

TIGHTBEAM

The Springboard of Ideas

#265

May 2013

INSIDE:

New Fiction by

Kent McDaniel

Jean Lamb

Comics by

David Heath, Jr.

Tim Allenby

Reviews

Lots of Fan Art!



TIGHTBEAM

The Springboard of Ideas

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Letter from the Editor



Tons of wicked thoughts merrily appear

When I started planning out this year's publication calendar in December, I only had one goal in mind: something new in members' mailboxes or inboxes every month—even if it was only a 2-page update of club business. Instead, I've been blessed by the high quality and quantity of art and prose to choose from each month.

In this issue, we have two original works of fiction: a short story of the macabre gone awry by new member **Kent McDaniel**, and a lengthy excerpt from **Jean Lamb's** latest novel, a moody ghost story.

Also, we have the second of three installments of **David Heath, Jr's** *A Treasure Hunt*, which has been out of print for more than three decades. And from the next generation of fan cartoonists, we have the strip, *This Is Normal*, from university freshman **Tim Allenby**.

In early April, noted film critic **Roger Ebert** died. He started his writing career as a teen involved in Midwest fandom before going to college and entering journalism as a profession. His death moved me to write an homage, perhaps because even though I'm 45 years old, I still want to be Roger Ebert when I grow up.

Also in this issue, **Ruth Davidson** and **R-Laurraine Tutihasi** join **Lee** and **J.J. MacFadden** in reviewing a crop of books and comics.

Keep getting your geek on,
David Speakman

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Malcolm Horton

17

Tim Allenby

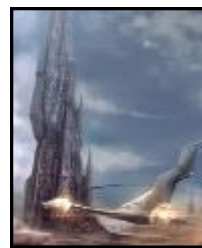
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Cover Art: "Tower" by
Kovryga Eugene Victorovich

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N3F Forum: Letters of Comment

The following letters of comment are correspondences received for both N3F publications, Tightbeam and TNFF, between January 15, 2013 and May 15, 2013. All editing of correspondence is kept to a minimum - limited chiefly to the insertion of name callouts to alert readers to whom a section of the letter is addressed. Please email comments to: cabal@n3fmail.com

2013.01.31

Jeffrey Redmond

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Tightbeam just keeps getting better and better. It's really looking like a professional production, putting so many of the others to shame.

[Really? When I look at an issue, all I see are the errors and typos that threaten to undermine the art and prose of the contributors. But thanks for the compliment! As for "putting so many others to shame" - I do want to point out that we are fans of other fanzines and believe that the only thing we are competing with is the clock as we try to get the issues out and distributed on time. - ed.]

2013.01.31

Angela Myers

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I'm loving the covers. Are prints of the covers available? *[Just like printed words, after initial publication in TNFF or TB, all art copyrights revert back to the original creator. As for art - all of our electronic versions (PDFs) of the zines include on Page 3 a list Art Credits where the name is sometimes clickable to the artist's page. Many of them have prints for sale. - ed.]*

2013.03.12

Jon Swartz

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I just downloaded (and read) the March issue. I feel very honored to receive a Kaymar Award. Please thank the committee for me.

I am also pleased to see that my article on the Hugos is listed as an upcoming Special Fandbook

[Yes, the July Fandbook .. which will be a special electronic (PDF) - but printable issue. - ed.]

2013.03.23

Jefferson Swycaffer

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DAVID SPEAKMAN: A very nice pair of newsletters! These latest issues of TNFF and Tightbeam were classy! Good stuff! Even a comic strip!

It's very sad that the membership roster is so sparse. The ad in Analog and Asimov's may do something to help. In any case, it's a heroic effort. Good on yer, sir!

[Thanks, every since I was a teenager living in rural Indiana, I dreamed of editing either "Tightbeam" or "TNFF" - but never thought in a million years that I'd be editing both zines.—ed.]

WESLEY KAWATO: I mostly wanted to write in response to the letter from Wesley Kawato that George Philies quoted as part of his Games Bureau report.

Wesley suggested that there was something wrong with the Traveler role-playing-game rules, because, in play,

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space ships misjump too often.

He compared it to an airplane pilot landing in the wrong city, four times out of forty-seven landings.

But the Traveler game system is not a simulation of real-world airline traffic. It's an adventure game, and the probabilities of events are skewed toward the dramatic. A star-ship, jumping to the wrong star-system, is a plot-hook. It's the basis for a rip-roaring, swashbuckling, high-adventure, dramatic game session -- at least if the referee is doing his job right!

Games don't work in the same way reality does...and nor should they. Imagine if the expected rate of return on investments in Monopoly was in line with real-life investments. Everybody would get a boring 3.15 per cent return, plus or minus 0.78 percentiles. In the same vein, then, imagine if star travel in Traveler were as dependable as real-life airline travel: you strap in, sip your drink, read a magazine, nod off to sleep, and arrive.

The worst you realistically have to expect is arriving 20 minutes late. Where's the drama? Where's the adventure?

In the GURPS game system, there is nothing -- nothing! -- that you can do that doesn't bear a 1.85 per cent chance of failure. Even the best pilot, the best soldier, the best administrator, the best scientist -- will flub a roll that often. The same is true for the Traveler game system...and even a bit worse. One roll in every 36 will be a failure.

Unrealistic? Highly! But it keeps the game dramatically vivid!

A "flaw in the rules?" Nay! The rules were crafted with adventure in mind, and, to the mind of at least one Traveler aficionado (I even have an "additional design" credit in one of the game's many supplements) they succeed most admirably.

GEORGE PHILLIES: I will definitely look for your book on The Avalon Hill Game Company's "Stalingrad" for beginners. I'm far from a beginner, but I'm guessing your book will be interesting to an old Groggnard as well as to a cadet! And I'd never heard of ZunTzu, Vassal, or Cyberboard; I'll investigate further. Is anyone publishing

solitaire-suitable historical computer wargames any more? Seems like the closest I ever see are shoot-em-ups and other action-adventure games.

Cheers!

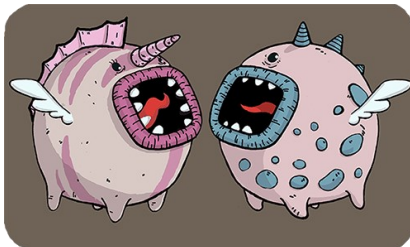
2013.03.25

Wesley Kawato

Chino Hills, California

DAVID SPEAKMAN: As for the way my Doctor Who story was edited (TB #263), maybe **Jeff Redmond** misread what I wrote when he typed up my story and sent it to you.

Enough said about that.



My car broke down in late January and I wondered if I could get to the LAX Marriott to sell magazines at Gallifrey One, held on Feb. 15-17. Two members of a new group called "Fans for Christ" saw to it that I could get to the convention.

These people knew about my faith in God and were willing to help me. I've heard that Fans for Christ is very active in the Atlanta area. They often show up at Drangon*Con.

*[Yes they are and yes they do. And, if my facts are correct, FFC hosts annual parties and has had Sunday prayer breakfast at D*C for years. — ed.]*

Now they're trying to form a chapter in the Los Angeles area.

Major car problems have left me without the money to publish another issue of Nova SF. The magazine will be on hiatus until the fall of 2014. I'll still be accepting story submissions in the interim. I'm asking all members of N3F to help me re-launch the magazine. I'm encouraging all of you to buy a sample copy or two. We carry space travel, time travel and alternate history stories.

Copies are available for \$6.50. (California residents add 45 cents sales tax.) Make out all checks to Wesley Kawato (not Nova SF). Send all orders to:

Nova SF
c/o Wesley Kawato
17983 Paseo Del Sol
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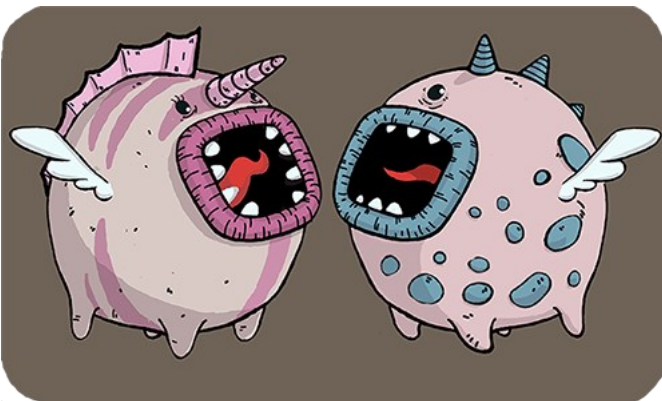
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N3Forum...

Nova SF has published 30 issues. We have stories by Brad Linaweaver in #4 and #10. We have a story by Sheila Finch in #25. Excerpts from back issues may be viewed at novascifi.com, assuming that website is up and running. My webmaster is rebuilding that site after a hacker repeatedly shut it down.

