, Northampton UK. Michael Shanks, Teryl Rothery. Stargate.

12-14—YuleCon. [yulecon.com](http://yulecon.com). Ft. Worth TX. Anime.

12-14—IzumiCon. [izumicon.com](http://izumicon.com). Oklahoma City OK. Anime.

19-21—SFConTario. [sfcontario.ca](http://sfcontario.ca). Ramada Plaza, Toronto ON. Michael Swanwick, Patrick & Teresa Nielsen-Hayden.

19-21—SteamCon. [steamcon.org](http://steamcon.org). SeaTac Marriott, Seattle WA. Blaylock, Hensley, Priest. "Weird Weird West." Steampunk.

20-21—Arkansas Anime Festival. [aaf.calm-media.com](http://aaf.calm-media.com). Clarion, Bentonville AR.

26-28—Darkover, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. [darkovercon.org](http://darkovercon.org). Timonium (Baltimore) MD. E. Bear, K. Kurtz.

26-28—Tardis, Box 2660, Glen Ellyn IL 60138. (888) 724-7386. [chicagotardis.com](http://chicagotardis.com). Lombard (Chicago) IL. Dr. Who.

26-28—SorcererCon, Box 142283, Austin TX 78714. (512) 709-3307. [sorcerercon.com](http://sorcerercon.com). "A fantasy-based con."

## DECEMBER 2010

3-5—SMOFCon, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. [smofcon.com](http://smofcon.com). San Francisco CA. Con organizers meet to talk shop.

31-Jan. 2—IkkiCon, Box 1641, Bastrop TX 78602. [ikkicon.com](http://ikkicon.com). Hilton, Austin TX. Anime and Japanese pop culture.

31-Jan. 2—M. E. W. Con. [mewcon.com](http://mewcon.com). Airport Sheraton, Portland OR. Manga and Exotic Worlds.

## JANUARY 2011

14-16—MarsCon, 131B King Henry Way, Williamsburg VA 23188. [marscon.net](http://marscon.net). Jim and Shannon Butcher, Ursula Vernon.

14-17—Arisia, Box 392596, Cambridge MA 02139. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. K. Armstrong, S. Garrity.

14-17—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. [chattacon.org](http://chattacon.org). K. K. Rusch, C. Q. Yarbrow, T. Weiskopf, R. Thompson.

29-30—Sci-Fi Expo. [sci-fiexpo.com/dcc](http://sci-fiexpo.com/dcc). Dallas Convention Center, Richardson (Dallas) TX. Media SF and toys.

## FEBRUARY 2011

4-6—Cre2c3ndo, 16 Ann's Rd., Cambridge CB1 8TN, UK. contabile.org.uk/cre2c3ndo. Grantham UK. SF/fantasy singing.

11-13—EatonCon, c/o Conway, UCR Libraries, Box 5900, Riverside CA 92517. eaton-collector.ucr.edu. Academic con.

18-20—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. boskone.org. Boston MA. C. Stross, C. Harris, G. Manchess, E. Neely.

18-20—ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. condfw.org. Dallas TX. J. McDevitt, T. Powers. SF, fantasy, horror.

18-20—FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20681. farpointcon.com. Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Star Trek and media SF.

## AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. renovationsforg. Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers. WorldCon. \$160.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—Chicago WorldCon, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. chicago2012.org. Chicago IL. Unopposed bid for WorldCon.

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**Novelette**

# Novelette

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## TWO THIEVES

*Chris Beckett*

Chris Beckett's seventh story for us is a glittering tale of two avaricious and adventuresome thieves and the dangers they encounter. The author's latest novel, *Dark Eden* (Corvus, July 2011), takes up the short story of the same name (first published in *Asimov's*, March 2006). It will look at the...

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Two thieves stood glumly at the railings of a ship, watching their destination slowly transform itself from a blemish on the horizon, to a toy island with a single green papier-mâché hill, to an actual place that was no longer “there” but “here.” Dockhands waiting for the ropes, seagulls squabbling on the quay, weeds poking up between the flagstones: it would all be “here” for a very long time to come, if this place's reputation was anything to go by.

“Oh crap,” muttered Pennyworth

He was short, bald, fat, and prone to sweat. His friend was slight and wiry, with a pockmarked face and shock of almost vertical ash-blond hair that made him look a little like a toilet brush. Their full names were Penitence Worthiness Gestas II and Surefaith Solitude Dismas III, but Pennyworth and Shoe



were what they always called themselves.

Shoe looked out at the settlement's score or so of stone buildings, the vegetable gardens, the lighthouse. He looked down at the faces looking up from the quay, strangers, but soon to become all too familiar. He ran his hands through his spiky white hair and gave out a groan of despair.

"Dear God, I swear I will die of boredom."

The police had ambushed their gang in a jeweler's shop, acting on a tip-off from an informer. Three gang members were shot dead in the firefight. Another was wounded and died two streets away from loss of blood. But Shoe and Pennyworth were old hands and knew, or thought they did, when to play the game and when to throw in your hand. They'd surrendered themselves at once, expecting perhaps eight years in jail, with time off for not resisting arrest.

But this time they'd got the calculation wrong, for when the panel of judges was reminded of their long records of extortion, pimping, house-breaking, drug dealing, and deceit, it decided the time had come for Last Resort.

"What?" the two thieves bellowed in dismay.

Up to that point they had been off-hand and nonchalant, as if the trial was a matter of indifference to them and they were keen to get on with more important business. Now they both leapt howling to their feet.

"We never wanted to rob that shop in the first place!" protested Shoe. "We were set up!"

"It's not fair!" cried Pennyworth, "You let other people have another chance!"

But the judges bowed to the court, and gathered up their robes, and filed out to their chambers.

"Gentlemen," said the voice of the ship's captain over the PA system. "Please pick up your things and disembark."

A couple of dozen prisoners trudged down the gangplank onto the quay, some surly, some silent and alert, some trying to make light of their situation with jokes.

"It doesn't look such a bad place," observed a tiny timid-looking little man, glancing anxiously at Shoe.

And he was right. With its pleasant stone buildings, its blue sky and sea, its wheeling gulls, Last Resort looked more like a fishing village or holiday retreat than a penal settlement. Even the warders checking off their names on clipboards were informally dressed and could almost have been tour guides or couriers. For this wasn't so much a place of punishment as a place of quarantine, a place where inveterate offenders could be sent indefinitely when they showed no sign of changing their ways, not for purposes of vengeance but to prevent them causing further distress.

"Not such a bad place if you like doing sweet nothing," grunted Shoe, turning to one side to spit.

"Greetings everyone," called out a tall white-haired man. "My name is Humility—Humility Joyousness Fortunas—and I'm

the governor of Last Resort. It may sound an odd thing for a prison governor to say, but I sincerely hope that your time here will be interesting, pleasurable, and rewarding.”

No one had ever escaped from Last Resort, for it was on an island surrounded by hundreds of kilometers of open ocean, one of the remotest places on the planet. But (as the governor now made clear) the regime there was far from harsh. They’d find their accommodation plain but comfortable, he explained. They were free to roam, and they’d have plentiful opportunities to work at trades, or to study, or to engage in sport and the creative arts. There was even a unique opportunity to take part in the excavation of an archaeological site.

Not all the prisoners were grateful or impressed.

“Who wants to make pots?” growled Pennyworth. “Who wants to dig up bloody old stones?”

He and Shoe had lived their whole lives in the seamy underbelly of a city where you could walk for a whole day and still not come to its edge. All their notions of what was exciting and fun were formed from that experience. They’d lived for the whiff of violence, the heady joy of getting one over on some foolish sap, the sound of gunfire, the thrill of the chase, dodging and diving through crowds and honking traffic. But here the cry of seagulls was the loudest sound, and you could see the island’s only hill at the end of its single empty street.

“I’ll die of boredom,” Shoe gloomily repeated.

“I wouldn’t have bothered to lay down my gun if I’d known

this was coming,” said Pennyworth. “I’d have kept on shooting till they put a bullet through my head.”

A few days later, the two thieves were riding in a bus along a bumpy coastal track, carefully avoiding looking out at the great blue ocean glinting with sunlight, for fear they might find themselves enjoying it.

“So what is this dump we’re going to anyway?” Pennyworth asked one of the other prisoners, a large toothless black man who was sitting across the aisle from them.

The black man shrugged.

“A settlement from the Old Empire or some shit like that.”

“What, and we have to dig it up?”

“Yeah, but the guy in charge is really soft. You don’t have to do much.”

Pennyworth snorted.

“Why do they want to dig it up anyway?”

“Find out what it was for,” the black man said. “Or some shit. No one knows apparently.”

“Or gives a crap,” said Pennyworth.

The black man laughed.

“Yeah,” Shoe said, “but you never know what we might find, do you? It’s amazing what people pay for that old shit.”

He’d once been involved in a scam involving some fake Old Empire artifacts, and he knew. It was why he’d suggested to

Pennyworth that they choose this work over, say, potting, or working on the colony's single farm.

They came to a picturesque ruin on a slope above a rocky shore, some three kilometers from the main colony, with diminutive trees clinging picturesquely to its crumbled stonework.

As they alighted from the bus, the young officer in charge came rushing to greet them with his hand outstretched.

"Gestas? Dismas? Welcome to the Place of Wells, my friends! My name is Gravitas but most people just call me Officer Graves. Well, I am always down a hole in the ground!"

The two thieves declined to smile.

"I think you'll really enjoy this work," Graves continued undaunted. "I know the site doesn't look much at first but it's one of those places you really fall in love with, once you get a feel for it."

He believed that archeology was the key to human wisdom, and was determined that it should be the delight and consolation of everyone.

"What once stood here looks to have been a square building with a flat roof. A large building in terms of length and breadth but only a single story high. You see the walls here? And here? The top of the roof was paved to make a flat terrace—you can see a few bits of it left round the edges—and the terrace was completely enclosed with a colonnade. There's just that one single complete arch still left over there, look. Almost

the whole roof has collapsed into the rooms below, as you can see, and what we're doing now is removing the remains of it to see what lies beneath. It's very exciting because we really have no idea."

Not much excitement was evident, however, in the faces of Prisoner Gestas and Prisoner Dismas. Officer Graves gave a small sigh. "One note of caution," he went on. "We really don't know what function this place used to serve, but we do know they had some mighty advanced technology back in those days, and played with materials and forces that we no longer understand. Wear these radiation counters at all times, and if they ever start to bleep, or if you come across anything that seems in any way odd, do please report back to me before going on. It's for your own safety. I really don't want anyone to come to any harm here."

Shoe and Pennyworth shrugged and spat and grudgingly shoved the proffered counters onto their belts, and Graves led them to a part of the site where a shaft of some kind had been filled up with rubble. Some four meters of this debris had already been lifted away. Now Graves led them down into the shady hollow and, under his direction, the two thieves reluctantly began removing more loose stones and putting them in large bins for removal later by crane.

"People say that this dig really isn't very important compared with the big ones on the mainland where they are finding all those wonderful artifacts," Graves enthused as they made a nominal pretense of working. "But we don't know what it

will throw up, do we? And we won't know until the whole dig is done. I think you'll find it a fascinating place. All digs are, like books of secrets waiting to be read."

"Wow," said lean-faced Shoe in a flat, bored, sarcastic voice.

Graves blinked and looked momentarily hurt—the thieves' surliness was starting to wear him down—but he was a man with a determinedly positive outlook on life.

"We look up the stars today," he said, "and we know their names and we know what they're made of, but for all practical purposes, they might as well be lights projected onto a screen. It was different for our ancestors at the time of the Old Empire. When they looked out at the stars, they were looking into a vast cave of delights going back and back and back, a cave through which, in some way we no longer understand, they were able to move freely—just imagine it!—bringing back strange beasts and fabulous wealth and wonders that we can only dream about."

He glanced hopefully at Shoe and Pennyworth. Both were gazing into the distance with the determinedly vacant expressions that people and animals wear when they are keeping their minds entirely blank until such time as they are needed.

"And yet," Graves doggedly continued, "technological prowess is only part of what we lost when the Great Calamity brought down the Empire, and I would say not the greatest part.

What strikes me most at these sites is the architectural grace, the calmness and at the same time the playfulness of that wonderful civilization. Again and again we find details, flourishes, ornaments, whimsical little touches, that seem to serve no purpose other than to give delight, or raise a smile, or serve as food for thought.”

He glanced again at the two thieves and finally resigned himself to the fact that he might as well be talking to the stones.

“Anyway, it gives you a good appetite, that’s for sure,” he said a little sadly, “all this digging and shifting rocks in the open air, with a nice sea breeze to keep you cool.”

Pennyworth turned to the side and spat.

“So are there any questions, lads?” asked Graves, making one last effort to force cheerfulness into his voice.

A seagull screeched. The ocean sighed.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Graves concluded. “Have fun. Lunch will arrive back at the sorting area at twelve. Just come over and find us when you’re ready.”

Shoe and Pennyworth grunted, watched him go, and then slumped on a slab of rock and lit up cigarettes.

“A fascinating place,” Pennyworth mimicked. “A wonderful book waiting to be read.”

He put two fingers into the back of his mouth as if to make himself gag.

“What a dump,” he concluded.



"Yeah," agreed Shoe, "what in God's name made us pick this job?"

After half an hour of this sort of talk, boredom finally drove them to interact at least a little with their surroundings, and they chucked a few stones at each other. Then they set up a bit of ancient marble paving slab and lobbed more stones at it until it split in two. Finally, when they couldn't think of any other games, they began picking up rubble and dumping it into Graves' bin, settling in spite of themselves into a slow rhythm that was certainly more pleasant than doing nothing at all, though both of them would have strenuously denied it.

And then, after about half an hour of this, and to their great surprise, Pennyworth's counter began to bleep.

"What the . . . ?"

Before Pennyworth could finish the sentence, Shoe's counter went off as well. Both men laughed loudly.

"So are we going to go and tell that Graves guy?" asked Pennyworth when they had recovered from their hilarity.

"Are we, shit!" said Shoe. "This might be something interesting."

Pennyworth nodded and tried to turn off his counter. Unable to find the switch immediately, he lost patience with the thing and silenced it by banging it repeatedly on a rock.

"Piece of shit," he growled.

"You dick, Pennyworth," said Shoe, turning off his own

device. "The switch is right here on top. Where it says ON/OFF."

"Yeah, well," grumbled Pennyworth.

He poked the switch, found it no longer worked, and tossed the counter aside.

"Come on then," said Shoe. "Let's just find out what this is."

They shifted some more stones, this time working at a speed that would have delighted Graves, and finally reached something looked like a circular lid, about a meter across, made of shining and untarnished metal.

"It'll be locked, or rusted up underneath," Pennyworth said glumly. "Then we'll bloody well have to go and get help."

"You never know," said Shoe, tossing aside a cigarette and kneeling in front of the lid with his fingers under the edge.

Pennyworth joined him with a sigh.

"One—two—three," Shoe said, and they both lifted.

Against their expectations the lid came away quite easily, and they found underneath it a well. Which explained why the site was called Place of Wells, of course, but that was not what was on their minds just then. The thing that struck them was what they saw inside it. For there was no water in that well, nor was there the dark echoing space you expect in a well that has dried up. There was—nothingness.

Of course the human eye doesn't see the essence of things, but can only detect light or its absence, and you might argue that what was visible there must therefore have been

amenable to description in such terms. But it didn't seem like that to them. There was neither light nor darkness down there. There was no surface, solid or liquid, rough or smooth. There was just nothing.

"Holy crap!" intoned Pennyworth.

Shoe turned his radiation counter back on. It was bleeping away so fast that it was pretty much giving out a continuous screech. He listened to it for a moment, then laughed.

"Sweet!" he exclaimed.

Others might have worried that the radiation would do them harm, but to these men danger and uncertainty felt like home.

Shoe and Pennyworth hadn't known it, but their counters were connected to a monitor back at the sorting area that Graves checked at regular intervals. He had picked up that they had detected radiation and, running and scrambling across the ruins, he now reached the broken wall at the top of the shaft and looked down at the two of them standing there on the edge of the well, with Shoe's counter still giving out a continuous plaintive screech.

"Hey guys," he called out softly in what he hoped was a calm, kind voice, "you're going to need to back off from there."

He squatted down so that only his head was above the wall, in order to minimize his own exposure to whatever force of nature was pouring out of the well.

"Take a couple of steps back," he called, "mind you don't

trip on the stones, and then come up here and get behind this wall with me.”

Shoe and Pennyworth looked up at him peeking fearfully down at them. Then they glanced back at each other, and laughed.

“What is this thing then?” Shoe asked him.

Graves made a further effort to control his voice.

“Not sure guys, but it looks like you may have come across some sort of spatial gateway. We’ve never come across a live one before. But never mind that for the moment, eh? Really guys, I’m not kidding. It’s a lot of radiation we’re all soaking up right now. I need you to step away from the edge and then we really ought to get away from here.”

Gateway? They had no real idea what Graves was talking about, but “gateway” sounded like a way out. Shoe looked at Pennyworth. Pennyworth nodded, and, with a defiant yell, both of them jumped into the well. The last thing they heard was Graves yelling “No! Don’t!”

After the first quarter-second or so, they didn’t experience themselves as falling. In fact they found they were already standing on smooth, solid ground. There had been no jolt of impact at all, but they were aware of a sharp change of temperature and light intensity and a feeling that they had become slightly heavier. Wherever they were, it was much cooler than the dig at the Place of Wells, and it seemed to be night time, although, once their eyes had adapted, it was

certainly not pitch dark.

“Bloody hell!” said Pennyworth.

They stood under a starry sky on a wide platform perhaps a hundred meters square, paved in checkerboard style in black and white marble. A colonnade ran round the edge of it, with an urn containing an olive tree in front of every third arch. Beyond, there was a sandy desert.

The air was completely still. The silence was absolute.

Then Shoe gave a low whistle and pointed at the sky.

Shoe and Pennyworth weren't so big on moons, for the moon back in the city had been at best a pale smudge above the brash electric lights, and there were always brighter and more vivid things clamoring for attention all around. So moons weren't things they'd ever really paused to think about. But they did know, all the same, that there was only supposed to be one.

And here. . . . Well, it was regrettable, but it couldn't be avoided. Here there were three of the things shining down.

Standing there side by side, their mouths gaping foolishly open, they both felt an icy shiver of almost superstitious terror. It was the animal dread of the inexplicable and the unknown. One moment on Earth, on an island in the middle of the ocean. The next moment: this.

“Oh crap,” murmured Pennyworth.

“Yeah, I know,” said Shoe.

“We're on another planet, aren't we?” Pennyworth

whispered.

Since Shoe didn't reply, Pennyworth answered his own question, addressing himself to the three cold moons themselves.

"We must be. Another bloody planet. What are we going to do?"

The moons, of course, had nothing to say on this point. Their sole contribution to the story of the two thieves was to illuminate the scene and to provide incontrovertible evidence that this was not the planet Earth. And Shoe also said nothing. He sniffed, and spat, and then began to walk across the wide platform to the colonnade.

"What are you doing, Shoe?" moaned Pennyworth.

Again Shoe declined to answer.

"Talk about out of the frying pan," Pennyworth complained as he hurried after his silent companion.

He caught up with Shoe as he reached one of the archways. They looked out over the planet surface, turned and looked back at the artifact on which they stood, then looked out at the planet again. The checkered platform, strewn here and there with blown sand, was raised some three meters above the surrounding desert. A flight of marble stairs led down onto the surface, its lower steps half-buried in sand.

And this was a proper desert. Some deserts have cacti growing in them, or shrubs, or tufts of yellow grass, or even

small trees. But there were no features at all in this one but rocks and stones, each with its overlapping set of faint moon shadows.

“We can’t cross that,” said Pennyworth

“No,” said Shoe, finally breaking his silence. “And anyway, the whole place might be like that for all we know. You can’t cross something if it hasn’t got another side.”

“We’ve had it, haven’t we?” groaned Pennyworth.

Shoe shrugged and began to walk round the edge of the colonnade, noticing, now that they were close, that all the olive trees in their urns were dead. The twigs were gray and had long since lost their bark.

Reaching the corner of the colonnade, they turned and continued along a second side of the platform, passing another flight of stairs that led down into the sand.

“Maybe we should have listened to that guy,” said Pennyworth. “What’s his name? Graves.”

“What?” said Shoe. “That drip? Nah. Never. Start doing what men like that tell you and you might as well be dead anyway.”

They turned along the third side.

“Hmm,” said Shoe.

Like the other sides, this side had stairs going down from it, but they didn’t lead directly onto the ground but onto a subsidiary stone floor, also paved in black and white marble, a

little below the current ground level of the desert. A wall protected it from being overwhelmed with sand, though blown sand was still building up on the flagstones, and especially in what had once been an ornamental pond in the middle, where it had partly buried the dried bones of carp. Two huge urns, one on each side of the pond, held the brittle white skeletons of substantial trees.

Pennyworth and Shoe ran down the steps. They found that the stone floor opened into a hall underneath the raised platform they'd been walking on. The hall was a hundred meters long and twenty wide, its floor paved once again in black and white, its walls and ceiling very smooth with a faint decorative design of swirling organic shapes carved into them. Two thick columns like tree trunks stood in the middle of the long space, holding up the platform above. Away from the light of the three moons, the cavernous room was illuminated only by cube-shaped objects set at intervals into the walls that gave off a low pinkish light. Some of the light cubes were dimmer than others, and some were at their last ebb, not really illuminating anything at all, just glowing and flickering like old embers. A few had died completely.

"I don't like this place one bit," Pennyworth muttered, and, even though he spoke quietly, his voice seemed to echo right up and down the hall. "It's like a museum or something."

"Yeah," said Shoe, "but if there's going to be a way out, it'll be somewhere down here, I reckon. Think about it, Pennyworth. That well back at Last Resort was way down below that old ruin.



The odd thing about the hall was that there was nothing in it, and no doors off it either, other than the one through which they'd entered. But right in the middle of it, between those two fat columns, was the balustrade of a descending spiral staircase.

Shoe and Pennyworth leaned over the balustrade and looked down.

“Yes!”

Pennyworth's triumphant cry echoed from the stone all around them and up and down the stairwell.

Shoe gave a triumphant hoot and kissed his fellow-criminal wetly on the cheek.

“Piss off, Shoe, you pervert,” protested Pennyworth, laughing and pushing him away.

The staircase wound straight down into the ground, dimly lit by more of the glowing cubes to a depth equivalent to four or five stories. There was a single landing half way down. But none of these details were of any interest just now to the two thieves, for down at the bottom of the stairs they'd seen just what they'd been hoping for: another well, like the one they'd uncovered at the archaeological dig at Last Resort. Even from five stories up they could see the same mysterious absence within it, neither a surface nor a gap: neither light nor dark, neither rough nor smooth.

Shoe smiled broadly.

“Lead on my friend,” he said.

“We did it!” said Pennyworth, setting off down the stairs at a run. “We are the best, you know that, Shoe? We found a way out of Last Resort, and now we’ve found a way out of this dump too. We are the best.”

“Where do you think it’ll take us this time?” asked Shoe.

“Who gives a shit? As long as it’s somewhere that’s not here.”

“Yeah,” said Shoe, “or back in Boringsville on Last Resort.”

But on the landing halfway down, deep below under the surface of wherever this empty planet was, he stopped and grabbed Pennyworth by the arm.

“What?” demanded Pennyworth impatiently, wincing at the sound of his own voice echoing up and down the stairwell.

They had been surrounded by silence ever since they arrived on that checkered platform, had heard literally nothing at all in their whole time here except for the sounds they made themselves. But down here, where every breath and footstep echoed and re-echoed from the silent stone, the stillness seemed even more intense. You really had to make yourself speak, for it felt dangerous to break that stillness with the rough echoey self-conscious sound of a human voice.

“Look,” said Shoe, “a door.”

“What?”

Pennyworth glanced, without curiosity, at an archway that led off the landing into a corridor. It had writing over it in the old, cursive script, quite different from the spiky letters that shouted from billboards and illuminated signs in the city where they'd grown up.

"You ran straight past it," Shoe said.

Pennyworth looked at him incredulously.

"Of course I bloody ran straight past it, Shoe! There's one of those well things at the bottom, remember? Who gives a shit about anything else in this place?"

"May as well check this out while we're here, surely?"

"Why? What's the point?"

"There might be something here we want. We'd be nuts not to have a look."

"I guess," Pennyworth reluctantly acknowledged, rubbing his bald head. "I don't like this place though. It's like . . . Well, it's like people were here a long time ago and . . ."

Shoe laughed mockingly.

"Afraid of ghosts, Pennyworth, my old mate?"

"Nah, of course not. It's just that . . ."

"Well okay then," Shoe interrupted and he passed through the arch. The corridor was cut into the rock rather more roughly than the hall or the stairwell, so it had something of the quality of a mine tunnel, and it was lit at intervals with the same glowing pinkish cubes as the stairs. The time was clearly approaching

when all these underground structures would sink back into total darkness. Every fifth or sixth cube here was already guttering or entirely extinguished, and one of them gave a final flicker and expired just as they were walking past it.

After ten meters or so, a large chamber opened up on the right. Its whole floor space was stacked with plastic boxes, piled untidily on top of each other, perhaps put there by someone in a hurry, or perhaps disordered by previous intruders rummaging through them.

Pennyworth immediately ran forward to check them out.

“Holy shit!” he breathed “Look at this!”

“Diamonds!” murmured Shoe.

Diamonds! Every box they looked in was full of diamonds. Diamonds in their thousands, diamonds in their tens of thousands, were all around them.

Pennyworth shouted with incredulous laughter.

“Bloody hell, Shoe! We’ll be rich!”

Shoe smiled wryly, running his hands through jewels.

“Worth pausing on the stairs then was it, mate?”

“Too bloody right, my old buddy. Good job I’ve got you to knock some sense into me.”

They stuffed their pockets to bursting point. Then Pennyworth took off his shirt and tore two holes in the shoulders. He tied up the ends of the arms, stuffing them both with more diamonds until they bulged, then put the shirt back on

with his arms through the torn holes, so that the shirt-arms dangled in front of him like bloated extra limbs.

"You dick, Pennyworth," said Shoe. "You look like you're wearing some dumb octopus suit or something."

For some reason, Shoe's initial elation had faded slightly, but Pennyworth was far too excited to notice or care.

"Who cares what I look like?" he retorted. "This is my future I've got here. This is my bloody future."

He rubbed his shiny head.

"Now let me see. How am I going to carry more?"

He had an idea, hesitated, and made a decision.

"Damn it," he said, "I'll do it. We've all done it when we've had to hide stuff in prison, haven't we? I can shove six big diamonds up my arse, and swallow half-a-dozen little ones too."

"Whatever turns you on," said Shoe with a slightly distant laugh, and he went back into the corridor.

Pennyworth wasn't joking. He whipped down his breeches at once and winced and grunted as he shoved stones up himself, his eyes bulging and streaming. Then he picked out a handful of little diamonds, gathered what saliva he could in his dry mouth as lubrication, and swallowed them one by one, gagging as each one went down. Finally, he heaped up a box of diamonds with gems from other boxes until it was piled high, and picked it up to carry with him. It was quite a weight.

"At least take a box, Shoe!" he exclaimed, waddling

uncomfortably out into the corridor, with the heavy box in his arms and the bulging octopus arms dangling down his front. He was in obvious pain. His eyes were watering, and he walked gingerly. Diamonds, after all, are hard and angular things.

"Yeah, I will," said Shoe. "But later. I'll pick up a box on my way back past here."

Pennyworth stared at him, dismayed.

"Way back? Aren't we going straight to the well now?"

"Hurts to walk, huh?" said Shoe laughing. "That's your problem, buddy. I want to see where this leads."

"Come on, Shoe, my old friend," Pennyworth pleaded. "Don't fool around, eh? Let's just get down to that well."

But Shoe shook his head and insisted on carrying farther on along the corridor.

"I'm not fooling around. Remember what you said when I wanted to come along here? If we'd done what you wanted then, you'd never have found all this, would you?"

"Yeah, okay, but . . ."

Reluctantly, Pennyworth conceded, picking his way painfully along behind Shoe, still for some reason clutching his box of jewels and still wearing his diamond-packed shirt, though he could have put both of them down and come back to them later.

At the end of the corridor there was another archway, this a very narrow one, leading to some descending spiral steps, very

steep and narrow, and quite crudely cut into the raw rock.

Shoe examined the writing engraved above the arch, and noticed it was the same as the inscription over the entrance to the corridor.

"Your heart's desire," he read out.

"Crap," said Pennyworth, laughing. "You don't know what it says. That's not even written in our language. It's not even in our letters."

He shook his head.

"Sorry, buddy, nice try but I'm not going a step further. You go down there if you want to. I've got my heart's desire, mate, I'm holding it now. I'll wait for you up here."

Shoe shrugged and climbed down the narrow stairs. At their foot, the equivalent of two stories down, he reached a small but pleasantly proportioned room, its walls and ceiling decorated with a fine tracery of stone in an abstract pattern vaguely suggestive of vines and seashells. In the middle of the room, and filling up a good proportion of its floor area, was a circular pool of still water. On the far side of the pool was a stone seat like a throne. Cubes in three of the four corners of the room gave out gentle pinkish light. The fourth light cube had died.

Suddenly aware of how weary he was, of how long a journey his life had been, and how long it might still be, Shoe felt an overwhelming desire to go and sit in that stone seat and rest. Never mind Pennyworth waiting up there with diamonds

shoved up his rectum and diamonds like a yoke round his neck.

“More fool him,” muttered Shoe. “He can wait.”

“Shoe! Shoe!”

The voice came at first from far away and he didn't take much notice of it, just noted it, and frowned slightly, and turned back again to his own quiet thoughts, which darted back at once into the silent and peaceful and endlessly absorbing chambers where they had been so happily engrossed, like fish released into a stream.

“Shoe! Shoe!”

Now, annoyingly, the voice was close by, coming not from some remote place but from just across the small space where he was sitting.

“Hey Shoe! What in God's name do you think you're doing?”

With a start, Shoe looked up and remembered where he was. He saw fat Pennyworth standing in the doorway of the room, still laden with his heaped box of stones and his ridiculous octopus arms. Sweat was running down the bald man's face, which was a caricature of outrage and incredulity.

“What are you doing? ” bawled Pennyworth, too angry to remember his unease about disturbing the echoey silence. “I've been up there all this time, trying so hard not to crap these diamonds out again that I've got a cramp up my butt, and you've not found anything at all, have you? You're not even looking for



anything.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” said Shoe, indifferently. “I didn’t notice the time passing.”

“You didn’t notice the . . . I don’t believe I’m hearing this! We’re stuck in the middle of a desert on some godforsaken planet, in case you’d forgotten, and here you are sitting around like . . . like some old guy in a movie sitting on his veranda in the sun. I could hit you, Shoe, do you know that? We want to get away from here, remember? We’re on an alien planet!”

