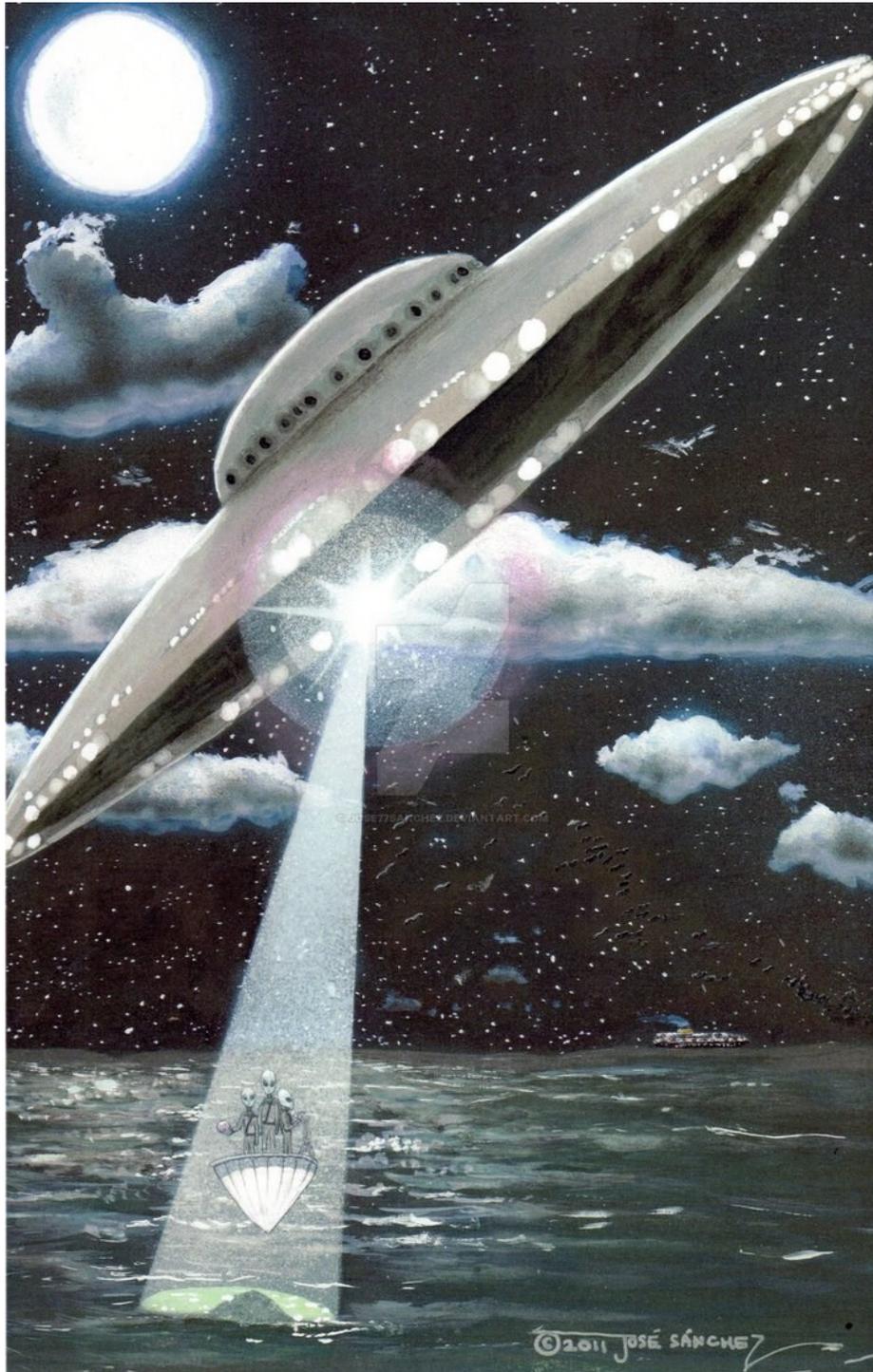


Tightbeam 290

October 2018



In the Silence of the Night — Jose Sanchez

Tightbeam 290

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Anime Reviews are courtesy Jessi Silver and her site www.s1e1.com Ms. Silver writes of her site "S1E1 is primarily an outlet for views and reviews on Japanese animated media, and occasionally video games and other entertainment."

Fiction reviews are courtesy Pat Patterson, Cedar Sanderson, Greg Hullender, and Eric Wong.

Pat Patterson's reviews appear on his FaceBook site www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000144650845 and also on GoodReads and Amazon.com.

Cedar Sanderson's reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/ and its culinary extension cedarwrites.com/eat-this-while-you-read-that/

Greg Hullender and Eric Wong publish their reviews at RocketStackRank.com

Editorial

Welcoming Our Associate Editor

Our new Co-Editor is the N3F Historian, Jon Swartz.

Welcome to this, issue 290 of Tightbeam, a zine now approaching its 60th year of publication.

Tightbeam is focused on reviews, fan politics, art, and discussion. We cover anime, fiction, films, food, and more. We are delighted to take Letters of Comment. We have SerCon (Serious Constructive) articles. We'd like to report on fan politics. For this issue, we have snippets...opening chapters of books by N3F members.

We are now reorganizing a bit. Henceforth, snippets of published books by Neffers will appear in issues of **Eldritch Science**

Table of Contents

Front Cover	— In the Silence of the Night — Jose Sanchez
2.....	Contributors
3.....	Editorial, Table of Contents, Publication notices
4.....	SerCon The Satirical Writing of Ron Goulart—Jon D Swartz, Ph.D.
5.....	Books — Reviews of the Dragon Nominees by Pat Patterson
5.....	Review—The Mutineers' Daughter
7.....	Review—It Takes Death to Reach a Star
9.....	Review—Sins of Her Father
10.....	Review—Martian Aria
11.....	Review —The Bureau of Substandards: Annual Report
12.....	Anime Book Club Mononoke Week 1: Bakeneko
17.....	Anime Review—The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar
19.....	Short Fiction Reviews: About RocketStackRank
20.....	Review—When We Were Starless
21.....	Review—We Ragged Few
22.....	Eat This While You Read That: Bolinhos de Bacalhau and Sarah Hoyt's Witchfinder
24.....	Eat This While You Read That:: Crepes with Maple Bacon Jam and Marko Kloos's Terms of Enlistment
25.....	Letters of Comment (Lloyd Penney, Will Mayo, Jon Swartz, Bob Jennings)
27.....	Snippets (When the Moon is Gibbous and Waxing by Angela Myers)
31.....	Snippets (In the Dark of the Moon by Angela Myers)
37.....	Back Cover provided by Jeffrey Redmond

Tightbeam is published occasionally by the National Fantasy Fan Federation and distributed electronically to the membership. We offer four different memberships. Memberships with TNFF via paper mail are \$18; memberships with TNFF via email are \$6. All other zines are email only. Additional memberships at the address of a current member are \$4. Public memberships are free. Send payments to N3F, POB 1925, Mountain View CA 94042. Pay online at N3F.org. Our PayPal contact is treasurer@n3f.org Send phillies@4liberty.net your email address for a public membership.

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SerCon

“The Satirical Writing of Ron Goulart”

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

Popular culture expert Ronald Joseph Goulart has written science fiction (SF), mysteries, mainstream novels, and reference books on a variety of subjects: comic books, comic strips, pulp magazines, and detective fiction. While a student at the University of California, he contributed artwork to SF fanzines. For a short period during the late 1990s he also published his own fanzine, *Comics History Magazine* (1996-1997), for a total run of 6 issues.

Goulart can satirize almost anything, and many of his stories are hilarious. He has also written some serious stories, of course, but he's best known for his satirical fiction. Much of his funniest writing occurs in the several series he has written around his characters of Jack Summer (Death Cell, Plunder, A Whiff of Madness, Galaxy Jane), Jake Conger (the invisible government agent), and especially The Chameleon Corps stories about the shape-changing government agent Ben Jolson.

The first collection of chameleon stories, *The Chameleon Corps and Other Shape Changers* (1973), collected Goulart's early shape-changing stories; and he returned to this theme later with his series of “ex-chameleon” stories. Goulart has admitted that his Ben Jolson character was copied from Plastic Man of the comic books: agents of Goulart's Chameleon Corps can change their shapes to look like just about anything, including inanimate objects. Such agents are quite valuable in the work of the Wild Talents Division of PEO (Political Espionage Office) of the planet Barnum, mother planet to a whole host of alien worlds.

Some of Goulart's non-series SF stories are also very funny. For example, *The Tin Angel*, one of my favorites, has several memorable characters: the smart-talking, cyborg dog Bowser; Bert Schenley, Bowser's agent and guardian; the Reverend Spud Scudder, a video evangelist; Pierre Hock, an investigative reporter who is offstage most of the novel; Slapsy Maxie Waynessmith, the head of the Metro-Italian-American Talent agency; Eli Katz, president of the West Coast Division of the United States; Chuck Tarter, an ex-government agent who has had his face reconfigured to look like Walt Disney; Sandberg and Chekov, bumbling government agents, etc. The smart-alec Bowser is especially memorable, and Goulart must have liked writing about him because a “sound-and act-alike dog” (this one named Sniffer) appeared in the last two of his ex-chameleon books: *Starpirate's Brain* (1987) and *Everybody Comes to Cosmo's* (1988). The first ex-chameleon book was *Daredevils, Ltd.* (1987).

Goulart has employed many pseudonyms over the years – Chad Calhoun, R. T. Edwards, Ian R. Jamieson, Joseph Kains, Jill Kearny, Howard Lee, Zeke Masters, Marshall Macao, Frank S. Shawn, Joseph Silva, and Con Steffanson. Some of these were used on series characters, and he also wrote under some “house names.” It has been reported that he “helped” William Shatner write all of Shatner's SF novels. Also, with Glen A. Larson, Goulart wrote three “Battlestar Galactica” novels.

A Goulart characteristic is his use of the names of real people in his stories (“Tuckerisms,” named after a former N3F member and BNF BobTucker). The names I usually recognize are the ones of Goulart's writer friends, in particular Harlan Ellison, William Nolan, and Bill Pronzini (and even some of their pseudonyms).

Goulart has been the funnyman in SF for decades, taking over the title from such famous writers of humorous/satiric SF as Fredric Brown, L. Sprague de Camp, and Robert Sheckley.

Writing under his real name and scores of pseudonyms, Goulart is probably the most prolific writer identified with SF since Isaac Asimov.

Books

Reviews of the Dragon nominees from Pat Patterson

I have written an Amazon review for this book as well, but Amazon doesn't have the same publication deadlines that I have. Therefore, my link to the Amazon review will be included in the comments, once it goes live. I'll put it up on Goodreads at that time as well. I mention these things because I want you to vote 'helpful' on my Amazon review, EVEN THOUGH!!! my Amazon review isn't nearly as good as the review written by Howard and Kelly Beam. That review is the first one listed in the Amazon listing for the book, and if ALL reviews were that good, authors would be happy, and so would readers. Check it out, okay? And, by the way: you can vote 'helpful' for theirs, as well as mine.

In 2015, I made it a point to review as many of the Hugo-nominated works in as many different categories as I could. I found it to be a very educational process, and I would not have gained such broad exposure to as many literature forms if I hadn't tried that approach.

Alas, the conduct at the awards ceremony let me know that People of My Kind were not welcomed, and I have not devoted any resources since to discovering what was being touted as 'The Best' by that group. Evidently, other People of My Kind were similarly affected, and The Dragon Award now rests in the place of honor once reserved for a plastic rocket ship.

And all were happy!

Well, not QUITE, for there is one more 'alas' offered by me, and perhaps some other reviewers. You see, the Finalists are announced less than one month before the awards are given, and that's all the time I have to read and review the nominees. I'm not going to try to review the movies, nor the TV series, nor games in any format. Since I am a curmudgeon, and tend to avoid interacting with popular culture, I'm also not going to review books with a media tie-in, because I wouldn't get the references. And, since I'm a sissy, and don't do horror, I'm not going to review any of the horror novels, either. With those restrictions, that means I have 22 days to review 28 books.

No, I don't think I can do it, either, but I'm gonna try.

So, THIS is my first review in my rushed-up run-up to the Dragon Awards. "The Mutineer's Daughter" is a finalist in the Best Science Fiction Novel category.

The Mutineer's Daughter by Chris Kennedy and Thomas A. Mays Review by Pat Patterson

From the title, I was expecting this to be entirely about the daughter, and if I had pushed my imagination further, I would have said it would be about the daughter overcoming her father's reputation. That could have been a vary good book; I have read similar tales in the past, and enjoyed them.

However, the book is about the Mutineer AND his daughter. Their separate stories are told in parallel, and it is VERY well done, indeed.

Benno is the father; he is a Chief Warrant Officer onboard the ALS (Alliance of Liberated



Systems) ship Chesty Puller. He had to select a career in the Navy in order to provide for his family and their farm, back home on Adelaide. The OBVIOUS enemy is the Terran Union (nasty little nickname), but wait, there's more...