[N3F offers free advertising to its paid members. Please forward copies of any art and copy and I'll make an ad for you in the next ish of the zine.—ed]



2013.03.30

Kent McDaniel

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DAVID SPEAKMAN: Hi, David. Enjoyed the February Tightbeam (#264), starting with the eerie cover. The juxtaposition of a post apocalyptic scene with the boy and his ball was chilling and poignant. And somehow weirdly beautiful. Also enjoyed the LOCS and reviews, and the cartoon by xkcd (?) on p. 2 was lol funny. Writers take note. But my favorite part of the issue had to be "Ashes to Ashes and Points Between" by Angela Myers. Really enjoyed the dry, mordant wit. Tightbeam is one of the better fanzines I've read in some time.

[Thank you. But as with all fanzines, the value in Tightbeam is in its content. I consider myself a curator at

best—but mostly lucky to have such high quality content in a free zine that only pays in egoboo.—ed.]

2013.03.30

Lloyd Penny

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DAVID SPEAKMAN: Thank you for TNFF, Vol. 72, No. 2. It's getting late at night, but I will try to whip up some comments for the next issue.

I went to Las Vegas for a fanzine convention some years ago, and had myself a fine time, but actually enjoyed the tour of the Hoover Dam more. When you look a half-mile east or west of the strip, Las Vegas is a seriously depressed little city. We didn't gamble either, nor did we gorge ourselves on cheap food.

New Fanzine Appreciation Society...well done. There are many fanzines still out there, and a long history, and more should know about it, and not feel that a sequential paper zine is old-fashioned. Time to learn about this chapter of fannish history, and perhaps take part in its more modern version.

I hope the separation of the combined zines is of benefit to the group. Any response from members yet?

Next weekend as this writing is our own long-time local literary convention, Ad Astra. This will be its 32nd convention over a 34-year period, the second-longest lasting SF convention in Canada. We will just be there for the Saturday...we are having other fun these days with antique shows, steampunk events and the local fandom that has sprung up around the Canadian-based detective show Murdoch Mysteries, which will be having its big annual event in Toronto in August. Very much looking forward to it.

Anyway, time to go, it does get late here. Many thanks for this current issue, and I look forward to seeing future issues.

[I have gotten nothing but positive feedback from membership in regard to the separation of the zines—egoboo in spades, so to speak. I do always look forward to your letters in particular each month.—ed.] ■



It was Fourth of July, 1989. Outside the house, Cherry bombs or M-80's--something loud--exploded, just as Stu's mother came waddling through the dining room, headed for the kitchen. He started, and she stopped to peer at him through thick lenses. Her thin permed hair was red like his; only her hair was dyed. It didn't make her look younger, either. It made her look ridiculous.

"Stu, you're so jumpy," she said. "What's with you anyway?"

He glanced into the living room, where his father stopped glowering at the nightly news and glared at him.

"Nothing, Ma," Stu cried. "Nothing's wrong with me. Okay?"

"Oh, well excuse me for being concerned," she said. "That's what mothers do, you know--worry." She trundled through the kitchen and out the door into the attached garage. At the dining room table, Stu slouched back over his bowl of tomato soup.

A minute later, his mother poked her head back into the kitchen. "Stu, come out here and pick up your toolbox, will you?"

He set down his spoon, swallowing soup. "Just pick it up and put it on the workbench, Ma." He ran a hand through his short hair.

"I can't pick this up," she yelled. "You want me to get a hernia or something?"

Feeling his father's scowl on him again, Stu sprang up

and carried his soup to the sink. He stalked into the garage and with two fingers, lifted his tiny red tool box from the cement and dropped it on the workbench.

"Thank you very much for your trouble," said his mother as he walked away, leaving her to sweep and dust.

Back in the kitchen, he peeked around the corner. His father still watched the news: Bush was going to visit Warsaw and said the Russians should get out of Poland. Like Stu cared. He went to the refrigerator and soon had everything on the counter he needed for milkshakes: chocolate for him, strawberry for his sister Marla. For the past few months, he'd made milkshakes every day before work, and he and Marla drank them together. He made his and then put everything for hers in the blender. Heart pounding, he peeked around the corner again at his father. He crept back to the blender, strained to hear any sound from upstairs or the garage, then pulled a capsule from his pants pocket. Not breathing, he yanked it apart and dumped the granules into the blender.

As he started up the stairs with the shakes, fireworks boomed outside, and he jumped, but really he welcomed the explosions. Like the milkshakes, they were part of The Plan.

He shouldered open the door to Marla's room and ambled over to her bed, where she sat watching the TV on her desk, her journal on her lap. She wrote in it during the

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commercials, and sometimes late at night, when the voices—"The Spirits"--were talking to her. Her hair, brown streaked with gray, fell to her waist, and as she took the milkshake, her blue eyes flashed. "Can you believe that asshole? I mean can you freaking believe him?" She was referring, he knew, to their father.

Earlier Marla had stormed into the house, yelling at him. Why the fuck wouldn't her car keys start her car? Why were they stuck in her freaking ignition? Triumph had flashed across their father's face. She knew holidays caused her problems, he said. She had been told to remain home. He had replaced the ignition key on her keychain with the look-alike jammed in her ignition. Why? Because he knew she would try to sneak out, and he didn't feel like coming down to Cook County Jail tonight.

It was stupid really: he might just as easily have taken her keys away, but their father loved his little games. A former principal, retired just this summer, his favorite story involved a little boy who'd been stealing coins from the milk-money jar on a shelf. By replacing the coins with red paint, their father caught the boy "literally red-handed," as he loved to say.

Marla snarled, "I mean, it's the Fourth of freaking July. And I'm gonna be stuck in this freaking house all freaking night." "Freaking" was her main adjective, and her voice was usually slurred and indolent. She hadn't always sounded that way; she used to sound intelligent and funny. And she'd had friends, lots of them. Back in the Sixties. Five years older than Stu, she'd been someone he looked up to--for her idealism, freedom, and high spirits. Ah, but where had it all led? To drugs, to pregnancy and abortion, to Jamaica, where she was raped, to more drugs, and finally San Francisco. There she'd found a lover who was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, Lord Krishna and Hitler, and she took mescaline with him daily for three months.

One trip too many. May of '74 their father had got a call from the San Francisco Police; Marla was in jail and out of touch with reality. He flew out and brought her back. In the years since, she'd managed to get herself institutionalized fourteen times. Her problems included everything from defecating on the street to slapping paint on store fronts and garages.

Stu took a sip of his shake. "I know you don't like staying home, especially on the Fourth. We can go out and see

Field of Dreams tomorrow night. I'm not working. Maybe stop by Wise Fool's Pub, after."

Her eyes lit up. "Wow, yeah, great. I can write in my journal tonight. Lately The Spirits have really been talking."

He held back his usual put-down of the voices she heard. He wanted nothing to upset her right now. When they finished their shakes, he took her glass and made to leave.

"All right, Stu," Marla beamed. "Tomorrow night."

As he went out the front door for work, the sound of Marla playing recorder floated down from upstairs, a wistful melody that haunted him as he walked to his VW van. Within forty-five minutes she'd be sound asleep. His windows down, he drove off through Rogers Park, a neighborhood of Georgian brick houses and small well-kept lawns. The temperature was maybe eighty, the sky hazy with a few scattered clouds. The radio was on, and a new Milli Vanilli song started. Not in the mood, Stu cut the sound.

He wound through the neighborhood and eventually followed a street lined with small businesses. He was bound for Stan's Italian Diner, where he'd delivered pizzas since he was twenty, sixteen years now. Occasionally, he found another job, but they never worked out, and he always ended up back at Stan's. He played guitar and sang and dreamed of being a musician but suffered stage fright.

For years the hope of what he now jeered as The Great Escape had kept him going. He was always saving money to move someplace where musicians he knew lived: Boston, Boulder, anywhere. Once he got there, he'd find a place, practice, and find a band.

Then a psychologist he was seeing pointed out a pattern to him: Stu continually saved up and left for the Promised Land, never to return, only to be back in six or eight weeks working at Stan's and living with his bonkers Mom and Dad. The Great Escape was a fantasy, insulation from reality, his trips only vacations. Stu had told himself that the psychologist was a spiteful old fool, replaced him with a psychic healer. But gradually the psychologist's words came to seem undeniable, obvious.

And more than ever life made him want to bash his head against the wall. Then a new idea came to him: The Plan. At first it was just a possibility that had occurred to him, but as a sort of game, he began to work out the details. Now as he wove through the early evening traffic, he re-

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membered: choosing the day, practicing disguising his voice, establishing the milkshake routine, getting ammunition for the thirty-eight his father bought after the race riots in the Sixties--like he'd imagined himself holding off ram-paging black hordes.

The trickiest part had been getting his father to name which pills were his downers and which his uppers. As big a druggie as Marla, really, his father had a jumbo medicine cabinet full of pills from his quack doctors; many looked alike, and Stu had to know which bottles contained which. Casually as he could, he'd worked the conversation around to the subject one afternoon and managed to get the information from his father. Afterward, though, anxiety gnawed at Stu. Had he aroused suspicion? For a couple days, he thought his father might've been watching him with narrowed eyes, but that passed. Anyway, when Stu needed them today, the pills were there.

