

Editorial

Eldritch Science continues its record of more-or-less yearly publication. For this issue we have seven short stories, six poems, a front cover, and six pieces of interior art. The stories range from hard science fiction to modern fantasy of Lovecraftian horror, and works in between. For the next issue, we already have two long works of fiction likely to reach us soon.

We still have the content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently the third Eclipse novel, *Stand Against the Light*. If any of you would like a free review copy of *Stand Against the Light* or any of my other novels, you have but to ask.

Eldritch Science

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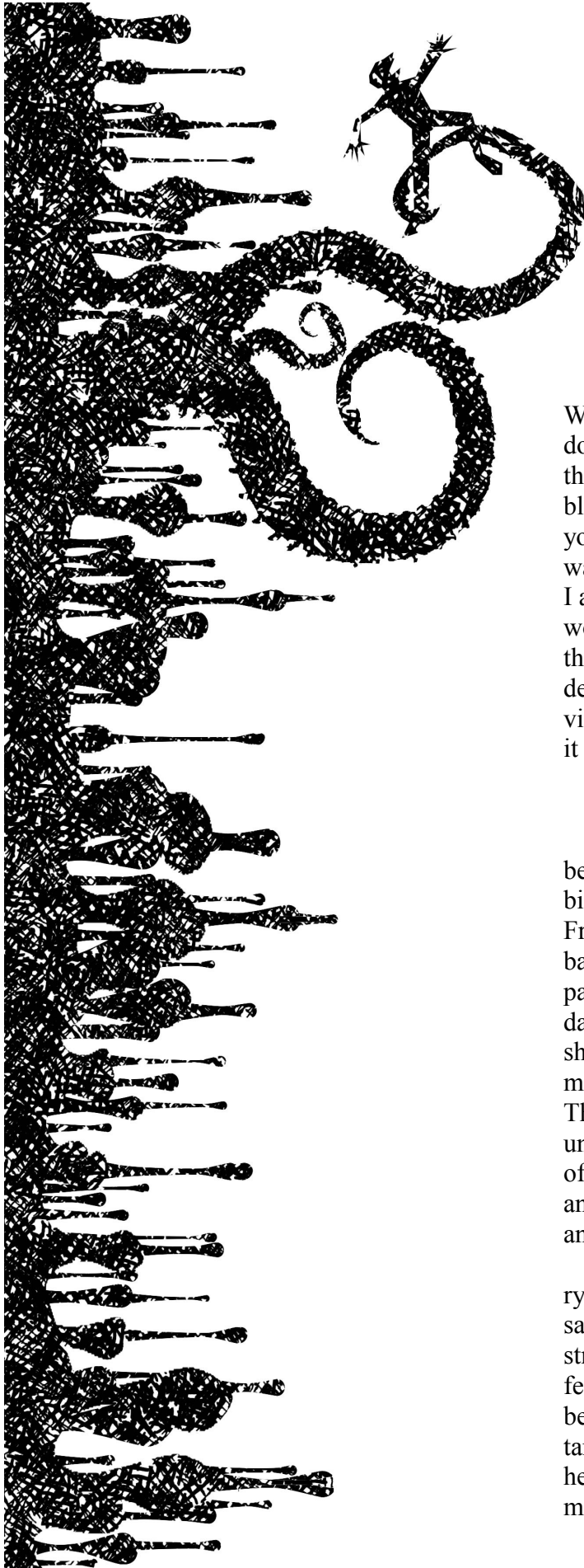
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THE VISITOR

by Alan White
(for Kaitlyn)

An editorial comment:

"H.P. Lovecraft meets World War One!

Which of the two is the more horrifying? You've done a remarkable thing with this story, capturing the horrific spirit of Lovecraft's arcane horror and blending it with the raw horror of WWI. I like your use of the grisly arcane descriptors Lovecraft was so fond of -- unwholesome, putrescence, etc. I also like the implied ending, where you hint at worse things to come but don't actually reveal them. In some ways, that's worse than a specific description! Your narrative description is very vivid, and you have captured the Lovecraftian spirit wonderfully."

Jefferson P. Swycaffer

Less than a year since the death of my brother I began to notice a creeping downturn in the sociability of my parents. His death in a trench in France was unbearable, not by happenstance of battle; nothing that might commiserate distraught parents but a sickness which tore him asunder the day he arrived at the front prior to firing a single shot. He was inexplicably overcome by what might best be described as... a peculiar growth. This he noticed the day he left Massachusetts, an unsightly blemish in the center of his chest; a thing of some annoyance becoming worthy of comment and upon reaching the trenches a thing of distress and finally despair.

He was laid upon a bench near a small infirmary cut into the walls of the trench; part soil, part sandbag and the rest merely shadows of the dead strewn in careless piles. He was given a cup of coffee and covered by a canvas tarp. Later that day it began to rain whereupon he disappeared under the tarp. If he had concerns, they would not have been heard over the cacophony of battle and screams of men and metal finding his problems petty at best.

Older, wiser, more brazen and ambitious than myself he was sure to garner the consummate wealth of my parents upon their demise while I remain a mere pittance in all regards with neither cause nor purpose. He found much enthusiasm in the aspect of an oncoming war, requiring no other enticement to enlist at his earliest convenience. Despite beginning a fine career in the Eldritch Sciences he was booted from Miskatonic University following accusations of committing uncommon yet I might add unfounded practices that will remain unspoken here.

There was a lull in the battle where the doctor rolled back the tarp to find his chest swollen so badly the buttons of his shirt were on the verge of bursting. With his boot knife he slit the man's shirt from navel to sternum and a froth of fungus burst forth like an explosion of creamed broccoli: bright forest green and from the crown of each a small tentacle waved back and forth snatching flies on the wing. The doctor stepped back aghast, unmindful of the battle raging just above!

He took a scalpel with a deft hand, sliced through a stalk when a spray of blood... presuming his blood was now green, fired from one side of the trench to the opposite to be devoured by the mud and blood of battle and covered him from head to foot. The fungus was not growing upon him but from him, whereupon he screamed as blood pumped from the severed fungi. Petrified the doctor stood eyes wide, pale, without response and gazed in horror at the abomination this man had become; nothing remained of his humanness. If he was alive there was no sign of it. For two days the battle raged while the tentacles grew and fell between the slats as if they had gutted a squid, several of which had grasped an assortment of rats and left bones cleaned white and falling to the ground like snow. Thus turning heads of the curious who thought nothing of shooting strangers in the face and using their bodies as stepping stones through the mud from one trench to another.

The doctor now badly wounded, found it within himself to overturn the bench and collapse the trench upon my brother and let him remain thus lest no others stumble upon him in the dark unknowing what simmered beneath.

Thoughts of war had become fog before that

very doctor visited us at the house with this tale; though his shrouded face was horribly disfigured and through which convolutions he found his way here remained unknown. He was also missing a leg and the stump of which continued to ooze an unwholesome fluid while humbly telling his story like a dog about to be whipped with an utterance more like projectile vomiting than speaking every word which I swear sent my parents into a tailspin of despair.

The next day he was found hanging from a tree at the edge of town near a sign reading "Welcome to Arkham, a Fine College Town" much to the inquietude of the locals. As the officials attempted to remove his body a purée of fungus gushed from his collar, his singular pant leg and the grotesque growths upon his face where his head became a putrescence that collapsed like a rotten melon sliding through the noose onto the ground where the flesh of his face remained like a rotting halloween mask. One upon a ladder, another on the ground, the workers stood silently aghast until dusk where they regained their sense of immediacy, climbed into their vehicle and sped away leaving their ladder behind.

Not for a moment doubting his story as heresy or madness it was upon this very day my parents became aloof, distant, seldom leaving their room. Less seldom did they leave the shadows of the house as if the very light offended their senses and each day a candle snuffed giving the appearance that darkness was slowly herding them into their room at the top of the winding stair. Both my parents, the house and the sky itself gained a gray sickly pallor that hung motionless, with barely the strength to rise above the skeletal shrubbery and deserted trellises. Our caretakers save one deserted the premises that very night leaving not just their belongings but wages as well and all that remained was given to a singular caretaker: a pallid ghost of a woman as an inducement to carry on. The workload had diminished greatly which was the bigger incentive. Dusting was no longer a concern, nor tidying the contents of any room on any floor of the house. Nor sweeping nor polishing the silver and letting knick-knacks gather their dust and spiders spin their webs without hindrance.

All that was required was to leave a pair of

bowls at the door of my parent's room. Content of the bowls remained unknown and the maid was loathe to divest the smallest particles of information regarding her employers.

My parents never spoke of nor to me again. But now the dreariness has become tangible and the maid could be seen at times doing... what? No one knows. One day I snared a rabbit, the first I'd seen in months and presented it to the maid who neither skinned nor dressed the carcass but laid it solely on a tea tray and placed it by their door.

I would not consume the slightest morsel from her kitchen and every other day would journey into town for a fine and filling meal and something to hold me over another day.

Upon my every appearance at the "Inn of the Fluke's Eye", fellow patrons found this moment to pick up and move their vittles to the farthest point from wherever I had chosen to sit. Finally, the owner bid me... "henceforth come to the rear of the establishment for service".

You might ask why I not find housing elsewhere, but I must tell you this house is my sole inheritance and all that I may own but a small stipend from my parent's life insurance. Though with each splinter, wormhole, and fleck of paint I see the value crumbling before my eyes.

Since they have chosen a reclusive existence they cannot perish quickly enough to suit my patience nor purse. It was here I became infuriated at being their only son smart enough to avoid the war to be sure and their one true descendent and yet so shabbily treated. Nearing dusk I returned to the house in a rage that I may confront my parents at last and secure a palatable future for myself before this God-forsaken residence tumbles in upon us.

The maid appeared on the stair forbidding my progress. A pale and unkempt thing, a specter she had become and frail beyond any consideration of which I could easily dash her to the floor with barely a blink of an eye had I been a gnat's breath less of a man.

In frustration I picked up that vase, my mother's favorite, heavy though it was and in my madness flung it high over the railings of the second floor against the doors of my parent's room where it was reduced to shards in a cloud of dust, scamp-



Lady of the Clouds
Angela K. Scott

ering rodents and a pile of empty bowls.

Momentarily there began a rumbling that shook every timber of the house and the twin doors of their bedroom burst open. Here was disgorged a great wave of fungus spilling down the hallways, down the stairs, oozing through the railing and over the balcony into the great room forming a mound, then a mountain from which became a river flowing towards the door and here a smattering of bones perhaps those of my parents or the maid's missing counterparts. The sea of fungus now submerging much of the furniture in the great room and filling the hallways. Terrified I ran from the house across the lawns as the fungi overtook the fountains, shrubberies, the rose garden, up the trees to their uppermost limits and from there into the air like dandelion seeds and then to... everywhere.

Overwhelmed by futility I faced my pursuer, shaking my fist and cursing my last and best... and was thus engulfed. I was lifted high into the air even with the tops of the tallest pines where this lurid abomination spoke to me... though kindly, declaring my purpose to be master of this food awaiting the oncoming Gods that they may feast well upon their arrival. And here gently returned to the surface though trembling I could barely keep my footing.

And there, ever-so high in the evening sky near the handle of the Big Dipper a singular star twinkled a little brighter.

Time Travel Bucket List David C. Kopaska-Merkel

Whiz kid Elbert H. Arneson,
Grew up an eccentric scientist,
Spending every weekend
In his no-car garage,
Dreams of time travel
Dancing in his head:

1. See the dinosaurs!
2. See #1!

Soon as the time machine was complete
He sent—a hamster,
A turtle, his pet rock,
All returned in fine shape.

The hamster, in fact,
Had been looking a bit peaked,
More spring in its hop,
On its return.

So in he dashed,
Destination 65 my B.C.
There was a whirring, a buzzing,
His stomach was all shook up,
But otherwise he felt great,

Felt at least five years younger,
Actually more like ten,
Fifteen, twenty...oh crap.
He lunged for the controls;
Already out of reach.

When the machine arrived,
Its door swung open;
Nothing moved inside.

After a while,
Some small furry animals crept in
To explore; one bumped a switch.
The time machine silently vanished away.

If Music Be the Fruit of Love Jack Mulcahy

“Stay here, Finola,” Padraigh directed. Giving me orders, as usual. I was fed up with him. “Wait til I tell you.” But I held in my irritation and remained in the cave, shivering with cold.

It’s not as if the man had ill intentions, for the most part. Though I’d never been a slave, he kept warning me about slave-catchers from Pandarus who’d sell me for auction anyway. As if I didn’t know already.

If the riders I’d seen were slave-catchers, they must be gone now. What did he think he would do with just a knife and gladius against armed horsemen? I knew my songweaving magic could match or even better any Pandaran slave-catcher’s power, but Padraigh insisted he had a duty as a man to protect a woman, any woman.

So I swallowed my objections and waited for his signal. Which seemed to take an eternity to arrive. When he at last gave the gesture, it took all my control not to bolt from the cave, away from the icy cold and stink of mud and guano.

I emerged into a thick forest of fragrant pine and birch. We were minstrels, astray in nigh-impassable woods in the far reaches of what Padraigh called Goz, on the way to a tavern.

“If we’re in Goz, why do Pandaran slave-catchers roam the land as if they own it? The Gozites are wealthy, they hate slavery, and they should have their own patrols to keep away the Pandarans, shouldn’t they?” If this was Goz, I should be safe. So why didn’t I feel safe?

The smile Padraigh flashed me might have made other women give him their first child. Not me. “Trust me, dear. We’re in Goz. But even they don’t have enough soldiers to seal the border. Anyway, Pandarus and Goz have a trade agreement neither side wants to violate. Those slave-catchers were probably lost.”

“Uh-huh. I worry every time you say, ‘trust me.’” I scowled and vocalized a few notes of my songweaving magic, to be certain no Pandarans lurked in the woods. I found none, praise the Lord and Lady, yet under bruise-colored clouds, I still

felt uneasy.

Padraigh, a songweaver like me, heard my song. “How long since you’ve enhanced your magic, love?”

The look I gave him would have soured new milk. “Stop calling me ‘love.’ I’m *Sh’gan*, in case you need reminding. Sex with a man won’t enhance my magic. It’s as wrong for me as it would be for you. You say you’re my friend, so act it and *please* drop the subject.”

“How do you know it’s wrong for you if you won’t even—”

“Am I your partner or your slave?” I stopped, put my hands on my hips, and met his eyes.

“When I say it’s wrong for me, you must take it as my final answer. I’m not the woman you want me to be. True, you helped me get away from Deanna in Sumharajz. But you’re as bad as—”

“I never beat you. Never touched you or even looked at you wrong. She blackened your eye and bloodied your lip.”

My stomach knotted. I shut my eyes and tried to banish the images of Deanna beating me, screaming that I was so worthless, it was just my good fortune she even tolerated me.

“And who knows what she did to you before?” He shook his head. “How could she keep such a powerful songweaver as you in her thrall?”

“Her sorcery overpowered me.” It sounded weak, and I could neither understand nor believe it. Though I would never tell Padraigh.

He nodded, with the familiar, smug look he always gave me. “How do you know she didn’t force you to prefer women? How can you be sure—”

I cut him off. “If you want me to leave, I will.” Many a time I resolved to break away from him. But though he sometimes irritated me, he’d never treated me as a toy for his pleasure, never tried to take liberties with me. There were worse men. He’d helped me escape Deanna. We made *siolfor* in large quantities because we played and sang together so well.

Threats to leave always got his attention. “Don’t go,” he pleaded. “A woman alone’s not safe in these times. I could not live with myself if I allowed you to come to harm I could have prevented.”

I wanted to tell him I could make my own decisions, but decided against it. I still admired him for his struggles not to be like his fellow Pandarans. These days, though, we seemed to argue a lot. Perhaps I could have stood up to him better, but letting Deanna enter my thoughts always dragged my spirits down.

Padraigh looked through the roof of trees toward the shadowy sky. “We’d better not waste any more time.” Sadness lurked behind his ever-ready smile, matched by regret that flared across my heart. I pushed it down. He’d have to resign himself to the situation and give up his impossible hope.

####

We kept up an inconsequential conversation. The sun had long gone by the time we reached a crossroads and a two-story stone tavern with a thatch roof and oak doors. Radiant windows cut through the dark. Smoke meandered from chimneys at either end. Padraigh stopped. “We’ll do well here. Ebur draws big, noisy crowds who like a good song.”

“Just so there’s enough blankets.” I shivered. “I can’t sleep when it’s cold.”

“I could keep you warm,” he commented, then winced and stammered an apology.

“I can’t believe you made such a stupid remark.” I shook my head and marched toward the tavern.

Noise slammed over me like an avalanche as I pushed the door open. Mugs hammered on wooden tables, with laughter and short talk in several languages. Men in workers’ garb elbowed up to the narrow bar. Whores in clothing that revealed more than it concealed wriggled between the crowded tables. My mouth watered at the smells of wine and roast venison, and a rumble in my belly reminded me how long it had been since I’d last eaten. In a corner, a few men played a game of Senet, the clack of tossed bones lost in the overall din.

A mandola’s plunk and a voice like an angel cut through the noise. The player’s fingers danced over the instrument’s strings. A peek around someone’s head showed me a dais where a dark-

haired woman performed. Patrons at nearby tables listened silently, enraptured.

Padraigh tugged at my arm when I tried to get closer to see. "We must see Ebur first, then settle in."

I let him lead me, but could not tear my gaze away from the singer. We broke through the throng near the kitchen when I heard a voice boom over the din.

"Hey! Padraigh!"

A huge one-armed man ambled toward us, wiping his hand on his apron. A head taller than Padraigh, he had a torso like a tree trunk and shiny black eyes. Thick, dark hair and beard made his craggy face into an island.

"Ebur!" Padraigh roared. The two men embraced, and hearty back-slapping ensued. But despite the exhibition of rowdy virility, my thoughts strayed to the minstrel.

"You're early, man." The giant threw his arm around Padraigh and nearly knocked him over. "Oh, you've a partner? Well!" He shoved us into the kitchen and whispered, "Get out of here now!"

"What is it?" Padraigh and I both demanded.

"Forget performing here tonight or tomorrow. There's a Pandaran *phenai* in here!"

Padraigh's face reddened. "I thought you didn't allow such scum in the place."

Ebur shook his head and looked at the floor. "Padraigh, you haven't been here in Haaton in a while, have you?"

"Haaton?" I exploded. You never said we'd be in Haaton! Lord and Lady, you promised you'd keep me safe!"

"What's wrong with Haaton?"

"It would seem your lady knows the situation better than you, Padraigh." The leviathan rolled his eyes, then looked at me. "Do you want to tell him, or should I?"

"I am *not* his 'lady,'" I snarled. Ebur backed away a step. "Padraigh." I glared at him. "You do remember Pandarus won the last war with Auriga, don't you?" Padraigh's eyes shifted from Ebur to me.

Ebur wiped his hand on his apron. "Haaton had to make, er, territorial concessions afterwards..."

I wanted to kill Padraigh. "We're in Pandarus,

aren't we?"

"Not yet, thank the Goddess," Ebur muttered. "But time may be short. For now, Haaton must grant Pandaran soldiers free passage..."

"Ebur, do you plan to introduce me?"

The newcomer conquered the kitchen like an overseer. Cooks, servers, and other workers all seemed to find other places they needed to be. He was compact, with a small-featured face, near-female, despite the close-cut blond beard. Ice-pale eyes seemed to peer through everything and everyone they trapped in his gaze. His Pandaran *phenai*'s black tunic and sash had no wrinkles or imperfections. When he threw back his cloak, knotted bands tattooed on his neck became visible. I'd once glimpsed similar, if less elaborate marks on Padraigh's neck.

"*Thiyudo* Epilochias." Ebur sounded as if the words hurt his mouth. "I did not see you enter the kitchen." "Thiyudo" was a common sobriquet in Pandarus for a priest, expressing solidarity between equals. Equal *men*, that is. In Pandarus, no female was ever anything but "slave."

Epilochias's eyes froze Padraigh, as if probing for a weakness to exploit. Padraigh had described how he'd deserted the Pandaran army at age twelve, just before the priests would have subjected him to Affirmation, to purge any "unreliable" thoughts, he'd told me. This Padraigh now seemed timid, not at all the man I knew.

Then it was my turn to be subjected to the *phenai*. The way he probed me turned my stomach. As a minstrel, I'm used to being looked at. Most men never look any further than my tits. I'm used to it, mostly. But this stare was like nothing I'd ever experienced, with no emotion, not even idle curiosity. He assayed me like a farmer would a cow or a pig. How much milk would I give? How much would I cost to feed? How long until I outlived my usefulness and must be sold?

"This is Padraigh." Ebur spoke as if civility was an effort. "My entertainment next week."

"A minstrel and his slave," Epilochias murmured. His eyes were not as soft as his voice.

Almost before he finished speaking, I broke in. "I'll thank you not to refer to me like I'm some whore! I'm Padraigh's partner!"

My words broke Padraigh's daze. He stepped between me and the Pandaran. "Finola is my partner. We sing together."

Ebur touched Padraigh's arm. "Why don't I show you two where you—"

"Just a moment." From his tunic, the *phenai* brought out metal object, like a knife, its blade twisted in a knot like those on his collar. "I must test this woman—"

When I saw the knife I stabbed with both hands, fingers spearing sensitive spots on both sides of the priest's neck, which threw him into uncontrollable spasms. I left Padraigh and Ebur behind and bolted from the kitchen to the common. I fought through the crowd with my harp on its leather strap on my back and made for the minstrel. Someone pressed against me and pawed my bottom. I spun and punched him with the side of my fist. Blood fountained from his nose. He collapsed like an empty sack, and I had all the space I needed.

As if I weren't angry enough. First that *phenai* pig stripped me with his eyes, now this.

Four brown-shirted Pandaran soldiers had taken over a table near the minstrel. One who exhibited the blood-red sash of an apprentice wizard, extended his hands at me in a spell. A scrap of magic diverted it before he'd even finished the words.

The novice tried again. Again I defeated the force. "We can do this all night." I almost hoped he would try again. To my disappointment, they retreated, and I had a table from where I could watch the dark-haired woman. I smiled to look at her.

She looked perhaps twenty-five, I guessed, slender as a willow. She'd shaved her hair off the right side and woven the rest into three braids which reached below her shoulders in a way I found attractive. When she played, a smile, all ivory teeth, lit up her entire face. Delight showed in her musicianship. Her fingers danced along the instrument's neck, creating tricky chords as smoothly as a fish gliding through water. I lost myself to a dream, hearing the notes of my harp blend with her mandola. Which led to a fantasy in which her hands caressed me...