Meo is the daughter; with her mother dead, the only tie she has to her family is a short holograph recording of her father, telling her that he loves her and will be back for her. She's 14, so you get all of the emotional fragility that lasses of that age experience; and, she has also been raised in the care of the neighboring family, who provide her with food, shelter, and clothing, but leave her emotional needs somewhat unmet. She is too young to go into space, even though that is all that she wants to do: ship out, and find her father.

Adelaide is one of the ALS planets, and shares with the other worlds in the system a strict class separation. The aristocracy is composed of those who are descended from the wealthy who provided funding for the colonization efforts; the plebeians are the workers, who contributed labor and

lesser technical skills. Although there are elements in the aristocratic class that advocate a looser class structure, the legal system, as well as the practices, keep the two groups separate. Benno is a bit of a unicorn, in that his long service and expertise resulted in promotion to the officer class. However, it is clear to him that the captain of his ship merely tolerates his presence, giving the impression whenever he is around Benno that he smells something unpleasant.

In the aftermath of ship-to-ship combat, Benno's heroic efforts are instrumental in keeping the Puller alive, and able to fight. However, that same battle reveals the ALS plans to abandon six of the worlds mostly populated by the lower class, while protecting the planets which are home to the aristocracy. Among those are worlds holding the families of many of the crew, and that includes Benno, because Adelaide is one of the six planets abandoned.

Benno tries to persuade his captain to allow him to leave the ship, and return to Adelaide to care for his daughter, attempting to trade on his recent laudatory efforts in repairing the ship to win favor. When reasoning, persuasion, and pleading have no effect, he completely loses his cool, and assaults one of the most contemptible aristocratic officers. He is tossed in the slammer, with a death sentence hanging over his head.

Meanwhile, on Adelaide, Terran invaders sweep through the farmhouses, killing all who resist, and burning the dwellings to the ground. Meo barely escapes, after witnessing horrors. Stumbling through the darkness that night, she falls into a cavern leading to an ancient tunnel system. She formulates plans to exact revenge upon the invaders, but when she finally makes contact with the Resistance, she is assigned to wash dishes. Not very heroic, is it? SHE certainly grumbles about it.

I don't think I have ever seen the parallel-story structure handled this effectively. There are NO dead spots, with one party facing certain death, the switch to a scene of the other party having oatmeal for breakfast. While the driving force for Benno and Meo is always reunification, each has a separate set of crisis events to deal with that are specific to their character. These aren't trivial for either of them, by the way; without going into spoilers, let me say that you will not expect some things to happen, in BOTH story lines.

That's a big factor in what kept me burning through the pages. I really did NOT know what was going to happen to these two characters, or to the people they were with. The story carried a tension I tend to associate with movies or TV, rather than with print media.

I DO admit that my threshold for suspense was formed in the early days of TV (the 1950's), when I used to hide behind the couch when the Lone Ranger rode through the canyon because the bad guy was waiting behind the rocks to shoot him.

Still, I doubt that many will be able to predict the development of these plots.
And hooray for that!

It Takes Death to Reach a Star
by Gareth Worthington and Stu Jones
Review by Pat Patterson

For the title of my Amazon review of the book, I took a passage from Psalm 139:

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

And a bit more context for that verse says a bit more about the context of the novel:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to You. (Psalm 139:7-12, NASB)

Disclaimer. Now, USUALLY, I try to make my Amazon review tiny, and expand here in the blog. Well, I TRIED, with some success, in doing that, but there was really so much stuff that needed to go on Amazon, that it turned out longer than I intended. Therefore, the first part of this blog is an expanded bit of the Amazon review; The second part of this blog is a CONDENSED version of the Amazon review; and the THIRD part of this blog isn't IN the Amazon review. So, I want you to do two things:

1. Read BOTH this blog post, AND the Amazon review (the link is up above), and
2. Vote 'helpful' on the Amazon review.

Part 1: Expanded from Amazon. The book is set five hundred years in the future, after World War III and the New Black Plague killed almost every man, woman, and child on Earth. Those few who survive are huddled in the bizarre architecture of Etyom, north of the Arctic Circle in what once was Siberia, but now is nothing. As far as any of the residents know, there are no other humans alive anywhere.

Humans are divided in three ways: class, based on genetics; location of residence, either at the top of buildings five miles tall, or in whatever shelter they can cobble together from the ruined city at the base; or role defining belief systems.

At the top of the class structure are the Graciles, the very best form of human that can be designed. Between 7 & 8 feet tall, they are uniformly perfect in features and health. Any imperfections are ruthlessly



destroyed before birth, or through a process called *Axiotimos Thanatos*, commonly referred to as being *Ax'd*, if discovered later. They rule the entire city. The next class below that are called *Robusts*, consisting of humans without any genetic manipulations, who make their living the best way they can in the frigid temperature. At the bottom of the heap are the *Rippers*, who have been cast out from *Robust* society, and live as feral humans. They produce nothing, existing by scavenging through garbage and attacking any *Robusts* or *Graciles* who wander away from their enclaves. They are cannibalistic.

Residential divisions mirror the class distinctions, in that the *Graciles* live, literally, at the top of the city. Great towers spread out at the five mile level, forming structures aptly named 'lily pads.' These are kept in place both by gigantic support towers, and by enormous bags of helium gas, which help to stabilize them. The *Robusts* live in one of eight enclaves at the bottom of the towers, separated from each other by walls which are of some value defensively, but do nothing to ameliorate the debilitating weather conditions. Outside these enclaves, in open areas with no infrastructure called 'the Vapid', live the roving bands of *Rippers*. Some commerce goes on between enclaves, but a group traveling without extensive protection will be attacked by *Rippers*, killed, and eaten.

The final division between people are their defining belief systems. All of the *Graciles* begin and end with a materialistic, fatalistic view of existence, and regard themselves as being the highest form of existence possible. The *Robusts* are divided into two, possibly more, groups, with their roots in either Christianity, in the case of the *Logosians*, who worship *Yeos*, or the *Musuls*, derived from Islam, and regarding *Ilah* as their supreme being. The *Logosians* are heavily persecuted by the majority *Musuls*, and find no favor with the *Graciles*, either.

Part 2: CONDENSED from the Amazon review. Mila is a *Robust Logosian* orphan who makes her living as a bouncer and courier. Demitri is an alienated *Gracile* scientist. Through alternating chapters, they tell the story.

Mila just wants to survive, learn to be a better fighter, and live out the *Logosian* principles in her life. She's doing pretty good with parts 2 & 3 of that, but she is just BARELY surviving.

Demitri is not only of the elite class, he is at the very TOP of the elite class; the Leader is higher, but no one else is. He has, literally, everything that money can buy, and some things that NO amount of money can buy, due to their rarity, such as vinyl records and bound books. And he has to cut his wrist in the morning so he can feel something. He is empty, and isolated, and the only person who talks to him is the voice in his head, which tells him he is a loser and a coward, constantly. He has to resort to illicit drug use to silence the voice. It's been with him as long as he can remember; he gave it the name *Vedmak*.

Mila just wants to make the rent; Demitri believes the Leader will use his work to destroy the world.

Part 3: Not included in the Amazon review. I expanded on the quote from Psalm 139 for the blog post, ONLY because they won't let you use that many words for an Amazon review title. Actually, I could have used a different Psalm, one that goes like this:

By the rivers of Babylon,
 There we sat down and wept,
 When we remembered Zion.
 Upon the willows in the midst of it
 We hung our harps.
 For there our captors demanded of us songs,
 And our tormentors mirth, saying,
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
 How can we sing the Lord's song

In a foreign land? (Psalms 137:1-4, NASB)

If the concept of God being taken seriously in a work of science fiction is anathema to you, then you won't like this book. That's because the ENTIRE BOOK is about living a life without meaning, and desperately seeking something that is the reason for it all; or, if not a reason, then something that at least gives life purpose. The primary Bad Guy in the piece has more power and control than everybody else combined, and it's still not enough. He is driven to find MORE, and quite literally would expend everyone else in pursuit of his goal. Sitting at approximately at the other end of the scale is a young man who just wants to be able to take care of his little sister. The smaller goal does not make HIM smaller; instead, he is large enough that he takes time to say thanks to people who have helped him.

With some of the books I review, I find that the story is excellent, and it's STRICTLY a story, that it carries no deeper messages. With some of the books I review, I find them nothing BUT message, and those usually get tossed, earlier, rather than later. This book is essentially demanding that we take a look at the ULTIMATE question, about Life, The Universe, And Everything, does NOT trivialize it by saying that the answer is 42, and delivers a smashing good yarn to delight the most depraved of us who thirst for MOAR EXPLODING SPACE-SHIPS!!! Look, you pays yer money, and you makes yer choice. That's the way this works. If this ain't yer cup of tea, okay. If it is, you'll love it.

Closing but HIGHLY significant comment! As a sort of throw-away at the very VERY end of the book, and I mean the VERY last entry, you find this: www.ittakesdeathtoeachastar.com

As it happens, the author had already told me there was some good material there, so I went and looked. (That's ONE of the reasons I spent ALL DAY with this book, except for the time I spent teaching Kenneth and Alicia how to change a tire.)

For one thing, there is some BEAUTIFUL art work by John Byrne, who designed the cover. We can hope we will see some of this artwork for sale at conventions or elsewhere.

But, ALAS! There is so much GREAT stuff there, and it's JUST NOT incorporated into the book!

P. S. It CAN be done, too. The author I know who has done the BEST job of incorporating a book/world wiki into an ebook is Rob Howell, and an excellent example of his art is "A Lake Most Deep." I wish a LOT more authors would follow his example.

Sins of Her Father
by Mike Kupari
Review by Pat Patterson

This is the second novel in the series "Privateer Andromeda;" I have not read the first in the series, but I do believe that all of the important issues covered in the narrative of this work, without spending a lot of time on artificial means to bring the reader up to date.

A bit of a review. Nickson Armitage is at loose ends on Planet Heinlein. He has money, he has time, but he doesn't have a job, because he doesn't have a ship. His last ship was smashed when the captain got too ambitious in pursuit of an enemy warship, a mistake he paid for with his life, and the life of others.

Nick's not a fire-eater. He can handle a crisis as well as any man, but the appalling number of casualties on his last trip, and the evisceration of the ship upon returning to port have left him a bit skittish. Still he knows where his skills lie, and he makes a deal to return to the Deep Black with the crew of the Andromeda, on a run that looks, at first, to be a fairly straightforward VIP escort. It's critical to the understanding of his behavior for the rest of the story: Nick did the best



job he could do, but despite his advice, the captain of his last ship got them into a fight they couldn't win. Nick did well to bring the pieces home. And he's tired, and he really, really doesn't feel prepared for another tour in a place where people are trying to kill him.

Zander Krycek, on the other hand, is rather used to people trying to kill him. As the war leader who toppled a monarchy, and tried to rule as elected President, he is familiar with the people who use guns, as well as the people who use contracts and words, and he has stepped away from all of that. It really is a case of a voluntary resignation of power, in his case; and only the most dire circumstances would bring him out of retirement to re-enter the planet administration business. Enter, dire circumstances.

In a different corner of the galaxy, Wade Bishop and Marcus Winchester are doing a job that could have been done in Wyoming, any time from about 1870 until 2020 AD. There are some modern touches, but they are essentially doing law the way Wyatt Earp and Walt Longmire

do law. And, as happened sometimes to those Western-style cops, the political ramifications trump the law business, and after shutting down the bad guys, but aggravating an undercover spook, they find themselves sitting beside the trail without even a gold watch.

And that's where the Andromeda's Captain Blackwood, with an offer to provide security for a man the entire galaxy seems to want dead.

There are two or three more MAJOR plot elements, but these few I've related are enough for me to set out what seems to be the core ethical issue here: What criteria do you use to know when to enter into a fight, especially a fight that could result in your death? Although THIS dilemma is expressed in terms of planetary warfare, those issues crop up for everyone. On one extreme, you have absolutely no stake in the outcome, and the outcome is trivial in nature. On the other extreme, you are completely invested (whether in terms of paycheck, patriotism, or family obligations, it doesn't matter), and the outcome might be as extreme as a matter of life and death. It's easy to make a decision based on the extremes, but on several occasions, the players in this drama get a much more tangled set of circumstances`.

Minor comments: There were several nicely done cultural references tossed in as little tidbits. I wanted to look at a map or globe of Planet Heinlein, and see what the other locations were named. I picked up on Coventry, but I tend to blow past names, so there may have been more nuggets I missed.

But, of ALL the characters I might have expected to crop up, NEVER would have anticipated this guy right here:

Homestar Runner

And with that, I'm done. You just CAN'T follow Homestar Runner with anything. At least, I can't.

