



(Acrobat PDF version)

## Contents: \_\_\_\_\_

Welcome to our second issue of *nanobison*. If you are a first time reader, welcome! If you're a return visitor, welcome back!!

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## Fiction

We have a number of fresh, new stories for you this month, a nice mix of sf and horror. Yes, we do publish fantasy and speculative poetry as well, but don't have anything for you in those areas this time around.

We do have:

- "Strategies of Resistance", a disturbing tale in response to the real horrors of war
  - "Children of a Far Star", a first contact tale, with a twist
  - "Waiting for Mr. Snickers", a horror story of guilt and retribution
  - "Chains", a speculative exploration of obsession and unlikely resolution
  - "Exiles in the Dust", old west meets future family values
  - "The Baha'i and Science Fiction", an alternative history
  - "In the Garden of Dust", a journey into purgatory, with baseball
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## Non-Fiction

### Article

Our co-editor, Pam Bainbridge-Cowan, brings us exciting news of another fiction outlet, via the spoken word, in her article "[nanobison and OPB 'Golden Hours' Radio](#)".

### Contests

Yes, we are keeping our contests alive. Participation was low first time through, which means you still have a chance to win! Sounding like a Publisher's Clearinghouse commercial? Maybe, but your chances of winning are considerably higher. Check out the [Contest Page](#).

### Editorial

Our co-editor waxes pseudo-eloquently in another rendition of nano-related stuff in the [editorial](#).

### Reviews

Our first review of hardcopy speculative fiction, this one for a new work called "It's Only Temporary", by Eric Shapiro. Check it out [here](#).

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## *nanostaff*

Our dedicated, unpaid staff are ever on the job, evolving *nanobison* toward overall betterness.

- Pam Bainbridge-Cowan: Co-editor, Alpha Story Editor, Art Content Director, PR manager, Quality Goddess
- Doug Helbling: Co-editor, Beta Story Editor, Site Design Director, Resident Bit Jockey, Zine Founder
- Mary Ann Woolman: Associate Story Editor
- Brian Wilson: Associate Story Editor



Fiction: \_\_\_\_\_



## Strategies of Resistance

by Gryffyd Eamonn Dempsey

The crow named Sashenka pecked at the soldier's eye, a soldier's eye in a meadow of corpses. The eye wept blood and crows cried raucous victory over the crop of meat spread across this field, fenced by the border of a pine forest.

Overhead the sky was blue and vast. Other crows flicked past over Sashenka and the eyeball. Some landed on corpses, some hopped along the smoking ruin of the German half-track. Soviet troops were looting at the far end of the clearing and so the crows as yet stayed away from those claimed corpses. Volleys of Katyusha rockets had killed and wrecked this German artillery unit. T-34 tanks lurked nearby somewhere, shaking the ground, unseen past the trees.

One crow crawled under a German helmet that a machine gun round had punctured and thrown to the ground. It lay propped up by a hummock of grass. The crow was as large as a dog and the helmet moved with it like a grotesque carapace, disturbing grass and twigs.

"Hi!" cried the crow. "I'm a German!"

"Look out," laughed several other crows. "Watch out Ivan! Germans are coming for you!"

"Yah! Die, Bolshie! Die, Yids!" The crow cawed excitedly, the helmet bobbing like bait over a lake bed.



The crow on the man's face looked away from the helmet, back at the eye. The fluid still flowed, tinged red. Crow calls rang in the early fall air. "That is so stupid," said the crow named Sashenka.

The crow in the helmet stopped. The other crows ceased their cawing.

The crow under the helmet hopped out. "How so, Sashenka?"

"When have you ever wanted to know anything, Misha?"

Misha laughed.

"If you call me stupid, I should know why."

Sashenka stretched his wings, walked onto the man's forehead.

"These things are not toys. You can tell the future with them if you know what you're doing."

"Ha," said Misha. "Yes, when I see a Panzerfaust I know I will soon be eating dead Russians!"

The other crows laughed again.

"So tell me, Sashenka, what does this thing tell you?" said Misha, fluttering up into the air and landing on the helmet.

Sashenka looked back down at the still, soot-blackened face of his soldier. "You moved it," he said, fluffing his feathers in dismissal. "It doesn't say anything now. I can't read anything in it." He walked between the eyes and up onto the tip of the nose.

"Ha, ha!" cried the crows.

"You're a liar," said Misha. He felt he'd scored a triumph.

"You are a fool. If I am not a liar, Misha, may you end up in a witch's stew," said Sashenka.

The crows hushed. This was the worst of all crow curses. Misha cocked his head. Sashenka must know something to back this up.

"What else can you read?" asked Misha, begrudgingly.



"Hm," said Sashenka, jumping down and standing on the man's lips. "The half-track, perhaps." He hopped onto the chin and cocked his head up to look up at the ruined vehicle. Its tracks had been blown off and two large holes had been punched through the thick metal of the fighting compartment. Smoke was still wafting from inside the driver's cab.

"Ah, the Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251/6," said Sashenka. "Most likely version 'B'."

"Hardly," said another crow.

"Yes," said another. "It can't be version 'B'. Note the lack of air-intakes on the bonnet sides. Definitely version 'D'."

"Indeed," says another wise crow. "I believe it's probably a 251/18. We saw them come into use last year, probably as a replacement for the /6."

"And that map-table?"

"Probably a field modification."

"Irrelevant," squawked Sashenka. "A machine is a machine!"

"So tell us the future, then."

"Very well. Be quiet a moment, can't you all?"

The clearing was still now. The air was chill in the wind blowing from the setting sun. Smoke drifted and spun among the trees at the edge, and over the trampled grasses. The Russians had left and in the distance Sashenka heard the growling of the T-34s as they returned to hunting Germans.

"I predict that . . . that this human I am standing on will come back to life."

The crows pondered that for a moment, then Misha said, "After you've eaten his eye? Not likely."



The man's hand grabbed at Sashenka but he had already leapt into the air with a quick flap of his wings. The other crows scattered in fright, harsh cries in the air.

The soldier rose slowly, a hand over his eye. He peered around, then began running with a limp toward the woods, stepping over pieces of his dead comrades.

Sashenka settled on the cooling hood of the half-track. He had often noticed that German soldiers were very reluctant to be taken prisoners by Russians, and would endure all manner of discomfort to remain still while any Red Army soldier looted nearby. He now watched the man in his grey, battle dress uniform until he was gone in the darkness between trees. Sashenka reckoned the soldier would survive days at the most.

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Over the next days and weeks the weather grew colder and wetter. The crows began to sense migration in their hollow bones. The fields became wastes of frozen earth and dead grass, burnt machinery and bones.

Clouds of crows darkened the sky as they flew west and south. The land beneath them was an enormous rolling board of fields, copses, dirt roads, villages, husks of burnt out tanks, columns of men and vehicles across the vast distance under banners of smoke and thunder of battle. First dustings of snow crept along from the east.

As they flew, roads became thicker with German troops and German redeployment bases, German supply trains, German ammunition caches and petrol depots. The crows flew over and through the shortening days, under clouds that grew darker and lower.

The land beneath seemed to grow more used, less wild, as they left the Soviet Union behind. Now they followed railroad tracks that made ever more connections, bore ever more cars and engines. The smokes



of industry and the rattle of freight were what Sashenka thought he sensed as the crows flew above the town of Oswiecim in Poland. Past the city another plume of smoke hung and about this the crows ahead parted as if skirting evil.

As if the flock were a liquid mass, waves of movement buffeted Sashenka. Other crows jostled for position to either side, above and below, bouncing in the air, pulled here and there by feathered tides. Sashenka began to lose sight of the smoke and the way ahead as crows clustered about him, and he hoped he was clear of it.

Then crows dive-bombed him from above, as if he were a hawk. Feathers exploded into the air as he tried to maneuver upward, but Misha was there, beating wings in his eyes. Sashenka fainted one way, then dove abruptly, and as he pulled up he flew directly into the thick of the smoke that drifted upward from Crematory V of Auschwitz II, otherwise known as Birkenau.

Sound was dulled, as if vanishing in a sea mist. The screaming of the crows, the rush of wind, all seemed as if heard from underground. Sashenka peered vainly into the darkness, gliding blind, cinders burning his eyes, smoke throttling him. He beat his wings slowly and he felt as if he were falling a long way into ice and death.

He flew, without reference, with no sense of time or distance. There seemed to tug at him a current of terrible eddies from that blanketing smoke. He flapped his wings reluctantly and after irregular intervals, not knowing if he faced up or down, hoping at last that he might come into clear air, to see the sun again, smell the earth, find his way. Once or twice he thought he heard faint calls from other crows, sounding like the voices of the dead. He did not wheel around and search, for fear of them and for fear of losing himself forever in endless spirals through the smoke.

Then it seemed as if the smoke had turned white and the crow realized he was flying through falling snow.

He skimmed the treetops almost bare of leaves. The air down here smelled familiar and Sashenka wondered if he had somehow flown all



the way back to the Soviet Union, or if its rebounding borders had pulled the old land to catch up with him. The bird circled above the trees for awhile then alit on the branch of a blasted pine tree and hunched its wings, shook its feathers, watched the snow blanket the frozen earth around this copse.

Then he jumped into the air as a hand grabbed at him and missed. It slapped against the branch and the man cursed in a shower of pine needles.

"God-damned bird," he cried. "Again!"

The crow settled on the ground a few yards away. Sashenka recognized the soldier -- the man shaking in a grey uniform, dirty and beginning to fray, several weeks of beard on cheeks dull with frostbite and thinning with hunger, one eye staring with anger, the other a swollen mess of ugly color and dried blood.

The crow hopped onto a lower branch of another tree.

"I am going to eat you, filthy bird," said the soldier, quieter, as if to bring himself and the bird to agreement. He took a few steps closer, limping. The crow fluttered to a slightly higher branch. The man walked nearer. For a few moments crow and soldier stared at one another with one eye apiece, the man's breath seething in frigid clouds between them.

Then the man lunged again and Sashenka flew into the air. The soldier cried in hoarse dismay and the crow, that had been plunging out of the sky toward Sashenka, smacked into his palm and he shouted in triumph now and Sashenka wondered momentarily if he were really flying in a panicked dive toward the ground or caught dead.

For another moment all was still -- Sashenka on the ground staring at the crow Yevgen, Misha's stooge -- the man's hand tight around the bird in reflexive shock. The soldier felt the hot body beneath the coarse feathers, the bird as heavy as a goose, heart beating almost too rapidly to track. Then the crow opened its beak and cawed and



jabbed at a thumb and the man reached out with his free hand and wrung its neck.

Sashenka scratched at the cold dirt, nervous, scenting something like the weight of scorned fate in the air, bobbed his head. The man, shaking, plucked black feathers, them settling in a cloud around his boots. The man tore at the flesh, broke bones under warm skin, ate the crow raw and still warm with life, gagging, thin blood running like tears down his chin.

When he was done he dropped the bones and tendons that he had sucked clean of meat and then licked his hands and wiped them on his tunic.

In the wilderness that armies had pounded out of peasant land the man and the crow stared at one another. The crow strained at the strangeness that now controlled his soul. The call of birds was fading from his mind. Out of the murder of crows and into the death of men he felt himself moving. The man, cold and still hungry, with the taste of raw bird dirty in his mouth, eye throbbing in its socket, felt a peace come over him as he peered through the snow at the crow. There was something tugging them together, not a thing of prey and hunter, but a pull of some wartime kinship.

The crow flew up into the air and the man shook his head. "Rudi, there's better ways of dying than following a damned bird," he said, but walked off after the crow towards the eaves of another pine wood.

They walked under the cold shadows of the trees as the short day edged toward dusk. The crow flitted from branch to branch, and Rudi cursed softly as he stumbled along. Sometimes they followed game trails for short distances, but always the crow plunged again into the undergrowth and hard, unyielding branches.

As the gloom under the trees deepened they came finally upon another clearing. At the far end was a hut and the sight of it made Rudi draw back against the bole of a tree. "Partizans and peasants -- all of them want me," he whispered. The crow cawed softly but flew on as if it didn't understand or care about Rudi's doubts, alighting on the low



thatched roof of the hovel. The man felt desperate for a moment and then shrugged and trudged resignedly across the deepening snow in the clearing.

The crow knew very well which houses were empty in the woods and which still smelled of living inhabitants. The front door was stiff but Rudi put his shoulder against it and with a groan of cold, swollen wood it scraped across a stone threshold. Past that the floor was bare packed dirt. Russian soldiers had bivouacked here and left rubbish -- empty ammunition boxes, cardboard cigarette butts, tin cans, paper -- strewn across the floor. A rough bench ran along one wall.

Rudi sighed and stepped into the house, just as the last of the light left the clearing. He groped about in the gloom and felt a few limbs of wood that had fallen out onto the hearth and so he shoved them back onto the cold ashes of the fireplace. He gathered scraps of paper and made a bed for the wood. Then he reached inside his tunic, inside the field blouse, and pulled out his last matches.

The fire slowly built and shone on the dirty kettle that hung against the back wall of the fireplace. Rudi reached out with coal-smudged hands and felt water slosh in it.

He sat back on the floor as warmth crept grudgingly through the space between him and the fire. Rudi stopped shivering. A chill weariness was still deep inside him and he smelled crow's blood on his breath. Sleepiness caused his head to nod, and he felt as if he were priming the fire for a witch's whispered incantations, heating water for her evil infusions, lit her house with a cheery evil glow to welcome her on her return home from murdering children.

A crow cawed outside.

Rudi crawled along the floor to the window. The glass was cracked but still held to the frame; dusty and cobwebbed. He peered through it, saw the clearing dimly, as if through dark water.

The gloom of a late fall evening obscured most of the trees bounding the clearing. The fall moon cast an unconvincing glow, reflected from



the fallen snow. A cherry tree grew near the middle of the clearing, separate from the pines. The woman who had lived an exiled life in this house hung from one limb. The infant she had borne a German soldier had been garotted and the wire tied around her wrist, so that the dead baby hung below her hand, like shopping, their feet dangling above the ground.

A crow was pecking at the rope tied around the branch above the woman's head. He cawed again, the voice of Misha.

The corpses fell to the ground. Misha fluttered down onto the dead woman's breast, then wormed his way into her mouth. His tail feathers disappeared as he wriggled down her throat.

Rudi and Sashenka were silent, and a few minutes later the head began to tremble, then a beak burst through an eye. The corpse began to sit up, hands scrabbling around and pulling at tufts of dead grass to lift itself. The dead baby was jerked back and forth.

"Make soup of me," said Sashenka. For a moment Rudi wondered at the sounds on the edge of comprehension in the crow's cawing. Sashenka said it again and Rudi realized that he was hearing German spoken through a thick Russian accent.

"Why should I ever do that?" asked Rudi, as if the request were weirder than its utterance.

"To give classification immunity," said the crow, croaking the unfamiliar words with stilted harshness.

Rudi shook his head, in fear or wonderment or refusal.

"Make soup of me," insisted Sashenka.

The crow flew over to the kettle and ducked under the mantle. It settled on the hot rim, shifting from talon to talon. The water was just coming to the boil and steam made the crow's feathers shine.

Then the crow stepped into the water and sank for a moment. Rudi hurried to the kettle's side, horrified, meaning to reach into the boiling



water. The crow's head bobbed up and one eye opened, peering up at Rudi. The beak opened and closed, but no sound came out. After a moment the bird shuddered in the roiling water, then its only movement came as the bubbles burst about it.

Rudi watched the dead bird swim about the water for a few minutes. Then he fished it out, grabbing the tail and tossing it on the floor. His fingers burned but he set to plucking the bird.

Its flesh was warm, half from the boiling water and half from ebbing life. Rudi felt the greasy meat catch in his throat, but he swallowed with determination, and finished it all.

The corpse shuffled across the meadow as the man ate. It walked as if motives struggled for domination -- the dead woman wanting vengeance on Germans, the crow in its head needing to kill the curse of Sashenka.

Rudi, gagging on the remains of the bird, startled as the corpse forced the door open. He stared in fear as the dead woman limped toward him, the dead baby dragging across the hard earth.

Then he moved, quickly gathering up the bones and feathers like fortune sticks and tossing them into the boiling waters. He stepped back and the corpse shuffled past him and drew a long wooden spoon from above the mantle. It began to stir the water.

Rudi backed slowly away, until he was by the cellar door set in the floor at the end of the bench. He bent his knees, keeping his back straight, his gaze on the dead woman, and lifted the door. He climbed down the ladder beneath it and watched the woman stir as he ducked his head and lowered the trap door.

The floor of the cellar was rough dirt. He lit another match and saw dirt walls, old boxes and jars, a rat scurrying away. Past clouds of his frigid breath, he saw a black hole in one wall, then a cold wind coming from the wall blew out the match.

Overhead he heard the hut's door open with a groan. Voices sounded in Russian, puzzled, then frightened. The stutter of a Russian PPS-43



sub-machine gun made Rudi crouch to the ground. Above he heard water sloshing with a hiss and crackle over flame, then the sound of the metal kettle tumbling across the floor, then the loud thump as the dead woman and baby fell.

Rudi crept toward the hole, hands and arms outstretched. He found the wall, and knelt, passing into the tunnel. He thought briefly of rats or a sudden plunge ahead, but thought also of Russians behind.

He had no more matches but the sides of the tunnel were close to either shoulder and he sensed no turns in the darkness.

Then he put a hand out onto nothing and his body pitched forward, hips catching at the hard end of the floor, then he slid over a ledge. His hands parted water, not shattering on stone as he expected. Rudi panicked as he rolled under water, in absolute darkness. There was no direction, and as he floundered, there was no time.

He let himself grow calm and realized he was only in shallow water. It flowed around the top of his calves as he stood carefully on trembling legs, feeling with his palms the stone roof just above his skull. He groped to either side and found another ledge making a bank to this stream. He crawled onto this, and, shivering, began to shuffle in a crouch in the direction of the current.

There was no time except that whispered at by the water, no book-keeping but the slap of his sodden boots on the rock. Rudi could not tell how far he walked and stumbled; he only kept on until his legs trembled, then drank mineral-tasting water into a quivering belly, rested an immeasurable while, slept unknowing, then moved on again.

The ceiling grew lower until he could no longer walk or crouch and he was reduced to his knees.

All he remained was instinct crawling down into the world. It seemed he crawled into sleep and back out, with little to signify a difference. One time he suddenly realized that the sound of the water was gone.

Now he crawled and the despair he had thought overwhelming became a totality. He felt like he was leaving a slick trail of blood from his



hands and knees for his fate to track him by. All he still owned was the pain of his body, especially in his eye.

Then he saw a blue glow ahead. The color at first seemed a chimera wrought by his despair, so he did not hurry ahead in foolish glee. Yet as he crawled further it strengthened, and finally he passed through the end of the tunnel into a cavern. He was at the top of a slope of rubble that buttressed this wall of the cavern; above him the ceiling stretched ahead into darkness. At the foot of the slope was a lake, an underground mere that glowed near the shoreline as if it had swallowed live fire.

The water stretched ahead, the blue glow dissolving into distance, into a seemingly endless dark, whatever further shore it possessed lost in blackness. The ceiling of the cavern was carved, with arches and buttresses overhead, pillars sinking from the roof to the water in galleries close to the wall on one side. There was a small quay down the rocky slope in front of him. The slope and the quay formed all this shore, with the walls of the cavern narrowing and curving to an end a few yards to Rudi's left, away from the water. The slope ahead reached almost to the wall across from him, leaving a small flat path as on a valley floor between the quay and the cavern's end.

From a tunnel's mouth in that wall Rudi saw gnomes walk out into the blue glow. They were small grey figures and they advanced between rails, set in the floor as if this were some subterranean train depot.

About thirty of the gnomes walked from the tunnel to the quay's edge, and then two black-clad men appeared. Rudi tried to crawl within himself and back into the hole as he recognized the SS uniforms.

The figures, grey and black, appeared small from Rudi's vantage point. The sounds were faint; he could see the SS men shouting but the vast water seemed to suck their voices away in cold echoes. The grey men clambered from the quay into two wooden boats on the lake, followed by the SS men.

Two gnomes stayed behind and Rudi saw them now hauling on ropes that stretched to the boats and beyond, dwindling into the blackness.



As the gnomes pulled, the boats drew further away from the quay, disappearing silently. Lamps appeared near their sterns, and their glow gradually shrank to pinpoints of light. For a long time the gnomes pulled, the lights glimmered, faint sounds of water on wood and stone or an angry voice floated back to Rudi.

Then Rudi saw that a gnome lay directly in front of him. He stopped his initial reaction to flee back up the tunnel. How had this one crept up on him?

The gnome didn't move and Rudi held his breath. Then, as a forming cloud assumes its shape, he saw that it was a man, a dead man, lying among the sharp-edged stones scree slope a few feet down from his tunnel.

He crawled forward. Stones rattled and he froze again, but the grey men by the water didn't turn towards him. The dead man's open, dried eyes stared at him, the shrunken skin was drawn back from the lips in a hopeless grimace. Rudi tentatively touched one of the fisted hands; it was like touching old wood. This one must have crawled up here to die alone.

The man wore a shapeless striped jacket and pants. Rudi stared at the corpse for a few moments, unsure if he was wondering at the spectacle of this man and the others in this unheard-of place, or if he was wondering if he could eat the dead man. At best it would be like gnawing a month-old chicken neck and at worst it would kill him. So he ignored it, and ignored the puzzle of it all, and stood and walked carefully down the rocky slope until he reached the rail track and then walked along it to the quay.

There sat the two men left behind—not gnomes at all, Rudi realized, just men in grey clothes--resting after their long haul on the ferry rope. They sat on the smooth stone of the quay, knees pulled up, heads on their arms. Behind them were piled loose rocks and stones, part of that which made the tumbled slope down from toward Rudi's tunnel. He couldn't see the black mouth of that tunnel on the dark cavern wall; the blue light suffused the air but did not illuminate much.



Rudi could see that these two men had little more flesh on their bodies than had the corpse. They saw him now and scrambled weakly to their feet. One of the men stared at him in recognition, or else in horror at the tatters of his army field uniform. Then, to Rudi's surprise, this man began undressing.

Rudi was embarrassed to see the man's starved body, averted his eyes from the genitals. The three of them stood for a moment, then the clothed man motioned at Rudi and said something Rudi did not understand. The clothed man mimed undressing while the naked man stood, shivering, his gaze dull.

Rudi shrugged and pulled off his ragged, dirty battle uniform and underclothes. The naked man pointed to his boots and Rudi reluctantly took these off as well. Then the naked man reversed the process, pulling on Rudi's boots, underclothes, pants, tunic, field coat. Then he turned away and paced off four steps and the fifth step stretched out over water and he plunged down.

His companion did not shout out or run toward the dock's edge. Rudi stood in confusion. The other man did not surface and Rudi became aware of how cold he was and so put on the other's clothes. The coarse shirt and pants were small and felt verminous. The shoes were made of wood and hard leather.

Then came a peremptory shout across the water. The other man grasped his ferry rope and began pulling, gesturing with his head for Rudi to join him. Rudi did so, heaving at his rope, staring at the water, over the quay where the man had disappeared.

The boats drew toward them out of the darkness. The beam of the flashlight waved over them as they pulled them to, then as they made fast lines, thrown from onboard, to dock posts.

The other grey men and the two guards climbed out of their boats. Rudi stood still, awaiting discovery, but the guards counted him among the others as if they'd always had this one-eyed man in their company.



Rudi fell in as they marched to the entrance across the cavern. From there a tunnel lit with several weak light bulbs led slightly uphill. Electrical cables were fastened to the low ceiling, and mining cart tracks ran along the floor.