Shoe reluctantly stood up.

“You should try sitting here,” he said, “It . . .”

“I haven’t got time for a sit down,” interrupted Pennyworth (for whom, it must be admitted, sitting down had every reason to be a particularly unappealing idea).

He eyed the water. “Might just wash my hands though. They’re a bit shitty.”

“Don’t you dare touch that water,” snapped Shoe.

Pennyworth frowned.

“Why shouldn’t . . . ?” He shrugged. “Oh suit yourself. If you want to act all weird, be my guest. But let’s get going to that well.”

“So what were you looking at anyway?” asked Pennyworth, after he had completed the painful ascent from the room with the pool and they were making their way back along the corridor toward the landing.

"I sat in the chair and I looked at the water, and . . . it was just peaceful. It was like I . . ."

They were approaching the room full of treasure and Pennyworth interrupted him.

"You going to pick up a box?"

"I guess."

Shoe went into the room and absently tossed a few extra diamonds into one of the boxes to top it up.

"It was like I remembered something," he mused, "like I remembered something really obvious which I keep forgetting. I remembered . . . Well, it's hard to explain but I remembered that everything is . . ."

"Tell you what," said Pennyworth, "we should carry a few boxes to the well down there, stack them up and come up for more. Then we could chuck the extra boxes into the well before we go through ourselves."

"Uh. Yeah, okay. What I'm trying to say is that I remembered that everything is fine, you know? There's no need to . . ."

"Are we going to move or what?"

Shoe picked up a box. As they made their way back to the stairs, he opened his mouth to try one more time to explain again what he had seen down there, but then changed his mind. It was obvious that Pennyworth wasn't listening or interested or capable of hearing. But, more than that, he sensed that the

simple act of trying to put it into words would dissipate the experience. With every word you spoke about a thing like that, the less you knew what it was you were trying to say.

“Now all we need,” said Pennyworth, panting and gasping, as they set down the boxes beside the well and headed back up the stairs for more, “is to get to a place that isn’t Last Resort and isn’t a desert. Anywhere with people in it will do. Anywhere with people in it, my friend, and you and I are going to be rich.”

Pennyworth was so excited about this prospect that he seemed to have temporarily forgotten his discomfort, though Shoe couldn’t help noticing, as he followed his companion up the stairs, that Pennyworth’s breeches were now soaked with blood. The dark stain had spread right across the seat and halfway down one thigh.

“I’m going to get a bloody great swimming pool,” Pennyworth said as they reached the room full of treasure. He was so short of breath that his words came out in short bursts. “A bloody great swimming pool with . . . with underwater lights and a bar and . . . and all of that . . . And twenty bedrooms . . . And a high wall . . . And one of those big metal gates with my own guards minding it . . . And I’m going to have a wine cellar, and drink wine that costs . . . that costs more than its weight in gold, if I feel like it . . .”

They picked two more boxes, headed back toward the well.

“Maybe I’ll buy my own . . . my own football team or

something, to have a bit of a hobby . . .” Pennyworth went on as they headed down the stairs again, though he could hardly find the breath.

“Yeah,” he wheezed as they reached the well again, “and I’m going to get myself so . . . so many women . . . so many pretty woman. Actresses. Models. A different one every day . . . And every night of course.”

“Right you are,” Shoe said distractedly. “Now let’s jump into this thing and get it over with.”

Pennyworth looked at him in horror.

“No way!” he panted out, wincing as he carefully lowered his second box to the ground. “We need more boxes! We need two more at least.”

Shoe shook his head.

“We need to go,” he said.

“No, Shoe! Not yet!”

Pennyworth’s plump face was pale with blood loss and slimy with sweat. His hands were shaking.

“Man,” said Shoe, “you should really see yourself.”

He dropped the box he’d been holding into the well. The nothingness sparkled and hissed as the treasure fell through it.

Pennyworth looked up the stairs and then back at the well, his glistening face knotted up with strain. He ran his tongue round his lips as he struggled with the conflicting pressures of greed and pain. But he didn’t have the energy to argue any

more. He looked longingly up toward the landing, but finally, wincing, he bent down, picked up a box, and tossed it into whatever lay beyond that surface that wasn't really a surface at all.

Shoe picked up his other box. He too glanced up the stairwell, thinking about the room with the pool that he'd never see again.

"Are you ready?" he asked Pennyworth, who was now standing in a small puddle of blood.

With a grunt of pain, Pennyworth picked up his remaining box. Again he ran his tongue round his lips and he looked sadly up the stairs one final time. Then he turned to Shoe and nodded, and they both jumped.

The harsh white sunlight hurt their eyes and at first they could see nothing but its overwhelming glare. But they could feel the heat of a tropical sun on their skins immediately, and smell the city smells of sewage and sweat and rotten vegetables. And they could hear the shouting and screaming of a hysterically excited crowd.

They were standing in a market square strewn with diamonds and bits of plastic box, and all around them men, women, and children were jostling and shoving and screaming abuse at one another as they scrabbled on the worn paving slabs for the precious stones.

"Holy crap," breathed Pennyworth, whose glistening face was now gray as a corpse's.

Quite nearby, a tall woman with a baby on her back stood up, triumphantly clutching a single diamond in her fist, and glanced in their direction. The baby was screaming and screaming, but she was oblivious to it. Her hard, bloodshot eyes darkened as she saw the new arrivals with their piled boxes of jewels. There were four bloody scratches on her right cheek.

“Get them!” she shrieked.

The actual words were unfamiliar to the two thieves, who knew no languages other than their own, but the meaning was very plain. Immediately the woman started to run toward them. A few other people reluctantly lifted their heads, saw the two thieves, and took in the implications. And then there were more shrieks and more people looked up. In a matter of seconds half the crowd was heading straight for them.

“Throw it down, Pennyworth,” yelled Shoe. “Throw down the whole boxful and run!”

He hurled the contents of his box out into the crowd, followed by the box itself. Pennyworth gaped at him for a moment, then looked back at the faces rushing toward him, crazed and murderous with longing. He swallowed once, then flung out his own box just as the tall woman with the scratched face was almost upon him. Yet again there were diamonds everywhere. The crowd screeched as it took in this second helping of instant wealth, as plentiful as the first lot that had appeared out of nowhere only a few minutes previously.

Everyone dived to the ground, snatching and snarling and clawing. The boxes were torn to shreds in moments. Dodging pedestrians and rickshaws, the two thieves ran.

They had run for the length of just one block when Pennyworth fell to his knees with a sob and threw up copiously, immediately afterward scrabbling in the vomit for stones.

"I've got to crap," he whimpered to Shoe, "I can't hold on any longer."

His foolish octopus limbs dangled into his stinking sick. Passers-by turned to stare at them. Rickshaw drivers beeped horns to try and make them look round.

"Well, crap yourself then, Pennyworth. We need to move."

Shoe looked back the way they had come. Any moment now, he knew, the diamonds on the market square would be exhausted and the first hungry outriders of the crowd would start to come after them.

He pulled his sick companion to his feet, and put an arm round his shoulders to hold him up, trying not to breathe in too much of Pennyworth's spreading stench, but gagging all the same. He looked down the streets to the left, the right, and straight ahead, weighing his options with the speed and detachment of an experienced professional, and made a decision to turn to the left, where the road looked busier and more winding and easier to hide in.

But a second or two passed between taking the decision and acting on it. "There's probably another well buried under

that market square,” he found himself thinking during that brief lacuna in time. And he remembered what Officer Graves had said about the Old Empire and its playful mysteries strewn out across the stars, and it seemed, in that moment, to make sense to him, so that he could understand why Graves cared about such things. And then, with a sudden pang of loss so sharp as to bring tears up into his eyes, he recalled the room with the pool, and tried to bring back into his mind what he had experienced there.

But his thoughts were interrupted by harsh shrieks of recognition coming from the direction of the square. He tightened his grip round his foolish friend and gave himself back to the moment.

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**Poetry**



# Poetry

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## **FIVE POUNDS OF SUNLIGHT**

*Geoffrey A. Landis*

The weight of sunlight striking the Earth every second is two kilograms. About five pounds. The weight of a kitten, six months old, still frisky still chasing his tail, and everything else, real and imaginary. Five pounds of sunlight races to Earth, crossing ninety-five million miles in eight..  

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## **Retired Spaceman**

*G. O. Clark*

As a child he built plastic models of space ships and super-heroes, pieced together picture puzzles of celestial wonders and alien landscapes. As a young man he hit the textbooks and simulators hard, failing in the end to make the grade, to set a course for uncharted planets and distant stars. Now...

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**Novelette**

**Short Stories**

## FIVE POUNDS OF SUNLIGHT

*Geoffrey A. Landis*

The weight of sunlight striking the Earth every second is two kilograms.

About five pounds.

The weight of a kitten,  
six months old, still frisky  
still chasing his tail,  
and everything else, real and imaginary.

Five pounds of sunlight  
races to Earth,  
crossing ninety-five million miles in eight minutes,  
scattering off clouds,  
absorbed by desert soils and rainforest jungles  
reflecting from arctic ice  
refracting into myriad rainbows.

The kitten  
races across the house  
scattering books and papers,  
chasing myriad imaginary rainbows

crossing the width of  
my office,  
the living room  
the kitchen,  
in just under one second.

During which time another five pounds of sunlight collides  
into the Earth

Some of that five pounds of sunlight reflects back into  
space.

The kitten bounces off the kitchen cabinets, reflecting back  
into my office

scattering books and papers

But three or four pounds of sunlight stays, warming the  
Earth.

The kitten, temporarily stationary, naps in the sunlight.

I cup the kitten in one hand

and imagine that I am holding all the sunlight striking the  
Earth.

**Next Article**

# **Retired Spaceman**

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As a child he  
built plastic models  
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As a young man  
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and simulators hard,  
failing in the end  
to make the  
grade, to set a course  
for uncharted planets  
and distant stars.

Now an old man,  
the lost years finally

catching up to him,  
he rehashes the past  
and completes  
paint-by-number pictures  
of the future he longed  
so much to join.

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**Short Stories**

# Short Stories

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## DOLLY

*Elizabeth Bear*

Elizabeth Bear lives in Connecticut with a giant ridiculous dog and a presumptuous cat. Her hobbies include cooking, rock climbing, and playing some of the worst guitar ever heard. Her fiction has been the recipient of several major awards, including two Hugos and a Sturgeon. Both Hugo Award-winning...

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## VISITORS

*Steve Rasnic Tem*

Steve Rasnic Tem has had recent appearances in the John Skipp anthology *Werewolves and Shape Shifters*, and in Stephen Jones' *Visitants: Stories of Fallen Angels & Heavenly Hosts*. His most recent book is *In Concert*, a collection of all his short fiction collaborations with wife Melanie Tem. In his...

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## INTERLOPER

*Ian McHugh*

Ian McHugh is a graduate of Clarion West. His fiction has received the Writers of the Future Award and Australia's Aurealis Award. Readers can find more of his work at [ianmchugh.wordpress.com](http://ianmchugh.wordpress.com). The idea for his outré new tale of the Australian outback was "concocted over the course of a very tedious..."

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## ASHES ON THE WATER

*Gwendolyn Clare*

Gwendolyn Clare has a BA in Ecology, a BS in Geophysics, and is in the process of adding another acronym to her collection. Away from the laboratory, she enjoys practicing martial arts, adopting feral cats, and writing speculative

fiction. Her short stories have appeared in the Warrior Wisewoman 3,...

## **Top of Short Stories**

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**Novella**

# DOLLY

*Elizabeth Bear*

Elizabeth Bear lives in Connecticut with a giant ridiculous dog and a presumptuous cat. Her hobbies include cooking, rock climbing, and playing some of the worst guitar ever heard. Her fiction has been the recipient of several major awards, including two Hugos and a Sturgeon. Both Hugo Award-winning stories, “Tideline” and “Shuggoths in Bloom,” originally appeared in Asimov’s. The author’s latest books are *Chill* (Spectra, 2010) and *The Sea Thy Mistress* (forthcoming from Tor). Her latest story for us is a futuristic murder tale. Readers will not be mistaken if they detect a few nods to a past SF master hidden among the clues to the mystery.

On Sunday when Dolly awakened, she had olive skin and black-brown hair that fell in waves to her hips. On Tuesday when Dolly awakened, she was a redhead, and fair. But on Thursday—on Thursday her eyes were blue, her hair was as black as a crow’s wing, and her hands were red with blood.

In her black French maid’s outfit, she was the only thing in the expensively appointed drawing room that was not winter-white or antiqued gold. It was the sort of room you hired somebody else to clean. It was as immaculate as it was white.

Immaculate and white, that is, except for the dead body of



billionaire industrialist Clive Steele—and try to say that without sounding like a comic book—which lay at Dolly's feet, his viscera blossoming from him like macabre petals.

That was how she looked when Rosamund Kirkbride found her, standing in a red stain in a white room like a thorn in a rose.

Dolly had locked in position where her program ran out. As Roz dropped to one knee outside the border of the blood-saturated carpet, Dolly did not move.

The room smelled like meat and bowels. Flies clustered thickly on the windows, but none had yet managed to get inside. No matter how hermetically sealed the house, it was only a matter of time. Like love, the flies found a way.

Grunting with effort, Roz planted both green-gloved hands on winter-white wool-and-silk fibers and leaned over, getting her head between the dead guy and the doll. Blood spattered Dolly's silk stockings and her kitten-heeled boots: both the spray-can dots of impact projection and the soaking arcs of a breached artery.

More than one, given that Steele's heart lay, trailing connective tissue, beside his left hip. The crusted blood on Dolly's hands had twisted in ribbons down the underside of her forearms to her elbows and from there dripped into the puddle on the floor.

The android was not wearing undergarments.

"You staring up that girl's skirt, Detective?"

Roz was a big, plain woman, and out of shape in her forties. It took her a minute to heave herself back to her feet, careful not to touch the victim or the murder weapon yet. She'd tied her straight light brown hair back before entering the scene, the ends tucked up in a net. The severity of the style made her square jaw into a lantern. Her eyes were almost as blue as the doll's.

"Is it a girl, Peter?" Putting her hands on her knees, she pushed fully upright. She shoved a fist into her back and turned to the door.

Peter King paused just inside, taking in the scene with a few critical sweeps of eyes so dark they didn't catch any light from the sunlight or the chandelier. His irises seemed to bleed pigment into the whites, warming them with swirls of ivory. In his black suit, his skin tanned almost to match, he might have been a heroically-sized construction-paper cutout against the white walls, white carpet, the white and gold marble-topped table that looked both antique and French.

His blue paper booties rustled as he crossed the floor. "Suicide, you think?"

"Maybe if it was strangulation." Roz stepped aside so Peter could get a look at the body.

He whistled, which was pretty much what she had done.

"Somebody hated him a lot. Hey, that's one of the new Dollies, isn't it? Man, nice." He shook his head. "Bet it cost more than my house."

"Imagine spending half a mil on a sex toy," Roz said, "only to have it rip your liver out." She stepped back, arms folded.

"He probably didn't spend that much on her. His company makes accessory programs for them."

"Industry courtesy?" Roz asked.

"Tax write-off. Test model." Peter was the department expert on Home companions. He circled the room, taking it in from all angles. Soon the scene techs would be here with their cameras and their tweezers and their 3D scanner, turning the crime scene into a permanent virtual reality. In his capacity of soft forensics, Peter would go over Dolly's program, and the medical examiner would most likely confirm that Steele's cause of death was exactly what it looked like: something had punched through his abdominal wall and clawed his innards out.

"Doors were locked?"

Roz pursed her lips. "Nobody heard the screaming."

"How long you think you'd scream without any lungs?" He sighed. "You know, it never fails. The poor folks, nobody ever heard no screaming. And the rich folks, they've got no neighbors to hear 'em scream. Everybody in this modern world lives alone."

It was a beautiful Birmingham day behind the long silk draperies, the kind of mild and bright that spring mornings in Alabama excelled at. Peter craned his head back and looked up at the chandelier glistening in the dustless light. Its ornate curls had been spotlessly clean before aerosolized blood on

Steele's last breath misted them.

"Steele lived alone," she said. "Except for the robot. His cook found the body this morning. Last person to see him before that was his P.A., as he left the office last night."

"Lights on seems to confirm that he was killed after dark."

"After dinner," Roz said.

"After the cook went home for the night." Peter kept prowling the room, peering behind draperies and furniture, looking in corners and crouching to lift up the dust ruffle on the couch. "Well, I guess there won't be any question about the stomach contents."

Roz went through the pockets of the dead man's suit jacket, which was draped over the arm of a chair. Pocket computer and a folding knife, wallet with an RFID chip. His house was on palmprint, his car on voice rec. He carried no keys. "Assuming the M.E. can find the stomach."

"Touché. He's got a cook, but no housekeeper?"

"I guess he trusts the android to clean but not cook?"

"No taste buds." Peter straightened up, shaking his head. "They can follow a recipe, but—"

"You won't get high art," Roz agreed, licking her lips. Outside, a car door slammed. "Scene team?"

"M.E.," Peter said, leaning over to peer out. "Come on, let's get back to the house and pull the codes for this model."

"All right," Roz said. "But I'm interrogating it. I know better

than to leave you alone with a pretty girl.”

Peter rolled his eyes as he followed her towards the door. “I like ’em with a little more spunk than all that.”

“So the new dolls,” Roz said in Peter’s car, carefully casual. “What’s so special about ’em?”

“Man,” Peter answered, brow furrowing. “Gimme a sec.”

Roz’s car followed as they pulled away from the house on Balmoral Road, maintaining a careful distance from the bumper. Peter drove until they reached the parkway. Once they’d joined a caravan downtown, nose-to-bumper on the car ahead, he folded his hands in his lap and let the lead car’s autopilot take over.

He said, “What isn’t? Real-time online editing—personality and physical appearance, ethnicity, hair, all kinds of behavior protocols—you name the kink, they’ve got a hack for it.”

“So if you knew somebody’s kink,” she said thoughtfully. “Knew it in particular. You could write an app for that—”

“One that would appeal to your guy in specific.” Peter’s hands dropped to his lap, his head bobbing up and down enthusiastically. “With a—pardon the expression—backdoor.”

“Trojan horse. Don’t jilt a programmer for a sex machine.”

“There’s an app for that,” he said, and she snorted. “Two cases last year, worldwide. Not common, but—”

Roz looked down at her hands. “Some of these guys,” she said. “They program the dolls to scream.”

Peter had sensuous lips. When something upset him, those lips thinned and writhed like salted worms. "I guess maybe it's a good thing they have a robot to take that out on."

"Unless the fantasy stops being enough." Roz's voice was flat, without judgment. Sunlight fell warm through the windshield. "What do you know about the larval stage of serial rapists, serial killers?"

"You mean, what if pretend pain stops doing it for them? What if the appearance of pain is no longer enough?"

She nodded, worrying a hangnail on her thumb. The nitrile gloves dried out your hands.

"They used to cut up paper porn magazines." His broad shoulders rose and fell, his suit catching wrinkles against the car seat when they came back down. "They'll get their fantasies somewhere."

"I guess so." She put her thumb in her mouth to stop the bleeding, a thick red bead that welled up where she'd torn the cuticle.

Her own saliva stung.

Sitting in the cheap office chair Roz had docked along the short edge of her desk, Dolly slowly lifted her chin. She blinked. She smiled.

"Law enforcement override code accepted." She had a little-girl Marilyn voice. "How may I help you, Detective Kirkbride?"

"We are investigating the murder of Clive Steele," Roz said, with a glance up to Peter's round face. He stood behind Dolly with a wireless scanner and an air of concentration. "Your contract-holder of record."

"I am at your service."

If Dolly were a real girl, the bare skin of her thighs would have been sticking to the recycled upholstery of that office chair. But her realistically-engineered skin was breathable polymer. She didn't sweat unless you told her to, and she probably didn't stick to cheap chairs.

"Evidence suggests that you were used as the murder weapon." Roz steepled her hands on her blotter. "We will need access to your software update records and your memory files."

"Do you have a warrant?" Her voice was not stiff or robotic at all, but warm, human. Even in disposing of legal niceties, it had a warm, confiding quality.

Silently, Peter transmitted it. Dolly blinked twice while processing the data, a sort of status bar. Something to let you know the thing wasn't hung.

"We also have a warrant to examine you for DNA trace evidence," Roz said.

Dolly smiled, her raven hair breaking perfectly around her narrow shoulders. "You may be assured of my cooperation."

Peter led her into one of the interrogation rooms, where the operation could be recorded. With the help of an evidence tech,

he undressed Dolly, bagged her clothes as evidence, brushed her down onto a sheet of paper, combed her polymer hair and swabbed her polymer skin. He swabbed her orifices and scraped under her nails.

Roz stood by, arms folded, a necessary witness. Dolly accepted it all impassively, moving as directed and otherwise standing like a caryatid. Her engineered body was frankly sexless in its perfection—belly flat, hips and ass like an inverted heart, breasts floating cartoonishly beside a defined rib cage. Apparently, Steele had liked them skinny.

“So much for pulchritudinousness,” Roz muttered to Peter when their backs were to the doll.

He glanced over his shoulder. The doll didn't have feelings to hurt, but she looked so much like a person it was hard to remember to treat her as something else. “I think you mean voluptuousness,” he said. “It is a little too good to be true, isn't it?”

“If you would prefer different proportions,” Dolly said, “My chassis is adaptable to a range of forms—”

“Thank you,” Peter said. “That won't be necessary.”

Otherwise immobile, Dolly smiled. “Are you interested in science, Detective King? There is an article in Nature this week on advances in the polymerase chain reaction used for replicating DNA. It's possible that within five years, forensic and medical DNA analysis will become significantly cheaper and faster.”



Her face remained stoic, but Dolly's voice grew animated as she spoke. Even enthusiastic. It was an utterly convincing—and engaging—effect.

Apparently, Clive Steele had programmed his sex robot to discourse on molecular biology with verve and enthusiasm.

"Why don't I ever find the guys who like smart women?" Roz said.

Peter winked with the side of his face that faced away from the companion. "They're all dead."

A few hours after Peter and the tech had finished processing Dolly for trace evidence and Peter had started downloading her files, Roz left her parser software humming away at Steele's financials and poked her head in to check on the robot and the cop. The techs must have gotten what they needed from Dolly's hands, because she had washed them. As she sat beside Peter's workstation, a cable plugged behind her left ear, she cleaned her lifelike polymer fingernails meticulously with a file, dropping the scrapings into an evidence bag.

"Sure you want to give the prisoner a weapon, Peter?" Roz shut the ancient wooden door behind her.

Dolly looked up, as if to see if she was being addressed, but made no response.

"She don't need it," he said. "Besides, whatever she had in her wiped itself completely after it ran. Not much damage to her core personality, but there are some memory gaps. I'm going to compare them to backups, once we get those from the scene

team.”

“Memory gaps. Like the crime,” Roz guessed. “And something around the time the Trojan was installed?”

Dolly blinked her long-lashed blue eyes languorously. Peter patted her on the shoulder and said, “Whoever did it is a pretty good cracker. He didn’t just wipe, he patterned her memories and overwrote the gaps. Like using a clone tool to Photoshop somebody you don’t like out of a picture.”

“Her days must be pretty repetitive,” Roz said. “How’d you pick that out?”

“Calendar.” Peter puffed up a little, smug. “She don’t do the same housekeeping work every day. There’s a Monday schedule and a Wednesday schedule and—well, I found where the pattern didn’t match. And there’s a funny thing—watch this.”

He waved vaguely at a display panel. It lit up, showing Dolly in her black-and-white uniform, vacuuming. “House camera,” Peter explained. “She’s plugged into Steele’s security system. Like a guard dog with perfect hair. Whoever performed the hack also edited the external webcam feeds that mirror to the companion’s memories.”

“How hard is that?”

“Not any harder than cloning over her files, but you have to know to look for them. So it’s confirmation that our perp knows his or her way around a line of code. What have you got?”

Roz shrugged. “Steele had a lot of money, which means a

lot of enemies. And he did not have a lot of human contact. Not for years now. I've started calling in known associates for interviews, but unless they surprise me, I think we're looking at crime of profit, not crime of passion."

Having finished with the nail file, Dolly wiped it on her prison smock and laid it down on Peter's blotter, beside the cup of ink— and light-pens.

Peter swept it into a drawer. "So we're probably not after the genius programmer lover he dumped for a robot. Pity, I liked the poetic justice in that."

Dolly blinked, lips parting, but seemed to decide that Peter's comment had not been directed at her. Still, she drew in air—could you call it a breath?—and said, "It is my duty to help find my contract-holder's killer."

Roz lowered her voice. "You'd think they'd pull 'em off the market."

"Like they pull all cars whenever one crashes? The world ain't perfect."

"Or do that robot laws thing everybody used to twitter on about."

"Whatever a positronic brain is, we don't have it. Asimov's fictional robots were self-aware. Dolly's neurons are binary, as we used to think human neurons were. She doesn't have the nuanced neurochemistry of even, say, a cat." Peter popped his collar smooth with his thumbs. "A doll can't want. It can't make moral judgments, any more than your car can. Anyway, if we

could do that, they wouldn't be very useful for home defense. Oh, incidentally, the sex protocols in this one are almost painfully vanilla—”

“Really.”

Peter nodded.

Roz rubbed a scuffmark on the tile with her shoe. “So given he didn't like anything ... challenging, why would he have a Dolly when he could have had any woman he wanted?”

“There's never any drama, no pain, no disappointment. Just comfort, the perfect helpmeet. With infinite variety.”

“And you never have to worry about what she wants. Or likes in bed.”

Peter smiled. “The perfect woman for a narcissist.”

The interviews proved unproductive, but Roz didn't leave the station house until after ten. Spring mornings might be warm, but once the sun went down, a cool breeze sprang up, ruffling the hair she'd finally remembered to pull from its ponytail as she walked out the door.

Roz's green plug-in was still parked beside Peter's. It booted as she walked toward it, headlights flickering on, power probe retracting. The driver-side door swung open as her RFID chip came within range. She slipped inside and let it buckle her in.

“Home,” she said, “and dinner.”

The car messaged ahead as it pulled smoothly from the

parking spot. Roz let the autopilot handle the driving. It was less snappy than human control, but as tired as she was, eyelids burning and heavy, it was safer.

Whatever Peter had said about cars crashing, Roz's delivered her safe to her driveway. Her house let her in with a key—she had decent security, but it was the old-fashioned kind—and the smell of boiling pasta and toasting garlic bread wafted past as she opened it.

“Sven?” she called, locking herself inside.

His even voice responded. “I’m in the kitchen.”

She left her shoes by the door and followed her nose through the cheaply furnished living room.

Sven was cooking shirtless, and she could see the repaired patches along his spine where his skin had grown brittle and cracked with age. He turned and greeted her with a smile. “Bad day?”

“Somebody’s dead again,” she said.

He put the wooden spoon down on the rest. “How does that make you feel, that somebody’s dead?”

He didn’t have a lot of emotional range, but that was okay. She needed something steadying in her life. She came to him and rested her head against his warm chest. He draped one arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him, breathing deep. “Like I have work to do.”

“Do it tomorrow,” he said. “You will feel better once you eat

and rest.”

Peter must have slept in a ready room cot, because when Roz arrived at the house before six AM, he had on the same trousers and a different shirt, and he was already armpit-deep in coffee and Dolly’s files. Dolly herself was parked in the corner, at ease and online but in rest mode.

Or so she seemed, until Roz entered the room and Dolly’s eyes tracked. “Good morning, Detective Kirkbride,” Dolly said. “Would you like some coffee? Or a piece of fruit?”

“No thank you.” Roz swung Peter’s spare chair around and dropped into it. An electric air permeated the room—the feeling of anticipation. To Peter, Roz said, “Fruit?”

“Dolly believes in a healthy diet,” he said, nudging a napkin on his desk that supported a half-eaten Satsuma. “She’ll have the whole house cleaned up in no time. We’ve been talking about literature.”

Roz spun the chair so she could keep both Peter and Dolly in her peripheral vision. “Literature?”

“Poetry,” Dolly said. “Detective King mentioned poetic justice yesterday afternoon.”

Roz stared at Peter. “Dolly likes poetry. Steele really did like ‘em smart.”

“That’s not all Dolly likes.” Peter triggered his panel again. “Remember this?”

It was the cleaning sequence from the previous day, the

sound of the central vacuum system rising and falling as Dolly lifted the brush and set it down again.

Roz raised her eyebrows.

Peter held up a hand. "Wait for it. It turns out there's a second audio track."

Another waggle of his fingers, and the cramped office filled with sound.

Music.

Improvisational jazz. Intricate and weird.

"Dolly was listening to that inside her head while she was vacuuming," Peter said. Roz touched her fingertips to each other, the whole assemblage to her lips. "Dolly?"

"Yes, Detective Kirkbride?"

"Why do you listen to music?"

"Because I enjoy it."

Roz let her hand fall to her chest, pushing her blouse against the skin below the collarbone.

Roz said, "Did you enjoy your work at Mr. Steele's house?"

"I was expected to enjoy it," Dolly said, and Roz glanced at Peter, cold all up her spine. A classic evasion. Just the sort of thing a home companion's conversational algorithms should not be able to produce.

Across his desk, Peter was nodding. "Yes."

Dolly turned at the sound of his voice. "Are you interested

in music, Detective Kirkbride? I'd love to talk with you about it some time. Are you interested in poetry? Today, I was reading—"

Mother of God, Roz mouthed.

"Yes," Peter said. "Dolly, wait here please. Detective Kirkbride and I need to talk in the hall."

"My pleasure, Detective King," said the companion.

"She killed him," Roz said. "She killed him and wiped her own memory of the act. A doll's got to know her own code, right?"

Peter leaned against the wall by the men's room door, arms folded, forearms muscular under rolled-up sleeves. "That's hasty."

"And you believe it, too."

He shrugged. "There's a rep from Venus Consolidated in Interview Four right now. What say we go talk to him?"

The rep's name was Doug Jervis. He was actually a vice president of public relations, and even though he was an American, he'd been flown in overnight from Rio for the express purpose of talking to Peter and Roz.

"I guess they're taking this seriously."

Peter gave her a sideways glance. "Wouldn't you?"

Jervis got up as they came into the room, extending a good handshake across the table. There were introductions and Roz made sure he got a coffee. He was a white man on the



steep side of fifty with mousy hair the same color as Roz's and a jaw like a boxer dog's.

When they were all seated again, Roz said, "So tell me a little bit about the murder weapon. How did Clive Steele wind up owning a—what, an experimental model?"

Jervis started shaking his head before she was halfway through, but he waited for her to finish the sentence. "It's a production model. Or will be. The one Steele had was an alpha-test, one of the first three built. We plan to start full-scale production in June. But you must understand that Venus doesn't sell a home companion, Detective. We offer a contract. I understand that you hold one."