Martian Aria
By L. A. Behm
Review by Cedar Sanderson

I had some time to read this last week, as I was on planes and in airports killing time waiting for those planes. In those situations, having my tablet loaded with books to read is a very good thing. The tablet has enough battery power to keep going basically as long as I needed it. And I

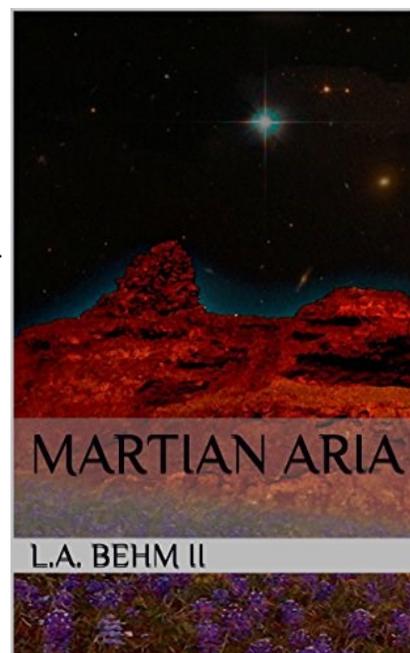
really appreciated having a long book to help me keep my mind off the wait., which is where L.A. Behm II's *Martian Aria* comes in. It is a satisfyingly big book.

Even though I love big books, just that alone is not enough. I always appreciate a good story, and he delivers. With some action and adventure, which is in there, too, deftly inserted as tales without being told. See, the central tale of the book is the old colonist telling the history of the Mars colony to a graduate student. Which could be, ah, academically boring. Only Behm manages to adroitly switch back and forth between 'then' and 'now' and there is a story happening in the 'now' as well. I shouldn't spoil this if I tell you that the book is Hard SF, except for the aliens. Only the aliens aren't alive in the 'now' of this story. But I'll let you read that part.

What I really liked about this story was the characters he built. It takes you a while to get to know them, as he slowly builds them, putting a little in here, a telling phrase or action there. I liked that. The main character, the narrator, you get a fairly good feel for almost right away. But as the story goes on, you are allowed a chance to see what his team and later his family think of him, and how they treat him is telling. His voice may be modest, but you see that he is loved and respected, even as he tends to 'aw, shucks' in his narration. And that's the other thing. There are no braggarts in this telling. Just men and women who got the jobs done, and in fact, one thing emphasized throughout is that those who are willing to get their hands dirty and work like dogs eventually win the prize.

There are no thrilling space battles in this book. But it's a fun read. My only complaint is that the first chapter is a little rough, and I was relieved to see the story smooth out and become more clear after that choppy introduction. If you like Heinlein's tales of colonization – *Farmer in the Sky* comes to mind – or...

I promised the author that I'd write a blurb for him, so here goes: *Martian Aria* tells the tale of mankind's first steps onto Mars, the adventures of reaching the red planet, and the thrilling discoveries that awaited humanity's best and brightest when they got there. A tale of rugged colonists, family, kittens, and those who were willing to get their hands dirty in pursuit of a new land, a new home. There is still another frontier, out in the stars, for those who are willing to grasp for it.

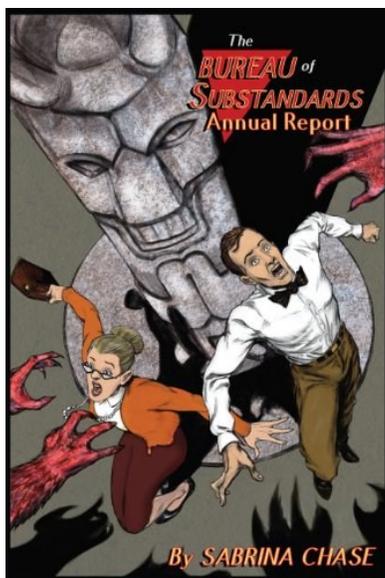


The Bureau of Substandards: Annual Report Review by Cedar Sanderson

This is actually going to be a triplet of reviews and a gripe. I spent most of yesterday under the weather (no, that's not a gripe, that's life, and I take it when my body says 'rest now or else' because else is usually pneumonia with me. I rested, and read) and I was having one of those restless, nothing felt right days. You know what I mean. You pick up book after book, only to discard it again as it's not working for you. I actually did that with both paper and ebooks, which was weird.

I have my *Handbook of Technical Writing* at bedside, along with a pulp novel titled "Have Gat, Will Travel" which is why I bought it. I have a stack of others, but those two were the ones that got opened. *Technical Writing* is going to be an 'absorb in small chunks' book, but very useful. The pulp novel is, well, pulpy. I didn't get far with it (it's also terribly brittle, being older than my *First Reader*).

On the kindle app, I finally gave up on Kal Sprigg's *The Shattered Empire*. It's a big, fat,



Weberian space opera, and I just can't get into it. The first book was satisfying, but in this one, there are so many characters I don't remember back stories for, and every time I get into a story-line, the author shifts POV. I think if I could sit down with it and just read... but I am stuck on reading in little bits, so there you are. I do suggest this author to fans of the Honor Harrington series, though.

And on to a gripe. I bought two Heinleins in ebook a week or so ago. I have some that were published by Baen, and I have been slowly 'porting my Baen library into my Kindle cloud, for convenience sake. Which meant I had the Expanded Universe, I Will Fear No Evil, and Farnham's Freehold on my device. To my dismay, the copy of Farnham's Freehold was absolutely riddled with errors, to the point of really being unreadable. I can dull my inner editor a bit, but not that much. Stick to the Baen copies, folks, even if you find a deal on Amazon. Expanded Universe is clean, tightly formatted, and very readable.

Next up, I grabbed an Agatha Christie I have in ebook, *Secret Adversary*. This one is a lot of fun, and if you have never read any of hers but Poirot or Marple, this one is a very different tale. It evokes Wodehouse far more than stuffy British mystery, and it will leave you wondering which one the villain is until very close to the end. But mostly, it's two young characters who are a delight to get to know. This one took me out of sick and into a post-war Britain most charmingly.

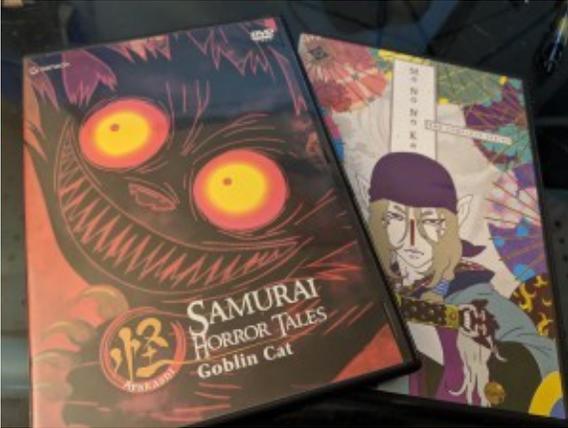
I picked up *Codename: Winterborn* and tried to get into it, with much confusion over what was going on and who all these people were... I'll try again when I'm not sick. I picked up Emerson Hough's *The Girl at the Halfway House: A Story of the Plains* and put it back down, really not in the mood for semi-poetic exposition set in the end of the Civil War. I picked up *The Thin Man* by Dashiell Hammett and put it back down, same problem as the Heinlein: horrible typos. Egg flog, for egg nog, for instance. Grr... Picked up *The Worlds Of Edgar Rice Burroughs*, which I have been savoring like a box of chocolates, and hit a real stinker of a story, *Apache Lawman*. Stilted dialogue, stiff characters, and OMG is this story going anywhere? I'll skip this one by Ralph Roberts and go on to the others which are much better. Ah, well, doesn't every anthology have to have a stinker? Makes the rest smell better.

Finally, I dug into my archives of books-I-had-bought-and-forgotten. And there, I found Sabrina Chase's short story collection, *The Bureau of Substandards: Annual Report* and hit gold. It's not a terribly long collection, (and I'd like more... I can bring bribes to LibertyCon? LOL) but the stories evoked several things to me. One, you all know I'm not a big TV watcher or film fan, right? Well, the one series of movies I adored as a teen were the Indiana Jones flicks, and this evokes them. It also evokes a show that was one of my kids' faves, and I enjoyed, while trying not to see the chinks in the walls of the stories. I loved the premise, and Chase hits directly on the connection between Warehouse 13 and Indiana Jones with an early scene in a certain warehouse with a scorched box... Anyway. You will like them. Go read it.

Anime

Anime Book Club – Mononoke Week 1: Bakeneko Review by Jessi Silver

So, this series of posts has been a long time coming. I've wanted to do a deep-dive on Mononoke for several years but never felt equipped to take it on. Part of that is because I like



the anime series so much and really, really want to do it justice in the way I talk about it. I have some baggage about this series that I've mentioned in the past and won't go into detail about right now (the short version is that I got ridiculed for liking it because I couldn't properly articulate why it wasn't just something that "looked cool"), but ultimately it only drove me to attach to the series even more. I suppose maybe I'm just petty like that (or I just really, really like great anime!).

It's a series of several stories that are all interesting to me, and some of them I believe speak to me on a personal level in a way that's unlike so many other anime (even

anime I like a lot!). Many people believe that the original story, which we'll be covering this week, is the "best" one; I'd have a difficult time arguing that as it's self-contained and arguably unlike pretty much anything else that came before it (it's also absolutely the best of the three stories in the anthology series from which it originated). Despite that, though, the series as a whole sets a standard that I feel few can match, as I hope you'll eventually agree!

I'm planning to eschew constructing any formal questions this time around; with Kino I felt like I was consistently posing leading questions and I'd rather hear people's free-form reactions and see if a discussion forms organically that way. I will still be posting my reactions and interpretations as I go.

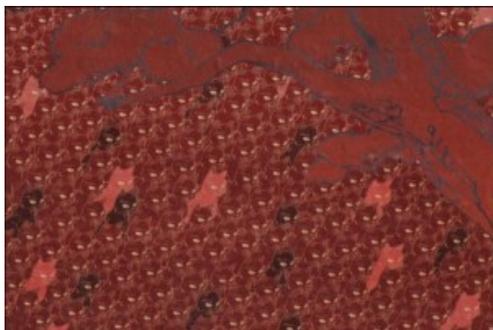
I'd also like to mention once again that this week's story arc, Bakeneko 1, isn't really available in a legal form unless you'd like to find a copy of the extremely out-of-print Geneon release (it's not super expensive but probably more than most people would want to pay for a used DVD) or the Japanese Blu-Ray release of the series in its entirety which I don't believe is subtitled (good luck). I'm not planning to tell you where to find the story arc, but I'll mention that I've seen it online in the past and I assume it's still floating around out there in case you'd like to watch it and can't obtain it another way.

Act 1

Lady Mao is set to be married into the Shiono family; the marriage is not so much for her own good, but to help to eliminate her family's many debts. A Medicine Seller arrives at her home on the wedding day to peddle his wares, though it's possible he senses something amiss. Kayo, a servant, allows him inside and is more than excited to gossip, but it's soon time for Mao to leave for her future husband's home. As she crosses the threshold to the outside, Mao is struck down by some unknown force and breathes her last. The household is thrown into a panic and believes there to be an assassin on the loose, but the Medicine Seller recognizes this as the likely workings of some supernatural force.



The household regards the Medicine Seller with suspicion, but as terrifying hallucinations of sight and sound become more frequent and the violent death of a servant causes tensions to rise further he easily breaks out of his bonds and begins putting up wards to keep the demonic presence away. Unfortunately this is just a temporary measure. He carries a sword used to exorcise demons, but it can only be used once the type of demon is identified, the truth of why it appeared is discovered, and its reasoning for haunting this place is known. The family must reveal what they know in order for the Medicine Seller to help them.



Act 2

The Medicine Seller makes his way to the kitchen, Kayo and Odajima in tow, to retrieve salt for a salt barrier (and sake for the home's mistress). He then sets up several "scales" that measure not weight, but the strength of the mononoke's presence in the area. After that he gets down to business, grilling the residents about any reason why a vengeful spirit may have taken up residence there. Why are there no cats in the home to control the rat population? It appears that the family procured several cats in

quick succession for the purposes of testing the sharpness of their swords, but could this alone account for the mononoke's rage?

Lady Mizue awakens from her unconsciousness as the mononoke prowls outside the room, tilting the scales as it walks by. Its power begins to overwhelm the Medicine Seller's defenses – first the salt barrier, and then eventually the seals begin to melt. Mizue crawls towards Mao's deathbed and removes the cloth from her face, only to immediately start going mad from a vision of a woman she calls Tamaki. The group witnesses a vision from within the opened sliding screen of a woman in white sending a swarm of blood-red cats into the room, devouring all as they go. The members of the group still alive rush further back into the home, and the Medicine Seller becomes more intensely focused on his questioning, more so as a secret passageway is revealed, leading to a hidden inner room. This family's secrets appear to be even more sinister than first suspected, and old Lord Yoshiyuki has a story to tell.

Final Act

Yoshiyuki tells the story of a night 25 years ago when he, as a younger man, came upon a country bride being transported to her new home. He kidnapped her, intending only to give her a fright, but because she never screamed nor fought him off it was almost as if she came with him willingly. By that point it would not have been a happy reunion if she were to return so he kept her locked away, providing her with the finest food to eat and beautiful clothing to wear. But having taken her in the prime of her life, he speculates, it must have been her grudge for a life not lived that possessed her pet kitten and caused it to transform into a mononoke. This appears to be an incomplete truth, as the sword cannot yet be unsheathed. As the Medicine Seller begins to physically collapse keeping the Bakeneko at bay, he sees pieces of a vision that paints a very different picture from what Yoshiyuki is claiming to be true. As the Bakeneko consumes and dismembers the other members of the family, Kayo, Odajima, and the Medicine Seller are shown the Bakeneko's "Truth."



