



Issue #64 • Mar. 10, 2011

[“Breathing Sunshine,” by Garth Upshaw](#)

[“Mr Morrow Becomes Acquainted with the Delicate Art of Squid Keeping,” by Geoffrey Maloney](#)

For more stories and Audio Fiction Podcasts, visit  
<http://beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

## BREATHING SUNSHINE

by Garth Upshaw

The rusty bridge in front of me creaked from gusts of wind that blew through the gorge. Black water rushed over rocks. My breathing mask and goggles itched. The new material worked better but was damned uncomfortable. I took a reading. Nominal. Thank goodness. The head gear slipped off my face with one tug, and I scratched the stubble on my chin.

Forward. I needed to reach Fort Clatsop by nightfall. But the instant my foot touched the rotted surface of the span, a slick, wet, woman's head poked through a gap ten meters in front of me. "This is a toll bridge." White fangs gleamed. She pulled herself one-two-three up. A leather belt cinched a long shirt tight about her waist.

I'd seen water pixies south of here, but I'd managed to avoid any close encounters. "What's the charge?" I twitched my jacket aside and put my hand on the butt of my revolver.

She moved faster than I believed possible. In an eyeblink, she stood next to me, breathing into my ear. "Pull that popgun, and it'll be the last thing you ever do." Raindrops spattered the bridge.

I breathed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Whatta you got?”

“Jacksons?” My stomach roiled.

She laughed. “Paper money? No one can spend it, and it makes lousy insulation.”

“Worth a shot. Sandwich?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Bread.” The tiny scales on her face shimmered. “What are you lugging around? It looks heavy.” She undid a buckle on my pack.

“Detector. Camping gear.” I turned to face her. “It’s delicate.”

“Just asking.” She put her palms up. “No need to get huffy. How about a story?”

“A story?”

Her eyes widened in mock surprise. “For the toll.” She leaped past me. “Follow.” Her lean pixie body disappeared over the railing.

I took a step forward. She stood in the doorway of a hut constructed from the tangled detritus of the river: torn canvas sheeting, battered pallets, gnarled lumps of tree roots.

“Not as windy.” She waved. “I won’t eat you.”

Time was slipping through my fingers, but I didn’t seem to have a choice. I walked back to the base of the ramp and under the bridge to her hut.

She pushed aside a pile of blankets to make room. Smooth rocks and glittering chips of glass lined narrow shelves. In the far corner, a candle leaned from a spindly metal holder. She saw my gaze. “You have fire?”

I nodded. “Cup of tea?”

She clapped her hands. “Excellent.”

I took a reading – safety first! – before lighting the candle. Nominal. “My name’s Desmond.” A warm yellow glow surrounded us. “What’s yours?”

She shrugged. “Pixie.”

“What were you called? Before.”

Her eyes narrowed. “How about that story?”

I unfolded my camp stool. The pump for the stove was tricky, but I got the fire going first try. “My mother built dirigibles for the queen. One day – “

A grunting scrape sounded from outside the hut. Pixie leaped forward. Her shoulder caught me in the chest and we tumbled backwards. Boards snapped. I skidded on my side across sand and rocks.

An enormous shape loomed over the far side of the hut. Orca. Killer whale. Mottled black and white skin surrounded a long mouth filled with dozens of pointy teeth. “Having company?” Its voice rumbled like thunder.

Pixie grabbed my hand. “Run.”

The orca hunched and thrust its body forward. Even without legs, it moved as fast as a sprinting human. Its blunt head knocked a corner of Pixie's hut askew.

I ran. My heart pounded. Pixie dashed up the bridge ramp with me in tow. The huge creature smashed more of her house. The candle tipped over, and the canvas caught fire. Flames danced. Noxious smoke billowed upwards.

"You bastard." Pixie threw a rock. It bounced off the orca's thick hide.

I pulled my revolver and held it steady. There. I squeezed. My ears rang.

The orca screamed and twisted over the sand. "You'll pay." Its mouth snapped closed.

I aimed again, but it launched itself into the water. Rain plastered my hair to my forehead. My hands shook.

"We should go." Pixie touched my shoulder.

I holstered the gun. "Hang on." My heart steadied. I unwound a grapple from around my waist. I wasn't about to abandon the pack, but I didn't relish venturing under the bridge again. A strap protruded from the wreckage of Pixie's home. A long shot, but I had to try. I swung the hook and released the cord. Missed. Damn. Fire crackled.

"Leave it." Pixie juggled my elbow.

I readied the hook again. "It's important."

“Yeah? For what?”

“It detects the particles. We think I’ll be able to track the source.” I tossed the hook. It snagged the pack. “Maybe restore the Before times.” Wind shredded the smoke.

“Huh.” Pixie didn’t look thrilled.

With a scrape and a bump, I pulled the pack from the burning lumber. My arm muscles ached. The pack dangled, twisting in the air. The tea kit was a goner, but I hoped the detector and my other gear were all right. “Don’t you want things to go back?”

Pixie shrugged. “You were rich, right?”

I frowned. “Not really.”

She snorted. “Let me guess. You had tutors. Never missed a meal. A summer home.”

“Cottage.”

Pixie leaned forward. “I scrubbed pots and pans. Day-in, day-out. Da died working the bauxite mines. Ma’s indenture was traded to a cooper down the coast. He didn’t want me.”

I brute-forced the pack over the railing. Some of my supplies were gone, but the detector looked undamaged. The gauges twitched when I tapped them. The intake mesh was whole. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged. “I get by.”

“Thanks for saving my life.” I shouldered the pack. “What got into that damn fish anyway?”

“He wanted me to be his wife.” Pixie’s eyes glittered. “Number four or five, I’m not sure.”

“Why try to kill us?”

“I guess he’s the jealous type.” She half-skipped to keep up with my pace. “He must have seen you.”

“You married him, then?”

“Not likely.” She laughed. “He wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I bit him.” Her fangs shone white.

“I wonder who he was. Before.” I shook my head. “We might never know.”

“He was the chief cook where I used to work.” Pixie tossed a rock into the water. “I’d recognize the bastard anywhere.”

We skirted a downed tree, scrambling through vine maples and opportunistic blackberries. The old highway followed the water, and we turned upstream towards Fort Clatsop. Worry twisted my stomach in a knot. I hoped everyone there was all right.

A splash sounded from the river. I whirled around. Nothing. I hated the way the mask restricted my peripheral vision. My nerves felt raw.

Pixie bounded ahead. I jogged after her. If we set a good pace, we’d make it to the fort before complete darkness fell. If

they were all right, if my fears were groundless, we'd get clean beds, hot food. Good air.

\* \* \*

Fort Clatsop straddled a bluff that thrust out of the ground like a fist. Old iron cannons guarded the narrows, relics of the days when Russia had designs on the wealth of the lush Northwest Territory.

I took a reading, cranking the handle to draw air through the mechanism. Pixie watched with bright, avid eyes. The bellows creaked. "On the warm side." My words sounded muffled behind my mask.

Pixie sucked an enormous lungful of air into her body. "Like breathing sunshine." The scales on her face sparkled. "You don't know what you're missing."

"Easy for you to say." I flicked a fingernail against the gauge. "I watched my brother grow roots." Water dripped. "Wood beetles killed him."

Pixie shrugged. "Sorry."

"You're one of the lucky ones. We could put a mask on you, keep the particles out for a few days. You'd turn back." I moved closer to the fort and took another reading. The needle hovered over yellow. My tongue felt as dry as sand.

"Don't even think about it." Pixie's eyes narrowed. "What makes you so all-fired sure you can stop the particles?"



I grunted. "I was trapped with a team of geologists in a mine shaft when the change happened." Memories flooded through me. "They're brilliant people. They built this." I slapped the detector. "And the masks. They have a theory." My boots crunched on rocks. "Their colleagues were working on a secret installation upriver. But word leaked. It always does." I packed the detector. "A weapon the Queen could use to warp the fabric of reality. No one really thought they'd succeed."

Pixie turned to face me. "But they did."

"That's our best guess."

"So why aren't they with you? Bring a whole team?"

"They're old. Injured. They'd never make it." I squared my shoulders. "So it's up to me." The wooden walls of the fort stood solid and quiet. "I'm supposed to get help here." I frowned. We should have been challenged by now.