Sweating, fingers trembling against the steering wheel, he turned from the street into the gravel parking lot at Stan's Italian Diner, a two-story wooden house, the ground floor of which had been converted into a restaurant. He ran a handkerchief over his face, plodded in, and donned his delivery-boy hat, a black baseball cap with Stan's Italian Diner stitched in yellow on the front.



Around ten, he left with his fourth load of pizzas of the night, a stack of seven. Under a bare sliver of pale moon, he delivered to the nearest three addresses first. The other addresses were at the northern and southern edges where Stan's delivered. Seven were a lot pizzas, and it wouldn't be unusual to take an hour getting back.

He drove several blocks and killed his lights as he pulled into an alley flanked by apartment complexes and lined with large metal dumpsters. He glanced about, jumped out and ran with the pizzas to the dumpsters. He threw each pizza in a separate dumpster and jammed them under the rubbish. No one would miss them; he'd ordered them from payphones last time he was out.

Sweating, he drove to two blocks from his parents' home and parked. He left his cap on the seat and climbed out, heart pounding. The street was dark and quiet, but if

anyone got a close look at him--he couldn't think about that. He scurried to the alley behind his parents' house, up the alley, and through the backyard. He peeked through a window and jerked back down. His parents sat in the living room. For a moment he wavered, but thought of no more squabbling, scowls, advice, orders, nagging; no more of their joyless routine, quiet desperation, or disappointment, unstated but always there. No more watching Marla shamle about, a ghost of herself. He thought of his parents' savings and life insurance, of having the house to himself. My God: The Plan was the ultimate Great Escape. Freedom from all this bullshit, forever.

He ground his teeth. He would go get the gun. If he chickened out, he'd use it on himself, goddamn it.

He snuck into the garage and through the door into the kitchen. He crept across it and stole a glance at the living room. Silent statues, his parents watched the anchors laugh about the Cubs, wrapping up their newscast. He skulked into the bathroom just off the kitchen. Easing open the clothes hamper, he dug to the bottom, where he'd hidden his father's gun. The hamper was the perfect hiding place: the laundry was his chore, and his parents might nag him, but they'd never do it for him—not in a million years. He pulled the gun out, a thing of dull metallic blue.

He strode from the bathroom and into the living room. He was three steps in when his mother happened to glance his way. "Stu! What're you doing home?"

He shot her in the chest. He shot his father, who was pushing up from his chair. Striding toward him, Stu shot him twice more. He turned and, jabbing the gun at her, put two more shots into his mother. Trembling, a haze of smoke around him, he stared. They were sprawled in their chairs, blood soaking through their clothes. He felt no triumph, no great remorse. Mainly he felt surprise: he'd done it.

He wasn't worried about the noise. It was Fourth of July. Independence Day. Just after ten-thirty, a little late maybe, but no one would think twice about the shots.

After a few moments, he walked into the kitchen, splashed some of his father's vodka into a tumbler and downed it. The next step was to wipe his fingerprints from the gun and wrap it in Marla's fingers, where it'd be when he returned from work at three in the morning and discovered the slaughter. Marla should be almost awake by then,

(Continued on page 13)



By David Speakman

After years of battling a cancer that took away his ability to speak, but not, thankfully, his writers voice, the world lost film critic Roger Ebert on April 4, 2013.

Above all else, he was a fan. Since its beginning, SF fandom has fostered an approach to reviewing works of fiction in a manner dubbed, “sercon” - meaning “serious and constructive” criticism.

In the 1950s, a teenager, who signed his LoCs as “Rog Ebert” was actively involved in SF fandom and fan friendships.

“But fan friendships, for me, were mostly long-distance and conducted by mail, and the influence on fandom was on my writing voice,” Ebert said in the forward of his *Movie Yearbook 2004*. “I became critical, I wrote smart-ass locs about other people’s writing, and read them about my own. I was in a world that stood outside the mainstream. Science fiction was the occasion for fandom, and often the topic, but the subterranean subject was a kind of kibitzing outside worldview.”

That outside worldview followed the young Ebert as he published his own SF fanzine, *Stymie*, as a teen before gafiating in college, (as many of us do) and started a career in mainstream publishing—first at the student

newspaper, then at community papers.

Roger Ebert and his “smart-ass” sercon writing style hit a nerve. He won a Pulitzer Prize for film criticism in 1975 for skills first honed as a teen in fandom.

As his celebrity grew, particularly with his on-screen partnership with fellow critic Gene Siskel. Watching the two spar passionately about the merits of a film was like attending a weekly con panel devoted to movies.

Siskel died of cancer in 1999. 14 years later, cancer took Ebert, proving to us again that cancer sucks.

In April, we lost the man who took fandom’s tradition of sercon criticism and popularized it successfully in mainstream media.

He eschewed celebrity-focused review formats where a journalist attends staged junkets to ask stars rapid questions. “I am utterly bored by celebrity interviews,” he once said. “Most celebrities are devoid of interest.”

Instead, he focused on the story—the writing and representation and what type of audience would see what type of film.

Roger Ebert always reviewed from a fan’s point of view—and like any sercon fan, never shied away from asking the pros to try again, but do it better next time. ■

RE: The Review Section

Unless otherwise indicated, the reviews editor compiles and writes the review section. Members of the N3F are invited and encouraged to submit reviews, preferably by email, although postal mail will be accepted. If you send a review by email and do not hear back within a reasonable length of time, please write to check on its status. Publishers: We are especially interested in receiving new books to consider for review. Heath Row, P.O. Box 372, Culver City, CA 90232; kalel@well.com.

Editor: Heath Row (HR). **Contributors:** Ruth R. Davidson (RD), Lee and J.J. MacFadden (LJMJ), and R-Laurraine Tutihasi (RLT).

Books

7G, by Debbie Kump (World Castle Publishing, 2011)

The premise of *7G* is technology gone awry. Very awry. Everyone wears Digital Optic/Ophthalmic Transmitters (DOTS), which are like contact lenses and ear pieces that connect them to everything and everyone all the time. (*Think Google Glass to the nth degree.*—HR) Soon *7G* will be here, and it will upgrade DOTS to a previously unimaginable level.

There are several characters in the book, but the main two are Alyssa Kensington and Erik Weber. Alyssa is a seaman apprentice aboard a submarine in the Navy, and Erik is a student at Southern Florida State University. Both have tumultuous love lives: Alyssa is in love with an officer, which is prohibited in the Navy; and Erik has just seen his girlfriend with another guy.

Alyssa suspects that the secret sonar tests the sub has been conducting have had a detrimental effect on local marine life. Her concerns are overlooked by her superior, and the officer she's been seeing doesn't even stick up for her.

Then *7G* arrives and changes everything. People and animals are dead, and it's up to the survivors to pick up the pieces of a dystopian world.

This was a good book, overall. There were some grammatical errors, but the main problem was that most of the story was about the anticipation of *7G*, rather than what

happened after it arrived. We would have preferred it if there was more to the ending.

The cover art is good but not great; the woman's expression is kind of irritating. Note: Mild language. (LJMJ)

The Boy at the End of the World, by Greg van Eekhout (Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2012)

My daughter read this book at school. She told me it made her cry, especially the last chapter. Of course, when she asked me to buy it for her, I did, and she told me I needed to read it. So I did.

The Boy at the End of the World is excellent children's science fiction. It takes place far in the future, after humanity has destroyed the environment to the point where we couldn't be in it anymore until the world healed. So we cloned humans, along with other species, all in suspension pods housed inside Arks, large heavily guarded complexes. Complicated computer systems, including artificial intelligence and nanotechnology were charged to protect the Arks and to guide the humans after the robotic caretakers deemed it safe to begin the process of humans repopulating the earth.

But something goes wrong, and no one knows about it except a robot named Click who awakens and mentors the only surviving human, a boy named Fisher. The world has drastically changed since the day humans ceased inhabiting it, yet our touch is still felt. Fisher's job is to survive, and Click's job is to make sure he's successful at it. But then Fisher discovers there might be other Arks, and he is driven to find them. During his journey, he learns there's more to humanity than mere survival.

The characterization is well done, and the story is well written. There were "Oh sh—" moments, moments where I smiled and chuckled. At one point in the story, I felt physically ill as an emotional response to the content. Additionally, I was pleasantly surprised when some things didn't quite turn out the way I expected. This story is a quick read, not only because it is meant for children but because you want to get to the end. It is well worth the read, for

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both adults and children. The approximate reading level is for children in 4th to 7th grade. (RD)

Earth Unaware: The First Formic War, by Orson Scott Card and Aaron Johnston (Tor, 2013)

This is the first book of a trilogy preceding the novels that feature Ender Wiggin. This novel tells of the first meeting between humans and the ant-like aliens. The book focuses on independent mining families in the Kuiper Belt, some ruthless corporate types, and an outlaw society in the asteroid belt. Readers are introduced to two mining families. One of the families is the first to notice something headed toward our solar system. They try to alert others, but damage to their communications system resulting from an unfair attack by a corporation keeps the message from getting very far. The families end up doing battle with the Formics on their own.