In reality, Tamaki did not stay in the home willingly, nor was she treated well. The underground room where she was held captive had become a den for many cats, which were killed in front of her as she was kept in a cage. As Tamaki began to refuse food, she heard the faint sounds of a kitten who had been hiding, and she used her meager meals to nurse it to adulthood. As a final act of rebellion, the cat attempted to guard her from being raped by one of the master's son's. Tamaki was killed soon afterward, her body dumped down a well. Now in possession of the full story, the Medicine Seller uses his power to exorcise the mononoke, allowing Tamaki's spirit and her cat their final rest. The survivors go their separate ways, but as the Medicine Seller leaves he wonders if he might have seen a woman in white and her black cat pass over the home's threshold.

Thoughts and Reactions

This is a series that I've seen many times and I'm very familiar with each story arc, but every re-watch reminds me of or introduces me to many details that are otherwise foggy in my own memories. Unsurprisingly, the concept that kept jumping out at me during my viewing of this story was the relationship between women and cats (imagine that). As a cat-lover myself, one thing I'm constantly having to deal with is the idea that cats are an animal typically more associated with women (think witches and "crazy cat ladies"). When you get into the reasoning behind the existence of that idea, there's not much of a positive association; there are people who consider cats selfish or fickle (compared to the simplistic loyalty of dogs), and these are traits that some people may apply in a blanket way to women. There are those that also consider cats representative of or connected to women's sexuality. Cats are associated with witches and witchcraft, symbols of women's empowerment (and therefore dangerous and transgressive). Considering the arc of this story in particular, it seems that the choice of a cat demon as a reflection of Tamaki's sickening treatment, assault, and death is especially appropriate.

I understand that people in dire circumstances will usually put the well-being of their pets ahead of themselves. To have to choose between one or the other is an upsetting thought, but I feel as though there's an element of human selflessness that reveals itself when providing care towards an entity that's less capable of providing for itself (that's kind of a cold, analytical way of saying that I find some beauty in people's ability to put something else ahead of themselves). I found it especially heart-wrenching as Tamaki continued to take care of the kitten, watching it grow as she withered away to skin and bones; to reach a point where you give up on yourself to ensure the survival of your will through the entity you're caring for definitely has an element of tragedy to it. Looking at that further, I feel like that concept applies to other women in this story as well. The women are used almost like currency as a way to seal alliances and conduct monetary transactions between families (Mao's marriage, if you recall, is partly to help abolish her family's debts). In the brief glimpses we get during the Bakeneko's flashback, it seems as though at least one other woman marries into the family unwillingly, and perhaps investing in Mao to allow her to escape and join another (perhaps better) family is her way of continuing in this sad tradition. This is an idea that reappears multiple times throughout Mononoke, and while it would be tempting to say that it's just an aspect of Japanese upper-class culture from that time period, I feel like it's something that we still do today when we become obsessive about our children getting ahead in school, having the right friends, being in sports and other activities. We want for them to have a better life than our own, but we also may want to live vicariously through their experiences and in that way have a second chance to fix the mistakes and regrets in our own lives. The degree to which this is helpful or harmful depends on the people involved, and it's complicated; sometimes a well-meaning action is tainted by the strength and nature of the emotions behind it.

I think that the concept of "thresholds" hangs heavily over this story. As it begins, there's a sense of foreboding as the Medicine Seller enters the home; the scene pauses and there's an uncomfortable sound as he steps through the doorway. Mao is killed just as she walks across the threshold to the outside world. The mononoke's power doesn't respect the salt barrier, nor the sliding doors and seals that seek to contain it. It's a motif that's repeated throughout the story – crossing the threshold spells doom and destruction. There's a tradition in the West of the bride being carried across the threshold on her wedding night, and I wonder if that isn't partly echoed here. I'm also reminded of the anime series *Kurenai*, which features a family so steeped in tradition that the family's women are kept within an inner sanctum that has a threshold which they may never cross (and of course there's a very symbolic shot near the end of the female lead walking across it without issue). I don't know if it's reaching to say that this idea in itself might

be included as a nod towards the situation so many women in history have found themselves in – contained within the homes of their parents before then becoming contained in their husband's home, only breathing the outside air as they're sent from one to the other. Even this simple experience, this one chance, was something that was forcefully stolen from Tamaki. This idea of women being contained or trapped is a story element that repeats itself in later stories, I'm realizing.

I'm amazed at how well this story speaks to the general tendency for human beings to safeguard themselves and their own mental state by bending facts to absolve themselves from responsibility. Lord Yoshiyuki's version of Tamaki's kidnapping paints him as an arrogant younger version of himself, committing a prank that went too far. His story of how Tamaki, after being taken captive, came on to him and lived out the short remainder of her life cloistered and taken-care-of gives the story a tragic bent, and provides others with more room to forgive him for what he may have done. Generally dead women can't speak, so had the Medicine Seller never arrived or no mononoke been brought into existence, this version of the "truth" may have stood unchallenged forever. I like how the episode uses a lot of visual symbolism to point out this duplicity, even prior to the Medicine Seller's experience within the Bakeneko's mind; there are some split-screen shots of the younger and elder Yoshiyuki – a young, virile samurai mirrored against the ugly old man spinning lies that he becomes. There are also similar scenes of a vibrant Tamaki receiving a black kitten as a gift, and then her haggard, starving body discovering the black kitten somehow spared from the cruel death of its brethren. The delicious gourmet meals, compared to the meager fare that was actually provided.

When I think about this story, the phrase "he-said, she-said" comes to mind. It's a turn of phrase that's unfortunately often used when discussing rape or sexual assault situations – it's her word against his, a duality of stories in which the "truth" is derived from whose story is most convincing. Considering the power dynamics that are often present in those situations, as well as the reality that witness testimony is its own evidence, at least in practice it has often come down to how much social clout each person in the situation has. While things have improved somewhat over the years, it's still common to hear things like "oh, she's just trying to extort him for money" or "if she was really assaulted why did she wait 5/10/20 however many years to talk about it?" We idolize the wealthy and powerful and hold their words in high esteem, so when a common person speaks out against them, instinctually it's easier to call it "sour grapes" rather than a legitimate accusation. Yoshiyuki is the head of a wealthy family; who would believe the word of a simple country girl over the word of a respected, powerful, wealthy man? Whether or not this is something he's consciously aware of, I believe it's definitely something that influences his behavior and his ability to lie about the crime he committed.

There's a moment in the third act after Lord Yoshiyuki tells his version of the story that really sticks with me and speaks to this point. It's assumed that, if the mononoke is somehow the product of Tamaki's grudge, it must be due to her jealousy of other soon-to-be-married women leaving the household (something she was never able to do). A male character states that "A woman's grudge is incorrigible indeed," which causes Kayo (the best character) to roll her eyes with skepticism. It's a generally accepted "truth" (heavily in quotes) that women, like cats, are fickle and emotional beings, so of course this entire mess must be the product of a woman's misdirected rage. Later, following his vision of the actual facts in play, the Medicine Seller states that he's seen the mononoke's (and Tamaki's) truth, and has "taken it to heart." Speaking as someone who's been through several situations in which my truth has been questioned, this moment is perhaps the most emotionally powerful of the entire episode. Speaking also as someone who's seen the entire series before, I think it's a good introduction to what I interpret the series as being about – learning women's truths, believing them, and then using that to try to cleanse society of the injustice done to women day-in and day-out.

I love what the Medicine Seller says to Lord Yoshiyuki upon leaving the compound; it's something to the effect of "this is your truth that you've been protecting." Not the truth, but Yoshiyuki's truth, one that he's nurtured and allowed to blossom over the unmarked grave of his own guilt.

I can't remember where, but I read something recently that interpreted the Medicine Seller in this story arc as being apprehensive and inexperienced compared to the persona he exhibits in Mononoke proper. I suppose any differences might actually boil down to the voice actor, writer, and director not quite having a handle on the character's portrayal just yet, or having a different vision of him in this single story arc than later on in the series. What I will say is that I feel like the character is more involved in the story here; things come as more of a shock to him and he's more emotional upon discovering the truth. I get the impression that the experience of being swallowed by the mononoke and seeing its story played out was deeply affecting to the character. In later story arcs the character seems more worldly, aloof, and willing to let the involved characters talk themselves into their own demise. The differences may be more evident later on, especially in the late reprise of this same story. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

That's about all I have to say about this story arc. It's probably the one I've watched the most out of all of them, and yet I still find it deeply affecting each and every time. I hope that if you get a chance to watch it, you'll agree. Next week I'll be continuing with the first two episodes of Mononoke proper, which is available on Crunchyroll. I hope you'll check it out!

The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar Review by Jessi Silver

Yuuto Suoh gets more than he bargained for when he joins his childhood friend Mitsuki Shimoya in testing out an urban legend. When he uses his phone to take a picture of himself with the local shrine's divine mirror, he is whisked off into another world – one heavily steeped in the lore of the old Norse myths. Using his knowledge gained from school and from his solar-powered smartphone, he has the chance to bring the Wolf Clan, the same people who cared for him, to prominence, all while earning the adoration of a group of magic-wielding warrior maidens known as the Einherjar. – ANN

Episode 1 Summary: It's been two years since Yuuto was accidentally whisked away to an unknown bronze age society, but in that time he's managed to become the leader and patriarch of a powerful clan. His goal isn't exactly to gain control of the entire land, though that might be the unintended consequence; he wants to bring about peace to its various warring groups so that he can then concentrate on finding a way back to his native time and place. Luckily Yuuto still has the use of his smartphone, as it gives him access to military tactics and other knowledge he's able to utilize to gain an advantage over almost any adversary. His most recent victory is over the Horn Clan, and the leader chooses to become his "sister," a term for a subservient position beneath the patriarch. Soon after their alliance is solidified, another group makes moves to attack the Horn Clan's homeland. Though the ink is barely dry on their alliance, Yuuto chooses to honor it by sending his armies to aid his new subjects.

Impressions: I think that sometimes writing stories are our attempts at justifying what we think are great ideas. A way of saying "this is how I think the world should work, and here's an example of it operating in the manner that I believe it ought to." I'm paraphrasing Boots Riley



when I say that art is never divorced from the political; when it seems to be so, it's simply upholding the status quo. Creative media is a conduit through which we can celebrate the things we like about society, confront and comment on the things that we don't, and present potential avenues for change. While some pieces of media highlight society's injustices and give voice to the underprivileged, some wax nostalgic for a time that never existed in a misguided attempt to convince modern day consumers that years of social progress towards equality has all been a terrible mistake.



The Master of Ragnarok is a tale that seems to be longing for a world in which the sex-redistribution fantasies of young, angry, but ultimately lonely souls is the norm. It presents these facets of its Bronze-age culture as infallible, unquestionable, and full of perks for the leader who can demonstrate his worthiness in making war. Though women are apparently able to achieve the role of "patriarch," as evidenced by the existence of Linnea, former leader of the Horn Clan, the language itself – "Father," "older brother," and "patriarch" – all specifically reference maleness and specifically the idea that men and male children are the important members of a family, worthy of mention, leadership, and glory. Not only that, but specifying these titles and then putting several buxom women in the position of having to refer to the male protagonist as their "big brother" locks them into a subservient role and also indulges a specific sexual power fantasy. Hooray.

I got into an argument with a friend of mine many years ago about the TV anime Strike Witches, of all things. If you're not familiar, it's a re-imagined version of World War II in which young girls with magical powers use special flight apparatuses attached to their legs to fight in air battles with alien ships. Because of these flying boots, the characters are unable to wear pants – clothing would interfere with the mechanical workings, obviously. I called BS on this and my friend wasn't happy about it; his argument was that the show actually had a really good story and the no-pants situation was absolutely justified within that world due to the aforementioned mechanical limitations of the equipment. My counter-argument, which I still hold to this day and is applicable to many different questionable pieces of fiction, is that anyone can justify a reason for anything that they want to see in a fictional universe; that doesn't make it infallible and unquestionable by real-life standards. The creators of Strike Witches, with infinite options laid-out before them, still chose to tell a story in which specifically teenage girls (because the older women get the weaker their magic powers are *sigh*) use magic that causes them to sprout animal ears and tails, and also have to fly around without pants and in such a way that their animated behinds are thrust at the camera at every opportunity. The franchise exists within a world created so that a specific set of character traits are necessary due to rules only inherent in that world. It's a self-justification that pacifies viewers who are willing to buy into it, but doesn't do anything substantial to stand up to questioning from viewers who aren't.

"It's their culture, so it's not right to question it," is poor reasoning in my book, but it is the bread-and-butter of these sort of self-justifying anime universes that bend over backwards to make anime women swoon over boring male characters. Yuuto's essentially cheated his way to the top through his access to modern technology and historical know-how, but because of this he's been able to rise up to a level of leadership that just makes women want to get with him. It's not his fault, this is just how this society works!(TM) But hey, at least the women are willingly throwing themselves at him.