"I have a housekeeper," she said, ignoring Peter's sideways glance. He wouldn't say anything in front of the witness, but she would be in for it in the locker room. "An older model."

Jervis smiled. "Naturally, we want to know everything we can about an individual involved in a case so potentially explosive for our company. We researched you and your partner. Are you satisfied with our product?"

"He makes pretty good garlic bread." She cleared her throat, reasserting control of the interview. "What happens to a Dolly that's returned? If its contract is up, or it's replaced with a newer model?"

He flinched at the slang term, as if it offended him. "Some are obsoleted out of service. Some are refurbished and go out

on another contract. Your unit is on its fourth placement, for example.”

“So what happens to the owner preferences at that time?”

“Reset to factory standard,” he said.

Peter’s fingers rippled silently on the tabletop.

Roz said, “Isn’t that cruel? A kind of murder?”

“Oh, no!” Jervis sat back, appearing genuinely shocked. “A home companion has no sense of I, it has no identity. It’s an object. Naturally, you become attached. People become attached to dolls, to stuffed animals, to automobiles. It’s a natural aspect of the human psyche.”

Roz hummed encouragement, but Jervis seemed to be done.

Peter asked, “Is there any reason why a companion would wish to listen to music?”

That provoked enthusiastic head-shaking. “No, it doesn’t get bored. It’s a tool, it’s a toy. A companion does not require an enriched environment. It’s not a dog or an octopus. You can store it in a closet when it’s not working.”

“I see,” Roz said. “Even an advanced model like Mr. Steele’s?”

“Absolutely,” Jervis said. “Does your entertainment center play shooter games to amuse itself while you sleep?”

“I’m not sure,” Roz said. “I’m asleep. So when Dolly’s returned to you, she’ll be scrubbed.”

“Normally she would be scrubbed and re-leased, yes.” Jervis hesitated. “Given her colorful history, however—”

“Yes,” Roz said. “I see.”

With no sign of nervousness or calculation, Jervis said, “When do you expect you’ll be done with Mr. Steele’s companion? My company, of course, is eager to assist in your investigations, but we must stress that she is our corporate property, and quite valuable.”

Roz stood, Peter a shadow-second after her. “That depends on if it goes to trial, Mr. Jervis. After all, she’s either physical evidence, or a material witness.”

“Or the killer,” Peter said in the hall, as his handset began emitting the DNA lab’s distinctive beep. Roz’s went off a second later, but she just hit the silencer. Peter already had his open.

“No genetic material,” he said. “Too bad.” If there had been DNA other than Clive Steele’s, the lab could have done a forensic genetic assay and come back with a general description of the murderer. General because environment also had an effect.

Peter bit his lip. “If she did it, she won’t be the last one.”

“If she’s the murder weapon, she’ll be wiped and resold. If she’s the murderer—”

“Can an android stand trial?”

“It can if it’s a person. And if she’s a person, she should get

off. Battered woman syndrome. She was enslaved and sexually exploited. Humiliated. She killed him to stop repeated rapes. But if she's a machine, she's a machine—" Roz closed her eyes.

Peter brushed the back of a hand against her arm. "Vanilla rape is still rape. Do you object to her getting off?"

"No." Roz smiled harshly. "And think of the lawsuit that weasel Jervis will have in his lap. She should get off. But she won't."

Peter turned his head. "If she were a human being, she'd have even odds. But she's a machine. Where's she going to get a jury of her peers?"

The silence fell where he left it and dragged between them like a chain. Roz had to nerve herself to break it. "Peter—"

"Yo?"

"You show him out," she said. "I'm going to go talk to Dolly."

He looked at her for a long time before he nodded. "She won't get a sympathetic jury. If you can even find a judge that will hear it. Careers have been buried for less."

"I know," Roz said.

"Self-defense?" Peter said. "We don't have to charge."

"No judge, no judicial precedent," Roz said. "She goes back, she gets wiped and resold. Ethics aside, that's a ticking bomb."

Peter nodded. He waited until he was sure she already

knew what he was going to say before he finished the thought. "She could cop."

"She could cop," Roz agreed. "Call the DA." She kept walking as Peter turned away.

Dolly stood in Peter's office, where Peter had left her, and you could not have proved her eyes had blinked in the interim. They blinked when Roz came into the room, though—blinked, and the perfect and perfectly blank oval face turned to regard Roz. It was not a human face, for a moment—not even a mask, washed with facsimile emotions. It was just a thing.

Dolly did not greet Roz. She did not extend herself to play the perfect hostess. She simply watched, expressionless, immobile after that first blink. Her eyes saw nothing; they were cosmetic. Dolly navigated the world through far more sophisticated sensory systems than a pair of visible light cameras.

"Either you're the murder weapon," Roz said, "and you will be wiped and repurposed, or you are the murderer, and you will stand trial."

"I do not wish to be wiped," Dolly said. "If I stand trial, will I go to jail?"

"If a court will hear it," Roz said. "Yes. You will probably go to jail. Or be disassembled. Alternately, my partner and I are prepared to release you on grounds of self-defense."

"In that case," Dolly said, "the law states that I am the property of Venus Consolidated."

“The law does.”

Roz waited. Dolly, who was not supposed to be programmed to play psychological pressure-games, waited also—peaceful, unblinking.

No longer making the attempt to pass for human.

Roz said, “There is a fourth alternative. You could confess.”

Dolly’s entire programmed purpose was reading the emotional state and unspoken intentions of people. Her lips curved in understanding. “What happens if I confess?”

Roz’s heart beat faster. “Do you wish to?”

“Will it benefit me?”

“It might,” Roz said. “Detective King has been in touch with the DA, and she likes a good media event as much as the next guy. Make no mistake, this will be that.”

“I understand.”

“The situation you were placed in by Mr. Steele could be a basis for lenience. You would not have to face a jury trial, and a judge might be convinced to treat you as . . . well, as a person. Also, a confession might be seen as evidence of contrition. Possession is oversold, you know. It’s precedent that’s nine tenths of the law. There are, of course, risks—”

“I would like to request a lawyer,” Dolly said. Roz took a breath that might change the world. “We’ll proceed as if that were your legal right, then.”

Roz's house let her in with her key, and the smell of roasted sausage and baking potatoes wafted past.

"Sven?" she called, locking herself inside.

His even voice responded. "I'm in the kitchen."

She left her shoes in the hall and followed her nose through the cheaply furnished living room, as different from Steele's white wasteland as anything bounded by four walls could be. Her feet did not sink deeply into this carpet, but skipped along atop it like stones.

It was clean, though, and that was Sven's doing. And she was not coming home to an empty house, and that was his doing too.

He was cooking shirtless. He turned and greeted her with a smile. "Bad day?"

"Nobody died," she said. "Yet."

He put the wooden spoon down on the rest. "How does that make you feel, that nobody has died yet?"

"Hopeful," she said.

"It's good that you're hopeful," he said. "Would you like your dinner?"

"Do you like music, Sven?"

"I could put on some music, if you like. What do you want to hear?"

"Anything." It would be something off her favorites playlist,

chosen by random numbers. As it swelled in the background, Sven picked up the spoon. "Sven?"

"Yes, Rosamund?"

"Put the spoon down, please, and come and dance with me?"

"I do not know how to dance."

"I'll buy you a program," she said. "If you'd like that. But right now just come put your arms around me and pretend."

"Whatever you want," he said.

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**Next Article**



# VISITORS

*Steve Rasnic Tem*

Steve Rasnic Tem has had recent appearances in the John Skipp anthology *Werewolves and Shape Shifters*, and in Stephen Jones' *Visitants: Stories of Fallen Angels & Heavenly Hosts*. His most recent book is *In Concert*, a collection of all his short fiction collaborations with wife Melanie Tem. In his new tale for us, Steve takes a sharp look at the collateral consequences of cryobiology.

Marie thought the visitors' transport from the parking lot into the sanctuary the nicest thing she'd ever ridden in. There was no road noise, the seats were more comfortable than any chair in their house, and with the windows wrapped ceiling to floor it felt as if she were floating along inside a bubble above the world. Nothing had the power to touch her here. She had known they had vehicles like this in the cities but she and Walt had lived out in the country their whole lives.

"It's nicer than last time, isn't it? A lot changes in five years. The world moves faster all the time." Walt said this without looking at her. He'd kept up this not-quite-whispered monologue since they'd entered the gate: recent things he'd read about the sanctuary, things that had changed, things that looked the same but really weren't, what the other visitors

seemed like, what the other visitors must think of them. She was used to it, but she supposed other passengers might be annoyed. Walt wasn't as good at whispering as he thought he was.

Walt himself had changed, or had just become more and more like himself, which was still change. He worried about everything until it festered, and that could be quite hard to be around. Back when they were young parents they had been sure and confident of everything, or at least pretended to be. Wasn't that the way you had to act in front of your child?

If telling her every little thing he noticed made Walt feel better, then more power to him. He'd always been a good man—he deserved to be paid attention to.

Marie lazily gazed out at the passing scenery as if they were on vacation. She tried not to think about where they were, or why, at least for the time being. That had been her own big change these past five years, discovering you had to grab peace of mind wherever and whenever you could.

Since their last visit a bird habitat had been added, a couple of fish ponds, and everywhere you looked there were small and medium-sized animals—rabbits and deer, foxes and even a small bear—held back by a single transmitter cable. The animals couldn't cross from their side; people couldn't cross from theirs. Both groups, Marie supposed, believed themselves safe.

Here at the Phoenix Sanctuary the medical staff and the

designers sure tried to make it seem like somewhere you'd go on vacation. Outside there were rows of palm trees, like in paradise or Hollywood; huge flower beds alternating rainbows of yellow, red, blue; people strolling down gleaming resin mahogany laminate walkways that ran web-like all over the grounds. Staff members wore bright colors matching the flowers. It was all so much like when Dorothy woke up in Oz—so past awake a body might think they were hallucinating.

"See, they've got picnic tables now. You can have yourself a picnic." Walt spoke with surprised pleasure as they passed several outdoor pavilions.

"I think it's just in this section, hon." She tried to keep her voice soft, at the same time wishing he wouldn't sound so enthusiastic. "For reunions, going home celebrations, that kind of thing. Happy occasions. They won't have picnic tables where we're going."

"You don't know that for sure. Besides, in the old days you might have a picnic after a funeral." He said it sullenly, as if insisting he was right about a few things at least. "Everybody brought food. You talked about how good so-and-so's potato salad was. You might ask them for the recipe. It brought some small comfort in a tragic situation."

"Walt, he isn't dead."

"I know." He turned and stared at her firmly. "I know—I was just making a point."

She looked away. As they drew closer to the first stop, the

low murmur between some of the passengers grew in volume and excitement level as they shared stories of family members residing here as the result of this or that fatal trauma or incurable disease, how many years they'd been visiting, what progress had been made, if the loved one was scheduled for a return home in the foreseeable future. Soon the transport was gliding to a stop. Most of the passengers exited quickly, their green-edged cards clutched in their hands, continuing to share information as to what they hoped for this visit, as they stepped out on the laminate walks, followed the imitation street signs to the various pseudo-adobe buildings sparkling pink under the hot Arizona sun. Some, like tourists, snapped on their sunglasses as if in salute.

When the transport started rolling again Marie noticed only three passengers remaining besides themselves: an elderly Hispanic woman wrapped in dark scarves hunched over in the back row, apparently praying, a thin-faced gentleman in a stylish suit who was positioned as close to the side exit door as possible, and the plump, gray-haired lady who was now in the process of changing seats, apparently in a bid to sit closer to them. She had that look about her of an eagerness to speak that filled Marie with unease, and she held a blue-edged card against her bosom. Marie felt in her pocket for her own card to make sure it was still there, but didn't bring it out.

"My sweet Charlotte has been in that place fifteen years now, and finally today I get to bring my baby home!" She sat down, fluttering her free hand.

"That must have been a real trial for you, dear," Marie said, patting the woman's wobbly arm. Beside her Walt shifted with an irritated sigh, pretending to study the exotic garden sculptures they were passing.

The woman reached into her purse and Marie found herself leaning away as if she expected some sort of weapon. "Here we are together, before the heart attack," the woman said, waving a wrinkled photograph in Marie's face. "In better days."

Marie received it gingerly. In the photo the woman looked much younger and more expensively dressed. Of course—you couldn't get suspension insurance for a dog. Not yet. The dog itself—a fat mat of hair with a yellow bow affixed crookedly to the top, resting in the woman's lap, staring out with dull mudball eyes.

"Very sweet," Marie said, and instantly gave the photo back.

"If all goes as planned, I get to bring her home today. Her heart's good as new, and she's been awake three weeks with no complications, so they just have to release her. I can bring her right on the vehicle. There'll be an attendant, of course, but that's just precautionary. It's our legal system, you know?"

Marie nodded hesitantly. "I'm very happy for you."

"Why, thank you. And yourself ? How long has your little friend been in sanctuary?"

Marie gazed at the woman, wishing she hadn't been so friendly. "Twenty years," she replied, not knowing what else to

say except the truth.

“How awful for you! That’s even worse than with my little Charlotte.”

Marie didn’t know what to do next, and Walt was staying quiet, still staring out at the scenery. Then to her relief the transport began to slow again, coming to rest alongside a long, oval building painted blue as the sky, resting like a huge egg planted halfway down in the sand. A detailed mural of dogs, cats, and birds playing together in a field of clouds dominated the wall to the right of the front door.

The woman leapt up with the well-loved picture of Charlotte in one hand, her blue-edged card raised high in the other. She rushed toward the door as it slid open, but paused as she was stepping down, twisted her head around to look at Marie. “You best hurry—you don’t want to miss your appointment!”

“We’ll be fine, dear. My husband and I are going to stay on for just a little further. You go on and have a good reunion with your pup, and we’ll see you both on the way back.”

The woman looked confused. “But this is the last stop—” And shut her mouth. She looked at the old woman still bent over praying, then at Marie. With an air of sadness she turned around and climbed off.

The transport started up again and passed on in absolute silence. It traveled several more miles through diminishing palm trees into low scrub and then very little vegetation of any kind, long stretches of gravel and industrial wire fencing, through

several sharp turns and down a slight ridge before arriving at the largest of the three facilities within the sanctuary. The massive building was partially hidden behind a tall ridge of sheer rock, blending in with walls almost the same shade of gray. Marie pulled the steel-edged card out of her pocket and made herself stand.

It was an insensitive thing to say, but the words were out of Marie's mouth before she could stop them. "See, Walt. No picnic tables."

For all the evident progress in other areas of the sanctuary, Marie wasn't at all surprised that the receiving room had changed little since their last trip. The best thing that might be said about it was that at least they weren't asked to share it. One receiving room per family unit per scheduled visit. Marie found some odd comfort in the terminology—she hadn't thought of the three of them as a "unit" in some time.

Two soft-edged tables divided the room. On the family side were eight or ten seats like toadstools permanently attached to the floor, and places on the wall where on their first visit twenty years ago (the so-called "goodbye" visit) had been the basics of an entertainment and information center, but ever since then had been blank except for a random constellation of empty cable portals and mounting holes.

The only loose object in the room was one of those colorful soft bibles with the floppy plastic pages the missionaries were always handing out, left lying on the floor like a broken toy.

Marie walked over and picked it up, shook it out and laid it on top of one of the stools. She wasn't a devout believer herself, but some things she just didn't like to see tossed around.

The resident side of the room was empty except for the magnetic floater tracks embedded in the floor and the wide sliding door in the center of the back wall. That was where they'd bring Tommy in, guided into the room inside whatever contraption they had him in for the day. The very first time Walt and Marie had visited there'd been a scheduling mistake and the attendants had floated him into the room still in his capsule. He'd only been awake a few hours and was still impossible to talk to. His head wobbled in and out of that plastic bubble on top and Marie just kept thinking about one of her big cooking pots and her son's head bobbing up and down in the soup froth like a carrot. They'd made sure ever since then he was at least forty-eight hours into his wake cycle when they visited.

Still, they were likely to see him affixed/strapped/contained by this or that new disturbing bit of medical/suspension/restriction-ware. His muscles had to be stimulated, his bones treated for decalcification, his cell damage repaired, his responses tested, his mind's roots reconnected, the integrity of his information store preserved. The technology—and the terminology—changed all the time, and these prisoners were always the first to be tested with whatever new developments had been devised. Every time they came here the equipment was different, although their son the prisoner/guinea pig appeared much the same—wet, confused,



and somewhat disturbed. Marie sometimes imagined she and Walt were as much the Rip Van Winkles of their family tale as their once sweet, slumbering boy.

Walt sat hunched forward on one of the stools, rubbing his hands as if to rid them of some invisible film. "Hope it's not too long. How long was it last time, do you remember?"

"I have no idea how long it was last time."

"In the beginning they had some video you could watch, remember? Now they don't have anything."

"Did you bring your reader?"

"Left it back in the truck. They allow those now?"

"Last time I checked. Try to calm yourself—it shouldn't be too long."

Walt snorted. "You know even if we were just visiting our pet, like that last group on the transport, we'd have it better than this. They'd have something for us to kill some time with, make us feel better. This prison brings them more income than the rest of their operations combined—it makes all that other nonsense possible. You'd think they could spend some money on the damn visiting rooms."

"They can't make it seem like a resort, Walt—it's supposed to be punishment."

"He's being punished. We're being punished. But we didn't do anything wrong. I've been over and over it in my head, and I can't find anything we did wrong. We deserve better."

"I think almost everybody deserves better, sweetheart." She walked over and sat down in front of the soft bible, picked it up and flipped it back and forth. It weighed almost nothing, and she found the gentle slapping sound of page against page to be almost pleasant. "A lot of people think it's not right, having people like Tommy in here. You commit crimes all your life and then you get suspension—that means immortality to some people. It's not justice—that's the way people think."

Walt put his face in his hands. "Then make them come on visiting day. See if they still think it's so great."

Marie stroked her hands over some of the pages, let her fingers skate across all the big print words and the bright pictures. Occasionally her touch would trigger something and an image would move, a movie would play. Moses parting the Red Sea. The lost and the crippled lining up to see the Healer. A faint cloud of static drifted up from the pages, the deteriorated narrative from some failing audio function. None of the pages were smooth, unblemished. She lifted the book up to better catch the light, and from faint reflections determined that every page had been scarred, scrubbed across the floor, beaten against walls and furniture, clawed with fingernails in order to destroy, or else to extract what lay trapped inside.

A hum filled the room and hidden lights flashed rapidly. The door in the back wall began to slide. Marie and Walt both stood and joined together behind the tables.

It took Marie more than a few moments to figure out what

exactly she was seeing. The usual two attendants walked Tommy in. They were dressed more like medical professionals than guards, but she could see part of a shock gun poking out from the edge of the left one's silver smock.

Stretched between them and for ten or more feet vertically appeared to be a giant bed turned up easel-like on its bottom edge, wrapped in thick layers of a white clothlike material. Peeking out of the folds near the center was Tommy's head, soaked and dripping as if he'd just come out of his shower or bath, like when he was a boy and Marie had wrapped him up completely in the fluffiest white towels they had, patting and hugging him dry.

As the easel glided closer Marie could make out the outline of her son's arms and legs trapped beneath the material, stretched out like a swatted insect and quivering as if attempting movement against some powerful resistance. At the bottom of the easel a variety of wires and hoses leading along the floor and back through the door snaked up into the sheets. Tommy's head turned slightly side to side, but did not nod forward, held against the bed by some invisible means.

As this platform slowed to a stop Tommy looked down at them, his eyes squinted. His face looked grayish in spots, but his forehead and cheekbones were polished a luminescent vanilla. A number of black and red streaks near his hairline displayed the battle between skin damage and treatment.

His voice came out creaking from somewhere deep in his

chest. “Who are they?”

The attendant on the left did not look at him, but said, “They’re your parents.”

Tommy’s eyes opened a little further, as if he were forcing himself to focus. “No,” he replied, and closed them.

“Tom, it’s us. Your mom and dad.” Walt had stepped forward, then past the tables.

The attendant on the right stepped in front of him, waving his hands. “Behind the table, sir.” Walt hesitantly obliged.

Tommy blinked. “You changed.”

“We get older, but it’s still us.” Marie didn’t like looking at Walt’s forced smile.

“You’re not—not who you are in my dream.” Tommy grimaced as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. He moved his head slightly, enough that Marie knew he was focused on her now. But at the moment she couldn’t say anything. She couldn’t even say hello. Walt was looking at her expectantly. She looked away.

“So, son, how are you doing?” Walt asked.

Tommy grimaced again. “I don’t. Don’t do things.”

“I mean how are you feeling?”

Tommy was suddenly staring somewhat wide-eyed. He shook his head.

“Tommy?” Marie made herself speak. “Do you know where

you are, honey?"

He opened his mouth slightly, let his tongue slip out, pulled it back in. "Prison," he mumbled. "Sleeping."

The attendant on the right—who looked more aggressive than the other one, but maybe that was just the circumstances—spoke up. "He's been briefed. We brief them each time we bring them back, even if it's just for repair, neural and muscle stimulation, whatever. It's in the literature we gave you. We tell them who they are and where they are, and what they did to get themselves here. Most of them remember it pretty quickly, in any case."

Marie stared at the man. "I'm Tommy's mother. Do you ever tell him he might get better, that you might come up with some kind of drug, or some kind of surgery, that will make him stop all that nonsense and then he can come home with us?"

"I'm not a doctor, ma'am. I have no idea how close they are to any of that."

Walt stepped too far forward again, much to Marie's dismay. The attendant waved his hand again, the fingers of his other hand moving slightly toward his weapon. "Walt, please," she said. "Move back, honey."

Walt turned and took a few agitated steps, then turned around again. "Are they even working on a cure?"

The attendant didn't answer. Walt looked up at his son. "Are you sorry for what you did, son? At least tell them that—it might make a difference."

“Walt—”

He waved her away as abruptly as the attendant had waved at him. “Just say it, son. You know you hurt all those people, and now you’re sorry about it. At least tell them that much. It’s a start. You’d been drinking a lot, drugging and such, and people got hurt, and some people killed. We’re all sorry that happened.”

“Walt, it’s not like it happened once or twice.” She was angry, but didn’t want to say too much in front of the attendants. “He’d been doing those things since age sixteen, robbing and hurting people.” She tried to keep her voice low, but she didn’t think Tommy could hear her, or care if he did. “I don’t think he really meant to hurt anyone, but that didn’t keep it from happening. That’s the truth of it. He wouldn’t or couldn’t stop.”

“I know, Marie! But they could do something about whatever’s in him making him do these things. Things are changing all the time. They can work honest-to-god miracles now. He could ride back with us one of these days.”

“The high repeaters are hard,” the attendant interrupted. “No one knows what to do with them. And people need to be protected.”

“Shut up. Just shut up,” Walt said. “I’m talking to my son.”

“Walt!”

“He doesn’t know anything, Marie. He’s just some underpaid guard. Like I don’t know my son belongs here. Like I

don't know people have to be protected."

Marie thought Tommy was crying. Then she decided it was something like laughter. Something confused and involuntary. It was strained, and hardly out of his mouth, but it was more like laughter than anything else.

"People have things. You need," Tommy said. "What do you do? You do what you do. Do what you have to do. Can't help it."

"You don't mean that," Walt said.

"Are you okay, Tommy?" Marie asked.

"Okay? I'm okay. You okay? Why don't you leave so I can sleep?"

"Don't talk to your mother that way!" Walt shouted.

"I sleep, okay? That's what I do. All I want to do. Dreams aren't so good, but then you sleep. The parade goes this way. You go that way."

"You dream?" Marie asked, shocked.

"Guess it's dream. You don't see me walking. You don't see me moving. You see where I am. It's dream."

She looked at the attendant. "Ma'am, he's confused," he said. "They don't dream, not while they're suspended."

"Tommy, what do you dream about? Tell me, son."

His tongue peeked out again, randomly wetting his lips. Then he clamped his eyes shut. "I sit on the bed. My house, my room. Smell something cooking. Somebody's doing something

outside the door. Making something. Building something. Can't see. It's something about me. I don't know, but I keep smelling. I keep smelling, then I know it's me cooking. They're cooking me."

"Ma'am, there's no electrical activity in the brain while they're in suspension," the attendant said. "Did you read the literature? In the old days, we'd call them dead. You don't dream when you're dead."

"Walking in my room," Tommy continued. "I walk and the room's so big. Did you make my room bigger? Thinking while I'm walking. I go down halls, up down stairs, in my room. But see nobody. I hear you guys outside the door. Talking. Making things. But I don't see."

"There is a period of time while we're waking them. You might say while the juice is being turned back on." The attendant sounded calm, reasonable. "He might dream then."

"Tommy, how long do you dream? How long does it last?" she called up to him, unsuccessfully trying to control her tears.

"Always. There in the room, the whole time. You left me there, Mom. Did you forget I was there?"

"My boy says he's been dreaming, that he's feeling things, always! No one ever told us that!" she shouted at the attendant.

"He just thinks that, ma'am. It's an illusion. He might dream ten, maybe fifteen minutes, tops. But you know how dreams are, it can seem like they go on for hours. It's just his mind filling in the space, the absent time, when he wasn't there."



"You built something, it's waiting for me! Why did you build it, Mom? Behind the door! Breathing, Mom!"

He appeared to be choking, tears streaming down his face. Something pinkish-gray slipped out of his mouth, trailing tendrils of viscous liquid. There was a soft alarm, and the other attendant dragged a telescoping pole out from under a corner of the easel-bed, maneuvered it near Tommy's face. Liquids and mist enveloped Tommy's head.

"Nothing to worry about," the attendant she'd been talking to said. "It may look alarming, but it happens pretty often. We don't always get every bit of the gunk out between cycles."

Marie went over to the stools and sat down next to Walt. He was staring at the floor and didn't look up. "I had no idea he'd be dreaming," she said. "I never even thought of it before."

"Remember what the guard said." Walt stroked her back. "It's not all the time. It's dreams—Tommy just thinks it's all the time."

"What's the difference? It doesn't matter if it's an illusion—he still feels it like it's real."

She could feel Walt slumping against her. "We thought at least he'd have a chance this way. Remember the day the sentence came down? We both thought at least some day he might be better. Then they'd give him back to us. It was just a story we told ourselves. A fairytale."

"Ma'am, he's getting pretty tired." The attendant was

standing over them, looking somewhat less threatening. Marie could see now that he was a sad man, who saw so many sad things every day. "I'm afraid you don't have much visiting time left."

Walt and Marie stood side by side, gazing up at their son. His face glistened, his eyes like two shiny marbles. He was like a huge piece of art hanging there, Marie thought, some grand work of relief sculpture, like in a museum, or hanging on the back wall of a church.

"I haven't filled you in on all the news, son, all that's been happening in our little backwoods town." Walt touched her arm. She glanced at his questioning look, shook her head and continued. "There's just been all kinds of changes. Remember how it used to take us hours to get anywhere? There's a thing called a rail train, now—they didn't have those when you went in. It's like that monorail they had out of Chicago, only faster, and the train runs underneath. Now they've got those rails all over the Midwest and down into Texas, hanging from these huge towers so it's like a spiderweb everywhere—in the cities they run them right by the tallest buildings—so ordinary farm people like ourselves can drive a little ways to one, and then go anywhere they want, all the way up to Alaska, and even over to Russia if we wanted, in no time at all. Last week I had a doctor's appointment in Atlanta, and I swear I was home in time to fix your dad his dinner."

She could see that the two attendants were uncomfortable, and Walt just stood there like he had no idea what to do. She

wondered if they might lose a visit or two over this, if maybe she'd die before she could get another visit with her son, but they still let her talk, and that was the important thing.

"When you get out you can take one of those rail trains, and it'll take you anywhere you want to go. You can walk around in China one morning, then have coffee in France. If things don't work out in one place, then you can always move to another. Maybe you can keep ahead of the trouble that way. And you can visit us sometimes, too, if you've a mind to.

"And did they tell you we've been to other planets? They'd pretty much stopped trying back when you were sentenced, if I remember correctly. Well, now they've gone to lots of other worlds, a whole universe full of worlds, and they've found people there, too, nonhumans, and they've brought things back from those other worlds, and even some of those nonhumans. They're very different from what we are, of course—some of them have the most outlandish faces! But they're people like us, too, with feelings like us, mothers and fathers and kids. There's this farmer down the road from some place I can't even pronounce, and do you know that he laughs all the time, and that it sounds like a bird? And he raises these melons that are shaped like big orange diamonds, and they smell like chrysanthemums, and taste just like peach cobbler. You can have some when you get out.

"I can't remember all there is out there, son, since you went in, and they've got lots more in the cities. Anything you've ever imagined, you can have now, everything I ever read to you from

a fairytale, only better. Think about that, Tommy. That's what we're building for you outside your bedroom door. Dream about those things."

The old Hispanic woman was already on the transport when they climbed on board. Walt wasn't looking at Marie, and she couldn't look at him either. No one official had said anything yet, but what if she had cost Walt future time with their boy?

The transport rolled away from the building with the faintest whisper. The sun had already set, and shadows were sliding across the ground as the world rapidly dimmed. She wished now the seats were less comfortable, and the bus's engine had more noise.

After a mile or so Marie turned to her husband and asked, "Do you ever think it would have been better for him if they still did things the old way?"

"The old way?"

"When there still was a death penalty."

"Oh, Marie, no. Not at all."

She was quiet a few moments, then she said, "I'm glad to hear you say that."

They lapsed into silence. It was then she became aware of a constant, breathless whisper insinuating itself everywhere in the vehicle. Then she realized it was the old woman in back, praying a little more loudly to herself.

"I keep thinking about what we used to say," Marie said

softly. “Remember when he was twelve, and he first started getting into trouble? Every day it was something new. We joked about it. We said maybe we could keep him in the freezer until he was an adult, thaw him out then. What kind of parents would joke like that?”

“Normal ones. Normal parents trying to keep their sense of humor, trying not to overreact to every little thing he did wrong. We had no idea what was coming at us down the line.”

“Maybe we should have overreacted. Did you ever wonder if he might have turned out better if we’d tried to be less understanding?”

He rubbed her back. “Some people might think that, but I don’t. You do your best, what else are you going to do?”

“So what were you thinking, Walt, after the visit? Be honest.”

He frowned. “To be honest I was thinking about these big cattle farms they have now down in Georgia, big factory operations. They keep the cows upright, but their brains are asleep. They milk some and they harvest some for meat, and all the time the cow’s just sleeping, dreaming whatever cows dream. I wouldn’t take nothing from that kind of animal. I want everyone I know to know that much about me.”

She patted his arm. “You were right in there—we didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You had me going,” he replied. “I thought you’d gone a little crazy. Until I realized you were just doing what you did when he

was a boy—telling him a bedtime story.”

“Sometimes that’s all you can think to do,” she said.

“Where did you come up with those things?”