The column of grey men stopped at a metal door set into one wall and a guard shot open the bolt and pulled back the door.

"Get in!" he shouted in German. Rudi understood the word but only as if he was a foreigner listening to a once-known language.

One of the grey men walked off with a guard as the others went into the room. Two long bunks of bare wood lined the walls, a bare bulb gleamed stingily, a pair of latrine buckets sat against the far wall.

The grey man returned, straining to carry a metal container. The guard carried a basket of bread. The other grey men quickly lined up and the guards began ladling out bowls of soup, handing out bread, smiling nastily.

Rudi pulled out the bowl and spoon he found in the pocket of his jacket, and received his watery soup and a small lump of hard bread. He drank the thin broth, a few slivers of turnips in it, soaked the hard bread and ate it, famished, though he could not match these other men for hunger.

After they ate and licked clean their bowls and spoons and a grey man had taken away the empty pot, the evil-eyed guard shouted an order and the men climbed into the bunks. The door slammed shut and the bolt shot home.

Then the men began to whisper. It sounded like Italian to Rudi, though these men did not look like the Italians he had seen on the Eastern front.

The light bulb shut off abruptly. Rudi tried to stay awake, to decipher the whisperings and find some reason for his being here, to discover what this place was.



He woke with the clang of the door, the bulb burning again, the guards shouting. There was some order to the movement of the grey men, a prison choreography he aped as best he could. They cleaned their faces and bare chests with icy water in one room, emptied their bladders and bowels in another, breakfasted on the same soup and hard bread, and lined up and marched back out to the cavern, and the quay, and the boats.

Rudi sat in his boat and watched the two grey men on shore pull on the ferry rope. The boat seemed still in the flat water, no ripples across the slack blue and black surface.

They came to the further shore and disembarked. Rudi followed the line through a tunnel, then into another large cavern, this one lit with strings of the weak light bulbs. A series of alcoves were cut into the walls, hangars for aircraft.

In the middle of the cavern sat one of those aircraft. It was sleek and monstrous, with a gaping maw and no propeller.

The men he had once thought were gnomes began dismantling the plane, as if meaning to return its metal to the earth, having mined it long before and shaped it, and now feeling remorse for the hunger of the soil.

As they worked Rudi came more and more to understand that these were slaves.

He joined another man in building crates, lifting sections of dismantled aircraft into them, sealing them and painting numbers and meaningless words on them with flimsy stencils. Then they had to haul the heavy crates into one of the abandoned alcoves, stack them, arrange them. The work steadily grew agonizing, such that Rudi felt half-dead. He wondered how these walking skeletons could stand it, but they did not tell him, only shuffled along at their tasks.

Back in the main hangar, Rudi saw a slave drop to the ground, as a sheet of fuselage ripped from the airplane and fell over his legs. When the other slaves lifted the sheet one of the man's legs showed an evil



bend. The slave didn't scream but an involuntary keening escaped from behind his bared, clenched teeth, as if something in him was begging, finally.

One of the guards laughed, pulled a pistol from its holster, and shot the man.

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Rudi had long before lost his sense of time, in the tunnel in which he had fled the Russians. He did not know if he and the slaves went on to dismantle thirty planes in two weeks, or two planes in thirty weeks.

There were no days for him, only reiterations of dark, hungry sleep, and light and starving misery, punctuated by miserly servings of their miserable gruel.

One period of dark eventually began to seem overlong to his attenuated senses, measured by his stomach's adopted timetable. The bulb did not shine, no guards shouted at them. Rudi slept and woke, stayed on his bunk. He either dreamed or not, the only sensations, those of hunger and a tap-tapping as one slave hopelessly knocked on the door with his shoe. Occasionally Rudi wondered idly if his dead eye had infected his brain and removed all sense of the world from him.

The door finally opened and a beam of light flashed inside, played over the slaves and the wooden bunks, the brimming buckets of waste, several grey men who had died in the long night and whose bodies were laid neatly out on the floor between the bunks. A voice said something in a language Rudi did not speak. The words were clearly accented by shock and horror and disgust.

The slaves squinted against the light, shielded their eyes. The voice spoke again, gentler now, muffled, as if trying not to breath in the foul air. Rudi felt a fear which he could no longer understand or remember. The voice beckoned, and one by one the slaves stood and exited the room.



Rudi hesitated, but he could not name his fear and so, ignorant, followed.

They walked uphill, away from the cavern. The tunnel's light bulbs were dead, and so they followed the flashlight, and they stumbled on the rail ties and the rough rock floor.

Then they were suddenly in the painfully bright air. A dozen Russian soldiers stood before them in a gravel parking lot in a clearing of spruce trees. The soldiers stared at the gaunt slaves in amazement.

Rudi gave up, finally captured by Russians, and wondered when he would die. Then he smelled something familiar in the air. They were in a narrow valley below steep limestone hills covered with fir and spruce and beech. A creek, unseen, burbled off to one side.

Crowning one of the hills was an old castle, its keep now down to two walls and bulwarks of crumbled masonry, tumbled by the Turks when last they had come this way. Rudi had been here before -- before the war he had worked for a construction firm in Vienna and they had once come out here to this suburb to grade a highway among these hills.

He had fled down into a hole in the Ukraine in the winter and come out in Austria in the spring. The black crows of Russia migrated each winter to Austria. Rudi remembered them from his boyhood, vast flocks blackening a cold, clouded sky. They had seemed monsters to him then, strutting in the snow, giants, big as dogs. They were gone by the spring, but now in their place these Russian soldiers filled the space in much the same way, as if they, too, newly owned the country.

An American-made deuce-and-a-half truck was parked at the edge of the gravel lot, near a road that ran along the stream. A red star was painted on its doors. A Russian officer, of the political sort, glared at them as the soldiers helped them into the back, the truck bound for some unknown destination, to what Rudi thought would be his death.

The officer grabbed Rudi's arm as he reached the back of the truck, shouted something at him. Rudi shrugged, trying to remove himself



from the grasp. Now was the time he would be led off into the woods, a single bullet behind the ear.

The officer let go and shoved him toward the truck, where other soldiers lifted him up and in. The officer berated another slave, but they were all mute to him, unwilling to attempt a credible explanation for the things that had befallen them.

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Rudi walked away from the train station in Neusiedel an der Zaya, near the Austrian border with Czechoslovakia. He wore an old but clean suit of clothes given him at a displaced persons camp. He clamped a bundle under his arm. Over one side of his forehead he wore a patch and bandages, courtesy of the Red Army surgeon who had amputated the dead eye.

He walked along the road between fields of dying sunflowers, their heads heavy on browning stalks thick as his wrist. Behind him the fields spread out over a flat plain. Ahead the land rose over several hills; built on one was his village. On and beyond the hills were the fields his father and others farmed. At the foot of the hill was the church and its cemetery; the main road led past these and wound along the side of the hill, leaving behind a length of row houses originally painted yellow and carmine but now half-burnt and crumbled open. He turned off the road well before these houses and climbed up towards a low yellow farm house with a green door, where his mother stood and saw him, and put her hands to her face.

#

"The Russians came from over the hills, yes, and just went right through the village." His father rested one of his immense brown hands against the wall, a fresh lath and plaster construction. "They burned



down some houses here, but we lost just this wall. Look, you can see on the beams."

Rudi looked at the ceiling and saw the scorch marks on the old oak beams. He looked around the sitting room. It had once been cluttered but now only a few pieces of furniture remained. A crucifix hung wedged between wall and ceiling in the corner near the door. His mother sat on a chair next to him, crying silently, her hands clutching her brown smock. His father paced the floor, nervously, his old blue overalls dingy and patched.

Rudi's son sat on his lap, quietly chewing a hunk of sausage Rudi had pulled from his bundle. "Where is Clara?" Rudi asked softly.

"Gone," said Rudi's father.

"The Russians took her," whispered the mother.

Rudi nodded. This child he had not seen in years. His last memory of him was as an infant held in his wife's arms as she watched him leave for the army. The boy had Clara's broad features, but his body seemed constricted from famine.

"Bertl and Hans died in France," his father said, his voice rough. "With you we thought it was the same, only that we were never notified."

Rudi nodded.

"Damned Jews," his father said loudly. "They did this to us."

"No Papa," said Rudi. "Don't say it." He brushed his hand against the boy's thin hair. His father had no answer for his only son to survive the wars. Outside the large crows flew in ragged black clouds across the sky. The father had always imagined them as coal smoke out of Vienna. That was a sight of the winter. Now they were here for all seasons, black background of the red flag of consequence.





## Children of a Far Star

by Paul Woodlin

Venus was still only a sphere suspended in the void, but Captain Wolfe could already see with the naked eye the golden dot that was an alien ship in orbit around the second planet. Somehow that vessel was responsible for the transforming of Venus taking place. As the world rotated, the growing circle of living green and yellow against the brown of the newly exposed surface came into view. It was a perfect hexagon so far as her eyes could see, except on the eastern side where the beginnings of a lively ocean grew into wherever the natural rock formations permitted.

Soon they were in orbit around Venus. On the captain's mark Commander Jackson detached the spaceplane from the booster that had carried the Argos and her crew from Earth and would wait in orbit to carry them back. Captain Wolfe then began easing the Argos into Venus's recently tamed atmosphere. Her hands guided the first and only interplanetary vessel of the UN's space "fleet" calmly despite knowing that if she made any mistake in landing that would damage the vessel they would die long before rescue came.

Wolfe could see the graceful alien vessel ahead of them in its in orbit around Venus. The cameras took more pictures of the strange craft with a hull only a meter in radius and eight times as long. The impression of size it gave was due to the vast, delicate solar sails that had propelled it from deep space. Over the years the craft had silently, slowly circled each major body in the solar system until making its final home in orbit around Venus as it ignored Earth's attempts at communication.



Wolfe did not allow herself to be relaxed by the comforting blueness she lowered the Argos into. The clear skies and growing oceans must have been the result of the alien's vessels tampering so no one, least of all Wolfe, knew what to expect from this alien world. Its sky had a greenish tint and the winds were still more powerful than Earth's despite the great changes mysteriously made by the alien probe. She noticed the sharp clearness of the virgin skies that were empty of industrial pollutants. The Argos had been designed with the best in clean fuel-engines possible to avoid contaminating the biosphere.

Bringing the space plane high over the coast look to for a large, solid place to safely land and provide the scientists a good base camp, the pilots had an excellent view of both land and sea. The sea was a translucent green-gold, and as the Argos followed the thin red line of irregular coast it was suddenly overflying a vast, but sparse, forest. It was as if someone had drawn a line and said, "Here will be life."

They had chosen this general area while still in approach because of the green and yellow colors, but this transcended Wolfe's wildest adult expectations, if not her childhood dreams of exploration. Eventually she saw a clearing and slowed the Argos until she could put the spaceplane into hovermode. The spot was even south of large hill; Jackson had determined in orbit that winds of chosen area were worst when they came from the north.

As they put on skin tight protective environmental suits Wolfe hid her excitement as Jackson and the other American, Professor Sothen, joked around to release their own. Wolfe had always wanted to explore; her heart had nearly broke as a teenager when NASA shut down and handed the routine maintenance of the communications network over to the Air Force. A curious person, yet not wanting to spend her life sitting around in a lab, she joined the military to satisfy her urge to explore. Now she was pleasantly surprised to find herself on Venus despite the last few decades of the government sacrificing everything from space exploration to education in order to satisfy entitlements and interest payments.



Everyone was careful with the protective suits; theory suggested that an alien biosphere would not have viruses dangerous to humans, but at the moment no one was going to test it, especially on an artificially created biosphere and so far from a real hospital. The rule book, which Wolfe had helped to write, stated that the biosphere would be tested for a week before anyone would venture outside unprotected. But there was hope that humankind could walk unencumbered on the surface of Venus: Singh and Jackson's atmospheric tests had revealed a thicker atmosphere and a lower percentage of oxygen than Earth's that fairly balanced each other out. The rest was made up of more nitrogen and other harmless trace elements.

They opened the Argos's outer airlock door to a greener sky and a young sparse "forest" of tall, slim plants swaying with a mild wind. Captain Wolfe activated her comlink with twitch of her jaw, and as she reported back to Earth the scientists spread out to take samples. Doctor Schuller began taking soil samples from beneath tall, yellow grasses with her sharp, precise movements while Professor Taki at first merely ran his hands along the smooth trees as if he could learn something by touching them through his gloves. Doctor Singh started towards the ocean, a translucent green-gold sea calmly lapping against the reddish shoreline to the east.

Wolfe, Jackson, and Sothen headed up the hill walking through the forest of thin saplings already widely spreading their branches and dark green leaves. After a few minutes they reached the treeless top and looked out across a vast marsh of yellow ferns where the land was just low enough to mix with the sea but not be swallowed up by it. Wolfe's trained eyes saw no threats from this vantage point, but wondered if she could recognize a threat from an alien environment.

"Only three years ago we couldn't have dreamed to set foot on Venus," said Sothen with a touch of awe in his voice.

"This isn't the Venus we knew three years ago." Jackson sounded worried to Wolfe's ears, and she wondered if it was old fear hidden from the psychtechs or a new fear grown from actually facing the unknown instead of simply contemplating it.



Sothen smiled to himself.

“Worried about little green aliens?”

“Most of the important people in government and scientific circles doubt any civilization would go to the trouble of transforming a planet merely because they can,” replied Jackson.

“It seems likely they intend to send colonists after the transformation is complete.”

“Then we have plenty of time. Given the direction and level of technology their solar vessel indicates, they shouldn’t be around for decades. Maybe centuries.”

Captain Wolfe turned on Sothen.

“Our rate of technological advancement may have leveled off, but that doesn’t mean theirs did. During the centuries it might have taken their vessel to reach our world they could have discovered methods of travel beyond our comprehension. Our world may have become so concerned with slicing up the pie they forgot to bake more, but perhaps their culture values knowledge more than materialism.”

Sothen had no reply, for all of them knew Earth had stagnated. When the wellspring of funding dried up, so did the promised fruits of technology.

Wolfe looked back at the waving amber ferns, all eerily similar to each other.

“They could be here next year, or even next month for all we know.”

“And if they are?”

“If we have enough warning from Earth, we hightail it back to orbit and hope they don’t mind our looking around without an invitation. In any case, we can only hope they will be friendly.”

“Well, they are building a world instead of taking ours, Captain.”

Wolfe nodded.



“We are hoping Venus’s transformation indicates that they are more constructive than destructive, but they might be like us and more than capable of both.”

At that, the winds began to pick up, and they returned to camp wondering if humanity had forfeited the resources of its own solar system through sheer disinterest.

#

After a week of testing, the crew sat around a table with a dark glass top. Wolfe sat at head of the table and Jackson at the foot with the scientists in between. Doctor Singh manipulated the controls on the sidearm of her chair and the dark screens showed her data. The screens came alive with symbolic chemical structures composed of familiar elements combined in ways both similar and radical.

“As you can see, it is water. We can drink it just as our own. The same elements exist, but the life forms that give it the light green tint are incompatible with our systems, as either a nutrient or a poison.”

She spoke the entire half an hour allotted to her without interruption but with the complete attention of the table. Then Wolfe nodded to Schuller to begin; it had been decided back when the mission plans were wrote up that science briefings would work there way up the chain of complexity from the most basic to the most general.

“The life forms are becoming more complex,” began Schuller with her Germanic accent sounding even harsher coming after Singh soft Indian voice. Schuller changed the screen to pictures of microorganisms.

“Besides the obviously advanced plant life, I have found the first stages of animal life at an early evolutionary stage.” After her half hour was up, the scientists began arguing over her initial assumptions about early and advanced plant life. Order was only restored when Wolfe pointed out the obvious.

“Evolutionary theory is not relevant when studying this biosphere. It is being artificially created and designed by the alien vessel. Early and late are terms the merely describe the order in which it places them



here, and apparently it has decided to create plant life before animal life. We are to figure out how and why Venus is being transformed, not study a 'natural' environment. If we ever visit the vessel's home world, then we can worry about evolution."

She told Taki to begin, and he lectured on the apparent means of plant reproduction, and on the differences between Terran and Venusian trees. The trees of Venus were soft and flexible, without bark, and so better able to handle the winds. This suggested to him that Venus and the alien ship's home world shared high winds.

Then it was Sothen's turn, and he called up tables of percentages that filled the screens.

"The genetic codes do indicate construction rather than natural evolution. The genes of the plants are too similar, as if all of the plants are clones. There are 64 different kinds of clones for trees, 64 different kinds of clones for ferns, and 128 different kinds of clones for the algae in the sea. When they start interbreeding a genetic mix should develop, and with more bases in their genetic code they should develop an even more diverse set of life forms than Earth."

As Sothen continued on, combining the data of the other scientists into larger theoretical structures, Wolfe began wondering about what they had learned even as she listened to him. Up above her the alien vessel, apparently carrying enough information to transform a world, was directing an entire planet on a new course suitable for life. But as of yet there was no sign of how or why.

When he finished, Wolfe thanked him and turned to her second in command.

"Commander Jackson, will you please give us a weather report."

"Yes, Captain," answered Jackson, manipulating the armrest controls, and a space side view of Venus appeared showing clouds and a red dot indicating the camp's position. "The winds are slowing down all over the planet. Even during our worse night here the wind speed



never went above 100 miles an hour. In a week it should be safe to take the copter out for a flight.”

The captain nodded.

“Then in a week you and Doctor Schuller should head out to the edge of the more advanced plant life and take samples. Try to find any evidence of the mechanism that is transforming this planet.”

Schuller smiled, her pleasure at being the first to make an extended trip cracking through her normally cold expression, even if she didn't like the idea of flying around in a helicopter that was little more than an engine with a frame to sit on. After she dismissed the meeting, Wolfe reviewed the data the scientists had given her. Whatever was out there creating the world, Wolfe suspected it was larger than a compound, but too small to see, and that meant Schuller was the best choice to go. But the captain wished she could have justified going herself, and see more of this new world being created even as they watched.

#

They left in the morning exactly a week later, and returned in two hours, which was surprising enough that everyone just stared for a moment before dropping everything and coming back to the landing field. Jackson and Schuller both got out of copter; Schuller's face was twisted between joy and frustration, while Jackson was distinctly uncomfortable.

“We found aliens!” announced Schuller, almost glaring at Commander Jackson.

“Explain that statement please, Commander,” was Wolfe's only response as the scientists eagerly awaited more. Wolfe could tell Schuller was angry at Jackson, and the captain addressed him to support her second in command.

“Captain, we saw a campfire and I believe tents.”



"We couldn't see anything more because Jackson wouldn't overfly the camp!" accused Schuller, but the Captain nodded her head calmly.

"Which was the proper action," said Wolfe. "You may remember that mission guidelines make me responsible for a contact situation." The rest of the scientists nodded, for Wolfe had been chosen mission commander not only for her combined piloting and command experience, but also her degrees in general science and anthropology; results of her wide curiosity and the military's encouragement of educated officers. Such a choice was made not only so that the commander could understand the scientists, but so that someone could study the aliens if they showed up.

"No one is to leave camp until I return. Except Professor Taki, who will be with me."

"I found them," objected Schuller, "I should go back!"

This time Wolfe's tone was sterner. "Professor Taki is a botanist and accustomed to studying things large enough to see with the unaided eye. He is also an artist of note and may be able to discern something cultural a pure scientist would overlook." He is also a black belt, she added to herself, just in case. "Where are they, Jackson?"

"Seventy-five kilometers southwest. Well within the atmospheric safety line and in one of the more diverse parts of the biosphere."

"Very well, Commander, you are in command here. I will report in each evening by radio."

"You won't return tonight?"

"We are walking, Commander. If they are so primitive they need a campfire and tents, I don't want them to mistake me for a god. If not, I can look forward to stretching my legs a little."

Taki laughed just a little. "As do I, Captain."



They made excellent time, encumbered only by the most basic of supplies and goggles that served as nightvision, infravision, or normal binoculars. Both were lightly dressed for the heat and horrible humidity, and their spirits were higher than the temperature.

Resting that night under the Venusian view of the stars, Wolfe remembered nights when she was escaping the college for awhile by walking along the railroad tracks, grown over from disuse, that still ran down the middle of campus. She would walk until the city lights were a mere glow on the horizon, and then as she stargazed wished her planet hadn't become so concerned with its problems that the people stopped looking up to dream. Only now, years later, she was exploring a different world, and somehow that simple fact vindicated her oldest dreams.

For that, she silently thanked the golden dot passing through the starry sky, made visible by its vast, feather thin wings.

By late morning on the second day Wolfe and Taki were laying down on a hill staring through the goggles at a camp of humanoids. It had been easy to find; it took a big campfire to roast the animal the inhabitants were preparing to eat. Wolfe whispered to Taki with wonder slipping into her voice.

"Reptilian, I think. This warmer environment would allow them to be active all day. Two legs, four arms. Look at how they gesture at each other. I'll bet they use sign language."

"They seem to have colored patterns on their green skin, Captain, unless the green is coloring too. They might be painted or tattooed instead of natural markings. The patterns seem too representational to be natural, but who knows for sure? How long has this part of Venus been habitable?"

"A little over a year," responded Wolfe instantly, having checked the records for precisely that bit of data before leaving camp.

"But where did they come from? Another spaceship didn't land. Teleportation?"



“With no sign of even stone age technology? I’m pretty sure that brawny looking fellow on the west side of camp is carving a knife out of bone.”

“Leather tents, with symbolic markings. See there, a being is preparing the skin and another is drying them.”

They continued to watch as the tribe systematically took the creature apart for various uses and feasted and celebrated into the evening, with the fire going the entire time. Taki pointed out that one alien wasn’t so much doing anything as watching everything. Wolfe watched the alien’s movements around the camp and saw that everyone paid attention to the individual, yet kept a slight distance. She wondered why.

At night the aliens surrounded the fire, dancing as they faced the flames without any sign of music. It was a fluid, energetic dance, with each individual’s movements slightly different. Despite never having cared for dancing, Wolfe wished she could join them. She also noted the ease that they had remained hidden from the tribe during the day, but wasn’t sure what to think of it yet.

Upon their arrival in back camp they were bombarded with questions, but Wolfe waved them aside and told them she had to report to Earth, leaving Taki behind to answer their questions. The UN Security Council authorized her, and only her, to contact the aliens to learn as much about them as possible; the idea of primitive aliens struck them as absurd and she was ordered to pay special attention to any signs of hidden technology.

\* \* \*

Wolfe left camp with nothing but water and space rations. Her superiors on Earth had assumed that if she met aliens that they would be a “superior” civilization, but since Jackson and Schuller discovered a primitive society instead she decided to leave behind any obvious products of a technological society to avoid contaminating the culture. But it didn’t make sense to her for them to be primitive. She wondered how could they have arrived on Venus without a ship and why they would live like primitives if they did.



As she went over the hill, the members of the camp soon noticed her and began to gather. They are surprised by my coming, she thought instinctively without knowing how she could have known. Wolfe noticed that no one had been standing guard, and somehow the warrior's side of her soul was touched by that innocence. When the aliens began to touch her, gently and curiously, she touched them back, stroking their smooth, leathery, skin.

They began to gesture at her with hands that had three fingers and a thumb, but as she could not understand them she held her arms at her side and hoped they would not take offense. As the aliens began to gesture amongst themselves, Wolfe felt strange, knowing that she was being discussed. It was eerie for Wolfe to know so much being said without any sound at all.

Some were bigger or smaller than others, but all had wide shoulders to allow for the lower arms coming out from their torso. The ones she guessed were female had wider hips. One larger alien, who she thought of as male because of he had the strongest looking arms and relatively narrow hips, wore a horn on a necklace and had a large bone knife hanging from his belt. Looking around, she saw that members of each "gender" had knives, and she didn't notice any favored side.