Pointed, thigh-thick logs, grey from years of rain, circled the top of the bluff. Roofed towers with overlapping fields of fire anchored the corners. No lights appeared. No hail-fellow-well-met came from behind the walls.

Pixie regarded the fort with a bemused expression. "Nobody's home."

"No shit." I didn't like the looks of this. We'd lost contact with Fort Clatsop a week ago. Our carrier pigeons kept

disappearing. Part of my mission was to get new chicks. Restock our flock.

I sidled forward with my revolver held ready. Pixie followed. The main gate was shut tight. Cedar-shingled roofs were all I could see of the inside structures.

Rain pattered on the road. I followed the wall counter-clockwise around the fort. Wind howled. Basalt cliffs plunged to the river. At the base of the northernmost tower, a single footprint had crushed a newly-budded daffodil. I dropped to my knees. The toes pointed away from the fort. My goggles obscured tiny details, but the imprint of five clawed digits was unmistakable.

“Been a few days,” Pixie said. “Maybe a week.” The edges of the print had been eroded by rain. She followed a barely discernible series of impressions towards the edge of the cliff. “Well, there it is.”

I looked over the sheer drop. A handful of crows pecked at a crumpled furry body on the rocks. “Poor bastard.” I tossed rocks at the birds, but they evaded with lazy disdain.

Pixie turned back to the tower. I followed her gaze. Two meters from the ground, a raw piece of broken wood dangled from a firing slit. The opening was splintered as though something large had forced its way out.

I readied the grapple, but Pixie leaped up the wall. Clawed feet dug into wood. In seconds, she was surveying the fort from the tower. She turned a full circle. “Looks a mess.”

“Here.” I tossed her a line and climbed up.

Half a dozen bodies littered the interior courtyard. Smashed glass gleamed in corners. Wet, charred wood poked from the remains of the main barracks.

We descended a ladder and wandered through the wreckage. A woman lay across a doorway. Blood had soaked the wood, turning it dark brown. Ants trailed out of an eye socket.

Annie? Susan? I didn’t know. I’d only ever exchanged notes with them. Letters in tiny handwriting curled into a metal tube and clipped onto a bird’s leg. A pitiful way to communicate.

Waves of nausea wrenched my stomach. I needed to vomit, but the mask blocked my mouth. My fingers tore at the straps.

“It’s not safe for you.” Pixie grabbed my hands. “Hot spot.”

She was right. I stumbled backwards, away from the bodies, reeling through the courtyard towards the gate. Out of the hot spot, I’d probably be okay, if I didn’t breath too many particles. If I kept it quick.

Outside, I ripped my mask off and threw up in the dirt. With every breath, the bitter tang of stomach acid mixed with

the sharp flavor of airborne particles. They entered my lungs, were absorbed by my blood, and lodged in my muscles like tiny chips of fire.

I slapped the mask back on. Too long. Change roiled inside me like a trapped tornado. My shoulders hunched and twisted beyond my control. Muscles tore with jolts of agony, and then rebuilt themselves in a heartbeat.

Pixie cocked her head and frowned. “Bad?”

The changes slowed. The bulk of new muscles on my back and chest melted away. The shakes calmed. “I’m okay.” I sat down hard. I wondered what I’d been turning into. My legs felt like rubber. Wouldn’t support a child.

“You could stop fighting it.” Pixie offered a hand up.

Anger surged through me. “Like whatever happened in there?” I slapped her hand aside. “Best guess. Let me lay it out for you. One: particle storm. Two: faulty detector. Three: some idiot didn’t have their mask.” Tears bit at the corners of my eyes. “Four: they turned. Into something. Something with claws.”

“It’s not always bad.”

“Thanks. Thanks a fucking lot.” I pushed myself to my feet. “I *knew* those people.” My breathing sounded hot and loud in my ears. “You think it’s so great, why’d you keep me from yanking my mask off inside? Huh?”

“I thought you’d want to choose.” Pixie looked me in the eyes. “Not change by accident.”

My anger vanished. I felt emptied out. Hollow. “You saved my life. Again.”

“You’d still be you. Inside.” Pixie helped gather the bits and pieces that had spilled from my pack.

“Maybe.” I forced myself to think of something else. The bodies. The thought of burying all the dead overwhelmed me. I’d have to carry them to a central place. Light a pyre instead. Tears dripped from my eyes. The goggles steamed up. I staggered to the wall and leaned on the rough wood for support.

To the west, the setting sun turned the clouds red as blood. Rain sleeted down, filling the world with water.

Pixie took my hand. “Let’s camp away from here. Get some sleep and come back in the morning.” She seemed to follow my thoughts. “We’ll take care of the dead tomorrow.”

I trailed in Pixie’s wake for half an hour of steady hiking. She found a hollow of ferns and hosta sheltered by an enormous cedar. A stream flowed down the hillside in front of us, pooling on the other side of the tree. Thick soft duff covered the forest floor, and the cedar’s flat sweeping branches protected us from all but the worst of the rain.

She watched as I set up the tent and checked the filters. The routine helped calm me. She'd been right. We'd go back to the fort tomorrow.

"Light a fire, Des." Pixie stepped into the water. "I'll tickle some fish out of hiding." She slipped below the surface with a soft splash.

I gathered wood, looking underneath fallen logs for anything dry. By the time I had a blaze going, Pixie had returned. Three small trout hung from the claw on her index finger.

"For you." She gave me a cockeyed grin. "I ate half a dozen of their brethren in the pond. Thrill of the chase, you know?"

Warmth spread through me like a healing balm. And not just from the fire. "Thanks, Pixie."

\* \* \*

The next morning, we returned to the fort. Water dripped from roofs. Branches waved in the wind. Pixie helped build a pyre, ripping half-burned timbers from ruined buildings with amazing strength, lifting bodies with me. When we finished, she held my hand as the flames caught and consumed.

Grit irritated the insides of my elbows. Black smoke boiled into the sky. Wood popped and crackled. The air filled with the smell of burning. I started to say something, anything, to mark their passage, but my throat clogged on the words.

I turned and pushed my way into the supply room. A rifle sat in a metal rack. Its barrel felt cool in my palms. I ripped a box open and stuffed my pack with dynamite and blasting caps.

I stood up, the pack heavy on my shoulders. Straps dug into my skin. I stumbled outside. Pixie walked behind me. We trudged east, towards the secret installation, towards whatever terrible failed weapon awaited us. I would stop the damn particles if it killed me.

Potholes riddled the highway. Entire sections of road had been washed out by winter storms. Pixie tagged along. I wasn't sure why she stuck with me, but I was glad. More than glad. I wasn't sure I could do this on my own. She kept me focused, sane.

Particles sparkled in the lee of every rock, every trunk. The readings got worse the farther east we headed. There were fluctuations, of course, random variations, but the trend was clear. By that evening, the needle stayed solidly on yellow with all-too-often excursions into the red. Pixie breathed deep and grinned.

I worried about the detector. Kept my attention up for the slightest tingle of accidental particle ingestion. My skin felt raw, burned. I had to swap out the filter on my mask days sooner than I expected.

The landscape altered. The lush greens of the inland valley turned harsher, rockier. Gnarled pine trees stretched wind-blown branches towards our approach as if imploring us to stay back.

Cat-sized gnomes with large, intelligent eyes scurried into our path. One wore a dirty lab coat. Another had cracked goggles wrapped around its eyes. “Go back, go back,” they squeaked. Pixie bared her teeth, and they scurried away. A distant part of me felt sorry for their change.

\* \* \*

By mid-afternoon of the fourth day, the needle stayed pinned to the far side of the gauge. The air sparked and shivered around us. We walked the road next to each other, taking turns carrying the pack. The cliff went up on our left and dropped down to our right. The sky ahead glowed.

“I feel more alive this instant than ever before.” Laughter bubbled from Pixie’s lips. “You plod along, earthbound.” She twirled on her toes. “I bet you wish you could fly.” Her outstretched hands left trails of glittering afterimages.

A rock the size of my head hurtled past me, bounced over the road, and splashed in the river. More rocks followed. I dodged, clumsy as a hippopotamus.

Pixie danced and spun. Shapes scurried across the top of the cliffs above us.



I pulled my revolver and squeezed off four quick shots. A gnome sagged forward and slid down the scree. Blood shone on the gravel. The barrage of rocks stopped. The sharp smell of gunpowder tickled my nose even through the filter.