I shook away the images. Deanna had used my

loneliness to lead me into a nightmare. I was tired of feeling like the only *Sh'gan* wherever I went, but how could I know how this woman would respond? She might not even be *Sh'gan*. She might be the happy lover of a man who treated her as she deserved.

"You make quite an entrance, Blondie."

I hadn't even noticed when she ended the song to applause and cheers. I looked up and found her in front of me. My face burned, at which she gave a musical-sounding chuckle.

"I... I don't usually have to fight off drunks and Pandarans." I looked down at the table, eyes intent on its gouges and marks.

She put out her hand. "Well, I can't keep calling you 'Blondie.' Do you have a name?"

As I accepted her handshake, I made myself meet her gaze. "Your eyes..." I broke off, aware on a sudden how dotty I sounded.

"My eyes don't match." She laughed again. I wanted to hear her laugh more often. "My Papa used to tell me the Lord and Lady couldn't decide what color eyes to give me, so they gave me blue for the right and green for the left. I'm Suzannah. But my friends call me 'Zannah.'"

"I... I like your songs." I was sure she must think I was inane. "The Lord and Lady gave you a good voice. I like your playing, too. My—my name is Finola."

She was even prettier up close. Dark brows. Large, liquid eyes I could lose myself in forever, with smile lines bordering them. She had a straight, pointed nose, just the right size and shape for her face, and her chin had a tiny dimple.

My heart sounded and felt like a bodhran.

"Ah." She extended the syllable. "In Gilam you'd be Fionnghuala. It means 'white shoulders.'"

"You're... you're from Gilam?" From her accent, I'd guessed her to be from one of the countries they call The Feuding Sisters, Haram and Gilam. "Me, I was named for my mother's sister, who came from Gilam."

"Mmm, yes." She looked at my harp. "How quickly can you tune?"

I slid the instrument off my back, plucked a C string, then tried a double-pluck. "The weather's

been dry, so it's in good tune."

"Well, they're waiting. Why don't you join me? I'm sure we must know many songs between us."

I hesitated. "Are you sure?" My insides churned like butter. Was this some kind of spell? Did she even realize what was happening to me? Just what *was* happening to me? Then she smiled, openly and without guile, as best I could tell. I had to trust myself. I swallowed hard. "If you'd like. Maybe just one."

One tune led to another. We played "The Rising of the Moon," "The Ash Grove," and "The Drunken Sailor." I learned two she'd composed, an instrumental she called "On the Road to Chophtha," and a sarcastic one about a slave, called "He Thinks He'll Keep Me." I taught her my arrangement of "Jar of Whiskey," which made the audience stomp their feet. During a pause, a glance toward the kitchen revealed Ebur and Padraigh arguing with Epilochias, all using many gestures. I wondered how long I'd be safe from the Pandaran.

Suzannah was like sunshine breaking through clouds, and I soon banished Epilochias from my thoughts. My heart lifted, such as I had never experienced before. Padraigh was an excellent partner, keyed to my playing, but Suzannah was a better partner than anyone I'd ever known. She amazed me the way she could anticipate my every change, every pause, every fill, fitting her music into the spaces I gave her as if she'd originated the ideas.

An hour vanished before we finished. I wanted to be with 'Zannah, *Sh'gan* or not.

She was someone I'd waited for all my life.

"You're too good for this place," I told her. We occupied my table near the dais, with tankards of ale. Epilochias was gone; like as not, Padraigh had handled him.

Suzannah blushed. Or was it the light? "If I think I'm better than I am, the audience will see it. If I keep at this ale, it'll affect my performance, not to mention my mind. I've an urgent need to pee." She set a hand on my forearm. "Don't go away. I'll be right back."

I wanted to jump into the air and cheer, but

managed to say, "I'll be here."

As the crowd closed around her, I followed her with my eyes, so intent on her I barely saw Padraigh slouch to a seat beside me.

"Why don't you play so well when you're with me?" he asked. He made short, jerky movements with his hands. Shifted my mug, then 'Zannah's, then the pitcher. Rubbed the back of his neck, the legs of his trousers. Scraped a hand through his hair.

"Oh, it's all her, she's much better than me," I stammered. I shook out my hands then buried them under me to hide their trembling. "Please don't be angry." I hated how servile I became whenever someone seemed cross with me. Deanna still echoed in my memory. I tried to change the subject. "What happened with Epilochias?"

I could not read the look he gave me. "Ebur got the Pandaran slug thrown out. I'm not angry with you. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Where's Suzannah?"

"Oh, she... She's gone to the jakes. Outside, I mean."

He gave a slow nod. "Well, you and I have to settle in, then rehearse. But we can wait til she's back, so you can thank her and say goodbye. I wouldn't want—"

"I'm not saying goodbye." I rushed the words out. "Not to her, at least. I'm... I'm plan to ask her if I can travel with her. For a while. To see..."

"She's bespelled you." Padraigh's face was grim. "So my care was wasted. You—"

"Stop with your shite how you need to cure me! The only cure I need is of believing you!" I balled my hands into fists, so tight my fingernails dug into my palms. I might have punched him, but for Ebur's sudden appearance.

"Finola, what have you done with Suzannah?"

I sprang up. "What have I done with Suzannah? She's gone to the jakes."

"She's not there." Ebur began to walk around aimlessly, flexing his arm. "We can't find her. She's not at the jakes. I sent a woman in after her. Nobody's seen her since she left the common. She's overdue for her next set."

"She just left." I recalled the way she shoved through the crowd. Lord and Lady, no! Let that not

be the last I'd seen her! I wanted to say she would be all right, but my throat closed and I could not speak.

Ebur's head dropped. "This close to Pandarus, there's only one answer when a woman disappears."

I looked from Padraigh to Ebur. "Epilochias has her." Padraigh said, his voice tight.

Recalling the way the Pandaran had stared at me, I clutched a small pouch of five-finger grass, ague weed, cinnamon, and sage I kept tied around my waist to ward off evil spirits, and uttered a short prayer to the Lord and Lady.

Ebur scowled. "He wanted 'Zannah. Fancies he loves her." I stiffened. "He must have decided to take her. I thought I eliminated him." He sighed. "At least with you two here, I have a week to find someone else."

I swore. "You'll let him get away with it? What does that say to the other women who work here? Cooks, servers, scullery maids, customers's wives... Even the whores. A slave-catcher can come into your tavern and take any woman he wants?"

Padraigh grasped my arm. I jerked free. "Finola, Epilochias is not an ordinary slave-catcher. He's wealthy and powerful. He's a *phenai*, for Jehan's sake!"

"I don't care if he's—"

"What can we do?" Ebur asked. "I can't close up to go after Suzannah?"

I wanted to slap him. "Don't pretend that's even a possibility! You've just made it clear you don't plan to do anything! 'Oh, well, he stole one. Plenty more left.' What if she were your sister? Your mother?" I glared at Padraigh, who colored and seemed to wither. "Padraigh, you say you love me. What if he took me? Would you abandon me to him?"

"I should say not! But you can't rescue her by yourself. He's a *phenai*. He has sorcery beyond what you or I have ever imagined."

"So you're afraid."

Padraigh's eyes flashed. "I'm not afraid. I just wonder what's in it for me, to attack a powerful *phenai* to rescue a *Sh'gan* woman you've just met, then see you leave me after you've saved her.

What if she's like Deanna?"

"If you were as sensitive to the magic as you claim, you'd have not asked the question. You'd have sensed the way her songweaving and mine blended so seamlessly." I knew what he wanted. "If-if... If we can save her, I'll-I'll stay with you." I told myself he was right to question my judgment. Reminded myself how kind he was to me, how well we played together. I cursed myself. Making excuses for not getting what I wanted.

But a vision of 'Zannah in a cage banished the excuses. My heart became a stone.

If Padraigh could sense my feelings, he gave no sign. "All right, Finola. We'll try. But I'll hold you to your promise."

#

An hour later, Padraigh and I were cantering along the South Road toward Pandarus on a horse Ebur had lent us. I sat behind Padraigh, my arms locked around him. Branches formed a roof over the road, blocking the moon's weak light.

"Can't you make this beast go faster?"

"In the dark?" Padraigh called over his shoulder. "Even if I tried it, this horse has more sense than to gallop into the dark. We'd crash into a tree or a branch and dash our brains out. We can't rescue your friend if that happens."

I knew he was right. But it did not banish the icy serpents from my belly.

#####

We caught Epilochias sooner than I'd expected. He had created a transparent blue magic dome in a narrow canyon. We crept as close as we dared. He'd wound sorcerous lightning bolts around 'Zannah's mouth, wrists and ankles. I could see her chin move, and knew she was trying to weave a song-spell, without effect, to judge by the tears gleaming on her face.

The Pandaran looked at her as if she were a wayward child. Like Suzannah's, his mouth moved but I could hear nothing. Then he stretched out his hand and ruffled her hair as a parent would do to a juvenile. The look she gave him would have poisoned a viper.

I began to sing about 'Zannah. I wanted to

touch her mind, to tell her I was near, without betraying my presence to Epilochias. I reached out with a spell to fight his sorcery. I battled for what seemed forever. The resistance vanished and 'Zannah's mind embraced mine.

Then Padraigh seized me, his hand clamped on my mouth I could utter a cry. "We must get away now!" he whispered. "Damned *phenai*'s too much for us!"

I wriggled my right arm free and punched Padraigh, with no appreciable result because I could not plant my feet.

"I'm not abandoning her!" For sure I shouted too loud, but didn't care. Padraigh swatted me away like an insect, then raised his right arm, fist clenched. His arm took on a red glow. I remembered the Pandaran sorcery he never brought up. His body began to tremble, and his face twisted into a grimacing stranger, not Padraigh, but something darker, uglier, more gruesome than I'd ever seen. Had Epilochias completed some spell begun in Pandarus long ago?

"Now you see my true face, girl!" He snarled like a demon, his mouth as dark as a cavern. His flesh turned the pale brown of baked mud, and his eyes flashed like a beast of prey and disappeared under the now-shelflike brow.

I wanted to flee. But Padraigh, my friend, had not abandoned me when I needed him. I fought down my fear and sang, a love-spell at first; what I felt for Padraigh. Not sexual, for it could never be. Yet I knew he had a good heart, despite how he could annoy me, and I aimed my magic at his heart.

I met the sorcery within him head on. Our spells, male and female, crashed like thunder and blazed like fire. The combined power almost lifted me from my feet, but I struggled and regained my balance. I hurled a song-spell at him. He flung a bolt at me. Back and forth we fought, each countering the other's power.

He thrust a black spell, engulfing me like a shroud. But my song cut the dark as a knife cuts cloth, and shredded his enchantment. As the sorcery dissipated, the monstrous visage faded, and the Padraigh I knew returned.

His face seemed to brighten, like sunlight breaking through clouds. But the brightness

dimmed. "Did I hurt you?" He turned his face away.

I cupped his chin in my hand and forced him to meet my eyes. "It wasn't you, it was the sorcery they forced on you. And because you spent your lifetime fighting it, it never took you over entirely. They tried to make you like them, but you defeated them." I released his chin and gave his chest a light poke. "Despite the fact you wish I could become someone I am not, you've never harmed me. I find you decent and honorable. I can never be your love, but I would like to think we can be friends."

His look softened. For an instant, I feared he might try to kiss me. My face must have revealed my thought, for he pulled away and gave a nervous laugh. "You'd think by now I'd know better," he said. Perhaps the fight helped him adjust his opinions. "But I have a thick head. I'm glad to be your friend. I'm sorry for all the stupid things I've said and done. I hope you'll forgive my mistakes."

"Padraigh..." I touched his cheek. "You have no reason to reproach yourself. Sure, you open your mouth without thinking, but who doesn't? I make mistakes too. I am not... without regrets. Now though, I have one more matter..."

He gave an eager nod. "'Zannah. Can we conjure some good spells?"

"When I told you I had one more matter, I didn't mean to—"

"You think I'd let you have all the fun alone?"

"You don't have to."

He shook his head. "I'd be no friend if I let my inaction cause you harm. You've never faced any power like him, a Pandaran *phenai*, a powerful, *EVIL* sorcerer. There's nothing he will not do to subdue you. You're no helpless girl, but Epilochias would crush you like an egg. In fact, he might crush us both."

I read the sincerity in his face. This was about more than just my pride and desire for him to see me as his equal. This was about Suzannah's freedom, even her life. Enslavement would kill her. He made sense. "All right. We're partners. *Equal* partners in this effort. Am I clear?"

He flashed the familiar grin. "Since I've known you, I've never doubted where you stood on anything, despite my wanton, foolish actions. What shall we do?"

"I'm open to suggestions, my friend."

"All right, here's what I think..."

#####

I had returned to the copse whence I had launched my initial attempt to reach Suzannah. I had but a vague idea where to find Padraigh. "Better you not know," he'd said. So as I left the shelter of the pines, I took time to reflect. I'd stayed with Padraigh due to gratitude, and because I feared hurting him. Then I met a dark-haired woman with mismatched eyes who seemed to be the person I had wanted to be all my life. Bold and funny and beautiful. She sang of life and love with a conviction which came from a heart that had known those emotions well. Sheer joy glowed in her eyes, her melodies and music.

Orphaned at seven in war-torn Gilam, she sang of a daily life gripped by hunger, biting cold and terrible fear. Yet her songs also included how blessed she'd been to meet the kind, decent man who had saved her from the streets and changed her life forever. Even as she'd questioned why the Lord and Lady had taken her parents, the tragedy had set ablaze a fire in her to some day help other children who had been torn away from their parents. In songs and talk, she had offered her soul to me. Meeting her felt like the peak of all my own dreams.

Now I approached Epilochias's dome again and used my magic. My spells had weakened the Pandaran's sorcery, so broke through more easily. Again I felt Suzannah's presence. It seemed a little weaker, as if her magic supply had dwindled, so I linked to her to feed her mine.

"Who—?" As I increased the spell, our minds met. I felt her pain and fear. *"Master, please, no—"*

"Be calm, 'Zannah darling, it's Finola. I'm here, and I'll free you." I tried to tamp down my anger at what he'd already done to her.

"You're not Finola, you're a phantasm, another trick, to torment me. Go away!"

My face flushed, but I forced myself to take deep breaths to calm myself. *"'Zannah, dear, for sure it's Finola. How would Epilochias know me, when we met not three hours ago?"* To convince

her, I sang her composition "He Thinks He'll Keep Me," and layered in her harmony part with songweaving. As I did this, I attacked the spells gaoling her. *"Could an illusion do this?"*

Suzanna's songweaving burst free in a flood. When I kept up my magical assault on the lightning bindings, she spoke. "Finola, don't waste your magic, I'll free myself! Get me out of this damned dome!"

I held her hand and focused my magic. The dome blackened like burnt paper. Suzannah gathered me into a tight hug. "I want to kiss you!"

My heart leapt. "You're not saying you're—"

The grin lit up her face again. "You are, too, aren't you?" Laughter sprang from her like a melody.

"Such charm," another voice broke in. Our joy vanished. Epilochias approached from amid the dome's remnants. He dragged Padraigh behind him, who looked near death. He did not react when Epilochias dropped him like a bundle of rags.

My heartbeat galloped. A desert would have been less dry than my mouth. Thoughts roared in my head. I vocalized a song-spell, but the Pandaran ignored me as if I were a moth.

"I must have made some mistake," he muttered. "No slave could do conjure such magic."

My thoughts had hurtled through my mind, but his incredible arrogance brought them to a halt. Ignore *me*, would he?

I directed a magic blast straight at Epilochias. While my attack occupied him, I gutted the sorcery that still clung to Suzannah. When our minds were linked by my spell, I told her to combine her power with mine, but emphasized her need to seem still enspelled. Padraigh had been correct when he warned me not to challenge Epilochias alone. The battle had been difficult when he'd been busy with Suzannah; defending myself when he had no need to keep 'Zannah in thrall now became next to impossible. I formed mystical shields; he demolished them like cobwebs.

"Little songmaker." He flung spell after spell. "Your petty tricks have no effect on a master of the dark arts such as I!" I fell back. With mystical claws he gripped my torso. I relived the time I'd battled a giant constrictor. That kind of serpent has no poison, no bite of any kind to kill you quickly.

It waits until you exhale, then squeezes before you can draw your next breath.

Epilochias's sorcery would squeeze me to death soon.

Sweat drenched my forehead and stung my eyes. My magic grew feeble. My ribs ached. I tried seizing the claws but managed only to burn my hands, which forced a scream from my throat. *He'll kill me*, I thought as consciousness faded.

"*Finola, I'm free!*" Padraigh's familiar voice brought fresh mystical energy. "*We'll all join all our magic and destroy this pig!*" I let their magics fill me, and felt renewed strength.

I freed my ribs from the spell and pressed the attack. Now the Pandaran fell back. His face showed shock and disbelief as I cast enchantments. "*Attack, attack! Don't let him think!*" Padraigh's presence. 'Zannah's "voice" resounded with the same power, yet less swagger. "*You're powerful. Keep at it.*"

Under our combined assault, Epilochias staggered and fell. His arms flapped, like a dying bird's wings. His power had ceased to be a factor. "*Would you like to finish him off, 'Zannah?*" I remembered her tears when she could not sing.

But Suzannah declined. "*If I kill him, I become like him.*"

Padraigh seemed to have no such qualms; his magic blast exposed the Pandaran's skeleton for an instant, then reduced him to a black, mass of smoke and ash.

Epilochias's death freed us all. We set off for Ebur's. Suzannah and I shared the horse, at Padraigh's insistence. I balked at first, but after a brief thought, I gave in. We all said little on the way.

#####

For 'Zannah and me, the quiet extended into the next day, and the next. She agreed with me that traveling together would be a fine idea. Our joy died a quick death, however, once I related how Padraigh had helped me get away from Deanna before, and his plans for me now. She gave a weak smile when I brought up my promise to remain with him in exchange for his help to save her.

"So the choice is obvious." She took me into



Lion Lore
By Angela K Scott

her arms. We remained clasped for a long time. Neither spoke. When she released me, tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She swallowed hard, looked away, sighed. "I guess I'll never see you again."

I could not speak, my throat had filled up so.

Then Padraigh appeared. How long had he been nearby? What had he heard? "Never is a very long time," he spoke in a softer voice than I'd grown used to from him.

I wiped my tears on my sleeve. Stammered, "Y-yes, it is." My voice kept shaking. I tightened my grip on 'Zannah, with a prayer. *Lord and Lady, let this moment never end.* My hands trembled and my heartbeat raced.

"What's happened here seems pretty obvious, Finola. You two—"

"Starting to give me orders already?" I rose to look him in the eye. "I know you mean well, Padraigh. You're not like... like *him*. Perhaps I should tell you more often how blessed I feel for knowing you. You exasperate me lots of times, but your intentions have always been good, and..."

He touched gentle fingertips to my lips. "Doom's road is paved with good intentions," he said. "In this case, mine. You know I never wanted any evil to befall you. But *him* ... He thought the gods sent him 'Zannah so he could protect her from other Pandarans. I'd guess it surprised him when she refused. He must have told himself he would always protect her, as soldiers protect each

other, back to back, one equal to another. But then he ruffled Suzannah's hair... You don't do that to your partner and equal.

"A simple action, but he revealed his true self, and showed me myself. Like me, he convinced himself she needed him to *protect* her. Never asked her what *she* thought.

"I'm not him. It's not enough to want *my* idea of 'what's best.' It was arrogant and vain for me to think I knew the best choices for you, and to give myself charge over your life. When did the Lord and Lady make me their equal?"

My heart leapt. "You mean..." I squeezed 'Zannah's hand. She responded in kind.

Padraigh nodded. "Go. Your destiny is not mine to give you. You did not have to earn it. It's been yours since your mother and father gave you life. If I stand in your way, then I'm no better than the Pandaran swine Epilochias. No better than any slave-catcher."

'Zannah and I each kissed Padraigh on the cheek, found our packs, and left. Before the forest closed around me, I looked back. He remained where we'd left him.

"He truly loved me," I murmured, and bid him a silent farewell.

Astral Planes

David C. Kopaska-Merkel

When I was a capsule – out on the astral planes,

My paralysing pistol could coagulate your veins,

And the knobs go flipping and the signals pipping away.

I'm faster than the speed of light, I see what can't be seen,

I'll flip my knob and flash it on your atmospheric screen.

I'm lighter than a feather, I'm infinitely tall;
My footsteps set me flying like a gas-filled rubber ball.

Bespattered by the fragments of planetary

soils,

Sometime I feel I suffocate in Monty Python's coils.

There's an easy satellite rider, he's a friend to me and you;

Some people call him Quatermass, some call him Dr Who.

The moon it is my satellite, it's under my control;

I'll plant the flag; I'll call it mine, and dig another hole.

There is not a grain of truth in what we hear or see,

In concepts of magnitude, nor of velocity;
It's all governed by the principal of relativity.

The Mekon is a poppy-head; he's coloured mountain-green

How he floats upon his gravy-boat, like a glossy magazine.

When I was a capsule – out on the astral planes,

My paralysing pistol could coagulate your veins,

And the knobs go flipping and the signals pipping away.

Marooned

David C. Kopaska-Merkel

A pirate maid,
skull but no X bones,
firm flesh below:

it's the stuff of nightmares,
but wide awake I was,
and not a ship in sight.

There's been no sea here for
300 million years or more.

I showed her some fossils,
her skull nodded,
then shook side to side;

the meaning unclear
until she put her hand on me,

began to undo buttons.
If she thought it strange,
her and me together,
she gave no sign.

She turned some fossils in her hand:
I showed her sea lilies,
the ridged shells of brachiopods,
and divers creatures
signaling a milk-warm, ancient ocean.
She seemed to nod agreement
and I noticed she was with child;
she hadn't been, an hour before,
I felt her hand upon my cheek,
blinked a long, slow blink;
suddenly they upped sails,
she and her small sailor boy.

The ancient sea up to my knees; tide rising
fast,
I held notebook and camera high
and sloshed toward shore—
awoke upon the fossil bed, my clothing dry,
the only trace she left
some marks on me,
and a fleeting musky scent.

Harde Science Fiction by David Rich

Captain Penelope Harde stood at the podium addressing the crew of the *SS Antarctica*. All were assembled in the mess hall to hear her speak before they commenced the groundbreaking mission.

"I am humbled," she said, "to be leading the most important endeavor in space exploration history." Harde was cognizant that using the word 'humbled' was an abuse of language. She was bragging, and 'humble' wasn't in her normal vocabulary.

She also recognized that its being the most 'important endeavor in space exploration history' was debatable. Yet, the first manned voyage to Farout was nonetheless a big deal. She'd be the first human being to step on the most distant known planetoid in the Solar System!