All good authors develop backgrounds to their novels. They might refer to this material from time to time. The Ender series of books was so successful that Card eventually decided to tell the back story. This is the first novel of that effort. While I found the book entertaining, it's not quite as good as the Ender books themselves. (RLT)

Forest Moon Rising, by P.R. Frost (DAW, 2011)

I read an earlier book in the series of which this book is a part. Having enjoyed the previous book, I requested this one as well and was rewarded by an entertaining read. The series is about Tess Noncoiré, a human who has discovered she is part fae. She can see things regular humans can't. She has an imp companion named Scrap, who spends part of his time in this dimension and part in another dimension. In her normal human life, she is a successful fantasy writer. She attends science fiction conventions and hobnobs with filkers and other fannish types.

As this novel begins, Tess is attacked by dark beings called Nörglein. As a result of that and other factors, she is suffering from writer's block. She needs to call for help from various people she knows, some of whom she considers to be friends and others not so much. This all takes place in Portland, Oregon, which has a lot of parkland. For one Nörglein, though, there is not enough, and what exists

isn't being taken care of in the way he would like. So he is waging a sort of war against humanity.

Tess must oppose him and rescue the people who have been enslaved by him. The novel tells of her struggles and her ups and downs. There are lighthearted and humorous moments. I found it an enjoyable book. (RLT)

Comic Books

Star Trek: Burden of Knowledge #1 (IDW, 2010)

This issue, the first part in a series, has the Enterprise crew hoping to admit the Mygdalians into the Federation. Bones is ecstatic about the prospect, as the Mygdalians are highly advanced medically. Bones, Kirk, Spock, and Lt. Thompson go down to the planet Mygdalus III to talk to Weis, the chief facilitator of the administrative council.

The planet is attacked, and Lt. Thompson is gravely injured. The Mygdalians offer to heal him, but there is more going on than they want to admit. The story has an interesting premise, and it reads much like a *Star Trek* episode.

Joe Corroney's cover is excellent. Looks just like the characters; you'll wish the inside looked like this. Frederica Manfredi's interior art is good, too, but the cover really stands out. Note: There is a violent and graphic story included after the *Star Trek* tale. Adults would be well advised to peruse before allowing their children to read this. (LJJM)

Star Trek Captain's Log: Sulu (IDW, 2010)

In *Captain's Log: Sulu*, Captain Sulu is given a diplomatic mission for which, he is told, his talents may be particularly well suited. He is to meet with the Tholians, who are "quick to anger, easily insulted, and [very] cryptic." He must not be late, or he will insult and anger the Tholians, who will then react badly.

Of course, Sulu is waylaid by a ship in distress, making him an insufferable 37 minutes past schedule. Sulu then goes about mending the situation in typical *Star Trek* fashion. There's no surprise ending, and Sulu doesn't do anything particularly imaginative. Regardless, written by Scott and David Tipton, this reads like a (very short) *Star Trek* episode.

Federica Manfredi's interior art is good, although Manfredi may be more adept at drawing backgrounds than

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people (there are times when she gets Sulu's face just about right). The scene in Sulu's quarters is quite nice, with plants, books, and what looks like a cup of tea. The cover by David Messina is very well done; we like the Japanese warrior in the background. Note: Mild language. (LJJM)

Star Trek: The Official Motion Picture Adaptation #1
(IDW, 2010)

This *Star Trek* movie adaptation hardly tells any of the movie plot; there's no space for it! If you want to see the entire film in comic book form, you're going to be paying

for more than one comic book (the publisher later released a graphic novel encompassing all the comic books in one big volume).

That is to be expected, however. Mike Johnson and Tim Jones adapted the screenplay by Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman. David Messina did the pencils, with inks by Gaetano Carlucci and colors by Giovanna Niro. Messina's cover is very good. Note: As in the movie, there is some violence and mild language. (LJJM) ■

(Continued from page 9)

The Great Escape...

most of the sleeping pill worn off. From the bathroom he got a washcloth and carefully wiped off the gun. Holding it by the washcloth wrapped around the barrel, he started up the stairs.

There was a loud knock at the front door. He froze. The knock sounded again, and then the crunch of a key turning the lock. He leapt from the stairs and into the kitchen, throwing the gun into the clutter on top of the refrigerator. The door opened, footsteps sounded in the hall, and as he stood paralyzed, Marla shambled into the kitchen between two cops.

He gaped at Marla, who grinned sheepishly, fidgeting from foot to foot, head swaying slightly from side to side.

And then it hit him. His father and his stupid, stupid games. That had to be it. His father must have switched bottles between his downers and his uppers. It had been an upper that Stu put in Marla's shake, and she'd snuck out later, walked off.

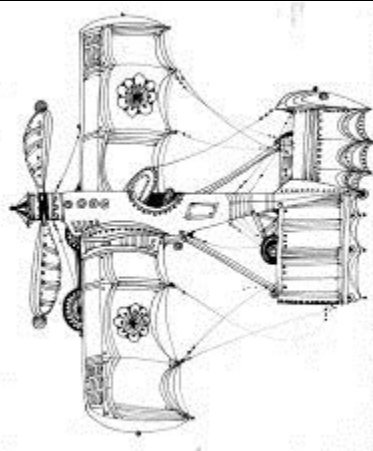
The younger of the cops, a tall, pale man, demanded, "This your sister?"

Stu nodded.

The cop stared at him dubiously. "Well, she had a problem in Biddy Mulligan's tonight. We had to escort her out of the bar." He glanced toward the living room, where the television was still on. "Might we have a word with your parents?" ■

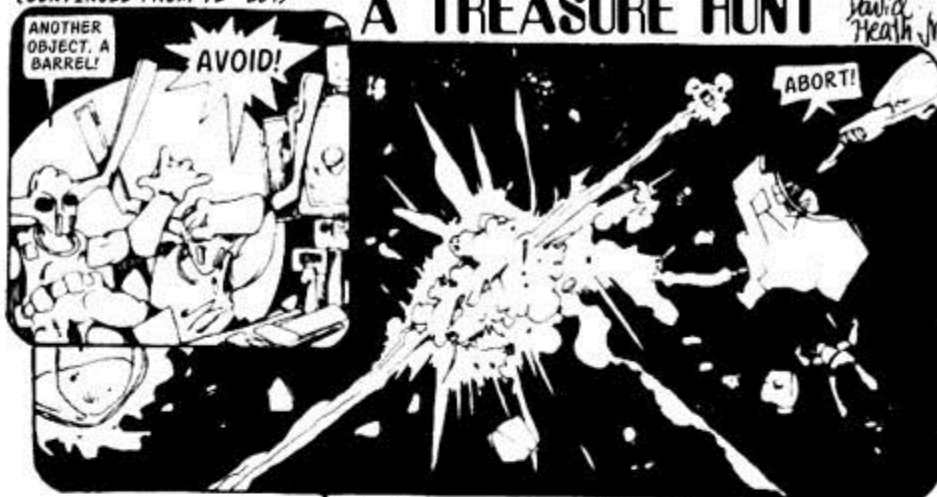
* * *

Kent McDaniel is an N3F member based in Chicago. This is his first work to appear in an issue of Tightbeam.



(CONTINUED FROM TB #264)

A TREASURE HUNT *David Heath Jr.*



ARE YOU TRYING
TO TELL ME YOU
RUN THIS SHIP
ALONE WITH NO
COMPUTER?

SURE, EASY FOR
AN OLD NAVY HAND.
WHEN WE MAKE
PORT I'LL SELL
MY ORE AND
REPAIR 3-80

HERE, HELP ME
FLUSH THE 2-3
TRACTOR ARMS

UH...
SURE.

YOU KNOW I USED
TO THINK THE OLD
GALACTIC UNION
WAS A LEGEND...
SO LITTLE PROOF

BUT YOU WOULDN'T
BELIEVE HOW EASY
THE PROOF WAS TO
FIND.

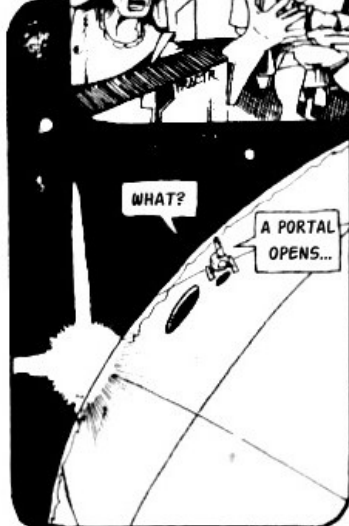
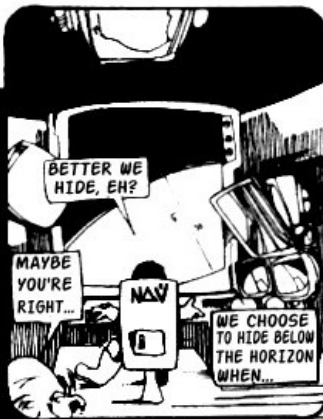
THE MAP PLANET IS ALLEGED
TO BE ONE OF THE LAST REMNANTS
OF THE EXTINCT FIRST EMPIRE OF
MAN. THE GALACTIC UNION, A
HUGE STOREHOUSE WITH A LIST
OF ALL THE PLANETS KNOWN TO
THESE WISE, ANCIENTS. MINES,
CITIES, INDUSTRIES. WHO KNOWS
THE MAP PLANET COULD FIND AND
LOOT THE OLD GALACTIC UNION
PLANETS NOT KNOWN TO US NOW.
AND WE FOUND IT!!