The big one waved over the watcher that Taki had mentioned as they compared observations. The waver, who seemed to act as a leader, took the watcher's left upper hand and Wolfe's left hand and put them together. When neither withdrew, the big one looked satisfied and waved off the rest of the tribe who went back to their daily business, even if they kept glancing at her from time to time.

The watcher took her to a tent on the outskirts of the camp. With the gestured invitation of the watcher, they sat down outside of the tent facing each other. The watcher pointed up at the sky and made a simple hand gesture with an outer arm. Wolfe repeated it, keeping her middle and pointer finger together to emulate having only four fingers instead of five. The watcher pointed at the ground and made another gesture. Wolfe repeated it again, and they continued this way until the sun met the horizon, with a sunset of an even deeper red than Earth's.



Then the two watchers fell asleep by a small fire, gazing at the stars, lost in their own thoughts of each other.

Over the next several days, Wolfe was mostly in the company of the watcher, who she found out later was named "Signer" because it had been his idea to attach signs to each thing, and he named her "Walker" since her first sign had been to point and herself and demonstrate with her fingers that she had walked to their camp. They would watch members of the tribe do their daily chores and Signer would make the signs for each activity, and sometimes each action. One day they left the village for the woods to the north, and Signer taught her the signs for the plants they found. Eventually she got a handle on their grammar too, as it was based simply on the importance of the words with the words either becoming more or less important as the sentence was spoken.

Signer lived with the tribe, but everyone seemed to kept a respectful distance from him most of the time and when ever they found a new thing they asked him to name it. It surprised Wolfe that the tribe allowed the relative outsider the authority to name a thing, given the power that implied over the way people would think of it even if it had been his idea. The aliens seemed almost as new to the environment as the humans.

As he taught her many of the simple signs, she interacted more with the rest of the tribe, but only on the most simple level since both sets of arms were needed for complicated subjects. Day to day matters were handled without even putting down whatever a being might be carrying. She also noted that a man and a woman held inner hands and lived in the same tent. Upon questioning, she discovered that they were beginning a family, and had a nice nest of eggs buried where the sun would warm them and the sand protect them. They answered her questions with their inner hands. Outer hands for the public, inner hands for the personal, decided Wolfe, and realized she and Signer had a public relationship as far as the tribe was concerned because of the way the big one had put their hands together. Host and guest, or ambassador and ambassador? Student and teacher? Wolfe couldn't determine which, and without four hands couldn't really discuss it yet.



Only once did she and Signer separate for an extended time. The big one, Knife Thrower, invited her to join a hunt. Wolfe had the impression that it was partially out of politeness, but more out of curiosity. She signed acceptance, but pointed to hip to indicate a lack of a knife. Signer gave her his with an upper hand and waved them off.

They were joined by two males and two females, and by this time Wolfe had learned which was which despite their definite advantage of keeping their sexual organs inside the body; males indeed had larger upper bodies while females had larger lower bodies. Using basic tracking skills, they were able to follow a herd of four legged herbivores, the first signs of other animal life, through she could have sworn she saw one wave away a bug. Along the way, Knife Thrower taught her the hunting signs.

After a few hours they found the herd. The creatures looked strangely like centaurs, but even more horse-like in the upper torso, and were using thumbless, two fingered hands to pull off leaves for their horse head features. After some quick gesturing about the proper distance and direction to attack from, the hunters crept carefully through the grass. Once close, all of the hunters, including Wolfe, sprung up and simultaneously threw their knives at the closest animal. Wolfe hit its throat. As the rest of the herd ran, the hunters jumped the crippled animal and pulled it down. They pulled the knives back out and used them to finish the kill.

As the other four hunters carried the carcass, Knife Thrower was congratulating Wolfe on her fine throw. There wasn't any aggression his attitude, he might have been complimenting her for fine needlework. Talking about a shared exploit created a feeling of closeness to Knife Thrower in Wolfe, and she wondered how he felt about it beyond being impressed with her accuracy.

As they talked a strange beast leaped out of the grass and attacked Knife Thrower. The other hunters backed off nor could Knife Thrower fight back, for all his strength was misdirected in his fear.



Wolfe jumped on its back and embedded her knife in the back of the cat-like beast's neck. It reared, trying to throw her off so it could turn and attack her, but she rode the predator, and stabbed again with the knife, this time in the throat. Soon the "cat" died. Only then did she step back and look at it. It had six legs and golden fur to match the grasses. Never before had she seen such darkly red colored blood.

The hunting party had worn little clothing and it took all of them for Wolfe to make bandages for Knife Thrower. She knew that if she taught them even the most basic medicine she would be impacting their culture, but while watching Knife Thrower bleed Wolfe didn't care if they made her healing goddess.

The hunting party looked to her after she finished. It was not because she was naked, for somehow their mutual nudity was innocent when their shapes were so different. Knife Thrower had been their leader because he had first realized that a knife could be thrown, and now he was unconscious and they were afraid, explaining to Wolfe in hasty signs that nothing like this had happened before.

She asked which two of them ran the fastest. The tallest two of the four raised their hands, and Wolfe sent them back to camp to tell them to send enough people tomorrow to help carry both the animals and Knife Thrower. Then she told the others to skin the cat-like creature so its skin could be used to keep Knife Thrower warm during the night.

As the sun went down, they made a campfire. They put Knife Thrower close to it, and then Wolfe signed for them to go to sleep. The others were hesitant since they were having their first taste of feeling hunted instead of hunting, but Wolfe assured them with signs that she could defend them again.

As Wolfe stood watch that night her subconscious mind kept an eye out for danger while she considered the aliens' reactions. They accepted her as their leader. Was it because she had killed, or because she had saved a life? Or might have it been because she had reacted successfully to a new situation? She couldn't tell, and didn't have the vocabulary to ask.



Somehow she felt like an adult among children, but these aliens had come from across the stars, and should have been more advanced than she was. Could these be colonists left on their own resources? Looking up at the stars, she wondered what kind of parents abandoned their children to the wilderness of space.

The tribe arrived shortly after sunrise. Signer looked over the strange new skill she had demonstrated, and gestured. The entire tribe repeated the two handed gesture. Then he pointed at Wolfe, and put that gesture before "Walker."

Wolfe returned the knife to Signer, but he accepted it and then raised knife to the crowd with such an elegant gesture that Wolfe was suddenly aware that Signer was about to do something that meant a great deal to him. Despite Wolfe already having cleaned it of blood, Signer slowly wiped it on the dew of the grass and then placed the knife in one of his inner hands. With that hand, he gave the knife back to her hilt first. She accepted it and, lacking an inner arm, tucked it under her shoulder. Signer nodded his understanding in a strangely familiar gesture, and then Wolfe realized he had been learning her language too; he had exactly copied the way she always nodded her head when she understood something.

Back at camp, Knife Thrower was taken to his tent to rest and after Wolfe checked his ad hoc bandages she allowed herself to be taken to the edge of camp. There both animals were prepared for the use of their remains and Wolfe was shown every step, even how to make tools and decorations from the bones. She had been hard pressed to copy their quick and graceful signs, but she found some satisfaction in being able to learn the basics of a few of their crafts even if she sadly knew she wouldn't have time to master them.

That night a large fire was made in the center of camp and Wolfe was honored with gifts made from the beast she had killed. Then Signer stood before the tribe and raised his hands to be seen. With the fire as his background, casting his shadow over all of them, his hands began an elegant series of gestures, and Wolfe did her best to understand them.



'Mother in sky flew between stars to here, once hot and dead. Mother calmed air and laid water and life. When we walk to edge, we see Mother's eggs hatching, and know she is with us. We hatched to meet tribe from blue star in sky, and please Mother in what we do.'

Wolfe carefully contained her excitement at having found the first clue as to what these aliens knew. They must have been in contact with the ship, she decided, or else they couldn't have known we could be coming. No wonder they weren't afraid of me.

She also found herself envying them for the certain knowledge of their beliefs. What would it be like to see God's Hands at work before your very eyes, she wondered.

When many of them got up to dance they left a place for her too.

Cautiously, she joined them, feeling that it was unlikely she would be able to mimic their wild dancing. At first all she did was try to keep from getting in the way of their chaotic movements, but as she watched her companions she realized they were dancing with the movement of the flames as if it was some kind of music to them. She watched the fire dance one way and followed it. The flame went up and she followed it. Gradually she became more fluid in her movement as her mind concentrated on the fire and forgot to worry about what she was doing, letting her body naturally follow the flames.

Dancers left when they grew tired and were replaced, and when Wolfe finally sat down she felt freer than she ever had before. Even dancing on Earth had not been such a release, for bars on Earth often seemed oppressive to her precisely because people went to them to release the tensions of the day by expressing them and forcing others to suffer them. Around this fire the dance had simply been an act of attunement to the fire and by doing so, by understanding a part of their arts, she felt she had crossed a barrier between them. She could see the looks she had learned meant approval on the faces of the people she no longer considered aliens. Signer touched her arm to get her attention.

'You are one of us.'



That depressed Wolfe even as she felt exhilarated, for she knew she would have to leave.

#

Wolfe arrived back at the Argos wearing just enough golden animal hide to maintain her dignity without dying from the heat, and wearing a necklace of teeth to complement her pair of bone knives. The scientists quickly gathered around to pester her with questions, but she waved them off.

“I want complete verbal reports on what you have found in a half an hour, then I will fill you in on what I learned.”

She continued on inside, and greeted Commander Jackson. He glanced over her attire in an amused sort of way.

“I take it the meeting went well, Captain.”

For the first time since leaving the tribe, Wolfe smiled. “Yes, it did. I am now ‘Healing Walker’ and they think of me as one of them, even if I can’t lay eggs.”

They shared a laugh, and Wolfe went off to shower and change into uniform in the air conditioned comfort of the Argos. Less than a half an hour later, the crew was gathered around their briefing table. Wolfe looked to Schuller first and asked if she had any success discovering the method of the transformation.

“We have gathered enough data to study for the rest of our lives, but there is one piece of data that would concern you far above any other, Captain.” Schuller looked at Sothen, who nodded and tapped the controls of his armrest and a picture of something like a mechanical cross between a crab and a spider appeared on the screens. After giving Wolfe a few seconds to look over the picture, Schuller continued.

“We have discovered that the probe is using nanotechnology to transform this planet. There are even smaller, simpler machines than this one that are basically molecules designed to replicate themselves



while producing breathable air and drinkable water. These machines make the trees and animals, while the programmed molecules produce the base components of the ecosystem using the raw materials of the planet's atmosphere."

"How were they able to do it so fast?" asked Wolfe, and Schuller nodded at Singh.

"By the way they self-replicated as they created the planet," she whispered. "They would produce a thousand molecules of water, then create another version of itself, and then both would repeat the cycle more rapidly than Earth science suggested possible. We did contain a few and Professor Sothen has been watching them for patterned behavior."

As Sothen began detailing his findings about the possible programs the behavior suggested, Wolfe began thinking back to the camp and remembered the attack on their hunting party. When Sothen finished, she looked them over.

"Have any of you seen any signs of animal life nearby?"

Jackson nodded. "Some small fish, and animal tracks in the woods, but nothing has come close to camp."

"If there are tracks, then there is danger. I want each of you to pair up when you leave the Argos, even just to stretch your legs outside the ship."

"I take it that necklace of yours is evidence of your encounter with a dangerous creature," said Sothen.

"Yes, indeed it was. The aliens have a hunting-gathering society, but unlike Earth's hunter-gatherers they are primarily living off of meat."

Taki nodded. "The plant life is not varied enough yet to support too many herbivores. The ratio of meat to plant substance may change as plant life becomes more varied." He looked thoughtful. "Odd that a predator would be added while the herbivores are still rare."



"There are more herbivores than you think," said Wolfe.

"I saw a whole herd of them."

"Did you learn much about the aliens?" asked Taki.

"The basics of their language. Enough to be polite and to ask them questions about practical skills. Unfortunately to ask them anything more symbolic requires four hands instead of a mere two." She spend the next hour relating her experiences to an intrigued audience and answer their questions. Then she rose from her chair, but before she dismissed them Sothen spoke.

"Those aliens hold the key to finding out anything more, if there is any key to be found."

"I know, Professor," responded Wolfe. "That is why Taki and I will return to their camp. As I recall, Professor Sothen, you wrote your master's thesis on complexity theory and the interactions between different levels of organization. Therefore you will write a summary of all our reports, including the one I am about to write, to create a total picture of what we have found. After each person has had a chance to read and criticize it we will attach our names to it. And, by the way, from now on we might as well start calling them Venusians until we know where the probe came from. They did get here first, after all."

#

As Wolfe, back in her tribal clothing, and Taki again traveled to their distant neighbors, Wolfe told Taki about many of the customs of the Venusians and the basic signs that the tribe used. Taki hazarded a personal question. "Do you want me to come along with you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"You seem rather grudging about telling me about them, yet at the same time determined to do so."

Wolfe thought silently about his words for awhile before answering.



"I suppose I don't want you to come. I don't want them to be examined like specimens, but we are here to learn."

"But you came to them first to examine them, and with the training of an anthropologist."

Wolfe shook her head.

"But I'm not an anthropologist, even if I did study it.

I've fought with them, I've danced with them, I've even learned from them. I can't help but think of them as people to be with instead of beings to be looked at." Her next words came only reluctantly. "I suppose I've lost my objectivity."

"How did you come to feel this way?"

"I think they still have something we have lost, Taki. They are curious about the world, something rare back home. Even rarer, they treat each other as people too, instead of acting as if others are there for their own use or entertainment. They have a community without dehumanization, and I don't want us to dehumanize them by treating them like samples."

Taki nodded and smiled slightly but comfortingly. "Do not worry, Captain. I may be a scientist, but I am also an artist, and art is about communicating with people. I shall come to them as an artist, open to their truth instead of judging how it came to be."

When they came into the Venusian camp Taki was prepared for the touching and smoothly gestured the greetings Wolfe had shown him. Signer took them to see Knife Thrower, who was recovering but not yet able to stand. But he did sign her, and with his inner hands alone even though the words were simple.

'Many thanks for life, Healing Walker.'

'Many thanks for hunt, Knife Thrower. It made me one with you.' She paused. 'This is Plant Watcher.'

'Different color.'



'My people have many skin colors.'

'We must paint to be different.'

'You should rest.' She shook her head. 'I shouldn't have come.'

'I rest more than I wish, and friends are good for health. Will you come tomorrow?'

'Yes.'

Signer took them to a new tent next to his own. There was a small fire glowing in front of the door; a flap of golden furred skin.

'Hunters made it. I tend fire.'

She thanked him, and then the three of them sat around the fire. Signer and Wolfe spent the rest of the day teaching Taki more signs so that he could communicate better with the tribe. As night fell and the tribe began gathering around a central fire, Wolfe touched Signer and asked him a question.

'Why do you choose signs?'

Signer made no gesture at first, and simply looked into Wolfe's eyes, his golden brown meeting her sea green.

'I cannot tell you. You do not have signs.'

That evening while everyone sat around the central campfire Taki slowly integrated himself into the community. A younger hunter ended up teaching Taki by example how to make a bone knife of his own, for by now everyone had a knife at their side. Wolfe was surprised to feel regret noticing that a pair of hunters kept careful watch off to the side. She wished they could have maintained the innocence of when she first met them, but as guilt from her association with the violent incident reared its head she reminded herself that she had not brought the cat creature upon them and had saved Knife Thrower's life.

She found herself sitting beside the couple who had the eggs. They looked at her with curiosity.



'Do you have inner companion?' signed the woman. Wolfe then realized they couldn't tell how she felt about Taki since she only had one set of arms.

'No,' replied Wolfe with a sharp gesture, and then, embarrassed at her reaction, felt she had to explain. 'People of my world treat each other like daggers or necklaces. Things to be used. Sometimes for a long time, sometimes for a short time.'

Wolfe decided to change the subject. 'How many eggs did you have?'

'Seven little ones will hatch,' signed the mother with a smile that didn't curve upwards and extended across her face.

'What are little ones like?' she asked

'They must be taught as they grow.'

'Did you grow?'

'We awoke.'

'Who taught you?'

'Signer.'

Wolfe looked to her other side, where Signer watched patiently. She knew he held the secrets of his people. Signer looked into the fire, and asked her what she saw.

Wolfe looked into the rising flames, watched how they chased away the cold darkness. She saw how the light interplayed with the dyes on the Venusians' skins. The flames were reflected in their eyes, their dance, their energy. These are children, she thought again, no matter how adult their statue. All except Signer, and even he accepts my strangeness with the naturalness of a child. My warm blood and strange features are interesting rather than threatening, and even my inability to make many of their signs is a challenge rather than a problem. How old was I, she wondered, before I noticed the difference between black and white, round eyes or slanted?



Wolfe signed, 'Little ones of far star.'

Signer nodded and rose, gesturing for Wolfe to follow into the night as he picked up a branch dipped in animal oil. As he lit it, the Venusians all looked at each other with unreadable expressions. Taki stood up too, but Signer indicated he was to stay.

"Stay here, Taki. This is apparently a private interview."

They walked for a hour by the light of the torch, without even the hand gesturing. The tall, thin trees still only sparsely covered the ground. The wide branches intermingled so lightly that stars could easily been seen between the branches. Quite abruptly they came to a set of stone stairs leading down into the ground, so ingeniously colored that they were only noticed when within a foot of them, and then by the strange flickering of the flame Signer held.

Taking her hand with his inner hand, he guided Wolfe down the stairs. First around a corner and continuing down, then another corner. At the end of that tunnel was a place to rest his torch, and Signer turned and right before her eyes he walked through a side wall and disappeared. Wolfe stepped up further, and realized as she saw Signer waiting for her she had fallen for another illusionary effect. This hall went on for a little while and then opened up into a vast chamber.

Stairs down ringed the room to the floor below a natural-looking ceiling. At the base was a crystal formation, and Signer gestured a greeting. A perfect holographic image of a Venusian woman in rich green and gold robes appeared a foot over the crystal. The Venusian's eyes were wide and curious, but old and tired.

"Greetings, Healing Walker." As the image signed, the crystals vibrated and Wolfe heard perfect Standard American English from their resonances.

"Greetings. I am Captain Alaris Wolfe. May I ask your name?"

"I am called Mother."

"How do you speak my language?"



"It has taken some time, but I have learned all of the languages being broadcast from your planet."

They stared at each for a moment, and then Wolfe sat down on the steps and gathered herself. "I have a lot of questions."

The Venusian smiled. "So do I."

Wolfe learned that the holographic image, and the transformation of the planet, was controlled by the artificial intelligence called Mother that could guided the nanomachines from orbit. Then she asked about the Venusians themselves.

"Clones from our DNA. Signer was first, fully us, that grow and live," was her answer.

"As children."

The computer image paused, and only after a considerable period of time for a computer answered her.

"If you define childhood as the stage in which flexible learning and the joy of discovery exist, then our kind are children for most of our lives. We come as children, so learn about other places with the joy and lack of understanding of children."

"The lack of understanding?"

"If you met what you would consider adults, then you would be understood through the filter of previous experience. More and more of our home world are becoming adults and fear the strange because previous experiences do not help us, and sometimes hamper learning. So we recreate ourselves on other worlds as we were in the most childish stage of our culture. Whatever is learned is eventually transmitted back home."

You are reborn even as you explore the galaxy, Wolfe thought.

"But how can you learn about the galaxy if you go around changing planets to suit yourselves?"



“My program has many options. If a planet is already full of uncommunicative life, then the DNA is adjusted to suit living on that world. And if a planet is empty of life but can be adjusted, I do so. But this is not a replica of our home world since we do wish for different environments. The basic contours of geography remain unaltered so that the colonists grow up around oceans and mountains are different from home. I also changed it, and them, just enough to allow your kind to visit, but not make the planet so friendly that your kind would stay. That why we can learn from you safely.

“From the different worlds I and other programs like me create come different experiences, different arts, and new neighbors like yourselves which are greeted with childish friendliness and openness to new experiences.”

Wolfe frowned.

“Some humans might try to overcome those difficulties to oppress you.”

The holograph shrugged in her way. “Your computers are not inaccessible to me. Any weaponry pointed at Venus will be disarmed, or, failing that, redirected back at the aggressor. I shall download a copy of myself to protect them before leaving.”

Wolfe rose.

“Thank you Mother, for you have given me the information I was sent to find. I only wish I didn’t have to leave.”

“You are welcome, Captain Wolfe.” As the crystals chimed her title and name, she noticed that the image signed ‘Healing Walker’.

#

The night before take off, Wolfe went to her second-in-command in the privacy of the cockpit. “Albert, I’m staying behind.”



Jackson sighed, not very surprised at her decision. She had been online with Earth for a long time that afternoon. "How will you live?"

"Mother says she can adjust my biochemistry to this environment."

"Are you sure Captain?"

"Albert, they came here to be reborn, and they might be able to do the same for me. Inside I feel more like them than I do like an Earther anyway, which may be why they are letting me stay."

Jackson stood and extended his hand to his captain.

"This planet helped the scientists, too. They looked more like children on a field trip each day." They shook hands. "Farewell, Alaris."

#

When the Argos took off, Healing Walker watched from a distant hilltop, flanked by Signer and Knife Thrower, each of whom had a lower arm around her waist as they watched the craft rush off home. She hoped the Argos carried the seeds of rebirth for her world in the knowledge that they were far from alone in a universe filled with possibilities, as the solar craft shining in orbit had for her, but here she would stay among the children to become one herself again.





## Waiting for Mr. Snickers

by Michael Pignatella

I didn't kill my son on purpose. I want to make that clear up front. It was an accident. I pushed him and he fell; that's it. I haven't told anyone that. Not my wife, not the police. The official story is that he slipped and fell down the stairs by himself. Case closed. It's better that way. They wouldn't understand.

It's cramped here underneath the big yellow slide, just one component of the huge playscape we spent way too much money on, but that Jason loved playing on. That we loved playing on together, until the accident. But I'm not here to play. No, not at three o'clock in the morning, when even the mosquitoes have gone to sleep and my joints have begun to stiffen and my eyes water from squinting in the dark, straining to catch sight of him making one of his macabre deliveries.

Mr. Snickers.

I inhale deeply, and wonder if I'll ever get the smell of grass out of my nostrils. I've been lying here on my stomach for three hours now, shotgun ready. My back is cramped and my stomach and chest are damp from the grass, but I won't give up. I can wait him out. I have to.

The thing is, this would never have happened if Jason had just listened. If he had done what he was told, and not set off my temper. I warned him time and time again not to back talk me, not to push his luck, but he had to test the boundaries. Are all seven-year olds so rebellious? Are all parents so frustrated?

Truth is, I don't even remember what he said, what was so annoying that I pushed him in the chest, not too hard, but hard enough, and then



he was stumbling backward at the top of the stairs, his little arms windmilling like propellers on a prop plane. I tried to reach him but it was too late and he fell backward, down the entire flight of stairs, and when I got there I could tell by the way his head was turned, half way around like an owl, and the way his eyes were open, unblinking, that he was dead. My son. My only child.

I didn't realize that Mr. Snickers was missing until the next day, when I went into Jason's room, looking for something. I'm not sure what, perhaps just to smell Jason's little boy smell and to be close to him. The door to Mr. Snickers' wire cage was open, the cage empty except for the water and food dishes, one squashed food pellet sitting alone, waiting to be consumed. Mr. Snickers, Jason's ferret, had escaped.

My wife and I searched, more carefully than the time that she had lost her engagement ring, as if finding Mr. Snickers would bring Jason back to us. We searched even as we planned his funeral, the little casket lined in satin, the flowers, the burial plot, the mourning, the pain. The never-ending pain.