“Let’s move.” I grabbed Pixie’s hand. The river rushed by below us. Sunlight danced on waves. We ran.

A thumping, pulsating sound seemed to burrow into my brain. We turned a bend, and I stopped in awe. A scaffolding of pipes surrounded a boiler the size of a large house. Steam hissed from fittings. Gnomes rushed backwards and forward like panicked ants. Lumps of coal were scattered across the dirt. A hungry fire roared in the structure’s center.

Sparks geysered from a tower that speared the clouds. The detector made an agonized squeal and expired with a puff of rubbery smoke. Pixie laughed. She threw her head back, eyes closed, arms wide open.

I unlimbered my pack and tore open the wrapped packages of dynamite. No blasting caps. I dumped the pack on the ground and searched through the contents. “Pixie?”

“Isn’t this grand?” She sucked deep lungfulls of air into her body. Her face glowed with inner fire. “Why would you want to destroy this?”

“Where are the caps?” The grip of the revolver felt ice cold in my hand.

Pixie dropped her arms. “You can’t bring the Before times back.”

“Was that why you came along?” My heart turned to lead. “Why not just kill me?”

“I could have killed you anytime I wanted.” Tears welled up in Pixie’s eyes. “Pushed you into the river. Slit your throat.” Her lips twitched. “I like you.”

I knew I could pull the gun. That she wouldn’t move. My muscles tensed.

Water sprayed my neck. I whirled around. Ten tons of angry killer whale humped up the rocky sand towards me. “She’s mine.” An ugly black hole on his side wept bloody pus.

I drew and aimed, but I wasn’t fast enough. A flipper caught my shoulder and sent me flying. The revolver skittered away. My mask tore. I inhaled a lungful of liquid fire.

My body twisted in agony. Muscles bunched, tightened, and reformed. My back felt flayed, split open. Pixie threw herself between me and the orca. “Back off.”

He hunched forward. “But darling....” His mouth gaped wide. “I love you.”

Pixie darted towards him. Her finger flicked his head. “Get the fuck away from me.” A bright line of blood slashed across his snout. “I don’t want you.”

He reared higher. “Too bad.” His mottled black-and-white body loomed over Pixie.

I pushed myself to my hands and knees. White feathers filled my peripheral vision. I flapped. Flapped! Wings. Enormous, impossible wings. Energy thrummed through me with every breath. I felt strong. Invincible. I bounced to my feet.

The orca launched himself like a runaway locomotive at Pixie. A gnome threw a lump of coal that caught the back of her left knee. She slipped off balance and fell to the ground. Time slowed. The orca’s gigantic bulk seemed poised to crush her into the dirt.

I leaped forward without thinking. My body slammed into slick wet flesh. The orca pushed against me. I thrust back. Brute force against brute force. My new muscles strained, holding his full weight. My knees bent. Straightened. I lifted. Sparkles filled my vision. I felt exhilarated.

“No.” I threw the orca away from Pixie. He twisted in the air before smashing into the pipes. A terrible grinding assaulted my ears. Jets of super-heated steam cut into his flesh. He screamed.

More pipes broke. Flames shot skyward. Gnomes clutched their heads and ran in circles. I scooped Pixie into my arms,

beat my wings, and leaped skyward. The chimney faltered, swaying back and forth. Sparks made crazy loops in the clouds.

“You were right.” I hugged Pixie close. My wings swept through the air. “We can do anything.”

Far below us, the boiler burst open. More pipes collapsed. The sparks sputtered and stopped. “Put me down.” Pixie pushed her body away.

“What? Don’t you like flying?” I swooped lower.

“The machine’s wrecked.” Pixie stretched for the ground. “You got what you wanted.”

She was right. Without the particles, we’d change back. My wings would shrivel and vanish. The new-found strength would wane. In a few days, maybe a week, I’d be my old self. I set Pixie on a bluff looking over the river. “I don’t know what I want anymore.”

Sunlight poured through clouds. Pixie squeezed my hands. “We’ll just have to find out.” She turned and stepped down. Cold wind blew against my face. She paused. “You still owe me a story.”

Copyright © 2011 Garth Upshaw

[Read Comments on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

*Garth Upshaw lives in Portland, Oregon with his super-genius wife and three precocious children. When he's not breeding tarantulas, he rides his bike through the sleeting downpours. His stories have appeared twice previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including ["Two by Zero"](#) in BCS #51, and his other stories have appeared in Clarkesworld Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, and other magazines.*

A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin grey border. The text "Support BCS" is centered in a black serif font.A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin grey border. The text "BCS on" is in a black serif font, followed by the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters inside a blue rounded rectangle.A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin grey border. The text "BCS on" is in a black serif font, followed by the word "twitter" in a light blue lowercase font inside a white rounded rectangle.

[Read more \*Beneath Ceaseless Skies\*](#)

# MR MORROW BECOMES ACQUAINTED WITH THE DELICATE ART OF SQUID KEEPING

by Geoffrey Maloney

## 1. The Invitation

*Mr Victor Morrow receives an invitation to a soiree—He wrestles with a social dilemma—and reveals a thwarted desire to be El Coco at the Danse Macabre.*

Victor Morrow, senior civil servant and regular man-about-town, received Madame Florabette Brackensfield's letter in his morning mail. Inside the cream envelope was a pretty lilac card, printed with gold lettering, inviting him to a soiree on the seventeenth of the month, for an evening of "scientific experimentation and enlightenment". If what he had heard were true, this would be one of Madame Brackensfield's most extraordinary and recondite "squidder" parties.

But, alas, the seventeenth was the night of the full moon, and he had planned to attend the *Danse Macabre* at Toowong Cemetery. He had already arranged for the preparation of his costume, that of *El Coco*—the Colombian bogeyman who

frightened children with his scary coconut head. It was an original choice, he believed; surely, the ladies would not be able to resist the charms of the legendary *El Coco*.

But yet, to decline Madame Brackensfield's invitation was to risk irreparable damage to his reputation. After all, her late husband, known to all as *the Admiral*, was one of the heroes of the Kraken Wars. Morrow decided there was nothing for it but to accept.

## 2.

### The Baffling Baffalator

*Mr Morrow investigates Madame Brackensfield's drawing room—Professor Andrew Jefferys introduces his pipe and attempts some bafflement—and the Major introduces Miss Twickenham and her delightfully pointy nose.*

Madame Brackensfield's was one of those wonderful old wooden mansions on the north bank of the river—two storeys tall, with marvellous cooling verandahs all around, and fans and vents built into the roof to ease the high heat of the Brisbane summer.

The place seemed to positively hum, as Morrow climbed the garden path leading from Madame's private wharf. The jacarandas had begun their fall, and Morrow found his dainty Italian boots squelching through a thick carpet of lilac

blossoms. Further up the hill, from the tops of the tall gum trees he could hear the koalas calling to each other in their guttural voices. It was, he thought sadly, an absolutely splendid night for the *Danse Macabre*.

At the door, Madame's maid, a dark-skinned native of Pago Pago, where the final battle against the Kraken had been fought, took his hat and coat and showed him into the drawing room. Madame, she advised, would be down shortly. Tomorrow, assuming he was the first guest to arrive, idled away his time inspecting the room's elegant features—a little peccadillo of his. A drawing room, which after all was the most public room in a house, revealed much about how a host or hostess wished to present his or herself to the world.

Madame Brackensfield's drawing room was splendid; there was nothing in it which was not both practical and beautiful. Many of her chairs and sofas were decorated in marvellous floral patterns, and the sideboards, occasional table, etcetera, were constructed of highly polished native woods, richly carved with images of sea serpents and other exotic animals from some fabulous bestiary. The one exception to the uniform balance was a collection of odd-looking scientific instruments prominently displayed upon the mantelpiece.



Morrow was studying one of these, a long tube positioned on a geared and levered tripod above a perfectly cut crystal mirror, when he heard a voice behind him: “Kraken artefacts. That one is the Baffalator. Perhaps you would care to hazard a guess as to its purpose.”

That was an instruction, not a question, Morrow thought, turning to find Professor Andrew Jefferys, a prominent biologist at the University of Brisbane. He was a tall gaunt fellow, with a deeply tanned complexion that showed he had spent much of his academic career in the field. He wore a pair of pince-nez clamped upon his nose in limpet-like fashion and a long thick beard that would have done a bushranger proud. Morrow had met him on several occasions when he had undertaken an environmental impact study on the city swamplands for the government.