To her left, the flash of her communicator

emitted the familiar blink-pattern belonging to Admiral Song. She pursed her lips at his timing and ignored the call.

"Our leadership would only select the finest captain and crew to carry out this mission," she continued, with greater emphasis on the word 'captain.' In all honesty, she had some doubts about various crew members.

She spent the next half-hour describing every success and accolade in her career. "In conclusion," she remarked finally, "you should have every reason to be confident I will lead this mission with utmost prowess. Thank you all."

At that, she stepped off the podium, grabbed her communicator, contacted the admiral, and began her walk toward the bridge.

"Harde!" Admiral Song responded quickly over the comm, "Why didn't you answer my call?"

"I was dealing with a crew emergency," Captain Harde replied. "I called at the very first possible moment."

There was a long, silent pause. Harde knew that the admiral doubted her story, but she bet that Song wouldn't have the time or patience to interrogate further.

"Thank you for calling," Song said calmly. "We have a change in mission plan."

#####

When Captain Harde arrived at the bridge, most of her bridge crew had already taken their positions.

"Number Two," Harde shouted at her executive officer, Commander Misha Garsovich. "In my ready room. Right now."

She caught Garsovich's eyes glancing around the room acknowledging the crewmembers' cringes. Harde took consolation in that she could at least fill a room with dread from a simple command. Then, Garsovich followed right behind her.

Once in the privacy of the ready room, he asked her, "Why do you always call me 'Number Two?' I'm the First Officer. Shouldn't I be 'Number One?'" He then averted his gaze.

Harde adored moments when Garsovich broke from his stiff and purely professional manner. Most men she'd commanded were simply terrified of her temper. They would never dare ask such a question.

But he was different.

"Listen Commander, I shall say this once. I'm captain of this ship. There's only one 'Number One' around here: me. Clear?"

"Perfectly."

Harde appreciated that Garsovich could communicate honestly with her while at the same time accepting her personality unconditionally. She'd never met anyone like him.

Then Harde pounded the wall in frustration right by a square inset nook. Into the wall's nook she shouted, "Tea! Earl Grey! Freezing goddamn cold with two sugars!"

She stared at the inset, waiting for her iced tea to appear. During the awkward silence, she spotted Garsovich's Adam's apple rise.

"Come on! I don't have all day!" she shouted at the inset.

Finally, the inset's back panel opened. Out popped the head of Bill Sinclair, her least favorite canteen employee. He sported a chef's hat with the 'Galactic Food Services' logo. It was a sour reminder that Sinclair, working for the fleet's subcontractor, technically didn't fall under her command.

Mocking Harde's tone of voice, he sneered, "Tea... Earl grey... Iced... For crying out loud, here's your damn tea! Sheesh!"

Sinclair retracted behind the panel and shut the door. Harde wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes. Then, in stressed out slurps, she gulped down the iced tea.

"What's this all about, Captain?" Garsovich asked.

"Farout's off."

"Off?"

"You heard me."

"How could they cancel a mission this big at the last minute?"

"They didn't cancel it. That's the thing. The *Antarctica* isn't going. They're sending the *SS Harpo Marx* instead."

"What??"

"I don't want to hear it, Commander. You're preaching to the choir. Our orders instead are to chase after some silly asteroid."

"Were you told why?"

"Apparently, with our proximity and horsepower, we're the most suited to haul this asteroid to station Outer Space 8.99 3/4. Admiral Song says it's got more lead than they've ever seen in any space rock."

"Lead?"

"Yes, you know, the metal?"

"Yes, Captain," he responded to her sarcasm with acceptable deference. "Can't lead be used to shield human beings against radiation?"

"The rock's also loaded with osmium and iridium."

Garsovich squinted and shook his head.

Harde jumped back in, "They're rare, but far denser and even more effective as radiation barriers. All of these metals are extremely heavy; it's prohibitive to launch them from the Earth's surface in meaningful quantities."

"Sounds like the mission could be very high-value to the Deep-Space Exploration and Colonization Program."

"Don't offer me your solace, Commander. Unfortunately, I suspect compared to the Farout mission, the history books will bestow less glory upon me. Those fools! I deserve the Farout mission! Damn you, *Harpo Marx*!"

####

Two weeks later, the *SS Antarctica* arrived at Outer Space 8.99 3/4. Harde futilely wondered why space station naming conventions couldn't just round up to the nearest digit. You'd think they were selling gasoline.

The ship attached to the station via its pod bay, and Harde herself chose to escort her new guests aboard. She'd been ordered to the station to pick up Drs. Steven Stephens and Stephen Stevens, both eminent experts in the study of asteroids. Although their names were pronounced precisely the same way, apparently they had no familial relationship.

Harde walked past the space pods that sat in the bay. She suspected they'd become an important part of the mission of grappling the asteroid and lugging it back to the station. She approached an exterior door in the ship's pod bay. On the other side of the door, she knew, was an umbilical to Outer Space 8.99 3/4, where her two guests were expecting to board.

After a few minutes of waiting for the door to open, she pursed her lips and began tapping her fingers against the back of her opposite hand.

"When's the door going to open?" she asked a nearby officer.

"They're probably doing safety checks, Captain," the woman replied. "I'll contact Engineering for you if you'd like."

She knew the officer would call some peon in the Engineering Department. But Harde was captain! This required escalation.

She opened her comm to Lieutenant Hal Epstein, Head of Engineering. Harde happened to be on a 'friendly' basis with him.

"What can I do for you, Captain?" Epstein's voice rang in her comm.

"Hal, you can call me Penelope."

"Yes, Captain. Umm, Penelo-"

"Hal, can you get a door open for me? It's in the pod bay. The one attached to OS 8.99 3/4."

"I'll look into it, Captain. I mean, Penelope. I think we're still doing safety checks."

She detected nonchalance in his tone and wasn't encouraged. Harde continued tapping her fingers for several minutes. The personnel nearby seemed busy. Were they too busy to open the damn door? Didn't they realize who was in charge of the damn ship?

The loss of the Farout mission weighing on her, Harde's facial muscles tightened. She'd accept no further nonsense. The captain clenched her communicator in one hand, walked straight to the door, and pounded it with her other fist.

"Open the pod bay door, Hal!" she shouted into her communicator. "Open the pod bay door! Hal, open the pod bay door! Damn it!"

She stepped to the side of the door and ripped several panels off. Harde spent the next twenty minutes hot wiring it. When it opened, safety warnings blared. It's difficult to find good help these days, she thought.

On the other side of the door were too short bald men she could barely tell apart. Harde assumed they were her new science officers, Steven Stephens and Stephen Stevens.

#####

The *Antarctic* blasted from Outer Space 8.99 3/4 to the Kuiper belt toward a unique floating

goldmine of radiation-shielding heavy metals. And in outer space, osmium, iridium, and lead were more precious than gold, for they conferred healthier long-term living.

After three months' travel, they approached the mission's coordinates. The entire bridge crew was staring at the asteroid on the giant viewscreen.

"It's odd-looking," Commander Garsovich commented to Harde.

Harde wasn't sure why her stare lingered far too long on Garsovich. When one of the two Stevens-Stephens scientists noticed her gazing at him, she quickly redirected her eyes to the asteroid's image on the viewscreen and then to navigation control.

"Whatever it looks like," she said, "let's just grab it and lug it home."

"It has some unusual features," Steven Stephens and Stephen Stevens said in unison.

"You guys really have to stop doing that," Harde said. "It's difficult enough to tell you apart."

Stephen Stevens (or Steven Stephens, she only 75% sure) approached the screen. "Look at that," he said, pointing to a peculiar protrusion.

"It looks like a big green toothbrush," said Steven Stephens. "Let's call that feature 'Big Green Toothbrush.'"

The other scientist said, "This could be evidence of alien technology!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Harde replied.

Then the scientist pair pulled up additional close-up images of the asteroid onto the viewscreen. The bridge grew silent. The surface was simply too ordered and elaborate to be natural. If that large detail were a 'toothbrush,' the asteroid had a whole medicine cabinet.

Garsovich commented, "If I were an alien on a long distance, multi-generational voyage, I'd cover it in radiation-shielding metals."

Harde stepped closer to the screen and studied the images. As her eyes silently rolled across the amazing, intricate structures, she grasped the significance of this discovery. In that moment, she'd all but forgotten about Farout.

She imagined her ship bringing home the first evidence of intelligent life in the celestials! Her mind conceived various courses of action in search

of the one that would bestow upon her the most accolades.

"This is... incredible," Harde said.

"And the aliens must have really big mouths," Steven Stephens said. "Because that's one Big Green Toothbrush!"

"It's not a toothbrush, for Pete's sake!" Harde shouted.

"Possibly. But we should still refer to it as 'Big Green Toothbrush,'" Steven Stephens replied.

"That's how you're supposed to label features of alien artifacts. After something that it reminds you of."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Nonetheless, it will forever endure in the minds of men as 'Big Green Toothbrush.'"

The other scientist, Stephen Stevens, nodded.

"Say 'Big Green Toothbrush' one more time, and I'll space you both out the airlock," Harde said, then turning to Garsovich, "Commander... in my ready room."

As she exited the bridge, she could just barely hear Steven Stephens mumble under his breath, "Big Green Toothbrush. Big Green Toothbrush."

####

Both in the ready room, Harde found herself again gazing at the commander. Catching herself, she looked at the ceiling.

"Captain, our orders were to tug that thing home," Garsovich said. "We need to explain our findings to command."

Redirecting her eyes back to Garsovich and trying to ignore the fact that she was blushing, she replied, "You know what they'll say, Commander... They'll say our orders are to tug that thing home."

"But you don't want to."

"Oh, I certainly do. But I'm not giving someone else the opportunity to be the first person inside that thing."

With Garsovich, she felt comfortable being transparent about her motives. He knew her too well for her to bother hiding the truth. In fact, the better he understood her desires, the more effective he was in driving crew execution toward them. Wow, she liked that about him!

"Captain, we have no idea what that thing is..."

It could be dangerous to the crew."

"To me as well, but I'm coming on the away mission."

After a brief pause and an inhale, Garsovich tapped his chin repeatedly, alternating two fingers. Harde took his contemplation as an encouraging sign.

"Maybe it doesn't want to be lugged to a human base. It could be dangerous to the entire human race," Garsovich said. "So... yes, I agree with you, Captain. We need to check it out first ourselves."

Harde grinned. He'd schemed a perfectly legitimate rationale for promoting her fame and glory. What a mind on that man, she thought!

It occurred to Harde that not every captain was so lucky to have a Commander Misha Garsovich. In fact, she imagined that a captain could go her entire career without ever meeting a Commander Misha Garsovich. Or worse, she thought, a captain could grow old and lonely and die without ever meeting a commander who just appreciated her for who she was, both ambition and baggage alike, without ever doubting his devotion to her!

Burying her train of thought, Harde's grin briefly evaporated.

####

"This away mission will be quite unusual and dangerous. So, I'm starting with volunteers," Garsovich said to the bridge crew.

Harde smirked. She knew full well that she'd order people to join if the right ones didn't volunteer.

"This is insane! It's beyond any accepted protocol," Steven Stephens complained. "We need to communicate with Command first. They'll be seeing the data and images soon."

"And that's why we need to go inside now!" Stephen Stevens, the other scientist, exclaimed.

Harde was stunned. "You two can disagree with one another?" she asked.

"Most certainly," Stephen Stevens replied. "As a matter of fact, I personally think that feature looks more like a disposable razor than a toothbrush... But, this mission, Captain..."

Harde resisted the urge to strangle him; she was too eager to find out why the scientist favored her admittedly reckless plan. The entire bridge

crew, in fact, stared silently at Stephens Stevens.

Appearing self-conscious, Stevens looked nervously at the other faces on the bridge. But the crew was keenly regarding him. Harde gave him an affirmative nod to encourage him along.

"I'm a scientist," Stephen Stevens continued. "Being the first person on that thing is a dream come true. It's the greatest opportunity *any* of us will see in our lifetimes."

"You can be certain that I'm coming with you," Lieutenant Aliyah Cassidy, Head of Security, said. Cassidy was petite, but her sharpshooting skills and knowledge of weaponry were unmatched.

In short order, a team of a dozen had volunteered. Even Stevens Stephens, yes, even Stevens Stephens (say that five times), the doubter and frequent mentioner of alien toothbrushes, agreed to go along.

Thank goodness for group think, Harde thought.

#####

In the shuttle pod on the way to the alien artifact, Cassidy was handing out hand blasters. Harde raised her hand to refuse; she always carried her own trusted sidearm.

The overly excited Stephen Stevens stared pitifully at Cassidy's giant laser rifle. "Can I hold it?" he begged.

"Not a chance," Cassidy replied. "You have any idea how powerful this is?"

"We're not shooting at anything!" Steven Stephens, the dour scientist, said. "We have no idea what's inside that thing."

"Which is why we need to be armed," Stephen Stevens argued.

"Now, Steven Stephens is right," Commander Garsovich said.

Everyone stared at the XO. Since both scientists' names were pronounced identically, no one could possibly know to which one he was referring.

"I mean that one," Garsovich said, pointing to the more level-headed scientist, Steven Stephens. "Keep all firearms on *safety-lock* until there's some real emergent danger. That's an order."

Harde didn't argue; she agreed. The last thing she wanted was someone screwing up the mission because they were excited to fire a blaster.

She looked out the pod's window and examined the asteroid's intricate features, which didn't wholly resemble a city. She postulated that they could be the facilities and infrastructure to support a city inside the asteroid. Perhaps when they found their way in, she thought, they'd find millions of aliens living in harmony.

Then again, maybe the aliens didn't want to be disturbed. It was clearly best that she be the one to make first contact rather than haul it millions of miles in a direction it didn't want to go.

They flew around the object several times in search of an opening. It had to have a door.

Then, Harde spotted something. "I spotted something," she said, thinking that her statement was rather 'on the nose.'

The apparent entrance, a dark pit, had been right there all along at the base of (though Harde struggled for a better name) Big Green Toothbrush.

#####

The shuttle anchored into the surface of the alien asteroid, right at the base of the toothbrush. Donning grappling space suits, the crew trekked to the dark pit Harde had identified.

The captain looked straight 'down' the hole. It seemed to extend to infinity.

Suddenly, from the depths of the hole, came a platform.

Harde looked at the crew and then broke the radio silence, "You suspect that's our way in?"

"We should be careful," Garsovich radioed back.

"I'll go first," Cassidy, the security officer, said.

Harde nodded affirmatively, and Cassidy stepped onto the round platform. Several seconds later, the platform dropped, pulling Cassidy along.

"Cassidy!... Cassidy!" Garsovich shouted.

"The metals are probably shielding the electromagnetic radio signal," Steven Stephens said. "Try leaning right over the hole."

Garsovich glanced around at the bewildered crew, then took the scientist's advice. "Cassidy? Cassidy? Do you read?" he radioed.

Within a few moments, he continued, "I can hear her. She's okay... She's inside!"

Everyone in the group cheered. Harde even

raised her right hand above her head. She hoped she would remember Cassidy's bravery.

####

One by one they made their way down the shaft via the moving platform. During her own journey, Harde found it difficult to estimate the length of the shaft. She could only perceive acceleration and duration, but she ballparked it at 300 meters.

At the end of the shoot, they'd each stepped off the platform onto a bed of golden sand. The crew looked into the distance. The place seemed inconceivably vast.

Their grappling hooks didn't latch to the sand. But Harde hadn't noticed it at first because there was gravity! It felt slightly less than *g*.

There were dunes of sand for as far as she could see into the distance. The 'upper' portion of the asteroid's interior was brightly lit, simulating a sunny day.

Kicking the sand, Stephen Stevens said excitedly, "It's like the beach! But no water... Isn't there a word for a vast sandy place with no water?"

"Yeah, a 'desert' you bonehead," the grumpy Steven Stephens replied. "By the way, there's almost no particle radiation to speak of here. And my sample readings suggest this air should be breathable. Not that I recommend removing your helmets."

But just as Steven Stephens said that, Stephen Stevens took off his helmet and inhaled deeply.

"Science Officer Stevens! That was reckless!" Garsovich shouted.

Harde appreciated Garsovich's desire to make orderly decisions. But she felt she had to try it.

Reckless or not, Harde released the latches of her own helmet. She joined Stephen Stevens in breathing the air. There was very little odor that she could detect or identify.

Following the captain's lead, other crew members removed their helmets. Garsovich was last to remove his, and did so only after Harde shot him a sarcastic stare.

"It'll be easier to move without our space suits," she said. "It's warm but surprisingly comfortable. Still, make sure to carry your full water supply."

The crew stripped out of their suits. Stephen

Stevens, of course, was first out of his. He immediately strolled a short distance from the crew. "Do you hear buzzing?" he asked. Eventually, the rest had removed their space suits and ambled toward him.

"Yeah, I hear it too," Garsovich said, "right over that"—Stephen Stevens took off running—"dune." Turning to the more judicious scientist, Garsovich asked, "Does he always do this?"

"Only when excited. And I'm afraid he's as excited as ever," Steven Stephens replied.

"Well, let's not stand around here. Let's go after him," Harde ordered.

At that, the crew jogged after Stephen Stevens. They met up with the brash scientist at the crest of a sand dune. Everyone looked down to the other side of the dune, where there was a black, immensely tall, rectangular stone.

It was humming.

Garsovich said, "It's like a—"

"Monolith," Harde completed the thought.

Suddenly, Harde heard five musical notes, then drums, from a hauntingly familiar Richard Strauss piece.

"Okay," Garsovich said, "let's approach it slowly. And *no one* touches it!"

After ambling toward the monolith, the crew had encircled it. They stared at it, trying to comprehend its deeper meaning.

After all his fervor, Stephen Stevens seemed bored and uninterested. In fact, he sat down, leaning his back against the monolith, and sighed, "It's a vibrating stone slab... an enigma that shall ne'er be solved no matter how long mankind ponders it."

"Hey, I said don't touch it!" Garsovich exclaimed. Sitting on the sand, back resting against the monolith, Stephen Stevens turned his head to Garsovich innocently.

Meanwhile, Harde noticed that by leaning against it, Stephen Stevens was causing the monolith to tip, with Steven Stephens standing on the other side. "Stevens!" Harde shouted.

Quickly, the monolith fell over, nearly striking the other scientist, who'd juked out of the way just in time. After a thud, the monolith was lying on the ground.

"That nearly landed on my foot!" Steven Stephens yelled to Stephen Stevens. "You imbecile!"

Upon saying those last two words, the front of the monolith opened up like a door panel.

"Holy—," Garsovich said in disbelief.

"Maybe that's how you say 'open' in the alien language," Stephen Stevens hypothesized.

"Like what?" Steven Stephens asked. "How do you think they say 'open' in their language?"

"You imbecile!" Stephen Stevens replied.

And as he spoke, the door panel closed. Everyone stared at the monolith for several seconds. Then Stephen Stevens repeated, "You imbecile!" At that, the monolith's front door opened again. "Huh!"

Harde and the crew looked into the mysterious monolith through the open door. It felt cold inside, in contrast to the warm desert-like environment.

Inside the monolith, there were cylindrical metal objects on several racks. Stephen Stevens pulled one out. He pulled a tab on its top. It cracked open, releasing a sudsy foam. He took a sip from the can.

"Beer!" he shouted. "How awesome! That's why it was humming. The monolith is a beer fridge!"

Garsovich made eye contact with Harde. He shook his head in obvious disbelief. Finally, he said, "Well... I guess a hot desert is a convenient place to put a beer fridge." Then he turned to the rest of the crew, "But I suggest we not drink it. We don't know—"

Harde squinted, wondering why Garsovich stopped speaking. In fact, he'd retracted his lips into his mouth.

Eventually, Cassidy said to him, "What, Commander? 'We don't know' what?"

"The sand," he replied. "It moved."

"Where? I don't see anything," Cassidy said, turning her head in all directions. "Maybe, it's your imagination."

Harde shook her head at Cassidy. She knew the Commander wouldn't just imagine something like that.

But before Harde could comment, Stephen Stevens announced, "Hey everybody, let's do a group selfie! Captain, you too." He waved at everyone to gather up.

Harde's immediate inclination was to rebuff

him. A selfie? Seriously? Then she saw that everyone else was participating. This photo, she imagined, could become history defining. Iconic. She *had* to be in this photo, center stage!

"Of course," Harde said, joining the group as they gathered in front of Stephen Stevens's camera. She stood next to Garsovich. The Commander smiled at Harde and placed his hand on her shoulder in a kind, endearing way. Harde returned the gesture by gingerly placing her hand on his sturdy back.

The physical contact was electrifying. She gave the camera a fake smile to mask her emotions.

"There," Stephen Stevens declared after he took the photo. He showed everyone his tablet, and the crew gathered to look.

"Send it to me," the other scientist, Steven Stephens insisted, with a glance of concern. Stephen Stevens complied with a few tablet swipes.

"What's that behind us in the picture?" Cassidy asked, studying the image on Steven's screen.

"Hard to tell," Garsovich said, squinting at the screen. He turned his head in the direction where the object in the photo would've been.

"Looks like a snake," Cassidy said.

Stephen Stevens then ran into the distance to the very spot where the suspected object had been during the photo. "It would've been right here!" he yelled, circling an area of sand with his pointer.

"Stephen Stevens!" Garsovich shouted. "Come back here now. Stay with the team!"

"Don't worry, Commander! I'll figure this out."

"No, it's too dangerous. Come back!"

The entire crew watched the gallant scientist nervously. With no warning, an enormous worm emerged from the sand right beneath him. It carried the man into the air, as the crew gasped helplessly. Harde took a deep breath, knowing a captain shouldn't show any fear.

The worm rose unimaginably high. A tiny slit on the crest of its bulbous head opened up into a giant mouth and chomped at Stephens Steven's body.

Cassidy, with her large rifle, was first to shoot at the beast. Her blasts spewed worm-flesh at each site of injury. The remaining crew members fired

their hand blasters furiously, and the worm suffered an onslaught of crippling damage.

Harde waived the crew forward to charge the worm. She wasn't going to lose a crew member in this historic mission. By the time they'd reached the worm, it had collapsed and fallen dead.

They approached the worm's mouth, but it was evident that they were too late. Stephen Stevens had been mutilated.

Harde squinted in revulsion at the sight of the man's carcass. She considered how his enthusiastic spirit had profoundly boosted the crew's eagerness to take on this very adventure. She committed to remembering and repeating those sentiments when she informed his family.

The crew grew solemn as they gathered around his remains. The survivor of the two scientists, Steven Stephens, lowered his head and drooped his shoulders. "And he wasn't even wearing a red shirt," Steven Stephens said.