WE?

YES... MY PARTNER
AND I WERE
RUNNING GUNS
TO RIGEL.

WE HYPE!

ROGER!





DEAD MAN'S HAND

Tonio Vitor laughed and threw the dice. He'd been gambling at various clubs since early afternoon, mostly at cards and tiles. The slow, but steady, wins that came his way from calculation filled his pouch, but not his spirit. He longed for the joy that came from real gambling, though, and found it here. Tonight, no matter how improbable, the dots and pictures he needed turned up as the glittering cubes obeyed his every command. The smoky light of the Dancing Cat, his favorite gaming club, made everything shine. This was his last night here in Argnon. It was only right that he and his friends spend it here in the wharf area, close to where his beloved *Wing* was docked.

He gazed down at the felt-covered table. Nothing was like the lightning that ran down his arm with dice. Of course, if he played *picwin*, he knew how to make his own luck. With his memory for tile-patterns and numbers, he was assured of coming out ahead unless the tide truly turned against him or his mother was in the game. He would miss this place. Tonio shook off the shadow of foreboding that assailed him. Why should he let the future douse his present joy? He paused anyway. "We have to go," he said reluctantly to his cousin. "The tide turns in a few hours." The will of the Star-Lady waited for no man.

"Leaving the tables so soon? Everyone will think you're ill," Harin della Rovere said with a peculiar smile.

"But not you." Looking at his cousin was like gazing into a mirror. They had the same narrow face, dark eyes, and pale skin. "You're usually the first one to drag me away, since anyone who stays here long enough loses everything. Then I swear never to put my house at risk the way your father has yours. Have I remembered your lessons?"

Harin rolled his eyes. "It's still true. You don't have to tell me that my mother's sister keeps all her gaming inside

the family, but my father doesn't. That's why I have to marry a rich merchant's daughter I don't even like to keep my line from going under."

"Yet tonight you're staying quiet, when you'd rather play the good spirit and keep me from temptation," Tonio said wryly, passing the dice to someone else, since he was delaying others by this talk. "Well, we don't have to stay here. For one thing, I haven't finished buying presents for my family. I wish one of them could have come and see us leave the University of Argnon covered in glory." He was proud of his accomplishments. Only one student a year received the Cup for skill in mathematics from Professor Sirisac. It felt peculiar to be taught by a dragon, but everyone else was used to it—the old fellow had been there for most of a century.

"I know," Harin said. "None of mine did, either. Lessimo had his uncle show up, or why he's not with us now, but the two of us have the same problem."

Tonio sighed. "Father prefers to oversee the barley planting himself instead of leaving it to clients, not to mention tending the *minta* trees. My brother certainly can't leave with his wife about to bear a child." Luifa, he thought with guilty passion.

"Old Vitor is proud of you. Mother wrote me how much he brags," Harin said.

"He promised me ownership of the *Wing* if I did well," Tonio said. "I suppose he is." Once he returned home, he would have to leave again. Luifa still lived there, wed to his beloved brother Anderay. His blood burned thinking about his luscious sister-in-law, remembering how her heavy-lidded eyes and red lips inflamed his heart. Her actual presence would drive him mad. It had before.

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And yet—perhaps she had given birth to his brother's child by now, and had grown to love her husband. There was no way he could find out save by going home.

"Oh, blazes!" Harin intercepted the dice as they came around to their corner of the table again. He put the cubes back in Tonio's hand. "A few more throws won't hurt. What's the big rush?"

Tonio smiled, shook off his thoughts, and tossed the dice at the croupier behind the cloth-covered table. He added a bow, out of respect. "I must be gone," he said. "The tide waits for no one." It was time to stop running away and face his fears. He was glad that Luifa was so near her time, or he might have to face more than that. Surely she had been carrying Anderay's child when they had befouled his brother's trust in them.

Harin and their other friends gathered around, ready to follow him.

"Leaving so soon?" Avdan Delcoros, the son of a rival family, walked into the gaming chamber. He had been sent north from Cuda to cool his heels, too, though he was rarely seen at his books. "How courageous of you to depart before anyone has a chance for revenge."

"You've had all night," Tonio said.

"Some of us have family duties even so far away from home," Avdan replied.

"Oh? Do they include hiring bravos to waylay me and my friends? One of them was too wounded to flee, and named a 'foreign lad, a great hulking brute' as his paymaster," Tonio said. Odd how none of the bands had attacked him while he was alone, though.

Avdan flushed red, but stood his ground. "As I said, some of us have family duties. But it will be a pleasure to pull you off your dunghill and pluck your tail-feathers!"

"Good ahead, try all you want. A pity it won't do you any good."

"Perhaps I'll just hang them up on the wall as a trophy," his rival blustered. Avdan threw back his shoulders, looking more like a prize bullock than ever. There was peasant blood in that family, which showed in darker skin and cruder attitudes.

"Why not?" Tonio said. "You deserve one last chance to humiliate me. I should warn you that I've been lucky all night." He was certain he had at least one more good throw in his tingling right hand, though he'd learned the

hard way to stop when it did. One month here he'd been forced to live entirely on the food at card parties rather than admit to his father that he'd lost his allowance. *But I can't be beat tonight, especially by a Delcoros!*

He pulled out his winnings and set them on the table, though he could feel Harin's unspoken disapproval. "I won't even ask you to match my wager if you can't. Just empty your pockets." He counted on Avdan to stand there and choke before admitting he couldn't.

It was fun to watch the great lump sweat during the time it took for Avdan to borrow enough money from those around him to equal Tonio's pile.

The dice-master discreetly signaled for more gentlemen to keep order. *Wise fellow!* Tonio thought.

The croupier announced the rules. "This is a private game. Side bets may be placed with the man in the gold baldric. This will be short. Each player will throw one pair of dice in turn for three throws. The best two out of three will win. The highest number wins each throw, and the dragon trumps all. A pair of dragons ends the game. Kiron, bring the tournament dice."

"No!" Avdan said. "No matter what is thrown, the other player ought to be able to try to match it."

"Do you agree?" The croupier turned towards Tonio.

"Of course." The picture side on any set of dice was called a dragon, no matter what the design actually looked like.

An older woman with lovely greenish eyes stepped forward. She was obviously a mage with an orange cap covering most of her soft brown hair. She held a tray bearing four small, six-sided dice. One pair was red, and the other blue. The mage lifted them to show that each one had the proper numbers and one picture on it. Tonio's set had two small ships marked in white, while Avdan's had dragons engraved yellow. Dragons were lucky for him, even in his enemy's hands, though he naturally preferred the ships.

"I assure you both that these dice have no spells and have the proper balance," she said, clearly speaking as the house mage.

Tonio threw first. His score was nine, with a five and four combination. It wasn't a great number, but possibly a winning one. His fingers still tingled, though.

Avdan looked disappointed when his dice bounced their way to a three. "Mage, I smell something rotten here. Can

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you make sure nothing in this room is working against me?"

"My dear sir, I renew the spells against any magic in here every morning," she said, clearly displeased. "If you were cursed outside of this room, I suppose you could be carrying it with you, though I doubt it. However, just to make sure that nothing can be said, I shall put one around this table so strong that my own magic won't work till I move away from here." She chanted a spell in some foreign language.

Tonio's heart fell as his right hand lost its fire. He'd never thought of his gift as magic, really, since it had worked here before and in other clubs equally guarded against enchantment. Unfortunately, he couldn't possibly back out now. Sweat prickled at the back of his neck. He forced a smile when he picked up his blue dice again.

His friends crowded around to lend their support, but Harin backed away. Tonio shrugged. His cousin was a good companion in all things but gambling. Harin had never run off, for instance, when they'd faced real danger on the streets of Argnon.

So what if he lost? He was only risking what he'd won tonight. He picked up the dice and threw without thinking.

Delcoros crowed with delight as his dragon and five beat Tonio's pair of twos. "Redouble!"

"With what?"

"You have this pile. And you own the Wing, don't you? Or is it still your father's?"

"It passed to be upon graduation, especially since I did so with honors. I haven't wasted my time stalking someone I barely know, unlike some people!"

Avdan's eyes flashed. "You have no idea what you're talking about. If you paid attention to something past the bottom of a wine bottle, you might learn more than you think. Besides, it won't kill you or your friends to work your passage home to walk home south along the Neck. I've always fancied myself a bit of a sailor."