I want to be clear that I don't think that this is even the worst episode of anime I've watched lately. Its visuals are rendered poorly and the culture and plot are an extremely thin justification to place a large, attractive group of women in the path of the main character's crotch, but Yuuto isn't a slave-master, he's not out to become a sexual conqueror, and he seems genuinely interested in making the best of his situation and bringing about some form of peace to this world he's a part of (since it aligns with his own goals anyway). His motivation is even sort of sweet in a way – he's got a girlfriend in modern-day Japan that he'd like to see again and who misses him. But the whole story just kind of reeks of longing for a world where powerful women are never too powerful to want to bone mediocre guys for no good reason. Its very existence is made to be indulgent of that kind of reasoning. That in itself is creepy and gross even if the building blocks on their own are only silly and ridiculous.

Not all art is highbrow. Not all art is feel-good. Not all art is challenging, or memorable, ugly, or beautiful. But all art, in its way, is political. Some of it is created to help bring about progress. And some of it is wistful for a social stone-age that, as much as some individuals may long for, was never truly a thing we can (or should) return to.

Pros: Yuuto isn't a terrible person ￣_(ツ)_/￣

Cons: The culture on display in this world is a male power fantasy, pure and simple. The characters are not rendered well or consistently.

Grade: D

Short Fiction Reviews

Our short fiction reviews are largely from Greg Hullender and Eric Wong, who review more or less every short story in the commercial literature. Their review count is amazing.

An Aside: About RocketStackRank From Greg Hullender and Eric Wong

If you look at one of our reviews, there's actually a great deal of information packed into it. Take a look at this one for "All Systems Red," by Martha Wells.

<http://www.rocketstackrank.com/2017/05/All-Systems-Red-Martha-Wells.html>

The subgenre is SF Thriller, and it's part of the "Murderbot" series. (The link takes you to a page to help you find others in the series.) Then there's a spoiler-free "blurb" which gives some idea of what the story is about. The blurbs are also useful at the end of the year when you're looking for things to nominate and trying to remember what the stories you already read were actually about.

The word count lets people know which category to nominate this work in, and the time estimate is just computed from the word count.

The rating is obvious, and the pitch "Thrilling, Thoughtful, Touching" is a little cheesy, but it's important for Twitter.

The "info line" (in this case, a link to articles on Tor about the story, the artist, the author, etc.) is extra stuff that doesn't spoil the story. This is where I'll tell people if the story can't be enjoyed without reading something else first, for example.

Even the basic publication line has useful links. Click on the title and it'll take you to a free online excerpt from the story. Click the author's name, and it'll show you all of her stories that RSR has ever reviewed. Click on "bio" and you'll get the author's web page.

If you click on the thumbnail image of the cover, you get a larger image plus a link to the artist's home page. And the link "find this story" under the thumbnail of the cover picture will

take you to the Goodreads page, from which people can find options to buy.

Click the "mini-review" link to flip over the review text and go to the bottom, where there are links to help find other reviews of the story, interview with the author, etc.

Compare that with the info for an Analog story, "Nexus," by Michael Flynn.

<http://www.rocketstackrank.com/2017/02/Nexus-Michael-F-Flynn.html>

Click on "find this issue" under the thumbnail of the Analog cover. This takes you to a page with information about ways to buy or borrow that issue of the magazine.

So it really comes down to how much you want to include. I'd be surprised if you want to print anything upside down, though. I'm thinking the best bet might be something that looks like the search page <http://www.rocketstackrank.com/search/label/Rating%3A%205> with links back to RSR for anyone who wants more info.

It's possible that that's not enough info, though. Neil Clarke wrote a piece in October 2015 called "The Sad Truth about Short Fiction Reviews" to explain why Clarkesworld doesn't run any. I wrote a response to it <http://www.rocketstackrank.com/2015/10/getting-more-from-short-fiction-reviews.html>. The essence of it is that I think people want to see reviews for two reasons: 1) they want advice on which stories to read and 2) they've already read the piece, and they want to see what other people thought about it. (I hadn't thought of the third use: to remember a story you know you read.) RSR is designed to implement the ideas in that article, which is rather different from the reviews that most people write (which, I agree with Neil, are largely useless). The important question to answer is whether our approach really fits with what you want in your own publications.

When We Were Starless
by Simone Heller
A review from Greg Hullender and Eric Wong

Touching and Bittersweet, with Tension and Excitement

(Post-Apocalypse; Shrouded Earth) In the ruins of far-future Earth, Mink's tribe desperately needs the resources of a large building that vanished humanity left, but she needs to purge it of "ghosts" first—and it has lots of them. (13,204 words; Time: 44m)

"When We Were Starless," by Simone Heller [bio] (edited by Neil Clarke), appeared in Clarkesworld issue 145, published on October 1, 2018.

Pro: Mink herself is the greatest strength of the story. By standing up to her fears, figuring out what Orion really is, and selling her tribe on the idea of accepting his protection, she earns her victory. And it's not just a victory over the rustbreeds; it's a victory over the traditions that made her kind moribund. She has bought them a future. She's not human, yet we relate to her anyway.

Orion starts off confused when Mink accidentally turns him back on, thinking Mink is a child and the exhibit still has a public to view it. But his AI is capable of integrating new information, and once Mink rubs his nose in it, he realizes he has no purpose at all now.

The tragedy is that he was designed to teach, and he could have taught Mink's people so much, yet as he himself saw, they had to destroy him in order to continue to live at all.

The moment when he gives them a vision of the starry sky was very moving.

The bleak setting itself is very well done. I have a vivid picture of the blasted landscape under the flat, reddish light of the sun filtered through clouds that never part.

Con: Their situation is so bad that one wonders how any of them are still alive at all.

It didn't seem that they spent enough time trying to find a way to save Orion or at least get more knowledge from him before they lost him.

We Ragged Few
by Kate Marshall
A review from Greg Hullender and Eric Wong

Strong Characters, Intricate Plot, Lots of Surprises

(Dark Fantasy) When Reyna kills a rot hound, she knows her dead sister's prophecy is coming true, and there's not much time to convince the rest of the hold they all need to flee. (25,052 words; Time: 1h:23m)

"We Ragged Few," by Kate Marshall [bio] (edited by Scott H. Andrews), appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* issue 261, published on September 20, 2018.

Pro: The pieces of the plot work together like gears in a fine watch: there are lots of intricate moving pieces that work together beautifully. Everything that happens is foreshadowed, if you know what to look for. For example, although we don't know why her world's moon is "broken" we do know that the graylings' moon was "unshattered," so the prophesy that she would "stand again beneath an unbroken moon" had to mean that she'd find her people a place in the world of the graylings, through the narrow passage.

There's plenty of thrills and excitement, all the way up to Reyna's horrible sacrifice: carrying the grayling blood in her mouth even as it ate away her tongue. And then using it to destroy the beam that kept the people safe but prevented her from rescuing the dying grayling heart.

All of the characters are solid. Talgrun isn't a villain; he's doing what he thinks is best for his people. He and the Crone both believe their narrative, and it's easy to see why: it's a much more attractive view of the world.

The setting has a lot of depth to it as well. The history of fleeing from giants. The curse of the gods. The wide variety of people: gelds, mutes, free men/women. The different social roles. The existence of a larger community, with an option to select a king in an emergency. And the magic that protects everyone from the graylings.

Con: The language is a little overwrought. E.g. a crow "flung itself skyward like an insult to the clouds." A little of that adds spice to a story, but there was too much of it for my taste.

Eat This While You Read That
A series launched by Cedar Sanderson

Bolinhos de Bacalhau,
to be eaten while reading Sarah Hoyt's *Withchfinder*
Cedar Sanderson/Sarah Hoyt

This is bacalhau, the infamous dried, salted cod. And this is not a recipe to approach lightly. You're going to have plenty of time to read, because from the form you see in the pot, which I started working with on Thursday, it took three days to meal on Saturday. So I recommend you begin with her fantasy set in Regency England, with dragons, and magic, and elves, and it's difficult to sum up, but a whole lot of fun to read: *Witchfinder*. When you've finished that, there's *A Few Good Men* (link at the bottom of the post) and don't forget the *Shifters* series, which is practically set in a Diner. Sarah and I share a love of hole-in-the-wall dives with great food.

Before you start on the reading, put the dried cod into cold water (I cut the filet you see above into halves to fit it in my pot) and cover it. Put it in a cool place (I used my pantry, which isn't heated) and let sit for about 12 hours. Go curl up with your book and a nice cup of tea.



When the time has come, drain, rinse, and put fresh cold water over the fish. Let it sit another 12 hours. Read, enjoy, and then when you drain off the second change of water, you will want to tear off a tiny pinch and taste the fish. At this point it will look almost like fresh fishmeat, but very tough. If it is still very salty, repeat the rinse, refill with water, and let it go another 12 hours.

Reconstituted Bacalhau, smells slightly fishy, but it's not overpowering.

When you have the fish to the point where you don't taste much salt, drain, and set aside.

Sarah takes over here, with her recipe.

Boil enough potatoes that when smashed they'll be about double the codfish. (It can be less than that, if you're feeling generous with codfish. One part codfish, one part potatoes is not unheard of.) I food process the two together at this point, and add a couple of eggs, enough to make it stick together, not enough for it to be runny. Add parsley and lemon and garlic to taste. Salt if you overdipped the fish. Form into cakes by playing them between two soup spoons. (Cakes will be oblong.)

Fry till golden.

Eat.

Codfish cakes with flour are southern and an abomination onto nuggan.

Another thing the village did with codfish, but which I never liked, was batter made of one egg, one spoon of flour, one spoon of water. Beat together. Thrown in oiled pan. Put some codfish in middle. Fold batter like omelet. Fry till golden. Eat. (Called Isca. Poor people's food. Which means we had it for lunch three days a week. We weren't poor. Just ask grand-ma.)

Cedar Sanderson comments on the recipe:

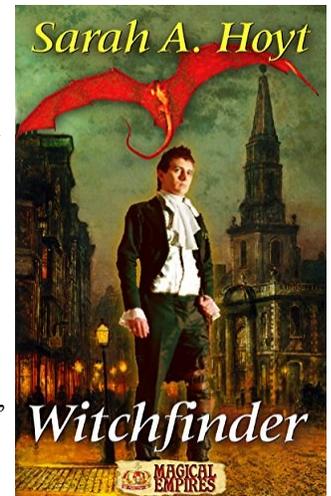
I've always known that at some point with this challenge I was going to run into trouble. In thirty years of cooking, I've done a lot of meals. I've always been adventurous, and tried techniques sometimes just to say that I had done them. But along the way, it hasn't always been smooth sailing. And for about ten minutes, I was sure I'd run up on the rocks with the Bolinhos. I was testing the oil to see if it had reached temp in my usual way, by dropping a spoonful of batter in – not much, but a bit to see what happened. It sort of sat there, so I knew the oil was still too cool.

I walked off and left it. I was still staging for photography, which is an added challenge to the cooking, and I knew from long experience that I'd fish that bit out when the oil go hot, and discard it (we have a dog. She highly approves of this tactic), and I wasn't going far, it's a little kitchen. When I came back to the pan, the oil was hot enough – and the bit of batter had dissolved. Oh, Carp... I fished out the lacy, crispy network of crumbs that was now floating on my oil, and dropped another spoonful in. With the cold oil, maybe the egg hadn't cooked fast enough for the proteins to bind it together. Nope... this one did the same thing.

Quickly, I incorporated two more eggs (bring it up to 4 in the batter) and the rest of the fish into the batter. Now, it worked. Whew!

Finally, cohesive little balls of light, crispy bolinhos

With the bolinhos staying together, there was only one other big hurdle to clear. The First Reader doesn't care for fish. He's not opposed to trying things, though, so when I told him I



was getting the first batch out, and draining it (note: use paper towels, my usual rack method does not pull out enough oil, and leaves them greasy) he came into the kitchen and tried a bite. His eyebrows went up. “It’s crunchy, and sort of like a potato pancake.” There was very little fishy flavor, mostly in some aftertaste. The texture is a lot like tempura batter – a little more solid than that, as the fibers of the cod give it a bit of ‘chew’ but it’s very light and crispy, surprisingly so.



The finished product is nicely crispy around the edges.

We also discovered that Sarah’s recommendation of a good beer was spot-on. With the oily, salty bolinhos the German dunkel we chose was perfect. We like a nice dark beer, I rarely drink beer at all, but happily gave this one, in combination with this meal, two big thumbs up.

Will we make it again soon? Well, I still have half the batter left – I wound up making more than I’d planned when I added the extra fish and egg to make it cohesive. I’ll either cook that up today, or toss it in the freezer and see what happens with it when thawed. The First Reader admitted he wouldn’t mind eating it again, once a year or so.

Bolinhos de bacalhau, Served with olives, fresh bread, and a little salad.

Sarah also sent me her low-carb version of this recipe, which looks like it would be equally as good, and when a year is up, I may try it this way, too.

I made the codfish cakes with 1lb codfish, 2 cups (after cutting) of celery root.