But before they'd had adequate time to reflect, a large pack of giant worms emerged from the sand.

"Run!" Garsovich shouted.

The crew raced swiftly from the charging worms. They fired their weapons at the monsters, blasting chunks of skin from them.

Steven Stephens ran beside the captain. "What do they look like to you?" he asked, hitting a worm squarely in the head with his blaster.

"They look like giant worms, Stephens! What's your point?" Harde replied.

"They seem phallic, Captain."

"Shut up, Stephens! Not now."

"Look Captain," he said pointing to the worm he'd hit, "it hurts them more when you hit their heads! These sand penises seem to be ultra-sensitive there."

"Call them 'sand penises' on more time and I'll blast *your* head off"—Harde noticed that Stephens had incapacitated the worm by blasting its head—"Everyone, aim for their heads!"

Soon after adopting the new target zone, the sandworms were slowing down.

"Captain, your strategy is working!" Garsovich said as he disabled another worm. Then he pointed his finger toward a rocky area to their left. "Let's head for those rocks, and maybe they won't fol-

low."

####

After the crew had successfully escaped the sandworms, they found themselves trekking through the valley of a small canyon. From the crew member's frequent glances, Harde could tell they were nervous about the tall rocks that surrounded them.

Lieutenant Cassidy had been scanning the rocks with her eyes, targeting it with her blaster. Cassidy's lips blinked frequently, but they always stopped before she'd said anything.

Harde imagined that the security officer any moment would announce a new threat in the canyon more terrifying than the sandworms. Therefore, it surprised Harde when Cassidy said, "Do you think those beasts were actually the intelligent life we've been seeking?"

"Did they seem intelligent to you?" Steven Stephens responded sarcastically.

"Intelligent enough to eat your friend," she replied.

Stephens' face flushed with outrage.

"Everyone," Garsovich interjected, "let's stop the fighting. Clearly, those life forms couldn't have built a space vessel or whatever this 'asteroid' is."

"Agreed," Cassidy said, "but what are they doing here if this was built by a more intelligent species?"

Harde had been pondering that very question and was quick to offer some possibilities, "Maybe they're part of the food chain? Or maybe they keep them as pets?"

"Or maybe they evolved here on the asteroid over time from smaller sand peni-, umm, I mean, sandworms," Steven Stephens suggested. Before Harde could grow irate, Stephen's eyes turned to the rocks of the canyon. "Look! Did you see that?"

"What?" Harde asked, somewhat alarmed.

"I caught a glimpse of it," Cassidy said.

"It looked like a little elf," Stephens said.

Harde wondered if this could finally be the intelligent life they were seeking. She immediately headed into the rocks in the direction Stephens had been looking. The crew followed Harde.

Soon, she spotted movement. The creature she saw did, in fact, look like an elf. It was wearing a reddish tan robe with a hood over its head. But it

scurried away before she could make out much more.

"I've photographed him!" Stephens exclaimed, presenting his tablet to the others.

Harde and the crew gathered around Stephens to look at the image. The elf was creepy, but in a cute way. Inside the robe's hood was a shadowed face of pure darkness... with two tiny shining eyes.

Harde was exploding with curiosity. She wanted desperately to see what the creature's body looked like behind its shaggy red cloak.

She ran deeper into the rocks to find the elf. For a moment, she stopped, realizing that she was being as impetuous as had been Stephen Stevens. And that got him eaten by a sandworm. Although this creature was small, a captain should know better than to make careless, risky assumptions. So, she considered regrouping and discussing strategy with Garsovich.

Oh, screw it, she thought, I'm the damn captain!

The crew followed her into the rocks without a word from anyone. Harde felt like the team was in a 'flow' state. She didn't need to order them to follow or protect her; the team seemed as curious as she was and altogether eager to join her in pursuing the tiny creature.

Within minutes, she caught sight of the little elf. Harde ran after it, like a madman chasing a chicken. Soon, Harde had just about caught up.

She clutched the back of its reddish robe as it scurried from her. For a moment, she considered that this wasn't terribly good protocol for first contact. But they had to determine what this asteroid was all about, and this seemed like the only way.

She dragged the elf closer, and with her other hand, yanked off its hood, hoping to view the mysterious head and face attached to those tiny bright eyes.

But she yanked so hard, she pulled off its entire cloak!

Harde regretted for a microsecond that she'd just publicly disrobed an intelligent alien life form. But then, she simply stared in amazement at what was behind the robe.

In fact, there was nothing! Absolutely nothing, except for two small 'lightning bugs' where the eyes had been. The bright bugs flew higher, leav-



Crystal Effect
By Angela K. Scott

ing behind the little reddish cloak.

"That was weird," Garsovich said.

"Wait I have a theory!" Steven Stephens shouted. "Follow those eyes!"

Everyone stared at the pair of fireflies floating away.

"You heard him!" Harde commanded. "Follow those eyes!"

The crew responded immediately, working their way through the rocks as the pair of elf-eye-fireflies sailed above.

Harde smiled for a moment, watching the crew jump at her command. She usually enjoyed that aspect of her job, the exercise of power over others. But in this instance, it gave her a completely different type of pleasure. It was the joy that comes when everyone around you is excited about the same thing.

Following the eyes was a great idea of hers, she thought. Then, she realized she'd need some clarity from Stephens on the theory behind 'her' great idea.

They walked a few kilometers pursuing the fireflies. Then, they approached an apex.

Garsovich was first to reach the top. Looking down to the other side, he said, "You'll never believe this."

Eventually, Harde and the crew reached Garsovich. Below was a city made of stone. Rather than gaudy or magnificent, the architecture was boxy and functional.

Harde forgave their lack of aesthetics when she

considered that she'd soon become the first person to discover an alien culture. She supposed the crew had come along as well, but Harde was the highest-ranking officer.

And she recalled having the tremendous idea of following the fireflies to the aliens' lair.

"I'm glad Science Officer Stephens thought of following those eyes!" Cassidy said.

For a moment, Harde glared at Cassidy with the look of murder.

"No kidding! What was your theory, Stephens?" Garsovich asked.

Harde bit her lip.

"That the elf was some kind of virtual avatar," the scientist answered. "That the eyes float around at the will of an intelligent life form in order to visualize being anywhere within this grand environment."

"Like a virtual reality game," Garsovich said.

"Yes, quite possibly," Stephens replied.

"Interesting, Stevens," Harde cut in. "Please educate me more later so I can properly detail my adventures to the admirals." Then she looked around to the group and continued, "So! Let's go down to the city and meet the builders! They must be eagerly waiting to meet me."

The crew hiked down the steep incline of the rocky hill. It was about a half kilometer to reach the first building.

They roamed the sand blown streets of the city. The buildings became monotonous. Harde couldn't tell one rectangular block from the other.

"Has anyone noticed there's no one here?" Cassidy asked the group.

"Maybe they're asleep," Harde replied swiftly.

"All of them?" Garsovich asked. Harde shot Garsovich a grimace. He lowered and shook his head in response. Harde hoped he realized his mistake, that he'd improperly doubted her in front of the crew.

"In the spirit of adventure, let us go inside and take a look," Steven Stephens said, having already approached what appeared to be a door to one of the many indistinguishable buildings.

He placed his hand on a round bronze fixture having a narrow hole in the middle. Possibly, it was a door handle. After staring at it for several seconds, he backed away.

Sighing, Cassidy waltzed to the door and yanked the handle. She pulled, then pushed, but nothing budged it. Several crew members joined in but had similar luck. Stephens muttered, "You imbecile," a few times for good measure, but to avail.

"Stand clear," Cassidy said, raising her blaster rifle. Planning to apologize to the aliens for the damage later, Harde nodded affirmatively at Cassidy, who nodded back.

Cassidy fired. The door cracked. She fired again. After that, there was enough of a fissure to peek inside. Cassidy barraged it with shots, and the door eventually caved in.

Harde pointed her thumb into the building and said to the crew, "Let's go."

They climbed over the rubble of the destroyed door into the foyer of the alien building. It was slightly cooler inside, but just as brightly lit. The foyer was empty but led to three branching hallways.

"Should we split up?" Steven Stephens asked.

"I recommend we stay together," Cassidy said.

Harde pointed to Cassidy and said, "Sounds wise. Let's take our time." Harde was worried primarily, however, that if they split up, she might not be in the first group to meet the aliens. Unthinkable!

They walked down the hallway on their left and found it lined with identical-looking interior doors. The crew gingerly approached the first door.

The door had no handle or knob. Harde put her hand to the door and pushed gently to see what would happen. It creaked, but moved noticeably. She surmised that a hefty shove would open it.

"Captain, please let me," Garsovich said, placing his hand on the door. Cassidy stepped right behind him aiming her weapon ready to defend.

"Go ahead, Commander," Harde ordered. She figured that, either way, the history books would indicate that she was first to greet the aliens. But if there were dangers involved, she trusted that Garsovich and Cassidy were the right people to enter first in the literal sense.

Garsovich pushed the door open and walked through the doorway, Cassidy right behind him. Harde peered into the chamber. Garsovich waved, beckoning Harde and the rest of the team to fol-

low, which they did.

There were various light-emitting objects scattered around the room. Harde lifted one to examine. She envisaged a member of the alien race eventually explaining to her all its functions. What great knowledge she would carry and deliver to all humanity!

"A tablet?" a nearby crew member suggested.

"Or a gaming console," Steven Stephens said.

Harde put the object down and followed Garsovich to the center of the room, which had a rectangular pit with a lowered floor. Soon, the team had encircled the pit. Within it below there were, to Harde's best guess, numerous couches.

She closed her eyes and tried not to acknowledge what saw resting upon each couch. But the crew was staring right at them.

"Bones," Steven Stephens said.

"Their bodies are weird," Cassidy added.

The skeletons on the couch had spherical torsos, approximately one meter in diameter, with four limbs. Two of those appendages ended in long feet shaped like skis; the other two limbs resembled ski poles.

"Being shaped like big spheres must have made it difficult for the aliens to give off body heat," Garsovich said. "If this desert environment is like their home planet, I wonder how they could have evolved that way."

Harde scrunched her face. She was irritated that the commander was speaking of the aliens in the past tense. For all they knew, there were plenty of them living in the other rooms and the other buildings.

"Maybe their planet isn't very hot," Cassidy conjectured. "This place is sandy like the desert, but the heat isn't oppressive."

"Actually," Stephens said, "their round shape may have helped them conserve water in dry environments. And those feet. They're like skis. Perfect for getting around on the sand."

Harde then commanded, "Let's check the other rooms."

The crew moved down the hall, room to room. Then they returned to the entranceway foyer and headed down each of the two other hallways. In every room throughout the building, they found

more or less the same: spherical skeletons, couches, mysterious electronic devices.

Harde's facial muscle tightened. Then she said, "Okay, let's check the other buildings. Come on, everyone! There's still more to see. Remember the eyes? Someone was using those eyes!"

"Captain, it's possible that those eyes were automated," Steven Stephens said in a consoling tone that merely agitated her. "In fact, the asteroid may still have functioning artificial intelligence even though the intelligent life forms are all dead."

"They're not dead, Stephens!" Harde shouted. "We've only checked one building!"

There was awkward silence. Stephens swallowed his saliva.

"I said let's go!" Harde exclaimed. "Let's check the other buildings. Now!"

Garsovich patted Harde gently on the shoulder and winked. "You heard the captain!" he commanded. "Let's move!"

Harde found herself staring at Garsovich as he marched the crew out. He took the team on a lengthy, painstaking search of building after building.

But each room was a variation on the same theme.

"It's possible they've been dead for centuries," Steven Stephens lamented. "For Millennia. Perhaps longer."

####

Harde sat behind her desk in her ready room aboard the *S.S. Antarctica*. The ship had been lugging the giant asteroid slowly toward station Outer Space 8.99 3/4.

She recognized that these discoveries were still of great significance: the first artifacts of alien life, treasure troves of advanced technology, and not to mention, the radiation-shielding heavy metals they'd been originally sent to acquire.

But it wasn't first contact with aliens. No, in time, someone else would claim that honor.

She rattled the ice cubes at the bottom of her empty glass of iced tea. Then, Steven Stephens buzzed her door.

"Captain, may I?" his voice rang on her desk speaker.

She thumped the glass down. "Fine, come in."



Dragorn

By Angela K. Scott

Stephens entered nervously. Harde laid back into her seat with a sigh. Stephens then scooted to a chair opposite her desk.

"Captain," the scientist said, "before I return to my duties on Outer Space 8.99 3/4, I wanted to say it was an honor to join you on this expedition. It was... unprecedented. Although there was tragedy along the way—"

"I know, Stephens! I lost a man. Your friend. A great scientist. I'm taking endless flak for it. The way the admirals see it, losing Stevens was my fault. So no, Stephens, I don't need to be reminded, thank you! Was there anything else?"

"Actually, Captain, yes," Stephens replied, turning his head left, then right. "I am an android. I've been watching over humanity for generations. I am programmed never to let human beings be harmed because of my own actions or failures.

"Captain, you did not order us to go on that mission! We went because it was the right thing to do. What if we'd brought home intelligent hostile aliens, and they slaughtered everyone on Earth? I

ran multiple simulations in my negatronic brain showing that for us to go aboard that asteroid was with the optimal decision for humanity."

"Stephens, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You're not a robot!"

Harde reached for Steven Stephen's face and flicked his nose hard.

"Ouch! What the hell?"

"You see. You're not an android."

"Alright! Alright! I'm not an android."

"Did you make up that absurd nonsense just to make me feel better about my command decisions?"

"Well, more to the point, Captain, your big revelation scene... you know, where you were expecting to greet intelligent alien life, but instead you found a bunch of bones?"

"What about it?"

"Well... that scene kinda sucked."

"So, by telling me you're a robot, you thought you could provide me with a more dramatic final revelation scene?"

"Yes, and a very cool plot twist I might say!"

"Get out of my office, Stephens!"

"Yes, Captain, umm, one last thing. I just forwarded you the group selfie that Officer Stevens took. You know, just before he died. He sent it to me first. Go back and read that part of the story if you don't believe me... But I'll be heading out, Captain. I'm sorry the mission didn't go as you'd hoped."

Stephens got up and walked to the exit door. But before he could leave, Harde said, "Stephens?"

"Yes, Captain."

"It was good to have you onboard. Good luck. And sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Captain. And... I do think Commander Garsovich likes you. Don't give up," Stephens said before he left.

Harde pulled open her communicator. She found the file that Science Officer Steven Stephens had sent her.

She stared at the group selfie. It had all of the members of the team who'd banded together for an adventure that fundamentally changed human-kind's understanding of the universe. The great endeavor was, as Stephens put it, the 'optimal decision for humanity.'

Harde sucked in her lips and bit down on them. Then, in the photo, she spotted Garsovich's hand on her back. She unclenched her mouth and grinned.

Afterwards, Harde opened her comm to Garsovich. "Commander, we should throw a celebration for the whole team before Officer Stephens departs. Let's begin some arrangements."

How God Created Evolution David C. Kopaska-Merkel

God gave birth,
first to cell-less vacuoles,
pearls of water in delicate organic films,
that popped quietly from her body,
like air from a crevice under water.
Beautiful, she thought,
and admired them,
but they could not propagate her dream.

Bacteria, then,
first, all of a kind,
but soon bewildering in their variety,
even to her unimaginable intellect.
Mutation just was,
but she invented sex, so the bacteria
could make of themselves new forms,
and they obliged Her:
they grew hairs and flagellae,
they changed their shapes,
some achieved gargantuan size.

She encouraged her progeny to evolve,
but she couldn't just let the experiment run.
Of course, She would micromanage.

She gave birth to larger cells,
some swallowed up their smaller kindred
(they'd invented eating--She was so proud),
some of these kept menageries,
hosts of slaves bred within themselves,
to do the tiresome work
of keeping their bodies running.

God was on a roll, and soon,
quickening within her,
parthenogenetically, as they must
(for there was no other god,
and hence no celestial coitus).
and emerging in due time,
the Ediacaria, those strange and fragile crêpes,
rippling their way across the bed of Sea,
and then some clever beasts,
all on their own, invented shells,
setting off an arms race
that went on almost forever.

It was hard work,
God knows child-bearing always is,
especially the sauropods
(she swore off gigantism many times,
but, again and again,
she yielded to temptation,
and the idea that size does matter),
so, like an unplanned third child,
there were giant rhinos, whales,
and, can you spell "redwood"?

All good stories come to an end,
and God eventually created beings
the spitting image of Herself
(the primary gender was, anyway),
and wouldn't you know it,
as soon as they moved out
of the verdant valley of their birth,
they started killing each other.
Next thing She knew,
they'd nearly wiped out the megafauna,
then, in the blink of an eye,
just about done for the entire biosphere.

When the smoke cleared,
she stirred the wreckage with a finger.
I've still got bacteria,
she said to herself,
and lichens too;
I'm not too old to start again,
and do it right this time:
no primates!

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The Landing at the Somme

Patrick McKay

“Charge!” Second Lieutenant Edgar Davies yelled.

Hundreds of men followed his order, pouring out of their trenches and rushing forward like a wave, their target the German trenches across No Man’s Land.

Davies had lost track of how many weeks they had been fighting near the Somme River, but he knew in that moment that he was to lead his men in an assault to take this strategic German trench in front of them,

And that’s what I’m going to do! Now focus, Edgar! Lead your men, protect your men, and send the Jerries back to Germany!

“For King and Country, boys! Chaaarrggee!” he yelled, rushing out of the trench, revolver in hand.

His men roared in reply, and he joined their deathly chorus as they rushed toward the Germans.

This impressive ferocity! Oh, I hope we all make it, boys – I will have reason to be very proud of you!

But the ferocity was soon drowned out by the heavy machine gun fire coming from both lines, the Germans hoping to break the advance, and the British providing covering fire.

As he led his men forward, Davies heard, before he saw, planes flying past and above them. He saw they were engaged in a dogfight, Brits and Germans battling for control of the sky.

Got to look out in case the Jerries win and strafe us, but now head out of the clouds, Edgar! You are in No Man’s Land now!

So Davies ran, his men all around him, desperate to close the gap with the German machine guns. One gun poured fired closer toward Davies and his men.

“Get down!” he yelled.

There was a large rock in front of him, he ducked behind it just in time to hear several bullets ricochet off of it. He tried to look around at his men, most of them had gone prone and avoided the storm of bullets, a couple of them had been hit;

however, their cries of pain mixing with the noise of the battle.

But he saw one soldier standing in the middle of the field, rifle in hands, looking up into the sky. *Shell-shocked idiot!*

With the machine gun now firing at a different squad, Davies ran out from behind his rock towards the soldier. He moved as fast as he could while keeping himself low. When he got close he recognized the man as one Private Eckles.

“Ecks! Get down!” he yelled.

But Eckles didn’t move; he just kept staring at the sky. When Davies reached the man he tackled him to the ground, cursing at him as loud as he could, trying to snap out of it.

“Oy! Lieutenant!” Eckles said after he hit the ground.

“What on God’s good earth were you thinking, you bloody idiot!”

“Lieutenant, the Germans aren’t firing. Look.”

“What?! What do you bloo-” Davies started to yell. But then he realized his shouts were the loudest thing around them. Even the constant artillery fire had fallen silent. The only sounds he heard from the battle before were the faint noises of the aeroplane motors off up in the sky.

Then he noticed that everything around him was getting brighter, as if a second sun were appearing in the sky. He saw Eckles looking up into the sky again, and following his gaze, Davies saw the second sun.

A flaming orb hung over the battlefield, just a little bit smaller than the sun in the sky.

“Is this a miracle, sir?” Eckles asked.

Davies, however, had a very different question.

“Is it... getting closer?”

The bright, second sun in the clear sky was getting brighter and bigger. Not only that, Davies was beginning to hear some sort of soft hissing noise as his surroundings got brighter and brighter.

An instinct, strengthened by time spent under heavy artillery fire, activated in his mind before he had time to think.

“Get back to the trenches! Take cover! Take shelter!” he yelled to his men, standing and pulling Eckles up with him.

“Go round the men up, Private! Quick, man!”

Davies yelled at Eckles.

"Sir, yes, sir!" Eckles said before running off, yelling, "Get to the trenches, boys!"

Davies saw a group of soldiers still prone on the ground. As he ran over to them, he heard faint cries from the German lines of "Runter, runter!"

The Jerries are taking cover, too. This isn't one of theirs. Could the high command have deployed a truly "miraculous" new weapon against the Germans?

While these questions passed through his mind, he knew that the second sun in the sky, even if it was one of the King's new weapons, could still misfire or miss.

Or be too powerful... Davies thought as he realized he couldn't look at the orb anymore, its luminosity too great.

"Get up! Get to the bloody trenches!" he yelled at the prone men, the hissing getting louder.

They rose cautiously, still wary of the Germans, but eventually listened to Davies' repeated commands and curses. As his men ran back to the trenches, he looked up once again at the glowing object and saw something else strange.

It was hard to make out with how far away it was, but Davies thought he saw a glass object in front of the glowing orb.

By George, that looks like one of those fancy "prism" things in glasswork stores.

Davies only saw the prism for a moment, though, as in the next couple seconds, the prism itself glowed briefly, but then shot forth several beams of blue, too many to count. Not beams, but rather lines of glowing blue, perfectly straight, and shooting forth in all directions. Some struck very close, primarily hitting the ground. Then Davies then felt the air around him chill dramatically, the cold emanating from the ground rather than the sky, the sun still warm on his face.

A scream drew his attention as he saw one of his men get touched by a blue line. It crawled quickly up his back and Davies heard a soft crackling. Then, perhaps mercifully, the blue line moved across the private's head, and immediately the screaming stopped and the man sank to the ground.

He tried to get a look at the wounds, but couldn't see them. He only knew that the man had been

killed painfully.

"My God... Run you fools! By God, run!" Davies yelled, running back to the trenches as fast as he could. The blue lines were now moving at rapid rates, racing across the ground and chilling the dirt.

As he came to the trench he jumped down into the mire, only then breathing a sigh of relief now that he was firmly in cover.

Have your men made it yet, Davies? a little voice in the back of his head asked. With a soft sigh he climbed up to a lookout position on the trench wall. Looking over the gap, he saw that most of his men had made it and only a couple of stragglers were just now hopping into the trench. There were, however, two men stuck behind a large rock, cowering for their lives.

"Stay there! Stay down!" Davies yelled at the men.