I even thought about Mr. Snickers as we sat in the funeral home, accepting condolences that could never assuage the sorrow, avoiding the looks of other parents frightened by the mortality of their own children, tasting the salty tears and smelling the floral arrangements. Where had the little guy gone? How had he gotten out of the cage? Was Jason playing with him before the accident? These thoughts obsessed me, even as we threw the first handful of dirt on the casket, even as we gathered to eat and drink and remember and forget.

The special deliveries started about two weeks later. At first they were innocent enough, I suppose. Just crap, literally, small turds that would appear in little piles during the night, strategically, almost artistically placed, in the backyard, while my wife and I pretended to sleep, lying together in our bed, our dead son wedged between us like he used to be on weekend mornings. Only now he was cold, as cold as our marriage. I haven't told my wife that I pushed Jason, but she knows. I know she does. Mothers always know.



At first I didn't even realize that the crap piles belonged to Mr. Snickers. I thought that they were from a cat or a small dog, a neighbor's pet, a neighbor whose child could still frolic in the backyard, whose child wasn't dead. But the little pellets were too small, too perfectly formed to belong to a dog or a cat. No, they were from Mr. Snickers. He was out there, taunting me with his feces.

I told my wife, one dinner when the silence was so loud that I had to say something to shut it up, but she just looked at me with that blank stare, the wordless, blank look that says so much. She hates me, I know. She hates everyone now, but there's a special place of darkness in her heart for me.

I bought a couple of traps to try to catch him. The non-lethal kind, of course, not the kind that you lace with poison or the kind that snap little creatures' necks like wishbones, like Jason's neck. I didn't want Mr. Snickers dead. Not then, anyway. The traps didn't work, of course; traps only work on stupid animals. It's just as well. I sure don't want that thing in the house now.

At some point the crap stopped, and the mice began. I'm not quite sure when it was, but I remember I was cutting the grass, a mind-numbing exercise I still enjoy, alone with my thoughts, such as they were. And there it was, a dead field mouse perched on a tuft of grass, lying on its left side with its visible eye frozen open, staring into the blue sky, the summer sun glinting off it like a glassy bit of black quartz. You shouldn't stare directly at the sun, I remember thinking, you'll go blind. I flipped it over with my sneaker and discovered that the opposite side had been gnawed on, the bone and muscle and sinew exposed. I grabbed a shovel from the garage and scooped it up, throwing it into the woods that border my backyard, thinking little of it, eager to get back to the dull comfort of my lawn mowing.

But the mice kept coming, and I kept disposing of them. Some were partially eaten, some were whole, some were inexplicably crushed. After a few days of this, I realized that Mr. Snickers was punishing me for my actions, was teasing and taunting me. Didn't he know that it was an accident, that I would never have purposefully hurt Jason,



never have killed him? My intentions were irrelevant to him, I guess. As they are to my wife. Little do they know how much I've suffered, how my insides are raw and barren, as if someone has cleaned me out with a paring knife, scraping away at me, leaving me empty and sterile. Little do they know.

One day the mice stopped, and I thought that I had paid my penance, that Mr. Snickers was releasing me, abandoning me to my grief and shame. How silly that thought seems now, as if the ferret had any other purpose but to persecute me, as if anyone had any other purpose. For Mr. Snickers had not stopped with the mice. No, he had just hidden them, stacking them under this very slide in neat little piles, waiting for me to find them. And eventually, I did.

It was the flies that led me to them, perhaps two weeks after I thought that the deliveries had stopped. The flies that swarmed around the base of the slide, covering it in a buzzing, dark wave. It crossed my mind that perhaps Mr. Snickers had come home to die, that he was underneath the slide, eyes open, sightless, breathless. He wasn't.

There were dozens of dead animals under the slide. Mostly mice, but also a few wood rats with beady black eyes and thin, serpentine tails and even a couple of squirrels who seemed embarrassed to be there, in the company of lesser rodents. They were piled in precise little mounds, like some kind of weird totem, like someone was trying to leave me a message.

I knew right away that it was Mr. Snickers, blaming me for Jason's death. Like they all did. It was then that I began to think about killing him, catching him and snapping the life out of him in one quick twist of the neck. I bought new traps, lethal traps, my conscience no longer disturbed at the thought of eradicating him. They didn't work; I knew that they wouldn't.

I said nothing more to my wife. What would be the point? She'd retreated so far into her shell that she was lucky to remember to brush her teeth. And she blamed it all on me. Telling her about Mr. Snickers would either enrage her or drive her so far past the mental point of no



return that I'd have to consider institutionalizing her. I didn't want that. Living in the house with her was bad, but living in the house alone with my grief would be worse. Much worse.

There was a lull in the activity after I set out the new traps, and I once again hoped that Mr. Snickers had given up, that I had satisfied him with my never-ending offerings of misery and self-hatred. Then one morning, about a week ago, when I had almost forgotten about him (although not Jason, never Jason), while going out to the shed to get my hedge clippers, I found it. It was under the slide. A human finger, poking out of the grass like an exotic flower. It looked to me to be a child's finger, the index finger if I had to guess, smudged with dirt, the skin pale, too white. It was the final straw.

That afternoon I went out and bought a shotgun. I've been waiting for him ever since.

#

It's deathly silent when he finally arrives, slinking out of the woods like a snake, belly low, sniffing, an object hanging from his mouth. I level the shotgun, aiming for the head. I want to obliterate him. So at first, I don't even see my son. When I do, I let the shotgun drop.

He's right behind the ferret, and I realize that he's just a ghost, his form insubstantial, gauzy, so that I can see the vague outline of the forest behind him. My son looks at me with a look of fear and pity and sadness that causes a sharp ache in my heart. The ferret sits on his hind legs, and now I can see that it's a hand in his mouth, a human hand. A small hand. My son's pet approaches and drops the hand on the ground in front of me. Then he slithers back to my son, to my son's ghost.

It's Jason's hand; I know it before I pick it up and see the tiny half moon scar on the side of the palm, where Jason cut himself on a rock in the backyard playing baseball. It's Jason's hand, my dead son's hand, and I killed him.



I look up and they are standing there, Jason looking at me, wanting something. I don't know what it is. I sit in a bright blue swing, Jason's favorite, where he would swing as if he could fly, sometimes letting go and soaring off the swing, landing in the thick, soft grass, giggling and laughing and crying, "Do it again, daddy!" I realize now that I need to release Jason, need to let him fly. To do that, I must pay my penance.

The muzzle of the shotgun is cold, tucked underneath my chin and against my jaw, the butt braced against the ground. I can just reach the trigger, if I stretch. I begin to reach for the trigger, and then pause. Mr. Snickers has returned, sitting underneath the swing, looking at me. I look up and see a lone tear run down my dead son's face. Then he begins to fade into the forest, leaving me alone with his pet. I let the shotgun drop.

Scooping the ferret and Jason's dead hand into my arms, I leave the shotgun there, a memorial to my impotent grief. I return to the house, entering through the sliders that lead to the deck, maneuvering through the darkness to my son's room, Mr. Snickers and the hand tucked in the crook of one arm, the telephone in the other. I sit in the old rocker, a remnant from Jason's infancy, where even up to his death we used to read books and snuggle, sometimes falling asleep after a hard day of work and play. The ferret in my lap, Jason's hand resting on the arm of the rocker, I dial the numbers that have become, in this time of tragedy, second nature to me.

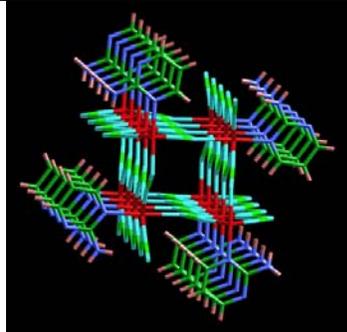
"Hello," I say when there is an answer, "I would like to report an accidental death." Even now, I will not use the word murder. I killed my son, but I didn't intend to. I give the police the details, the details I omitted the first time, and wait for them to pick me up.

They arrive and find me in the rocking chair, deep asleep, dreaming the dreams of the forgiven. Mr. Snickers's body, weeks dead, is in my lap, his fur matted and stiff, his eyes open and empty. My hand strokes the top of his head, even in my slumber.



Jason's hand is gone, never to be found. But his fingers leave an indelible mark on my heart, clutching with the love and fear of a child.





## Chains

by T. Bilgen

Alison freaks when she finds out about the game, gives Eddie hell for it like it's all his fault. The whole bungalow shakes with her hollering; she wants my fat, freeloading ass out of her house. Eddie calms her down, then comes knocking on my door.

With just a desk lamp on, my room feels smaller than it really is. Eddie steps over pizza boxes and piles of clothes like he's walking a highwire, then scoops out a place to sit on the bed. He never razzes me about the mess or the smell. I'm still his big brother.

He slumps his shoulders, and I know how it is. I know the layoffs at the plant have got him scared, I know money's already tight enough and now the baby's on its way. I know it's tough on him, and Alison was never keen on me moving in.

"Two years, Dale. We thought you were in here studying, working hard. And all along you were just," he stops and searches for the tight words, "fooling with tinker-toys. Legos."

The game, Globe's Chain, is more than a bunch of candy-colored plastic tiles, but I keep quiet.

He looks down at his Nikes, probably thinking a guy should never have to say this to his own brother. I'm welcome to stay, he says, but I've got to do way better in school this semester.

Or quit college, get a job and start pulling my own weight around here. Or I could leave. "However it goes, Dale, it's okay. Between us."



I sit in my broken swivel chair and chew my thumb; it stings. Finals are in a couple of weeks. I'll squeak by, but that might not be enough. If I drop out, the student loan turns into a monster debt overnight, and I get in line for a McJob. Worse, if I drop out, I can't play at the city's only authorized Chain club; it's students only.

I'm good at the game. My strategies and motifs baffle them down at the club, and I'll mop up at the tournament next week. Been working on the solution too, the one hidden configuration that solves the whole game and makes you a millionaire. It's all about perpetual motion, I'm sure of it; I just need a little more time.

"I understand, Eddie," I say, talking to my potbelly.

Once he leaves, I check my computer. Clunky old thing's still chewing on my latest Chain simulation, a new motif with a Red Photolink core. I fiddle with the game tiles on my table; they're hard and shiny, and I guess they do look like oversized legos.

#

I spend the morning in Kendrew Hall, in that basement game room with the wobbly tables. A lot of the guys are here, still wearing their 'Chain-gang' T-shirts. As if every club in the country hasn't thought of that stupid name. Isn't hard to see

I've got a decade on most of these people.

Casey never wears team colors, thank God. She's only what, twenty-one, and a real sharp player.

"Red Photolinks with Green Braces?" she says, pushing up her glasses. "That's different."

"Something I've been playing with."

We're well into the game, linking tiles together one by one, each of us building our own colorful, flexible chain. Different tiles attract and repel each other, so the chains twist into pretzel-shapes; they even stand up sometimes, looking like bugs or skeleton hands in full



kindergarten color. Chains can also collapse or lock up without warning--that loses you the game. You want to string together as many tiles as possible without letting that happen. The first six or seven moves, the core tiles, are crucial.

Right now my chain's a crooked treble clef that swishes its tail end, catlike, on the tabletop. Casey's chain reminds me of fancy calligraphy.

It's her turn. Instead of adding to her own chain, she tries to destabilize mine by attaching a White Brace, a tile like a little piece of ivory. The treble clef squirms, but it doesn't lock up.

"That Red-Green core is hot," I say, jotting her move down in my spiral notepad. The paper curls, I'm pressing so hard.

"You stay up nights figuring out new core combinations, don't you?"

I glance up at her; she's not looking at me, she's focused on the game. She doesn't think I'm a total geek. Does she?

Over the next few moves I try some weird stuff, adding a Yellow Force then a Blue Photolink. The treble clef shivers, then locks up with a soft clicking sound. The tangled chain is no bigger than an apple.

"Another suicide, Dale?"

"Just had an inspiration." She's not disappointed, is she? I chew my thumb.

She wrenches the chains apart, piece by piece. "Those inspirations are leading you astray, my dear. You ought to be way higher in the rankings."

We put the tiles in the cardboard game box, and our hands almost touch--wonder if she notices? Myron Globe, the game's inventor, stares out from the box lid like a hypnotist, and a cheesy word-balloon reads The solution will present itself.

"Sometimes," I say, "a chain just looks right."



She lays a hand on my wrist. "You're not falling for all that Chain-Jedi-mysticism, are ya?" She smiles, like a kid: big front teeth.

I hold my breath and shake my head and hope she doesn't think I'm such a loser.

"You two at it again?"

I pull my hand away as Keith drags a plastic chair over to our table. He sits down, his leather Engineering jacket creaking. "Ready for the tourney? Going for the gold this time?"

"This man," Casey says, pointing at me, "is. Gonna. Rule."

"Super," Keith says, "it'll be down to you and me again, big fella."

I nod and bite into my pinky finger, tasting dust and spit. Keith's an excellent player. Nice guy too, sometimes.

We talk game-stuff for a while, about software and a new chatroom. Then Keith gets all quiet and the three of us are in a secret society together. I see the way he looks at Casey. Does she?

"Guys," he says, "I'm this close to the solution."

Her eyes go wide and her palms push out on an invisible wall.

"Woooooooooooo. You and every other Jedi around here."

"I mean it," Keith says. "The chains wiggle and move, right?" He raps a knuckle on the table. "Myron's using us to design a perpetual motion machine. Sooner or later, someone's bound to come up with the right chain. Myron buys it for three million, then he buys us all with a limitless energy supply. And that's why you have to be in one of these licensed clubs if you want to compete. Twisted genius, right?"

My gut goes tight. Everybody's got their own ideas about the solution; Myron Globe's never said what it's supposed to solve, exactly, and says even he doesn't know the right combination of tiles. But he guarantees that whoever builds the winning chain will know it, without a doubt.



"A little psychological warfare, Keith?" Casey says. She leans back in her chair and stretches and I try not to look at her chest. "Mind-games before the games?"

"My latest cores bear me out," he says. "And three million? I'd settle for it."

I haven't played Keith in ages. How far has he gotten?

He stands up and says finals are gonna kill him. "See you later Dale," he says, clapping my arm, then he saunters out like a jock.

My pinky's bleeding a gusher.

"So-loo-tion," Casey says. "How many people play Chain just for a shot at that prize, you think?"

"Lots." I dab blood on my jeans, then bite into my index finger.

"Losers. It's a scam, it's marketing. Keeps people interested. But if there is some big riddle and it gets solved, then the game'll be dead. Nobody'll want to play anymore."

Casey always goes off on this; she loves the game because it's fun to play. I do too--hope she knows that.

"If it's for real," she says, "I'm buying some rope, 'cause whoever finds the solution ought to be hanged."

Now my index finger's bleeding.

#

I'm in my room with nothing to eat but a Hershey bar. I'm starving and I have to use the bathroom but I'm staying right here.

My stuff's been moved around, and my Chain-strategy books are out of order, so I know Alison's been snooping. She's got her eye on me these days, wants to catch me playing instead of studying. I just spend more time at the club; everyone's cramming so the place is deserted and I can do my Chain-work in peace. Wish I was there now.



Alison's in the living room with her friends, everybody chattering at once. She talks about the baby in her belly, mostly, but she mentions me, too. She says all I ever did was sponge off my parents and now it's Eddie's turn. She says even if I make it through college, what good's a Humanities degree anyway? Says I'm in arrested development, over thirty and still playing kid's games and never even had a girlfriend. (She's wrong there; no one knows about me and ugly Nora back in high school.)

I flop down on the bed and crack the books: European History II, Comparative Religion, Economics. Sure, we'll fix this world right up with big words and even bigger SUVs.

The laughter from living room makes me think of Keith. He's laughing too, somewhere, like in the future, after he's won the tournament, and the prize, and me and my plastic blocks are out on the street.

Maybe I'll call Casey. Or email her. And talk about what, how I'm worried Keith will find the solution before I do? Ask her out? She's probably busy studying and she's just a kid anyway what am I thinking she doesn't need anything from me I'm nothing forget it.

I toss the books and tear the wrap off the Hershey bar. Rip its clothes off, cram it into my mouth, chocolate smears my face, melting sticky sweet, taste it lick it off my fingers.

Now I'm at my table, slapping together a new core. The tiles are smooth and hard and they click together so easily. Start strong, with ruby and topaz, stay flexible with emerald and pearl, balance with sapphire. Photolinkers, force-tiles, links and braces; hidden combinations working in secret, a code I'm going to break.

The chain grows. At twenty tiles it snakes into a familiar S shape. Green Forces and a Yellow Photolink make it coil and flex; it raises itself, arching like a bridge. Thirty tiles and it's still standing and now there's a loop under the arch swinging back and forth, a ticking metronome, the tiles pushed and pulled and pushed again. This might work.



Come on, work, this is what I'm good at, this is what makes me real, building these little sculptures piece by piece, even if nobody else cares. You've got to work, come on, another Green Brace to stabilize, come on--

The chain locks up into a jeweled fist. So do the next dozen. They're supposed to fix or answer something, The solution will present itself. But nothing works.

More laughter from the living room. Maybe I'll hide out here until the tournament.

#

Keith's good. Better than last year. He's careful now, he knows his tiles, and he's got radical ideas. He sits there in his black silk shirt, acting as if he's already famous. His chain makes a tick-tock sound, and reminds me of a rocking chair, the way it moves. The judges are impressed.

My fingers look like they've been through a food processor and my T-shirt sticks to my skin. I've only managed to build a lopsided cone. It slouches on the table, a sad little cartoon teepee.

The games started at nine this morning; it's almost four now and the room stinks of bad breath and gamer-sweat and this chair's making my legs hurt. Final rounds, six of us left. The eliminated players crowd around the table to watch me and Keith.

They whisper and write down our moves, their shoes squeak on the floor. The judges--the club president and some overenthusiastic profs--circle around like it's a final exam.

Casey's still here, smiling her kid smile. She played some awesome games, but Keith locked her up in the round before this one. During our last break she wished me luck and gave me a hug and even got me a Cherry Coke from the machine down the hall. Red blotches glowed on her cheeks and neck. After this I'm taking her for a cup of coffee, I've decided. It won't be a date.



I gulp the last of the cola. It's warm and sweet and suddenly I'm seeing a place for a Red Force, in a pocket right there in the teepee. A strong tile like that might trigger a lock up, but think I see how it'll fit, what it'll do. It makes sense. Feels like a cool breeze on my face.

The tile's slick in my hand, stop-sign red, and Keith smirks and Casey, she gives me a shaky thumbs up.

The tile clicks into the chain. A nice sound.

The cone shivers and part of it bends and suddenly there's a little loop inside it, spinning, a clockwork egg-beater gyroscope, working all by itself. Now a second loop slithers out and it reaches--

It doesn't take long. Keith's on his feet and the spectators all jump back, startled. Then everybody's talking, to each other and into their cellphones, and it sounds like ocean waves but then I've never been to the ocean. The teepee, the chain with a heart, it grabs loose tiles from the box and it takes apart Keith's rocking chair and it makes a patient, machine kind of noise and now there are two teepees, and it doesn't take long at all.

And everybody wants one. They scramble to the other tables, pour through their notes, rifle through boxes and snap tiles together like kids on Christmas morning. Keith's yelling at the judges, jumping up and down, what about the game, he says, what about the game? Nobody cares.

I stand up, light-headed. The chains make new chains, and the new ones aren't perfect copies of the original. A lot of them sit still or lock up; they carry some flaw and never get their motor running. Others start up just fine only they're not cone-shaped; they're round, or square, or anything, and they all have that little loop, that fluttering bird, trapped inside them.

There are so many of them now they spill off the table. Some break into pieces when they hit the floor; they're cannibalized by the ones that survive the fall. Some roll, others inchworm around. A couple of



guys start feeding them, laughing, tossing out tiles like dog treats. The new copies are faster, and graceful. There goes a Crayola centipede.

They scuttle at our feet, whirring and buzzing and multiplying, a toy circus, their clown colors flashing. They search and poke everywhere, blind, desperate little things, and I wonder if we're really any different.

The air's thick with talk and heat and there's somebody right next to me, one of the profs, a skinny old guy in a wrinkled brown suit. He's smiling at me.

I finally spot Casey; she's way over there, standing with Keith. His face is pinched up ugly-mad and he's saying something and he points to the things on the floor like they're obscene. She's looking straight at me, or through me, as if I'm just dumb luck or maybe I've never been here at all.

The old prof taps my shoulder. I can barely hear him. "Isn't there something about this in the Bible?" he says, trying to be funny.

A technicolor crab gropes at his shoes.

#

Outside Kendrew Hall, the sun is still shining. I'll just rest here on the grass, in the sunshine. No. I don't know what I want to do. It's past seven and I'm not even hungry. I shuffle through the quad, my shadow long and thin and weak-looking.

My heart somersaults when I see Casey, sitting crosslegged on the lawn. Her face is blotchy. Has she been waiting here all this time? For me? She sees me, but doesn't wave.

It took a few hours to clean up the game room. Stupid chains'd crawled into every nook and cranny--we even found one ambling down the hall. We took them all apart; some of the gamers weren't too happy with that. The club president shook my sweaty hand and made me sign a bunch of forms. Somebody from the game company's supposed to contact me in a couple of days.

I walk up to Casey and it's like we're the only two people alive. I've got



so much to say (there are coffee shops nearby, it wouldn't be a real date,) but all that comes out is Hi and I feel stupid and take it out on my pinky.

Her voice is flat. "It was more than just perpetual motion, huh?"

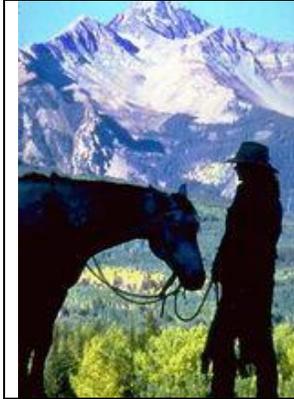
I shrug.

"Kindof like life," she says, squinting into the sun. She stands up in one smooth motion, unfolding her strong legs. "You got your solution, Dale. You win. Congratulations."

Suddenly I feel cold. Sometimes you just know you're not going to see someone again. Casey's marching over the grass, a million miles away already.

I think of those chains, poor little things fumbling around, searching; they'll probably never find what they're looking for and it probably doesn't even matter. And I guess that means Casey's right; they're a lot like real life.





## Exiles in the Dust

by Justin Stanchfield

A month without rain left the dust so dry it clung to the roof of every mouth and stained the skin, until even the barefoot boys playing in the street seemed gray as the hitching rail. Jenny Fetters wiped her forehead with the back of her long gingham sleeve and wished for the thousandth time whoever had built the kitchen in the back of the old boarding house had thought to put in windows. She placed the dough she had been kneading in a chipped bowl, covered it with a cloth, then set it near the stove to rise. Finished, she stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. Despite the day's heat she felt refreshed as she walked around the two-story building, rough planks begging for a coat of paint they would never receive. A commotion at the far end of the street caught her eye.

A rider on a rangy bay, both so caked in dust they gleamed ghost-like in the August glare, rode closer, the pack of shaggy mongrels who claimed Cinnabar's single street barking at their heels. The rider paid no heed to them as he pulled up beside the Double Eagle and eased down to the sun-baked earth. He loosened the cinch on his battered saddle and made to tie up outside the tavern.

"Ain't nobody there," Jenny shouted. "Old Bob who run the place died a year ago, and nobody's took it up."



The rider nodded, then, leading his horse, ambled toward the boarding house. He was tall, but not so tall as to stand out in a crowd, his skin burned dark in the summer heat. He had the loose jointed way of moving of someone who had spent his life watching the world slide under him from the back of a horse. A holster hung low on his left hip.