Boil the celery root for an hour and the codfish for twenty minutes, food process together with four eggs. Because you need to balance the celery root, use some garlic powder, some dried onion (like three table spoons of the later and a sprinkle of the first.) and parsley (fresh, 1/4 cup)

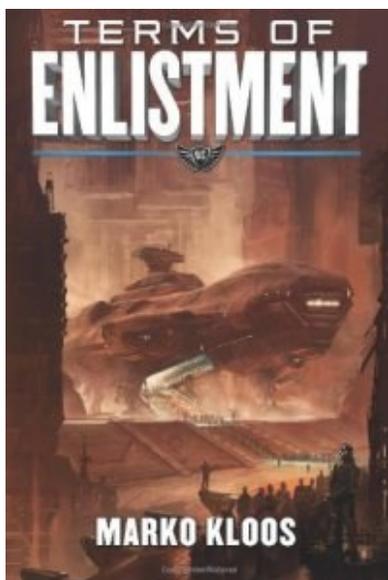
Shape with spoons. Fry in hot oil till golden. Drain on paper towels. They look like regular ones and taste pretty close too.

I recommend serving with olives, a light salad and good beer.

Crepes with Maple Bacon Jam

And here’s the dish that began this series for me. Marko Kloos shared a lovely picture of his breakfast one snowy recent morning, and the First Reader looked at it and asked if we could find some of that jam and try it... As I was shopping online for it (it was snowy here, too! And Kloos lives in New England, so I wasn’t sure if I could find the jam, or would have to make it.)

it occurred to me that this would be a nice way to promote a fellow author, even if Kloos is no longer an Indie, he started that way. A conversation with friends later, Eat This While you Read That was born.



To begin, you will need a copy of one of his books, which you can find at his Amazon page, or start with the book I did: Terms of Enlistment. He writes action military science fiction, and the books are not terribly long. I did enjoy, and reviewed, although I had some reservations on a few details.

And then, the jam I found here, Stonewall Kitchen Maple Bacon Onion Jam. The ingredients for the crepes are few, and simple, it’s all about technique with them!

In a blender (if you have one. I haven’t, and I used an immersion [stick] blender which worked fine, a whisk would, but would take stamina. Re-

crust a teenager if you plan to whisk) combine:

3 eggs
 3/4 milk
 1/2 c water
 1 c sifted flour
 3 tbsp melted butter

Pulse until smoothly blended, then place in the refrigerator to allow the bubbles to disperse, for about an hour. Heat a non-stick pan (I used a well-seasoned cast iron flat round, about 10") at about medium. Scoop or pour about 1/4 cup of batter and swirl the pan to spread it. You may need to add more liquid to the batter to achieve this, otherwise you get pancake. Flip after about 15-20 seconds on a side. When cooked, move to a plate, stacking as you go. You could separate each crepe with wax paper, I didn't.

Immersion, or stick, blender. Takes a little longer than a pitcher blender, but it gets the job done.

cooking with cast iron

Crepes on a flat cast iron griddle, with a large spatula for turning

Crepes

Thin, golden brown, a growing stack of crepes.

When all the crepes are finished (this recipe made about 10 for me) then spread a spoonful of the savory jam in the middle, roll, and eat. You can, of course, put darn near anything in them. I sautéed finely chopped onions and mushrooms to put in some, since we weren't sure about the jam... Bacon and mushrooms to go in some of the crepes

The final verdict was that the jam is nice, rather sweet, citrusy, and you cannot taste the bacon at all in it. We'll use it up, but we won't bother repeating it. I do have a recipe for bacon jam somewhere, and we occasionally pick up a 5lb package of 'seconds' bacon cheap, so I'll try that later on. The crepes were very nice. If I've made them before, I don't remember doing it. I did learn that the batter needs to be very thin, and you can't turn your back on them, I burned one!

Also, this is great for a lazy Sunday brunch, with the time involved. Feels luxurious.

Crepes, fruit, and jam. Perfectly delicious.

Letters of Comment

Dear George:

Thanks for issue 289 of Tightbeam, and good for you on taking the reins while another editor is found. It's a lot of work, but getting people to help out is not the easiest job. Anyway, here are some comments.

As always, I cannot make any comments on anime work, but I can make an observation on one anime-like programme that seems to be getting a busy fandom, and that is Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug and Cat Noir. Friends showed me that while it was supposed to be a regular anime programme, it became a CGIed programme, set in Paris, and may be going beyond the typical two seasons that most cartoon programmes get these days. I got all of this from a local dedicated fan, so who knows, I might try to see an episode or two to see why its fans are as dedicated as they are.

The Films column...I very much agree with the recommendation of the film Hugo. One main character refers to mon oncle Georges, and that is indeed George Méliès, who was driven into poverty by Thomas Edison's purchase of much of the film technology. The film derived from an interesting combination novel/graphic novel called The Invention of Hugo Cabret, plus The Hugo Movie Companion, both by Brian Selznick.

The Letter column... Many fan editors have had Bob Jennings' complaint, that people do not respond to their zines, even when specifically requested. Even an acknowledgement of reception of the zine would help, I imagine, but I guess you can't force it from people. Well done to give Bob the Franson Award.

Anyway, read and enjoyed, Jean Lamb, and I think I may be done here. I had hoped this letter would be longer. I am admitting to myself that writing many locs are getting tougher to do all the time as my own interests change. Take care, many thanks for this issue, and please do keep them coming.

Yours,
Lloyd Penney

Dear George

I especially enjoyed the article on early science fiction movies and that on the writings of the science fiction author Philip Wylie. Please keep it coming.

Will Mayo

George,
Received the Dragon Con Program Book today.
The N3F ad is very impressive!
Jon Swartz

Hi George;

Well, after the mix-up I finally got a chance to look at the latest issue of Tightbeam, #289. I think the Supergirl cover illos could have benefitted with some sort of progression, from current to these new assorted variations. I had to look twice to be sure the pictures were actually Supergirl.

I have to say I am not a fan of anime, but I did read all the reviews by Jessi Silver and found them interesting and informative. Even tho I happen to be one hundred percent sure I will never see any of the DVDs and compilations she covered, I thot she did an excellent job discussing the strong and weak points of the titles she covered.

I found it interesting that Ms Silver is also part of the Lolita fashion craze. I was also a bit surprised by her comment that in Japan, Lolita fashion innovations seem to center around performing musical bands, with the fashion show being what the girls have managed to concoct that is, if not exactly new, at least striking and provocative. I have been simultaneously stunned and fascinated by the whole sub-culture of Lolita dresses and costumes. Given the obsession Japanese media has with extremely young girls, it always seemed amazing to me that the Lolita styles ever caught on anywhere else except in the far east, but from what I understand, there are women embracing the concept all around the world now. Who would ever have imagined that grown women would be trying to dress up to look like little pre-pubescent girls in frilly fashions that might, possibly, have been popular in the 1860s or thereabouts? What kind of men are the ladies trying to fascinate with all those elaborate costumes?

The closest parallel in the US I can think of might be the costumes worn by the female auxiliaries of the various New Orleans Marti Gras parade Indian Tribes, where the women are expected to design costumes and dress like little baby doll children.

Odd stuff indeed.

Not much to say about the regular book reviews, except I was a bit surprised by Ms Sander-son's comment that she is so used to reading books and documents in pixel format that she is now uncomfortable handling a genuine book. I don't think I'll ever reach that point, even tho I find e-books on the tablet very convenient, and certainly a money saver when dealing with very old printed material that would cost big stacks of Sacagaweas if I had to buy the originals. But I still enjoy the feel of reading stories on real paper.

I have to admire Pat Patterson's ambition not to say his Grit & Determination. He gave himself 23 days to read and review 14 separate novels. I don't see how he managed it. I certainly would never attempt such a Herculean task. Even tho in theory I have spare time and I try to read a couple of hours each day, my reading speed is slow, and I perform poorly reading-wise when under any kind of time constraint deadline.

I think he pointed out one of the perils of the modern science fiction/fantasy book scene, namely, there are so many series books and novels with interlinked-universe societies out there, that trying to jump into the latest book without the proper background often results in a confused and somewhat unsatisfactory reading experience.

Unfortunately, readers seem to be nominating these 'latest' volumes for a lot of the awards in the genre. Certainly that applies to more than just the current DragonCon roster of nominations. I also wonder who can afford to buy all this stuff. Most of these books don't come cheap, and unless you're near a library with a strong SF section, just keeping up with the flow of material in even a few shared universe series could turn into a serious expenditure.

I think his reviews of the military science fiction novels this time also point out clearly that most of the books that get nominated for these awards have many fine points, and that choosing the Best out of a field of very strong contenders produced by accomplished writers is often a crap-shoot, or a matter of how many people actually bother to vote. There can only be one grand prize winner, but most of the runner-ups are usually top notch adventures as well.

I enjoyed the write-up about Philip Wylie. Checking over the list of science fiction novels and stories he wrote reinforces a conclusion I came to some years ago, namely that the man was obsessed with doom & gloom, especially with the possible end of human civilization as we know it. His fascination and frustration with the atomic bomb seems to have foreshadowed the paranoia of the 1950s when the threat of atomic war was on everybody's mind. I liked many of his stories, but they are best read in small doses, separated by many months of reading something else in between.

I also enjoyed the long intro chapter(s) of "The Dragons Pearl" by Jean Lamb, even tho I am somewhat over-saturated on stories where the protagonist is catapulted into a completely new environment and has to swim upstream trying to figure out what is going on and how it might interact with his past problems. The writing was strong with good narrative and excellent imagery. I am not that thrilled with all these odd and unusual names tossed in everywhere, but I suppose that goes with the context. Just don't expect me, a simple reader, to remember all these tongue-twister titles and formal names.

I was interested enuf to actually follow the link at the end of the segment to see how much the actual novel might cost. \$4.99 for the pixel version is not bad. I'll probably download it tonite to the tablet when I get a chance.

An enjoyable issue of Tightbeam. I have to scold a little bit about some of formatting and paragraphing that could use closer editorial attention, but these are trifles. I look forward to the next one.

--Bob Jennings
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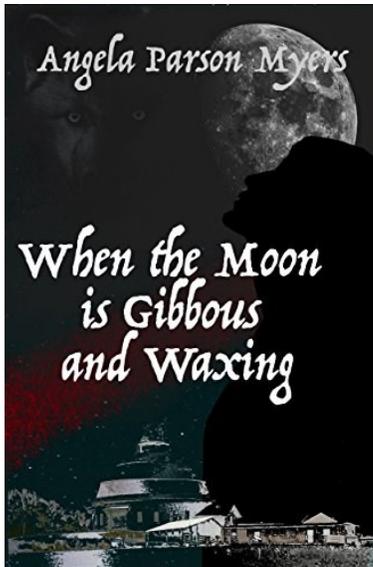
Snippets

When the Moon is Gibbous and Waxing

by Angela Parson Myers

[amazon.com/When-Moon-Gibbous-Waxing-Risen-ebook/dp/B078N1HSH2](https://www.amazon.com/When-Moon-Gibbous-Waxing-Risen-ebook/dp/B078N1HSH2)

Chapter One



Natalie recorded the final reading for the blood she had drawn from her guinea pigs that afternoon and looked up from her meticulous notes. The lab was so quiet she could hear the pops and cracks of the building cooling in the night air.

Once again, she'd lost herself in her research so completely that she'd stayed far past the lab's official closing time. The clock over the door read 11:30. She was probably the last person left in the building. She sighed. If she didn't leave soon, the janitors would be knocking on the door to chase her out. They got a little testy when students interfered with their work.

She gathered all the slides she had prepared and cataloged them for later study in case she found something she wanted to revisit. When she slipped into her denim jacket and walked out of the lab into the dim, silent hall, the hands on the clock were nearly touching twelve.

When Natalie stepped out of the building, the moist south wind clutched at her jeans and the long braid of her hair, making her struggle for bal-

ance. Dead leaves skittered around her feet, and then escaped into the darkness across the parking lot. She glanced up and shivered. The full moon always made her anxious. When she was a child, her grandmother sometimes sat up with her until she finally drifted off to sleep—often well after midnight.

Natalie's eyes misted over. Grammy had died six months ago, and Natalie felt foolish still getting weepy every time she thought of her. But Grammy had been Natalie's only family, and her sudden death left Natalie feeling very alone.

The feeling of aloneness hovered over Natalie as she walked toward the '76 Valiant at the far end of the back parking lot. The twelve-year-old Plymouth was the only car left. Back here, the full moon's silver light was lost in blacktop, leaving only swarthy ponds created by lights in widely spaced medians.

Then the feeling of aloneness was gone, replaced by an eerie presence of evil behind her and to the right, near a clump of trees. Fear tightened her stomach.

Natalie walked faster. She glanced back over her shoulder. You're being silly. It's just the full moon. But her heart continued to pound, and gooseflesh crawled up her thighs. She stumbled over a pile of damp leaves. The musty smell nearly made her gag. Light glinted off little patches of moisture on the blacktop. She glanced back again.

Two men had stepped out of the trees and were following her across the parking lot. She gasped and started to run. Get to the car. Just a few seconds. That's all I need. But now they, too, were running. She could hear their breathing as they drew closer. She reached for the door handle.

The car was locked. She reached to open the door, but the keys slipped from her shaking hand. As the crash of their fall reverberated in her skull, she smelled the men's excitement and knew they were reaching for her. She sobbed.

Then her fear grew cold, and colder, until it became anger and turned to heat, coursing through her veins like fire, and she realized she had nothing to fear as she turned to meet her attackers.