Looking over the battlefield he saw that there were even more blue lines than before, and they were all shooting from the falling prism in the sky. From the safety of his trench he was able to see what the blue lines had done to the areas they had struck. He saw dirt running like water or oil or some other fluid he couldn't quite name, and there were small amounts that seemed to float in the air just inches off the ground.

But as he tried to study the phenomenon he noticed the glowing orb change. The hissing grew louder, but the object grew dimmer.

Much dimmer.

He could make out the shape of it now, it looked like a metallic oval, not unlike two bullets stuck back to back. The prism was in front of this main object and he thought he saw another, smaller object trailing behind it.

"Ahhhhh!" A man screamed from nearby.

Davies dropped down immediately to see one of the blue lines cross the chest of one of his men.

Cries of "Medic!" and the Private's continued screams filled the trench as Davies rushed up to the man. The line had left a strange mark from his hip to his shoulder. One of Davies' hands grazed the fabric that had been hit, and it crumbled to cold ash. It also revealed the flesh underneath, which to Davies looked like some strange form of flamethrower burns.

"Private, what are you feeling?" Davies asked.

"Ahh, it burns, sir. It's freezing, sir! Ahhhhhh!" the Private screamed.

Seeing his men just staring dumbfounded, Davies yelled, "Hug the wall! Don't let the blue lines strike you!" At this his men obeyed quickly, and he turned his focus back to the wounded man.

"Now, Private, I'm going to try to move you to better cover. So be still and brace yourself man, alright..."

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" the man called out a final time as the burns began to trickle blood, first slowly but then with an increasing frequency. Eventually spurts of blood shot out of the cold burns and the Private twitched repeatedly, until finally his head twisted back, blood running down from his mouth, and he stopped moving.

"My God..."

Davies squatted there, the words hanging in the air.

"Lieutenant, move!" a soldier near him yelled, and Davies felt a hand grab him by the uniform and pull him to the other side of the trench. As he recovered from his shock, he saw a blue line trace over the area where he had been squatting.

"Hug the wall!" The warning rang out over and over as blue lines struck the far wall of the trench with increasing speed and frequency, the air continuing to chill. Davies could see his breath in the air now, and the hissing was getting closer.

He saw men at the top of the trench wall trying to look over the edge at the object. "Get down from there! Don't let the lines hit you!" he shouted.

Most of the soldiers descended; one that was near him called out, "Brace yourselves! It's crashing soon!"

Davies and the rest of his men crouched down as low as they could, bracing themselves in the same manner they did for artillery fire. Several moments passed before a shock wave slammed into Davies with a loud boom, throwing dirt everywhere and making his ears ring.

He looked up and saw some of his troops standing up already, unaware of the potential dangers of falling debris.

"Stay down!" Davies yelled at them, his own

words quiet in his ringing ears.

Their ears are ringing, too! They can't hear me!

Then the second shock wave hit, wildly more powerful than the first. Davies' head was whipped by the blast, and he tried desperately to shield his eyes. The last thing he saw was the standing men fly off. He felt himself begin to roll down the trench as the blast continued to blow past, but as he rolled, he felt one of the stone supports at that section of the trench and grabbed on with both hands. The roar of the blast was overwhelming, and it took all of his willpower just to keep his grip on the trench support as he was pounded by the wind and dirt.

And then, just like that, the wind stopped, and Davies fell to the dirt. He felt terrible, his ears ringing, his body covered in mud and other refuse that had been blown all over, and his arms and fingers sore from clinging to the stone support for so long.

He tried to pick himself up, slowly shifting until eventually with a painful push he got himself onto his knees. He took a breath to keep himself awake, and it cleared his mind greatly. He noticed first that his helmet was gone, the strap snapped off, then realized that his hearing was completely gone and that his ears hurt. Reaching a hand up he felt wetness near his ear, and when he looked at his finger, there was blood on it.

He turned his gaze from his finger and saw that the world around him had been completely devastated. Trench warfare had ruined the French landscape already, but the trench Davies was in was unrecognizable. Nearly all the man-made fortifications and machine gun nests and supports had been ripped away.

The only support that had stayed had been the large stone one Davies had latched onto, which his men had built into the trench when they created it.

His men, who were now all gone.

Davies got to one knee and with great effort managed to stand up in the trench. He climbed up the far trench wall and looked back, away from the German lines, and saw many of his men shifting on the ground, thrown several yards out of the trench in the blast. As he looked over at his bat-

tered men, he saw the entire area behind the trench stripped of everything man-made, as well. The blast had also had enough force to partially level the uneven ground, making the artillery blast craters less visible.

When Davies finally turned his gaze to No Man's Land, he was greeted by a blank wasteland that had somehow become even more blank. All the barbed wire was gone, along with all the water that had been in shell holes.

But that was nothing compared to the crater, larger than any building, Davies saw on his left, northwest of his position. *Good God, that must be the impact site of the object.*

He was sorely tempted to go and explore the crater right then and there, but the same voice he had heard before nagged him in the back of his mind.

Edgar, are your men okay?

"No, clearly not," Davies said aloud, surprised to hear a little of his own voice, the ringing not as bad.

He moved to his men as fast as he could manage without his head spinning. A couple of them were up and about already, trying to get their bearings.

As he walked he felt new, sore wounds for the first time, but still he trudged on to his thrown-about men, helping those who could get to their feet and making note of the ones who couldn't.

And the ones who were just dead.

His own counting showed that most of his men were dead or dying, and only six could walk at all.

With great effort he was able to get his soldiers who were in better condition to gather and take care of the more wounded ones. That done, he found one of his men from the healthy group, a Private Taylor, and set off with him to go investigate the giant crater.

"Sargent Brand, I entrust these men to your care. If you come under fire get the men back to the trench as fast as you can," Davies ordered his junior soldier as they left.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, a shocked look in his eyes. And with that, Davies and Taylor set off.

The crater was quite close in the grand scheme of things, less than one mile away by Davies' reck-

oning. He felt a great deal of urgency to find out what was in the crater, so as best as he and Taylor could manage, they rushed toward it as fast as they could.

The actual crater walls were not that high and made up mostly of soft dirt. After a short ascent with just a couple slips, Davies came to the crest and beheld something which could only be other-worldly.

It was a giant, metal oval, completely smooth except for two holes at opposite ends, one he could not make out very well, the other smaller and with a strange parachute-shaped object attached to it.

"What could this even be?" he said, breathless.

As he helped Taylor up to the top, however, he felt a shift in the earth, the two nearly falling off the wall as the ground shook.

"Woah, man! Hold on!" Davies said as the private slipped. But as he pulled the man up to safety his mind was full of concern; the vibration had come from the orb, but he hadn't seen any movement.

He realized that if they shifted some dirt they would be able to lie prone as they observed the orb. "Taylor, get out your spade and help me make a wider platform for the two of us."

"Yes, sir," Taylor said softly, staring at the orb in awe for a long moment before he took out his spade and obeyed.

A few moments later they had their platform and laid prone, observing the orb. All while the vibrations increased in frequency and intensity.

"What do you reckon it is, sir?" Taylor asked him.

Davies had taken out his binoculars to inspect the surface of the object. The question made him stop and think.

"Something... beyond us, Private," *And something that scares me.*

Right after Davies finished the ground rumbled again, but this time it didn't stop. The rumble continued for several seconds, until he watched in terror as the orb cracked in half with a sound like artillery, and a creature began to rise out of it.

Its legs were three in number, long and spindly, but still the size of tree trunks. Its head was

glistening in the sun, shaped like a rounded saucer, but with a large, telescope-looking object on top of it and two thinner, smaller ones on the sides.

It rose above the crater walls and didn't stop, Davies' estimate of its size getting larger and larger.

When it reached its full height, Davies realized also that, despite its nimble movements, it was not a creature, but rather a metallic machine.

"Good God!" he yelled, fear being usurped only by his commanding instinct. "Taylor, leave your rifle and rally the men and artillery! Quick, man!" Davies yelled.

Taylor handed off his rifle and descended down the crater wall in a rough tumble, cursing all the while as he ran back to the men.

Meanwhile, the "head" of the three-legged machine swiveled at high speeds as it appeared to look around. While it turned, Davies saw a blur that caused him to focus. The exterior of the three-legged machine was not as smooth as the capsule it had emerged from, with what looked like various grooves and other patterns on its surface. One in particular had stood out to him, a groove that had looked like the German Iron Cross.

No, no, the Jerries can't have made this, he told himself, but the thought lingered and made him somehow more afraid than before.

While he watched the machine he took aim with Taylor's rifle. He saw what appeared to be small observation windows, and while he couldn't see inside them, he figured they were his best chance of damaging the machine if it came to that.

A moment later the machine bent itself down toward him, aiming its' telescope-like objects at him. It became very still as it took him in; its stillness and gaze unnerved him.

As he stood there with his rifle trained on the observation ports he saw something that shook him even more than the miracle machine in front of him.

A carved Iron Cross on both sides of the machine. Carved strangely, but distinctly the Iron Cross.

He took a shuddering breath, steadied his grip, and squeezed the trigger slowly.

The shot was silent in his ears. What he heard

crystal clear was the loud *ping* of the bullet ricocheting off the observation port. He lowered the rifle from his shoulder and stared at the machine.

The telescope-looking device on top of the machine started to hum loudly. Davies knew then that it was clearly a weapon and turned to run down the crater wall. As he turned he heard a sound he could only describe as a mix of a flamethrower and an electric spark.

And then Davies stopped hearing and stopped thinking, his world becoming dark in an instant.

"My God, the machine is attacking the Brits!" Lance Corporal Paul Klein yelled out. His light infantry squad had found cover from the blue lines emitted by the object in a long-destroyed house. When it had crashed to the ground and the shock wave came, the house had been almost totally destroyed, but the heavy supports in it had held enough that his men had not been crushed.

Nearby, two gun crews had tried to take cover as well. One group had tied their gun to a large stone and then braced themselves; somehow they had survived the blast. The other crew had merely taken cover behind their field gun and had not even braced it. They and their gun had been blown away.

"The Brits struck first, I saw!" the artillery officer with his surviving crew yelled.

"And why not? This machine is clearly not theirs!" Klein yelled back.

"Which means it must be ours! This is what the command was promising us when they said we would be relieved soon! We must support our men in the machine!"

Klein was incredulous. The artillery officer was making potentially dangerous decisions on too little information.

But what if he is right and THIS is what the High Command's plan has been? This wonder weapon as the way to win the war?

Don't be stupid, Paul, this cannot be German. This cannot be man, made! This is... Good God... What is this?

"Take aim, men! The Brits are desperate, look! They have their artillery out in the open! Take aim!" the artillery officer ordered. All the while,

blue lines fired out of the machine toward the British lines.

"Sir, what are your orders?" Private Wilhelm asked him.

"Hold position for now... and prepare to engage the enemy," Klein replied.

"What enemy, sir?" a Private, whose name was also Paul, asked.

Klein looked at him and said nothing.

"Fire!" the artillery officer yelled, followed by a loud roar from the field gun. Klein watched as the gun jumped back at the recoil, but something else caught his attention before he saw whether or not the shot was good.

From a mile away, the machine's turret swiveled, and it fired a blue line instantly striking the entire artillery crew and the gun in a second.

"Get down!" Klein ordered his men, pulling his head back behind the wall and getting as low as possible.

His men obeyed and got themselves low, and he braced for the worst. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then thirty.

Nothing is happening...

He mustered the courage to peek his head out and saw that the machine was now firing at the British lines again.

It didn't see us! Thank God!

But as he watched the machine he began to notice a pattern. The Brits were engaging with it the most, but whenever a German unit engaged either the machine or the Brits, the machine would quickly turn its deathly gaze upon the German unit, as well, and fire its strange weapons at them.

Klein sat down and let out a groan. It was a tell he knew he had for when he was deep in thought.

"What is it, sir?" Private Paul asked him.

For a moment, Lance Corporal Paul Klein said nothing.

Then, with a mustered courage that he put into his voice and orders, "Prepare to engage the machine."

His men froze.

"Shall I lay it out clearer for you, boys? Prepare your minds, bodies, and equipment for battle against the machine! That is an order!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" his men roared in reply, immediately following his orders.

diately following his orders.

"Leichs! Leave your rifle and grenade with me, and prepare on my command to run and deliver a message to division command," Klein ordered his fastest Private.

"... Yes, sir," was Leichs' disbelieving reply.

As he took the grenade and rifle from the Private, Klein saw that the artillery gun and crew were all frozen in the strange way typical of the blue lines. What he also saw was several boxes of unused, high-explosive shells, too heavy to have been blown away, and not frozen, either.

And they were giving Klein an idea.

"Wilhelm! Jonas! Go quickly and grab that box of shells and bring them here. Keep low."

With a moment's hesitation, the two Privates put down their rifles and ran out, bent at the waist, and made it to the shells quickly. They then each grabbed an end of the box and hauled it back as fast as they could, a much slower speed than Klein would have liked.

Still, his men made it back with the box and set it down in the ruined house. "Good job, boys," Klein complimented, his mind distracted with other problems.

"Paul, Leichs, look for some straps or something that could attach to the box," Klein said as he looked out again toward the machine.

"That box was heavy sir, we can't move it any faster than that," Jonas said.

"Yes, yes, silence," Klein ordered, his mind still on the problems of the machine.

Immune to machine gun fire. Unsurprising considering how powerful its construction is. Certainly immune to grenades as well. The charge wouldn't be focused or powerful enough.

But an explosive artillery shell, at point blank range, detonating one of its legs...

"How many shells are in the box?" Klein yelled.

His men quickly tore it open. "Four, sir," Paul said.

The artillery gun had been of a smaller size, and the shells were each a bit bigger than a loaf of bread.

"How much do they weigh?"

Wilhelm lifted one. "Maybe twenty kilos, may-

be less.”

“How many could you carry and still move fast?” Klein asked.

Wilhelm scratched his head and then tried tucking the shell under his armpit. “Two I think, sir. It’d help if I didn’t have to carry my rifle.”

“Good, do that. Leichs, help him and someone else to get the two shells ready. You two can leave your rifles here. We will come back for them when we finish the mission,” Klein said.

“What exactly is the mission, sir?” a Private Walther asked.

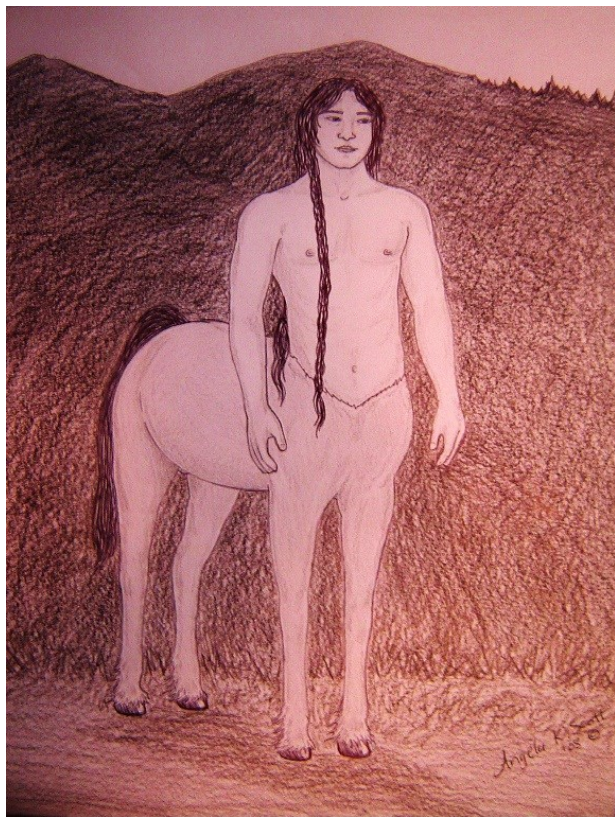
“We are going to destroy the hostile machine, Private,” Klein said, deadpan.

His men stopped.

“Is that possible, sir?” Wilhelm asked.

Klein didn’t know. “With these artillery shells, it should be.”

After a pause, he continued with. “The plan, boys, is this. We will charge the machine while it is distracted by the British and our other forces. Wilhelm, Adolph, you two will leave your rifles here and each take two of the artillery shells. You



Centaur
By Angela K. Scott

both will go up to one of the legs of the machine that appears stationary and will place the shells as close as you can and fallback. Paul and Walther, you two will make a left side flank of our charge and attract the attention of the machine with rifle fire. One of you fire at a time and then hit the ground. This machine has fast reaction times, and ideally you two will be alive to distract it for a long time.

“Wilhelm, Adolph, give your grenades to Jonas and me. When you both clear the shells by the leg, we will throw grenades at the shells and detonate them.”

Klein paused for just a second before saying, “The machine should fall when this happens, effectively taking it out of action. Ernst, Herbert, if any of us are killed before our task is completed, then you shall immediately take it over. Stay behind us until you are needed.

“Leichs, you have the most important job of all. You must deliver this message to division command as fast as you can. Commit what I am about to say to memory.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Lance Corporal Klein reports that there appears to be a third combatant on the battlefield in sector two. It is a single machine with weapons beyond our own and well-armored. It is attacking both the British and our own forces. I am leading a demolition assault on the machine with my squad. Whether we succeed or fail, a temporary truce with the British is needed immediately.

“End of message, repeat it back to me,” Klein finished.

Leichs repeated the message back with some variation, but remembering everything important Klein wanted to report.

“Good enough. Remember to tell them it is sector two. Now go! Fast, Leichs! Fast!”

“It is willed!” Leichs acknowledged, then turned and ran out toward the rear.

“We give him thirty seconds, then we prepare to charge. We charge after ten seconds. Clear?”

“Clear!” his squad yelled in reply.

“Good, get in position.”

They got in position. Klein alternated his gaze from his watch to Leichs to the machine still firing

on the British.

Ten seconds passed.

“Paul, Walther, you two will go first. Two second start. Clear?”

“Clear.”

Twenty seconds passed.

Klein took a moment to look around at his men. They seemed prepared, and nervous nonetheless.

Thirty seconds passed.

“Prepare to charge in ten, nine, eight! Willy, Adolph, you next! Four, three, two, one! Go! Fast! Fast!” Klein yelled.

With that, Paul and Walther charged out.

“One, two! Go! Fast!” Klein yelled again. Wilhelm and Adolph ran out, followed immediately by Klein himself, shells under their arms and a rifle in Klein’s. As he got out of the building, he saw the machine clearly, its turret swiveling at break-neck speeds as it turned its weapons on a new target, the bright blue lines firing with a perfect, straight shot every time.

He looked behind briefly to see the rest of his squad following closely. He also caught a far glimpse of Leichs running with the message. He had already covered a long distance.

Good. One part of this will succeed, anyway.

Klein focused on his own running. The lack of barbed wire made it easier, but the amount of trenches and shell holes still made it rough terrain. The run was a long one, the machine still very far away, and Wilhelm and Adolph were weighed down enough with the awkward shells that Klein had now reached them both. Paul and Walther, however, were quite a ways ahead.

“Paul, Walther, match our speed!” Klein yelled.

Both the Privates looked back briefly and then slowed their run. Klein was realizing that this would be more of a jogging approach than a wind sprint to the machine.

“Slower, men, but keep up a good pace!” he shouted in between breaths.

So they jogged across the desolate landscape, running toward the most advanced machine they had ever seen, worried it would see them with its steely gaze and end them before they could even

fire a shot.

Running nonetheless.

The machine was bigger now in Klein’s gaze. He guessed it was at least one hundred and eighty meters tall, probably more. He was finding himself running out of breath as he ran, and he suspected he was in better shape than at least a couple of his men.

When he spotted a trench about a hundred meters ahead, he yelled to his men, “Take cover in the trench ahead, we will catch our breath!”

He got no reply beyond some grunts he barely heard over his heartbeat in his ears. But when Paul and Walther made it to the trench, they jumped down into it as opposed to over. And Klein and the rest of his men followed suit.

Breathing, focus on breathing, Klein told himself, his chest heaving as he tried to get as much air into his body as he could, while he could hear his men’s labored breaths, as well.

He heard something else in the background, however. He realized the source was the zapping of the machine’s weapons. Every time the blue lines fired, a soft electric shock-like sound emanated from them.

They had more jogging to do, but as he caught his breath, Klein realized that they had been fortunate to have not been spotted in their first run.

“One minute, and then we go. But keep in cover, men; stealth now is key,” Klein ordered.

“Yes, sir,” his men replied, one after another in between breaths.

“Good,” Klein said, looking now at his watch.

As the seconds ticked by, he looked up at the machine, seeing it standing still and laying waste to the British and German forces. He also, with fifteen seconds remaining, looked out over the trenches to see the best path to the machine.

“Get ready, boys. Ten, nine...” Klein started as he scurried back down into the trench. His men got ready, picking their loads back up.

“Paul, Walther, we are right behind you, go! Fast!” Klein yelled as the count approached zero.

As they ran off he continued with, “Two, one. Move, men!”

And so they moved. Klein led the way through the trench now, winding them along the path as he kept one eye on the machine up above them, Paul

and Walther on his left flank outside the trench.

As they approached the machine, Klein figured that it would take them four minutes to get within close contact range.

“Walther, Paul, break left, but keep advancing for three more minutes. Keep count, and when you hit three minutes, engage with caution. Clear?”

“Clear, sir,” Paul replied.

“Good, now go!”

They broke off left, and Klein was left with only five men as they approached the giant machine towering over them all.

The next three minutes marked a distinct increase in worry for Klein. The sounds of intermittent machine gun and artillery fire aimed for the machine were now loud in his ears, and the machine’s stature was truly intimidating. He also realized he had made the mistake of not keeping time of the three minutes to Paul and Walther’s attack, so he did not know when it would happen.

“Faster! Faster, men!” Klein called out, quieter now for fear of being heard somehow by the machine.

The going was rough. Although the mud that was so often in trenches was gone due to the impact before, that did not stop the trench from being a grisly sight. There was an occasional body impaled or smashed onto some object that had survived the blast, the bodies themselves usually torn to pieces by the forces wrought against them.

They continued on at their fast pace, now within only a hundred meters of the machine, when Klein stepped on something unusual that shattered under his foot.

He looked down to see the corpse of a Brit, with the typical wounds of a man hit by one of the blue lines. The thing Klein had stepped on had been the man’s leg, but when Klein had placed his weight on it, it had shattered like glass, bone and flesh alike. It did not bleed since all the blood had frozen, and the alienness of it sent shivers down Klein’s spine.

Then he heard nearby rifle fire. Paul and Klein had started their attack.

“Move now! Go, go, go!” Klein yelled, leaving the Brit behind, except in the back of his mind, knowing that could be him, too.

His men were too slow for his liking as he also saw the machine swivel to identify its attackers. “Faster, fools! Faster!”