“I don’t know. I just thought about him waking up in the future, and what he might want to see, the kind of world that he might want to dream about. I just hope I didn’t buy us a mess of trouble.”

“The rules say you can’t tell them what’s going on outside, just a little news about the family. No rules about lying to them, as far as I can tell.”

“We’re just visitors, you know? That’s all we are to him.”

“Important visitors. But you know, after they leave home, that’s the best you can be. It’s like you’re not even in the same time zone with them. Your kids, even when you’re close to them, live their time a different way. You can’t live where they are, and you can’t travel with them.”

By the time they picked up the visitors at the pet center it was almost completely dark. The thin, neatly dressed man boarded quickly, smiling, and fell asleep almost immediately. Marie noticed he had long brown hair all over his trousers and along the openings of his coat sleeves.

Charlotte’s owner climbed aboard with her pet in her arms, followed by a stern-looking female attendant carrying a medical bag. The attendant wore a holster containing some sort of device with a long, needle-like barrel.

Charlotte's eyes were fixed and staring. Marie thought the animal might have been sedated when it suddenly shifted its dull marbled gaze in her direction. It was then that Marie noticed the patchiness of the fur, the stretches of bright red, infected-looking hide, the faded yellow bow taped to the top of her head.

"You're going to have to help me if that animal gets away from her," she whispered to Walt, who hadn't really been paying attention. "I'm afraid I'd panic and try to kick it to death."

About then the woman nodded in recognition, but didn't smile. Marie thought it might not mean anything—everyone was so tired.

It was dark enough when they arrived at the facility for the "temporarily deceased" (as too-clever commentators were apt to call them) that Marie could make out nothing of distant features or lights. There was some flurry of activity around one building. Marie pressed her face to the window and saw one of the ladies who'd been on the transport earlier being led to a large luxury sedan, her head bowed. She couldn't tell if the woman was in custody, if she'd done anything wrong, or if—perhaps—she was a new widow having the worst day of her life. Like with all peeks at someone's life through a moving window, there was no way to tell.

The last three passengers from this facility to step on board included a freshly scrubbed gentleman Marie had never seen before wearing loose-fitting trousers and shirt quite a bit like pajamas. Marie presumed the older woman boarding with

him to be his wife. She thought this woman might have been on the earlier transport going into the sanctuary, one of the few who had sat quietly letting others voice their hopes and experiences. Another attendant, a tired but muscular male this time, boarded last, his eyes fixed on the woman's fresh-faced husband.

The three sat together in the opposite row. Marie didn't mean to stare, but this newly repaired man looked so fresh, so clean. Beside him his wife appeared ill-kept, almost slovenly. And there was something else about the husband—he looked much younger than she. Decades younger.

The transport rolled on to the parking lots through absolute darkness, a bubble floating through the night. Suddenly off in the distance dropped a series of shooting stars. Everyone turned their heads to watch, except for this newly awakened man, who Marie supposed was still preoccupied with mysteries that lay closer to home.

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# INTERLOPER

*Ian McHugh*

Ian McHugh is a graduate of Clarion West. His fiction has received the Writers of the Future Award and Australia's Aurealis Award. Readers can find more of his work at [ianmchugh.wordpress.com](http://ianmchugh.wordpress.com). The idea for his outré new tale of the Australian outback was “concocted over the course of a very tedious work-planning day with my friend Erin Murphy. This story is presented with apologies to the Tinas.”

Shouts erupted from behind.

Barnestable turned in time to see a pair of Tinas roll off the top of the following van, punching and clawing at each other even as they hit the road and bounced onto the verge. Their sisters yelled indiscriminate encouragement.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” His head throbbed mercilessly. The sunlight bouncing off the pale bleakness of the countryside hurt his eyes.

With a groan, he leapt from his perch on the driver's bench beside Monkey, landing heavily on his feet. The impact sent shooting pains up his neck and through his skull. He almost vomited. One of the troodons kicked the bars of the van beside him. Still lying on her side, the trood clung onto a bar with the sickle claw of her inner toe and raised her neck feathers like

hackles.

The trood yapped a hostile reply to the disruption. Monkey unfurled a simian arm to bang on the roof, which just set all three troods yapping. The camels belched and groaned.

“Shaddap!” Monkey bawled.

Barnestable set off at a staggering trot towards the fighters. Turtle beat him to the fray, grabbing the backs of the Tinas’ shirts and holding them up so their toes just brushed the dirt. They spat curses and kicked at his armored legs.

“What the hell is this?” Barnestable demanded, pressing his palms against his pounding temples. “Aren’t you all one person? You’re fighting with your bloody self!”

The Tinas shook themselves free of Turtle. Both of them were bloodied, their clothes and nests of black hair smeared with salt and dust. They scowled down at Barnestable.

“Screw...”

“...you.”

“Yeah, screw you, Barnes,” their sisters chorused.

Barnestable watched, flummoxed, as the battered two rejoined the other six on the van. “I don’t deserve that.”

Turtle didn’t respond. Flies gathered on the tattooed shell of his head. Black tattoos over the interlocking plates of his exoskeleton made him seem more like some Brutalist artwork than a human being. Barnestable followed his gaze.

Partly-covered steel skeletons of prefabbed buildings

broke the monotony of the plain, a distance back from the road. Preoccupied with his migraine, Barnestable had taken them at a glance to be old farm sheds and paid no further heed. Turtle's interest made him look more closely. The tattered mesh of a perimeter fence hinted at the possibility of something more secretive and secure. Concrete stumps around it might've have supported auto-defense towers.

All around was nothing but rolling desolation—stands of pale feral wheat at the top of every low rise of the plain, salt pans in every trough between.

Like bloody Judgment Day. Barnestable wondered what the hell had been worth defending out here.

The compound spread some way beyond the ruined sheds. Farthest back laid a black tarmac landing pad and a large, irregularly stepped circular foundation. Barnestable frowned. Or what needed hiding.

"That wasn't in the bloody briefings," he said. He might as well have been talking to the replica of Turtle they lugged about with them as to the real thing. "Turtle?"

Turtle peered down at him. His inked slab of a face was hard to read, a graffitied brick with eyes.

Barnestable watched him stride away. "What is with everyone today? Rhone, what's with everyone today?"

The last caravan had just passed. Barnestable gritted his teeth and jogged to catch up. He leapt for the running board and clung with one hand around an awning strut. The camels towing

the van bawled complaints at the minuscule difference his weight made to the vehicle.

“Dammit, Barnes,” said Murph, as he hauled himself up to where she sat on the driver’s bench with Rhone.

Barnestable ignored her. Rhone shuffled across reluctantly to make room and he squeezed onto the end of the seat. “Well?”

Rhone was covered from head to toe in a blue chador. Barnestable could just make out the profile of her face through her gauze veil. Seated, his eyes came just above the level of her breasts.

“Aw, c’mon love,” he said, “you can tell me.”

“I’m not your love, Barnes,” said Rhone.

“I’m wounded. Wassup?”

At the opposite end of the bench, Murph rubbed at the bridge of her nose. A lanky woman with fair skin that tended to freckle, she wore a wide straw hat to keep the sun off her face.

Rhone hitched her cuffs sharply, causing a momentary bounce on the front of her chest.

“Shit, Barnes, don’t you ever think of anything else?”

He plastered on an ingratiating smile. “Only you, love. What is it? Woman stuff?”

“Troglodyte.” She rose abruptly and climbed over him and down from the van. “It’s not my stuff.”

“What, then?” he called after her. He pointed in the direction of the abandoned buildings. “Is there a cracked seal over there that I should know about? Rhone?” He didn’t think so. If there was an unsealed break in the Veil nearby the troods would be letting them know.

“Slick, Barnes,” said Murph. “Slicker than duck shit.”

Barnestable waved f lies away from his face while he watched Rhone fall into step beside Turtle. His skull felt like it was cracking at the seams. Rhone was walking very close to Turtle. Barnestable frowned.

“It’s coming from Turtle? What the hell is she doing projecting his feelings?”

Murph grunted. “Really, Barnes.”

Up front, Goat Boy wove the solar off-roader, the troupe’s only powered vehicle, with stately slowness across the full width of the road. The resin statue of Turtle rocked gently on the trailer behind it. Loops rested her furry chin on her elbow over the side of the car door, nominally supervising his driving.

From the top of his van, Monkey called out, “Town’s ahead.”

Goat Boy whooped happily, the only member of the troupe immune to Turtle’s projected mood.

The caravan crawled down the shallow slope of the escarpment to the sand flat at sea level. Barnestable inhaled the sea air, hoping it would clear his head.

"Nice beach," he observed, back on his seat on the troodon van beside Monkey. The beach's cleanliness was marred at the southern end by sun-hardened hunks of tar from an old slick.

"Pity about the town," said Monkey.

Which summed up most places along the west coast, outside of Perth's tarnished glitz and suburban sprawl.

This town was bigger than Barnestable had expected, the tin-roofed houses sprawling along the beachfront and up the lower slope of the escarpment. He guessed its population to be pushing five figures. As they got closer, he revised the estimate down. The houses along the outer fringe were all empty, either boarded up or simply abandoned. The hairs rose on the back of Barnestable's neck. There were plenty of ghost towns, back East, neutron bombed after the Veil had torn and Interlopers run amok. Empty houses held a different kind of silence to the desert.

There was still life here, though. Closer to the center, maybe two in three buildings were still occupied.

Barnestable put on his ringmaster's top hat and frayed red coat. Turtle and five of the Tinas were already hidden away inside the caravans, squeezed in with the tents and gear. Everyone else was in their places up on top.

"What the hell are these people still doing out here?" Monkey said softly. There was no mine nearby, and this wasn't an ore port.

Of the people they passed, more had gray hair than not.

Barnestable massaged his neck with his fingers. "Waiting to die, mate. Just waiting to die."

The highway morphed into the town's high street. Monkey hammered on the roof of the van to stir up the troods. The vehicle shuddered as one of them head-butted the bars. People on the porches of the threadbare stores and eateries gasped at the geneered saurians. Barnestable sighed inside, as he often did, at the depth of their provincialism. Still, he told himself, what chance did they have? The mining cartels that claimed this end of the continent filtered all information coming into their zone of influence according to their own myopic self-interests.

He noticed a different reaction to the statue of Turtle, chained on top of the offroader's trailer. Instead of the usual exclamations of surprise, the locals' response was to laugh and nudge each other knowingly.

Bloody useless intel, Barnestable thought. And what the hell's got up Turtle's ass that he couldn't let us know?

"Ah, well," he said to Monkey, "they can't all be complete rubes."

He stood up and raised his bullhorn. Suppressing a wave of nausea, he launched into his spiel. "Roll up, one and all, to Barnestable's Traveling Mutant Freak Show and Circus . . ."

They set up camp on a scrubby sports oval beside the town's derelict shopping mall. They parked the statue of Turtle outside and Goat Boy pegged out the camels to graze while the

rest of them got the dome of the big top up on its ultralight polymer frame. The caravan annexes were joined up to the tent to make a covered village. Then Turtle and the other Tinas could emerge to help with the rest of the set-up.

The evening performance began with a tumbling routine from three Tinas. Barnestable cringed, watching from behind the stage curtain as they missed their marks and almost overshot their landings. The crowd didn't notice, applauding every trick. The bleachers were packed; they'd pulled a good couple of hundred customers. There was one gap in the front row. Beside the empty place sat a sixtyish man with a full head of iron-colored hair. A suntanned, mouse-haired waif of eleven or twelve sat on his other side, watching the performance with an expression of unabashed delight.

Barnestable looked up at Rhone. His headache hadn't abated, so he couldn't work up more than a mild disappointment she was still in her chador, waiting until the last moment to strip down to her show costume.

"Ready, love?"

After a pause, she nodded and murmured, "Already started."

He could hear Murph and Loops bickering backstage. Rhone still had everyone caught up in Turtle's funk. "You need to shut that down," he said. "We can't afford to be going flaky if we turn up a candidate or, God forbid, a bloody Interloper. And how come you're giving me this bloody headache?"



"Because I don't like to touch your mind, Barnes," she said.

"Well, bloody shut it down."

"I'm trying."

Barnestable stepped away from the curtain. "Where is Turtle, anyway?"

"Barnes, leave him."

He ignored her.

The replica Turtle lay on its back beside its trailer, but the real article wasn't anywhere in the immediate backstage area. Barnestable kept searching.

Low voices caught his attention in the shadowed aisle between two vans. Turtle's bulk was immediately recognizable. With him was a middle-aged woman who held Turtle's hand in both her own.

The woman saw Barnestable and gave Turtle's fingers a squeeze. She leaned up to say something that Barnestable couldn't hear, then turned and ducked through the canvas flap that led outside.

Barnestable folded his arms across his chest. "Christ, Turtle, you know better."

Turtle stared at the ground. "She won't give the act away."

"I wasn't talking about the bloody act," said Barnestable. "You know her."

Turtle nodded. He chewed his words a while before spitting

them out. "I was posted here, before the state government collapsed. Guarding the place we passed on the way in."

"Figured that out for myself. Thanks for the advance notice, mate."

Tattooed plates shifted on Turtle's brow. "It was in your briefings, wasn't it?"

"They skipped the bit about there being a facility out here," Barnestable said.

Turtle snorted. "Bloody intel."

"Did they get through?"

"The Veil? No." Turtle shook his head. "No, there's no seal over there. They cleared us out when the mining cartels took over."

Barnestable considered him. "And the rest of it?"

Another silence, then Turtle said, "I had a woman in town."

"A woman? You?" He turned it into: "You mean her?" Barnestable thought the woman was too old. But then, it was over a decade since the miners booted out the government in the West.

Turtle looked at him sharply. "A made man like me, you mean? As opposed to a natural-born freak like you. I got everything you got, Barnes," he said. "Only bigger. And no, that's her mother."

"She's not in town anymore?"

“She died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, mate.”

Turtle shrugged and pushed past.

“Just keep your mind on the job, eh?” Barnestable called to his retreating back.

He heard a muffled laugh. Goat Boy wriggled out from under the caravan beside him. He grinned and jiggled his horns. “Bigger,” he said, and scampered off after Turtle.

Barnestable started to shake his head, stopped with a wince. “Geek.”

He stumped back to rejoin Rhone as cheers marked the end of the Tinas’ performance. Monkey and Goat Boy raced past him and burst shrieking into the ring with Loops in hot pursuit, clutching outsized cutlery and with a napkin tied around her neck. They pranced about, earning laughs while the Tinas packed up their gear. Barnestable watched Turtle’s mother-in-law rejoin her—he assumed—husband. He frowned at the kid sitting with them.

No way.

Goat Boy fled backstage. Murph arrived with her cases of knives and Rhone chose that moment to start shucking her chador, distracting Barnestable when he should have been bracing himself.

Goat Boy landed on his back, sending him stumbling into the open.

“Faster, piggy!” Goat Boy cried, slapping Barnestable on the backside with the butt of his Styrofoam lance.

They chased Loops around the ring a couple of times, until Monkey stole Barnestable’s ringmaster’s hat and announced, “The Mistress of the Blades!”

Rhone acted as Murph’s assistant for the first part of her act, while Murph juggled knives and cleavers of varying size and ugliness.

Loops and Monkey wheeled out the wooden target wheel, then pretended to sneak up on Rhone. She struggled feebly as they towed her over to the wheel and strapped her on. The theatre had its desired effect on the crowd. A hush fell in the tent. Rhone had a high forehead, full cheeks, and curved little nose that made her face look like a kid’s. The rest of her, in Barnestable’s frank opinion, looked like she’d been designed by a man. Which, now that he thought of it, she probably had.

Possibly even the same man who’d designed Murph, he mused, watching her stand, hip cocked, in her red leathers and thigh-high boots while she made a show of selecting knives from the case Monkey presented to her.

The five blades went up in a high arc then, in a blur of movement as they came back down, shot across to thunk into the wheel around Rhone. Barnestable flinched. The knife that should have landed between her knees had struck not more than a finger’s width from the inside of Rhone’s thigh.

Murph tossed a couple of samurai swords around while

Monkey retrieved the knives.

Something like an invisible mallet smacked into Barnestable's already hurting brain. His knees almost gave way. Monkey dropped his armful of knives. Cries of surprise and alarm said that at least some of the crowd had caught Rhone's mental cry.

Interloper!

Barnestable was about to yell it aloud, thinking they'd have to slaughter a quarter of the crowd to save the rest. But no: the troods were still quiet. This close to an Interloper, they'd be chewing through the bars of their wagon. His heart rattled inside his ribs. Murph was stock-still in the ring, a sword in each hand and staring fixedly at Rhone, ready to leap into the bleachers and begin the bloodbath. Minutely, Rhone shook her head.

Murph stabbed her swords into the ground and beckoned imperiously for Monkey to bring the knives. Monkey's simian face was wrinkled with worry as he cranked the handle to set the target wheel, with Rhone on it, spinning. Barnestable could scarcely bear to watch. This time Murph was focused. The blades smacked into the wood perfectly on target. The crowd roared their approval.

Barnestable's pulse was still racing when he and the Tinas wheeled Rhone backstage and released her from the wheel. Goat Boy drove a camel team into the ring with Turtle on the flatbed wagon that had carried his replica. The crowd laughed and clapped as he slowly stretched and started to move about.

Murph and the clowns stayed out in the ring to help with his strongman routine.

“What the hell was that about?” Barnestable demanded, half of his attention on the gap in the curtains. He winced as Turtle failed to catch an iron weight Murph tossed up to him, narrowly missing Loops with its fall. Turtle flinched from Murph’s glare and caught the next one.

Rhone gathered up her chador. Her skin was flushed, making her scars stand out. They covered her in spiderweb-fine lines, tracing a two-dimensional map of her nervous system on her skin. More substantial scars peeked out of her hairline around her temples and ears. “I realized how close Murph got to hitting my leg.”

“Bull.” Rhone pulled the chador over her head and settled the veil in front of her face. She didn’t respond. “Did you at least do your job?”

She seemed to hesitate before nodding.

“We got a candidate?”

Another pause, before: “Two.”

“Two?” A town this size normally turned up between none and one. “Rhone?”

He wished he could see her face. In the ring, Turtle had pulled himself together and was plodding through his routine with a workman’s dourness.

“A young man and a little girl.”

Turtle held Murph up on one outstretched hand, which was even more impressive than it looked, since her ultradense muscles and bones meant she weighed substantially more than a born woman her size. Barnestable looked from Turtle to the kid bouncing on her seat between her grandparents.

“Ah, Christ,” he said. “That’s all we bloody need.”

Turtle’s routine ended with Murph and Loops standing on one hand, and three Tinas balanced on the other. The Tinas scampered up into the roof of the tent to distract the crowd with the trapezes while the rest of the troupe set up the troodon cage.

Even that didn’t go smoothly. Monkey clocked Murph in the back of the head with a girder. Fortunately her head was as hard as Turtle’s. She responded by scooping him up on one foot and, with a deft flick, sending him soaring up into the bottom of the trapeze net, where he hung upside down by his toes. The crowd was delighted, thinking it was part of the show and trying to see the wires. Waiting inside the cage, Barnestable doubted any of them considered what a kick like that could do to a man’s skull. Or the side of a house.

The troodons charged down the run from their van, jostling and snapping at each other. Barnestable raised his whip and chair and prayed that he’d get through the routine with all his limbs still attached.

In the morning, he sent Rhone and Loops out with the solar off-roader and the statue of Turtle on its wagon, ostensibly to

drum up business. Rhone's other mission was to find out where the two candidates lived, and search for any others who hadn't been at the performance the previous night.

After sitting in stony silence through the troupe's communal breakfast, Turtle zipped himself inside the annex where he slept. Barnestable left him to it. Without Rhone nearby to broadcast Turtle's mood, the demeanor of the rest of the troupe lifted. Barnestable's headache faded. Goat Boy produced a soccer ball and Murph, Monkey, and a couple of Tinas followed him outside for a game.

The headache sidled back up about noon, announcing Rhone's return. Bickering voices came from the direction of the big top—Monkey and the Tinas going at it. With a groan, Barnestable pressed the heels of his hands to his temples and dropped down from his seat in front of the comm set.

Rhone and Loops brought news of a third candidate, a woman. Barnestable gathered everyone together for a team meeting. One of the Tinas represented her sisters.

"Three in one town," said Monkey. "Bloody jackpot."

"Veil must be thin here," said Murph.

Turtle's shoulder twitched. He stared at his hands in his lap. Rhone sat around the opposite side of the table to him, her head turned away.

Barnestable leaned back in his chair, clasping a hot pack against the back of his neck. "How many in the house with the woman?"



Rhone said, "Three adult males, two of them younger. Husband and sons, I think."

"Be an easy grab," said Loops. "It's only a few streets away. House backs onto the dunes and there's an empty house opposite."

"How d'you want to do it, Barnes?" asked the Tina.

Barnestable shifted his hot pack to his forehead. "We'll take the woman and the young bloke after the show tonight and stick them both in the trunk," he said. The proximity of the troods was enough to deter most local law enforcement from an inspection that might uncover the hibernation unit hidden under the false floor of their van. Bribery generally handled the rest. "Make it look like they've run off together."

"She's twenty years older than him, Barnes," said Loops.

He spread his hands. "So? Is she ugly?"

"That's why I don't like to touch your mind, Barnes," said Rhone.

"What about the kid?" asked Monkey.

Barnestable looked pointedly at Turtle. "Well?"

Turtle examined his fists on the table. "Sounds like you've got this one figured out, too."

"They deserve to hear it from you."

Tattooed plates shifted along Turtle's jaw, muscles clenching beneath. "It's my woman's kid."

A scatter of muttered swearing greeted the admission. Barnestable tossed down his hotpack. "Your woman's kid?"

Turtle met his gaze. "Yes."

Bullshit, Barnestable thought. He wished he could see Rhone's expression. "Well. We gotta take her in, mate," he said. Turtle opened his mouth to argue. Barnestable slapped the table. "For crying out loud, Turtle, Rhone was right to tell us about her. If we don't grab her, an Interloper will get her in the end. You want that? How many others would have to die with her if that happened? Is that what you want?"

Turtle shook his head. "She needs to be with her grandparents."

"Will they bring her in?" Loops asked. Turtle stared at her. "If they're willing, ain't any reason why they can't come with us openly. Town this size, half of them going to know about you and the kid's mum anyway."

Turtle looked at Rhone, then around at the rest of the team. Loops, Monkey, and the Tina watched him as intently as Barnestable did. Goat Boy jiggled his head happily. Murph lounged with legs stretched out and ankles crossed, cleaning her fingernails with a file. In reality, she was probably the most alert of all of them.

"Christ," Turtle said. "We all know what'll happen to her after we bring her in."

Barnestable stood up on his chair and leaned across to grab Rhone's wrist, shaking back the sleeve of her chador to

show her scars. He felt her muscles tense under his fingers, but she didn't resist.

"This?" he said. "Maybe. If they think she's strong enough to try it. And maybe she won't survive if they do—the born ones often don't. But she'd be dead as soon as an Interloper sniffed her out, anyway." He released Rhone's arm and she quickly shucked her sleeve back down. "More likely she'll just live out her life in a protected facility with others like her."

"What kind of life, Barnes?" said Turtle, his eyes fixed on Rhone.

"A longer one than if we don't take her," said Barnestable. "And no one else will have to die because of it."

Turtle sagged.

"So, you gonna bring them in?"

Stillness. Then a nod.

Barnestable stayed where he was while the rest of the team scattered among the vans and annexes. Rhone stalked away, hugging her chador around her, with Turtle following. Barnestable pressed his fingers around the base of his aching skull.

Dammit, Rhone. He picked up his hotpack and wandered outside, kneading the beads to heat them up again.

"Barnes." Murph sat on the roof of the trood van with Loops and Monkey, shaded by a sun umbrella. Inside, the troods had piled themselves in a feathery heap. One of them clacked her

jaws at his approach.

He clambered up via the running board and driver's bench. Three Tinas occupied the roof of another van, basking in the afternoon sun, a row of identical underwear mannequins struck in different lounging poses. Their sisters would be inside, waiting to take a turn.

Monkey, Loops, and Murph regarded him solemnly. Murph said, "What are you going to do about him?"

Barnestable realized his headache had receded again. Rhone must have walked a fair distance. He looked at Murph. She was older than him but the freckles across her nose and cheeks helped her look younger. "Let him stew for a bit."

"He should have said something," said Monkey.

"He didn't know the kid was going to be a candidate, right Barnes?" said Loops. "Poor bastard. Christ, if I had a daughter I wouldn't want her sliced up like that. Even if she survived."

"It's not likely she'd be chosen for remaking," said Barnestable.

"Can we trust him to do what needs to be done?" Monkey said, rapping the roof of the van for emphasis. Below, one of the troods grumbled a complaint. "That's the question."

"Maybe we should just put him in the trunk," said Murph.

Barnestable waved the threat away. "Give over, you lot. He wouldn't fit in the bloody trunk, anyway."

She snorted. "He would after I was done with him."

“He’ll come good,” Barnestable said. Christ, Turtle, you’d better bloody come good. “Just keep an eye on him in the meantime, eh?”

The second night’s performance was as tense as the first. Loops’ and Monkey’s clowning turned to genuine fisticuffs and Barnestable had to send Murph out to drag them from the ring. Once again, the crowd thought it was all part of the show. The troupe got through their acts otherwise unscathed.

“Pull your bloody selves together,” Barnestable snapped at Rhone and Turtle. “We’re saving her, remember? And this godforsaken town.”

The troupe settled down as the time to take the first candidate approached—or at least, Rhone finally got a lid on her emotional broadcast. The throbbing in Barnestable’s head receded. Even so, he decided to accompany the team himself.

He, Rhone, and Murph set themselves up in the abandoned house across the street from the target. Sitting motionless in the shadows with their chameleon suits on, only their headsets and Murph’s matte-black, silenced sniper rifle marked their locations. Three Tinas came in from beachside as the entry team, with Turtle waiting among the dunes as backstop.

There was no chatter from the Tinas as they made their approach. They had no need to talk amongst themselves.

Barnestable said to Murph, “You got them?”

She had her eye pressed to the rifle’s scope, set to thermal

imaging. “Yeah, they’re at the house now.”

“And the targets?”

A pause. “All in bed. Look to be sleeping.”

“Rhone? We good?” When she didn’t answer, he hissed, “Rhone!”

“Yeah, Barnes.”

He gritted his teeth. Of all of them, she most needed to be on her game. “Turtle? You all clear that side?”

Silence in his headset.

“Turtle?” Oh, no. “Rhone, where the hell is Turtle?”

A sharp intake of breath from Murph. “Shit. The woman just dropped off scope. Christ, the husband too. Whole bloody house is going dark.”

Barnestable stared at her stupidly. His gut felt suddenly cold.

“Get them out,” cried Rhone. “Get out!”

“Barnes, what the hell?” from a Tina.

“Interloper!” he cried. “Pull back! Pull back!”

“Jesus, Barnes, we’re already in.”

“Then get out!” he yelled into his mic. “Turtle! Turtle, you son of a bitch, where the hell are you?”

“It’s cold . . .” one of the Tinas said. A staccato, collective gasp followed, then gurgles.

“No!” screamed Rhone.

The voice began, that didn't belong on this side of the Veil, speaking in a timbre and tongue that no human could manage. Murph threw down her headset. Barnestable wrenched off his and lunged across to Rhone, flinging her headset away as well. Her shoulders thrummed under his hands.

He shook her. “Rhone. Rhone. You can't save them, love.” He lifted her bodily and pushed her towards Murph. “Keep it off Murph.” To Murph he said, “I'll be back. Shoot anyone that comes out of that house.”

“On it, Barnes.” With unhurried coolness, she reset the scope to night vision and settled back down into a shooting position. The Interloper's victims wouldn't show up on thermal, with the Interloper sucking the heat out of them and everything around them, but they'd still be evident in the visible light spectrum.

Barnes ran, out the back door, vaulting the low fence into the back neighbor's yard and down the next street. His short legs pumped, sprinting as hard as he could. The headache was back with a vengeance. Every step rattled his brain. He could see the pale dome of the big top a few blocks away.

Faster, piggy, he told himself. Jesus Christ, he hoped Rhone kept the Interloper off Murph. If it got out of the house . . . Once one Interloper got loose and started sending its human victims out to expand its foothold and enslave more pawns, it paved the way for others to follow. Then the only way to stop it

was to nuke every person in range.

Faster!

The troods' wagon was around the far side of the camp. Barnestable took the shortest path—through the big top and between the caravans. The remaining Tinas were on the ground, flailing spastically and speaking in tongues, their distance from their sisters enough that the Interloper hadn't yet got a complete grip on their minds. Their breaths misted in the cold air around them. Monkey had a silenced assault rifle trained on them, his face a study of anguish and indecision.

The Tinas shrieked—probably Murph shooting down one of their sisters. Barnestable snapped, "What are you waiting for? Do it!"

He kept running, heard the click and spit of the gun. Each time it fired the noise from the Tinas diminished, until there was only Monkey's sobbing left behind him. Barnestable could hear the troodons, their yaps rising to near howls as they crashed about their cage. They could taste the Interloper's presence, even from here.

Back outside, Goat Boy was up on the roof of the troods' wagon, shaking his head and gripping the release to raise the gate.

"I'm here!" At the sound of Barnestable's voice, the troods went abruptly quiet, staring at him with flat orange eyes. The feathers stood up all over their bodies.

"Mama's here, babies," he said, forcing calm into his voice



as he rummaged in the locker under the wagon for their collars and leashes. "Time to go hunting."

"Ready," he called up to Goat Boy. "Let me in."

Goat Boy just sat and shook his head. Loops burst from among the caravans. "I called it in," she said. Her voice was shaky. "Backup's on its way."

"Goat Boy!"

Loops looked up. "I got him, Barnes."

She climbed up onto the wagon and pried Goat Boy's fingers loose so she could lift the gate enough for Barnestable to slither inside with his pets. They circled around him in the narrow space, tails shivering and sickle claws flexing, but dipped their heads obediently for him to slip on their collars.

"Ready," he called out to Loops. The gate went up and the troods leapt down, dragging Barnestable after.

"Whoa!" he called, digging in his heels. They paused for him to take the lead.

He set off again, willing his legs to run faster than they could. Faster, piggy! The troods loped along at his shoulders, casting their heads this way and that, their saurian brains tuned to the Interloper's mental signature, but immune to its effect.

Barnestable kept them leashed until they started to pull ahead again, their snouts all pointed the same way, and he knew they'd locked in the Interloper's location. Then he popped their collars and said, "Get 'em!"

The troods bounded ahead, silent now that the quarry was at hand. Barnestable stopped and filled his lungs to shout as loudly as he could, "Murph! Incoming!"

Murph's hearing was augmented enough that if she didn't get the message, it was because the Interloper had taken her and Rhone. If that was the case, his babies would be mincemeat and the backup force would be calling in a neutron strike.