“Fraid you aren’t seeing Cinnabar at its best.” Jenny smiled and hoped she hadn’t overplayed the accent. So far, in the months she had been here, no one had suspected her true origin, but she could never be too careful. “You can get a hot meal here, if that’s what you’re looking for. Going to be an hour or so till the bread’s done. Hope you don’t mind waiting.”

“Thanks,” The words trickled out his throat, slow as the last drops of fire in an empty bottle. “Cinnabar? That’s what this town is called?”

“If you want to call it a town. Not much around here since the silver dried up.”

“Cinnabar.” He repeated the word softly. Without warning, his pale blue eyes glazed, as if an early frost had settled over them. Jenny stepped back, alarmed. She had seen the look before. If he noticed her apprehension, he gave no trace of it. “Mind if I tie up here?”

“Help yourself.” Jenny continued to back away. “Like I said, mister, the bread won’t be done for an hour or so.” She stepped around the corner of the boarding house, then ran to the back door and ducked inside the kitchen. Heat rolled over her, the yeasty aroma of rising bread so thick she nearly gagged. Quietly as she could, she reached behind the cloth-faced pantry and brought out the shotgun she had cached behind it, cracked the action open and made certain it was loaded, then rested the twelve gauge against the pantry in easy reach.



"Gods," she whispered, her throat tight. "How did they find us now?"

#

Dusk seemed a long time coming. Jenny urged her horse, a dun mare with a dark stripe down her back, up the winding trail into the narrow valley west of town. The horse fidgeted, bobbing her head at the mosquitoes following in their wake. Jenny paused beside a tall boulder, the cat-piss scent of juniper strong on the evening breeze, and glanced back. To her relief, she was alone. Again, she pushed the nervous mare ahead.

A low cabin hove into view, the slab-roofed structure surrounded by heaps of broken stone and rusted mining equipment. A lantern burned yellow in the window. Jenny turned her mare loose in the little corral out back, then, shotgun in hand, stepped inside. The single room was empty, supper dishes stacked unwashed beside a water basin. A narrow bed, the mattress so limp it sagged nearly to the floor, filled one wall. On it, utterly out of place, lay a tiny silver starship, the details perfect. Jenny frowning at the carelessness, swept the toy into her hand, then pulled the tattered rug away from the trapdoor it covered. With her boot heel she stomped a quick cadence, two long, three short. A rap from beneath answered, and seconds later, the hatch swung up.

"Jenny?" A bearded face peered up from the darkness beneath the cabin. "What are you doing here?"

"We've got trouble." She passed the twelve gauge down to him, then, mindful not to trip on the ungainly dress, climbed down the ladder. Rock-laced air filled the abandoned drift, the temperature cool enough she wished she had worn a coat. Light beckoned around a bend in the



passage, steady and unwavering, definitely not the flickering glow of coal oil. She hurried toward it.

More faces greeted her. Another man, tall and elegant despite his ragged clothes, gray hair swept back from a high forehead until it curled in a cowlick, stepped forward.

“What’s wrong?”

“Plenty, Robert. There’s a slipper in town.”

The man’s face turned ashen. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. I caught him transmitting.”

“Did he recognize you?” The man who had let her into the tunnel asked. Unlike Robert, he was young, his beard bright red in contrast to his short blond hair. “You didn’t let him follow you here?”

“No,” Jenny snapped. “Give me some credit, Andrew. Where’s Luke?”

“Outside. He said he was going to take some emission readings.”

“Damn it. What if one of the locals sees him?” She pushed past the men and faced the children, then held out the toy starship. “Who does this belong to?”

The children glanced back and forth at each other, none anxious to step forward. Finally, a little boy with dark brown hair and a runny nose held out his hand. “It’s mine, Aunt Jenny.”



"Xander, how many times have we told you, you can't leave your things upstairs?" She knelt down until her face was on the same level as his. The boy stared at his feet, shifting back and forth, clearly ashamed. Jenny sighed, then placed the starship in his chubby hand. The boy's face split into a grin as he took his prize and trundled off to play. Jenny rose and looked at the other children. No, she corrected herself, young adults. There were two boys, fuzzy beards already visible, and four girls, their developing figures all too plain beneath their threadbare dresses. It had been a long time since any of them were babies. Only Xander was truly young, his birth an unexpected complication, something none of them had anticipated. But then, she thought sadly, how much had they foreseen in the confusing days prior to the exodus. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, her head aching, as she gathered her thoughts.

"Listen. For the next few days, we have to be especially vigilant. We may have been compromised. And if that's the case, we'll be evacuating sooner than we expected. I don't want any of you going outside until we get this sorted out."

A collective groan escaped the children's lips, but she silenced them with a frown.

"I can't impress on you enough how dangerous the situation is. The Enemy has managed to bring a slipper into Cinnabar. And if he locates this mine, it's all over."

"Aunt Jenny?" Xander's voice pitched high with fear. "What's a slipper?"

"A slipper," Robert broke in, "is someone from this time frame whose mind has been infected with a neural string, and is now under control



of the Enemy.” The boy nodded gravely, as if he understood the explanation. He turned his wide eyes once more toward Jenny.

“Was it a slipper who killed my mommy?”

Jenny blinked back a tear, then nodded. “Yes, honey. It was.”

#

Midnight.

Jenny sat in the cabin with Robert, waiting for the man named Luke to return, the shotgun cradled in her lap. She was drowsy, the fire banked in the cast-iron stove a pleasant buffer against the high mountain chill, and her thoughts drifted back to the day six years ago and centuries away. She shuddered, memories of the missiles striking with deadly precision still vivid, the concussions, the stench of cities on fire filled with the dead and dying. The Alliance had ceased to exist in that attack, the shipyards destroyed, their antiquated defense systems infiltrated by slippers. No one had seen it coming. But it was the children, the next generation of navigators, the Enemy wanted. That they had managed to save as many of the gen-alts as they did was in itself a minor miracle.

“Jenny?” Robert’s voice broke her reverie. The elderly man glanced toward the door. “Someone’s coming.”

Alert once more, she stepped into the shadowed corner of the cabin, index finger curled around the trigger. The latch lifted, and the thick plank door swung inward. A broad shouldered man with a crude canvas pack slung over his shoulder stepped inside, blinking as his vision adjusted to the light. His eyes, so blue they seemed almost black, widened as he noticed the shotgun pointed at his stomach.



"For God's sake, would you point that somewhere else?"

"Sorry." Jenny swung the muzzle toward the wall and carefully lowered the hammers. "What took you so long, Luke?"

"So long?" His face twisted into an irritated scowl. "Didn't know I had to check in with the committee every time I left the cabin. What are you doing here, anyhow?"

"She saw a slipper today," Robert said, stepping in to quell the argument before it developed further.

Luke's frown vanished, replaced by an expression of startled fear which quickly bloomed into anger. Unlike the other men, he was clean shaven except for a long and elegantly curled mustache. The sandy hair that poked out from under his hat curled boyishly on his forehead. Despite his attempts to blend in as a down and out miner, the man's natural vanity shone through in everything he did. He set his pack down on the table.

"You're certain?"

"Yes." Jenny's tone was curt.

"Where is he now?"

"At the boarding house. He paid for a weeks lodging in advance."

"You should have shot him."



"In broad daylight?" Jenny snorted in disgust. "Maybe you've forgotten, but murder is a hanging offense here. And that's assuming I could have killed him before he realized who I was and took me out first."

"Then wait until it's dark," Luke said. "He has to sleep sometime."

"Luke, it's not our way," Robert said softly. "We are sworn to peace, not to attack without provocation."

"Don't talk to me about provocation. The Enemy hits without warning. They've tracked us every jump we've made, and killed us when they could. It's time we started shooting first." The angry flush faded slightly. "Maybe if we had done that before, Maria would still be alive."

"Damn you." Jenny stepped toward him, and was glad to see him step back. "Don't tell me about Maria. My sister wouldn't have died if she wasn't protecting a child she was never supposed to have."

"Don't you dare bring Xander into this." The hollows above his jaws drew inward. Again, Robert stepped between them.

"Stop it, both of you. We have more important matters right now than opening old wounds." He let the words sink in. "Now then, can we evacuate if we have to?"

"Not yet." Luke relaxed slightly. "Not all of us, anyhow. We don't have enough fuel to power the waveguides for any distance."

"Why not?" Jenny still wanted to argue. "You said this region was loaded with uranium."



"It is." Luke managed to somehow look both contrite and condescending at the same moment. "There are plenty of deposits, but with the primitive mining technology here, I can't reach them. That's why I was outside tonight. I'm surveying the old silver workings to locate enough high-grade ore to replenish what we've used in the last few jumps."

"Assuming," Robert asked, "that you could locate the ore, how long until the core is back at full?"

Luke shrugged. "It all depends on the ore, how hard it is to retrieve and what kind of problems I have refining it. Best guess, two months."

Jenny's heart sank. "That's not soon enough. If the coalition suspects this is where we've gone, and they must or they wouldn't have risked a slipper, they'll be all over us in a matter of days. If we had to jump tomorrow, how far could we go?"

"Not far." Luke's shoulders sagged. Suddenly, he looked as old and weary as Jenny felt. "A few decades at most. Further if some of us stayed behind."

"Out of the question," Robert said with conviction. "We do not leave unless we leave together."

A chill ran down Jenny's back. She had seen the vacant expression in the slipper's eyes. The others hadn't. She looked first at one man, then the other and said in low, defeated tone, "We may not have any choice."



She saddled her horse in the dark and left before sunrise, anxious to reach town unnoticed. A few brave stars still rode the indigo horizon, dancing in the cool air. Jenny sighed. How many of them had she visited, walked on the planets in train around them? It seemed a lifetime ago. Once, she had been one of the most sought after linguists in the Alliance, an essential member of dozens of trading expeditions, responsible for seeing that the scattered arms of humanity understood each other. Now, she spent her talent making sleep-loops of archaic languages so they could hide in the dirty, disease ridden centuries they exiled themselves in. She laughed sourly. Even her name, like the others, was a false front, her true name as buried as the rest of her old life.

How many teams were still out there, lost among the planets, refugees from the Enemy's religious zeal? The thought that they might, in fact, be the last left a burning hole in her stomach. They were unlikely heroes. Robert, the old Academy professor, was as fine a man as she had ever known and utterly worthless if it came to a fight. Luke, who once had been the pilot of the largest starship in the fleet. Andrew, gentle, trusting Andrew, the navigator. They relied on his psychic talent to jump between points in time and location, but his indecisive nature left him a cripple in the harsh reality they now faced. She could only hope the half dozen children he was training wouldn't share his peaceful soul. They needed lions, not lambs.

Then there was Xander, the boy who should never have been born. The product of Luke and Maria's reckless dalliance Xander was sweet and intelligent, a remarkable child by any measure, but now a handicap. She loved the boy as if he was her own, but, as dirty as the idea made her feel, regretted his birth.

Without warning, the mare missed a step and wrenched Jenny back to the present. She glanced down the trail as Cinnabar came into view across the sagebrush flat. The town still slept, no light in any window. Jenny breathed a sigh of relief and kicked the mare into a slow trot



toward the livery stable. She unsaddled the animal, then found a curry comb and began working it over the animal's steaming back.

"Morning, miss."

Jenny spun around. A lanky figure stood in the stable's broad, open doorway, backlit by the first burst of sunlight that streamed between the gaps in the rough plank wall. The stranger from the boarding house ambled toward her, his pistol in plain sight. She smiled as she backed slowly away, all too aware how far the shotgun, still sheathed and tied to the saddle, lay from her.

"You startled me." She angled toward the saddle but the man stepped between her and the gun.

"Kind of early for such a pretty lady to be out riding, don't you think?"

"I stayed with friends last night." Jenny's pulse raced as she tried once again, unsuccessfully, to reach her saddle. The slipper edged closer, so near she could smell him, a cloying blend of tobacco, horse dander and soured sweat. A crooked smile split his face, but his eyes remained fixed and cold, a rattlesnake stare. She had seen slippers before, but something in this man's eyes felt different, as if the enemy's control was not as deep as they expected. She felt an urgent need to run, but knew he could easily overtake her.

"Where do these friends of yours live?" he asked.

"That's none of your damn business."

"I think it might just be." Without a pause, the man's voice changed, the pitch flat as he shifted into Com-speak. "?Kwa ani from tu?"



“Pardon?” Jenny ignored the feeble attempt to trick her into using her birth language, grateful at least that whoever controlled the slipper wasn’t absolutely certain she was a target. She shook her head broadly, stalling for time. “I’m sorry, but I don’t speak no Mexican.”

The man’s grin widened, the tips of his yellowed teeth exposed. Again, she saw the control slip on his weathered face. A spasm raced up his neck, and without warning he snapped his right arm toward her. Jenny ducked, then seeing an opportunity, darted toward the saddle and the shotgun hung from the pommel. A sharp pain snapped through her ankle as the slipper kicked her feet out from under her. She grunted as she struck the hard dirt floor. Before she could roll out of the way, the man placed his boot against the small of her back and pressed down. The steel on steel click of his revolver warned her to lay still.

“I’m going to ask you one more time. Where are these friends of yours?”

“Let me up and I’ll tell you.” Jenny tried to sound frightened.

“Oh, I’ll let you up, all right. Right after I get what I want.”

The pressure on her spine shifted as he knelt down, the pistol cold against her ear. His free hand ran along her side, lingered at her hip, then, with an angry swipe, pulled her dress and petticoat up, the heavy materiel bunching around her waist. He pinched her ass so hard she gasped, but before she could struggle free he straddled her, his legs pinning her to the dirt.

“Now you be a good girl, understand?” Stale breath rolled hot over her as he brushed his stubbled lips across the nape of her neck. Furious, Jenny snapped at him in Com-Speech.



“Tu basta, me tu cut vos cajones.”

The outburst had the desired effect. Jenny felt his muscles bunch as the enemy tried to regain full control of the slipper. With a grunt, she heaved herself upward and rolled away. He grabbed her ankle, but she kicked his face with her other foot. A roar of pain, his words little more than babble, burst from his throat. Again, Jenny struck his face with her heel, then, lashed out at the pistol. It flew out of his hand and landed with a thud. She lunged toward her saddle, but tripped over the hem of her dress and lit once more on the floor, the shotgun still out of reach. In a blur, she saw the man dive for his pistol.

Time seemed to slow, her mind racing. In front of her, dappled in the sunbeams, lay a pile of fresh straw, pitchfork jabbed into it, the slender handle in easy reach. Jenny grabbed the fork, struggled to pull it free from the matted pile, then spun to face her attacker. The man knelt on the floor, pistol in hand, his face contorted as the controller hammered against his will. Without hesitation, Jenny drove the pitchfork against his chest. The tines weren't sharp enough to penetrate his coat, and he fell backwards. Jenny saw the pistol flash, heard the lead ball whistle past her ear, smelled the sulphur reek of black powder. She pushed harder, leaned into the thrust until the curved iron spikes slipped through his ribs and pinned him to the duff.

The man screamed, an animal howl of pain and fury as he thrashed on the floor. He tried again to aim the pistol, but Jenny grabbed it away from him, pulled the action back, and holding the heavy weapon in both hands, fired point blank. His back arched, then, with a final convulsion, he lay still. Jenny dropped the pistol, suddenly aware of what she had done. Her tongue curled, and before she could stop herself, she dropped to her knees and vomited.



Outside, a dog barked. The sound pulled Jenny out of her daze. The locals would arrive soon, drawn by the pistol shots. Quickly, she turned his limp body on its side and ran her fingers over the back of his skull. A tiny prod lay imbedded in his neck. With a twist, she broke the device free, then ran out the gaping doors into the bright morning light.

#

On foot, she made her way to the cabin, avoiding the trail. She had been careful over the months they had stayed in the dying town not to tie herself to the old mine, but knew all too well that suspicions existed. Given her horse and saddle were within stepping distance of the body, she doubted it would be long before they realized who had killed him.

A burst of heat spread over her palm.

“Damn it.”

Jenny opened her fist and stared at the prod she had taken from the slipper’s neck. The device pulsed with worm-like motions, the bloodied tip glowing softly. The sight of it filled her with revulsion, and she almost threw the neural link away. She stopped herself. People had died trying to secure one of the prods, the technology unknown among the Alliance until the surprise attack destroyed them. It was vital now, she realized, that the prod go with them, at least until they could find another cell and pass it into more able hands.

Nearby, a twig snapped. Jenny dropped behind a fallen fir tree and held her breath. With relief, she watched Andrew step into a small clearing, followed by one of the older children, no doubt involved in another arcane training ritual. She rose and started toward them, annoyed to find them in broad daylight after her warning, but before



she reached them, the prod in her fist grew hot once more. Andrew seemed to sense the signal, and with a quick hand sign the pair vanished, gone as if they had never been.

“Wonderful,” Jenny muttered. “Now they’re playing nav-games.”

She risked letting herself be seen and jogged the last quarter mile to the cabin along the brush choked wagon road. Robert sat outside the door, his feet propped on an old dynamite crate.

“Jenny?”

“Get everyone inside,” she said without preamble. Muffled voices could be heard from within, and she hurried inside. Andrew and the boy she had seen earlier sat at the table, a holo map projected above the grimy surface. They saw her and immediately looked chagrined. “What the hell were you thinking about? I told you to keep the kids inside.”

“I...” The navigator stammered, a nervous habit that always overtook him when he was pressured. “I can’t teach them to jump inside the mine. It’s...it’s too risky.”

“It’s riskier out here.” She slammed her fist against the table. The map flared, then flickered out. “When I tell you to stay inside, I damn well mean it.”

“Jenny.” Robert carefully closed the door then joined them. “Don’t be angry with Andrew. I told him it was all right to practice this morning.”



She glared at him, furious that no one took her seriously. "What's wrong with you people? Didn't you hear me last night? The enemy has found us!"

Before she could say more, the door opened. Jenny lurched to her feet, heart pounding, relieved to see it was Luke and not some angry posse come to root her out. His face was flushed as if he had been running. He seemed startled to find Jenny at the mine, but spoke first to Andrew and his trainee.

"Get out of sight, both of you." He pulled the trap door open. "We've got riders on the way."

A lump formed in her chest. "They're looking for me. I killed the slipper this morning."

"Why?" Robert's face turned ashen. "We agreed last night we wouldn't resort to that?"

"He was trying to rape me." The words sounded flat in her own ears, as if they had been spoken by someone else. She laid her right hand on the table and opened it. The neural prod rolled off her palm and sat writhing on the table. Luke's eyes widened.

"What is that thing?" the boy Andrew was teaching asked.

"It's the reason we lost the war," Luke told him. "Get down the ladder. Both of you." He reached toward the prod but didn't touch it, his index finger a hairs breadth from the implant. He stared at Jenny, his eyes haunted. She nodded.



"I know," she said softly. "This changes everything. We have to get it to one of the fighting cells."

Robert seemed not to notice the prod, but instead paced back and forth near the cabin's single window. He muttered something, though whether he was talking to himself or for their benefit, Jenny couldn't be sure. "Robert, did you hear me?" she asked.

"Of course I did." He wandered to the table. "The best thing we can do is stay the course. Relocate if we have to, but to take this back to our own time? What if we're tracked? What if that thing," he shook his finger at the prod, "leads the Enemy to the resistance? It's simply too much to risk."

"We risk more if we don't," Luke said. Before anyone could stop him, he took a silver snuffbox from his coat pocket, dumped the brown, aromatic powder out, then placed the writhing probe within it. "If the controllers can track the slippers through the probe, chances are we can track them as well. And if we can find them, we can kill them." He put the silver case back in his pocket, then to Jenny said, "Get downstairs. Those riders will be here any minute." He retrieved a battered carbine from the corner near the bed and jacked the action open.

"So much violence." Robert's mouth turned down at the corners. "Perhaps you should turn yourself in? It was self-defense, wasn't it?"

She stared at the old man as if he had lost his mind. "Self defense? Is that all you're worried about? Whether I killed the son of a bitch with due cause?" Suddenly the anger and guilt exploded within her. "I killed a slipper! An enemy agent. Doesn't that matter to you?"



She felt hands on her arms, and twisted away, but relaxed as she realized it was Luke, not another unseen assailant. He smiled sheepishly, then nodded at the trapdoor. Without another word she descended into the hidden tunnel. It was warm below, but she felt chilled, almost feverish as she rounded the corner into the make-shift living space, so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. A cot lay against the rough wall, and she slumped onto it. The children and Andrew drew back as if she were somehow tainted. Only Xander treated her normally, though it was clear from the look on his face that he sensed her worry. She patted the cot beside her and without further invitation he curled up beside her and soon lay snoring in the stillness of the mine. The child warm against her, she drifted off as well.

#

Voices woke her, angry words, men arguing. The tunnel was dark, the lights extinguished. Gently, careful not to wake the sleeping boy, she rose and felt her way along the wall toward the ladder. She waited beneath it, listening. Some of the voices she knew from Cinnabar. She recognized Robert and Luke as well, their tone angry.

One voice, she didn't recognize at all.

Jenny held her breathe, scared that even that muffled noise might give her away. She clung to the wall, sorry now that she had returned to the cabin. But what choice did she have? If she hadn't killed the slipper, if she had let herself be raped, the result would have been the same. Her mind raced back to the day three years ago when she had returned to the safety of the hiding place and found her sister dying on the floor. They had been living in fourteenth century France, secreted in a desolate keep abandoned during the plague. Thinking themselves secure, they had taken the children into the forest to hunt for wild mushrooms, the springtime morning too glorious to ignore, and left her sister at home with the newborn Xander. On their return they found



Maria, her hands bound, her body covered with long, straight burns. A one-eyed man stood over her, his movements jerky and uncertain, not fully in control of his body. An iron bar lay in his hand, still hot from the fire. Luke had rushed the man, but the bar had caught him under the jaw and sent him sprawling. Jenny's response had been more effective. From a hidden pocket she drew a tiny revolver and fired. The one-eyed man clutched his stomach, then ran out of the deserted tower, leaving scattered specks of blood in his wake.

Jenny's fingernails bit into her hands as she relived the moment. They had been spared by chance, safe only because they had left their hiding place for a pleasant outing. Maria had not been so lucky. Jenny cradled her sister's broken body in her lap as her life ebbed away, muttering in com-speak. How much she might have given up to the Enemy while she was tortured, they never knew. As much as she loved her sister, she had never been strong. In the end, despite Luke's insistence that they hunt down the monster who had killed her, Robert had persuaded them that flight was the only option. Again, she felt the weight of shame she had felt that day, holding Xander in her arms as they opened the waveguide and retreated into another century.

Now she wondered if Luke hadn't been right. How long could they stay one step ahead? How long until, the Enemy cut them down one by one, the children and the hope they represented lost forever? She thought about Xander and knew she would happily kill again to protect the little boy.

The voices above her grew louder and she strained to listen. Robert sounded apologetic as always. Luke, on the other hand, was practically shouting.

"I told you, she's not here."



"Then," the stranger's voice seemed to guide the conversation. "You don't mind if we stick around a bit to see if she shows up?"

Jenny frowned. As frightened as she was, her professional curiosity was piqued. A strange accent lurked beneath his words, as if he was, like them, not from this time-frame. A cold knot formed in her chest. Slippers they expected, locals with their nervous systems high-jacked. But if this man was from the future, the Enemy had not only found them, but was here. Again, she heard Luke's voice.

"Get out."

"You will, of course," the stranger said, "let us know if the woman does come here?"

"Of course," Robert said, his conciliatory tone sickening. "We wouldn't think of harboring a criminal."

"Good. We'll be back."