His men ran, and Klein led them toward the machine’s leg as it bent down in order to get a firing angle at Paul and Walther.

With thirty meters left to the leg, Klein saw to his chagrin that the trench came to an end.

“Up and out! Now! Fast!” he ordered, running up the trench wall. As he looked back at his men getting out, Klein’s attention was grabbed by a sudden scream. Whipping his head over, he saw a man he thought was Paul fall down, struck by the blue lines.

“Herb! Go!” Klein yelled after his moment of shock.

Herbert immediately ran back to go help Walther distract the machine. It was also then that Klein noticed Ernst running away from the machine as fast as he could.

He cursed Ernst’s cowardice silently before turning to Wilhelm and Adolph and saying, “Go! You are so close! Come on, boys!” He kept urging them on as best he could.

He looked over to Walther and saw him still putting fire onto the machine, ducking down just in time to avoid the blue lines, using the limited terrain very well.

“Faster, boys!” *We have to make sure Walther’s work is paid for.*

They ran toward the large leg, a metal cylinder the size of a small silo and with strange metallic ridges and overlaps that would have fascinated Klein if his primary thought hadn’t been, *We must destroy them as fast as possible!*

He stopped ten meters from the leg, took a knee, and prepared to throw his grenades.

“Go! Place the shells!”

Wilhelm and Adolph obeyed as Jonas came up a few meters from him.

The machine was shifting its upper body continuously in its attempts to hit Walther. But its leg stayed in place as Wilhelm and Adolph ran up to it with the shells. Adolph arrived first and putting his shells down at least three meters from the leg.

“Closer!” Klein yelled, cursing under his breath. He knew the shells needed to be as close as

possible. "A decimeter away! No less!"

Adolph obeyed with a grimace as Wilhelm placed his shells by the leg, side by side, standing them up. Adolph did the same, but as they both ran away, it was clear from his speed alone that he wanted away from the machine more than anything.

"Ready?" Klein turned to Jonas, who nodded.

"Three, pull, one, throw!" Klein called out as he and Jonas pulled the pins and threw their grenades. Wilhelm and Adolph hit the ground immediately, and Klein and Jonas both cowered as the weapons flew through the air toward the high explosive shells.

Klein's mental timer counted down their detonation.

Four, three, two... They both landed by the shells, *One*.

The double explosion of the grenades was loud, but it didn't set off the shells.

The force wasn't enough! Klein realized in horror.

The machine, which was still trying to hit Walter, turned its attention immediately down to them, bending the upper parts of its legs to bring its turret down to fire at them.

The machine looked down at them through its dark, glass "eyes" in a terrifying stare and fired at them, hitting Adolph first and stopping him dead instantly.

Klein's gaze turned back down now, saw the shells still by the leg, one now tipped over by the grenades, and saw a saving grace.

The fuze!

The machine turned its weapons on Wilhelm and, with a flash of blue light rushing over his body, froze him dead in an instant.

Klein grabbed his rifle and loaded a bullet with the bolt.

The machine shifted to Jonas' running form and froze him a second later.

Klein aimed for one of the fuzes.

And squeezed the trigger.

The explosion was deafening and bright. The shock wave struck Klein immediately and knocked him flat on his back.

As he opened his eyes slowly, the world spin-

ning all around him, Klein looked up at the machine and saw the beginning of a shift, a tilt, and a wobble! Its leg shook violently. He lifted his head to see the destroyed leg.

And saw it intact.

What?

The leg stood there, shaking, but still in one piece.

What!?

He looked up and saw the machine lift and slam one of its other legs down with such force that Klein felt the impact in his chest hundreds of meters away. The machine then lurched down like a cat looking to pounce, a glint on its descending metal hull, its observation ports like eyes glaring down at him.

Klein roared and threw his other grenade up, managing to actually hit the lowered turret of the machine with the small explosion, but the machine didn't even shift. It just stood there as the smoke cleared around it.

"What creature of hell are you?!" Klein yelled.

The answer was a soft whirring and glow from the weapons of the machine.

Klein closed his eyes and said a prayer his mother had taught him in his youth.

There was a split second where he felt his body go from extreme cold to an almost burning sensation, until finally everything became numb, and he fell asleep.

The Dream Library by David C. Kopaska-Merkel

I'm building a library of bread crumbs,
full of books all about you,
other books, of course, millions,
but every square inch of you a wing,
a treatise on each bone, an epic
for each passing limpid thought.

In dreams, my library's a palace,
it pierces cerulean clouds
of stork-lizards; their murmuration
the storm and curse of my great work;
bad luck to shoot 'em,

or I would; they’re always
shitting on windowsills,
making their untidy nests
wherever a window’s open,
or broken, reference works
preferred, they hold up best,
all but physics, too labile
(tho they all loved string theory).

Their eggs taste like learned tracts,
dry, hard to swallow,
but lately I’ve been thinking,
in celebration of your life,
I’ll feed them pages of you,
just a few, and on my birthday
dine on that sweet essence I once knew.

A Bad Turn
Adrian Rayner

Early morning sunlight glinted silver off a calm sea, its gentle waves lapping the foothills of the mountains circling Amantea Bay. Out in the sound, Aldo watched flocks of crimson pangolins swarming around the jellyfish trawlers plying their trade in the shallow, fertile waters surrounding Serantino City. By evening the markets would be full of fresh jellyfish, one of the two indigenous food staples feeding the city and the rest of Augusta Prime.

The planet’s other food staple grew on the slopes of Mount Augusta, the massive volcano towering above Serantino. Those slopes belonged to Aldo’s family and were the breadbasket of their business; Massari Food Industries.

From his office on the top floor of Massari Tower, Aldo gazed at Mount Augusta, its lower slopes blanketed in emerald blooms of thermophilic fungi spreading green fingers up towards the crater crowning its summit. The fungi grew in other places on Augusta Prime, but nowhere as prolifically as here in Amantea’s sheltered Bay.

Harvesting machines crawled over the slopes like gigantic agitated spiders, scooping up the precious protein rich blooms before scuttling back to the processing plants ringing the base of the mountain.

Aldo turned from the window and walked over to his priceless, antique Gaggia coffee machine standing sentinel in one corner of his office. With the flourish of a practiced barista, he conjured up a cup of velvety black espresso. He gently squeezed its handle between a gold-ringed index finger and thumb, lifted the porcelain demitasse and took a sip. Perfetto. Best espresso in Serantino City, he reckoned. Aldo looked over at the holoportrait proudly displayed on the wall behind his ornately carved tigerwood desk. His grandfather, Enzo Massari. The old boy’s exploits were the stuff of legend: founder of the company, business entrepreneur, the man who discovered the protein rich fungi soon after the colony ships arrived.

He took another sip of the creamy rich espresso and smiled. Everyone said Aldo looked just like him; his slender frame and olive skin, the aquiline nose, the strong jaw-line and deep-set brown eyes. And his trademark smile that Enzo exploited to charm his colleagues and peers, the one Aldo adopted when he was a child. Aldo smiled again, just to make sure it was still there.

Enzo built the company from scratch, starting as a one-man band hawking the green fungi in plasplex jars on street corners. As the business grew, he secured the capital investment needed to build the processing plants and develop the company’s infrastructure. Before he died, Massari Food Industries had become the biggest food group on Augusta Prime with leading brands established across a wide product portfolio.

At times, when he sat alone in the office and looked at the portrait, Aldo swore he could hear his grandfather’s voice, whispering to him as though he was standing at his shoulder:

Bravo mio Aldo, keep up the good work, keep the family business growing.

The trouble was he wasn’t. Since he’d taken over the helm from his father, business had been flat. Now they were in trouble, big trouble. Hungry new competitors had entered the market undercutting their prices, stealing their business. The Massari brand had lost its lustre. Something had to be done, a fundamental change to their business model was needed to regain lost market share. It was daunting and hung over Aldo like a threatening storm.

A message pinged on his desk terminal. Alberto Contesini, his CEO. Time for the monthly business review meeting. He punched the call back button, a wave of anxiety washing over him.

“Ciao Alberto. So, tell me the news.”

Contesini sighed, a concerned tone in his voice.

“It’s not good I’m afraid, Direttore. Sales have continued to weaken across all core categories. Total sales are down five percentage points this month versus same month last cycle; cycle to date down four percent versus budget. Profit down three percentage points. We’ll have to cut the marketing spend if we’re going to hit the profit target.”

Aldo winced. Slashing the marketing budget; the road to a slow death. Further cost reductions would be needed, yet another round of redundancies. He swallowed, a sour taste in his mouth.

“And the new product development initiatives?”

“We ran them through the virtual focus group last week, Sir. I’m afraid nothing scored high enough to launch. We’ll run some more sensory evaluations through the AI consumer panel and see what turns up.”

Aldo was sure a scowl flickered across the face in the portrait, mirroring his own. He sighed, an irritated edge creeping into his voice.

“Look, Alberto, this is unacceptable. We have the strongest global brand in the sector. Everything we sell proudly displays our iconic slogan on the pack; “Massari Foods, first choice for quality”. That’s a fact. It’s flashing above our heads on the holosign on top of this building. Alberto, again and again you come to me with nothing but bad news, with more problems. You’re my CEO, I want you to tell me how you’re going to fix them, that’s what I’m paying you for.”

“We’re doing all we can, Direttore.”

“Well, you need to do more. What do you expect? You think I should come down there and do your job after I’ve finished mine?”

“No, Sir.”

In frustration, Aldo cut the com link.

A sinking feeling churned his stomach. All the money they’d borrowed, all the investment in marketing and new products, all the top flight execu-

tives hired and he still couldn’t turn the business around.

He needed to get out of the office, needed time to think.

Daylight was leaching from the late autumn afternoon as Aldo strode towards the white, styrocrete factory’s reception area at the base of Mount Augusta.

A faint metallic smell hung in the chill early evening air; acetate secretions exuded by the fungi up on the mountainside bit his nostrils. Aldo coughed. The soft humming sound of harvesters could be heard in the distance, still hard at work on the slopes.

The noise was abruptly cut as the reception door slid shut behind him.

Aldo walked through the empty foyer past walls covered with exhibits detailing the proud history of MFI. Laid out on the lobby floor were miniature 3D printed replicas of the early production facilities, running the length of one wall a cabinet displaying the extensive portfolio of company products, and on top of the cabinet a row of prestigious food industry awards. And in the centre of the floor a full size holo of Enzo holding a bottle of Massari tomato ketchup, the company’s most iconic product.

All a glowing testament to past glory. Would they put a holo of him up in the foyer one day, or was his legacy going to be overseeing the company’s demise? Would he have nothing except failure to pass on to his children?

No. He had to find a way to bring MFI back from the brink.

He walked briskly through the reception area out into the factory. Towering above him the massive 3D food printers were silently weaving the protein rich fungi into recognisable food products. Whatever shape, texture or flavour you wanted, MFI could print it.

Dwarfed in one corner of the factory, butted against the bare granite wall was the original factory building, preserved for posterity, now a memorial to honour the founding of the company. This was the place he came to think.

Inside the ancient building Aldo stood on a gantry overlooking the volcanic fissure, the elongated fracture glowing dull orange lit by lava bub-

bling deep below the surface. This was where it'd all started, where Enzo first found the thermophilic fungi greedily feeding off the nutrient rich volcanic soil. Since then, they'd cultivated the crop, irrigated a huge network of fissures criss-crossing the mountainside and increased the fungi yield to thousands of tonnes per month.

Aldo gazed into the crevice, as if it was telling him the story.

He'd always wondered how the old boy'd done it, how Enzo'd paid for and secured the rights to the land, beaten his competitors to the prize.

There were rumours, wild allegations, that back in the beginning the Sicilian colonists had fought amongst themselves, that some of his grandfather's rivals had ended up here, somehow lost down in the crevice.

Just baseless rumours. Nothing'd been proved.

Aldo watched the steam rising from the fissure, trailing like white ribbons up to the vents in the roof. This was where Enzo had his vision, the idea that led to Massari Foods.

Now it was his turn.

It was evening when Aldo left the factory and walked out into a starlit night, the bronze glow of Augusta Prime's moon shimmering gold flecks across the calm waters of the bay.

He looked up with new hope stirring in his heart, searching the night sky. There it was, high above the horizon, the brightest star in the firmament. But it wasn't a star. It was Augusta Prime's sun reflecting off the new gate array orbiting out in deep space. It was still under construction and wouldn't be fully operational for another few months.

The huge fusion engines were already parked in space fanning out from the massive central station, providing the immense energy required for intragalactic gate travel. Augusta to Sol System in one instantaneous jump, like Earth was just down the street, not a quarter of a million light years away.

Earth and the other frontier worlds. New markets soon to be open for business, markets with more prosperous consumers than here on Augusta Prime. Just one percent market share would double their current business.

He'd been weighing up the pros and cons, the upsides and downsides. Now he knew what he had to do. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He was going to turn MFI into a galactic corporation.

A familiar voice whispered in his head.

Si Aldo, fantastico. Go for it.

#####

"*Crap process, crap product. Bloody amateurs,*" Harmattan concluded.

She could've sent her boys to do the job, but she liked to keep her hand in. Show everyone she'd still got it, that she was still the best in the business.

Harmattan scanned the wreckage of the quantameth lab, finger on the trigger of the Heckler and Koch plasma pistol, searching for the remaining technician.

Movement on her heads-up display visor. Harmattan swung round. A squeeze on the trigger, flash burst from the barrel, the sweet and pungent smell of ozone. The guy running for the door disappeared in a spray of crimson vapour.

Job done.

That'd send a message to any other independents thinking of muscling in on her business. Play with the Black Scorpion clan and you play with fire. It'd be a while before any new indie set up shop here in Serantino.

But protecting your market was only one element in the business mix. To hit the big time, to become a real player here on Augusta Prime she had to expand clan business, find new markets, new consumers.

Harmattan holstered the pistol and strode out of the demolished quantameth lab into the dimly lit backstreets, past grime encrusted old tenement facades out onto the bay corniche.

There it was, up in the night sky shining through the city's light pollution. Her ticket to business growth; the new gate array. Thirty new worlds just one jump away.

All she had to do was find a secure route to market for her product.

#####

It'd taken weeks of planning and hard work, but the first consignment of Massari products was finally on its way up to the gate array then on to Earth.

Aldo watched the transport pod roll along the feeder ramp into the customs checkpoint. The red beam from the security scanner lasered up and down the plasplex container, confirmed its contents and validated the customs clearance. The gate hissed open and the container continued on its way to the space elevator.

That was one big advantage for a company with Massari Foods' reputation. No rigorous customs inspection required, no tedious export documentation to provide. Just the company's invoice along with the goods and bingo; straight into the inter-planetary logistics network in the blink of an electronic eye.

Back in the office, Aldo checked his diary. He'd forgotten the meeting, a representative from an Altar Two distribution company, the next planet on the company's target list. Right on cue, he heard the clickety clack of high heels coming down the corridor outside his office.

The door swished open. A young woman stood in the doorway; jet black aerogel business suit, short slicked-back dark hair, piercing blue eyes... and the stiletto heels. A poster for this year's best dressed corporate executive.

She strode purposely across the room and held out a slender, bejewelled hand. Aldo noted the beautifully manicured cerise nails and the intricate scorpion tattoo on the back of her hand. Unexpected.

She smiled revealing perfect pearl teeth. A velvety voice.

"Good afternoon, Direttore Massari. My name is Francesca Bove, owner of Bove Distribution Services Limited." A slight Lombard accent; must be descended from the Milanese colony ship, Aldo thought. He took her hand and returned a smile, the same charming one in the portrait behind his desk.

"Ciao, please call me Aldo, Francesca. I've received the BDS company holovid, very impressive. The Altar market is new to us, so I've made some enquiries. I have a problem; there appears to

be no record of BDS on Altar Two. How can this be?"

"Ah, there seems to have been a misunderstanding. BDS is currently just a legal entity on Altar, we intend to establish the company infrastructure shortly. At the moment, I'm here to discuss another business opportunity with you. We admire the Massari Brand and your family's achievements, Aldo. But we also have our own unique product with the same quality positioning in, shall we say, a more sensitive category, one that requires special handling and the need for confidentiality. What we need is a secure supply chain, one that only a trusted and renowned company like MFI can provide. I am proposing you export our product to the new worlds along with yours. Just a few cases concealed in each container. We would be prepared to cover a substantial part your transportation costs to make it worth your while; to be negotiated, of course."

Aldo was taken back. This wasn't what he'd expected.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. You say you want us to "conceal" your product in our shipments. Are you talking about smuggling?"

A wry smile inched across the executive's face.

"Exactly. As I said, we are prepared to make you an extremely lucrative offer. This is the product we want you to export."

Manicured fingers disappeared into a breast pocket, then placed a small transparent vial on Aldo's desk.

Aldo picked it up. Inside were small, uniform turquoise crystals. He recognised them immediately. Quantameth. He'd tried it in college a few times back in the day, but it wasn't his thing. He'd read it was epidemic on Serantino's streets, all the youngsters seemed to be hooked. His wife'd even found some on one of the kids. Anger surged like a wave through his body.

"What? You dare come here to my office and ask me to distribute your drugs. Use me like some mule. How dare you even contemplate that I would associate my family's name with this filth or with scum like you. Now get out of my office before I call the police."

He dismissed her with a flick of his hand.

Aldo had never seen anyone move so fast. One moment she was sitting in front of his desk, the next she was behind him. A hand grabbed his hair, lifted him from his chair and slammed his head hard on the desk. Another sickening thud. Pain seared through his groin.

Steel crept into the velvet voice.

“Let’s get a few things straight, “Direttore”. Firstly, I don’t give a shit about your family name. And I don’t give a shit what you think or what the rest of your bastard retarded family, who were thrown out of the ass end of Sicily, has to say about anything. Here’s how it’s going to go down. You’re going to do what I say, transport my product and now you’re going to do it for free. If you don’t, someone in your family will pay the price, maybe those sweet kids of yours. I strongly recommend you do not cross the Black Scorpion Clan. I’m going to return in twenty four hours and organise the first consignment. Oh, and don’t bother going to the cops, I’m on first name terms with most of them and they’re all in my pocket.”

She threw him back on the chair and strode out of the office leaving Aldo gasping for breath, sweat pouring from his body, heart beating like a trip hammer.

Slowly the pain in his groin subsided and he recovered his composure. He ran a check on Black Scorpion through his desk terminal. Oh God, there it was, the mafia clan rumoured to have a monopoly on the quantameth business across the entire planet. And a picture. Her. “Harmattan”. Ruthless gang leader, said to be responsible for countless murders, she’d evaded capture by the authorities for the last ten cycles.

Fear gripped his gut. Clearly the threat was real, his wife and kids were in danger. He knew what Harmattan was capable of. And she was working out in the open under the noses of the authorities. What she’d said must be true, the police were in her pocket. No help there. Maybe he should do it, only a few cases at a time she’d said. And perhaps there was money to be made? But could he take the risk?

What the hell was he going to do?

He turned around and stared at the holoportrait.

Aldo nervously tapped his fingers on the tigerwood desk. A wave of anxiety washed over him; she was due any minute. There was no other way, he had to do this.

There it was again. The same clickety clack of heels, a swish of the door, the same corporate executive façade hiding the gangster underneath. Time to play the role he’d been practising all night. Aldo breathed in and swallowed hard.

“Ah, right on time again. Please come in and take a seat. Do I call you Francesca or Harmattan?”

The wry smile returned.

“Oh, I think for the purposes of our business discussions you should refer to me as Francesca, Aldo. I do hope you have some positive news for me.”

Aldo indicated the seat in front of his desk and the gangster gracefully sat down and crossed her legs. The blue eyes pierced him with menace. Aldo returned the stare and cleared his throat.

“Please, we must have a cup of my coffee. I believe it is the best espresso on Augusta. Allow me Francesca.”

She nodded and he made his way to the Gaggia machine. His barista hands were trembling slightly as he prepared the coffee. He placed a demitasse in front of her and took his behind the desk.

She took a sip and nodded thoughtfully.

“You know, I think you may be right, Aldo. Delicious.”

He took a sip from his and raised a smile that Enzo would’ve been proud of.

“Ba bene. Look Francesca, I’ve decided to accept your request. But I want to negotiate a service deal as you originally proposed. Let’s say I want us to become partners, for us both to profit and cement our relationship going forward.”

The menace in the blue eyes softened a little.

“That’s a sensible approach, Aldo. As you say, we should become partners in this enterprise, that way’s so much better for business. I would be prepared to cover thirty percent of your freight costs.”

Aldo stifled a laugh.

“Come on, Francesca. We both know the street value of your product. Our services are worth considerably more than that to you. And we’re the

ones taking the risk. I think seventy five percent is a fair price.”

“You strike a hard deal but...I think...I...I...”

Aldo watched as she slowly sank back in the chair, her arms falling limply over the armrests, the demitasse now swaying gently from a crooked index finger, the black espresso dripping silently onto the carpeted floor.

Aldo walked over and slapped her face. No reaction. He moved forward stopping two inches from her head staring into the blue eyes.

“I know how you enjoy your drugs, Harmattan, so I thought I’d give you a new experience. Tetraxylazine, my dear, incredibly fast acting, strong enough to stop a tagboar in its tracks. It was in the espresso tab I used for your coffee. Yes, I know you can still hear me; the supplier told me you’d remain conscious but wouldn’t be able to move a muscle. So “here’s how it’s going to go down”. You’re going to pay for threatening me and jeopardising my business, for coming into my office and dishonouring my family. You’re going to find what happens when you try to intimidate the Massari clan.”

Aldo turned and looked at the holoportrait.

The smile inched up a notch.

Aldo pushed the packing crate along the gantry and stopped next to the guard rail at the end of the passage. He flipped the lid, dragged Harmattan out and heaved her body against the rail.

He looked down into the deep fissure. The vapour cloud swirled around the gantry, tinted orange by the boiling lava flowing deep below. A long way below.

He took a deep breath. Could he really do this? Could he take a human life? He hesitated and took a step back.

A familiar voice rang in his head.

She has to pay the price, just like the others. Do it, boy.

Aldo clutched the gantry rail tightly and shoved her over. Silence as she fell, just the wide-open blue eyes staring back at him as she disappeared into the volcanic steam...

Plop.

Surprisingly, it’d been easy. All he felt was satisfaction, like the conclusion of a successful business transaction.

Now for the next step in his plan.

#####

Five cycles later:

Aldo looked through the window of the cramped shuttlecopter’s cabin, the tower block below growing closer as the copter approached the landing strip on its roof.

There it was, Massari Centre, the new galactic headquarters on Earth. His dream had come true. He’d located it in Pittsburgh, on the site of an old tomato ketchup factory that once stood here.