They shook hands in the overly friendly manner that business acquaintances do.

“The Baffalator, eh? A curious name,” Morrow said, studying the device now with a show of greater interest. He had once seen the stuffed body of a Kraken in the Natural History Museum, and it had profoundly disgusted him—the lifeless creature had looked as threatening and evil as he imagined it had in real life. It was like a cross between a pig and human, so much so the newspapers had nicknamed the Kraken the

“Pigmen” during the war. “It appears to be a microscope of some sort, or possibly a small telescope, although the lens is in the oddest position and there is nowhere to mount a slide.”

“Quite so,” Professor Jefferys said, pulling his pipe and tobacco pouch from the pocket of his baggy linen jacket. “And not a scientist in the land has been able to discover what use it was ever put to by the Kraken. Its sole purpose appears to be no more than to baffle us humans. Hence its name.”

Just then Major Pankhurst entered the room from the verandah. With him were his wife, Lady Amberly, and a young woman whose handsome face was familiar, but for the moment Morrow could not put a name to it.

“Victor, how nice to see you,” the Major said, ever his affable self. “Jefferys is baffling you with the Baffalator, is he?”

The Major—retired—had served with Madame’s husband. He was said to have been “the military mind” behind the destruction of the Kraken’s base on the dark side of the moon. Morrow doubted the veracity of that particular rumour. The Major was one of his father’s golfing foursome, and Morrow regarded him as an amiable old duffer with a huge amount of luck on his side. He had bumbled his way through his military career and had now bumbled his way into a successful second marriage. Lady Amberly was a lady of rank in the Old Country

who, after the death of her first husband had come out to the Antipodes to make a new life, met the Major, and fallen in love.

Morrow shook the Major's hand robustly, as he was expected to, then bowed to Lady Amberly as he took her hand and raised it to his lips. She may have been in her late fifties, but Morrow was pleased to find she giggled like a schoolgirl as he did so.

"And you know Miss Twickenham, of course," the Major said.

Of course. Morrow now realised where he'd seen her before. Lucy Twickenham, an up-and-coming Shakespearian actress who trod the boards at La Boite. Last summer she had played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Her interpretation had been a little on the light side for his tastes but professional nonetheless. "Of course," Morrow said, bowing. "The quality of mercy is not strained. It dropeth as a gentle rain from heaven.' Your performance was most delightful, Miss Twickenham. Victor Morrow, at your service."

Miss Twickenham blushed in a deliberate and fashionable manner. "So you're a theatre-goer, then, Mr Morrow?"

"Infrequently, I'm afraid. My work often keeps me too busy for so many of life's pleasures." He smiled warmly as he studied her features. There was something about her pointy nose he found altogether delightful.

“Still flogging off that swampland for the government, are you?” Professor Jefferys asked. “Haven’t you made your fortune yet?”

“If it’s a fortune I’m making, then as a humble servant of the public, it’s most certainly a fortune for the government.” Morrow smiled once more at Miss Twickenham. He was just about to think up something incredibly witty to say—he’d learnt that wit impresses a young lady no end—when Professor Jefferys grabbed his elbow.

“Allow me to show you the tanks, dear fellow.”

“The tanks?”

“Where Madame keeps her squid.” Professor Jefferys winked at the others and steered Morrow towards the French doors that led onto the verandah. Morrow smiled his most polite smile, although the professor’s grip on his elbow was just a little too strong.

### 3.

#### A Damn Fine Pipe

*Mr Morrow makes the acquaintance of the squid—Professor Jefferys fails to provide enlightenment—Mr Morrow discovers the professor has a splendid tobacconist.*

On the verandah, Morrow found there were two tanks, six feet long by three high, with galvanised metal frames. The

night air had grown increasingly humid, and it now carried the smell of burning coal from the new electricity works further up river.

Morrow walked to the nearest tank, crouched down, and peered through the glass. At first he thought it was empty, apart from the ridge of jagged grey rocks that ran through the middle. But then, as he studied the white sands that lay across the bottom, he detected three sets of dark and shiny eyes watching him closely. He could only just discern the outlines of their bodies, which blended almost perfectly with the cream-coloured sand.

Morrow tapped his knuckle against the glass. One of the squid shot up from the sand in a burst of bubbles, its body changing from cream to mauve to deep royal purple as it did so. It was perhaps no more than four inches long, and Morrow was mesmerised by the way its body changed colour so rapidly. Here was a living creature with its very own fireworks display. Now its body flashed a pleasant green, and it seemed to be just as curious about Morrow as he was of it. There was, most certainly, he decided, a certain arrogance and nobility about its manner.

He turned back to the professor. "Such remarkable creatures. The way their colours change is extraordinary."

The professor had finally put his pipe in his mouth and was puffing merrily upon it, exhaling streams of bluish smoke through his nostrils. Morrow sniffed, drawing the fragrance in. It was rather sweet, reminiscent of cinnamon.

“Admiral Brackensfield brought them back after the war,” Professor Jefferys said. “They were found aboard the Kraken submersibles in rather odd globular flasks. We surmise they kept them either as pets or as a food source, or....” The professor hesitated, puffing furiously upon his pipe.

“Or?” Morrow prompted.

“The Kraken may have kept them for ritual purposes, at one stage, but that evolved over time....”

“Ritual, as in religion?” Morrow had had more than his share of the new spiritualism that was sweeping the country, and the charlatans that accompanied it. Of course, he was never critical of those practices in public; too many prominent people were believers in such things, but he wondered what he was in for tonight.

“Merely a supposition on my part,” the professor said. “I believe, however, that as the Kraken developed their civilization, the ritual purpose evolved into a scientific one. That is what we shall be investigating this evening.”

For Morrow this was hardly an illuminating explanation, but before he could ask a more pointed question, the professor continued.

“Most certainly they are remarkable creatures. But look at them, they’re virtually prisoners in those tanks. I bet they’re just dying to get out, and they will soon enough. Gentleman are required to choose the males; the ladies the females. It’s an experience, most certainly it is.” The professor winked at Morrow and blew more smoke from his nostrils.

Like the devil himself, Morrow thought, and found a creeping nervousness coming over him. “Out of their tanks?”

He imagined his voice must have betrayed his emotions, for Professor Jefferys took a bright yellow handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the stem of his pipe. In a show of smoker’s etiquette, he handed it to Morrow. “Here, have a smoke. It’s a relaxing blend, tinctured with laudanum. You will need to be relaxed for what comes next.”

Morrow took the pipe and sucked upon it greedily. The tobacco was as rich and pleasant as it smelt, and taste of the laudanum was readily detectable. It was a damn fine pipe indeed. He wandered back and forth between the two tanks as he smoked, studying the squid, thinking what delightful creatures they were. The way their tentacles furled out from their mouths like big floppy moustaches.

“So what does come next?” he asked the professor.

4.

The Capture and the Swallowing

*Mr Morrow finds himself somewhat befuddled—Madame Brackensfield descends from her boudoir with a splendid beehive hairdo—The Major demonstrates the fine art of squid catching.*

Morrow could not recall the professor having answered his question. The next thing he remembered was sitting in a wicker chair with a fish net in his hand.

Madame Brackensfield herself had now descended from her boudoir and taken charge of the party. She was dressed in an elegant grey silk frock that was rather frilly in places, with puffy sleeves and a low cut bodice that revealed a generous helping of her ample and splendid bosom. Her dark hair, just beginning to show with some savage streaks of grey, was swept atop her head in an elaborate conical beehive, creating the impression that she was much taller than she was.

Now she was providing her expert advice to Morrow and Miss Twickenham. “You need a firm grip, but not a harsh one, and the action is to slide the net into the water so it causes the least disturbance. This allows the net to billow out and trail.”



Morrow practised with his net, slicing and scooping it through the air to the amusement of the others.

“Oh, he is a born squidder,” Lady Amberley cried, and the other guests chuckled.

Morrow was not adverse to playing the clown when it allowed him to be the centre of attention, but he suspected he was acting a little foolishly and had become somewhat befuddled by Professor Jefferys’s pipe; it was as if his head was caught in a fog and he was viewing the world through a dirty pair of spectacles.