Fancied is the right word, Tonio thought. He'd seen Avdan at the tiller of someone's else boat, and it hadn't been a pretty sight. Delcoros had been so distracted by whatever he was watching, instead of where he was going, that he'd nearly run the little vessel aground.

"You still haven't offered anything of equal value," Tonio said. "This is a different bet."

The other man glanced at those around him. They shook their heads, after being bled for one loan already. "Isn't my word good enough?" Avdan said, his face full of panic.

"Perhaps with the Mintaran slave factors, but not with me!" The Vitors and their friends were opposed to involvement with the trade of that empire to the south of Cuda. However, the Delcoros clan and their allies pressured the Congregation of the Houses to increase trade with Mintar, and to look the other way when their ships raided the shores of Allante and Grand Marq. One of the good things about Argnon is that most people here hated Mintar, too.

Thus far the influence of Sandro Vitor as First Speaker had steered the Houses away from such a dangerous ally. *Father is right about them*, Tonio thought. Besides, trade with Argnon and a free hand in Lemgol already meant wealth and plenty of markets for Cudan wine and minta oil. Why risk losing what they already had to gamble for more?

Then again, perhaps he ought to back off from the same course himself. "I am content to keep the bet as it was," he said. "Do remember that my friends are here as witnesses to whatever you'd like to say." *Oh, Avdan, please give me the chance to run you through without having to fear your family's revenge!*

"Damn you! It's a deal!" Delcoros rapidly scribbled on a piece of a paper. "You'll have to believe in this note, if my word's no good."

"I hope you realize how much the Wing is worth," Tonio said. His heart beat faster.

"Getting cold feet now? Maybe you don't know how much my share of this year's harvest is worth, even though I'm the youngest. I suspect it adds up to more than yours."

"I doubt it," Tonio said, though the wealth of Avdan's family was legendary.

"Well, if you don't trust my accounting of it, you can look at the steward's tally yourself." The other man wrote some more on the paper.

Tonio eagerly wrote his own note for the *Wing*. Winning the right to examine the Delcoros financial records was worth the risk. If he lost—but he couldn't lose. *I can look Father in the eye and say I did it for the family. Besides, knowing a rival's standing is wealth beyond counting to any Great House.* His heart sank, though, knowing he put

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THIS IS NORMAL

by Tim Allenby



(Continued from page 19)

his sweet little yacht at risk. After this game he'd take a vow not to game for at least a month. This was how Harin's father had lost so much.

The house mage frowned, but took custody of both pieces of paper. The croupier declared the first game null and void, replaced with this one, in which one throw only would determine the winner—unless there was a tie, of course.

Sweat ran down Tonio's back. He stared at the table. This was too important a throw not to think about it first. How many factors could he influence? Then he studied the dice. Was it his imagination, or did Avdan's pair look subtly different than before? Then again, the light in the chamber changed as candles burned down and were replaced. He should ask for two new pairs to be brought, as was common in such games.

On impulse, he reached for the crimson pair. "As the challenged party here, I have the choice of dice," he said. Avdan could easily have changed them while everyone was writing notes, and... Tonio suddenly remembered what the mage had said. Her powers were gone as long as she stood by this table, because of the spell she'd cast at his opponent's request.

Delcoros turned pale, but said nothing.

He's got courage, Tonio thought, and balanced the little red cubes in his hand. They felt fine, though he wasn't sure

if he would recognize any differences unless they were blatant. The one time he'd been certain the dice were loaded, he'd quit the game as soon as he could. *Surely there is something different... unless he wanted me to have these dice...* He smiled to himself. Even old Uri didn't have that twisty a mind. He hoped.

"One roll decides the bet," intoned the croupier. "Same rules as before. Blue dice throws first."

Avdan made his throw. His dice bounced off the inside corner of the hollowed-out table, flipped up, and then landed. Everyone gasped as two tiny ships faced the crowd. Delcoros's broad face lit up.

Oh, Death-Lord, I've lost everything. Tonio stared numbly at the small engravings that now blackened his hopes. "Wait," he said in a hoarse voice. "I have the right to equal it, if I can."

"Why, of course, Vitor. Never let it be said that a Delcoros isn't your match in courtesy."

Tonio wanted to wipe that smirk off Avdan's face. Sick terror overwhelmed him. It was too late to back out now. He breathed deeply. His opponent had wanted these dice for a reason. Now he would find out why.

"Never say that a Vitor gives up too easily," he said. "For Siranna!" he cried, dedicating this throw to his family's estate. He let the dice fly.

The glowing cubes bounced against the back of the table, leaped into the air, and rolled to a stop.

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Two beautiful yellow dragons blazed face up, their eyes picked out in tiny rubies.

Avdan wiped his forehead, clearly aghast that his throw had been met. "We have to toss again!" he said. "Now it's my turn to use the red dice."

"No, Delcoros. Dragons trump all." No wonder the other man had wanted the red pair. Not only did they match the ones he'd started with, but the rules favored him in a tie. Now they favored him. He folded his arms and smiled.

The house mage sighed. "That's correct. You had the red dice for two throws, and the other gentleman has had them for only one."

"I don't plan to give them up." Tonio picked them up before anyone else could get too close a look. "If we toss again, I will use this pair."

Avdan's shoulders slumped. He pushed the pile of coins in front of him to the middle of the side-table. "It's all yours."

Tonio rejoiced in the blank despair he saw in his enemy's eyes, and gleefully pulled his winnings to him as Delcoros walked away. His pleasure became even greater as he collected the two notes from the mage, and tore up the one for the Wing.

It was time to go. "Gentlemen and ladies, I really must leave you now." His friends crowded around him, noisy with relief and pride. Harin had returned, too. *A good thing I won*, he thought, *or he'd still be gone. At least the others are loyal*. No, that wasn't fair. His cousin had good reason to abhor this kind of gambling. A pity that Father had turned Harin down as a husband for his sister Issola, who had also pleaded for the match. Tonio wouldn't mind having his companion as a brother-in-law as well as a cousin.

He wrenched himself back to the present as the manager of the club, a tall, thin man, walked over. "Ser Vitor, would you care to sit down in a quiet room for a short time? Winning can sometimes be exhausting."

"Is there some trouble?" he asked.

"No, of course not. Your friends may accompany you, if you wish. We often offer this courtesy to winners, and sometimes losers, at this time of night."

Tonio decided he could use a brief rest, despite the clamor from the others to go out and celebrate. He picked up a small handful of gold and gave it to the croupier, and then offered the same amount to the mage.

She declined. "I'm oath-bound never to touch money while I'm employed here," she said. "It helps remove temptation."

"That must make shopping difficult."

Then one of his friends called out, "We'll be having something to drink in the front room, Tonio! We know better than to get in your way." The small group left, which was reasonably tactful for them.

"It sounds like your friends are used to your flirting," the mage observed.

"Ah, yes," he said, trying to ignore the warmth in his face. "Before I was interrupted, I wanted to tell you that you should be surrounded by beautiful things, to best display your own gentle face." She appeared more attractive at the minute to him.

She smiled, revealing her dimples. "I shouldn't listen to a flatterer like you." Then she looked sober. "I have to discuss a few things with you. Come with me for a moment, though please don't assume that I've fallen for your charms."

Tonio blinked, but did as she said. The manager had reassured him that he wasn't in trouble. He hoped that was still true.

Once they were both inside a room lit by a couple of lamps, with two chairs and a table, she had him sit down while she remained standing. "First of all, I really wish you had asked for a fresh set of dice. The spells in this place not only affect anyone who brings in their own dice, but anyone who uses them knowingly. Clearly, your opponent found out who our supplier was, and had his dice altered to roll a Grand Dragon through weighing the opposite side. He was quite clever, really—asking me to reinforce the spells against magic so thoroughly meant my powers could not detect the false dice soon enough to insist on a new set. However, you may find your winnings rebound on you somehow. Who knows, it may have been better for you to lose this time."

"My ship!" he said.

"Some losses are easier to bear than others," the mage said. "I'm certain that idiotic boy will suffer for his. I simply wanted to warn you that you could run into problems as well. You're a generous lad, for all your foreign ways. You've been a good player, though if you had any control over that tingle in your arm you might end up with a cap like mine. Granted, it's not much if the normal spells

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don't stop it, or we would have told you to stop any dice-play a long time ago. I...I just wish you hadn't handled those ones."

Tonio wished he hadn't now as well. He sighed. "Is there some place where I can make an offering to turn away this bad luck?"

"Nothing that is open this late, not for the gods your people worship. Stop at the nearest shrine on your way home, though. That might help. And say a prayer for the poor lad you cleaned out. His fate isn't going to be good either."

He's the son of Uri Delcoros, he thought. *That's bad enough, I suppose.* "I'll consider it, my lady." Tonio didn't want to think about any problems Avdan could have, though.

"Oh...could you have a servant bring me some black-bean tea with honey? Someone in my group needs to stay sober, and I expect it's going to be me." He'd received the Philosopher's Cup from Dr. Sirisac at dawn today, or yesterday, and since then he'd been in the company of his friends. "Also, I would like to know about secure storage. I don't want to carry this much coin on the way home."