* * *

Natalie awoke behind the wheel of her car in the dark parking lot of her apartment building. She couldn't remember getting there. Puzzled, she searched for memories of climbing into the old Plymouth, driving out of the lab parking lot, turning onto the street. The last thing she remembered was leaving the lab. After that, she found nothing but nightmare remnants—an evil presence and numbing fear.

You fell asleep at the wheel. You idiot!

She stretched stiff arms and legs, opened the door, and crawled out of the car. Her mouth had a foul taste. Her hands and jaw ached, and the smell of blood seemed to be trapped in her sinuses.

Natalie plodded up the steps to her tiny second-floor apartment and let herself in. She kicked off her shoes just inside the door, stumbled across the living room into the bathroom, and stopped a moment, leaning on the sink. She turned on the light, flinching and raising her hand to shield her eyes while they adjusted. Then she reached up to get her toothbrush out of the medicine cabinet.

She stopped, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Blood was caked on her parted lips and caught in the crevasses between her teeth. The front of her jacket was damp with blood. Natalie looked at her outstretched hand. Blood was under the fingernails and caked around the cuticles. She turned her hand over and found blood in the bends of her fingers and in the lines of her palm. "Oh, my God!" she whispered.

Trembling, she washed her hands and face and scrubbed her teeth. She examined her tongue and the inside of her mouth, but found no injuries. She removed her jacket and held it at arm's length, wondering what to do with it. After a moment, she threw it into the tub. She pulled off her jeans and threw them into the tub also. She dropped her shirt and underwear to the floor behind her.

A cheap full-length mirror left by a former tenant hung on the back of the bathroom door. She stood in front of it, turning slowly. No blood, no cuts, no scratches—not even a bruise.

The blood must be someone else's, then. She closed her eyes. She remembered every detail of the tests she'd run that night. She hadn't spilled any of the guinea pigs' blood. But she still couldn't remember the time between leaving the lab and awakening in her car in the parking lot. How long did I sleep? She bent over the tub and searched her jeans for her watch. She pulled it out of a hip pocket. It was a little past two.

My God! Where was I? What did I do? She tried to calm down and think. The smell of blood in the bathroom was nauseating. Most of it was from the clothes in the tub, but some lingered on her skin. She felt dirty.

Natalie dropped the watch onto her shirt, stepped into the tub and turned on the shower, letting the water run over her and the bloodstained clothes. Pink rivulets ran from the clothes to the drain, lazily circling clockwise before disappearing. Natalie lathered every inch of her body, scrubbing herself until her skin felt raw. She undid her braid, letting the dark hair fall down around her shoulders. She shampooed it, rinsed, and shampooed again. When she turned off the shower and stepped from the tub, she stopped the drain to let water cover the clothes. The water slowly turned pink. She could still smell blood, but it no longer made her feel ill.

Drying herself with a towel, Natalie rubbed as much moisture from her long, thick hair as she could. She was about to start blowing it dry when she heard a noise in the living room. She

froze, her heart pounding.

“Nat?” she heard Bobbie call softly.

Not now! Natalie and Bobbie had been close friends ever since they were dorm roommates as freshmen in the class of '86. They remained close even after they both graduated and started working on their master's degrees and Bobbie got serious about Jack. Any other time, Natalie would have been delighted to see her.

When Natalie heard Bobbie stumble and swear, she reached for the robe that hung on a hook near the tub.

“Nat!” Bobbie called again, louder and with a note of panic.

Tying the robe, Natalie squeezed out of the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

“What's the matter?” Her voice sounded tense.

Bobbie's fair hair was damp with perspiration. In the crook of one arm she carried a basketball. In the other hand, she held Natalie's sneakers. “Are you OK?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Your door was standing open. Then I tripped over your shoes when I came in.” She held out the shoes. They had dark spots on them. “This looks like blood, Nat. What the hell's going on?”

Natalie stood with her back against the bathroom door, feeling something inside her wind tighter and tighter until it snapped. She gasped for air. Then Bobbie was beside her, moving her to the dining table, settling her into a chair.

Natalie buried her face in her arms and tried to calm down. Several minutes passed before she raised her head.

Bobbie, her face nearly white and her eyes wide, knelt beside her. “What happened, Nat? Do you need me to call the police? Take you to the hospital?”

“No!”

“What happened?”

“I can't remember.”

“Tell me what you do remember.”

“I remember—leaving the lab about midnight. I remember a nightmare. And running.” Her voice started to shake.

“But you're OK?”

Natalie nodded, relaxing a little, breathing deeply. “I haven't been hurt, not even a scratch.” She paused, surprised. “But I am hungry. Really hungry.”

Bobbie stood up. “I'll fix something. You go ahead and get dressed and dry your hair.”

By the time Natalie finished, Bobbie was putting cups of tea on the table beside plates holding cheese omelets, sliced peaches, and toast. Natalie's formerly spotless sink was filled with pans, but the food smelled wonderful, and Natalie's stomach cramped painfully in response. She sat down and attacked the meal with a gusto that surprised her. When all the food was gone, she sat looking in amazement at the empty dishes.

“Did I eat all that?”

“Yes, you did, and I still can't believe it, either.” Bobbie paused. “Do you remember anything else yet?”

Natalie shook her head.

“Maybe you just fell asleep at the wheel. I told you last week you were pushing yourself too hard. You do nothing but study.” Bobbie stared into Natalie's face. “There's more, isn't there?”

Natalie nodded and swallowed. “When I got here, I saw that my jacket and jeans had blood all over them. But none of it is mine. They're soaking in the bathtub.”

Bobbie stared at Natalie a moment, her eyes narrowed and her head cocked to one side. Then she looked at the blood-splattered shoes where she had dropped them on the floor. She

went to peer through the bathroom door, pulled it back shut, and returned to the kitchen table. Her face had gone pale again.

“You haven’t started dissecting yet, have you?”

“No.” Natalie’s voice started to shake again. She hadn’t intended to tell Bobbie the rest of it, but she felt like she had to tell someone. And the only person she could tell, the only friend she had, was Bobbie. She held her hands tightly in one another.

“There was blood,” Natalie hesitated, trying to control her voice, failing, and continuing anyway, “on my lips and teeth, and on my hands.”

“Oh, shit.” Bobbie stared wide-eyed at Natalie. “Nat, you should see a doctor. No nightmare caused that.”

Natalie steadied her hands on the table in front of her. “They’d probably just put me in the psychiatric ward.” She suddenly felt very tired and numb, as if she had exceeded her capacity for fear. She looked out into the living room at the big wooden desk she’d used since childhood, its top bare except for a pen set and a lamp. On the shelves above it, her textbooks were in alphabetical order. “I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for it, anyway. I’m just too tired to think of it. Maybe tomorrow it’ll make more sense. Maybe tomorrow I’ll remember.”

Chapter Two

Michael parked his squad car at the north end of the building and joined Lisa, who had been patrolling nearby, and a U of I officer he recognized but couldn’t name. A few more officers were already stationed at the south end of the building to prevent people from entering the crime scene—just in case anyone was out wandering around this time of night. Michael checked his watch. Or morning,

The officers had glanced in his direction when he drove up, but were now studiously avoiding looking at the tumbled heaps of mangled flesh in the southwest corner of the parking lot. A neatly dressed man who appeared to be in his mid thirties sat in the back seat of one of the U of I squad cars. The doors were open, and even in pre-dawn light, Michael could see he looked a little green. Michael realized why when the slight south breeze wafted the stench of scattered blood and intestinal contents toward them, and his own stomach flipped.

“That the janitor who called it in?” he asked.

Lisa nodded. “I think he regrets coming to find out who was in the parking lot before he called the cops.” As usual, she seemed much cooler than the other officers. Michael felt a stab of envy, not for the first time. They’d been in criminal justice classes together, and she’d whipped his butt in nearly every area with some regularity. It didn’t help that she was also a damn good-looking woman. Pretty women shouldn’t be that tough. He realized he was thinking with his hormones.

Michael offered his hand to the U of I officer waiting with Lisa. “Michael Clary. I think we’ve met?”

“We went to the same workshop a couple of months ago,” the officer said as he shook Michael’s hand. “I’m Pete Thompson.”

“What happened here?”

“The janitor said he parked in the front lot and started on the first floor about 1 a.m. He looked out the window and noticed a heap of something at the edge of the back parking lot, but didn’t worry about it—leaves and corn stalks blow in here from the fields all the time. Then when he got up to the second floor and looked out, he realized it looked like bodies. He said a couple of grad students usually work late—so late he sometimes has to chase them out so he can clean the labs—and his first thought was that it might be one or both of them, so he came out to check. When he realized they were dead, he called us. Well, he puked first. Then he

called us.”

“Is it the grad students?”

“Looks like they’re both male, so not the female, at least. We’ve had several break-ins reported out here the last couple of weeks. Maybe they’re the burglars. They look a little old for students, but it’s kind of hard to tell. Their necks are nearly gone, and they’re soaked in blood. One arm was about four feet from the body, and it looked like it’d been torn off. One’s stomach was ripped open. We were told to secure the area and wait for the specialists.”

“Lieutenant Cooper’s on the way,” said Lisa. “He said I can leave when my shift ends, but he wants you to stick around.”

An evil twinkle in her eye made Michael suspicious. “I suppose you had nothing to do with that?”

She grinned smugly. “Well, I might have reminded him that he said he likes the way you take all the time you need to check out details.”

Michael sighed and cancelled his plans to jog before the heat of the autumn day set in. In his five years as a police officer, he’d helped the lieutenant at the scenes of a few other murders. The investigations were thorough and lengthy. He’d be lucky to get off in time to catch a few hours’ sleep before his next shift. But he couldn’t help being a little excited about working with the lieutenant. He enjoyed trying to follow the lieutenant’s logic, and he’d spent far too many nights lately just passing out traffic tickets and breaking up loud parties.

In the Dark of the Moon By Angela Myers

Prologue

LaShawn didn’t look ill. Anyone who hadn’t known him when he was football-fit wouldn’t realize how much muscle tone he’d lost in the months he’d been too weak to work out. Still had his six-pack—just not the energy to use it. But even that was coming back.

“I’m fine, Doc.” He felt the serum the professor had just injected moving through his veins, leaving him pain-free and euphoric. The euphoria would fade in several hours, but he would continue to feel strong and energized for nearly a week. Until just before time for his next injection.

The professor looked at the empty vial in his hand and turned to put the needle into a sharps box on the wall. LaShawn began to get a little concerned as the silence stretched. Finally the professor spoke. “Your blood tests normal now. It’s time to take you off the serum and see how you do—see if the disease comes back or if you’re really cured.”

LaShawn went cold. He knew with instant clarity what he had begun to suspect. Not only had he been cured by the serum, he could no longer even think about living without the weekly injection of hope and happiness. “No. I need the serum. I’ll get sick again.”

“If you do get sick again, we’ll put you back on the meds. Remember, we discussed before we started this that if you were on the serum too long you’d risk severe liver damage. That’s why we’re doing these trials—to figure out how to cure the disease without destroying your liver.”

“Doc!” LaShawn’s smile and tone became ingratiating. “Man, my life was over, and you’ve given it back to me. A possibility of liver damage doesn’t scare me. Besides, you don’t want the university knowing about these trials, do you? You’d be in deep shit if they found out you’d gone ahead after they told you to do more animal testing first.”

The professor frowned. “You’re willing to continue treatment even knowing it could kill you? Even if your disease could now be controlled more conventionally?”

“Controlled how? With chemo and radiation that leaves me so sick I can’t even get my head out of the toilet? I’d trade a year of life with your serum for twenty of that kind.”

The professor smiled grimly. “OK, LaShawn. If you feel that strongly about it, we’ll keep going.”

When LaShawn left the lab a few minutes later, he thought he heard the professor mutter, “You’ve had about a year.”

LaShawn walked out of the building onto a nearly abandoned parking lot. In spite of the narcotic effect of the serum, LaShawn was uneasy. He had grown up in Chicago, and rural areas like Urbana gave him the creeps. The insects were all wrong. He could deal with roaches—at least they were quiet. Out here he could smell the South Farms, too. He’d quit drinking milk after he smelled that stench. And the darkness was intense. Streetlights were farther apart, and that pervasive glow of the big city was nearly absent.

No bus out here this time of night, either. Never could figure out why the professor insisted he come to the lab so late. Probably had something to do with not having permission to actually test the serum on humans. Or maybe the creepy dude just liked working at night. Didn’t matter that much to LaShawn, though. He felt great. He could walk the mile or so to the dorm easily now that he’d had his injection. Taking a deep breath of the cool, if somewhat tainted, air, he started north toward the next streetlight. Healthy blood coursed through his veins, and long, muscular legs ate up the sidewalk.

The grove of trees that bordered the west side of the parking lot sheltered several picnic tables—almost like a city park. Usually that was how it struck LaShawn—like a park. But tonight the darkness under the trees seemed absolute, like portals into hell. As he strode alongside the darkness he felt gooseflesh creeping up his upper legs and spine. When an owl hooted, he jumped, and then laughed at himself in embarrassment.