Footsteps. A door slamming. Soft thuds as horses cantered away. After a few minutes a patch of brightness broke above her, the trapdoor opened. Jenny grabbed the wooden rungs and pulled herself back into the cabin. Robert offered his hand and helped her out of the hatch.

"We have to go," he said.

"I know." Jenny shuddered as the memory of Maria's dead eyes rolled through her. "I'll get the kids ready."



#

Worried faces. Nervous bodies shuffling back and forth, children forced into adulthood long before they were ready. Jenny watched the six, acutely aware that the gangly crowd represented the hope of their fallen civilization. Andrew stood with them, waiting for someone to tell him what to do. Vaguely, she became aware of Robert standing beside her.

“It’s time to go,” he said.

“All right” Her body ached from the lack of sleep and the beating she had endured at the slipper’s hands. “How much longer can we keep running”

“I don’t know. I wish I did.”

“Maybe we should stay here and fight,” one of the boys said. The other children nodded, several taking hesitant steps forward. Jenny smiled for their benefit.

“Your time comes later. Right now, we need to jump. Jump as far as we can. Stay safe and someday, when you’re ready, we’ll take the battle to them. But not yet.”

The boy nodded. After a moment, the others assented as well. Andrew looked uneasy. “Jenny, maybe I should go with you? None of them have ever made a jump like this on their own.”

“No.” She tapped the bulge in his shirt pocket, the snuffbox hard against her fingertip. “Get that probe back to the front. Find the resistance. They’ll know what to do with it.”



The ladder creaked as Luke struggled through the hatch, a canvas pack slung over his shoulder. He brushed past Jenny and laid the pack on the table. From within he drew a gleaming metal cylinder. The waveguide hummed softly as he adjusted the controls. "I've used every bit of fuel we have. It should be enough, but just barely. Andrew, you go first."

The navigator reached toward the cylinder, then stopped. Outside the cabin, hidden in the pre-dawn shadows, a horse neighed. Jenny stiffened. The agent had returned sooner than even she had expected. She pushed Andrew's hand onto the waveguide.

"Go."

"But," he stammered, torn by indecision. "What about you?"

"We'll be fine," she lied. "Just go!"

The navigator, nodded, shut his eyes then vanished. Nothing remained but the faint odor of hot metal swirling in his wake. A cold finger raced down Jenny's spine as outside, she caught the muffled beat of hooves against the hard-packed earth. She grabbed the carbine and darted to the single window. Though it was still too dark to see into the encroaching forest, she sensed eyes watching from the shadows.

"Maybe," she whispered, "we should go now."

"We can't." Luke's tone was flat. He bent over the waveguide, his fingers clenched around the table edge. "Andrew's jump took more power than I expected."



"How long until it's recharged," she asked, low enough she hoped the others couldn't hear. Luke snorted in disgust.

"Recharge? The fuel is all but gone." His face hardened. "There's enough for the kids, if they're as well trained as Andrew said they are. One other, two if we're lucky, can go with them."

Chilled, Jenny's gaze drifted along the line of waiting children and settled on Xander. The boy tried desperately to be brave, but his eyes gleamed with fear. She looked back at Luke, and he nodded in answer to her unasked question. Without the ability to jump, the child was dead weight. "We can't leave him behind," she said.

Robert joined them. The man seemed on the verge of panic. "What choice do we have? We have to get the children to safety. And they can't go alone." He glanced at Xander, but quickly turned away, ashamed. "I love the boy too, but we must think about the future."

"He's my son," Luke said. "I'll stay with him here."

"Of course," Robert seemed relieved. Jenny stared at him in disbelief.

"Are you insane? They'll be killed if we leave them."

The old man swallowed. "We will all be killed if we don't."

The years fell on her, Maria's death, her own rape, the unfairness of it all crushing. A cold, empty clarity settled over her, the solution all too plain. "There's one other option." Jenny glanced at Luke. He sadly smiled, resigned. She turned back to Robert. "You get them to safety. We'll stay behind and cover you."



“No!” Unexpectedly, Xander threw himself at Jenny and wrapped his arms around her legs. Hot tears streamed down his tiny face. “I won’t let you go, Aunt Jenny. I won’t let you.”

“Xander, honey...” Her tears mingled with the child’s as she bent down and pulled him close. “You have to go. Be a good boy and do what Robert tells you. Promise me you will?”

“No, no, no.”

Jenny kissed the trembling child, but before she could say more, a spray of glass filled the cabin, followed instantly by the crack of a rifle. One of the girls screamed. More shots followed, dull thuds that sent dust sifting down from the ceiling as the bullets struck the cabin. Numb, she started toward the window, but Luke pulled her up short. Before she could stop him, he jerked the carbine out her hands.

“What are you doing?”

“What we should have done a long time ago.” Luke jacked a shell into the chamber, then, thrust the weapon into Robert’s hands. The old man tried to back away, but Luke grabbed him by the collar and shoved him toward the door. “For once, damn it, be a man.” He drew his pistol and laid it on the table.

“Why are you doing this?” Jenny yelled as another volley smacked the logs. “I told you, I’ll stay.”

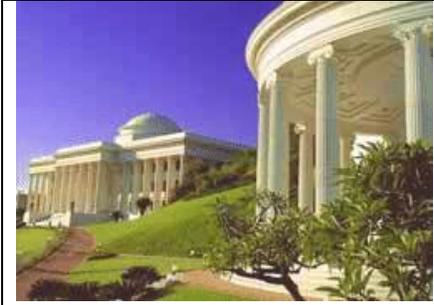
“It’s you Xander loves. It should have been me, but it’s too late for that now.” Luke picked up his son and pressed him into Jenny’s arms. Tears darkened his cheeks. “Please, don’t make this any harder than it



is." He stuffed the waveguide into the canvas pack, then tossed it to the tallest boy. "Go," he said sharply.

Arms wrapped around her as she was pulled backwards into the huddled children. Xander fought to break free, kicking and thrashing to reach his father, but already it was too late. She clutched the boy to herself as the vertigo struck. The light grew translucent, the world breaking into oily swirls as jump began. The last thing she heard before they popped out was the sound of wood breaking, while the child in her arms cried for his daddy. Jenny cried too, but wiped her eyes as they arrived, where or when she had no idea. Still holding Xander, she gathered the children around her, then led them quietly into the sheltering woods. Daylight would come soon enough.





## The Baha'i and Science Fiction

by Lavie Tidhar

Looking back at the history of the twentieth century, historians arguably trace the great political and social changes of the last century to a series of interlaced events, seemingly insignificant in themselves, that began with the arrival of the young Shoghi Effendi in America in 1920.

Shoghi Effendi Rabbani was born in 1897 in what was then Palestine; he was the grandson of the Bahá'u'lláh, the head of the then nearly-unknown Baha'i faith. His education was diverse: it included first attending a Jesuit school in Haifa, then a Catholic school in Beirut, then the Syrian Protestant College (later the American University in Beirut) for his final years of high school and first years of university. The young man arrived in the United States at the age of twenty-three and undertook a post-graduate degree which included such diverse topics as political science, social and industrial questions, logic, and English economic history since 1688. These were to have a significant impact on Shoghi Effendi's vision.

While studying, and following the death of his beloved father, the young man became Guardian of the Baha'i faith – its leader – and began forming a large ministry based in America. In those days of cautious optimism, of growing prosperity and technological innovation, the message of the Baha'i was welcomed by many: countless converts joined the faith, and it was only appropriate for its first temple, a grand building made of nine concentric circles and meticulous gardens, to be built in the seat of prosperity and optimism: Henry Ford's city. The city of Michigan.



There is a picture, taken in black and white and formally structured, of that first meeting between the Guardian of the Faith and Ford, his most important convert at that time. The two men shake hands formally, their backs to the ornate gates of Ford's industrial complex (then the largest in the world) along the banks of the Rouge River in Dearborn. A faint smile, half-amused, half-sincere, fleets on Ford's face, but the Guardian's face is solemn, and his eyes look directly into Ford's. Details of further meetings are few, but it is well-documented that, six months after that initial meeting in 1926 Ford has officially joined the Baha'i faith.

The combined power of Ford and the emerging Baha'i movement was remarkable. The end of the 1920s saw Americans reach new levels of despair, but the support of the two men led to the eventual election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the first of four terms at the White House in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression. In 1937, Shoghi Effendi invited to America the daughter of the Polish Dr. Lazarus (Eliezer) Ludwig Zamenhof, inventor of the now-standard Esperanto language. Lidia Zamenhof arrived in the U.S in 1937, and began to teach both Shoghi Effendi and Ford the new language.

At the time, Ford was already experimenting with teaching a standard language, English, to his multilingual employees, but he and the Guardian took to the new language of Esperanto quickly and with an overwhelming enthusiasm. It began to be taught in Ford's language schools and, following its success there, the teaching of Esperanto was initiated as a country-wide program by FDR in 1939. In that year, too, the Baha'i temple in Washington D.C. was built, to the same design of concentric rings. Baha'i missions and temples were erected in most major cities and in many of the smaller towns of continental USA.

The arrival of Zamenhoff coincided with another significant encounter of minds, when a young, virtually-unknown writer called John W. Campbell Jr. took over the editorship of a pulp magazine called Astounding Science Fiction. There is nothing to suggest that the Guardian was in any way exposed, in the past, to the new form of



literature known as scientification or science-fiction before Campbell took over *Astounding*, but he was soon profoundly interested in the new genre (which he saw as echoing, in its interest in science and technology and the betterment of mankind, the tenets of his own faith of the Baha'i) and before long Campbell was meeting with the *Guardian* regularly, until he, too, converted to the Baha'i faith in the winter of 1939. Campbell soon took to promoting his new faith through the magazine, shaping a new generation of writers who wrote what can be termed Baha'i-influenced science fiction stories, amongst them Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and the British Arthur C. Clarke, though few were converts. In 1945 the magazine, along with many publications in the USA, began publishing exclusively in Esperanto. This era is known to historians of the genre as the Golden Age of science fiction, though it can be argued the Golden Age has never ended: the majority of science fiction today is still predominantly Baha'i in its outlook and vision.

Meanwhile, the signs of war in Europe were unmistakable. FDR (with help from both Shoghi Effendi and Ford) designed a new kind of organization which he called the United Nations, or UN, but it was obvious by then that without military intervention such a grand vision of world peace could never be realized. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor America joined the war, and won it in 1945.

The extreme human sufferings endured during the war have affected the *Guardian* deeply. Shoghi Effendi swore that such a thing must never happen again: the United Nations was set up as a first attempt at world governance, though its internal division made it less than ideal; American soldiers brought with them the new religion – Baha'i – and the new language – Esperanto – to Europe and the *Guardian* decided an intensive missionary and expansion program must be initiated beyond the shores of America.

By 1947 Ford was dead, and his manufacture empire controlled entirely by the Universal House of Justice under Shoghi Effendi. Yet luck, or perhaps, as the *Guardian* often suggested, divine intervention, brought him face to face with just the man for the job of taking the



Baha'i faith and its principles to the larger world. In 1947, attending a meeting of science fiction professionals in New York (all now working for the new Futurist Institute founded in 1945 by the Guardian) Shoghi Effendi met a charismatic author and a recent convert to the faith: a man by the name of L. Ron Hubbard. Hubbard has been a writer for some time, and a successful one, but Shoghi Effendi was struck by his commitment to the faith, by his charm and by his charisma. In 1947 the Guardian appointed Hubbard as the head of the missionary arm of the faith, responsible for initiating a Baha'i presence – including schools and temples – in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and South America.

Based in the UK, Hubbard soon transformed what was, until then, a movement restricted mainly to the American continent and parts of Persia and Palestine (now Israel, and the official seat, in the city of Haifa, of the Baha'i Universal House of Justice, the place of Bahá'u'lláh's grave) into a truly global presence, being particularly successful in the Soviet Union, where in 1955 - and following the death of Joseph Stalin - the USSR's new leader Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev publicly converted to the Baha'i faith and made the famous flight to Washington, D.C. where he and the American president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, signed the historic Friendship Accord between the two super-powers. By the 1960s, Baha'i accounted for an astonishing one quarter of the Earth's population, and the United Nations first dreamt of by FDR and the Guardian has become the first World Government, with charismatic young American president John F. Kennedy taking the first seat of World President in 1961.

Kennedy set the Futurist Institute the goal of coordinating a successful space program, and put one of the key people of the institute, Robert A. Heinlein, at its head. Heinlein amalgamated NASA with the RKA (the Russian Space Agency) and the newly-formed ESRO (European Space Research Organization) with impressive results: the first landing on the moon took place on July 20th, 1969, when American Neil Armstrong and Russian Yuri Gagarin touched down on its surface simultaneously. It was, as the devout Baha'i Gagarin had

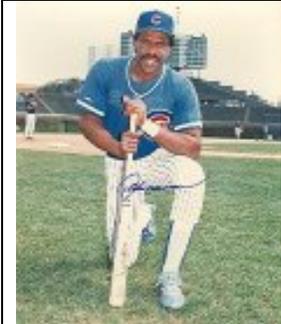


said, “one small step for man”, but “one giant leap for mankind”. On Earth, millions watched the landing on television screens and celebrated in the streets. The age of space had arrived. The moon landing was followed by the first international colony on the moon; by the 1980s the World Government’s influence extended not only to the moon but to major parts of the asteroid belt, and the successful 1984 manned mission to Mars confirmed Earth’s growing peaceful dominance of the solar system.

Today, as we approach the new millennium in peace and prosperity, knowing that the guiding hand of the Universal House of Justice extends over us all, whether on the moon or in the most remote parts of Earth, it is worth remembering that, barring a series of small, seemingly-random events, the world could have been a much darker, different place. Had Shoghi Effendi gone to Britain and not America for his post-graduate studies he would never have met Ford; The Baha’i faith may never have grown beyond five or so million people; Esperanto may never have been spoken; indeed, imagine the possibility that there would be no lunar colony, no international space program, no manned mission to Mars!

As John W. Campbell Jr. said, all those years ago in his milestone editorial: “I have seen the future, and the future is Baha’i.”





## In the Garden of Dust

by Nicholas Scipior

***They sat like little congressmen in solemn conversation, child stockbrokers enrapt in the midst of formal negotiation; that is, until he appeared and diluted the importance of their baseball card barter with his wounded eyes and suspect grin and ultimately, his peculiar offer. Something false, they thought, sitting there in the woods, dumbstruck friends watching the strange kid with a growing sense of irrational dread.***

#

Kurt sat on the stone bench, his chin resting in the palm of his hand, his face tilted downward, examining the broken cobblestones beneath his feet. He closed his eyes, slowly; reopened them, slowly, the lids wiping over dark irises like wet denim. Sunlight filled the air and rinsed over him, irradiating the golden fuzz on the nape of his neck. That it was a pleasant day was the first thing he realized. That he had no idea where he was, how he'd gotten there, or the length of time that he'd been sitting there was the second.

Kurt looked up.

The massive headstone had settled unevenly into the earth, a patina of dark green moss mottling the left side of its sun-washed face like a half-shaven beard. Years, centuries of them, had smoothed the epitaph into illegibility. The neighboring gravestone had suffered a similar age; an entire corner had disintegrated into pebbles and dust, a name had receded to its last anonymous consonants, streaks of grime ran down its white face like dried smears of axle grease.



Slowly pushing himself to his feet, he traced the ancient stone pathway in front of him. To the left it threaded between a row of assorted burial vaults, aboveground crypts elaborately sinister with gothic design, yet small, each tailored for just a single corpse. Some were crowned with steepled roofs, some were fronted with small peristyles, others were faced with Doric pediments and entablatures and narrow stained glass windows. More or less, all of the stone shanties were being slowly eroded by time - a missing cornice, a dark blush of exotic moldering, a critically fractured foundation.

To the right of where he stood, the path wandered into a fathomless warren of tombstones and megaliths and teetering obelisks. Grave markers jutted from the earth like misaligned rows of blunt, cavity-pitted teeth; some stones were white, some were gray, some were toppled flat like dominos. Mausoleums and sepulchral chambers crowded and jockeyed for precious space. Broken footpaths crisscrossed and intersected and wound about in irrational directions, none seeming to confidently lead in any one direction. Fissured stones and concrete bricks hemorrhaged fountains of pale grass and scarious, creeping weeds. Trees and copses sprouted in irregular intervals, the shade of their foliage brushing charcoal shadows over the morbid, concrete landscape. Umber runlets of desiccated leaves and snarled yellow grass snaked and spilled everywhere. But nothing moved or rustled; not a blade of grass stirred, the leaves on the trees held like plastic, every age-tinted gravestone and crypt frozen in grotesque repose. A vast museum recruited with the dead.

Kurt again looked to his left, and then to his flank, then craned his neck to look forward around a garage-sized mausoleum, but there was no end in sight; over rolling hills and obscuring slopes the cemetery just seemed to go on and on and on.

He turned and regarded the bench he'd been sitting on.

Questions began to telegraph across his brain cavity. A cemetery? Was he really standing in cemetery? And if so (and this was a quiz



buster) *why?* Kurt tilted his head, concentrated, physically tried to muscle his wits into obedience. What recent sequence of events in his life had led him here? And what was making it so hard to remember anything? Moments passed and Kurt found that there was some memory there, only it was like looking at his own reflection in a steam-fogged mirror; he recognized vague colors and wooly shapes, but the details were all blurry. Take, for example, his wife, Jessica. Her yielding reddish-gold hair, her blue pastel eyes, her delicate smile revealing an upper row of ivory pearls and that little eye tooth that was just crooked enough to be endearing. But where was she now? He tried to remember other things, landmarks that would lead him to the present. Kids? They didn't have any kids, but they'd been working industriously (with the aid of several fertility drugs) to change that. They weren't rich, but they were more than comfortable - over the last few years he had day traded them into a lifestyle beyond that which would be expected for an insurance salesman and a legal secretary. And their home: a sizable, four-bedroom ranch with powder blue siding and little black shutters and arbor vitae shrubs hugging the foundation and a recently sealed L-shaped driveway. But could have possibly led him away from that cozy dwelling to this corpse farm?

*Something* must have happened recently to have ushered him to such a grim place, but *what? How? Why?* The critical nexus was densely wreathed in a silky mist, still beyond the realm of his dazzled ken.

*Oh my God, somebody died.*

Coldness flooded his arterial chambers and spilled over into the rest of his body. Someone had died, someone close to him, someone he loved, and now here he was, overwhelmed with catatonic shock, mourning the sudden, insufferable tragedy.

*But...*



He glanced around again, absently searching through the labyrinth of centuried tombstones and their intervening sun-diluted shadows.

That didn't seem right. Kurt probed his thoughts a little deeper, but couldn't discover any sense of grief or throb of raw misery that might accompany the loss of a loved one or even a good friend. Personal tragedy, as he remembered from his father's untimely death, had an unmistakable flavor, a singular agony that would so deeply saturate the consciousness that the misery became dogmatic, physical even, something raw and viscous that occupied your chest like a pneumonic infection. But he didn't feel anything like that now.

Now he simply felt like the fading end of a smile. Like he'd been quite content up until recently, but this had ruined it all. And with good reason: there was nothing quite like a repository of rotting flesh to kill a man's good humor. He was standing in a graveyard with no idea how or why. That, he surmised, was pretty damn serious. And surreal even, like a...

"Dream." Kurt said, exhaling. Of course. He was having a lucid dream, the kind where you know you're dreaming and just sit back and watch it like a grainy low-budget movie - you know it isn't real, but it could still be entertaining. Sometimes. It seemed like a pretty obvious answer. Why didn't he think of it earlier? All he had to do now was power-think his way back into the world of the waking.

He pinched his arm, he slapped his cheek, he hopped in place.

It wasn't working.

An idea came to mind, albeit a slightly crude one.

Kurt walked around the bench and stood against a tall, white, slightly reclining headstone. He unzipped his pants and pointed himself at the badly effaced epitaph.



Amazingly, a hot stream of urine came pouring out.

That *never* happened in his dreams. Always he would wake up before the actual flow came, would climb around Jess, stomp blindly through the familiar darkness towards their master bathroom to take a leak for real. And didn't they always say (those great and wise they-sayers) that if you urinated in a dream it meant that you were pissing your bed? Like everyone, Kurt had a number of secret shames, but he was positive that bed-pissing wasn't one of them.

When he was relieved, Kurt zipped up and turned around. For a long moment his gaze wandered throughout the impossible necropolis.

He wasn't dreaming.

Then for some reason he had ended up in a cemetery and had forgotten how he'd arrived there. A raw discomfort began in his throat, an ulcer of serious discontent.

*Calm down*, he thought. He had to force himself to calm down. There had to be an explanation. Somewhere. Somehow. Maybe he just had to look for it.

Kurt began to walk, slowly, leisurely, choking down panic, forcing himself to gather an objective appraisal of his strange surroundings; that was the only way to solve this. He followed the footpath until it intersected with a wider road that was paved, but so bleached by the sun that it looked like a dry riverbed of ash. For no reason at all, he turned onto this road and proceeded down its subtle grade.

It was dismally endless. Far to the right, Kurt could see a thick wall of trees, their healthy foliage vibrantly basking in the light, but it was not the end of the cemetery. Staggered ranks of roundtop gravestones marched away into the wooded depths like exhausted confederate soldiers heading home from war, trudging beneath the arboreal canopy where the darkness gathered like a satin fog, split only here and there



by a few slanting shards of light. It seemed a lovely place to stay the hell away from.

To the left, the cemetery swelled into a countless number of hills, daunting, morbid, their slopes muted with a carnival of charnel stone, the full panorama of which was always obscured, at least in part, by the more immediate tombstones and mausoleums. Even though his line of sight was more limited in this direction, Kurt had a sickening feeling that behind those gentle rises was only more of the same.

He stopped.

Something was crucially wrong, out of place, or perhaps even missing, some massive flaw that existed beyond the fact that he was lost in a boundless cemetery.

He turned a full circle and looked for it, scoured the area around him. What time was it? He looked to his wrist for a watch, but found none. By the height of the sun it would have to have been at least...

Kurt looked up into the sky. And looked. And looked.

But there was no sun.

A nauseating fact considering that there was a substantial amount *sunlight* as evidenced by the shadows that were sprouting everywhere. But there was nothing above him but a seamless, cerulean basin.

Now he was scared. Terrified.

#

Two things happened that made the fact that he was wandering through an impossibly vast cemetery seem ordinary.



One was that an old friend of his, Eddie Lauder, had called the cell phone Kurt hadn't even realized was tucked in the front pocket of his pants. But compared to the other thing, which had occurred just a moment before, even that was pedestrian.

The thing seemed to have popped up out of nowhere. At first he had considered it with a mild, almost humorous amusement, like an aberrant piece of modern art that nobody liked, that nobody could understand, that was plainly a vain attempt to create novelty from simplicity. It was just a thick hemp rope dangling in front of him about three feet off the ground. Like Arabian magic. Or gym class. But after a very brief moment it wasn't humorous at all. It wasn't even amusing. It was a rope. Dangling in the air. Not only was it something that should not be, something that could not be, but there were other things. For instance: all of the scattered rubble and detritus that littered the underlying walkway, scattered about like someone had dropped and obliterated an enormous... something.

Kurt bent down and picked up one of the pieces, knowing that in a moment he would have to look up into that sunless sky and see where the rope was coming *from* and that the prospect of doing as such seemed rather ridiculous, even tantamount to admitting that any of this was sane. What he held in his hand was a busted portion of a polished ceramic tile. Or of many tiles rather, as though it was a small part of a large mosaic. Its color was powder blue and its enameled surface was smooth to the touch and there were bits and pieces and remnants of it lying everywhere, scattered across the pathway and throughout the nearby plots and gravestones.