"You would be better off sleeping and leaving on the noon tide," she said. The mage picked up a lamp, walked to the far end of the room, and opened a door. Tonio followed her into the narrow passageway, which led to another chamber, which was obviously not hers. Well, she hadn't given him any encouragement anyway.

"We let anyone come here who wants to," she said, and waved at a stack of metal boxes piled high on tables against the walls. Some boxes had doors that hung open, while others had a red seal on them. "Each box is closed by a magical lock and will open to one person only. You can leave instructions for me to open it for someone else, though. Go ahead and try your thumb on the seals. They won't open. In fact, we invite people to come in and try as many as they like. It's amusing and keeps idiots from breaking in."

Tonio gazed at the stacks. What riches must be stored in them. "No wonder you're bound not to touch money. Is there anything valuable that you are allowed to have?" He ran his thumb across several locked boxes, with no result.

She shook her head, and showed those lovely dimples again when she smiled. "Pick one of the empty boxes, load

it up, and close the door. I'll turn my back, and will seal it for you when you're ready."

He bowed to her. Once she wasn't looking, he looked over his winnings. The pile of gold and silver glittered in the dim lamplight, but of course, the note from Delcoros was worth more. Avdan was probably right that his share of his family's harvest might come to more than his own portion in Siranna. If only old Uri wasn't so rich! Then nobody would listen to the horrible old man, and Father would have an easier time of it.

Tonio counted out enough gold and silver to get home on for his pouch. He needed a few last-minute supplies for the *Wing*, and to finish finding presents for his family. Oh, how glad he was that he'd done so well in his studies. Without that, he couldn't have dared so greatly and won so much. What would old Uri offer to keep the Vitors from looking at his books?

He chose one box, and put the coins and the note inside it. If anything happened at sea, or in this city, his family could still have their revenge. Tonio closed the box's lid and said, "I'm ready now."

She nodded gravely once she saw which box he'd picked. "Place your hand over the lid," she said, and then muttered something to herself.

A red seal now covered the door. It felt cool and slick to Tonio, more like glass than metal or wax.

"Remember, your box is number 39," she said. "One last thing. Never try to remove any of the boxes from this room. We keep the skeleton of the last man who tried on display."

Tonio had wondered about that, since he could lift one of the empty boxes without much trouble. He wasn't about to doubt a lady's word, though, especially on such a matter.

Both of them went to the manager's office, and Tonio paid the fee that would cover storage for five years. He also let the man know that anyone with the Master-Ring of Siranna should have access to the box. Sandro Vitor, his father, might prefer the note kept safely away from any feuds until agreement on what it was worth could be reached. *Who knows, perhaps Father can trade the note for a favor worth more to the family than any gold before the old man can play merchants' tricks with the tally.*

He went back to the sitting room. Harin was there, along with the blackbean tea. "Here, drink this," his cousin said.

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“You look almost as bad as Delcoros did.”

“I’m just glad I won,” Tonio said. He didn’t tell his friend about the curse the mage had mentioned, but took the cup and sat down.

Harin kept standing, and looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry I deserted you,” he said. “The chance you took—it reminded me of my father.”

“I know. I must have been mad.” How could he explain that the greater the risk he ran, the greater the joy and relief when he won? The terror that ran down his spine made him feel alive the way few other things did. “Mother’s warned me a dozen times. I’ve lost count of how often you’ve spoken to me about it.” *No wonder Harin doesn’t want to go home right away. Maytera Montegardo is attractive, but she’s still a merchant’s daughter.* He tried not to remember the way her eyes flashed, even though she’d been angry with him the one time he had met her.

Harin sat down in the other chair. “Perhaps you ought to concentrate on sailing, now that the Wing is yours. Trying to drown yourself, and the rest of us, ought to be enough excitement.”

Tonio laughed. Then he let his head droop. The black-bean tea wasn’t helping much. The exhilaration of winning faded all too quickly.

“I’ll go find the others and we’ll come back here. I still think we ought to have a good night’s sleep before going home,” his cousin said. “There will be other tides.”

“I’m beginning to agree with you,” Tonio said.

“And don’t be too proud. Hire a pilot. I know you received your license last month, but I swear, it’s busier than the Grand Avenue out there.”

“You’re no fun!” Tonio emptied his cup. “I worked so hard for it, too.” It was rare for a foreigner to be allowed to take the exam, even for just the commercial area of the port. Dr. Sirisac must have intervened for him. Well, Marlena might have, as well.

“I’ll look for the others now, but if I come back here and find you asleep, we’re not leaving till noon.” Harin stood and yawned. No doubt he was tired as well.

“All right,” he said. Once his cousin was gone, Tonio took an oilskin pouch from his belt, opened it, and admired several pieces of paper that he spread out on the table before him. The first was the deed to *Beloved’s Wing*. *That’s the most important one*, he thought. *Merciful*

Death-Lord, what was I thinking when I risked it? He folded it and put it back. Then he beamed at his rather large certificate, signed by Dr. Sirisac himself with his right foreclaw dipped in red ink. Tonio still doubted that he had really *mastered* philosophy, which included mathematics, but he wasn’t going to quibble. He knew how privileged he was to be taught by a dragon, who were rare even in Talisgran.

The last item was a sealed letter from home, received by special messenger today—well, yesterday. He hadn’t opened it yet, since he knew all the reasons no one from the family could come and didn’t want to hear them again.

I might as well read the latest news, he thought with a sigh, and opened the packet. He recognized his great-grandmother’s crabbed handwriting. Tonio had never known anyone who could squeeze so much in a single sheet of paper as she did.

They tell me you did well with your studies. I’m glad you’re coming home, and so is everyone else.

How like his Nonna to begin so abruptly.

I finally told your father why you left. Of course you wouldn’t say anything, but I guessed. I don’t think Sandro will tell your brother. I knew you didn’t do anything that little minx didn’t ask for. Tell her ‘no’ the next time.

We should have sent someone to show those northerners that we were proud of you. Luifa can’t travel in her condition, though, and it is her first. She’ll settle down once the baby is born, or I’ll find out why. Your mother is much too lenient with the girl, as is your brother, but they don’t listen to me. I talked with her, though, and told her to keep her eyes to herself. I’m telling you the same thing!

Tonio bristled. It wasn’t Luifa’s fault! She was a wonderful woman, and made Anderay happier than he’d ever been. He should have refused to walk with her in the garden last autumn. He should have sailed north from Cuda to Argnon the week before. He should have left immediately after his brother’s marriage, in fact—especially when he had realized she was looking at him the way she should have been looking at his brother.

He bent back to the letter. *I should find you a wife, but you have too much Gambrell blood to settle down for a few years. Your father thinks you can use that to the family’s advantage. Talk to him when you return—no more of those proud silences! I’m glad that fling between you and that daughter of Argnon came to nothing. You deserve*

better than to be that little madam's plaything.

Tonio felt his face go hot. He'd had no idea that Marlana was the one who had cleared the way for him to study for that pilot's license—or that she was the Duke's eldest child. Fortunately, some other nobleman had caught her interest. With any luck she'd forgotten about him. Even he wasn't bold enough to sail in *those* waters. Given that Argnon had once been occupied and ruled by one of his fellow countrymen, his presence at Marlana's side would undoubtedly cause riots, if not an actual uprising.

He continued reading. *It's been several generations since someone brought a foreign bride to Siranna, but maybe it's time again. Who can I train to take over after me? These Cudan girls all pretend to bow their heads, and then do what they want behind my back. Bring one home who'll shout right back at me!*

He smiled at that. It was fun to tease his Nonna by imitating her harsh Allanten accent. She was truly his great-grandmother, but everyone called her just Nonna. Respectfully.

Did I ever tell you about your ancestor, the pirate? Of course I did, I'm not senile yet. I could name a few ports that could use the same treatment Old Gambrell gave them, but you've heard plenty from me about that.

Some of his favorite nursery stories had been the blood-curdling tales of Ravin the Pirate storming the ports along the Inner Sea. Even death hadn't slowed the fellow down—after his death, his ghost had supposedly rallied his ships to strike and burn. It probably wasn't true that the

old pirate had trained all the gambrells to spy for him; besides, it was bad luck to kill those birds of the sea.

Tonio had laughed when he'd discovered that 'ravin' was dockside cant for 'ghost' here in Argnon. *One of these days I'm going to use that riddle-rhyme Nonna taught me to find my way through the rocks of Collar Island, and find out if Gambrell's last stronghold is still there. And perhaps I might pay a call on the current ruler of Allante.*

The first Tyrant had murdered nearly all the Gambrell family, except for Nonna. She had already entered the Vitor family, as a bride of fourteen in the days when women's names were never mentioned below the second floor. The second Tyrant had hunted down the few remaining survivors at the beginning of his reign. Now the third boasted of destroying all the great families that had once tempered a ruler's power.