An almost imperceptible rustle in the leaves behind him jerked him to a sudden stop, gooseflesh continuing up his back and neck to his scalp. Slowly he turned.

He released the breath he had been holding when he saw the slightly built man who had crept up behind him. Then the man smiled, lips curling up over canine teeth too long and sharp to be human.

LaShawn stood paralyzed by fear as the man wrapped his arms around him almost like a lover. Even LaShawn’s renewed strength wasn’t enough to break the embrace. He opened his mouth to scream, but it was too late. The man tilted his head and sank his fangs into LaShawn’s jugular.

Chapter One

Michael and Lt. Cooper sat at a corner booth away from a scattering of other customers in the Elite Diner at this quiet time between afternoon coffee break and dinner. Cooper waited until the waitress poured each of them a cup of coffee and left. “I’m sorry.”

Michael could see he was. His normally morose expression was even sadder than usual. He’d been Michael’s mentor practically from the day Michael joined the department, and he was the only person in Michael’s world who knew about Natalie. Not that they ever discussed it. Just every full moon when Michael came in, Cooper would ask, “How’s the little woman, Michael?” Michael would reply, “She’s a real bitch, Lieutenant.” They’d both chuckle, leaving everyone else wondering what the hell they were talking about.

Now, Michael asked him, “Why didn’t I make sergeant this time?”

Cooper frowned into his cup. “I did the best I could for you, Michael. You know I wanted you to be positioned to move in behind me when I retire. You’re the only officer on the force who shows any real potential to do detective work. But it’s going to take a long time—if it ever happens. Too many people remember that the two officers you partnered with wound up dead,

and too many people remember that when you were injured, you talked about werewolves. No matter that you were in shock at the time.”

Michael lowered his head. His lips thinned as he fought the anger stirring deep in his gut.

Cooper took a deep breath and continued. “The committee interviewed a lot of your fellow officers, and while every one of them had good things—great things—to say about you as a person and a police officer, most of them were concerned about working under you. You have the leadership qualities, but you don’t have the full confidence of the men. Or women, though they seem to be a little more forgiving than the men. Too bad we don’t have more of them on the force.”

Michael saw his future with the department stretching before him—twenty more years as a patrol officer, maybe five as a school liaison or spokesman, then retirement. They’d never forget. And they’d never accept him as a leader. He couldn’t blame them.

After switching shifts with Michael, Buchanon was found in an alley, looking like he’d been attacked by a lion. Lisa was working with Michael the night she died. He’d found her bleeding to death, her carotid artery ripped open. Later the beast had mauled Michael and left him unconscious, but not before Michael put four rounds into its chest. By the time they found the body in a nearby cornfield, it was a young man, and the only person in the department who suspected what it had been was Lt. Cooper. And he had good reason not to share his suspicions. As Michael had just discovered.

When he was seventeen years old, Michael had decided he wanted to be a police officer. He’d struggled to make it happen, taking remedial courses at the community college to qualify for the criminal justice program. As soon as he found a job, he started taking courses at the university, one or two a semester, to finally earn his bachelor’s degree. Now the map he had drawn for his life dissolved like ink running in rain.

“Thank you for being honest with me.”

Cooper stared at the table.

Michael got up, walked back across the street, and marched into the captain’s office to turn in his badge.

Then he went home to try to draw a new map.

*

Natalie sat at a table in the tiny lunchroom in the basement of the lab building, glumly regarding a vending-machine tuna salad sandwich. Normally she brought her lunch, but she’d forgotten it today because Michael had distracted her.

Her heart ached for him. Since she’d come home to find him brooding at the dining-room table a week ago, he’d spent most of his time second-guessing his decision to quit the police department. And he was already going stir crazy. He’d inquired about openings in almost every nearby city and made arrangements to test in some of them, but the system moved at glacial speed.

He worried about money in the meantime, although he knew very well money wasn’t a problem. They lived modestly enough to nearly get by on Natalie’s meager salary as a research assistant without dipping into the money her grandmother had left her. In fact, most of Natalie’s salary had been accumulating in her account, since Michael insisted he pay all their bills for food and housing.

“It’s a man’s duty and honor to provide for his family,” Michael declared. Natalie understood how much duty and honor meant to him, even when it was old-fashioned and illogical, so she didn’t argue. But they had a nice little nest egg to fall back on.

More importantly to her, his plans and ambitions had been crushed. His self-image centered on being a police officer. Now that center was gone, even if only temporarily. She knew what he was going through because it wasn’t so far from what she’d experienced nearly seven years

ago. Hers was a bit more fundamental, though. At least he hadn't discovered he was a werewolf.

His eventual ability to accept her as she was had been a big part of her acceptance of a new image and place in the world for herself. Now she wanted with all her being to help him find his way to whatever the future brought. But she didn't know how.

Dr. Samuels, the portly assistant professor who worked in another lab in the Biological Sciences Building, slid into the chair across the table from her. He peered at her from behind the dark, heavy frames of his spectacles and raised his eyebrows. "Why so sad?"

Natalie sighed. "My husband resigned from his job about a week ago because he found out he wasn't going to be promoted—maybe ever—and now he's driving me crazy asking me to find things for him to do. I've had him paint every room in the apartment and rearrange all the furniture, but he's bored silly. He's kicking himself for being so impulsive. Not preparing for his next move isn't like him."

"Oh man, that's rough." Samuels frowned and stared into space a few seconds. "Hmmm. He was a police officer, wasn't he? You know, I almost hesitate to mention this, because he might be insulted, but I'd like to hire him to run a little errand for me. A cop could be perfect."

Natalie was surprised. Samuels wasn't usually interested in other people's problems. She couldn't imagine what kind of job he had that would require a police officer. But she felt like he tended to over dramatize, especially about his research, and any kind of work for Michael demanded her attention right now. "What do you need to have done?"

"I need a courier. It shouldn't be dangerous, but I do think something's going on that isn't—well—maybe isn't completely legal. A cop might be the right kind of person to deal with it."

Now she understood his sudden concern. "What do you need to have delivered? And what do you think might be going on?"

"You know about the research project I've been working on with Professor Patel at the University of Glasgow?"

Natalie nodded. He'd bragged about his international collaboration often enough. "Diseases of the bone marrow."

Samuels leaned forward, placing his forearms on the table. "We think we're on the verge of something big. The problem is, he suspects someone's been intercepting our communications. They've been arriving looking...kind of ruffled and out of order, as he described it. He knows how meticulous I am about having everything in order. He wants me to hand-carry my latest results to him. I can't leave right now, and we really don't want to wait until I can."

Natalie knew he'd turned down a graduate assistant because of his unwillingness to trust anyone with his research. She suspected his lack of trust in anyone else's abilities was the main reason he couldn't leave. "Aren't there people who do that kind of thing for a living? Why not use them?"

"He thinks hiring a regular courier would tip off whoever's checking our mail." Samuels shrugged. "I think he's paranoid, but he's also brilliant, so I want to cooperate any way I can. Think your husband might be willing to take a package to Scotland for me? I can pay airfare and a small delivery fee."

"I'm not even sure he has a passport. I'll have to check and get back to you."

"Great."

Dr. Samuels appeared to concentrate on his sandwich then, devouring it in four or five huge bites. Natalie had seen Michael eat like that when he was in a hurry, but it still amazed her to watch it. Michael told her she hadn't seen anything until she'd seen a squad of high school football players shovel it in. She hoped to be spared that sight, but thinking about it reminded her of the football player who'd been found dead near the labs about a week ago.

“Do you know if the authorities ever figured out what happened to that kid they found out by the parking lot?”

Dr. Samuels stopped mid-bite and put down the remains of his sandwich. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth drawn downward. “No. I heard it looked like someone had slit his throat somewhere else, because he’d bled out, but there was no blood anywhere around him. I don’t think they’ve even found the crime scene yet. Sad. He was a good football player once.”

Natalie felt a surge of sorrow for the dead student and for the secretary who discovered him as she came in to work, then a great flood of relief that perhaps she’d found something to keep Michael busy for a week or so. If he had a passport. In the back of her mind she chided herself for not knowing. They’d been married five years, after all. She should know nearly everything about him.

*

Michael used his fork to pull a piece of meat off the Cornish game hen in his plate. “Who is this guy again?”

If anything good had come from Michael’s decision to resign, it was that Natalie no longer had to worry about preparing meals. Not particularly interested in food except during the full moon, when she craved steaks—rare—she had never really learned to cook more than the most basic recipes. Michael, on the other hand, loved to plan, prepare, and savor all kinds of elaborate dishes that Natalie considered exotic. Like this little chicken.

“Dr. Samuels. He’s an assistant professor who’s doing research on diseases of the bone marrow. He’s pretty egotistical, but he has some right to be. He and a professor at the University of Glasgow—”

“In Scotland? That Glasgow?”

“Yes. They met at a conference when Dr. Samuels was a graduate student and discovered they had several common interests. They realized they could accomplish more if they shared data. Could you be his courier? Do you have a passport? All you said when I applied for mine a couple of weeks ago was that you didn’t think you could get off to go with me to the conference in Geneva.”

“Yeah. Time off’s not much of a problem now, is it?” His half-grin was a little sad. “My dad arranged for all of us to get passports a few weeks before he died. He was going to take us to Ireland to see where his family came from. We never used them, but I renewed mine when it expired. I thought maybe I’d get over there some day on my own. It seemed like...I don’t know...the respectful thing—or maybe the hopeful thing—to do.”

“Would you be willing to make the delivery for him, then?”

Michael looked thoughtful. “I don’t know off the top of my head if there are any legal requirements for being a courier—licenses, bonds, that sort of thing. I’ll do some research tomorrow. And I want to know more about why he thinks they need someone who isn’t already a courier. I’ll make an appointment to talk to him after I find out if it’s legal. But right now”—Natalie could almost see his brain compartmentalizing all the details before he continued—“guess what I made for dessert?”

Natalie sighed. She hoped Michael found a job before she outgrew all her clothes.

*

Michael’s footsteps echoed down the hall of the lab building. The place unnerved him. He didn’t understand how Natalie could continue to work here after she was attacked in the parking lot nearly seven years ago. True, she hadn’t been physically hurt, but she’d been terrified, and he knew killing the two men who attacked her that night, even in self-defense, weighed on her conscience. When they’d talked about it, she told him, “I don’t have any choice. That’s where the job is.” She was a strong woman, he thought for about the millionth time.

But this time he wasn't here to see Natalie. Michael's research had shown no legal requirements prevented him from simply declaring himself to be a courier. All the agencies he had checked were bonded to protect their clients, but no license was required.

He looked again at the slip of paper Natalie had given him. Yes, this was the right lab. He knocked gently on the door.

"Come on in. Door's unlocked."

Michael opened the door to the broad back of a man in a white lab coat. The man turned to reveal a round face surrounded by wildly curly dark hair and partly concealed behind thick glasses. "You must be Michael. I'm Dr. Richard Samuels." His smile was cold and professional.

Dick, thought Michael, as he nodded and shook the offered hand, which was as cold and insincere as the smile. But I don't have to like him.

Samuels waved past a bank of cages that imprisoned several monkeys to a couple of chairs in one corner of the lab. Most of the monkeys seemed listless and disinterested. Only one screeched and bounced off the sides of the cage as they approached.

"Shut up, monkey." Samuels picked a banana out of a basket on the table and handed it to the animal through the bars of the cage. The monkey promptly sat down, adeptly peeled it, and started stuffing it into its mouth.

Samuels pulled out a chair and motioned to Michael to take the other. "So, Natalie tells me you might be willing to deliver a package for me."

"Why do you think you can't trust a professional courier, Dr. Samuels?"

Samuels hesitated a moment before answering. "It's not that I can't trust a professional. But we tried that, and whoever is intercepting our mail seems to know when to expect it. That makes me suspect someone in the university office is passing them information. And, though I didn't admit it to Natalie, I'm concerned that the person who is intercepting our mail could be a bit... dangerous. We're at the point where the right person might be able to use information from our communications to duplicate our research. The team that completes this project stands to make a lot of money, not to mention achieving the kind of fame most scientists can only dream of. Some people would do anything for the fame alone."

Michael noted Dick didn't mention the people who could be cured by a serum developed using his research. Natalie had said thousands of lives could be saved if it was going in the direction she suspected from the few things she'd heard about it.

"You say they might be dangerous. You do understand I can't carry a weapon now, don't you? Certainly not in Scotland."

"Oh, no, no, no." Samuels waved both hands in denial. "Not that dangerous. Though I do suspect they could get physical." Samuels smiled as his gaze ran over Michael's broad shoulders and biceps. "You look like you could handle a little push and shove."

"And how much would you be willing to pay for me to handle a little push and shove?"

"I'll pay your air fare, of course. I can't afford a great deal beyond that because it has to come out of my own pocket for the time being. Say a thousand dollars in addition?"

Michael had played a little poker for spending money when he was at the community college, and after that frank and somewhat disturbing survey of his body, he'd wager Dick hadn't. Or if he had, he'd lost, because the man's thoughts seemed to show on his face as soon as they passed through his brain. At least Michael wouldn't have to worry about Dick hitting on Natalie while he was gone.

"Not enough for that kind of risk," he said. "You'll need to come up with at least five thousand."



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