Now the Major rose from his chair, and with his net poised in his right hand strode arrogantly towards the tank that held the male squid. His breathing was relaxed, but there was an intense expression on his face. As his shadow fell upon the small watery world, the squid dived, seeking refuge among their rocks. The Major waited. No-one spoke. Finally, one squid swam out from behind a rock in a taunting playful manner, waving its tentacles all about and flashing its colours. The Major plunged his net in and pulled it out quickly. It was empty.

“He teases you, Major,” Madame Brackensfield said. “Perhaps your approach was somewhat intimidating.”

“I am merely playing his game to gain his confidence.” The Major licked his moustache and placed his net in the water

once more. This time he allowed the squid to make several passes, allowed it to grow a little more daring. The Major's net flashed and broke the surface with the flapping creature captured within.

The Major walked to the centre of the verandah. He held his net forth so it could be verified by all that he had indeed captured a squid. Then, without a word of explanation or any other warning, he reached into the net, plucked the squid out, and held it perched above his open lips.

He couldn't be serious, Morrow thought, could not possibly be...but then the Major allowed the squid to slip from his fingers and into his mouth.

Miss Twickenham stifled a horrified gasp. Morrow's heart quickened its beating. Surely, there had been some sleight of hand in the Major's actions. What he had witnessed was impossible, and he wondered just how strongly the professor's tobacco had been tinctured with laudanum.

The Major's face contorted in a ghastly fashion. His eyes grew round and wide as if they were about to burst from their sockets. A bluish tinge came upon his lips, and his throat bulged horribly as if he had suddenly contracted a goitre of astounding proportions.

A shuddering wave of contractions swept through his body, starting in his legs, then passing up his portly belly to his

chest and down the length of his arms. Morrow was almost convinced the Major was about to die a horrid death right before his eyes, but then the crisis—if indeed this was not just some skilful theatrical performance—was over. The Major breathed easily and a silly smile formed upon his lips. Morrow joined in the round of applause as the Major returned to his wicker chair. It was a hoax, of course. It had to be. A rather admirable party trick and nothing more.

Madame Brackensfield herself was the next to venture to the tanks. Altogether her graceful manner seemed entirely at odds with the strange practice they were engaged in. As she approached the tank, Morrow stood from his chair and moved forward to gain a better vantage point. If there was trickery involved, and he was sure there was, he wished to be close enough to observe it.

Madame Brackensfield employed a rather different style to the Major, altogether more genteel and ladylike. She simply took her net and slipped it into the water in one corner of the tank as she hovered above and cooed softly.

After a few moments had passed, one of the squid detached itself from its fellows and approached the net with a quick blast of its siphon and a flash of its tentacles. Amidst a flurry of bubbles it swam into the net, giving itself up freely. Whereupon Madame pulled the net up and eased the creature

out of the water. Then in an instant the squid was in the air, above her mouth, and down her throat.

This time the facial contortions were of a lesser degree. Madame appeared for a moment to have merely swallowed an overly large plum plucked whole from a Christmas pudding. Either that or she was having some difficulty in passing wind.

But so quickly had it happened, Morrow, despite his proximity, could not pinpoint where the sleight of hand lay. Perhaps there had not even been a squid in Madame Brackensfield's net, but they had seen one because they wished to believe there was. Or perhaps the squid—they were not very large after all—had simply slipped down the front of Madame's dress and now lay quivering in the abundant cleavage of her smooth white bosom.

In the next moment Professor Jefferys came forward and took Morrow by the elbow. Once more Morrow believed his grip a little more forceful than the occasion warranted. "Our two novitiates next," the professor said. "Come, Mr Morrow, Miss Twickenham, you shall perform a little duet. Myself and Lady Amberly will assist."

Miss Twickenham was looking decidedly green. Morrow experienced a momentary twinge of fear. He felt even more light-headed than before, as if he'd had one glass of absinthe too many at the Tweeters Club. He quelled his fear by assuring

himself that, if he were mistaken and it were not a hoax, then the practice, albeit a decidedly unpleasant one, was quite harmless: Madame Brackensfield and the Major sat peacefully in their chairs with radiant smiles upon their faces.

“Now,” Professor Jefferys began, “the object is to be both quick and careful. Fortunately for Miss Twickenham, the female of the species is noted for its good manners and will gladly accept your invitation, as Madame Brackensfield so artfully demonstrated. Whereas the males, Mr Morrow, enjoy a challenge. They won’t go down without a fight. They must be captured and subdued.”

“What exactly...,” Morrow began, but Professor Jefferys raised a finger to his lips. “Miss Twickenham, are you ready? Mr Morrow?”

Lady Amberly came forward to assist Miss Twickenham, who seemed to hesitate for a moment but then allowed herself to be led to the tank containing the two remaining female specimens. Her hand shook a little as she dipped her net into the water. “Yes, nice and gentle,” Lady Amberly whispered and began to coo above the tank as Madame B. had done.

Not to be outdone, Morrow made a great show of studying the tank before him. He was hoping the squid he’d made the acquaintance of earlier would somehow decide to volunteer, that was, if it wasn’t already sitting in the Major’s stomach. But

the two remaining squid had buried themselves in their sandpits, not moving at all.

“Oh, well done, Lucy,” Lady Amberly cried, and from the corner of his eye Morrow saw Miss Twickenham’s net being lifted from the water.

“It’s now or never, dear chap,” Professor Jefferys whispered. “You can’t let the lads down.”

Morrow took one more look at where the squid were hiding, plunged his net in, scooped and pulled it out. Surprisingly, there was a squid within it.

“Did you see that?” Professor Jefferys cried, and laughed a little. “Oh, did you see that!”

“Beginner’s luck,” the Major said from his wicker chair.

“Rather, I’d say a natural aquarist,” Madame Brackensfield responded.

“Quickly now,” the professor said, “down the hatch it goes. They don’t like to be in the air for too long, and whatever you do, don’t chew, simply swallow.”

Morrow raised the quivering net above his mouth, thinking this was the point where someone, either the Major or Madame B., would step forward and cry, “Stop!” and then everyone would burst into laughter and all agree what a grand joke it was and retire inside for dinner. But that command

never came, and Morrow was left with little choice but to place the squid in his mouth.

It tasted of salty water and was somewhat metallic into the bargain. It was, to be more precise, like having a large live and angry oyster in his mouth.

“Swallow,” the professor said in his ear.

He did what the professor suggested, but the squid caught in his throat. It was fighting the descent. Morrow found he could not breathe. He felt his throat tighten and begin to bulge. All he needed to do, his body was telling him, was to bend forward and cough to expel the beast. But just when he felt he had used the last of his breath, his throat suddenly opened and squid slid into his stomach.

Morrow shook his head, surprised at what he had just done. He heard the sound of clapping and looked up to find Miss Twickenham regarding him. The smile on her pretty face matched his own. It was a spontaneous gesture; they walked towards each, saying, “Well done,” and exchanged kisses on each cheek in the European fashion.

Lady Amberly and Professor Jefferys guided them to their chairs.

Madame Brackensfield leaned towards them, “That was simply wonderful for first-timers. You and Miss Twickenham obviously have an affinity with the creatures. I’ve seen people

take the squid and shoot it straight out of their mouths. It is no good for the squid and no good for the person either.”

Morrow nodded good-naturedly. He was feeling rather pleased with himself, and pleasantly full in his stomach as if he had just eaten a splendid dinner. Yes, he decided, he was feeling very pleasant indeed. Perhaps it was a mild euphoria from having successfully met the challenge to swallow a live squid, which he now imagined he was digesting. It was bound to be good for him too. Lots of protein, vitamins and minerals; a very pure and natural meat.

## 5.

### The Ingestion

*The professor continues his bafflement—The Major reveals the name of his pet rabbit—Mr Morrow has an unusual experience.*

“Now we shall begin,” the professor said. “For the benefit of Mr Morrow and Miss Twickenham, our novitiate investigators into the unknown, let me explain the procedure.

“I want you to think of something that is known only to you. Do not tell me what it is, for I am about to demonstrate that with the squid *in gastro* I am able to read the minds of each and everyone of you, and indeed, as the evening progresses we shall find we will shortly be communicating with



our minds only. It is my belief, you see, that the Kraken used the squid to communicate between their ships by thought alone, as they travelled the dark reaches of space. You will appreciate, of course, the possibilities this opens up for us when we ourselves begin to reach for the stars.”

“Very well,” the Major said. “I have a thought which is unknown to anyone else in this room, even my good lady wife.”