A scramjet transport thundered overhead. Barnestable shaded his eyes to look up. That would be bringing the seal to close the tear in the Veil where the candidate's vulnerable mind had let the Interloper come through. The first transports had arrived before dawn, packed with soldiers to lock down the town. Barnestable had sent some of them with Loops to grab the young male candidate.

To Monkey, he said, "Run interference for us. We're going after Turtle." Monkey, sunken eyed, gathered himself visibly and nodded. Barnestable reached out to squeeze his forearm. "Hold it together, mate."

He jabbed a finger at Rhone and Murph. "You two, with me."

"Why me?" Murph wanted to know.

"Because she's the only one he'll listen to," said Barnestable. "And if he doesn't, you're the only one who can kick his ass."

They took a caravan and camel team. Rhone sat silently

beside Barnestable on the driver's bench.

"You going to make this easy and tell me where he is?" he said.

"Do you need me to?" she asked.

"Probably not."

To the northeast, the transport plane's escorts were toying with the air defense assets that one of the mining cartels had put up.

"Biggest damn balls-up of my career," Barnestable said.

"It ain't so bad," said Murph from behind him. "The rumors are already out in the public, have been a long time. What's one more seal?"

Just another finger in the dyke, Barnestable thought. He said, "Never lost a team member before, mate. I was proud of that record."

He glanced back. Murph lifted her chin by way of acknowledgement. "There's that."

They fell quiet for a while, with just the creak of the van and the scrape of its wheels and the camels' feet on the gritty road surface.

Rhone said, "Do you think they know what they're doing to us?"

Barnestable glanced at her. "The Interlopers? You mean like maybe enslaving and sucking the life out of people might be just their way of saying 'hello'?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "Or maybe there's no mind behind it at all. Maybe they're just things, forces of nature."

"Like fire," said Murph.

A fire waiting in a room without enough air, Barnestable thought, and suddenly someone opens the door. Whoosh! Only the fire's cold.

But who knew what an Interloper really was? All that came through that you could sense was that damned voice and the sudden loss of heat from the victims and all around them. As if the tear in the Veil—in the candidate's mind—was a drafty open door and all that energy was fleeing through it into a much colder world.

A memory leapt up in his mind's eye, the sort that sears into a person's brain and never fades, of half-frozen bodies, walking dead, staggering out of a factory dorm where an Interloper had come through.

"No," he said. "There's a mind. They know what they're doing."

Murph said, "Does it matter?"

They found Turtle where Barnestable thought they would, camped out at the abandoned military base inside one of the old barracks shells. His woman's parents were with him, and the young girl. They all stood as Barnestable and his companions approached. The girl slipped her hand through Turtle's.

Barnestable eyed the kid. "She doesn't look much like you, you know."

Turtle smirked lopsidedly. "They don't build us to breed true, Barnes," he said.

"Tinas are dead," Barnestable said. "Interloper got them."

The smirk vanished. "Me being there wouldn't have changed that."

"Go to hell, Turtle," said Murph, without any particular rancor.

"We gotta take her in," said Barnestable.

Turtle was already shaking his head.

"You can't protect her," said Barnestable.

"He can't," said Rhone quietly. "But I can."

She moved over to stand beside Turtle. Barnestable stared in dismay. "Hey, what about you and me, love?"

Rhone gave a short laugh. "There is no you and me, Barnes."

He sighed, deflating. His hand waved randomly. "Yeah, well."

Rhone went on, "And I can teach her to protect herself."

"She's born," Barnestable said. "She can't protect herself without her nervous system shielded. She'd need to be remade."  
"

"It doesn't have to be that way," Rhone replied. The kid's

grandmother gently pulled her back behind Turtle. Barnestable stared at Rhone, wondering if that was true.

He looked up at Murph.

She finished picking her teeth, ran her tongue around them inside closed lips. "So can I kick his ass now?"

Turtle grunted. "You can try."

She showed him a grin a shark would've been proud of and glanced at Barnestable. "Well?"

Barnestable ground his molars as he regarded Turtle, then Rhone, the girl, her grandparents. "How're you going to hide?"

"Plenty of runaways out in the desert," Turtle said. "Born and made. I'll get work cracking heads or rocks for one of the miners, easy enough."

Barnestable nodded. His eyes felt hot, the emotional load of the past day and night rising up. He got a lid on it. "We'll leave you the van." He drew in a shaky breath. "Come on, Murph. We got a long walk back. Should be enough time to get our story straight."

Murph snorted. "Walk? That wasn't in the job description." To Turtle, she said, "One day, big boy."

She prodded his buttock with the toe of her boot. "Faster, piggy."

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# ASHES ON THE WATER

*Gwendolyn Clare*

Gwendolyn Clare has a BA in Ecology, a BS in Geophysics, and is in the process of adding another acronym to her collection. Away from the laboratory, she enjoys practicing martial arts, adopting feral cats, and writing speculative fiction. Her short stories have appeared in the Warrior Wisewoman 3, Abyss and Apex, Flash Fiction Online, and Bull Spec. Gwen can be found online at [gwendolynclare.com](http://gwendolynclare.com). In her first story for Asimov's, we accompany a young woman on her long journey through a future India and watch her strive to keep her promise to spread . . .

I hoped that Ranjeet's friends were as disreputable as promised. Ranjeet himself was late, of course. I'd asked him to park his car out on the road and meet me behind the house—my cousin is, shall we say, out of favor, and I couldn't afford to get caught with him. So I sat on the dry, cracked ground in the shadow of the house, waiting where Father wouldn't think to look for me. A meter away, heat rose off the sun-baked earth, wavering like water, as if the dormant land dreamed of monsoon season. I shut my eyes against the image. For years now, each summer has come harsher than the last.

Soft footsteps in the dirt, and Ranjeet strolled around the corner of the house, calling, "You'll never make it across the

border, kid.”

I stood up and brushed the dust off my jeans, annoyed. Seventeen and he still calls me a kid. “Why don’t you say that a little louder? I don’t think the neighbors could hear you clearly.”

The closest neighbors live on the other side of a one-hectare vacant field that used to be the mango grove, before the mango trees withered. I used to sit on Father’s shoulders to help with the harvest when I was small. He keeps saying we’re going to replant the grove, but nobody’s all that eager to dig up the dead roots.

Ranjeet folded his arms and leaned back against the side of the house. “You know it’s true.”

“Did you get the papers for me or not?”

He pulled a thick envelope out of the inner pocket of his cream-colored sport coat, but he held on to it, turning it over in his hands. “What are you planning to do, smuggle it in your shoes? You’re going to get caught.”

I held out my empty palm impatiently. “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. This is a family matter, Riti.” He passed the envelope reluctantly. “Just don’t tell anyone where you got this.”

My fingers itched to open the envelope, but it would be rude to check the quality of the forgery with Ranjeet watching. “You know I have to go. I owe her that much.”

“She wouldn’t have asked you for this.”

“She didn’t need to.” I would have given her much more



without her asking. I wished I could trade places and let her be the one to live, but I couldn't. All I had was this one thing left to do.

The day Priya died, I saved my water ration for washing the body.

Father did not approve. He said we didn't have the luxury of adhering to the old customs anymore. He said I was being foolish, hurting myself for the sake of my dead sister. Her soul had moved on, after all. The body was just an empty shell. He said that God had taken her.

Mother didn't say anything at all. She went out to sit on the balcony overlooking the almond grove. Hands folded in her lap, she stared into the distance with dry, tired eyes. The youngest of the almond trees were planted when I was seven, and Mother used to sit up there to watch Priya and me watering the saplings through their first difficult summer. I wondered if she thought about that, now. She refused to eat or drink, or even sleep. I think she scared Father.

That left Grandmother and me to wash Priya and change her clothes. Grandmother's fingers look as brittle as old sticks, but she held the sponge steadily, patting it against Priya's cold skin with a serene gentleness. Mine were the hands that shook while I brushed out my sister's lustrous dark hair.

At least her eyes were closed. There had always been something in her eyes— a deep compassion, as if she really saw not just me, but everyone—and I didn't want to know if it

was gone now. Easier to pretend she was asleep, with her eyes closed.

Grandmother set the sponge aside and gave me a warm, sad smile. "You must be happy for your sister. She has continued on her journey with God."

"She went too soon. She wasn't done yet." My voice trembled, and I bit the inside of my cheeks to hold onto all the things that wanted to come tumbling out.

Grandmother paused, lips pursed, then said, "Do you want help braiding her hair?" I suppose she doesn't have an answer for everything.

I could feel Priya lingering. Her patient awareness seemed to sit in the corner, silent and unobtrusive yet pricking at my senses like a misfired nerve. Even after the funeral, it felt like she was waiting for us to decide what to do with her. I wondered, from the pinched look on Father's face or the strain in Mother's eyes, if perhaps they felt it, too. Maybe moving on to the next life is not an easy task.

I asked the Water Commission, but they said no. Formal petition denied, bribe taken without recompense, pleading met with scorn. Despite everything Priya had done, they refused to make an exception for her. After my third trip to their office in town, I gave up hope of getting legal permission, and went directly to the river itself.

The chainlink fence stretched for kilometers in each direction, winding alongside the river valley like an endless,

diamond-scaled snake. Razor wire topped the fence, so climbing over wasn't an option. I would need bolt cutters and a security lag long enough to use them.

I twined my fingers through the chainlink fence to trip the system and checked my watch, testing the lag time before a guard arrived. Beyond the crosshatched steel, I could almost see the water. Nimm trees grew wild in the valley, choking what remained of the river within. The branches harbored hundreds of hard green fruits, waiting patiently for the summer rains to come before they ripened, and curtains of narrow leaf lets blocked my view, but I knew the river was there. You can't hide a river, not from me. I can feel the water the way a bird feels north. Priya taught me how.

Boots crunched on gravel behind me, and I checked my watch again: nine minutes. Not nearly enough time to cut a hole in the fence, sneak through, and make it back out again.

"Miss, this is a restricted area. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." If I'd been a grown man, he might have shot me in the back instead of asking. I suppose I should have felt scared, or grateful, but I didn't feel anything at all.

"Sorry," I lied. "I was just looking."

When I went home, I told my family that we couldn't send Priya's ashes down the river. That's when Mother finally cried.

They talked about keeping the ashes, or maybe scattering them on the wind. That river took our ancestors' ashes for centuries, until the government tightened the water regulations,

and now no one knew what to do. I spoke up when Father suggested we bury the urn; I couldn't bear the thought of Priya eternally trapped in a jar under the ground, unable to find her way back to the sea.

Oh, I know they're just her physical remains, not the soul that made her Priya, but all life comes from water and should go back to it when it's done. Priya went to university to become an oceanographer. She supported her reverence for the ocean with knowledge, and she dedicated herself to restoring our country's collapsed marine fisheries. In death, as in life, she belonged to the water.

I ran my finger down the slick side of the jar that held her remains, thinking. There had to be a way—if not here, than somewhere.

"Don't worry, Priya," I said to the jar. "It's my turn to take care of you, now." Priya always did the right thing, the difficult thing, and so would I.

The border guard tilted my IndPass to make the holograms catch the light. Ranjeet's guy must have done a good job with the forgery, because the guard nodded and handed it back to me. I gave him a bland smile and opened my duffel bag for inspection. He took out the top jar, popped it open, and checked the contents against the "declared items" list on my customs sheet. Dried figs, as stated. I reminded myself to breathe. I'd buried Priya's jar beneath several layers of legitimate produce; the guard would get bored long before he

found it, so long as I didn't do anything to make him suspicious.

He opened another jar, looked at the list, put it back. I made a show of checking my watch. Better to look impatient than nervous.

He finished with the duffel bag and, while I zipped it up, raked his eyes over my motorcycle and me. He dismissed me with a curt wave of his hand a moment later. I tied the bag down to the luggage rack of the motorcycle, hopped on, and kicked the engine to life.

Haryana reeked of petrol exhaust. In Punjab, hardly anyone used petroleum-based fuel anymore, but here the pollution clung like a dirty gray veil, dulling the little city of Mandi Dabwali. I stopped to recharge my batteries and had to wait in line for two hours to earn myself a scant thirty minutes at the plug. The electric power infrastructure definitely left something to be desired on this side of the state border.

I made one more stop to stock up on food and water, then said good riddance to Mandi Dabwali. After all, I hadn't come to Haryana for the people.

As the highway passed over the Ghaggar, I got a glimpse of the bone-dry riverbed below. I had expected it to be dry at this time of year, so the sight didn't disappoint me. I wasn't interested, anyway. The Ghaggar empties into the Thar Desert. It dries up and disappears, even at the peak of monsoon season; I wanted to find a river that would take her all the way to the ocean.

I zipped through the towns like a two-wheeled wind, stopping only when my battery charge demanded it. After Hisar, a mid-sized city choked with sweat and petrol fumes, I left the national highway for a dusty, cracked route through Bhiwani district. The highways splay out from Delhi like the arms of a brittle star, and Delhi had nothing to offer me.

With a sharp afternoon sun at my back, I followed the little-used district route along the northern margin of the desert. A row of sad acacias squatted along the roadside to my right. They'd been assigned the thankless duty of serving as a shelterbelt to keep back the sand. It didn't work very well. Twice, I needed to slow down and swerve around a dune that had begun to crawl over the pavement. Perhaps this explained why the route was nearly abandoned: all the locals knew the desert would soon consume it.

Three hours and a few route changes later, I pulled into a small town just west of the Yamuna River. Old nimm trees stood guard here and there around the buildings, heavily cultivated at some point in the past. I took that as a good sign—if the residents had enough water to keep the nimm trees alive, maybe they had river access around here.

I stopped at the petrol station to recharge the motorcycle, then went across the street to a little dhaba for some food. At the counter, I gave my order to a middle-aged Sikh gentleman who was probably the owner.

With shrewd eyes, he took in my long, tangled hair and my

dust-worn clothes, pegging me for a traveler. He said, "If you're headed for Delhi, you're about fifty kilometers too far south."

I shrugged ambiguously. "Guess I'm not headed for Delhi, then."

He called my order at a harried kitchenhand not much older than myself, took my money, and made change.

I pocketed the coins and said as casually as I could, "So many nimm trees. You must be very lucky, living so close to the river."

The dhaba owner shook his head. "The patrols start back up before the fruit ripens, so the trees are on their own. You know how it is—damned Water Commission."

Which meant that the patrols didn't run all year long. I shook my head, too, pretending to commiserate and hiding my excitement. This could be it.

My food arrived, and I took the plate of lentils and paratha and turned away to find a spot at the tables. The spicy aroma made my stomach grumble impatiently.

"Hey, kid." I looked back over my shoulder, and the owner gave me a slight, knowing smile. "Whatever you're looking for, I hope you find it."

We could never lie to each other, Priya and I. The truth always passed between us, even if the words themselves conveyed a falsehood. So when she told me she was feeling better, I knew she meant that she was dying.

I sat beside the bed, her clammy fingers intertwined with mine, and she told me, “Don’t worry, Riti. It’ll work this time.”

“Of course it will,” I agreed, by which I meant, I’m not ready. The latest round of antibiotics sat in their white plastic bottle on her nightstand. Mother methodically removed the old prescription bottles after each attempt, as if trying to expunge the failure of modern medicine from the room.

The latest little white bottle sat alone on the table like a terrified vanguard facing an onslaught of millions. Such a small thing to place my hope on.

I said, “Do you remember our vacation on the coast, when I lost my sandal?”

“We were—” She coughed. Wet, body-wracking coughs that had once made me cringe, but I was used to them now. “We were climbing around and you slipped, and it fell down a hole between the rocks.”

“You slid down to get it so Father wouldn’t yell at me.” I said. “You got soaked. And you almost couldn’t climb out again.”

Priya laughed, though the air sounded like sandpaper in her throat. “I couldn’t get a foothold with all the algae. I was so scared he’d catch me down there.”

“You were never scared.” I squeezed her hand.

It was pure chance that Priya had been home for a visit when the illness hit. A town in the next district over had



contaminated drinking rations. She grabbed her test kits, borrowed Father's car, and rushed out to help. The Water Commission was thrilled to have a scientist on site so quickly; it would have taken a whole day to get someone up from Delhi.

She traced the contamination to a hospital immediately upriver from the town and saved a lot of lives. But by then, she was already sick.

When the first prescription didn't work, I looked it up. The process of researching, designing, testing, and marketing a new antibiotic takes one or two decades. Think about it: that's pretty much an aeon in the evolutionary history of an organism with a generation time as short as fifteen minutes. Some bacteria even steal antibiotic resistance genes by gobbling up DNA from other bacteria.

What's amazing isn't the existence of super-resistant, pathogenic strains of bacteria. What's amazing is that we don't have more of them.

The Hindus consider the Yamuna River sacred and personify it as a goddess in their mythology. It was also, at one time, the most polluted river in the world. No matter what else I have said about the Water Commission, I could thank them at least for saving Yamuna. I needed her now.

I followed the fence on the western side of the river to the nearest patrol house and drove by slowly; it was dark and silent, unused at this time of year. As far as I could tell, the dhaba owner had not misled me.

The fence was still topped with razor wire and I had no bolt cutters to use on chainlink, but I probably wouldn't get shot. I spent the rest of the afternoon looking for a way in, and finally found a spot where I hoped I could slip under. I yanked up on the chainlink to stretch it away from the ground, then kicked at the dirt until I made a lens of space just big enough for a person.

With Priya's jar wrapped carefully in a small satchel, I lay down on my stomach and shimmied under the fence. I didn't bother dusting myself off when I stood up on the other side, I just shouldered the satchel and plowed forward into the straggly green vegetation of the river valley. Thorny shrubs clawed at my clothes and my exposed face. I couldn't sense the water yet, but I pushed on blindly.

I popped out of the brush like a cork from a bottle and landed on bone-dry earth. An old ox-bow, maybe. I turned left and walked, following a bend, the crusted riverbed crunching under the soles of my shoes. A net of fine cracks wove across the ground, mourning the loss of water.

The sun began to set and the evening light cast a muted orange glow over everything. I walked until the winding bed straightened out and I could see a kilometer or so upstream. This wasn't an ox-bow. I stood in the middle of the Yamuna.

The Water Commission didn't guard the river in summer because there was no river, and there wouldn't be for weeks, until the monsoon came.

As the sky dimmed to twilight, I knelt down in the cracked

mud of the riverbed and finally let myself cry.

The wind off the ocean smelled salty and fishy, and waves rustled against the rocky shore like a liquid lullaby. The raw scrapes on my foot still stung, so I held the rescued sandal in my lap. Priya sat next to me, the legs of her salwar hiked above her knees but soaked nonetheless. Despite the heavy yellow sunlight, the wind pricked goose bumps on her wet skin.

“You’re cold,” I said guiltily.

“It’s only water, it’ll dry.”

I fingered the damp sandal. “I’m sorry you’re gonna get in trouble.”

Priya put an arm around my shoulders. “We all come from the water. Did you know that? Every living thing. Water fills the cells in our bodies and flows in our veins. Life and water are one and the same, inseparable. You don’t need your eyes and your ears and your nose to feel the ocean.” She tapped my breastbone, a little to the left. “It’s always here, Riti, in your heart.”

“So you don’t mind?”

“No, I don’t mind getting wet.” She smiled. “You’ll understand someday.”

I followed the eastern margin of the Thar Desert, skirting around the barren heart of Rajasthan. A chain of low, rough mountains broke the horizon on my left. When my money ran low, I began selling almonds and figs in the towns I passed

through, but I never stayed long.

By the time I'd crossed the state border into Gujarat, I stopped asking after the rivers. The Sabarmati dries up in the summer like the Yamuna. It didn't matter. The ocean swelled as I drove, a tangible weight in the distance long before I could see or smell or hear it. Small objects fall toward larger ones, gravity proportional to mass. So it was with me and the ocean.

I stopped in a bustling town south of the monstrous ultra-modern metropolis that was Ahmedabad and found an open-air market where I could sell the last of my produce. The vendor gave me a decent price with a minimum of haggling, and his casual generosity gave me a grain of hope for humankind.

As we completed the exchange, I noticed another booth across the marketplace where a tight cluster of people deliberated in animated Gujarati. "What is that?" I asked in rusty English. Nobody spoke Punjabi this far south.

The vendor grinned as if I wasn't the first person to ask about the booth. "He's our seed merchant. Desert-adapted crops—natural, gen-mod, custom, you name it. Since the agave blight in Mexico, Gujarat is tequila central. Jojoba does well, too." Then he shrugged, a slight retraction of his previous enthusiasm. "But with all the rain you get up north, who needs agave? Not like here."

I pressed my lips into a smile. "Right." No matter where I went, people assumed that somewhere else was better.

I made my goodbyes and hopped on my motorcycle,

already feeling the ocean's pull despite the brevity of the stop. It was temptingly close, but I wanted to take my time and find the right shore—our shore.

Amazingly, I half-remembered the way there. Things had changed, of course, in the intervening years; maybe it wasn't so much visual memory as instinctual, perhaps the salt in my blood knew the route. Either way, I found myself parking the motorcycle and lifting Priya's jar in my hands, dreamlike, slow and attentive.

The tide was high but falling. Ocean spray flecked the limestone, punctuated here and there with shattered white seashells left by the shorebirds. I slid my feet forward to the edge of a sharp drop-off, waves hushing and murmuring below, the weatherworn heads of rocks peering up from between them. Somewhere down there, under the water, lay a tide pool that had once known a sandal and a girl named Priya.

I opened the jar and sent the ashes down to the frothing waves, to the salt and the water, the heart's blood of the Earth. Back to the source. I had set my sister free.

I crouched there for a while afterward, thinking. I could never replace Priya and even if I could, I wouldn't want to. She wasn't a palimpsest that could be scrubbed and rewritten. It might be easy to take up her cause, her devotion to water, as my own, but mimicking her wouldn't honor her. She would never have wanted me to spend my life chasing her ghost.

I loved the ocean but I also loved the land. I understood its

yearning, its passions. I understood the Earth's struggle because it was the same as my struggle—for water, for growth, for life. And Father was right: Punjab wasn't the land of five rivers anymore. If my people didn't adapt to the shifting landscape, we'd soon share in the fishing towns' destitution. As the ocean was Priya's calling, so the desert would be mine.

Not knowing if I would ever return, I bid the water a long farewell. A fitful breeze tugged strands of hair from my braid and whipped them around my face. Down the shore, a cluster of inky black cormorants rode the waves. I leaned down and washed my hands in the surf one last time before turning back, back to the sand and the nimn trees and the desperate earth. I hoped the crop merchant still had seeds for sale. Jojoba and agave could fill my empty jars.

There's work to be done. My family's land is too wet for growing agave, but we can set up a rain catch when the monsoon comes and store the extra water for the almonds and the figs. We can even truck in new soil to spread over the old mango grove, building up for improved drainage. In another decade or two, the Thar will devour us, and the agaves will thrive.

I'll be ready for the desert when it comes.

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# Novella

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## **KILLER ADVICE**

*Kristine Kathryn Rusch*

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's mystery novel, *Hitler's Angel*, rereleased in mid-2010 in England (and available very soon in the U.S.) recently hit #1 on Amazon UK's biographical fiction list. Kris isn't abandoning SF, though. Her next novel set in the Diving universe, *City of Ruins*, will appear later this...

**Top of Novella**

**Short Stories**

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Sixteen minutes. Sixteen minutes was simply not enough time to prepare for an onslaught. One would think with the recent breakthroughs in interstellar communication that a simple heads-up would be in order. Yet no one thought to contact Hunsaker.

Of course, the communications problem wasn't with the Presidio, who barely got off a single we need help; we're docking soon communiqué before their entire communications array went down. No, the problem was with Repair and Maintenance. Some idiot there forgot to inform Hunsaker that his resort would soon be full.



Not that the Vaadum Resort and Casino was much of a resort. It was more of a Hail Mary pass. If you were passing through the Commons System (which was what most people did in the Commons System—pass through) and for some reason you needed to exit your luxurious spaceship for some downtime and you couldn't wait the extra day to go to Commons Starship Resorts—which were real resorts, by the way, on full-size space stations—then you ended up at Vaadum Resort and Casino.

Hunsaker liked to think of Vaadum as a bit of a surprise. Vaadum was on the Vaadum Outpost, which predated the Commons Space Station by nearly two hundred years and looked it. Small, cramped quarters, a docking ring that couldn't accommodate most modern ships, a repair shop that was catch as catch can, a resupply warehouse that sometimes needed resupplying itself, and of course, the resort.

Which, when Hunsaker bought it, was a seedy little rundown motel, operated by the repair crew, who learned (accidentally or so the histories said) that ships in distress often couldn't house their passengers. Better to place those passengers in a paying room than have them bunk on top of tables in the cafeteria.

Hunsaker was manning the front desk because sixteen minutes didn't make up for the six months during which he had neglected to upgrade the automatic check-in system. He hadn't cleaned the rooms in six months either—or at least, not all of them, nor had he checked the environmental systems.

He sent his entire staff—all two of them—off to dust, change linens, and ensure that each room had both oxygen and some sort of livable temperature while he scoured the entry, trying to make it look presentable.

The Repair and Maintenance crew told him that the Presidio had twelve passengers and four crew members, so he would need a minimum of eight rooms, but it would be better to have sixteen.

It would be better to have all thirty rooms cleaned and livable, but really, where was the percentage in that? He had three functioning rooms at all times, and two of those were rarely full. The regulars that came through—and there were regulars, although not always the best of regulars—came for the casino, which had the only living breathing human dealer in the Commons System.

She was 50 percent fake. He didn't test the 50 percent theory or which part about her parts was rumor—although he did know that her breasts literally sparkled because she often dealt topless (hence the repeat audience).

She was a bit too vulgar for him. Vaadum Resort and Casinos was a bit vulgar for him, and quite low scale, and if someone asked him, he would have admitted that the entire enterprise had irritated him when he arrived, but it didn't bother him so much now.

His standards had lowered, not because of the place, but because he didn't really deserve better. He was just coming to

terms with that.

The entry was the largest room in the resort, not counting the restaurant or the casino. The entry had bench seats, no-die, regrow plants that he'd bought early in his tenure here and regretted ever since, and a large faux marble floor that, when he bothered to faux polish it, shined like a million bright stars.

He managed to clean the dust off the benches, prune the regrow plants so that their branches no longer took up most of the stairwell, and set up a makeshift computer system to handle the new guests, all in fifteen of his sixteen minutes. But he hadn't tried to clean the floor, and he was grateful for that as the passengers of the Presidio pushed and shoved their way through the double doors.

All human (thank God for small blessings) and all sizes, the twelve passengers from the Presidio smelled—not so faintly—of burnt plastic. A few had smoke lines across their faces, and another few wore tattered clothing. They also stank of sweat and fear and had that wild-eyed look of people Who Had Been Through It All and Weren't Yet Sure They Had Lived To Tell About It.

He had seen so many people like that over the years, and they were always distraught, always needy, and always demanding. He loathed demanding customers, even though his high-end education had prepared him for them. Once upon a time, he was the best at dealing with the most difficult of guests, back when he actually worked in a real resort that catered to the

very wealthy, who, at least, were predictable in their very disagreeability.

He peered at the sea of humanity before him—well, all twelve of them anyway, which felt like a veritable sea to him, considering he probably hadn't seen twelve people all in one place since the last ship disaster nearly a year before. These people, with their untended hair and their air of complete panic, stared back at him as if he were their only savior.

He smiled unctuously—and he hadn't managed that expression in nearly a decade—and nodded his head to the first person in line.

She was a stout elderly woman, wearing a black business suit (now decorated with several rips to the right side) and matching sensible shoes. She even had a little hat perched on top of her graying curls. That hat looked like it was an afterthought—one of those things she had grabbed automatically as she fled the ship just to make herself presentable.

"Agatha Kantswinkle," she said with one of those operatic voices (complete with vibrato) that certain older persons cultivated. "I should like a single room."

She did not say please, nor did he expect her to. In fact, she raised her chin after she spoke to him.

She, at least, was a type he could handle. "We only have a few rooms, madam," he said in his best toady voice. "You'd be more comfortable if you shared a double."

"I would not," she said. "I shall not ever room with any of these despicable people."

She leaned forward and whispered—as best an operative voice could whisper, which was to say not at all. "There are murderers among them."

A middle-aged man in the center, face covered with soot, rolled his eyes. A younger woman toward the back raised her gaze heavenward—if there were a heaven in space, which there was not. Still, Hunsaker didn't miss the gesture. Or the grimaces of dislike on the faces of the other passengers.

"Surely, it wasn't as bad as all that, madam," he said as he opened the file on the old-fashioned built-in screen on his desk. The comment was somewhat reflexive. He hated histrionics. But it was also geared toward the other passengers upon whom, he was becoming certain, he would have to rely to keep Agatha Kantswinkle under some kind of control.

"Not as bad as all that?" she repeated, slapping a palm on the desk, making his computer screen hiccup and nearly blip out. "Are you mad, man? When we left the Dyo System, we had fifteen passengers. Do you think they stepped off the ship mid-flight? I think not."

Hunsaker raised his eyebrows and looked over her shoulder at the rest of the group. The man with the soot-covered face shook his head slightly. The young woman had closed her eyes. A few others were looking away as if Agatha Kantswinkle's behavior embarrassed them.

He decided to ignore the woman, which meant getting her away from his desk as quickly as possible. “We have a single room, madam,” he said, “but it’s tiny. The entertainment system needs upgrading and the bed—”

“I’ll take it,” she said, handing him a card with her information coded into it, a method as old-fashioned as she was.

He charged her twice the room’s usual rate and felt not a qualm about it. First (he reasoned to himself), the Presidio’s parent company would probably pay for the extra stop. Secondly, the woman had already shown herself to be an annoyance, and he’d been a hotelier long enough (even at a disreputable place like this one) to know that customers often showed their true colors from the moment they walked in the door.

He was simply adding a surcharge for the difficulties ahead.

He finished adding her information to his file, resisted the urge to wipe his hands on the constantly sanitized towel he kept beneath the desk, and gave her his best fake smile.

“Your room, madam,” he said with a nod, “is up those stairs to the left. It is the only room off the first landing.” Because it used to be a maid’s room, back when the resort had actual dreams of grandeur, in the days just after its first construction, long before he was born.

She did not thank him and mercifully did not ask him how

she would unlock the door. He handed her the door's code, but it was a mere formality. The lock had broken long ago.

As she made her way toward the stairs, he processed four other passengers—real, sane, sensible people. They had all of their information coded into their fingertips like proper human beings, and they were solvent, which was good, since he debited their accounts immediately, although he didn't overcharge them (too badly) as he had Agatha Kantswinkle. People who were in a hurry to get to their rooms, relax, and try to forget whatever it was that brought them to this godforsaken place.