Massari business was going great guns. The quantameth lab he’d secretly built under the processing plant in Serantino was now in full swing. Far more profitable than the food business. Harmattan had got it right, Earth was a bonanza. Production costs were much lower on Augusta, they were undercutting their rivals on the streets and offering a higher grade product. And the Massari food business was the ideal cover story. Business was booming.

The pilot flicked switches, running practiced fingers over the control console activating the landing protocols.

Aldo leaned out of the landed copter and jumped down, holding his breath as he walked through dust kicked up by the copter’s churning rotors.

There was the welcome party. Alberto Contesini with a couple of senior executives in tow. Alberto marched forward, deftly executed a suitably impressive bow and stretched out a hand.

“Benvenuto, Direttore.”

“Ciao, Alberto. Let’s have a look at this new HQ, then.”

They took a private passenger chamber from the roof down to the ground floor and out into the building’s massive atrium.

Aldo smiled. There, towering above him, a huge holofigure soaring up to the top of Massari Centre. Two hundred metres of digital Aldo Mas-

sari. Perfetto. The holo artist had got his new slicked-back hair style just right and slung nonchalantly over his shoulder that flamboyant gold embroidered navy-blue jacket he'd seen on one of the old Earth photoreels. Turn of Earth second millennium, from some place called Karnabee Street. The holographic face wore the trademark smile... and proudly held aloft in one hand the piece de resistance; a bottle of Massari ketchup.

Bravo, mio Aldo. You deserve it.

Wind Walker and Guest David C. Kopaska-Merkel

They make it back for the holiday sales,
W wants something trend-setting, then
a light meal at a rooftop place he knows,
drops Raoul off at Payless Shoes,
Raoul's looking for a pair of size 450 wide
running shoes,
Better give me two, he says,
Yuggoth's quite a slog on foot.

Jump Jiving by Lyle Hopwood

When Eric Barker woke up, he remembered he existed, and a flood of dread washed away the blackness.

He came round slowly, this time. His body aged little in Cold Sleep, but he always emerged mentally bruised, as if someone administered psychic punishments during the long sleep. Strength crept sluggishly back.

"Behatar masoos krana, Eric," a voice said. With a jolt that slumped wearily into tedium, he realized language had changed yet again and he didn't understand the words.

"I'm fine," he replied, knowing what to say without knowing what had been said. He pulled himself upright. Vision re-established itself. Thousands of points of yellow and pink light swirled, pushing away black tunnel walls; pins and needles of the eyes, the feeling returning to his retinas in a painful display of neon flowers.

"Dhere, dhere," the attendant said, putting their hand on his shoulder.

Another voice interrupted, "Eric, I speak English. Don't move so quickly. Your chemistry is still stabilizing."

"What year is it?" The room shifted into focus. It was white, as were the medics' clothes. The overhead lights were a searing 5000K, also known as white. His sight finally located color—an icon of the elephant-headed God, Ganesh; saturated blue skin and red floral lei.

"You been asleep nearly a hundred-fifty," the English-speaker said. They looked male, but Eric had learned not to guess, here in the future. *Which is the present.*

He nodded, his partially restored view rippling. "I keep thinking humanity will outgrow us and never wake us again."

The instruments at the head of the hibernaculum clicked softly and the medic turned their head. "Ready to lift you out, Eric."

*

In the recovery room, Jordan Ellis, Raj Kumar and Mindy Haverling picked at a silver tray of flatbreads and pungent dips.

"Eric!" Jordan said as Eric entered. "Ready for action?"

"Could do with another one-fifty in the sleeper," he mumbled. "Anyone speak the local argot?"

"Some variant of Hindi, or Urdu—I can make out quite a lot of it," Raj said.

"Food's delicious," Mindy said, seeing Eric hesitate. "Worth waking up for."

"It would be okay if they never woke me again," Eric said.

Mindy shivered. "Dying in a hibernaculum, like Lisa did. The thought gives me the creeps."

No one knows they exist while they're asleep so what difference would it make if existence ceased? Eric didn't say it out loud because they'd had this argument at least five times over the last two centuries.

"Where are the others?" Mindy asked. As she spoke, the door banged open and four more groggy people traipsed in.

When all twelve were sitting around the table chewing on naan bread, Jordan stood up. *The bandleader, taking charge.*

Jordan began, "We're flying to Kyzyl tonight for our first..." He didn't finish before uproar broke out.

"Where the hell is kzzl?" Mindy said.

"We don't get a chance to rehearse?" Eric yelled.

"No orientation? We can't go in blind!" Raj said.

"No press conference? Why are we here? Who called us up?" Eric said.

"What are our financials? What's the break-even for this outing?" Raj said.

"Shut up!" Jordan said. "I have no idea. I was asleep, just like you. We can catch up with the news on the plane."

*

Kyzyl turned out to be in Mongolia or a country near Mongolia, Eric couldn't tell. There was an official translator on the fourteen-hour flight, but their English was worse than the doctor's. Questions about the forthcoming engagement were met with deflection or gibberish, or both.

"Let me explain it to you again in different words," Mindy said to the translator. "It costs money to thaw people. We're unfrozen when economic circumstances make it worthwhile. Whoever is paying for that—and you—and this flight—must have some financial figures. A spreadsheet. A balance-sheet."

The translator shook their head and spread their hands.

Eric lifted his head and stared hard at the cabin staff-member. Stewardesses, they were called on flights in the twentieth century. The word had become a slur, and its replacement word had likely become equally unthinkable hundreds of years ago, so even if it came back to him, he wouldn't dare use it. His stare worked.

"Vodka," he said as the cabin-person came over to his seat.

They understood immediately and headed toward the galley. Eric wondered if words for alcohol change slowly or whether desperation showed on his face.

I'm literally strung out, he thought. Not on drugs or drink but on time. All my friends are dead. Except Mindy and Jordan, and they hardly count. My best friend was Lisa, in my bed a month

ago. He took the glass from the server. A month ago, my time—200 years ago in reality. Even her grandchildren will be dead this time around.

—You signed up for this, his mind argued. You chose to be frozen with the others. Two of your best friends are here with you. Better than the alternative.

Is it, though? he thought as he drank.

The others caught him watching them through the bottom of his glass and shouted for drinks of their own.

Last time, they'd used sub-orbital rockets for intercontinental travel. The technology for those space-hoppers apparently no longer existed, but the upsides to the absurdly long flight included the abundant space in a subsonic airliner and time for a practice session. Mindy had brought an electronic keyboard onto the plane and Jordan carried his electric guitar with a tiny amp and octave pedal. Two clarinets and a trumpet had found their way in carry-on baggage with the horn section. Raj improvised a drum kit from a food cart.

Jordan chose an old standard as warm-up, "Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar."

Everyone smiled at the finish, except Eric.

"Eric, there's not a lot for you to do in that song, but 'phoning it in' would be generous," Jordan said.

"Do they even have phones here?" Eric said.

"Eric—" Jordan began.

Eric turned to the translator. "Tell me about the charts."

They made the *no comprendo* gesture again.

"The pop charts. Billboard. Boy Bands. Rock bands. Singers. Concert venues. Live music?"

"Live music, yes." That one rang a bell. "In Kyzyl. You play."

"Are there many live bands? Who do you listen to?" Eric pressed.

Headshake.

"It's no use, Eric," Mindy said. "There's no pop music anymore. Raj cornered someone in the Sleep Center and got nowhere. No streaming services, not even vinyl."

"Jordan, riddle me this, Man," Eric said. "Why would someone wake up a Swing Revival band if there's no Swing Revival?"

Jordan cleared his throat. “Uh, economics is called the Dismal Science for a reason. Nobody knows why anybody buys anything. Swing Revivals usually happen like 25 to 50 years apart.”

“More than a century, this time. There isn’t even a mechanism for determining whether there is a revival.”

“Maybe there’s no Ticketmaster anymore, but somebody knows what’s selling,” Jordan countered.

“Selling in Mongolia.” Mindy rolled her eyes.

“Maybe it’s the economic powerhouse of the world now, who knows?”

“We certainly don’t. You haven’t attempted to survey the market, assess the venue, compute the gate, calculate the percentage or get a contract,” Eric said.

“I don’t think they have any of those.”

“You don’t think?” Eric’s voice rose. “You’re our manager now, for God’s sake.”

Jordan hung his head. Mindy moved to comfort him, arms around him, resting his head on her shoulder.

Eric said, “When Lisa died, Jordan, you said you could be bandleader and manage us at the same time. ‘Four weeks a century, anyone can do that,’ you said, and laughed. You don’t even know how many concerts we’re contracted for.”

Jordan said, softly, “I know I’m no Lisa, Eric. But there’s no way to return. It’s a one-way ticket.”

Eric’s mind wandered back. His ‘musical differences’—that was what screaming arguments were always called in touring bands, for some reason—with Jordan had come to a head around 2480. If he’d left the band then, even if Lisa had agreed to join him, he would be shipwrecked among strangers he barely understood and compelled to live at their rate, one year per year. He would have had Lisa, but Jordan and Mindy would be lost to him forever. That time, the band had slept for almost fifty years. He would have been left marooned on a desert island of time. Jordan persuaded him to come back to the Sleep Center, to stay with him and the others.

“Remember we learned to play from Jay Massie’s Jazz Band recordings,” Jordan had said to him,

back then, as Lisa napped on a hotel couch. “And when we became professionals ourselves, some bright spark hauled Jay Massie out of retirement for yet another farewell tour?”

“Of course I remember,” Eric had replied.

They’d both gone to see him on the tour. On the giant LED screen, close-ups of Jay’s face showed the stretched lips of a facelift and his stiff gait and missed cues belied his attempts to hide his octogenarian status. It suddenly came clear to Eric that video recordings and fansite photos always remained the same age, but the performer did not. Twenty-year-old Jay lived forever on the internet, never aging. That night, they vowed never to disappoint their fans. Never to ‘do a Jay Massie’.

But Lisa had passed away, as the euphemism had it. Eric imagined her sleeping body tumbling through time, never to wake again. Before he could fall back into self-pity, Jordan clapped his hands for attention, and the band members turned their attention to him.

“C’mon, ‘Dust Bowl Boogie,’ everyone,” Jordan chivvied.

The horns and keyboard players picked up their instruments.

Like Pavlov’s Dogs, Eric thought. But he found himself counting them in and singing the exuberant vocals with an enthusiasm he himself could not distinguish from the real thing. The song ended on a high C clarinet squeal. Before Jordan could pick another song, the cockpit door opened and the uniformed pilot emerged. They said something to the translator, who made their habitual moue/shrug of non-comprehension.

Before the translator could speak, Raj interrupted, “I’m not waiting for another bullshit translation. The captain said, kind of, ‘Love that analog sound.’”

He spoke with the captain in hesitant Urdu. “Captain says, kind of, ‘Sounds like the birthday party will go with a bang.’”

“Birthday party?” said Jordan.

Questions and answers flew back and forth.

“Captain says we’ve been chartered by Koenigsegg Reddy—that’s a person. He’s, or she’s, a multi-billionaire, or whatever they have now. They heard us on their antique collection of

NFT MP3s. We're just playing the one gig for them. Live, transient events never happen now-days, so this will be a first for lots of their guests."

Raj spoke with the pilot again. "Recordings are forever, but a live concert exists only in memory. It's an, um, unique time-bound experience."

The pilot smiled.

"This is for you, Captain. Our big hit." Raj picked up his sticks.

The horn section straightened their backs. Jordan switched his guitar to bass and Eric wailed out "Zoot Suit Voodoo," putting in the effort for the captain's big moment.

"Swing's back, baby," Jordan said, grinning.



Collaboration
By Angela K. Scott

The Prudence of Silver Sean Jones

As we four survivors of Fox Platoon slinked down the foot-smoothed steps of the mausoleum into darkness, the steel plates of our tat-

tered, leather brigandine armor clinked softly. In the uncanny silence, I wondered how many of us believed the fables of necromancy. *Did the tales of risen corpses, of shambling skeletons, of mummified and embalmed cadavers, undying creatures imbued with supernatural strength, did the pulse of those legends quicken as we entered the domain of the dead?*

"Hold at the cross corridor, Krenthellor," said the lieutenant, who, in sunlight, looked sharp as flaked obsidian. She'd lost the silver-bar rank-insignia once pinned to her chest. She was sending me into a space where I could command perpendicular stone passageways but where I might be attacked from any direction, by anything from the darkness.

Was I the only one who felt the chill, an unearthly iciness? Did only I notice the figure flitting down the hallway, some phantasm darker than the murk?

I moved ahead five, six strides into the gloom. I knelt and peered about, my heavy cross-bow, Entynn, ready, her lighter cousin, Freyn, strapped to my back.

"Nire, light a torch," said the lieutenant. Javnete, set a picket for Private Krenthellor."

Towering, bald Corporal Javnete sidled next to me, the sound of his limping distinct on the damp stone, and he planted the butt of his glaive polearm in a cleft between granite tiles. I heard the chit-chit-chit of Sergeant Nire's flint-and-steel and I saw the halls bloom with amber and orange hues as his pine-pitch lit and limned malformed figures that tottered toward us in rags, lifeless orbs aglint, teeth jagged, black and foul, nails of gnarled fingers pointed and gleaming.

Three – no, four – of the hissing ghouls approached and, while the pulsing torchlight molded and folded their shadows into shifting forms more hideous, their unnatural gait choreographed a macabre cotillion. I let fly my last broadhead bolt and half-severed a stragglehaired head from its torso, making it loll upward and stare lifelessly-yet-alive at the vaulted ceiling, even as its body stumbled closer, closer.

Slow-thinking but quick-acting Javnete swung his glaive at the creature's knee as a man

might scythe through barley. The brute's rasping became a shriek of frustration as it collapsed and writhed, slithering in circles, propelled across the muddy floor by its good leg.

Short but nimble, the lieutenant strode past Corporal Javnete and laid about with her broadsword. Snick and slice, hack and chop, she hewed swollen limbs and skewered bloated bellies, cutting through leprous flesh. Beside her, burning brand held aloft, swung the red-headed sergeant, maul wielded one-handed, the warhammer that might crack a man's clavicle pounding the walking corpses with muffled thuds.

The heavy breathing of my fellow soldiers amplified the din of the underworld monstrosities but I heard the clack-clacking of skeletal figures as they approached from my right.

"Bones!" I said. "Skeletons from the north hall."

I set down Entynn and unslung Freyn and set into her quarrel-slot a blunt bolt I plucked from the holster on my left thigh. Sighting as best I could in the doom-gloom, I beseeched the missile to strike true and I pulled the long trigger up and into the crossbow's underbelly. The front of Freyn's tiller kicked up with the release of the bolt, the string shuddered and I imagined the stone-tipped shaft speeding down the corridor in a tight spiral, passing below the ribs of the leading skeleton. I saw the bolt shatter the horror's spine, cleaving the freak in twain while its dozen compatriots side-stepped and advanced. Retrieving Entynn from the floor, I retreated to reload.

"Behind you," I admonished my platoon-mates.

"Sergeant Nire," said our officer, "attend to that."

While the lieutenant and corporal sliced and carved the fleshy hellions, the red-bearded NCO rushed to meet the onslaught of the bony fiends with hard steel, the sergeant outnumbered twelve-to-one. I saw Nire's hammer break vertebrae and phalanges, the black metal cracking yellowed scapulae and fibulae into shards. Bone-men collapsed and clattered and lay quivering.

But, as they shivered, the digits and limbs liberated themselves from their natural architecture

and scuttled about the slimy floor and reconstituted into constellations never imagined in the starlit world. Hands sprouted from pelvises and righted vibrating skulls onto their jawbones. Toes curled and flung forearm-bones with merciless accuracy, battering Nire about the face with impacts that caused him to drop the torch as he fended off the bone-storm.

Ribcages cracked open along their sternums and snapped open-shut, open-shut, moving toward Nire and behind him, claspings his knees, immobilizing the sergeant. Slivers of bone flung themselves at the hapless warrior, countless daggers and darts finding purchase amid flaws in the sergeant's armor, pummeling and piercing. As he twisted in agony, they dug themselves deeper, into his organs, wriggling and writhing.

Nire collapsed, his bleeding body covered in a bizarre exoskeleton. I finished cranking Entynn and trained her front sight at the grotesque pile. *How does one assassinate a colony of bones?*

"Kill the head and the body dies," this imperiled sergeant once had coached me.

I let fly at a skull and the quarrel penetrated the forehead and reduced the dome to fragments. Setting down Entynn, I readied Freyn for a go at a second skull.

"Sergeant, Private, are you well?" asked the lieutenant. She and tall, tall Javnete stepped into the north-south hallway. Despite the poor light from the sputtering torch, I saw the Corporal's nose was broken and bloodied.

"Destroy the heads," I said. "Ma'am."

My fellow soldiers pulverized cranium after cranium. While some of the skulls still "lived," bones flew about the passageway, as if maddened hornets in a swarm, and they pelted my colleagues, who bore the punishment but persisted in stomping and cleaving.

I set Freyn's string with her goats-foot lever and placed and let fly a bolt that demolished the side of one skull-fiend as the lieutenant toe-kicked the frontal bone of the last of them, sending it smashing with a clatter into the damp, grey stone of the tomb's passage. Her face was ashen.

In his voice-from-the-bottom-of-a-well, Javnete asked, "Does he breathe?"

The lieutenant shook her head.

"I am sorry," I said as our platoon commander brushed aside with a rattling clash the heap of bones covering Sergeant Nire. "So sorry."

For the hundredth time, I felt the pang of guilt at having survived after others perished, felt unworthy while they closed with the enemy as I sniped from afar.

The lieutenant showed tears; she and the sergeant had served together across many campaigns. "Private, Corporal, move this soldier to the end of the corridor."

We dragged the ginger sergeant's body into a rubble-filled alcove and lay him face-up with his arms crossed over his chest. Bone splinters jutted from his flesh, the once-ivory slivers and chips making tiny eddies in the rivulets of his blood.

In a voice muffled by his broken nose, Corporal Javnete said, "May he find repose. May he achieve peace. May he end his quest. May he rest."

Javnete turned away but I felt we should do more for our comrade. The ceremony seemed perfunctory.

"If we survive, we'll honor him properly," sobbed the lieutenant, weeping.

I respected her for not acting the tough warrior, for being honest. She never cloaked her heart and made a better leader for showing her platoon her true psyche.

"Let's fix that beak of yours," I told Javnete, reaching up with a cloth. "Shall I straighten it?"

His voice was soft thunder as he said, "Make me pretty."

From behind us, I heard the lieutenant say, "Platoon, assemble."

Platoon diminished to three hungry, tired, under-equipped soldiers, I thought.

Javnete stood, left hand gripping his glaive, while his right hand clasped his nose, and I stood to his right, holding Freyn at port-arms.

"Inspection," said our officer, stepping in front of Javnete, looking him over. "Acceptable, Corporal." She did a left face, took one step, did a right face and examined me. "Your weapon does not meet the Army's standard, Private," she said.

I'd played enough tabletop *shatranj* to keep

my face passive, not wanting to show my shock, but I thought, *what is standard about our unit aside from the maroon armor we wear and the matching bronze helmets we've lost? Special forces are irregular. Why would my weapon be a problem?*

"Forthwith, you will employ Nire's hammer." Her face showed no emotion but the eyes were bleary. "Platoon, fall out."

Carry only one crossbow, alongside the fallen man's maul? Which of my late father's weapons would I abandon? I retrieved the sergeant's hammer and I made my choice. *Goodbye, Entynn. Rest well beside my mentor.* I set down the heavy arbalest next to Nire and slung Freyn over my back.

"On patrol, Platoon," said the lieutenant. "Corporal, take the lead. Private, light a torch and follow."

Corporal Javnete limped west, kicking aside bits of ghouls' arms and legs, torsos and heads, covered in mottled, grey skin. The carnage gave off no smell other than the reek of this mossy and mildewy catacomb. I'd heard quasi-romantic notions ascribing to sepulchers "the smell of death" but, here, the bodies were odorless. As the battlefield had taught me, the smell of death is blood and shit, shit and blood.

We were creeping past a narrow alley when we saw a glimmer of yellow-orange and heard a twang and a thwack and a gasp as a crossbow bolt struck Javnete's right shoulder. I grasped the corporal's broad belt and yanked him into the alleyway and I charged down the corridor toward the light, holding the torch away from my body, hoping the flame might draw any subsequent missile. The lieutenant was faster, sprinting, brandishing her broadsword, probably wishing she still had a shield.

A second string hummed and another bolt whizzed past. The lieutenant hacked at a fleeing holy man dressed in crimson silk – for the Ravenen enemy allowed only clergy in the necropolis – and her blade bit into his haunch, drawing a screech. The man and his companion dashed into a doorway and slammed the portal shut before the lieutenant could take another swing.

Finding ourselves in an octagonal chamber,

its walls lined with alcoves stacked floor-to-ceiling, some revealing the ends of wooden coffins, she and I saw a dark door – perhaps ironwood – that granted entrance to a small, circular room set amidst the eight-sided one.

“Staircase upwards?” I asked. It sounded as if someone were ascending, treading on wood.

“Likely,” she said. “Spike it shut while I administer to the corporal.”

I picked up the enemy torch and handed it to the leader of our “platoon.” “You’ll need this, Ma’am.”

With Nire’s hammer, I drove four iron nails into the dense wood, maybe trapping two Raven crossbowmen. As I worked, I noticed three – no, four – caskets’ ends had been torn off and each funerary box was empty.

Walking back to the alcove, I found Javneta braced against the rough stone wall, the lieutenant driving the enemy quarrel through the corporal’s back until the square point protruded. With her sword, she cut through the wood and the metal tip – silver, by its sheen – fell to the floor with a clink.

A finger’s-width of shaft stuck out from Javneta’s shoulder and the lieutenant asked, “Ready for the jolly part?”

Javneta nodded his immense head.

The lieutenant grasped the haft in her teeth, her smile a rictus, and she pulled, tugging the bolt as a farmer’s ox might pull a stump from the ground. She released her grip, gained new purchase and twisted. Again and again until the haft came free. She spat it out and it thudded on the tiles.

“Private, doff this man’s armor and bandage him.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” said the corporal, pain raising the pitch of his voice nearly to that of the lieutenant.

I turned physician, digging through my oil-skin bag for bone needle and gut suture, though the sack was nearly empty.

Javneta bent low to whisper in my ear. “She could not keep us from leaving, Kren. The gate at the top of the stairs is not barred.”