“Would you care to write that thought down for Miss Twickenham and Mr Morrow?” The professor pulled a notebook and a pencil from his pocket.

“Certainly.” The Major scrawled something quickly, tore off the page, and handed it to Morrow. Miss Twickenham leant close to him as they read it. Morrow could feel her warm breath caressing his cheek.

*I once had a pet rabbit called Mr Tootsie.*

Morrow chuckled. The tip of Miss Twickenham’s tongue touched his earlobe. He could not believe she had just done that. Surely, he had imagined it. He looked into her eyes. Some golden light seemed to be dancing in her pupils, and he realised for the very first time that Miss Twickenham was not just another person, but she was as alive and as real as he was. It was all very strange.

“Now,” the professor said, “the Major was thinking about a pet rabbit he once had called Mr Tootsie. Is that correct, Miss Twickenham, Mr Morrow?”

Morrow turned back to Professor Jefferys, about to protest that this was no demonstration of thought power at all but simply a parlour trick which had been pre-arranged. Instead he gasped and completely forgot what he was about to say.

He looked at the Major, Madame Brackensfield, and then Lady Amberly, and felt his grip on reality slipping. Instead of their faces, instead of their heads, a live squid now perched upon their necks. From the shoulders down they were the very same people—he could tell this from their clothes—but their heads had been completely replaced by the body of the squid they had swallowed. They waved their tentacles merrily at Morrow. Dear God, the horror of it! He turned to Miss Twickenham, for reassurance he was not going mad, but, alas, she bore a squid head too.

Morrow screamed, leapt from his chair, and rushed from the verandah.

## 6.

### Such a Lovely Squid Head

*Mr Morrow becomes acquainted with his own squid head—  
Miss Twickenham reveals something of her nature—It takes  
two to tango.*

*Squid heads, squid heads,  
Lovely, lovely, squid heads  
Squid heads, squid heads  
Eat them up... Yum!*

Morrow's head spun. A half-remembered nursery rhyme echoed in his ears. Inside the house, he rushed about looking for his hat and coat, then stopped suddenly as he caught a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror. With his mouth dry, he turned slowly to face his image. His head, as those of others, was no longer his own. Now a pair of golden squid eyes stared back at him, and where his mouth should have been there was an assemblage of tentacles waving in the air. It was as if his moustache had come to life.

Morrow staggered back from his reflection into the drawing room, felt for a chair behind him and fell into it a shaken heap. Most certainly, he was not the man he used to be. His hands were trembling, as if he were in dire need of a drink.

He reassured himself that calm and careful reasoning was called for in a moment such as this. The squid he had swallowed was obviously releasing some sort of toxin into his bloodstream, that when mixed with the ingredients of

Professor Jefferys's pipe had become a powerful hallucinogen. That was it; there could be no other answer. In a moment or two it would pass. He was sure of it.

When he felt a little calmer, he rose from the chair and went to the mirror once more. His squid head was still there. But now that he knew it to be nothing more than an illusion, panic did not rise to engulf him. If anything he was feeling quite relaxed and found some of his earlier euphoria returning.

He began to wonder where his brain was. It seemed entirely incomprehensible he should still be able to think, if his entire head had been replaced with the body of a squid. Ridiculous! But that, of course, proved what he already believed. How silly he was to let his mind wander like this. He did not have a squid head! And none of the others did either. It was nothing more than a toxin-induced illusion.

Morrow raised his hand and watched as it rose in the mirror before him, thinking what a strange pink appendage a hand was. It hovered before his squid face. Touch it, he told himself, touch your face, feel your lips, your moustache, your nose...his fingers began to wave in time with the tentacles. How similar these things called fingers were to the squid's tentacles, he thought, but still he did not touch his face. He did not dare.

But as he studied his reflected image further, he decided that if he had to have a squid head then most certainly it was a

handsome one: those lovely golden eyes. Those tentacles with their changing array of colours. The way they waved all about. It was the most attractive he had looked in his whole life. What a thing it would have been to turn up to the *Danse Macabre* with a live squid head and not some silly cardboard costume *El Coco* head.

“Victor.” The sound of his name came straight into his head.

He turned away from the mirror.

The image that confronted him was at once bizarre and erotic, and more beautiful even than his own squid head. There stood Miss Twickenham with her squid head a’quivering, its tentacles flashing all manner of colours, and her long black skirts hoisted up to reveal a neatly trimmed Mound of Venus. It seemed, like many a young woman in Brisbane, she had forsaken the wearing of undergarments—which was entirely sensible given the tropical nature of the city’s climate.

That would have been enough to excite the lust of any young man, but there, sitting upon her neck, so delightfully slimy and shiny, was the most lovely squid head Morrow had seen in his whole life. Its eyes held a dancing green fire and its tentacles waved in a most sensuous fashion.

“Would you care to tango?” Morrow asked, apropos of nothing but the sudden passion that swirled within him.

“I would,” Miss Twickenham replied, offering her hand.

They drew close. Their tentacles caressed. They embraced and danced a passionate tango up and down Madame’s hallway. Morrow felt his likely lad shooting to attention. The buttons of his fly were positively bursting. Miss Twickenham pressed her body against his, bit his earlobe and whispered, “The glistening girl is open to invitation.”

“Is she now,” Morrow murmured.

Their dance climaxed with the infamous step known as *El Rondo de Azul*. Archbishop Frobisher, the guardian of all that was good and proper in Brisbane, had described it as beyond all “moral decency and decent morality”. Morrow was pleased to find that the Archbishop had not been exaggerating. Thus the likely lad met the glistening girl in what could only be described as a lustful embrace, wherein all sense of decorum and modesty was lost in the heat of the moment.

## 7.

### The Life Squidotic

*Mr Morrow goes for a pleasant swim—Professor Jefferys  
longs for his pipe—The Baffalator revealed!*

Morrow returned to the verandah while Miss Twickenham adjourned to the water closet to “rearrange her clothes”. Things had taken a splendid turn, and he was now thinking what a

delight it was to have swallowed a squid. It led to such spontaneous encounters.

“I appear to have a squid head,” he said, only to find the manifestation of squid heads upon Madame and her other guests had entirely disappeared, and Morrow was left feeling he had imagined the whole thing.

However, before anyone could respond to his presence, the Major leapt to his feet and rushed to one of the tanks. He stood over it, gasping and heaving, until finally the squid he had ingested shot from his mouth and into the water. When he turned from the tank, the features of his face were entirely blank and his eyes exceedingly dull. He walked to his chair on shaky legs, as if the ordeal had sucked half the life out of him.

That looked just a trifle unpleasant, Morrow thought, feeling a sudden nausea rising in his stomach.

Now Madame Brackensfield was up from her chair. Her hand went to her mouth as if she was attempting to suppress a rising belch. After a few steps she broke into a quick trot and reached the tank just in time to disgorge. Next, Miss Twickenham came rushing out of the house, straight from the water closet to the tank. Her countenance was a ghastly green and, when she heaved, Morrow felt his own stomach rise in deepest sympathy.

In a flash, he too was grasping the metal frame of the tank, his mouth wide open above the water, waiting and hoping it would be fast, as it had been for the others. He imagined he could feel the creature climbing up from his stomach, its slimy suckered tentacles creeping inch by inch along his oesophagus. Then he felt its grip upon the bottom of his throat. He gagged. The slippery beast rose into his mouth, but as he expelled it, he felt himself, his whole conscious being, drawn along with it, and then he was flying out of his own mouth, and through the air...

...and suddenly found himself swimming effortlessly and enjoying the delightful freedom of water all over his body. Morrow darted from one end of the tank to the other, fascinated by how quickly he could move and turn. He ducked towards the craggy rocks at the centre of the tank, thinking *here comes instant death for fearless flying Victor Morrow*, but with a quick tilt of his lateral flaps and a burst from his siphon, he manoeuvred over them at the very last minute. Next he buried himself in a sandpit so only his eyes were visible. *No one can see me, no one; I'm perfectly camouflaged.* It was sublime. It was beautiful. It was ridiculous. But above all it was exhilarating. *Hello, everybody*, he wished to cry, *I am the invisible squid. You can't see me. No, you can't.*



It took some moments for that thought to sink in: *I'm a squid.... Good God, I am a squid!* A squid trapped in a tank three feet by six. Don't worry, don't worry, he told himself, there was a rational explanation for everything. The hallucination continued, perhaps. But his memory told him that he really had danced that tango with Miss Twickenham. It was still fresh in his mind. They may have been intoxicated in some way, but it certainly had been no hallucination. *Ta-da-da-dah! Ta-ta-ta-te-da-da-dah!* Why, they had even....