Kurt's mouth, which had been jarred agape for the duration of this baffling discovery, puffed out a gust of breath. *What the hell?*

Slowly, he looked up. Far above him, two hundred yards at least, there was a rupture in the sky and it was from this that the rope dangled. The void sat like a blotch of starless midnight on the otherwise faultless (late afternoon?) firmament, distinct and ugly and fey. It was



as though some great and angry deity had punched a whole through the fabric of existence. An existence, at least in this cemetery, that was partly made out of ceramic tile.

It was then, as Kurt was barely setting the lip of his reason around this insurmountable circumstance, when his cellphone chimed to life. And it *was* his cell phone he thought, it was his ring - through a small gap in his steamed-clouded memory, he remembered that generic digital jingle. The bluish glow of the face panel said that the incoming call was from his best friend, Eddie, whom he'd known since he was a toddler, grew up with, went to high school with, stayed close with.

*This is what it's like to go insane.*

He couldn't believe what he was actually about to do.

"Hello?"

"Kurt?" A voice said. It was grainy and distant, but familiar.

"Where are you calling from?" Eddie asked. "I'm getting some pretty funky reception here."

Kurt sighed and combed a hand through his hair. "Well, Eddie, I... I'm..."

"You're in trouble."

"You could say that. How'd you guess?"

"Well I- This is going to sound really weird, but it's no bullshit, ok?" Eddie said, sounding uncharacteristically tentative. Most times he was a comedian, had a droll, if sometimes vulgar, wit; he was rarely serious. He was serious now.

"Yeah." Kurt said, thinking: *Weird? You have no friggin' idea, pardner.*



“Well I was just sitting here in my office and all of a sudden I got this really odd feeling like I should call you. Like something bad was going to happen and that I should get a hold of you right away. Like a premonition or something.” He was quiet for a moment, waiting for a response. “Kurt? You there?”

“Yeah, uh... holy shit.”

“What?”

Kurt massaged the bridge of his nose. What he wanted to say was going to sound horrible and awkward and perverse and maybe even a little hysterical, like a loud fart in church. The best way was probably to just come out with all of it on the pretense that it was real. “Listen, Eddie, I’m lost in some kind of huge... cemetery. And there’s this rope here. And pieces of some tile or something and there’s this big hole in the sky.”

He could have put that better. Out of the corner of his eye, Kurt noticed a pickaxe lying in a patch of grass between two headstones. And not far away, a spade.

“A what?”

“A cemetery. Like were they plant dead people.”

“No, you’re bre- up. I thought I-you- a cemetery”

A bizarre crackling noise surged over Eddie’s floundering voice. Kurt rechecked the reception on the phone and found that it had dissolved to nothing.

“Eddie, you’re breaking up!” Kurt tried to shout, but his lungs felt heavy and wet, soggy with the sudden realization that Eddie might be his one and only lifeline to whatever reality he had known before this. “Eddie!”



He listened, but there was nothing. On the face panel, he found that the connection had been completely severed. His heart listed, capsized, sank into the roiling acid-waters of his stomach.

Kurt mashed buttons on the cell phone and flipped through the menu, trying to relocate Eddie's number. He found it and hit the 'send' button. After a moment of disparaging silence, he reexamined the phone's glowing face: "NO RECEPTION."

He wanted to scream. He wanted to shout. He wanted to shriek like a primate with its ass on a grindstone. But then, he wouldn't want to wake the-

"Don't even start that," he said to himself. Something that felt like a bit of winter fingered its way up his spine. "Damn you, George Romero."

He tried several other numbers - Jessica, Mom, Dad - each with the same result.

*Ok then, back to your original plan: keep walking.*

He did. He stopped. He looked back. The rope was still there along with the mess of scattered rubble. But there was something else now he could see: the shadows were getting longer, stretching like black puddles of crude away from a nonexistent, but apparently bedding, sun. Somehow, time *was* changing, ticking away just as it would in any normal world.

Is that what it was? Another world?

It was beginning to feel like one; an acute sense of isolation congealed his marrow, making him feel like a deep-space astronaut who curiously examines the frayed end of his broken tether as he



listlessly floats away from his shuttle, wondering " *now how in the hell did I manage this? Now just how in the hell?*"

#

For some reason he was thinking about kids sitting in a forest with boxes of baseball cards. Now that was odd. Especially because Kurt thought he might have been one of the kids.

But what that had to do with the price of bread in Russia, or this cemetery for that matter, he didn't know. What he did know was that the sunless hues of yellow and orange painted across the sky were getting longer and deeper, turning ochre as though their invisible star were falling over the black edge of the horizon. Now and then he looked back, still seeing that tiny tear in the sky and the thread that hung down from it. But it wasn't a sky, he thought, it was a dome. And though he hadn't actually walked very far at all, (how long *had* he been walking? - time was meaningless here) it had to be the largest dome ever imagined, much less built. Too large, in fact, to be architecturally feasible.

He turned and tried to keep moving, but it wasn't going very well or very fast; the hole **in** the sky kept on stealing his attention.

A few moments later his steps dribbled off to a complete stop. A huge, wrought iron lichgate straddled the path before him, wedging out of the cadaver-fertilized earth like the charred skeleton of a dead volcano. With several tributary fences, it partitioned off four nearly identical tomb-fields. Standing just to the side of its archway was a large, exotic sign.

And sitting beneath it all, where the thick signpost met the grass, just as innocent as a severed head, was a baseball. *Buncha kids sitting in the woods, trading baseball cards and bullshit.* Why did that vision keep popping up in his mind? Kurt picked up the baseball and turned it over in his hands. Written by hand in blue ink was: "June 23, 1987."



He turned it over again, gripping the laces as if to hurl a fastball - two fingers across the horseshoe.

Next, he considered the sign. It was hard to miss. Shaped like a genealogic tree, each branch tapered to an arrow, most of which pointed to the sky. Something was written on each of the arrow signs, destinations with no mileages, directions to what? Places? People? He began to read, but the names were senseless, foreign, something made-up. *R. Archeron. Minos. Cerberus. Plutus. R. Phlegethon. Gate of Dis. Malebolge (X). Cocytus.* And yet... the names had an uncertain verisimilar quality, an exactness he couldn't define, but were as genuine as all the stones and trees around him. He dismissed it as lunacy. What else could he do? It (the lunacy) seemed to be the driving substance of this place, the deceptive fabric of a dark matter world. Kurt shook his head and stepped through the lichgate, continuing on the downward sloping path, his mind tossing around things like youth and baseballs cards and an afternoon in the woods. And the year 1987 - something had happened.

Moments later, as he hoped and almost expected it would, the cell phone chimed to life.

It was Eddie. "Ho-ly flying fuck, where the hell are you? I've been trying you for the last three hours, but kept getting your voicemail."

Three hours? Really? It seemed like minutes since he'd last talked to Eddie.

"I'm in some kind of cemetery. I'm lost." Kurt said, pacing along the edge of the ancient path.

"That's what *I thought* you said the last time I talked to you. What is going on?"

"I- I can't explain it, Eddie. It was just like I woke up out of some deep, deep, sleep and here I was, sitting in this cemetery."



There was a long lapse of silence. Kurt double-checked the connection. Still there.

“Eddie?”

“Yeah. Still here.” He had a grim tenor.

“What is it?” All at once Kurt felt his nerves curl and shrivel like singed follicles. He had a feeling that his friend was about to hit him with a bomb, a bunker-buster.

“Kurt, I... I just got off the phone with Jessica about twenty minutes ago. I called her, you know, because I was getting worried.” There was a small, but noticeable pause. “She said you’re in the hospital. That you slipped into a coma sometime during the night - from your diabetes.”

*Diabetes!* It splashed over his mind like a floodlight: he was a type-I diabetic. That was one *huge* detail that had been mucked up in the fog.

Kurt’s legs felt like hot rubber. “Eddie.... that’s impossible.”

“I know.”

“Because I’m right here - wherever here is - talking to you.”

“Yeah.”

“You know my voice.”

“Hey, we’ve been friends since we were crapping our Huggies. We grew up on the same block. Of course I know your voice.”



Kurt pressed the palm of his free hand into the side of his head. “Then what the hell is all this?”

“I think maybe... oh God, Kurt, I think maybe you died.” Eddie said.

A vacuum of silence.

“Did Jess say I was dead?”

“No, she said you were in a coma, but-”

“Well I’m not dead!” And the notion that anyone would presume as such, Kurt felt, was oddly offensive. “I’m right here, fit as fucking fiddle.” To illustrate the point, he spit on the ground. “Look at that! I just spit on the ground.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well... dead people can’t spit can they?”

“I don’t know...” Eddie sounded unsure and exhausted, as though the pinnacle of the mind-shattering revelation had already come and passed. “I guess you could spit in heaven.”

Kurt let out a sharp laugh. “Whatever this place is, it’s not heaven. I can tell you that much.”

“Then what is it?”

“June, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1987. That mean anything to you?”

“No... no, I don’t think so. Why?”

“I found a baseball here and it had that date written on it.”



"A what? A baseball? This really isn't making a lot of... wait, did you say '87? Wasn't that the year-" A swell of that same crackling noise rolled over and crushed Eddie's voice into nothing.

"Eddie, you there? Eddie." There was nothing but a dry wall of silence. "Shit."

*Wasn't that the year... What, Eddie? What?*

But then, almost as though on cue, he was thinking of baseball again, and more specifically, baseball cards.

*"Molitor, Robin Yount and Cecil Cooper for your Andre Dawson rookie."*

*"No way, pardner," Eddie says. "You gotta be shittin plums if you think I'm gonna give you my Dawson for that crap. This is a rookie, Kurtis. You could buy that '87 Donruss set for what this is worth."*

A diabetic coma - that was what Eddie had said. It was possible. Times before too much insulin before going to bed had sent his blood sugars plunging dangerously low during the night, each time arousing him from sleep into a groggy, half-witted delirium. Jess had been scared and later, scolded him for not being more careful with his injections. They both knew the consequences of careless slip-ups with his diabetes; one of them was the possibility of slipping into a hypoglycemic coma. Low blood-sugar coma. Usually, if treated with a glucagon shot - a high intensity blast of glucose - you would rouse the diabetic back to consciousness. Sometimes not. Sometimes it was a mistake you only made once.

But what did that have to do with this place? And how was Eddie able to call in to him, but he not able to call out? And what the hell was the deal with this baseball? And the summer of 1987? And-

He needed to sit down. He needed to concentrate. A tub of malt scotch would be nice. He needed to find a way back home. And he



needed to do it all in a hurry, because the fey radiance over this surreal world was being rapidly stripped away, replaced with the blue vapors of impending darkness. He found a fat headstone and made a chair out of it.

In 1987 he would have been twelve years old. It would've been the last summer he would've been interested in things like baseball cards and comic books - the following September he would ascend into Junior High, an adolescent wonderland of girls and team sports and dreams of cars that would be driven in less than four years. And something had happened in June of that year.

Late June. For some reason the 23<sup>rd</sup> felt like a Tuesday.

*It seemed like he almost... has Eddie in a irresistible trade: an Andre Dawson rookie for three Milwaukee Brewers and Eddie can never resist baseball card acquisitions for his favorite team, even if it means giving up a little more than the three cards would be worth as long as he can stall off for a bit, giving the appearance of a hard bargainer, saving a little face in front of the other couple of kids in the brokerage.*

*"I dunno, pardner. I don't know." Eddie says, smoothing an imaginary goatee.*

*"Come on, Eduardo. Just come on and do it, will ya? It's a good trade."*

*And it goes on like this for almost an hour as they sit in their secret alcove, that small clearing tucked in the hinterland of Ruckholt Woods, their conversation taking desultory tangents, each eventually leading back to the momentous transaction at hand.*

*Eddie begins to hem and haw and now Kurt knows it's a lock, because Eddie never does this unless he's made a decision and when three legendary Brewers are involved there can only be one decision.*



*So he leans forward getting ready to accept Andre Dawson (rookie) into his collection when something comes trampling through the woods, a stranger, some twerpy kid with dark eyes and dark hair - all of the kids that know about this place are present and accounted for - ambling in their direction without the slightest bit of stealth or apology, running even, trampling saplings and dead brush and finally, most annoyingly, bursting upon their powwow, forever obliterating the Andre Dawson deal. After this, Andre Dawson (rookie) will seem pathetically insignificant.*

That was the last time he ever traded baseball cards, Kurt thought.

*He sees Eddie's expression: just who in the hell does this shithead think he is, bulling in here like this? Kurt himself wondering: how did he find this place, how did he walk into it like he always knew it was there? And also: there goes my friggin' deal. And Eddie has a ruddy glow like he's going to sock the kid in his jaw.*

*"Hey." He says. "Heard some guys were trading out here."*

*Though none of them say it, they all think(Deleted :)" from who?"*

*Eddie glances askance, lethally, at Joey Slusarski and Ben Archibald (Ben Itchyballs to friends and enemies alike), their wide eyes feigning innocence, but Eddie suspects different. Eddie suspects that one of them let the secret slip. Idjits. Joey and Ben's cards are usually impotent - sub-.300 hitters, benchwarmers, no names, newbies, nothing before '85 - because their cash flows from an allowance and not a paper route like he and Kurt, but it's nice to have a couple of others, even if just as witnesses.*

*"Mind if I sit?" The kid says, already sitting.*

*"Yeah fine." Eddie grumbles. "Gotta name?"*

*He says his name. For some reason Kurt can't remember that part.*



*"Say it was a good thing I found you guys."*

*"Why?" Eddie asks immediately.*

*But the kid gestures towards Eddie's lap. "Is that Dawson a rookie?"*

*Eddie admits that it is, proudly, letting him see the back of the card, the single bar of stats that also happens to comprise the career totals, thereby drastically spiking the value.*

*And by the way, the kid says as though we actually might, don't tell his old man that he was out here today. The old man's really on the rampage today and he's supposed to be grounded. Grounded. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on, hey? And his mom too. They're always nagging and bitching about something, riding his butt about everything under the sun. And he's just a bad kid. That's what they always say. Can you believe that? Just a bad kid.*

*And Kurt and Eddie thinking, (deleted colon) "What does this have to do with baseball cards?"*

*"But hey, anyway..." The kid looks away, his impassive countenance betraying no fear; if he's really worried about his old man his poker face is hiding it. Then, almost as an afterthought, he says, "Oh, hey. I got something to show you guys. You guys are gonna shit." His hand disappears behind him and then reappears, no reaching, no grabbing, no digging in a pocket, just a wave back and forth. Like magic. "Check these out."*

*Good. God.*

*They're in hard plastic cases like some of his own cards, but really, Kurt thinks, they should be in safe, a vault, a stronghold garrisoned with a battalion of United States Marines. At first he can't believe it.*



*They all huddle close around the kid, jaws dangling, eyes disbelieving, then believing, then disbelieving again.*

*These things can't be real.*

*Hank Aaron.*

*Mickey Mantle.*

*Lou Gehrig.*

*They must be real. Kurt doesn't suspect that they're anything but rookies; it's almost as though they're glowing, radiating a nuclear energy or a divine aureole. Eddie is too dumbstruck to speak; in fact, he's squashing Andre Dawson underneath his left foot (good thing for those hard plastic cases).*

*Then the kid scoops up the cards and looks at the group, his eyes hard and dark like knots of burnt wood. "I gotta get rid of them before I go back home."*

*Kurt can almost understand. The cards don't belong to a kid, but an adult. These are the legends only fathers rumor about. They have to be stolen.*

*Tyler holds out the cards. "Here."*

*He's saying it to no one, Kurt thinks. And then: No. Wait. He's saying to me.*

*Eddie actually leans back as though wilting from a powerful and pungent stench. "We can't hold those for you."*

*Tyler shakes his head. "I don't want you to hold them." At this moment Kurt realizes that the kid is looking at him and only him. "I want you to have them."*



*He wonders 'why me?' He feels like a man (not a boy now, a man) wrongly sentenced to death by the electrocution chair, but his tongue, he discovers, is swollen and gluey and fastened to the roof of his mouth, outraged by the ineluctability of what has been offered.*

*Have them.*

*(yeah right)*

*Come on.*

*(nah, no thanks)*

*And aw, come on.*

*But floating out of his body, lightheaded, warm, drunk with transcendence, he wonders what choice is there when offered the world's rarest treasures, the fabled sacred graal of twelve-year-old boys.*

*There is no choice. No choice at all.*

"What the hell was his name?" Kurt whispered, his squinting eyes oblivious to the ochre twilight spilling from the artificial sky.

The cell phone rang. It was Eddie again. Almost absently, Kurt flipped open the phone and held it to his ear.

"Eddie?"

"Yeah."

Without even a moment's hesitation Kurt asked the question, knowing without reason that Eddie had been thinking of the exact same thing.

"What was his name?"



There was a moment of hesitation, surprise that they'd been sharing the same thought.

"Tyler. Tyler Berk."

"He has something to do with why I'm in this place."

"All I know is that he had some goddamn hand of cards. They were all rookies too. Mantle. Aaron. Lou Gehrig."

Kurt shook his head, knowing that by Eddie's voice, he was doing the same, both of them reliving the bizarre events of that afternoon all over again. "But that wasn't the worst thing." Kurt said. "The worst thing was that he wanted-

"-to give us the cards. For nothing. And I couldn't beh- ou-" Eddie's voice was chopped away again by a surging cackle of white noise.

"Eddie, I'm loosing you again."

"-urt, -ou happe- -ext da-"

"What?"

"-member what hap- the next-"

Whump. Kurt grunted and the phone slid out of his hand and skidded over the path. Something small and blunt had slugged him in the small of his back with a force that was neither gentle nor violent; it had been meant to gain his attention. Kurt spun around, having a good guess at what sort of small leather-bound globe would produce such an impact. He found it rolling towards the nearest headstone - another baseball. He'd been beaned.

He retrieved his phone, but found reception was nil, so he put it back in his pocket. He picked up the baseball and weighed it against the



one with the date inked on it. *Hint, hint.* His eyes searched the legions of stone markers.

Then he heard it, shrill and clear; since there was nothing else but silence, the sound dominated the morbid atmosphere. Someone was whistling "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

"Hello?" Kurt shouted. He couldn't hone in on the location of the sound. It could have been coming from any one of those myriad tombstones; each seemed to harbor as much malice as the next.

*Buy me some peanuts and Crackerjacks, I don't care if I ever come back...*

"Alright, I can see what you're getting at." Kurt announced loudly. "Come out and explain this to me. I want to know why I'm here. Tyler."

The whistling stopped.

Silence washed over again and the last light of day just skimmed the summits of the gravestones and crypts with splashes of red florescence. Underneath, shadows stretched and yawned and grew like black nocturnal weeds.

Kurt watched the shadows, watched for ghouls.

Then he was simply there, standing with his hands in his pockets behind a headstone not more than ten yards away.

"I was wondering how long it was going to take you to catch up." Tyler said. He was still just a twelve-year-old boy.

*He died, you know. Right after we met him in the woods.*



That was right, he had died, but standing in a place like this, Kurt thought the important question might be *how?* Under what ill circumstances?

"Been a long time... pardner." Tyler was grinning.

*Pardner? No one calls me that but Eddie.*

Kurt slowly threaded through the gravestones to where the boy was standing. "Am I dead?"

"No."

"Are you dead?"

Tyler nodded.

"Is this heaven?"

"No."

"Hell?"

Tyler chuckled as though it was stupid question. "Hell is worse. Much worse. This is more of a... a halfway place. A purgatory or something."

"But how would you-"

"What do you say we stroll this way while we talk?" Tyler said, nodding towards the direction behind him. All it looked like was more endless cemetery, but Kurt allowed himself to be led - if the kid was a ghost then he should know his way around.



“What is this all about?” Kurt asked as they moved backed onto a path. He couldn’t tell if it was the same one he’d been walking on before.

“Well, in case you haven’t figured it out yet I’m the reason why you’re here. I guess you could say that I *summoned* you - if you like that word - because I need some help.”

“Why do I have to help you?”

Tyler reached over and grabbed the baseball with the date on it out of Kurt’s hand.

“Because you owe me, dude.”

“Owe you.” Kurt echoed softly, thoughtfully.

“I know you haven’t forgotten, not really. For Mantle. For Aaron. For Gehrig.”

All those years he had allowed himself to forget, swallowed the bad memories, repressed them like a victim of severe trauma, an auto wreck survivor. The cards were still in his possession, still in their hard plastic cases, buried deep in some unlabeled box of dusty sundry, shelved deep in a corner of the attic or the basement, forgotten so well that maybe it never happened.

Kurt tried this once more. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t be stupid. You *know* what I’m talking about. It’s just hazy because you’ve been trying to forget for so long. But even then, it was always there for you, lurking in the back of your mind. And what’s with that anyway? Most kids our age would’ve thought that getting those cards would be one hell of a prize.”

No they wouldn’t have, Kurt thought. Most kids would have been like Eddie and Joey and Ben: too petrified with suspicion, too frozen by the



illogic of such an offering to even think about accepting, smelling something ill about the entire thing. It was like having a stranger rush up on you out of nowhere and stuff a suitcase full of freshly minted greenbacks in your chest and saying, "Here, have this." Great. Awesome. Fantastic. But you knew right then and there that it was only in trust, only for safekeeping while they escaped their crime, and that as soon as they were ready they'd be coming back for it. Even as a kid he'd known that. But Tyler was right - he had taken the cards, reached out his sweaty hands and accepted them without a thought, instinctively, like a cow opening its maw for a fistful of hay, because a twelve-year-old businessman couldn't refuse a temptation like that, was *incapable* of refusing it. Maybe that's why he'd had so much success day trading - he never could pass up a good deal when he saw it.

But in the few years after that fateful afternoon, often late at night when teenage dreams were far way, smoldering like dead embers, he would take out the cards and look at them in their hard plastic chambers, remembering that day in the woods, wondering about the child that had given them to him, wondering what had motivated such irrational gratuity. By the time he was in high school, he'd selectively forgotten the whole thing.

"Did you come out of that hole in the sky?" Kurt asked, returning to where he was, the disturbing things he had seen. "Down that rope?"

Tyler nodded. "I've been digging my way up out of there for a long time."

"Don't you mean *down* from there?"

Tyler shrugged. "Up. Down. Everything's kind of flipped around here."

Kurt wiped his hands over his face.



“Look, I’m not asking for your soul or anything,” Tyler said. “I just need a little help is all. Getting out of this place.”

Kurt felt feverish. And his bowels were starting to dance, shuck and jive. “But you said you were dead.”

“Well, truth is that I’m not quite dead. Not here anyway. No one on this level is quite dead. Like I said, it’s a sort of halfway place. A purgatory. Limbo. Whatever you want to call it. The important thing about it though is that things can *change* from here. People can...they can go back from here. It’s like a place of second chances.”

Kurt thought that the kid’s face looked like blushed porcelain, radiant in the early blue light of evening and that his evasive eyes were only honest when looking away and sheltered some selfish pretence. An abomination of innocence. There was a deception at work here, some rotten impetus that had begun in a summer of Kurt’s youth and had worked its way to this moment, this strange here and now. Eddie had remembered something just before the phone gave out. *What was it?*

It was the one thing he himself had buried too deep to remember. And now he was too exhausted to even try. All Kurt wanted to be home with his wife and out of this outlandish nightmare.

“Ok. I’ll help.” Kurt said. “But first I want you to answer me two questions.”

Tyler looked up at Kurt and gave him a wary glance and shrugged. “Ok, I’ll try.”

“Is there a heaven?”

“Sure is.”

“Why aren’t you there?”



They stopped walking and turned to face each other - a grown man and a twelve-year-old kid who had never made it out of 1987. Kurt could see him squirming in his shoes.