Come home. Bad times are on their way. Uri Delcoros is growing stronger in the Congregation. We can't let Cuda be sold to the Mintarans! Your father and brother will need your eyes and ears, though they don't realize it yet. We were a sea power equal to Argnon once. Are we going to let that sorry bunch of northerners fight our battles for us? I remember when Kercherrian ruled there, and was an idiot to lose it. What fools we would look asking them for help!

Tonio considered that. To this day, some people in Argnon spat on the ground if they realized he was from Cuda. After he learned why they called Arion Kercherrian the Butcher, the way that hero had died looked less like

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hideous treachery and more like great good sense.

Come home. We miss you. I threw an offering to the Sea-Lady to keep you in Siranna for as long as I live. Humor an old woman, will you?

Love, Nonna.

He breathed a huge sigh of relief. He hadn't found a good way to explain his lack of honor to his father. The Maiden willing, only he and Luifa would ever know what the two of them had done. No doubt she'd already been pregnant by his brother when they'd met, since she was so close to her time now.

Tonio folded the letter and returned to the pouch. What a weight his great-grandmother had taken from him. He always wanted to help the family, but had his own dreams too. Surely there was a way to do both, and it sounded as if Nonna had thought of one.

The old woman was the strongest of the clan despite her many years. Sandro voted her way in the Congregation, and everyone in the Vitor family knew it. No one spoke of it to strangers, of course; a woman's influence, save for a surviving widow with a young son, was usually private.

That didn't stop the house from being flooded with gifts for Nonna every time the Congregation was in session. She laughed, accepted the booty, and claimed to be only a crazy old woman when a messenger pressed for an answer from her. Everyone thought it a huge joke, especially Tonio's father. Being able to pass of political pressure to each other amused both Sandro Vitor and Nonna—and drove the enemies of the house out of their minds.

Tonio thought he'd kept his own secret well. He was so glad he'd been wrong. Father had been so angry when he'd mentioned staying in Argnon permanently.

He bowed his head. It had been years since he'd made an offering to the Grove of Siranna with his father and brother. He gazed into the cup of blackbean tea, now stone cold, and sank into meditation. Yes. Deep down inside, he still felt the pull of those ancient trees. His birth-cord, along with those of all the sons of the Vitor family, was buried there. No wonder he'd never been truly lost at sea. In the center of his heart he always knew where he was.

Most men of the Congregation had that gift, even Avdan Delcoros. That was one reason a Cudan fleet was always

feared, and why Allante hadn't attacked its main rival for over a century. It took more than that to make a good sailor, though, and Tonio was proud to have it.

He stood up and stretched. Harin and the others were waiting for him. He froze as he heard voices on the other side of the wall. Gentlemen didn't eavesdrop, but he listened anyway.

"If I knew someone reliable who could run the Chute more than once a month and could dodge the Emperor's pickets, I'd send the stuff myself," a man said.

"Surely it's not that bad?" That was a woman, an elderly one by the sound of her.

"That's what I'm told. Whoever goes has to avoid being inspected by the customs officials, or have a better hiding place than the last one. Your profits will be higher if he doesn't have to pay the fees, plus I won't have to pay a fine to see him come back."

"If they see what I want to send the old man, they'll keep the lot for themselves. Now, Artur, what's the point of the Shadow Guild if you can't do me a simple favor?"

"Yes, mother." The man sighed. "But I have to find someone who can get past the Hounds."

Tonio decided he'd better leave. A Shadow Guild member might not like being listened in on. A pity he couldn't tell them the Chute wasn't that bad if the ship had a centerboard. The tide didn't have to be full-moon high to sail without a keel. The Wing's draft with the board pulled up kept her from grounding, at least once the spring storms were over. He'd slipped into Lutan past the Emperor's picket ships on a dare just last fall.

He met Harin and the others in the front room. His friends were glad to see him, and only Harin seemed sober, compared to the others. The group noisily made their way through the port area, stopping only when Tonio bought gifts with some of his winnings, or paid his harbor and slip fees, which were required before departing.

Tonio nearly did all the work himself rather than trust drunken friends to raise sail and cast off, though they cheered his every move. Finally, he was tired of being distracted, and sent all but Harin below.

He glanced proudly at the gold-colored medallion nailed to the mainmast. It testified that he'd passed the harbor pilot's course and no longer had to pay anyone else to sail for him inside the bar. It hadn't been easy. The narrow

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eastern channel was handiest to the quickest route to the University, but he'd had to learn the traffic rules in the central commercial area, where the entrance to the Talis River began. However, it had taken Dr. Sirisac's influence to allow him a cursory run through the westernmost channel, where the ships of Argnon were docked when not out in the Inner Sea. That was an unusual concession for a Cudan, to say the least.

Marlena never told me how highly ranked her family was... Tonio mused as he inhaled a rotting whiff of vegetation and dead fish. A pity he hadn't admired her as much as she apparently had him, but the odd system of marriage here would confuse anyone not raised to it. He refused to be one of three, if nothing else. It was bad enough to have a family arrange one marriage, let alone more.

He cursed as he nearly struck a marking buoy. He really should have slept and left on the noon tide, instead of raising sail at dawn. Tonio felt anxious to be home, though he told himself it was only because his brother's wife might be near her time.

Harin silently helped him, if only by his presence. It was annoying to be stuck right behind a Mintaran slaver, which easily maintained its position with oars. The Duke of Argnon could not forbid them the harbor entirely, though rumor said he wanted to. The southern empire spread poison that now oozed north. He'd met a few southerners in the last year, especially when he'd slipped into Lutan. They hadn't seemed like such bad fellows, but had taken slavery for granted in their daily lives. Of course, none of them were likely to give him any other opinion but the proper one.

Once past the bar, Harin went down below and Lessimo came up. This friend of his was almost too pretty to be a young man, but was competent enough with sword and dagger to avoid taunts. He had also studied sailing, and knew the way home to Cuda as much as they all did. He now looked pale and wan, as if he'd visited a chamber pot with the wrong end of him recently.

A wave of sleepiness passed over him once they were out to sea. He turned the helm over to Lessimo, who was now reasonably sober.

As Tonio went below, he saw Harin with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "You have a nice design here. I didn't

know you were interested in larger ships. One with three masts needs a much larger crew than you normally deal with."

"Yes, that's part of my final grade with the old dragon. And then he told me the real contest was last year!" Tonio had racked his brain to come up with a compromise between something sturdy enough to haul cargo, but which could still endure storms and be faster than most other ships of its size and class. He'd really wanted to design something fit for racing, and had hated the other parameters. "I nearly screamed when I found out," he added. "Who knows, I might see it built one day, though I can already think of improvements. For one thing, I have to find a way to put a bigger bed in the captain's stateroom..." He yawned.

Harin laughed. "Speaking of bed, I'd better let you lie down." He stood up, put the papers back in a box, and then waved his friend towards the berth.

Tonio took the empty place on the bunk and sat. He was lucky to have one—there were ten people on board, who either slept in hammocks or on deck. "I'm glad I stocked the ship and made it ready to sail between the end of tests and graduation," he said. "I can't believe it's only been a few hours since I threw those dice. It feels like a couple of days."

"My memory's clear enough! You frightened me out of a year's growth."

"I know. I didn't mean to," Tonio said. "You've probably heard that from your father, too."

"No, he never apologizes any more. I'm just glad you won." His cousin looked sober. "Enough of that. I'm going up on deck to keep Lessimo awake, but you should sleep."

Tonio was exhausted, but he had one more thing to do once Harin had left. He opened the chest where he'd stowed the presents for his family, and pulled out a gossamer scarf.

The filmy gauze rested in his hands like a breath of light blue air. *Oh, Luifa, if only I could stop loving you.* ■

* * *

Jean Lamb is a long-time N3F member and current Bureau Chair of N'APA, our club's amateur press association. The preceding story is from the first chapter of her book Dead Man's Hand, which is available for sale at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).



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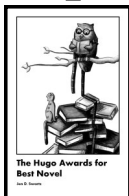
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TNFF 72.5

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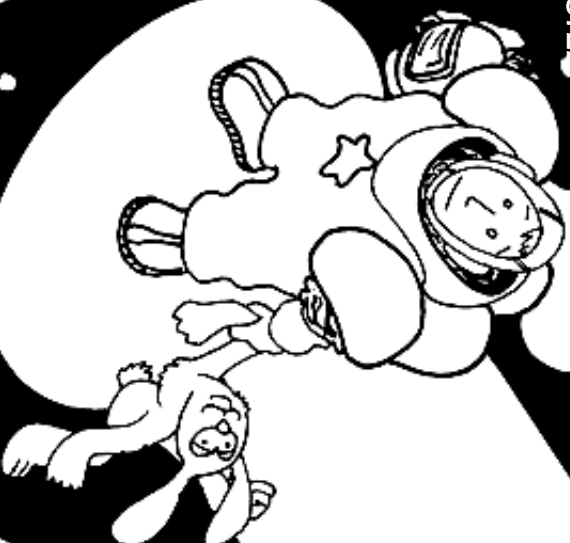


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