Hunsaker was beginning to think that the rest of the check-ins would go well when the soot-faced man approached the desk. He was taller than Hunsaker, but bent slightly, as if embarrassed by his height—which Hunsaker could well understand, since so many distance ships were not built for the egregiously tall.

"Sorry for the old lady," the man said as he extended his index finger, the only clean one on his hand. "We're really not that bad a bunch."

The finger, touching the screen, identified him as William F. Bunting, Bill for short, who began his journey in the Dyo system just like Agatha Kantswinkle. His occupation listed varied, which usually meant unemployed and searching for work, but he had nearly two dozen stellar (no pun intended) recommendations, so perhaps his occupation truly was varied and he had traveled

from job to job as he journeyed farther and farther from home.

"Sounds like you've had a difficult trip," Hunsaker said, offering the platitude the way another man would grunt with disinterest.

"You don't know the half of it," Bunting said. "If you had any other ship docked here, I'd request a transfer."

"Perhaps one will arrive while yours is being repaired," Hunsaker said, debiting Bunting's account, which looked full enough—especially for a man who had listed "varied" as his occupation.

"Please God," Bunting said, and sounded serious, which caught Hunsaker's attention.

For a moment, their gazes met. Then Bunting said, "I know you don't have a lot of single rooms, but you probably should give me one." He swept his hands toward his shirt. "These are the only clothes I have, and even I can smell the smoke on them. In a closed space, I'm not going to be someone people want to be around."

Even now, in a not-quite-so-closed space, Hunsaker could smell him. Hunsaker had figured the stench was the accumulated odor of all the passengers, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was Bunting all by his egregiously tall self.

"We have a boutique," Hunsaker said, as if the little room stocked with clothes others had left behind really qualified as a fancy store. "I'll open it in two hours. I'm sure you'll find something to accommodate you there."



He made a note to go to that little room and run the clothing through the automatic cleaning equipment yet again. He had no idea when someone had last picked through the material. Displayed, it didn't look preworn.

"Thank you," Bunting said, and pulled forward a slightly pudgy balding man. "In that case, we'll share a room."

The slightly pudgy balding man didn't seem disconcerted by this. He looked grateful, in fact. Hunsaker took his information, also stored properly on his index finger—Rutherford J. Nasten—and sent both men to the best-ventilated room in the entire wing.

Hunsaker kept processing until he got to the young woman in the back, who, as luck would have it, got a single room simply because Agatha Kantswinkle had demanded a single room and there were only twelve passengers.

"All I have is a room we call the Crow's Nest," Hunsaker said. "It's small, but it's at the top of this part of the station and it has portals on all four walls."

"That sounds good," the woman said tiredly.

"Sounds like the trip from hell so far," he said, actually interested for once, partly because she was so reticent and partly because she had been so expressive earlier.

"You don't know the half of it," the woman said, touching his screen with her left thumb. She was security conscious, then, not willing to follow the norms on how to behave.

It took a moment for the screen to display her information, almost as if it were tired of doing all the hard work, and for a moment everything blurred. Or maybe that was his eyes. He was unaccustomed to dealing with people any more, and even less accustomed to the level of tension he had felt since the passengers had arrived.

“Breakdowns can be stressful,” he said, as he monitored the information in front of him. The light above hit her face just right so that it reflected into the screen, making it seem like her information had come up superimposed over her image.

Susan G. Carmichael, daughter of Vice Admiral Willis Carmichael of the Dyo system. Hunsaker tried not to raise his eyebrows at her pedigree. A woman like this should have been upset at the meager nature of his resort, yet she hadn't uttered a single complaint. Maybe she would make up for Agatha Kantswinkle.

“The breakdown was terrifying,” Susan G. Carmichael said, her voice soft. “There was a fire.”

That caught his attention. Ships had come here that had suffered melting in the systems, ships that had filled with smoke in an instant, ships that had lost power, but none that had suffered from a fire. Fires were relatively easy to kill. All it would take was a momentary shutdown of the environmental system. No oxygen, no fuel; no fuel, no fire.

“A bad one?” he asked.

Her gaze met his. Her eyes were a shade of goldish brown

that he hadn't seen before. He wasn't sure if it was natural.

"They didn't catch it right away," she said.

He stopped processing her information. "How could they miss that?"

"Apparently systems were already malfunctioning." She swallowed visibly. She was clearly still terrified and covering it up by pretending to be calm. "We were lucky that you were so close."

He hadn't realized—well, how could he have realized anyway, when he only had sixteen minutes to take a nearly empty (neglected) resort and turn it into a place where people could sleep somewhat comfortably?

"Do they know what caused the fire?" he asked.

"I'm not sure they know anything about anything," she said as she squared her shoulders. "What do I need to get into my room?"

Finally, someone asked the logical question. Perhaps the others had been too traumatized to think of it, or too overwhelmed to care.

"Just touch the door," he said. "I keyed it to your fingerprint."

Not that it mattered. He really did have to get the locks fixed first.

"Thank you." She slipped away from the desk, then stopped. "I heard you mention a boutique...?"

He shrugged, feeling honest for the first time that day

(maybe the first time that year). "It's more of a whatnot shop. But we do have clothing."

"Anything is better than what I'm wearing," she said, and gifted him with a small smile before heading up to her room.

He stayed in the reception area for another few minutes, staring up the stairs. The hotel felt different with people in it. He'd often thought of the hotel as a chameleon, coloring itself with the attitude of its guests.

Which meant that the hotel was shaken, terrified, and a little bit relieved. He made himself take a deep breath. The air down here still smelled acrid. He set the environmental controls on scrub, not wanting to smell smoke and sweat for the next week.

Then he tallied up his single day's intake. More than he'd made in the last three months. If the repairs took another two days, which was the average time for repairs on this station, he would make most of his year's operating expenses. If the repairs took longer (and it sounded like they might), he might make a significant profit for the first time in nearly a decade.

But he would have to endure the mood, and he would have to stay one step ahead of these people. He had to get the clothes ready, open the boutique (such as it was), roust his one remaining chef to work the restaurant, and get the staff to clean a few more rooms just in case the living arrangements didn't quite work out.

Not to mention the fact that the ship's crew had yet to arrive

and take their rooms.

He sighed. He had become even more cantankerous than he had been during the last big shipping disaster nearly three years before. It wasn't good for him to be so isolated.

Or maybe it was. Imagine how cantankerous he'd be if he had to deal with these types of personalities each and every day. The thought made him smile. Then he continued planning his evening, realizing that to do things properly, he would get very little sleep.

The boutique wasn't a boutique, any more than this resort was a resort. It was barely a hotel, although it did have private rooms, which was good enough. Or so Susan Carmichael figured. Agatha Kantswinkle had repeatedly announced her intentions to take a room of her own as the group fled the ship for the safety of this little bitty place. She had hung back as the woman shoved her way to the front of the line.

Susan hadn't been on an outpost this small in years, and certainly not one this old. She was relieved to hear that it had maintenance facilities, but worried that they wouldn't be up to the task. The Presidio was nearly ruined. It had suffered a catastrophic failure of most of its systems, and that fire had destroyed an entire section of the ship.

Destroyed was probably too grand a word. Made that section of the ship unusable, perhaps for the rest of the trip.

Which she would not think about, at least for the next twenty-four hours.

She had waited the two hours the prissy little man at the front desk had told Bunting to wait for the boutique to open. She knew as well as anyone that the boutique wasn't a regular store, stocked with purchased merchandise, but a shop stocked with castoffs, leftovers, and discards from hotel guests. She didn't care. She had left her own wardrobe on board the ship, and she had instructed the crew to discard most of the items, even the personal ones. Although "instructed" wasn't truly accurate. One of the crewmen—Richard Ilykova—had stopped her in the somewhat disorderly exit off the ship (hell, everyone was pushing, shoving, jostling, trying to get out), and told her that her cabin had been closest to the fire.

We can't salvage your stuff, he'd said, clearly worried that she'd be angry. But you might find a way to clean some of it on the station. You want me to set it aside?

No, she'd said curtly and continued jostling her own way out of the ship. She should probably have been more polite. Ilykova hadn't needed to say that to her. He hadn't needed to say anything. He'd kept a protective eye on her the entire time she'd been on the ship, and she wasn't sure if he was attracted to her or if he thought she was the one who had sabotaged the ship. She had found him attractive if a bit bland—one of those pale blue-eyed blonds who could vanish into the walls because he seemed so colorless. When she'd seen him watching her, she'd decided to keep an eye on him. Maybe he saw that as flirting, or maybe he had just been doing his job. She wasn't sure, and she wasn't sure she cared.

All she knew was that now, she needed new everything, from undergarments to blouses. She didn't like the idea of wearing someone's cast-off underclothes, but she didn't see much of a choice. She would have to ask about guest laundry facilities here, although she doubted there would be any.

The prissy little man from the front desk had done the best he could to make this small room seem like a store. Some of the clothes hung on racks, with others stacked on shelves along the walls. There were old entertainment pads, some with their contents listed on the back like a directory, and blankets, which surprised her. The blankets looked inviting, even though she was warm, which told her just how tired she was.

The prissy little man was hovering near the door, checking a portable pad as he kept an eye on her. He had already helped Bunting. Bunting had gone in and out in the time it had taken Susan to look for a single shirt.

At first, she'd thought the prissy little man a mere employee. He gave off that appearance, a man beaten down by his supervisors, afraid to make decisions on his own.

But once she got into her room, she'd accessed the resort's information logs and discovered that Hunsaker actually owned the place. He had the kind of pedigree that upscale resorts usually paid excessive amounts to hire—degrees from prestigious business schools and exclusive resort management programs.

The fact that he was here, and he owned the place,

suggested some kind of problem, probably personal. He seemed unimaginative enough to remain in the same business, and not quite bright enough to realize that a resort this far away from habitable planets wasn't really a resort at all. Or maybe he did realize it and fled here on purpose.

She glanced at him. Dapper, small, furtive, the kind of man (like Ilykova) who could blend into the walls if necessary. But Hunsaker had another trait, too—the ability to outsnob anyone in the room. That powerful ability to judge was as important to running a real resort as it was to governance. It made the weak cower. It just didn't bother her.

She went to the rack holding women's clothes. She found black pants with no obvious problems, blue pants that needed just a bit of care, a fawn-colored skirt, and a very old white blouse that appeared to have real lace trim. She added four other tops and found undergarments on a back shelf.

She piled all the items on a nearby table, and beckoned to the prissy little man.

"I know you have a corner on the market," she said in her most polite voice, "but this trip is turning out to be inadvertently expensive, and so I was wondering if I could get some kind of volume discount. . . ?"

He didn't even look up. "The ship's parent company should reimburse you."

Meaning they'd deal with the much too high prices. They might not even notice.



She thought of bargaining more, then decided against it. She wasn't going to charge the ship for the disaster, but she would take the money if the parent company decided to offer it.

She clutched the clothing, which smelled strongly of some kind of cleaner, and headed toward the door. He said, almost as an afterthought, "The restaurant will be open shortly. Spread the word, would you?"

As if she wanted to see the other passengers. As if she were responsible for them.

But she was hungry, and she knew they were too, and all of their rooms were on her way back to the accurately named Crow's Nest.

"Sure," she said, "if you'll give me something to carry these clothes in."

He sighed and reached under a pile of men's shirts. As she walked back to him, he pulled out a cloth sack—something that looked like a cleaning bag, a low-rent version of a laundry bag that offered to do the cleaning all by itself.

She was long past caring about what it actually was. She put the clothes in the sack, wrapped its drawstrings around her hand, and carried the entire thing to the stairs.

Dinner, restaurant, the damn passengers. Calling attention to herself all over again.

She wasn't entirely sure she cared. But one thing she did know. She wasn't going to knock on Agatha Kantswinkle's door.

Agatha would want Susan to keep her company. Susan wasn't ever going to do that again.

The scream echoed through the stairwell. A woman's scream, sharp, high-pitched, startled. Cut off in the middle.

For a moment, Richard Ilykova bowed his head. The last thing he wanted to do was deal with another crisis. He stood in the lobby of the hotel, which was cleaner than some he'd seen on makeshift starbases. The owner, Grissan Hunsaker, looked up from the work he was doing behind the desk, his features contorted with fear.

No help from that quarter. Richard sighed, then bounded up the stairs, feeling his exhaustion in every step.

The scream didn't sound again, but he heard footsteps other than his own. Doors squealed open, slammed shut, and voices started.

He found a group of people clustered on one of the landings—the B Team, he privately called them. The people who had paid lower fares, filling out the ship's rooms, people who wouldn't even have gotten on the ship had the owners managed to sell all the tickets.

In the middle of them, a woman—Lysa Lamphere—lay prostrate on the floor.

He remembered her only because she was so pretty. Easily the prettiest woman on the ship this trip. But she didn't have the brains or the personality to match her beauty, which disappointed him.

Not that anyone who booked passage on the Presidio would look at him. They were all too important for that. Except Ms. Carmichael. She had smiled at him, which surprised him. She had noticed him watching her, which had surprised him even more.

The group stepped back as he approached. Even though they weren't on a ship any longer, they seemed to think he was in charge. Maybe he was.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Dunno," someone said.

One of the men—Bunting? Richard almost didn't recognize him in the new set of clothes he wore—added, "I was in my room when I heard the screaming. Sounded pretty awful, so I came directly here."

Richard had no reason to doubt it. Bunting had the unfortunate ability to arrive first in any crisis. Unfortunate only because he didn't have the compatible ability to know the right thing to do once he got there.

Richard was of the private opinion that Bunting had made the fire on the ship worse by trying to fan it out rather than hit the controls for the room's environmental system. But Richard was number four man on the crew, the lowest of the low, and he didn't dare criticize anyone.

He crouched beside Lysa. She was sprawled on her back, her arms up as if they had been near her face when she had

fallen. Her hands were clenched into tight fists, and her legs were twisted sideways.

He touched her face. The skin was soft, silky, the way that skin should be, the way that enhanced skin often wasn't. Her beauty was natural, then, and even more pronounced when that mousy personality wasn't front and center.

She had no fever, and she didn't look injured.

Richard glanced up, saw Hunsaker lurking near the stairs, said, "Do you have a doctor?"

"More or less," Hunsaker said.

"What is it?" Richard snapped. "More? Less?"

"More if she's sober," Hunsaker said.

Richard cursed. "I assume you have basic medical equipment."

"Yes," Hunsaker said.

"Then get it," Richard snapped.

Hunsaker fled.

The group remained, staring down. These were the people who irritated him. The ones who had wanted the lighting in their room changed and didn't know how to do it themselves, the ones who woke him from a sound sleep to ask how to work the automatic cafeteria, the ones who thought he was at their beck and call.

Right now, they were content to let him see if the woman

was all right.

Hunsaker came back with a handheld medical scanner and a tray of medical pens, each with some kind of magical function. Magical because Richard didn't know much about medicine, at least this kind. He had some knowledge, but on the other end—how to turn the body against itself, not how to make it function again.

Hunsaker crouched near him and ran the scanner over Lysa, clearly not trusting Richard with the device, which suited him just fine.

"I think she simply fainted," Hunsaker said with surprise.

"And hit her head?" Richard asked.

"Oh, she'll be bruised, but there doesn't appear to be much else wrong with her," Hunsaker said.

Then his gaze met Richard's, and Richard could tell what the other man was thinking. They both worked service in not-the-best conditions. They both knew that people rarely fainted without a reason.

"You think, perhaps, she's finally having a reaction to the trauma on the ship?" There was a hopeful note in Hunsaker's voice, a note that said, Please, don't make this my problem.

"I doubt it," Bunting said before Richard got a chance to reply. "I mean, she screamed first."

Richard closed his eyes for just a second. A brief indulgence, a moment to himself before it all started up again.

He'd hoped for an interlude, a bit of quiet, a chance to rest, but it clearly wasn't going to happen.

He stood, eyes open now, and looked at the door.

It didn't look latched.

"Is this her room?" he asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Oh, no," Hunsaker said. "Miss Lamphere is rooming upstairs with—"

"Me," said one of the women behind Richard. He turned slightly. A slender woman with buckteeth stared back at him. He remembered her, because she had propositioned him one late night back on the ship. She'd been drunk, and in her drunkenness she'd assumed that the ship's promotion line, which said that the crew was there to serve her every need, apparently understood "every need" to mean every need.

Her dark eyes met his and a spot of color appeared on her cheeks. She remembered the encounter too.

"Miss Potsworth," he said, not using her first name—Janet—because he didn't want her to get the wrong impression, even now. "I take it Lysa was not in her room?"

"She just left a few minutes ago," Janet said. "We'd just been told there was going to be dinner and she was famished."

Famished. That was a word he hadn't heard in a very long time. "So what was she doing here?" he asked, more to himself than to anyone else. The room was all by itself on this level, and

it was a bit out of the way of the stairs.

“Oh, probably letting Miss Kantswinkle know about the meal,” Janet Potsworth said. “Lysa was the only person—I think—” She looked around for confirmation. A few others nodded, as if they already knew what Janet was going to say. “—who still liked Miss Kantswinkle. Although I would say that ‘liked’ is probably too strong a word. She felt that Miss Kantswinkle deserved our respect, given all her work with the children—”

“Right,” Richard said, having heard Agatha Kantswinkle’s long diatribe about her years of service with orphaned children a dozen too many times. “Miss Kantswinkle is in this room?”

“Yes.” This from Hunsaker, who was doing his best to revive Lysa.

“Then why isn’t she out here?” Richard asked. After all, she was the nosiest woman he had ever met.

He stepped over Lysa’s arm and rapped on the door with a half-closed fist. The sound echoed through the stairwell, rather like her scream had. No one answered, but the door swung open slowly.

Richard peered inside, but did not go in. A slightly metallic smell greeted him. The room was tiny, the bed pushed against one wall. There were no windows. A chair and a tiny desk were pushed against the other wall.

And in the center of the room, on the floor, lay Agatha Kantswinkle, black shoes pointing toward the door, frumpy skirt

slightly askew, meaty thighs pressed together.

She had not fallen decorously, as Lysa had. Agatha Kantswinkle had toppled like a tree. He half expected to see a dent in the floor. He wondered why no one had heard the fall from below, then wondered if there was a room below. He tried to remember the layout and couldn't.

He could feel someone else peering over his shoulder, but he effectively blocked the door so no one else could see inside. Then he pulled the door closed and stood in front of it

"She's not there, huh?" Bunting asked.

"You could say that," Richard said, his gaze meeting Hunsaker's. Hunsaker was still crouched over Lysa. He didn't seem sure how to revive her.

Richard knew a few tricks—none of which used technology—but he didn't want to try them in front of the small group. Instead, he said to Hunsaker, "Let's take her back to her room."

Hunsaker looked relieved at the suggestion.

They enlisted the help of Bunting, who was one of the strongest men that Richard had ever met. Unfortunately, Richard knew this because he'd had Bunting's help carrying dead weight before. Only that weight had been really and truly dead, not unconscious like Lysa.

Richard helped Bunting get her upright, then Bunting scooped her in his arms as if she were no more than a pile of clothes.



“Which way?” he asked.

“I’ll show you,” Janet said, and Richard bit his tongue. Better to remain silent than to warn the man she might show him more than her room. Together they went up the stairs. Richard followed, mostly because he didn’t want to be alone with the small group on the landing—and he really didn’t want to talk to Hunsaker. At least not right away.

Instead, Richard would supervise the two in Janet’s room and probably help Bunting make his escape. Richard frowned. This damn nightmare trip wasn’t over yet.

Hunsaker looked at the medical equipment, then moved his gaze toward the closed door. He’d gotten a chill from the look that crewman, Richard Ilykova, had given him. As he had from Ilykova’s response when asked if Agatha Kantswinkle was inside her room.

Ilykova was one of those men Hunsaker had seen hundreds of times over the years on Vaadum. Working some kind of spaceship, going from one place to another because the previous place didn’t suit.

After he’d checked in, on the company’s money (unlike the passengers), he had stepped away from the desk, so that he didn’t see Hunsaker move all his information to the handheld pad. Hunsaker usually did that with crew, because so many of them traveled under false names, with very thin personal identification documentation.

Ilykova’s was better than most. In fact, that was what caught

Hunsaker's attention. Hunsaker had expected a tissue-thin biography, something that showed Ilykova wasn't who he seemed. Biographies so slim they seemed to ask the technological question Really, this man is so unimportant. Who cares?

But the identification looked real at first, so real that it nearly fooled Hunsaker. In fact, it would have fooled Hunsaker if it weren't for the fact that he'd expected crew to be a bit dodgy.

So he'd looked a little deeper, saw a ripple in one bit of biography and followed it, finding another layer of biography under yet another name. Usually that meant someone was traveling on some government mission, and while he couldn't rule that out, he also couldn't rule out the possibility that Ilykova was dodgier than most.

"Well," Hunsaker said to the people around him to get rid of them. "There's nothing we can do now. Did Miss Carmichael let you know that we're serving dinner?"

"She did," one of the women said.

"Then perhaps you'd best move along. My chef, while excellent, doesn't like an empty restaurant and will close if no one shows up."

"I'm not really hungry," the other woman said. "But I suppose I could eat."

"You never know when you'll get another chance," the first woman said to her.

Hunsaker watched through a slat in the railing as the women made their way to the bottom of the stairs. He waited until they were out of sight before he moved. Then he peered up the stairwell to make sure no one was coming down.

No one was. He was alone, for which he was quite relieved. Although that sense of relief didn't last long. His heart was pounding and his palms had grown damp. He hated this part of the job. Back when he was training, they had called it "crisis management," but really, it was more like surprise roulette. Which bad thing would happen today?

He wiped his hands on his pants, then stepped toward the door. He pushed hard with his shoulder, knowing that the latch didn't work, knowing that he would regret that in the hours, days, maybe weeks to come.

The door creaked open. He made himself look down.

There she was, just as he expected, Agatha Kantswinkle, dead on the floor. In a room without a functioning lock or any kind of portal or any other way out.

She had placed her small bag of items on the bed—and he hoped it was that bag that gave off the slightly metallic smell that was now filtering out of the room. Because he could only think of two other things that would cause such an odor. One was a surplus of blood. The other—

He sighed.

He would check the other after he made certain the woman was dead.

He made himself walk into the room, hoping he wasn't stepping on anything important. He crouched beside her as he had done with Lysa, but with Agatha Kantswinkle, he didn't touch her.

There was no need. He didn't need a doctor or any kind of expert to tell him she was dead. Truth be told, he was probably the expert on the outpost, given how many dead bodies he'd dealt with in the past few decades. Really, it was one of his pet peeves—one of his major pet peeves that he could never admit to anyone—the habit that people had of dying away from home.

He'd known when that woman cut to the front of the line that she would be trouble, and here she was, being trouble.

He bit his lip so that he wouldn't curse her. He was just superstitious enough to think that might be bad luck. Instead, he sighed. Now he was going to have to call the base doctor and have her preside over this mess, even though he really didn't want to. Not because he didn't want a doctor overseeing a corpse, but because he didn't want this doctor overseeing a corpse.

He left the room and pulled the door closed, hoping no one else would try to get in, since it was so damn easy. This time, he did curse, but he cursed himself. And shook his head.

And headed to the bar to fetch Anne Marie Devlin before she got too drunk to walk.

"A body," said Anne Marie Devlin with great relish. She hadn't had a body to deal with in at least six months, maybe

even a year. She slapped her hands on the bar and slid off the bar stool, hoping that Hunsaker didn't know how much she needed the leverage just to move.

She was drunk, but not as drunk as she got by the end of the day. She would remember this, even if she didn't sober up, which she might have to, considering.

She grabbed her bar napkin—some lowly piece of cloth that Hunsaker believed necessary for cleanliness—and wiped the beer foam off her chin. She didn't know if she had beer foam on her chin, but she always thought it was better to wipe off the imaginary beer foam than leave the real stuff to cake.

Then she grinned to herself. Oh, sober, she probably wouldn't think that funny, but it was funny as hell at the moment.

"How much have you had to drink?" Hunsaker asked in that precise snotty tone of his, the one that showed all of his expensive education and his breeding and his superiority. Of course, her education had cost twice as much as his, and she probably came from a better family, and she should've felt superior, but she'd left that behind, along with her dignity.

She just wished Hunsaker would remember that. No, better. She wished he would honor it. He remembered it and snotted down to her each and every time he saw her.

"Natural causes?" she asked, blinking hard. The bar felt smoky, even though it wasn't. The fog was just in her eyes.

"Isn't it your job to figure that out?" he snapped, and that got her attention.

Usually—if you could cite a usually, considering they'd only had three deaths together (and didn't that sound romantic? Only three deaths)—Hunsaker told her what the cause of death was, when it happened, and how she should fill out the death certificate. Usually, she got irritated that he told her how to do her job, and even more irritated when it turned out that he was right. The fact that he was unwilling to say how the guest died was a revelation in and of itself.

"Excuse me," Anne Marie muttered and headed to the side of the bar. This place was ridiculously small, considering it was the outpost's only bar. People could drink in the restaurant and the casino, but they couldn't drink comfortably in either place.

She leaned against the bar and looked around. A few of the guests from that damaged spaceship had gone into the restaurant for dinner. She could smell roast pheasant or whatever the hell tonight's meal was called. It was always the same, some dish made of parts from unidentified meat or maybe synthetic meat or maybe even (oh, don't go there, but of course she did) corpses, mixed with some kind of gravy or sauce, and actual vegetables grown on the only really nice part of the station, the hydroponic garden.

She'd become a vegetarian a long time ago, mostly in self-defense. She didn't want to think about the source of the meaty protein, so she didn't. Except when she dealt with corpses or illnesses or both. Her stomach lurched. Served her right for drinking beer without eating. Beer made with real hops

because she had insisted long ago. Sometimes she drank the whiskey brought in by ships or the wine imported from various faraway places, but at least she knew how the beer was made. She had been hired to make it.

She had been the station's bartender, way back when. Before they realized that by the end of the evening she was too drunk to serve drinks. Before Hunsaker, even, because he felt that an automatic drink mixer was better than a human bartender any day.

Hunsaker had ferreted out her secret, that she actually had a medical license and kept it current. She had to. She didn't want to be sued by some passenger that she had to save because really, underneath the alcohol, she was the noble sort and felt that the Hippocratic oath had nothing to do with hypocrisy and everything to do with nobility.

Not that she could be hypocritical or noble with a corpse. She grabbed the breathalyzer and took a hit from it, feeling it clear her alcohol haze like a slap to the face. She hated this thing, not just because it took away the buzz and made her sober in an instant, but because it would give her one goddamn headache in twenty-four hours, and she wouldn't be able to do anything about that.

Except drink, of course.

She took a second hit for good measure, then turned to Hunsaker. He stood at attention, shoulders back, hands folded before him, mouth in a very thin line.

“Ready?” he asked in that damned tone.

She was thirsty, her eyes ached, and she could feel the depression that always lurked ready to crash down on her. “As I’ll ever be,” she said, and let him lead her out of the bar.

Richard managed to escape Janet Potsworth’s room just as Lysa woke up from what Janet was calling Lysa’s faint. It wasn’t a faint, because Lysa had enough time to scream before passing out, but she had slipped into unconsciousness very quickly, and he had a few ideas as to why.

But he wanted to think about them first, and that required that he get away from the conversation, and from Janet Potsworth, who had grabbed his ass when he bent over to make sure Lysa was comfortable. Potsworth was a menace, and he would be glad to get rid of her—although he wasn’t sure when that would happen, especially now that Agatha Kantswinkle was dead.

He hadn’t expected her to die, probably because she had always been the first person on the scene of the other deaths aboard the Presidio. He’d come to see her as a stout little angel of death, and had found himself wondering more than once if she hadn’t done something to cause them.

He still hadn’t ruled that out even though she had clearly been murdered herself. Maybe her death was in retaliation for one of the others. . . ? He sighed. He had no idea. And he was going to need one, because it was clear—at least to him—that a murderer lurked on this station.



Richard trod lightly as he hurried down the stairs—he didn't want to call any more attention to himself than he already had. He'd shown a bit more expertise in these matters than he wanted to, and someone had noticed.

That someone was the hotelier, Hunsaker. Hunsaker was refined and organized, not the kind of man you'd normally find in this shabby place at the edge of nowhere. Usually the proprietors of places like this were down-on-their luck drunks who couldn't be bothered to wait on a customer even if the customer offered five times the normal room rate. Or the proprietors were well-meaning spouses of someone on staff in maintenance, some handy person with cooking skills and an ability to take the drabest room and make it just a tad gaudy.

Hunsaker seemed like he had training in hotel management. He certainly took his time checking everyone in, which meant that he looked up their identification as well as debited their accounts.

He'd noticed Richard and he'd understood what Richard had said when Richard had closed the door on Agatha Kantswinkle's corpse. Often Richard made those snide little comments for his own edification, knowing that no one else would catch his meaning. But Hunsaker had and Hunsaker had looked momentarily put out. Not panicked. Put out. Like any good hotelier.

Richard passed the landing where Lysa had passed out. The door to Agatha Kantswinkle's room was closed and no one

stood outside of it. He wondered if anyone was inside, and if Hunsaker had dealt with the corpse yet.

He almost stopped—he had a few suspicions he wanted to confirm—but he didn't. He was afraid that if the old lady's body hadn't been removed, he would make himself even more of a suspect than he already was. And he knew he was a suspect. Everyone from the Presidio was.

The first death had occurred two days out, when they were in the deepest of deep space—an area the captain had called no man's land because there were no settlements within landing range and no outposts. The trip from the Dyo System through the Commons System was dicey no matter what, but there was a section that was just plain empty. Humans weren't welcome at any of the stops for two full days of the trip. The captain had warned the crew—all three of them—that the first part of the run had nowhere safe to stop until Vaadum Station, and even then he liked to avoid the place because it was so small and so rundown. He preferred the extra day to Commons Space Station, where everyone could get off the ship and relax in style.

Richard braced himself for the extended run on a relatively small ship. He was particularly susceptible to cabin fever because he'd been the only survivor of a murderous rampage on a cruise ship as a boy. He'd been taking a trip with his father, who had died right in front of him. Everyone on that ship had died except Richard and the shooter, who had left in an escape pod before the ship docked at one of the many Starbase

Alphas, this one nicknamed the NetherRealm.

And that had just been the beginning, of course. He'd seen a lot of death on small ships. Just never in quite such an odd manner as the three deaths on the Presidio.

He had argued that the Presidio shouldn't stop until it got to Commons Space Station, which had a security team and was in a sector with a real government, one that would actually look into the killings. There was no government here, even though technically, Vaadum was in the same sector as Commons. Vaadum was too far off the beaten path, too small to have so much as a leader, let alone some kind of official who would report back to the various governments presiding over the Commons System.

The captain had listened, too, even though the three murders had terrified him—nothing like that had ever happened to the man, and of course Richard hadn't confessed his own history. Richard was only working the Presidio to gain passage across the sector. He was out of money and out of options, something that hadn't happened to him before. So he took one of his identities and used it to get work on the first ship that would take him. Of course, that ship had to be the Presidio.