"What a lovely shade of magenta you've just turned, Victor." Another squid swam down and made a sandpit next to Morrow. "It's not all bad, you know. We were in worse situations in the Kraken War."

"Major?"

"At your service." Just then the tank shook. "Ah, if I'm not mistaken, this shall be the professor now. I'm sure he'll have a solution to our predicament."

Morrow blew the sand away and swam up to the glass. Undoubtedly those were Professor Jefferys's trousers on the other side; he recognised the checked material. The tank shook once more and, in the next moment, the professor came tumbling through the water in a fury of exploding bubbles. When he came to a stop on the bottom of the tank, he sunk himself in a sandpit and pulsed with colour, changing from an

angry purple to a soothing cream. Morrow swam down to greet him.

The professor cocked a black and gold eye at him. "This is most unusual," he muttered.

"Indeed it is," the Major said.

With a growing uncertainty, Morrow asked, "What happens next?"

There was a long moment where neither of his companions replied. What could be seen of their creamy-hued bodies beneath the sand became spotted with splashes of tangerine. If he were outside the tank looking in, Morrow knew he would have thought how lovely they looked. But now trapped inside a squid body, he instinctively knew those tangerine spots were representative of a certain apprehension.

"You tell him," the Major said.

"Well, it seems," the professor began, "that we have never been in this situation before. Um, most certainly something will happen next, but as to what that something might be, well, now would be the perfect time to postulate a new hypothesis."

"The Major said you would have a solution to our predicament," Morrow said.

"Did he now?" the professor said, pulsing red.

Morrow was feeling quite angry about the whole thing. He imagined that he would be trapped in the tank for the rest of his life, while that impostor out there walked around in his body, living his life for him.

“No need to turn purple on us, young lad,” the Major said. “I’m sure it will turn out all right, and if it doesn’t then we’ll just need to implement a strategy to resolve the matter.”

“Indeed,” the professor said. “Let’s think of it as just another part of the wonderful scientific experiment we are engaged in. This an excellent opportunity to truly experience life as a squid.”

“A captured squid,” Morrow reminded him. “In a glass tank that is a mere three feet by six. Prisoners of our own folly!”

“I’m glad,” the Major said grumpily, “that we didn’t have more of your kind around during the Kraken war.”

“More of my kind? What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Pessimists!” the Major retorted.

“Well, one thing is for certain,” the professor said. “We now know the squid communicate telepathically, and by temporarily ingesting them their powers are passed to us, as they were to the Kraken.”

“I don’t quite follow the logic of that,” Morrow said. “I mean the fact that you knew about the Major’s rabbit, Footsie —”

“Mr Tootsie,” the Major said, “and he was a dear little thing. The cutest rabbit you’ve ever seen. Unfortunately, he came to a very sad end. The—”

“—doesn’t prove,” Morrow continued, “that you didn’t know about Mr Tootsie beforehand.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Morrow. You are absolutely correct. That little example was merely a starting point for further experimentation. However, you will agree that we appear to be communicating very effectively now? Without the aid of lips, tongue or voice box, and underwater. Hence I conclude we are using the natural functions of the squid’s nervous system to communicate telepathically. There is simply no other hypothesis to explain it.”

“By jove,” Morrow cried, “of course. I just assumed, you see...I mean if you hadn’t pointed it out I would have accepted it as perfectly natural, as if we were simply speaking...but, of course—”

“The cook unfortunately bought a gamy rabbit for the Easter stew,” the Major continued. “We always had rabbit at Easter. It was a family tradition. So as not to spoil Easter dinner, the cook put Mr Tootsie into the pot.”

“How did he taste?” Professor Jefferys asked.

“Remarkably good. Everybody said it was the best Easter stew we’d ever had, but, of course, we didn’t know at the time that we’d eaten Mr Tootsie.”

“I’m sure Mr Tootsie was a wonderful rabbit,” Morrow said, “however, I doubt a discussion of...hang on a minute, what are you up to professor?”

“Wishing I had my pipe. I always think better when I have my pipe. But I realise that’s a silly wish. It would be impossible to ignite the tobacco underwater.”

“In our present condition, I imagine you would be unable to draw upon your pipe as well.”

“Quite so,” the professor said wistfully, “quite so.”

“However, I was actually referring to the you out there.” Morrow studied the professor’s human form through the glass. It was arranging some sort of apparatus upon the table, and all the other stolen bodies were standing around paying close attention, as if Professor Squid was offering them detailed instruction upon some matter of the utmost importance.

The professor joined Morrow at the front of the tank. His squid body was radiating lines of inquisitive bright green. “It appears I’ve taken the Baffalator from the drawing room,” he said.

“But whatever for?” the Major cried. “It’s a useless piece of junk.”

“My mind, Major, is fast forming a theory. I do believe we are about to find out precisely what the Baffalator is capable of.”

Morrow saw his own human form move away from the others, and soon the gaslights inside the house and those upon the verandah were extinguished one by one. The waters of the tank became a murky grey stew. “What happens next?” Morrow wondered, and believed they were soon to find out.

Barely a minute later, a wonderful luminescent glow began to creep across the verandah.

“Ah, the moon, it rises,” Professor Jefferys said. “What’s the date?”

“The seventeenth. It’s a full moon tonight,” Morrow said, and thought once more of the *Danse Macabre*. Right then, despite the passionate tango he had performed with Miss Twickenham, he thoroughly regretted his decision to accept Madame Brackensfield’s invitation. He was already bored with his life as a squid, nothing but four glass walls to look at, separated from female companionship, and only the Major and the professor for company. He could not have imagined things turning out any worse.

“A beautiful light,” the Major said, and Morrow thought he heard those thoughts echoed by the ladies in their tank.

Morrow watched as moonbeams crept across the verandah, and for a moment there was a rather intense and thoughtful tableau laid out before him. There was the eminent Professor Jefferys, hands outstretched as he explained the infernal workings of the Baffalator. Standing next to him was the Major, with a look of profound befuddlement. Lady Amberly bent forward eagerly, clutching the Major's arm. Miss Twickenham, on the other side of the table, clasped Madame Brackensfield's hand. There was a look of amazing hope in their eyes. And Morrow, himself, was there with his hand upon Professor Jefferys's shoulder as if assuring him all his calculations were correct.

Who were these people, Morrow mused, who had taken their bodies? They were not merely squid, not merely Madame's esoteric pets that could convey telepathic powers. These were intelligent and dynamic beings whose hopes and fears showed upon their stolen faces.

Now the moon's beam hit the luminous crystal mirror that sat beneath the Baffalator's scope. For a moment, nothing happened. It was as if the crystal was absorbing the moon's energy. Then, as if it had reached its threshold, the crystal burst into brilliance, reflecting a beam of glowing energy up the Baffalator. It emerged from the other end as a solid ray of golden light; its trajectory, the moon.

8.

Le Baffalator, La Guillotine

*The squid heads return—the Baffalator does its business—and  
it's off with their heads!*

In the next instance the nets were upon them. Morrow saw his body stride towards the tank and the net slide into the water. *What the hell*, Morrow thought. It appeared to be his only chance of escape. He swam into the net, and in a sudden rush he was in the air. The thick night sucked at his delicate squid skin. He knew what was about to happen.

His intellect told him not to fight it. Here was the chance to return to his human form; he would no longer be trapped within the tank. But still his physical reaction was to resist as he entered his own mouth and found himself sliding down his own throat, towards his stomach.

Everything went dark, terribly dark, then Morrow opened his eyes and they were all squid heads once more. There was Miss Twickenham with that pretty lady squid upon her neck and, no doubt, the delightful girl still glistening between her legs. He went to go to her, and that was when he found he had no control over his body. The squid was his master now.

In a familiar sequence, the Major was the first to rise from his chair. He walked towards the Baffalator's beam, struggling



with every step, his body all wooden and jerky as he fought to gain control of it once more. But there was nothing he could do. The squid that rode him carried him straight into the beam, which very neatly sliced his squid head off.