The suggestion was absurd. Neither of us had the light complexion of the Ravens nor the

blue or green eyes. We could not pass for natives. If we surrendered, word would reach our captors’ ears that our Army had defiled the holiest gravesite of their capital. They’d retaliate in the least holy of fashions.

“Amusing, my friend,” I whispered as I sewed.

The lieutenant said, “Let us finish this chore. Find the sarcophagi and destroy them.”

“By your grace, Ma’am,” asked Javneta, “what will that accomplish?”

“We massacre their minds, for Raven priests bolster their witchcraft by ancestor spirits. If we succeed, High Command believes we can turn the tide and win this war. Will you earn your salt?”

“I am ready,” said Javneta, though he stood shirtless and without his armor.

“We’re late for the ball, Corporal,” she said. “Put on your dress.”

As I helped Javneta don his brigandine, for he could use only one hand, I saw the specter I’d seen when we entered. Man-shaped, it hovered where the corridors intersected, bobbing as if buoyed by a wind, and I felt a chill, though the air stood stagnant. I retrieved from the floor the quarrel-point and the crossbow bolt that had missed us. Silver seemed prudent.

As we moved, our two torches pushed back shadows to reveal another four-way junction. When we approached it, the walls seemed wetter and the slippery floor fled from view, covered to ankle-depth in muddy water with a discernible flow across the corridor.

“Which way, Lieuten- ?” Javneta began to ask but his voice crescendoed into a scream. A splash sounded as he fell into a chasm unseen in the slurry.

The apparition I’d observed seemed to dance with the shadows cast by our flames, while the air turned frigid as hoarfrost formed about the walls and curved ceiling. From ahead, a blond-haired and red-robed Raven priest gesticulated and chanted. To our left, uncountable pairs of tiny eyes reflected torchlight as a chattering chorus arose, rat upon rat upon rat scurrying, the chirruping mass of them seething toward us.

I swung Nire's hammer at the wraith but may as well have been threshing fog. Where Javnete had submerged, I heard sloshing and I noticed a churn in the muddy water and I saw – or hoped I saw – his glaive catch on the floor where we stood – but he had only one operable hand and I worried. We'd never trained to swim in armor and the corporal wore bronze greaves and vambraces on his shins and forearms, weighing him down.

I had no inkling of the enemy priest's actions save for staccato bursts in the Ravnen language and what sounded like an eagle's cry. A lavender nimbus enshrouded him and the air smelled of a lightning storm while faerie fire in blue and purple and indigo cavorted about the lieutenant's body and mine. From somewhere, from everywhere, a deep thrum sounded, outshouting the twittering of the rats, the rodent horde that swam toward us, perhaps drawn to the eerie illumination gamboling about our armor.

I swung and swung and swung, Nire's black hammer passing through the floating and flitting wraith, and I ignored the rats forming a living bridge that abutted where two of the nasty, grey fellows dug claws into a gash in the lieutenant's armor. She prodded them with her torch and she jabbed with her broadsword inverted, like a person committing suicide. She stabbed and screamed, killing vermin, suffering bites about the face and neck, slaying and suffering, shrieking in rage and pain.

As the lieutenant thrashed, I changed tactics and strove to crush the rats that swarmed her but I could not be gentle and I dealt as much harm as I prevented.

Then, they attacked me.

Claws, claws, teeth, teeth, teeth. Agony too intense to believe and, therefore, disavowed. My mind swirled and I took notice of the cavern around us, its murky outlines sharpened by the pain my brain tried to deny.

With the chilling, chilling, chilling of the air, I saw ice crystals glisten and grow and form a skin over the muck like a blue-white mold, glinting and glimmering as they lidded over the watery coffin that entombed our companion. *Did I see pat-*

terns in the rime, did I notice runic letters of the Ravnen script, and what would they have said could I have read them? Here lies Javnete, corporal of Fox Platoon, able swimmer, drowned and frozen while his comrades perished under the weight of multitudes of rodents?

I returned to the world of the rational as the piercing ache of biting rats interrupted my reverie. They nibbled and gnawed between the battered plates of our brigandine as much as they sliced and rent our flesh. "Ma'am," I shouted. "Cut the fastenings of your armor and take it off. Do the same for me. We have to cross the stream and fend off that priest before the water solidifies. The wraith cannot cross running water."

It's not Army-like for an officer to accept a suggestion from a private but she swung her broadsword with a deftness that belied the agony she endured and she slit the thin straps from my armor and tossed her weapon to me. I shucked the metal-and-leather protection, dropped Nire's hammer and caught the lieutenant's sword by its blade, cutting my left hand. A dutiful soldier, she'd kept it sharp.

"Do the same for me," she said.

Gritting my teeth, I sawed through the leather shoulder-thongs of the lieutenant's armor while she put torch to pest, flame to fiend. Bleeding, I unfastened her leather belt and she shrugged out of her brigandine.

Luck: we had some.

The rats found the oxhide of our vests more tasty than our bloodied bodies and they granted us a hiatus, enthralled with the coruscating lights that flared along the armor, chewing the maroon leather.

I hurled my torch across the watery chasm, hoping, vainly, to ignite the enemy priest, to add orange flame to his red robe. The blond man chanted and moaned, danced and gestured, but the rats took no notice of his actions. I believed his incantation froze the liquids around us or commanded the wraith to do so. In either case, the air grew more wintry.

"Your crossbow, Krenthellor," the lieutenant said.

"Ma'am?"

“Shoot the fucking clergyman!”

I picked up Freyn from where she had fallen and I fumbled for ammunition. As fate would dictate, I found the silver-tipped Ravnen bolt I’d retrieved from the priests’ assassination attempt. I slapped it into Freyn’s groove, knocked it against her bowstring, tugged upward on the trigger and let fly. I felt the kick and watched the red-robed and yammering priest become impaled by his countryman’s quarrel.

They say irony is bitter but, in that moment, it was honey.

Then, the aftertaste.

From behind us, a figure approached, a man with hair and beard of red, a soldier dressed in the maroon armor of our platoon, a perfect portrait of Sergeant Nire. Unlike the clumsy, bloated ghouls we’d vanquished, Nire strode soundlessly and straight at the lieutenant, grappling her, pinning her sword-hand behind her back, clamping his forearm about her neck.

She back-kicked a booted heel into his knee and I heard it snap. Where such trauma might have dissuaded a mortal, Nire-not-Nire fell to the floor, dragging the lieutenant with him, making her drop the torch into the water, extinguishing its flame. Our only illumination six paces away, I could nevertheless see Nire would murder her.

“Kill the head and the body dies,” Nire-of-the-Past reminded me.

But, how?

With the enemy priest sent to the next world, with the specter vanished, with the rats feasting on armor, I had an instant to think.

Silver seemed prudent. Taking the Ravnen quarrel-tip from my pocket, I twisted and pried back Nire’s head, feeling for his mouth, tugging his upper lip over the tip of his nose, jabbing my thumb between his teeth.

I fed him breakfast.

I’m a worse cook than soldier and, as the sergeant had often chided me, he found the meal unpalatable. He stiffened, as if made of stone, his grip a statue’s clinch about my officer’s throat. The lieutenant and I pounded and levered and prized the dead man’s forearm from her trachea and freed her from his deadly embrace.

“The corporal,” she croaked.

Javnete. I’d forgotten.

I sloshed to the watery pit and reached in a hand, groping and hoping, finding only the frigid and muddy flow.

“Help me look, Ma’am?”

She crawled over, grabbed twice-fallen Nire’s hammer, and stirred about the basin. I moved downstream and felt about the cleft, finding nothing.

“Into the water, Private,” she said.

We slipped in and felt about and chilled ourselves, seeking a hopeful omen. I kicked in the dark-and-muddied water and felt a metallic caress on my ankle but we never found Javnete nor his glaive.

Somehow, Javnete had shed his armor and we retrieved his belongings from the bottom and tossed his greaves, vambraces and the front half of his brigandine onto the far side, the north side, the side toward which our mission compelled us.

“I am sorry. So sorry,” I said, repeating my subterranean requiem.

The lieutenant’s face stood featureless in the gloom, as if she were too weary to weep. “Did he dissolve?” She didn’t address me; she queried the darkness.

As I took a torch from my oilskin bag and lit it – using Nire’s flint-and-steel – the lieutenant said, “Private, we have two orders. Find the sarcophagi and destroy their contents.”

“Two orders. Yes, Ma’am.”

She shook her head. “That’s one order. The second is, ‘Stay alive.’” Something of a flicker in her eye – did she wink?

From the corpse of the Ravnen priest, we took his red silk clothing, for that fabric has many uses, one being the bandaging of a careless private’s hand. The cleric had been bedecked in amulets and bracelets, pendants and anklets, ornaments beset with gemstones and – more saliently for dealing with the undead – wrought from silver. The lieutenant and I mended and donned our brigandine over our sopping blue gambesons, I put on Javnete’s arm- and leg-armor and we decorated our bodies in Ravnen jewelry, hoping, – praying? – to elicit mystical protection.

As we looted the dead, I tried to hold in my

heart some reverence for the clergyman. His eyes squinted and his lips were locked in an O, an expression of surprise or pensiveness. Though the enemy, he'd been a man nevertheless much like us, bound to his duty. While I remembered to honor the Raven, I nearly forgot Sergeant Nire.

"Ma'am, what'll we do about Second Squad's leader?" I pointed across the underground river.

"When there's time, Private," she said, shaking her head. "When there's time. The mission."

"Ma'am?" I asked, "might it be wise if we had two crossbows? Double our artillery?"

The woman-chiseled-from-obsidian smiled and said, "Fetch your father's arbalest, Private. I will carry it as far as I'm able."

Each of us so armed, we crept through the labyrinth, keeping lit a burning brand, tossing it ahead five, six paces, lighting the passageways and staying in darkness, ready to loose bolts at whatever atrocity the Ravens sent. We'd expended our torches and had resorted to burning slats of wood torn from coffins. Occasionally, I remembered to feel guilty about desecrating the dead.

We traversed a westward-leading hallway, this one dry and dusty, and we came upon a lavish room, thirty strides across and square, pillars in pink marble supporting the vaulted ceiling, rosy grave-slabs set into the floor, forty-odd of them, each inscribed with runes in Raven. They weren't sarcophagi but I wished to know their contents, for I'd tired of ambushes by bodies risen from their repose.

No, nothing sprang from the ground.

They attacked from behind us and ahead.

Why in the world – in the underworld – would the Ravens have created mummies of baboons, how could they have given life to such creatures and how did their strategists know to hit us from two places?

Monkeys may screech but these simians, embalmed and wrapped in tan rags – hideous where ribbons of desiccated flesh and tufts of stiff hair showed through – they hissed. At us they came, three for the lieutenant, three for me – no, two apiece, for she and I each let fly a lethal bolt. We'd refitted the tips with silver, the pentagram of

the priest broken into five sharp points, each to become a warhead directed against the non-living.

They latched their long canines onto our arms, finding the cloth of a gambeson easier to pierce than shredded brigandine. *Were the baboons trained?* The lieutenant wore a pair of the creatures like sleeves as the two monsters clamped and held, drooping while they drained her blood, and they prevented her from counterattacking. My attackers shunned my torch-bearing arm and sawed their jaws across my right biceps as if ripping meat from a rib. The pain, the pain, the pain. I could not move that arm. I wanted to abandon it, to donate it to the undead apes.

I knew the lieutenant suffered, for she fell to one knee and bashed the beasts against the pink grave-slabs as she chanted, "No, no, no." Like lampreys attached to a mackerel, their grip was implacable.

Silver seemed our panacea; it had proved potent against all enemies in this dismal oubliette but how might we bring any to bear? Between the two of us, we wielded one free arm.

The fire: I used it.

I learned a baboon-mummy will flare up brilliantly and consume itself rapidly, blinding a soldier when four such lamps blaze. Call it dark humor but I laughed, because, when they burned, they hissed more than they had when they were alive-not-alive.

"Gods above," said the lieutenant with a sigh that became a cough. "And, thank you, Private."

"If you'd like to stand sentinel, Ma'am, I'd be glad to reload our crossbows." She seemed weakened. Exhausted and spent.

"Yes, attend to the artillery. I will light up a few casket splinters. Let's see what we can see."

I cranked and loaded Entynn and handed the heavy arbalest to the officer. As I set Freyn's bowstring with her goats-foot lever, a figure at the edge of our firelight shuffled into view, announced by a rasping moan. Tall he was, dressed in one of our blue gambesons, one arm hanging limp, one leg twisted and nigh useless, head larger than a normal man's, unmistakable as Javnete – but was he the late corporal, *à la* the reanimated Sergeant

Nire?

Two sounds answered my question: a twang from Entynn and a thwack as a silver-tipped bolt impaled our platoon-mate's chest. Thus came the response: he was dead – now that the lieutenant had skewered his heart. He dropped like a stone – like anything inanimate – but he bled and bled.

The wail that came from the lieutenant's throat, her scream sounded like some crone vomiting stones into a ceramic vase. She would not stop shrieking and I stepped up and put one hand over her mouth, the other over her eyes. For many, many heartbeats, I held her.

"He was already dead, Ma'am," I lied. "Corrupted and controlled by the Ravens." *Maybe she'd come to believe this.*

Javnete could not tell his story but I wanted to think he'd been carried downstream and washed up on an underground shore, from where he stumbled his way in the dark, seeking and searching the passages of these catacombs, avoiding Ravens and finding us – so he could say farewell.

Her sobs ebbing, the lieutenant gathered her composure and said, "Find a dignified place for him." She smiled, anguish and irony showing in the tight set of her lips, the clench of her jaw. "There ought to be a suitable spot around here."

I placed the too-tall corporal in a niche in quite the ornate alcove, decorated in white sea-shells. I remembered when he'd said, "Make me pretty." Quoting his elegy for Sergeant Nire, I said, "May you find repose. May you achieve peace. May you end your quest. May you rest." Unlike with Nire, I felt we'd paid some reverence to the departed.

Interrupting my reverie, the lieutenant said, "The mission, Private."

Wending and backtracking, skulking and sneaking for unknowable hours, we chanced upon a low-ceilinged secret passageway by which teams of Raven acolytes in red robes hunched and carried opulent coffins painted in purples and golds and greens. Thoughtfully, these enemy men had provided lantern-light by which to watch them work and they remained preoccupied, cursing as they banged into the narrow-set walls, blind to us as we crouched in shadow.

"They suspect our plan, even unaware we are the last two," whispered the lieutenant. "Though they have few priests left, the Ravens are moving their ancestors."

"Ma'am, to where?"

"Wherever it is, we must destroy them."

"Shall we initiate the melee?"

Her stifled laugh was delightful, a girl's giggle. "Follow," she said.

When the passage cleared, we crept along it, coming to the edge of a great dome, a hemisphere that stretched a hundred strides. We slinked along the curving wall, its blocks made of the same grey granite as the bulk of the catacombs, and we saw that sarcophagus after beautiful, painted sarcophagus had been opened, ornate stone lids slid aside, leaving a person-shaped void. Candles of beeswax lit the scene for us but the place never went unoccupied. Always, two or three Raven prelates or priests in crimson silks emptied sarcophagi and carried off the elegant caskets, while more clergy arrived to do the same.

"How much ammunition is left, Private?"

"One bolt, Ma'am. A blunt-tip."

"I promised I'd carry your father's cross-bow as far as I'm able. In return, you must complete the mission." She sounded fatalistic.

"Will do, Ma'am." Out of respect for her, I wanted my stoic reply to mask my doubt that she – or I – would survive.

"Hand me the missile," she said.

I gave her the last bolt from my thigh-holster and the lieutenant readied heavy, heavy Entynn for a shot at a Raven priest ten strides from us. Bearing wounds from the baboon-mummies, she propped the weapon atop a sarcophagus lid and I hoped she'd have the strength to squeeze the trigger-lever.

She told me, "Take off your armor and dress yourself in whatever red rags we have from the clergyman you shot." She unwrapped the silk bandages on her arms so I'd have enough cloth. Her wounds oozed. They trickled.

Setting aside my concern and following orders, I bedecked myself as a Raven, though the tatters did not comprise an ensemble. I imagined I'd look quite bedraggled to any "fellow" priest.

“Are we desperate enough to kill mere children?” she asked, a rhetorical question, I hoped. “When those two altar-boys leave with a coffin, we strike,” she said. “Before the men return.”

While we waited, the priests and adepts heaved a stone lid from its resting place, raising a deep, rasping sound, and they reached into the sarcophagus and hoisted out a coffin lavish in its decoration, its gilt-and-copper sides forming a flowery background for the beautiful painting of the blonde and blue-eyed girl held within, the lass lain in a meadow overseen by azure sky and white clouds. The enemy men handled the artifact with reverence and I, too, felt its spiritual presence. *Had she been a princess?*

As they departed into the secret passage, the lieutenant said, “Now, Private.”

For once, I wanted the darkness. I approached the pair of priests and, I as I grew near, I noticed they wore their adornment discreetly, each man showing only a pentagram pendant, while I could have passed as a jewelry vendor at the bazaar, as a whore in the red-lantern quarter. The clerics busied themselves reading the filigreed gold nameplate atop one of the open sarcophagi and took no notice of me.

I circled behind them. From across the room, I heard a bowstring’s twang, heard a thud as the blunt bolt collided with a priest’s ribcage and heard a howl as the pain seized and shocked him. His comrade rushed to his aid while I unraveled my rags of silk and slipped a loop around the unwounded man’s neck with my good arm, tightening it, wrenching him down, holding him to the floor, twisting and constricting.

The lieutenant, though slowed from her injuries, attacked the screaming priest, and, without the use of her arms, kicked his abdomen to drive the air from his lungs. She slithered over the fallen man and caught his arm in the crook of his neck with her legs and bore down, clamping his carotid against his shoulder, choking him until he shuddered and stopped, my officer grimacing from the pain that wracked her.

“Quickly, Private,” she said. “Move these men across the chamber and hide them.”

Releasing the new corpse I’d made, I said,

“I assume we’ll disinter two Ravnen ancestors, Ma’am?”

“Yes.” She bent over and coughed, more a feeble wheeze. “And, then, we impersonate them.”

#

The coffin containing me jostled. It and I moved to the place – I presumed – where the other caskets stood. Sounds of stone on wood, sounds of men speaking a foreign tongue, sounds of grunting from exertion. I stood in my tiny tomb and did nothing but let time pass. I frowned and fretted.

Much later, I ceased to hear coffers being moved or conversations in Ravnen. I was well-armed, having my father’s crossbows and my sergeant’s hammer. I waited and waited, breathing in an aroma of pine needles and sage, perfumed oils and floral-scented balms. The enemy buried their dead with veneration and *what desperation*, I wondered, *would drive them to make monsters of their departed?* *What necessity could justify this ancestor-revering people’s decline into necromancy?* *Had we “won” the war; having forced them to abandon decency?*

My soldier’s mind interrupted my conscience, saying, *we must win this battle before we win any war*. Quietly, quietly, using the pick end of Nire’s weapon, I pried open my casket from the inside, just a crack. A beautiful sight I witnessed, pure bliss, a scene unappreciated unless one has spent uncounted hours beneath the earth; I saw pure sunlight streaming in. For once, I felt warmth.

Prizing open the lid and peering about, I saw we “deceased” populated the window-filled Great Hall of the necropolis’ chapel, its tan, wooden walls and arches festooned in friezes and *bas-reliefs* of Ravnen exploits in war. An uncountable number of coffins stood about the place, the plain and the opulent commingling as if our assault on this most holy of Ravnen places had disrupted the class-system of their society. “We massacre their minds,” the lieutenant had said.

I searched for her coffin. She’d placed me in mine before she’d chosen hers and I knew not which one she’d appropriated. The expedient method would have been to shout for her, but not

the prudent way. Working through the maze of caskets, I knocked on each as I passed. Silence replied. *Had she freed herself?* I hoped to find an open lid – no, if she’d emerged, she’d have closed it to conceal her presence – as should I have. I sneaked back to “my” coffin and pressed its lid onto the dowels that aligned it.

“Lieutenant,” I called softly as I moved about and tapped with Nire’s hammer.

Then, I saw the blood at the foot of a short casket, judging by its painting, one that had been occupied by a Raven lad. I pried open the lid and found her lifeless form. When she fell to the wood of the floor, I noticed she’d bled profusely from the wounds she’d sustained in the crypt. A meager consolation, her dark and flinty features seemed serene.

I saw no reason to “bury” her in the coffin. Her people’s tradition was funeral by fire.

Before I cracked open caskets to find the oils the Ravens provided their ancestors’ cadavers – to anoint themselves in the afterlife – and before I doused the church – and before I set fire to the holiest of holy artifacts of the Raven culture – and before I immolated the source of their eldritch energy – I did some things.

I retrieved Entynn and Freyn, artifacts from my ancestor, my father who’d once battled these Ravens on our soil, and I found the passageway from the chapel to the catacombs. First, gathering dried fruits and biscuits given to the dead for their long journey, I then took shelter in the crypt as the cathedral above burned and burned and burned.

Underground, I found a beautiful niche, decorated in roses made of red coral, and I enshrined Sergeant Nire with his black hammer.

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When I tell the story to the three women and four men of my sniper-squad as we train on the sunny field outside the former Raven capital, do they believe Corporal Krenthellor’s tale of risen corpses and shambling skeletons? Can they foster appreciation for the sacrifices of Fox Platoon, especially Nire, Javnete and the lieutenant? Can they feel a reverence for fallen soldiers – for fallen enemy – and what do they feel when I speak of the

respect the Raven bestowed upon their dead?

Do they heed me when I tell them to hold the tillers of their crossbows tight against their cheeks, to squeeze the trigger-lever gently? Do they understand the bolt flies in a helix and an arbalester must know the distance to his quarry – must calculate, from range, how the missile gy-rates along its path – and, if he wishes to place a quarrel into an enemy eye, how he must account for the bolt’s spiral twist?

As I point out the land we’ve won, as I alternately ignore and assuage my guilt, as I weigh whether the slaughter Fox Platoon perpetrated has justified the price, has redressed the brutality, has balanced the barbarism, I wonder if the killing of holy men was worth the cost to my compassion. Such are the musings, the remorse of a surviving soldier. But glimmering through the countershading of these melancholy reflections, I hope – no, I must ensure – my sniper-squad grasps the lesson summed up by fallen Nire’s sage advice for Fox Platoon’s mission. I must ingrain the sergeant’s words: “Kill the head and the body dies.”

When wars are no more, we’ll consider what perishes when one kills the heart.

Fiction by Neffers

In some issues we would now have reached a traditional section of Eldritch Science, namely Fiction by Neffers, fiction by people who are dues-paying or Public Members of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Please consider submitting your work for future issues.