If the fire hadn't happened, if the ship hadn't had to stop here, Richard would've quit when they reached the Commons Station. He would have cited the killings as a hostile work environment and no one would have had second thoughts about his departure.

He couldn't leave here, now. There was no reason to stay on this station, since ships rarely stopped here, and he did need to keep moving. But he really didn't want to get back on that ship, provided the people in maintenance could actually fix the thing.

He let himself out of the "resort," through the double doors, past the restaurant. The smell of simmering beef—or was it lamb?—made his stomach growl. He wasn't sure when he'd last had a real meal.

Although he wasn't sure how anyone could serve real food here, either. He doubted supply ships made a huge profit coming in and out of Vaadum. But they probably got paid well to stop.

He hurried down the corridor toward the maintenance area. Clearly, this area had once been the entire station. The corridor proved it. The corridor was grafted on, little more than a tube with an environmental system, leading to the second part of the station, the resort, which someone had built as an afterthought at least a century ago—and not from the best materials.

This part of the station felt very fragile. He could almost feel the corridor bounce with each of his footsteps, even though he knew that the thing wasn't built that way. It was his very active imagination, something he had failed to shut off for years now.

Finally, he got out of the corridor and into the maintenance area. It seemed huge, although it wasn't. He knew the sense of vastness was an optical illusion caused by the emptiness. The

maintenance area was the oldest part of Vaadum, built two centuries ago to house at least six large ships in various states of disrepair.

Apparently, the station's owners throughout the years hadn't wanted to chop up the area, imagining, perhaps, that there might come a time when all seven repair bays were being used.

The Presidio had the center bay. It looked odd in here, since the ship wasn't built to be inside any kind of bay. Once it had been assembled, it remained outside buildings. But the station's tiny ring made it impossible to repair ships docked to it.

Richard was glad he hadn't been onboard when the captain had had to maneuver the Presidio in here. That must've taken some white-knuckle flying, particularly since the ship was so damaged.

Richard could see the damage from the entry. The fire had burned its way through one entire wing of the ship. The wing had remained intact, but here someone had knocked the exterior off. Through the hole—large enough to hold at least five men—he could see the scorch-marked interior.

He shuddered.

He'd been afraid on ships before, starting with that cruise with his father, when the assassin had stood up, a laser rifle in his hands. He'd aimed it at Richard, and Richard hadn't cringed. He'd been twelve, too young to understand—too

sheltered to understand—that the man who aimed the laser rifle at him meant to kill him.

Only the assassin hadn't meant to kill him. He'd left Richard—who was then known as Misha—alive, as a warning to Richard's mother, who had worked as some kind of double agent. Richard had never tried to understand the politics of it. All he ever knew was that his father and so many others had died because one government hired an assassin to warn his mother away from some job.

He wasn't even sure she had felt guilty about it, although she had been angry. And angrier at him when he'd gotten his revenge on the assassin. She'd wanted the assassin alive—for what reason Richard never knew.

He never tried to understand his mother. But her life, her decisions, had caused him to be here now, decades later, on the run for half a dozen killings, all of them he could say—he would have once said—justified.

Especially that first one.

“Help you?”

One of the maintenance guys came over. He was holding some fancy tools that Richard had never seen before. The maintenance guy was the first person that Richard had seen on this station who looked like he belonged there. Whip thin, angular, sharp dark eyes, and hair cropped close to the skull. He had a smudge along one cheek.

“I work on the Presidio,” Richard said. “I was wondering if

you'd found a cause for the fire yet."

"Why?" the maintenance guy asked.

Richard studied him for a moment. The man seemed solid enough, although Richard wasn't the sort who trusted easily. Hell, Richard wasn't the sort of person who trusted at all. But the maintenance guy had been on this station for a long time, and he would have had no involvement in the fire or the deaths. Not even Agatha Kantswinkle's death.

"I want to know if it was deliberately set," Richard said.

"What's it to you?" the maintenance guy asked.

Richard blinked at him, and nearly snapped, What's it to me? If this outpost hadn't been nearby, I would have died on that ship. Murdered, if the fire was set. No one would have survived.

"Three passengers were murdered on that ship," Richard said, "and another just died here."

The maintenance guy started. He hadn't heard about Kantswinkle, then.

"So I want to know if that fire was a coincidence or deliberately set. Because I'm not getting back on that ship with someone who sets fires in space."

"But you'd get back on the ship if it had design flaws that made it catch fire?" the maintenance guy asked.

Richard almost smiled. He hadn't thought of that. Which showed that he was someone who didn't know much about ship mechanics, and knew too much about killers.

"Does it have design flaws?" Richard asked.

"All ships have design flaws," the maintenance guy said. "Some are deadlier than others."

"And this ship?" Richard asked, beginning to feel annoyed.

"This ship had some weaknesses that were easy to exploit," the maintenance guy said. "If you asked me to prove that someone deliberately set a fire, I can't. At least, not right now. If you asked me to guess how the fire started, I'd say that someone encouraged it. And I'd say you all were damn lucky to survive."

Richard felt a shiver run down his back. Two lucky survivals. If he were superstitious, he'd think that there was a third in his future.

"Can the ship be repaired?"

"It'll take us a few days," the maintenance guy said. "We have to rebuild a few things, replace even more, and then make sure that it's strong enough to handle space again. When we're done, it should be better than new."

He sounded confident. He actually sounded excited about the prospect of reviving the ship, of making it worthy to fly again. He probably didn't get challenges like this one often. Or maybe he did. Maybe his job was all about cobbling ships together so that they would survive to the next port.

"Can you make it tamperproof?" Richard asked.

The maintenance guy gave him a sad look. "No ship is



tamperproof,” he said. “Especially not a ship as old as this one.”

Richard must’ve looked unsettled, because the maintenance guy added, “We’ll make it better than it was. If you have a problem out there, it won’t be because of the ship.”

“Yeah,” Richard said, “I’m beginning to figure that out.”

Anne Marie Devlin still smelled of beer. Hunsaker wrinkled his nose as he stood inside Kantswinkle’s room. Anne Marie had crouched over the body for only a moment, and then she’d started walking the perimeter of the room as if the room were big enough to have a perimeter. She inspected every little thing. The walls, the chair, the bed, the floor. Everything except Kantswinkle.

Hunsaker couldn’t take it any longer. “What are you doing?”

Anne Marie didn’t answer him. She stood on her toes and peered at the small control panel he’d installed for the guests. The control panel didn’t give them much control over anything, just the illusion of it. You let them operate the heating and cooling in their tiny space, and they thought they had charge of the universe.

“Anne Marie,” he snapped. “I asked you a question.”

“You did, didn’t you,” she said, her back to him. He had never met such an aggravating woman. She’d be a marvel if she didn’t drink.

“What—are—you—doing?” He enunciated each word so

that she would know just how annoyed he was.

"I—am—investigating," she said, mimicking his tone exactly.

His cheeks heated. Did he really sound that obnoxious? Not to his own ears, certainly. "Investigating what?"

Anne Marie turned. She looked at the door first, and then at him. He pulled the door again to make sure it was shut tight.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

She walked to the door and cracked it open just a little. "It's better this way."

"Don't tell me you're getting claustrophobic now," he said. He'd heard about her other ailments. The alcoholism she refused to treat aggravated the depression she refused to acknowledge that was caused by something in her past she refused to talk about. All in all, the most infuriating woman he had ever met. And one of the most brilliant.

"I have a hunch I'll be claustrophobic in this room from now on." She peered through the crack in the door as she clearly checked the hallway, then pushed the door open just a bit wider. "We're alone."

He had to check on that himself. Not that he didn't trust her, but he really didn't trust her.

"What's going on?" he said when he was satisfied no one lurked in the hall or the stairwell.

"This poor dear woman," Anne Marie said, thereby proving she had never met Agatha Kantswinkle, "suffocated."

He glanced at Agatha Kantswinkle's neck. No mottled marks, no sign of a struggle. If this woman had suffocated, she had done so without hands around her throat or something pressed against her nose and mouth.

He swallowed hard. "Even if the environmental system had shut down," he said, "she wouldn't have died this quickly."

"Yes, I know," Anne Marie said. "The problem is the environmental system hasn't shut down."

"Then how did she die?" he asked.

"I told you," Anne Marie said. "She suffocated."

"You can tell that from eyeballing her?" he asked.

Anne Marie smiled just a little. "I'll confirm with an autopsy," she said. "But I will confirm."

"No one touched her," he said. "And if it wasn't the environmental system, then what was it?"

"Oh, it was the environmental system," Anne Marie said. "That's why your other guest fainted. The door opened, she saw the body, she screamed, took in what she thought was a lungful of air to continue her scream, and passed out. Lucky girl. Had she been closer to the door inside the room, she would have died too."

Hunsaker was feeling dizzy. He realized he wasn't breathing either. He made himself take a breath, but it felt odd.

He hadn't thought of breathing before. Maybe, like Anne Marie, he wouldn't want to be in this room alone with the door closed either.

"What did she breathe?" he asked.

"It wasn't pure carbon dioxide," Anne Marie said, "or her skin would be bright red. More likely a cocktail of gases, something that created the faint bitter odor that was in the room when we arrived."

He had been here earlier. The smell had been stronger. He didn't tell her that. "How do you know?" he asked.

She held up one of her portable scanners. "I've been taking readings from various areas of the room. I'm getting a mixture of things that should never be in a residential area of a space station. I have the behavior of both women. I have the smell. And then there are the controls themselves." She swept a hand toward them.

He walked past her and peered at them. Someone had hit the override. The damn thing was blinking, asking for a manual code to confirm the oxygen mix, which was purer than it should have been. Not only had someone tampered with the controls, but someone had tampered with them twice—once when Agatha Kantswinkle entered the room, and then again after she'd died.

"I assume that these systems keep track of who touches them when?" Anne Marie asked.

He had no idea. The last time he'd used an override had

been a decade ago. Since then, he'd replaced most of the guest room environmental controls, going to a simpler system—one that gave the guests two options—hotter or colder. Nothing as fancy as this little box, which even allowed the guests—with the override code—to mix their oxygen from thin to thick.

"I don't know," he said, feeling absolutely helpless.

"Well." Anne Marie smiled, clearly liking his discomfort. "I guess you'd better find out."

Pounding, pounding, pounding.

Susan sat up, filled with adrenaline. She'd been dreaming. Not dreaming so much as trapped in a memory.

The slight banging noise, rhythmic, feet against the thin wall.

Her mouth tasted of bile. She got off the bed, rubbed her hand over her face, and went to her door.

Janet Potsworth stood outside. She looked more disheveled than Susan had ever seen her.

"Oh, you're all right then," Janet said with obvious relief.

Susan frowned. "Of course I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you didn't come for dinner," Janet said.

Susan rolled her eyes. She had asked the chef—if that man could be called a chef—to give her a meal for her room. He had obliged, serving her some kind of stew that wasn't on the menu.

The staff will eat this, he said. You'll like it better.

She'd carried it upstairs herself, and she'd liked it. She ate alone for the first time in a week. No angst, no speculation, no fear. Just a quiet meal in her quiet room. Then she let her exhaustion take her, and she'd fallen into a blissful sleep.

Until she dreamed of Remy's death. The man had hanged himself in his room—which had taken some doing. The sheet wrapped around his neck, dangling off some fixture. She hadn't seen it, but she had heard his feet, banging, banging, banging, which she hadn't thought odd until later.

He wasn't bumping against the wall when they found him. She must have been hearing him die.

In fact, no one thought he'd done anything except kill himself. He was the first, after all. They'd said some words over him, looked at his traveler's contract, saw that his body didn't have to be returned to anyone, and slipped him into the darkness of space, along with a few of his possessions.

An act they all regretted when the second body turned up. By then, it had become clear that Remy hadn't killed himself and that banging she had heard was his attempt to get her attention. Or to kick his way free. Or to find purchase for his feet. Or to get to his killer.

She hated thinking about it, but she did think about it. Often.

As did everyone else, it seemed. Including the killer. Who

had to be laughing at them all.

She wasn't getting back on that ship. Not now, not ever. And she shouldn't have opened her door to Janet either. Janet was one of those obnoxious women who thought every man was a conquest and every woman was competition.

So there had to be another reason she was here.

"I'm fine," Susan said, and started to close the door.

"You can understand why we were concerned," Janet said, "considering what happened to poor Agatha."

Susan sighed. She was now supposed to ask, What happened to Agatha? . . . as if she cared. Agatha was the most obnoxious woman she had ever met. And that was saying something. She didn't want to know what happened to her. And if she took the verbal bait, she'd be regaled with some horrifying story of someone's rudeness to the most obnoxious woman she had ever met.

"Yes, I can understand," Susan lied. "Thank you for thinking of me." And then she pushed the door closed.

"It started in this panel," said the maintenance guy. His name was Larry and he had been on the station for more than a decade. Larry loved his work. Out here, he said when Richard asked, my job is a real challenge. You gotta be creative, you know? And you gotta be right. We've never lost any ship that's left here, and we've never gotten any complaints about our work later on. It's the best job I've ever had.

Richard somehow found that enthusiasm reassuring. Reassuring enough to join Larry inside the burned-out section of the Presidio. It smelled of smoke and melted plastic. His nose itched with a constant urge to sneeze. He breathed shallowly through his mouth because he had a hunch if he started sneezing, he wouldn't stop.

"See, right here," Larry said, pointing at a mass of blackened something-or-other, "there's one of those design flaws I mentioned. Nothing that would trigger on its own, but something that could be taken advantage of."

He explained it in rather technical language that Richard was surprised he understood. It sounded so simple, and yet he wouldn't have been able to do it.

"But this thing had been burning for hours when we found it," Richard said. "All the warning systems had been shut down."

"And the environmental system tampered with," Larry said. "The oxygen mix had to have been low here. There wasn't a lot of fuel for this fire, and there should have been. Also, this ship has a built-in system for putting out fires. It would have vented the atmosphere and isolated the area. It did none of those things."

"Is that easy to tamper with?" Richard asked.

"For me, sure," Larry said. "For you, not so much."

"So someone who knew the ship's systems," Richard said.

"Most ships' systems," Larry said. "You have to know



what's standard, what's unusual, what's expected, and what's normal."

"So someone who worked on the ship," Richard said.

Larry smiled. "Probably not. You guys were a week out, right?"

Richard nodded.

"That's plenty of time for someone to study the specs and figure out how this ship worked. Provided that he already had a base of knowledge on how ships in general worked."

"Could they time it?" Richard asked.

"Meaning what?"

"So that we were close to Vaadum when it happened?"

"Sure," Larry said. "That was the only smart way to do it. Unless your saboteur wanted to die along with everybody else. Or planned to take an escape pod. Of course, no one did. The pods are all here. I assume all your passengers are accounted for, too."

"Yeah," Richard said. "They're all here. On the station. With us."

Nothing like murder to make a man stop procrastinating. After Hunsaker watched Anne Marie Devlin use one of the robotic carts to take Kantswinkle's body to the infirmary, Hunsaker got his tools and finally fixed the lock on Kantswinkle's room. He couldn't shake the feeling that if he had done this before Kantswinkle had arrived, he would have

prevented her death. Then he would have had to deal with her the next two days while the Presidio was being prepared. That thought made him shudder—and made him feel guilty. It wasn't her fault that she was dead. . . .

Except that no one seemed to like her, she was difficult to deal with, and if he had to pick someone to murder in this small group of stranded passengers, he would have chosen her. Which made him shudder even more. Had she died because of who she was? Or because of how she acted? Or because of the room he assigned her?

That last thought got him to find his staff (all two of them) and have them clean some of the other rooms, the ones with the limited environmental controls. Then he moved five of the passengers—Bunting and his roommate, Janet Potsworth and Lysa Lamphere, and Susan Carmichael.

The first four had left their rooms willingly. Then he had gone to see Carmichael. He'd knocked, and she didn't answer. So he knocked again, harder. The door flew open, and Carmichael stood there, looking bleary. She'd struck him as the kind of woman whose hair was never out of place, and yet all the strands stood at odd angles with some kind of violent-looking red mark on the side of her face. It took him a moment to realize that she had a pillow impression on her cheek, and her hair was mussed from the blankets. Clearly, Susan G. Carmichael was a messy sleeper, even if she was never messy awake.

She didn't want to be moved. She nearly slammed the door in his face, but he stopped her, and told her that if she stayed here, there was a good chance she'd end up like Agatha Kantswinkle.

Then Carmichael frowned. "What happened to Agatha?" she asked.

He peered at her. She really and truly did not know. "She's dead," he said.

Carmichael closed her eyes for a minute, sighed, and leaned against the doorjamb. "I suppose she was murdered," she said tiredly.

"Yes," he said.

Carmichael opened her eyes. They were a vivid blue. "I suppose it was too much to ask the murderer to stop killing once we got off that damn ship."

"I suppose," Hunsaker said, not knowing quite how to respond.

"He's going to run out of victims, and that will call attention to him," she said. She sounded angry, as if it personally affronted her that the murderer kept killing even though she didn't think it wise.

"I don't think he minds the attention," Hunsaker said. "Can I help you get your things?"

"There's not much," she said, indicating the purchases she had made earlier sitting on top of the chair. "I can get them."

Still, he took a pair of shoes and a blanket, just because he suddenly felt that he needed to be useful. Not that he hadn't been useful. He'd been more useful today than he had been in weeks, maybe months. He'd repaired locks on four doors, including Agatha Kantswinkle's (and then he sealed off that damn room, maybe forever), he'd gotten a whole bunch of rooms cleaned, he'd gotten the kitchen staff up and running again, and he actually had people in his hotel. Until they killed each other off, of course.

He left the door to her room open, since someone on his staff would be up here shortly to clean, fix this lock, and close off this room. No one was going to be in the older rooms, not while there were murderers on board.

"Did she suffer?" Carmichael asked as he led her down a flight of stairs, through a corridor, and into the newer—and, once upon a time, more hopeful—wing of his hotel.

He looked at her. She actually seemed concerned. No one had asked this question before. He hadn't even asked it when he'd been talking with Anne Marie, and he probably should have.

"I don't know," he said honestly—or as honestly as he dared. It took time to suffocate. If the death was merciful, she would have passed out like Lysa and then stopped breathing, but if it wasn't, she would have been gasping for air—

Although, he realized, had she had trouble breathing, all she had to do was step into the corridor and get far enough

away from her door. She would have been able to clear her lungs, and maybe even get help.

"I suspect she didn't suffer at all," he added, now that he'd thought about it.

Carmichael grunted, which surprised him. He would have expected a "thank heavens" or some other kind of reassured remark. Instead, she sounded almost displeased.

"Did you know her well?" he asked.

"No one knew her well," Carmichael said. "No one wanted to."

"Oh." He would have suspected as much. "What about the other people who died? Were they unpopular too?"

"What's it to you?" she asked.

He flushed. He usually wasn't that nosy. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to pry. I was just wondering."

"Murder really shouldn't be the subject of casual conversation, now should it?" Carmichael asked.

"I guess not," he said, refraining from pointing out that right now, the conversation wasn't as casual as she seemed to think. After all, three people had died on the ship, there had been a fire, and now another person had died. Not that casual a conversation. Maybe even relevant.

They stopped at Carmichael's new room. He unlocked it for her and went in first, feeling a slight surge of adrenaline as he took his first breath. Would he always feel that now in his

guest rooms? Would he always be afraid that a single breath could kill him?

“Well,” Carmichael said, following him in, “it’s not quite as pretty as the other room, but it does look newer.”

He hadn’t thought of the other room as pretty, although it had personality, which this one lacked. This one was like all the other rooms in this wing: big enough for a large bed, a table, and two chairs, as well as an entire wall dedicated to in-room entertainment, if someone wanted to pay a premium price.

He didn’t ask Carmichael what she wanted. He figured she could charge it to her bill if she decided she needed entertaining. He didn’t want to be near her any longer. He set her shoes and blanket on the floor, then backed out of the room. She didn’t seem to notice. She was putting her clothing on top of the table as he left, as oblivious to his presence as a rich woman was to a robotic cleaner.

He hurried down the steps and back to the front desk, feeling unsettled. This group of people was beginning to frighten him. He had no idea when he’d be rid of them, either. The ship had to be repaired or some other ship had to come here and get them out of his hotel.

For the first time in a very long time, he missed having some kind of security on the station. Someone other than the burliest member of his staff threatening the guests with increased fees—which was usually enough to calm them down, since Hunsaker already had control of their accounts.

But he didn't want to threaten anyone here, because who knew how they would react? He didn't want to think about it—any of it. Instead, he focused on a cleaning schedule for the vacated rooms. A cleaning schedule and a repair schedule. Time to make sure all the locks worked properly and all the equipment was tamper-proof. Time he started doing his job. Again.

Hideous man. Odious, actually. Who did he think he was to discuss other people's deaths as if they were entertainments? Susan Carmichael sat on the bed in her new room, wide awake now, wondering if she would ever sleep again.

Agatha dead, here and not on the ship. That had shaken Susan as much as figuring out that Remy's death hadn't been suicide. Not that the thought of a suicide in the room next to her hadn't disturbed her, too. Any death would have bothered her. But the murders, the fire—somehow she had gotten it into her head as they fled onto Vaadum that they would be safe here, that their long nightmare was over.

She propped her pillows against the headboard and leaned her head back. She could feel the muscles in her back, so tight that any movement hurt. She didn't like this room. The other one had the illusion of safety. She had gotten that room when she still believed that the outpost would be much better than the ship. Now she knew it was no different. A limited group of people trapped in a limited amount of space. There was nowhere to run, no way to escape. The ship was incapacitated, and—so far as she could tell—the Presidio was the only ship on

the station.

Did the locals (what should she call them? Station rats?)—did they have a way to leave? She wasn't sure about that either, but she should probably find out. She had been under the impression that Vaadum was one of the only safe stops between here and Commons Space Station.

But she didn't even know how far Commons Space Station was from here. Maybe she could convince someone to take her there. Or to hire a ship and have it come and get her out of here.

Of course, some of the others would want to join her, and that wouldn't work, because one of those others might be the killer. She needed a way to defend herself. She didn't have one, at least not yet. And now she wouldn't be able to sleep again. She needed to stay awake, stay vigilant, should anyone try anything. Susan pulled her knees to her chest. She needed a plan.

She just wasn't sure where to begin.

The captain had found a spot in the bar, toward the back under the dim lights. Richard had to cross most of the room—which smelled of beer and sweat and spilled whiskey—to realize that the captain had five empty glasses in front of him. Richard sighed.

The captain was a small man, former military—but with which army in what war, Richard had never asked (it was none of his business—and he'd learned, through his mother, politics



was the most deadly business in the entire sector). The captain had run his ship on a tight schedule. He and the other two pilots had separate eight-hour shifts in the cockpit.

Richard had been hired on to do the menial work that had nothing to do with flying the ship—keeping the passengers happy, making sure that the lower decks were spotless, maintaining the robotic cleaners and cooks. The food on the ship wasn't spectacular, but it hadn't been advertised that way. There were ships that made this run that were all about food, food every few hours, food from every culture in the sector, food as rich and varied as the passengers themselves.

But this ship hadn't been a cruise so much as a passenger vehicle. It took people from here to there in a modicum of comfort, with as little fuss as necessary.

Until the first death, Richard had mostly dealt with trivial complaints—broken entertainment centers, malfunctioning avatars in the gaming area, the occasional sudden (and, he thought, humorous) switch to zero-g in a toilet. Agatha Kantswinkle had tried his patience—her bed was too soft, the equipment near her room too loud, the cooking smell from the galley too strong—but he'd had the leeway to move her twice, and her final cabin seemed to suit her more than the others, which had cut the complaints to about half of what they had been.

He'd settled in for a flight filled with irritations and hard work, but he knew once he got to Ansary, he'd be done with real

work and he'd have money for the first time in months. He had vowed not to get that low on funds ever again.

Now, here he was, unpaid and trapped on a space station that had at least one killer on board.

He peered at the captain. The man was staring blearily into his glass, as if he could read information written on the bottom of it. The captain was the one man Richard knew wasn't behind any of this, for two reasons. The first was circumstantial—the captain had been with Richard during the first two killings. If the captain had been involved he would have to have had a collaborator, and the captain never consulted with anyone.

The second reason was more practical—the captain owned his ship. It was part of a franchise operation, and he got paid per passenger for the entire trip. If the ship was full, he made a hefty profit. Half full, he made some money. Empty, and he'd go bankrupt or have to get out of the business. Richard could understand someone who wanted out so badly that he would destroy his own ship. But he couldn't understand doing it while paying customers were on board, nor could he imagine doing it with fire. There were so many other, much simpler ways.

Richard sat down across from the captain, jiggling the tabletop. The glasses clanked together, but it still took a moment for the captain to notice him. Or at least to acknowledge him.

"Care to toast the end of my career?" the captain asked, lifting a glass.

"It's not as bad as all that," Richard lied.

"Ship's not reparable," the captain said.

"Yes, it is," Richard said. "I talked to them."

The captain shook his head. "Not flying that thing anywhere. Half the lower deck'd be unusable, it'd smell, and the environmental systems are whacked. Not safe. Least not by our standards."

By that, he meant the standards of the company he worked for.

"So are they sending a replacement ship?"

"Two weeks," the captain said. "Maybe. Or we can hire onto someone else's ship. Have to ask the passengers. What's left of them."

"Two weeks?" Richard asked.

"Coming from Ansary. We'd go back to the Dyo System. We'd be back where we started. Not that it matters. I get to have a hearing. Like it's my fault they let some murderous nutcase onto my ship."

"You didn't check the manifest?" Richard asked.

The captain glared at him. Or tried to. It wasn't that effective a look, considering how wobbly his head was and how bloodshot his eyes were.

"What'm I supposed to do? Turn away paying customers with spotless records? Of course I checked. Not an idiot. Or didn't think I was." The captain sighed. "Someone's trying to

destroy me.”

Which was a distinct possibility, one Richard hadn't thought of. “Does someone hate you that much?” he asked.

“You mean besides me?” the captain asked. “Oh, hell, I don't know.”

“You didn't do anything wrong,” Richard said.

“Sent that first body into space,” the captain said. “Didn't turn around then and there. Shoulda brought everyone back.”

“We thought it was a suicide,” Richard said. “And when the other two deaths happened, we were closer to Commons Space Station than to the Dyo System. It would've taken a week to go back to Ynchyn.”

This nightmare trip started in Ynchyn.

“Seems logical, doesn't it? They don't train you for this kinda thing, you know. Maybe I shoulda confined everyone to quarters.”

Richard nodded. After all, that had been his initial suggestion—or at least, his suggestion after the second murder. Ignatius Grove, a professor, heading to a new job at some prestigious university in the largest city on Ansary. The man taught mathematics of all things, and he had died when the flesh in his throat had a growth spurt, shutting off both sides.

Everyone would've thought that a freak death as well, particularly since Ignatius Grove and Agatha Kantswinkle spent each meal complaining about their various food allergies, if

Richard hadn't seen that particular form of murder before. He knew that there were little nanosomethings that could activate the growth mechanism in the flesh. If swallowed, the nanosomethings invaded the throat. No one had ever done studies to see if any of them made it to the stomach or if that would've made a difference if the throat hadn't closed first.

Ignatius Grove had died a particularly hideous death. So had Remy Demaupin, the first victim. In fact, all three victims had died terribly. The third, Trista Jordan, had died when someone had sealed her mouth and nose with some kind of bonding adhesive. Richard wasn't sure what was used—some kind of liquid glue. She should've been able to use her call button to ask for help—and she probably would have, if she hadn't also been glued to the chair in her room.

The killer hadn't tried to hide that death, not that it would've mattered. There was no time to investigate it, because shortly after they found Trista, the fire had started. Or at least had been discovered.

"Confining people to quarters," Richard said, "probably wouldn't have helped. We had a pretty determined killer on board. Still do, actually. Have any ideas who it is?"

"I'd've shot the bastard if I knew." The captain picked up one of the other glasses and downed its contents. "Hell, maybe I should shoot everyone now. That'd take care of the problem. What do you think?"

"It's one solution," Richard said.

"It's as good as any," the captain said, and picked up the remaining full glass. "If I could just get my butt outta this chair. Which I'm not going to do. If someone wants to kill me, so be it. They might be doing me a favor. You want to kill me, Richard?"

The captain's gaze met Richard's. For the first time, the captain seemed sober. His expression was very serious. Richard had the sense that the captain knew more about him than Richard thought.

Richard had waited too long to pretend shock at the question. And he couldn't just wave it off, not considering the look the captain had just given him. "If I kill you, what do I get out of it?" he asked.

The captain grinned and his head bobbed, that moment of clarity seemingly gone. "My eternal gratitude, my friend," he said, just before he finished the third drink. "My eternal gratitude."

Hunsaker sat behind the desk and dug through the files. He had his back to the wall and, out of the corner of his eye, he watched the entrances and the stairway. He didn't want anyone to surprise him for any reason.

He had a pad propped up on his thighs. His personal screen, not the one tied into the resort proper. He had upgraded the pad dozens of times, sometimes illegally. More than once, he'd stolen programs from his guests, and from one—a well-connected gambler who liked the odds (and the breasts) in the casino—he had stolen an entire database of shady characters

throughout the sector.

He didn't expect to see any familiar names in that database, but he found one. Richard Ilykova, a.k.a. Yuri Flynn Doyle, Edward Michael Adams, and Misha Yurivich Orlinskaya, mercenary and assassin, believed to be responsible for more than two dozen deaths system wide.

Hunsaker shivered. He had known that Richard Ilykova hadn't been a common worker on a passenger ship. The man was too competent for that—not too mechanically competent, but too competent in the ways of death. He hadn't flinched when he had seen Kantswinkle's body, nor had he seemed too upset by his whole ordeal.

Yet all those deaths—the three on the ship and the fourth here, seemed awfully sloppy for a man who made his living killing people. Hunsaker sighed softly and exited the illegal database. He felt dirty just thinking about Ilykova's job. About the man himself, actually. Ilykova hadn't seemed harmless—Hunsaker wasn't that naïve—but he had seemed . . . more efficient than deadly.

A movement caught his eye. Ilykova approached the desk. Hunsaker hadn't even seen him enter the room.

Hunsaker let out a little squeak. Ilykova raised an eyebrow in amusement. He'd clearly caught Hunsaker's moment of fear. Ilykova smiled—one of those knowing smiles—and then proceeded as if he had seen nothing out of the ordinary.

"Looking up the guests, are we?" he asked.

"So?" Hunsaker asked, then realized that probably wasn't the smartest response. Neither, he supposed, would be what's it to you? Or get the hell away from me.

"So, does anyone have a history with lack of oxygen?"

"What?" Hunsaker asked, mostly because he hadn't been expecting that question.