Morrow watched in awe as the squid head bounced around inside the beam for several moments, then vanished in a shiny burst and was gone. The Major's headless body crumpled to the floor without a drop of blood, and nothing to be seen where the gaping wound should have been but a soft ghostly haze puffed in a cloud the shape of a mushroom.

Madame Brackensfield was the next to be decapitated, then Miss Twickenham. Ah, poor Lucy. Morrow's heart went out to her. Such a terrible death for one so young and beautiful. But off came her squid head, and now it was Morrow's turn. There was no point in fighting it. He had already decided that. Better to die a noble and gallant death than to spend your last moments as a staggering puppet. "It is a far, far better thing I do," Morrow thought as he allowed the squid to take him into the beam.

There was no pain. He did not lose consciousness. He simply fell to the floor headless, as the others had, and wondered once more, as he lay there, where his brain had gotten to and why he could still think without it.

Most certainly, it was a damn fine pipe that Professor Jefferys had given him, a damn fine pipe indeed. And Miss Twickenham's glistening girl had fitted the likely lad like the most gorgeous kid glove. Now there was a lady he needed to pay more attention to, and that silly beehive on Madame B.'s head, whatever was she thinking, really it was just a trifle too gauche...and he had swum, yes, he had swum like a squid, and the Kraken were defeated for once and for all, and he had to go to work on Monday and flog off more of that bloody swampland to developers; he had missed the *Danse Macabre* and wanted so much to be *El Coco*—he had planned it for months...but the Kraken for all their faults were a intelligent enemy and he'd helped the last of them go home. It was a noble and decent thing to do....

## 9.

## The Danse Macabre

*Mr Morrow regains his head and drinks a gin and tonic—*

*Madame B. reveals that the Admiral loved calamari—*

*Professor Jefferys expounds on the true nature of the Kraken*

*—and Mr Morrow and the delightfully scrumptious Miss Twickenham dance through jacaranda blossoms on their way to the Danse Macabre.*

The next thing Morrow knew, he was sitting in a comfortable wicker chair with a gin and tonic in his hand. He looked around at the others. They were all pale and shaken. Miss Twickenham looked absolutely beautiful, but it was the beauty of a feverish consumptive shortly before death. There was a tremor in her hands as she raised her glass to her sweet lips. Morrow winked at her and he was delighted when she winked back. His hand went up to his face. "I seem to have my own head back now," he said.

At those words, Madame Brackensfield burst into tears, sobbing into her handkerchief. "I'm so sorry, so sorry. Nothing like this has ever happened before. To think what may have become of us. To think my dear husband's pets were the Kraken in disguise. He brought the squid back after the war, intending to breed and harvest them for our kitchen. He was exceedingly fond of calamari, and the fresher the squid the better the calamari is.

"So there we were one evening, having just eaten a delightful calamari entrée from our own tanks, and we suddenly found ourselves getting light-headed, and in the next moment we realised we were conversing with each other without our lips moving. This went on for sometime, until we both suffered an incredible nausea and were forced to retreat to the water closet in the direst need. We both slept with a

bucket next to our beds that night. The experience was frightful and we never ate the squid again. Professor Jefferys has been most helpful in solving the mystery. I am so sorry for the danger I have put you all in." And with that she began to sob once more.

"Sorry?" Professor Jefferys said. "I think not, Madame. You have nothing to be sorry for. Tonight has indeed been a most fortunate and revealing experiment. Now at last we know the true nature of our enemy and have unlocked the secrets to one of their confounded machines. It is undoubtedly an advanced transportation device that has returned them to their base on the moon."

"To the moon?" Lady Amberly cast a glance towards the Major. "You told me their moon base was destroyed during the war and that you yourself had a hand in it. It was in all the newspapers at the time."

The Major cleared his throat and looked at the professor, then at the faces of the others. "Oh, dear," he said, "it seems I need to make a clean breast of it. The rocket that was meant to destroy the Kraken base on the moon never left the Earth. It exploded when it was launched. It was an unmitigated disaster, but the situation at the time required us to announce the mission a resounding success."

“So the Kraken threat is still with us,” Madame Brackensfield said. “The Admiral never knew. He went to his grave believing he could rest in peace.” Her hand went to her throat. She was so pale it appeared that any moment she would fall into a swoon.

“Fear not,” the professor said, “we will be prepared for them when they next attack. And, forgive me, Madame, but your supposition the squid were the Kraken in disguise is ill-founded. It is my belief the Kraken *were* the very squid you have looked after in your tanks for so many years. They are parasites, and the Pigmen, whom we believed to be the Kraken, were merely their hosts. You can imagine what future they had planned for humanity had they won the war....”

Professor Jefferys droned on, extrapolating his theories. Morrow checked his pocket watch and rose from his chair. He said to Miss Twickenham: “The *Danse Macabre* is being performed at Toowong Cemetery this evening. I would be honoured if you would accompany me. If we leave now, we’ll be in time for the ferry.”

Miss Twickenham smiled. “I would be delighted.”

“The delight is mine.” Morrow bowed to the rest of the company, thanked Madame Brackensfield for an interesting evening, then offered his arm to Miss Twickenham.

The Major escorted them to the door. “The Kraken will rise again,” he said as he shook hands with Morrow. “The government will need to take action immediately. The world needs to be told of what we have discovered tonight.”

Morrow sighed. “Professor Jefferys will no doubt write up his theory and it will become accepted as fact, *if* he has any luck. If not, he will risk his career to no avail, and make a fool of himself.

“Nobody witnessed this but the six of us. And it remains uncertain precisely what these strange events truly mean. It may have well been nothing more than a grand illusion brought on by the toxins we ingested as we digested the squid, and they have not returned to their base on the moon but are now part of our very own bodies, in the way that all the food we eat becomes part of us. In any case, the government will wish to believe, and the people *will* believe, the Kraken are those stuffed Pigmen in the museum. They were the enemy we defeated once and for all.”

The Major seemed about to say something but became lost for words. He smiled warmly like the affable old gentleman he was and closed the door. Morrow knew he was thinking he was a silly young fool.

Miss Twickenham said as they walked down to the wharf: “They were the defeated enemy. Prisoners of war. She told me, my squid. We helped them go home, didn’t we?”

Morrow took her hand. “I believe we did. Imagine being intelligent creatures and trapped in those tanks for your whole life, swimming up and down, up and down all the time, the males segregated from the females.”

“I would go mad,” Miss Twickenham said.

“And at the *Danse Macabre* you shall have your chance to be as mad as you wish.”

Morrow twirled her around on the garden path and they danced gaily through the jacaranda blossoms towards the wharf. For a split second only, Morrow thought of his *El Coco* head sitting on his dressing table at home, and decided for once that he was more than happy to simply be himself.

Copyright © 2011 Geoffrey Maloney

[Read Comments on this Story](#) in the *BCS* Forums

*Geoffrey Maloney lives in Brisbane, Australia, with his wife and three daughters. He has had over one hundred short stories published in magazines and anthologies in the UK,*

USA, Australia, and Ireland. Tales from the Crypto-System, published by Prime books in 2003, collects the best of his stories from the 1990s. His most recent stories, “Insecta in Camera,” “Through a Scanner Darkly,” and “Things that Dead People Do” have appeared in Aurealis, Australia’s longest running F/SF magazine. His next story, “The Dunces’ Castle,” will appear in issue 40 of Albedo One.

A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin black border. The text "Support BCS" is centered in a black serif font.A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin black border. The text "BCS on" is in a black serif font, followed by the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters inside a blue rounded rectangle.A yellow rectangular button with rounded corners and a thin black border. The text "BCS on" is in a black serif font, followed by the word "twitter" in a light blue lowercase font inside a white rounded rectangle.

[Read more Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)



## COVER ART

“Into the Unknown,” by Kerem Beyit



Kerem Beyit is a freelance artist born in Ankara, Turkey. He started drawing in his early childhood with the influence of comic books, and he trained himself from great fantasy artists like Frank Frazetta and Gerald Brom. He has won Master and Excellence Awards from Exposé 7, and his artwork has been used for covers of European editions of fantasy novels by Tad Williams and George R.R. Martin. Visit his website and gallery at [www.theartofkerembeyit.com](http://www.theartofkerembeyit.com).

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1046

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

Copyright © 2011 Firkin Press



This file is distributed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 U.S. license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/). You may copy and share the file so long as you retain the attribution to the authors, but you may not sell it and you may not alter it or partition it or transcribe it.