Tyler's shoulders swelled and deflated. "Listen, man, we both know that I- *oh shit!*"

Tyler's eyes dialed in on something over Kurt's shoulder. In the next moment, Kurt felt himself being yanked down behind a large granite coffin. They crouched there for a moment before Tyler eased his head around the corner, looking in the direction from which they'd been walking. Kurt did the same.

The hole in the top of the tile firmament was still visible, only much smaller, distant. He couldn't even see the rope. What could be seen, however, and most horribly, was a tremendous shaft of scarlet light pouring out of the gap and swerving about like some terrible alien death ray. A spotlight.

Kurt couldn't believe what he was seeing. "What in the hell..."

"Exactly." Tyler said, his voice very small, very quiet, like a frightened boy. "*Get down!*"

They barely managed to pull their heads behind the tomb when a flash of crimson light blazed over them. When it was gone Tyler risked another glance, then pulled back, his chest heaving for breath.

Kurt grabbed him by the shoulder. "*Why aren't you in heaven?*"

"There's no time, man. We gotta go. We gotta go *now.*"

There had been something that not only had happened on that afternoon in the woods, but on the day *after*. *That* was what Eddie was about to tell him. What had it been? Kurt was too harassed by



the searching, livid ray to effectively reason. He felt like a fugitive or at the very least, a conspirator.

Tyler was pawing at his arm.

Then he saw them.

Winged bodies, black in the roving light, were dropping out of the hole in the sky and *flying* down, flapping their wings like bats with human torsos, like the vicious progeny of excommunicated angels.

Tyler was tearing at his arm. "*Come on.*"

"Not until you tell me why you aren't in heaven."

The boy was very small now and shivering, his dark, rheumy eyes filled with worlds and galaxies of terror. "If they find us, you won't be going back home. Ever. And that's only the beginning. We have to go *right now.*"

A distant shriek, angry and malicious, unzipped the cemetery's perfect silence. Other shrieks responded.

Kurt found himself scrambling after Tyler, maneuvering through the darkness like soldiers under fire, scuttling at a crouch, dashing from one gravestone to the next, then walking, then running, then walking again, lungs burning for air. At last, when the red light and the horrid shrieking had receded into the safe distance, they stopped.

"We're almost there," Tyler said, gasping.

"Almost where?"

"It's just ahead."

A moment later they were standing in the short yard of a single chanel house that lorded over a gentle rise. The door was open;



darkness lay within like the black tide at the bottom of a lover's leap, waiting to reap youth and suicidal dreams.

"What is this?" Kurt asked, both enticed and appalled by the crypt that seemed to have been waiting for them.

"It's the way back home for you." Tyler was just a small shadow in the blue darkness. "I can go with you if you take my hand."

*And that's the catch, Kurt thought, that's what he gets for Mantle and Aaron and Gehrig. And it's wrong. It's not what's supposed to happen.* If it was, he realized, then Tyler would have had his own door. Tyler, who had done something on the day after they met him in the woods. Tyler, who Eddie bitterly remembered. Tyler, who had not made it to heaven.

Kurt turned to him. "You're not supposed to go back."

"But I made it here." He was a pitiful little boy now, pleading. "I escaped and I wasn't supposed to be able to. It took me twenty years of hiding and creeping and digging and running through what no human can imagine to get here. I was lucky. I was one of the few. If you help me, I can have a second chance. That's what this place is all about, all of these people who've gone back - it's all for second chances. Second opportunities. But I need your help. Remember, you owe me."

"I thought those baseball cards were a gift." Kurt said.

"No you didn't. Nothing's a gift and everybody knows it. Everything costs."

"And if I don't help you?"

Tyler shrugged.



*If I don't help, maybe I just go back and nothing happens. But poor Tyler would be SOL. And maybe, Kurt reflected, he'd just live the rest of his life and never think about this again. But I'll be a deal-breaker. Dishonest perhaps and maybe a little heartless. And maybe there's no injustice in being a deal-breaker. Maybe that's just kids stuff. Then again, maybe deal-breaking is the worst thing someone can do. And maybe after I die there's a place for deal-breakers, a place like where this kid busted out of. Or maybe nothing. Or maybe worse. But he was innocent, wasn't he? He never knew what those baseball cards meant. They were just baseball cards. He thought they were a gift.*

Except that there were no gifts in life. Everybody knows that. There were only trades.

Caveat emptor.

Kurt opened his hand and waited for Tyler to take it. He did and together they stepped through the doorway.

#

A television was on. That had to be a good sign.

Kurt fought through the helium stupor and cracked open his eyes. A television was propped high on the wall off the foot of his bed - or rather someone's bed as this was clearly not his. Almost immediately he became aware of a light pressure on the top of his left hand, a rawness that needed to be itched. He looked down and found a thin plastic tube coiling out of the back of his hand.

"Oh," he said.

Someone stood up from the corner of the room. It was a woman.

"Kurt?"



It was Jessica.

“Oh.”

Before he could think of anything else to say, she was surging towards him and there were lights turned on in her eyes, a bright and thankful sparkle.

“Oh God,” she said. “Oh God.” Jessica sobbed into his chest for a long time. Finally she looked up with sultry eyes. “When the glucagon shot didn’t work, I thought I’d lost you. I thought you died in your sleep.”

They embraced and traded kisses and hugs and small, reassuring noises. In due time doctors and nurses came in and made pleased comments and took vitals and smiled and made notes on their charts and said things about luck and powers that be and excused themselves and left.

Later, when everyone was gone (even Jessica), Kurt rolled out the hospital bed and padded across the room, tugging his squeaky-wheeled IV tree along with him. He found his shirt and pants hanging in a small closet. He took the cell phone out of his pocket.

He turned it on and called his best friend.

Two rings and Eddie picked up. “Hello?”

“Hey, pardner. I guess I’m back.”

“I know - I just talked to Jessica.” She said you’re going to be ok.

“Thank Christ, huh?”

“Thank Tyler, maybe. I found him over here, if you can believe that. He was still twelve years old. He showed me how to get back.” Kurt



sat down in the room's recliner, his free arm still clutching the high-tech coat hanger. "But he called me on those cards."

Eddie drifted mutely on the other end of the phone. "So I'm not just insane." He finally said. "It really happened. I mean... you saw him." There was a depleted sense of expectation in his voice, like he'd guessed that might happen.

"He called me on those cards."

"Aaron, Mantle, and Gehrig." Eddie recited, gravely.

"Those are the ones. We had a little chat and talked about that day and how I should live up to my end of the trade."

"Chat? Kurt, I don't see how..."

"I don't expect you to believe any of this. It's crazy. All of it. I'm not even sure that it wasn't all just a dream."

"No, Kurt. I *talked* to you on the phone when you were in a coma. It happened. Somehow it did. What I was going to say was I don't understand why I wasn't there with you."

"You were always my closest friend and you, more than Ben or Joey, shared that experience with me, you *knew* just like I did that something wasn't right with the kid, but you weren't the one that took the cards." Kurt said. "If you had, our places would probably have been switched under some sort of alternate circumstances. But I was the one that made the trade. I was the one that had to go."

"What did he want? What did he say?"

"He wanted to get back. According to him the cemetery was only like a halfway place, a purgatory. But that wasn't where he'd spent the last twenty years. He was... running away from someplace else."



Someplace worse. And when it was time for me to come back he wanted to go with. So I helped him.”

“That was a bad idea.”

“I know. But I was afraid not to hold up my end of the trade.”

“You never should have taken those cards.”

“I know. But I did. And it was about twenty years too late to do anything about it.”

“You remember now?” Eddie asked. “About the day after?”

Kurt felt terrible, painfully nauseated, like there was suddenly a large hole in his abdomen that was vomiting an endless supply of greasy white guts. “A little, but not much. Everything’s still pretty foggy about that. Why?”

“Because we read about Tyler in the newspaper. The names were withheld, but we knew it was him. We just knew. Remember?”

Vaguely. Kurt had a dim image of Eddie rushing up his street after dinner on a weeknight, gasping and holding a crushed portion of the daily tribune in his hand.

“It was the front page. About how a twelve-year-old boy on the West twenty three hundred block of Saratoga Avenue had been found dead in his home from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. And about how the authorities had quickly determined that it had been that twelve-year-old boy who had taken a ball pein hammer and had bludgeoned his mother to death while she soundly slept (she was day-sleeper because she was a third shift nurse at the hospital). About how later that day that same twelve-year old boy put a bullet in his father’s skull as the old man stepped in the house coming home from work. And about how the neighbors had heard shots fired and had called for the police who



discovered that the second shot from the old man's .357 revolver had been the one that the twelve-year old boy had saved for himself. And how neighbors and friends and relatives were so completely floored because they always seemed such a nice, happy family."

"Those are always the ones with the demons. The nice and happy ones." Kurt said. He was remembering now.

"Yeah. Right. And remember how you were so upset when I showed you that article and you said that you knew it was Tyler and I told you were full of bull crud and that it could have been any twelve-year old kid. And then what did you say?"

The chapped corner of Kurt's lower lip twitched. "I said, 'Then why did you come running up my street to show me this?'"

"We both knew it was him. Somehow, we both knew."

Kurt leaned forward and set his chin on the palm of his hand. "I never should have taken those cards."

"So explain this to me again, he wanted you to help him back? To where?"

Kurt ignored the question, partly because he wasn't at all sure himself. Though he had a hunch. "Do you think his parents abused him?"

Eddie sighed. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Well I mean if a kid was abused really bad, sexually even, does that give him the right to kill his parents? Is that justice?"

"With a ballpeen hammer? Putting a bullet in your dad's skull as he steps in the door after a hard day's work? It's a tad more than an eye for an eye if that's what you mean. Remember, the police told the



media that they never had any records of any domestic violence incidents. And the neighbors and friends and family were clueless too. Totally unexpected. Thought they were a happy family."

"That doesn't mean anything," Kurt said.

"No, but what does your gut tell you? From that one day we spent with Tyler, what was the feeling you got? What do you think of when you remember him now?"

Put that way the answer came effortlessly. Tyler Berk was a boy that they had known for only one day, for an afternoon really, but what he had said and what he had done that afternoon - such a simple, seemingly innocent offer - had been a dark nucleus in his life, something that he regretted to the point where he had to forcefully gag and purge the entire incident from his memory. Tyler had wanted someone to take those cards for a reason and it hadn't been charity. And thinking about it now, when almost everything was clear, he had to wonder: what kind of kid buys insurance on his soul?

Kurt sunk a little further into his chair, wilted. "That he wasn't telling the truth. That he was trying to pull something, deceive us somehow."

"Right," Eddie said. "He was a liar; the worst kind, lying about the worst kind of thing."

Kurt stared away into an invisible space halfway between his retina and the hospital room floor.

After a moment, Eddie spoke again: "And you know what else I think? That Tyler's parents had nailed it right on the head, that maybe Tyler Berk was just a bad kid."

"I made a huge mistake, pardner. Now I think maybe I made two. I took his hand and gave him a second chance."



Eddie was quiet for a minute, thinking. Maybe he understood. "Hey, what's done is done."

They were best friends. Eddie wouldn't deride him for what couldn't be helped now. It was out of their hands.

Kurt said: "I guess the only question now is what happens when you give a dead kid a second chance."

"That is a good question."

Alone in his hospital room, the television silent, the hallway silent, Kurt thought he heard his scalp tighten over his skull like overstretched leather. He glanced at the room's door - it was shut. "What do we do if we see him around? Because I got this bad feeling like he's just waiting around the next corner."

"I don't know," Eddie said. "Walk the other way."

#

Three weeks later, at breakfast.

Kurt sat at the kitchen table, sipping a mug of coffee, assiduously studying a slab of the Wall Street Journal. Morning brilliance radiated in through open windows, presaging warmth and blue skies and an altogether beautiful day. Just outside birds frenzied over the hanging bird feeder, chirping an intense staccato of what was either matutinal bliss or a primal struggle to see who could scatter the most seed out of the feeder.

Kurt thought about making breakfast, wondering if there was time for frying eggs. He thought about it some more as he got up to pour himself another cup of coffee.



When he turned around, Jessica was standing at the far end of the kitchen where the room opened up into their dining area. She was smiling with tears on her face, a combination Kurt hadn't seen since they'd stood at the alter.

"What is it?" He said. Then he saw and knew. She had one of those little pink and white boxes in her hand.

The organ pumping in his chest swelled and skipped and sent pink warmth rushing to his face. "Yes?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Jess!" Kurt reached out and swept up his wife and told her he loved her and how he suddenly felt like talking (or shouting even) about a thousand different things, about all the plans they had talked so hopefully of for the last two years. Finally it had happened.

She smoothed out the wrinkles on his shirt and looked down once and then up into his eyes with a soft smile. "I love you so much, honey, and I know this is going to be a new thing for the both of us and it's going to be a lot of effort on both our parts but we did it! And I love you and I'm so excited and I can't wait to tell mom and- and oh, I was thinking - just something that popped into my head - if it's a boy, what do you think about the name 'Tyler?'"





# Nonfiction

Article: \_\_\_\_\_

## ***nanobison* and OPB Golden Hours Radio**

by Pam Bainbridge-Cowan

Webzines are by and large a visual medium, but with the advent of streaming audio, MP3, and our recent agreement with voice-over talent Andy Cartmill, we will soon be offering stories to our audience through the medium of audio as well.

Andy, a professionally trained voice artist, has the control, sustained energy and vocal variety to “make the story come alive” and to captivate his listeners. In addition to his paid work voicing commercials, TV spots and public service announcements, Andy has volunteered hundreds of hours reading and recording books for the blind, as well as hosting a live radio show on OPB’s Golden Hours.

Golden Hours was founded in 1975 by Graham Archer. Archer recognized the value of a radio reading and entertainment service when his mother-in-law became housebound and in need of information and entertainment. The service started with a signal carried over telephone wires. It is now carried as a second audio channel on OPB’s television signal and can be received on any stereo equipped TV or VCR and on the Internet.

*(<http://www.opb.org/programs/streams/index.php>)*

Golden Hours is on the air 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and strives to provide enough diversity in their programming to meet the information, education, and entertainment needs of their listeners.

Nanobison is proud to be able to provide fresh material for Golden Hours, and to offer our writers a new venue, and audience, for their speculative fiction.



## Contests

We have three contests that are all carry-overs from our first issue. See the editorial in this issue for some biased opinions as well as some extra clues as to how to win!

### Prizes:

The prize for all three contests is a \$10 credit at the "A Second Story" on-line bookstore, for anything that is in their inventory. Upon confirmation of your winning status, we'll get your pick from the current on-line selection and have it shipped to you (terrestrial addresses only please!).

### Eligibility:

All readers, contributors, and submitters are welcome to try their hand at any or all of the contests, regardless of planet of origin, political affiliation, species, or length of fur. Participants who possess psychic powers are kindly asked to NOT remotely mind probe the editors for answers to the contest questions, as they are prone to migraines when thusly probed. The only persons not eligible are the *nanostaff*, folks actively involved in the production and content review of *nanobison*.

### Entering:

To enter, send an email to contests ..... at symbol ..... the domain name of this magazine, with the following information: number of contest and issue it was listed in, your answer. You may submit one entry per each week, if your initial entry is not a correct or winning answer. Once a particular contest has a winner, this information will be posted on the contest page. If you are the winner of a particular contest, this does not affect your eligibility for other contests. We will ask the winners to provide us with their real names and a GIF or Jpeg of their faces, so we can post them here.



## Contest 1 - Speculative Fiction Trivia

There are three questions below. If you think you know the answers, send an email per the general instructions above. Questions for this contest are all from science fiction short stories. The first email received with the correct answers will win! (Hint: free clues in issue2 editorial)

**Question One:** What short story contained the following line?

"I also saw that all the robots were bowed down with toil and affliction, that all were weary of responsibility and care, and I wished them to rest."

**Question Two:** What short story contained this line?

Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.

**Question Three:** What short story contained this line?

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

Name the stories and the authors.

---

## Contest 2 - Who Wrote / Spoke This?

Following is a science fiction quote. Name the character so spoke this dialogue or the author of the work. Extra points (a.k.a. our undying admiration) if you name the work itself.

**Congratulations, Captain. Against our better judgement, the B'omar Sovereignty has agreed to grant your vessel passage through our territory.**

---



### Contest 3 - *nanobison* Steganography

What is steganography? In short, it's a cool way to share in plain site some form of hidden text, image, or entire file. It can be used as a form of underground communication among folks who's privacy is compromised by various external forces.

This month's steganog contest is a carry-over from issue 1. The objective is to determine the catch-phrase in the crow picture on our home page.

Your weapon of choice should be a freebee program called **CAMERASHY**. You can get it right here at nanobison by clicking on the EXE - Camerashy link from the download menu. It is a single file Windows program that will run on anything from Win95 to WinXP. You can download it to any location on your system that you want. It requires no installation program and contains its own built-in help. What you need to do is enter the nanobison URL and decode the message.

The magic words? Here are a couple of hints.

The password happens to be the name of this magazine (how hard can *that* be?).P

The signature is the same as the username of one of our editors as it appears in the nanobison forums . He made it easy for you by posting a message in the forums saying "Hey, it's ME".

Another Hint: Case (upper or lower) is important.

To win, simply be the first to inform us of the contents of this Secret Message, per the general contest instructions above, exactly as it is depicted. Note that the answer is the name of a famous SF author and one of his works.





## Editorial: The Evolution Continues

by Doug Helbling

### *We're Back!*

As in, We are Still Here. Welcome to our second issue of *nanobison!* Thanks to our readers and to all of the writers who submitted work for consideration in this and the premiere issue. We greatly appreciate your efforts.

### *Revised Layout*

This issue sports a revised page layout, driven by feedback from readers and staff on issues with the functionality of the layout on the first issue, especially among users who still operate their screens at resolutions under 1024x768. Hopefully, you will find the new layout easier on the eye and easier to navigate as well. We'll continue to refine and enhance the format over the coming months, with input from you, the readers and contributors.

### *New Hosting ISP*

With this issue, we are also being hosted by a new ISP. Our previous ISP decided to nuke our message board as a part of their "routine service review activities". This was just one of a series of service gaffs that drove us to seek a new hosting home. We settled on [Datacabin](#) and are more than pleased with the results. We have a several year relationship with the folks running [Datacabin](#), and can heartily recommend them to anyone looking for flexible, reliable, and affordable hosting services. Their budget hosting service is only \$4 / month. How can you argue with that! (No, we don't get a commission on referrals ... we just really like these folks.)

### *Contests*

While I have your attention, I'd like to remind you of our contests. Participation in the contests posted in the first issue was, to be fair, nearly non-existent. The little bit of feedback that did trickle in on this



subject included comments like "Gee, that's just *too hard!*" What I will offer here in this chatty editorial space is a bit of encouragement to potential participants, and I will throw in some free clues as well.

First, the prizes are real. They are not huge, but they are real, and should certainly appeal to nanobison readers. My co-editor, Pam, is providing a \$10 book credit toward the purchase of any items in her '[A Second Story](#)' on-line bookstore, shipping included. Are the prizes too small to excite readers into participation? I don't think so. I'll assume that the quiet response is really about the fact that we are new and still building our readership. We will continue with the contests, revising them as we go.

Regarding the first contest, the **Camerashy / steganography** contest: I tried to make this very easy for participants with even the mildest bend toward nerdliness. I have played with this program with other 'Net Friends' and we had some fun with it. I am making this even easier this time by offering a download of the Camerashy program directly from our site and posting a tutorial on our message board. So there will be a new magic word and so many clues that this contest should be more about who actually tries it first. And that's OK! A short note on the Camerashy program: if you run the McAfee virus checker, it will identify Camerashy as an 'unwanted program'. It also flags half of the tools in my personal network intrusion detection / response toolkit, including nmap, netcat, and several other completely benign programs. In other words, Camerashy is NOT A VIRUS!

The second contest was a sci-fi trivia "Name That Story" contest. I did have one colleague over on the SF Reader discussion board say he had figured out two of the three quotes. I'm going to throw you all a Big Bone of a clue on this one. All three quotes come from science fiction short stories that were included in a recent collection of masterpieces edited by one of my top 5 favorite SF author's, Orson Scott Card. If you already have this collection, your work is almost done. If you don't, I heartily recommend this work, and offer a free plug and my thanks to the folks at Ace for publishing it, as it is a worthy addition to any SF collection.



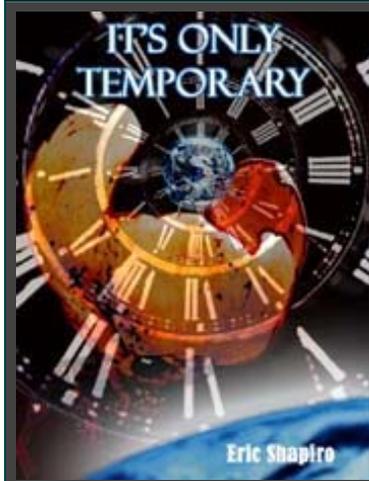
The third contest asks for either the name of the writer or of the speaker of the specific line of dialogue. Free clue: hey kids! There's this new thing on the internet called Google, and it allows you to find stuff!! Seriously, this is a Star Trek thing, offered in all due homage and reference to the armada of Trekkie's and Trekkers out there. It should not take that much research to find the answer to this one.

As I reread this editorial, I realize that I am trying to encourage you to participate in these contests by cowing you into it. Well, hey, whatever works! Just give 'em a try if you have a mild love for puzzles. We would like to do more of these in the future.

### *Forums and Guest Book*

As mentioned above, our discussion board, created before the first issue of nanobison came out, was nuked by our previous ISP. We lost all of the user accounts. It's since been rebuilt along similar lines on our new site. I encourage you to drop by, sign up for a login, and bug us about anything you want. If you want to simply say "Hi, I was here" you can use our newly created Guest Book as well. If you really enjoyed a particular story, drop a few lines on one of these two channels to share your reaction with the author.





## It's Only Temporary

by Eric Shapiro

Review by Doug Helbling

### Details:

100 pp, © 2005, Permuted Press  
(<http://www.permutedpress.com>)

Mena, Arizona, USA

Editor: D.L. Snell

Cover Art: © 2005 by Ian Jarvis

(<http://www.itsonlytemporary.com>)

With all of the high praise and stellar commentary already lining the back cover and inner pages of this book (I found 21 review quotes in all), we were a little surprised at the author's interest in having **nanobison** review his book. But he asked, so here it is.

This book is short, just 100 pages. The story is fast-paced, lively, and credibly hip in its use of subculture lingo. Our protagonist, Sean, battles highway crazies, man-eating lions, and his own guilt-ridden self-destructive urges as the tale winds its way to the inescapable conclusion. At times, the lapses into introspective search for meaning in this first-person narrative were a little too saccharine for me, but most of the book flowed very well.

My favorite line in the book: "**How it must pleasure psychos to find others just like them.**" This line says much about the main character, who realizes, in the face of the chaos that rules the worldspace of this book, that he is himself perhaps really not all that messed up after all. I like this guy!

All in all, this was a fun, finish-in-one-sitting read, with at least a few images that will stick with me for a while. I look forward to future works from the author and wonder (with interest) what he'll have in store for us if and when he ventures into the realm of longer, novel-length works.

The nanobison rating? I give this one a **nano nano**.

- Doug Helbling



### Nanobison Review Rating Guide:

<b>buffalo drop</b>	Don't bother. This book is an insult to the pulping of trees.
<b>hoof's up</b>	Readable diversion.
<b>nano nano</b>	Somehow fresh, crisp, edgy, or otherwise diverse and thus recommended by one or more of the <b>nanostaff</b> .
<b>golden bison</b>	When "WOW" is a word that comes to mind: a remarkable work, inspired and impacting.