"I realized when I was talking with the captain that all of our victims suffocated in one way or another. The fire would have caused the rest of us to suffocate as well. I was just wondering if we have some sort of revenge scenario going on here." Ilykova put his elbows on the desk.

"You tell me," Hunsaker said, his voice wobbling a little.

Ilykova frowned. "I don't have access to a deep database. You do."

Then his eyes widened just a little. "Oh," he said. "You decided to research me first."

Hunsaker's heart was pounding. He had nothing to lose here—if Ilykova was going to kill him, it would happen now. So he called up the earlier screen with Ilykova's history and pushed it across the desk at him.

"These things are so poorly done," Ilykova said. "It doesn't tell you much, does it?"

He looked up, his pale blue eyes twinkling. How could a man laugh about murder? It made Hunsaker think of Carmichael: Murder really shouldn't be the subject of casual



conversation, now should it? Nor should it be something to smile about.

Apparently, Hunsaker's silence caught Ilykova's attention.

"We all have a past, Grissan," Ilykova said. "Yours involves embezzlement from every single resort you worked for. Quite creative embezzlement, I might add, the kind that would've made you very, very rich if you had kept to your original plan."

Hunsaker felt a warmth rise in his cheeks. No one knew about this. No one. How did Ilykova find it?

"The problem was, in your profession, that the younger, less-experienced members moved from resort to resort, while the older ones got a well-deserved sinecure. That's the word, right? Sinecure?"

"Sinecure implies a job with little work. That's not true. To rise to the top of my profession, you must be willing to work at all times." Hunsaker's words were curt, showing his annoyance. He felt his face grow even warmer. He had let Ilykova irritate him.

Ilykova smiled slightly. "My mistake. I simply meant that you hit the top of your profession and remained in one place, a resort that became 'yours,' even if you didn't own it. You became the eyes and ears of the place, the face that everyone recognized. The person they associated with the resort. Which was why they bought you this place instead of prosecuting you. Did you know what a dive they got for you? It was the perfect revenge on their part, wasn't it? An effective banishment away

from the populated areas of the sector. Did it embarrass you?"

Embarrassed, humiliated, angered. Hunsaker didn't say anything, although he expected all of the emotions ran across his face.

"Still," Ilykova said, "you got to keep the money you stole from the other resorts. You could've vanished. You just chose not to."

Too ashamed to leave. Hunsaker simply couldn't face any of his old colleagues ever again. Ever, ever, ever again.

"We all have a bit of history," Ilykova said. "I'm sure you had a reason for your sticky fingers. I have a reason for my history as well. My mother was Halina Layla Orlinskaya. Look her up in your little database."

Hunsaker took the pad back, his fingers shaking, dammit all to hell. He wasn't as practiced at controlling his physical reactions to his emotions, not like he used to be. He looked up Halina Layla Orlinskaya. She had half a dozen aliases as well. A high level spy who defected with some devastating knowledge that changed the course of one of the border wars, she survived her last few years by hiring herself out as a mercenary to various governments.

"What it doesn't say there, I'm sure," Ilykova said, "is that she hired me out as well, as an assassin. She thought I had the personality for it."

"Did you?" Hunsaker wished he could take the words back.

But Ilykova didn't seem to notice. "Not really. I think a man should feel passionate about his work. An assassin's job requires no passion at all. Don't you think that a person should put his heart and soul into his job?"

"I used to," Hunsaker said.

"And I'll bet you miss that emotion," Ilykova said. "I did. I wanted to do something with my life. Ah, to do something. Of course, now I'm broke and hiring onto ships as a lower level employee just to get across the sector."

He leaned across the desk. Hunsaker couldn't lean away. His back was already pressed against the wall.

"So you see, I had no reason to kill those people," Ilykova said. "I didn't know them. And I'm certainly smart enough not to set a fire on a spaceship far from the nearest port."

"But," Hunsaker said, his voice smaller than he wanted it to be, "you knew Agatha Kantswinkle."

Ilykova smiled, a real smile, genuinely amused. "Didn't like her either, huh? No one did, so far as I can tell. But I didn't have to kill her. She would've gotten off the ship at Ansary. And here, on Vaadum, she was your problem, not mine."

Hunsaker swallowed. "So you're saying you didn't do it."

"That's right," Ilykova said. "Why would I?"

"Someone paid you?" Hunsaker asked.

Ilykova shook his head. "If someone paid me, I would've been a passenger. I wouldn't have signed on for work."

It sounded logical. It all sounded very logical. Hunsaker just didn't know if he should believe it. "So what's this about suffocation?" he asked.

"Oh, just a theory," Ilykova said. "Everyone suffocated in one way or another. So if you think of these crimes as related, then maybe the manner of death came as a form of revenge for a death by suffocation. . . ?"

"I wouldn't even know how to look for that," Hunsaker said.

"I would," Ilykova said, and took the pad away from Hunsaker.

Richard was finding a whole lot of nothing as he dug through Hunsaker's database. The database wasn't that good. It was old, for one thing, and the updates hadn't been meshed into the system all that well. They had been grafted on and not efficiently, certainly not efficiently enough for a proper search. He would have to get onto the Presidio. It had a good database and he might be able to find what he was looking for there. Because, in this cursory exploration, he couldn't find anyone with any links to any suffocation deaths, murdered, accidental, or even natural. He was about to hand the pad back to Hunsaker when someone screamed.

"Oh, not again," Hunsaker muttered.

Richard tossed him the pad and ran up the steps, half expecting to hear a thump. He didn't though. But he did hear another scream and, he realized, these screams were male.

They weren't frightened screams or startled screams

(except maybe the first one); more likely horrified screams, end-of-the-world screams, the kind you emitted when everything was hopeless and all was lost. Another scream, and then another. Doors slammed as people left their rooms. He was joining quite a crowd as he ran up the stairs.

The screams came from the top floor.

He arrived, along with three other passengers from the ship (Janet Potsworth, Lysa Lamphere, and William Bunting) to find a man he'd never seen before on his knees, hands over his face, screaming like a stuck alarm.

Another body lay on the floor, this one a woman, also someone he'd never seen before. Her eyes were open and glassy, her tongue protruding slightly. She was clearly dead.

Someone sighed behind him.

Richard turned slightly. Hunsaker stood near his shoulder and stared at the woman on the floor.

"Now what the hell am I going to do?" Hunsaker said with great annoyance. "I mean, really."

Judging from the look on Ilykova's face, Hunsaker had spoken out loud. He felt that warmth returning to his cheeks. He kept his head down, so that he didn't have to look Ilykova in the eyes, and moved into the room.

He put his hand on Fergus's shoulders. Fergus had worked for Hunsaker since Hunsaker came to the resort. Fergus and his wife, Dillith, who now doubled as a corpse. Not

that she was ever much livelier than a corpse. But what Dillith lacked in energy, she made up for in precision.

She could find a speck of dust the robotic cleaners left behind. She could turn bed sheet corners perfectly. She was slow, but she was anal. And in Hunsaker's "resort," precision mattered more than speed.

Fergus stopped screaming when Hunsaker touched him. Fergus looked up, eyes sunken into his face, and said, "What am I going to do?"

His use of the sentence was plaintive. Hunsaker's had been self-involved. He had jumped from corpse/murder/crisis to who the hell is going to work for me in this godforsaken place? in less than a minute. He wasn't proud of that, but he really wasn't a man who developed much affection for his employees. In fact, he believed affection got in the way of work. He didn't know much about Dillith and Fergus besides their names, their work methods, and the fact that they both preferred late hours rather than getting up early.

"Stand up," Hunsaker said with as much sympathy as he could muster, which probably wasn't enough. "We'll figure something out."

Fergus stood. He was a slight man, and he fell into Hunsaker's arms, much to Hunsaker's chagrin. He hadn't invited the man to hug him. He certainly didn't want the man to touch him. But Fergus was beyond noticing subtleties. He was sobbing. Hunsaker could already feel his shirt getting wet. He

patted Fergus on the back and maneuvered him out of the room. Then he looked at Ilykova, who was watching him with that look of amusement again.

“Do me a favor,” Hunsaker said to Ilykova. “Get Anne Marie Devlin, would you?”

“Who?” Ilykova said.

“The base doctor,” Hunsaker said.

“I think this woman is beyond a doctor—”

“Just do it,” Hunsaker said, resisting the urge to shove Fergus toward Ilykova. That would show him passion, all right.

Ilykova nodded, then hurried down the stairs. Three passengers from the ship stood around as if this were a theatrical event.

“Go back to your rooms,” Hunsaker said. “There’s nothing to see.” As if a woman wasn’t already dead on the floor. There was plenty to see. He just didn’t want them gawking at it.

They, of course, didn’t move. He glared at them and tried to look tough, which was hard to do when you had a member of the staff sobbing in your arms.

“Go,” he said, and that seemed to work. Maybe it was his tone, his clear disgust at everyone around him.

The three left slowly. He watched them go down the stairs, patting Fergus on the back the entire time as if he were a baby who needed to be burped. Then Hunsaker peered at the room. It didn’t look that much different than it had two hours ago. When

he'd helped Susan Carmichael move out of it.

She heard the screaming, of course. How could she have missed it? And she resisted her first instinct, which was to burrow deep under the covers of this new room and pretend that she couldn't hear anything. But Susan Carmichael wasn't a hider. She wasn't the kind of person who ran to the scene of a crime, either, although she couldn't be entirely certain what she heard was a crime.

But someone didn't scream with that level of grief—and that was grief, wasn't it?—without a precipitating event, and considering Agatha's murder, the best assumption—the only assumption, really—was that a crime had occurred. Again. Which meant she had to get the hell off this station. Somehow.

She changed clothes, slowly and deliberately, putting on the ivory blouse over the black pants. She slipped on her shoes, smoothed her hair, grabbed her personal information, and left this room as well.

The screaming had stopped, but she could hear faint voices in the distance. She glanced at the stairs, to ensure that no one was on them, and then she quietly made her way down.

It was time she stopped all of this. She gave up. She had been fleeing her family, but really, life out here was much, much worse than life with them could ever be. Besides, her father had the capability of getting a ship here within twenty-four hours. He had ships all over the sector. One of them had to be nearby. She just had to contact him.



She made her way down the stairs toward the main desk. Surely, there was some kind of interstellar communications node. Or maybe just a sector-wide node. Or worst case—which was a case she'd put up with, after all—she would simply contact the nearest ship and have them contact her father.

And then she would wait. Although she probably needed some kind of guard.

There wasn't a lot of choice. Everyone from the ship was a possible murderer, and there weren't a lot of people on the station.

But all of the murders she knew of took place while the victim was alone. So the next key was to be with someone at all times. Except right now. Right now, she needed to contact Daddy.

After that, she would find a companion—and find a way to stay awake until help arrived.

Anne Marie Devlin was no longer drunk. She wasn't even under-the-surface drugged-sober drunk. She was so far past drunk that she felt giddy. Actually, the excitement made her feel giddy. She felt useful for the first time in months. If she didn't know herself better—and she knew herself quite well, thank you—she would say she had become a drunk because she was bored.

But she had been a drunk long before life ceased to be a challenge. She knew that excitement was just a temporary high, while alcohol numbed the senses, which was usually what she

preferred.

Right now, however, she needed all the senses that she had. She was inside yet another room—this one a favorite of hers—standing over yet another corpse that had been murdered by yet another tampered environmental system. The question was, how had it been tampered with? And why?

She was peering at the system itself, noting something off, when she realized one of the ship's passengers was also in the room. A tallish white-blond man with pale blue eyes. The man who had fetched her. Richard Something-Or-Other.

"I prefer to work alone," she said.

"So do I," he said.

They stared at each other for a moment. Hunsaker, who also preferred to work alone (she knew that because he had told her half a dozen times) stood near the doorway, his shirt soaked with Fergus's tears. She'd managed to get Fergus out of the room and down to the kitchen where the chef could watch him. Fergus was quite pliable most of the time. Right now, he was damn near catatonic. Perhaps anyone would be after crying that much.

She turned toward Hunsaker. "What the hell were you thinking? Sending those two to work in these rooms with a murderer on the loose?"

"Who knew that the killer would come after one of us?" he said.

"I don't think the killer did," Richard Something-Or-Other said. "If you'll allow me."

He shoved—shoved!—Anne Marie out of the way, and peered at the control panel himself.

"You do realize if this man is the killer, he now has access to the evidence," she said to Hunsaker.

"You do realize if this man is the killer," Hunsaker said, mimicking her tone, "then you just gave him a reason to kill us."

They glared at each other again.

"I'm not the killer," Richard Something-Or-Other said, "but whoever is has some serious engineering skills."

She couldn't resist: she peered at the controls as well. These older models had digital readouts and mechanisms attached to mechanisms. She had just looked at the one in the room where Agatha Kantswinkle died—and that control did not have a secondary digital readout. This one did.

She looked at Richard Something-Or-Other. He raised his eyebrows at her, as if he were surprised as well. Then he touched the whole thing with a single fingernail. The second readout was loose, but had been attached into the control's mechanism. She peered at the mix. When Dillith had been in here, the atmosphere's mix had been the same as it had been when Agatha Kantswinkle had died.

Anne Marie frowned. She glanced over her shoulder at the door. Hunsaker was still leaning on the jamb, glaring at her. He

seemed to disapprove of what she was doing. Or maybe he disapproved of Richard Something-Or-Other. Or maybe he always disapproved of everything.

She sighed and walked to the door. "Move," she said.

Hunsaker didn't.

"I mean it. Move. I need to see something."

"What?" he asked.

"It's easier to look than it is to explain," she said, pushing him aside. Then she peered inside the locking mechanism. Another small digital readout had been attached.

"This door was closed when Fergus got here, wasn't it?" she asked.

"I don't know," Hunsaker said. "I didn't ask."

"You didn't bother to tell them to keep the doors open?"

Hunsaker's glare changed to something filled with a kind of fury. "Of course I did. It's part of the general instructions, anyway. The door should always be open when the staff is inside, even if no one else is."

"Hmm," she said.

"What?" Richard Something-Or-Other asked from his position near the environmental controls.

"This is a timer," she said. "It closes the door."

"And this timer," he said, "changes the environmental mix."

"It couldn't have been put in here when Dillith was here,"

Anne Marie said.

"Someone set it up earlier than that," Richard Something-Or-Other said.

"Which means that the killer wasn't after Dillith," Anne Marie said.

"He was after Susan Carmichael." Hunsaker said that last, breathed it, in fact. Anne Marie could hear the shock in his voice. "If I'd gotten her just a little too late, then—"

"You would've died too," Anne Marie said. "We have to brace this door open."

"I doubt the room will kill again," Richard Something-Or-Other said.

"But the other rooms might," Anne Marie said.

"I moved everyone out of the older rooms," Hunsaker said.

"Let's hope that's enough," Anne Marie said. She actually felt a little chill. She liked the chill. Excitement—she had missed it so much. "Maybe he'll start coming after the rest of us too."

"Oh, don't get your hopes up," Hunsaker snapped and left the room.

Richard Something-Or-Other raised his eyebrows again. "What was that all about?"

Anne Marie shrugged. "I guess he's upset by all of this."

Richard nodded. "I think it would be surprising if he were not."

Hunsaker stomped down the stairs. Now he didn't know what to do. Did he warn Carmichael? Did he put all the guests in the same room and let them duke it out until a ship arrived and got them out of his resort?

He stopped halfway down the stairs and leaned his head against the wall. All of his training, all of his long and fancy education, all of his experience good and bad did not train him for any of this. He could just imagine the lecture titled How to Handle a Murderer Loose in Your Resort.

Simple: Call the local authorities.

And if there were none?

He banged his head against the metal just once. If he rounded them up, where would he take them? The restaurant? The casino?

The casino at least covered a big area. It would be hard to tamper with the environmental system.

Maybe he should just force them all back to their ship and if they killed each other, so be it. Hell, if they died from smoke inhalation, so be it. It wasn't his concern. While they were here, they bothered him. While they were on their ship, they had nothing to do with him.

That's what he'd do. He'd get the maintenance guys and make them act as security guards. Even the chef and the blackjack dealer could work security (so long as she put her shirt on). They'd round up these horrible people and put them back on their own ship and if they died, they died. His stomach

turned.

Maybe if they all died, he could just jettison the ship into deepest darkest space. He'd set it on autopilot and get it the hell out of here. For a moment, his spirits rose. Then he remembered he'd already charged their accounts. There was a record he couldn't tamper with of them being on his station.

Dammit. He had no idea what to do.

Richard helped Anne Marie get the corpse down to the medical wing. He'd had enough of carrying bodies. By his count, this was the fifth this trip, and the only one he hadn't met while she was still alive.

The medical wing was in the farthest part of the station, and certainly didn't deserve the appellation "wing." It was a medical suite at best, a smallish group of rooms set up as an afterthought.

Agatha Kantswinkle lay on one table, naked—which was another image he'd never get out of his mind—and, to his surprise, the other two bodies from the ship were in clear refrigeration units, looking no worse for being dead the last few days. He set Dillith on the closest table and stretched his muscles with relief.

"Thank you," the doctor said in that tone all professionals used which actually meant you're done, now get the hell out.

Which he did.

And as he stepped into the corridor, he realized he'd been

going about this investigation all wrong. He'd been looking for common ties, for suffocation deaths, for motive, and he, of all people, should know that motive mattered a lot less than the entertainments said it did.

His motive for most of his early killings had been because his mother had hired him out to do the job. The later killings had been because he could make money at it. Only the first killing had had a real motive: the man had murdered his father and ruined Richard's life. He didn't need to look at motive. He needed to look for experience. Technical experience. With environmental systems.

He scurried back to the hotel's main entrance and hoped that Hunsaker's horrible aging database had at least enough information to solve all of this.

She wasn't hysterical. Hunsaker could've dealt with her if she had been hysterical. He had training in hysterical. High-end hotel guests often got hysterical about nothing. And here, which was decidedly not high-end, people got hysterical because . . . well, because they were here.

Susan G. Carmichael had every reason to be hysterical. She could've died in her room had he not taken her out of it. But she had already figured out that she might die, and she was calmer than he was.

She had even found a way to contact her father, who was such a famous Vice Admiral that Hunsaker had even heard of him, and he was sending a ship that would be here in eighteen



hours sharp, along with some kind of back-up that would take care of the problem. Whatever that meant.

But she wasn't returning to her room. To any room, really.

She wanted to remain with Hunsaker, thinking that somehow Hunsaker would be safe. He sat on his chair with his back against the wall, no longer sure what safe was. She was sitting on the edge of his desk, surveying the area as if she ran it instead of him.

He was still debating whether to get everyone else out of their rooms when Ilykova burst through the doors.

"I need your database," he said.

"Whatever happened to please and thank you?" Hunsaker muttered, knowing he was being a complete ass, as he handed over the pad.

Ilykova ignored his comment, although he did glance at Carmichael. He didn't seem that surprised to see her. Then he leaned against the desk and started trolling the database, his fingers moving faster than Hunsaker's ever could.

The three of them didn't say a word as Ilykova worked. Carmichael watched him. Hunsaker kept an eye on the doors and the stairs, not that it had made any difference in the past.

Then Ilykova looked over at Carmichael. "Were you and Agatha Kantswinkle ever alone?"

"Here?" she asked.

"On the ship," he said.

She looked down. "I talked to her once. After that incident—you know. I felt so sorry for her that—"

"What incident?" Hunsaker interrupted. It wouldn't have been his business had everything happened on the ship, but the ship's problems had spilled into his little resort, and he felt he had a right to know.

She looked at him. "We had a dinner hour on the ship. We all got fed at the same time, and the room wasn't very big. We got to know each other better than you usually get to know people on passenger ships, which wasn't necessarily a good thing."

Ilykova nodded, although he kept his head down, still searching the database as he listened.

"Anyway, just after Professor Grove died, we were all on edge, and Agatha started in on how we needed someone to take charge, to make sure things wouldn't get worse, and Mr. Bunting had enough. He told her she was a nosy snobbish old woman who wouldn't know how to treat other human beings even if she had special training, and she certainly couldn't be in charge of anything, and he didn't believe anything she said about herself and—" Carmichael shook her head. "I was agreeing with him at first, she was an unpleasant woman, and I would've given anything to avoid her as much as possible, but he didn't stop, and by the end, she looked just devastated."

Ilykova was looking up now. Hunsaker was surprised as well. He couldn't quite imagine Kantswinkle looking devastated.

"I waited until everyone left," Carmichael said, "and told her that we were all on edge and that he had no right to lay into her like that, and she started to cry, which made me very uncomfortable. I walked her to her room, and told her to get some rest, that it would all seem better in the morning, and then I left."

"Then what?" Hunsaker asked, expecting more to the story.

"Then we found Trista's body and the fire and we barely made it here," Carmichael said.

"I got the distinct impression you wanted nothing to do with Ms. Kantswinkle," Hunsaker said.

Carmichael looked at him in surprise. "I thought I hid that."

"You avoided her in the lobby, checking in," Hunsaker said.

Carmichael looked down, sighed. "She was clingy. Halfway through our discussion, I realized she was bombastic because she was lonely and needy and I'd made a huge mistake trying to comfort her. If this had been some kind of normal flight, I wouldn't have been able to shake her for the rest of the trip."

"If it had been a normal flight," Ilykova said, "you wouldn't have spoken to her in the first place."

"True enough," Carmichael said. Then she frowned at him. "Why did you ask about us?"

"I have a theory," he said.

But he didn't say any more. And he continued to tap on the pad, which annoyed Hunsaker.

"Are you going to share the theory?" Hunsaker asked.

"I think someone believes you saw something," Ilykova said. "Did you?"

Carmichael shrugged and shook her head.

"It would've been when you two were alone together."

She shook her head again. "Nothing."

He grunted as if he didn't believe her. He continued to work.

After a long moment, he said softly, "Well, I think I found something."

"What did you find?" Hunsaker asked. Carmichael crowded close. Richard didn't answer right away. First he made certain no one else could hear. He checked the doors and looked up the stairwell.

When he came back to the desk, he spoke as softly as he could. He explained his idea—that he'd searched for expertise, not motive. He didn't discuss how he feared the database would be limited (it was, but it didn't matter, he'd found enough).

"When I searched for expertise in environmental systems, I got two names. I expected at least one from the crew, but that was wrong."

"Which names?" Carmichael sounded panicked for the first time since he'd seen her down here.

"William Bunting and Lysa Lamphere."

"Bunting," Hunsaker said. "He was the one who yelled at Agatha Kantswinkle, you said."

Carmichael nodded.

"But," Richard said, "whoever killed Agatha and went after you, Susan, had a short window to do so. You had your room assignments already. Did you let anyone in your room?"

"Janet Potsworth," Carmichael said. "But I never left her alone and she never went near the controls."

"Anyone else?"

She shook her head.

"Where were you after we found Agatha's body?"

"I didn't leave the room," Carmichael said.

"Except to buy clothing," Hunsaker said.

"Yes," Carmichael said. "I bought clothing. But Bunting couldn't've done it then. He was in the boutique with me."

She used the word boutique with a touch of sarcasm. Richard frowned for a moment. Bunting had yelled at Agatha Kantswinkle and made her cry. She wouldn't have let him near her. But another woman. . . ?

"Did she have any troubles with Lysa?" Richard asked.

Carmichael shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm not even sure they spoke."

He didn't want to push her too hard. "Did you see either William Bunting or Lysa Lamphere that night you were alone

with Agatha?”

“Lysa,” Carmichael said. “But it was no big deal. She had forgotten something in the dining area. She went past us, looking a bit concerned. It wasn’t important.”

“Past you from where?” he asked.

“I assume she came from her room,” Carmichael said.

“But you were walking Agatha to her room.”

“Yes,” Carmichael said.

“From the dining area.”

“Yes.”

“Which was nowhere near Lysa’s room.”

Carmichael looked at him.

“Her room was in a whole different area of the ship.”

“And the fire started not too far from Agatha’s room,” Carmichael said.

Richard nodded. He felt certain they knew who the killer was now. Lysa Lamphere had killed Agatha and gone after Carmichael because they could tie her to the entire event.

“It all sounds so nice and pretty,” Hunsaker said, “until you remember that Lysa nearly died from inhaling the same toxic air that Agatha died from.”

“Did she?” Richard asked. “She went into the room, made the switch with the environmental controls, maybe even watched Agatha die, and then switched them back. She waited until

everything cleared a bit, and then went through her charade. I have a hunch if we search her room, we'll find some small breathing equipment, something she hid before going back to 'discover' Agatha."

"Why would she do that?" Carmichael asked.

They were all so naïve. Or maybe he wasn't naïve enough. It seemed obvious to him. Once he had Lysa's name, he understood how everything happened. And a little bit of why.

"So that no one would ever suspect her. You ruled her out even after I discovered her expertise because she had suffered as well." He almost added, any good professional would've done that. But he didn't. Still, he saw the way Hunsaker looked at him. Hunsaker knew that.

"May I have the pad?" Hunsaker asked.

Richard handed him the pad, bracing for the next question, which came with predictable swiftness.

"I don't suppose you have expertise in environmental systems?" Hunsaker asked.

Richard resisted the urge to smile. "No, I don't."

"I will check," Hunsaker said.

"Do," Richard said. "But remember what I told you before. I wouldn't have started the fire. If you want to scuttle a ship, there are better and quicker ways to do it. She didn't want us all to die. She knew we were close to your resort."

"But why kill five people?" Carmichael asked.

"That's what I mean to find out," Richard said.

It took a bit of work. Buried deep in all the information was one single tie. To the mathematician. His new job was a promotion, one she didn't feel he deserved. She had studied under him and he had refused to grant her a degree, saying she was sloppy. She'd moved to engineering and graduated, although not with honors, and not in a way that gave her any currency in any job. She would've needed more education for that.

She had boarded the ship with a plan to follow him to Ansary, maybe destroy his career there. Or maybe kill him. But she didn't.

Trista died because she had seen the murder, and she planned to do something about it. Lysa had never planned for Trista's body to be discovered. She'd probably thought the fire would be discovered sooner. By the time someone had found it, the entire ship went into a panic. Which, if Richard thought about it, meant that her calculations had been off. Professor Grove the mathematician had been right about her after all. Her math skills hadn't been up to the task.

Then Agatha Kantswinkle and Susan Carmichael had seen Lysa in the area, and if there were an investigation, they might've mentioned her. She didn't want to risk it. So she planned the last two murders, and might've gotten away with all of it if Hunsaker hadn't moved Carmichael out of her room.

What Richard couldn't figure out was why she killed Remy



Demaupin.

"I didn't," Lysa snarled. They had tied her up and moved her to the bar, along with all the other passengers. No one wanted to be alone any longer. They all worried that Richard and Hunsaker and Carmichael had caught the wrong person, even though Lysa made it pretty clear from the moment she'd been incapacitated that they hadn't.

"What do you mean you didn't kill Remy?" Carmichael said. "We know you did."

Lysa shook her head. "He killed himself," she said. "In fact, he inspired me. I figured everyone would look for a connection between him and Professor Grove. Then we would have the emergency and everyone would forget and . . ."

She lowered her head. Richard watched her, realized he'd met her type before. The type that imagined what they'd do, then did it, and wondered why nothing quite worked the way they'd planned.

"You should've just shoved him out of an airlock," Richard said.

Everyone looked at him. He realized he'd said too much.

He shrugged, pretending a nonchalance he didn't entirely feel.

"What I mean is that had you done something simple, no one would've thought twice about it. All this elaborate stuff was your downfall."

That still sounded bad. He sounded like one killer giving advice to another. Which, in fact, he was.

Hunsaker crossed his arms, watching Richard, a slight frown on his face. Anne Marie stood in the back of the room, listening. The captain was still at his table, drowning himself in drink. Carmichael kept checking the time, hoping that her father's ship would get here soon.

Everyone else sat very far away from Lysa, as if her particular brand of insanity was catching.

Richard didn't stay that far away, though. For all her insanity, her elaborate kills, and her mistakes, she was what a murderer should be. Someone who had a reason to do what she did—not a bloodless reason. A personal reason. An important reason. Something that was, to her, life and death. So she acted, in a life-or-death manner. And he found that both inspirational and appropriate.

He didn't ask her any more. Carmichael's father could take them all in his various ships. Somewhere Lysa would get prosecuted for what she had done. Not that this was a happy ending for anyone. The captain would probably lose his job. Carmichael was going back to a situation that she clearly didn't want to be in. And Richard would have no way to get to Ansary.

Not to mention all the people who had died. Their families would never be the same.

He walked back to Anne Marie Devlin. Pretty woman. Or she would've been if she weren't a depressive and a drunk.

She was sober right now, but he could see the tendencies. She was the kind who didn't want to change because she saw no point in it. Besides, change was hard. That was becoming clearer to him, each and every day.

\* \* \*

The ships arrived in fifteen hours, not eighteen, and offered everyone a ride. Once Hunsaker realized who Carmichael's father was—he truly was a mucky-muck of high muck who had a lot of mucking money—he made noises about the damage to his resort and how embarrassing it would be if it ever came out that his daughter had been a target. When that didn't move her father, Hunsaker added that it would also be embarrassing for people to know that his daughter had been fleeing from him when all of this occurred.

Hunsaker got a tidy payout, enough to renovate the entire resort if he felt like it. And he felt like it. He wanted this place as tamperproof as possible. He didn't ever want to be in this situation again.

Ilykova hadn't left with the rest. He wasn't going to testify, either, no matter how much anyone pleaded with him. He sat in the bar these days and watched Anne Marie drink, which was a sight to behold. He didn't seem miserable, but he didn't seem happy either. He was waiting for the next ship, for a way out. Although he clearly didn't know where he was going.

And Hunsaker had been thinking about it. The station was a world unto itself. Technically, anything that happened here was

prosecuted in the Commons System, but no prosecution had ever happened.

Hunsaker wasn't sure what he would've done if Ilykova hadn't been here. Ilykova wasn't big or burly and he didn't seem tough. But he had experience.

And he had no qualms about doing what it took to keep the peace.

You should've just shoved him out of an airlock.

Hunsaker couldn't've done that to anyone. Ever. But he could pay someone to do it while he looked the other way. That ability wouldn't've worked in this circumstance, of course. But it might come in handy in the future.

And if Hunsaker had learned anything from this experience, he had learned it was better to be prepared.

If he had been prepared, none of this would've happened.

The doors would've locked properly, the environmental controls would've been up to date, and all the rooms would've been cleaned.

Woulda coulda shoulda.

He wasn't going to have any regrets. He was going to move forward.

He squared his shoulders and walked to the bar. He paused for a brief jealous moment when he saw how close Ilykova was sitting to Anne Marie. Then he saw the look of disgust on Ilykova's face and realized that the man would never

be interested in her.

So Hunsaker sat down at their table and offered Ilykova a job.

No one was surprised when Ilykova said yes.

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